



A CHRISTMAS  
*Lynx*

IDLEWYLD MATES BOOK ONE  
RENEE HEWETT

# A CHRISTMAS LYNX

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BOOK ONE

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# A CHRISTMAS LYNX

A mob enforcer bear shifter, a lynx shifter nurse with a deadly history, and an invitation to Esme Baer's famous Christmas Party!

Pryce Desalvo is the top mob enforcer in town, and he's sworn off love. He wouldn't want to bring anyone into his kind of life, and he certainly can't abandon his position and leave his friends open to dangerous opponents.

Love is something Nila Havens figures she'll never find, so she focuses her passion on her career—caring for her cancer patients. Life is simpler that way, and she is plenty happy with her life as it is. Well, maybe not *plenty*.

But when Pryce and Nila each receive an invitation to Esme's Christmas party, they'll have to do the polite thing and show up. What will happen when they run into each other? Not what Esme expected.

The two might be determined to go their separate ways, but secrets from Nila's past will have Pryce realizing that once you meet your mate, there's no turning back.

He might hem, and she might haw, but when a world-famous paranormal matchmaker sticks you together, you might as well accept it!

CHAPTER  
**ONE**

IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN SNOWING OUTSIDE, BUT PRYCE DESALVO sweated inside his motorcycle shop.

He kept the temperature cranked high, preferring warmth to cold. Of course, it didn't matter to his bear side if it was cold or hot: both were appropriate for crawling into bed for a good long nap.

He could probably sneak one in without anyone knowing. He hadn't had a customer all week, and he owned and ran the shop, which meant he didn't have any coworkers who would complain about him snoozing on the job.

Sometimes his boss—not his boss at the shop, but his boss at his *other* job—would come into work in the back office. The shop Pryce ran wasn't necessarily a front for mob business—as none of the family money ran through it—but it did provide working space, as did several other family locations tucked around Idlewyld, Colorado.

But Oren Cavalli wouldn't be in since he wasn't handling mob business over the holidays. Instead, the man was focusing on his family for once, preparing for a ski vacation with his wife and three kids, leaving Pryce and a few others to guard the territory while he went out of town.

Pryce's hodgepodge of friends hadn't visited the shop that week either. He'd collected a ragtag gang of misfits over the years, and they'd become more like family than Pryce ever would've thought possible. Turned out, when you saved someone's life, they stuck to you like a barnacle whether you wanted them or not. And while he often complained about them talking his ear off about inane town gossip and drama, he found that when they weren't there, something was missing.

Pryce generally liked quiet, but he had to admit that during the holiday season he felt a bit lonely. He kind of craved the chatter, and he hoped someone would stop by with a new box of treats—he'd already eaten the last of the Christmas cookies dropped off the day before.

He shoved it all out of his mind, though, and concentrated on his latest project. The 1963 Harley Sportster was in good shape but needed a bit of rust removed and a few parts replaced. If things stayed slow, he might be able to finish her before the new year.

No sooner had the thought crossed his mind than the front door chimed. Part of him groaned, knowing if one of the chatterboxes entered, he might lose an entire afternoon, but another part of him lit up, happy to have company.

But when he turned, he caught sight of a woman entering. A woman he didn't know and had never seen before. She had short white hair, a fancy-looking suit, and an expensive pair of sunglasses she took off to look around the shop floor.

"Can I help you?" He wiped his hands on a rag and trundled his way to the counter, figuring the woman wanted to set up a future appointment. He knew better than to assume she might be there to ask about a husband's or son's bike. The woman had power in her stance and stride and a steel in her

eyes that spoke louder than any fancy suit or expensive pair of sunglasses. He could easily imagine her driving her own motorcycle, no problem.

“Hello!” The woman held her hand up and moved through the shop to him. “You must be Pryce Desalvo. My name is Esme Baer.”

“Hello, Ms. Wilder, and if you’re looking for Pryce, you’ve found him.” People often learned about Pryce through word of mouth, but usually, they called in to book an appointment and didn’t just wander in. “You got a bike that needs work?”

The woman shook her head but smiled, a gleam appearing in her eye—the kind people had when they dreamed about putting miles behind them while they rode an iron steed. “I am here on business, but not that kind. Mr. Cavalli has hired me.”

“Oren didn’t tell me about hiring anyone.” Pryce eyed the woman with suspicion. Why would Oren hire her? He would have told Pryce to expect someone if Esme had something to do with the family business. It wasn’t like they’d have a position open anytime soon—thanks to peace treaties kept by all the neighboring families as of late.

And if Oren hired her, it would have to be for the family business, as Oren didn’t hire for Pryce’s shop, and Pryce didn’t need anyone else to work there anyway.

“Oh, well, that doesn’t surprise me.” She pointed to one of the stools at the counter. “Do you mind if I sit?”

“Go for it.” Pryce’s bear growled inside, but Pryce kept a stoic outward appearance, not allowing any rudeness to show. She wore an air about her that said you didn’t disrespect her—if you knew what was good for you. “Would you like a drink?”



I'm guessing you must have traveled from out of town, seeing as I don't know you."

"Water would be nice, thank you. It wasn't a long flight, but any time stuck in that recycled air will dry you out."

While Pryce went to the mini-fridge to pull out a bottle for her, he called over his shoulder, "And you won't mind if I give Oren a quick shout, just to make sure your story checks out?"

"Of course not."

He placed the bottle of water on the counter for her then dialed Oren. His boss picked up on the first ring. "Is Esme there?"

"Yeah." Pryce didn't need to add the *why didn't you tell me you were hiring someone*.

"She'll explain what she does. I need you to answer her questions. She's traveled a long way, and she's a dear family friend. Swing by tomorrow morning, and I'll fill you in on why I brought Esme into this."

Pryce hung up with his boss, unease creeping up inside him. Oren wasn't usually that cryptic with him, which meant Pryce wasn't going to like whatever Esme had to tell him.

"You check out," he informed her, settling onto a stool on the opposite side of the counter. "He says you'll explain."

Esme's face hadn't shown any sign of worry the whole time. Pryce could respect that kind of collectedness. "Every so often I'm hired indirectly, and in those cases, the person I'm meant to help can be a less-than-willing participant. If they know of my arrival ahead of time, they might just make themselves scarce. I let Mr. Cavalli decide to tell you in advance of my arrival or not."

Her laugh didn't do anything to lessen his unease. "What are you, a stylist or something? An interior designer come to spruce up the shop?" That would be annoying and would explain why Oren wouldn't give him advance warning.

"Oh, no. I'm not here to give you or your shop a makeover." Esme's smirk told him she enjoyed teasing him.

The unstated question, *well, what are you doing here?* went unanswered. Esme played some kind of game, and he'd participate on her terms as his boss had instructed.

"Oh, I just remembered. I brought some snacks!" She hopped off the stool and reached for her bag.

*Snacks?* Pryce's bear perked up. *I knew I had a good feeling about this lady.*

*Then what was all that growling about?* Pryce inwardly rolled his eyes at his bear, then focused on Esme, who perched back on the stool and opened a white box to reveal an array of cookies and pastries. Pryce's stomach rumbled happily.

"I find it's easier to be interrogated when sweets are present."

"Interrogated?" Pryce spoke the word with a mouth full of honey bun.

"Well, some people see it that way." She tapped a pen Pryce hadn't noticed on a notepad he also hadn't noticed. *Damn her, she's good,* he thought, glaring at the traitorous pastries that had distracted him. "You're not currently involved with anyone, is that correct?"

A question that instantly rubbed him the wrong way. He reminded himself that Oren had instructed him to go along with whatever Esme was up to, so he answered, "Correct."

“And do you have a preference in a mate? I don’t just mean gender or hair color. I also mean paranormal or shifter type.”

“I prefer *no* mate. Being single is my preference. You can jot that down.”

“That wasn’t the question, Mr. Desalvo.” When he failed to produce a better answer, she laid down her pen. “If you’d prefer to conduct the interview at Mr. Cavalli’s, we can do so. It makes no difference to me.”

He sighed. She’d won. “I’ve only dated women shifters. In my line of work, it’s too hard to date humans. That’s one too many secret worlds I’d have to bring them into.” The secret world of humans who could shift into animals, as well as the secret world of the local bear mafia.

Pryce found himself answering her questions and not holding back—something completely unlike himself. Had the woman woven some kind of spell around him? They quickly fell into a discussion about his life and his dating—or lack thereof—history. A good hour went by before Esme finally closed her notebook and announced she would be leaving.

“Ah, can’t forget. Here is your ticket to my Christmas party next weekend,” she said, handing him an envelope. “I look forward to seeing you there.”

“All of that questioning, just for a party invite?” Pryce turned the envelope over in his hand. What a lot of trouble just for vetting party guests...

Esme shook her head. “No, it was to make sure that I also invite your mate to the party. You see, Mr. Desalvo, I’m a matchmaker.”

CHAPTER  
TWO

WORKING IN A HOSPITAL DURING THE HOLIDAYS HAD ITS PROS and cons. On one hand, Christmas decorations, music, and treats brought in a little brightness and cheer, as did the visiting therapy dogs dressed in little elf ears when they came to visit the patients.

Plus, her patients arrived for treatment with more family at their side—out-of-towners or locals who had time off they could spend with them. She loved when her patients had company and support while they received their treatments and when they had a ride home with someone dear to them instead of relying on the local free transportation.

On the other hand... no one *wanted* to be in the hospital for Christmas. They wanted to be *home*.

Even a holiday as cheerful as Christmas couldn't overpower the pain and worry associated with having someone in the hospital. Especially if they were in Nila's area.

Nila Havens worked in the outpatient cancer wing. They didn't have beds or overnight patients, but they did have people checking in each day for treatment. People battling a disease in which the treatments might make them sick, yet still showing up and fighting to live another day.

Because of the strength they showed, Nila wouldn't let the sadness of their situations overpower her. Every day she set a resolute face and gave the patients not only the medical care they needed but also the personality they needed. Some wanted her to be serene and quiet. Others enjoyed an upbeat, cheerful, and chatty nurse. Whatever they responded to, Nila would give them.

In the end, though, it exhausted her. She was deeply affected by their pain, and even when the patients received a clean bill of health—their cancer in remission—it still wore her out. Nila collapsed the moment she returned home every day, but even so, she couldn't imagine doing anything else with her life. She helped people when they needed it most, and though it drained her energy, it filled her soul.

It was another busy evening, as many patients tried to come in for treatment the week before Christmas so they wouldn't need to be there over the actual holiday. Nila had been on her feet for eight hours straight when she caught sight of an unexpected but friendly face. Esme Baer's presence always came as a special treat—especially when she brought delicious baked goods.

“Hello, Ms. Wilder!” Nila called out when Esme neared the nurses' station.

Esme pulled out a few cellophane bags filled with goodies. “Pass these around to the others, would you?” Then she made a swatting motion and rolled her eyes. “Nila, how many times do I have to tell you to call me Esme?”

Nila smiled sheepishly. She couldn't shake the feeling that calling an older acquaintance by their first name was disrespectful, but she knew it was worse to disregard their requests. “Thank you, Esme. This is so sweet of you. I hadn't

expected you to be in today.” Esme made regular visits to the hospital but usually came earlier in the week. Her presence brought cheer to the patients, and it always seemed like she knew *everyone*.

“I’ve been traveling, so I couldn’t make my usual rounds, but I certainly wanted to stop in and say hello to everyone. Plus, I wanted to talk to *you*.”

“Me, specifically?” Nila squeaked. She could hardly believe that Esme knew her at all, let alone would seek her out for something. “How can I help?”

Esme chuckled. “Yes, you, my dear. Take a walk with me.”

Nila looked at the other nurse who’d just returned to the desk and was eagerly inspecting Esme’s treat bags. The woman nodded and waved for Nila to go.

She walked around the counter and joined Esme in handing out treats to the people in the waiting area—patients and their family and friends—who all lit up when they received a bag.

When they finished with the waiting area, Esme turned down the hall to the treatment rooms, but before walking very far, she stopped and looked at Nila, leaning in a bit closer as she asked, “You’re not dating anyone, are you, Nila?”

The question caught her off-guard, but she quickly replied, “No, ma’am. I’m not.”

Esme didn’t look surprised by Nila’s answer, yet she followed up with, “Why not?”

Nila blinked, unsure how to summarize a bevy of excuses that had taken a lifetime to accumulate. Finally, she settled on, “Nursing takes up a lot of time.”



Esme *tsked*. “Not all nurses are single. You can have a life outside of work. A spouse, kids, if you wanted. Anything is possible.”

Nila shifted from one foot to the other and cleared her throat. “I mean, I always assumed I’d have a family, but I love my job, and it gives me enough satisfaction. I just don’t feel the need to try to fit anyone else in my life.”

Esme cocked her head to the side and squinted at Nila. “Honey, a job doesn’t keep you warm at night or on your days off.”

“Well, no, but that’s what cats are for.” Not that she had one, though she’d been tempted lately. She needed to do something to liven up her quiet apartment.

Esme gave her a side-eye. “Cats are good at two-sided conversations, are they?”

Nila laughed, knowing how pointless arguing with the great Esme Baer could be. “No, not really.”

“And when was the last time you got laid?”

Nila quickly looked both ways in the hallway, mortified at who might overhear such a personal question. “Esme!”

“That long, huh?”

“I mean, I’ve been working here for three years... and I haven’t exactly had the time or energy to party when I’m not working.”

Esme reached out and placed a hand on Nila’s shoulder, making eye contact and pulling Nila’s attention in. “You have no idea how quickly a few years turns into a decade, into two decades...and before you know it, you never lived for yourself, just for others.”

“I don’t think I’d regret my life if I spent it caring for others.”

“Sure... but you didn’t enroll in a convent, did you?”

“No...”

“If you do want love—and to be loved—then you need to move it higher on your priority list.”

Nila sighed. “If only it were that easy. From my experience, modern romance is just a series of dinners with incompatible strangers who are just hoping to get lucky. I figure, why go out and waste time on dating duds when I could use that time to binge the latest Netflix show? At least that way, I don’t have the chance of embarrassing myself in public or regretting getting my hopes up.”

At that, Esme smiled. “So, dating isn’t completely out of the question. Tell me, what are you doing this weekend?”

Nila’s thoughts froze. She hadn’t expected a question like that. “Um, I’m not doing anything. I have this weekend off. I was going to visit my family, but the parents decided to take a last-minute trip, and my brother is heading to his wife’s family. Why?”

Esme dug around in her designer tote bag. “Well, I’m having a party. Perhaps you’re aware?”

“Yeah, of course.” *Everyone* knew about Esme’s famous Christmas bash. Did Esme want her to work it? Nila would love a chance to witness all the glamor and extravagance.

Esme pulled an envelope from her bag and offered it to Nila. “I hope you can attend. I’ve never had you at one of my Christmas parties, have I?”

“Oh, no,” Nila gasped, in too much disbelief to take the envelope. “Not *me!*” She laughed at the mere thought. She didn’t know what someone had to do to obtain one of those sought-after invites, but she’d never been given one.

Esme pressed the envelope into Nila’s hand. “It’s this weekend, and I expect you to be there, decked out in your best.”

Nila stared at the envelope, blinking. You didn’t argue with Esme. She just shook her head. “Wow, thank you.”

“Better close that mouth before you catch some flies.” Esme chuckled, patted her cheek, then walked away, leaving Nila with the invitation.

The thick envelope weighed heavy in her hand. She flipped it over, admiring the wax seal—an imprint of a fancy “G” in it. Nila carefully pried it open to find another envelope inside. This one had her name handwritten on it. *Nila Havens*.

Esme hadn’t just randomly chosen to give her an invitation. She’d invited her on purpose. But why?

“Hey, Nila, whatcha got there?” Her friend Kat approached, alerting Nila to the fact that her shift had ended, since the two of them had plans for dinner.

Unlike Nila, who had dark hair and an Italian complexion, Kat was blonde-haired, blue-eyed, and pale as a vampire—if such things existed. She worked in the pediatric unit, and whenever their schedules matched up, they’d grab a meal together.

The two lynx shifters had bonded their first year of nursing school—becoming best friends and close enough to seem like sisters separated at birth. They connected quickly and naturally, as they shared a secret world and an otherworldly

nature that most humans didn't know about. Who else better to study with than someone who wouldn't freak out when you said stuff like, "Yeah, that's so similar to when you're chasing a snowshoe hare through the snowdrifts, and the little bugger finds a tunnel in the underbrush to escape you."

"It's an invite to Esme Baer's Christmas party," Nila answered. "Did you get one?"

"Nope, but I'm going to work it! One of the other nurses can't make it, so I'm taking her spot!"

"That's cool."

"Why do you look worried?"

Nila rubbed her neck, not wanting to flaunt the invitation. "Do you wish you were going as a guest instead?" Before she'd become a nurse, Kat had partied hard. According to Kat, she'd been *too much* of a party girl in her younger days and used up all of her partying for a lifetime or two. Nila personally thought Kat seemed to be punishing herself, but she had no idea why.

"No way, I am *so* looking forward to dressing up with elf ears and playing with the kiddos."

"So I can be excited, and you won't feel left out?"

"Heck, yeah. I mean, I'm excited for you!" Kat lowered her voice. "Do you think there might be some hot guys there Esme wants to hook you up with?"

"Guys, plural?" Nila raised her eyebrows.

"Well, whatever floats your boat..."

Nila elbowed her friend. "And, no, I don't think there is anyone Esme would hook me up with. I've never been one of her clients, and Lord knows I don't have time to date with my

work schedule.” Though she wouldn’t admit it, a teeny-tiny part of her wondered if the famous matchmaker had something up her sleeve.

“How many work-life balance courses do they have to send us to before you stop talking like that?”

“You’re one to talk.” Like Nila, Kat rarely dated. “But she did grill me pretty hard about my love-life before she gave me the invitation.”

Kat squealed and grabbed Nila by the arms. “Oh my God, what if this is it? What if Ms. Wilder is about to change your life forever?”

Nila looked down at the envelope in her hand, her bit of excitement suddenly melting into fear. It was one thing to wonder, but to hear someone else say it out loud?

*What if Esme Baer invited me because she’s hooking me up with someone?*

What if Nila walked into that party and straight into her mate?

Was she ready for that?

CHAPTER  
**THREE**

THE NEXT MORNING, PRYCE DROVE TO THE CAVALLI HOUSE bright and early.

He couldn't wait to hear why his boss had sicced a matchmaker on him.

He waved at the camera at the gate and drove his motorcycle through when it opened, making his way down the long winding driveway until the mansion came into view. The place provided a second home to him, with how much time he'd spent here over the years combined with the fact that the people who lived here felt like family.

Yet lately, a bit of distance had started to form between him and Oren. At first, when Oren had married Anaya, the three of them had made an inseparable team. But as the years went on, one child after another came around, and it became clear that Pryce lived on the outskirts. A beloved uncle to the kids, sure, but extended family wasn't the same as immediate family.

He left his bike parked in front of the house and let himself in through the front door, waving at the posted bodyguard as he went through the foyer and into the living room.

Oren sat on the couch, reading on his tablet. Though only a few years older than Pryce, he looked closer to forty than



thirty. Years in the business had taken a toll and peppered Oren's black hair with many grays, while Pryce's own dark hair remained untouched by signs of age. *Maybe it wasn't the business that did it*, Pryce thought. *Maybe it was the wife and kids!*

Pryce didn't bother waiting for Oren to acknowledge him. "Why?" he asked, not needing to specify. Oren knew exactly why he was there and what he asked about.

"Ehhh..." Oren hesitated, but before he could say more, Anaya bounced into the room, their newest baby on her hip.

Could you still call them babies after their first birthday? Pryce had no idea, but he figured if she didn't talk and she walked on unsteady legs, he could probably still call her a baby.

The tot looked more and more like her mother each time Pryce saw her. The light peach fuzz had started to turn into blonde locks, and her blue eyes looked capable of sparkling with the same mischief her mother was known for. He smiled, wondering what his friend would do with a firecracker of a daughter.

"Pryce!" Anaya breathed his name with excitement and wrapped him in a one-arm hug before handing the baby to him. Pryce felt so comfortable with the kids, he could be their nanny—and he had, on occasion, babysat. "How did the meeting with Esme go?"

Pryce groaned and sat on the couch across from Oren, bouncing the baby on his knee. She wiggled to be let down, so he set her free to play with the toys on the carpet. "Seriously?" Pryce asked, directing his question to his boss. The unsaid part being *you let Anaya hire a matchmaker for me?*

Oren shrugged.

He loved Anaya Cavalli like a sister, and while he hadn't had any of his own, he wondered if they all meddled as much as Anaya did. It made complete sense that she would have something to do with the whole situation. The thing was, usually, Oren talked her down from her ideas. So why had this one gone through?

"I don't care if you're mad," Anaya said, her voice holding the intensity that a mob boss's wife would. "I hate the idea of you staying here alone during the holidays. It's about time you found someone to settle down with."

"You know how I feel about this, Anaya," Pryce replied. "I live a dangerous life. I've never wanted to find a mate and pull her into all this danger." He looked at Oren for backup, but the boss held up his hands to signal it was out of his power.

"That's when we were younger." Anaya sat in the chair next to him and reached for his hand. "Things aren't like they used to be. You spend more time at the motorcycle shop doing mechanic work than other stuff." She wouldn't and didn't need to say *enforcer work* out loud. "And might I remind you, if Oren can settle down and have a family, so can you."

Pryce shook his head. His situation differed from theirs. The boss could do it—he had the resources to protect his family—but as an enforcer, Pryce didn't have that kind of setup. He had a reputation, though. Not just for his skills with a gun but also for being such a close friend to his boss and the boss's family. It didn't matter if he never did another job for Oren—everyone would still know the Cavalli family valued him. Anyone who tried to enter their territory could easily go after him—and any loved ones he might have.

"I'm not doing this," Pryce said.

“You are, and you need to go into it open-minded.” Anaya sighed and picked up the baby. “I have to finish packing, or we’ll miss our flight, but I wanted to tell you not to miss out on a chance for happiness because you’re afraid and just covering that up by pretending to be noble.” She bent to give him a kiss on the cheek and then left Pryce and Oren alone.

“You’re doing this,” Oren spoke. “I take it Esme invited you to the Christmas party thing?”

“She did.”

Oren leaned forward, his hands folded together. “Look, I agree with Anaya. Family is good for people. Look at me. I’m better off. If you go to the party and you meet someone who rocks your world, then I say good for it.”

“Why am I really going to the party?” Pryce asked, ignoring the relationship advice, knowing his boss and friend would have never agreed to the idea without an ulterior—business-related—reason for him to attend the party.

Oren looked past him and nodded at one of the nearby guards, who brought over a wallet-sized leather pouch. The guard handed it to Pryce, who was familiar with the mission process. Inside the pouch would not only be the item that needed to be delivered but also the instructions on who he would meet, how to identify him, and what he’d expect to retrieve in return.

“I need you to hand off that flash drive at the party,” Oren said. “Things all kind of lined up nicely. You’ll meet our contact at the party, make a quick handoff, and no one will be any the wiser.”

*Ah.* It made sense to Pryce now. This provided a way of avoiding being tailed and followed. With a drop-off at a

crowded event, it wouldn't be as obvious that a meeting took place.

“That being said,” Oren continued, “I wasn't lying about Esme being a family friend. She hooked up me and Anaya. Did you know that?”

Pryce didn't. He'd always thought they'd met at a bar. “Really?”

Oren nodded. “Yeah, she did. So, if she happens to find you and introduce you to someone, be polite. You can ghost the girl later. And we'll kick your ass for it.”

The bodyguards started bringing luggage down the stairs, so Pryce helped them load up the SUV. A part of him stung with a pang of regret that he wasn't going with them all. A long time ago, he would have, but he'd outgrown the role of bodyguard when the business expanded, and he became Oren's top enforcer.

Now it would just be odd for “Uncle Pryce” to tag along on their family vacation.

“We're going to miss you,” Anaya said, giving him a hug. “Who knows, maybe you'll meet your mate at this party, and then next year, you can rent the cabin next to ours for your own little family.”

Pryce grunted, not giving Anaya the pleasure of agreeing with her. For most of his life, he'd been perfectly happy with his solo existence. Just because the holidays gave him a bit of ennui didn't mean he needed to hook up with someone.

He pictured sharing a home with a mate... meeting up with Oren and Anaya for brunch on Sundays...

Why didn't those images make him as uncomfortable as he'd expected?

“Have a good time, stay safe,” Pryce said, waving to the kids before stepping away from the caravan and hopping on his bike.

In lieu of flying out to the party, he decided to take a road trip. The weather projections called for clear skies, and he had winter leathers that would keep him warm. The open air would give him a chance to clear his head, figure out where his priorities were....

And shake off whatever had him in a maudlin mood as of late.

CHAPTER  
**FOUR**

DESPITE HER RESERVATIONS AND AN URGE TO SKIP THE PARTY, Nila had to go. One did not receive an invitation from Esme and ignore it. Nila couldn't imagine the type of person who would dare.

She couldn't just not show up to something Esme invited her to. Not without a good excuse, at least. Though she'd hoped she'd be called into work or asked to pick up a shift, she didn't luck out. She remained free to go to the party.

With no other good reason to give Esme the next time she saw her, Nila resigned herself to attending, nerves or no nerves.

At least she'd try to enjoy it. Why not take the chance and dress up? She picked out a deep burgundy boat-neck mini dress covered in sequins that came mid-thigh with three-quarter length sleeves. To match, she used a palette of glitter eyeshadow that wasn't appropriate for work—therefore hadn't been used since she bought it.

She let her long brown hair hang free, using her curling iron to make certain flyaways behave—the ones around her ears that mirrored the lynx-tip hairs she had when she shifted into her lynx form.



Looking at herself in the mirror, she wondered what someone might think when they looked at her. Would she give off a good first impression? Then, naughtily, she thought about dressing completely out of her comfort zone so she could give the potential mate a bad impression of her, thus scaring them away.

*Stop it, she chided herself. You don't even know if Esme has anyone in mind for you. She might have just been making polite conversation.*

Though she didn't want to admit it, the fear only existed because a tiny piece of her had hope. Who wouldn't want a fairy godmother to appear and deliver their true mate? The problem—was she ready for that? Could she fit someone into her life? What if her past caught up with her?

She had to stop wasting time worrying. It was time to head to the party.

Esme had her annual Christmas party in a large mansion, a place Nila had never been before. She allowed the valet parking to take care of her car, as the invitation explicitly said *valet included*. She probably would have parked herself if she could've figured out how to find the parking lot.

Nila entered the mansion, still filled with nerves. She wished she hadn't arrived alone. A date might have been nice—no, she would have been more nervous with a date. A group of friends, though, that would have done the trick.

But then, she probably wouldn't leave herself open to meeting her mate.

*Was she open to meeting her mate? She figured so since she'd shown up.*

As she entered, she approached signs directing one way to the children's wing and another to the adult party. Since butterflies filled her stomach, Nila chose to take a peek in the direction of the family section, where Kat should be working. She needed to find a friendly and comforting face.

The moment she stepped foot in the hall, the decorations transported her into a gingerbread wonderland.

A line of families stood waiting to have photos taken under a gingerbread archway. Next to the arch, a cutout gingerbread-style house, flanked either side with cotton snow, cutout gumdrops, lollipops, and gingerbread men created the scenery. As the focal point, the golden throne Nila figured must be where Santa would sit sometime that evening.

Kat snuck up behind Nila. "Esme sends everyone home with photos. This one and a later one with the kids on Santa's lap."

"You look so cute!" Nila gushed, giving her friend—in all her elf-like glory—a hug. Kat's green sequin top complemented the homemade green and red tulle skirt, which topped her red and white striped leggings and black knee-high boots. A headband with a red and green striped elf hat, complete with pointy ears, sat on her head above her blond pigtails.

"And you really dressed up. Look at you, you look great!" Kat returned the compliment. "Can you believe we decorated that whole tree just today?" Like the rest of the theme, the Christmas tree looked straight out of a movie. Little gingerbread houses peeked through the branches here and there, spread out among large shiny orbs of different colors. A gleaming crown of lollipops topped it all off.

“You all did a great job. Is it okay that I’m down here? I don’t have any kids. Will I get in trouble for sneaking in on the family side?”

“No way! Adults wander through to check out the decorations. I mean, don’t try to sneak into any of the babysitting rooms, but you can definitely check out the hallways.”

“I can see why you wanted to do this,” Nila commented after Kat greeted a small girl, making her face light up when she handed her a candy cane.

“Yep. The families wander around, but when the parents want to venture off to the adult side, they leave the kiddos with us, the nanny staff. I’ve been promised a night full of fun, including some hardcore pin the nose on the snowman and a Kids Bop dance-off!”

Kat nodded toward a large room, and Nila peeked in at the DJ dressed like a gingerbread man playing some kid-friendly version of some top pop hit. Little jumping beans—in costumes ranging from Elsa to Batman to forest animals like wolves and bears—already crowded the dance floor, seeming to be having the time of their lives.

The sight of children of paranormal creatures dressed up like their shifter form—as though they were a little bear cub inside of a human child dressed as a bear—made Nila wonder... if she met her mate tonight, would she be showing up to a future party with an adorable lynx daughter?

“Looks like fun, but you’re not sad to miss out on the other side?” Nila asked, shaking away the image of her imaginary children.

“No way. Adult conversation is boring.” While Nila didn’t doubt that Kat enjoyed playing with the kids, she questioned her friend’s insistence on being happy to not socialize with people her age. She made a mental note to talk to Kat about it another day.

*Esme’s meddling ways are rubbing off on me already.*

“Well, I can’t hide here with you forever,” Nila said, butterflies rising in her stomach again at the prospect of what might be waiting for her.

“Nope, you can’t! If you try, I’ll rat you out to Esme myself.” Kat gave Nila a friendly shove toward the other side.

Nila waved her off, taking one last look at the fun kiddie area before she walked to her doom.

Her glistening-white winter-wonderland decorated doom.

Guests knew instantly when they left one area and entered the other, since the decorations contrasted starkly. The browns, reds, and greens of the family side vanished in the adult wing, in favor of stark whites with blue and gray accents.

Nila stood in the line of guests entering the main dining room and peered around to get a glimpse of the place. Dinner tables with white lace tablecloths, blue plates, and gray napkins held centerpieces of tree branches painted white or large crystal vases with white-rose floral arrangements. Guests in evening gowns and tuxes stood mingling, laughing while taking sips of fancy drinks from the open bar.

The whole scene held a mature elegance that Nila knew she didn’t fit into. She’d never been to a party like this—what was she thinking? She was going to stick out like a sore thumb. She might as well be a clumsy lynx kitten again—

trying to scale the open cliffs while the clowder of elders watched and laughed.

Before she could step out of line and beeline to the exit, she found herself in front of Esme herself, who was greeting people at the entrance to the dining room. “Nila, you made it, and my, you look lovely.” Esme beamed.

“Thank you so much for the invitation, again,” Nila said while reminding herself that she could sneak out, especially now that she’d said hello to Esme.

“Just do me a favor and have some fun. Mingle!”

“I will,” Nila promised, giving Esme a hug before continuing into the room. She promptly kicked herself. Why would she promise Esme she’d mingle if she was just going to leave right away? Now she’d have to stay if she didn’t want to be a liar!

She took a breath after a few steps in, processing more of the decorations. From the ceiling, strings of white lights draped down, giving off the impression of snow falling, with a magical twinkling effect that somehow made Nila feel less awkward, as though she’d stepped into a fairyland where everyone was welcome.

Then the next question hit her. Where would she sit for dinner? Would she be stuck at a table with strangers? That didn’t seem very fun... Maybe she’d find some people she knew. Or maybe, just maybe, she’d do what Esme likely wanted and meet someone new.

As if on cue, a voice spoke up behind her. “Hello, kitten.”

Nila’s hackles rose, and she turned, stepping back a few feet while politely answering, “Hello.”

She instantly assessed the man as not her type. His slicked-back hair looked like he used raw oil to set it, his squinty eyes held no warmth, and his smile looked more leering than friendly.

And when she reached out to shake his hand, he squeezed too hard and held on too long.

“Esme told me to introduce myself to you. I’m Mikel Katen.”

Nila’s heart sank. *This* was who Esme wanted to hook her up with? She’d always heard the rumors that Esme had a 100 percent matchmaking success rate, but this wasn’t what Nila had expected. Sure, she could identify through smell that, like her, Mikel was a lynx shifter, but something was off.

Her world hadn’t stopped spinning. Shouldn’t that have happened? Wasn’t one supposed to feel walloped by something bigger than themselves the first time they laid eyes on their mate? Nila felt nothing at all for the man standing in front of her. Except maybe disdain.

“I’m Nila.” She shuddered in horror when he dipped his head to kiss the back of her hand.

*What do I do?* If Esme had instructed him to meet her, then it would be rude to Esme if Nila slipped away from Mikel. Maybe it took getting to know each other better before the mating bond happened?

“You look uncomfortable, Nila.” To her disgust, he pulled her close to him, locking his arm around her waist. “Let’s find you a drink so you can loosen up a bit.”

She recoiled but couldn’t pull away from his firm grip. “I’d really rather not.” She tried peeling his hand off her, but not even a finger budged.

“Come now, darling,” he whispered in her ear, making her wish she were anywhere else. “Be a good kitty-cat, and Mikel will reward you later tonight.”

A moment before she kneed Mikel where it counted, a new voice entered the conversation. “Ma’am, is this man bothering you?”

And *that* was when her world bottomed out.

CHAPTER  
FIVE

IN ADDITION TO THE FLASH DRIVE HE HAD TO DELIVER, PRYCE also received a photo and general description of Alphonse Norquist, the person he'd make contact with at the party. Pryce studied the photo and memorized the stats—black man, five foot nine, around 180 pounds—and destroyed it before setting foot in the party.

Even if Alphonse didn't stand out among the crowd, he'd have one thing that would call out to Pryce: a broach with a boar head wearing a Santa hat.

Pryce parked a ways down from the mansion—preferring to walk rather than allowing someone else to take his keys and his mode of transportation. He'd leave valet parking to those attending to actually enjoy the night. Besides, he wouldn't let another person touch his bike.

When he came around to the mansion entrance and the streams of people walking in, he cursed to himself. Oren could have chosen any other employee to do this task. Sure, Pryce sat at the top of the trustworthy list, one of the few Oren could be certain would be discreet while not letting alcohol or being surrounded by singles distract him. But couldn't Oren have wrangled an invitation from Esme without the matchmaking interview?



In all the years he'd worked for Oren, Pryce had never been accompanied by fear. Yet, for the first time, his heart beat rapidly, and his palms sweated. *Is this all over the idea of being introduced to my mate?*

Not enough time had passed for Esme to find his mate. He had to be realistic about things. No way could Esme find his *perfect mate* in just a few days.

Pryce took a breath and shook off the strange nerves. *Focus. Go in there, do the exchange, leave, and never again worry about this matchmaking nonsense.*

Easier said than done. While Pryce had studied the mansion's floorplan, he hadn't expected the party to sprawl out in so many directions or for there to be so many people. Which room would he find Alphonse in? At least he could cross the family and kid side off his list. Alphonse would be in the adult section.

The line at the entrance to the adult section tested Pryce's patience. He wanted to get in and get out as quickly as possible, but he'd draw attention if he tried to cut ahead and sneak right in. So, he acted the part of an enthusiastic partygoer and waited in line, inching closer to the front until finally he understood the source of the holdup.

Esme herself stood at the entrance, greeting each and every person.

She smiled widely as he approached her. "Hello, again, Pryce. I'm so glad you made it."

"Uh, yeah, I'm here." He held out the invitation to her.

She shook her head. "Oh, I don't need that. I know you're on my guest list."

“Okay, sure.” Pryce shrugged, shoving the invitation into his jacket pocket, next to the flash drive.

“Enjoy yourself a little tonight. And if I may, I think you’ll want to head in that direction.” Esme pointed. “Good luck.”

“Thanks.” Assuming Oren had asked her to help him find Alphonse, he followed Esme’s indication, looking closely at anyone who matched Alphonse’s profile closely. No boar pins in sight. *Maybe she’ll send Alphonse to me when he arrives.*

To try to look casual, he picked up a drink to nurse while he waited. On his way to the open bar, something akin to gravity forced him to turn, and his eyes instantly zeroed in on the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen.

Tan skin, long flowing brown hair, dressed in a sparkly reddish dress. She was so alluring he felt like he’d been slapped. His world tilted, and his head whirled like he’d had a few drinks too many—though he’d yet to have any.

*Mine. That woman is mine—my mate.* The bear side and the man side agreed.

But something was wrong.

It wasn’t just the fact that another man’s arms circled his mate’s curvy waist, but the fact that she tried to pull away from him, and he held his grip firm, refusing to let her go.

Pryce held back on the urge to walk right over and bash in the skeevy-looking man’s face. He wouldn’t make a scene at Esme’s party—especially not before finishing his mission. Instead, he calmed himself before he reached them, using one of the traits that made him especially good at his job—his ability to hold back from acting on instinct and instead approach with level-headedness.

“Ma’am, is this man bothering you?”

The woman opened her mouth to respond, but the man spoke over her. “What do you want, bro? This is a Esme match here. Me and my mate don’t need you butting in.”

Pryce didn’t need to see the look on the woman’s face to tell she didn’t agree with the man. Even so, her distraught look caused a feeling of protectiveness to rise in him. A sense he hadn’t experienced before—not even for Oren’s family.

“Back away, *bro*,” Pryce growled. “You might want to check again with Esme because the lady doesn’t seem to agree with you, and last time I checked, all people involved have to agree on being mates.”

The man rolled his eyes. “Women, am I right?”

“No, you’re not right. I don’t know if you’re talking about Esme so flippantly, or the lady here, but either way, you better remove your arm before I rip it off.”

Pryce started to pull off his jacket, ready to roll up his sleeves to display what the man would be facing when the ass let go of the woman and held up his hands in surrender. “Okay, okay.” The man backed away while still facing Pryce.

Wordlessly, Pryce watched the man until he melded into the crowd.

“Thank you,” the woman said, letting out a big sigh. “I’m Nila, and that was Mikel, who, I assure you, is *not* my mate.”

“Pryce,” he replied, turning toward her and pointing to himself as though it wasn’t already obvious who he was talking about. He inhaled, identifying her as a shifter—some kind of cat, though he couldn’t tell which, thanks to his bear nose being limited in that area as well as Mikel’s scent lingering around her.

“You okay?” he asked, holding back on the compulsion to pull her into his arms and rub away the scent of this other man. Since she’d just been manhandled against her will, he figured keeping his distance would be wise.

“Yeah, just a bit embarrassed that I couldn’t take care of it myself. My father would be ashamed.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself. Everyone gets into a mess now and then. That guy had no right to hold you against your will. He deserves an ass-kicking.”

“One minute longer and he would have had his family jewels crushed.”

Pryce winced in phantom sympathy pain while his heart swelled with pride. His mate was a badass. “Well, I’m glad I could help. I’m sure Esme didn’t want any scenes like that going on tonight.”

“You’re 100 percent correct. Thank you, again.”

Despite the situation, Nila’s composure held a strength Pryce admired. Being pawed by someone could really shake someone up, but Nila showed no sign of being rattled.

He had to wonder what kind of life she lived if that kind of thing didn’t bother her.

“He said Esme told him to find me,” Nila whispered, jolting him out of his thoughts. “But it can’t be right. Why would he lie?”

“No idea,” Pryce grunted. Triads—or more shifters mated to each other—could happen, but Nila clearly had no attraction to Mikel, so that wasn’t what they were dealing with. “Guess some guys come to things like this hoping to get lucky, however they can manage it.”

“That’s disgusting,” Nila muttered, and Pryce nodded in agreement.

So they’d established that Mikel was *not* her mate. Now what? Pryce didn’t know the proper procedure in a situation when one’s entire world had narrowed to a focus on just one person—*their person*.

*Did you say, Hey, there is definitely this mating thing going on here, but I never wanted that, and I still don’t, and I’m sorry to say that if you pin your hopes and dreams on me, they’re all going to end up broken and destroyed, so I’m just going to head off now, and hopefully someone more deserving will show up to sweep you off your feet like the goddess you are...*

Esme should make a class on proper mate-meeting etiquette.

“Hey, Earth to Pryce.” Nila waved her hand in front of his face, pulling him back from his thoughts.

“Sorry, did you say something?”

“Dinner isn’t for a little bit, and I need some fresh air. Want to go look at the decorated trees and ice sculptures with me?”

His desire to run battled his deep need to stay by her side. He tried to reason that she didn’t need him anymore. He could go on and find Alphonse and forget he ever met her... but what if Mikel hovered in the area, waiting to scoop back in the moment Pryce left her side? Or what if some other jerk looking to move in on her came by? He couldn’t leave her alone to be accosted again.

“Okay, let’s go,” he replied, following her out of the dining room.

*She can take care of herself, he argued with himself. But she asked me to go with her. Maybe she feels unsafe and wants some muscle.*

*Or she thinks you're mates and wants this to be a date...*

No. He couldn't let it be that. Bodyguard, sure. That was where he excelled—at being a protector.

Besides, maybe he'd find Alphonse out there.

At least, that was what he told himself.

Because he couldn't listen to the part of him that didn't ever want to be apart from Nila again.

CHAPTER  
SIX

AS THEY LEFT THE DINING ROOM AND ENTERED THE BACK gardens, Nila relaxed and became more comfortable in her own skin.

Meeting Pryce had rattled her. She hadn't known what to say, or what to do, and every word that came out of her mouth had sounded inane to her ears. At least he'd agreed to walk outside. She needed the fresh air, as the air inside had become too thick, and she worried she might pass out.

Pryce was her *mate*. A bear shifter—if her keen senses were correct. A hunky man with dark hair, the most soulful blue eyes she'd ever seen, a square jaw, and model good looks that made her think *no way* and continuously sneak glances to see if he really was as handsome as she'd first thought.

He was.

She pushed all thoughts of Mikel out of her mind, deciding that he must use the “Esme sent me” line to pick up chicks. She figured that someone should let Esme know, but not during the party. She'd bring it up the next time she ran into Esme at the hospital.

“Ice sculptures, that's weird,” Pryce said as though he searched for something to talk about, just as she did.

“It’s tradition—a contest. Over here, ice sculptures, over there, tree decorating. Artists from all over enter.”

“What do they win?”

“The glory? Bragging rights? Who knows? It’s pretty awesome, though. I’ve never seen it myself, just photos from parties past. We need to start on the tree side,” she explained.

“Why?”

“Because the ice sculpture tent is artificially chilled, and I don’t have a hat and gloves, so we’ll want to go back inside after.”

“Makes sense.”

They entered the Christmas tree trail, Nila overtaken by the beauty of the decorations and how different each tree appeared. Some were traditional red and green-themed, some blue and white. But others presented very non-traditional themes, such as the one with blue and purple birds and another with nothing but wolf ornaments in different shapes and sizes.

“Almost makes me wish I had one up at my place,” Nila commented.

“You don’t decorate?” Pryce asked.

Nila shook her head.

“Why not?”

“I’m pretty busy with work, and that’s a lot of effort just to have to pack it all away after a few weeks. I don’t have that kind of extra time on my hands.”

“Hmmm.”

“You?”

“No, it would be just for me, and I’m rarely at my place.”



“You could have one at your work, then.”

Pryce rocked his head back and forth as though considering it. “Maybe, but then, like you said, that’s a lot of effort.”

“Yep.”

“I think it’s different when you have a family. My buddy, he and his wife and kids decorate their tree. They make it a big party, playing Christmas songs and drinking eggnog and eating cookies they baked. After they set the thing up, they play a family board game on the floor by the tree.”

The description sounded beautiful to Nila, and something she’d never imagined, but now that she had, she wanted something like that. “That sounds like a fairy tale.”

“Yeah, they’re pretty lucky.”

“Have you always wanted something like that?”

Pryce lost his footing for a moment. “I really never imagined myself in that picture, no. It seemed like something for other people.”

“Yeah, me too.”

They’d reached the end of the Christmas tree trail and turned toward the ice sculpture tent area. At the entrance, party staff handed out hot chocolate at a small table.

“To keep your hands warm,” the woman passing Nila a cup said. “Of course, you can always *hold* hands to keep them warm too.” She winked, and Nila blushed, taking a cup of cocoa.

She’d love to feel Pryce’s hand in hers, or even better, to have his arms around her. It would help erase the awful

memory of Mikel's touch. But Pryce stayed back a bit, reserved, and they had just met. Physical contact could wait.

Pryce passed on the hot chocolate. As soon as they entered the machine-chilled area, their exhales became fog visible in front of them. Pryce rubbed his hands together, then shoved them into his pockets. "I guess they really do keep it cold, huh?"

Nila nodded, but already her attention had focused on the first sculpture, an intricate carving of a bear in front of pine trees, lit from behind with twinkling lights that went from green to blue and then pink.

"I like the bear," Pryce commented.

Nila laughed. "I suppose you would."

"You'd prefer a cat of some kind?"

Nila shrugged. "Lynx, to be exact," she replied, answering the unasked question. "But I suppose I don't have anything bad to say about bears."

"We're cuddly."

"Lynx are too."

"We're both good in the winter."

"By *good*, you mean your kind likes to hibernate through it?"

"I do love a good nap."

"Okay, same." Nila laughed, enjoying the fact they could be open about their shifter forms in this party's environment, surrounded by other shifters and humans who were in on the secret about the paranormal world.

A cry from across the way drew Nila's attention. "Does anyone know CPR?"

The call instantly threw Nila into emergency mode as every training session she'd ever had—multiple a year since working at the hospital—had prepared her for. She completely dropped her conversation with Pryce, shoved her hot cocoa into his hands, and spun around, sprinting in the direction of the shout.

She easily found where the request had originated, as a small crowd had gathered in front of a swan ice sculpture.

"I'm certified in first aid. How can I help?" Nila asked as she approached.

"My husband is choking!"

Though there was a big difference in needing CPR—chest compressions for a stopped heart—and the Heimlich Maneuver, it was semantics. Nila could do either.

She assessed the situation. The choking man, easily twice her size—muscle and tall—had a bag of mixed nuts and popcorn spilled at his feet. He held both hands on his throat, his face a sickly blue. Identifying that he still had consciousness, but knowing time was of the essence, Nila spoke quickly yet clearly. "Sir, I'm going to try to help you. Do I have your permission to proceed?"

The man nodded frantically, and the woman at his side cried, "Yes, please, help him!"

Someone could very quickly choke to death, so Nila wasted no seconds in positioning her arms around him, spreading her feet wide so she'd have a solid stance and the ability to build the momentum she'd need on a man of his size, and began abdominal thrusts.

“I always tell him to slow down when he’s eating,” his wife cried.

Nila ignored the woman, focusing on saving her husband’s life. On the third thrust, the item in question flew out of him, and he wheezed, catching his breath. The crowd cheered and applauded.

“I told you I was starving.” The man coughed. “You should have let me have a sandwich before we left. You know I need extra calories after my workouts.”

Really? The man could have died, and the two of them went right into a marital squabble? Nila shook her head. She’d never understand some people.

But then they fell into each other’s arms, tears flowing from the woman’s eyes. Then Nila understood. Sometimes it was easier to focus on something else other than the terrifying thing that you had just endured.

Only then did she wonder what had happened to Pryce.

He’d followed her, and he beamed at her while clapping with the rest of the crowd. She smiled at him, feeling a bit shaky with the aftereffects of adrenaline, and found herself very glad to find his face in the crowd.

“Wait, we didn’t properly thank you!” the woman called after her.

“Yes, thank you,” her husband added.

“It’s all in a day’s work,” Nila replied, ducking her head in modesty and hoping not to draw too much attention. Her eyes darted through the crowd, looking for faces that looked at her wrong. A habit she couldn’t break. She wanted to go back to having a quiet moment with Pryce.

CHAPTER  
**SEVEN**

IF PRYCE HADN'T ALREADY EXPERIENCED THE MATING PULL TO Nila, he certainly would have fallen in love after watching her snap into emergency mode to save a man's life.

She'd gone from a bit of a shy girl to an alpha female with steel control of the situation. Any awkwardness between them had melted away when she turned her focus completely toward what she needed to do. Without any hesitation, she'd run, and by the time Pryce had caught up, she'd already wrapped her arms around the man twice her size.

Pryce had been in plenty of clutch situations—tense times that required him to keep his wits about him. He had some coworkers that could compare to him in ability for keeping cool when bullets flew, but he'd bet that Nila reacted more like him in a moment of peril than any other of Oren's lackeys.

Pryce was damn impressed with her. So much so, he found himself wrapping her in a hug when she walked away from the man she'd just saved. "Hell of a job," he murmured in her hair.

"Thanks," she replied. Her body vibrated slightly, likely the effects of the adrenaline rush, not fear. He could relate. He'd been there before. Different circumstances, but still intense.

"You're a badass. For real."

“I’m a nurse. It’s what we do.”

A murmur went through the crowd, and it parted a little to reveal Esme walking toward the center. “Is everyone okay?” she asked.

“That young lady saved my husband’s life!” the woman shouted and pointed at Nila.

Pryce released Nila from his arms just as Esme followed the woman’s gesture and looked at them. Her gaze went from Nila then to Pryce, and she smiled widely. “Well, Nila, thank goodness I invited you.”

Nila made a combination of shrug-nod-head shake that communicated she didn’t know what to say.

Esme turned her attention to the man and his wife, offering words of comfort, and Nila leaned toward Pryce. “Would you mind if we went inside? I really don’t want to be the center of attention, and I’m a little cold.”

Her red cheeks and nose illustrated her point, and Pryce happily obliged her. “Yeah, come on. I think your hot chocolate is probably cold by now.” He dumped the cup into a nearby trash can and placed his arm around her shoulders. His urge had been to keep her warm, but he hadn’t been expecting how much emotion would overcome him as she leaned into him.

This was his mate. And holding her felt *so right*.

Back in the mansion, the party hadn’t quieted. In fact, the crowd in the hallway seemed just as dense as before they’d ventured outside. Pryce couldn’t believe how many people milled around. Was there anyone Esme *didn’t* know?

Of course, there was one person he’d still not encountered, and a bit of worry niggled at him that he might not find

Alphonse—at least not unless he ditched Nila and focused on scouting the place for his contact.

As he tried to formulate the words to excuse himself from her company—though his inner bear growled at the mere suggestion—Pryce lucked out. Leaning against the wall, Alphonse, boar pin and all, glanced up at him. When they made eye contact, Alphonse nodded and went into the nearby men’s restroom.

*Shit.*

The time had come. He had a job to do, and he needed to be rid of Nila. He pulled his arm away from her and cleared his throat.

“Hey, I’ll be right back, okay?” *Why did I say that?* “I mean, do you want to find a seat for dinner, and I’ll meet you in there?”

“Okay.” Nila nodded, seeming completely oblivious that Pryce intended on ditching her, which caused him a deep pang of guilt.

His inner bear cursed him, but it had to be done. He would make his trade with Alphonse, and then he’d head straight out the front door.

With that in mind, he took a last long look at Nila. In a move unlike his usual self, he shoved rational thinking to the side and gave in to one indulgence, pulling her back into his arms and bending his head to kiss her.

She sucked in a breath before her soft lips accepted his, allowing him to taste her sweetness and experience an embrace unlike any he’d ever had before.

For a moment, everything else disappeared—the crowd of guests, Esme, Alphonse. Nothing existed in Pryce’s entire

world except for his delicious Nila, who eagerly kissed him back, sending shockwaves from his head to his toes.

What would it be like to kiss her every day like this? To come home from work every night to this woman?

The question rushed reality back to him, and he pulled away, knowing he shouldn't have allowed himself to kiss her. His attraction to her had amplified, and he only had himself to blame.

“What was that for?” she asked.

“You really impressed me back there. I wanted you to know that.”

“Oh, okay.” She gave him a strange look, as though maybe she suspected something, but she didn't question him any further.

He held her chin for a moment, memorizing her brown eyes, her still-flushed cheeks, the way her hair fell in her face a little. How could he be saying goodbye, without saying anything, to this woman who would surely haunt his dreams for the rest of his life?

*Then don't let her go.*

*I don't have a choice.*

She took his hand from her face and gave it a squeeze before offering one last small smile and turning to walk into the dining room. He watched her as she went, her curvy ass looking delectable in her sparkly red dress.

*Get your shit together.*

Alphonse wouldn't wait for him in the restroom all day.



Pryce turned—not happily—away from Nila and entered the men’s room. He surveyed the area, counting one man at the urinal, three stall doors, and one of them closed. He identified Alphonse’s shoes, having taken a good look at them before the man went into the restroom, and took the stall next to him.

They didn’t need to use words. As soon as he closed his stall door, he dropped the little leather sachet containing the zip drive onto the floor.

Alphonse did the same, dropping a similar-looking small brown leather bag. They each reached down and picked up the other’s item. Then the toilet flushed in Alphonse’s stall.

Pryce waited while Alphonse left his stall, ran the sink, then exited the bathroom.

He waited a few more moments before flushing his own toilet and leaving.

No one would ever know an exchange was made.

He half expected to find Nila waiting for him when he exited the restroom. Even though he’d watched her walk away, a part of him hoped she would’ve returned and made it impossible for him to ditch her.

He couldn’t deny that his heart sank a little when he didn’t see her anywhere.

He shook his head, willing thoughts of her out of his mind, and headed toward the front door—his exit.

He had it in his sight when a hand gripped his arm. A grasp strong enough to hold a big man like himself back.

“Going somewhere?”

Esme.

He didn't bother facing her. "My business is done. I'd like to thank you for the invitation and your discretion in this matter."

Esme's grip didn't loosen. "Nila is in the dining room, saving you a seat."

Pryce sighed and turned to the matchmaker. "I went along with this for the job, but I never had any intention of settling down with anyone. I'm sorry for the subterfuge. I'm sorry if you went out of your way to invite her for me, but—"

"But nothing," Esme interrupted, her gaze as stern as her grip. "That's as weak an excuse as I've ever heard, and rather unexpected from you. I look into my clients, you know, and everything on you suggests that you're a stand-up guy. Not the kind that would just ghost a nice girl like Nila. So what are you doing?"

"I didn't sign up for this. No one asked me if I wanted to find my mate, because if they had, I would have told them I have no intention of settling down."

"You have *no idea* how many people tell me exactly that. The thing is, you were supposed to be more fearless than this."

"What's fearless got to do with anything?"

She finally released his arm, settling back on her heels with a smug look on her face. "You don't want to be mated because you're afraid."

"No." He lowered his voice to an annoyed hiss. "I don't want to be mated because I don't want to have to explain to someone how being with me means they need to accept certain new lifestyle changes, like how a bodyguard is a basic accessory or living behind a locked gate isn't an extravagance, but a necessity. I don't want to be mated because I can't bear

the thought of the fear that will fill my wife's face the first time she hears gunshots ringing out."

"You've already thought that far ahead with Nila?"

"No, I—" he sputtered.

"Regardless, that girl is in there waiting for you, and after her heroics outside, I think the least she deserves is to not be stood up. Ghosted. Whatever. You don't want to see her after tonight, fine. That's your business—you're wrong, but it's your business. But stop thinking about yourself and how the feelings you're having are so overwhelming, and go in there and be there for her, at least for tonight. Put Nila before yourself."

"I am. I'm thinking about her safety."

Esme smiled and waved at someone behind Pryce, taking a step forward before leaning close to him. "People aren't always what they seem. You're lying to yourself about the safety thing. You're just trying to make it easier to leave quickly, but leaving her sitting at that table next to an empty chair is a dick move."

CHAPTER  
**EIGHT**

SHE FOUND A SEAT AND PLACED HER CLUTCH ON THE CHAIR next to her to save it for Pryce. Looking at the little bag there reminded her of all the times her mother had done the same for her father when he was off closing some deal or doing something work-related while the family waited for him.

*He's just in the bathroom, chill,* she told herself, looking around nervously, ignoring the nagging fact that he seemed to be taking much longer than necessary. Men's rooms didn't usually have long lines...

Her mind wandered to the amazing kiss they'd shared. It fulfilled every fantasy she'd ever had about what kissing her mate might be like. Sensual, passionate, and life-altering. His arms had held her strongly while her legs had turned wobbly, and her head had become woozy, lost in a fugue state while her only certainty had been the fact that she would never be satisfied unless she had more.

But, somehow, something in the kiss had felt like a goodbye.

He'd seemed honest when he said she'd impressed him, but it had also sounded like he had some sort of regret. Like he was pulling away.

*That's silly.* Why would the thought cross her mind? He hadn't given her any reason to think he'd ditch her. He was at Esme's party, after all. Didn't that mean he was there to meet his mate also?

Unless he, like her, hadn't truly believed Esme would find their match.

*Drat.*

Nila hadn't intended on meeting her mate when she'd started her week, but sometimes life just happened. Even if Nila wasn't what Pryce wanted or expected, he at least should have told her if he intended on leaving before dinner, right?

She was being paranoid. Just because she grew up a certain way—with people who had ulterior motives almost all the time—didn't mean that was what she was experiencing now.

Maybe it was the way people did things now. She hadn't dated in a long time, and even when she had, it hadn't been anything serious. She'd enjoyed dating in her younger years, before she went into nursing school and became serious about her career. Though, even when in high school, she always had to be cautious about who she let close. It was easier to keep boyfriends at arm's length, so they didn't learn too much about her family—and so her family didn't look too much into them.

In truth, none had seemed more than silly flings to her, even at the time.

Unlike Pryce. Even if she hadn't felt the mate bond to him, she would have known it. He reminded her of the men she grew up around. Somewhat stoic, strong, and muscular. He had an air around him that spoke to dependability and trustworthiness. He had a “don't mess with me” vibe that

warned he might kick someone's ass if they looked at him wrong.

And, *whoo boy*, Pryce was such a hot specimen. Mate sense or not, she would have an undeniable attraction to the buff, handsome man with the dark locks of hair and the brilliant blue eyes.

She pulled herself back to the moment when a voice interrupted her thoughts. "Nila! What a surprise to see you here!"

The woman speaking to her was Cornelia Jandris, a former patient who'd been out of treatment since going into remission months ago. At Cornelia's side stood her husband, Len. Nila jumped to her feet to give them both hugs. "Oh my God, Cornelia! It's so good to see you!"

Cornelia had gained weight since Nila had last seen her, and her natural hair had grown back, a little grayer than before treatment, but all in all, the woman looked absolutely radiant, and it thrilled Nila to no end, reminding her of exactly why she continued to work in cancer treatment.

"Please, sit with me," Nila invited, noticing how happy Len looked as well. For Cornelia's husband to look equally joyful—a stark contrast to how drawn and worried his face had been for the duration of Cornelia's treatment—Nila knew her job was worth everything she sacrificed. "Tell me what you've been up to."

As they filled her in on their recent traveling—making good on their promises to each other during Cornelia's treatment—Nila couldn't help but think how they represented such a testament to the duality of love. On one hand, the two had each other to lean on, to spend their lives with. On the other, illness and death could bring pain unlike anything else.

The Jandrises paused their stories when another couple approached the table. They introduced themselves as Slade and Dixie Galath, friends of Esme.

“Are you two another Esme match?” Cornelia asked after the two new people sat. “She put the two of us together nearly half a century ago!”

“Yes, we are! Much more recent than that, but no less perfect.” Dixie beamed at Slade, and he placed his hand on hers, giving it a squeeze.

Cornelia looked at Len, giving his shoulder a rub. “That’s just it with Esme, perfection. She’s never wrong.”

“So I hear.” Pryce surprised Nila so that she nearly jumped.

He handed her clutch to her and spoke softly. “Sorry I took so long. I ran into some chatty folks.”

Raising his voice, he introduced himself to everyone at the table and asked what he’d missed.

Nila’s heart soared. He hadn’t ditched like she’d feared.

“You two are a handsome couple,” Cornelia said, winking at Nila as she took a drink.

Before Nila could think of a response, another couple approached, pleasing Nila when she recognized the man she’d given the Heimlich to. He seemed in good spirits, as did his wife.

“Are these seats taken?” the wife asked.

“Nope,” Nila answered.

“Good, I’m so happy we can sit with you. I wanted to make sure we properly thanked you.”

Nila shook her head. “That really isn’t necessary. You thanked me outside, and that’s plenty.”

The husband chimed in. “Well, if we can’t heap thanks on you all night, at least I’m going to enjoy sitting at the safest table in the place, knowing we have a hero if anything bad happens again.”

“What’s all this about?” Cornelia asked.

“She saved my husband’s life,” the woman explained. “He almost choked to death, but she saved him!”

Nila looked to Pryce helplessly, hoping he’d understand how uncomfortable she felt. He did. “I don’t think we were properly introduced. I’m Pryce, and this is Nila.”

“Oh my, you’re right! I’m Erlene, and this is my husband, Ham.”

A waiter, dressed in black pants and a white shirt with a shimmering blue bowtie, approached their table and handed around menus. They had a few plate options, and once they all gave their selections, the waiter collected the menus and left.

“So, where is everyone from?” Erlene asked.

As the others replied, Nila realized how much importance that question had to her regarding Pryce. His answer would impact the future of any relationship they might have. If he were local, she might see him again, though she’d yet to determine if that was a good or bad thing. He didn’t seem like the kind of needy guy who would want to see her all the time and throw a fit at her for working too many hours, but one never knew. First impressions could be wrong.

When it was her turn, Nila said, “I’m from here.”

Pryce’s turn. “I’m from a town called Idlewyld.”



“California?” Nila asked.

“No, Colorado.”

“I didn’t know there was an Idlewyld in Colorado.” *Duh*, she didn’t know every city in every state.

So, their potential relationship spanned a short flight or a long road trip. Far enough to still be considered long-distance, but close enough that they could meet up once in a while... if they wanted to.

The chatter at the table ended when their food arrived. Once they finished, the waiter returned to clear away their plates and deliver dessert.

“Boy,” Ham chided Pryce when the waiter didn’t deliver him a sweet. “You’re supposed to always order dessert so your lady can have it!”

“Oh, sorry...”

“It’s okay,” Nila told him. “After all that steak, I couldn’t possibly fit more than a few bites of my chocolate cheesecake anyway.”

As desserts disappeared, their tablemates said goodbye and headed off to enjoy other parts of the party, leaving Nila and Pryce alone. After having the buffer of the others, Nila suddenly felt awkward.

Nila started, trying to think of where they should go next. “So, do you want to—”

“I have to be honest with you—” Pryce said at the same time.

They both stopped, waiting for the other to continue.

“You go,” Nila said, a foreboding sense telling her she wouldn’t like what he had to say.

He sighed and ran his hand through his hair. “I don’t want you to take this the wrong way. You’re great and all, but I didn’t come here looking for a mate. I didn’t expect to meet you, and I really never *wanted* to find my mate. I’m not saying this to reject you or hurt your feelings, because if I were looking for a mate, I’d be thrilled to find you.”

“Oh,” Nila replied, taken aback at the words, though she could see he took no joy in saying them.

“It’s just... I don’t have my life in order. I don’t have stability to offer you. I’ve made a career for myself, and that’s all I do or plan to do—invest all of myself into my work. I’m really sorry.”

At that, a laugh escaped her. *The irony!*

“This is funny?” he asked, looking confused.

“Sort of, yeah, because I feel exactly the same. All my spare time is spent at the hospital. I don’t date, and I’m not interested in dating—not that I wouldn’t like to have someone special in my life—but if you were to be with me, you’d be neglected, and it wouldn’t be fair for either of us.”

She thought she saw relief flood him. At the very least, he smiled. “Then we can finish tonight, both knowing where we stand with each other, and then part as friends with no hard feelings?”

Nila nodded definitively, surprised at her own relief. She was freed from all she’d felt conflicted about. She’d found her mate, but in true compatibility, neither of them wanted to actually settle down and give up their lives. They really were a perfect match! “I think that sounds like a good plan.”

CHAPTER  
**NINE**

WELL, HOW ABOUT THAT? HIS MATE HAD THE SAME AVERSION to being tied down as he did. He hadn't seen that coming.

Nila let out a big sigh, heaving her shoulders up and down. "Well, what now? We've shown our faces, we've mingled..."

"You saved somebody's life," Pryce added.

Nila rolled her eyes and shrugged, still playing cool about the whole thing. "In any case, this is far more socializing than I've done in a long time, and I'm beat. I think we'll be able to sneak out without Esme noticing or stopping us at this point."

"I agree." He stood and offered her his hand, helping her up from her chair. Now that they'd cleared the air, things seemed much more natural between them, less awkward.

Almost enough to make him rethink his stance on letting her be part of his life.

But the choice was no longer his alone. She didn't want a mate either, and he respected that. She was clearly a talented nurse and wanted to keep excelling in her field. Being with him would mean she'd have to leave her job and move cities over, starting over at the bottom of the rankings. It didn't matter how conflicted he felt, because even though they had a connection, they weren't meant to be together.

Even so, when she placed her hand in his and stood, so close he could smell her scent of wildflowers and vanilla, he knew he had to hold her in his arms, just once.

“Dance with me before we say goodbye?” he found himself asking.

Her eyes rounded, and for a moment, he thought she’d refuse. But then she smiled. “Okay, one dance.”

They walked together out of the dining hall into the ballroom.

The band played a slow song, exactly what he’d hoped for. What better reason to pull a woman into your arms and feel her pressed against you for three minutes or so?

As they swayed, he asked, “It’s kind of weird, isn’t it?” Being with her overwhelmed him. Having her in his arms was the only thing he could ever imagine wanting. He tried to imagine a new motorcycle, a raise, a trip to the moon... None of them compared to how intensely he wanted Nila.

The only word that came to mind to describe it was *love*.

“Yeah, but I think it’s kind of nice, to know you’ll be out there.”

That made his chest tighten. He pulled away from her, just enough so he could tilt her chin up so he could look her in the eyes. “And you know if you ever need anything, you can count on me.”

“I don’t want to do that,” she said, her hand moving up to cup his neck and pull him close again. “I don’t want to exchange numbers or info or anything like that. I think it would be too tempting.”

He sighed. “You make a good point.”

His mind said that he didn't have room for a mate in his life, but his heart, his body, and more importantly, his bear, disagreed with him.

*Sometimes you make plans, but they're interrupted for something better,* his bear growled at him while he swayed with Nila pressed against him. He rubbed his hand over the soft skin of her arms and turned his head, his nose pressed into her head, which rested on his shoulder.

She smelled like heaven.

He'd bet that he could grow old with her and never tire of holding her in his arms.

*You don't change everything you've worked for just because you meet someone,* he argued with himself, holding off on the fact that she wasn't just *someone*. She was literally *his* someone. The person fate had created for him.

But people didn't leave their life for a mate anymore. Modern shifters lived different kinds of lives. Lives that didn't always include a mate.

When the song ended, he didn't want to push it anymore. They made their way to the coat check. Nila pulled out her tag, and he took it from her, collecting her coat along with his helmet and leather jacket. The simplicity of the act, collecting his mate's coat, hit him differently. He almost liked the feeling, doing something for her. He didn't think it could be so rewarding to do something so simple for his mate...

He had to shake that off, though. He had to say goodbye.

And it was more than just what he or she wanted. He had to also remember that he'd vowed to never be involved with someone because they would be in danger from his enemies, nor could they handle the pressure of a mob lifestyle.

“You rode here?” she asked, taking in his gear.

He nodded. “You ride?”

She shook her head. “Never had my own, but I’ve been on the back of a bike or two.”

Another blow to his resolve. He imagined her sitting behind him, her arms gripping him tightly while they rode off into the sunset. She was his dream woman, through and through.

*Shake. It. Off.*

They headed to the valet line where most of the people waiting were families with young ones, calling the night early.

“You sure you’re okay, not staying longer?” The words slipped out before he could stop himself.

Nila nodded. “This was far more partying and excitement than I’ve had in a long time. I’m exhausted, and you have a long drive ahead of you.”

She showed a stronger resolve than he felt, which he was grateful for.

If it were left up to him, he’d probably weaken enough to go back to her place with her, though, without a doubt, spending the night with Nila would make parting that much harder.

His heart already constricted, knowing he had to say goodbye after just a few hours together.

He hesitated, fighting every urge to ask her number or give her his. To walk away with no way of being able to contact her felt *wrong* in so many ways.

But he had to push that aside and stick to his guns.

Neither of them wanted a mate.

“You don’t have to wait with me,” Nila said.

The statement nearly gutted him. She was trying to have him leave her faster. “All right,” he replied. Feeling the sting of rejection, he tamped down the urge he had to kiss her one last time or to give her a hug goodbye. Her body language, with her arms crossed and leaning away from him, spoke to the fact that she didn’t want any more. In fact, he already cursed himself for pushing the dance on her.

She’d told him she wasn’t interested. He needed to go.

“Nice meeting you,” he added before walking away without looking back.

He set out on foot, walking down the street to where he’d parked his motorcycle. The walk down the back road seemed longer than it had earlier, but the darkness and quiet gave him a chance to think over how the night had all gone wrong.

He should have turned tail when he set eyes on Nila. He shouldn’t have played hero and approached her at all. She would have been fine. She was tough as nails. She didn’t need him.

She’d never need him.

Even so, he didn’t regret any of it. He’d met Nila, and he’d watched her save someone’s life.

At the very least, he’d had a successful mission, handing off the flash drive and fulfilling the main reason he’d even attended the party. The *only* reason, he reminded himself.

He’d done his job. Now he’d go home and return to his normal life.

The memory of Nila would haunt him, and he hated that. He'd have had a far easier time being happy with his solo life if he didn't have the memory of her perfection reminding him of what he could've had if they'd found a way to be together.

He was so lost in thought that he had to jump out of the way when a speeding vehicle honked.

He turned, his acute bear senses kicking in, his shifter night vision zeroing in on the passengers and, to his horror, identifying the driver as Nila.

And the passenger as some scumbag who was pointing a gun at her!

He saw a second man in the backseat before the car sped past him, picking up speed down the dark road.

Without a second thought, he sprinted the rest of the way to his motorcycle and kicked it on, making haste to follow the shrinking taillights of Nila's car.

He had to make it to Nila and surprise the men with her so he'd have the advantage. He didn't want them to know he tailed them, so he kept his light off, relying on his heightened shifter senses to alert him of any wild animals that might be about to jump into the road.

*Goddamn it, Pryce thought to himself. We walked away from each other, and yet she's still in danger from my enemies.*

*What's more, no one lays a finger on my mate.*



CHAPTER  
TEN

NILA STOOD IN THE VALET LINE, WATCHING PRYCE WALK AWAY.

She'd been cold toward him, starting with their dance, but she did what was necessary, pushing back her feelings and maintaining her conviction. Because as much as she told everyone—even herself—that she was happy without a man, she couldn't ignore the deeper secret reason why she couldn't change her mind about it.

The family.

It rarely crossed her mind now that she lived on her own, and her father had retired to Florida. He no longer claimed the title of active boss in the area, and to some degree, she'd been able to leave it all behind her.

She'd been so used to the “I can't date, I don't have time, I'm too busy with work” excuse that she'd nearly forgotten *why* she'd become so involved in her career in the first place.

Some would say there was no such thing as retiring from the mob. Even if she *wanted* to quit her job and move far away and have a happily ever after with someone, she couldn't. She grew up as a mob princess, and she'd forever be tied to that life.

Short of an arranged marriage to someone in the family business—and from the few her parents tried to introduce her to, she'd realized that she didn't want any of those kinds of men—she'd never been able to settle down. She knew too many secrets to ever be “out,” and the family didn't allow for the risk of allowing just any outsider in.

Even if, somehow, she was given the approval to marry an outsider, how exactly could she expect someone to stick around after the first bullet flew past him? He'd be packed up and gone before the next shot rang out.

The stark reality of her life settled in as Pryce walked out of sight.

Reaching the front of the waiting line, she gave her ticket for the valet to bring her car back. Her mind still on her messed-up life, she entered her car so lost in thought she didn't realize anything was wrong until she pulled up to the end of the mansion's long driveway and the back seat flipped down, revealing two men hiding in her trunk, both pointing guns at her.

“Turn right. Don't make a scene, and we won't shoot.”

Though her blood turned cold, she didn't panic. She fell into autopilot, following their directions, not bothering to ask what they wanted.

She'd been prepared her whole life for something like this—kidnapping of the mob boss's daughter. Even now, with her father retired, she remained a valuable pawn that could be used—if anyone dared.

So, she remembered her training.

*Follow their directions. Be strong. Focus on survival. Sit tight and let them make their demands. They don't hurt family.*

*You'll be fine.*

Even so, her body started to shake as she drove down the road, and it became even worse when she almost ran someone over. *Why are they in all black in the middle of the road at night?*

She swerved past the person in the road.

“You better step on it,” the goon snapped with the gun pointed at her head since she'd slowed to avoid the pedestrian.

When she only picked up her speed a little, he pushed the cold steel of the revolver more firmly to her temple. “I said faster.”

She did as told, smashing the gas pedal to the floor and hoping no more pedestrians or wild animals would dart out.

She followed the rest of the directions, turning this way and that until they arrived at the outskirts of town in a warehouse district. She parked where instructed and exited the car without a fight.

Reminding herself of her lessons:

*Be strong.*

*Survive this.*

*Get information on who these fuckers are so we can make them pay later.*

*Don't get hurt.*

*Offer a deal. Call Dad if I can.*

*Get out of this mess.*

She planned to wait until they entered the building to start farming for information. Had she tried in the car, they would

have become annoyed and perhaps trigger happy. Now, safely inside and on the goons' turf, they'd be more chatty.

Her theory seemed accurate when they entered the nearly empty warehouse, and both men holstered their guns.

She didn't feel anything when three more appeared. It didn't surprise her. She figured there would be more.

One of the men pointed to a table with a metal chair, and she went obediently and sat. "So, what exactly am I helping you guys with?"

They ignored her question, and she watched as they went into a little office and closed the door. She'd be a fool to try to run past the office and escape. Not only would she not make it, but she'd also be breaking protocol, giving them a reason to harm her.

Instead, she sat at the table, waiting for them to talk to her.

She'd lived for so many years looking over her shoulder. The family saw to her protection when she was a child, but leaving her parents' place as an adult meant she had no security guards. No one watching her.

She'd moved cities away in an attempt to build a life with some sense of normalcy, some amount of relative safety, but the chance of someone finding her and wanting to use her to get something from her father was never zero.

Attending a party shouldn't have presented any kind of extra risk, and it wasn't like she should have known better. The party didn't give bad guys a unique opportunity to nab her. If they wanted, they could have grabbed her any time she left work or her apartment for the past two years.

Of course, part of what made her feel safe at the hospital was the fact there were cameras in the parking lot, and

coworkers usually milled around. And the truth was she never felt absolutely safe since she'd always walked through the parking lot prepared with pepper spray.

Same when it came to her apartment. She left her car, pepper spray in her hand, knowing she had easy access to the knife she'd moved from her glove box to her purse—she couldn't take it into the hospital, so she kept it in the car.

And she'd chosen an apartment building that had a double security feature. A set of doors to the outside that required a code to enter and a second set of doors that required a key.

How had these people known she would be at the party? Esme had only invited her a few days ago. Had that been enough time for them to prepare?

And what did they want from her father, exactly? He'd handed off all of his power to the next boss. Maybe these men thought they could use her to make her father negotiate with the new boss?

The office door opened, and one of the men—the same one who'd held the gun to her head in the car—walked over to her, holding a Coke.

“Here you go.”

“Thank you,” she said, being polite, as she'd been taught. “May I ask what you'd like me to do for you?”

“Not yet,” he said, a man of few words as he pointed to the drink on the table.

She felt reassured by the offer. The gesture showed an attempt to treat her well, an adherence to the code: Kidnap the mob boss's daughter, and negotiations could happen, but harm a hair on her head in the process, and you and all your cronies were going down.

Nila took a sip of the drink and then settled back in her chair. “Have you already contacted my father, or am I supposed to do it?”

“Your father?” The man furrowed his brows. “I don’t know anything about your father. We’re after your mate.”

As though a record scratched to a stop in her brain, Nila blinked at him. All of her training, all of her preparation went out of her head for a moment.

She’d always been ready to be kidnapped as a mob boss’s daughter... what did Pryce have to do with anything?

And she’d met her mate only a few hours ago... How exactly did any of this connect?

*Pryce...*

He’d never told her what he did for a living, though he made it clear he focused on his career.

The sound of metal tearing interrupted her thoughts. *What the hell was that?* The horrible sound seemed almost deafening, and while it motivated the other four men to run out of the office, the man at the table made a grab for her.

He held her in a headlock with his gun to her temple. “Don’t move, or you’re dead.”

Nila said nothing while she tried to figure out what the hell had happened.

CHAPTER  
**ELEVEN**

THE DUMB FUCKS DIDN'T EVEN TRY TO HIDE HER CAR.

What were they thinking?

Pryce parked his motorcycle at the far side of the parking lot, in front of a different warehouse.

His phone had been ringing.

He didn't bother to listen to the messages from Oren but called him directly.

"What the fuck is going on?" Oren answered.

"This whole party thing has blown up."

"Did you get the flash drive to Alphonse?"

"I did."

"Then why am I getting these threats from the Santibanez group?"

"I guess they don't know that I don't have the drive. They must have been at the party and not known we made the swap. They have my mate."

"Your mate." Oren's voice gave no hints of his thoughts.

"Yeah, Esme delivered. I met someone at the party. Her name is Nila, and these fuckers are going to pay for taking

her.” He didn’t need Oren’s permission. He knew one way or another he was going in there for Nila, but if Oren gave his blessing on the mission, he’d at least stay out of trouble with his boss.

“I don’t see any other way. They’re demanding the drive for the girl, and you don’t have the drive.”

“Ten-four.” Pryce hung up his phone, dropping it into his saddlebag. He stripped off his clothes. He didn’t see anyone around, and it was too dark for them to see anyway, but regardless, he shrank back into the woods for his shift.

He didn’t wait for his shift to complete but ran toward the warehouse where those fuckers kept his mate.

The Santibanez pack were gray wolf shifters, but that didn’t mean they had wolves on this job. They could use humans, sometimes, if they felt the job didn’t require real muscle or if they wanted to insult someone by telling them they weren’t worth the big guns. In any case, he hoped the people inside shit their pants when his giant grizzly bear ripped a hole through their building.

The metal shredded under his claws like butter, though he knew the noise on the inside sounded more like a giant garbage disposal choking on a spoon.

He was fast about it too. Tore through the wall and into the building before anyone inside had a chance to prepare themselves for the battle.

It took them only a few extra seconds, though. The size of his bear, plus the unnatural act of attacking a building, surely alerted them to the fact that they weren’t dealing with a regular bear. The men inside shifted, ripping out of their clothes and becoming a pack of mangy gray wolves.



The Santibanez clan had sent some of their real muscle.

Though the wolves looked scrawny in comparison to his oversized bear, he faced a hell of a battle. Four wolves instantly jumped on him.

He threw them off easily, but they came back for more, as though they'd been trained to tire out an enemy instead of taking them down.

They launched onto him, latched on, and he threw them off. Each time they left behind new scratches and bites, and Pryce lost some energy. They took turns, one after another, giving the others time to recharge before their next attack.

He would soon be overwhelmed if he couldn't start taking them out.

From nowhere, a fifth body hurled toward him.

But instead of latching on to Pryce, the new body speared the wolf charging him.

*Nila!*

*Yes.* Her reply came clearly into his mind.

Through their mate link.

They had no time for further discussion, though. No time for him to stop and appreciate the small, spotted wildcat taking down a wolf twice her size.

Her efforts tackling the one wolf gave Pryce a reprieve, and he was able to turn on the offensive, charging at first one then the second wolf, removing them from the count.

Nila took the upper hand against the wolf she fought, and the two of them stood side by side, facing off the last wolf.

Making a wise choice, the wolf turned and fled, leaving through the ripped-open wall.

*Is that all of them?* he asked Nila through their newfound link.

*There was a fifth over there with me. You provided enough distraction that I was able to shift and end him.*

He looked over to where the lynx gestured with her head, and he saw the human figure on the ground. Again, she impressed him. She really was a badass—someone who was too calm and collected for this situation.

*We should get out of here if we want to take our vehicles. Otherwise, if anyone else shows up, we'll have to hightail it like this through the woods.*

He'd barely finished his thought before the lynx darted toward the hole he'd made during his entrance.

*I keep spare scrubs in my car.*

He left the building and followed her lead, shifting as she did.

Her naked human form filled his eyes, her backside smooth and curvy in a way that had him wanting to take her right there, right then, in the woods.

What else did someone want to do after a victory in battle and when faced with their perfect-in-every-way mate?

But they were still on enemy territory.

He turned, more to give her privacy than to hide his large erection.

“I threw my keys on the floorboard when we got here, and they didn't bother to collect them.”

He heard her open the car door and the trunk pop. Some rustling of clothes, and then she said, “Okay, I’m decent.”

“You were more than decent without the scrubs,” he said, turning to face her, the shadowy image of her naked body forever seared in his mind.

Her eyes traveled down to his manhood, and he stood proudly, knowing he had the stuff to be admired.

It was too dark in the parking lot to see her cheeks flush, but he had the feeling she blushed as she spun to face her car.

“What do we do now?” she asked, her hand resting on her door handle.

“I’m not leaving you alone tonight.”

She glanced over her shoulder, her eyes meeting his. “Okay.”

Though brave, a touch of vulnerability in her eyes reflected in the moonlight. He wished he could pull her into his arms and offer her his strength. Instead, he had to move her to safety. “Get in your car, lock the doors, and follow me.”

The warehouse sat on the outskirts of a town Pryce knew well. He racked his brain for where they could go, somewhere close enough that they wouldn’t be on the road too long but far enough that they wouldn’t be on Santibanez pack territory.

Not only was it late, and both of them were about to drop from an adrenaline rush, but the Santibanez pack would be looking for them as soon as the runaway wolf reported in.

Pryce weighed the options of going to Nila’s place or to a nearby hotel. They might easily figure out where she lived, and a hotel wouldn’t be any better. They could track them there or at least be able to find their vehicles outside.

Their best choice was to hope no one would find them on the road and take the forty-five-minute trek north to one of the Cavalli safe houses.

If they didn't run into any trouble on the road, then Pryce would be able to protect her from inside.

CHAPTER  
TWELVE

HER MIND DIDN'T STOP RACING THE WHOLE DRIVE. SHE HAD no idea how far Pryce wanted them to drive. She also had no idea if he even knew where he led them. Did he have any idea what they were dealing with?

Would someone find them as they drove?

And then there was the big part of her that wanted to just push all the difficult thoughts aside and focus on the image of Pryce's naked body permanently etched in her brain.

Was it too much to hope they'd arrive somewhere—soon—so they could forget everything else but each other for a bit?

They drove through territory unfamiliar to her, going north into some mountains. She worried for Pryce's safety on his motorcycle, but he seemed to have it under control, even in the dark and even after the intense battle they'd just been in.

When they finally pulled down a dirt road and then up to a gate, Pryce punched in a code then led her slowly through the thick woods.

The ornate gate led her to believe they'd be driving up to a mansion, much like they'd just left from the party, but instead, they approached a cabin, one she hadn't even seen at first, as the trees hid it so well from prying eyes.

They drove around, and a hidden door opened. She followed Pryce down into an underground garage.

The door shut behind them, and she exited her car, alone with Pryce with only soft low lights illuminating them.

“Where are we?” she asked once his helmet was off.

“Family safe house.”

Her world stood still for a moment when he said those words.

She’d heard them before, many times, in fact. They were as familiar to her as “breakfast cereal” or “Saturday morning cartoons.” Why was her mate saying them?

Why did things seem like they weren’t fitting into place?

She wanted to learn the truth of it all, and it started with one specific question. “Why did those men say they took me to get to you?”

“Come inside. We have lots to talk about.”

She could protest and demand he tell her everything right there, but the garage was chilly, and the prospect of a warm fire inside the cabin convinced her to listen to him. She grabbed her go-bag out of her trunk—the one she kept handy in case she took a double shift and needed toiletries and extra clothes to keep her going.

She followed him through another door and up a set of stairs.

As soon as they entered the cabin, she fell in awe of its beauty. The garage led straight into a large kitchen with gray stone counters and a large wood-top center island. Above the island hung a large iron chandelier with lights that looked like candles.

He gestured her to follow him into the next room, the living room, which seemed to have more windows than walls. Though she could see only the darkness of night, she had a feeling that a great view would greet her in the daylight.

Pryce threw logs into the fireplace as Nila sat on one of the leather sofas, placing her bag on the thick wooden coffee table.

“I need to make a phone call,” Pryce said as he lit the fire.

“Okay.” *Good*, she thought, as it would allow her the chance to call her dad. He would need to know everything that happened. She waited until he stepped outside and shut the door behind him.

Her father answered on the second ring, despite the late hour. She filled him in quickly with just the basics of her kidnapping and escape. She didn't tell him that the kidnappers had said they were after her mate. Not only did she not know what they meant by that, but she also didn't want to explain the *mate* thing with her father just then. Too much was already going on.

“Who are you with?”

“Um, a guy I met at the party.”

“His *name*, Nila.”

“Um, Pryce.” Feeling awkward, she realized she didn't know his last name.

“Let me talk to him,” her father ordered at the precise moment Pryce walked in.

His words were loud enough that Pryce must have heard him because he took the phone from her outstretched hand.

Dismay filled her. She knew her father would demand their location and send people to retrieve her right away. She'd

never be free from guards again. She'd never have a chance to make any of her own choices again.

And right then, clarity hit her. After all they'd been through that night, and at the prospect of having him taken away from her, she knew with absolute certainty that she wanted to be with Pryce. He'd faced guns and goons, and he'd shown strength and bravery. He wasn't scared off.

*Why wasn't he?*

"Mr. Mavraganis," Pryce said, shocking Nila at the sound of it.

"How do you know my father's last name?" she asked, though Pryce turned away from her and ignored her.

She'd stopped using that name and legally changed her name to Havens when she'd turned eighteen.

"Pryce Desalvo here. I'm sorry your daughter was caught in some Cavalli family business, but Oren would be glad to fill you in on all the details. Right now, we're at a safe house, and I need to check the perimeter and set up for the night. I assure you that Nila is safe with me."

She heard all the words he said, and while they shocked her, she still prepared for her father's objection. For his demand for the location and insistence on bringing her home.

Instead, Pryce recited a phone number and ended the call, handing her phone back.

She stared at it a moment before looking up at Pryce. "What is going on?"

"I really do need to check the security cameras, make sure everything is good," he said. "But while I do that, I can tell you."



“Okay.”

He turned on the TV over the mantel of the fireplace, and he used one of the remotes on the coffee table to switch to a channel of security feeds.

“On our way here, I checked in with my boss.”

“Your boss?”

“Yes, Oren Cavalli, Idlewyld mob boss. Kingpin. Whatever you want to call him.”

And like that, all the pieces came together—her strange feeling that he was doing a job while she waited at dinner for him. His ease at taking down the wolves who’d kidnapped her. The fact that they were in a *safe house* that seemed to have about fifty security camera feeds on the TV.

And the implicit knowledge that fate—and Esme Baer—had conspired to bring two people together who were absolutely perfect for each other, in *every* way possible.

Despite her realizations, Pryce continued talking. “When I’d talked to him before going into the warehouse, I’d mentioned that you were my mate. He put the team on finding out everything they could about the Santibanez pack, so we knew what we were dealing with.”

“As you would when facing a possible mob war.” Nila nodded, processing the information easily, as it fit into what she already knew about family procedures.

“You were another variable in the situation, so they pulled information on you too.”

“Sure, he’d want to see if I had ties to the Santibanez pack, if I’d somehow tricked you into thinking I was your mate and then worked with them to lure you there.”

He nodded. “Bingo.”

“And it wouldn’t have been too hard to piece together who I am. Or was.”

“Mavraganis family.”

She did understand. Her father would have done the same research on all the players if the roles were reversed. A boss didn’t leave any stone unturned when action was taken against their family.

“An ally to the Cavalli family.”

His words sank in, and she realized why he was able to get her father off the phone so quickly. “Oh.”

Seemingly satisfied that the cameras were in order, he sat next to her. “We both agreed that we were mates tonight. We both agreed to go our separate ways, for whatever the reasons. I convinced myself that it was because I had to be focused on my work, but really, it’s because I didn’t want to bring someone into this crazy lifestyle.”

“But I’m already a part of the life,” she mused, her head still spinning. “Who are you to the Cavalli family?”

“Top enforcer.”

Her eyes widened. It was a position her parents wouldn’t be prouder of her marrying into. If she wanted to be with Pryce, they would give their blessing, no problem. The question was, did she want to be with him?

Of course, she did.

He was everything she could have ever hoped for. Handsome, courageous, kind. He was her mate, which told every fiber of her being that they were meant to be together.

They were compatible. They were attracted to each other. They worked well as a team.

She just had no idea that fate worked in such mysterious ways. He'd turned away from love because of the business, and so had she.

They really were made to be with each other.

“Did you change your name to Havens because you were trying to escape this world?” he asked.

“Yeah,” she admitted. “But it never really went away. I always knew they could find me if they wanted to. I was always looking over my shoulder for trouble.”

“And tonight, because of me, trouble found you. I'm sorry about that. Very sorry. I know you're passionate about your career, but if you want a do-over, Oren will see that you get a new name, a new place, a new job.”

She mulled over the idea for a moment. Was that what she'd want to do? Start over?

“I suppose I don't have a choice, one way or another.”

“And what way or the other do you mean?”

“One way, get the new identity you're offering. The other, well, we agreed it wasn't going to happen, so I don't suppose I should consider it at all.”

“Nila, if you're talking about what I think you're talking about, then I want you to know that I'd be all in. I'd protect you with all fibers of my being—you and any future children we may have. I was set on walking away from you when I thought you'd be better off far away from my life. But now, I want you with me. If you want a solo life, you can have it, but

I'll always be watching, protecting you from afar. You'll never not be part of my life."

"Then it seems like we're both in agreement. Again."

"You want to be with me?" he asked, his expression hopeful.

"Yes."

He swept her into his arms, carrying her up the wooden stairs to a beautiful bedroom with a window wall that overlooked the mountains, a four-poster bed, fireplace, and chandelier constructed from antlers.

He laid her on the bed. "Tell me you want to be my mate, my wife, now and forever."

"I do," she replied.

He kissed her, and she kissed him back. They shed their clothes, and their bodies melded. He entered her, and together they rocked, inching closer and closer to climax.

"Do it," she said, not needing to tell him what she meant. He placed his hand on her hip. She hissed a bit as he left the mating mark, a bear's scratch, but the sting vanished quickly, lost to their dual climaxes.

He collapsed on the bed next to her, pulling her into his arms to cuddle.

"I love you, Nila."

"I love you too, Pryce."

# EPILOGUE

IT WAS OFFICIAL. NILA WOULD START WORK AT IDLEWYLD General Hospital the week after New Year's.

In the short time between the Christmas party and New Year's, Pryce and the other Cavalli men had swooped in, packed her things, and moved her off to Idlewyld.

It all happened so fast. She was still wrapping her mind around it all, but she knew one thing for sure: every day she woke up with Pryce next to her, she was happy.

Also, she was thrilled that she wasn't moving to Idlewyld alone. In a strange *coincidence*—Nila knew exactly how coincidences worked around a mob family—the hospital was also hiring a pediatric nurse, one at a higher level, which would be an advancement for Kat.

So her BFF had moved to Idlewyld and would start at IGH the following week as well.

Nila had no idea that her friend would be so ready for a new start, but no sooner had she signed the papers than she packed up and moved into Pryce's old penthouse.

Because Pryce had moved to a new house on the lot next to Oren's.

Nila didn't know how much Pryce and Oren had to do with her and Kat's new jobs, but she wasn't going to question it. Kat was happy for the "new adventure," as she called it, and Nila couldn't have been happier to have her best friend still at her side.

The three of them arrived at the Cavalli New Year's party together.

Pryce introduced them to Oren and Anaya—who were happy to retell the tale of setting him up to do a job so he'd meet his mate. After informing Nila that they were basically sisters, now that Nila was with Pryce, Anaya took Kat on a tour of the house, leaving Oren to debrief Nila and Pryce.

"I've spoken with your father and assured him that you're part of my family now and under our complete protection."

Nila nodded. Her father had talked to her too.

"I'm sorry about what happened to you the night of the party. I hadn't meant to put you in danger."

Now that she'd been able to reflect on the night, she recognized all the signs that Pryce had been on a job. She'd been too preoccupied with the *mate* topic to really analyze Pryce's actions, and even when her suspicions had arisen—like when she'd remembered all the times her father had kept them waiting because he was doing a drop—she'd tried to convince herself she was wrong. She'd doubted her instincts, but she wouldn't do that again. Now the blinders were off, all secrets were out, and she knew exactly what she was getting into.

"I understand. If you hadn't assigned him the mission, he would have never gone to the party, and I wouldn't have met

him. And besides, I wasn't hurt in any way, so I'd say it was worth it."

"They were likely planning on jumping him while he walked back to his motorcycle in the dark, but they saw your interactions at the party and took a bet on you being his mate. At the very least, they knew if you were a date, he would feel compelled to save you. They knew they had a better chance of using you than taking him two on one."

"How did they get into the party?"

"I can answer that." To Nila's surprise and delight, Esme had appeared. "Unfortunately, the Santibanez pack had paid off some of the catering staff and snuck in that way."

*Ah, it made sense.*

"Esme! What are you doing here?"

"Well, it is such a busy day, I can't stay long, but I wanted to drop by and see how everything is going."

"You mean how your matchmaking turned out?" Pryce muttered jokingly.

Esme shook her head confidently. "I never wonder how my matches turn out because I know exactly how they'll turn out. It's only the clients who think they have something to doubt, and they always learn not to."

"Never doubt the incredible Ms. Wilder."

A voice came from behind Esme, and she stepped aside to reveal a familiar face. It took Nila a moment to recognize it, with the shaggy hair not gelled back and the bright eyes no longer leering. The man looked completely different than when they'd met before.

“Mikel, right? We met at the Christmas party.” For a moment, her heart sank. What was he doing there?

Pryce stepped up next to her and let out a low rumbling growl.

Mikel held up his hands. “I’m not here for any trouble!”

Esme stepped in. “Actually, I wanted to bring Mikel here to clear the air... I may have played a little bit of a dirty trick, getting my good friend Mikel here to play a role the night of the party.”

“I am an actor, you see. Hired to play decoy for that night,” Mikel said, a bit of a French accent to his words. “When Ms. Esme makes a request, you do it. I mean, at least I do while I’m still waiting on her to match me with my perfect man!”

“Esme told you to act like you were my mate?” Nila asked.

“Well, sometimes people need a good push,” Esme said.

“I hope I didn’t do anything to give either of you any lasting trauma,” Mikel said.

“No, not any trauma, but it wasn’t for lack of talent. I had a good distraction that took my mind off our meeting,” Nila said.

Mikel turned up his nose, clearly teasing them. “Well, maybe you won’t forget me now, and now that you know the truth, perhaps I’ll even be invited to the wedding since I had such an important role in getting the two of you together.”

Esme laughed and patted Mikel’s shoulder before turning back to Nila, Pryce, and Oren. “I can’t stay for long. I’m going to leave you all and give my new year good wishes to the rest of the party. Oh, is that Kat over there? I do need a word with



her.” Esme gave each of them a hug and waved as Mikel followed her across the room. Oren nodded and followed them.

“A decoy...” Nila mused.

Pryce shook his head. “She knew she’d have to do something to activate my protectiveness and make me meet you. Otherwise, I would have sensed you were near and hightailed it in the other direction.”

“She’s wily...” Nila mused, shaking her head.

They walked around the party, Pryce giving her a tour and introducing her to some of his friends. She didn’t see any more of Esme, but surprisingly, Mikel stuck around. Now that he’d dropped the act and no longer acted like a creep, she felt a kinship to him. He was a familiar face among all the unfamiliar faces, and he was right. He had played an important role in getting her and Pryce together.

What’s more, he and Kat seemed to be becoming fast friends.

She made a mental note of following up with him to see if he wanted to have coffee and get to know each other a little better.

As it neared midnight, Pryce pulled her out of the room and onto the porch.

They could see the party guests by the pool below them.

He pulled her into his arms, and she leaned against him.

“For however it had to happen, Esme found my perfect mate. Someone strong and fearless, who can stand by my side but who is also kind and compassionate. I never thought this would be my life, Nila, but I’m so glad it is.”

“I couldn’t agree more.”

The music from below drifted up to them, and the crowd began the countdown.

*5... 4... 3... 2... 1*

*Happy New Year!*

Nila happily accepted the kiss from Pryce, knowing it was the first of many she had coming her way that night and the rest of their lives.

She settled against him as the fireworks started. “I have a feeling this next year is going to be amazing.”

“Yeah, but did you really know I was working the night of Esme’s party?” he asked, one eye narrowed at her.

She grinned. “I don’t think you’ll be getting away with much anymore, Mr. Cuddles. No napping unless I’m under the covers with you.”

### **The End**

*Did you enjoy this story? I’d love it if you could let me know by leaving me a review on your preferred platform! Your kind words keep me inspired to keep telling stories.*

*Speaking of which, Esme has a good reason for talking to Kat at the New Year’s party! Find out who Esme has in mind for her in The Untamed Lynx (Idlewyld Mates Book Two)! And later, Esme will guide Mikel to his Mr. Right!*

*And if you remember the couple that ate dinner with Nila and Pryce, you can read Dixie and Slade’s story in The Dire Bear’s Witch (Immortal Affinity Book One)!*

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Renee Hewett** writes paranormal romance. Before becoming a full-time writer she worked in marketing, web writing, and editing. She's volunteered for at many events, such as C4 Comic Con, Can-Con, and Romancing the Capital.

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