

A brown bear and a red fox are sitting on a tree stump in a snowy forest. The bear is behind the fox, and both are looking towards the right. The background is a misty, snow-covered forest with bare trees. The ground is covered in snow, and there are some holly leaves and berries in the foreground.

all
FOXED
UP

SAM HALL

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Author Note

This book is written in Australian English, which is a weird lovechild of British and American English. We tend to spell things the way the Brits do (expect a lot more u's), yet also use American slang and swear more than both combined.

While many people have gone over this book, trying to find all the typos and other mistakes, they just keep on popping up like bloody rabbits. If you spot one, don't report it to Amazon, drop me an email at the below address so I can fix the issue.

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Chapter 1

Christmas time. The most wonderful time of the year.

Yeah, right. Not if you worked in retail.

I mean I get it, when I was a kid, that crinkly wrapping paper with all the gold and green and red on it used to be my drug of choice too. I'd be feeling up the presents set under the tree so damn often, to try and work out what was inside, the paper would 'accidentally' rip and then Mum would find out and throw her shoe at me, but still. If you're over eighteen, Christmas fucking sucks.

Which brings me to here.

I'd just spent the days leading up to Christmas working in my cute little bookshop, with my not so cute employee, Nicky, who didn't so much have resting bitch face as resting bitch everything. Between the two of us, we'd been fielding questions from the dozens of people that come out of the woodwork around this time of year, who walked aimlessly up and down the aisles of every available shop, as if that would resolve the fact they didn't really know jack about their family member's gift preferences. I was tired, I didn't want to hear Mariah Carey warble another thing about wanting Christmas and me, and yet here I was, standing out the front of my bestie's place, four hours' drive away from home.

I was the designated support person for Nat to get her through this holiday. She might have a frankly palatial house in the leafy suburbs of Adelaide, and four hunky bear shifter mates, but that kind of awesome came at a cost.

I pressed the button on the door to alert the inhabitants I had arrived.

Apparently it was the means to summon baby dinosaurs, because I heard a couple of high pitched screeches inside, kind of like how I'd imagine young velociraptors sounded, and then thundering steps that made them sound more like tiny T-Rexs. The door was jerked open and two of the cutest kids you'd ever seen appeared.

Kai had a wild halo of dark hair that made me think he'd been avoiding his mum's attempts at brushing it again. But with all that olive skin and blinding white teeth, the kid could talk his way out of anything. Then there was Sven. The kid was all Lars, a stocky little nugget of a kid with ice blue eyes that look straight through you, and that was the only warning you ever got from him.

“Aunty Holly!”

He launched himself forward like a tiny little torpedo, all that shifter strength used to slam into me.

“Oof!”

Apparently Nat had decided to enrol her pair of three-year-olds into a rugby team because these little bastards drove the wind from my lungs. My arms went around them anyway, if only to prevent further injury, even as I struggled to catch my breath.

“Did you get us presents?” this collective tornado of children asked me. “Lots of presents? The pew pew gun and the fire truck with the siren?”

Goddess help me, I did. Nat was gonna shit when she saw the noisy things the kids had requested but hell, I had to keep my rep as the cool aunty. I'd even included batteries in with their presents, so the whole house could be shaken by the mechanical sounds of the most annoying toys ever.

Yesss...

“You'll have to wait until tomorrow to find out,” I told them, ruffling their hair, but that didn't stop their faces from

falling, those beautiful eyes getting bigger and shinier by the second, damn them. “But today, I have these!”

I pulled out two chocolate bars from the bags of stuff I was carrying. Kids were like dogs, as far as I could figure, the little bastards ready to do anything for treats. The sad looks were quickly banished and replaced by this.

Bears love sweet shit, so chocolate always went over well with the boys, but right now? Their little gimme gimme hands were turning into claws. Not actual claws, they wouldn't shift for some time yet, but still, you could see it. Their eyes shone with an unholy light, small growls forming in their chests, animalistic enough for me to shove a bar into each of their hands and then step the fuck back.

Damn, do not get in between bear cubs and their food, because they turn into little savages. The wrappers were torn off and then each kid took a massive bite of their chocolate bar.

“Who...?”

Nat appeared in the doorway looking red faced and just a little frazzled. Like the muscles around her eyes were so tight, one was twitching involuntarily. That twitch spasmed faster as she took us in. Me, standing there with bags of presents, food, one of my nanna's fruit cakes and a duffel bag of my own clothes and the boys... Chocolate was now smeared all across their faces, their hands, even their very nice shirts.

Shit...

“Um... hey,” I said, waving my hand. “Merry Christmas and all that bullshit.”

“Bullshit?” Kai's voice was muffled by a mouthful of chocolate, but he managed to get the swear word out anyway.

“Bulldust,” I corrected hastily. Why anyone let me within ten feet of children, I didn't know. “Bulldust.”

“Bullshit!” Kai said and then turned to Sven. “Bullshit!”

The two of them started to cackle then as they repeated the word over and over until the real adult stepped in.

“You’re eating chocolate before dinner,” Nat said with a small growl, “and you know you’re not allowed to say that word. The two of you better get upstairs, clean yourselves up and stop swearing, or Santa might be making a detour around this house tonight and go to the houses of some kids who don’t eat chocolate for dinner.”

“Oh my goddess...” I hissed as the kids turned tail and bolted upstairs, making a beeline for the bathroom. “We always said we’d never pull that shit with any kids we had.”

“Yeah, well, I’m starting to understand why our parents did a lot of the things they did,” Nat said, wiping her forehead with the back of her hand. “It’s hot as balls. The kids are like meth-addled squirrels from the moment they wake up, to the moment they go to sleep. Like I love them...” Her eyes strayed upwards where the unmistakable sound of kids having a water fight was going on. “But they do not stop.” Her focus shifted to me. “And then my best friend gives them enough sugar to send them into a rage spiral just before bedtime.”

“Um... soz not soz?” I shot her a sheepish grin. “I’m not like the other aunties. I’m a cool aunty, so—”

“Awesome.” When Nat slapped her hand on my arm and dragged me inside, I should’ve known I wouldn’t like what was to come. “You can be the cool aunty tomorrow and keep the kids from drowning in the sea or throwing sand in each other’s eyes or eating sand, or shells, or rubbish.”

“Kids do that?” I asked in hushed tones.

“Pulling hermit crabs from their shells, then crying when they get bitten. Putting on sunscreen. Avoiding jellyfish. Making sure they don’t poke any poor unsuspecting sea life they find in the rock pools. Oh and keep them away from other kids. They’re going through this biting phase.”

“Biting...” I barely whispered that.

“Help.” Her eyes went wide as she said that word. “Please? The guys are awesome with the boys. Better than anyone really. They seem to know what they’re going to do before they do it but... Tomorrow is Christmas and all of the

families are coming and I just want it to be perfect and the guys will be hanging out with their parents and... help?"

"Bitch, I got you," I said, walking in the door.

Chapter 2

I didn't have her, it, or anything. If this was child rearing, I was getting my tubes tied at the hospital's earliest possible convenience, because after a long day's drive and a slap up meal in Nat's amazing kitchen, Thorn put it best.

"Welcome to Thunderdome," he said as he hoisted a squirming Sven over one shoulder once dinner was done. His brother, Koda, grabbed the other unruly child. "Four men entered and I'm not sure how many are gonna make it out."

"Story!" Sven demanded. "Story, Daddy!"

"We can hear the story about the two naughty bear cubs who wouldn't go to sleep before Santa comes," Koda said. "The ones who won't get their presents if they wake us up before 6AM again."

But despite how frazzled Nat looked, when the guys brought their sons over, her expression changed. Her hair was still sticking up all over her head. I hadn't had the heart to tell her and honestly, it was kinda funny to see her such a mess. She'd survived the stupidity of her ex without missing a beat, but two small children were her downfall. But as they drew close, I saw it, the love in her eyes. Every mother loves her children, feels bound to them by some mysterious force I'd never understand, but for Nat it was more than that.

These were the children she never expected to have.

My bestie had spent far too much of her life married to the wrong guy and during that time she thought she couldn't have

kids. Turns out her body knew what her brain was yet to accept, that Paul was never going to be the one. Nat had gone into heat, something that had caught my attention and resulted in a whole lot of intrusive questions, until she told me to shut the fuck up about it otherwise she'd never tell me another thing again, but then the boys happened.

She'd given birth to the twins and everything seemed right in the world. Because the way she stroked her hands down each of the boys' cheeks, the love in her eyes, it'd have been a damn crime not to give that love somewhere to go. The boys instantly quietened, staring into their mother's eyes, those crazy grins softening into something much sweeter.

"Night, Mummy," each one of them said, pressing a kiss to her cheek and she did the same, until they were whisked upstairs.

"So, parenting, huh?" I said when silence fell over the house.

"It's amazing." Alaric stepped forward and tugged Nat into his arms. "Incredible."

"Tiring, exhausting," Lars added with a slight scowl. "We haven't slept in since the moment they were born and while I thought things would get better when they were a bit older, walking and talking, somehow it's worse."

"They get into everything," Alaric explained. "And if you're not there with them, the results aren't good."

"Remember when we found them in a pile of sugar?" Lars said with a chuckle. "They upended the sugar jar all over the floor and we found them giggling as they played in it."

"And ate enough to make them sick," Nat said with a sigh. "Then there was the washing powder incident."

"They love a bubble bath," Alaric said, "and noticed that the washing powder creates bubbles when doing some hand washing and..."

"Everything has locks on it," Nat said, with the slightly unhinged look of an involuntary prison guard. "All of it. Then we needed to get new locks because the old locks weren't

strong enough. They're devils, both of them. I don't know how they do it but—"

"Nat." I stepped forward and placed a hand on her arm. She just stared at it. "Nat, it's OK. You love them."

"I do." She seemed to collapse in on herself as soon as she admitted that, but it was OK, Alaric had her. All of her guys did. "So, so much and that's why tomorrow has to be perfect. It's their first real Christmas. They weren't old enough to understand what it really meant last year and now..."

I surveyed the kitchen, seeing all of the supplies and bowls and meal prep half started all around her.

"And now we roll up our sleeves and get this party started," I said. "I'll make the potato salad, you start in on the coleslaw."

AUSTRALIAN CHRISTMASSES ARE different to those in the Northern Hemisphere. Like some of us are insane and still do roast turkey or lamb or whatever, but when the temperature is pretty much the same as Satan's arse crack, things like cold cooked prawns and sliced ham and salad seem like a much better option. So we worked as a team late into the night. Nat had been trying to knock over more prep during the day, but between family dropping in and the boys rampaging through the house on a Yule induced bender, she hadn't got far. That was OK, it was what I was here for. I started slicing up cold boiled potatoes and spring onions and that was when my mind started to wander.

I didn't want this kind of life. I'd looked at domesticity and decided it wasn't for me a long time ago. Like Nat and Paul? The whole town used to coo over the fact that these 'childhood sweethearts' were making a life together, but it felt like we were seeing two different things. I was the one that noticed the casual kind of negligence relationships seemed to devolve into, where the other person you shared your life with became this vaguely annoying presence you had to put up with, like a pound puppy you'd impulsively signed up to foster.

Before meeting Nat's sleuth, I'd never wanted to be someone's girlfriend, wife, the old ball and chain. From what friends told me, you couldn't even rely on having good sex on tap. It felt like relationships were some kind of magic amulet people clutched to their chests, hoping to ward away the spectre of loneliness, but there seemed to be nothing lonelier than being in a relationship with someone and being largely ignored or overlooked. No, if I was going to take the plunge, it'd be for something like this.

The guys took their cues from Nat. She didn't realise this, but they were always watching her, reading her, taking the temperature of the room and then adjusting their behaviour as a result. Nat was currently fretting about getting everything done on time, so Lars pulled out the food processor and Alaric set it up, plucking the carrots she'd peeled from her fingers and then pushing them through the chute. They watched her shoulders loosen a little as piles of shredded carrot appeared. Then Lars whipped up a homemade coleslaw dressing and Alaric took over chopping the cabbage and dumping it into the massive bowl, ready for tomorrow. Every time she started something else, they quickly finished the job they were doing and took over, turning her from labour into a foreman of sorts. Then Alaric pushed a glass of wine into her hands, to give them something to do.

And that's when the tension seemed to leach out of her.

Yeah, if I could have something like that, where I mattered, where I was the centre of someone's world, or several someones, maybe I could come at this whole relationship idea.

But that wasn't going to happen.

Nat had bugged me and bugged me about coming to some bear shifter events when I was in town, see if I tripped any sleuth's triggers, and while I could academically admire the big, burly specimens of taut man flesh, I didn't feel anything special happen, and reportedly neither did any of them. It didn't come as any surprise to me that I wasn't fated mate material. Some people have main character energy and that

was Nat all the way, but there was nothing wrong with being a support person.

“This is like the Christmas Eves we spent at your nan’s place,” Nat said, sidling closer. “Remember?”

“Nanna Madden cracking the whip, taking us to task for not cutting everything up exactly the same size.” I lifted my knife theatrically and cut up the spud before me in haphazard chunks. “No, Holly, making sure every piece is a uniform size means every mouthful is the same balance of ingredients. The old bat...” I shook my head. “She says hello and sent you one of her bloody fruit cakes.”

“Oh my god, really?” Nat started digging through the bags I pointed to with my knife. “They are amazing.” She pulled it free with a reverent look and then carried it over to Alaric. “You need to taste this cake. Want a piece, Hols?”

“See, I like dried fruit, sugar, brandy, just like the next girl, but put them all together?” I shook my head. “Fucking nope. Tastes like arse to me, so have at it. Saves me from having to turf it into the compost bin.”

“You don’t!” Nat gasped.

“Well, not where Nan can see it, or smell it.” I wrinkled my nose. “That woman, she’s got eyes in the back of her head and even if she doesn’t catch you in the act, somehow she knows what you’ve done before you even do it. Better I bring them up to you. I’m fairly sure this is just far away enough that she won’t work out what I’ve done.” I frowned, seeing my grandmother’s keen green eyes in my mind, judging me. “Maybe.”

“God, that’s good...” Lars groaned, then blinked rapidly. “And got enough brandy to kick a horse.” His focus shifted to Alaric. “We need to keep this the fuck away from the kids.”

“On the top shelf,” the other man agreed, then eyed the pantry. “In a locked box. Inside another locked box.”

“God, if I have enough slices of this, I won’t even care if the kids get to it.”

Nat rubbed her stomach, getting that sleepy look on her face that told me she was in her happy place.

“So we’ve got enough prepped for tomorrow?” I asked, cautiously testing that good mood. “You’ve got enough food here to feed an army.”

“But not several families of bear shifters,” she said, the haze quickly dissipating as she eyed the kitchen benches. “Let’s get started in on the snacks.”

I COLLAPSED into bed some hours later, feeling the exhaustion throbbing along with my heart, all through my body. But that was what Christmas was about. You worked hard to make sure everything was perfect, inviting friends and family into your home to share in that labour for one special day. I let out a long sigh, sinking into the lovely soft bed in the spare room and letting my eyes fall closed, and for just a moment it wasn’t hard to wonder what it’d be like if I was doing the hosting.

Nanna Madden and the rest of Dad’s side of the family walking in through the door of my place, but it wasn’t the flat above the shop. This place was open, airy, light streaming in through huge windows that showed... My brows creased as my eyes fell closed, my vision failing when I tried to press for more details. Then there were the Rileys, Mum’s side of the family, and that was a little strange.

The Rileys were a little infamous in Langston, because far too many of my second and third cousins made it into the newspaper and not for good reasons. No major crimes, but if you found your car broken into and all the spare change gone, or if you left something outside and someone swiped it, you could bet it was probably one of the Rileys who took it. Made me damn glad I grew up as Holly Madden, not Holly Riley. It was also why we rarely invited them to family events, the Maddens not wanting to have a bar of the Rileys.

But they weren’t the surprising element to this dream.

It was them.

Loud voices that drew my dreaming attention, then tall shapes, broad shoulders and a flash of reddish brown hair. Strange men were walking into my dream house like they had a right to be here and that's what had me shifting restlessly on the bed. Somehow I knew them, with the strange logic of dreams and I was moving forward, a smile on my face, wanting to get closer. But there was Great Aunty Agnes leaning in for a kiss and telling me I was too thin, and my cousin Vinnie, saying I needed to follow this workout routine he was now using, to make me skinny thicc, whatever the fuck that meant. Mum was asking if I'd gotten the roast on and Dad was grabbing at my hand, looking for the eskies to put the slab of beer on his shoulder into, but somehow I wanted to fight my way past all of them.

Until finally I managed it.

I stumbled free of the throng, into the expansive foyer of my dream house and there, three men stood, chatting away with my family, as if that was the most natural thing in the world. But as I stared, I caught their attention. Three sets of keen green eyes, they met mine and that's when their lips curved into a smile, the soft, kind of knowing one that comes from someone who's seen you do the no pants dance.

"Holly, love," one said, stepping forward, those green eyes burning bright as he drew closer. "Merry—"

"—Christmas!"

I woke with a start to find one surprisingly heavy little boy sitting on my chest, the other starting to clamber onto me to join his brother.

"Aunty Holly, it's Christmas! It's Christmas!"

Chapter 3

I groaned, blinked and stared out the window, catching the thin grey light of dawn. Jesus, it was Christmas morning, but only just.

“OK, shh... shh...” I struggled to get sound out, to settle the boys down before they woke their parents, but the sound of heavy footsteps down the hallway stopped any attempt I might make to keep the little munchkins under control. Christmas is for kids and they vaulted off me, managing to kick me in the guts in the process, before launching themselves at the door.

“Santa?” they asked as they wrenched it open.

“Daddy,” Alaric corrected, bending down slowly to pick his sons up. “And what did I say about Christmas morning?”

“Not to wake Mummy,” Sven replied solemnly.

“But we didn’t!” Kai pointed a finger my way. “We woke Aunty Hols!”

“OK, I can see my error now,” Alaric replied with a long suffering sigh. “New rule: don’t wake up anyone on Christmas morning. You know how to get yourself some cereal and how to turn the TV on. You could’ve watched cartoons until we all woke up.”

“But Daaaad...” Kai placed his head on his father’s shoulders and fluttered thick eyelashes any girl would’ve been jealous of.

“Too late now.” Thorn emerged with a yawn, scratching at his chest before stepping forward and collecting Sven. “Your evil plan worked, tin lids. Everyone’s awake so it’s present time!”

“You’re just reinforcing bad behaviour,” Lars growled, scrubbing at his stubble. “My dads would’ve made me wait.”

“Your dads put half the presents under the tree,” Nat corrected, then pressed a kiss to her mate’s cheek, right as we heard the doorbell. “And that will be them now.”

Which meant it was go time. They say Christmas is a time for giving and family but for so many women it seemed to be stress and meal prepping and making sure everything was perfect, and it was my job to try and take some of that pressure off Nat.

“I’ll be down in a tick,” I told Nat. “Get things started without me. I’ll just have a shower, throw on my beach stuff and start packing the car.”

“You’re amazing,” she told me, sweeping in to give me a hug.

“I’m even better with a mimosa in my hand,” I said, giving her a long look. “You might be too.”

And for a minute I saw my bestie there, ready to race downstairs and pour the champagne to get this party started. That was the old Nat, the one that was left to rattle around in that big house she and Fuckface had built, but this Nat? She had a whole arse family to look after and love now.

“Muuuum...!”

Voices, so many voices downstairs alerted me to the fact the whole bear community was filing into the lounge room for the privilege of watching the kids unwrap their presents.

“I’ve gotta go,” she said, that line between her brows deepening. “But take your time. This is your Christmas too, y’know.”

It wasn’t really. The magic of Christmas? We lost it at some point between twelve and eighteen. First when we

realised Father Christmas wasn't real. Secondly when we stopped being children and started being expected to shoulder the burdens of preparing for the big day. At Nanna Madden's place she'd have had us girls up before dawn, washing and chopping and wrapping and prepping. It's half the reason why I jumped at the chance of coming up to see Nat, because my bestie was nowhere near as harsh a task master.

“And this is my Christmas present to you,” I told her. “I mean there was that double ended bear dildo from the weird shop that makes anthropomorphic peen.”

“What?”

“I figure if you had four mates, at least one of them would be open to being pegged.”

“What? Oh my god...” Nat went white. “Tell me you didn't...” Her eyes stared down the stairwell. “Holly—!”

“Muuum, are you coming? We're about to open the presents.”

Nat moved like the speed of light then and I just cackled. It was low key evil, leaving her to think that there were weird sex toys wrapped up under the tree, but a girl's gotta take her pleasures where she finds them. I had a shower, washed my hair and dragged a comb through it before putting on my bikini and light cotton coverup I'd gotten from this amazing importer of handmade Indian clothing before running downstairs.

“HOLLY!”

Bear shifters and their mates are good people, but damn are they intense. The moment my foot hit the bottom step, a cloud of perfume and resort wear descended upon me.

“You look gorgeous, Darling!” That was Meryl, Thorn and Koda's mother. She held me at arm's length for just a second to inspect my dress, then wrapped me in a hug. “And where did you get this amazing dress?”

“Ah, this nice importer—”

“Stop smothering the girl, Meryl!” Those clipped tones, that was Anne, Alaric’s mother. She held a wine glass filled to the brim with wine and orange juice with a kind of elegance I’d never managed to imitate. “Though that is amazing. Is that an A line cut?” I plucked at the hem of my dress, having no idea. “I’m getting a very 70s vibe here. Reminds me of better times.”

“Holly!” Whatever else the women had to say, it was cut off by the sound of two rambunctious children running towards me at full tilt. “Can we open the presents now, please. Please!”

“You’re waiting on me?” I looked up and saw the lounge room was packed with people sitting around the tree.

“Of course,” Nat said, getting to her feet and then slinging her arm around my shoulders. “You’re family.”

Yeah, but... I wanted to say. I was the family that hovered around in the background, trying to make my bestie’s day perfect while she spent it with her real family. There was food to be put in containers, drinks to be packed and snacks to be bagged and... But every eye was upon me right now, so I smiled and said, “Then let’s get this party started. Bags being Santa!”

I threw myself onto the ground, skidding along the no doubt crazy expensive rug to land in the mountain of presents and then picked up the nearest one before giving it a shake.

“Ohh, I reckon this one is for Sven!”

That look in his eyes, one part greed, one part incredible excitement and all love, that to me was the spirit of a secular Christmas. It was for kids to enjoy and for adults to provide. I passed him the package and the kid tore through paper like a little tornado.

Or a bear cub.

He sat back on his heels, eyes going wide as he saw it, a fire truck with whirling lights and the most annoying siren sound ever. I know, because I quizzed the kid working at the toy shop about it. It would annoy Nat, her guys, and me as

long as I stayed here, but the look on Sven's face made clear it was worth it.

“Whaddya reckon, Sven?” I asked.

He threw himself at me, nearly knocking me back into the pile of presents, arms wrapped tight.

“I love it, Aunty Holly!”

I always felt weird holding Nat's kids. She'd offered me baby Kai to hold not long after she gave birth and I was like ‘Oh no, thank you.’ He was too small, too red, too fragile and floppy for me to hold. But when they got older and more neck control, it still felt strange. They were these little terrors, full of irrepressible energy and love, so much love, but when I gave Sven a squeeze back, it wasn't hard to imagine a different scenario.

One where I found my own mates, who set me up in a fancy arse house and spent their days loving me and then, after a long, hot, lusty heat, me getting pregnant and then giving birth to our sons. But... I shook my head. I wasn't jealous of Nat's life. Bear shifters were cool, but I was pretty sure I was more of a wolf girl. There was the deep sexual imprinting that happened when Taylor Lautner was on the screen meant that if I was gonna fall for any shifter it'd be one like him, with a cute crooked smile and long dark hair and lickable abs and—

“Aunty Holly?” Kai looked at me in confusion. “You're drooling like a baby.”

“Am I?” My hand went to my mouth and came away wet. Gross. I hastily wiped that on my dress, then refocussed on the important things. “OK, who wants a present?”

Both his and his brother's hands shot up, but the next one was for one of the adults.

“Ooh, this one is for Mummy from me.”

I watched Nat's eyes widen as she took in the long box, watched the cogs whirr as she tried to work out if it actually was a double ended bear dildo or not. It was actually a really nice chef's knife, but that didn't stop me grinning. Her hands

went out hesitantly, but when she didn't snatch the box from my hands, Kai did it for her.

“For you, Mummy!”

“Ah, I might open mine later,” Nat said. “Let's give Kai a present next.”

“Open it.” Alaric gave her a small nudge with his elbow. “You've been slaving in the kitchen for days preparing for today. You deserve presents too.”

Nat fixed me with a dire look. She mouthed some words that I'm pretty sure were, *If this is a dildo, you're dead.*

You know you want it, I mouthed back.

But while the rest of the family looked on in confusion, Natalie opened the box.

Her sigh of relief, then the flush of pleasure, that was what I was looking forward to. Nat had become quite the foodie now she had a sleuth who loved every one of her creations. The blade was made from that wavy steel that comes from layering it over and over during forging. The salesman tried to explain it to me, but my eyes started rolling back in my head seconds into the spiel. “Does it cut properly?” I asked. “Is it easy to sharpen? Will it last?”

“Of course!” the man spluttered. “This has a warranty of...”

Ugh. Bored now.

I spaced out, then came back with a jolt when he was finally finished talking, instead standing there looking expectantly at me.

“I'll take it,” I said, then waved my credit card in front of his face to ward off yet more mansplaining about an extended warranty.

“Oh my god...” Nat sighed.

“OK, that's a beautiful knife.” Koda picked it up, looked down the length of it with one eye closed and then consulted the blade. “Damascene steel, Holly? That shit is expensive.”

“Oh, you shouldn’t—”

Nat did that all the damn time. Someone did something nice for her? She’d start protesting, like she didn’t deserve it.

“Yes, I should. In fact, I did,” I said. Because more than my blood relations, she was my family. We might’ve pashed some of the same guys in the school, and checked each other’s butts for bleed through when we first got our periods, and sat up late at night talking about what our future would be like, only to talk so many times afterwards as both our dreams and our fears failed to come true. But one thing remained. Nat was my best friend, my real sister, and I’d never buy her anything other than the best, because that’s what she was to me.

Of course, being an Australian, I couldn’t actually say any of that. The stiff upper lip shit we imported from the UK, along with rabbits and foxes, meant you kept your emotions to yourself.

“And you can use it later to make me a sandwich,” I added with a cheeky grin.

I was trying to make light of... well, everything. There was so much family and love in the room, the grandparents talking to Sven about his fire truck oh so intently, and Nat’s guys surrounding her, wrapping their arms around her shoulders and shit, I needed to lighten the damn mood, but she left the knife with Koda and launched herself at me, wrapping me up in a tight embrace.

My hands went up, not sure what to do and my eyes went wide. I felt like everyone had to be looking at us, even though I knew they weren’t. They were all having their own little Christmas moments, because that was what the day was for, so I gave Nat an awkward hug back.

“So glad it wasn’t a double ended dildo,” she whispered.

“Pretty sure your guys would say the same, unless you use tons of lube and take it super slow,” I rasped back.

She punched me in the arm then. Ahh, right back to the level of intimacy I was comfortable with. I belted her back, which of course, had the kids turning around, because the little

fuckers could smell the blood in the water. We kind of tussled around on the floor for a bit, and Thorn made some comment about it being hot, and then Sven asked why, right before the kids jumped on us, using skills normally seen inside a WWE ring.

So this was Christmas.

Not the way they usually showed it on the TV screen, but fuck, I wouldn't have had it any other way.

Chapter 4

“Nope!”

Nat and I barked that the minute the cars pulled up at the beach, the kids’ hands going to the door handles, then wrenching on them to get them open. We all heard the plastic handles groan, right before Lars spoke up.

“You break those door handles again and I’ll reverse Santa all of those presents of yours.”

“What’s a reverse Santa?” the kids and I asked.

“It’s where I ring the North Pole and speak to Santa about coming and picking his presents back up and taking them away.”

“That’s a thing?” I whispered at Nat and she gave me the look. It was the ‘just go with it’ look that the five of them often had to use. Parenting bear cubs was the Wild West and the sheriff and her deputies had to back each other one hundred percent, or risk being taken down one by one by the little devils. I nodded solemnly, then looked over at the kids.

“But that’s not going to happen, is it, boys?” They looked to me because one, I was female and therefore more likely to be a soft touch. I mean diamonds were softer than Lars, but anyway. And two, because I was not one of their parental units, constrained by the mysterious laws of being a family authority figure. I could be appealed to, cajoled, convinced, damn, even manipulated. “We’re going to get out of the cars and *hold hands*.” I emphasised the action bit because the boys

tended to just nod their heads furiously to get free of the car, then ignore all previous requests. “With each other *and* Aunty Hols.” That got me a wary nod. “I’ll take you straight down to the picnic tables and we’ll have some lunch, before going for a swim.”

“You have to wait for half an hour after food to swim,” Lars warned.

“Apparently that’s not a real thing,” Nat said.

“What? But our parents—”

“Said you’ll get a stitch swimming and drown? Yeah, not a thing.” She grinned as Lars’ eyes narrowed. “It’s not. I talked to the kiddie swim instructor.”

“The young bloke with all of the muscles?” Lars growled. “That kid is still wet behind the ears—”

“I assume so, seeing as he’s a swimming instructor,” she replied, shooting him a meaningful look.

“He seemed to like the look of you in your swimmers.” His eyes grew heated and ew, ew, ew, the big, bad bear shifter was having horny thoughts about my bestie.

Like did I like to think that Nat was getting the most stupendous dick from her four mates? Fuck yeah, otherwise what was the point? Having four dudes who forgot to put the toilet seat down after they pissed and then performing the bare minimum of foreplay before pumping away on top of you, making their Goofy face as they came, while you thought about the shopping list. What would be the point? I knew Nat had it good, but did I want to be confronted by the reality of that in any way? Yeah nah.

“Maybe we might head out and leave Mum and Dad to talk this out,” I said to the boys in a bright tone.

“Why was someone looking at Mummy in her bathers?” Kai asked, looking at me, then his mother quizzically.

“He wasn’t—” Nat replied with a sigh.

“Damn straight he wasn’t. I had a quick word with him,” Lars growled.

“You didn’t...” Nat gasped, but even I could see through that. Under the horror was something else.

Lars was possessive. Outside of the other guys in the sleuth, he got all growly when other men looked at his girl. Her fuckface ex gave her a hard time for not shagging his mates, because then he would’ve been justified in doing the same. And when Lars was like this, Nat always reacted the same. Her cheeks got all pink and she couldn’t seem to work out where to look and then she’d lock eyes with Lars. They’d stare at each other like they were the only people left in the world and then...

A sharp rap on the window let us know the others had arrived.

“So what do we do once I open the doors?” I asked the boys.

“Hold your hand, don’t run off, be good,” they replied in chorus.

There was no way they came up with that themselves, but I was eternally grateful to whoever had coached them. I opened my door, then started to undo Sven’s car seat, and that’s when he began to squirm. Some irrepressible energy seemed to swell up at the least bit of provocation.

“Sven...” I said, trying to get him to calm down, to chill, but the kid kept wriggling, then Thorn opened the other door.

“Hey, little man,” he said to Kai, reaching over to do the same.

“Boys...” I said, trying to contain them, keep them calm. If they got too hyped, there was no bringing them down. I thanked the bear gods they couldn’t shift right now, because damn... These two taking fur? They’d rampage through the park adjoining the beach, tearing the place down in seconds.

“Boys, chill.”

Koda stuck his head in, fixing both children with his cool, even gaze. He didn’t respond, didn’t show any other emotion other than a quiet strength. It was exactly what they needed.

They both went still at those two words and we were able to get them out of the car in one piece.

“What the fu— um, frig is that?” Thorn whispered hoarsely. “Like how do you do that?”

“Bring the right energy to any situation and people will match it,” was all Koda would say, before hoisting Sven up in his arms.

“If you mean magic, just say magic,” Thorn complained before grabbing Sven’s hand and tugging him after his brother. “Daddy’s a magician, isn’t he?”

“Magician!” Sven agreed, trotting forward.

The kids were under control for the moment, which only meant the eskies full of drinks, the food, the utensils and plates, the chairs and condiments and the beach stuff needed to be moved. I let out a small sigh and then opened the back of Lars’ car, but not before the cavalry arrived.

“Lars having a moment with his mate?” Joe, one of Lars’ dads said and where there was one bear dad, there were more. Suddenly I had an army of muscly Daddies at my disposal.

Just not in the fun way.

“We’ve got this, love,” Jack said, another dad.

“But Nat said—” I started to say.

“Natalie’s a good girl,” he replied, “but she has trouble accepting help.” His smile faded. “Like she is scared to.” Then he brightened. “But not from you. You stick by our girl, help her out when she needs it, so we’ll help you.”

“That way Nat can’t start taking over and brushing us away,” Joe said. “And here she comes now.”

Nat was walking around the side of the car, hand in hand with Lars, her cheeks all flushed and her mouth swollen, but she looked so damn pleased about it. The dads launched into action, grabbing every damn thing out of the rear of the car, almost the spare tyre, until they realised what they were doing and when she saw what had happened, they sprinted off towards the picnic grounds.

“But I...” she said.

“You’ve had your hands full with preparing all this food. Least the old pricks can do is to carry shit for you, love,” Lars said, placing a kiss on her temple, but when we heard a loud shriek, we all spun around.

“Oh god...” Nat was pulling away, going into Mum-enator mode in 2.5 seconds, ready to tear apart anything that might mess with her babies, only to see that Thorn was romping around, pretending to be a bear, with the two boys clinging to his back.

“Oh god, indeed,” Lars grumbled. “He’s a bloody idiot.”

“He’s my mate,” Nat corrected, then placed a kiss on his cheek. “Just like you are.”

“Oh my god...” I sighed dramatically. “Gag. Are all shifters as moony and obsessive as bear shifters?” I rolled my eyes. “Please, please tell me wolf shifters aren’t as sappy as you lot.”

“Holly has a thing for Taylor Lautner,” Nat explained. Lars just frowned. “Twilight?”

“Actually I’d have been very happy with all the hot guys from the Uley pack to be honest. You don’t happen to know any hot wolf shifter packs looking for a girl?” I asked, fluttering my eyelids.

The idea was ridiculous obviously, but Lars just got grumpy face again.

“Wolf shifters can be pricks,” he told me, like I was seriously intending to run off with the next furface I met. “But other shifters...” He shook his head slowly. “There are a lot of them that you don’t want to get anywhere near.”

“Well, you don’t have to worry about me. I like flying solo. I maintain full control of the remote, never have to tug the blankets back so I’ve got some, or listen to anyone else’s snores.” I smiled. “And I can drop everything and come and help my bestie, be free babysitting, which reminds me...”

When I turned around I saw the machine that was Nat's support network had gotten to work, organising everything we'd brought to the park. The kids kept veering off towards the beach until Alaric picked them both up and sat them down at the table, him on one side, Koda on the other. I felt a pang of guilt then, because that was supposed to be my job. Look after the kids so their parents could actually enjoy themselves today.

"I better go."

"Hang on, Hols."

Lars let Nat go with a squeeze, just leaving the two of us next to the car and when I saw her tremulous expression, I moved closer.

"What's up? You have a funny expression on your face. Do you have gas? Are you pregnant?" My eyes went wide and my hands moved to hover over her stomach. "Oh my god, you are, aren't you?"

"I'm not bloody pregnant," she said, slapping them away. "I got you something." She pulled a small present out of her pocket and I just stared as she handed it to me. "I didn't want to do this in front of everyone else, because you always get embarrassed when people make you the centre of attention and then you start cracking dick jokes or some other crap that would have the grandparents gasping. It's not a monster dildo, but..."

She twisted her hand, making clear I was to take it so I did. I stared at the neat packaging, the pretty silver bow.

"Hey, good things come in small packages," I said with a wobbly smile. "Except dicks. Dicks should come in monster packages. Like if they're not as long as your arm—"

"Just fucking open it."

That's all it took. I tore the paper and bow off with all the gusto the kids had displayed, revealing a very pretty velvet box. I popped it open and that's when I saw what my bestie had bought me.

"Holy crap, it's beautiful."

It was a fox head pendant, made from silver and enamel. The solemn face of the fox was coloured in broad stripes of red, brown and orange and its eyes were carved from precious stones.

“Moldavite?” I asked.

“I knew you’d pick it,” she said with a grin. “The lady in the shop said it’s the crystal that represents self-discovery and finding one’s path, which made me think of you.”

Shit like this set my heart alight and made me so bloody uncomfortable at the same time. Nanna Madden, she showed her love by barking instructions, belting you with the wooden spoon if you didn’t move fast enough and then a few grudging words of praise afterwards maybe, if you were lucky. I didn’t know how to do this shit, sappy shit.

“But I only got you a knife.”

“You gave me a lot more than that.” She moved in and gave me a hug and that seemed to settle me. “You knew I’d be melting down at Christmas time and you drove from one end of the state to the other to be here to help. You brought me one of your Nan’s fruitcakes.”

“To be fair, I would’ve tossed it in the bin otherwise,” I said.

“You got the kids very annoying presents.”

“They begged me. Have you heard them when they want something? And then there’s the big shiny eyes thing. Powerful stuff.”

“And last night you helped me make all the stupid food people are probably not going to eat and you knew that, but you did it anyway, to help me out.” She gave me a long look.

I paused then, my throat growing thick.

“To be fair, you did have that weird vein thing jumping on your forehead.” I tapped mine to illustrate. “So I think we were all just a tiny bit terrified you were going to have an aneurysm if we didn’t.”

“Hols—”

“But you’re forgetting one thing.” I looked her square in the eye. “I don’t need to go on a journey of self discovery.” One eyebrow lifted. “I know what to do with my no no square.”

“Fuck, Holly—”

“I worked out how to ring the devil’s doorbell in middle school. Do you need help? I can show you if you like?”

When she shoved me, we were right back where we usually were, me cracking jokes like an idiot and her sighing.

“No, because this year we’re gonna find a guy or some guys who’re gonna ring your doorbell for you,” she said, pushing me towards the picnic tables. “And you’re not gonna know what hit you.”

She said those words in a long suffering tone, but that pendant? It grew warm to touch, the eyes flaring bright green for just a second. I frowned at it, having seen my share of weird stuff come through the shop before, which meant I should’ve shoved the necklace in my pocket, left it there until I got home and could ask my nanna about it.

Instead I did a very dumb thing.

I put it around my neck and did up the clasp, the pendant feeling warm against my skin. Because I had been holding it, that’s what I reasoned, but I was about to find out just how wrong I was.

Chapter 5

“Oh my god, the rockmelon...” Natalie gasped.

Sven had insisted on ‘helping’ as we all carried the Christmas food over to the picnic table in the park adjoining the beach, so I had given him a small container of snacks to carry, thinking he would be fine. He wasn’t fine. With all the skill of a three-year-old, he’d managed to find the one tree root in his path and went stumbling forward, only to drop the box and spill the contents all over the ground. I had a split second to mourn all that hard work before we rushed forward.

“Mummy...!”

Sven’s face had transformed, becoming a mask of misery. He knew he’d stuffed up, though thankfully he wasn’t hurt, but Nat dropped down to his level.

“Hey... Hey, it’s OK.” She held his shoulders firmly and his tear filled eyes met hers. “You were doing such a good job of helping.”

“But... ground!”

The boys seemed to lose their words the moment they got upset, his little finger jerking in the direction of the spilled snacks.

“It’s OK. You don’t even like rockmelon,” she said, then turned him around. I watched her fit his body to hers, her arms cradling him close. “And look. The ibis like rockmelons.”

Ibis, or bin chickens as we like to call them in Australia, would like to drink our brains from our skulls with their creepy narrow beaks, I was fairly sure, but the birds clustered closer, seeing the spread before them and fighting to get their piece.

“You gave them a Christmas present,” she explained.

“I wanna give the bin chickens a present!” Kai said in a stropy tone, stomping over. The ibis barely fluttered their wings. They were fairly sure they could take on a tiny bear cub and still get to feast on succulent fruit, so they kept on eating.

“They don’t need any more presents,” Alaric said, scooping him up. “Just like someone else I could mention, they’ve got a whole lot of presents already.”

I saw the mutinous look in Kai’s eyes, the moment where he was about to put his foot down, but then Alaric dug his fingers into his son’s ribs, getting him giggling before swinging him over to the picnic table.

Crisis averted, now it was go time.

PART OF NAT’S anxiety about all of this was because she was hosting the family Christmas for the first time. The guys tried to talk her down off a ledge, reassure her that the family would be fine with some Woolies BBQ chooks and coleslaw, but she wasn’t having it. My bestie had a vision in her head fuelled by Pinterest boards, canny marketing by the supermarkets, and the amazing feasts the grandmothers had put on in previous years, and she would not be dissuaded.

But now we had to bring it all together.

I nodded to Nat and she did the same back, the two of us moving as one.

First there was the plastic tablecloth. She’d found it online, the print on it bright and garish enough to be cutely kitsch, then it was plates, cutlery and condiments. Christmas crackers were set out by each place setting and so were cups. Then wine glasses for those that liked it, unbreakable tumblers for

the kids. Nuts, dried fruit and other traditional Aussie Christmas snacks were set out, and that had people drawing closer, just like the ibises. While they sat down at the main table, we organised the buffet.

Plastic containers of freshly made cold salads sat next to Glad Wrapped plates of sliced ham and pieces of cold chicken. Massive bowls of cold prawns joined them. Bread rolls, stone fruit like nectarines and cherries, I kept on unpacking and Nat arranged until finally we stepped back to survey all the work.

“Oh Natalie, you’ve outdone yourself,” Anne said, drawing closer.

Nat was brushing flies away from the fruit when she looked up, then flushed bright red. “Oh, thanks.”

“See...” I said under my breath, shooting her a look.

Her eyes locked with mine and I saw it, the moment when all her hopes and dreams about today seemed to be coming true. I smiled back, amazed at what she’d been able to do with two rowdy boys underfoot, but that was the thing.

She didn’t.

The sleuth had pitched in and so had I once I arrived, because wasn’t that the point of Christmas? To bring people together to make the day special and right now I hoped that was the case for her.

“This looks bloody delicious!” one of Thorn’s dads said, rubbing his hands together.

“Really?” Nat surveyed every single one of their faces, looking for clues that they were being sincere. “Well, dig in!”

And just like that, plastic wrap was peeled back, lids removed, serving spoons shoved in and tongs clacked as pieces of meat were placed on plates. All that hard work was torn to pieces and replaced by this.

I didn’t hate Christmas when it was like this. I was sitting down Nat’s end, between her and Kai, but rather than eat the delicious food, I watched the day unfold. People asked each other to pass them the different sauces, took big mouthfuls of

food and then rolled their eyes back in appreciation, a hum setting up around the table, made up of cutlery cutting, chewing, moaning, chatting, slurping, shifting, nodding, creating a symphony of satisfaction. When I turned around, Nat was watching it all unfold too.

I caught her smile, small at first, then slowly spreading, her shoulders started to settle back down from where they hovered around her ears, her back straightening. She nodded and then picked up her own cutlery and dug into her own food.

“Aren’t you hungry, Aunty Hols?” Kai asked me, mayo spread all across his face. I grinned as I grabbed a paper napkin and then wiped it off.

“Hungry as a bear!” I said, curling my hands into claws and roaring, sending him and his brother into hysterics.

“Well, here’s to the amazing cooks,” Joe, Lars’ dad said, getting to his feet. He held out a beer can, dripping with condensation and we all did the same. “I think I speak for everyone when I say thank you for preparing this amazing meal.”

Nat blinked, because part of her still wasn’t used to having supportive in-laws, so many supportive in-laws, but then she smiled. Her cheeks grew pinker and pinker, her eyes growing suspiciously shiny as cheers went up around the table. The boys even held up their little plastic cups, slopping cordial on the tablecloth, but that was OK. Christmas was never supposed to be about being perfect, no matter how hard we try to make it so. Christmas was about family.

“Hear, hear!” I said, adding my own voice to the chorus. “Hear, hear.”

Chapter 6

So Australian Christmas traditions were dumb.

Right when we should've been holed up in the house, gasping beneath the aircon as it fought to keep up with the thirty-five-degree heat, we were down the beach, being all festive and shit, while trying very hard to pretend we weren't wilting. Then Thorn, the bloody muppet, said the words.

“How about a game of cricket?”

Cricket is supposed to be a gentleman's game according to the Brits, and by that they must mean it's really fucking boring. Games go for daaays. I, and every other woman in Australia, know this, because it seems to be a male past time to leave it droning on the TV all fricking day. One person throws the ball, one person bats and everyone else just stands the fuck around, waiting to catch the ball.

Or in my case, not.

I was standing on the outskirts of the area we had claimed to play the game, keeping an eye on the boys, moving strategically to get between them and the beach. We'd already gone down there for a swim post meal (and didn't die. Lars seemed vaguely disappointed by that), but the boys seemed drawn to the sea like a pair of seal shifters, not bears. But then someone would hit the ball and they'd shift focus, racing after that.

Better them than me.

I'd said I'd 'play' only on the proviso no one hit the ball my way. I was already standing out in the sun. Despite the swim and the light clothes I had on, sweat was trickling down my back. I was sticky, sandy and all around gross, so I wasn't going to compound that by racing after a damn cricket ball. That agreement seemed to hold up, right until now.

Koda had Kai with him at the 'stumps'. We'd repurposed a park wheelie bin for that honour. His hands were over his son's and he was bent down low to make sure the kid could hold the bat correctly. Kai didn't care that he wasn't doing it all on his own. The fact he was being helped to play a part he'd watched all the men in his family do was enough for him. His eye was on one of his grandfathers, who was trotting up slowly towards the 'pitch'. Meryl called out support from the sidelines, Anne holding up her wine glass in recognition. Ingrid, Lars' mum, was suggesting some very violent tactics, not befitting the sport of gentleman, but sometimes she seemed more bear than the men.

And then the ball was tossed down the pitch.

"Koda!"

Nat was moving forward, not to catch the ball, but to protect her boy. Kai's eyes were wide open, not from fear but anticipation. Koda and the bear cub moved as one, smoothly sweeping forward and then crack! The ball hit the plastic bat and went sailing through the air.

Towards me.

"Fuck!" I yelled, tossing my plastic wine glass into the grass. That was a waste of a good mimosa, but because Kai had hit the ball, I had to make a show of catching it. I jogged lazily backwards, back, back. Holy crap, this kid could play for Australia when he was older, and even I could get behind the idea of handing the Poms their arses in the world cup. I moved and kept on moving and that's when I heard the sounds.

We weren't the only family to lose all grip on sanity. Others were doing the exact same thing, conducting their Christmas celebrations in the park by the beach. The public

BBQs and picnic tables were all quite far apart, so we remained quarantined away from each other, though Lars growled and muttered something when he saw the family that set up next to us.

Make that tribe.

There were adults, so many adults, young, old and in between and heaps of screaming kids, which drew our boys closer like a moth to a flame. But the guys were very definite about not letting them get any closer.

“We don’t want the boys mixing with them,” Lars had growled.

“What, other children?” I’d asked, incredulous.

“They’re shifters,” Anne had replied with a tight smile.

“Like wolves?” I was moving closer without thought.

“Not wolves.”

That was the only explanation I got from Lars before I got distracted by the kids flinging potato salad at each other. Nat was already swooping in but shit, I’d spent half the night cutting spuds up. It went in their stomach or stayed in the bowl. But whatever shifters these people were, they were about to get a rude surprise, because the damn ball was zeroing in on their party.

I didn’t run ever. Nicky, my shop bitch, liked to joke the only cardio I did was climb the stairs to my apartment above my shop. I burned incense and sipped nice herbal teas and found mummy porn for old ladies, that’s what I did. So when I was forced to sprint, my muscles whinged, complained and then outright protested as I was forced to move faster and faster. People were clustered around the table, their backs facing me. They were singing Christmas carols about snow and shit, which surely was a symptom of heat stroke. They were pulling Christmas crackers and pawing through the shitty contents, putting the tissue paper hats on their heads, unaware that a child prodigy hadn’t hit a six in backyard cricket, but a twenty.

“Hey!” I shouted or at least tried to, my breath coming in hard and fast. “Hey!” But my voice was little other than a croak. Cricket balls are hard, round, missiles of self destruction and it was about to explode.

People turned around when I came bolting into their area, some staring in shock, others turning around with sloppy smiles on their face that came from beer and good cheer. But I busted through all of them, backing up, my eye on the ball and that was my fatal mistake. My hands went up. I could see the ball coming arrowing down, aiming straight at me. I was going to catch it, I felt it in my bones. But while my eye was on the ball, they weren't on the party, its inhabitants and the esky that just so happened to be in my path. So right when I went to catch the ball, something caught at the back of my legs, sending me arse over tit, instead of saving the day.

I fell in slow motion, it felt, the corner of the concrete slab the BBQ was installed upon rising up to meet the back of my head. The ball saw I had an exposed belly and aimed for it. But I couldn't do anything. My hands flailed around, completely helpless, not grabbing onto anything, because there wasn't anything to save me. A small scream formed in my throat. I knew what was going to happen, and that it was going to hurt, and I didn't want to go to hospital on Christmas Day, but to be frank, that was the best possible scenario here.

Or this.

A hand shot out, snatching the ball from the air, joined to a very muscular arm. How did I have the time to notice that? Because other hands jerked out and grabbed me, stopping me from dashing my brains out on the concrete, then holding me close. Big, strong, muscly and smelling kind of spicy, that was what I got before I looked up.

“You all right, little fox?”

I stared up at him, unable to believe my eyes, because my rescuer should've been a complete stranger.

But he wasn't.

That crooked smile, I'd seen it in my dreams, along with those sharp, sharp cheekbones. A damn dimple popped up as I stared and then I squinted. He had bright green eyes, which was enough to get anyone's attention, but in particular, mine. Because I'd seen similar coloured eyes every time I looked in the mirror.

I was staring like a damn idiot and his smile spread wider, revealing a set of very sharp canines. I needed to look away, but I couldn't. My cheeks were burning hot from exertion and embarrassment, but it wasn't the only thing searing my skin. The pendant Nat had given me grew hot, hot, hot so my hand slapped down around it to jerk it away from my neck.

And that's all it took.

Moldavite, the crystal for self discovery and finding your true path, it did its magic right now, because the body I'd taken for granted all my life melted away and left this.

"Well, well, well, what do we have here?" Several other men clustered closer, looking like giants now.

Because they were.

I scuttled back, not on two feet, but four. Actually make that paws. I looked down incredulously to see four brown socked paws where my feet in the cute little sandals with the beading should've been. I shifted, whined... Hang on, when the fuck did I start making sounds like a damn dog? Was that what I was? A dog shifter!? I pawed at my face, trying to get a feel for it, but I now understood how useful opposable thumbs were. All I knew was I had a long muzzle and fangs.

"She's one of us?" a young woman said, clustering closer.

"A Riley by the smell of her," an older woman said, staring down at me. "They're bad news, that lot, every single one of them."

"None of that matters," my rescuer said, shuffling closer. "Not now—"

"No, Rye," the older woman growled, the sound sending my fur on end. I crouched down low, my tail swishing back

and forth as I let out a weird little chittering sound. “No, you —”

“You belong to us, don’t you, little vixen?”

He crooned the words out like I was some kind of simple creature, which irritated me, but it had the fox stopping still. Our body was locked tight with tension, ready to dart away in any second, but... The scent of him. That spiciness seemed to grow by the second, becoming sweeter and more and more intoxicating. I loved a good aftershave or even the scent of freshly washed men could be enticing, but not like this. Foxy was running the show and she couldn’t even conceive of the possibility of not getting closer to him. Our nose worked, and we sucked in great big lungfuls of him as we dropped down low and crept closer. I did belong to him, I felt that deep in my furry little heart.

And them.

“This is her?” This guy shoved a long lock of reddish brown hair behind his ear and he peered at me. His brows creased, but those keen green eyes seemed to take every part of me in. “She’s—”

“Ours.” He had similar coloured hair, but it was much shorter, forming lazy spikes all over his head as he smirked down at me. His body was the biggest, most powerful. Good for protecting our kits, the fox’s instincts informed me.

Insert record scratch noise right here.

No, no, no, no, I tried to reason with the fox, but they aren’t creatures of reason. She was ruled by her instincts, growing all wiggly as she made these high pitched keening noises, wriggling on her stomach, then rolling over to reveal it. Strong fingers buried themselves in my fur, sending ripples of pleasure through me with every scratch.

“Holly?” My ears pricked at that, but I didn’t roll away from that hand. “Holly, are you...?” I opened one eye to see Nat coming blundering in, flushing and then smiling. “I’m sorry, but my friend came running through here to catch our cricket ball and—”

“This cricket ball?” Spiky head passed it to her and she took it, staring at the rough red surface before nodding.

“Right, so my friend...”

“Time to come back to yourself, little vixen,” the guy scratching my belly said and it was then it felt like the consciousness that was me was torn from the fox’s body and returned here.

“Fuck!” I said. Actual words not whines or chitters, because I’d come back to skin abruptly, and was wearing nothing other than the pendant Nat had given me.

“It’s all right,” my rescuer started to say, but I grabbed my cover up and jerked it over my naked body, then snatched up my bikini.

“It’s not all right,” I said, shaking the bathing suit in the air. “I’m not all right. I’m—”

“A fox shifter,” my rescuer said, getting to his feet. “A beautiful one too and our—”

“Don’t say it,” I growled. “Don’t you dare.”

“Rye, think this through,” the older woman said.

“That’s right, listen to Baba Yaga over there,” I snapped, which had her hissing. “Thanks for... whatever the fuck that was but—”

“Our fated mate.”

This Rye, he looked just like in my dream, smiling with this kind of intense energy, all coiled power and intent. The look would be damn sexy on a wolf shifter, specifically Jacob Black, but that was on the big screen or in the pages of a book, not my damn life.

“No, I’m not.” I stabbed the air with a finger for emphasis. “I’m not. I’m...”

Words failed me, because I could still feel the fox inside me, and that was disconcerting as hell. I’d spent over thirty years on this earth not feeling a bloody wild animal inside me,

until now. I didn't wait for Nat, for their response, anything, as I strode away, but she caught me up.

“What the hell happened?” she asked me. “I saw you running for the ball, which was a shock in itself and then—”

I tore the necklace from my neck, wincing at the brutal treatment of such a beautiful pendant, but my nanna had been the one to teach me the wisdom of the crystals. Moldavite was a powerful transformer and I'd just discovered how much.

“And then I turned into a fox,” I announced, right as we came to a stop by the cars.

Chapter 7

“What?”

I saw every freckle on Nat’s face because she stared at me blankly, but I put my hand out.

“Gimme the keys, Nat.”

“What?”

“Focus.” I put out two fingers and pointed them at my eyes, then hers. “Eyes on me. Ignore what I just said—”

“You turned into a fox?”

“Not important. Keys, Nat, keys.”

“No, no, no, no...” She poked a finger in my face and some part of me wanted to snap at that.

Foxy, if that’s you, do the smart thing and stay down! I thought furiously.

“No?”

It felt like Nat was going through all the stages of grieving in real time, but I didn’t have time for that. I shot a look over my shoulder, and saw I did indeed have the attention of what I assumed was a sleuth of fox shifters. Sleuth? What did you call a pack of foxes? A pain in my arse. Yeah, that was it. Whatever the hell they were called, they were coming closer, ambling slowly towards us.

“You’re a fox shifter.”

Cool, we'd rushed past shock to denial and now we were at acceptance.

"Yes and this foxy lady needs to get home right fucking now, Nat."

She pulled her car keys from her pocket and slapped them into my hand.

"You can't run away from this." Then her head swung around and her eyes went wide as she looked at the three men getting nearer by the second. "You can't run away from them."

Now here's the fucking thing. Nothing, I mean nothing, makes me dig my heels in harder than when someone says I can't do something. I stared back at those guys, somehow hoping that the power of my glare would communicate what I felt.

Keep the fuck away from me, I thought. Hey, if I could suddenly turn into a fox, maybe I could start to communicate psychically as well. *I don't need fated mates. I definitely don't need to be turning furry at random moments. Forget you even saw me.*

"The hell I can't," I said, then jingled the keys in my hands. "If I take the car, will you guys be able to get home?"

"Alaric will just ring one of the other guys from his team to pick us up. Someone's always on call, just in case, so..." She fucking smiled then, a slow, mischievous thing that had my back stiffening. "You're gonna fight this? Oh, this is gonna be good, so damn good."

No, it wasn't, but I didn't bother arguing with her. I gave her the world's shortest hug, there and gone again. I knew she wanted to talk about the situation, but this wasn't like high school. We couldn't sit there and analyse every single thing that Danny Harris did, wondering if there was any evidence to be found that he liked me. My body felt weird, swollen, sore and also kinda numb, like it wasn't mine anymore. I sucked in a breath, forced myself to smile and then looked at her.

"I'll see you when you get home."

“You better be there.” She shot me a sympathetic look. “I know this is tough—”

“Not yet, Nat,” I said, the keys digging into my palm. “Not yet.”

I felt like I was carrying around a brimming cup of fear, anger and disbelief, but it was all kept down by a thick layer of pure shock. But that would wear off soon. I needed to get back to Nat’s place, hunker up.

In my den?

Fuck.

I shook my head and then unlocked the car, climbing in, not able to let out a full breath until I was behind the wheel. I felt bad leaving Nat with the clean up, having to wrangle the kids at the same time, but if she stopped trying to be super mum and let her phalanx of grandparents help, she’d be fine. Maybe this whole thing would be a learning experience for her. But as I felt the blast of the air conditioning on my face, my hands clung to the wheel. Home, my instincts or Foxy’s, I didn’t know, but the impulse to drive and keep on driving until I saw my shop burned hot and hard in my chest, right up until I put the car into reverse.

Going to make us chase you, little vixen? a now familiar voice said inside my head. *Bring it on.*

I slammed my foot on the brake, going stock still, my heart beating faster and faster as I searched the picnic grounds until I saw them.

Spiky was grinning, making me think the message came straight from him, but the one they called Rye? He just crossed his very impressive arms and stared across the grounds at me. The other one with the long hair, his eyes flicked between the lot of us with a quizzical look that made a lot of sense. I didn’t know what the fuck was going on either, but I did know this.

They could chase me all they liked, all the way back to Langston, if that’s what it took, but what they didn’t understand was this. I went to school with most of the coppers stationed in my hometown, and would have no problems

organising a restraining order. Then there was the matter of my dad, my brothers, my cousins and my uncles, all of which were a dab hand with a rifle. Admittedly those on the Riley side might sell me off to these strangers for ten bucks, but if I made it clear they could take whatever the guys had on them, they might stay loyal. I shook my head and then pulled out of the carpark, determined not to let anything else stop me.

WHEN I GOT BACK to Nat's, I started picking up my gear, ready to put it in my car. I hadn't properly unpacked, so it was a matter of picking up a few bags. I made the bed, straightened the pillows and then went into the en suite to check if I'd left anything, when I caught my reflection in the mirror.

The henna had washed out of my hair mostly, leaving it a weird strawberry blonde. I'd caught some sun, my nose red and probably ready to peel in a few days, even though I'd slipped on a coverall, slopped on some sunscreen, and slapped on a hat. But it was my eyes, wide and bright, bright green that caught at me. Because as I stared, it wasn't hard to see another three sets of eyes overlaid over the top of them. One wide eyed and dazed, one full of certainty, and the last sparkling with barely repressed mischief. I blinked and blinked until I just saw me.

Were we related? Is that what the fuck this was? Nanna Madden had tut-tutted when she saw that my eyes were going to stay green, always making some oblique comments about... The thought seemed to fall apart as my fingers dropped lower, stroking over a red raised burn on my chest in the shape of a fox. But just as I was about to trace the shape of it, I heard the door downstairs open. Feet came thundering up the staircase, and the bedroom door was shoved open seconds later.

"What if Holly is changing..." Nat protested, right as five sets of eyes stared around the doorframe at me.

"Changing into a fox?" Lars' usual grumpy face turned from a scowl into an outright glare. "You never said you were a shifter."

“Because up until five minutes ago, I wasn’t,” I shot back. I went to push past them, but the bears all clustered around me.

“You’ve shown no signs of shifting prior to this?” Alaric asked.

“If you’re asking if I’ve ever gone furry, then the answer is no.” I started stacking my bags together, which made Nat frown.

“You’re going home?”

“Seems like it’d be for the best,” I replied, then looked up at her. “Whatever the fuck that was... Well, I’m hoping it never happens again, if I get far, far from here.”

“Pretty sure that’s not how it works,” Thorn muttered, then we all glared at him. “What? We can’t just take off, try and outrun the bear.”

“Not helping,” Nat said between gritted teeth.

“But we need to find someone who can.” Lars nodded sharply, then pulled out his phone. “Maybe there’s some kind of suppressant, or maybe the witch community could work on a spell for us.”

“There’s witches?” I asked, staring at him. “Why am I only just hearing about this now?” I shook my head. “It doesn’t matter—”

“Dad, can I have some of the grown up cake?” a little voice asked.

“No!” we all replied at once. Nanna Madden’s cake would give a three year old cirrhosis instantly.

“But Dad...” one of the boys whined.

“Come on, darling. I have cake that will put hairs on your chest.” Oh god, that was Ingrid. “And ice cream and custard.”

“OK, you need to make sure your mother isn’t feeding our child rum or brandy infused cake,” Nat said, poking Lars in the chest. “And the rest of you need to put the food away, make sure our guests are OK.”

“And you’ll look after Holly,” Alaric said before shifting his focus to me. “I know Rye Beaumont and his skulk.”

“Skulk?” I jerked back. “A group of foxes is called a skulk? That’s even weirder than sleuth.”

“We’ve had some... encounters with them on some of the sites we’ve worked on,” Koda said, but it was his careful tone that caught my attention.

Because I knew what this was. People did the same when talking about my mum’s side of the family. While Mum herself was just a nice, boring housewife, the others... People would be slagging off the Rileys in my presence, going to town on their description of my cousins’ or my uncles’ characters, right before they remembered who I was to them.

But while I knew Uncle Gavin was a thieving prick, he also used to give me the best horsey rides, hoisting me up on his shoulders when I was a little girl, then galloping around until I was shrieking with laughter. And while I stiffened when my cousin Vinnie walked into the shop, he’d come around in the dead of night to help me change a flat tyre when I was stuck on the side of the road.

“What kind of spell would you want a witch to cast?” I asked, before the men left the room. “What would you want them to do?”

Thorn looked at Koda, and Alaric scratched at his beard, but Lars stepped forward and spoke with his customary bluntness.

“Help find a way to suppress your animal,” he told me, “because fox shifters? They’re the lowest of the low in the shifter community. Cunning bastards and sneaky with it. You can’t trust a fox.”

It was then he looked meaningfully at Nat, and that had me taking a step backwards, then another and another.

“No, Holly,” she said. “No, I—”

“It’s true, Nat.” Thorn shot me a sheepish look. “I’m sorry, Holly. This must be tough, finding out what you are so late in life, but you’ve gotta know—”

He was interrupted by the doorbell going off.

“Who the hell would that be?” Lars growled.

“Alaric?” Anne called up the stairs. “You’ve got some visitors.”

“I’ll handle this,” he told us, but I was pushing past him, because somehow I knew.

I’d thrown a bra and underwear on when I got home, but still I felt the cool air of the air conditioning on my legs as I sprinted downstairs. I had an army at my back, the heavy tread of the guys’ steps and Nat’s letting me know they were following me. Anne stood at the doorway looking terribly stiff, eyeing the gap and then us.

“These men say they’re here for Holly.”

Lars growled, the other men all moved to address this, but I cut them off. I stepped up to the door and there they were.

Rye’s fucking dimple popped again as he smirked at me, and Spiky? He loomed over his... what? Skulkmate’s shoulder. The one with the long hair hung back slightly, meeting my eyes then looking away, and that’s when Rye stepped forward.

“We haven’t had time to find suitable gifts to lay at your feet, but...” Rye pulled a small box from his pocket. Not a new one, the velvet on the box was slightly scuffed, the nap pressed down in places. “Perhaps this will do as the first of many.”

I shouldn’t have taken the box. I definitely shouldn’t have opened it, and my mouth shouldn’t have fallen open as I saw the contents. Nat had given me a beautiful necklace and I’d torn it off me, and as if in recognition of that, I was being offered another one to replace it. Inside, on a necklace of beautiful hand-wrought, silver links, was a pendant. Carved from an olive green piece of crystal was a small fox.

“Moldavite...” I said with a small sigh.

Chapter 8

Rye

Gods, she was so fucking beautiful.

Standing in the doorway, she was a slender figure, looking like some kind of forest nymph rather than a woman. One I wanted to chase down and ravish, now. The fox inside me paced and paced, snapping at the bond between us, but I forced him to be silent.

“Moldavite,” she said, this Holly, our mate.

Someone had taught her well about crystals and their uses. Many of our kind deployed them with great skill when needed, but this one? I’d carved the pendant myself when I was a teenager, thinking of just this moment. At the time I’d assumed I’d run into my fated mate at a skulkmeet, a social event where the different fox shifter clans got together, or perhaps see her on the street one day, being swept off my feet by her beauty. Time had gone by and hope had begun to temper, then fade somewhat, making me think perhaps we would never be so blessed until...

Holly had stampeded into our clan Christmas party to prevent one of my family being hit by an errant cricket ball. She’d been a picture, perfectly focussed on the trajectory of the ball and nothing else, when all I could look at was her. When I saw her fall, my heart felt like it was being wrenched out of my chest, so of course I dove forward. Todd, my skulkmate, snatched the ball from the air, preventing any

further catastrophes, while I grabbed her. I'd pulled her into my chest and that's when her fox came wriggling forward.

With all the desperation of a caged animal, her animal greeted mine for just a second, before bursting forward for what I now knew was the first time. The look in her eyes when she came back to skin, the terror there. This was not a woman who had been schooled through her first shift by her family, helped to get to know the other side of her nature. She was—

“No thanks.”

I blinked, seeing the woman now, and she was shoving the box towards me, putting it in my hands when I didn't respond, then closing my fingers around it. Did she feel that deep, throbbing pulse when we touched, because I did. The bond leapt to life like a live wire, pulsing once a connection had been made. But whatever it was, she seemed to have no problems pulling away again, taking a step backwards.

Which only drew us forward.

Even Wyatt, the last of our skulk and perhaps the most reticent, found himself drawing closer. Holly saw that with a frown and then shook her head.

“What do they do in the books? I reject you.” Her eyes flicked from one to the other of us. “I reject the bond, being your mate, whatever this mess is. I reject...” She cast her gaze further afar, as if people lurked in the bushes. “I reject taking fur and becoming goddamn vermin.”

I flinched at that because the fox did too. In Europe, the fox had a varied reputation, sometimes praised for his wiliness, sometimes hunted down by a pack of dogs, but in Australia our cousins were an invasive species.

“While I'm sure I could do my part to keep down the rabbit numbers...” Her beautiful green eyes went unfocussed for a second. “Are there bunny shifters as well?” She looked over her shoulder, and that's when I let out a little growl. For some reason my mate was choosing to hang out in a bear's den. “God, I hope not.” She wrinkled her nose and then shook her head. “And what kind of weird peen would they have...?”

Wherever the hell this rambling monologue was going, it seemed to slow as her eyes trailed across my body, sliding downwards.

The fox inside me fluffed up, pushed out his chest, then shifted restlessly. When she accepted our bond, we'd spend much time together in fur as well as skin, getting to know each other, performing the mating dance, right before we—

“What was I saying?” she said, her hand going to her forehead.

“You were wondering what kind of weird peen foxes have,” another woman said, but this one stunk of bear. The fox bared his fangs within me, while I maintained a cool expression.

“No I wasn't.” Her frown grew deeper. “Anyway, it was nice meeting you...”

“Rye,” I said, putting a hand to my chest. “This is Wyatt.” I pointed to my other skulkmate.

“I'm Todd,” the last of us said with a grin and chin tilt.

Holly's eyelids fluttered. “Of course you are. Well, Bri, Wayne, Terry, it's been so much fun, but I think we're going to have to call it quits—”

“No.” Wyatt was always the quieter one of the three of us, the one that hung back and watched, so the fact he stepped forward now said something. He crossed the gap between them and when he took her hand, she didn't pull away, just stared down at where their bodies met. “And you don't really want that.” He sucked in a long breath. “You're frightened, confused and... surprised.” He glanced back at me. “She doesn't like surprises.”

“And I don't like people reading my goddamn mind for me either,” she snapped, yanking her hand free before turning to the other woman. “Is this how it works? They know whatever you're thinking by what, scent?”

“Pretty much,” her friend replied with a shrug.

“So that’s how they know when to get chocolate right before your period hits... oh!” Holly stared wide eyed at us, then her lips twisted in a look of disgust. “Yeah, I don’t want that at all, so yeah, thanks for coming by—”

“We’ll be back tomorrow with more suitable gifts,” I promised, then shoved the necklace box back into my pocket. “Ones that you will enjoy more and when you are ready—”

“Nope, nope, not gonna happen. I’m leaving tonight.”

“Tonight?” the other woman said. “But you just got here.”

“And now I’m going home, far, far away from all of this.” Holly waved her hand around vaguely. “I’ll go back to my bookshop, my apartment, my herbal teas, and my shop boy with the resting bitch face...” We all tensed at that. “And get on with my life.”

She looked completely resolute in that moment and that couldn’t be right. We were fated to—

“You should do the same.”

Before I could get in another word, she turned and walked back inside this ridiculous house and slammed the door shut in our faces.

Which just left them.

“You heard the lady.”

Him, I knew. Lars Nelson, polar bear shifter and mean as a snake, he folded his arms, thinking that by standing between us and that door he was going to provide some kind of barrier between us and our mate. Todd started to mutter something, but I cut across him.

“We did,” I agreed.

“I dunno how you found her so fast, or what made you think it was a good idea coming here, but you need to back the hell off. The girl said no.”

“You didn’t take no for an answer,” the woman told him.

She was close to my Holly, I could tell by her scent and her manner. She was also Lars’ mate. She shot him a

belligerent look, and I got a front row seat to the very amusing sight of a polar bear backing down, then shaking his head.

“That’s different.”

“How exactly?”

Of course my Holly chose a woman like this as a friend. She was strong, wouldn’t stand for crap, which was evident in the way her eyes bore into her mate’s.

“It’s just different, all right. They’re foxes.” Ahh, this, always this. “It’s bad enough that Holly—”

“It’s bad enough that Holly what?” Real steel throbbed in the woman’s voice. “It’s bad enough that Holly what, Lars?”

His head jerked up and he stared her down.

“It’s bad enough that your best friend is now a fox shifter.”

We heard this over and over, caught the suspicion, the dark looks whenever our skulks came onto a work site. Men muttering insults to their friends, but never saying anything to our actual faces. But this bear was obviously as stupid as he was big, because every line in the woman’s body screamed of anger.

“They can’t be trusted,” he said finally, putting the last nail in his coffin, because she didn’t reply to her mate, but me.

“I’m Natalie, Holly’s best friend.”

When she thrust out her hand, I took it, squeezing it for a little longer than needed, just to watch the bear shifters seethe.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Natalie, friend of Holly’s,” I replied.

“I can’t help you in any way. This is Holly’s decision, not mine or yours.”

Todd started to say something about that, but I silenced him with a look.

“Of course. The woman always chooses whether or not to accept the bond, but...” I looked past her to the scowling bear shifters. “In fox circles, it runs a little differently. Now that

Holly has found us, her fox will become harder and harder to control. The woman might choose to reject us, but the fox... By her reaction, I can tell she is relatively new to her dual nature. She will need us before too long.”

I pulled out my wallet and drew out a business card, but when I handed it over, the bears moved forward.

“Don’t take anything from the weaselly shit,” Lars growled. “They can’t be trusted.”

“In this case, no three people are more focussed on your best friend’s welfare than us,” I assured her. “We merely wish to ensure Holly is safe, happy and satisfied. We will be back with more gifts, better ones next time.”

When the fox realised what I was about to do, he started to shift restlessly, then pushed against the bond, growing more and more frantic as I headed towards the car. Wyatt followed me, though he kept looking back over his shoulder, and Todd just stood there, staring up at a window on the second floor, until I was forced to bark an order for him to follow us.

This hadn’t ended the way I’d hoped. Our clan had good standing within the fox community. The families knew us and knew our reputation. If Holly had been born amongst them, she would’ve already known who we were, and we’d be carrying her in our arms back to our car, ready to have every pleasure lavished upon her. Instead I was forced to endure my heart feeling like it was being torn in two, the fox’s claws raking across it over and over in a bid to get free. The lot of us would have the control of cubs until she came to her senses and claimed us, and when we got to our car, I closed my eyes for just a second.

“Well, that was a shit show,” Todd said, leaning against the car as he stared back at the house. “But damn if she didn’t smell good. Like honey on—”

“Shut up.” My fingers pinched the bridge of my nose, the breaths coming in long and slow because I forced them to do so. “Just shut up for a moment.”

My fox was strong, too damn strong and that's why I led our skulk, navigating the complex world of shifters and the associated politics.

"You need to take fur, go for a run," he insisted, when I had regained control enough to unlock the car.

"What I need is our mate."

Each one of them stared at me wide eyed, but they both nodded slowly before looking back at the house.

"We'll win her over," Todd said. "It's always hard, but the chase...?" When he grinned he flashed his fangs. "That just makes the surrender all the sweeter."

As I wrenched the door open, I hoped like hell that was true.

Chapter 9

“So you’re seriously going?” Nat said from the doorway of the guest bedroom.

I gathered up my bags, grabbing handle after handle until my puny arms started to shake. She let out a sigh and then moved to take some of the load, but the possessive way she was holding them made me think they were being held hostage, not to be carried to my car.

“Christmas dinner is over, and no one got drunk and said anything inappropriate, especially not me. Everyone seemed to like the food. The kids have more noisy toys than any small children should have access to.” I dimly heard the pew pew of the plastic guns I’d given them. “Everything went off without a hitch, so my job here is done.”

“That’s not why I invited you up for Christmas,” she said.

Fuck. Fuck. Nat had that sappy look in her eyes, the one where she was gonna make me pinky swear we’d be BFFs forever or something. And we would. That bond, I clung to it so damn tight in my mind, but I couldn’t put my shit on Nat. She was still studying, she had the boys, and her sleuth—

“And you.” She looked at me meaningfully. “You’re important to me too.”

“Did I say that out loud? Fuck. Look, I get it. You want to rush in and fix shit, like you always do, but I don’t even know what shit there is to fix right now.”

“So we find out together,” she insisted.

“I can’t.” My heart beat way too loud in my ears. “I can’t, Nat. I’m the support person. That’s what I do, remember?”

“And you’re too scared to let me in enough to do the same for you.” Jesus, she was bringing out the big guns now. “I went through this already. It’s disorientating and overwhelming and weird, because the guys are basically all in from the moment they lay eyes on you, and you’re like who the fuck are you, and why are you turning furry all of a sudden, and why are your ears so little, cute and furry and...” She let out a shuddering sigh. “Who else is going to help you through this?”

“See, that’s the problem right there.” I dropped the bags to the floor. “This situation is completely different. Your guys swept in, kicked Paul’s arse, took you away from fucking Langston to live in this palatial home in the posh end of Adelaide, and gave you two beautiful babies. Mine—”

I had a whole speech ready, to make clear the shitty hand I’d been dealt, but instead I felt it again. Like all of my skin started to crawl at once, I managed to suck in a breath right before the fox shoved forward.

I knew Nat, but the fox didn’t and she jumped up on the bed, tail whipping back and forth, ears flat to her skull, trying to seem bigger than what she was. All she knew was talking to this woman made me stressed out, so she took over.

So not helping.

I let Foxy know that, screaming inside her skull, but she just snarled and snapped at my bestie. More noisy footsteps and then the guys came rushing in, because of course they did, because right now I was a threat. But they weren’t the only ones. Kai and Sven came as well, their grandmothers rushing after them, and the only reason why the grandfathers weren’t here was because the bloody cricket was on.

“I touch the foxy!” Kai declared, ducking between his parents’ legs. “I touch the foxy!”

But Foxy’s instincts were kicking in hard. There were too many people in this room and we needed to get the fuck out

now. She leapt off the bed, making terrible noises, right as she scuttled between their legs. We were forced to duck between stamping feet, the sounds of their shouts and shrieks ringing in our ears, until we made it to the stairs, then we stampeded down them, making for the door.

Foxy! I snapped. *Give me control. I know a way out of this. Give me control, you little furry bastard.* But she just paced back and forth, rising up, trying to turn the door handle and failing, until I showed her a mental image that I could do that, and of course that's when she let me come back to skin.

Leaving me standing naked in the foyer of Nat's fancy house, right in sight of the lounge room.

"Erm... Holly?" one of Alaric's dads said.

I grabbed the curtains that hung over the window by the front door and wrapped them around me.

"Sorry! Sorry! Having a little shifter emergency. Only just learned I could shift today, so still ironing out some kinks."

"Righto." He grabbed a throw blanket from the couch and tossed it to me, the other men only just turning around. "So Australia's trouncing the Poms."

"Great. Great. Go team."

But right as I made myself an impromptu toga, the rest of the family arrived.

"Do it again!" Kai announced as he jumped off the bottom step. "Be a foxy!"

"Soon," I said, ruffling his hair right as my heart felt like it was going to beat right out of my chest. "But only if you're a really good boy for Mummy."

Dear god, between the two of us we were using all the bad tricks from our parents' playbook.

"Holly, Rye said—" Nat began to say.

"That he's going to leave me the hell alone? That there's a cure for what the fuck—"

“Fuck! Holly said fuck!” Sven said, chortling like an old man.

“Sorry, whatever this is,” I corrected myself. “Sven, do not say that word again.” His mouth shut with a click. Ooh, apparently there were some benefits to being a shifter. “Does he have a way for me to get in my car, drive home and have my life back?”

I knew the answer before she even opened her mouth, yet was somehow disappointed when she shook her head slowly.

“The opposite.” She held out a small piece of card. “He said this would get worse the longer you left things. You need to talk to them.”

I didn’t need to do anything of the sort. Part of me had always wondered what it would be like if I was the one that met my fated mates, not Nat, but now I had my answer. Chaos. I shook my head and then headed back upstairs, getting dressed again and grabbing my gear, relieved when I didn’t take fur. I couldn’t reason with the fox, but I could show her some very explicit pictures of what would happen if she didn’t let me maintain control. That seemed to keep her quiet and still, hunkered down in some small part of my soul.

“Keep it,” I told Nat as I made for the front door. “If I need it, I’ll call.”

“You’ll call me anyway.” Her lips thinned. “I should come with you, make sure you get home in one piece. You could take fur and have a damn accident.”

“Nope, not gonna happen.” I had shown Foxy all the pictures of car accidents we were forced to look at by a particularly tough driver’s ed teacher at school. “You left Langston and we both promised you’d never come back.”

She nodded slowly, coming forward and wrapping her arms around me, and that’s when I let out a sigh. I fucking missed Nat. I was glad she’d left and got the hell away from Fuckface, but bugger it, couldn’t she have found dudes who owned a posh house somewhere closer? I didn’t dare mention that because she’d have the guys looking around for

somewhere within the week. Instead I just held her tighter, before forcing myself to let her go.

“I’ll see you in a month or two,” I said.

“You better.”

By the time she pulled away I saw the tears in her eyes, but I couldn’t focus on them, because my own were blurring my field of vision. Everyone had come into the foyer now, the grandmothers and grandfathers, a whole bear shifter community clustered around Nat. She didn’t need me anymore, that’s what she didn’t realise. There was a time when I was her family, but she had a whole new one now to rely on, if she just let them in.

Speaking of family, I showed the fox a mental image of Nanna Madden, wondering how she’d respond. The fox sniffed the air warily, then jerked back, going to her little hidey hole inside me.

My grandmother had taught me about crystals, about herbology and how to use different teas to help people. She’d shown me how to repot plants or grow them from seeds, how to set a snare and dispatch the rabbit we caught, then gut and skin it. She’d taken me into the pine forests around Langston, telling me stories of her grandmother and her ancestors’ grandmothers before them, in the quiet hush. Nanna Madden knew more than how to make a killer Christmas cake, and so she might be the person best placed to help me with this situation. I got in the car and turned the ignition on as the kids pressed their faces to the glass, waving madly, so I waved back.

Christmas was over and now there was only the new year to look forward to. I pulled out of the driveway and went on my way.

Chapter 10

Wyatt

The next day we returned to the bears' den with a car full of gifts. The others had spent the evening and most of the morning trying to find just the right thing to gift our mate, but somehow I knew it wouldn't work. I looked at the gold chains, and the pretty shoes, and the lovely pieces of glasswork and none of them seemed to fit the feel of Holly. They'd held each item up for my input, then grown frustrated when I just shook my head, rejecting each one. I didn't know much about courting, gifts for women or anything for that matter, but... Each piece was beautiful, valuable, and any vixen would've been pleased to receive them, but not Holly. I stayed silent on the drive over, willing, wanting to be wrong, right up until we pulled into the driveway.

"She's not here."

This was Koda Henley, not Lars and while he was nowhere near as snarly as the polar bear, his quiet tone allowed for no argument.

Which would never stop Todd.

"Where did she go?" My skulkmate peered over the bear's shoulder. "What did you do with her? If you hurt—"

"Hurt Holly?" Those dark eyes bored into Todd's green ones. "She's my mate's best friend. We consider her family, and up until yesterday I would've said she was happy." His arms crossed his chest. "She's not now. Holly left."

“Where?” Rye stepped forward, getting in the bear shifter’s face. “Where did she go?”

“She asked us not to say anything,” was all he would say in return.

“But... she needs us.”

I was as surprised as my skulkmates when I blurted that out, but I knew just how Holly must be feeling. Restless, unable to settle at the best of times and at the worst? Like my skin was on fire. I wanted to rake my claws down my arms, much like I had in the days before my first shift. But the fox could come and go as needed now, so there was no need for this discomfort. I’d be forced to endure it anyway, the mating urge growing and growing until...

Koda scowled at me, making clear any input I might have was not needed. Normally I’d take that social cue and honour it, but not now.

“She’s going to go through a tough time—” I said.

“Already happening,” he said in a flat tone.

“One that will only get worse the longer we spend time apart,” I added.

He snorted. “Sounds like a convenient way to pressure me into telling you where she is, but it’s not gonna happen.” His focus shifted to Rye. “She has your card. If she wants to talk, she’ll talk.”

“But—” I started to say.

“There’s no point arguing with bears,” Rye said in his deadliest voice. “They will never understand. Their women don’t take fur. They will never know what it’s like to share a soul with a woman who has her own animal.”

He turned to face Koda.

“But know this. The woman you call friend is a brand new shifter, and I assume none of her family take fur. She is alone, forced to find her way without support, a fox without a skulk to keep her safe. You must remember your own first shift, the bewildering feelings that came with it, the instability and lack

of control, and you did so with a whole community to support you. She has no one.”

“Fuck...” Koda’s stony facade seemed to crack just then, and his eyes flicked around before settling back on us. “Fine, but... you have to respect her boundaries. She said she rejects the bond.”

“We can never hurt Holly,” I said, my voice cracking on the words. “She’s the only woman in the world for us. You know how it works.”

“I do.”

He let out a sigh and then he gave us the information we actually needed, not the car full of useless presents. Our mate’s head would not be turned by fancy things, but help... Perhaps that was the in we needed to convince her to let us into her life.

“LANGSTON.” We sat in the car as Todd searched the place up on the sat-nav. “It’s a few hours drive from here.”

“I’ll put the necessary calls through once we arrive,” Rye said, turning the engine over. “We’ll drive in shifts, keep going until we reach her, agreed?”

“Agreed.”

Chapter 11

I got back to Langston in the early hours of Boxing Day, fuelled by bad coffee and a desire for answers. I ignored the need to head home, have a shower and make myself presentable, instead driving straight to my grandmother's place. When I got out of the car, some of my family was awake, hanging out on the big porch that ringed Nan's house, sipping their morning coffee, the smell of eggs and bacon wafting from the kitchen.

"There's my girl," Pa Madden said as I walked up the driveway. "Missed you yesterday." I placed a kiss on his whiskery cheek. "Merry Christmas, love."

"Merry Christmas, Pa. I'm looking for Nan?"

"In the kitchen, as per usual, no doubt running your mother ragged, and anyone else she can rope into help." He flicked his newspaper at the seat beside him. "Might be best to stay out here."

"Did you have a good time, love?" Dad asked. "I thought you'd be with Natalie for a bit longer, though it's good to see you. You didn't drive through the night, did you?"

Dad hated night drives. Kangaroos were like tanks that came bounding out of the bush only to smash into cars with all of their ninety kilos of weight, totalling your vehicle and causing horrendous crashes.

"I'm all right. I just really need to see Nan."

Both men looked at each other and shared some kind of secret men's business thing, before nodding.

“Well, you know where to find her.”

“THOSE CHIVES ARE TOO COARSE.” I knew the terse sound of Nan's voice when I heard it. “You need to chop them finer.”

People talk about mothers-in-law from hell, but no one had it tougher than my mother. I loved my nan, but even I recognised what a tough old bitch she was. She ruled the family with an iron fist, and apparently when Mum married Dad, that meant she had to submit to Nan's rule. As I rounded the corner and walked into the kitchen, my grandmother looked up, then her eyes narrowed. They caught everything. When you hadn't brushed and combed your hair, when you'd pulled on a dress you wore yesterday, when your undies didn't match your bra. The woman had fricken lasers instead of eyes, so when they settled on the burn on my chest, left by the pendant, I should've known how this would go.

“Out of the kitchen,” she barked.

“You don't want the chives?” Mum asked, and I wasn't sure if that was a sincere question, or to troll my grandmother.

“They'll go straight in the compost bin,” she replied. “You cut like a drunken butcher.”

Mum laid the knife down, but came over to me.

“Everything all right, love?” She reached up and pressed the back of her hand to my forehead, just like she had when I was a kid. “You're running a little warm.”

I was. The sweltering heat hadn't started yet, but that wasn't what had sweat prickling across my brow. It felt like I had a furnace burning inside me, right at the hottest part of the year, one with a furry face and cute little brown paws.

“She's fine.” Nanna pointed to the door with her knife point. “And I'll deal with this.”

“This?” Mum seemed to come to attention then, frowning as she looked at Nan, then me. “What...?”

She was slower to notice than Nan, but everyone else was in comparison with my grandmother. No one could keep up with Nan’s steel trap mind. She’d be tearing the nurses a new one when we were forced to put her in a home, delivering cutting one liners until she took her last gasp.

“I told my Fergus not to marry a bloody Riley,” Nanna told her. “I never wanted him to marry you.”

“You think that’s some kind of grand realisation for me?” Mum snapped back. My eyebrows shot up because despite all the crap Nanna put on her, she bore it like a champ. “I’ve known that since the first moment he brought me into this house.”

“Then you should’ve made the right decision.” Nan bustled around the kitchen table to stand before Mum, both women bristling like angry dogs.

Or foxes.

I just blinked, open mouthed. Like a lot of families, all the conflict simmered just under the surface, never to come up but for small hints, if you knew where to look. I did. I searched the two of their faces, seeing Mum’s eyes glowing brighter and brighter green, while Nan’s remained a consistent hazel.

“I did make the right decision,” Mum ground out. “Being with Fergus meant I was able to bring the boys and Holly into the world.”

When they turned to me, each one of their expressions softened. I felt like a small child, not a grown woman, but I was not about to allow anyone to infantilise me.

“What makes me think you two know a lot more than you’ve been letting on,” I said, as their eyes dropped to the mark on my chest.

“That’s a nasty burn, Hols, what caused that?” Mum asked in an artificially even tone.

“It’s the Riley blood coming through—” Nan started to growl.

“What the hell does that mean?” I slapped my hand down on the kitchen bench and Nanna’s frown deepened. “You say shit like that all the time.”

“Holly!” Mum said.

“But you never explain what it means. The Riley’s don’t carry around the mark of Cain.”

“It would be better if they did,” Nan shot back.

“Why?” My challenge went unanswered, the grumpy look on the old woman’s face growing deeper. “Why, Nan?” My voice broke and both women’s expressions shifted at that, but I pushed on. “Is it something to do with moldavite?”

My grandmother pulled back in surprise, but she rallied quickly.

“I told you the lore about the crystals for your own good, not to be worn like trinkets.” Nan gestured at my necklaces and rings. “Not to be sold to silly women who wouldn’t know the divine if it bit them on their arse. Crystal work is a potent thing, with unpredictable results. I educated you as a warning.”

“For what?” My words hung in the air. “Moldavite is the crystal that represents self-discovery—”

“And finding your own path.” Mum gave me a sad smile. “Is that why you’re back from the city so quickly? Did you...?” There was melancholy and joy, resignation and hope, all rolled into one in her expression. “Did you... discover yourself?”

“Did I realign my chakras and find inner peace? No, I was too busy trying to keep two bear shifter cubs from rampaging through a public park, creating chaos wherever they went.”

I’d never said anything about the nature of Nat’s sleuth before this to anyone, but I watched their faces closely. Nan looked filthy, Mum, surprised, but not with the kind of shock the average person would feel.

“Natalie is mated to bear shifters?” Nan asked. “Pah! Filthy things.”

“And what about fox shifters?”

Foxy had been a good little girl, sitting quiet in the back of my mind, but not now. She prowled forward, like this was my nan’s chicken coop, not her kitchen. We caught every tiny shift in my grandmother’s expression. That flash in her eyes, the way her lips thinned down to a straight line, then that steely look she fixed on me. Foxy shifted, whined and then let out a couple of sharp barks in warning, but that wasn’t the strange thing. My grandmother jerked as if she heard each one.

“Get my satchel,” she snapped at Mum.

“This was always going to happen,” was my mother’s only reply. “You tried, but you said—”

“I’ll get it myself.”

Nan snatched up the leather satchel that always sat on the kitchen bench, despite every single other implement or container having a space in the cupboards. “I tried my best with you, Holly, but blood runs true.” She pulled out a small wad of herbs, bound with cheesecloth and a faded ribbon. “But you are a Madden as well as a Riley.” Then she started to mutter something in a language I’d never heard before. Low, guttural, the words seemed to rake across my skin, leaving stinging welts behind.

Foxy paced back and forth, back and forth, then reared up on her hind legs, testing the boundary between the two of us. I’d promised I’d get us home safe, to my den, but I hadn’t fulfilled my part of the bargain. She’d been shoved down deep, so deep I couldn’t even feel her, and she was never going back in that cage.

Which made me wonder who put her there in the first place.

“No, Jeanette!” Mum said, storming over to my grandmother, but when she put a hand on Nan’s arm, the old woman tossed it off with surprising strength.

“What’s going on here?” Dad said, appearing in the doorway, Pa behind him. “Mum?”

The shouting, so much shouting, it hurt her ears and I wasn’t protecting her, so she needed to do it herself. The fox swum up and out of me, forcing me back and in the same cage she’d been locked in for so long. My dress and underwear fell to the floor and Foxy stood in the midst of it.

“She...” Dad said, wide eyed.

“Yep.” Mum’s reply was much more grim.

“That’s—”

“Our daughter, Fergus.” Mum turned to face him, then pulled a necklace out from under her dress. I’d asked about it more than once, but she’d always redirected my attention away.

“Nothing good will come of this,” Nanna said in the dire tone of an ancient seeress. “I’ve told you that more than once.”

“Sometimes there isn’t a choice between right or wrong,” Mum told her, gripping the fine chain hard, then giving it a yank. “Sometimes there is only what is.”

The pendant she’d pulled free fell to the floor with a clatter, but my mother wasn’t there to pick it up. Instead, in the space she had occupied, was a big red fox. She let out a little whine, yawned dramatically and then stepped forward, before giving my face a lick. Foxy submitted to that with all of the docility of a newborn kit. Then my mother yipped, turning tail and trotting out of the kitchen, turning to look over her shoulder at us, the invitation clear. Our paws moved and we loped after her, out of the house, out of the yard and into the forest beyond.

The world tries to make Christmas about things: snow, pine trees, food, the piles of presents you must offer your family like sacrificial offerings, but underneath it all was this. Christmas is about family and right now I was finding out the true nature of mine. Our bodies moved in perfect unison as we ran and ran, that feeling swelling in my furry little chest. Home, that’s what I felt pulsing in my blood, I was home.

Epilogue

Todd

“This is the place?”

It was a typical, cute country town in Australia. Lots of leafy trees and houses that looked like they’d been built back in the 1950s, and somehow remained perfectly preserved that way. There was nothing wrong with it, but it just felt... small.

She wasn’t.

Holly had come busting into our Christmas celebration, creating chaos wherever she went, but the minute I caught that cricket ball? It felt like I caught something else too. Plenty of girls in my past had labelled me a fuckboy, even though I was always straight up about my intentions. Here for a good time, not a long time, until... Those wide green eyes, that strawberry blonde hair, and that expression, of horror and fear and helplessness, that in any other woman would’ve had me turning tail and running, had me moving forward. Rye caught her. Of course, he did. Always had an eye on the prize, that guy, but I... For the first time ever I felt a savage wrench of jealousy.

He rescued our mate. He was holding her close. I watched his nose work, sucking in her scent, something I caught the moment I got closer. He talked to her, reassured she was OK, right before she... My fox went rigid when hers appeared, making clear my days of fucking around were done. He’d never liked that I messed around with girls before this, but it would never happen again. I’d always expected to miss that, to

feel hemmed in, constrained, but not now. I'd listened to her try and reject us back at the bear shifter's place, and knew that was never going to fly.

No woman had ever gotten my full attention before this, but Holly had mine entirely now.

"This has gotta be her shop," Wyatt said.

Sure enough, painted on the glass front of the place were the words 'Holly's Books and Brews.'

"So we go in?" I was trying to be cool and failing utterly, the others staring at me for just a second. "What? It's what we're here for, right?"

But before they could respond, I saw a guy walk up to the front door and unlock it.

Who. The fuck. Was that.

I jerked open the car door and was out before anyone could say anything further, striding over to the door to accost this stranger who thought he could walk into our mate's territory like he had a right to.

"Hey!" I said as soon as I got close.

"Calm your fucking tits..." The guy's belligerent tone dropped away as he spun around and saw me. "Oh."

His eyes went wide and a pink flush bloomed across the tops of his cheekbones as he stared straight at me.

"I'm here for my fated mate," I growled, making clear he needed to get the fuck out of my way.

"What?" The flush deepened. "Me? Oh my god, finally! When that bitch Natalie ended up with those four hunks of bear hotness, I was like what the actual fuck? How the hell does she deserve dudes that profess undying love to her and not me?" His eyes grew heavily lidded. "I mean, I wasn't expecting a ranga, but..." His hand smoothed over my chest. "The rest I can work with."

I batted his hand away with a frown.

"Not you. Holly. Where is she?"

“Holly?” The little man started to puff up. “Holly! What the hell—?”

“Oh my god, bitch, are you calling my name again?” A familiar voice said from behind the door. “I thought you only did that when you were jerking off?”

She was grinning when she opened the door, dressed only in a light cotton dressing gown, but that faded as soon as she saw me.

“You...”

Her finger hovered in the air.

“Me.”

I leaned against the door frame, and shot her my best panty melting smile. It didn't work. She slammed the door in both of our faces, and then locked it behind her.

“As if I don't have a fucking key!” the guy shouted, before turning to face the three of us. My skulk mates had arrived. “So you're Holly's fated mates?” He looked down his nose at us, his eyes narrowing. “All of you?”

“Damn straight,” I said, seeing if my smile had any effect on him.

It didn't. Fuck, I was striking out all over the place today.

“Well, I shouldn't let you in.”

“Don't you dare, Nicholas!” Holly shouted behind the door. “Don't you fucking dare! I will fire your arse.”

“But the chaos that is likely to ensue?” Nicholas smiled slowly. “Totally worth it.”

He shoved his key in the lock and then forced the door open, much to Holly's disgust. We followed him in.

“I told you I reject you!” she shouted, backing up step by step.

“Wolves do the whole rejected mate bullshit,” I informed her. “But foxes?” I winked at the only girl I'd ever want going forward. “We do things a little differently.”

“Your fox is unstable,” Rye told her, moving closer, “and she will become more and more unpredictable the longer you hold out. The courting process destroys your control, but forming a mating bond will make all of us stronger than ever before.”

“You mean to say...”

Our mate was about to deliver what was no doubt a stinging retort, but as she opened her mouth, I felt the fox in her surge forward. There was a flurry of cotton and then right where the woman stood, the fox now sat on its haunches. She chittered at the sight of us.

“Oh my god, Holly’s a fox shifter?” Nicholas yelped.

“Yes, and she’s our fated mate.” We crouched down to get to her level, our foxes straining to get close to her. “And one way or the other, we’re going to work this out together.”

What comes next?

I have a book planned to finish Holly's story some time in 2024.

