



UNVEILED INTENTIONS

leona crowley

blackpaw prophecy: origins  2

UNVEILED
INTENTIONS

Unveiled INTENTIONS

Blackpaw Prophecy: ORIGINS, Book 2

Leona Crowley

Unveiled INTENTIONS

Blackpaw Prophecy: ORIGINS, Book 2

Copyright © 2023 by Leona Crowley

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the written permission of the author. The author does not assume responsibility for third-party websites or their content.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, events, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, places or organizations is purely coincidental.

This book is not a stand-alone book. It is part of the Blackpaw Prophecy: ORIGINS series. *Undiscovered Magic* is the first book in the series.

Content warning: Story contains mature themes and language and is intended for mature readers (18+).

Cover design: 17 Studio Book Design

ISBN-13: 9798865932550 (Paperback)

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing

Join the Pack!

The Blackpaw Prophecy: ORIGINS series is part of The Blackpaw Prophecy world. This series starts at the beginning of how it all began, but it doesn't end there.

The witches have a unique perspective on the world of shifters.

And you're invited to join the pack just in time to learn their secrets.

For all the latest updates and news about upcoming book launches, visit the webpage to sign up for the mailing list.

<https://www.subscribepage.com/leonacrowley>

And...

I respond to all messages, so if you have any comments, thoughts, loving words of encouragement, or just want to say hi...be sure to reach out.

For Aunt Kathy

Contents

[Unveiled INTENTIONS](#)

[Dedication](#)

[CHAPTER 1](#)

[CHAPTER 2](#)

[CHAPTER 3](#)

[CHAPTER 4](#)

[CHAPTER 5](#)

[CHAPTER 6](#)

[CHAPTER 7](#)

[CHAPTER 8](#)

[CHAPTER 9](#)

[CHAPTER 10](#)

[CHAPTER 11](#)

[CHAPTER 12](#)

[CHAPTER 13](#)

[CHAPTER 14](#)

[CHAPTER 15](#)

[CHAPTER 16](#)

[CHAPTER 17](#)

[CHAPTER 18](#)

[CHAPTER 19](#)

[CHAPTER 20](#)

[CHAPTER 21](#)

[CHAPTER 22](#)

[CHAPTER 23](#)

[CHAPTER 24](#)

[CHAPTER 25](#)

[CHAPTER 26](#)

[CHAPTER 27](#)

[CHAPTER 28](#)

[CHAPTER 29](#)

[CHAPTER 30](#)

CHAPTER 1

Skye ... June 2009

The first rays of sunlight filter through the branches high above me. The ground feels cold and hard underneath my body. A cool breeze rustles the leaves that lay around me. Each sensation is amplified by my rhythmic breathing. Each breath takes me higher. I'm ready to soar. To dance with the nature spirits that hide behind the air molecules.

Caw. Caw. The sound of a crow interrupts my solitude.

This time it's a crow. Yesterday it started raining. And the day before that, it was something else. Why is this so hard?

I look around for my black-winged intruder. Maybe he has a message for me from the sylphs. They know that I want to join them inside the void between air and ether. To commune with them among the clouds. A note about what I'm doing wrong would be good about now.

I met an air sylph once. At least, I believe I did. Her name is Parahim. She told me that she would wait for me. For when I would be ready to join in the dance that takes place in the currents that flow high in the sky.

I begin most mornings the same way. Meditating before the sun rises under the old oak tree at the edge of our property. Lying comfortably on the ground, I trace a sigil in the air above me with my finger to set my intention. Focus my breathing to invite a trance-like state. And invite Parahim to join me.

It hasn't happened yet.

I search for the crow, ready to give him a piece of my mind. But the fog is too heavy this morning. I can't see anything. And he has gone suspiciously quiet all of a sudden.

Time to get up and start my day. And today's going to be a good one because today is the day I start my quest. The adventure of a lifetime that breaks the mold. I've put it off

long enough. Even tried to talk myself out of it once or twice. But it's now or never. And I'd like to think that Parahim is on my side about this.

Believe me, I'm not making this decision lightly. I've spent more than two years preparing and strategizing. Month after month of doing meticulous research. Non-stop planning. Endless hours spent cross-referencing and cataloging way too many scenarios that all lead to the same conclusion.

I have to break my family's firm, never-to-be-broken rule: stay away from shifters. Observe from afar. Never interact.

We live near a shifter town, so finding someone responsive to become friends with should be easy enough. Spend a few weeks developing a trusting relationship. Then gradually move into sharing what I know about the prophecy and how I think the two of us can save the world together. With any luck, they'll skip right over any sort of freak-out phase and move right into being eagerly ready to join Team Skye.

Don't get me wrong. I'm completely aware of how tough the road ahead is going to be. Challenges will be waiting around every corner. One of the biggest ones I see hitting me right out of the gate is that I can't share what I'm doing with my family. And there can be no slip-ups. Not a clue left to be discovered or a whisper of suspicion detected. Nothing.

If we were normal people, this plan would be doable. But we're not normal. Not even close. You see, I come from a long line of Chandler witches. Suspicion is in our blood. No one outside of the family is trusted. Not even a little bit. And despite how close we are, trust inside the family is usually only reserved for those of the same element.

To say that I'm going to need to be on alert and ready at all times is an understatement. My sister Snowbie's scrying ability has gone from entry-level beginner to master pro practically overnight. And Aunt Clairabelle is the one teaching her. She's been scrying for over forty years. Her reputation as being one of the best has been well-earned.

If they suspect anything unusual in my behavior, they'll drop my name into their obsidian looking glass without hesitation.

Then they'll justify their actions by saying it's done in love. Quickly followed by a healthy dose of *for your own protection*. And these two aren't the ones I'm worried about the most. They're only the water witches.

The element of fire is who I need to keep a close eye on. My mom and sister both have an uncanny ability to be able to detect a lie. I swear, it's like they can smell dishonesty in the air. They'll be the ones to alert Snowbie and Aunt Clairabelle first. And they'll do it long before they interrogate me. Trust me. A fire sign doesn't start asking questions unless they already know all the answers.

I worked too long and too hard to let this blow up in my face over a slip-up inside my own house. And I've documented everything that's been done so far. Crossed every *t*, dotted every *i*, and created backup plans for every possible hiccup I could think of. Even added a few more for good measure.

All my research, notes, and theories are perfectly organized in three unassuming store-bought journal books. A fourth journal book sits empty. It's on my bedside table, waiting to be filled with the copious amounts of information I'll learn from my new shifter best friend.

I'm beginning this quest with the task of finding a suitable hiding place for the journals. This is long overdue. And probably should have been done way back when I first started toying with the idea of breaking from family tradition. But oh well, I'm doing it now.

This works out better anyway. Having a win on my side in the beginning will boost my confidence and set me up for a well-deserved victory.

A large portion of each journal is predominately detailed notes that summarize the research. Facts, dates, charts, and paraphrased descriptions of historical events, each organized according to relevance. But the rest undermines long-standing family beliefs, questions our purpose, and challenges those who will come after me to do what they believe is right even when those around them are convinced it's wrong.

This information has challenged me to be as authentic as I can. And it's given me the courage to start speaking my truth. The caveat to this last bit is to also know when it's best to keep my mouth shut. I'm still working on that one.

The research portion of the journals isn't the part that needs hiding. The long list of convincing reasons as to why I have to break the rules is. And my family isn't going to like it. Shifters might not like it either, now that I think about it.

For centuries, each generation of Chandler witches has accepted its familiar obligations by stepping into line right behind the generation that came before. The older ones teaching the younger ones. The younger ones doing just as they were told. Each element under its own narrow spotlight. No one stepping out of the lines. No one asking questions.

Well, I have too many questions. And it's about time we started getting some answers.

Our family has a well-documented history. Roughly seven hundred years of that history is contained within close to fifty homemade tomes that we call grimoires. Some are rudimentary, being nothing more than a few loose papyrus sheets. Others are elaborately constructed parchment pages handsewn between embossed leather bindings.

The oldest grimoire we have dates to the fifteenth century. This one is too damaged to be of use, but it's still cool to have. The main-source grimoire, jokingly referred to as the *Mother*, dates to the seventeenth century. This volume earned its status above all the others because it mentions the *prophecy* for the first time.

Prior to the *Mother* grimoire, humans were depicted as living side by side with shifters. Not always getting along, but co-existing all the same. No secrets, no hiding, and no rules. The grimoires dated after that show a steady progression of shifters moving deeper into seclusion and farther away from humans.

I'm not sure what caused the great divide we have now, but I think I know when it happened. One date is referenced several times in some of the recent grimoires. *Late fall 1693*.

The first mention of this date is in the *Mother* grimoire. And the corresponding event associated with the date is the death of a shifter ice dragon named Tora.

This didn't seem significant until I noticed that Tora is the first of nine dragons mentioned by name in the grimoires. Each name has beside it the date of their death. The only other names used in any of the other grimoires only belong to Chandler family members.

That got me thinking. A lot.

Why are *these* dragons called out by name and no other shifters? And why only document their death?

Here's another interesting detail that piqued my curiosity. The first mention of the word prophecy appears on the page very close to where the first mention of Tora's death is located. Unfortunately, a large portion of the page is badly damaged, leaving the intended meaning of the fragmented remains unknown.

To me, there appears to be a direct correlation between dragons dying and the prophecy. Why else would future generations pay so much attention to only dragon deaths?

Now, let's move on to the prophecy itself. In simple terms, way back in the late sixteen-hundreds, a distant relative of mine predicted the complete annihilation of shifters. A gradual decline in population that will lead to extinction. Species wars fueled by extended periods of time isolated from humans are considered to be some of the contributing factors.

This is the same contributing factor that helped me make my decision. Humans, that's me, and shifters were never meant to be apart. By embarking on my genius endeavor, I'm fulfilling my role as a Chandler witch. I'm leading the charge and doing my part to help save shifters all in one.

Go me.

The one event that's believed to mark the beginning of the end for the prophecy by speeding up population decline is probably going to happen in my lifetime. The *probably*

estimation is based on one of Aunt Clairabelle's scrying visions. And in forty-plus years, she's never been wrong.

This means that the time to strike is now.

So, why am I the only one taking action?

My family is too focused on honoring tradition. The shifters want to hide in the woods and pretend that all is right in the world. And the handful of humans out there lucky enough to be in the know...well, let's just say they don't want to hear what a crazy old witch has to say. Or a young one either, for that matter. I'm only twenty-three.

These journals are my way of being heard. They outline my belief that my family has the prophecy all wrong. And my plan to go out and make friends with a shifter is my way of setting the record straight.

I've tried in every way possible to tell them. But no one will listen. My mom and aunts seem worried that I've taken the loss of Aunt Lily too hard. That, in my grief, I've gone astray or lost my way somehow.

It's true that everything changed for me when my Aunt Lily passed two years ago. Yes, I allowed myself time to process my grief. But then I moved on. I started seeing myself and my place in the world around me differently. Then I started to notice that what worked for me before, didn't work anymore. Writing it all down in journals seemed to be the easiest way to get the thoughts out of my head.

I didn't set out to break the rules and upset the natural balance of the world around me. And this is by far the most rebellious thing I've ever done. But I don't see any other way. The more I question, the more answers I get. Those answers evolved into arrows that are all pointing in one direction. One solution. And it all started with my Aunt Lily.

In our family, you begin your witch training at the age of twelve. Learning about witchcraft from a family member of the same element. For me, that was Aunt Lily. She divided my witchy education into three categories. First, the element of air and what it means to be an air witch. This part includes the

Chandler family history. Followed by the prophecy as a whole and our connection to shifters. And finally, the role I'm to play in all of it.

Aunt Lily passed away without ever mentioning anything about my part in all of this. She regularly shouted as she pointed heavenward. *We have plenty of time for that. The element of air doesn't come into play until well after the natural-born alpha female is found and mated.*

Since her passing, my family has stepped in to further my education. The family history, the prophecy, and the shifter stuff are all pretty standard. But it's hard to learn about the element of air from any other element.

Each element interacts with the world around them from a different perspective. Using the essence of their element to gather and dissect information in the way that works best for them. Making what is important to one minimal to another. Strengths and weaknesses vary considerably. One element may be action-oriented, while another is more stationary or better at generating ideas.

I am governed by the element of air. All the information I need or yearn for floats within the ether around me. Thoughts, experiences, and memories yet to be cherished are all accessible. The higher I let myself soar, the more that is available. The freer I allow myself to be, the easier the dispersal process is. With all the possibilities out there waiting, my mind and my earth-bound body are my only limiting factors.

I stand in the middle of my room, surveying my surroundings. There must be a witch-proof hiding place in here somewhere. Under the mattress is out. That's the first place my sister Terra will look. Not in the drawers or the closet either. Way too easy.

I think I'm going to have to get creative.

Whoosh. Bang! The bedroom door flies open and hits the wall in one swoop.

“What are you hiding in the bag, Skye?” Ember strolls through the door, throwing herself across my bed as I bury one of the journals in the bottom of my bag.

See. This is exactly why I need to hide my things. No privacy.

My older sister Ember is a fire sign. Aries, to be exact. Flame red hair and an attitude to match. She never backs down from a challenge. And right now, her sights are set on me. She knows I’m keeping a secret. And I know that she’s the only one in my family who won’t back down until she knows what it is.

In fact, I’ve woven her suspicious nature into my plan perfectly. She has accused me of keeping a secret for months. Even when I didn’t have one. Well, not a real one anyway. And I’m pretty sure she has said as much to our mom.

The way I see it, she bought me some wiggle room. I just need to stay within the lines of her carefully constructed misconception. And be super careful about not giving her any ammunition to use against me.

She’d tell my secret and ruin my plans faster than I could blink. Not in a malicious, evil sister way. Quite the contrary. To Ember, duty is everything. And the whole is greater than the one. Which means that family comes first. In her mind, she is protecting me out of loyalty which will, in turn, strengthen the family. And I’m sure that on the surface, my actions going forward will appear reckless to her. That I’m abandoning my post, my sisters, my family, and my legacy in some way.

I drape the messenger bag across my chest with as much confidence as I can muster. “I’m not hiding anything. I’m going into town. The book I requested at the library finally came in.”

Ember cocks her head to one side as she gives me an unblinking glare, letting the moment linger a few seconds before she replies. “Mom’s worried about you. I heard her talking to Aunt Violet. They’re playing with the idea of looking for an air witch outside the family to teach you about

your element. Violet's calling a coven leader she knows in Bangor for advice."

I glance around the room one more time to make sure I haven't forgotten to conceal anything incriminating. Careful to avoid eye contact with my freakishly observant sister.

"They wouldn't dare. No way they'd bring an outsider in on the prophecy. And the shifter secret is too interwoven into who we are to exclude it. I'm not worried." I shrug off the news as nonchalantly as I can.

Ember chuckles as she gets off the bed. "Huh. That actually made sense. It's not like you to sound so confident. Or logical. Anyway, I know you're up to something. Take my advice: whatever you're thinking about doing. Don't. At least not until you tell me what it is."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Ember puts her hand on my shoulder. Guiding me to look in her direction. "Cut the crap, Skye. You might have everyone else fooled, but not me. What's going on? And be for real this time. It wasn't that long ago that we told each other everything."

I lean against the edge of the bed and out of her grip. Sighing my response. "I really don't know."

Ember plops down beside me in a huff.

I throw my hand up to cut off her rebut as I keep going. "Hold on. Before you get mad, let me finish. You're right. Something is going on. But I don't know how to explain it. My dreams are changing. And I feel restless all the time. Like I'm on the edge of something bigger than me. Bigger than all of us. I can't figure out the right words to describe it. And I constantly feel like no one is listening to me when I try. All I know is that I have to keep moving. Do something. Do anything that will get me closer to whatever this *it* is."

Ember cocks an eyebrow in my direction as she speaks. "What does any of that have to do with Aunt Lily dying? Aren't you still grieving?"

“That’s exactly what I’m talking about.” I push off the bed and walk to the door to emphasize my point. “No one listens to me. Aunt Lily passed two years ago. I’m fine. Snowbie and Aunt Clairabelle moved to New York last fall. OK. Our family doesn’t live under the same roof anymore. So, what? This is about me. About finding my own way in the world so I can do my part for the prophecy. You can’t help me because you have your own path to follow. But just because my path looks different than everyone else’s, doesn’t mean that it’s wrong or bad. It just means that it’s mine.”

“All right. I’ll let it go for now. Just promise me you won’t do anything stupid without talking to me first. Follow all the rules and you’ll be fine.”

I glance into the hallway. Lowering my voice to just above a whisper in case our mom is within earshot. “Don’t you ever get sick of all the rules? Has anyone ever stopped to ask why we have to stay away from shifters in the first place? Wouldn’t it be easier to help them if we were at least friends with some of them?”

Ember laughs. “I’m with you on that one. The rules suck. But as long as we live in our mother’s house, we have to follow them. I’m sure that someone in our family would have slipped up at least once in the last few thousand years. Male shifters can be sexy as hell. If the right one turned his attention on me, I don’t know that I’d say no.”

“Tell Mom I’ll be home in time for dinner.” I start down the stairs toward the back door. Knowing that the sooner I get myself out of this conversation, the better off I’ll be.

Ember’s voice trails off as the door closes behind me. “Skye? We’re not finished with this.”

Rules.

This is where things get interesting.

CHAPTER 2

Declan

The smell of bacon gets me moving a bit faster this morning. If I'm not downstairs in a hurry, I'll miss out on seconds. Pack living is great most of the time, but not when it comes to food. Or women, now that I think about it. And you're ranking in the pecking order determines how much you get of both. The alpha gets first dibs, followed by the alpha female. The beta is next. Then the deltas fall in line after that.

I'm the second delta from the top in a wolf pack of seven. That puts me fifth in line for bacon. After nearly two years with this pack, I've only gotten a second serving of meat twice.

Not cool.

Believe it or not, women are easier to come by. Mostly because shifters can't live without protein in their diet. Large amounts are consumed at every meal to maintain enough strength and muscle definition to complete the shift. The process of morphing from one shape to another takes enormous amounts of energy. And we shift back and forth multiple times a day.

Energy is used up on women too. During the hunt and the takedown. But we're usually a bit more selective about when we expend that kind of energy. Something I haven't done in quite a while. I grab my shoes as I double step out of my room. There's no rule that says you can't have breakfast in stocking feet.

It's taken longer to get acclimated to this pack than I was expecting. The alpha of the pack I was a part of in Utah traded me for two females who lived here in Maine. I volunteered, hoping that the change of scenery would be a better fit.

I could never put my finger on why I felt out of place in Utah. I stayed busy and loved being on the construction crew. To me, there's nothing better than long days, physical labor,

and being outdoors. I should have thrived. Still not sure why I didn't. It just always felt like I walked around with this in-the-wrong-place-at-the-wrong-time cloud over my head.

Maine felt like a better fit the moment I arrived. The only problem I'm having is that I have nothing to do all day. My fellow pack members are fish and wildlife conservation officers. And I came here under the assumption that I would be an officer as well. But that hasn't happened yet.

The long-drawn-out process has been grueling. Most of it has been consumed by a state-wide hiring freeze. I barely made it on the list when the state announced a temporary thaw a few months back. Since then, there's been lots of classes and training exercises.

The funny part is that I thought that most of the learning was going to be about wildlife with a little gun and boating safety thrown in for good measure. Maybe some search and rescue on the side. But no, that's not it at all. I spend most of my time being trained on how to deal with humans who are unaware of shifters.

Most of the avid hunters out there know about shifters. They've been in the woods and crossed our path enough that a form of mutual respect has developed. It's a fragile bond. And not all hunters, or shifters, abide by it. But we're all aware of the unspoken bond and hold ourselves accountable to its existence. The rest of the humans out there, the ones we label as recreational, are the wildcards.

Our job description says that we protect the natural resources. That's true. And it is our primary focus. But our underlying motive is to keep humans and shifters separate. That separation keeps the shifter communities hidden and their existence a secret. An outcome that has proven to be safer for everyone.

The kitchen is quiet as I come down the stairs.

"Chloe said you got a letter yesterday." The alpha's gruff voice breaks the silence as I come around the corner.

I drop my shoes next to one of the chairs at the table as I answer. “Morning, Bryce. The mail came after you left to go out on patrol. I’ve passed all the pre-training course requirements and have officially been accepted into the warden program. I’m on the roster for a September start. Should put on the uniform not long after that.”

Bryce walks away from his mate to take a seat at the table. “That’s good to hear. You got moved up. Last time I checked, you were on the schedule to begin next spring. Have you thought about how you’re going to keep yourself busy until then?”

Chloe, the alpha female, approaches the table carrying a carafe of coffee. Beaming with excitement as she walks. “I love the shelves he built in the pantry. I was hoping he could help me redesign the supply closet in the hallway.”

I nod in Bryce’s direction as I reply. “I think I could work that in. Yesterday I started moving all the outdoor gear in the garage down to the basement. There’s enough width to add some shelves inside the back door down there. Organize it by season. Make room in the garage to get the snowplows in and out easier. Hopefully, free up some floor space so that repairs to the ATVs won’t have to be done out in the weather.”

Bryce pours himself a cup of coffee. “That would be nice. Check with Jordan before you make any purchases. I think we have a credit on the books at the hardware store out by the old airfield. Get whatever you need. Build whatever Chloe wants while you’re at it.”

Chloe flutters her eyelashes from across the kitchen at her mate. Smiling as she makes a request. “Can he help me make changes in our bedroom closet too, please? I’ve always wanted shoe shelves.”

Bryce chuckles as he shakes his head. “He can build them out here. No way he’s going in our room.”

Jordan, the pack beta, walks in and takes a seat at the table.

Chloe saunters toward Bryce. Smiling as she drapes one leg across his lap to straddle him. Kissing his neck as she pleads

her case. “Please? Just this once. He only has to come in to measure and do the heavy lifting. I’ll do the rest. And I promise I’ll be good. Or bad. Whichever you prefer.”

Jordan pushes away from the table with force. Bumping the back of my chair before he jerks the refrigerator door open.

Bryce smirks as he gropes his mate. “Got a problem, Jordan?”

Jordan slams the door closed. Planting himself against the counter as he looks out the window past where our alpha is sitting. Avoiding eye contact, he finally replies in a huff. “Was kind of hoping for breakfast without a show this morning. Haven’t gotten laid in a while. Guess it’s been longer than I thought.”

Bryce glares across the room at his second-in-command as Chloe continues her persuasive maneuvers undeterred. He adjusts her position on his lap as Jordan bows his head. His posture slumps ever so slightly.

The alpha can communicate with the members of his pack using mind speak at any time or in any form. While we can only respond when we’re a wolf. Jordan’s sudden change in demeanor tells me that their conversation continued without me. And I’m completely fine with that.

Bryce smiles as he listens to his mate’s quiet whispers. Waiting before he speaks over her. “Jordan? Do you remember if we still have an account at the hardware store in town? Wasn’t there something about an unspent credit? Where was that at? Declan’s going to clean out the garage and build some shelves before he puts on his uniform.”

Jordan nods as he answers in a calmer tone. “The account is still open. But the credit was used last spring when we got the new trailer for the dirt bikes. The account is in my name, Declan. Remind the guy that we get a ten percent discount on all purchases and to itemize the receipt. Check what supplies are in the shed before you go on a shopping spree.”

The rest of the pack walk in and take a seat. Spencer, Willy, and Harris are all deltas like me. Spencer is the only one who

outranks me, and he likes to remind me of it every day.

Bryce nudges Chloe off his lap as he questions the room. “Why isn’t anyone mated yet? I know y’all are getting laid often enough. I can smell it before you come through the front door. Am I to understand that your pecker only works for a bar fuck, but you can’t get it up for a real woman? Is that it?”

The tension in the house has been rising these last few months. A steady and unrelenting pressure that’s building just under the skin where you can’t quite get to it. And so far, nothing we do seems to be able to provide any relief. We’re all feeling it. But no one’s talking about it.

I take a sip of coffee as I glance at Jordan over my shoulder. He crosses his arms in defiance, making it clear that he’s not going to answer the question. Looking around the table, it’s obvious the others aren’t sure what they walked into the middle of. But it’s clear they’re keeping their mouths shut too.

Shit.

I hate being in the middle of situations like this. Bryce is expecting an answer and the longer he goes without one, the worse it will be for all of us.

I bite my tongue and blurt out the first thing that comes to mind. “I can only speak for me when I say that getting it up isn’t the problem. But Howler’s is the only shifter bar in town. And Jordan gets first pick along with all the other betas who happen to be there. What’s left is all right for a quick hookup to take the edge off, but that’s it. The bar scene just isn’t the place to find a suitable mate. Besides, the women who go to Howler’s only want hookups too. And most of them aren’t too selective about who or what they get it from.”

“You agree with that, Jordan?” Bryce asks as Chloe begins putting platters of food on the table.

“Sounds about right.”

Bryce shakes his head as he reaches for a piece of bacon. “Bullshit. I’m not buying a lack of options excuse. There’s got to be more to it than that. Besides, I’ve been mated for over a year. The instinct to claim a mate should be close to

unbearable by now. Are you telling me that there isn't a single suitable woman within a hundred-mile radius of where we sit? Because if that's the case, then I'll begin negotiations with another alpha today. Who wants to go first?"

Everyone remains motionless. Each of us frozen in place. No one wanting to respond. If the alpha makes that call, you have no say in the matter. You pretty much get what you're given.

"No one, huh?" Bryce plants his fist on the table, rising to stand.

Chloe pulls out her chair, rubbing her mate's arm as she coaxes him back down. "Deciding on a mate is a big decision, Bryce. And maybe Declan is right about a lack of options. The wolf packs in this area are spread out over distances greater than your hundred-mile limit. All surrounded by large human communities that are clueless about our existence. What about this? Since this is the first time you're bringing the subject up, why don't you give them a few days to work it out among themselves. If that doesn't work, then we can play matchmaker together."

Bryce makes eye contact with each one of us as he lays down the gauntlet. "Finding mates is now a priority. I don't care who goes first. Just get it done. We go too long with only one female in the pack and the pack comes across as weak. And I can't bring in more males until we balance out. Playtime is over, boys. We have a pack to grow."

The room stays mostly quiet through breakfast. The only conversations going on around the table involve the passing of food or drink. I know that I'm keeping my head down and my voice low to ensure that the subject of mating doesn't come up again. My guess is that everyone else is doing the same.

The mood changed after Bryce announced his mating decree. The tension before wasn't too bad, but it was manageable. There was an ebb and flow to it that changed from day to day, making it easier to navigate. Now, it feels like it's here to stay. And I can tell that I'm not the only one unhappy about it.

I did get an extra piece of bacon this morning. Not a full second serving, but enough to count it as a win. I'll try again

tomorrow.

I double-check that the list for the hardware store is in my pocket before I get in the truck. Took me over an hour to go through the shed in the back. I'll probably organize that after I get the shelves in the house finished. Anything to keep me busy until I put on my uniform.

CHAPTER 3

Skye

Halfway through town, I decide to skip the library. It's true they're holding a book for me. I just don't think I need it anymore. The research phase of my plan is over. Now is the time to act. And I'm excited to be starting today. Just as soon as I sort out a hiding place for these books.

My car turns into the parking lot of Star Hardware and finds a spot as if it's on autopilot. I've never been to this store before. Never been in this town either. This is Wolfdale. The closest shifter town to where I live. And it's just far enough away that no one in my family will see me here.

Technically, I'm already breaking the rules just by being here. But since my quest hasn't officially started, I'm deciding it doesn't count. Besides, the store was chosen for its name, not its shifter location. And I'm believing it's going to be lucky for me.

Holding a small piece of Rose Quartz in my left hand, I take a deep cleansing breath. Exhaling slowly, I whisper my intention for this excursion: *inspiration is waiting around every corner. I am open and ready to receive.* I slide the crystal into my pocket as I get out of the car.

Caw. Caw. A crow calls out from his perch at the edge of the parking lot.

I look up as two more crows fly over me, joining the other one high up in an old tree. The trio cawing in unison. They seem determined to deliver a message today. And the tiny hairs standing up on my neck confirm that I'm the one the message is for.

Three crows together are usually a sign of impending change. What kind of change are they warning me about? Hope it's for the better. I guess the bigger question is, what am I going to have to remove from my life in order for this change to take place?

These crows have my attention. It can't be a coincidence that they were in my backyard this morning as well. I shrug off trying to decipher their message for now. I'll journal about it later when I have more time to go through the details.

Hardware stores have always fascinated me. I have no clue what most of this stuff is used for, but that doesn't stop me from wanting to stroll down the aisles in search of great ideas.

Ten minutes in and no one has stopped to ask if I need assistance. In fact, I get the impression they've gone out of their way to avoid me. It doesn't seem like they're used to people coming in without a detailed list in hand. And definitely not a young woman who seems to be wandering around aimlessly.

So far, all I see are tools and hoses. I'm starting to get the feeling that the hardware store might have been a bit ambitious. I'll give it a few more aisles before I call it quits.

The sign on the corner for the next aisle reads: Hinges, Brackets, & Fasteners.

Hinges sound promising. Maybe I can pull up a plank in the floor like you see in the movies. Make a little door that squeaks when I open it. The squeak is necessary, I think.

Do you need a hinge to remove a piece of wood in the floor? I have no idea. But I let myself get carried away. I'm ready to be swept off my feet by the sheer number of quick and easy hiding place options.

Ideas, here I come.

Oh, wow. I seriously had no clue there were so many different types of hinges. Big ones, tiny little ones, and some so monstrous that they seem impossible to use. Nothing for floors, though. Maybe I'll leave the floor idea as a last resort.

Look how detailed some of these are. Scrollwork designs so intricate they appear too delicate to be metal. While others are nothing more than hunks of raw steel.

I hold one of the big heavy ones in my hand. Listening to the metallic *swish-swoosh* as I fold the hinged piece back and

forth. If I wait long enough, maybe it'll murmur a solution to my problem.

Swish-swoosh. Swish-swoosh.

I stare at the wall of brackets in front of me.

Swish-swoosh. Swish-swoosh.

Booted footsteps approach from my right. The two distinct sounds have merged into one.

Swish-thud, swoosh-thud. Swish-thud, swoosh-thud.

I'm standing in the middle of the aisle, motionless. The rhythmic echo engulfs me as the footfalls get louder and louder. Closer and closer.

I don't move. Imagining that I'm cemented in place as I fold the hinge back and forth in my hand. Listening.

Swish-swoosh. Swish-swoosh.

Wait.

The thud stopped.

I hear someone take an item off one of the hooks behind me. A slight shuffle as they shift their weight from one foot to the other.

Swish-swoosh. Swish-swoosh.

"Excuse me, do you need help with anything?"

A deep velvety male voice causes all the hair on my neck to stand on end. Sending an electrifying jolt up my spine at lightning speed.

I turn around slowly to hide the shiver. Lifting my head to see a very tall and handsome distraction. I mean man. Oh no. The more I see of him, the more the word distraction is right. Broad shoulders, muscles on top of muscles, chocolate brown wavy hair, bright blue eyes you could swim in, and a sinfully innocent smile that could tempt me into doing just about anything.

I hold up the hinge that is still in my hand in an attempt to hide a sudden wave of nervousness. "Do you know what this

is? Do you think I could use it in the floor to make a hidden compartment?”

He raises one eyebrow as he smirks. “That is a hinge. Best used on interior doors. I’ve never built a hidden compartment in the floor before. I guess the hinge would depend on what you were trying to hide.”

“Books. Three for now. A few more may be added later.”

He chuckles. “Oh. You’re serious?”

I exhale heavily to try to force my shoulders to relax. Still holding the hinge as I reply. “Yes. Very serious. I have super nosey sisters. And I need to hide what I don’t want them to see. I was thinking that I could pull up a plank in the floor and hinge it with this thing. You know. Like they do in the movies.”

The good-looking stranger widens his stance as he crosses his arms over his chest. “That’s one idea. A bit on the destructive side. And if your house was built within the last fifty years or so, there might not be enough space in the opening to hide much of anything. Got any other ideas?”

I watch him closely as he talks. He seems attentive, listening to every word while still aware of his surroundings. He holds the space he’s in like he owns it. Defending it as if he claimed it outright. My instincts are telling me he’s a shifter. His height and build are screaming shifter as well. And I’m pretty sure he just leaned closer to sniff me.

That’s a shifter move if ever I saw one.

This day is getting better by the minute. A shifter friend and a hiding place all under one lucky star. I knew I had a good feeling about this place.

Wonder what species of shifter he is? He’s too lean to be a bear. Too tall for a fox. More rugged than the graceful big cats. Their movements are more fluid. Way too big for any of the birds of prey. Could be a coyote. But they usually give off a strong can’t-be-trusted creepy vibe.

I’m going with wolf. And a wolf would be a perfect new best friend.

I glance around at the merchandise as I talk, hoping it will help me avoid staring. “No. My sisters are smart. They’ll look in all the obvious places. I’m still living with my mom until I find someplace permanent. I guess that means the hiding place needs to be temporary as well.”

“Then you need to make the obvious, not so obvious. Hiding something in plain sight is usually better anyway. I suggest you keep it simple. Look at your existing furniture a little closer. There could be an empty void just big enough to hide a book underneath the drawers of a dresser. No one would find it unless they removed a drawer.”

I smile up at the handsome stranger with stars in my eyes. His irresistible good looks could be a problem for me later. But on the team-player front, he’s all that I could hope for. He threw out that idea like it was nothing. I’ve been wrenching my brain for weeks.

“Good thinking. I’m not sure my furniture is antique enough, though. If I overstuff my sock drawer, the socks overflow into the drawer below. I’ll look when I get home. But I don’t think that’s going to work. Got anything else?”

“Well, another possibility would be to add a sheet of wood to the underside of an existing table. It would work as a hidden shelf. Trust me. If it’s done right, no one would know it was there.”

“How would I do that exactly? Are you sure they won’t see it?” I furrow my brow, not entirely sure I understand what he’s talking about.

He turns and walks back up the aisle as he waves with one hand. “Follow me. Let me show you what I’m talking about. A piece of wood and a few nails are all you would need. Anyone can do it.”

This guy is awesome. And technically, I still haven’t broken any rules. Yes, he’s a shifter. But he offered to help me. Turning him down would be rude. Besides, I’m not going to mate with the guy. Just accept his help graciously and see how it goes after that. The fact that he’s sexy as hell is irrelevant.

Uh-oh. Does this mean I'm going to have to tell Ember she was right? I sure hope not. She'd never let me live it down.

I follow behind him. Speaking up to make sure I'm heard. "Yes, please. Lead the way. Any help would be greatly appreciated. I've never done anything like this before. Are you sure your pack won't mind me keeping you away from your work?"

There. I did it. And it's a risk I had to take. Besides, how else does a human let a shifter know that you're aware of their kind without being all up in their face about it?

I might have panicked a little and threw it out too soon. Oh well. There's no going back now. The ball is in his court. He'll either ignore what I said and just be the nice man who helped me in the hardware store. Or he'll reply in a positive way that lets me know that the proverbial door is open for friendship. And if I'm completely wrong and he's human, he'll be offended that I assumed he was a shifter. Either way, I'll have an answer.

He glances over his shoulder as he rounds the corner. Adding a wink and a smile to his reply. "They won't mind. I'm on my own today."

Golly. That smile could get me into a lot of trouble if I'm not careful. Soft. A little higher on one side adding just a hint of playfulness. And that wink. Wow. The combination of the two is sinful perfection.

He stops at a display of various plant stands and shepherd hooks. He grabs a small wooden table and points. "See this wood part here? It's called an apron. If you attach a thin plank of wood across the bottom, the gap inside will become a shelf."

"Oh, I see. But how will I get the books out if the whole thing is covered? I don't need to hide them all the time. Just most of the time. I'll be taking them in and out every day. Probably more than once."

I take the small table from him. Rotating it in my hands as I study the bottom. I think my vanity table is made with an

apron like this. And it's bigger than this. Which is plenty for when I need to add more books.

He leans over to grab one of the flyers off the counter adjacent to us. Folding it in half and laying it across the bottom of the upturned table in my hands as he continues. "You don't need to cover the entire area. Half is more than enough. Then you can slide the books in and out from underneath as often as you like."

"This is great." I beam as I marvel at how easy this idea is. "You are a genius. And I think I have the perfect table in my room already. I just need to look underneath it. So, what do I do next? How do I know what size to use for the wood? Wait. How is this going to work? I can't bring the table to you without someone in my family noticing. And I can't bring a wolf shifter home without getting in trouble—"

I slap my hand over my mouth. I can't believe I said that out loud.

Eyes wide, I begin to backpedal. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean that in a bad way. My family loves shifters. Well, not love-love, but like a lot for sure. And bringing you home wouldn't be bad, just that it would make the hiding of the books rather pointless. And I know it's wrong for me to assume you're a wolf. But you're being nicer than a coyote would be, and you're too small to be a bear. And wolves are better anyway. Everyone knows that."

"Stop." He snickers under his breath with his hand up to cut me off. "No need to explain. I'm not offended. This is an easy project that you can do all by yourself. I'll talk you through it step by step. No furniture moving or sneaking around required."

"Phew." I sigh. Relieved that I didn't ruin our beginning.

His snicker grows to a laugh as he takes the table out of my hands and puts it back with the others. He winks again. "You're cute when you're flustered."

"If you flirt with me, I'll never get this finished. Back to work, Mr. Wolf. Where do we start? And thank you for

helping me. You have no idea how much this means.”

“Introducing ourselves might be a good place to start. I’m Declan Adams, handyman extraordinaire. And you are?”

I smile a big toothy grin as I reply. “Skye Chandler, spy in training. Nice to meet you, Declan. What’s the next step?”

He nods once and begins. Talking while he walks toward the back of the store. “Let’s look at the sheets of wood they keep in stock. You’ll need something thin enough to not be noticeable but not so thin it buckles from the weight. They might not have anything here. We really need to know the size of the opening before we can decide what’s best to use.”

I’m following along as I listen. Buckle? That’s a funny word to use. I didn’t know wood could buckle. What am I going to do if they don’t have the wood?

“Eek!” I shriek.

Swerving to avoid crashing into him, I reach out and grab his arm to steady myself. Once I have my balance, I look up to see him staring at my hand on his arm.

Oh crap. I jerk my hand away as fast as I can.

“Sorry, again. It’s all my fault. I know there’s a *no touching* rule. I really do. It was automatic. I thought I was going to fall over and I just reached out without thinking. You stopped so fast that I lost my balance trying to avoid hitting you. You must think I’m a real mess. I wouldn’t blame you if you changed your mind about helping me.”

Touching is a big deal to shifters. Or not touching, rather. Their senses are way more powerful than ours. Each species has one sense that you could call their superpower. The one they’re the best at. For wolves, it’s smell.

Scent is transferred through touch. They can tell where you’ve been, who you talked to, and what you ate, all from trace elements gathered from just being in a space. Those scents are amplified by touch. And skin to skin contact is usually only allowed for mated couples.

“It’s fine. Accidents happen.” Declan gives his arm a shake as it hangs next to him. Continuing like he isn’t affected. “I said I would help. And I will. How soon can you measure the opening? Do you have a measuring tape?”

“I have a ruler. Will that work? And how do I give you the measurements? Do they have the wood here? Where else can I go that sells thin flat wood?”

I take a step back. Hoping the extra space between us will get me back in his good graces.

“Don’t panic. I’ve got an idea. Come outside with me. You can borrow the measuring tape I have in my truck. Take it home, measure the opening, and meet me back here this afternoon. If this store doesn’t have anything that will work, there might be something in my garage at home.”

We walk out of the store together. Stopping when we get to a full-size white pickup.

“I can do that. What time do you want to meet back here?”

My smile portrays more confidence than I really have. I’ve insulted the guy and broken one of their cardinal rules in less than five minutes.

Declan opens the door to the back seat and begins riffling around in a tool bag on the seat. “The store closes at five. Can you be here by four-thirty? That gives us plenty of time to get you what you need.”

“Four-thirty it is. I’ll be here.” I try to sound enthusiastic. Hoping it will bring back the flirty mood we had earlier.

He holds the tape measure out for me to take. His outstretched hand is suspended between us as he goes over the directions. “Measure the overall length and width of the opening, outside to outside. We’ll figure out the size we need together. Got it?”

I reach up and over the top of his hand to take the tape measure. Replying slowly so that I can focus on being extra careful to not touch him again. “Got it. Overall length and width only.”

My fingers in the pinching position to ensure my success, I pluck the tape measure out of his hand with ease.

Yes. I did it.

Just as I begin to pull away, Declan's hand rolls up and over my hand. Caressing me ever so gently as his hand retreats.

My head flies up to look at him. But he turns away too fast. Closing the back door and getting in the driver's seat before I can formulate any words.

He raises his voice as the truck engine roars to life. "See you at four-thirty."

"Bye." I wave. Unable to find more words.

Oh shit. He touched me back.

His truck pulls away. A cloud of dust settles around me as I watch him fade away. Standing there while a whirlwind of thoughts swirls around in my head.

The scent transfer happened when I touched his arm. Touching again doesn't alter the result. And who touched who doesn't matter either. The scent is the same.

Does this mean that his touching me after the fact has nothing to do with scent transfer? It's got to mean something I'm not aware of. Something significant. But I don't know what it could be. Our family has studied shifters for over a thousand years. I should know this.

Why don't I know what this means?

CHAPTER 4

Declan

Walking into the hardware store, I expected the usual smells of sawdust, machine oil, and fertilizer. It's the blended mix of a little bit of stale and a whole lot of pungent that usually makes me want to hurry up, get what I need, and get out. But today, it's different.

There's a new scent in the assortment today. And it started tickling my nose before I even got out of the truck. Walking through the door, I get the full breath of this intoxicating aroma. It's a female. And so far, I like it.

I'm not excited about being forced to find a mate. But I guess I should put in a little effort since we're both in the same place with no other available males around. And this female has definitely piqued my interest.

Always imagined that I'd be one of the hopeless romantics out there that was holding out for their elusive fated mate. Even joined this pack with that plan in mind. It was a good plan, too, until the alpha took a mate last year.

Tracing this female's steps through the hardware store has me curious about what she looks like. If she's to bump a future fated mate out of my life, she needs to be a knock-out. Judging by scent alone, she's the right age. Probably in her mid-twenties. But if I don't like what I see, I'm out.

Her scent is driving me crazy. Both my wolf and my cock are twitching with excitement the closer I get to her. Her essence is the perfect blend of salty and sweet. And it has my wolf ready to go all in right now.

To my wolf, there are two options for how to live. Mated or not mated. And when you're not mated, sex is purely physical. A carnal need that has to be met with surprising regularity no matter what. Emotions, love, and other feelings of the heart are only felt on the human side of who we are until the mating

bond is sealed. That bond puts all of us on the same team. Man, woman, and wolf.

My wolf is liking how our prowl through the store is starting to resemble a hunt. We haven't had this kind of action in a while. And he's ready to lay down his prey whether we end up mated or not.

I round the corner and instantly like what I see. A slender blonde with curves in all the right places. Hips that I can't wait to hold on to. And a good height for resting her head on my chest when I'm finished with her.

I stop behind her to get closer to her ass. Grabbing something off the rack to make myself appear busy. Probably a good idea to keep my hands busy too. My wolf is feeling touchy-feely.

This close to her, I'm getting more of her scent. She's not a virgin, but she is *pure*. As in untouched by shifters. So far, she seems to be perfect mating material. It also means the situation is delicate.

Once a human female announces through scent that she is open to shifter attention, it becomes a frenzied free-for-all. Then it's just a matter of time before every unmated shifter in town will want a piece of her. But only one can claim her as a mate.

Most guys just want fifteen minutes with a fresh catch. And in a shifter town, the higher you are in your pack, the fresher that catch will be. Pack order is the only thing that matters in this game. But with no one else around to challenge me, it's looking like she might be all mine.

What should I do?

I could walk away like I never saw her and be done with it. Or I could talk to her. See what happens.

Talk. Talk. Touch. My wolf chants in my head. He is a horny little fucker. And right now, I can't say that I disagree with him.

Being this close for too long will put too much of my scent on her. That alone could get her unwanted attention. Amount

alone is not the problem, though. It's what quantity paired with only-one-source implies. That's where problems arise.

Shifters don't ask for a detailed explanation about various scents. If I don't claim her as my mate, they'll interpret the scent of our interaction as her rejecting me. Giving them permission to move in and succeed where I failed. No questions asked. Scent alone dictates what the outcome will be.

Being as pure as she is, she might not know about shifters at all. Most humans in a shifter town have small traces of shifter on them just by going about their normal day in town.

Her having no shifter scent on her at all is causing me to pause for a minute. There's already enough of my scent on her to change how her day goes when she leaves here. Any more and I'm altering the course of her life.

I'll ask her if she needs help. No harm in that, right?

Watching her turn around to respond takes my breath away. Her long silky hair fanning out over her shoulder looks soft enough to touch. The breeze it created is making the hair on my arms stand to attention. And that's making my cock fall in line, ready to salute.

I can't stop staring. She's stunning. Bright blue eyes that twinkle when she smiles. And sexy as fucking hell. If she keeps nibbling her bottom lip like that, we won't make it out of the store.

The conversation is smooth. Effortless. A little weird. But if she wants to hide things from her sisters, that's her business.

Hearing that she knows about shifters is a plus. But I'm not convinced that's enough to want to claim her as my mate yet. I get the impression she doesn't know a whole lot.

Doesn't matter anyway. I'm in too deep. My wolf would revolt if I let her get away now. And besides, I already said I would help.



Well, that was an unexpected trip to the hardware store. I can't believe I just left her standing in the parking lot like that. But getting away from her was the only way to calm my wolf down. He took her touching us as an invitation. And he wasn't convinced when I told him it wasn't.

Me touching her back was a surprise I didn't see coming. Not sure why I did that. Maybe I've already made up my mind about her. Maybe she made it up for me by touching me first. Even if it wasn't her intention, in my world that form of contact implies that she wants to claim me as hers. And I think I like how that feels.

Didn't get a damn thing I needed from the store. I'll wait an hour and go back. Let some of her scent dissipate so my wolf doesn't get all worked up again. Hell, so I don't get worked up either. It's going to take two cold showers and a long run to settle me down before I see her this afternoon.

I could see myself mated to her. Still can't stop thinking about how beautiful she is. The image of her nibbling her bottom lip is burned into my memory bank. And I'm counting down to when I get a taste of that lip for myself.

Mated.

There's a word I didn't expect to be thinking about happily.

When Bryce gave the command, I'll admit that I was a little pissed about the whole thing. Deciding to take a mate should be something you're looking forward to doing. It's a decision you want to make with the person you're considering spending the rest of your life with. Not an ultimatum forced on you by your alpha.

I will say that meeting Skye today certainly has me warming up to the idea of being mated.

The house is quiet when I walk in. Chloe is usually in the kitchen at this time of day. Maybe I can sneak past her undetected. Get upstairs and take a shower before anyone notices a woman's scent on me.

The shower doesn't take the smell of another person away completely, but it does tone it down quite a bit. And it's that

toned-down version that's easier to pass off as an accidental encounter.

“Hold up, there, Declan. I smell a woman on you. Oatmeal Raisin cookies just came out of the oven. Come have one and tell me all about it.” Chloe is talking to me from inside the kitchen, out of view.

I didn't even make it to the staircase. Stupid of me to think I could get past her. Bryce may be the hard-ass alpha who wants everyone to think he rules with an iron fist. But Chloe is the real leader around here. She's smart, keeps herself involved in pack members' lives, and is the true heart of the packhouse.

I step around the corner and stop. Shaking my head as I scrub my hand over my face.

“Holy shit. Looks like you met *the* woman.” Chloe puts her spatula down and grabs a hand towel. “That was fast. Sit. Tell me everything.”

I pull a bar stool away from the island and sit down. Burying my face in both hands, trying to pull myself together before I say anything. Hearing Chloe say “the woman” makes me realize that this is really happening.

Chloe grabs a bottled water out of the refrigerator and sets it in front of me. “Here, drink this. I've never seen you like this before, Declan. Look at you. Paler than a ghost. You're scaring me a little. Start talking or I'm calling Bryce.”

I shake my head in protest as I open the water bottle and take a big gulp. “Don't call Bryce. I'll tell you. Just give me a second.”

Chloe leans against the island opposite me, rapping her fingernails on the counter. The *tick, tick, tick* of her nails hitting the surface reminds me that she's not going to wait long before she enforces her threat.

After a few deep breaths, I begin. Blurting out whatever comes to mind. “This woman was in the hardware store. I didn't get a damn thing I went in for. She blew me away. Absolutely gorgeous. And funny. She knew about shifters. But I swear, I don't think she's ever been around any before. Her

scent was so pure it seemed more magical than natural. I couldn't get enough. She touched my arm by accident and my wolf went fucking insane. I had to get out of there."

Chloe stops me. Her hands are waving back and forth as she asks me to clarify. "Wait. You're all over the place. Why don't you start at the beginning and don't leave anything out?"

I spend the next twenty minutes giving Chloe a detailed account of the entire encounter. Every smell, word said, and impure thought. I started with my wolf being ready for a hunt when we got her scent at the door and finished with me driving out of the parking lot.

Chloe grins as she stands upright. "Wow. You met your mate today. That'll make Bryce happy. Have you thought about what you're going to say when you meet her later?"

"No. I can't get past how good she looked. And all I thought about on the way home was going back to the store to get what I went there for in the first place. Figured I'd take a cold shower or two to clear my head. Maybe go for a run. I'm not meeting her until this afternoon."

I finish the water bottle and grab a cookie off the baking sheet. Staring at it in my hand as I try to process my thoughts out loud. "I always thought I'd wait for my fated mate. Didn't think it was possible to have this strong of a reaction to someone who wasn't fated. Definitely not with a human. But wham. Here she is. Hitting me in the chest like a ton of bricks."

I raise my head. Making eye contact with Chloe to ensure I'm understood. "This woman has knocked me on my ass. I want all of her. I think she's my mate."

The sound of the front door creaking open stops me from saying anything more. I take a bite of my cookie, figuring the conversation is pretty much over anyway. Word will get around the packhouse fast enough without my help. Sometimes it's nice to hold on to your privacy for a little while.

Jordan walks in. Stopping just inside the archway to the kitchen.

I feel him staring at the back of my head. I pop the last of the cookie into my mouth and swivel the barstool around to face him.

“Jordan, is something wrong?” Chloe questions him with concern in her voice.

He doesn't answer. And his cold empty stare continues for a couple minutes before he turns and goes back out the same way he came in. Slamming the door behind him.

I hop off the barstool and start toward the stairs. “I'm off to take a shower.”

Chloe takes another pan of cookies out of the oven as I leave the room. The harsh reality of pack living is expressed in each of the next words she says. “Judging by Jordan's reaction, he's not going to let this go unchallenged. You want this woman? Better make her yours before he forces Bryce to intervene.”

Shit.

Skye's not a fated mate. Just because I'm the one who found her, doesn't necessarily mean I'm the one who gets to keep her. If Jordan liked what he smelled, which I know he did, then he's already planning to push me out of the picture.

He'll want to check her out first, of course. Make sure he likes what he sees before he makes a move. I wouldn't put it past him to follow me, either. He stood there as long as he did to analyze the scent. Not just mine and Skye's, but where we were and what we were doing as well.

Until I claim her as my mate, she's fair game. It won't matter how it plays out. Whether Jordan takes her from me or Bryce makes the decision that she go to a higher-ranking pack member, the outcome will be the same. She won't be mine. And watching her love someone else would be torture.

This is why shifters don't do relationships or have girlfriends. No one is yours until you're mated. If you find someone you like enough that gets you even remotely thinking about being

mated, you seal the deal as fast as you can. Or walk away and don't look back.

When you're dealing with humans, mating doesn't happen that way. And the long transition from meeting to mating usually ends in trouble. Which is why most shifters avoid humans altogether.

I have a decision to make.

If Skye is my mate, then I need to work fast because time is already working against me. If she isn't. Well, then I need to cut ties with her and put her out of my mind as soon as possible.

I'd take her to bed right now if I could. But I haven't made up my mind about her being my mate yet. And I can't quite put my finger on why that is. My rock-hard cock is proof that I can't stop thinking about her. My wolf constantly barking at me to *go back* tells me that he can't either. I have a feeling it's going to take more than a cold shower and a run to calm us down.

CHAPTER 5

Jordan

I climb into my truck, slamming the door behind me. Resting my head on the steering wheel with my eyes clenched, trying to figure out how Declan came in contact with such a delicious-smelling aroma. That scent. It's intoxicating. Heavenly sweet with a hint of salty arousal. The pureness of it is a perfect blend of innocence and seduction.

He was in the same kitchen as me only a few hours ago.

Where the fuck did he go to find her?

I've been looking for a mate since the first time Bryce mentioned Chloe's name. Taking the patrols that no one else wants because they allow me to cover more ground. I'm crisscrossing the damn state like I'm in heat.

Bang! Bang! Whacks on the truck window cause me to jump to attention.

"What the fuck are you doing in there?" Bryce shouts as I lower the window.

"Get in. Declan met a woman, and she smells fucking fantastic."

Bryce opens the passenger door and climbs in as he replies. "I know. Chloe told me with mind speak. Said he's pretty sure she's his mate."

I stare out the windshield smiling. "I haven't seen the woman. But judging by scent alone, I want her."

"I would like to see Declan put up a fight. He's by far the stronger delta. He should've challenged Spencer for the position a while ago. I can't figure out why he's holding back. Maybe this woman will light a fire under his ass."

"Are you telling me to back down?"

Bryce smiles. Shaking his head as he opens the door to exit the truck. "No. A little competition might be good for you two."

For now, I want to see if Declan will step up. Giving him a little room might make that happen. You can make your intention known and still hold back a little.”

I don't respond how I want to. Instead, I bite my tongue as I follow him out of the truck. I change the subject as he approaches the front door to avoid a confrontation. “We need to go through that insurance paperwork. Is now a good time?”

He answers while walking through the door. Looking back at me before he closes the door. “Give me an hour with Chloe. I'll call you when I'm done.”

They have sex every day before lunch. Every chance they can get, really.

I want a woman to have noontime-nookie with. But it's more than that, really. I'm tired of being lonely. And a house full of packmates doesn't fill the void of emptiness.

I want someone to share my life with. Someone to wake up to in the morning and share all my secrets with. A real partner. I want a mate. And I think I might have found her.

CHAPTER 6

Skye

My mind is all over the place driving home. A jumbled mix of a little bit of frustration, a dab of embarrassment, and a whole lot of excitement. I should be trying to figure out what he meant by touching me, but I can't think about that right now. I'm way too excited about meeting a wolf shifter to become best friends with. The fact that he's cute and flirty is definitely a bonus.

My plan is falling into place better than I could have imagined.

I'm forcing myself to not rehash the whole encounter with every *would've*, *should've*, *could've* I can think of. Every moment played out exactly how it was meant to be. Including the little hiccups.

I hold the tape measure close to my chest while getting out of the car. His tape measure. The one my shifter friend is letting me borrow. If I toss it into my bag, it might get damaged. And I don't want anything to happen to it.

My mom and Ember walk out onto the porch as I approach the house. I slide the tape measure into the messenger bag carefully as I drape it over my shoulder.

Caw. Caw.

That damn crow is taunting me, I swear. That's the third time he's made himself known to me. I wish he'd just deliver his damn message and move on.

Mom pays no attention to the crow. She's pointing into the backyard and talking without skipping a beat. That confirms it, then. Since I'm the only one bothered by the crow, the message it has is for me.

"Make sure all the branches are picked up and the yard is cleaned. Aunt Violet and Terra are bringing a load of firewood

in the morning for the bonfire. You and Skye can help Terra stack it over by the shed when they get here.”

I cut across the carport, hoping to slip through the back door without them noticing me.

Ember calls me out. “Don’t sneak off, Skye. I’m not doing all this work by myself.”

“Let me run upstairs to put my bag away and go to the bathroom. I’ll be quick. I promise.”

Our cat Jinx is sitting in the hall outside my room. She’s an orange tabby with bright green eyes.

“Hello, Jinx. Why aren’t you taking a nap?” I walk up to her with my hand out. Ready to fulfill my daily cuddle allotment.

Hiss. She scratches my hand. Then runs off with the hair on her back frizzed out.

That was weird.

Mom’s dominant voice echoing her to-do list through the window gets me back on track. I close the door to my room. I can’t worry about what’s wrong with the cat now anyway. I’m a woman on a mission.

I grab the stuff on the top of my vanity table by the handfuls and toss them onto the bed. There isn’t much there. Just a makeup bag, a brush, a stand-up mirror, and a bottle of perfume. Then I lay the table onto its side so that I can flip it over.

Oh, look. The apron piece in the back is already missing. I never even noticed that before. This is a good idea for a hiding place. And it won’t matter how thick the wood is because there are two aprons. The straight pieces of wood on the inside are probably the real apron. And the curvy pieces on the outside are just for decoration.

No one will ever know that there’s a hidden shelf under here.

I study the bottom of the table for a second to make sure I understand what exactly I need to measure. If I’m going to attach the new piece of wood onto the ledge of these straight

pieces, then I should probably measure this inside part. That gives me three sides to put the nails.

Perfect.

I grab a piece of paper and begin measuring. I also draw a rough sketch of the underside of the table to help me explain what it looks like to Declan. I probably took more measurements than necessary. But I'd rather be safe than sorry.

Satisfied with my work, I slide the tape measure and piece of paper into the side pocket of my bag. Then I set up the vanity table back to how it was before I started. Checking to make sure everything is in its correct place before I head back downstairs.

I catch up to them in the kitchen.

My mom is still reciting the list that only exists in her mind. Standing at the sink rinsing out a coffee mug as she continues. "Aunt Clairabelle and Snowbie will be here the day after tomorrow. The two bedrooms upstairs need to be dusted and vacuumed. Clean sheets put on the beds. Skye, I want you to make sure the hall bathroom is cleaned."

I don't respond in any way. Her calling me by name lets me know that she's aware I've joined the conversation. And I learned a long time ago that when she's mission oriented, it's best to keep your mouth shut. Being a grown adult doesn't alter the backlash from this lesson in any way. She's still my mother.

The summer equinox is in less than a week. The one day of the year when day and night are equal in duration. The moment marks the transition from action to nourishment. And being witches, we celebrate it in a big way.

This day is celebrated by witch covens all over the world at what we call The Fire Festival. There are variations in how the festivities progress depending on where you are or what type of witchcraft you observe. But the exact moment the sun rises to the point in time where it appears to stand still is what we're all waiting for. That moment marks the climax of the growth

season. And the beginning of the sun's journey toward winter. Toward death and renewal.

My mom, Poppy, oversees the organizing of how the Chandlers mark this auspicious occasion. For us, the festival is pretty much the same every year. A family-only gathering held outdoors with lots of food, wine, and laughter.

Most of the day is spent enjoying each other's company and being outdoors. We don't talk about our day-to-day lives or the prophecy. We dance and sing, share our favorite recipes, and show how much we're grateful for each and every blessing in our lives.

The only thing structured about the day is the one ritual we perform at sundown. Four witches representing the four elements stand in their cardinal positions around a bonfire and recite incantations. Our clothes, the time of day, the altar and the offerings placed upon it, and the words spoken are all carefully chosen and placed to worship the strength of the sun. Witches everywhere will do something similar.

The moon phase for this year's equinox will be a waxing crescent. Waxing means that the crescent part is growing toward fullness. It also means that a portion of the moon is hidden by the Earth's shadow. Some believe that secrets are hidden in those shadows. Possibly some treasures too. But only for those brave enough to seek them out. I haven't decided if I'm up for the task this year or not.

The official countdown to this year's fire festival has begun. And my mother is in full attack mode. Which means there better not be a leaf or stray dust particle out of place. Thankfully, this year Aunt Violet's in charge of the food.

Ember stares at me from across the kitchen table. "Why are you so smiley? Just because you didn't hear what all needs to be done outside doesn't mean you're not helping me do it."

"I know."

Figured it's best to keep my answers short to not draw unwanted attention to myself. The faster I move this along, the

sooner I'll be on my way to my secret rendezvous with my new tall, dark, and handsome friend.

“Skye, I need you to drive out to the Trapp Winery later this afternoon. I placed an order yesterday for a pick-up today. It's already paid for.”

I feel my mom watching me as she talks. Drying her hands on a kitchen towel to make me think she's not paying attention. I've fallen into the trap of this tactic before.

I listen carefully. Telling myself to stay calm. Breathe in, breathe out. She is not the person to be acting nervous around.

“I can do that.” Doing my best to reply as nonchalantly as possible.

Don't want to sound too eager. But this is the perfect errand for me to run. I'll drive right past the winery on my way to the hardware store. I make a mental note that I should probably pick up the wine before meeting Declan. Forgetting the wine would not be good. And it would lead to more suspicious looks. Questions too, probably.

The rest of the morning is spent cleaning the house with Ember. We've decided to focus on the inside today. Leaving the outside work for tomorrow since our sister Terra will be here to help us.



The wine is in the trunk of my car. I left the house early to pick it up because I wasn't sure how long it would take at the winery. Now I'm waiting in the parking lot of the hardware store for Declan. I've been here for about ten minutes. He's not late or anything. I just didn't want to miss him.

I decide to practice my breathing while I wait. But I can't concentrate. Thoughts of Declan keep filtering in and out. Why did he touch me? And why did he offer to help me at all? My mom always made it sound like shifters would avoid humans if they didn't already know them. Declan wasn't standoffish at all. He was friendly and approached me first.

I smile to myself when I see his truck turning into the parking lot. He's early too. Really wish I could get a handle on this breathing technique that's supposed to help me remain calm. It sure would come in handy right about now. Declan looks even better now than when I saw him a few hours ago.

I wait for him to back into the spot next to me before I open my door. Smiling as I get out, holding the tape measure and piece of paper to let him know that I'm ready to work.

How is it possible for my knees to be this weak and he hasn't even spoken yet?

I love that he showered before he came. His clothes are different, and his hair is wet. This T-shirt is a better fit. The shade of green brings out the highlights in his eyes. And the way it hugs his body shows off his muscular chest.

I know. It's not a good idea to fall for the shifter friend that's going to help me save the world. But I think it might be too late for that. There are so many butterflies in my stomach right now that I wouldn't be surprised if I lifted off.

This is another one of those situations where that breathing technique would come in handy to help me stay grounded. But I can't stop smiling long enough to relax my body.

Focus, Skye. You just have to stop drooling long enough to explain the notes you made about the vanity table.

CHAPTER 7

Declan

The box I've already moved four times is getting on my nerves. I kick it across the garage floor and through the door to get it out of my way. There's no doubt that this woman has gotten under my skin. I want her in every possible way. Her scent, her body, all of her.

I'm thinking about her so much that I can't concentrate on what I'm doing. And my wolf isn't helping either. He has spent most of the day imagining all the different ways we could claim her.

This woman has invaded my life in the best possible way. I can still feel the touch of her skin on my arm. I want to feel more of her. And her scent is better than candy. That first taste is going to be incredible.

A truck pulls up and stops in front of the open bay door. I do my best to ignore it. Not really in the mood to be social right now. My cock is hard for a woman that's not mine yet. And until I get the release I need, it's best to be alone.

I hear the truck doors close one after the other. Then curse myself for looking on instinct.

Jordan gives me the evil eye as he passes. Not saying anything as he goes into the house. Slamming the door behind him with a loud thud.

I look over at Spencer as I toss an old set of jumper cables into one of the boxes. "What's his problem?"

Spencer laughs as he takes a seat on one of the snowmobiles in the bay next to me. "He's probably trying to figure out how you met an available female so fast. Spill, man. It hasn't even been a day."

Spencer pauses to lean in closer to me. Taking a big sniff as he continues. "Holy shit, Declan. Is this girl a pure? That's why Jordan's pissed. She smells fantastic."

“Stay away from her, Spencer. Besides, it’s not like that. She couldn’t find what she was looking for in the hardware store. A little harmless flirting while I helped her out. Nothing more.”

I assert as much power as I can muster into my words as a warning. Spencer is the only delta in the pack that outranks me. But in this situation, if he wants what I have, then he’s going to have to fight me for it.

Spencer lowers his shoulders. Resting his elbows on his knees to make himself look smaller as he states the obvious. “Except you touched her.”

I fire back a quick response. “No. I didn’t. She touched me by accident.”

Spencer raises an eyebrow as he smirks. “Who did the touching doesn’t matter. The scent transfer is the same.”

I stop sorting the box in front of me and lean against the wall of shelves. Wiping sweat from my brow as I shake my head. “Shit. You’re right. She knew I was a shifter. But somehow, she had no clue about what that really means. It wasn’t her intention to start something. I need to warn her.”

“Why does that sound like you’re seeing her again?” Spencer questions me as he gets off the snowmobile.

I don’t answer. Diverting my eyes, hoping he changes the subject.

“Oh, I get it. You like this girl. Bad idea, Declan. You should have fucked her when you had the chance.”

I stand tall. Ready to defend my actions with every word. “I don’t want to just fuck her. I want to claim her as mine.”

Spencer laughs out loud as he reminds me how dire the situation is. “Jordan is the least of your worries. I can name at least fifteen higher-ranking shifters in town who won’t hesitate to challenge you for her. And that’s just the wolves. I’m sure there are a few bears too. Probably a couple coyotes. Who knows who else? Her scent’s been wafting through town all day. Tickling noses and springing cocks.”

“I get it, Spencer.” I’ll blurt out anything to get him to shut up. “You don’t have to keep going. I’m aware that time is not on my side.”

“Time isn’t the problem, Declan. You should have never let that girl out of your sight. I’ll cut you some slack, though. Bow out early so I can get a good seat for the brawl you’re about to be in. See you later, man. And good luck. You’re going to need it.” Spencer goes into the house laughing the whole way.

Deep down I knew that driving away from her this morning was the wrong move. But I was trying to play it cool to buy myself a little time.

Stupid call on my part.

Spencer’s right. Her scent was driving me crazy before I even stepped foot in the hardware store. It’s definitely caught someone’s attention by now. I wouldn’t even be surprised to find out someone’s already moved in and claimed her.

I leave the garage as disorganized as I found it. I can’t stay focused anyway. I’ll go for a run before I take a shower. Maybe that’ll help me get my head in the game. Besides, it’s almost time to head to the hardware store to meet her. I’ll get there a few minutes early just to be safe. If she’s a no-show, then I’ll know that I blew my chance.



I smile as I approach the parking lot. Not only do I see her sitting in a little silver hatchback, but I smell her too. And my scent is still the only one she’s wearing. The universe has gifted me with a second chance. And I’m not blowing this one.

I remind my wolf that this isn’t a fuck-mission as I get out of the truck. We want her to be our mate, and it needs to happen sooner rather than later. After he settles down, we both agree that the best approach is to be charming. My wolf isn’t sure what that means, so he’s leaving it to me.

I take a step in her direction as I greet her. “You’re early. I’m usually the first person to arrive anywhere.”

Her smile gets bigger as she inches closer. “I had to run an errand for my mom. I haven’t been here long.”

My eyes travel down her body, admiring the view. I wink when I get back to the top, letting her know that I like what I see. “You look cute.”

She looked good this morning in her dress. But there’s something about faded jeans and a white T-shirt that really melts my heart.

She repays the gesture. Winking back as she replies. “So do you.”

“I see the tape measure in your hand. Did you have any trouble with the measurements?”

She unfolds a piece of lined school paper as she moves over to the hood of her car. Laying it out in front of her as she begins to explain. “No trouble. In fact, I drew a little picture to explain what I did. The table I chose is going to work great. The apron piece in the back is already missing. It looked like it was broken off a long time ago. And the apron that is there has a second decorative piece in the front that hangs lower. It’ll hide whatever we put in place with no problems.”

Hearing her say *we* makes me smile.

“What? Did I say something wrong?”

I turn my attention to the piece of paper in front of her as I continue. “You said it perfect. Let me see what you drew.”

I take a few minutes to look over her sketch. She did a good job. I don’t know how accurate the measurements are, but the drawing is detailed and easy to understand. This is definitely something I can work with. Both the drawing and the person who drew it.

“Does it make sense? I wasn’t sure how to draw that part.” She points at one section as she questions me.

I love how she’s leaning into me to see what I’m looking at. I’m breathing in her scent like it’s a drug I can’t get enough of. It’s more powerful somehow. Earlier it was only a taste to get me hooked. Now, it’s flooding my system.

“This is great. I was just admiring your handiwork. I’ve worked with professionals that wouldn’t have done this well. You know, I think I have a piece of wood at home that will work. All you’ll need to get is wood glue and some finishing nails. Do you have a hammer?”

She nods as she points toward the front of the store. “Yes, I have a hammer. Can we get the glue and nails now? I’m not sure I know what finishing nails are. Are they different from regular nails?”

Excellent idea. I’m not ready for this meeting to end. And I get the impression she’s not either.

I fold the piece of paper and slide it into my pocket. Taking her hand as I nod toward the entrance. Lacing our fingers together as I walk. “Let’s go. I’ll show you.”

She follows my lead but then hesitates. Questioning me while looking at our hands. “You’re touching me? I thought I read that touching was only for mated couples.”

“Read? Where would you read about shifters? Are there books out there about us?” I laugh it off. But something about how she said that doesn’t sit right with me.

Her cheeks turn red, and her heart rate increases a little as she responds. “Yes. I read it in a book. But to my knowledge, my family is the only one writing about shifters. And trust me, no one reads them but us.”

I replay her words in my head as we enter the store. She was truthful. There was no deceit detected at all. But *what* she said is sending up warning flags.

I wait before I question her further. Giving myself a few minutes to think about how I want to proceed. We walk through the store hand in hand. Grabbing a small box of nails and a bottle of wood glue on our way back to the register.

I like the feel of her hand in mine. But that feeling contradicts the thoughts that are racing through my mind. My head is telling me to get away from her while I can, my body isn’t so quick to judge, and my wolf is pacing with indecision over the fact that he still wants to get laid.

The guy at the register puts our items in a small bag. “Eight dollars and thirty-nine cents. Cash only today. The card reader is broken.”

Skye lets go of my hand and reaches into her pocket. Pulling out a handful of rocks and a ten-dollar bill. She hands the money to the guy. “Here. I almost forgot that I put the change from the winery in my pocket.”

The clerk passes the bag and the change to Skye.

I walk her to her car, trying to figure out which question I want to ask first.

Skye starts talking while I’m trying to decide. “You went quiet on me. I guess you’re wondering about these books I mentioned. Probably want to know why I’m walking around with a bunch of rocks in my pocket too.”

I can tell she’s nervous. She’s fidgeting with her fingers and avoiding eye contact. My gut’s telling me to keep quiet and let her talk.

“The truth is, Declan, I really like you. But there are some things about me that you need to know. And I figured it was best that you learned those things before I got my hopes up about starting a friendship with you.”

Other than a few nervous cues, I’m having a hard time reading her. And I’m not sure how I feel about that yet. She’s being true. But that doesn’t seem to be the issue I’m having.

I smile at her. Hoping she understands that I appreciate her honesty. I ask my first question and hope it’s an easy one. “Can we start with the rocks? I feel like they’re a safe place to start. Don’t you?”

She smiles back as she reaches into her pocket. Holding out her hand as she lines them up one by one. “These are crystals. This is a black tourmaline. It’s used for protection. Blue lace agate to help me speak my truth. This one’s working overtime today. The pink one is rose quartz to help me remember to do everything with love. A piece of moonstone to remind me to listen to my intuition. And finally, an arrowhead-shaped piece

of obsidian. It's also good for protection. But I mostly carry it because I think it looks cool."

"Why do you carry them? Does it have anything to do with the eagle feather hanging from the rearview mirror in your car?"

She looks at the feather and back at me as she replies. "Not really. But maybe a little. The feather was a gift from a female eagle. Well, at least I believe it was, anyway. She dropped it as she flew over me and it got caught in my hair. I felt like we connected in some spiritual way. Any time I look at that feather, I feel like I have the strength to soar above any problems that life wants to throw at me. And you know. My name is Skye. And eagles fly really high in the sky."

I chuckle under my breath as I comment. "The feather isn't from a shifter."

"That's good to know. I didn't think it was. But I wasn't sure. The only shifters I've seen in person are wolves, bears, and coyotes. But only as people. Not in their animal form. Can I ask you a question now?"

"Yes." I'm curious to hear what she's going to ask, so I answer without hesitation.

She pauses before she continues. "Are you still going to help me? Did I mess it up by overthinking what I should tell you?"

We're staring into each other's eyes. Neither of us looking away. The intensity builds as we stand there. No matter how bothered I am by what I'm hearing, this woman still takes my breath away.

"Can I answer that question after you tell me about the books?"

She nods as she begins. "Fair enough. And here it is. There are a lot of witches in my family. For over a thousand year's we've lived close to shifters. We watch and observe only. Writing down what we learn in books. The goal is to use that information to help shifters the best we can."

Huh. I'm not sure what I was expecting. Whatever it was, that wasn't it. I'm at a loss. Confused about how I'm feeling

now. I want her just as much as I did before. But at the same time, I can't ignore that there are still some warning flags making me doubt pursuing her.

I decide to play it safe by leaving all my options open.

"All right. That doesn't sound too terrible. But I don't understand how you help shifters."

She bites her bottom lip as she grins. "I'm still learning about the watching and observing part. Hint, hint. Since I don't seem to be any good at keeping my distance, I don't think I'm going to be graduating to the helping part any time soon."

I laugh out loud. Breaking the tension that was building between us. And answering the question she asked earlier. "Yes. I'll help you finish. You didn't ruin anything. But I will say that I'm not sure how I feel about you being a witch. I've never met one before."

She reaches out and takes my hand in hers. "Then I'll be your first witch. And you'll be my first shifter."

I look down at our joined hands, liking what she said. "Sounds like a fair deal."

Skye raises up onto her tiptoes as she squeezes my hand. "I can't meet you later. My family's already going to question why I've been gone so long."

"Meet me? For what?"

I'm confused. Is she agreeing to be my mate?

She tilts her head to one side. Responding with furrowed brows. "You're going to cut me a piece of wood that you have at home. You said you'd still help me."

"Right. Yes, the piece of wood. How early can you meet me in the morning?"

My wolf groans out an objection. He doesn't want me to let her out of our sight again. He's ready to claim his mate. At least for the sex part of it anyway. He doesn't care about books. Or witches. Unless they're preventing him from having food or sex. Then he might have a problem.

I mostly agree with him. Her leaving here alone increases the chances of her crossing paths with another shifter. And I wouldn't say no to the sex either. But there's a small part of me that's starting to doubt whether she's the one.

I'd like more time to think about it. Try to decide how much her being a witch bothers me. The mating bond that forms when we seal our connection will illuminate many of these concerns. But it's the ones that will remain that give me pause. And I won't know what they are until we're mated.

“Mornings are easier for me. It takes me about forty-five minutes to get here. Nine is probably the earliest I can arrive. Do you want to meet here again? We don't need anything from the store.”

I perk up at hearing her response. “That's a long drive. Where do you live?”

“My family lives in Eden Brook on the east side, close to the river. I came all the way out here because I liked the name Star Hardware. It reminded me of a shooting star. And I didn't want my sisters to see me and start asking questions.”

Her answer brings a smile to my face. Eden Brook is a completely human town. That's why her scent is so pure. Wolfdale is the closest shifter town to where she lives. This hardware store is the first shifter business you come to as you enter the town.

There's no place in town safer for her to be.

It doesn't matter how good her scent smells or how much of it wafted through Wolfdale. There isn't a shifter around brave enough to venture into Eden Brook to pursue her. And from where we're standing, the town line is only about eight miles up the road.

“Eden Brook is nice. Let's meet at nine o'clock then. That's a good time for me too. This parking lot will work. There won't be anyone here that early anyway.” I look around, then back into her captivating eyes. “The sun's starting to go down. Do you have plenty of gas for the drive home?”

I don't want her making any unnecessary stops on the way home. I need her to be out of Wolfdale as soon as possible. And preferably not stepping foot out of her car until she's in her own driveway.

"I have a full tank. Filled up yesterday. And you have the paper with my measurements?"

I walk her to her car. Opening the door to let her in as I point to my front pocket. "Yes. Got the paper right here. Drive careful."

She gets in and starts the engine. "See you in the morning."

I open my truck door as I wave goodbye. Sitting there for a few minutes to watch her car drive away. I feel better the farther away from me and the closer to the town line she gets.

This morning I felt great about possibly finding my mate. Now, I have mixed emotions. I'll sleep on it and see how I feel in the morning.

CHAPTER 8

Skye

I clench my eyes closed trying to force myself to meditate. I shift and shuffle back and forth searching for a comfortable spot, but it's not working. A rock is poking me in the back no matter what position I choose. And the ground feels harder today. Colder and unforgiving somehow. I swat another leaf out of my eyes. That's the fourth one to fall on my face since I laid down.

Maybe I should call it quits for today.

Clearing my mind seems rather pointless today anyway. Declan has consumed my every thought since I met him. And I don't want to stop thinking about him, not even for a second. I've never fallen this hard for a guy before. I still feel the sensation of his hand holding mine. And it feels amazing. I want more of his touch. I want more of him.

Caa. Caa. The crow calls from the edge of the woods. Again.

I jump up, determined to find the crow this time. My heart is pounding as I search the foggy tree line for any sign of this annoying bird. But I don't see him anywhere.

His call is different today. Screeching with a slight undertone of determination. Almost like it's verging on being a warning. Does this mean the message has changed? Or is he growing impatient because I'm not listening?

"Hello, Parahim. It's me, Skye. Is the message the crow is delivering from you? Can you help me decipher what it is?" I speak to the morning sky. Letting my words get picked up by the breeze.

The house is quiet as I sneak out the back door to go meet Declan. My mom sleeps in most days, so I don't have to worry about her. And since Ember isn't lurking close by, I'll assume the coast is clear for a clean getaway.

Lately, Ember and I have sort of come to an unspoken agreement. I'll stay out of her business as long as she stays out of mine. She hasn't been holding up her end of the deal as much as I'd like her to. And if I weren't knee-deep in my own stuff, I'd probably be more interested in what she's up to. But for now, it doesn't interest me.

I set my intention before the hardware store comes into view. Clearing my mind of any negative thoughts to allow for a positive outcome. I set an intention yesterday. And look what came about because of it.

Declan's truck is already there when I turn into the parking lot. I like how the low-hanging fog adds an air of mystery to our rendezvous.

He gets out of his truck as I turn my car off. Greeting me with a piece of wood in his hands as he approaches my door. "Morning."

I stand with my door open. Returning the greeting. "Hello. Have you had coffee yet? I stopped at a bakery I passed on my way. Picked us up a coffee and a pastry."

He's acting different today. No flirty smiles or eye contact. Very serious. And giving off a weird stay-away vibe.

I'm not sure what changed. Maybe he's just having a bad day. I decide to play it cool. Act normal until I get more information.

I reach in and grab a coffee for him and the bag. Holding out the bag as I describe its contents. "I wasn't sure what you'd like, so I got a raspberry-filled croissant and an almond croissant. Are you feeling nutty or fruity?"

He leans the piece of wood against my car tire and takes the bag. "Thank you. I'll have the raspberry one."

I pass his coffee to him and grab mine. Closing the door to join him.

We eat quietly. Yesterday he couldn't keep his eyes off me. Today he's not looking at me at all. This doesn't seem like the same person I met yesterday. And I'm not sure what's changed.

I search my brain for something to talk about. Blurting out the first thing that comes to mind. Hating that it feels forced.

“I see you have the piece of wood.”

He glances at the wood on the ground as he pops the last bite of pastry into his mouth. Answering as he chews. “Yes. Here it is. Cut to the size you need. You should have no trouble. A thin line of wood glue along the edge, then nail it in place with the finishing nails you got yesterday.”

I smile as I set my coffee cup on the hood of my car. Picking up the wood to set it in the back seat as I reply. “Thank you. I really appreciate your help.”

“You’re welcome. And thank you for breakfast. I guess we’re done here. Maybe I’ll see you around sometime. Bye.”

He gets in his truck and leaves without another word.

I stand there confused.

And a little heartbroken.

What the hell just happened?



I let myself cry during the drive home. But then I wipe my tears and get on with trying to figure out what went wrong. There must be a way to fix this. I mean, seriously. You don’t go from flirting and holding hands to whatever that was overnight.

We weren’t dating or anything. But I think I deserve an explanation.

There’s no one around when I get home. I get the wood upstairs and nail it to the underside of the vanity table in no time. The journals fit beautifully. There’s plenty of room. I could fit ten to twelve more books if I needed to.

Outside I begin picking up branches and cleaning up the fire pit area. We haven’t used the backyard since last fall. And there are still some limbs scattered around from the ice storm we had a few months back.

Dragging branches and carrying handfuls of sticks is helping me get out my frustration. I try breaking a few tree limbs to make me feel better, but it's not enough. I kick the ground and throw some rocks too. But that doesn't work either.

The breathing exercises have completely abandoned me today. I can't center myself enough to begin. I'm too wound up. And I can't stop thinking about Declan.

Why was he acting so strange this morning?

I've replayed every second spent with him. Every smile, every wink, every touch. He flirted with me just as much as I was flirting with him. Nothing about what happened this morning makes any sense.

I wonder if it has something to do with him touching me after I touched him by accident. No, that can't be it. If that were the case, then why did he hold my hand later?

Man, I wish I could ask someone about this. Ember would know what I should do. She probably knows what his touch meant. But there's no way to ask the question without giving her the reason as to why I'm asking. And I'm not ready for my family to know about this yet.

Aunt Violet and Terra show up after lunch. Terra helps Ember and me stack the firewood near the firepit. I keep cleaning the yard with my head down. Opting to ignore their conversation as much as I can because I have my own mess to deal with.

The more I think about what happened this morning, the more upset I get.

The thing is, I don't even know how to find Declan to talk to him about this. Wolfdale is a big small-town that spreads out pretty far. A downtown center with a few stores surrounded by large, forested areas that hide pack houses and bear dens.

If I knew where he hung out, I'd go there. Walk right up to him and demand some answers.

Wait. Now that I'm thinking about it, there is one place in Wolfdale that shifts frequent on a regular basis. And with

today being Saturday, it's almost a guarantee that he'll be there.

I'll be taking a big chance by going there. But after today's debacle, I think it's a risk worth taking.

CHAPTER 9

Declan

The rest of the pack is already at the dinner table when I walk in. I pull out my chair and take a seat just as the first platter is being passed around. Perfect timing. I worked up an appetite finishing the shelves in the garage this afternoon. I'm starving.

I feel eyes on me but ignore it. Dinner is the only thing I'm interested in at the moment. I'm so hungry that I decide to go ahead and spoon a second scoop of mashed potatoes onto my plate. The gravy will come around next. And now, I'm ready for a double serving of that too.

"Declan, is everything all right?" Chloe is the first to speak.

"Yes." I don't look up. Answering as I pass the bowl of potatoes to Spencer.

I know what she's asking me about. But I'm not in the mood to talk about it. Especially in front of the whole pack. I regretted my actions this morning more than I'm willing to admit. And since there's no way to go back and change the outcome, I don't see the point in rehashing where I went wrong.

My wolf has snarled at me all day about it. The impulsive stunt I pulled caught both of us off guard. Him more than me judging by the bad attitude he's had since it happened. He nearly forced a shift driving away from her. And at the time, I only had two choices: get him under control to avoid a wreck or turn around and go back for her.

I chose to avoid the wreck.

Nothing about my decision to let her go was planned. I trusted my gut in the moment and followed through without giving it another thought.

The remorse set in before I made it out of the parking lot. But it was too late. By the time I got my wolf under control enough to turn around and go back, she was gone.

Bryce takes over the conversation with more direct questions. “Where’s your mate, Declan? I was under the impression I’d be meeting the newest member of the pack today. What was her name again?”

I take a swig of the beer in front of me to give myself a few seconds to think about how I want to answer. Responding when I put the bottle down. “Her name’s Skye. But she’s not my mate. I let her go back to Eden Brook alone.”

The room is eerily quiet as I respond to the alpha. They’re watching me instead of fixing their plates.

Bryce continues in a tone I can’t read. “I thought she was perfect. What changed your mind?”

“At first, she was perfect. A single, good-looking young woman needing help in the hardware store. I willingly obliged. But the more I talked to her, the more I realized she didn’t know as much about shifters as she led me to believe. Then she started talking about being a witch. Seemed weird enough that I decided she’s not the one. So, I backed off.”

I reach across the table to grab the platter piled high with fried chicken. Everyone stopped passing the food around. And I’m ready to eat. I see Bryce and Jordan nodding at each other out of the corner of my eye as I put the platter back. I remind myself that what they make eyes at each other about is none of my business.

Chloe keeps the conversation going. “A witch? I wasn’t expecting you to say that. I don’t think I’ve ever met one before. Kind of surprised they live in Eden Brook. I thought they’d live someplace less suburban and more woodsy.”

“Knowing what I know now, Eden Brook makes sense. She said they lived on the east side, close to the river. That location is centrally located to three of the largest shifter communities in this part of the state. Wolfdale being the closest.”

Bryce rejoins the conversation. “Why is being near shifter communities important?”

I take a bite of a crispy drumstick. Licking my lips as I answer. “Because she said that they spend most of their time

watching shifters so they can help them. She implied that she was only supposed to observe from a distance. That she was breaking the rules by being in Wolfdale. She didn't go into detail, and I didn't ask. I figured that being from Eden Brook explained why her scent was so pure."

Bryce picks up his beer. Pausing before he takes a drink to ask more. "How are they going to help shifters?"

"Don't know. I asked, but she didn't answer. She did bring up these books that her family keeps. The way she talked about them implied there's more than one. They documented what they've learned about shifters for generations. All shifters. Not just wolves."

Bryce puts a piece of chicken on his plate as he continues. "I'd like to know more about her and these books. Can't figure out yet if I'm concerned or just curious. Any way for you to get in touch with her?"

"Nope. Not unless I track her all the way to her front door."

Bryce doesn't respond.

I look across the table at my alpha for the first time since I sat down. He's staring at me with a pointed expression.

I question him directly. "You seriously want me to track her through the middle of Eden Brook? Isn't Eden Brook off-limits to shifters?"

Jordan chimes in, eager to please. "I'll do it. Wear my fish and game uniform and drive a work truck. Knock on the door and tell her I'm following up on a bear sighting in the area."

I cut my eyes at Jordan as I stand. Backing away from the table to take up a more offensive position.

Bryce stands. Alpha power is woven through every word as he speaks. "That's far enough, Declan. Sit back down and eat. No one's going to Eden Brook. Including you, Jordan. We'll let it slide for now. If she's forming a rebellious habit of being near shifters, then it's only a matter of time before she shows up in Wolfdale again."

The conversation dies out after that. Everyone puts food on their plates and eats before all the food is gone. Eventually, the question of whether we should go to Howler's tonight comes up.

It is Saturday night. Just like any other shifter bar around, that usually means there will be a good crowd. After a heated back-and-forth discussion over transportation, the decision to go is made. Bryce's new find-a-mate initiative may have influenced that outcome a little.

I'm not really in the mood to go out so soon after rejecting Skye. But maybe a little bar action will help clear out the thoughts of her that have decided to take up permanent residence in my mind.

CHAPTER 10

Skye

Our work is done. The yard is officially ready for the fire festival later this week. That means Ember and I are finished for the day. And since my mom went shopping with Aunt Violet, I can spend as much time as I need getting ready for tonight without worrying that I'll get caught.

I towel dry my hair as I lay a few different sundresses across my bed. I've never been to a shifter bar before. Not sure what the dress code is. I want to be comfortable but cute.

"Where are you going?" Ember's head appears in my doorway. Watching as I look through my options.

"Going out. There's a guest speaker at the library. He's a big-time psychologist who's done a lot of research on brain waves and the subconscious mind. You should come. Which dress do you like better?"

If the word *library* doesn't make Ember lose interest, then *psychologist* will. Anything science related makes her run for the hills. It's not a complete lie, either. I am going out. And there is a guest speaker at the library. I'm just not going to be there to see him.

Ember points at the dresses as she replies. "I can't go to the library, remember? Permanently banned and proud of it. Don't wear the orange. It's way too bright. I'm not sure about the pink, either. Way too innocent. Kind of gives off a self-sacrificing vibe, like you're trying too hard. Go with the blue. You'll come across as both smart and confident. You'll fit right in."

How could I forget that she was kicked out of the library for pretending to teach two of her tenth-grade classmates how to cast a spell that would eliminate homework? The librarian didn't think it was funny. And when she came down with a case of shingles a few days later, Ember's witchy deed was

blamed for it. The librarian retired several years ago, but the ban remains to this day.

I start putting the other dresses back in the closet. Responding as normal as possible to not let my excitement show. “Thanks. I like the blue one too. Will you leave the back door unlocked, please? I don’t know how late I’ll be.”

“Sure thing. Have fun. Not.” Ember’s voice fades as she disappears down the hallway.

Getting her to back off without suspecting I’m up to something was easy enough. All I need to do now is get ready to go.



Only a few empty parking spots are left when I arrive at Howler’s. I’m backed into one that gives me the best view of the front door. I looked at all the vehicles twice already. I don’t see any trucks that resemble the one Declan was driving.

I decide to stay in my car for a little while. Watch some of the people come and go. I wasn’t sure what time to get here. The sun hasn’t been down long. Maybe it’s too early and he’s not here yet.

Sitting here in the quiet car makes me realize that I didn’t get a visit from a crow this afternoon. Ember and I were outside most of the day without a crow in sight. Not sure if I’m bothered by that or not. Maybe the message wasn’t for me after all.

Oh man, some of the shifters are more than just good-looking. They are downright irresistible. I feel a little guilty about not telling Ember where I was going. She would love sitting in this car with me right now.

I’ve sat here long enough that I think I can tell the different shifter species apart. Seeing them up close like this, the differences seem obvious.

The three that just got out of that big red truck are bears. No question about it. Look how massive that one guy’s chest is. He’s huge.

I've noticed that the bears seem to like to wear a full beard. Now that I'm paying attention, facial hair is worn by most of the shifters. I don't think I've ever seen one that was clean-shaven. Wonder why that is?

It never occurred to me to bring something to take notes. I think I'll put an extra journal in my glove box for future scouting missions. This place is a treasure trove of information. I hope I remember all of it.

Whoa. What kind of shifter is that guy? He's muscular, but his head is tiny. And the foxes are bigger than him too. Is he my first bird of prey? I think he is. But which bird is he? I'll need to see a few more before I'm willing to take a guess.

So far, I've only seen men going into this place. And a lot of them. Where are all the women shifters? I thought it would be more of a mixed crowd. And I haven't seen one mated couple either. Do they not come here on date night?

I've been here for about an hour. Shifter-watching has made the time go by quickly. Kind of relieved that no one has noticed me sitting in my car. Not sure if this is the place I want to meet so many of them all at once. I'm smart enough to know when I'm out of my element.

Maybe Declan's not coming tonight. Maybe he doesn't come here at all. Since I'm learning a lot about shifters that I didn't know before, I'll wait another hour before I call it quits. I'd hate to leave and then worry I missed him.

The thought has crossed my mind that maybe he's already inside. But that theory is going to have to go untested. I'm not brave enough to walk in there without solid confirmation. If Ember was with me, definitely. All by myself, no way.

I notice two white trucks that look exactly like the one Declan was driving pull in and park. Three wolf shifters get out of the first truck, and two get out of the second. And Declan's one of them.

Looks like he's with his pack. I can't tell if any of the others are an alpha. I guess that would depend on if he was mated or not. One of them could be a beta. But you can't tell by how

they're walking. No one seems to be clearly in the lead. They're all in one group.

Oh man, Declan looks good. My heart flutters every time I see him. He's dressed for a night out on the town. Those tight jeans fit him like a glove. And that button-down shirt really accentuates his broad shoulders. I like how the sleeves are rolled all the way up to his biceps.

I watch them cross the parking lot. I want to wait for them to enter the building before I get out of the car. Part of me feels like it's important to walk through that door alone. Like I'm being initiated into a club or something.

Once they're all inside, I open the car door and get out. Following in the pack's footsteps with my head held high.

CHAPTER 11

Declan

Howler's is drawing a crowd tonight judging by how many vehicles are here. And that's a good thing. The sooner I get this woman out of my system, the better. I've never met anyone who had this kind of effect on me. I thought that walking away from her would be the end of it. But memories of her refuse to leave.

Even my wolf is convinced Skye's scent is in this parking lot right now. We both seem to be smelling her everywhere we go. I can't seem to be able to escape her.

I ignore my wolf for now. Just trying to stay focused on getting through the door. I'll deal with him after I get a beer in my hand.

Jordan gives me a strange look as we approach the entrance. Scanning the parking lot behind us as he opens the door. I blow off the unusual vibes he's throwing my way and walk into Howler's behind Harris and Spencer.

Two steps in the door and I start to hear the chatter. Voices and comments from every direction. And they're all talking about the same thing: Skye.

There's a pure in the parking lot.

Hey, Declan. Why does that pure have your scent on her?

*Who the fuck decided we have to wait for her to come inside?
I want my turn now.*

Fuck!

I turn around. Connecting eyes with Jordan just as the door behind us opens. The crowd closest to the entrance parts as Skye's scent announces her arrival. Every hard-up shifter in the place watches her walk in wearing a tiny blue dress and smiling like it's her lucky night.

Jordan shouts as I charge toward her. “Get her the fuck out of here, now!”

I barrel past him and right into Skye. Using my body to push her out the door backwards before it closes. Covering her scent with mine as much as I can while I hold her against my chest. Her feet lift off the ground in the process.

“Declan, stop. What are you doing?” Her shouting voice is muffled against my chest as I step off the sidewalk.

Once we’re on the gravel, I put her down. Turning her around to guide her to the truck by her arm while still keeping her close to me.

“What are you doing, Declan? I just got here.”

I jerk the truck door open as I shout. “Get in. Now.”

She reluctantly climbs in the truck with me right behind her. I push her across the seat to the passenger side as I slam the door closed.

“Fucking hell!” I bang my fist on the steering wheel, trying to think of what to do next.

My wolf is going ballistic. Snarling and panting at the same time. He can’t figure out which we’re preparing to do first: fuck or fight. And I need to keep him under control to ensure we do neither.

“Declan, you’re scaring me. What’s going on?”

Skye’s soft voice beside me brings me back to where I am. And who I’m with. I look over to see a lone tear on her cheek. She’s biting her lower lip to stop it from quivering.

She’s beautiful. I regretted walking away from her this morning. And here she is in front of me. It’s not how I would have planned a second chance. But I’ll take it.

I scrub my hand across my face hoping it helps to calm me down. Glancing over my shoulder at the door to Howler’s before I let out the deep breath I’ve been holding.

“Skye, what the hell were you thinking? You should have never come here.”

I see her reaction turning defensive before I finish the sentence. I probably could have worded that better. Approached this from a different angle.

“I came to see you. Why are you so mad? You’re not acting like the same guy I met at the hardware store. I think we should go back inside.” She puts her hand on the door handle as she finishes talking. Staring at me with wild eyes. The vein in her neck visibly pulsing.

My wolf detects fear coming from Skye that wasn’t there before. And he doesn’t like it one bit. He’s ready to fight off the threat just as soon as I let him out.

I force my wolf to calm the fuck down. Explaining to him that it’s us that she’s now afraid of. And that he needs to let me be the one in charge of getting the situation under control.

Smiling softly in an attempt to make my delivery more pleasant, I begin. “Please, stay in the truck. If you get out, I won’t be able to protect you. Can we just sit here for a minute, so I can figure out how to fix this?”

She leans closer to me as she responds. “Protect me from who? I don’t understand. What is there to fix?”

Crash! A beer bottle explodes on the sidewalk near the entrance to Howler’s.

I look back to see a crowd beginning to form. About twenty shifters so far. I’m sure more will be coming out to join in the fun. Most are wolves. But a couple coyotes and at least one bear is in the mix.

A few of these guys are acting like they’re ready to jump. Eager to challenge anyone who gets in the way of claiming tonight’s big prize: Skye. The rest just want a front-row seat to watch how this plays out.

“I thought you said you knew about shifters? If you knew, you wouldn’t have come to a shifter bar alone. Whatever your intentions were in coming here tonight, I’m guessing these aren’t the consequences you were expecting.”

“I know plenty. I came to talk to you. The other two times we met you were nice and flirty. But today you were acting weird.

I wanted to know what changed.” She pauses to look at the growing crowd, then asks. “What are those guys doing over there?”

I glance over my shoulder again before I look back at her. Answering as honestly as I can. “They want you. And for someone who claims to know about shifters, you don’t know a whole hell of a lot.”

Skye cocks her head to one side as she pouts out an answer. “I know plenty. But why don’t you explain it to me anyway, since we don’t seem to be going anywhere.”

“You see, when a female walks into a shifter bar, she’s shouting a giant *hell yes* that she’s available for a fuck on our terms. And right now, each one of those males over there is trying to decide how much of a fight they’re willing to put in to winning you.”

She looks at the crowd again while trying to appear more confident than she really is. Her words not matching the fact that her eyes are darting around the cabin of the truck searching for the safest spot. “Why would they fight? I’m with you.”

I shake my head. Stressing the importance of every word I say. “You’re not *with* anyone until you’re mated. And unfortunately, this is one fight I can’t participate in. Well, I could, but it wouldn’t be to win you for myself.”

“You wouldn’t fight for me?” Her voice cracks as she talks. Lowering in tone as her pulse quickens. The fear has taken root.

I exhale heavily, hoping it softens my words. “Anyone, regardless of species, who outranks me gets first dibs. There’s nothing I can do about it.”

I pause to survey the crowd one more time. Continuing to explain to ensure she understands the situation we’re in. “You’re what we call a *pure*. And that makes you highly desirable. The fight wouldn’t just be male against male. It would be pack against pack. It could even escalate to a species

war if it went on long enough. My participation would be in support of one of my packmates. Probably my beta.”

I point toward the crowd over my shoulder.

She looks in the direction of where I’m pointing, but the crowd of shifters is now too many for Jordan to be identified. The more she hears, the more her heart rate increases. But she’s still listening. And that’s a good thing.

She asks a question quietly. “I’ve never heard the term *pure* before. What does it mean?”

“Your scent is pure. Meaning you’ve never been touched by a shifter. Not sexually, anyway. You’re not a virgin either, but we don’t care about past encounters with humans. Until you met me, your scent was completely pure. No shifter contact at all. That makes you new territory that hasn’t been conquered yet. Whatever species pops your shifter cherry will forever be your species of choice. Our endorphins are different than humans. And once you’ve had a taste, you’ll be hooked. It’ll be an addiction you’ll never be able to shake.”

She nods as if she understands. Replying simply. “Unless we mate, right?”

“If you don’t mate with the first shifter you have sex with, you’ll never be mated. The scent of every sexual encounter you’ve ever had is carried with you always. And a male shifter wants the scent of the woman he’s going to spend the rest of life with to be as clean as possible.”

“Oh, that explains why I didn’t see any female shifters going inside.”

I chuckle. “The rules for females are different. Most alphas won’t let them anywhere near a shifter bar. They’re too valuable.”

Crash! Another beer bottle explodes against the gravel.

I look again to see Jordan with his back turned to me. He appears to be keeping the crowd back. Being the highest-ranking shifter over there, he won’t be challenged. That buys Skye and me a little time. But I can’t tell if Jordan’s seriously helping me out or playing a fucking mind game.

Skye scurries across the seat and climbs onto my lap. Wrapping her arms around my neck as she straddles me.

I act on instinct. Grabbing her hips to pull her tighter against me. Burying my nose in her neck as I whisper into her ear. “What are you doing, Skye?”

“Maybe if we look like we’re making out, they’ll go back inside.”

I slide my hands under the hem of her dress. Squeezing her ass as I hold her in place. “Won’t work. But do whatever you want. I like it.”

“Are you sure it won’t work?”

I chuckle against her neck as I respond. “Positive. Our actions are scent driven. We can smell every deed done and not done. Every touch, every lick, every juicy penetrating moment has a distinct aroma attached to it. A perfect blend of what you were doing and who you were doing it with. Trust me. You’re forever scent-marked by every action you take.”

Holy fucking universe. This woman feels better than I imagined. I love how soft her skin feels. And this ass. I can’t wait to get it out of these clothes and laid out in front of me.

She pulls away from my chest to lean against the steering wheel. Putting just enough distance between us to look me in the eye. “Are you saying that we need to either have sex or mate? And we need to do it right here, right now?”

“Something like that. Sex is the obvious solution. But the aftermath for you is a bitch.”

“How so?”

“You’ll be harassed daily. Every unmated shifter will want to have a turn with you. They’ll be persistent in their pursuit. You won’t be able to escape. You will never be anything more than a good-time girl.”

Skye’s back to biting the inside of her cheek. But we do seem to be making progress.

She furrows her brow as she relaxes ever so slightly. The concern in her voice is waning. “Why are your eyes glowing?”

I've heard about glowing eyes before. But I've never seen it happen."

I wrap my arms around her waist and pull her close to me as I moan out a reply. "Glowing eyes means I'm horny as hell. And you wiggling your ass on my cock isn't helping."

She bites the inside of her cheek. Which gets my attention because it's different than her usual lip nibble. And the lone tear I saw earlier is now joined by a steady trail of friends.

"Talk to me, Skye. Tell me what's making you cry."

She diverts her eyes as she tries to put more space between us. Speaking so softly that I can barely hear her. "I get it now. You like me enough to want to protect my reputation but not enough to want me as your mate. It's why you left the way you did at the hardware store this morning. You chose the cut-and-run option. I'm such an idiot."

Skye lifts her leg to move off my lap.

I hold her in place with one hand as I caress her cheek with the other. "Skye, it's not like that. I mean, it is, but not how you think. Will you please let me explain?"

Crash! Another beer bottle explodes on the perimeter of the parking lot, causing both of us to look.

"Can we go someplace else to have this conversation, Declan? I can't think with them watching us."

Skye crawls back to her side of the truck. And this time, I let her go.

"We can't. This isn't my truck. I don't have the keys."

She points at her silver hatchback parked on the other side of the parking lot. "Can we take my car?"

"Yes. Good idea. We'll get out of the truck on your side. Stay close to me and go as quickly as you can. Got it?"

She reaches into a small bag and pulls out the keys. Handing them to me as she responds. "Got it. You drive."

Keys in hand, we exit the truck and make a run for her car.

I know we're in the clear the second we pull out of the parking lot. Unfortunately, the win is only temporary. And I can only keep her safe for so long.

We're not mated. And the long line of shifters wanting to get at Skye is just starting to form. Half the town will be hunting for her by sun-up. That's only counting the ones from the town of Wolfdale. Shifters from two other towns frequent Howler's. News of a pure hanging around will travel fast.

Right now, Jordan's my biggest threat. It may look like he's helping me protect Skye. But my gut's telling me that he's at the front of the line. Now that he's had a good look at her, he'll want her for himself.

I'm not sure what my chances are of claiming her as my mate tonight. She's been on quite the roller coaster ride of emotions. It could go either way. If I'm being honest with myself, then I'm leaning more towards a *not happening* outcome.

On the plus side, I have the second chance with Skye that I wanted. And this time, I'm not going to fuck it up.

CHAPTER 12

Jordan

Another night spent going to Howler's to compete over a whole lot of nothing. Everyone knows that you don't go to a shifter bar if you're looking for a mate. And nameless bar-fucks don't do it for me anymore. But since Bryce is watching, we all have to play our part to put on a good show.

I think I catch the slightest hint of Declan's mystery witch as we're crossing the parking lot. My wolf seems to think she's close by as well. But judging by Declan's reaction, he doesn't agree.

Maybe it's wishful thinking since I've been ordered to not track her down.

The second I open the door to Howler's, I learn I'm wrong. She's here all right. And everyone in the place knows it.

Seeing her for the first time is throwing me for a loop. Holy shit, she's breathtaking. Her scent is fantastic by itself, but it doesn't match her beauty at all. The two together make her a complete package. The future mate everyone here imagines for themselves.

No one's going to waste a fuck on her. If they get her alone, they'll claim her. Mark my words. There's absolutely no doubt that she's going to be someone's mate. And soon. The question is: who will she be mated to?

I know now why Declan hesitated with her. This woman is the real deal. And only a real man is worthy of her. But winning her is the easy part. Then you get to spend the rest of your life trying to be the man she deserves. I'm even starting to question whether I'm man enough myself.

My wolf is furious that I'm letting Declan take the lead on the rescue mission. And I agree, this was probably my only chance at winning her without generating any bad blood between Declan and me.

There's not a lot I can do about it now. He's the one sitting in *my* truck with her. While I'm standing out here holding back a bunch of sweaty knuckleheads. I bet not one of these guys knows the first thing about how to treat a real woman, let alone mate with her.

Declan owes me big time for this.

Spencer walks outside. Handing me a beer as he nods toward the truck behind me. "What's the deal, man? Why are you out here with these yahoos instead of in *your* truck with the hot blonde?"

I take a long draw of the beer. Forcing myself to not look over my shoulder at the truck as I reply. "That's a good question, Spence. I'll let you know when I figure out the answer."

This is going to be a long night.

I survey the crowd that's gathering in front of me. Sending Spencer back inside to get me another beer. The one coyote isn't anything to worry about. He's clearly in over his head. I think the delta that's with him is using this as a teaching moment. But I could be wrong.

The bear in the back and at least two of the delta wolves out here could challenge Declan and it'd be a fair fight. But I'm pretty sure they won't make a move with me standing here.

The one wolf that's staring me down is a beta like me. He's got me a little worried. Don't know a lot about the guy or his pack. And that concerns me too. He definitely seems keen on leaving here with a woman tonight. Preferably with the blonde that's sitting in my truck.

The rest of these guys out here are hanging around hoping to see a good old-fashioned bar fight. And I'm standing here trying to prevent that from happening.

Declan better hurry the fuck up. Entertaining assholes is not what I wanted to be doing tonight.

CHAPTER 13

Declan

The old hunting cabin in the woods is the only safe place I could think of to take Skye. The deeper we drove into the woods, the more intense her fear got. And getting out of the car didn't help to calm her nerves either. I'm hoping that once we're inside and I get a few lanterns lit, she'll settle down.

I take the padlock off the door and push it open. Telling her what I'm doing as I make my way through the dark. "We're on pack property. I promise you. No one will disturb us out here. Stay put while I light one of the lanterns."

The darkness doesn't bother me. Wolf shifters can see just fine whether there's light or not. I know my way around anyway. We all use this cabin more often than not. Sometimes pack living gets a little crowded. And this is where we come to just be alone for a while.

The lantern ignites as I touch it with the match. Lighting up the one-room cabin in an instant. I slide one of the steamer trunks into the middle of the room. There's one for each pack member lining the wall. Opening it, I retrieve one of the blankets stored inside.

I motion for Skye to come closer as I lay the blanket across the only cot in the room. "You can sit here. Are you cold? I have bottled water in the trunk if you're thirsty. But know that there isn't a bathroom out here."

She looks around the cabin as she walks in. Her voice lets me know that she's still unsure. "What is this place?"

"It's an old hunting cabin. Everyone in my pack uses it." I point to the trunks on the floor as I continue. "This cabin was here when we bought the land."

She's biting the inside of her cheek again. The last time she did that, she was upset.

I keep talking about the cabin to ease her into being here. “These trunks are useful. There’s one for each of us. Everything I use in this cabin is stored in that trunk. It helps to limit the amount of scent that is absorbed by the room. We can relax easier when we’re not bombarded by everyone else’s scent.”

She’s still just looking around.

“We have the same thing in the packhouse. Our bedrooms are off-limits to everyone but a shifter and his mate.”

I don’t like how quiet she is. I sit down on the cot next to her. Close but not touching.

I keep talking. Changing the subject to draw her out of her shell. “Skye, will you look at me, please? Yesterday when we first met, I was convinced that I had met my future mate. This morning, I panicked. I even turned around to go back to you, but you were gone. You do understand that shifters don’t date? We meet and mate pretty fast. It’s the only way to keep what you want. You get that, right?”

She nods but doesn’t say anything.

I turn the questioning around on her, trying to get her to start talking. “Did you come to Wolfdale because you were looking to be mated?”

It takes a couple minutes, but eventually she opens up.

“No. The idea for a hiding place was legit. Thank you, by the way. The wood fit perfectly, in case you were wondering. But I chose that store because I wanted to find a shifter to be friends with. I thought I could learn more about how to help by getting to know you better. I didn’t realize how important scent is. I’m not sure I understand how my scent is affecting everyone. How is it communicating things I’m not aware of?”

She talks with her head down. Twirling a loose thread on the blanket around her finger. Honesty laced through every word.

I take a deep, cleansing breath. Exhaling as I question her further. “Can you tell me why you’re upset? If you didn’t want to be mated, then you can’t be mad that I didn’t ask you to be my mate.”

She stands and starts pacing the floor. Waving her hand as her voice climbs. “I don’t know why. I guess I’m upset because if I have this right, then this is the end for us. No friendship, no future, no nothing. And that makes me sad because I really like you. It seems that shifters look for if someone is mating material, just like humans look to see if someone is marriage material. Maybe I thought you could be marriage material.”

What did she just say?

I couldn’t have heard that right. But it sounded like she wants to be my mate. My wolf is acting like he heard the same thing.

“Did you just say that you want to be my mate? Because if you did, this changes everything. We can be mated right now. Problem solved.”

She runs her fingers through her hair. Lowering her voice as she looks at me. “I’m saying that I feel something between us. And I think you feel it too. Only I’m not ready for it to be over yet. I want more time for us to be the ones to decide if we want to be together or not.”

“Yes. I feel it too.” I stand to pull her into a warm embrace. Wrapping my arms around her to hold her against me as I continue. “But we don’t have that kind of time. A day at the most. And even that’s risky. You have a target on your back. And every unmated shifter in Wolfdale wants to hit the bullseye.”

She lays her head on my chest. Hugging me as she gives a muffled reply. “That doesn’t make me feel any better. What do we do now? Eventually I’m going to have to go back to Eden Brook. I can’t stay here all night.”

“Driving out of town shouldn’t be a problem. I’ll ride with you most of the way. You can let me out on the side of the road when I feel it’s safe. Once you cross the town line, you’ll be fine anyway. How much gas do you have? I don’t want you to stop for anything on your way home.”

She leans away from me to give me a stern look. “I can’t leave you on the side of the road and drive away. That’s crazy.”

I laugh out loud as I pull her back into our hug. “I’m a wolf, Skye. Running through the woods at night is one of my favorite things to do. It’ll do me good. Let me run off some of this sexual frustration that’s building up.”

She doesn’t laugh with me. She doesn’t say anything, either. She is holding me tighter around the waist. The reality of the situation weighs on both of us.

I talk against her head. Little strands of hair tickle me as my lips move. “Can you meet me here tomorrow? Do you think you’ll have an answer by then?”

“That’s it then? I get one night to decide my future. The screwed-up part is that if I don’t hurry up and decide for myself, a decision will be made for me. And technically, you haven’t asked me to be your mate. I mean, it’s kind of pointless for me to spend a sleepless night agonizing over this decision only to find out you don’t even want to be mated.”

I kiss the top of her head, hoping it reassures her. Pulling back enough to look into her eyes as I ask. “Yes, Skye. I want you. Will you please consider being my mate?”

She smiles back at me. “Maybe. Is there anything else I should know about being mated first? The shifter world seems to have a steep learning curve. Based on everything I’ve learned in the past hour, I’m starting to believe there are quite a few gaps in what I know about the mating process.”

I let my smile grow as I lean closer to her. Tracing one finger along her chin in preparation for a kiss. “You know enough that a kiss won’t matter.”

She raises up onto her tiptoes. Meeting my challenge but stopping just before she reaches my lips. “Are you sure you want to do this? There’s no going back, you know.”

“Oh, I know. And I’m all in.”

Our lips touch. Sending a jolt of carnal desire straight down to my cock. The kiss deepens as our tongues introduce themselves. My arms wrap around her body. Holding her close. She moans as I lift her off the ground to take in more of her.

The kiss slows, but neither of us moves away.

She smiles against my lips as she whispers. “It’s about time you kissed me. I was starting to worry that a little peck on the head was all I was going to get.”

I laugh as I lower her to the floor.

“Believe me. I want you more than anything right now. And so does my wolf. But having sex now would seal your fate in the worst way possible. I can wait until we mate. This is about more than a quick fuck. This is our forever.”

Holding Skye in my arms, I let myself get caught up in the excitement. I know that it’s not a done deal yet. But I’m confident she’ll say yes. We will be mated. And soon. My wolf knows it too. He’s not excited about waiting to claim her. But we’ll be mated soon enough.

We spend the next few hours getting to know each other better. Revealing who we are one piece of clothing at a time. Tossing them on the floor alongside the night’s events that led us here.

I’ve never made out with a woman this long before. I’m loving how it feels like an adventure. Taking my time exploring all her secret tickly spots. Learning what turns her on. Letting her take the lead.

Knowing that she could be my mate changes things. No more rushing to get to my own finish line. I want to take my time. Enjoy the journey. And make sure she’s beside me through every sensation, blissful discovery, and climactic end.

We’ve kissed a lot. But I haven’t tasted her yet. Saving that delight for when I get to claim her as my mate. It seems fitting since it’s the only way for me to cover all her scent with mine. The mating bond takes care of the rest when it joins our scent as one.

I don’t know what time it was when we left the cabin. It took the whole drive out to the town line to convince her to let me out on the side of the road. After a little coaxing, she gave in. I watched her drive away. Waiting for her to cross into Eden Brook before I shifted.

The long run home is helping me burn off some of this sexual frustration. Waiting isn't so bad when you know what the prize is at the finish line.

CHAPTER 14

Skye

I don't know what time it was when we finally left the cabin. And leaving Declan on the side of a deserted road felt weird. I would have liked to have seen his wolf, but he waited until I was gone. Maybe some other time. It doesn't matter anyway. I'm so happy I could burst. I can't stop smiling.

I'm trying not to think about all the ways this night could have gone horribly wrong. The fear I felt while that group of shifters was standing outside Howler's watching me was real. The intensity that was coming off those guys was hitting me in waves. It was visceral and raw. And it scared the crap out of me.

The flip side of that fear is that I've learned more about shifters in one night than most of what's been documented in the grimoires in the last one-hundred years. And that information is priceless. Even if my fear was the price paid to get it.

I'll be writing it all down in one of the journals before I go to bed.

Nothing about my mission to make friends with a shifter has turned out like I had planned. And I'm not entirely sure I know when it all went sideways. But I think it's safe to assume we're now operating without any sort of plan. We're in uncharted territory from here on out.

A handsome wolf shifter sweeping me off my feet is not what I had envisioned when I thought up this grand idea. I guess I thought my new shifter friend would be a girl. Now I know that as a human, I was never going to get close enough to a female for a friendship to develop.

Declan Adams came out of nowhere and changed everything. I love how I feel when I'm with him. Alive and full of hope that anything is possible as long as we do it together. And he's the complete package. The smile, that wink, those hands, a

deep voice that causes me to shiver, all of him. He's sexy perfection. I mean, seriously. The tingles are still dancing across my skin from his touch.

I love the way he looks at me with those deep blue eyes. A simple glance penetrates my soul and makes me feel seen. Like he's the only one who knows the real me. He gives me the sensation that I'm free and untethered in the best possible way.

My soul believes it can soar when I'm near him. And being one who embodies the element of air, I'm ready to ascend as high as I can go. As long as he's by my side.

Am I really considering being his mate?

Yes, I think I am. Not just because I'll learn more about shifters by being a member of a pack. But because I'm pretty sure I'm falling in love with him. And shouldn't I be making this decision based on what I want? Even if it goes against what the members of the Chandler family want for me.



The back door is unlocked when I get home. Thank you for that, Ember. I have to admit that I wasn't completely sure she'd help me out when I asked her to do that earlier.

I make my way through the house quietly. Our cat Jinx is waiting on the bottom step. Stopping me from passing with an unreadable glare. I try to step around her, but she hisses. Swatting at me as I make a run for it.

What is wrong with that cat? I used to be her favorite. Now, she seems out for revenge or something. I make it to my room unscathed. Closing the door before I turn on the light.

“Where have you been, Skye?”

Ember's whispered voice catches me by surprise. I turn around to see her lying on my bed.

“Why are you in my room? Are you spying on me?”

I look around for any signs that she's been snooping while I take off my shoes. Kicking them under the chair, hoping that I

can avoid answering her by asking a few of my own.

Ember sits up. Throwing her legs over the side of the bed as she continues her interrogation. “I know you didn’t go to the library. Are you going to tell me who you were with? Or are you going to make me drag it out of you?”

“How do you know I wasn’t at the library? Did you follow me?”

Crap. Her raised eyebrow tells me that I answered that wrong. I played right into her hand.

Get it together, Skye. You’re better than this.

I rifle through the top drawer of the dresser looking for a sleepshirt. I need to do everything I can to avoid looking at her directly. If we make eye contact, she’ll know I’m keeping more from her than an innocent trip to the library. And that will lead to a whole lot more questions.

She walks over to where I’m standing. Watching me but not saying anything.

I flick my hair off my shoulder as I turn to confront her. Trying to express anger while keeping my voice down. “Stay out of my business, Ember. You can leave now. I’m tired and want to go to bed.”

Her eyes flare as she points at my neck. “I knew it. You were with a guy.”

I fire back at her, ready to defend myself. “No, I wasn’t. You better not have been following me.”

Ember laughs as she crosses her arms over her chest. She has a smug look on her face as she responds. “Really? Still trying to play innocent? How about explaining how you got that hickey on your neck?”

Shock engulfs me as I scurry to the mirror. Inspecting my neck for proof.

How did this happen?

I knew Declan was kissing my neck. But I didn’t pay attention. I was too caught up in the moment. And being in his

arms felt really good.

Shit!

How am I going to hide this from the rest of my family? The fire festival is in a few days. And it's the middle of the summer. A scarf around my neck will look more obvious than the hickey I'm trying to hide.

“Did you even go to the library, Skye? Who is this guy, anyway? You obviously haven't known him for very long. You didn't start acting suspicious until yesterday. Or maybe you have known him for a while and yesterday was the day you decided to let him start sucking on your neck.”

I stand up straight to pull myself together. Scrambling for the right words that will allow me to come clean without giving away too much information. I'll tell my family the truth before I'm mated. But I'm not ready to share Declan with them yet.

“You win, Ember. I met a guy. When I'm with him, I can just be me. There's no prophecy or family obligation dictating my every move. I laugh and flirt. He makes me feel like a woman instead of a witch on a mission. It's freeing. And I like it.”

“I get it, Skye. I really do, but—”

I cut her off to keep going. “I'm not sure you do. Because if you did, you wouldn't be grilling me about it. Let me ask you this: have you ever thought about what our lives will be like after the prophecy? I know I do. I think about it all the time.”

I pause for a few seconds to watch her. My words continue after I see her sigh. “Aunt Clairabelle predicted that the prophecy would be resolved in our lifetime. That the natural-born alpha female is out there right now. Possibly even the same age as us. That means that it all ends with us, Ember. Where will we live? What will we be doing? What will our lives be like? And more importantly, who will we be sharing our lives with? I ask myself these questions every day. Are you telling me that you don't?”

Ember walks over to the door. Looking a little deflated as she replies. “I think about it too. More than you know. I'll let it go for now. Just promise me you won't do anything stupid.”

I nod as she leaves the room without saying anything. Watching her close the door behind herself as she goes.

Well, that wasn't as bad as it could have been. And it seems like I've gotten her off my back. At least for a little while, anyway. But there's one thing I know about Ember Chandler; she doesn't give up easily. Her retreat won't last long. She'll be back with more questions. I need to be ready when she does.

Speaking of being back. These crows are starting to bother me. They seem determined to deliver their message about change coming. The problem I'm having is that every little thing in all areas of my life has gone off the rails. And that makes trying to find what the crow is warning me about nearly impossible.

I change clothes and crawl into bed. Letting thoughts of Declan push the crows out of my bed for the night. There isn't room for all of us. And dreaming about a hot muscley man who seems to adore me wins out of over three loud birds easily. I don't even have to think about it.

My mind is already replaying everything that happened this evening. I want to make sure I get every detail right. The pillows are adjusted, and a blank journal book is in my hand. I'm ready to add my mark to the Chandler family legacy.

CHAPTER 15

Declan

The wood is cut for the shoe shelves that Chloe wants. I begin carrying the pieces into the living room just after eight in the morning. I want to assemble these units as close to their bedroom as possible since I'll be the one lugging them to the door. And the sooner I get these finished, the more time I can devote to winning Skye over.

With any luck, I'll be getting mated later today. And I'll have more time alone with my mate if I don't have any unfinished projects hanging around.

Jordan slams a cabinet door in the kitchen. He hasn't said a word to anyone all morning. But it's apparent he's pissed about something.

I have a pretty good idea that I know what it is. But his problems belong to him. I want nothing to do with them.

Bryce walks out of his bedroom which is just down the hall. Barking about the noise as he enters the room. "What the fuck is everyone's problem this morning? I felt the bad mood before I got out of bed."

I ignore the question. Bryce hates being interrupted in bed. And since I'm in a good mood, his rant doesn't have anything to do with me.

Keeping my head down with a smile on my face, I concentrate on separating the wood pieces into three piles. One for each of the units to be constructed.

Jordan is the first to speak. "Declan's groupie showed up at Howler's last night. Walked right in like she owned the place. Her blond hair and little blue dress had all the boys' tongues dragging the floor. Seems I held the crowd back for nothing, though. No one got lucky. The night was a bust."

Willy laughs as he embellishes the tale. "A fight would have been more fun. Declan couldn't seal the deal, and the blonde

bombshell got away without a chase.”

Spencer and Harris laugh with him. Both adding comments about who would have participated in the fight if it had broken out.

Bryce nods. A slight tilt of the head as he questions the pack. “I’m confused. Judging by her scent, this girl’s a keeper. Jordan? Spencer? Anyone care to explain how the night ended with no one mated? Why didn’t either of you challenge Declan for her?”

Jordan is staring at Bryce shaking his head. And looking like he’s about ready to explode. He’s pissed. And I don’t blame him. The alpha calling out the beta in front of the whole pack is disrespectful. Lumping him in with a delta while he does it is a slap in the face.

Jordan finally growls out a reply. “I was the highest-ranking beta there last night. I kept the crowd at bay to avoid a fight breaking out. We were in the middle of a fight over there not too long ago. One more would have made the pack look bad.”

That answer puts Spencer in the hot seat.

Spencer half shrugs. Stepping back as he answers. “I told Declan that I was bowing out yesterday. This girl’s not my type.”

“Really? She’s not your type?” Bryce makes eye contact with me and Jordan before turning back to Spencer to continue. “Didn’t you just call her a hot blond? And she smells this fucking good? From what I’ve gathered so far, there isn’t an unmated male in the state that doesn’t want a piece of her. Your backing down doesn’t make sense to me. Care to explain.”

Spencer looks down at the floor as he takes another step backwards. “No, sir. I don’t.”

Several minutes go by in silence.

Why is Spencer not fighting me for her? I’ve been so worried about Jordan that I didn’t realize what was happening. Bryce is right. What is Spencer up to?

“Declan? You got anything to add? I was under the impression you cut her loose.” Bryce’s alpha authority demands my attention.

I drop the wood in my hand to face him. Choosing my words carefully as I begin to answer. “She didn’t know what it meant to go to a shifter bar. I felt like it was my responsibility to get her out of there. To protect her.”

“Smells like you did more than rescue her. You should have fucked her out of your system when you had the chance. You know the rules, Declan. No girlfriends.”

Bryce doesn’t seem happy about how this is evolving. Not only is no one mated yet, but Skye is disrupting the pack. Only instead of each of us fighting over her, they’re all stepping down. None of this is good for me. But it does seem to be working in my favor.

I nod as I reply. “Fucking her and turning her out would have been wrong. She deserves better than that. I asked her to be my mate.”

“Then why aren’t you mated?”

I’m not happy about having this conversation in front of the whole pack. I can feel Jordan staring at me as he listens to every word. He’s waiting for me to slip up. To give the one response that gives him permission to take Skye away from me. And he’ll do it in a heartbeat.

“She asked for some time to think about it. We’re meeting later today to make sure she understands exactly what she’ll be agreeing to.”

Bryce looks over at Chloe before turning back to me. Scratching the back of his head as he responds. “I have to be honest, Declan. I don’t like it. But if waiting means that you’ll be mated today, then I’ll wait. But get it done today, so we can get on with our lives.”

“I’m going to the diner for breakfast.” Jordan walks out of the room, his face in a scowl.

We break up after that, assuming the conversation is over. Chloe goes into the kitchen as everyone else leaves. Bryce

follows Spencer out the back door. And I go back to assembling the shoe shelves. Putting the pieces of wood together one by one.

Chloe stands at the back of the sofa, drying her hands with a kitchen towel as she watches me. She speaks up after a few minutes. “I like what you did with the shoe shelves. Why did you make three instead of only one?”

“I figured three smaller pieces would be easier to reconfigure in the closet if you want to change things up. This way they’re lighter. You can move them by yourself if you want to. And if I did the math right, you have more shelf space this way. Which means more slots for more shoes.”

“I knew you were the right man for this job. You’re always looking out for everyone else around here. I’m glad you’re going after Skye. It’s about time you put yourself first.” Chloe smiles as she goes back to the kitchen.

Am I going after Skye? I asked her to be my mate. But am I willing to fight to make that happen?

Yes. I think I am.

CHAPTER 16

Skye

My mom's car drives past the restaurant we usually go to for breakfast. Then she passes the road that would take us over to Aunt Violet's side of town. Now, I'm confused. I thought we were meeting them to discuss the final preparations for the fire festival.

I question my mom from the backseat. "Where are you going? What about breakfast?"

"Aunt Violet and I thought it was time to start exposing you and your sisters to shifters. We probably should have done this sooner. But today's a good day to start. Don't worry. Your Aunt Clairabelle knows where to meet us." Mom turns onto the road that leads right into the middle of Wolfdale.

What does she mean by the word *exposing*? I have a bad feeling about this. But as a passenger on this little excursion, there's nothing I can do except go along for the ride.

I'm quiet the rest of the way. Thinking that I would feel safer if I could warn Declan that this is happening. We should have exchanged numbers last night. But a lot of good that would have done in the car.

We arrive at the Wolfdale Diner quicker than I'm ready for. My mom and Ember get out of the car. But I hesitate to look at how many cars are in the parking lot. There's way more than I'm comfortable with.

What are the odds that someone in this place was also at Howler's last night? I'm thinking it's pretty high.

I get out, ready to follow my mom into the diner. Feeling secure with Ember right behind me.

Caa. Caa. A crow cries in the distance.

That crow's really starting to get on my nerves. Maybe coming here was what he was trying to warn me about. Nah.

That's not it. Eating breakfast doesn't have anything to do with the kind of life path change they usually warn people about.

I put him out of my mind for now. This breakfast is going to require all of my attention if I'm going to survive. And the shifters are the least of my worries. They don't have Poppy Chandler for a mother.

Aunt Violet waves from the big table positioned right in the middle of the place. Motioning for us to join her.

I keep my head down. Trying not to draw attention to myself as I walk to the table.

The restaurant goes unnervingly quiet while we take our seats. A few shifters stand along the perimeter to watch us.

I pick up the menu that's lying on the table in front of me. Anything to help me ignore the hairs that are standing up all over my body. I can feel them staring. And there's no doubt that someone in here saw me at Howler's last night.

Ember elbows me in the arm. Leaning over to whisper in my ear. "You forgot to mention that your *guy* was a shifter."

I stare at the menu in my hand. Not saying a word.

"Ember? What did you do?" Mom barks across the table at my sister.

I laugh under my breath at my mom. It's a little funny that Ember's getting blamed for something I did.

Ember jabs me with her elbow again as she defends herself. "I swear. It wasn't me this time."

A coyote shifter crosses the restaurant. Bumping the back of my chair as he passes our table.

Whack. The sound comes from the table in front of me.

I look over to see my mom glaring at me. Her hand is still on the table where she slapped it with her palm to get my attention.

"Skye, you better start explaining yourself. Now."

I look around the room before I say anything. Landing on my mom as I begin. “I’ve been hanging out with a wolf shifter. And I’m learning a lot. There. My secret is out.”

My mom shakes her head as she fires back. “This reaction is not that innocent. Define hanging out. Have you had sex with him?”

I gasp out a reply. “Mom, I can’t believe you asked me that. No. But I did kiss him.”

Aunt Clairabelle and Snowbie walk through the door of the diner. I hear Aunt Violet updating them about what they’ve missed as they take their seats.

Mom stares across the table at me. Her neck turning red is a clear indication that she’s more than not happy. She’s furious.

I make an attempt at trying to explain myself. “The rules we follow are too strict. Too limiting. You’ve even said yourself that you didn’t like them. I just figured that there had to be a better way, so I went for it.”

Mom grits her teeth at me from across the table. “We didn’t make those rules. They did. And your little stunt has violated a level of trust that has taken generations of Chandlers to earn.”

Aunt Clairabelle chimes in from the other end of the table. “Did your Aunt Lily not teach you anything?”

A coyote shifter approaches the back of my chair. I feel him take a clump of my hair as the door to the diner opens wide. He drops my hair and walks away as the newcomer enters.

All the shifters in the place move back to their own tables as the newcomer surveys the room. His presence seems to be sending a warning to all the others. After a minute or so, he begins to walk a slow path through the restaurant to the counter in the back.

Oh. He looks familiar. He’s one of the guys that Declan was with last night. I think he was keeping the crowd away from me.

Feeling safer, I continue talking in hopes of proving that my efforts have not ruined anything. “I’m learning so much in a

short amount of time. Have you ever heard the term *pure*? It was new to me. I guess you can say that I got a crash course in what it means last night.”

My mom watches the new shifter pass by before she questions me. “Is that him?”

“No. I think he’s one of Declan’s packmates. Maybe the beta, but I’m not sure. I don’t know his name. Are you listening to me?”

Mom pushes her chair back and leaves the table. She walks to the back, stopping at the counter next to the shifter that just arrived. Talking to him like it’s a completely normal thing to do.

What the hell is she doing?

I can’t tell what they’re saying over all the noise. And it’s not just me. Every shifter in here is paying attention to their conversation too.

Why is my mom doing this?

Aunt Clairabelle and Aunt Violet whisper back and forth with each other. Pointing around the room as they lower their voices even further. Snowbie and Terra are glaring at me from the other side of the table. And Ember nudges me again. Smiling from ear to ear and being way too happy about my predicament.

I don’t like how Aunt Clairabelle is looking at me. I’m guaranteed to be her next scrying target after this. Mom’s not liking any of the answers I’m giving. And Aunt Clairabelle is the only one who can help her with that.

Why is this happening to me?

Could this be what the crow was trying to warn me about? The diner, coyote shifters, and Aunt Clairabelle scrying on me. Their message seems bigger than that. But right now, what can be bigger than my whole life falling apart in front of me?

Ember leans closer to me. “You have some explaining to do.”

I ignore my sister. Struggling to crane my neck so that I can hear any part of my mom’s conversation with the beta.

Mom returns to the table. She and Aunt Violet nod at each other as she picks up one of the menus from off the table.

“What did he say? Mom, what are you doing?” I lean across the table, hoping to get some answers.

Mom answers without looking up from her menu. “It’s called damage control, Skye. Instead of working on the fire festival with your aunts, I’ll be cleaning up the mess you’ve made.”

Ember nudges my arm again to get my attention.

I turn toward her, making no attempt at lowering my voice. “Can we talk about this later, please? My life is kind of falling apart over here.”

Ember gives me a cocky smirk. “Yes. I know. Which is exactly why you should’ve included me. You suck at covert missions.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? You’ve never done anything like this before. You definitely couldn’t have done any better. Trust me. Your scent tells on you.”

Ember winks at me as she responds. “I know. That’s because I’m better at this than you are. I’ve learned a few things over the years. Enough that you don’t see the coyotes focusing on me. And I’ve never been scryed on by Aunt Clairabelle either. You should have listened to me when I offered.”

Are you fricking kidding me right now? Since when has Ember been hanging around with shifters?

I scowl at my sister. “Sounds like you’ve been keeping secrets a lot longer than I have. I’m not giving you anything until you come clean about all of it.”

The waitress interrupts our conversation to take our order. I can’t focus on reading the menu right now. I decide to listen to what everyone else is ordering until I hear something that sounds good.

Terra’s getting the blueberry waffle with real maple syrup, a coffee, and a small orange juice. That works. I’ll have the same.

Waiting for our breakfast to arrive is excruciating. The coyotes are getting closer, my mom's getting angrier, and I'm stuck in the middle hoping for a lifeline.

Ember rubbing all my mistakes in my face isn't helping, either. How have I not noticed her sneaking around? Better yet, how has she been able to get away with it right under Mom's nose?

Maybe she is better at this than I am.

CHAPTER 17

Jordan

Being forced by the alpha to stay away from Skye again is bullshit. She should already be mine in every way possible. Last night, I figured out too late that I was probably blowing the only shot I was going to get at taking her away from Declan without any backlash. I sure as hell won't make that mistake again.

I turn into the diner parking lot to pick up a couple breakfast sandwiches. Skye's scent greets me as I open the door to get out of the truck. This woman is turning up all over the place. Does she not understand how dangerous this town is for her? Does Declan?

I survey the parking lot looking for any vehicles I might recognize. Sniff the air for any familiar scents. All I get is coyote. And a lot of it. But that's not surprising since the diner sits between two of the largest coyote packs in Wolfdale.

I pull open the door to the diner and step inside. Skye is sitting smack dab in the middle of the restaurant, surrounded by more horny coyote deltas than I care to count. Half of them are standing like they want to make a move. The one coyote fucker had the nerve to look me in the eye just before he bumped her chair.

I walk toward the counter in the back. I let out a burst of beta power at full strength when I pass Skye's chair as a warning. Hoping each of the assholes in here understands that they need to back the fuck off.

“Morning, Jordan. What can I get for you today?”

Charlotte takes my order as I reach the counter. I keep my back to the rest of the room to wait for my food. I really hope no one decides to challenge me on this. I'm not in the mood for any bullshit today.

“Excuse me. I'm sorry to disturb you. But I believe you know who my daughter is. And it's my understanding that you are a

member of the same pack as her *new friend*.”

I turn my head to the left to see who’s talking to me. A tall, red-headed woman makes direct eye contact without a hint of hesitation. She’s wearing a scowl that implies she’s already met her bullshit quota for the day as well.

“I’m listening.”

She nods as she continues. “Thank you. Are you the alpha?”

I shake my head as I answer. “Beta.”

“Would it be possible for me to talk to your alpha? I can wait if necessary. But the sooner this conversation takes place, the better it is for everyone involved.”

I watch her for a second. Then I call out to the waitress that took my order. “Hey, Charlotte. Can I use your phone, please?”

A couple minutes pass before Charlotte slides a cordless phone across the counter toward me.

“Thank you.” I pick up the phone and dial the number for the packhouse.

“Hello?”

“Chloe, it’s Jordan. Let me talk to Bryce.”

Seconds later, the alpha answers. “What’s up, Jordan?”

“There’s a woman at the diner who wants to talk to you. Here she is.”

I pass the phone to the redhead.

“Hello, my name is Poppy Chandler. I believe that I can help clean up the mess that my daughter Skye has made. Can you meet me in the park across the street from the diner at ten tomorrow morning?”

“I’ll be there.”

Bryce hangs up. The woman passes the phone back to me, turns, and returns to her table without another word said.

Damn.

Regardless of what happens with Skye, this woman has earned my respect. She's all human. But she's got fire in her blood for sure. She is not intimidated by me or my beta power at all. If she's one of the witches Skye told Declan about, then I'm glad they want to help rather than hurt. One thing's for sure: I don't want to be anywhere near this woman's bad side.

Charlotte sets my order on the counter, and I pay the bill. I take the bag and go out to the truck to wait for whatever is going to happen next.

I hear Bryce in my head with mind speak as I'm getting in the truck. *Call me.*

I take the cell phone out of the center console and hit number one on speed dial.

Bryce answers on the first ring. "What the fuck is going on? Who was that woman?"

I chuckle as I begin. "First off, you need to tell Declan that his girl is having breakfast at the diner and might need some help. She's causing a commotion again. I'm keeping the deltas at bay for now, but I can't stay here all day. And if another beta or an alpha shows up, I'm out. I'm not going to fight for her unless I can keep her."

Bryce sighs his reply into the phone. "I hear you, Jordan. But I'm starting to think that this woman might be more trouble than she's worth. Tell me everything. Start at the beginning."

I walk Bryce through the encounter this morning from start to finish. Being sure to include what I thought about the red-headed woman he talked to on the phone.

The call ends. And I sit here to wait it out. Taking a bite out of one of the breakfast sandwiches as I weigh my options.

Skye has no fucking clue that I'm the one who saved her last night. Not Declan. All he did was usher her out of the way. I'm the one who made it all possible.

I'm saving her again, right now. The only thing Declan's going to do is show up just in time to take all the credit.

This is bullshit.

If I could just have one conversation with Skye, then I'd know for sure if I wanted her to be my mate or not. And that should be easy enough to make happen. I could go back inside and tell her that it's safer for her to wait for Declan in my truck.

That's actually a good idea.

I move on instinct. Tossing the sandwich onto the dashboard and getting out in one motion. Walking back inside just as a coyote shifter is approaching Skye. One look from me sends him back to his own table.

I address the redhead from earlier as I pull out Skye's chair. "It's safer for her to wait in my truck. Declan's on his way."

The woman nods as Skye stands.

I escort her out of the restaurant. Opening the door for her to climb up into my truck. Holding her hand for a little extra assistance. Scent-marking her at the same time to ensure Declan's aware of my intentions.

Skye starts talking as I'm getting in the driver's seat. "Thank you for helping me. I'm Skye, by the way. I know that you're in Declan's pack. I remember you from last night. It wasn't my plan to come here this morning. If I would have known, I would have tried to talk them out of coming. Not sure it would have worked, though. You met my mom. She can be intense when she wants to be. She's a Leo."

I let her talk. She's nervous but not scared. This is good. It means that it won't take long for her to warm up to me.

I like having her this close to me. My wolf does too. Looking at her, she's absolutely stunning. I could do without Declan's stench all over her, but that's an easy fix.

I think I get why he's giving her a lot of leeway despite the risks. There's something about her that draws you in. Captures your attention and holds it hostage.

I see a hickey on her neck. Declan must think he's being funny. The fucker marked her without actually leaving a mating mark. Anyone who tries to claim her will get a mouth

full of him first. It could be a deterrent for some. But not for me.

The left side of the neck is what's expected for the mating mark. But there's no hard rule that it must be there. I'll just mark her on the right side.

I smile when she pauses. Speaking calmly to not arouse any suspicion. "I'm Jordan. The pack beta. No one will harass you when you're with me. I guarantee it."

"How would Declan find out that I'm here?"

Interesting how she worded that. It makes me think she might not want him to know that she's here.

I point to the cell phone that's standing up in the cup holder as I answer. "I talked to our alpha when I came outside. He knows I'm here protecting you."

"Is that who my mom talked to on the phone? Your alpha?"

She's smarter than she lets on. I can almost see her mind trying to work out what's happening. Putting the pieces together one by one.

"It is. Do you know why she wants to see him in person?"

I make a feeble attempt at trying to get a little information from her. It's not really why I wanted her out here with me. But for now, it's getting her to talk. Which is helping her to be more comfortable with me.

"I have no idea. Nothing like this has ever happened before. I've never even seen my mom near a shifter, let alone talk to an alpha."

Declan's truck comes to a stop right beside me before I can say more.

Damn. I would have loved a little more time with her.

I wave out my open window. Smiling wide as Declan gets out of his truck. Flashing my eyebrows the moment he realizes where I put Skye to keep her safe.

Declan approaches the truck on my side. Talking past me as he glares. "Get in my truck, Skye. I'll make sure you get

home.”

Skye opens her door and keeps talking. Completely oblivious to the tension that’s building around her. “Thank you, Jordan. See you later.”

I wait for her to close the door to speak to Declan. Lowering my voice so only he can hear me. “I won’t turn my back again. You claim her, or I will.”

Skye waves as she passes in front of my truck. “Bye.”

“Bye.” My voice is all high-pitched and chirpy. Waving back as I mimic her flirty-ness. Adding a wink in Declan’s direction to emphasize that I’ve accomplished what I set out to do.

I back my truck out to leave. Completely satisfied with how that turned out. I’m not entirely sure I know what I was looking for when I brought her out here. But I sure as hell found it.

Skye is fantastic. And I can’t wait to make her mine.

I pick up the phone to call Bryce as I pull out of the parking lot. It’s time for the alpha to know what my intentions are where Skye is concerned. Even if it means challenging Declan to make it happen.

CHAPTER 18

Declan

One conversation with Bryce has derailed my entire morning. Before he interrupted me, I was just about to start assembling the last of the three shoe shelves for Chloe. Now, she's not only going to be mad I didn't finish, but she's also not going to like that I left a mess in the living room.

Two things Bryce said caused me to run out of the house without looking back. And both involve Skye. The first is that she's at the diner in Wolfdale drawing a lot of unwanted attention from a bunch of young coyote shifters.

What the hell does she think she's doing? She shouldn't be in Wolfdale at all. Didn't I stress to her last night how important it is for her to stay in Eden Brook? Wolfdale isn't safe for her until after we're mated.

The second thing, and the one that concerns me the most, is that the person keeping the coyotes away from Skye right now is Jordan. He hasn't said out loud that he wants her for himself. But my instincts are telling me that he's thinking about it real hard. And it's only going to take a few minutes in her presence to help him make up his mind.

Thank the universe they're in a crowded diner and not alone.

Why the hell do we have to live so far out in the damn woods? The more time he spends with her, the less confident I am that she'll be mine when all is said and done.

I see his truck as I round the corner. I turn into the parking lot without slowing down. Skidding to a stop right next to him as my wolf riles up inside me. He's gearing up for a fight, and it doesn't take me long to figure out why.

They're not inside the crowded restaurant like I assumed. He's got Skye next to him in the front seat of his truck. Not another fucking soul around.

Damn it.

I jump out of the vehicle. Leaving the engine running and the door open as I approach Jordan. Trying to contain my anger with every word that comes out of my mouth.

“Get in my truck, Skye. I’ll make sure you get home.” I hope she listens to me.

She nods and then looks at Jordan. “Thank you, Jordan. See you later.”

Jordan and I both watch her exit the vehicle. Then he speaks the dreaded words I hoped he would never say. His hushed tone hitting me at my core.

“I won’t turn my back again. You claim her, or I will.”

It’s done. He’s made his intention known. And there’s not a damn thing I can do about it. The only question I have is, why is he waiting? He had her in his truck. He could have driven away and claimed his prize outright.

I get back in the truck, only slightly relieved that I still have a chance with Skye. It’s a slim chance, but it’s all I have.

I don’t say anything as I’m getting in. Needing a few minutes to calm both me and my wolf down. Reminding myself that she’s here with me and that’s all that matters. Besides, acting like an ass right now could send her running right into Jordan’s arms. And I don’t want that. Not even a little bit.

I put the gear shift in reverse to leave.

“Wait.” Skye waves her hand to stop me. “That’s my mom. I need to see what she wants before we leave.”

An older red-headed woman is standing on the sidewalk watching us. Arms crossed over her chest as she stares at me.

I guess I did jump the gun a little when I got here. Didn’t assess the situation from every angle when I pulled up because all I saw were warning signs. In the moment, getting Skye away from Jordan was my primary objective. Now, all I want is to take her someplace where we can be alone. And far away from coyotes.

The woman steps off the sidewalk and approaches the truck. Stopping a few feet away as she glares in Skye’s direction.

“Mom, this is Declan. Declan Adams. He’s going to make sure I get home safe. Don’t worry. He and his pack are taking care of me.”

The mom raises an eyebrow as she turns her attention toward me. “Is that so? The whole pack, huh? That’s interesting. I have a meeting with your alpha in the morning. Can you please keep her *safe* until then?”

The woman turns and walks away. Entering the restaurant while I watch, bewildered.

What the hell was that all about? Did she just tell me to not claim Skye as my mate? Who the hell does she think she is?

“Don’t worry about her. She gets all worked up and then calms down like it never even happened.”

I look over at Skye as I back out of the parking spot. Shaking my head, baffled by her naivete. How does she have no clue about what’s going on? That woman, her mother, knows exactly what’s happening here. And she doesn’t like it at all.

I stare out the front windshield as I drive. Trying to calm down just as much as I’m trying to think of how to start this conversation without coming across as an ass.

Skye starts first. Giving me more time to think.

“I swear I didn’t know this is where my mom was taking us for breakfast. She said as we were driving into Wolfdale that it was time for us to be exposed to shifters. It wasn’t too bad, though. A few shifters inside were acting weird. But then Jordan showed up and they backed off. Where are you going? Eden Brook is the other way.”

I slow down. Pulling the truck off the road and coming to a stop in the grass. Throwing the gear shift into park as I rotate to face Skye.

“Do you not understand how much danger you were in back there? Your mother does.”

Skye shakes her head as her smile wanes. “You mean with the coyotes? They weren’t doing anything. Standing around

the edges of the restaurant. One bumped my chair, but that's it."

"They had you surrounded, Skye. Each of those coyote shifters was from a different pack. They were challenging each other while keeping their target, you, in range. If Jordan hadn't arrived when he did, that could have escalated into a pack war. You were not safe at all."

Skye looks away. Turning back with a tear in her eye. "You weren't there. That's not what happened."

"Jordan called our alpha. Told him what he witnessed when he walked in and who the players were. It's how I knew you were there."

Skye looks out the window. A few minutes pass with her sitting there in silence.

I reach out to take her hand. Rubbing the back with my thumb to get her attention. And to smooth things over while I'm at it.

Her hand relaxes in mine as she speaks. "That's why Jordan took me out to the truck? He said he rescued me for you."

I take in a sharp breath. This is where I need to be careful about not turning into an ass.

"Not exactly. He rescued you for his own benefit. And to make sure I knew his intentions. He wants you as his mate."

Skye's head snaps around to me. Her eyes are wide with surprise. "He said it was safer for me to wait for you in his truck. That's what he said. I swear."

"You let him touch you, Skye. He scent-marked you to send a warning. And he told me he wanted you when you were getting out of his truck. He could have left with you before I got there. I'm not sure why he didn't. I suspect it has something to do with your mother's meeting with our alpha tomorrow."

Skye looks around the cabin of the truck, shaking her head. Explaining how she remembers it. "No, it wasn't like that. He

gave me his hand to help me get in the truck. That's all. He said we were waiting for you."

"He wanted you to feel safe with him. For you to be comfortable in his presence. He's preparing to make a move for you, Skye. And judging by how the coyotes were acting in the diner, he won't wait long."

"Why did the coyotes act that way? Circle me, I mean. No one at the hardware store acted that way."

"The few shifters that were in the hardware store were mated. They didn't care about you. The coyotes in the diner this morning know what we did last night. The kissing, the touching, the tiny orgasm you had in my arms. Until you're mated, every unmated shifter wants a chance with you. And they'll fight whoever is in their way to get it. Even if it's a fellow pack mate."

I let that sink in before I continue. Watching for any signs of stress before I go on. "Do you understand what I'm saying, Skye? You will either be mated to a shifter or forever marked as a good fuck. These are the only two options. We passed the point of no return with our actions. There's no going back to the life you had before."

I pull the truck back onto the road. Heading for the cabin so we can continue this conversation on pack property. Knowing that the coyotes have started to organize their efforts toward Skye makes being out here in the open too dangerous.

I decide to let the rest of the ride go by quietly to give both of us some space. Skye being afraid of shifters is not the goal here. But she does need to know the reality of who and what we are. I can tell that she's processing what she heard. She's mumbling to herself and biting the inside of her cheek.

We pull up in front of the cabin but don't get out.

She sniffs the hand that Jordan touched. Looking out the window as she speaks. "I don't smell anything."

"Despite what you see, we're not human, Skye. We're animals, pure and simple. We eat, sleep, run, and fuck. And we'll fight for any of them. It may appear that our worlds are

the same because of how they overlap. But we're playing the game of life by a completely different set of rules. Letting me know that you're aware of shifters and going into Howler's the way you did, announced the intention that you're willing to play our game by our rules. And it doesn't matter if you know all the rules are not."

I watch a few tears roll down her cheek as we sit there.

"Skye, I'm not saying any of this to scare you. But yesterday you asked if there was anything you needed to know about being mated. Learning the rules is a good place to start. And understanding that females are treated differently is one of the big ones. It won't always be like this. After we're mated, it'll be better. You'll see."

She watches me while still biting her cheek.

"Come on. Let's get inside before the rain starts." I get out of the truck and walk around to her side.

CHAPTER 19

Skye

One thing I've learned in the short amount of time I've spent with Declan is that the Chandler family knows nothing about shifters. Yes, we know of their existence and how to tell the different species apart. And there might be a few hints peppered through a few of the grimoires about the importance of scent. But that's about it.

I've replayed every word Jordan said, every move he made and look he gave me. I wasn't uncomfortable with him. There were no red flags warning me that I shouldn't trust him. He was a perfect gentleman.

Am I that gullible? Or was he that good?

I look out the window of the truck to watch Declan unlock the door to the cabin. Has he been manipulating me? Playing a game just to win a mate?

Those are questions I don't know the answers to. I can't separate my perspective of the situation from anyone else's. I can't wrap my head around how every action I take is interpreted by the shifters to mean something different than what I intended.

Are the intentions I'm setting not being received by the Universe? Or am I getting exactly what I've asked for?

I don't know anymore. The foundation that I've always relied on to be underneath me and steady is...now very unstable. And the rightness of the new ground I'm walking on doesn't feel comfortable to me yet. The contrast is throwing me off.

I admit that I didn't have all the facts when I came up with my grand plan to become friends with a shifter. But now I know that from my sheltered vantage point, I was never going to learn any of this. There was no way to even comprehend that I was missing information.

What do I do now?

Declan opens the truck door waiting for me to get out.

I don't move. Hating that I'm now unsure about taking the simplest of actions. Doubting myself more than anything else.

"This property belongs to our pack, Skye. The coyotes won't come onto this land. You're safe out here."

"What about Jordan? He's a member of the pack." I look him in the eye. Watching for any of the signs that I've apparently been missing this whole time.

"You're right. I can't stop Jordan from coming here or from taking you. And to be honest, any of the unmated pack members in the pack could challenge me for you as well. The only way to guarantee that we'll be together is to mate. Once we're mated, all this attention and stress will instantly go away."

Is he only saying that to get me to be his mate? Only pushing me toward what he wants.

Argh!

I hate that I'm pulling his words apart. Looking for dishonesty to be hiding in each little gap or a trick around every corner. He's still the same guy that melted my heart when we met. And nothing he has done has altered the fact that I'm falling in love with him.

"What about your alpha? Can't he stop them from taking me away from you?"

"He could, but he won't. This isn't his fight. And he's already told me to either claim you or let someone else have you."

My gut wrenches at hearing his words. The thought of being with anyone else is unthinkable. Especially someone from the same pack. I'm in too deep. My feelings for Declan are too strong.

"Can he force you to break up with me?"

Declan squeezes the jam of the truck door as he talks to me. I see his knuckles turning white as he replies. "You're not my girlfriend, Skye. We are not together until we're mated. The alpha's number one priority is to protect the pack from both

external threats and internal conflict. And right now, you are a threat to him.”

“But I’m not—”

Declan cuts off my defense. Stepping closer to me as he takes my cheek in his hand. Leaning against the seat with his other hand on my thigh. “Listen to me, Skye. Until your position in the shifter world is determined, you’re a liability. And the longer this drags out, the less an alpha will want to take the risks needed to acquire you. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

I nod as I move to get out of the truck. Holding him close as I hop down. Pulling him into a hug to keep him close to me.

The rain begins as we’re standing there. Light drops fall all around us, but neither of us moves. I am completely enveloped by him. His arms surround me in the most blissful way. His head’s next to mine. The warmth of his breath on my skin is causing me to tingle all over.

I am in love with this man. All the chaos and craziness go away when I’m in his arms. Right now, hugging him in the rain, there is no fear or threats. It’s only the two of us. And I’m pretty sure that’s what I want my future to be.

He whispers onto my forehead as he pulls away from the embrace. “Let’s go inside.”

I follow him through the door. The room is glowing with lantern light and a blanket is laid across the cot. The sound of raindrops hitting the roof adds to the ambiance.

I stop just inside the door. I know how I feel about him. But in everything he’s said, there’s been no mention of his feelings for me.

“Do you still want me as your mate? There’s no point in me being here if you don’t.”

Declan pulls me back into his arms. Kissing me fully while he lifts me off the ground. Holding me tight against his chest as the kiss deepens. The passion building slowly. The intensity causes my heart to pound as I melt into him.

The kiss leaves both of us breathless. Our lips still touch as he holds me in the air.

“Yes, I do. I want all of you. Nothing will make me happier than being your mate. But the real question is, are you ready to give up your life to be with me?”

I lean away from him to get a better look at him.

“What do you mean, give up my life? I don’t understand. What exactly would I be giving up?”

Declan lowers me to the ground. Letting me walk to the cot while he explains. “Once mated, you’ll be a member of the pack. Leaving the human world to join ours. Your life will revolve around the pack in every way. The alpha’s protection only extends to immediate pack members. That means that the only way to protect your family from the harassment you’re getting now is to cut them out of your life.”

What he’s saying makes sense. It’s logical and is in agreement with everything I already know about shifter alphas and pack living. But for some reason, applying the concept to my own life seems absurd.

He can’t be serious. Can he?

“I can still see them, right? It makes sense that they can’t come to the packhouse whenever they want. But I can still visit them in Eden Brook?”

Declan sits on the cot next to me as he replies. “No. You can’t. All shifter rules and laws will apply to you after we’re mated. There are no exceptions. As a member of the pack, you will be treated just like any other shifter.”

I stand and walk back to the door. Feeling unsteady with each step I take. Turning to face Declan halfway across the room. “Are you saying that I have to choose between you and my family?”

Declan lowers his head as he exhales heavily. Scrubbing his hand over his jaw as he stands. Looking at me with an unreadable gaze as he nods. “Yes, Skye. I am. I’m asking you to choose me. To choose love. And I know that this is a big

ask because despite how harsh it sounds, I do know what you'd be giving up for me. For us."

He takes a step closer to me. But I hold my hand up to stop him from coming any closer. Shaking my head as I let his words sink in.

"Don't shut me out, Skye."

"You don't understand. This changes everything, Declan."

CHAPTER 20

Declan

Panic sets in for both of us but for very different reasons. Skye's faced with the reality that choosing me equates to never seeing her family again. While I'm stuck waiting for her decision, knowing that if she chooses her family, then I lose her for good. And all I can do about it is stand here and watch her contemplate our future.

The tension in the room is palpable. Building with every second that passes. Skye's heart is pounding in her chest so hard that it's audible. I don't like that she won't let me comfort her. And my wolf isn't happy about any of it.

I get us a bottle of water from out of my trunk. Maybe offering her something to drink will allow me to get closer than I am now.

She doesn't notice me approach her. Her eyes are darting around the room as she mumbles something I can't understand. I hold out the water for her, but her words stop me in my tracks.

"Doing this your way won't work. What about the prophecy? How will I be able to do my part to save shifters if I don't have access to my sisters? The four elements must work together. And I'm the element of air. They'll fail without me. Air is essential. Has your alpha considered that?"

I furrow my brow as I struggle to make sense out of anything I just heard. I'm at a complete loss.

"What are you talking about, Skye? What prophecy?"

She looks at me as if she's just as confused as I am. Cocking her head to one side as she questions me back. "You don't know about the prophecy? How is that even possible? You're a shifter. I would think that something that predicts the complete extinction of an entire race of people would be known by everyone. And this is supposed to occur in our lifetime. I bet that's why your alpha is hell-bent on adhering to the rules. He

doesn't know how important it is for me to help. Maybe if we explained it to him, he'd allow me to be mated *and* see my family."

The smile on her face is baffling me more than anything she said. I think she thinks she's figured out the perfect solution to get this predicament to work out in her favor. But I can't get past the insanity of what she's saying to come to the same conclusion.

"I still don't know what you're talking about, Skye. I've never heard of any prophecy. Sit on the cot with me, and let's talk about it."

I guide her across the room with me. Passing her a water bottle as she sits down. She takes a tiny sip of water. Talking before I have time to take a seat myself.

"The prophecy is a prediction someone made long ago. We think it came from one of our ancestors, but we're not sure. The earliest reference to the prophecy was in 1693. Anyway, it doesn't matter who predicted it first or when. The fact that it's real is all that counts."

I get comfortable next to Skye. Sitting close enough that our legs touch. Listening intently to absorb the details to ensure I understand all that is being said.

"Are your ancestors also witches? Like you?"

She nods as she replies. "Yes. I come from a long line of hereditary witches. All the women born into our family are naturally inclined to learn the craft. We use our skills to help shifters."

Skye's demeanor is different than anything I've seen before. She's choosing her words carefully. Watching my reaction before moving on to the next item. I get the impression she's revealed herself in this way to others before and it hasn't gone well.

"Go on. Tell me about how this is supposed to happen in our lifetime."

She rotates her body to face me. Putting her hand on my thigh as she talks. "Over the last four hundred years or so,

there has been a steady decline in the shifter population. That decline is supposed to accelerate when a specific fated event takes place. This event will usher in a time of change for shifters. At the end of this relatively short time period, the outcome will go one of two ways. One being that all shifters die out. The other being that they live and prosper. Think of it like a door opening. And it's not until that door is closed that we know what the outcome will be."

I do like her touching me. It makes hearing what she has to say easier to receive. Nothing she's said so far has been terribly alarming. Smaller shifter communities spread out over greater distances has become normal. And there are lots of stories about the old days when shifters outnumbered humans. Many elders talk about wanting to return to that way of life.

"What's the fated event? Is it something we'll know when we see it?"

Skye inches closer to me as she continues. "I don't think we'll know as it's happening. But we'll know when it's over that it has occurred. Does that make sense?"

I nod but don't respond otherwise.

"Let me explain. The event is the mating of a fated pairing. We won't know when the couple has met. But my family believes that everyone will know the moment they become mated. Humans and shifters will get a sense that something has occurred, even if they're not sure what it is or how it will affect them. Alphas will sense more. We're just not sure what that is yet. Unfortunately, this is one of those situations where we don't know what we don't know."

"Why will the alphas know more?"

Skye rubs my leg as she smiles at me. "Thank you for listening. I know this is a lot to take in. I really do appreciate that you're hearing me out. And not just blowing me off like I'm some sort of crazy person."

I give her a quick peck on the lips. Smiling back as I reply. "If it's important to you, it's important to me. I'm not sure if I believe any of it yet. But so far, it sounds like it could affect all

of us. Now, keep going. Tell me about the alphas. What makes this shifter couple so special? I thought fated mates were normal.”

“Fated mates were more common long ago. But nowadays, they’re growing increasingly rare to find. More and more shifters are choosing human mates. Which isn’t a bad thing. It’s just that it reduces the number of available shifter offspring. With fewer and fewer shifters being born each year, pretty soon there won’t be enough left to sustain the population. One of my aunts believes that we’ve already crossed that threshold. Another one has hope that there’s still a chance to turn it around.”

Skye may not know much about our day-to-day lives or how important scent or rules are to us. But she knows more than I originally gave her credit for. Enough that she’s got my full attention.

“OK. I’m with you so far. Tell me about the alpha. Is he a wolf?”

She pulls her legs up to cross them under her. Resting her elbows on her knees as she continues. “Now, the alpha. We’re not sure what species he is because he’s not the special one. And he won’t become special until after he finds his fated mate. My mom thinks that he could be any regular alpha out there because the female is the one who has the power to change everything.”

Skye takes a sip of her water before going on. “Once the two are mated, the alpha will become the high alpha.”

“What’s a high alpha? I’ve never heard that term before.”

I scoot back to lean against the wall. Pulling Skye back with me.

“He’s an alpha who will have authority over all other species, including humans. Every person, including the alphas and humans, will have to decide whether they are for him or against him. The ones that submit to him in their hearts will become members of his greater worldwide pack. The ones that don’t will embark on a mission to remove him from power.

Packs will be divided, and wars will break out everywhere. This is the *door opening* event I mentioned earlier.”

I sit up straight. Shaking my head in disbelief. “Wait. You mean that, hypothetically, a wolf alpha would be able to alpha command a coyote alpha, and he’d have to do whatever he was told?”

“Yes. That’s exactly what I mean. And not just coyotes. Bears, cougars, foxes, wing predators too. All of them.”

I slap my hand on my thigh, laughing out loud. “I can’t wait to see a coyote fucker bowing on his knees to a wolf alpha. That’ll be great.”

“We don’t know the species of the high alpha yet. What if he’s a coyote? Or a dragon?”

My laugh fades as I look over at Skye in surprise. “I thought dragons were extinct. Are you saying that there are some still out there?”

Skye nods, her eyebrows raise and her voice lowers like she’s telling me a secret. “Yes. Not many though. Less than ten, I think. My Aunt Clairabelle met one once. But she won’t talk about it. Are you ready for me to tell you about the female?”

I lean back against the wall as I reply. “I’m ready.”

“The female is a human.”

Skye watches me as her words sink in.

My eyes narrow as I question her mistake. “That’s not possible. Alphas can’t mate with humans.”

Skye grins as she continues. “He can with this human because she’ll be his fated mate. The best we can figure is that she will be born a human but have all the traits of an alpha female. Long ago one of our ancestors coined her the natural-born alpha female. And we think she exists now. That she’s out there somewhere on a divine path toward her fated mate.”

“Then what?”

She shrugs her shoulders as she unscrews her water bottle lid. “Nothing. That’s it. We wait for the fated pair to find each

other. There's not much we can do until we know whether the masses are for or against them."

Skye takes a drink of water. Replacing the lid as she continues. "Some of my family think that we should be trying to stop them from meeting. That keeping them apart to prevent the door from opening is the only way to save shifters. Others believe we should be pushing the couple together. That opening the door as soon as possible is the only way to save shifters. No one's been able to agree about how we should proceed for generations."

"But you do think that it has something to do with turning the decline in population around. A human being fated to an alpha would accomplish that. Why do you think our numbers are reducing so quickly? Now that I think about it, Bryce and Chloe have been mated for a year and Chloe's not pregnant yet. That's not normal, right?"

Skye hops up onto her knees with excitement. Waving her arms as she speaks. "Yes. That's exactly what this is about. It used to be normal for a mated female to be pregnant within the first few months and have several offspring throughout her life. Now, you're lucky if you get one after years of being mated. Can I tell you my theory? My family doesn't agree with it. They think I've *lost my way* when I bring it up."

I lean closer as if fueled by her excitement to reply. "Tell me all of it. I want to know more."

"My theory is simple. And it explains why my ancestors have only documented dragon deaths for the last three hundred plus years. If the dragons go extinct, then so will all the other shifters. The decline in population to the wider shifter community parallels that of the dragons. I believe this fated pairing of an alpha and a human opens the door for dragons to also be fated to humans. Something that was incredibly rare before. And if the dragons prosper, then so will the rest of the shifters. But only if the shifters turn their attention toward finding mates and not on fighting with each other."

I pull Skye to me. Wrapping her in my arms as I lay her down on the cot. "I'm all for that. We can start right now. Let's

get mated and make some babies.”

She laughs underneath me. Gazing into my eyes as she pushes a clump of hair off my forehead. “What do you think of the prophecy now? Are you still unsure about whether you believe it or not?”

I kiss her on the forehead as I move to the side. Careful not to hurt her as I adjust my position. “I think I do believe you. It makes sense. Everyone talks about pack sizes being smaller than what they used to be. I can personally say that our alpha is feeling the pressure to expand the pack. He’s been mated a year and none of us have taken a mate yet. The desire to find one just hasn’t been that strong. I’m sure we aren’t the only pack going through this.”

Skye plays with the hem of my sleeve as she turns serious. “I won’t be able to help with the prophecy if I’m cut off from my family. Do you think Bryce will let me keep seeing them?”

“He won’t allow it, Skye. That’s a decision that has nothing to do with him. Being cut off from your family after you’ve taken a mate is a shifter law that’s rooted in the natural world. Most animals in the animal kingdom isolate new members from their old life in this way as a form of protection. It’s the only way to keep your family and our pack safe.”

She wipes a tear from her cheek as she attempts a smile. “Maybe the prophecy will change some of the old laws too. Create a world where I can have both.”

“Are you still considering being my mate?”

Her smile is genuine this time. Kissing me before she replies. “Yes. I’m just having a hard time letting my family go.”

We spend the next few hours being serenaded by raindrops hitting the roof. Tangled in each other’s arms, kissing and hugging. Touching and teasing. Feeling more confident than ever that we will be mated. And soon.



I’m starving. Just dropped Skye off in her driveway. And now I’m ready for some dinner. The drive to Eden Brook

didn't take as long as I was expecting. I should arrive at the packhouse just as they're sitting down at the table.

I broke the rules by going to Eden Brook, but I don't care. The only way I was going to know that Skye got home safe was to take her there myself. I didn't make any stops, nor did I get out of the truck. Went straight there via the shortest route and came straight back. Even drove with the windows up to ensure my scent wasn't left on anything but Skye.

We spent the whole afternoon together at the cabin. The more she talked, the more at ease I felt about her being a witch. And the more we made out, the more confident I became that she'll be mine. It was incredible. And a little painful since both my cock and my wolf are ready to claim her.

I walk in the front door as Chloe shouts.

"Dinner's ready."

Perfect timing.

Jordan's blocking the path to the table. Staring at me with a smug look on his face. "Where have you been all day? There's a fucking mess in the living room with your name on it?"

"Back off, Jordan. You know where I was and who I was with. Chloe knows that I'll clean up the living room when I'm finished."

The rest of the pack is quiet. Watching.

I make a move to walk past Jordan. But he steps in front of me.

"You have a problem, Jordan? What? Can't handle that she wants me instead of you. Is that it?"

Jordan lunges toward me. Grabbing me by my shirt with both fists as he slams me against the wall. "What she wants doesn't matter, you little fucker. If I wanted her, I'd take her."

Both of us are panting. Our faces inches from the other.

"Stand down, Jordan. I want to hear what he has to say about this witch I'm meeting tomorrow." Bryce walks in from the bedroom. Pulling out a chair and sitting down as he shakes his

head. “And Declan, you better have something interesting to tell me or I’m letting Jordan loose.”

I push Jordan off me. Watching him sneer as he walks away.

I take a few deep breaths to calm down. My wolf is pissed that we have to walk around smelling like Jordan now. He keeps snorting and snarling at the funk that he knows won’t fade anytime soon. And son of a bitch, Jordan’s stench is starting to cover up Skye’s sweet aroma. Now, I’m mad.

“There’s plenty to tell you. Can I grab a beer first?” I walk to the refrigerator without waiting for a reply. Talking as I walk. “Have any of you ever heard about a prophecy that’s supposed to wipe out shifters?”

Bryce chuckles as he looks around the room. “What kind of bullshit is this girl selling? And why are you buying it?”

Chloe gasps. “I heard stories about a prophecy when I was a kid. The elders would talk about it at night when they sat around a big bonfire in the summertime. I remember because it always made me scared to go in the house by myself when it was time for bed.” Chloe takes her seat next to Bryce. Shivering as she continues. “It still gives me the chills to think about it.”

Bryce looks at Chloe long and hard. His smirk disappears as she nods, indicating that they’re having their own private mind-speak conversation about this so-called prophecy.

Bryce makes eye contact with everyone one by one. “Anyone else heard about this prophecy? Anything at all?”

A wave of headshakes travels around the table. Then all eyes land on me.

“You’re up, Declan. Let’s hear it.” Bryce leans back in his chair with his arms crossed.

I spend the next two hours telling them everything Skye said about the prophecy and answering all their questions. Eating dinner happened in starts and stops, and we went through a couple cases of beer before everyone was satisfied. All in all, it turned out better than I was expecting.

Spencer and Harris leave to do one final patrol of the property as Bryce and Jordan grab another beer. I help Chloe clear the table since Willy left an hour ago to take care of some game warden business.

Bryce pushes his chair away from the table as he pops the cap off his beer. “Did Skye say anything about why her mother wants to meet with me tomorrow? Jordan said this woman is a real firecracker.”

“The only thing she said was that she didn’t know why it was happening. That she’d never seen her mother talk to an alpha before.” I set the last platter on the counter next to the sink as I turn to face the alpha.

I grab another beer out of the refrigerator on my way back to the table. Nodding at Bryce as I return. “Have you ever seen a dragon?”

Bryce shakes his head as he looks at me. “Nope. I thought they were extinct. The more I think about everything you said, the more inclined I am to think there’s something to this prophecy.”

Chloe closes the dishwasher and grabs a hand towel on the way over to her mate. “Can I go with you tomorrow? I want to see the witch.”

Bryce nods at Chloe as he points to Jordan. “I want you there as well. You too, Declan. The four of us will go. We’ll take two trucks. I was playing with the idea of blowing the whole thing off. But now I’m curious to hear what she has to say. Should be interesting.”

CHAPTER 21

Skye

The more I'm with Declan, the more I want to be mated to him. I feel truly alive for the first time in my life. Like I'm discovering parts of my heart that I never knew existed before. And my body is waking up to a whole new world of passion and desire after being in a cold dark slumber for way too long.

I wave as he backs out of my driveway. We spent the entire day at the cabin. I told him everything I knew about shifters, the prophecy, and our family's mission to save the world. And he listened without judgment.

After the talking, we fooled around. It was different this time. More intimate somehow. Definitely better. Maybe by coming clean and revealing our true selves to each other, we had removed some invisible wall that stood between us. Now, there's no more hiding in the shadows. No more secrets.

Watching him leave while I can still feel the sensation of his touch on my skin is almost painful. I miss him terribly when he's not next to me. And the nights spent apart are getting increasingly more difficult to bear.

The stronger these feelings get, the more I'm starting to realize that Declan is my future. My family will always have a place in my life. But my sisters and I are meant to go our separate ways. Journey toward our own chosen paths without the others by our side.

Walking through the back door of my childhood home doesn't feel the same as it did yesterday. It's changed in a way that I don't fully understand. As if I'm now a stranger intruding where I don't belong. I'm hit with the realization that this is no longer my home.

My place is with Declan now. With my mate.

"You weren't here when we got home. I was under the impression Declan was bringing you straight here. Were you with him all day?"

My mom is sitting at the kitchen table as I come through the door. Occupying the chair that's facing the door head-on. Nothing in front of her on the table. Not even a cup of tea. No one around but her.

She's been waiting here for some time. Her thoughts brewing. The speech she's prepared in her head has finished steeping. Ready to be served to me whether I want it or not.

"Yes. I was with him." I rush to the table. Pulling out the chair, ready to lay out my cause in front of her. "I know you're mad, Mom. But I really am learning a lot."

She stares back at me. Her emotionless expression unchanged.

"I told Declan about the prophecy. He had never heard of it before, but he's eager to help me do my part. He wants us to work together as a team."

Mom's glare remains blank as she comments. "I'm not surprised he hasn't heard about the prophecy. Few shifters have. Do you realize that this isn't a *friendship* for him? That spending time with him is putting you in danger? Every time you go to Wolfdale is more dangerous than the time before. His alpha can't protect you, Skye. Has he explained any of this to you?"

My enthusiasm deflates. I slump into the back of my chair to prepare for another one-sided conversation where she does all the talking and I'm forced to just listen.

"Yes. He explained all that. It's why he broke the rules to bring me home himself. He didn't trust anyone else to do it."

"This isn't a game, Skye. Their very strict, death-is-the-punishment-for-breaking-them rules are in place for a reason. Those rules are why we live in Eden Brook. This is the only place where we can be close enough to observe and still be safe."

I cross my arms over my chest as I give the standard reply. "I know all of that, Mom."

"Really? I'm not sure you do. You don't even see that Declan's own packmates are gearing up to challenge him for

you. I'm surprised you came home at all. That beta had the perfect opportunity to whisk you away for himself. I can't figure out why he didn't. And that makes me nervous about his motives. Trust me, Skye. There isn't an alpha out there who'll tolerate a human disrupting his pack. Whatever decision he makes on your behalf will be final. Declan won't disobey his command for you."

My mom knows way more than I thought she would. If they know all of this, then why aren't they teaching any of it to us? This is what we should be learning about. Real-life stuff with real shifters. Not locked away in a secluded humans-only town reading about other people's encounters and hoping for the occasional rare glimpse.

I want the prophecy to happen. I want it to shake things up. Break the barriers that divide our two worlds and create a new reality where all live as one. And it can't happen soon enough if you ask me.

It's time to get real with my mom.

"Declan asked me to be his mate."

Mom blinks twice before she responds. "What was your answer?"

Oh. That got a reaction. I haven't seen the elusive double-blink in years. I caught her off guard. She wasn't expecting me to say that at all.

"I told him that I needed a little time to think about it."

"Are you in love with him? And before you answer that, you need to know that their endorphins are different than ours. Stronger and addictive to humans. They give the illusion of love. But it fades quickly when you're away from them."

I give myself a minute to think about what she said. Remembering each encounter with Declan as I respond with confidence. "Yes. I fell in love with him. I know it sounds weird to say it happened slowly when it's only been a few days. But how I feel about him now is different than the first day we met. I admit that the rush of endorphins fueled the

attraction in the beginning. But spending so much time alone, we've gotten to know each other."

Mom stands and pushes her chair up to the table. Looking at me with the same blank expression to respond. "Weigh your options carefully. Your decisions carry consequences that can't be undone."

I remain in my seat as she walks out of the kitchen.

She stops at the bottom of the stairs. Turning back to ask one final question. "Do you think you're the first Chandler to fall for a shifter?"

She starts up the stairs as she continues. "You're not even the first one from this house. Every generation has at least one. I just didn't think it was going to be your name that was added to that list. One day you'll realize that you're not learning anything we didn't already know. And none of it will help with the prophecy."

I stay in the kitchen alone for a bit. Trying to decide if the conversation we just had changes my mind in any way. I don't think it does. My mind is made up. I'm going to say yes to Declan.

I wonder who fell for a shifter besides me?

My money is on Aunt Clairabelle. Her mysterious move to upstate New York a year ago felt off to me as soon as it happened. And has gotten weirder the more time that has passed.

There was no plan or discussion. No reason given. Just an out-of-the-blue whim that shocked all of us. She came downstairs for breakfast one morning and announced before coffee: *I'm moving to New York. Today. And Snowbie, you're coming with me.* The only person not surprised by the big announcement that day was my mother.

Yep. This is one of those situations where one questionable deed added to one generalized statement about the family equates to the conclusion that Aunt Clairabelle had a tryst with a shifter. Except, in the end, she chose the family over the guy.

I turn off the light and go up to my bedroom. There's a lot I want to write about in my journal before I go to sleep.

CHAPTER 22

Poppy Chandler

Meeting with an alpha is not what I wanted to be doing today. This is the second time I've had to arrange one of these meetings since the fire element baton was passed to me. The first one was with a dragon shifter. And let's just say that I hope this meeting turns out better than that one did.

The house is quiet when I walk into the kitchen to start a pot of coffee. It won't be long before Skye, Ember, Clairabelle, and Snowbie are down. I heard them moving around as I left my bedroom.

Violet and Terra will be here soon with a box of pastries from the bakery around the corner. We don't splurge on treats like this very often. But today it feels necessary.

This meeting is being used as a training tool. When I met with the dragon years ago, the girls weren't born yet. Today's lesson is mostly for Ember. She'll be the one who'll carry on this responsibility.

Ember walks in wearing pajama pants and an old T-shirt. Tying her hair up in a scrunchie as she plops down in one of the chairs.

"Ember, why are you dressed like that? You're going with me today. Upstairs now. Hurry. We can't be late for this meeting."

She huffs as she runs back up the stairs.

Clairabelle and Snowbie walk in with Skye right behind them.

I set coffee mugs on the counter and start filling them. "Skye, get the creamer from the refrigerator. While we're gone, you are not to leave this house. You and Terra have plenty to keep you busy for the fire festival. And Clairabelle has a list of her own if you run out of things to do."

"Why can't I come? Isn't this meeting about me? Ember doesn't have anything to do with it." Skye questions me with

the refrigerator door wide open.

“Ember’s going because this is a good training exercise for her. It’s not necessary for your element to be there at all. Fire is the only one that is required.”

Knock. Knock.

Terra shouts from outside the back door. “Open up. Hurry, the box of croissants is about to fall.”

The pastries make it to the table unscathed. I keep my eye on the time as everyone eats. This is one meeting I don’t want to be late for.

Violet sets her mug on the counter, then steps toward the door. Patting the satchel that’s draped over her shoulder as she passes the table. “Ready when you are, Poppy. Let’s get this show on the road.”

I put my mug next to hers. Looking at Skye as I follow her out. “You better be here when I get back. Ember, let’s go.”

In the car, I remind Ember of the conversation we had last night. Making eye contact with her in the rear-view mirror as I talk to her. “You are to watch and listen only. Any questions you have, save it for when we’re alone. Violet and I will explain everything to you before we return home. Do you understand?”

Ember looks out the window as she huffs. “You told me this yesterday. I got it. Mouth shut. Eyes open.”

We arrive at our destination soon after that. I back the car into a parking spot at the edge of the park across the street from the diner we ate at yesterday. No one is in the park, which is a good thing.

We’re here fifteen minutes early. I didn’t want to be late. And Violet and I both wanted a few minutes to check out the surrounding area. Put eyes on all the roads coming in and out of the park.

Violet points at three crows as they fly overhead. Looking at me as they land in a nearby tree. She shakes her head as I watch the messengers closely.

“Ember, have you seen any crows hanging around the house lately?” I ask as I continue to watch the crows.

“No. But I haven’t been looking. Why do you ask?”

I make eye contact with Violet as I reply. “No reason. Just curious.”

Violet winces as she turns her attention back to the birds.

It appears that Skye has gotten the universe’s attention. And I fear that this meeting to save her is happening too late. The outcome has already been decided. All I can do now is hope for the best.

We know what we’re here to do. And we’re completely comfortable with doing it. What we don’t know is how the alpha will respond to the information being delivered.

No time to consider all the options now. Two trucks just parked next to each other on the opposite side of the park. They’re here.

Violet, Ember and I get out of the car and start walking across the grassy field in front of us. Stopping in the middle to ensure they meet us halfway. Out in the open is safer for everyone.

Four people are walking toward us. I’m assuming the two out in front are the alpha and the alpha female. Followed by the beta that was at the diner yesterday. And Declan is last.

The alpha stops a few feet in front of me. Making eye contact with each of us, he nods in my direction. “We’re here. What do you have to say that couldn’t have been accomplished over the phone yesterday?”

I swallow hard and begin. “Thank you for coming. My name is Poppy Chandler of the Chandler Clan. I want to begin by apologizing for my daughter’s reckless behavior. Before we continue, please read the document that’s inside the case my sister will present to you now.”

Violet pulls a rectangle-shaped wooden box out of the bag that’s draped over her chest. She uses the key that’s hanging on a chain around her neck to unlock it. Then she steps

forward with outstretched arms. Holding the box in front of her for the alpha to open. Nodding at him without saying a word.

The alpha looks at me and then back to the box. “What’s this?”

I answer patiently. “The document inside that box will explain better than I can. Only you can open the box and retrieve it. We’ll wait while you read it.”

The alpha looks over his shoulder at his mate and then at his beta before stepping closer to Violet and opening the box. He removes the parchment scroll carefully. Studying the wax seal before he unrolls the document.

His three companions step forward to get a better look.

The beta is the first to comment. Gasping in disbelief. “Holy shit. Is this what I think it is?”

The alpha female points over her mate’s shoulder. Talking over the beta. “Look at the date. *1693*. But what’s that thing on the bottom?”

The alpha looks at me with a raised eyebrow.

I nod as I answer the female. Knowing the answer without having to see what marking is being questioned. “That’s the draconic seal of the former head of the shifter council. The second scroll in the box is from the current leader. Honoring this agreement and giving us permission to continue our work.”

The alpha makes eye contact with his mate before he goes back to reading the document in its entirety.

After a few minutes, he questions me again. “So, the prophecy is real. What do we do now?”

“Yes, the prophecy is real. There’s nothing for you to do regarding the prophecy. Our main responsibility is to prepare the next generation to take over where we leave off. Skye is participating in that training now. She’s a good student who still has much to learn. But I’m afraid her overzealous tendencies have gotten her into trouble this time. We’re here to

offer our assistance to you. How can we help diffuse the situation?”

The alpha holds out his hand to pass the scroll to me.

I shake my head as I respond to his actions. “Only alphas can touch the contents of the box. Will you please return it to the box it came from?”

He does as he’s asked. Questioning me while he does so. “There are three scents I’m not familiar with inside the box. Is that the scent of dragons?”

“Yes. The two scrolls were scripted by ice dragons. The other scent is from a fire-breathing dragon. Years ago, he participated in a meeting similar to this one.”

Violet steps back as the box closes. Locking it and returning it to the bag it came out of.

The alpha gives me a long look as he scratches his chin. “Dragons still exist too? That’s great. Well, I’m sorry. But what’s done is done. Your daughter sealed her fate when she walked into Howler’s alone. The only thing I can do is allow her into the pack after she’s mated. If she chooses not to mate, then she’s on her own.”

I make eyes at Violet as I respond to the alpha. “I understand. May I ask which member of your pack she’ll be mated to?”

The alpha glances over his shoulder at the two males with him as he smiles. “That hasn’t been decided yet.”

Declan steps out in front of the beta. Shoulders back as he raises his voice to make his declaration. “I asked her to be my mate. She’s supposed to give me an answer today.”

The beta lunges for Declan but stops in mid-step as the alpha raises his hand. I can only assume that the alpha is communicating with mind speak based on the beta’s actions.

This is an incredible opportunity for us. I’m glad Violet is here to witness it with me.

The alpha speaks with authority. Addressing them more than us. “I’ve been waiting for you to show me what you’re made of, Declan. I’m impressed. It sure took you long enough.

Jordan's one of the strongest betas in Wolfdale. There aren't many who'd do what you just did and live to talk about it."

The alpha glances at his mate before he continues talking to the wolves. "This is what I can do to reward your efforts. You and Skye get twenty-four hours starting now. If you're not mated when time's up, then she'll be offered to Jordan. This is my final decision. Both of you hear me?"

Declan nods with enthusiasm. "Yes, sir."

Jordan shrugs as a low growl rumbles from deep in his throat.

The alpha turns to me. "That's the best I can do. Unless the coyotes get to her first, of course. But can we be clear about one thing? There will be none of this prophecy business discussed in my house. I respect what you're doing. And I'll do my part when the time comes. Until then, I don't want it anywhere near me. I'm trusting you to make sure Skye understands this before she crosses the threshold."

"I'll make sure Skye is given this information. Thank you for your time. Have a good day." I turn and start walking back to the car.

Ember bellows behind me. "That's it? You're just going to give Skye over to them without a fight? Why are you thanking him?"

Violet grabs Ember's arm as I charge toward her. Lowering my voice to avoid a scene. "Get your ass in the car. Now. We will not talk about this here. That alpha can hear us, and several coyotes are watching our every move. Can we get out of Wolfdale before you start yelling at your mother?"

The mood in the car on the ride home is very different than when we started out this morning.

Violet starts explaining the situation to Ember as I drive. "You need to understand that we're not *giving* Skye to them. What's happening to Skye is a result of her own actions. Her going into that shifter bar determined her path. The alpha was right. There's nothing anyone can do about it. She will be mated to someone. Or worse. The best we can hope for is that she ends up in a good pack."

Ember blurts out her objection. “What’s worse than never seeing her again?”

I sigh from the driver’s seat. Changing the subject to get what I have to say out before we get home. “Ember, today was part of your training.”

“I know, Mom. You’ve told me three times already.”

“Over the next few weeks, Aunt Violet and I will teach you everything you need to know about the contents of the box in her bag. You are the next Chandler responsible for guarding those documents.”

“Why me? I don’t want it.”

I ignore Ember’s outburst and keep going. “We will explain in more detail later, but for now, know that the existence of these scrolls is to remain a deeply guarded secret. Many shifters would be outraged to learn that we have the full support of the shifter council. If this information got out to the masses, it could cause species wars.”

“Then why are you giving it to me?”

Violet continues where I leave off. “It’s been a family tradition for many generations that the scrolls be passed from one fire element to the next. Sometimes, the earth element keeps the key. But that’s for you and you only to decide. Terra will not be made aware of the box, the scrolls, or the key unless you are the one to tell her. Whatever you decide, the shifter council will be notified when you take over. They will need to know who has the key as well.”

“Who’s the leader of the shifter council? Is he the ice dragon you told the alpha about?”

I interrupt to respond. “The less you know about the shifter council, the better.”

Violet adds as I finish. “It’s called plausible deniability.”

“Are you two making me the fall guy? Am I going to be hunted down for this?”

Violet laughs as she responds. “No. Nothing like that is going to happen. The rules are in place to protect everyone involved.

We talk about the prophecy daily within the family. Never stressing the importance of its secrecy before now. If you mention it in most circles, you'll just be labeled as crazy. And we like it that way. It helps us continue working without drawing too much attention to ourselves."

"What other secrets have you been keeping from us? No wonder Skye's in so much trouble. Does she even know what's about to happen to her? I can't believe you just handed her over like that."

I watch Ember through the rear-view mirror as I stress the relevance of this information. "She wasn't handed over. But it was necessary for us to extend an olive branch. The next few months are crucial. Right now, we have to assume that Skye will be leaving the family to join a wolf pack. That means there will be no one working on the air portion of the prophecy. You are the only one who can pick up the slack. And we have to start preparing for that today."

Ember doesn't say any more as she gazes out the window.

I let the conversation die out for the rest of the drive home. Spending the rest of the time thinking about how I'm going to prepare my daughter for her new life with a pack of wolf shifters.

CHAPTER 23

Skye

The morning has crept by slowly. Ever since Mom, Aunt Violet, and Ember left to meet with Declan's alpha, I swear I've looked at the clock on the wall every other minute. I hate not knowing what's happening at that meeting. And I hate even more that I wasn't included.

Snowbie's voice snaps me out of my thoughts. "Get with the program, Skye. Pay attention to what you're doing. I've already done the tableware. You're supposed to be cleansing the crystals in both of those bowls."

Today, we're cleansing the items that will be used during the fire festival. Everything from dinnerware, glasses, and utensils that we will be eating and drinking from to the crystals and crystal clusters, candles, seashells, altar pieces, glass bowls, wooden platters, and blades, as well as the altar cloth itself. All of it has to be cleansed with sage before it gets set outside to charge in the sunlight.

There are close to two hundred crystals on this table. This is going to take hours.

I rifle through one of the boxes in front of me. Looking at Snowbie as I question her. "Where are the sage bundles? I thought this box was full of them. There's none here. I think you're using the last one. And it's almost burnt out. What are we going to do?"

Aunt Clairabelle walks in from the other room carrying a box. Setting it on the table as she replies. "We're low on candles too. Someone needs to make a supply run. Give me a sec to look through this box to see what candles we'll need while you three decide who's going."

"I'll go." I jump up, ready to walk out the door right now.

Aunt Clairabelle purses her lips as she looks at me. "All right. Take Terra with you or your mother will kill me. No

stops along the way. Straight there and straight back. You hear me?”

Terra stands at the back door, nodding. “We got it. I’ll make sure Skye stays focused. We’ll be back before you know it. What color candles do you want?”

Aunt Clairabelle moves items around in the box as she talks. “Get four or five of the big ones in colors: red, orange, yellow, white, gold, and pink. And two each of black and green. They’ll be good for leaving negative habits behind while we level up for the year ahead. That should work. We have plenty of everything else. And don’t forget the sage bundles.”

Terra is quiet when we get in the car. But I know she wants to say something. She grinds her teeth when something’s on her mind. And backing out of the driveway, she’s louder than the hum of the engine.

I decide to stay quiet. Wait her out since I have a feeling this is about Declan.

She finally starts talking. “I overheard Aunt Violet talking to Mom on the phone last night.”

I joke, hoping to lighten up the mood. “Someone should really explain the speaker phone to Aunt Violet. It’s not supposed to be used for every conversation.”

Terra keeps going in the same dull tone. “Are you really considering mating with this guy? Why didn’t you tell us what you were doing? I know that I’m not brave enough. But Ember would have gone with you to Wolfdale.”

Since all my secrets are out of the bag, I decide to be honest with my sister. “I didn’t tell anyone because I knew you’d try to talk me out of it. Or worse, you’d tell Mom. And she’d tell Aunt Clairabelle, who’d scry through all my deep dark secrets until they found everything there was to see. Including an image of the tiny air sylph that I had tattooed onto my ass cheek last year when we went to the beach. I just wanted to do something that was all me.”

“When did you have time to get a tattoo at the beach last year? We all went. And we were only there three days.”

I glance over at Terra while I drive. “Seriously? That’s the part you’re asking me about?”

“Come on, Skye. This isn’t one of the small rules you’ve broken here. No weeklong punishment will get you out of this. Once you’re mated with this guy, you will be a member of his wolf pack. Forever. As in the rest of your life. Are you really considering leaving your family for this guy?”

“Can you stop calling him *this guy*? His name is Declan. And yes, I want to be with him. I want to be his mate. Why is it so hard for everyone to believe I fell in love?”

I turn into the Mystic Ways Holistic Shop parking lot. Coming to a stop in the first available empty spot.

Terra and I get out of the car without saying anything more. Both of us watch the sky above us as three crows fly directly overhead.

I point at the birds, transfixed by their appearance. “Tell me you saw that? Those crows have been following me for days. I wish they’d leave me alone. Let’s go. I want to get this done. I have to be home before Mom, remember.”

Terra bellows beside me. “There were three crows, Skye. That means your life is about to change. When did you see them first?”

I stop in the middle of the drive aisle of the parking lot as the realization hits me. “The morning I met Declan. They *cawed* to me. I knew the message was for me. But I chose to ignore it.”

Terra guides me through the parking lot. “Let’s go inside. We need to get this shopping done and go home. We need to talk to Aunt Clairabelle. She’ll know more about what the crows are trying to communicate.”

We choose way more items than what we originally needed. The sage bundles and candles all make it into our bags. But we grab a few palo santo sticks in case we need more. I can’t remember how many were in the box at home. And some local honey from a farm my mom likes.

On our way to the register to pay, we grab a pouch of loose mugwort leaves to help raise our vibration and a softball-sized piece of raw black jade that Terra says she just has to have. Besides, it's supposed to help us steer clear of negative people. Who couldn't use a little of that kind of help nowadays?

Now we're both carrying bags across the parking lot to the car. I stop in the middle of the drive aisle when I realize we're being watched. Whispering to Terra to get her attention.

"Terra, look."

I get a bad feeling as the tall, scruffy man leaning against the hood of my car smiles at me. Flashing his eyebrows as he blows me a kiss.

She adjusts the bags in her hands as she raises her head. "Who's that creep?"

"He looks like one of the coyote shifters from the diner yesterday. We need to get out of here." I look back at the store, trying to decide which way to go. Inside to call for help or to the car to leave.

Terra exhales heavily beside me. "We run for the car on three. Ready?"

"Ready. One, two, three."

We both take off running as the man moves to cut me off. Grabbing my arms just as I reach for the door handle.

He slams me against the driver's door as he digs his fingers into my arms. Licking the side of my face from my neck up to my forehead. Slurring his words as he talks with his lips against my cheek. "Looky, looky what I found. Aren't you a tasty piece of ass? I think I'll take you home and lock you away. Keep you as my own private plaything."

"ARGHH!" Terra roars from behind the shifter man.

Whack! A loud thud sends the coyote stumbling off me. Crashing to the ground a few feet away.

Terra yells as she races for the car door. "Get in the car! Hurry!"

Both of us pull open the doors as fast as we can. Throwing ourselves in the car. Closing the doors as our feet clear the opening. Me in the driver's seat, her in the backseat on the same side of the car.

The coyote jumps to his feet and throws himself against the door just as I hit the automatic lock button. Turning the key to get us out of there as fast as I can.

“You, bitch! You can't hide from me.” The coyote shifter punches the window as he shouts. A trail of blood is oozing down his cheek from his hairline. Little red splatters hit the window as he claws at the door to get it open.

Terra cracks the window in the backseat. Shouting as I hit the accelerator to pull away. “Your head better not have broken my new piece of black jade. You asshole.”

We both start laughing as the car speeds down the road. Terra more than me.

Terra climbs between the bucket seats to get in the front. Fastening her seatbelt as she settles in, still laughing as she jokes about what just happened. “I kind of thought the black jade would have kept the negative people away better than that. But hitting him upside the head with it in the bag seemed to do the trick. We'll have to remember how it works for next time.”

My arms are shaking as I clench the steering wheel with both hands. I can't seem to catch my breath. Gaspings for air as the first tear breaks free.

I can still feel where that coyote licked me. Gross and sticky at the same time.

Holy shit. Did that really just happen? But we're in Eden Brook. Shifters aren't supposed to be in Eden Brook.

I slow down just enough to do a U-turn in the middle of the street. Turning around to go to Wolfdale instead of back home.

“Skye, what are you doing? This is the wrong way.”

“I can't go home, Terra. It's not safe. Declan told me that shifters aren't allowed in Eden Brook. And if that guy was one

of the coyotes from the diner yesterday, then he came here looking for me.”

Terra tosses the bags I threw on the floorboard to the backseat with the others as she questions me. “Where are you going?”

“Declan and I have been meeting at an old hunting cabin on his pack’s property. I’ll go there. I don’t know where else to go that I’ll be safe.”

The tears are flowing freely now. I can’t hold them back any longer.

“Do you want me to drive?” Terra asks quietly.

“No. Focusing on the road is helping me keep it together.”

I take a few deep breaths to help calm my nerves before I continue. “Holy crap, Terra. I can’t believe that just happened. What would I have done if he would have taken me? And what would have stopped him from taking you too?”

“Don’t think about that now. Stay positive.”

We drive in silence the rest of the way. Me busy with my thoughts. Terra rubbing the piece of black jade that just saved both of us from captivity.

The whole way down the driveway to the cabin, Terra questions if this is a good idea. I didn’t answer her because the truth is, I don’t know if it’s a good idea or not. But for now, it’s all I’ve got.

It took twenty minutes to convince her to leave me there. My argument that someone had to go back and tell our mom what happened to us turned the tide in my favor.

Now, I’m sitting on the ground leaning against the locked cabin door alone. Waiting. Did I mention that I’m out in the forest in the middle of nowhere?

Still alone. And still waiting.

Every sound startles me. The jumping to attention every few seconds is making me cry harder. And the crying makes me hyperaware of all the sounds that are making me jumpy.

Bruises are starting to appear on my arms where that asshole grabbed me. My heart is pounding in my chest. And the longer I sit here, the more helpless I feel.

What do I do if no one shows up?

I'm afraid to leave. And I'm afraid to stay here alone.

Crack. A large branch breaks just out of view.

I hurry to my feet. Panting as I struggle to see through the thick underbrush.

A big black and grey wolf appears from behind a tree. His eyes fixated on me as he takes slow, deliberate steps toward me.

I talk to the wolf, convinced it's one of Declan's pack mates. Raising my voice for him to hear me without coming any closer. "I'm Skye. Can you please tell Declan that I'm here?" I burst into tears, unable to control myself as I continue. "I didn't know where else to go."

The wolf transforms before me. A wolf one second. A naked man, the next. Shifting in front of me as he walks closer.

Jordan appears in front of me. Passing by to retrieve the key that unlocks the cabin door. "Why do you smell like a coyote?"

I snuffle back my tears to explain. "A coyote attacked me in Eden Brook. He said he was going to lock me away. My sister and I got away from him somehow. I made her bring me here. Is Declan coming?"

"He's on his way."

Jordan unlocks the door and returns the key to its hiding place. Stopping in front of me like he's going to say something but doesn't. He looks at the bruises on my arms and the side of my face where the coyote licked me, then walks away.

Turning back to face me, he finally speaks. "Nothing can get to you out here. You have my word."

He walks into the forest. Shifting back into a wolf as he disappears between the trees.

I push the door closed behind me as I enter the cabin. Opening Declan's trunk to pull out the blanket and a bottle of water. I curl up on the cot, unsure about how long I need to wait for Declan.

I'll never admit it to anyone, but that coyote really freaked me out. The thought of him taking me and doing only the universe knows what makes me never what to leave my house again.

I do feel a little safer in here. But I'm not too happy about being alone. I mean, are wolves safer just because I'm flirting with one of them? Declan's been telling me the whole time that his own packmates could take me from him.

Is there anywhere I can go and truly be safe?

I'm scared. And I don't know what to do about it.

CHAPTER 24

Jordan

Bryce holding me back from ripping Declan to shreds really pisses me off. That little delta fucker is too lucky for his own good. If he can't seal the deal with Skye and claim her as his mate in twenty-four hours, then he doesn't deserve her. It's that fucking simple.

What does some mystical prophecy have to do with any part of this situation anyway? None, as far as I can see. Skye walking into Howler's has nothing to do with the survival of the species.

Oh, wait a minute. Maybe it does. There's a fifty-fifty chance she'll have a shifter when she gets pregnant. I guess getting knocked up is considered helping if you look at it that way.

Who gives a shit if some old witches have shifter council permission to do whatever it is they're doing? So what? It doesn't affect me or the woman I choose to be my mate in any way.

I took off for a run as soon as we got home from meeting with the witches. Wanted to be by myself for a while. And far away from Bryce and Declan. Needed plenty of room to let my wolf run out his frustration about this whole shit-show.

I can't stop thinking about Skye. The more this drags out, the more danger she's in. Is Declan thinking about that every time he sends her back to Eden Brook alone?

I get the slightest hint of Skye's scent when I crest the top of a ridge. Her scent is mixed with a little fear and way more male coyote shifter than I'm comfortable with.

I take off running. Following the scent trail all the way to the hunting cabin at the back of the property.

Skye stands the instant I step out from behind a tree. Her heart is racing, and her breathing is choppy. She's consumed by fear.

I mind-speak Bryce: *Tell Declan Skye's at the cabin scared to death. I smell coyote shifter and blood on her.*

Her voice is shaky as she talks to me. She's trying to convince me she's not frightened. But it's not working. She's petrified.

I shift in front of her, so I can unlock the cabin for her to go inside. There's no way to avoid doing it. The closer I get to her, the more of this coyote I smell. That is one brave low-ranking delta. He'll be top delta in no time. That's if he lives long enough to make it that far.

I put the key back in its hiding spot after the door is open. Stopping in front of her for one last look before I go. I don't know what this coyote did, but the bruises on her arms give me a pretty good idea. And the coyote saliva down the side of her face fills in some of the details.

I let out the breath I was holding. This woman has been through a lot. She's standing here in front of me trying to keep her shit together while every unmated shifter in three towns is hunting her down like she's some kind of wild animal.

That's enough to break most people. But here she stands. Shoulders back, head held high, and a glint in her eyes that's daring me to fuck with her.

I like her. Probably too much.

I make the decision here and now to walk away without saying anything more. I'll give them the twenty-four hours Bryce allotted. Not for Declan or because I was commanded to. Nope. This is for Skye. She's earned my respect.

If by some chance fate decides to bless me with an opportunity to make her mine tomorrow, I'll take it graciously.

CHAPTER 25

Declan

I finish cleaning up what's left of the mess in the living room when we get home from the meeting in the park. I want to get this finished before Skye calls. Yesterday, I gave her the number to the pack house. No more taking chances. When she's ready, I'll pick her up and bring her out here myself.

Bryce walks in while I'm putting the last few items into a box. He's standing there watching me but doesn't say anything.

"What? The shelves for Chloe are done." I point at the wooden fixtures lined up along the back wall. "This box is the last of the mess."

Chloe walks in behind her mate. Talking to no one in particular. "I can't believe the prophecy is real. That one witch was intense. I don't even know how to find the shifter council, let alone communicate with them. There is some crazy shit going on out in the world today."

I look around as I respond to her. Making sure I got everything off the floor. "I didn't know Skye was a witch when I met her."

"Forget about the living room for a minute, Declan. I'll stand by what I said and honor the twenty-four-hour time limit. But know that I'm half tempted to cut this girl loose right now. Between the prophecy being real and learning that those witches are working with the shifter council to prevent it from happening, I'm starting to doubt whether I want this girl in the pack at all."

I blink at my alpha, surprised by what I'm hearing. I start defending Skye with every word out of my mouth. "I understand. I'm a little freaked out by the whole thing myself. But I already told her that she'll be cut off from her family. That there will be no communication with any of them and no

prophecy work after we're mated. She'll just be a regular human member of the pack. I swear, Bryce."

"You make damn sure she understands the rules before she steps foot in this house. I want everything prophecy related to be kept far away from me."

Bryce stops suddenly. Pointing at his head to let me know that he's listening to one of our packmates communicating with mind-speak.

He looks at me with a raised eyebrow. Relaying the information as he hears it. "Jordan just found Skye at the cabin. She's scared and smells like coyote and blood. Go."

I take off running before the last word is out of his mouth. Getting to her is my top priority. Multiple scenarios are playing out in my mind to explain why she has the scent of a coyote on her. And none of them are good.



There's no sign of Jordan when I arrive at the cabin. I see that the door is cracked open from where I'm sitting inside the truck. I let out the breath I was holding as I exit the vehicle.

The foul stench of a coyote delta hits my nostrils before I've taken the first step. The faint hint of blood is wafting in and out too. I take it as a good sign that there isn't a lot of blood.

My wolf is snarling by the time I reach the door. The combination of coyote contact and human fear is nauseating. The fact that Skye's the human part of this scenario makes it even worse. We haven't even seen her yet, and my wolf's ready to go on an old-fashioned coyote hunt right fucking now.

That bastard better hope he never crosses my path.

I stop at the door to calm my wolf down some more. We don't know what we're going to find inside the cabin. And I don't want my reaction to scare her any more than she already is. I need to go in there nice and smooth.

I push the door open in one swift motion. Blinking to help my eyes adjust to the darkness. Skye is curled up on the cot in

a ball with the blanket pulled over her head. Her whimpered breath is the only sound in the room.

“Skye? It’s me. Are you all right?”

I rush to the side of the cot as I announce my presence. Kneeling to my knees as I get closer. Leaning against the cot, half afraid to touch her.

The blanket flies through the air as Skye propels herself into my arms. Slamming into me full force, sending both of us to the floor.

“Declan, thank the universe it’s you. I’ve never been so scared in my life.” She sobs into my neck. Trembling as she tightens her grip.

“I’ve got you. You’re safe now.”

I let her cry in my arms as we lay on the dusty wooden floorboards. Relieved that my worst fears have not been realized. And the coyote touches are only superficial. But at the same time, I’m pissed as hell that Skye’s been attacked this way.

I’ve been trying to convince her to be my mate. That she’s safe and protected with the pack. That once we’re mated all the drama and shifter stalking will go away. And this coyote stunt isn’t helping my cause at all. He better not have blown my chance.

Skye relaxes her grip after a few minutes. Whispering into my neck as we lay there. “I didn’t know where else to go so I came here. We were shopping in Eden Brook. When we came out of the store, a coyote shifter was leaning against the hood of my car waiting for me. I’m still not sure how we got away. It happened so fast. I made my sister bring me out here.”

Shit.

If that coyote went into Eden Brook to find her, then that means this isn’t a random one-off occurrence. He tracked her down intending to keep her. And there’s probably more than one asshole out there brave enough to follow his lead.

I begin to sit up. Guiding Skye to do the same. “Let’s move to the cot where we’ll be more comfortable. Tell me everything that happened.”

She gives a detailed explanation of the events as I listen quietly. Doing my damndest to keep a straight face until I hear everything.

I look Skye over as she talks. Confirming that my initial impressions about her being all right are true. Everything I’m seeing is corroborating her story. The bruises on her arms are where he grabbed her. His foul stink on her face is where he licked her. And the droplets of blood in her hair belong to the coyote. Her sister knocking the bastard upside the head with a big rock was good thinking on her part.

I’ll have to remember to thank Terra for that if I ever get a chance to meet her properly.

“I’m so sorry, Declan. The shopping center is located a few blocks from the center of Eden Brook. We only went for a few things. I thought I was safe there.”

I pull her tight against me. “You should’ve been safe. I don’t like how this is escalating. You do understand that more will be coming after you, right? This coyote was only the first to get to you.”

“I know. What do we do now?”

I kiss her on the forehead before I respond. Speaking softly to emphasize my sincerity. “Being mated is the only thing that will make it all go away. Have you decided? Are you ready to be my mate, Skye?”

“Yes, Declan. I am. But can I say goodbye to my family first? I want to tell them in person if I can.”

I smile at my beautiful mate.

Whoosh. Bang! The door flies open and slams against the wall in one quick motion.

I jump up, ready to protect Skye. I’m staring at a room full of witches, completely confused by their arrival.

Skye pushes past me, shouting at the intruders. “Mom, what are you doing here?”

The red-headed witch from the park nods at her companions. One by one they step outside, leaving her alone in the cabin.

She looks at me as she begins. “Please forgive the intrusion. But when I got home and heard what happened to Skye, I had to come see for myself that she was all right. I take it you’ve explained the situation to her?”

“No, ma’am. We were just getting to that part when you arrived.”

The woman steps closer as she questions me. “Will you allow me to tell her?”

I nod as I move over to the door. “That’s fine. But can we do it outside? This is a private space for us. There’s already too much of your scent in here.”

The woman turns and walks out. Whispering under her breath as she crosses the threshold. “Absolutely fascinating.”

Skye and I follow her out to find five other women, all staring right at me.

Skye grabs my hand. Beaming as she confronts the women. “This is Declan. And I’ve agreed to be his mate. Declan, this is my family. My mom, Poppy, who you met earlier. My Aunt Violet and Aunt Clairabelle. And my three sisters: Ember, Snowbie, and Terra.”

I smile at Terra. Nodding as I address her. “Thank you for saving my mate. That kind of quick thinking probably saved both of you.”

Mom interrupts the exchange. “Declan, do you mind if we take Skye home with us? Just for tonight?”

I pull my mate closer to me, ready to object.

Poppy steps closer. Her soft smile leading her plea. “I know that I’m asking a lot. But this is the last night we will have with her before she joins your pack. Will you please allow us this short amount of time to say our goodbyes? We can help her pack her clothes. I’ll personally put wards of protection

around the house so no one can find her. And I'll bring her back here first thing in the morning myself. I promise."

I look at Skye standing next to me. Tears are falling as she smiles at me. A slight nod letting me know that this is the closure she needs.

"All right. But I'm following you back to Eden Brook. Make no stops between here and your house. That will be the only place Skye is safe. No stops in the morning, either. I'll be here at sunrise. Don't be late."



I walk into the house with one thing on my mind. Get my room clean and all the laundry done before I go back to the cabin in the morning. I'm bringing home a mate tomorrow. And I plan on spending the next three days in bed with her minimum.

Spencer and Willy are inside when I walk in. And I hear Chloe in the kitchen moving around.

Chloe looks behind me as she questions me. "Where's Skye? Did you just leave her there?"

"No. The witches came and got her. The mom is bringing her back in the morning. She agreed to be my mate."

Spencer laughs as he walks up to me. "You let a minivan full of witches take your girl? What a dumbass."

Rage wells up inside me. I react without thinking. Pulling back and cold-cocking Spencer right in the face.

I shake out my hand as Spencer falls to his knees. "Shut the fuck up, Spencer. I'm not in the mood for your shit today. That's not what happened."

Man, that felt good. I've wanted to tell him off for way too long.

Jordan walks into the room. Pointing at Spencer rolling around on the floor. "What the hell happened to you?"

I get in Jordan's face hoping to catch him off guard. "You shifted in front of Skye, asshole. You were told to back off. My time isn't up yet."

Jordan shoves me backwards while walking away. "How else was I supposed to let her into the cabin, asshole? I alerted Bryce the second I found her, unlocked the door, and left. That's it. You still have your time with her."

Spencer yells while cupping his face in both hands. Blood oozing out of every crevice. "You broke my fucking nose, Declan. Can't you take a joke?"

I step over Spencer to get closer to Jordan. Shewing him away like a fly with my reply. "Shift and you'll be fine. Or don't. Maybe a crooked nose will improve your luck with the ladies."

Jordan and Willy start laughing. I join them as the tension that's been building within the pack for several weeks finally breaks.

Bryce walks out of the kitchen. I didn't notice him standing next to Chloe this whole time. Watching, listening, but not interacting.

He looks down at Spencer still rolling around on the floor. "Get up, Spencer. You're getting blood on my floor."

The alpha points at me. "You're now top delta."

Spencer stands while protesting. "Hey. You can't do that. Finding a mate doesn't move him up in rank."

Bryce gets in Spencer's face as he responds while emitting full alpha strength. "Mating has nothing to do with it. He knocked you out of the top spot when he knocked you on your ass. It's time you grew up and started taking things more seriously around here. If you want the position back, you're going to have to earn it outright."

Bryce makes eye contact with both Jordan and me. Nodding before he returns to the kitchen.

Everyone goes their separate ways after that.

I run upstairs to strip the bed. Get the washing machine going while I move on to cleaning the rest of my room. I want everything perfect for when Skye comes home.

CHAPTER 26

Skye

No one talks on the way back to Eden Brook. Going into the house, my sisters are looking at Mom like they're waiting for something to happen. Aunt Violet opens a bottle of wine while Aunt Clairabelle takes wine glasses out of the cabinet. One by one everyone takes a seat at the kitchen table. My mom leaves the seat at the head of the table for me.

I can tell already. This is not going to go well. But I pull out the chair and take a seat anyway.

Mom takes a sip of her wine. Looking at Aunt Violet and Aunt Clairabelle before turning her attention to me. Smiling softly, she begins. "Skye? I've decided that you should go live in New York with Clairabelle and Snowbie."

"What? No!" I spring up out of the chair, outraged.

She doesn't even pause during my outburst. Keeps talking without skipping a beat. "We can pack your belongings tonight and the three of you can leave before sun-up. You'll be out of the state before Declan even knows that you're gone. You can start a new life in New York. Clairabelle and Snowbie love it there."

"Did you just lie to Declan? To me? You promised him you'd bring me back in the morning."

I'm flustered. Bouncing between anger and confusion. I'm pacing back and forth, trying to settle on one emotion. Shocked that my mom is doing this to me.

Mom stands. Stepping closer in a very controlled manner. Her calm demeanor is starting to freak me out a little. This is not normal behavior for her. She tends to handle situations with a tad more fire and fury.

"I didn't lie to Declan. But on the way home, I did change my mind. You may not see it now, but this is what's best for you."

“Mom, I’m not running away. I want to be mated to Declan and be a member of his pack. I love him. Why is that so hard for you to believe?”

Aunt Violet draws my attention to the table as she continues where my mom left off. “Skye, you need to understand that we’re doing this for your own good. I know that the feelings of love are strong now, but they’ll fade with time. Trust me. This decision is a permanent one. Being mated means that you will forever be a member of a wolf pack. Bound to their way of living and following their laws. You’ll never be allowed to leave.”

I continue to pace back and forth. Listening to their nonsense without saying anything.

Mom takes over from Aunt Violet after she takes another sip of her wine. “Have you thought about how this will affect your natural abilities as a witch, Skye? Because we’re not sure what will happen when you become mated. There’s a good chance the mating bond will sever that connection. You will be just a regular human mated to a wolf. Any skills you have now will probably be gone. Are you ready for that?”

I stop pacing and turn to my mom. Speaking up while the tag-team seems to be regrouping. “I know about all that. Well, not about my abilities. But it makes sense. The mating bond connects us on all planes of existence. Not just the physical. Declan told me that saying yes to the mating meant that I’d be leaving the human world for good. The connection between family, witchcraft, and the prophecy would be severed permanently. And I said yes to him. Yes, to all of it.”

Aunt Clairabelle finishes the wine in her glass in one gulp as she stands. Pointing at me with the empty glass as she reaches for the bottle. “I know how you’re feeling right now, Skye. I’ve been there. The attention from a handsome shifter, the rush of desire, hormones flooding your body. And the kiss. I remember that kiss like it was yesterday. Pure perfection. No one will ever kiss me like that again. You know how I know that?”

I knew she was the one who broke the rules before me. The look on her face as she talks through her nostalgia is almost dreamlike. She remembers every detail like it happened last week. I don't know how long ago this happened for her, but her love for him hasn't faded at all. And moving to New York didn't seem to help either. In fact, I suspect it probably made things worse for her.

“How do you know, Aunt Clairabelle? Tell me.”

She refills her glass as she replies. “Because I chose family and our work on the prophecy over a meaningless encounter with a shifter. All he did was distract me from what's really important. And when I realized that, I ended it. There are consequences to your actions, Skye. And sometimes those consequences don't appear until many years later. But trust me, they'll find you no matter where you are.”

Mom steps in front of me. Giving me a determined look as she changes her tone. “I love you, Skye. And I only want what's best for you. Trust me, you'll thank me for this one day. Come on. Let's get you ready to go to New York.”

I step back away from my mom. Grabbing the cordless phone off the wall as I reply. “No. I'm not changing my mind.”

I dial the number to the pack house that Declan gave me yesterday. After the coyote incident, I felt it necessary to memorize the number. You know, just in case I needed to get him in a hurry.

Waiting for an answer, I continue talking to my mom. “I love Declan. And despite all the consequences and sacrifices, I choose him. I choose love.”

The phone rings several times before a female answers. “Hello?”

I talk into the receiver with my family watching me. “Hi, this is Skye. Can I speak to Declan, please?”

A few seconds pass before I hear his voice on the line. “Skye, is everything all right?”

“I'm ready. Can you come get me?”

“Leaving now. Be there soon.”

The phone disconnects.

My mom doesn't say anything more. She fills her glass with wine and walks out the back door. Aunt Violet and Aunt Clairabelle follow her outside. Aunt Violet grabbing another bottle of wine on her way out.

I put the cordless phone back on the charger and go upstairs to pack. Taking a suitcase out of the hall closet on my way to my room. Reminding myself that I can only take clothes as I lay the suitcase across the foot of the bed.

My room looks different to me now. Feels different too. I'm standing on the precipice of my new life. And this room, this house, is not going to be a part of it.

I'm excited about what this next phase of my life will be like.

Nervous too.

I have so much to learn about being in a wolf pack.

“Need any help?” Ember walks in with Terra and Snowbie behind her.

Terra goes to the closet. Rifling through the hanging clothes as she talks. “Don't forget your winter clothes. It's summer now, but it'll start getting cold soon. Are you taking everything?”

Snowbie turns around to leave the room. “I'll get another suitcase.”

Ember stands next to me. Putting her hand on my shoulder as she turns me to face her. “Are you sure about this? I know mom can be intense. But you *can* back out.”

I step out of my sister's reach. Responding as I open the top drawer of my dresser. “I'm not changing my mind, Ember. What is it that you're always saying? Love is an energy that offers itself freely to everyone. Well, I get it now. That gift is sitting in front of me wrapped in a sexy package. And I'm taking it without looking back. And don't give me that look. You'd take it too if the tables were turned.”

I grab all the bras and panties in the drawer in one scoop and walk them to the suitcase. Dropping them in the bottom of the suitcase as I continue. “Don’t you see, Ember? This is my chance to have a normal relationship with a man who adores me. For generations every woman in this family has sacrificed true love for a family legacy and a prophecy that no one believes will ever happen. I’m sorry. But I’m bowing out early.”

Ember walks out of the room as Snowbie walks back in.

Terra, Snowbie, and I spend the next forty-five minutes cramming as many of my clothes as we could fit into two suitcases. We laugh a little, cry a lot, and hug more times than Declan is going to be happy with.

I drag the first suitcase out the door of my old room.

Hiss. Jinx, the cat, is sitting at the top of the stairs. Stopping me from going any further.

“What’s your problem, Jinx? You’ve been acting weird for days. Get out of the way.”

I try to nudge her with my foot, but she swats at me with a loaded claw.

Ember picks the cat up. Leaning on her doorframe to pet her as she gives me her opinion. “She’s acting weird because you were her person until you started coming home smelling like a wolf. You’re the one abandoning us. We’re just all trying to figure out why. Including Jinx.”

I shake my head as I continue down the stairs with the heavy suitcase. Snowbie is right behind me with the other one. We drag the suitcases out to the carport. Terra and Ember meet us outside to wait.

Declan should be here any minute.

Aunt Violet, Aunt Clairabelle, and Mom walk around the corner of the house just as Declan pulls into the driveway. He gets out and takes my bags. Putting them into the back of the truck as I say goodbye to my family.

I hug Terra first, then Snowbie. Followed by Aunt Violet and Aunt Clairabelle. Ember brushes away a tear before she gives in and hugs me.

My mom hangs back.

I can tell she's been crying. But I don't push her into hugging me.

Caa. Caa. A black crow flies over the top of us. He's followed closely by two of his friends.

I get it now. Three crows symbolize impending change. They visited me six times which implies that the change is happening in a *now* moment. And not far off in the future. The first day I saw the crows was the day that I met Declan. It's not hard to put the rest of their message together.

Meeting Declan has altered the course of my life. And I go down this new path with an open heart and a willingness to embrace the journey ahead, being fully in the present.

I wrap my arms around Declan's waist as I turn to address my family. "I really do feel that I'm doing the right thing. I know you don't see it that way. Maybe one day you will. Until then, know that I love you. And I'll miss you terribly."

My mom steps out of the shadows. Pointing at Declan as a tear rolls down her cheek. "You better take good care of my daughter."

Declan smiles at her. "I will. I promise."

I let go of Declan to hug my mom.

She whispers in my ear as she holds me tight. "Be happy."

I pull away from the hug and my mom. "I will."

It's time. I nudge Declan before I turn to walk away. Getting in the truck without looking back.

Declan backs out of the driveway as the tears begin to fall.

"Are you sure you want to do this, Skye? Why did you call so soon after you left the cabin? What happened?"

I take Declan's hand in mine as he pulls away from the house. Answering him as I take a deep breath. "I'm sure."

I sit there for a few minutes waiting for the tears to subside.

Declan squeezes my hand. Kissing the back of it as he questions me again. "Going to tell me what happened?"

"They wanted to pack my clothes and send me to New York in the middle of the night. Hide me away until I came to my senses about leaving the family to be your mate. They wouldn't listen when I told them that I loved you. Or that this is what I wanted. I called you to get them to back off. And because I didn't trust that my mom would take me to the cabin in the morning."

Declan turns the truck into a gas station. Stopping on the side but not turning off the engine. He turns to face me.

I begin talking before he has the chance to say anything. "I love you, Declan. I want to be your mate. And I want you to be mine. I'm absolutely positive that I'm making the right choice. Nothing anyone says will change my mind. I'm that sure. So, are we going or what?"

Declan leans over and kisses me. Smiling as he turns the truck around and pulls out into traffic. "We're going. You'll be mated and a member of the pack just as soon as we get home."

"Home? You mean we're not going to the cabin?"

Declan winks at me while flashing that smile that I love so much. "I'm claiming you in our own bed. Even managed to wash the sheets before you called. Didn't get the rest of the room clean, though. But that's fine. It'll all have to be moved to make room for your clothes. That won't happen anytime soon because I don't plan on getting out of bed for a few days at least. And being at the house puts us closer to the kitchen."

I laugh out loud. "Sounds like you have it all planned. When will I meet the rest of the pack?"

"Not until after we're mated. And you should know that no one in the pack will talk to you or acknowledge that you're in the house until after Bryce welcomes you into the pack. You may feel a strange sensation when he says it. Just know that

what you're feeling is his alpha power recognizing you as a member of the pack. All you have to do is say thank you back. If you were a shifter, you'd feel compelled to say that you submit to his authority as well."

I listen carefully. I don't want to offend anyone as soon as I arrive. It's important that I start off on the right foot. And wow. The crash course in learning how to be mated to a shifter is starting before I even get there.

"Submit? Does that mean what I'm imagining? It sounds pretty harsh."

Declan kisses the back of my hand as he replies. "All it means is that you accept that he has authority over you. That you'll follow the rules and live as a productive member of the pack. He can't protect you until you're accepted into the pack. And that begins with him."

Doesn't sound too bad.

"You said before that Jordan wanted me to be his mate. Is it going to be awkward after we're mated?"

Declan rests my hand on his thigh as he drives. Glancing at me as he answers. "No. After we're mated, Jordan, and everyone else, for that matter, won't see you the same as they did before. The mating bond that joins us eliminates all that when it changes your scent. My scent will be different too."

It doesn't take long before Declan is turning off the road and driving down a long driveway. We turn through a bend in the road to see a really big house appear in the distance. It almost looks like a small hotel. There's even a parking lot off to the side with several vehicles parked neatly in a row.

The grounds surrounding the house are expansive. The landscaping is immaculate. And the house itself looks like it belongs on the cover of one of those architecture magazines.

This is a packhouse? Wow. I definitely had something very different in mind.

Declan parks the truck and gets out. Walking around to my side to open the door. I hesitate as I continue to look at the house.

Declan takes my hand to coax me out. “Don’t be nervous. We’re going to walk in and go straight to my room. You won’t see anyone until after we’re mated. Bryce will make sure of it.”

“Why is that?” I stay in the truck while I await his answer.

“Until we’re mated, your scent could cause a fight to break out. But that’s not going to happen because Bryce knows that I went to get you. And the only reason I brought you here is to get mated. Let’s go. I’ll give you the complete tour after we’re mated.”

I hop down out of the truck. Smiling with each step I take. Completely ready for what’s next.

CHAPTER 27

Declan

She's here. This is really happening. Walking through the door to the packhouse gets my wolf excited. Me too, if I'm being honest. He knows what we're about to do and with whom. And he dares anyone to get in our way between here and my bedroom.

I decide to make a pit stop in the kitchen. Pulling a grocery bag out of the pantry as I walk in.

"Skye, grab us two of those bananas out of that basket over there. I'll get us some waters out of the fridge."

"I'll take two apples as well. Anything else?"

"No. That should get us through the night. Here, put them in the bag." I drop the water bottles into the bag as I look around the kitchen. Grabbing the large zip bag of oatmeal raisin cookies as I leave the kitchen.

"What about my stuff in the truck?"

I smile at my mate as I guide her toward the staircase. Winking as I get closer. "We'll get it later. You don't need clothes where we're going."

She giggles as we go up the stairs. And the musical sound warms my heart.

My room is the last door on the right at the end of a long hallway. Every door between here and there is closed. Some of the rooms are empty. But not all of them.

I hurry us down the hall to get her into my room as quickly as possible. One, the sooner we're in my room, the sooner I have her out of those clothes and laid out on my bed. And two, the less of a chance of an incident occurring because there's an unmated female in the house with way too many unmated males.

Every member of the pack knows Skye's in the house. They knew the moment we pulled into the driveway. Bryce telling everyone to clear out was the only way to ensure her safety and my success. Besides, I still have roughly twelve hours left before my time is up.

I close the door behind us as we enter. Dropping the bag we just took from the kitchen on the dresser and pulling Skye into my arms in one motion.

She dodges my kiss. Looking around the room as she squirms. "Wow. Your room is big. There's even a sitting area. Is that the bathroom? Why is your bed so big?"

I let her go so that she can get acclimated. I can tell she's nervous. And I don't mind going a little slow at first.

"Yes. That's the bathroom. And a walk-in closet. The rooms are big because this is our only private space. One thing you should know right off the bat is that you are to never go into anyone's bedroom. And no one will come in here. This space is only for you and me. Common areas are shared spaces. Oh, and there's no sex in common areas, either. If you get turned on while we're watching a movie, you'll have to control yourself until we get behind that door right there." I wink as I point to the door we just came through.

She smiles as she wraps her arms around my waist. Holding me as she lays her head against my chest.

"Skye? Are you all right?"

"I hear your heart pounding in your chest. I'm sorry. Now that I'm here, I'm suddenly nervous about the whole thing."

I lean away from her to get a better look at her. "Are you having second thoughts? If you are, then we need to get you out of the house. No pressure, but you being in here to get mated comes with a short fuse."

Her expression remains unchanged as she replies. "Will it always be this rushed? Frantic and hurry up to get it over with? I guess I expected it to be a little more romantic. More like we're falling in love."

I kiss her on the forehead, hoping to reassure her. Smiling as I answer her as honestly as I can. “The first time is hurried. My wolf is focused on getting the physical need met. I am too a little bit. But after we get started, we’ll both be ready for the changes. The love floods in after the mating bond is sealed. Then we’ll do it again. And that time will be more like what you’re expecting.”

She furrows her brow. “Ready for what changes? I’m not sure I know what that means.”

I walk her over to the bed. Guiding her to sit down as I drop to my knees between her legs. Rubbing her thighs as I try to explain. “When shifters have sex when they’re not mated, they have to hold back to fight the urge to claim whoever they’re with. Think of it as fucking through a hole in the wall. No emotion, no heart, no foreplay, no anything other than just satisfying a physical need as quickly as possible. Are you with me so far?”

She nods but doesn’t say anything. Her blank expression is making me doubt my whole approach to this conversation.

Shit. I started all wrong. Think, Declan. What the fuck are you trying to say?

“When you’re claiming a mate, all that changes. The wall is gone. I know it doesn’t seem like it to you, but I’m nervous too. That wall created a way for me to interact with people from a safe distance. No one knowing the real me. It’s all I know about sex.”

I move over to sit beside her. Taking her hand in mine as I try to continue from the heart. From my heart. “Everything about what we’re about to do will be different. Every touch will feel better. Every sensation will be more alive. I’m not only showing you the real me. I’m allowing myself to experience all of you. No more holding back. Claiming a mate is about opening your heart for the first time and letting the love in. Letting the love out that’s been building too. And I’m ready for all of that with you. Are you ready to be my mate?”

Skye’s smile starts slow. Then she tilts her head to the side as she grabs my shirt and pulls me into a kiss.

I go willingly. Laying her on her back as I lift her further up onto the bed.

Our shirts come off one after the other as the kiss deepens. But then I pull away. Getting off the bed to turn off the overhead light and turn on the lamp on the bedside table. My jeans are already unfastened as I stand there looking at Skye.

I push the jeans down to the floor in one swoop as I kick off my shoes. Watching my soon-to-be mate's reaction.

Skye takes off her shoes and tosses them across the room.

I look down at my mate. "Do you like what you see?"

She takes off her pants as she nibbles on her bottom lip. "I do. Is all that for me?"

I chuckle as I crawl back on the bed toward her. Spreading her legs to position myself perfectly between them. "I'm all yours."

Lowering myself to take a bite of that damn lip. It's been teasing me for days. I'm ready to have a taste.

I remove the bra Skye's wearing as I leave her lips. Traveling down her neck. Exploring every inch of her along the way. Moving closer to her plump breasts. Finally sucking one of her hard pearl nipples into my mouth. Savoring her moan as she surrenders to my will.

I release her nipple with a pop. My hands caress her body as I move lower. Removing her panties with my fingertips. Soft kisses discovering the newly exposed skin.

Skye raises off the bed. Whimpering her plea as she pushes against me. "Why are you going so slow? You're driving me crazy."

I smile as I lick a slow trail along her hairline. Drawing little circles with my fingertip high up on the inside of her thigh as I reply. "I've never played with anyone like this before. I want you to have an orgasm first. Then I'll claim you."

She lifts her head off the pillow. Giving me a stern look as she attempts to plead her case. "We did this at the cabin. I had an orgasm while we were there."

“No. That was different. I was touching you while trying not to touch you. Now we can have fun. It’s important to me that you are satisfied.”

I grab her hips with both hands as I continue. “I get all of this to play with for real. And that wasn’t an orgasm. That was tiny. You were holding back too. I want you to really let go this time. Show me the way, beautiful.”

I don’t wait for a response. Gently pushing her legs further apart as I follow the aroma of her arousal. My tongue leading the way to the taste I’ve been longing for since the moment I first caught her scent at the hardware store.

Skye arches on the bed the instant the tip of my tongue makes contact with her clit. Her body trembling underneath me as I finally get to lap up her delectable essence. Covering her scent with mine in the purest possible way.

My fingers tease her opening as she gets closer to the edge. Her panting morphing into cries of joy as the rush of ecstasy washes over her. A satisfied smile on my face as she goes limp beneath me.

I move away from her to roll her over onto her stomach.

She cries out in protest. Grabbing me with both hands. “No. Please don’t stop, Declan. I want more. I want you inside me.”

“Oh, we’re not done. That was just a warm-up. Flip over. I want to claim you from behind.”

Skye smiles as she does as I ask. Kissing me on the cheek as she moves. “I love your glowing eyes. Especially since I know they’re glowing for me.”

“Glowing eyes is a good indication that this next part is going to go quick. My wolf is almost out of control. He’s right on the edge.” I show her the skin on my arm rippling beneath the surface as I continue. “But don’t worry. He won’t hurt you. You’re his mate, just as much as you are mine.”

She traces her finger over my arm before she settles into place. The sensation makes the rippling more intense.

“When will I get to meet your wolf?”

“After.”

“What do I need to know about this part? You’re going to bite me, right?”

I kiss her neck as I gather her hair to move it off her shoulder. “I’ll bite you here. Don’t be afraid. I’ll tell you before it happens. I’ll try to time it so that we climax together. The sting of the bite will only hurt for a split second. Then the rush of a more intense orgasm will take over. Sealing the mating bond between us permanently.”

She presses her lips to mine. Kissing me deeply before she responds. “I’m ready. I trust you completely. But can we start slow? You’re way bigger than I imagined. I don’t want it to hurt.”

I smile as I stroke her back. Winking while I pick her up. “You’ve been daydreaming about my cock? I wish I would have known that earlier. It wouldn’t have taken so long to get you in my bed.”

She points at my face as she laughs. “That. That wink right there. I’ve been daydreaming about every inch of you since the first time you winked at me. I knew in that moment that you were going to get me in trouble. And hey? Isn’t it *our* bed now?”

I laugh out loud as I move into position. Letting my tip rest at her opening. Applying just a little pressure to allow both of us, and my wolf, to be drawn back into the moment. My hands rubbing Skye’s hips as I slowly push in.

The sensation of breaking through the surface hits me like a shock wave. A low growl erupts from deep within me as I inch deeper. The sound of Skye’s euphoric moan encourages me to keep going.

Skye pushes against me as she rolls her hips. Crying out as I pull back to do it again. “More. Don’t stop.”

My body is tingling all over. Caught up in the pleasure of each sensation. The momentum builds with each stroke. I hit harder, then pull all the way out faster and faster. Climbing higher than I’ve ever been before.

“Skye! Don’t stop.” I pant out my words.

“Declan. Yes.”

“Now, Skye. I’m going to bite you now.”

I let my eye-teeth drop as I grab Skye around the waist to hold her in place. Pulling her to me, I bite without hesitation. Falling onto the bed with my mate in my arms as the mating bond melds our hearts into one.

We quiver in each other’s arms as the spasms brought on by our orgasms slowly subside.

“Yum.” Skye turns around in my arms to face me. “That was fantastic. I want to do it again.”

She kisses my neck as I bury my face in hers. Licking the mating mark to help the open wound close quicker. The action making her shiver in my arms.

“Whoa. What was that? And can you please do it again? That felt awesome.”

I laugh against her neck as I respond. “The mating mark will always be sensitive to touch. I feel it too. If you touch it when I’m not around, I’ll feel it and be turned on by it.”

She giggles against me. “You mean I have my own sexy wolf signal? You’ll come running whenever I want you?”

I tickle her sides as I roll her over onto her back. “You already have me. I’m all yours.”

She relaxes next to me as she looks around the room. “So, does this mean you’ll never go to Howler’s or any shifter bar again? When do you have to tell your alpha, Bryce, right, that we’re mated? They won’t come bang on the door or anything, will they?”

I prop up on my elbow as I lay next to her. Massaging her breasts as I answer. “Bryce already knows we’re mated. He felt our connection the moment I bit you. No one will come to the door for a few days. This time is for us to solidify that bond. Get to know each other and become one.”

“You mean, fall in love.”

I smile at my mate. “Yes. That’s exactly what I mean. It’s why I grabbed us some provisions on our way upstairs. Are you thirsty?”

“No, thank you. Finish telling me about Howler’s.”

I kiss her before I continue. Loving how good it feels to be lying here with her. “Howler’s is a great place to go for lunch. And now that we’re mated, we could go together. Sometimes they have mated couple’s only nights. Bryce and Chloe have gone. You won’t go anywhere alone now that we’re mated. I or someone else in the pack will always be with you.”

“Wait. What’s this about me never going anywhere alone? Are you being serious?”

I hold my mate in place. Not letting her get too far away as I explain. “Yes, Skye. I told you before. The rules for females are different. The threat of you being taken for mating purposes is gone, but you can still be taken for other reasons. You are now valued as an asset. All females are highly protected. If you leave this house, someone will go with you. You’re my mate. But you’re also a female member of the pack. It’ll feel natural before too long. You’ll see.”

Skye hugs me with both arms. Holding me tight as a little anxiety rises to the surface.

“Skye? Talk to me. What’s bothering you?”

She shakes her head against my chest. “There’s so much for me to learn. When you explain it, it makes sense. But honestly, I never would have thought about it like that. What’s going to happen to me when I screw up?”

I push her away from me to look at her. And for her to see me. “Everyone knows that this comes with a steep learning curve. And shifters don’t have it any better. Every pack is different. And every time someone new enters the pack, it changes the dynamic. We’re learning just as much from you as you are from us. Nothing bad will happen to you. We move on, knowing that next time we’ll do it better.”

We spend the next twenty-four hours making love and talking. Tickling and teasing each other all over the room.

Showering and sneaking down to the kitchen to refuel when necessary. Falling in love in every way possible. And I couldn't be happier if I tried.

CHAPTER 28

Skye

Each time I wake up in Declan's arms is more amazing than the time before. I've never felt so loved, so cherished, so complete as I do now. His touch grounds me in ways that I didn't know was possible. The feeling of pure contentment that I have while lying next to him with my eyes closed is confirmation that I made the right choice.

I put my hand on my chest to see if I can feel the warm flutter that's now next to my heart. It wasn't there before. I know that I've been overstimulated with more orgasms than I can count. But it seems like one of the butterflies that has taken up residence in my stomach has moved up to my heart.

I move my hand around trying to get a better feel for where it is exactly. But I can't quite get the right location.

Declan's hand moves over the top of mine. Lacing our fingers together as he groggily whispers into my neck. "I feel it too. That flutter is our mating bond. It's like a second heartbeat, my heartbeat, is beating next to yours. We're not just joined in the physical. Our souls are forever connected."

I roll over in his arms to face him. Peppering his cheeks with little kisses to encourage him to wake up.

He grunts as he lays me on my back. Crawling on top of me as he opens his eyes to kiss me fully.

"You're killing me, woman. I can't get enough of you. I'm even dreaming about you in my sleep."

I gasp underneath him as he pushes into me. We're both staring into each other's eyes. Letting the sensation wash over us like a wave.

We've made love over and over again. Each time we connect, we go higher, feel deeper, and need each other more. And this time is no different.

"I love you, Skye."

Neither of us looks away as the orgasm launches us higher than we've been before. Still kissing as we settle back down to earth.

"I love you too, Declan."

Everything he said at Howler's that night now makes sense. Now that I've had a taste, I'm addicted to this man. I don't know if it's because he's a shifter, or if it's because I'm so over the moon in love that I feel like I can't breathe without him.

We've been in this bed for well over thirty-six hours. Our provisions, as Declan called it, ran out pretty quick. We snuck down to the kitchen late yesterday afternoon, but all we managed to get was a small snack.

I'm starving.

I wonder what time it is? The sun seems to be bright in the sky.

Declan sits up as he rolls off me. He scratches his head as he turns the clock on the bedside table around to face us. We turned it toward the wall soon after I got here. Both of us wanting to get lost in the moment. And a digital clock staring at you the whole time makes it harder to do that.

"Come on. Let's get in the shower. We're expected to join the pack for breakfast this morning."

I follow Declan out of bed and into the bathroom. Questioning him as I step into the shower. "How do you know? Did they leave a note that I didn't see?"

"No. Bryce told me with mind speak. Said it will be ready in about an hour."

"So, he can talk to you whenever he wants? Do you hear words in your mind? Is he his wolf right now?"

Declan chuckles as he stands under the stream of hot water. "The alpha can talk to any pack member at any time. Doesn't matter if he's a wolf or a man. I can only respond with mind speak when I'm a wolf. Everyone in the pack can. It's how we communicate when we're wolves. It's how Jordan told Bryce you were at the cabin when you showed up scared. And yes. I

hear words just like you're talking to me now. Sometimes it's annoying and I want to turn it off."

I think about what he said as I wash my hair. This is the kind of information my family would love to learn about.

I move under the shower head to rinse out the soap. "Will I be able to hear him use mind speak? You said that I'm now a member of the pack."

Declan shrugs his shoulders. "I don't know. We'll have to find out. Maybe you would hear him in the event of an emergency when Bryce was blasting out a warning using full alpha power. We can ask him at breakfast."

I finish getting cleaned off and just stand there. Suddenly feeling very nervous to leave the bedroom and meet everyone.

Declan turns the water off and grabs two towels off the towel bar. Handing me one as he kisses my forehead. "Stop worrying. You'll be fine. We're just going to breakfast. Think of it as meeting the parents. Except that they aren't my parents. Bryce is only about ten, twelve years older than me. Forget about that idea. OK, try this. Think of it as meeting all my best friends at one time."

I dry off while trying to focus on being calm and in the moment.

"Are they your best friends? Is that what a pack is?"

Declan walks out of the bathroom with me following behind him. Picking up a pair of jeans off the floor as he answers. "Yes. I guess they are. But it's more than that with a pack. We're closer than just friends, with a bond that's tighter than family. Each one of them would give their life to save me. And I'd do the same for them."

I wrap the towel around me as I look around the room for my stuff. "My suitcases are still in your truck. Will you go get them so that I can wear something different? I want to make a good impression. Both times we went to the kitchen I was wearing the same dress I arrived here in."

"You could wear that. I won't mind." He kisses me as he tugs on the bottom corner of the towel.

“Leave my towel alone and go. My blow dryer is in one of the suitcases too. Do I need to wear shoes?”

Declan kisses me before he walks to the door pulling a T-shirt over his head. “Stop overthinking it, Skye. It’s just breakfast. Besides, they’re a bunch of wolves. They don’t care about your clothes.”

Men. They don’t get it.

My heart starts racing soon after he leaves the room. A sense of panic engulfs me. I sit in one of the chairs breathing so hard I’m on the verge of hyperventilating. A fear that I’ll never see Declan again overpowers me.

What’s happening?

Declan charges into the room carrying both suitcases. Dropping them on the floor as he rushes over to me. On his knees between my legs, hugging me to comfort both of us.

“It’s all right, Skye. I’m right here. I felt the same thing. That’s how the mating bond reacts when we’re apart. We’ll get used to it. And it won’t be that powerful as we learn how to adjust. Bryce and Chloe will teach us what we need to know. That’s why the alpha always mates first in a pack. He leads the way for the rest of us.”

I hold Declan around his neck like I never want to let him go. The panicked state dissipating faster than how it arrived.



Declan watches me dig through my suitcases and laughs as I contemplate what to wear. I love how attentive he is. Even when I don’t think he’s paying attention, he’s acutely aware of every detail. Something about it makes me feel both seen and heard. And adored.

The AC in this house seems to be set somewhere in the range of sub-arctic temperatures. It’s freezing in here. I didn’t pay attention when I was in bed with Declan. He kept me warm and cuddly. And I loved it.

When I leave this room, I have to face the frigid cold alone. I can't walk around using Declan as my own personal heating blanket. That would be weird. And probably get a little awkward.

After much deliberation, I finally decide on a sundress with a sweater to cover my arms. But this is a test run. I may have to change into jeans if my legs get too cold.

“Are you ready to go downstairs?”

Declan stands at the door, holding my hand. Patiently waiting for me to respond.

I nod. Smiling at him as we leave the room together.

Voices can be heard coming from the kitchen as we descend the stairs. The louder they get, the more nervous I feel.

Declan stops just inside the room. Pulling me out from behind him as he introduces me. “Everyone, this is my mate, Skye. Skye, this is everyone. Bryce, the alpha, and his mate Chloe. Jordan is the pack beta. You met him already. Then there's Spencer, Willy, and Harris.”

I smile, trying to make eye contact with each of them. “Hello. It's nice to meet you.”

Bryce, the alpha, stands. Nodding at me as he speaks. “Welcome to the pack. We're glad you're here.”

A rush of heat hits me like a flash. And then fades just as quickly as it came.

Declan squeezes my hand as he leans closer to whisper in my ear. “That's the alpha power I told you about. Now you're a member of the pack.”

I look at Bryce, the new authority figure in my life. “Thank you.” I don't have it in me to say that I submit to his authority. Mostly because I don't exactly know what that means yet. Maybe I'll be able to say it after being a member of the pack for a while.

Chloe stands and walks over to me, all smiles. “I wasn't sure if you drank coffee or not. I put a mug out in case you do. I'll show you where everything is once they leave. Oh, wow. I

love those shoe boots. So cute. It's about time we had another female around here. These guys know nothing about fashion. All they wear are those ugly brown fish and game uniforms."

Bryce grabs his mate's hand and pulls her backwards toward him. "Let her sit down, Chloe."

The conversation about patrol schedules that was in progress before we walked in resumes flawlessly as Chloe continues to talk about shoes over them. I pour myself some coffee and take a sip. Taking it all in as Declan makes his plate next to me. And just like that, I'm a member of a wolf pack.

I'm home.

Jordan pushes his chair back to stand. Emptying his glass of orange juice before he speaks. "We need to go over the house schedule, Declan. It should have been done yesterday."

A hint of tension creeps into the room. The change in mood is felt by everyone.

I give Chloe a shoulder shrug. Looking for guidance about what I should do in this situation. She replies with a slight head nod.

Spencer leaves the table in the middle of our interaction. Knocking over a glass while his fork and napkin fall to the floor.

Declan seems to ignore Spencer as he replies. "After breakfast is good. Will that work?"

"That works. Meet me in the office when you're done eating." Jordan walks out of the room like nothing happened.

I squeeze Declan's thigh to get his attention.

He winks at me as he serves himself a second serving of bacon. "You better eat something. The food usually goes pretty fast around here."

I grab the spoon to give myself some scrambled eggs as I whisper to my mate. "What was that about? Spencer seemed upset."

Declan answers in his regular voice. “Recently, I took the top delta position away from him. He’ll adjust. There’s nothing for you to worry about. This kind of thing is normal when you’re in a pack.”

I smile at Declan.

“Congratulations. Oh, is this a *congratulations* kind of thing? Should we celebrate or something?”

Declan flashes his eyebrows at me as he gives me a peck on the lips. “We’ll definitely celebrate.”

Chloe laughs at the other end of the table. “Skye, you need to know that to these guys, *celebrating* means having sex. And they want to celebrate everything. Last month when chicken was on sale at the grocery store, Bryce wanted to celebrate for two days.”

Bryce smiles at his mate as he pulls her closer to him. “I don’t remember hearing you complain.”

She kisses him as she glows from the attention. “You’ll never hear me complain. I love celebrating with you.”

Declan wraps his arm around me. Drawing my focus back to him.

“I’m going into the office to talk with Jordan for a few minutes. I’ll be just down the hall. Eat something while I’m gone. Be right back.”

He kisses me before he leaves the table. Taking a piece of bacon with him as he goes.

One by one the rest of the male pack members leave the room. I eat some eggs and toast while I finish my coffee. Then I help Chloe clear the table to pass the time while I wait for Declan to return.

I put the last stack of dishes on the counter next to the sink. “Do you mind if I go up to Declan’s room? I want to start unpacking my clothes.”

Chloe smiles at me. Closing the refrigerator door as she replies. “You don’t have to ask permission. It’s your room now

too. And this is your home. Go. We'll hang out later with a glass of wine. I want to know where you shop for shoes.”

Walking up the stairs to the bedroom feels normal. Seeing all my clothes strewn out across the furniture in Declan's room gives the impression I've lived here for years. I love how being mated feels.

A tinge of homesickness hits me all of a sudden. The sadness isn't triggered by anything specific. Just a sense of longing that I can't quite put my finger on.

Terra would love this house. She'd want to explore every nook and cranny. Snowbie would go crazy if she knew how much I've learned about wolf shifters in such a short amount of time. And Ember would be drooling over the good-looking single packmates.

It's interesting that I don't see other men that way now that I'm mated. I guess the mating bond ensures that you only have eyes for your mate. Any other man seems dull by comparison.

I hate how I left in the middle of the night. My mom didn't put up a fight. But she wasn't happy about me leaving either.

Was giving me her blessing really too much to ask?

The more she talked about her plan to hide me in New York, the less I felt that I could trust her. Calling Declan felt like the only right thing to do. I trust him.

I miss my family. But at the same time, I'm excited about my new life with Declan. This is the beginning of a whole new quest. The one I started a week ago sure didn't turn out like I expected. Not one part of it went according to plan. And I couldn't be happier about failing miserably if I tried. In the end, I got exactly what my heart wanted all along: true love.

This morning I realized that the fire festival was yesterday. It feels strange that I'm not sad about missing it. For my family, the whole year revolves around this one day. And I've participated in it every summer since I was seven. This solar event is the keystone that defines us as a family of witches. But I'm not a part of that family anymore.

Being mated to Declan is redefining who I am as a person. And it's giving me a whole new family to bond with in the process. My life feels enhanced. But I still feel like me. Not like anything is missing.

Declan walks in, all smiles. Closing the door as he begins to undress in front of me. "Are you ready to celebrate, beautiful?"

I giggle as he tosses each removed item of clothing into the air. Letting them fall to the ground around us as he struts toward me. Scooping me up in his arms before the last piece hits the floor.

We fall onto the bed in each other's arms. Both of us still laughing as we begin to make love.

"Are you happy, Skye?" Declan smiles as he brushes the hair out of my eyes.

"Yes, Declan. I'm happier than I ever thought possible."

CHAPTER 29

Declan...six months later

Getting out of bed to go to work while Skye is still sleeping is the hardest part of my job. I finally put on the game warden uniform a couple months back. And other than being stuck with the schedule no one else wants, I couldn't be happier. I know it won't be like this for much longer. Rumor has it my schedule will change after some new recruits start in the spring.

I leave the room half-dressed. Carrying my shirt and boots to finish getting ready in the kitchen. For the last few weeks, Bryce has been getting home as I'm about to head out. We spend about an hour talking about work and updating each other on pack business before I leave.

I don't know if it's because I'm mated now or that I'm working alongside the rest of my packmates with the fish and game service, but the pack dynamic has improved drastically. Communication is better too. There's a flow to it that wasn't there before. And with the competitive edge to find a mate removed, everything seems easier somehow.

Having more females has definitely balanced out the pack. Skye coming in six months ago reduced the tension levels considerably. Everyone noticed it. And Jordan finding and mating with Denise last month removed any remaining residue that may have been lingering.

Denise is also human. She and Skye hit it off as soon as Denise arrived. And Chloe has blossomed as an alpha female with them here. The three of them quickly became best friends. I love hearing their laughter from the kitchen when I walk into the house. Something about it feels like home.

Chloe enters the kitchen rubbing her eyes. Today's her day to get breakfast started. She and Skye have been taking turns in the mornings. I like it when it's Skye's turn because that means I get more time with her before I have to leave for work.

The front door opens and Bryce walks in covered in mud.

“Stop right there.” Chloe scurries past me with a towel in her hand. “Take off your clothes where you stand. I’ll grab a laundry basket to put everything in. I don’t want that mess anywhere near our bedroom. You seem to have a knack for finding the stinkiest mud on the planet. What did you rescue this time?”

Bryce reaches for his mate as she passes by him on her way to the bedroom. “Kiss me first, baby. Let’s mud wrestle.”

“No way. Keep that mud away from me.” Chloe jumps out of his reach, giggling. Returning a few minutes later with a clothes basket and clean pair of pants.

Bryce addresses me as he changes out of his dirty clothes. “Did you talk to Jordan last night?”

I tie my boots as I reply. “Haven’t seen him since we finalized the house schedule yesterday morning. Spent the rest of my day off with Skye.”

“Spencer asked my permission to leave the pack late yesterday afternoon.”

I stop what I’m doing and look at Bryce. “Really? He didn’t say anything to me when we were running our wolves the other day.”

“He wants to go to New Hampshire as soon as possible. He’s already been in contact with the fish and game office over there. They’re apparently waiting on me to arrange the trade with another pack. He’ll need to be aligned to an alpha before they’ll add him to the roster.”

“I knew he wasn’t happy, but that seems extreme. And fast. Want me to talk to him again?”

“No. It’s not necessary. If this is what he wants, I’ll let him go. The more miserable he is, the more it negatively affects the rest of the pack. Since Skye arrived, he’s been adamant that he doesn’t want to be mated. Since Jordan brought Denise home, he says it’s been getting increasingly harder to resist the urge. He wants out before it’s too late. Finding a pack with an

unmated alpha shouldn't be hard. I made a few calls earlier today."

I stand to pour myself a cup of coffee. "I'll touch base with Jordan later about any changes around here. Anything else I should know before I leave?"

Bryce shakes his head. Disappearing into his bedroom as he replies over his shoulder. "No. Can't think of anything. Chloe, you coming?"

I make a few breakfast sandwiches to take with me after our conversation ends. Leaving for work before they return to the kitchen. I'll call Jordan later in the day to follow up.

Hearing about Spencer wanting to leave saddens me a little. But I'm in too good of a mood to let this news bring me down. His not being happy has nothing to do with me taking the top delta spot away from him, nor is it about Skye. This is all about him. And unfortunately for him, he's the only one who can fix it.

I, for one, know a good thing when I see it. Skye is the best thing that's ever come into my life. And I love every second of our life together. We laugh and play, plan our future, and fall more in love with each other every day. And I won't let anything, including Spencer, interfere with that.



The light is still on when I enter the bedroom. It looks like Skye fell asleep waiting for me to get home. I was supposed to be here hours ago, but a late rescue mission took longer than expected.

I tiptoe through our bedroom. Turning off the light before I go into the bathroom to take a quick shower. I hate leaving her to go to work. But having her in my bed when I get home, makes it all worth it.

I close my eyes as the water cascades around me. Letting the shower wash away any signs of work so I can go to my mate completely focused on her.

Man, I love that woman.

I smile when I feel a touch on my back. One hand at first. Then two hands slide around my waist from behind. Joining together in front to hold me tight. I turn around in my mate's arms, eager to say hello.

Neither of us speaks as I lift her up. Propping her against the shower wall while I wrap her legs around me. Lowering her onto my waiting cock while we kiss. Our eyes are wide open as we brace for full penetration. Wanting to go fast to get our needs met but going slow to ensure we savor the moment.

“I missed you.” Skye kisses my lips softly.

“Coming home to you is my favorite part of the workday.”

CHAPTER 30

Skye

We crawl into bed after we get out of the shower and dry off. I love joining Declan in the shower at the end of his workday, but I love curling up in bed next to him even more. I love everything about being mated to him. My life is perfect now. I wouldn't change a thing.

I know that I need to be going to sleep right now, but I can't. Declan works long days. When he's home, I want to spend every second I can with him. And I want to be awake for all of it.

The feel of his naked body against mine, his arms around me holding me close, the sound of his heart beating in his chest. If we could bottle up this perfect feeling of complete bliss, we'd make a fortune.

"Did Denise get her cast removed today?" Declan speaks softly as we lie in each other's arms.

"No. The appointment got moved to tomorrow." I nestle into my mate's chest as I reply.

Declan rolls us over in one motion. Looking into my eyes as he settles on top of me. "Is it your turn to make breakfast this morning? Please tell me you aren't getting out of bed in a few hours."

I smile at him as I shake my head. "I'm all yours. Chloe and I traded mornings because Bryce got called in to work. He left right after we finished dinner. Something about helping to set up a sting operation to catch some off-season bear poachers."

Declan smiles as he begins kissing my mating mark. "That's the best news I've heard all day. Tell me everything you did while I was gone."

I keep talking. Enjoying the attention as I lay there, letting him worship me. "Denise demanded that she be put in the

breakfast rotation as soon as the cast comes off. I don't think Jordan liked that idea very much."

"Of course he didn't. His mate has spent every morning in bed with him. If he had it his way, she'd keep the cast on indefinitely."

Just over a month ago, a call came in that there was a wounded hiker stuck high up on one of the mountain trails. Jordan responded to the call that day. An hour or so later, he found Denise sitting on a boulder with a broken ankle. Jordan carried her out in his arms instead of waiting for backup to arrive. Says that he knew she was his mate before they got to the trailhead.

The interesting part for all of us watching was that Denise knew absolutely nothing about shifters. That hiking trip was the first time she'd ever been out of the city. She told us later that she finally decided that it was time to stop being afraid of nature. Took off on the trail looking for a new adventure that would change her life.

Jordan was determined to make her his. And definitely didn't want to let her out of his sight. He told her everything she needed to know about shifters and asked her to be his mate all before she was discharged from the emergency room. She moved into the packhouse the very next day.

Chloe says that I've been a real asset in helping Denise acclimate to shifter life. That I understand the human point of view better than she does. And we have both loved having another female to go shopping with.

Tomorrow night we're all supposed to go on a triple date together. I hope Bryce is home in time. Howler's is having a mated-couples-only night and I can't wait. This is the first one they're hosting since Declan and I have been mated. And it's about time too. I'll finally get a real look at the inside of the place.

Most of the time, I'm too caught up in our day-to-day life to think about how my life has changed since I met Declan. I thought I would miss my family more than I do. I think about

them often and hope that they are doing well. But the truth is, I don't miss that life.

The most important thing I've learned since I arrived here is that trust is the backbone of a wolf pack. Without it, you won't survive. That one little detail made me realize how little trust there was in my own family. My sisters and I always keeping secrets and forming allies. Words spoken to each other filled with hidden agendas and ulterior motives. Always living under a veil of suspicion.

I'm so glad to be living a completely transparent life with Declan and the pack. What you see is what you get. And I love having my eyes, and my heart, wide open to all of it. I sleep better. I feel more deeply. And I love more fully.

Lying here with my eyes closed is pure heaven. The sensation is amplified by the feel of Declan's lips on my skin. I push all the thoughts away from the forefront of my mind and allow myself to surrender fully to the moment. Each breath takes me higher. I feel both weightless and grounded to the present moment at the same time.

Before I met Declan, meditating was a struggle. An arduous task complicated by more interruptions than I can count. Now, it comes easy to me.

The trick that I discovered is simple. First of all, I stopped thinking of it as meditating. That turned it into an assignment that had to be checked off some imaginary list somewhere. Instead, I focus on the here and now.

The longer I'm happily mated to Declan, the more I'm starting to think that living fully present in the moment and enjoying all that life has to offer is the key to everything. Not just for shifters either, but for everyone.

Fate is going to do whatever it's going to do, and life is going to play itself out accordingly. So, why not enjoy the journey?

To be continued...

Psst...

Skye here. I hope you enjoyed reading our story just as much as we loved sharing it. Please leave Leona a star rating and a review for *Unveiled Intentions*. Reviews and ratings are very important to indie authors. They are one of the only ways to give potential readers who don't know Leona's work an idea of what to expect. And they provide her with valuable feedback she can use to improve and make the stories better. Hope to see you in the next book.

<https://www.subscribepage.com/leonacrowley>

Acknowledgments

The creative journey continues to surprise me every day. New adventures are found around every corner, and each step greets me with new lessons to explore and new friendships to enjoy. I know that none of this would have been possible without the support and guidance I received along the way. I am eternally grateful to all of those who have been a part of my getting here: Shelley Davis, Diane Shirk, Tara Trapp, Beverly Russo, Randy Russo, Gladys Barnette, Helen Chaney, The Thompson Sisters, and each member of my ARC team.

About the Author

Leona Crowley enjoys bringing her paranormal imagination to life through writing. Leona is an avid reader of just about everything and loves the endless possibilities of fiction. Inspired by her dreams, she first began creating imaginary worlds in the late 1990s. Leona now lives in Connecticut and spends her free time exploring New England with her son.