



Brick (Northern Ohio Shifters #4)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Wolf shifter Jade never imagined her alpha would betray her.

When he arranges for her to mate a dangerous wolf from another pack, she has no choice but to run.

A friend helps her find refuge in Northern Ohio, where the wolf pack welcomes her with open arms.

But it's Brick, the pack's loyal and charismatic second-in-command, who truly makes her feel safe—and stirs emotions she's never felt before.

Brick has always trusted his instincts, and the moment he meets Jade, he knows she's meant to be his.

Smart, compassionate, and stronger than she realizes, she's everything he's been waiting for.

But with enemies closing in, Brick will do whatever it takes to keep her safe, even as the bond between them deepens into something unbreakable.

When a fanatical anti-shifter leader targets Brick and Jade as part of his master plan and the wolf she fled comes to claim her, the Northern Ohio wolves must come together to keep their pack safe.

As danger looms and tensions rise, Jade and Brick's love becomes their greatest strength—but will it be enough to overcome the forces determined to tear them apart?

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Chapter

One

“Scrub harder, Jade. It’s not clean enough.”

Alpha Holloway’s words echoed in Jade Albright’s mind as she scrubbed the concrete patio, her palms raw from the brush scraping against them. Her wolf stirred within her, restless and angry, but she smothered it. Losing her temper wouldn’t help her a damn bit.

She didn’t need the coming full moon to feel the weight of the alpha’s power—every blister on her palm was a reminder of his control and her utter helplessness.

The July sun beat down relentlessly, turning the air into a suffocating blanket of heat and humidity. Summers in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula could boil water, and the alpha’s patio had soaked the heat up like a sponge.

Scrubbing the patio until her hands cracked and bled hadn’t been about her duty to the pack, it was straight up punishment.

A lesson in humiliation for refusing to bend the knee.

He’d called her rebellious, as if she were a disobedient child, stomping her feet and saying no with her fingers in her ears.

But she wasn’t rebellious—not really. She was tired.

Of pack politics. Of punishments. Of watching her packmates look the other way to her mistreatment.

She stood, brushed off her knees, and left the supplies in the storage shed behind the house before leaving without a backward glance.

The pack would gather in a few hours for the full moon hunt.

While her wolf would rather be anywhere but here, because the camaraderie she should enjoy with her packmates on the full moon was all but gone, she didn't have a choice.

It wasn't as if she could simply leave town and start over somewhere else.

Holloway had locked the pack down, refusing to allow anyone to leave without permission.

So walking away wasn't an option. Not with the alpha's eyes everywhere. And that was a hopeless kind of hell that made her feel like she was slowly drowning with no escape.

A restless afternoon spent watching the clock so she wasn't late had left her feeling even more dejected. When the alpha's house came into view, she couldn't help but glare at the patio she'd spent the afternoon cleaning. She was pretty sure she was going to dream about that damn concrete.

The pack milled around the yard, males close to the house and females on the periphery. Jade stopped at the edge of the yard and let her gaze sweep over the pack members. She rubbed at her arms as a chill made her skin tingle despite the heat. Something seemed...off.

Holloway strode out of the house like a king before his subjects, flanked by the high ranked males. His gaze cut through the crowd, landing on her.

Her wolf bristled and a snarl threatened to rip from her throat.

She shoved the urge to bare her fangs and growl at her alpha away—barely—but refused to look away from his searing gaze.

Defiance bubbled inside her. Recklessly she thought about challenging him, shouting that he didn't scare her, but she wasn't that foolish.

It was kind of fun to imagine though.

Holloway's lip curled and she heard the low growl.

She thought he might call her out or send one of his high ranked goons to punish her, but instead he ordered the pack to shift and hunt.

Her heart pounded as she turned away from his dark gaze and hurried toward the tree line.

She swore she could feel him watching her as she disappeared into the dark woods.

The feeling she couldn't shake of him watching her? It was a stark reminder that no matter where she went in the territory, he was the alpha of everything.

She hadn't made it more than a few yards when she felt once more like she was being watched. She looked around, not even daring to breathe, but didn't see anything. Unease gnawed at her like a dog with a bone.

Jade exhaled and started walking again, her mind drifting to her father. He'd been

distant, more figurehead than parent, but his high rank had shielded her from Holloway's worst. It wasn't until his death a year ago that she realized just how much he'd protected her.

Jade stopped, the weight of her situation pressing down on her. The constant punishments and reminder that without her father, she didn't have anyone in her corner was oppressive. She fought for herself because she had no one else, but how long could she keep that up?

Unless something changed—and soon—she wasn't sure how much fight she had left.

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Chapter

Two

Brick Beaumont, second-in-command of the Thorn Hollow Pack in Northern Ohio, loved the full moon.

Well, he was certain he'd love it more if he had his truemate by his side, but for now he loved the hell out of hanging out with his pack and running through the woods hunting for whatever crossed his path.

Someday though.

Someone clapped him on the shoulder and he looked over to see his cousin and alpha, Adam, next to him.

"It's hot as hell," Adam said.

"Which is why I'm supervising the young wolves tending to the clearing and not doing the actual work myself." He rocked back on his heels with a chuckle.

Being second-in-command had its perks.

Among them was delegating things like raking leaves, pulling weeds, and chopping wood for the bonfire.

"We did that plenty in our youth. It's time for the next generation to suffer," Adam

said.

Brick hummed in agreement. The half dozen young males and females worked visibly harder as they noticed the alpha watching, and Brick smiled. He'd been like that once upon a time, but now he knew Adam found him loyal and reliable, whether he was sweating his ass off chopping wood or not.

"I'm going to take a run around the perimeter before we kick off the night," Brick said. He glanced at Solan, his close friend and another high ranked pack member, and said, "Keep an eye on the kids."

Solan nodded.

"See you in a few," he said to Adam and headed off into the woods.

He hit the edge of the pack's territory, which was almost entirely populated with wolves, from the owners of the mini-mart to the pack-run car dealership and garage.

Humans and other types of shifters and supernatural creatures were welcome in town, but only pack members could hunt in the woods.

"Hey, Brick."

"Hey, Leo. How's it going?" Leo was another high ranked pack member and was part of the security team Brick was in charge of. And along with Solan, one of his best friends.

"All quiet," he said. He fell into step with Brick. "Something going on?"

"What do you mean?" Brick asked.

“It just feels like there’s some extra tension this full moon.”

“Yeah, I feel it too.” Recently, a she-wolf had come to the pack, an albino from a pack in Michigan.

She’d found her mate, a tiger in a pride that shared Northern Ohio with the wolf pack, and her appearance had brought along a hunter named Hawthorne, who specialized in locating and trapping unique shifters for who the hell knew what.

Sadie had been abducted and nearly killed, and the tiger pride was on high alert, as was every other shifter group that called Northern Ohio home.

“I think it’s the hunter,” Brick said. “And the damn Humans Against Shifters assholes.”

“Those fuckers.”

Brick chuckled ruefully. The anti-shifter group was run by a maniac named Brent Foley, who wanted to destroy all shifters and was not above using any means necessary.

With Foley and Hawthorne in Northern Ohio, it meant that every shifter had to be aware of their surroundings and have each other’s backs.

Security ran through the pack’s territory twenty-four-seven.

They hadn’t found anything out of the ordinary lately, and he was hopeful that Foley and Hawthorne would know that the wolf pack wasn’t worth messing with.

Thanks to Adam’s mate Cinder, a lygisa, essentially a cross between a Wiccan and a wolf, their pack’s security was not remotely in question.

She kept their borders safe with her magic that she replenished every full moon as she shifted into her golden-furred form and ran around the edge of the woods.

Tonight, she'd do it again and they'd be safe for another month.

But it didn't mean they didn't need to keep an eye out.

Foley was tricky and Hawthorne was a wild card.

"It'll be a good night," Brick said finally after mulling over everything they'd dealt with recently.

"I certainly hope so."

They talked as they walked around the pack's hunting territory, ending up at the alphas' house where Adam and Cinder were talking quietly as the sun was setting, bathing the whole area in amber.

"Everything okay?" Cinder asked with a smile.

"Absolutely," Brick said.

"Good." Cinder sighed.

"What's that sigh for?" Adam asked.

"I just...feel like something different is going on. This full moon feels weird."

"Weird good or weird bad?" Leo asked.

"When is weird good?" Adam asked.

“I don’t know. When you try a weird food and it turns out to taste good?”

Adam rolled his eyes with a chuckle and looked at his mate. “What do you mean, baby?”

Her eyes turned a bright golden color and she let out another, deeper sigh. “Tonight is a turning point,” she said, her voice taking on an ethereal quality. “Change is coming. For the pack. For us.”

Her eyes flashed brightly and then returned to their normal green and she sagged against Adam.

“Holy shit, baby, are you okay?”

“I’m good, but that was bad weird. I need to sit down.”

Adam scooped her up into his arms and carried her into the house. Brick looked at Leo, who shrugged. “I guess we aren’t the only ones feeling like something is going on.” He looked up at the slowly darkening sky. “Maybe this is the night.”

“For what?” Brick asked.

“Magic. Romance. Finding our truemates.”

“Hope springs eternal.”

“Indeed.” Leo chuckled and strode off, heading toward the clearing where the pack was gathering before the hunt.

Brick went into the house to check on his alphas, and Adam said Cinder was fine, just tired, and couldn’t explain the sudden prophetic-sounding words.

“Whatever happens,” Brick said, “it’s the full moon and the night is filled with promise.”

“I like your optimism,” Adam said. “Go get everyone ready. I’ll bring Cinder out in a few.”

He nodded and left. Once upon a time, the full moon hunts started off with the pack alphas having sex in front of the bonfire and supernaturally sharing their pleasure with the pack.

Up until a few years ago, it was the status quo.

But in the last year or so, Cinder had decided it was antiquated, and the pack could just choose to be happy with or without their help.

Brick didn’t mind.

He rarely had someone to enjoy it with anyway since he’d long tired of the full moon lays with female pack members that never turned into anything.

What he really wanted was to find his truemate and share the full moon with her.

Maybe Leo was right and tonight was the night.

Or maybe Leo was off his rocker and full of shit.

Either way, Brick would hunt like the rock star he was and take down the biggest buck. He never tired of the thrill of the hunt.

Finding his parents in the crowd by the bonfire, he kissed his mom, Sophie, on the cheek.

“You look happy,” she said.

“I don’t know, Mom. I feel like something good is coming.”

“Oh? Like a mate and some grandbabies for me?” Her brows lifted, and she smiled hopefully.

“I don’t know, but something’s coming.”

Hopefully something good.

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Chapter

Three

Jade returned to where she'd left her clothes in the woods and dressed, and as she listened to the sounds of the night around her, she heard low voices and, against her better judgment, she'd followed them.

Creeping through the woods, she'd followed the voices to the alpha's house, where she'd seen Alpha Holloway standing on the back patio with two of his high ranked males and speaking to three other males she didn't recognize.

She couldn't explain it, but there had been something devious about the whole thing, something secretive. They were meeting while the pack was hunting, and even though it was out in the open where anyone could see, no one ever went back to the alpha's after the hunt; they simply went home.

Except for her, apparently.

See? This is why he thinks you're rebellious and a troublemaker.

She didn't dare get close enough to catch every word of their conversation but picked up enough to hear words that chilled her to the core.

Arranged mating.

It's not up to her.

Punishment.

Her wolf let out a worried whine in her head. Her stomach churned as she turned back and made her way silently to her house, where she tossed and turned all night.

By the time the sun rose the day after the full moon, Jade was certain that Holloway was talking about her.

There were several unmated females in the pack.

Perhaps the group was talking about more than just her, but one thing she could feel deep in her bones: her days of remaining unmated were coming to a close.

Suddenly, the way the alpha had been treating her recently made sense. He was perhaps trying to break her spirit, get her in a mental place where she'd welcome an arranged mating if it meant leaving his pack.

Which, hello, she would like to leave. But she'd like to make the choice herself.

She'd never heard of the alpha arranging matings without the consent of the parties involved, but the way he'd met with those males under cover of darkness? It seemed highly likely that the scenario that filled her with dread was going to come true.

She was going to be forced into an arranged mating.

Considering Holloway didn't like her, she could guess he wouldn't pick the nicest, most handsome male to pair her up with.

While she guzzled her second cup of coffee and stared out the window over her kitchen sink with a mixture of terror and anger, she tried to figure out what to do.

Could she escape? Where the hell would she even go? If she got in her car, she'd be stopped for sure since the town was routinely patrolled by pack members loyal to the alpha.

Sadie came to mind.

The rumors about her mom, Evelyn, helping her to leave flitted through the train of thought of the only person Jade knew who'd ever escaped the alpha's wrath.

Finishing the coffee with two large gulps, she shoved her feet into her tennis shoes and hurried out the door, not even bothering to brush her hair or put on clean clothes.

Making her way to Evelyn's tiny home, she was about to knock when she heard someone approaching and spun around.

"Jade? What are you doing up so early?" Evelyn asked. She held a basket filled with wild blackberries and a small bouquet of flowers.

Jade stared at the woman who'd been kind to her over the years, more so after her father died, sharing treats and sweet words with her.

As she stared into Evelyn's kind eyes, she broke down, too exhausted to hide the fear that coursed through her.

Evelyn hurried her into the house, shushing her gently. They sat on the couch and Evelyn set her things on the nearby coffee table.

Evelyn gave her a hug and rubbed her back. "You know, don't you?"

"I...heard things," Jade said, explaining what she'd witnessed between sobs.

“I was going to come find you today,” Evelyn said, brushing the hair from Jade’s face with a motherly touch.

“Yesterday morning, I was tasked with cleaning the alpha’s house before the full moon.

Around lunchtime, Holloway bellowed to me that he needed drinks served in his office for guests.

By the time I gathered a tray of refreshments, there were a handful of males in his office along with several high ranked males from our pack. ”

“Did you know who they were?”

Evelyn hesitated and said, “I didn’t think I knew them at first because I assumed they might be from his brother’s pack. You remember that his brother is an alpha and came to visit last month? It was right after my daughter left the pack?”

“I remember.”

“Well, these men weren’t his brother or from his pack, but as I was leaving, one of the males made eye contact with me, and I recognized him. It’s been a long time, but you don’t forget a male like that.”

“Like what?”

“Dangerous. Violent.”

Evelyn shared a story from several years ago about a cousin of Holloway’s who ran his pack with an iron fist, taking who and what he wanted.

“He has a scar on his face, running from his temple to his jaw. He got it when he went after a lion pride who tried to take over the pack’s territory when he was a teenager before he could shift.

I don’t have to tell you the kind of male who goes after a lion alpha before he can even take on his wolf form.

” She shuddered. “His name is Dane, and he’s here because he wants to form an alliance with Holloway and take over the town next to Ironwood, which you know is entirely human.

In exchange for the alliance, he’ll hand over several females from his pack as mates for the high ranked males of our pack. ”

Jade’s heart sank. “Holloway is giving me to him?”

“I’m sorry, honey, but I believe so.”

“When?” she asked, her voice squeaking with emotion.

“Tonight. Holloway was making arrangements for a ceremony tonight when I finished cleaning the kitchen.”

“What am I going to do?”

“You’re going to get out of town, that’s what.”

“But I don’t know if I can. Where would I go?” She had a little cash on hand, but enough to start a new life somewhere and also stay hidden so no one from her pack would find her? It seemed impossible.

“It’ll be okay, Jade, I promise. I helped Sadie get free of the pack, and I’m going to help you.

But it has to be now. I don’t think you can wait.

” Evelyn rose to her feet. “Go into Sadie’s room.

Hanging on the closet door is a crossbody bag.

Fill it with a change of clothes from the dresser. Do you have your phone?”

Jade stood and brushed at the wetness on her cheeks. “Yes.”

“Okay, turn it off. I’ll have my friend bring a new phone for you when she meets you. Only turn your phone on to make a call.”

“Call? Who? What are you planning?”

“I have a friend named Alli, a fallen angel who lives in Northern Ohio. I’ve known her for years.

She helped Sadie get to safety and she also knows a wolf pack in the area that’s very welcoming.

I’ve got a plan, but I need to reach out to her first.” A text pinged on Jade’s phone containing Alli’s contact information.

“Now, turn off that phone and hurry to pack a bag. I’ll be ready when you’re done. ”

When Jade didn’t move because she was too surprised by everything that was happening, Evelyn said, “Listen, Holloway was going to put Sadie in a cell to keep

her away from his asshole brother when he came to visit. Because he liked to blame all the pack issues on her being ‘bad luck,’ he wanted to hide her away because he was embarrassed by her. I wouldn’t put it past him to put you in a cell to keep you where he can find you easily.

You don’t have the luxury of time right now, okay? They could come for you at any moment.”

Jade nodded and hurried down the hall, powering off her phone as she did so. She found Sadie’s room and the bag where Evelyn said it would be. Digging through Sadie’s things, she rolled up a pair of shorts and a T-shirt and stuffed them inside, along with a pair of sandals.

Evelyn had made plans by the time she walked out of the bedroom.

Jade would shift into her wolf and run until she was out of the territory.

She would keep running until she reached the next town, where she’d shift back into her human form, get dressed, and then board a bus to take her to Ohio, right to the town where Alli lived.

“I just ordered your ticket,” she said as she handed Jade a piece of paper.

“I sent it to your phone, but here’s the confirmation number.

It’s bus number 2455 and leaves in one hour.

You can check in at a kiosk at the station and board the bus.

Turn your phone on only if you need to contact Alli.

She'll be waiting for you at the bus station when you get there.

It's a long bus ride, but it's the safest way to get you to Ohio. "

"Why are you helping me like this?"

"Because you remind me of Sadie. And also because I knew your mother once upon a time, and I miss her. She was a sweet, kind female."

Jade felt a tightness in her chest. She hadn't been allowed to talk about her mom, who'd been ousted from the pack when Jade was too young to remember her.

The only thing she knew for sure was that her mom and dad had been an arranged mating, and her mom had been miserable.

Holloway clearly hadn't been good at arranging matings, and Jade doubted he'd gotten any better at it over the years.

Giving Evelyn a hug, she said, "Thank you so much."

"Sadie's in a town called Whisper Creek. You can have Alli take you there to visit with her. And Alli knows how to get in touch with me without compromising your safety."

"What if you get in trouble?"

She shrugged. "It's worth it to help you. Dane Malrick is dangerous on a hundred different levels, and I'm certain the life you'd have with him would be brutal. I can give you a chance at a good life, and I want that for you."

"You could come with me."

“Maybe someday I’ll leave, but today is about you.”

They discussed the patrol schedule, and then Jade stripped and shifted into her wolf form.

Evelyn tucked her clothes and shoes into the crossbody bag, along with some cash and a few granola bars, and hung it around her neck.

Evelyn checked to make sure the coast was clear before opening the back door, and Jade hurried off.

Her paws were silent as she made her way through the woods, her heart racing with fear and uncertainty.

She didn’t know what the future would bring, but she knew that this was possibly her only chance at freedom, and she had to take it.

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Chapter

Four

Brent Foley waited for the call to connect as he stared out the window of the new headquarters for Humans Against Shifters. He'd never had to find so many new headquarters like he had since he'd come to Northern Ohio, but his secret locations kept getting found out.

He'd been focusing on the tiger shifters when he first arrived, spying on Whisper Creek and the animals who pretended to be humans. He'd lost a lot of people in the battles that had followed, and even teaming up with Victor Hawthorne, a world-renowned shifter hunter, hadn't staved off the losses.

In fact, the idiot probably cost him more people than if he'd gone it on his own.

"Hawthorne."

"Where are you?" Brent demanded, turning in the chair as the man's voice came across the phone's speaker.

"Not in Ohio."

"What? You were supposed to meet with me today."

"Change of plans," he said.

“What sort of change of plans?”

“I’ve got a line on a unique shifter in Canada. I won’t be back in Ohio for a while.”

“Are you serious? The deal was we were supposed to help each other.”

There was a long enough pause that Brent had to look at the screen to make sure the call hadn’t dropped.

“I’m very serious,” Victor said. “I know what our deal is, and I will keep up my end of the bargain. But I need a successful hunt for a unique shifter to keep my clients. Losing that albino wolf nearly cost me my entire livelihood.”

Brent rolled his eyes. Hawthorne was obsessed with the albino wolf who’d come to the wolf pack and hooked up with a tiger, which was why Brent had been willing to use his personal resources and personnel to help Victor get to her.

Victor had promised to help him eradicate the tigers so long as Brent helped him secure the white wolf, but in the end, Victor ran off, and Brent lost a dozen men in the fight with the tigers.

And now, apparently, Victor had left the country.

“You’ve put me in a bad position,” Brent said.

“I’m not that far away. I tell you what, if you get a line on a unique shifter in Ohio, I’ll come back and then I’ll help you take out everyone else.”

“So you only want to help me when it benefits you?” Brent couldn’t keep the sneer out of his voice. He was so fucking fed up with people not keeping up their end of things.

“You only agreed to help me so that I would help you,” Victor said. “It’s what quid pro quo means. You said you were going to focus on the wolf pack. All you need to do is figure out their weakness and exploit it.”

As if Brent didn’t know that.

The problem was that the wolf pack had a special protector.

The alpha female was some kind of mix of witch and wolf and kept the borders of the pack’s territory safe.

It meant that Brent couldn’t get to them while they were in Thorn Hollow, and the wolves were nothing if not careful with their own kind.

“Fine,” Brent said. “If I see anything unique, I’ll reach out.”

“And if I can quickly capture this unique shifter up here in the wilds of Canada, I’ll come back and help you get to the wolf pack. You might find a warlock who’s powerful enough to go against whatever that witch-wolf is who protects the pack, but I don’t know one who could do that.”

“I’m not working with a damn warlock again.”

“Suit yourself. Until our paths cross.”

The call ended and Brent stared at the dark screen. The man was an absolute dick.

“Paul!” he bellowed for his second-in-command.

He hurried into the room. “What’s up, boss?”

“Get everyone together. We need to brainstorm how to take out the wolves. We fucked around too much with the tigers helping Hawthorne when I knew it was a fool’s errand. It’s time to get serious.”

Paul nodded and strode off. Brent gathered his things and left the small room in the abandoned office space he’d taken over as his new headquarters in a town called Cedar Mills, twenty minutes south of the wolf pack.

He was certain they’d be able to come up with a way to take out the witch-wolf creature who used magic to keep the pack’s hunting territory safe and destroy the pack.

Those animals’ days were numbered.

Brick yawned as he made his way from the second floor of the alphas’ home to the kitchen.

Like several other high ranked males, he lived in the alphas’ home along with Adam’s parents, Craig and Lucy.

Adam’s sister, Angie, had lived in the house once, but she was now mated to two vampires and lived at the vampire-owned club in downtown Cleveland.

He missed his artistic, sweet cousin and hadn’t seen her in a few weeks.

He was surprised to see his aunt and uncle as well as Adam and Cinder sitting at the kitchen table when he walked in.

“I didn’t miss a family meeting, did I?” he asked. He patted his jeans pocket and realized he’d left his phone upstairs.

“No, I was about to call you though,” Adam said.

“Do I have time to get coffee first?”

Adam nodded.

Brick filled a mug from the pot on the counter and picked up a breakfast sandwich that his Aunt Lucy had made.

He pulled out a chair and sat down at the large kitchen table. “What’s up?”

Adam took Cinder’s hand and gave it a squeeze. “Cinder’s pregnant.”

“Hey, congratulations!”

“Thank you,” Cinder said, smiling gently.

Brick frowned as he caught the concern in her eyes. “What’s going on? This seems like something you’d all be happy about.”

“We’re deliriously happy,” Cinder said. “But I had trouble shifting last night and my magic was wonky. I was still able to cast the protection spell, but I don’t think I’ll be able to shift again. Not until after the baby is born.”

Adam pressed his lips into a thin line, then said, “I don’t have to tell you that our pack has relied on Cinder’s magical protections since she and I mated, along with our security team and the technology we use, such as the motion cameras in the woods to alert us to intruders.”

“How far along are you, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Six weeks,” she said. “So we’re looking at somewhere around eight months of needing to figure out how to keep the pack safe without my magic.”

“You don’t have access to it at all?”

“Not like I do in my shift.” She looked at her hands and then at Adam. “I can feel my magic and my wolf, but it’s muted.”

“We’ll recruit more pack members to join the security team,” Brick said.

“We can also add more motion detectors and cameras in the territory, and I had an idea about closing off the access roads and making it one way in and one way out of town, setting up a security booth to help keep track of who comes and goes in town.”

“But we let anyone come into town,” Craig said. “If we close off the roads and use a security booth, our businesses may suffer.”

“It’s not a bad idea though,” Adam said. “Even if it is just for eight months. We can convene a meeting with the high ranked and elders and get everyone’s take on it. Maybe we can do it in the future if we need to. For now, recruit whoever you need to and let me know what the schedule looks like.”

“I’m going to reach out to the Wiccans and see what Lorene and the Corners can do for us. They may be able to set up some protection wards around the territory that will help keep everyone safe,” Cinder said.

“I want a pack-wide bulletin sent out that no one goes anywhere outside of town alone, period. Don’t share the news about Cinder’s pregnancy yet.

We’ll share it with the pack once we have everything in order to keep our people safe.

We don't want anyone panicking unnecessarily because they're worried about their safety. ”

“Of course,” Brick said. “Hey, I’m really happy for you guys and don’t worry. No one has seen or heard from that shifter poacher asshole or Foley and his merry band of anti-shifter dickheads.”

Cinder grimaced. “Brick, honestly, do you have to curse every other word?”

“Sorry.”

“Thankfully the baby doesn’t have ears yet. I don’t want his or her first word to be dickhead.”

Brick snorted a laugh. “I promise I’ll watch my language. Calling them you-know-what-heads is a really good description though.”

“Indeed,” Adam said. He brought Cinder’s hand to his lips and kissed it. “I’m going to meet with Brick in my office and get the meeting in the works.”

“Do you need me?” she asked. “I didn’t sleep well last night.”

“Go rest, sweetheart. I’ll get you if I need you.”

She smiled sweetly at him and excused herself.

“I’m going to clean up the kitchen. Brick, do you want to eat the other two breakfast sandwiches?” Aunt Lucy asked.

“Hell yes.”

She arched a brow.

“Sorry, sorry,” he said, accepting the sandwiches. “I just learned I have to curb my language. It’s going to take some getting used to.”

“Try harder,” Adam said. “I don’t want to hear Cinder complaining that the baby comes out talking like a pirate because you don’t know how to say frick or darn.”

Brick tried to imagine his powerful alpha-cousin saying frick.

But he adored his alpha female and cousin-in-law and would do anything to help the alpha couple.

Except say frick.

He didn’t think he’d ever want to say that.

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Chapter

Five

Jade's heart was in her throat. She waited until she was the last one on the bus, peering out the big windows as she moved down the aisle toward the exit.

Evelyn hadn't had time to tell her much about Alli, and Jade had never met a fallen angel, and up until this point she figured they were more myth than reality.

Her feet hit the pavement and she paused, looking around.

The station was ahead and since it was late, there weren't a lot of people milling around.

A female waved as she rose from a bench. She was wearing a heavy metal T-shirt and shorts with wedge heels. Her blond hair was piled on her head in a way that looked both effortless and perfectly coiffed.

The smile on her face was stunning and made Jade think about the cherubs in ancient paintings.

"Are you Alli?" Jade asked as she walked toward her after taking one more look around to make sure no one was staring at her.

Even though she was pretty sure she hadn't been followed as she'd made her way by bus from Michigan to Ohio, she couldn't shake the feeling that her getaway had been

too easy.

“I sure am, hon!” She hugged Jade and said, “Come on, let’s get to my car and get the hell out of here.”

As if she sensed Jade’s hesitation, she whispered, “There’s no one paying attention to either of us. And just let some asshole wolf try to mess with you. I’ve got a sword in my car.”

Her brows lifted. “A sword?”

“Yup. I’m pretty deadly hand to hand, but swords are a lot of fun to wield. I’ve got your back, hon. You’re definitely safe with me.”

Jade wanted to sag in relief. But she didn’t. She locked her knees and smiled. “Thank you.”

“You bet.”

Alli hooked her arm through Jade’s, leading her to the parking lot and a convertible with the top up. After settling inside, Alli turned on the engine and said, “It’s so freaking humid that putting the top down makes me sweat! I’m so thankful for air conditioning.”

“I’m a fan of it myself.”

Alli grinned as she pulled away from the parking spot and took a right out of the lot. “I’ve been around for a long time, and let me tell you that air conditioning is one of the better inventions of mankind.”

“How long is a long time?”

“A few hundred years. After the first hundred, you stop counting.”

“Wow. So you fell? What does that even entail?”

“Another angel chopped off my wings and I lost all my heavenly powers,” Alli said with a shrug. “Angels don’t recognize fallen angels as anything but immortal supernatural creatures. I was created and not born, so I don’t have a family. But the friends I’ve made along the way became family.”

“The chopped off wings part sounds awful, but it’s pretty cool you’ve made your own family,” she said.

“It was a long time ago,” Alli said. “So, changing the subject. Evelyn told me some things, but not everything. Mainly that she had a wolf who needed hiding and knew I was just the person to help out, since I helped Sadie. Did you know her well?”

“Not really. She’s older than me and we ran in different circles. But Evelyn was always really kind to me.”

“Then tell me the deets. I reached out to Alpha Cinder and she said I could bring you by any time after dinner tomorrow night, or we could push it back a few days if you want to decompress.”

Jade twisted her hands in her shirt as she stared out the window.

Suddenly things were moving even faster than before. She’d thought her life was in warp speed after meeting with Evelyn that morning, but after sitting on the bus all day and just generally worrying about everything, she had to meet with alphas of another wolf pack? What would happen?”

“Hey, hey, it’s okay, babe, I promise,” Alli said, giving Jade’s shoulder a gentle

squeeze. “I wasn’t trying to rush you. You don’t have to meet with Adam and Cinder anytime soon, you can just hang with me until you get settled. It’s very safe where I live, and I’m an excellent roommate.”

Jade chuckled and tears slipped down her cheeks.

“Thanks, Alli. I just... it’s a lot, you know?”

Yesterday I was grumbling about being punished unfairly by the alpha and I had a weird feeling that something was going to change.

Now I’m in another state in hiding and I don’t know if I should worry he’ll come after me or if he’ll just be glad I’m gone.

I didn’t even have a chance to pack anything from my place. ”

“I’d suggest Evelyn send your things here, but that would probably be a terrible idea.

She’d give me a heads-up if she heard someone was looking for you, so I wouldn’t worry about it.

She used a gift card to make the bus reservation for you, and while your alpha might think you were with the tigers because of Sadie, he would also realize that you would be under someone’s protection and wolfy alliance or not, I kind of doubt he’d come all this way to retrieve you. ”

“I’d like to believe that.”

“I get it. It’s okay to be concerned for your safety, but just don’t let it keep you from living your life.”

Jade let that roll around in her head. Then she sighed, and it felt like it bubbled up from somewhere deep inside her. “I never thought I’d get out of Ironwood.”

“But you made it. And Northern Ohio is great. Except for the winters, which suck, although I suppose Michigan winters aren’t a walk in the park either.”

“Definitely not.”

They talked about the town where Alli lived and her wild past, traveling all over the world and going on some crazy adventures.

When they reached the apartment complex, Alli let her into her place and said, “We can go shopping tomorrow if you’d like, or we can order whatever online.

I know you don’t have much money because you had to book out so fast, but I’ve got you covered.

You don’t live as long as I do without figuring out the stock market and also making friends with a psychic or two who can help you get a handle on finances. ”

“Handy.”

“For sure.”

Alli left her in the spare bedroom and told her to make herself at home.

She cleaned up and dressed in Sadie’s borrowed T-shirt and shorts and stretched out on the bed.

It was late and she was exhausted.

But for the first time, she felt a modicum of safety. She didn't feel quite at home, but then again, she wasn't sure she'd ever really felt at home anywhere.

Her dad hadn't made her feel like she was at home in the house she grew up in, but he'd kept her safe, so there was that.

She rolled to her side and closed her eyes.

Her wolf sighed softly in her head, and she felt herself relax, muscle by muscle, inch by inch until she fell asleep.

As her thoughts drifted away into dreamlessness, her last thought was that maybe Ohio could really be home, and maybe, just maybe, Alpha Holloway would forget about her, and she could make a life for herself here.

Maybe.

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Chapter

Six

Monday morning, Brick met up with the pack members who'd volunteered to be part of the security team throughout Cinder's pregnancy. While he was overseeing the new additions, he was relying on Solan and Leo to help keep an eye on the recruits and assist with training.

"All of you new recruits will be shadowing one of the current security team members in groups of two or more," Brick said as he stood on the back patio of the alphas' home.

"Today, you're learning the ropes of our patrols, and tomorrow you'll receive your assignments.

I will take into account those of you who requested particular shifts due to family or work constraints and will do my best. If you have any issues, check in with Solan, Leo, or me, and we'll do what we can. Questions?"

He waited and then smiled when no one responded.

"Great," he said, putting his phone in his back pocket. "Security team, grab one or two recruits and get going."

He waited until everyone had been chosen, save for one pack member: Uncle Carl.

“Hey,” he said, grinning. “You’re stuck with me.”

“Nice,” Carl said. “This is neat. I’m glad I could be part of things to help.”

“We definitely need someone who can work nights and weekends.”

“Your Aunt Janie is on a cooking show kick, and I don’t mind getting out of the house so I don’t have to try her creations.”

Brick laughed. “We’re going to start in the security office. I’ll show you how to check in and get your assignment, and then we’ll head to the edge of the territory to show you the cameras and motion detectors, and then we’ll walk the perimeter.”

“You got it.”

They walked toward the shed that had been turned into a security office a few years ago. Adam also had access to all the security feeds in his office, but the security office was manned twenty-four-seven by team members. Currently, Stewart sat at the U-shaped desk that was lined with monitors.

After showing Carl how to check in and get his assignment, he let Stewart show him the monitors and what each one was looking at.

Someone opened the door to the shed hard enough that it cracked against the wall with a loud bang.

“He’s missing!”

Brick’s instincts went on high alert as he saw Benjamin, wild-eyed and frantic, in the doorway.

“Who’s missing?” Brick asked.

“My son! Caleb was playing in the backyard. I went inside to grab something, and when I came out, he was gone!”

Brick put his hand on Ben’s shoulder, looked at Stewart, and said, “Send out an alert, and we’ll do a grid search immediately, starting at Ben’s house. Also, check the cameras to see if you see Caleb anywhere.” Brick then turned to Ben and asked, “Where’s Julia?”

“She’s out shopping with her mom. She’s on the way back, but she’s an hour out, and she’s going to kill me! Oh shit, I never should have left him alone.”

Brick said, “Uncle Carl? Let’s get to Ben’s.”

“On it.”

Brick led Ben out of the shed and said, “We’ll find him. You should shift and try to locate his scent. He couldn’t have gone far since he’s only four. And also, your house is pretty far from the edge of the territory, so I doubt he made it out of our town.”

They ran to Ben’s, and by the time they got there, half the security team had arrived and started a grid search from the house into the woods. Ben stripped and shifted, putting his nose to the ground and snuffling.

Solan came over. “We can start a grid search in this other direction too. You know what’s over there.” He gestured away from the house in the opposite direction of the grid search. Brick frowned. The creek that wove through the territory.

Even though it had been a dry summer so far, the creek was deep in places, with areas of wide, rushing water and slippery banks, and there were rocky outcroppings all over

that could be treacherous even to experienced climbers.

Carl said, "I'll stay with Ben and text if he finds him."

Brick texted Stewart to see if he located the child on the monitors. There weren't a lot of security cameras near the homes, so he wasn't hopeful anything would show up. Most of the security measures were near the perimeter and the alphas' house.

"Thanks, Uncle Carl, we'll head this way," Brick said. He whistled and the remaining team members and recruits joined him and Solan, spreading out to make a long line. "We're going to follow the creek. Keep your eyes peeled."

A few pack members shifted to utilize their heightened sense of smell. He and the others walked slowly, calling for Caleb and scanning the ground and trees as they moved away from the house.

Ten minutes later, they were in the thickest part of the woods and walking along the creek. Solan was on the other side with a severe frown on his face.

"How the hell far could a four-year-old walk?"

"If he was chasing something? I don't know, probably pretty far," Brick said. "He must have gotten into the water because no one can pick up his scent and we should have if he had remained on the ground."

He paused as something caught his attention. The sound of rocks falling.

"Did you hear that?" he asked.

"I only hear the water in the creek."

Brick turned slowly and tilted his head, focusing his hearing. As the sound of rocks sliding against rocks happened again, he suddenly knew exactly where little Caleb was. “The bend of the creek, where we used to hang out when we were kids. The ledge. Remember?”

“Oh shit,” Solan said.

They called for the others to follow as they took off toward the ledge.

When Brick and Solan were young, they would hang out with Adam and a few others in their age group at the creek in the summer, at a place they called “the ledge.” It had a shallow cave where they stashed girly mags and snacks and a ledge that leaned way out over the center of one of the widest points of the creek.

They would jump off the ledge into the water, sometimes slipping on the moss or rocks. He hadn’t thought about it in years.

As the ledge came into view, he saw young Caleb standing on the edge of it, crying and pointing. Rocks fell into the water below as he swayed back and forth on his bare feet.

“Caleb!” Brick called up to him. “Hey, kiddo! What’s the matter?”

He approached slowly, not wanting to scare the pup. Solan motioned that he was going to move to the other side of the rock and disappeared with a few team members.

“Bunny,” he said with a sniffle, pointing to the water that rushed by.

“Bunny?” Brick asked.

“It’s his stuffed animal, I think,” Reba, one of the recruits, said. “I’ve seen him in the deli with his parents with it. Maybe it fell in?”

“What if he dropped it in the water back where the creek is near his house and walked all this way?” Mark, a team member, asked. He pointed to the bank of the creek where small footprints led to the ledge. “He walked on the wet bank of the creek, which probably masked his scent.”

“Shit, he could have slipped in at any point,” Brick said. It was a miracle the kid hadn’t fallen in. “We’ll find Bunny,” he called up to him.

Caleb let out a little wail and took a step toward the ledge as Solan appeared on the top.

“Whoa, hold on, kiddo,” Brick said. “Don’t move!”

He was so damn close to the edge. Solan backed up. “It’s okay, little dude, we’ll go find Bunny together.”

Caleb smiled in relief and took a step toward Solan with his hand outstretched, but his bare feet slipped on the loose rocks and he pinwheeled his arms as he tottered backward.

The whole world slowed down as Brick shouted for the boy and raced toward him.

As Caleb tumbled over the edge, Brick leaped for him, catching his arm and pulling him into his body as he hit the far bank of the creek, half in the water and half in the mud.

He rolled on the bank, protecting Caleb from the impact, and exhaled sharply as he came to a rest on his back with the young boy on his chest.

Caleb, in shock, stared at Brick for a quiet moment, then he wailed.

The team members rushed over, and Reba lifted Caleb into her arms after checking him for injury. “You’re okay, kiddo. Brick just took you for a ride.”

“I’ve got it!” Marcy, one of the recruits, said, holding a soaking wet stuffed rabbit in one hand. She wrung it out and gave it to Caleb, whose tears dried up immediately.

Solan offered his hand to Brick. “Quick thinking, man. That was a superhero-esque leap.”

Brick groaned as he stood, his bones feeling like they’d taken quite the jostling with the impact. But better him than the kid. “Just doing my job.”

“I texted Carl and he and Ben will meet us at Ben’s house.”

“Let’s get the kiddo home,” Brick said.

“Yeah, and maybe suggest they put a tracker on him,” Solan said.

“Or definitely never let him out of their sight.”

As they made their way back to the house, they saw where Caleb’s footprints started along the bank of the river. Brick suspected he was playing, and his bunny got caught in the creek’s current and he just walked away without realizing where he was going.

Julia was at the house when they arrived and rushed to take Caleb into her arms. She thanked everyone, and Ben, still in his wolf form, howled happily.

“He must have climbed up the ledge to look for the bunny and then got scared,” Brick said.

“Who knows how far he would have wandered if he hadn’t gotten stuck.”

“Thank you, guys, so much,” Julia said. “We’ll make sure this doesn’t happen again if we have to fence in the whole yard.”

“It’s our job,” Brick said, “And we’re always thankful for happy endings.”

He called the team and recruits away from the house and the rejoicing parents, and said, “Okay, that was a great way to show how our team just jumps right in to help in emergencies. For anyone who shifted, keep up your patrols with your team member, and the rest of you get back to it.”

Carl stood next to him as the others left. “That was damn exciting.”

“Yeah, it was,” he said. “It’s been a long time since something like that happened. Thankfully it had a good resolution. It could have been a lot worse.”

“For sure. So we’re going to get back to checking out the security cameras and motion detectors?”

“Yep. Then we’ll hit the perimeter and walk around the entire territory.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Brick glanced over his shoulder at the house where a young family could have experienced a terrible tragedy. He was thankful the child was being returned safely.

He saw Julia and Ben together with their son, and knew that in the future, his own family would be like that.

He’d have his true mate by his side and they’d have children they would love and

protect.

His wolf felt an unshakable certainty about the future, that his mate would make him an even better protector than he already was because he'd be protecting the most precious thing in the world: his family.

His wolf let out a curious sound in his head as he and his uncle walked away, and Brick had the strangest feeling that something good was going to happen.

And soon. He didn't think his wolf was psychic, but Cinder's prophecy yesterday had stayed with him, and he could definitely feel that a change was coming.

Maybe, just maybe, he'd be meeting his truemate soon, and then he could get the next chapter of his life going.

The chapter where he found the other half of his heart.

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Chapter

Seven

Jade walked out of the bedroom three days after the full moon with an aching back and a grumpy disposition after spending another restless night tossing and turning.

She found the seemingly always cheerful fallen angel in the kitchen washing blueberries before putting them into a bowl with other fruit.

“Morning, hon.”

Jade plastered a smile she didn’t feel on her face. “Morning.”

“You look like the dead. You didn’t sleep well?”

“No. And thanks,” she said with a grimace.

Alli laughed and set a mug of coffee in front of Jade, then scooted a container of half and half across the table. “Sorry.”

“I didn’t wake you up tossing and turning, did I?”

“Nope, I had earbuds in all night. I love listening to the rain when I fall asleep.”

“I’m glad I didn’t bother you.”

Alli put a plate in front of Jade with an omelet and home fries, then settled in the chair across the table with the bowl of fruit salad. As she spooned some into a bowl, Jade picked up the coffee and took a sip.

“You okay?”

“I think I need to go to the wolf pack,” Jade said.

“Oh? What’s going on in that wolfy head of yours?”

“My wolf is unsettled. Has been since we got here. And if I ever want to get a good night’s sleep again, I need to go there.”

“Why do you look like you’re making an appointment to get a root canal?”

“Because I’m worried.”

“Adam and Cinder are great, honestly. If I thought they’d be assholes to you, I wouldn’t take you there.”

“It’s not that,” she said. She put the mug down and lifted the fork, giving a gentle poke to the omelet. “It’s just... What happens when I get there? What if they ask me to join the pack? Or what if they say I can’t?”

“Do you want to join the pack?”

“I don’t know if I can. I’m still a member of the Ironwood Pack. I wasn’t exiled, I ran away.”

“To save your life, honey.” She hesitated, then picked up her phone from the table and swiped up, turning it around and setting it in front of Jade. “I got this email from

Evelyn about three a.m.”

Jade read the message.

Thank you for helping our friend. I hope she has a good life. Alpha is suspicious that I helped but has no proof. I’m too low ranked for him to care about. Other pack has left town, several arranged matings occurred. I wish I could have helped them too. Tell our friend hello. xx

Jade’s eyes stung. “So you think that means I’m safe? And also that Evelyn is safe too?”

“I’d say so. If she was in trouble with the alpha, she wouldn’t have been able to message me, and if you were in danger, she’d have said something about that too. She’s always a little cryptic in her messages, but she’s one of the most careful people I know. If she was worried, she’d let me know.”

“That’s...really wonderful.”

“So the answer to your worries is that I don’t know what will happen when you meet the alphas of Thorn Hollow.

They’re not going to make demands of you, like expect you to just join up with them immediately, and no way would they endanger you by reaching out to your old alpha.

It’s just a meeting. Just a how-do-you-do sort of thing. ”

Jade exhaled and rolled her neck. “I can do that.”

“Yeah? You can say how do you do?”

Rolling her eyes, she said, “Oh my gosh, yes.” Then she smiled. “Thanks for letting me know about Evelyn’s message. It makes me feel a lot better.” She wasn’t sure she’d ever get to a place where she felt completely safe, but she was a step closer. It would probably just take time.

Maybe she’d be able to really make a life for herself in Northern Ohio, whether she joined up with the pack or not.

“If you decide pack life isn’t for you right now, I’m planning to hang out with Sadie later and you can hang with us.

The tigers are very open to visitors. Plus, my friend Angie, who’s a wolf and mated to two vampires, has a place she goes with some other shifters for full moon hunts and I know I could get you an invite. ”

“Did you say two vampires? As mates?”

“Yup.”

Jade’s eyes went wide. “I didn’t know vampires shared.”

“Some do. I think most don’t. That goes for shifters in general, I’d say.”

“True.”

While they ate, they talked about the shifter groups in the area. Jade had never heard of so many different kinds in one place, but along with the vampires and Wiccans who also called Northern Ohio home, there were bears, dragons, wolves, tigers, falcons, and white lions.

“There’s a Pegasus in the bear den, his name is Atlas, and there are also a few

scattered around, like a panther who works for the vampires, and there's the vampire club house band that has a wolf, a panther, and a falcon."

"The vampires must like shifters. I thought they liked our blood too much to have us hang around."

"They can control themselves," she said. "It's a common misconception."

"I've never been around a vampire. Or much more than wolves, honestly. Northern Ohio is eye-opening."

"I'm your first fallen angel too, huh?"

"Yep."

"Well, you started with the best. What can I say?"

Jade felt a little lighter in her heart as they chatted about shifters and other supernaturals. Her wolf wanted to go to the wolf pack and meet with the alphas, and the fear that had been nagging her wasn't quite so profound since Evelyn had reached out.

Thank goodness Evelyn had helped out in the first place. Otherwise, Jade might have found herself in an arranged mating to that dangerous male.

No longer bound by the whims of her alpha, Jade was free to make her own choices.

And she was choosing to see what the Thorn Hollow Pack was like.

"I thought you weren't nervous anymore," Alli said.

Jade stared at the big house that belonged to Adam and Cinder Beaumont and chewed on her thumbnail. “I’m not.”

“Liar.”

“Okay, I wasn’t as nervous after reading Evelyn’s message, but I’m still a little nervous. They’re alphas!”

“Yeah, and good people.”

“You keep saying that.”

“It’s true. But you won’t know until you get out of my car.”

“Fine.” She inhaled deeply and then exhaled sharply. Opening the door, she stepped free of the convertible and shut the door, taking a moment to scent the air. It smelled heavily of the woods and summer heat. And wolves. Plenty of them.

The Thorn Hollow Pack had over a hundred members, and Adam had been alpha for a long time.

According to Alli, he and his mate Cinder lived in the home with his parents and several high ranked males.

The three-story house was huge on all fronts, with a manicured front yard.

It looked inviting and intimidating all at the same time.

Her heart thudded suddenly, and she rubbed it with her fingers.

Her wolf was acting up again and had been vocal since they hit the road after lunch.

She wished her wolf could talk, but all the beast could really do was give her feelings and intuition. And she was definitely feeling something. Like the place she was supposed to be was here, in Thorn Hollow.

But for what reason?

The front door opened, and a male stood in the doorway. She didn't have to be introduced to know he was the alpha. He just had the vibe. Powerful, authoritative.

"Hello, Alli," he said, his voice deep and rich. "And you must be Jade."

They walked up to the front door, and she shook his extended hand. "Hello, Alpha Beaumont."

He gave her a curious look and then said, "You're safe here, Jade. We take care of our own, and you're under mine and Cinder's protection now whether you join up with our pack in the future or not."

She blinked in surprise. "Oh. I...Thank you so much."

"I can tell you're nervous, and from what I've heard of your history, that makes sense. Nothing has to happen today but a chat. Come and meet my mate, and we'll see where the day takes us."

"Do you need me to stick around, babe?" Alli asked.

Jade smiled. "I think I'm good."

"We can have one of our security team run you home whenever you're ready," Adam said.

“That’s works, thanks.” She hugged Alli and said goodbye, following the alpha into the house.

He introduced her to Cinder, a beautiful blond who welcomed her with a warm hug. They sat in the family room on comfortable couches. After declining a drink, she was asked about her history, and she told them the story of how she’d come to flee Michigan and wind up in Ohio.

“Damn,” Adam said.

Cinder smacked his arm.

“Crap, sorry.” He rubbed his arm. At Jade’s confused look, Adam said, “We’re not really telling anyone, but Cinder’s pregnant. Keep it under your hat for now.”

“Congratulations, and I sure will.”

“This whole pack swears like they’re descendants of sailors,” Cinder said with a sigh.

“So you’ve got quite a backstory there,” Adam said. “Your alpha sounds like a real piece of work. I don’t operate that way. The only way I’d arrange a mating was if I was asked to, and both parties would have to agree.”

“I’m just thankful to be anywhere but there.”

“What if I bring in some females to hang out for lunch? Nothing fancy, just a casual get-together? My mother-in-law is awesome. You’ll love her. We can go for a walk around the territory too, maybe?”

“Only with protectors,” Adam said.

“Of course.”

“I’d love that,” Jade said.

“Let me go make some calls,” Cinder said, excusing herself.

For a moment, Jade felt like whatever she’d been feeling before suddenly got stronger. She rose slowly to her feet and looked toward the hall that led to the front door. Her wolf perked up, eager and alert, as if sensing something nearby.

Or someone.

“You okay?” Adam asked.

The front door opened and everything inside Jade went profoundly quiet.

She opened her mouth to answer Adam, when a male stepped into the family room a few moments later.

He was huge. Broad-shouldered and muscular, with dark hair and eyes, and the air of someone with power and authority.

Her wolf surged forward, slamming into her with the recognition of the male before her.

Her mind reeled as a word echoed inside her. Truemate.

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Chapter

Eight

Brick grabbed lunch from the deli in town run by pack members. Brandon and his mate Claire had been supplying sandwiches and snacks to the pack for decades and were a staple in the community.

“Heard you had an exciting morning,” Brandon said as he sliced fresh roast beef for the sub.

“Yep. With a happy ending,” Brick said.

“That’s always a good thing.”

He piled the meat high on the freshly baked sub roll and took Brick’s direction for cheese and toppings.

His mate came from the back and smiled. “Hi, Brick. Can I get you a drink?”

“I’ve got one in my car already, thanks.”

“Are you heading back to the alphas’ house?” she asked.

“Not directly, I was going to the security office after my break, but that’s near the house and I can stop in. Why?”

“Cinder called and asked if we had chips. She’s having a little luncheon at the house and is out.”

“I’d be happy to take them over.”

She smiled and returned to the back while Brandon wrapped up his sandwich.
“Anything else, son?”

“No, I’m good, thanks.” He paid the bill and then took the paper sack containing two large bags of chips before saying goodbye and heading to his truck.

He scrolled social media and ate his sandwich, then crumpled up the wrapper and stuffed it into the cup holder to toss later. When he got to the alphas’ house, his wolf suddenly became restless.

He felt an urgency he couldn’t explain.

There wasn’t any danger. No strangers roaming around to rouse his beast.

But still. He felt like something was pulling him out of his truck, and it was such a strong feeling that he couldn’t ignore it.

He climbed from the truck, grabbed the bag containing the chips, and slammed the door shut. He inhaled to see if he could pick up any scents but didn’t smell anything out of the ordinary.

His wolf was no actual help, just head butting him from the inside and urging him to get into the house.

He walked into the house and dropped the chips off in the kitchen.

And then he froze as his heart clenched tightly. What the hell?

He heard voices coming from the family room and was drawn there. He strode into the room and scanned it, his gaze landing on a female he didn't know.

His whole world tilted.

His wolf surged forward within him and he had to grit his teeth to stop from howling or shifting, or both.

Recognition rose inside him.

She's ours.

His breath caught, and for a moment, he was struck speechless. His instincts demanded he approach her, claim her, but he reined them in. She seemed to be similarly frozen and staring at him in surprise, but he couldn't miss the wariness and the stiff posture.

Adam rose to his feet. "Jade Albright, this is Brick Beaumont. He's second-in-command of the wolf pack and also in charge of security. And, as a plus, he's my cousin. You're in safe hands with him around."

Brick snapped to attention and forced himself to relax. Adam saying she was safe with him around told him that something was wrong in her world, and maybe she was in danger.

Not on my fucking watch.

He joined them and extended his hand. "Hi, Jade, it's nice to meet you. Welcome to Thorn Hollow."

She shook his hand, her grip firm but cautious. As their gazes met once more, her eyes flashed amber and then back to a beautiful green.

“Jade was brought here by our fallen angel friend Alli,” Cinder said as she walked into the room. “She’s not in danger per se, but we do have some concerns and were going to talk to you about them. Perhaps...Jade would like to tell you herself?”

Jade looked at Cinder and then back to Brick, but she didn’t say anything.

“Have you been around the territory yet? We could go for a walk, and I could show you our security measures if it might ease your mind,” he offered.

“That sounds like a great idea,” Adam interjected. “Cinder invited some females over to meet Jade, but they can just hang out until you get back. Assuming you want to go for a walk, of course, Jade.”

“Sure,” Jade said. Her voice was flat but a spark of curiosity was in her eyes.

Brick took her out the front door and into the yard. He said, “The alphas’ house is the center of the territory. Our pack has a clearing nearby that we use for ceremonies and full moon get-togethers. Was your pack like that?”

“Yeah.”

“I suspect most of them are, but it just makes it easier to have a place to get together.” As they strolled through the woods, he kept the tone light, pointing out the security measures around the alphas’ home and then the ones toward the edge of the territory.

He let her set the pace for the conversation, and eventually, as they reached the ledge where Caleb had nearly taken a header that morning, she talked about her past.

They stopped at the edge of the babbling creek and he listened as she told him about her mom being exiled when she was little and having no idea where she was or if she was even still alive, her distant father and his death the year before, that had opened the floodgates of her alpha's crappy treatment of her.

She stared at the water and cracked a twig between her fingers.

"I think I started rebelling when I was younger to get a reaction out of my dad. He never seemed to care about me one way or the other, but when he had to get me out of trouble, it was like he actually saw me. I don't think he liked being a dad."

She glanced at him and he saw the pain in her eyes. He wanted to wrap her up in a hug and promise to never let anyone hurt her like that again, but he kept his hands to himself. She was clearly going through things and needed time.

"I'm sorry about all of it," he said. "I know that doesn't change what you went through but still, I'm sorry."

She gave him a half smile. "Thanks." After a long pause, she continued the story of how she came to be in Thorn Hollow thanks to a pack member's quick thinking and a benevolent fallen angel.

"Alli should start a rescue organization," he said. "She's been a friend to so many people over the years." She'd even saved his cousin Angie's life when she was on the way home from the vampire club and they were attacked by the anti-vampire church wackos.

"She'd be really good at that," Jade said.

"You don't feel safe," he said.

“What makes you say that?”

“You’re tense and looking everywhere, like you expect someone to pop out from behind a tree. It’s understandable that you’d worry about either your alpha looking for you or that dangerous male he was going to mate you with.”

“But?” She turned to face him, her eyes wide and her lips parted slightly.

“But what are the odds they could actually track you here? You said you turned off your phone before you left your pack and never had to turn it on, and you didn’t use a credit card for the bus ticket or buy anything on the trip.

The odds they’d figure out you came here seem pretty damn tiny. Microscopic even.”

She pursed her lips together and then smiled. “Microscopic?”

“Definitely.”

When she actually smiled at him, genuinely, he almost fell to his knees.

He’d thought her beautiful when he first met her, but she was truly a stunning female.

Petite and curvy in all the right places, with a dimple in one cheek and long, dark lashes, and she had a waterfall of dark hair he itched to run his fingers through.

He wanted to pull her close and kiss her, savor the taste of her like fine wine.

And he thought about all the other wickedly wonderful things he desired to do to her.

“I’m worried I won’t ever be able to stop looking over my shoulder.”

“I understand,” he said. “But you don’t have to be afraid here. Not only does the wolf pack protect those within our territory, but I’m not going to let anything happen to you.”

She stepped close, their bodies nearly touching.

“Why is that, Brick?”

He wondered for a heartbeat what she was looking for in an answer. But he was an honest male and wouldn’t try to beat around the bush.

“You’re my truemate, Jade. I knew it the second I saw you.

But it’s also clear that you’ve been through hell.

So I’m not going to ask you to be my mate until you’re ready.

We’ll take it slow, get to know each other.

” He lifted his hand and hesitated, then cupped her cheek.

She sighed at the contact, and he smiled.

“But no matter what, I promise you’re safe here in Thorn Hollow and with me. ”

She wrapped her hand around his wrist and stared up at him. “I know you’re mine too. I didn’t think that would ever happen to me. I always kind of felt like I’d be alone forever, and maybe that’s because we were so far apart.”

“Let me take you out tonight. It’ll just be us. Mostly.”

“Mostly?”

“Our pack doesn’t let anyone leave the area alone, so we’d have backup in the form of a few security team members in a following vehicle.” He took her hand and they walked back toward the alphas’ house. He told her about the anti-shifter group and poacher who’d been causing problems.

“I had no idea there was an anti-shifter group. Or a poacher.” She shivered. “How awful.”

“Right? You have to be some kind of sicko to think that’s okay. But anyway, you won’t even notice the security team is nearby, and I promise you’ll feel safe.”

They reached the back patio of the alphas’ house and stopped, facing each other. He could see she was still a little wary, probably about leaving the safety of the pack territory, but there was a glimmer of hope in her eyes.

“Okay,” she said. “I’d love to go out with you.”

He felt a surge of triumph when she agreed, his wolf practically tap-dancing in happiness.

“I’m supposed to eat lunch with Cinder and some females, and then someone was going to take me back to Alli’s.”

“I’d be happy to drive you there,” he said.

“If you don’t mind waiting for me to get ready, we could go out after that so you don’t have to drive back and forth.”

“I wouldn’t mind the driving if that’s what works for you, but I’m happy to hang out.

Did you get a new phone yet?"

"Yeah, Alli helped me get one so no one could track me with my old one. What's your number?"

After giving Jade his number, she texted him so he had hers.

"I'm heading back out on patrol. Just let me know when you're ready and I'll drive you to Alli's," he said.

She gifted him with one of her amazing smiles again, then said, "Have fun on patrol. And be safe."

"Always."

He watched her go into the house and then turned to head to the security office. His wolf was prancing like a show pony and he was excited for what the night would bring. He couldn't believe he'd found his truemate. At his alphas' house of all places.

Opening the door to the security office, he was glad to see a handful of males inside, including Leo and Solan.

"All right, guys, I need help. I've got plans tonight with my truemate and I need to impress her with a spectacular first date. Ideas people. I need ideas!"

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Chapter

Nine

Jade didn't really want Brick to leave, but she also wanted time to come to terms with what had just happened in a short amount of time. Not only had she been sweetly welcomed by the alphas, but she'd found her truemate.

What were the odds that Evelyn had sent not only her daughter to Ohio but also Jade, and both females had found their mates?

Within an hour, the kitchen of the alphas' home was bustling with activity and a handful of females were seated around the island, chatting and eating a buffet of lunch items, from chicken salad with grapes and pecans to homemade potato chips and onion dip, to a platter of small cupcakes and cookies.

The females immediately made Jade feel at home with their kind words and easygoing natures as they asked her questions about herself without seeming to be prying and shared as much about themselves as they asked of her.

When the meal had wound down and the females were gone, she helped Cinder in the kitchen with the dishes.

"What did you think?" Cinder asked, rinsing a plate and setting it on the rack to dry.

"They're sweet."

“They sure are. I was raised by a Wiccan coven, so I didn’t grow up with a pack.

It wasn’t until I met and mated Adam that my lygisa nature came out, and I was able to shift for the first time.

Everyone has always been so sweet to me.

Even though Adam and the high ranked males can be real crazy about keeping everyone safe, the pack as a whole is sweet as pie. ”

“It seems like it.”

Cinder gave her a curious look. “We take care of each other in this pack. You and Brick are truemates, and even though you just met, you’re already under the protection of the pack.

Not to mention Brick’s personal interest in keeping you safe.

If there’s anyone who can keep you safe, it’s your truemate. ”

Jade dried off a bowl with a ring of delicately painted wolves on the rim and set it in the cabinet. “I never really felt safe. Not anywhere.”

Cinder hummed. “I’m sorry things were rough for you with your old pack.

I’m sorry that you lost your mom at a young age and that you had a dad who didn’t give you the affection and protective nurturing that you needed.

But you don’t have to tie yourself to that anymore.

You can forge a new path here, in Thorn Hollow. ”

With Brick.

Something ached in the center of her heart and Jade rubbed the space with her fingertips. “I’m just afraid.”

“Of your alpha coming for you? Or of losing the safe feelings that are starting to bloom within you?”

Jade gave the alpha female a curious look.

Cinder chuckled. “Even though I didn’t have the same situation as you growing up, I really had trouble trusting Adam in the beginning.

I didn’t want my life to change, I was happy with how things were, or at least I thought I was.

He came crashing into my life and, if you couldn’t tell, he has kind of a bossy streak.

It took a lot for me to trust him and to let myself go into the new path for my life that finding him created.

I never thought I’d be part of a wolf pack or a hybrid wolf-witch who can help keep my people safe, but here I am.

” She turned off the water and dried her hands on a towel.

“Your alpha is clearly old-school, so he wouldn’t simply show up here and abduct you.

He’d go through Adam. And trust me when I say that my mate is not about to let someone take you away from your truemate, fully mated or not.

Thorn Hollow is safe, and Brick is a sweet guy who would genuinely lay down his life for you.

That's how serious the males in our pack are when it comes to their mates. ”

A shiver wove through Jade. She'd always thought her dad had done a good job keeping her safe, but he did it out of obligation, not because he cared about her well-being per se.

But she could tell that Brick wanted her to be safe.

In the span of the time they'd spent walking around the territory, that was the one thing she knew was true.

He already cared that she was safe.

And she cared about his safety too.

“I didn't realize how unsafe I felt in my own pack until I was here. Our groups are very different. Brick... is different.”

“In this scenario, different is good.”

The front door opened and Jade knew it was Brick before he walked into the kitchen. She could feel him, like her wolf was attuned to him.

“I think you're right,” Jade said.

“Hi, ladies,” Brick said with an easygoing smile when he appeared.

Jade thought her heart was going to pound out of her chest. He was genuinely the

sexiest male she'd ever seen in her life, and her wolf was making a lot of demands in her head about how they should move forward. She wanted to take things slow, but her libido had other ideas.

"How was the patrol?" Jade asked.

"Quiet," he said. "Just how I like it."

She gave Cinder a hug. "Thank you for today, it was great."

"Anytime. Have fun on your date. The last first date you two will ever have."

Jade's wolf let out an appreciative growl, which she barely stifled with a cough.

After saying goodbye, she walked with Brick outside and he opened his truck door for her. They were on the road a few minutes later, leaving Thorn Hollow, followed by an SUV with two security team members—Brick's best friend Solan and his Uncle Carl.

"So you and Solan grew up together with Adam? Did you know he'd be alpha someday?"

"For sure. He always had that powerful air about him. The alpha before him, Lit, had a mate who was a Wiccan, and she'd been the pack Sahri until they had to leave the pack because of some family drama. Adam wasn't planning to take over for a long time, but Lit needed to focus on his family."

"So the pack isn't hereditary for leadership?"

"It is now since Adam changed the laws when he took over. Before, whoever was second-in-command took over when the alpha stepped down. Now, it's the oldest

child born to the alpha pair.”

“You don’t mind not being able to be alpha someday?”

“Hell no, I don’t want to be alpha.”

She laughed at his tone. “No?”

“Absolutely not. I deal with enough headaches as the number two, but Adam also has to play diplomat with the Wiccans, vampires, and other shifter groups, not to mention keeping our pack safe, plus his mate and their future children. It’s a huge job.

He delegates a lot to me, but he’s got a ton of responsibilities. I’m happy being second-in-command.”

“That’s good, it would suck if you really wanted to be alpha but he changed the laws so you couldn’t be.”

“I’m sure it happens,” he said, “where someone believes they’re a better fit than the next in line, but that’s not me.”

While they drove to Alli’s, she told him about the visit with the pack females and how sweet everyone was, and he told her about the quiet afternoon on patrol. “I also set up the schedule for next week so that I had more free time.”

Her stomach flipped.

The way he said free time had a charged tone.

She bit her bottom lip, her cheeks heating as images played through her mind.

What the heck did he look like naked?

Good, she bet.

Fantastic.

Brick growled softly and reached for her hand, bringing it to his lips for a moment. “You smell incredible, Jade.”

She might have been a little embarrassed that he could smell how turned on she was, but she could tell he was too. He smelled amazing, like the best cologne she’d ever sniffed wrapped up in a devastatingly handsome package.

Dark eyes, dark hair, wicked smile.

Sex on a freaking stick.

Clearing her throat and trying to shove the sexy thoughts to the backburner for the time being, she gave his hand a squeeze as he rested it on his thigh.

“What are you planning for our first date?”

He glanced at her with a knowing smile. “Nice change of subject.”

“Well, I’m going to spontaneously combust if I don’t do that.”

“I wouldn’t want that to happen. At least not while we have clothes on.”

Oh my stars!

“Anyway,” he said, his voice rough for a moment, “I’ve got a reservation for dinner

for us at this tiny Italian place.

It's close to Alli's. When I say tiny, I mean it's literally in the basement of a home that's been kitted out like a restaurant.

Everything's fresh and made to order. Leo told me he'd seen something on social media about it, and Adam called on my behalf to see if they could seat us tonight, and they have a table for us. ”

“Wow, sounds amazing, but honestly, it wouldn't matter to me if we got burgers in a drive-thru as long as we were together.”

“I want to make sure we have the most amazing first date together. Whatever we do, as long as we're together, I'll be happy.”

She was sure she would be too.

Chapter

Ten

Brick couldn't get over how good Jade smelled when she was turned on. Like melted sugar and sweet feminine heat. He wanted to pull over to the side of the road and kiss her and touch her and make her feel as amazing as he felt just being in her presence.

But he didn't because he was a gentleman, damn it, and he was going to give his skittish sweetheart time to come to terms with her new life. He wanted to keep her safe, and he wasn't going to be a caveman about anything. She could come to him when she was ready, and he'd be waiting.

When they got to Alli's apartment, he and the fallen angel talked while Jade got ready for their date. Brick had dressed in slacks and a dress shirt, casual but a little upscale.

Alli was a protective and strong female who looked out for her friends.

"Do you think you'll bring her back here tonight?" Alli asked. "I want to give her a key to my place since I was going to head to Lykos."

"I'll hold onto it," he said.

Alli handed the key to him, and he hooked the carabiner on his own keys.

"Thanks, Brick. Hey, take good care of my new friend. She's nervous about putting her trust in anyone because she just found out a few days ago that her alpha was

going to force her to mate with some dangerous asshole.”

“I promise to be careful with her,” he said.

“I hear your sweetie, lemme leave you two to things. Have fun!”

As Alli disappeared down the hall, Jade walked into the kitchen wearing a short black skirt and a white gauzy tank top with soft gray florals. Her hair was long and loose around her shoulders and her eyes were bright with excitement.

“You look amazing,” he said. He captured her hand and kissed the top of it.

“Thank you,” she said. “Alli took me shopping when I got here since I only had one change of clothes with me.”

“You look like a dream,” he said. My dream come true.

He offered her his arm as she blushed sweetly and smiled at him, and escorted her to his truck.

In no time they were at the little restaurant having the best lasagna he’d ever had in his life.

Conversation flowed easily between them as they ate.

By the time they shared a white chocolate crème brûlée with fresh berries, he was half in love with her.

He hoped she felt the same.

They stepped out of the restaurant into the humid night.

The whole evening he'd felt like things were moving forward between them, and she was starting to genuinely feel safe.

She stared up at him, and the air became charged.

It was as if he could see the electricity flowing between them, the early bloom of their relationship as mates starting to form.

He wanted to tell her how beautiful she was and how much he liked her already, but when he opened his mouth to say something, she went onto her toes and kissed him.

He was so surprised that he didn't move for a heartbeat, and then his instincts kicked in and he pulled her close and let himself go into the kiss. She was soft against him, her curves fitting against the hard planes of his body perfectly.

As the kiss deepened, he was aware that they were in public and he should be paying attention to their surroundings. But he couldn't stop kissing her.

Just a second longer.

Or a few minutes perhaps.

But then something prickled in awareness for him and he broke from the drugging kiss.

He looked around the small parking lot and the few vehicles there, including the one Solan was driving.

He didn't see anything out of the ordinary, but the strange feeling that they were being watched lingered so he took Jade's hand and led her to his truck.

As they approached, he caught sight of a dark sedan parked a few spaces away.

The engine was idling nearly silent, and the windows were tinted too dark to see inside.

Something about the way the vehicle was sitting there, idling, made his wolf stir with unease.

He guided Jade to the passenger side and opened the door. When she was seated, he shut the door and stared at the sedan.

His instincts were screaming at him that something about the sedan wasn't right.

Climbing behind the wheel, he texted Solan to keep an eye out for the sedan and see if it followed them. He hoped he was just seeing things because he was on alert with his mate, but he wasn't so sure.

As he headed to Alli's apartment, the unease stayed with him. Jade was talking animatedly about the lasagna and how she'd like to learn how to make it like that, but his attention was divided.

A text alert from Solan showed up on the GPS screen.

Sedan just passed us. We can't see inside with the window tint. Suspicious.

"What's suspicious?" Jade asked. "What sedan?"

He quickly told her about what he'd seen and the strange feeling he had while they were kissing.

"Oh gosh," she said. She turned in her seat and looked behind them. "What are you

going to do?”

“Change of plans,” he said.

“To what?”

“I’m going to take you to the pack. You can stay in the alphas’ house with me in one of the spare rooms on the second floor where my room is. It’s the very safest place for you.”

He glanced at her, and she met his gaze.

“Okay. I trust your judgment.”

That meant the world to him. He used the voice control to send a message to Solan, then slid across two lanes to take the next exit, leaving the sedan on the highway. He and Solan wove their way to Thorn Hollow, never seeing the sedan again.

But if someone was watching them at the restaurant, they most likely knew they were wolves and had come from the pack. He suspected it would just be a matter of time before they saw it again.

Adam and Cinder were waiting when they reached the alphas’ house. Brick walked Jade inside.

Cinder said, “You can stay in the spare room right next to Brick’s. I’ve got jammies you can borrow too.”

“Thanks.” Jade grabbed his hand and pulled him aside. She gave him a hug and said, “Thank you for looking out for me. For tonight. It was amazing.”

“I’m sorry it got ruined.”

“It wasn’t ruined. I mean, it sucked at the end there, but we made it back here unharmed. And you showed me that you can keep me safe. Honestly, I’ve never felt so comfortable with someone before.” She stared up at him, her eyes glittering with emotion.

He cupped her face and kissed her, and she melted against him with a soft sigh.

She was his to protect, and he’d be damned if he let anyone hurt her.

As the kiss ended, he whispered, “I meant it when I said you’re safe with me, Jade. There isn’t anything I wouldn’t do to keep you safe and with me.”

“I believe you.”

He brushed his lips over hers and said, “Sleep well, sweetheart. I’ll see you in the morning.”

She pursed her lips for a moment, then said, “Good night, Brick.”

She left his arms and met up with Cinder, and he and his mate shared a lingering look before she took to the stairs to go to the second floor.

He walked to Adam, who spoke to Solan and Carl about the sedan. “First things first, let’s check the vehicles for trackers, but I believe you’re right, Brick. They were clearly watching our town for people leaving,” Adam said.

“They didn’t try to get to us though,” Brick said. “They just followed us.”

“Maybe there was an ambush closer to town and we avoided it because we came in a

different way with the detour,” Solan suggested. “Maybe they were trailing us and planning to run us into danger.”

“I think it’s pretty clear that Foley is up to his tricks again,” Adam said with a growl. “Send a pack-wide alert to reiterate that no one goes anywhere without an official security escort, including walking through the territory.”

Carl clapped him on the back. “Sorry your date got ruined, Brick. Looks like you two had a good time though.”

“Up until the end there,” Brick said ruefully.

“There will be other dates,” Carl said. “The important thing is you got her and yourself to safety.”

Brick nodded. He desperately wanted to spend more time with Jade, but this was definitely important.

If Brent Foley and his anti-shifter people had turned their focus on the wolf pack, then trouble was brewing for sure, and Jade’s safety, along with the safety of the pack, were of the utmost importance to him.

“Let’s go for a run in our shifts and check if we can scent anything out of the ordinary,” Brick said.

“Sounds good to me,” Solan said.

“I’ll go too,” Adam said.

“I’ll hang ‘round the house here until you return,” Carl said.

“Let’s do it,” Brick said.

They headed outside and stripped on the porch, shifting and flying into the woods with warning howls. The pack would not allow anyone to harm their people, and Brick was going to do everything in his power to ensure that his sweetheart was safe, and the pack too.

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Chapter

Eleven

Jade hung up her clothes and changed into the tank top and matching shorts that Cinder had brought for her. Then she sent a text to Alli.

How was the date? Alli responded.

Awesome. Until things went to crap. Jade told Alli about being followed and how she was going to stay at the alphas' house for the night.

Yeah, of course, stay there and be safe. No way Foley and his assholes could get anywhere near the alphas' house. How do you like the wolf pack?

Jade smiled. I like them a lot. Everyone that I've met is friendly and welcoming.

I told you they would be! I'm so glad you're enjoying yourself, and I think it's awesome that you and Brick found each other. Talk about a silver lining.

Thanks for bringing me to the pack. Have a good night.

You too. xx

Jade put the phone on the nightstand in the small, tidy bedroom. It had an attached bathroom, and both rooms were done in soft grays, from the plush carpeting to the comforter on the full bed.

She heard voices outside and peeked out the window, seeing Brick with the alpha and Solan, talking about patrolling for danger. They started stripping and she turned away to give them privacy.

Well, she looked a little bit. Brick was a sexy male and even sexier when he stripped.

She thought about him as she sat on the bed and looked around the room. It was quiet in the house since it was late, but she was too on edge to sleep. The truth was that she wanted to see Brick again. It felt like their date had gotten cut short, and she didn't like that.

What would have happened if their date had ended naturally? He would have taken her to Alli's and they would have kissed on the front steps of the apartment complex and he would have left her to go home. But here she was, actually in the house he lived in.

But she was alone in a room.

She wasn't a very bold person, she didn't normally step out of her comfort zone, but she wanted to see him. The kiss at the restaurant left her feeling achy and needy, and she wanted more.

She didn't want him to mark her as his mate—not yet—but she wanted to do something.

She craved him.

And she'd never craved anyone before.

She rose from the bed and walked to the door. Opening it, she peeked out into the hall and found it empty. She didn't know how long Brick would be, but she couldn't think

of a better place to wait for him than his bedroom.

She slipped from her room and walked the short distance to the next one. Opening it, she couldn't see much in the dark, but she could pick up his sexy scent and knew it was his room. She closed the door and walked over to the window, tilting the blinds to let in a little of the moonlight.

Her stomach flipped.

How long would she have to wait in the dark to see her sexy...mate?

Mate.

Brick was her mate. Her truemate.

She was going to do something bold and wild, and she hoped he was ready for this next step. She was skipping some steps in the get-to-know-each-other phase, but they could make up for the other stuff later.

Her whole body was on fire, and the only one who could take care of her was her sexy, sexy truemate.

She wasn't really sure how much time had passed before she saw the shadow at the door and heard Brick tell someone goodnight.

She swung her legs around on the bed and rose to her feet.

The door opened and Brick stood in the doorway.

He was highlighted by the low lights in the hall. He paused and inhaled sharply, and then growled softly as he shut the bedroom door.

She'd made it halfway to the door when he stepped into the room and she froze as he approached. Her heart was beating wildly, and she was tongue-tied.

"Jade," he murmured.

He stopped in front of her, smelling like moonlight and the woods.

Her voice squeaked as she tried to speak and she cleared her throat and said, "Everything good outside?"

"All safe and quiet."

She stared up at him, his features mostly hidden by shadows, but her eyes had adjusted to the moonlight streaming through the blinds and she could make out his features.

Not that she needed to see him clearly to know what he looked like because she'd memorized his features at dinner, from his strong jaw to his straight nose, the dark eyes framed with thick lashes and perfectly kissable lips.

"I wanted to see you," he said, his voice a little growly. "But I thought you'd be asleep."

"I didn't want to go to sleep without seeing you. I didn't really want to go to sleep at all."

"No?" He moved a little closer, their bodies bumping with the motion.

What could she say? That she'd been fantasizing about him since she'd walked into his bedroom, laying on his bed that smelled like him and wondering what it would be like to really be held and touched by someone who cared about her?

“I’m glad you’re here,” he said. “I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you since we parted ways downstairs.”

“I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you either.”

She saw his eyes flash to the amber of his wolf in the darkness. “I can tell, sweetheart. You smell like you’ve been thinking about wicked things.”

She bit her bottom lip as her body heated.

Of course he could tell she was turned on because shifters had an intense sense of smell. But they were mates, too, and even if they weren’t actually mated they were connected on a stronger level.

He tipped her chin up and whispered her name before he kissed her like he was staking a claim. Passion flared deep within her as he slid his tongue against hers and deepened the kiss. She reached for his shirt and tugged it upward.

He snarled softly and lifted her up, turning and setting her on the dresser. He slid his hands up the inside of her thighs, delving them under the shorts. He pushed her panties to the side and rubbed his fingers along the lips of her pussy as he kissed her.

She tilted her head back and broke the kiss as he slid two fingers slowly inside her.

She moaned softly and met his gaze as he pulled his fingers out and pushed in again.

She spread her thighs farther apart and grabbed his shoulders, leaning back as he fingered her, finding just the right places to touch her.

Her toes curled and the center of her body turned to molten lava.

She bit her bottom lip to stop from crying out loudly as she came, his fingers deep inside her, this thumb on her clit driving her wild, and her whole world focusing on him.

With her climax still rolling through her, she gasped in surprise as he carried her to the bed and laid her down, swiftly stripping her and himself, revealing inch after inch of sexy perfection.

“I don’t want to mark you,” he said as he kissed his way up her body until he was stretched out overtop her and smiling down at her. “Not until we’ve got each other’s hearts and are both ready for it.”

“I want that too.”

He growled in approval and thrust forward, his cock sinking deep and their bodies crashing together.

He fucked her hard and fast, never taking his eyes off her as he drove them both toward pleasure.

She scored his back with her nails as he rocked into her, tilting her hips to meet his thrusts.

As she came again, his thick cock hitting all the right places inside her, she gasped his name and stars lit her vision.

He stifled his cry of pleasure through gritted teeth, his cock spasming inside her as he came. He kissed her, once, twice, then buried his face in her neck and kissed the dewy sweat from her skin.

“Fucking hell, Jade, you’re the best thing that ever happened to me.”

She wrapped her arms around him and held him close, loving how it felt to have him still inside her, still against her.

“You’re the best thing that ever happened to me too.”

Here she was, wolf on the run, new to town, still kind of fucking scared of everything.

But she was in Brick’s arms, and he was her mate.

And she knew that, somehow, everything would be okay.

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Chapter

Twelve

Brick finished eating breakfast across the table from his gorgeous mate, whose cheeks pinked every time she met his gaze. He loved that he could affect her without even touching her.

The night before had been incredible, and earlier that morning as they'd woken up in each other's arms and proceeded to drive each other wild in and out of bed, he'd decided that his new favorite thing was the way her eyes glazed over after she came, when she was spiraling down from the heavens and blissed out.

By the time they'd made their way to the breakfast table, everyone else was gone and his Aunt Lucy had left plates for them wrapped up in plastic on the counter.

"This is really neat," Jade said as she finished the last bite of ham and cheese quiche.

"The food?" he asked.

"Yes, but I mean that so many people live in the alphas' house. In my old pack, the alphas' house was only for the alpha."

Brick hummed and picked up his plate and hers, carrying them to the sink.

"Well," he said as he turned on the water to wash them, "it's always been this way with our pack."

Before Adam took over, the alpha and his family lived on the third floor, and Adam lived here, and so did I with some other high ranked members.

When Adam took over, his parents and his sister Angie moved in. ”

“Your parents don’t live here?”

“No. Adam offered them one of the spare rooms on the second floor, but they’re happy in their house.”

“And you don’t have any siblings?” she asked, mentioning that she was an only child.

“No, it’s just me. But Adam and I are close like brothers, and I count Solan and Leo as brothers too.”

She joined him at the sink and dried the dishes as he washed them.

“What’s going to happen now? With me?” she asked.

He handed her the second plate and turned off the water.

Drying his hands on another towel decorated with howling wolves, he faced her, folding his arms and leaning against the counter.

“The pack is the safest place for you. If you’re asking me if I want to take you to Alli’s and leave you there, the answer is I will, but I don’t want to.

I can’t guarantee your safety when I can’t keep you personally safe. ”

She put the plate in the cabinet and folded the towel on the counter. “You want me to stay here.”

He frowned. Something was off about her tone, but he couldn't figure it out.

“Jade?”

She looked at him but didn't say anything for a long moment. Then she said, “Do you only want me here to keep me safe?”

He was about to say that hell yes, he wanted her here to make sure she was safe, but he got the impression that the answer she was looking for was more complicated. And much more important.

He put his hands on her shoulders. “Sweetheart, I want you here in the alphas' house because it's my home, and I want to share it with you.

Even if the world was safe and no asshole anti-shifter fanatics were watching us, I'd still want you with me.

Hell, I don't want to go to work today because I just want to spend time with you.

” Her eyes softened and he could tell that's what she'd wanted to hear, and he was happy to share the truth with her.

“Plus,” he said, lowering his voice, “did you really think that we could rock each other's world last night and this morning, and I wouldn't want to keep you close? ”

She blushed and he chuckled. Giving her a kiss, he said, “Jade, if you want to take things a little slower, you can stay in the room next to mine until you're ready to move in with me officially. But I won't promise that you won't find me sneaking in and driving you wild.”

She leaned into him with a sigh and he hugged her close. “This is all new to me, you

know.”

“I know. It’s new to me too. I don’t want to rush things because I know you’re still worried about your old pack, and now there’s another layer of things to worry about with the anti-shifter people, but where I want you is by my side, and I’ll do anything to keep you with me and keep you safe.”

She rubbed her cheek on his chest and held herself tight against him, her hands digging into his back as she pulled herself even closer. He rested his head on top of hers and inhaled her sweet scent. He didn’t think he’d ever get tired of it.

“I’d like to stay with you,” she said. “If I’m allowed since I’m not a pack member.”

“You’re my mate, which makes you an unofficial pack member and under the protection of Adam and Cinder, not to mention me. If you weren’t allowed to stay in the house, I’d just take one of the empty homes in the territory and claim it for us.”

“I like this house,” she said. “But maybe someday we could have a place of our own.”

“That works for me.”

“Oh shit. Sorry,” Adam said as he walked into the kitchen.

Brick kissed the top of Jade’s head and said, “Don’t be sorry, we were just talking about Jade officially moving into my room, and then, of course, I was going to come talk to you.”

“That’s awesome, welcome,” Adam said with a grin. The smile dropped quickly and he said, “I have a task for you.”

“Sure,” he said.

He and Jade separated, and she fixed herself another cup of coffee as Adam explained that because Cinder wouldn’t be able to shift any longer, and they were aware now that the Humans Against Shifter jerks were watching them, he wanted to have Brick talk to the Wiccans about setting up some protective wards around the territory.

“Sure, I’d be happy to go talk to them. I’ll grab Linus and Dove to ride with me.”

Linus and his sister Dove were new to the security team, but both were fitting right in and were very serious about helping keep everyone safe.

“Jade could go with you,” Adam said. “If you’d like to get out of town for a bit.”

“Really?” she asked. “I’ve never met any Wiccans before.”

“They’re a great bunch of females,” Adam said.

“Cinder was part of their coven before she and I got together. Her lygisa magic isn’t the same as Wiccan magic, so she left the coven but the North Corner Lorene is like an aunt to Cinder, and Bitty, one of the Corners, studies shifter history and mythology so we reach out to her when we have questions about things related to our people or other types of shifters. ”

“I’d love to go,” Jade said.

“Lorene’s expecting you,” Adam said. “Tell her I said hi.”

Brick nodded, then turned to his mate. “Road trip.”

“Sounds awesome,” she said. She grabbed a travel mug and poured her coffee into it.

He reached out to Linus and Dove, who met them at the security office.

After assigning them to follow him and Jade, they set off to the Cleveland Mother Earth Store, which the Northern Ohio coven used as their main office.

On the drive, he told Jade about what had happened when Adam and Cinder became mates and her lygisa power had made her a target of some pretty nasty wolves, and how Lorene had been instrumental in helping the pack to get Cinder back when she'd been abducted by her biological father for nefarious purposes.

Brick parked in front of the Wiccans' store and got out, meeting Jade at the front of the SUV. They walked inside and the scent of sage and dried herbs was heavy in the air. A young female stood behind a counter and smiled brightly.

"Hi, I'm Lulu. How can I help you today?"

Before Brick could answer, Lorene strode into the room, her long skirt swishing around her ankles. "Lulu, Brick is here for our meeting."

"Oh, of course," Lulu said.

Brick looked at Dove and Linus. "Hang out here and keep an eye on things."

"You got it, boss," Dove said with a curt nod.

Brick took Jade's hand and led her to Lorene. She was two hundred-something years old, but looked like she was in her thirties thanks to her supernatural long life.

"Hi, Lorene," he said. "This is my mate Jade."

Lorene extended her hand and when Jade shook it, she said, "It's lovely to meet you."

I'm the North Corner and head of the coven. Come into my office where the others are waiting for us."

Inside the quaint office was a round table with three other females seated around it. Lorene introduced them as the other Corners, Bitty, Gwen, and Maritza, as they all took their seats, and Brick introduced Jade.

"The floor is yours," Gwen said.

Brick told them about Cinder's pregnancy and her belief she wouldn't be able to shift until after the baby was born, which would leave the pack without her protection.

"And Foley's paying attention to us," Brick said. "It's twice we've seen them now, and with how he operated with the tiger pride, we know it will just get worse."

"He and his men are dangerous, but we can hold them at bay with our magic. The Corners and I will come to the pack tonight and set up protection wards." Lorene gave Brick a long, quiet look.

"The wards are effective in many ways, but they won't stop everything.

It's important that your people are being careful. "

"We will be. Thank you."

He thanked the Corners, and he and Jade walked out of the office with Lorene. While he and Lorene discussed her trip to the pack, Jade wandered around the store, chatting with Lulu for a bit before Bitty came out and talked to her.

"We'll do our best to help you keep your people safe," Lorene said. She glanced at Jade and Bitty, who hugged briefly. "She's got some shadows in her aura."

“What do you mean?”

“She’s scared. It’s a deep-rooted fear that will only heal with time. The fear will keep her from truly embracing happiness with you.”

“Even though the female who helped her get free from her old pack said she’s safe now, she still harbors some fears that her old alpha will come for her,” he said after giving a brief rundown of Jade’s situation.

Lorene shook her head. “I hate antiquated males like that. It’s the twenty-first century. Get with the dang times.”

“Agreed.”

Lorene rested her hand on Brick’s shoulder and he felt her warmth and power. “She’ll find happiness with you and the pack, but it will take time. Love her to the best of your ability and trust that she is happy with you and she does care for you, but all those emotions are bookended by fear.”

“I’ll do my best.”

Jade walked up to them and Lorene dropped her hand and turned to her. “Did you have a nice chat with Bitty?”

“Yes, she’s really sweet.”

“We’ll see you tonight. Safe travels.”

Brick and Jade said goodbye and left the store with Dove and Linus. On the way back to Thorn Hollow, he noticed she was holding something in her hand.

“What is that?”

She opened her fist and he saw a carved pendant and a silver chain. “Bitty gave it to me. For protection.”

“Really?”

“I was looking at the pendant and she told me it was for protection and asked if I felt like I needed some. I said yes, and she handed it to me. She said that protection wasn’t just about keeping danger away from us but also about building up our own strength.

Every time I start to really feel safe with you, the fear bubbles up inside me like a tea kettle on a hot stove.

I don’t feel strong enough to handle things. ”

He covered her hand and the pendant with his own.

“You’ve got more strength than you realize.

You left everything you ever knew to start over with strangers, protecting yourself from whatever designs your alpha and that dangerous male had for you.

That’s not something a meek person could do.

I think the pendant is a great idea. I want you to feel safe, but I know it will take time.

You’ll find your inner strength, and I’ll do my best to help you. ”

She gave him a grateful smile. “I’m so glad I met you.”

He smiled back, warmth filling him. “Sweetheart, I’m so glad I met you too.”

Chapter

Thirteen

The next day, Alli came to visit and brought the clothes that Jade had picked out during one of their shopping trips since the pack was on relative lockdown with no unnecessary trips out of town.

They walked through the territory with Brick and Solan trailing behind them, the summer sunlight streaming through the branches and the oppressive heat making everything feel sticky.

“I was not built for hot weather,” she said, wiping her brow with the hem of her tank top.

“Oh, me either,” Alli said. “Air conditioning was one of the best inventions. That and refrigeration.”

Since Alli appeared so youthful, it was easy to forget that she was several hundred years old. “Is air conditioning your favorite modern convenience?”

“Well, television is pretty awesome, and indoor plumbing.”

She peeked at her friend. “You’ve definitely seen a lot, huh?”

“Yep.” She looked over her shoulder and then said with a low voice, “You didn’t mark each other?”

“We decided to wait until we get to know each other better.”

“That’s sweet. But doesn’t your wolf want that? He’s your truemate.”

“Yeah, she does.” It made her ache sometimes how much she wanted to truly belong to Brick.

He was everything she’d ever imagined for herself in a mate and more.

Sexy and protective and so damn sweet. But she wasn’t ready to pull the proverbial trigger on the mating because of that lurking fear in her subconscious that told her things were too easy right now.

“You’re waiting for the other shoe to drop? With your old pack or that arranged mate?”

“Yeah. I’m used to being on my own and keeping my defenses up. It’s hard to let someone into that because of how much I worry.”

Alli put her arm around Jade briefly in a hug. “You’ll do it when the time’s right and it will be amazing.”

“Do fallen angels get truemates?”

“I’m not sure. I feel like everyone has a truemate, but if I hadn’t fallen, I wouldn’t have feelings about finding a truemate. Angels aren’t mated, period. But fallen angels? The ones I know aren’t mated, and I’ve never heard of any who are.”

“What other fallen angels are around here?”

“Darien, who works for Mishka, the vampire master of Cleveland, and Paris. He runs

Lykos.”

“The shifter bar?”

“Yep.”

“A fallen angel runs a shifter bar.”

Alli chuckled. “Sure, why not? He’s strong and fast so he can keep up with shifters, and people listen to him. Plus, he can kick ass and he’s easy on the peepers.”

It was Jade’s turn to laugh. “Maybe Brick and I can meet you at Lykos sometime.”

“To get a peek at a cute angel?”

She rolled her eyes. “To have a drink.”

“Sure, sure.” Alli giggled. Jade imagined that if she still had wings, they would shake with her laughter, rustling like tinkling bells.

“Anyway,” she said, giving Alli a nudge with her elbow, “how did your time at Lykos go? Did you dance with anyone?”

As Alli told her about her time at the bar, they wandered the territory. Jade liked having Brick watching her back so she could relax and enjoy the time with Alli, who had a funny take on pretty much everything she did.

They stopped near the edge of the creek that wove through the territory and Jade stared at the water that babbled along the bank. “You haven’t heard from Evelyn?”

“Not since the last message,” Alli said, shaking her head. “But it’s not unusual for her

to go a while between emails. Before I helped Sadie get away from the pack, I hadn't heard from her in a long time. Are you worried?"

"A little. I don't want her to get hurt because she helped me."

Alli hummed, twirling a leaf between her finger and thumb. "She's smart and resourceful. We just have to trust that she's okay. In her last message, she said the alpha was suspicious but didn't have proof that she'd helped you. I'd say she's in the clear."

"Yeah, I hope so. I'm really glad she helped me. If she hadn't gotten me out when she did, I wouldn't be with Brick."

"She's a good female."

She turned to tell Brick they were ready to head back to the house when something caught her eye. She paused and stared but didn't see anything. Then she tilted her head and saw it again—the sunlight highlighted something dark on the ground.

"Brick?"

"Yeah, baby?" he called.

"There's something on the ground there. It's black." She pointed and he jogged up to them, looking to where she indicated.

"I don't... Hold on, okay, I see it. Stay put." He walked forward slowly, scanning the area, and then bent and picked up a stick that he used to prod around. He squatted down, peered at whatever the black thing was, and then picked it up.

"What is it?" Solan asked as he joined the two of them.

“It’s black rubber. I’m pretty sure it’s the cover for a binocular lens.” Brick frowned as he looked at it and then walked over to show it to them.

Jade took it and gave it a squeeze and the rubber bent easily. It certainly looked like a binocular lens cover. “Does the security team use binoculars?”

“Not usually.”

He looked past her, his frown deepening. “The alphas’ house is that way.”

He and Solan moved to where the cover had been on the ground and searched the area. Jade shivered, but not from the cold. If the security team didn’t use binoculars, then someone was in the territory watching.

“It’ll be okay, babe,” Alli said.

“I feel exposed out here.” She looked around, wondering if someone was watching them right now.

Brick and Solan joined them. “Let’s get back to the alphas’ house.”

“Someone’s watching?” she asked.

Brick nodded. “It certainly seems so. The ground is flattened like someone was standing for a while, and it might be in a blind spot for the security cameras. Solan had the security office run the videos for this area. If it is a blind spot, we’ll add more cameras and motion detectors.”

“What about the protective wards the Wiccans set up last night?” Jade asked.

“They should have stopped someone from getting through,” Solan said.

“They’re not foolproof. They don’t stop everything,” Alli said.

“The wards would be strongest at the alphas’ house and would get progressively weaker the farther from that point they went.

If it’s Foley, he could have hired someone to watch and report back, so there wouldn’t be bad intentions or a bad aura that would stop someone from getting through the wards. ”

“Geez,” Jade said. “I thought it was bad enough to worry about my old alpha or that dangerous male coming for me, but that the anti-shifter group might have hired someone to spy? It’s creepy as hell.”

“You know what they say,” Alli said. “It’s not being paranoid if someone is out to get you, and Brent Foley and H. A. S. are definitely up to no good.”

“We’ll be careful,” Brick said. “Jade’s safety is paramount to me.”

When they reached the alphas’ house, she and Alli walked inside after parting ways with Brick and Solan at the security office.

After telling Cinder what was up, Jade told Alli about the pack meeting the night before, where Cinder and Adam announced the pregnancy and the Wiccans filling in with protection wards.

Alli leaned against the kitchen island and said, “It seems like you’ve got great systems in place to keep everyone safe, and as long as you’re noticing the small stuff—like someone watching the alphas’ house from the creek—you can alter the security measures and make things even safer.

It’s better to find the gaps in security now before something bad happens. ”

“Good point.”

A few moments later, a smiling older woman came into the kitchen carrying a paper sack.

Flowers peeked from the top. “Hello there.” She pulled the flowers out of the sack and handed them to Jade.

“I’m Brick’s mom, Sophie. I saw these at the market and wanted to give them to you for the bedroom.

Nothing takes the masculine vibe from a male’s bedroom quite like pretty flowers.”

Jade grinned. Brick had a very masculine bedroom. The pink and yellow flowers would be the perfect pop of feminine color. “I love them, thank you so much. It’s so nice to meet you. Do you know Alli?”

“Of course, how are you?”

“Wonderful, Sophie, thanks. You?”

“I’m wonderful too, now that my son has found his truemate. I couldn’t be happier.”

His mom was so sweet. She’d instantly made her feel welcomed into the family even though she and Brick weren’t fully mated yet.

Adam rushed into the kitchen, skidding to a halt. “Where’s Brick?”

“In the security office,” Jade said. “Is everything okay?” Her stomach suddenly felt like it was filled with lead. Why did Adam look so upset? He was the alpha and they weren’t supposed to get rattled easily.

He paused, then said, “Jade, someone’s reached out to me. About you.”

Her heart felt like it stopped beating entirely.

“What? Who?” It had to be her alpha. Who else could it be?

“Dane Malrick.”

“Who’s that?” Alli asked.

“The male that Alpha Holloway was going to force me to mate.”

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Chapter

Fourteen

The security office door opened hard enough to slam against the wall. Adam stood in the doorway, his eyes flashing amber.

Brick immediately knew something was wrong.

“I was just coming to find you,” Brick said. “We’ve got a problem.”

“I know. I was coming to talk to you about it.”

“Wait, what problem are you talking about?” Brick asked.

“The male Holloway arranged to mate with Jade just called me and demanded a meeting.”

“What?” Brick nearly roared the word.

“He’s outside town. He’s waiting for me to bring her to him.”

Everything inside Brick went dark and cold. “How did he find her?”

“I don’t know, but we’ll get to the bottom of it.

” He gave Brick a long look and said, “He’s following protocol.

He didn't come into our territory; he reached out, alpha to alpha, to right what he perceives as a wrong.

She was promised to him in an arranged mating, and he and Holloway are apparently both such enormous jackasses that they don't believe females have the right to decide their futures.

As far as this Dane fellow is concerned, Jade belongs to him. ”

Brick snarled. “The fuck she does.”

“Hey, direct those fangs elsewhere, bro,” Adam said.

Brick hadn't even realized his fangs elongated so quickly. Inhaling deeply, he rolled his shoulders and waited for his fangs to recede. “Sorry.”

“It's okay to be pissed. But we have to be smart. We can't risk the pack's safety by refusing to meet with him. Jade is under the protection of the pack, and she's not going to be leaving with anyone. But she does have to go with us and we do have to meet with him.”

He looked past his cousin toward the house. “We're not fully mated yet.”

“I have a feeling this guy is enough of a dickwad to not care one way or the other. But we still need to deal with it according to pack protocol. I'll make the arrangements to meet with him in an hour. You gather a security team and include Alli. She's intimidating with a sword.”

“Will do. I... need to see Jade first.”

“Yeah, of course. We'll meet in the kitchen in ten.”

Adam left and Brick turned to face Solan and Stewart, who were manning the video cameras. Solan nodded. “You don’t even have to ask. I’m there with you. Who else do you want on the team?”

“Leo, Dove, Linus. Maybe Joey? Stewart, can you call up team members to replace those of us who’ll be going?”

“You got it. Good luck.” He turned away and lifted his phone from the desk.

“Thanks. Both of you.”

“I’ll meet you at the house after I round up the others,” Solan said.

Brick rushed from the security office. Jade met him at the kitchen door, her eyes shining with unshed tears. “What’s going to happen to me?”

“Nothing, baby,” he said, hugging her tightly. “I promise I’ll keep you safe.”

“Can’t I just hide? Do I have to see him in person? What if he tries to hurt you to get to me?”

“He could come into the pack and hurt innocents trying to get to you. Adam’s right, we have to do this according to pack protocols.” He smoothed the hair from her face and kissed her gently on the forehead. “It’ll be okay. No one is going to take you from me.”

“We’re not mated yet.”

“You’re still mine and I’m still yours. We’re not going to rush into mating each other because he wants to show up and flex his muscles.

And he seems like the kind of male who wouldn't care if we were mated fully or not.

He believes you're property to be traded, not a person.

You can't reason with those kinds of people. ”

“Fucker,” Alli said. She cracked her knuckles. “Please let me come along and bust heads if we need to.”

“Yes, please,” Brick said. “Do you have your sword handy?”

“You know it. It's in the trunk of my car.”

Ten minutes later, the team of wolves going to the meet up were in Adam's office along with Jade and Alli, who'd already fitted herself with a sheath for her sword that would allow her to keep it safely tucked against her back.

“Dane Malrick is the alpha of a small pack in North Dakota. He's cousins with Alpha Holloway, who is Jade's former alpha.

Holloway arranged a mating between Dane and Jade, but she was able to escape her pack before that came to fruition.

I've done some research, and while there's not a lot on him or his pack, I found some articles about territory battles and humans getting caught in the crossfire.

Malrick doesn't seem to care if people get hurt so long as he gets what he wants.

Half his pack came from him taking over another pack and killing the high ranked males and their families.

He's dangerous, and while he's agreed to meet in a neutral place, he definitely believes that I'll be handing over Jade to him. "

Jade shivered next to Brick and he took her hand and gave it a squeeze.

"Did he say how he knew where she was?" Brick asked.

Adam nodded. "I asked how he figured out she was here and he said that Holloway took a pack female's computer and discovered she'd bought a bus ticket to Northern Ohio. There's only our pack here, so it made sense that Jade would have come to another pack and asked for sanctuary."

"Did he say if Evelyn is okay?" Jade asked.

"He didn't, I'm sorry."

Adam rose from behind the desk. "We're meeting him in about forty-five minutes in the parking lot of a closed drive-in movie theater in Millbourne.

I'll make it clear that Jade is under my protection and that she's free to make her own choices about who she mates.

Jade, you'll very clearly state that you and Brick are mates and you don't want to be with Malrick. "

The room was quiet in the moments that followed.

Alli cleared her throat. "Why does it sound like that may not be the end of it?"

"Because there's no way to know how he'll handle it," Adam said.

“If he was willing to walk away from this arranged mating, he wouldn’t have come here.

I asked him why he sent people into our territory today to spy, and he said he didn’t know what I was talking about, that his people had staked out the major roads around our town but had not entered the territory even once.

I believe him, which means the binocular cover you found had to have come from someone Foley sent. ”

That was just what the pack needed, two damn problems.

“First things first,” Adam said. “We’ll deal with Malrick, and if he doesn’t want to take no for an answer, then we’ll make sure he does with fang and claw. Alli, Brick is going to trust you to have Jade’s back so he can fight if he needs to.”

“You got it,” she said.

“Good. Then let’s get on the way.”

Brick and Jade sat in the office when everyone else had filed out. She leaned into him, trembling. “What’s going to happen?” she whispered.

“The only thing I know for sure is that I’m going to be bringing you back here, okay?

” He pushed her gently away from him so he could look at her.

He wanted her to see the truth in his eyes.

“Jade, I’m crazy about you. It’s only been a couple of days, but I feel like I’ve known you forever.

If this Malrick guy thinks he can come and take you from me, he's gravely mistaken.

I won't let that happen. Trust me to keep you safe. ”

She gripped his wrists as tears slipped down her cheeks.

“I do trust you. I'm crazy about you, too, but I'm also crazy scared.”

“Fear is a good thing. It's your body telling you to be ready for anything. But you can still trust me to keep you safe. And Alli with her sword.”

“She's turning out to be a great person to have in my corner.”

“Definitely.” He kissed her once and then a second time, his wolf humming at the contact. “Let's get this show on the road and get back home. The sooner the better.”

She nodded and they rose to their feet together and joined the others to head to Millbourne and face her demons head on.

He was determined to prove he could keep her safe because failure was not an option.

He was not about to lose the most important person in his life, and whatever he had to do to keep her by his side? He was damn well going to do it.

Brick scanned the oddly eerie surroundings of the abandoned drive-in movie theater. The town itself seemed deserted, not to mention the utter desolation of the drive-in, with weeds growing through the cracked asphalt and two huge rusting movie screens looming behind them.

The atmosphere was tense, the summer heat heavy in the air, and Brick couldn't help but think it was a weird place for a meet up with a pack that clearly had violent

intentions.

It seemed to scream “trap,” just the sort of place a lunatic who thought he could order someone to be his mate by force would choose for a meet and greet.

Jade was shaking so badly that she was visibly trembling, so while he kept a vigilant eye on their surroundings, he held her close. Alli was next to them, sword in a sheath at her back and her whole vibe one of don’t-fuck-with-me.

They’d brought eight with them, including Alpha Adam and Solan.

A line of vehicles arrived through the only road into the drive-in.

They parked away from their group, leaving a wide stretch of the parking lot between them.

A dozen males got out of the vehicles, and the one in the lead was clearly the alpha.

He looked so arrogant and entitled that Brick wanted to give him a good punch in the face on principle.

Dane stopped in the center of the distance between their vehicles and Adam walked up to him, with Leo and Solan flanking him.

“I’ve come for the female,” Dane said, crossing his arms.

Adam let out a low growl and then motioned behind him. Brick brought Jade forward with Alli trailing close behind, a smirk on her face that just dared someone to mess with her friend.

“You’ve had your fun,” Dane said. “It’s time to do what your alpha has ordered.

You've been given to me in exchange for an alliance between our packs."

Jade inhaled sharply but didn't say anything.

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Brick stood subtly in front of her. “She’s not yours, and she’s not Holloway’s property to give away.”

“This doesn’t concern you,” Dane said.

“She’s my truemate. She’s not going anywhere with you.”

“Irrelevant,” Dane said. “She’s been promised to me and I’ll take what I’m owed.” He looked at Adam. “I gave you the courtesy of meeting in neutral territory, but I didn’t come to have a conversation. Hand her over or suffer.”

Brick was two seconds away from launching himself directly at the offensive male when the sound of engines revving split the silence and vehicles rushed in from the road and surrounded them.

Dark-tinted windows lowered and Brick saw the flash of a muzzle just a heartbeat before bullets started flying.

“Ambush!” Brick shouted as he pushed Jade to Alli and let out his claws and fangs. Their pack rushed to the vehicles for cover, and he hit the ground by one of the SUVs and leaned against it as the dust billowed up around them as bullets hit the ground.

“Son of a bitch,” Brick said. “Dane is fucking running away!” Maybe Brick shouldn’t have been surprised that an alpha who thought a female was some kind of package to be given away rushed through the line of cars to escape.

“Coward,” Leo snorted as he ducked another barrage of bullets.

The tires screeched as the vehicles stopped and the doors opened, males rushing from them with guns and knives.

“Who the hell are these assholes?” Alli yelled as she pulled her sword free. Jade peeked around her and caught Brick’s gaze. She was clearly freaked out but was safe, and that was all that mattered.

Brick was almost certain it was the H. A. S. group, and then someone yelled, “Die, shifters!” and he knew for sure it was them.

“Human Against Shifters,” he yelled to Alli.

“Those fuckers? Shit. All right, let’s take out the trash.” The fearless fallen angel stood, yelled a battle cry worthy of a Viking, and rushed into the battle, sword swinging.

“She’s not going to have all the fun,” Leo said to Brick. He followed Alli into battle, dodging bullets and rushing toward the males who were firing as they were the most dangerous.

Brick hollered for Dove. “Keep an eye on Jade!”

“You got it, boss!” Dove scooted back to where Jade crouched next to the SUV’s large tire, her claws and fangs ready to defend.

Brick raced into the melee, knocking a rifle from one male’s hand with a brutal kick and disarming another, sending him flying through the air with a well-aimed punch.

Brick kept an eye on his fellow pack members and saw someone with a knife stalking toward his alpha.

“Not on my watch,” he snarled, barreling into the male and disarming him before using the knife and stabbing him through the hand, anchoring him to the asphalt.

As the male screamed in pain, Brick grinned at Adam.

“Thanks, man,” Adam said.

“Anytime.”

Side by side, he and Adam fought with claws and fangs, driving the humans back into their vehicles until they fled, tires screeching as they raced away. Their fallen brethren, all still breathing but none of them in good spirits, moaned and begged for mercy.

Alli pointed her bloody sword at one of the males. “Can I kill him? He kicked me.”

“Let’s let the police handle these people,” Adam said.

“Boo. You’re no fun.”

Adam shook his head with a chuckle.

Dove brought Jade to Brick and he hugged her. “You’re okay, sweetheart?”

“I am. You?”

He knew he had some cuts and bruises, which would heal soon enough.

“I’m fine, I’m just glad you’re okay.”

While they waited for the police to arrive and deal with them, Adam interrogated the

ones who were conscious and eventually got out that they were indeed part of H. A. S. and had spied on them earlier that day, and also followed them to the drive-in in hopes of taking them out.

“You guys should go,” Leo said to Brick and Jade. “Adam too. I’ll stay and talk to the police.”

“If you’re sure?” Brick asked.

“Hell yes. Go. Before you’re stuck here for hours.”

“I’ll stay with Leo,” Alli said.

Dove and Linus agreed to stay as well.

“Keep me posted,” Adam said.

Brick clapped him on the shoulder. “Thanks, Leo.”

“This is what it’s all about. Fighting for the people who matter. The pack is a family and we’re supposed to have each other’s backs. Whoever my truemate is, I hope she’s not in danger like Jade has been, but at least I know I have the pack to help me keep her safe if I need it.”

“One hundred percent,” Brick said.

“Thank you,” Jade said.

Alli said, “I think that Alpha Asshole got scared away by the H. A. S. guys, but I doubt he’s going to give up so easily.”

“I doubt that too, but that’s a problem for another day,” Brick said.

The rest of the pack got into their vehicles and left before the police arrived. Jade sat next to him in the passenger seat while he drove home, with Solan and Adam in the second row.

“It was a success in some ways,” Solan said. “But a misfire in others.”

“True,” Adam said. “We won the fight but we didn’t find out where Foley has been holing up.”

“At least we didn’t lose anyone,” Brick said. But while the H. A. S. people were an issue—a deadly one—the main problem was that he doubted Dane would give up, which meant they needed to keep security tight and keep an eye out for him and his people.

The Thorn Hollow Pack had proven once more that they were ready for anything, even violent alphas and crazy humans.

“I’m thinking tacos,” Solan said.

“What?” Brick asked, wondering if he’d missed part of a conversation about food.

“Tacos. When we get home. What do you think?”

“It’s always a good time for tacos,” Adam said.

“And maybe a margarita?” Jade added.

“Oh, definitely,” Brick said. He glanced at her and smiled, so damn thankful she was safe with him. He’d do everything in his power to ensure it stayed that way.

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Chapter

Fifteen

As they returned to Thorn Hollow, Jade couldn't shake the feeling that they weren't anywhere near close to being done with problems, not with Foley and his H.

A. S. fanatics and not with Dane Malrick, who saw her as property to be handed over and not a person.

While she was listening to Brick, Adam, and a few of the high ranked males discuss the ambush in Adam's office, her phone buzzed and she saw a text from Alli.

Leaving the room to check in with her friend, she walked into the kitchen and looked at the screen.

Police are here and picking up the buttheads. Did you make it back to town?

That's good news and yeah. The guys are discussing next steps. I'm afraid that alpha is going to come back again.

He won't get to you, babe. Your mate is badass and will throw down with anyone trying to hurt you.

Jade smiled. Brick was definitely a badass. I know, I can't help but worry, you know?

I do, trust me, but it's okay to lean on your mate and the pack. They're your family

now and they're going to take care of you. Plus, you have me! Police want to chat with yours truly. I'll holler at you when we're finished.

Good luck!

She lifted her head as something caught her eye outside. She stared into the woods surrounding the house, wondering if she was simply seeing things or paranoid because of all that had happened.

Then she saw it again. Something dark behind one of the trees.

She stared, feeling like she was going crazy because it looked like a shadow, but it also looked out of place. Dark against the trunk where it shouldn't be. The longer she stared, the more she was certain it didn't belong.

And then she had a thought: If the protective wards set in place by the Wiccans were compromised, then someone could be spying and that's how Foley and the H. A. S. people knew where they'd be.

"Brick?"

She didn't hear his reply, but she didn't want to leave her spot, afraid she'd lose sight of whoever, or whatever, she was looking at.

"Brick! I need you!"

Footsteps sounded and her mate came into the kitchen. "Yeah, baby?"

"Someone's out there. See that tree?"

She scooted aside and pointed, and he stared out the window, his brows drawn.

“What’s going on?” Adam asked as he came into the kitchen along with Solan and a few other high ranked males.

“I don’t,” Brick said, and then he paused. The dark shadow moved and she was very certain it was an arm. “Shit! We’re being watched!”

He pushed the sliding back door open and raced off the porch with Adam and a few others on his heels. The shadow moved suddenly and she saw a flash of long, red hair before the person—a female, she was sure—ran away.

Carver, one of the high ranked males, stood next to her. “Good job catching sight of whoever the hell that was.”

“Thanks,” Jade said. “It was just a fluke I came out here. I wonder who it is?”

“I don’t know, but Brick’s fast, I don’t think they’ll get far.” He smiled at her. “Stay in the house, okay? I don’t need Brick kicking my ass because you wandered off and got abducted.”

She chuckled. “I promise. I don’t want to get abducted either.”

It didn’t take long for the pack members to return, with Brick escorting a red-headed female back to the house. He pushed her roughly to a chair on the porch and called for Jade.

As the pack surrounded the female, Jade hurried to Brick and hugged him.

He kissed the top of her head. “Thanks for noticing her.”

“Thanks for catching her. So what’s the deal? Why was she watching?” she asked.

“She doesn’t want to talk, but we’re going to do something about that,” Brick said.

Adam disappeared into the house and returned with Cinder. He brought her to stand in front of the female, who looked up at them with a mixture of arrogance and fear.

Cinder rubbed her hands together and a purplish-golden glow appeared. Her voice took on an ethereal quality as she spoke, “You will tell us what you’re doing here or you’ll suffer. I’m lygisa of this pack, guardian and protector, and you have made the mistake of pissing me off.”

The hair on Jade’s arms stood up as the air became electrified. The purple-gold glow rose slowly up Cinder’s arms and seemed to expand outward. The female’s whole body was highlighted by the magical glow.

The redhead pressed her lips together in defiance.

Cinder took a step forward and Adam let out a deep, low growl that made Jade want to hit the porch on her knees and tilt her head in deference to his authority.

“Okay. Okay! I’m sorry!” the female said, her eyes going bright with tears. “I’m sorry, I didn’t know what else to do!”

As Jade listened, the female—a Wiccan coven member named Maris—wove a tale of being blackmailed by Brent Foley to reveal the weaknesses of the protective wards.

“He threatened my sister. He had pictures of her and her schedule as if he could get to her! I thought just getting him information on how to get through the protective wards would be enough, but then he demanded I spy on you myself! I didn’t want to, I tried to resist, but he ran my sister off the road when she was coming home from school and nearly killed her in a crash!

I had no choice. I had no choice!” Maris sobbed, her voice cracking.

“Son of a bitch,” Adam said. He put his hand on Cinder’s shoulder and the purple-gold glow ceased.

She let out a deep sigh and leaned on him.

“Keep an eye on this female, I’m going to call Lorene.

Brick, send word to pack members that our territory is not safe and everyone needs to shelter in place until we can get this fixed.

Double security, run the perimeters tightly. ”

Jade grabbed Cinder’s hand. “Are you okay? I thought you couldn’t use magic.”

“It was showy magic, not anything nearly as powerful as when I shift. I thought it might scare her.”

“It sure did the trick.”

“Thanks for seeing her. You saved us, I’m sure,” Cinder said.

“Just a girl answering texts at inappropriate times,” Jade quipped.

Cinder laughed as she followed Adam into the house.

Brick dispatched the high ranked males to join the current security team members to keep the territory safe, then sent out a text to the pack to stay in place. Then he used rope to bind Maris’s wrist to the arm of the chair so she couldn’t leave.

As Jade thought things might even out for a little while, she felt a strange tension fill the air, and then someone bellowed her name.

Malrick!

Brick could not fucking believe that bastard Malrick had not only come for Jade but had the audacity to forgo all wolf pack protocols and come directly to the alphas' house.

"What fresh hell is this?" Adam demanded as Brick and Jade moved through the house toward the front door.

"That son of a bitch came here," Brick said.

"How did he get through the protection wards?" Jade asked.

"From what Cinder said, the protection wards are strongest here at the house and that witch messed with them to get close to us to spy. So they're essentially useless right now, which is how he got through."

"Damn it," Jade said.

"Unbelievable," Adam said. He let out a growling sigh. "Lorene is coming with the other Corners to redo the wards. They will take Maris with them and punish her according to coven rules, which is fine with me. Who's watching her?"

"Carver and Dove," he said.

"Good."

"Send me Jade or suffer!" Malrick's voice came from the front yard.

Jade shivered next to Brick and he snarled. What a fucking day it turned out to be.

“Stay back until I call for you,” Brick said. He and Adam walked out onto the porch. Malrick was in the center of several males that Brick recognized from their encounter at the drive-in. He opened his mouth to tell him just what he thought about his actions when Adam cut in.

“You have a lot of nerve coming into my territory uninvited,” Adam said.

“I’ve come for the female promised to me. I will not be leaving without her.”

“She’s my mate,” Brick said. “You’re not taking her anywhere.”

“I have every right to take her with me. Holloway is her alpha and he arranged for her to be mated to me. I don’t recognize your authority, Beaumont, or this male who claims her as his mate. She is mine and I’ll take her, or my people will rain down hell on you all.”

Brick motioned for Jade and she walked out, her eyes wide and her hands cold with fear as she gripped his arm. “Just reiterate what you said at the drive-in.”

Inhaling shakily, she straightened her shoulders and said with a loud voice, “I have left the Ironwood Pack and Alpha Holloway no longer has authority over me. I chose exile before he arranged a mating, and I’ve chosen sanctuary with the Thorn Hollow Pack and my mate, Brick.

You can shove your arranged mating crap where the sun doesn’t shine. ”

Adam growled and took a step forward, his claws springing from his fingertips and his fangs showing in his mouth. “You will leave my territory, one way or another, without Jade. She is under my protection and I will defend her right to choose her

future to the death.”

Brick pushed her gently behind him and stepped up next to his alpha.

“You’re interfering in the politics and laws of two other packs,” Malrick shouted. “You don’t know what you’re doing!”

He took a menacing step forward and Brick reached his boiling point. There was no way he was going to let this male think he could just waltz into the pack’s territory and threaten his mate. They had bigger things to deal with, namely Foley and H. A. S.

Letting out a growl from deep in his soul, he leaped from the porch. As he hit the ground, he raced forward, aware that his friends and fellow pack members had his back and had joined him.

Malrick’s eyes went wide, but he didn’t step back as Brick invaded his space, getting close enough to pick up the scent of his wolf. Brick stood firm, his muscles taut and ready for anything, his wolf brimming under the surface.

Malrick snarled, his eyes flashing amber, but it was clear it was a show of bravado because he hadn’t expected so many people to have Brick’s back. Pack members formed a loose semi-circle behind Brick, their postures tense and ready for anything.

Adam remained on the porch because this was really Brick’s fight, but he was the alpha. “You have a choice to make here, Malrick. Leave under your own power or in the trunk of one of those vehicles you drove into my town.”

Malrick’s lip curled, and he leveled a defiant look at Brick. “You can’t hide behind your pack forever.”

Brick growled low in his throat and took a step closer. “She’s not yours, and she

never will be. Get out of our territory. Now.”

The male seemed to hesitate, but Brick could see that the males with him were uneasy with the show of force from the pack.

“This isn’t over,” Malrick said. He backed away with his chin tilted up, then turned and strode to the vehicles they’d parked on the street. As the engines roared to life, they left in a trail of dust and flying debris.

Brick watched until they were out of sight, and then he turned and looked at Jade. She was standing next to Adam, her lips pressed into a thin line and her eyes filled with worry.

He jogged to her and leaped up the stairs, bringing her close in a hug. She shuddered in his arms.

“It’ll be okay,” he said.

“Brick,” she said thickly. “I just...want to not have to look over our shoulders forever.”

“We won’t,” he said, kissing the top of her head.

Somehow, he was going to prove that to be true. First, they’d get the Wiccans to secure the territory again, then they’d deal with Foley, and then if that asshole Malrick was still hanging around, he’d make sure he left Ohio with his tail between his legs.

“I’m sorry about all of this,” she said.

Adam grunted. “You can’t help that your old alpha was an asshole who traded you to

another asshole.

You're not responsible for anyone else's behavior.

"He looked at Brick and said, "But that being said, even though the timing is terrible, and I know you guys wanted to wait, I think we need to move forward with the mating ceremony so that Jade will officially be part of our pack. She's got sanctuary protection, but it's not the same as being under my authority and also fully mated. "

"When?"

"Tonight when the sun sets. We'll do something small, just high ranked and elders so we can keep an eye on each other. Once the Wiccans fix the wards, we should be able to run in our shifts without worrying about anything. At least for tonight."

"We'll be ready."

Adam put his hand on Brick's shoulder for a moment. "Take the rest of the day and spend time with each other. I'll get Solan to help me get everything set up. And Leo, whenever he gets back from the drive-in."

"I'll tell Alli," Jade said. "She can't be part of things because she's not a wolf, but she'd want to know."

"You can reach out to her," Brick said.

When they were alone on the front porch, he said, "I'm sorry about all this."

"Sorry for what?" she tilted her head and looked at him.

"I'm sorry that we can't wait. I know you wanted to."

“Well, I wanted to get to know you better, and I feel like I do. Even though I know we’ll get to learn more about each other with every day that passes.” Her eyes darkened slightly and he caught the subtle hint of her arousal. Immediately his body responded and he growled softly.

“Brick, I’m falling for you,” she whispered. “You’re the sexiest, most protective, sweetest guy I’ve ever met. I can’t think of anything better than mating you and joining the pack.”

“I’m falling for you too,” he said, cupping her face. “You’re gorgeous and so strong and fierce. You’re everything I ever hoped I’d find in my truemate and so much more.” He took her hand and turned away from the house, leading her down the steps.

“Where are we going?”

“We’re going to get some privacy. If we’re going to mate and mark each other, I don’t want a house full of people listening in.”

He knew just the place to go for privacy. As they turned at the end of the yard and walked down the street, he sent a quick text to Solan to let him know where he was headed, and then he put his phone on do-not-disturb and tucked it into his pocket.

His focus now was on his beautiful mate and making her his in truth.

Chapter

Sixteen

Jade was flustered, a combination of worried about the Wiccan who'd been spying on them for the H. A. S. jerks, that pretentious asshat Malrick, and also turned on because Brick was sexy as hell and taking her somewhere for privacy.

It was highly strange to be worried about being safe and also thinking about having sex and marking her mate.

She couldn't believe how quickly she'd gone from keeping up walls around her heart out of fear to wanting Brick to sink his fangs into her neck.

But she shouldn't be surprised by that either. He was her truemate, the one guy on the planet meant to be hers. Of course he would be able to get through the protections she'd set up around her heart.

And not just because he was phenomenal in bed.

He was also sweet and kind and so careful with her.

She knew he'd do anything to keep her safe and that she was his priority.

He might be high ranked, but she came first for him.

And that's how it was supposed to be. She'd never been first in anyone's life, not

even her dad's.

He'd put the pack first, and look where that had gotten him?

When he died, the alpha replaced his position in the pack and moved on the same day as if he wasn't even worth grieving.

The street was lined with trees, and there were only a few small homes here and there. It was quiet as they walked side by side, the soft crunch of gravel underfoot the only sound. She glanced up at him, finding his steady, protective presence a balm to her wildly spinning mind.

"This place we're going to," she asked, breaking the silence, "it's safe, right?"

"Completely, I promise."

Jade relaxed slightly, letting herself hope that the promise of privacy might ease the tension knotting her shoulders.

Or some sexy, fun times, for sure. There wasn't anything that seemed to banish the darker demons of doubt in her mind than tumbling between the sheets with her sexy male.

Then, the rumble of vehicle engines revving shattered the quiet of the street.

Brick spun and tucked her at his back. She peeked around him and saw two vehicles moving toward them at a quick pace. Jade's heart pounded.

"What are we going to do?" she asked.

Brick snarled as the vehicles screeched to a halt, and six males spilled out, their

movements predatory and dangerous.

Malrick was at the center, grinning smugly.

Brick pushed her backward. “Go through the woods and get to Adam’s.”

She turned to move when Malrick’s voice made her freeze in place.

“You didn’t think you could hide, did you?”

Brick gave her another nudge. “You were told to leave, Malrick. Do so or suffer.”

The male chuckled, his arms spreading wide. “I’m not leaving without her. She belongs to me by pack law.”

Jade’s wolf surged to the surface, her anger sharp and unrelenting.

This guy had some serious balls. Or delusions.

She stepped out from behind Brick, not wanting to abandon him to be so hopelessly outnumbered.

She imagined her old alpha handing her over to this maniac so coldly, so callously.

She wasn’t a thing to be bartered and traded, she was a person of value.

And damn it, she had a mate now and she was tired of this male trying to separate them.

“I don’t belong to you by pack law or any other law.”

Malrick's smirk twisted into a snarl. "You don't have a choice in this."

Brick growled, his body vibrating with barely restrained fury. "She said no three times now. I've had more than enough of this bullshit."

"Then I'll take her by force," Malrick said. He jerked his shirt off and Jade inhaled sharply. He was going to shift.

"Run, baby," Brick said as he undid his jeans and shoved them down his legs.

She stumbled backward and turned toward the woods. One of Malrick's males appeared in front of her, cutting off her escape.

She looked over her shoulder to see her mate shift quickly, as did Malrick. The two lunged at each other, meeting head on as the males with Malrick stayed in their human forms.

But they weren't watching the two wolves battle, their focus was on her.

Shit.

She backed up as the male closest to her extended his claws and bared his fangs, stalking toward her.

The others skirted around the two battling wolves, making their way to her.

She knew she didn't have enough time to shift herself and if she didn't strip before she shifted she could get tangled up in her clothes.

There was a house a bit down the road from them and she was pretty damn fast.

But maybe she could try something else.

Opening herself to her wolf, she lifted her head and let out a piercingly loud howl, the sort of howl that wolves would know meant there was a wolf in trouble.

She turned to run toward the house and immediately crashed into the chest of one of the males, who grabbed her by her throat and lifted her off her feet, cutting off her second attempt at howling for help.

Her claws came out as her oxygen was cut off, and she raked them down his arms, digging deeply into his skin. He snarled and punched her in the face with his free hand, making her eyes water and her vision blur.

No matter how she kicked or struggled, he didn't ease up on his hold.

Her ears rang and her world narrowed down to a pinprick.

And then she hit the ground, gasping in a ragged breath as she struggled to see what was going on. She slumped to the ground as darkness fully encompassed her. The last thing on her mind was that Brick was outnumbered and she'd failed to get help.

The fight was chaos. Brick and Malrick were well-matched in size and skill, but Brick had an edge over the male. Malrick might be fighting to take Jade because he felt like he owned her due to some arranged mating, but Brick was fighting for Jade's right to choose who she wanted to mate.

And she wanted to mate Brick.

He was damn well certain to make sure that happened.

Malrick dodged out of the downward swing of Brick's claws just as a feminine howl

echoed around them. He checked to see his sweetheart howling for help and then promptly getting caught by the throat and lifted off her feet.

Hell no!

He ducked away from Malrick and raced to her aide but was caught by the back leg and yanked backward. His claws dug into the road for purchase as Malrick pulled him away from helping his mate, but Brick wasn't about to leave her on her own.

He rolled to the side, pulling out of Malrick's jaws.

His sharp teeth shredded Brick's leg, but he didn't let that stop him from twisting sharply and sinking his front claws into the male's side.

Hot blood poured over his paws and Malrick yipped and jerked away.

Brick leaped to his paws and raced toward his struggling mate, taking the male out at the knees and knocking her from his grip.

He heard the pounding of feet and knew his pack had answered her howl for help.

Letting out a deep and furious growl, Brick stalked back to the injured Malrick, who was limping away, blood dripping from the deep gashes in his side.

Brick slammed into him, his jaws closing around his throat. Malrick writhed beneath him, his claws scraping on the pavement, but Brick didn't let go.

He'd seen it in the male's eyes when he came for Jade. He was never going to stop, so Brick needed to stop him.

With a violent shake, Brick ended it, Malrick's body falling limp.

Brick released his grip on Malrick's throat and lifted his head in a victorious howl.

Then he spun and looked for his mate and the other males, who'd retreated, bolting toward the vehicles.

Brick rushed to her side and nudged her with his nose.

She let out a whimper and opened her eyes, rolling to her side.

Her gaze was unfocused for a moment and then she shook her head and blinked rapidly a few times.

"Oh, Brick!" she whispered roughly.

Solan stopped next to them. "Holy shit! Are you both okay?"

She tried to speak but grimaced and he was sure her throat hurt from being manhandled. He wanted to kill the male who'd put his hands on her.

Brick settled back on his haunches and nodded. Jade nodded and sat up, leaning on Brick for help.

"Malrick's dead?" Solan asked.

Brick nodded.

"The others fled in their vehicles. I've got our people following them to make sure they actually leave town this time. I'll handle getting the wolf to the clearing to burn the body. You guys want to come or do you want to go to your parents' place?"

Jade pressed her hand lightly to her reddened throat and whispered, "I want to go to

the clearing.”

“Yeah, sure.”

She leaned on Brick again, her arm around his neck, and watched as Solan and another security team member picked up the dead wolf and carried him into the woods.

“You’re okay?” she whispered.

He nodded. His wounds would heal either in his shift or as he returned to human. The important thing was that they were both alive.

After a few minutes, she rose unsteadily to her feet, and then they walked into the woods to the clearing. Already a fire had been started in the pit.

Cinder rushed to them, checking on Jade and then asking if Brick needed her to help heal his wounds, which he didn’t but appreciated her asking.

The high ranked males and elders stood around the bonfire as more wood was added, and then the body of the male who’d tried to take Jade away was laid on top and covered with more wood.

“This is an old tradition,” Adam said, “to burn the bodies of our enemies and banish them from the world. This male could have walked away at any time, but for whatever reason, he chose to push himself and his agenda on Jade and Brick, and as a result, he lost his life. Let the smoke and ash carry away the memory of this male’s attack on our people, and let it be a grim warning to any who would come against the Thorn Hollow Pack.

Our people are united in strength and loyalty.

Come against one of us, and you come against us all.

One pack, unbroken.” He lifted his head and let out a deep howl.

Brick joined in, as did the others, lending their voices to the declaration made by their alphas.

“I’ll bring you something for your throat, Jade,” Cinder whispered when the last howl’s echo had ceased. “Unless you want to shift?”

Jade shook her head. She settled on the ground next to Brick and he leaned against her.

Adam walked over as Cinder disappeared to the house to make tea. “I’m glad you’re both safe. We can put a hold on the mating ceremony. With that male dead, the threat is gone to Jade’s safety.”

Brick nodded and Jade rested her head on Brick’s shoulder and sighed.

He wished he could talk in his shift. He’d tell her how scared he was that she’d be taken or hurt while he was fighting Malrick, or worse, that he might die trying to keep her safe and she’d be left unprotected.

But mainly what he wanted to say was that he wasn’t just falling for her, as he’d said before everything went to shit.

He’d full-blown fallen.

It was fast, but that was the way things were with truemates.

He was in love with his mate, and he was so damn thankful that he’d get to tell her

the three most precious words in the world once he could shift again.

They sat in silence with Adam and several others, watching the flames as they destroyed the male who'd tried to take everything from him. He was glad that Jade was safe and he'd never have to worry about that male again.

The anti-shifter people? Yeah, they were still a concern. But right now, his mate was safe and that's all that mattered.

Chapter

Seventeen

Whatever was in the tea that Cinder had made for Jade had done wonders for her aching throat. By the time Brick was able to return to human form, the remains of the male who'd come after her weren't recognizable as anything but bones, and she was feeling like herself again.

"We'll keep the fire burning until the bones are ash," Everett, one of the pack elders, said as he poked at the wood and moved some of the logs around with a long-handled metal rod. "Then we'll scatter them in the creek. You two can head out. The elders will handle things."

"Thank you," Brick said.

He looked down at Jade. "You ready, sweetheart?"

"I'm ready to talk to you privately."

Her body was humming like a tuning fork and had been ever since the healing tea had fixed her aches.

She'd spent the last two hours talking quietly to her wolfy mate about her past and her hopes for the future.

He'd been a captive audience, gazing up at her with amber eyes.

She'd spilled her proverbial guts to him, telling him everything she could think of about her past and how crazy she was about him.

"Of course," he said. "But let's take my truck instead of walking."

She grinned and said, "I'd like to get mated tonight. If you want to still?"

"We don't have to. That male is dead and no longer a threat.

We can wait until the full moon." He looked down at her, his brows drawn in thought.

"But I do want to if you do. But not for any reason other than you and I can't wait until the full moon because we're just so very crazy about each other that we can't wait a minute longer. "

She couldn't help but smile. She was definitely crazy about him. "I want to do it for us and I don't want to wait."

"Then let's talk to Adam and Cinder and get somewhere private so we can talk."

They said goodbye to the elders and he took her hand, walking with her toward the alphas' home. "Clothes would be nice," she said, glancing at his nakedness, which just made her wish they were closer to being somewhere private.

"Yeah," he said with a laugh. "I bet they're still in the road, or maybe the security team picked them up. I can grab some from my room though."

They hurried to the house, where he changed, and then met with Adam and Cinder, who were seated at the kitchen table playing a card game, which Cinder was clearly beating Adam at, much to his chagrin.

“Absolutely we can do the mating ceremony tonight,” Adam said, putting down the cards.

“No worries at all. You two spend the afternoon together and come here an hour before sunset. Cin and I will get everything together. We’ll have the ceremony, a cookout, and a shift and hunt with the pack.

We could use the distraction from everything that’s been going on.”

“Thanks,” Brick said. “We’ll see you guys before sunset.”

Cinder pushed the cards into a pile to shuffle. “Enjoy your time together, and don’t worry about anything. We’ll handle it because you’re family, and that’s what family—and pack—does for each other.”

Jade smiled at the couple and thanked them, and then left with Brick.

“So where are we going?” she asked as he opened the door to his truck and helped her inside.

“Where I used to live.”

“Your parents’?”

“Yes and no.” On what turned out to be a very short drive, Brick said, “When I was a teenager, I wanted more privacy, but I wanted to also be close to my folks, so my dad and I built a stand-alone garage with an apartment over it. It’s a large studio basically, with a kitchen and bathroom.”

“That’s really awesome.” She’d only ever lived at home. In her old pack, females didn’t move away from their parents’ home until they were mated.

He parked in front of a large two-car garage. As she got out of the truck, she looked at the house next to the garage. “That’s where your folks live?”

He led her up the metal stairs to a small landing.

He used his thumb on a keypad and the door unlocked.

“Yep,” he said, holding the door for her.

“Sometimes I crash here when I don’t feel like being around the noise of the alphas’ house, especially on the prep days leading up to the full moon.

It’s like the house is never quiet. When we wanted privacy, this is the first place that came to mind. ”

She looked around the space. A bed was along one wall, a dresser with a lamp, a small couch and TV hung on the wall, and a kitchenette. He pointed to a door and said, “Bathroom’s in there. The fridge is stocked. Are you hungry or thirsty?”

She put her hand on the door and pushed it closed. “I’m good.”

He hooked his hand around her waist and drew her close. “You look like you’ve got wicked things on your mind, sweetheart.”

“I do,” she said. “Even though we haven’t known each other long at all, it feels like we’ve been together so much longer.”

“Well, a lot of seriously messed up shit happened in a short amount of time,” he said with a chuckle.

“Definitely. But even if things hadn’t gone to hell... several times... I’d still want to

be yours in truth, to wear your marks and join the pack.”

“We’re truemates. That kind of connection makes everything feel accelerated.” He pulled her a little closer and she felt the ridge of his erection. “You’re so fucking sexy, Jade. Everything about you calls to me on a cellular level.”

“You’re pretty damn sexy yourself.”

He lifted her into his arms and carried her to the bed, setting her on the edge and standing between her parted legs. He cupped her face and gazed down at her. She could see his wolf, the edges of his eyes simmering with amber.

“I love you,” they both said at the same time.

And then they both laughed.

He leaned down for a kiss. “I do, sweetheart. Love you.”

“I love you too,” she said. “Great minds think alike.”

He kissed her again. “I have a great mind with great ideas.”

“Do tell, sexy male.”

“I’d rather show you.”

He leaned into her, kissing her again, deeply and sweetly.

She fell back onto the bed and he followed, climbing up the bed over her.

While she pushed up on his shirt, he undid the buttons of her top and spread it open,

rubbing his fingers lightly over the swell of her breasts.

He straightened enough to take off his shirt.

She wiggled from her shirt and unhooked her bra, and he helped free her from the satin and lace.

He leaned down and kissed her nipples, taking one into his mouth and sucking on it gently. She closed her eyes and reveled in his attentions as he drove her wild with his talented tongue.

He kissed his way down her body and stripped her shorts and panties off, and then he stood and shucked his jeans. With a light tug on her knees, he pulled her to the edge of the bed and dropped to his knees.

“You’re a fucking feast, sweetheart,” he said with a growl.

And then he was licking her like she was his favorite piece of candy and everything in the world dropped away but them. He drove her to a quick climax, a shout of pleasure making her voice crack as waves rolled through her.

He climbed up her, his eyes glowing with his wolf, and fit the thick head of his cock inside her. Her head kicked back as he thrust hard and fast into her, and then he stilled, holding himself over her for a heartbeat. Their gazes clashed and he grinned, showing his fangs.

She shivered and hooked her legs over his hips. She couldn’t wait to be his mate.

As they made love, reveling in each other, she kissed him and whispered her love for him.

“I’m not scared anymore,” she said against his lips. “I’ve got you.”

“You will always be safe with me,” he said.

Then he drove her to another great height of pleasure, and just as she crested the wave of bliss, he sank his fangs into her neck and marked her as his. He lifted from her throat and growled as he came, his cock spasming inside her.

She shouted his name as happiness wove through her.

He scored his tongue and licked across the wound to ensure it scarred, and then he tilted his neck so she could do the same to him.

When she’d marked him and made sure it would remain forever, the connection between them solidified, their bond as mates unbreakable.

As they both came down from the heights of pleasure, they snuggled on the bed and talked quietly about what they both wanted for the future.

A place to call their own.

A family.

And a life full of love.

She couldn’t wait.

Chapter

Eighteen

Brick had been to dozens of mating ceremonies over the years, but now it was finally his turn. He felt like he'd been waiting an eternity to find his truemate, even though the reality was that it really hadn't been all that long in the scheme of a shifter's long life.

He stood with his father at the bonfire next to Adam and Cinder. The fire roared in the pit, filled with special logs. Cherry for a sweet life, oak for loyalty, pine for fertility, and ash for protection.

He wore dark jeans and shoes but no shirt, plus the traditional woven leather bracelets the male gave his female during the ceremony.

Alli had wanted to come for the ceremony, but since it was for wolves only, she sent a gift basket. It was waiting for them at the garage apartment, where they were going to spend their mating night.

"I hear them," his dad said with a low voice.

Brick's heart kicked up a notch. He couldn't wait to see his mate.

The pack went silent as the small group of females approached. Along with his mom and aunt, Jade had asked Dove and Brooke to help her get ready, females she'd enjoyed getting to know since she'd arrived in the pack.

He heard her delicate footsteps as she made her way to the clearing.

The sun had set, and the woods were bathed in flickering light from torches set up around the perimeter of the clearing and the bonfire.

However, he would have been able to see everything about her anyway. She positively glowed with happiness.

Mating would do that to a person.

Hell, he was sure he was glowing too.

The females left her to walk to him alone, carrying a cluster of white sage tied with raw cotton fabric that Cinder had blessed with her magic.

The white sage represented cleansing and protection, the raw cotton symbolizing leaving the past behind and starting fresh.

It was the perfect symbol for their future.

After tonight, she wasn't only going to be his mate in truth but a full member of the Thorn Hollow Pack. Her past was behind her and she would now have the full support of his pack.

And him, of course.

She always had his full support.

As she reached him, they turned to face each other. Adam and Cinder positioned themselves so they stood close and could look past them to the pack.

“Tonight, we gather under the stars to witness and celebrate the mating of Brick and Jade,” Adam said, his voice strong and clear in the quiet night.

“In this moment, we honor the journey that brought them together and the future they will build as one. From this night forward, your lives are woven together like a sacred blanket, bound by love and trust. Are you ready to declare your bond before the pack?”

Brick went first, removing the bracelets and slipping them on Jade’s wrists. “I, Brick, choose you, Jade, as my mate. I vow to protect you and our future offspring with my life, to honor your strength, to stand by your side in all things, and to love you with my whole heart.”

Jade sniffled and smiled at him. She handed the sage to Cinder and took his hands. “I, Jade, choose you, Brick, as my mate. I vow to stand by your side in every season, to be a helpmate to you in all things, to be the balance to your wolf, and to love you with my whole heart.”

Adam rested his hands on their joined hands. “As wolves, your bond is not just physical, but it’s also spiritual. Truemates are special and are to be cherished above all else. You are now two parts of one whole, stronger together.”

Cinder laid her hands on top of Adam’s. “Jade and Brick, as your alphas and your family, we welcome you into the pack as mates. Let your wolves howl in celebration, and the pack join in!”

Brick and Jade lifted their heads high and let loose howls of joy from their wolves. The pack joined in, the woods echoing with their happiness.

Adam and Cinder stepped back and Brick pulled Jade into his arms. “Baby, I love you from the bottom of my heart.”

“I love you too.”

He kissed her, pulling her close and letting his wolf revel in being fully mated and marked with his beautiful female.

He eased from the kiss and smiled at her, then nodded at Adam.

“Let’s eat!” Adam shouted.

Cinder gave the sage back to Jade. “You can keep it or toss it into the fire.”

Jade looked down at the bundle and said, “I’d like to toss it into the fire, but keep a sprig to press in a book for a keepsake.”

She gently pulled a sprig of sage from the bundle and gave it to Brick to hold.

Then she moved to the edge of the bonfire and said with a low voice, “This is the end of the hold my old life had on me and the start of my new life with Brick and the Thorn Hollow Pack. I banish my demons and dark thoughts to the past, and I embrace my future and all the good things that life has to offer.” She tossed the bundle onto the fire and turned to face him.

“I’m starving, but I also want to shift. ”

“Eat first, then shift?” he offered. He tucked the sprig behind her ear and kissed her cheek.

“Good plan,” she said.

“I’m starving too,” Cinder said, elbowing Adam.

“On it,” he said. He put his arm around his mate and said, “All right, you two, now I heard you were thinking about not staying in the alphas’ house?”

“We’ve been talking about it,” Brick said. “There’s an empty house on the street where my folks’ place is. We like the alphas’ house, but it’s a little noisy.”

“It’ll be noisier when the baby comes,” Cinder said. “I think you’re right. I love having you both at the house, but it’s not for everyone.”

Brick liked the idea of having a place for him and Jade all to themselves. Then they could walk around naked and not worry about anyone crossing their paths. Not to mention that Jade worried about being too noisy during sex, and he liked it when she was as loud as she wanted to be.

They reached the alphas’ house where the cookout was being held.

Tables had been set up in the yard and the pack was milling around and waiting for them.

He and Jade sat at the head table with Cinder and Adam, plus his parents and Adam’s parents, and they were served by members of the pack.

The menu was everything they liked, from grilled steaks slathered with compound butter to mac and cheese and Jade’s favorite peanut butter pie for dessert.

He kissed her temple and said, “I’m so glad you’re mine.”

She cut into her steak and grinned. “I’m so glad you’re mine too. And I’m really looking forward to getting back to the apartment tonight.”

“Oh?” he asked. “Feeling sleepy?”

“Heck no!” she said with a laugh. “I want to sex each other up all night. But first, we eat and shift, and then we’ll see where the night takes us.”

To the heavens and beyond with pleasure to spare, he was sure.

The pack families came by to congratulate them, and when they’d eaten their fill, they shifted and ran around the woods.

He loved seeing his beautiful mate in her furry form, with her white paw and bright amber eyes.

She was smaller than him but quick on her paws, chasing him as much as he chased her.

By the time they were out of their shifts, the moon was gone from the sky and the woods had quieted. He drove them to the apartment and carried his mate up the stairs to their temporary home.

But before they tumbled into bed, he asked her to marry him and gave her a ring that had belonged to his great-grandmother.

As her happy tears fell and he slipped the ring on her finger, he didn’t worry about anything but making her happy in as many ways as possible, in and out of bed. He wanted to always see her smile, always keep her safe.

He’d never been happier than he was at that moment, kissing his mate. She was the other half of his heart and the most important person in his life.

Chapter

Nineteen

“I have an idea,” Jade said the following afternoon as she and Brick relaxed in the apartment over the garage after lunch with his parents.

“A sexy one? You’re insatiable,” he said, his eyes dancing.

She rolled her eyes. Then she swung her leg over his and straddled his lap. Leaning in for a kiss, she said, “I’m always thinking sexy things about you. But I was wondering if we could go out?”

“Out...of the territory?”

“Yep.”

“For what?” He slid his hands slowly up her sides, delving under her top.

“A date.”

His brows rose. He cupped her face and drew her down for a kiss. “I’d love to take you out. Did you have something in mind? We’ll also need an escort, of course.”

Leaning into him, she rested her head on his shoulder. “Something fun.”

His wolf rumbled in his chest.

“Have you been to Lykos?”

“The shifter bar?”

“Yep. I haven’t been in a while. The last time I was there, I was escorting Brooke and Harper.”

“Oh, I like them, they’re sweet,” she said. “So it’s a date?”

“Of course. We’ll grab a bite and hit the bar for some hot and heavy dancing, and then I’ll sex you up good when we get home.”

She grinned. “You can sex me up good right now.”

He grabbed her tightly and rose to his feet, hauling her over his shoulder. “Whatever my sweetheart wants.”

She giggled as she landed upside down, staring at his butt.

“Just you, Brick. And a night out.”

“You got both.”

“Hey, want some company?” someone called from the street as she and Brick walked out of the house to meet up with Leo and Solan, who would be their security escorts for their night out.

Jade looked to the road and saw Cinder waving from the front seat of a dark blue SUV.

“Sure!” She hurried down the driveway and told them what their plans were.

“You two can ride with us,” Adam said. “Leo and Solan are waiting.”

Brick came up to the SUV and Cinder opened the door. “Brick, you can take my seat.”

“Absolutely not, you’re the alpha,” he said.

“I want to talk to Jade, and if I turn around while the car is in motion, I’m going to barf everywhere.

So either I drive, which you don’t want because Adam says I make him nervous with my lead foot and tendency to flip people off, or you sit in the passenger seat and talk to your cousin while I get to know the newest member of the Beaumont family. ”

“She’s got you there,” Jade said with a laugh.

“Indeed.”

Brick opened the second row’s door and Cinder and Jade slid onto the bench seat. He closed the door and got into the passenger seat.

“We were going to try Cactus Cantina,” Brick said. “It got good reviews online, and Jade said she’s in the mood for a strawberry margarita and chips with salsa.”

“Sign me up, but not for the booze part,” Cinder said.

“Works for me,” Adam said.

They pulled away from the house and headed to pick up Leo and Solan. When they’d met up with the security escort, they hit the road. While Brick and Adam discussed security for the pack, Jade and Cinder talked about the bar, the night ahead, and

Cinder's pregnancy.

After having the most amazing strawberry margarita and the best chips and salsa on the planet, they parked at the back of Lykos.

"So we just...walk in the back?" Jade asked as she took Brick's hand and stepped out of the SUV.

"Yep," Brick said. "Paris has an arrangement with the high ranked males of the shifter groups who live in Northern Ohio so that they can come in the back if they'd like, along with the alphas, of course."

"That's pretty cool," she said.

He took her hand and said, "It's handy when the weather sucks, that's for sure."

They knocked on the back door and a female wearing a bar T-shirt opened it. "Hi, everyone, come on in."

"Thanks," Brick said. Leo walked through first, then she and Brick followed with Adam and Cinder, and Solan brought up the rear.

The bar was busy and the music was loud and it took Jade a moment to adjust to the pounding bass. They settled at a table that was reserved for members of the wolf pack that were high ranked, and Brick said that there was always at least one table set aside for each shifter group in the area.

Brick took her hand and led her toward the bar. "Come on. There's someone I want you to meet."

Behind the counter stood a striking figure. He was tall and broad-shouldered, with

dark hair and eyes. He smiled when he recognized Brick.

“Paris,” Brick said as they reached the bar.

“Heya, Brick, who’s the lovely lady on your arm?”

“This is my mate, Jade. Sweetheart, this is Paris.”

He extended his hand and she shook it. “Nice to meet you,” she said.

“You’re Alli’s friend. She told me about you when she was here the other night,” Paris said.

“She’s been really wonderful,” Jade said.

“She could start a refuge for shifters in need of help, I swear.”

Jade agreed.

“What can I get for you?” Paris asked.

“I don’t want anything with alcohol,” she said. “I’m still a little warm from the margarita.”

“Me either,” Brick said.

“Coke?” she asked.

“I have syrups. Do you like cherry?”

“Yes,” she said.

“How about a cherry coke?”

“Sounds awesome,” she said.

“Make that two,” Brick said.

“Sounds good, I’ll bring it over.”

“Thanks,” Brick said.

While waiting for their drinks, they hit the dance floor, and she swore she’d never had so much fun in her life.

They stopped at a table with a small group on the way back to their own table, and Brick introduced her to tiger shifter Gavin and his mate Sadie.

Brick spoke to Gavin for a few moments privately, and then they returned to their own table.

“Everything okay?” she asked as she sat down and smiled at the drink in front of her. The tall glass had a slight red hue to it, and two cherries on top of the ice.

“Yeah, of course,” he said. “He and I have been keeping in touch about H. A. S. I contacted him after the attack at the drive-in and when we captured that Wiccan spying on us. I wanted to let him know we hadn’t had any other issues, but we’re staying sharp.”

“We’re definitely keeping a close watch on our borders,” Adam said. “Foley would be a fool to come against us again.”

Foolish and dangerous, which was a bad combination. She didn’t understand

someone wanting to destroy shifters just because they could shift.

“Some people are terrible,” she said.

“One hundred percent,” Brick said.

When they left the bar two hours later, Jade’s feet hurt a little from all the dancing and her ears rang from the loud music, but she’d had the time of her life.

Her mate was sexy and could dance, and she’d fallen even more in love with him over the course of the evening.

Charming didn’t even begin to cover it.

The low thrum of music inside the bar was muffled as the door swung shut. The night air was humid and the sky was full of stars, a perfect summer evening.

“This was so fun,” she said.

He grinned. “I’m glad you liked it. You danced like you’ve been doing it your whole life.”

Jade laughed softly. “That’s because you’re a good partner.”

“I’ll drive,” Brick said to Adam.

“I was going to suggest you could do that for your alpha,” Adam said, tossing the keys to Brick.

Leo and Solan waved from their SUV as Brick unlocked the SUV and opened Jade’s door.

After settling her in her seat, he shut her door and walked around the front of the SUV, sliding behind the wheel.

As he started the SUV and pulled onto the road to head back to the pack's territory, she relaxed into the seat, letting the memories of the evening replay in her mind.

"I'm really glad we came," Jade said, breaking the silence.

"Me too," Brick said.

"Ditto," Cinder said.

"Absolutely," Adam said. "It was a great night out, and we should definitely double date again before our pup is born."

"I'd love that," Cinder said.

Jade nodded in agreement. She'd had a lot of fun getting to know her alpha female. She was warm and compassionate and really cared about the pack.

She opened her mouth to say that she would love to double date again when her answer was cut off by the revving of several engines and the flood of bright headlights from behind them, too close and too fast.

"What the heck is that?" Jade asked, shielding her eyes from the brightness reflected in the sideview mirror.

Brick growled. "Trouble." He reached for the GPS screen and pressed the button for the phone.

The first hit came without warning. The jolt pushed Jade into the seatbelt and she

threw her hands out to brace against the dashboard.

“Hold on!” Brick said as he tightened his grip on the wheel.

“Adam!” Cinder said loudly with a sob in her throat.

“Brick, get us out of here!” Adam shouted.

Another hit from behind sent the SUV skidding to the side of the road. Gravel sprayed up as Brick tried to control it.

“Leo!” Brick said as he managed to connect a call to the security team. “Where are you?”

“They forced us off the road! We’re under attack!”

Jade’s heart pounded as the vehicle rammed them again, and the truck spun, the world outside spinning in a blur of headlights.

“Brace!” Brick shouted.

The SUV hit the guardrail with a bang, jerked to the side, and tottered for a moment. Jade’s head swam as she slammed against the door. The SUV landed on all four tires with a creak.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“I’m okay, Jade, are you?” Brick asked.

“My shoulder hurts from hitting the door, but I’m okay. You guys?” she asked, looking at Adam and Cinder.

“We’re good,” Cinder said. “What the heck was that!”

“Stay in the truck,” Brick said, looking pointedly at Jade. He opened his door, which creaked loudly.

“I’ll come,” Adam said.

“Be careful!” Cinder said.

Jade’s instincts screamed at her that they were in even more danger than when they’d been run off the road. Where was the truck that had hit them?

She saw something dark out of the corner of her eye, and she shouted for Brick a moment before he was tackled.

An engine roared, and brakes squealed outside the SUV, and then her door was wrenched open, and she was pulled out.

As she struggled and screamed for help, something sharp jabbed into her arm and she felt a sudden heaviness descend over her.

Her vision blurred and her muscles went lax.

She tried to call for her mate, but the only thing that came out was a soft whimper as her whole world faded to nothing and the feeling of being carried away from the most important person in her life.

Chapter

Twenty

Everything moved in slow motion.

One moment, they were coming back from a great date night, and the next, he'd been tackled by an unknown person. The only thing he did know for sure was that his mate and his alphas were in the car, their security detail had been attacked, and he was going to have to keep everyone safe.

And then some fucker tackled him.

He heard Jade scream for help and his wolf went crazy. No one puts their hands on his mate!

He leaped to his feet and grabbed the male, swinging him by the arm into the side of the SUV.

Then he jumped onto the hood of the SUV, using it as a launching pad.

He soared through the air, taking out the two males pulling his mate from the vehicle.

One managed to roll away, but the other hit the ground under Brick's full weight with a groan.

Jade slumped to the ground next to the SUV, and Brick took a moment to check on

her and found her unconscious.

Adam joined Brick, and the two fought several males together, claws out and growls echoing in the night.

The deserted stretch of road didn't have any lights, but Brick and Adam could see thanks to their enhanced eyesight from their wolves.

The humans were nearly blind in the darkness, something they used to their advantage.

Someone punched Brick in the face, and he stumbled backward, nearly toppling over Jade.

He snarled, punching back and connecting with the male's jaw, making his head snap back.

The man grunted, and then Brick saw a glint of metal and knew he had a knife.

Brick slammed his elbow down on the male's forearm and the knife dropped to the grass, then he delivered a brutal punch that sent the male airborne and into the side of the van that idled nearby.

He saw something out of the corner of his eye and realized someone was trying to drag Jade away. No!

With a roar from some ancient part of him, he kicked out and nailed the male in the head, snapping it to the side with a crack, the male dropping to the grass in a heap.

As Brick crouched near Jade with his claws brandished, the van peeled away and he had to duck and cover Jade as gravel and dirt sprayed from the tires.

“Fuck,” Adam said with a snarl.

There was the sound of a punch and then nothing. Brick lifted his head and saw Adam standing beside a male who wasn’t moving.

Brick felt for Jade’s pulse and was thankful it was beating strong and steady.

“Baby, you okay?” Adam asked.

“Are they all dead?” Cinder asked.

“Two of the three,” Adam said. “Is Jade okay?”

“Unconscious. We need to get her to Doc’s.” Brick’s voice cracked with relief, but he was still furious. “Are Leo and the others okay?”

“I don’t know, I’ll reach out. We need to be picked up and the SUV towed.”

“I’ll call it in.” Brick touched his jeans pocket, but his phone was in the SUV.

He stood and moved to reach inside when the attacker, who was still alive, groaned.

Brick growled and took the steps to close the distance to him.

He grabbed his hair and lifted his head, wrenching it back hard until the male groaned in pain.

“Who sent you?”

“Fuck...you,” the male wheezed.

“I think not,” Brick said. “Tell us or suffer. You’ll wish you died as easily as your friends.”

Adam strode over, his eyes flashing to the amber of his wolf. “I think I’ll shift,” Adam said. “That way I can eat him and there won’t be anything to identify him with.”

Brick smiled at his cousin’s banter because he knew that Adam was absolutely not going to shift right now. But the shiver of fear that made the male in his hold shudder was all that they needed to happen.

“No!” the male whisper-screamed.

Brick gave his head a shake. “Answer me and you’ll live. Don’t and you’ll find out what it’s like to be peeled like a banana by a furious wolf.”

The male let out a low moan. “I work for H. A. S.”

No surprise there. But Brick was still pissed off.

“Why did you target us? How did you find us?” Brick demanded.

When the male hesitated, Adam took a menacing step toward him. He tried to shrink back, but Brick didn’t let him go anywhere. “She’s the mate of a high ranked beast. That makes her valuable.”

“The alpha female?” Adam asked.

“No, she’s magical, Foley said we couldn’t take her, but we could take the number two guy’s girl.”

“Foley tried to get to me through my mate?” Brick asked.

“You want to cause a ruckus in a pack and make a beast go nuts, you take away their mate. At least that’s what Foley said. He wanted to make an example of her and show that no one is safe. Shake your whole foundation.”

“What were you going to do with her?” Brick said with a low voice. Vengeance was singing in his veins, but he needed to know.

“Use her to get to you. We knew we were no match for you, but we could distract you and take her, then use her to lure you and your friends somewhere and...” He stopped talking like he realized he’d suddenly said too much.

Brick’s stomach churned with rage.

“And what?”

“And kill you all. Eventually, you’d all fall, Foley said so.”

“Where is he? Where is his headquarters?” Adam said, squatting down and looking the male in the eyes.

He swallowed hard, his bravado cracking a bit. Then he said, “I’m not saying shit. Not without a lawyer.”

Dropping his hold on the male, Brick opened his mouth to say that there wasn’t going to be a need for a lawyer because the male wasn’t going to survive if he didn’t talk, when the sound of engines drew close.

Adam rose to his feet. “It’s Leo and a few more vehicles with pack members.”

“Good,” Brick said, barely registering their arrival as he crouched beside Jade and kept his fingers on her pulse to reassure himself that she was alive. How the hell had the night gone so off the rails so fast?

Cinder dropped to her knees next to him. “She’s alive and that’s what matters. We’re all alive.”

“I know,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

“About what?” she asked.

“About endangering you and your child, putting Jade into harm’s way, all of it.”

“Oh, Brick,” she said, resting her hand on his shoulder for a brief moment. “It’s not your fault. This is all on that bastard Foley. He’s the one who won’t leave us alone. We can’t spend the rest of our lives looking over our shoulders and never leaving town. That’s not living.”

“She’s right,” Adam said. “Tonight was awful, but we took out several of his people and we’ve got one of his males to interrogate. We’ll find out where he’s holed up and take him out once and for all.”

There was the creak of vehicle doors opening, and Leo rushed to them with Solan and Dove. “Is everyone okay?”

“I need to get Jade to Doc’s, and I’m sure Cinder needs to be looked at too. We were all knocked around pretty good with the crash. You guys are okay?”

“Yeah, we’ve got the males who came after us tied up in the back of the SUV, unconscious,” Solan said. “After we called for backup from the pack security team, we got here as fast as we could. We’ll handle things here. Go get them checked out at

Doc's."

"I'll follow you for security," Dove said.

Brick nodded. "Get someone else too. We'll take three vehicles.

" Brick carried Jade to one of the waiting vehicles.

Cinder got into the second row, and Brick laid his mate across the seat, her head on Cinder's lap.

Adam got into the front seat and Brick got behind the wheel.

He gave final instructions to his people and got on the road, speeding away from the scene and heading for what he hoped was a safe place for his mate.

The hum of the truck's engine was the only sound as Brick drove through the quiet streets toward the Whalen Family Clinic.

Everyone was tense and no one was talking, and that was okay with Brick.

His throat was too tight for him to speak, his wolf pacing in fury that their mate had been hurt and nearly taken from him.

He pulled into the parking lot of the clinic.

Adam helped Cinder out of the SUV and Brick lifted Jade into his arms. The security team that followed them split up to surround the building to keep an eye out for danger.

The door to the clinic swung open as Doc stepped out, his keen eyes assessing the

situation. “Bring her inside.”

Brick followed Doc into an examination room. He sent Adam and Cinder into another room. “Alpha, I’ll send in my nurse to check Cinder over,” he said.

“I’m fine. Please help Jade,” Cinder said.

Brick settled his mate on a hospital bed and lifted her shirt sleeves, finding the location of the bruise where the needle punctured her skin.

Doc took her blood and sent it to the in-house lab to find out what she’d been injected with.

While Doc hustled to deal with the blood work and form a treatment plan, Brick undressed his mate and put on a hospital gown, then tucked her gently into the bed.

She was on oxygen and a pulsometer attached to her finger, her heartbeat beeping steadily in the quiet of the room.

Adam stood in the doorway looking grim.

“Is Cinder okay?” he asked.

“Yes, they called her OB and she’s coming in to give her a full exam just as a precaution. But I got a call from Leo.”

“Are they all right?”

“The police showed up.”

“They did? How? The road was deserted.”

“This is just a guess on my part, but I think Foley was watching us from somewhere out of harm’s way and called the police so that our people wouldn’t be able to interrogate any of his people and find out where he is.”

“Damn. Well, we can still hope the police figure out where Foley is.”

“We could have,” Adam said. “If the remaining H. A. S. people weren’t all dead.”

“What?” Brick barked the word, his fists clenching.

“The police were attacked. Some of them were taking the injured to the hospital and the rest were taking the others to the station for questioning. The H. A. S. members were killed by masked men and the police were unharmed.”

Brick was stunned. “Foley cleaned house. He didn’t want them talking to anyone, police or otherwise.”

Adam nodded. “One interesting thing, though, is that when a police officer called Solan to let him know what happened, he said that one of the dead males was identified as Paul Duggan, Brent’s second-in-command.”

“Wow,” Brick said. “If he killed his number two, then he’s desperate to stay hidden.”

“That would be my guess,” Adam said. “But desperate or not, I don’t think this is the last we’ll see of him. We need to find him before he attacks again.”

Brick looked down at his unconscious mate. He smoothed the hair from her forehead and leaned over to kiss it.

“I’m putting out the word that the pack is on lockdown.

We're going to close all roads into town except for the main one, and we're going to staff it with a security team twenty-four-seven.

We'll be adding more security around the town—cameras, motion detectors, the works—and we're going to deputize more people into the security team so we're not caught off guard again," Adam said.

"When Jade is better, I'll help. I want to focus on her right now." He didn't want to say it, but it was hanging in the air anyway—he'd nearly lost his mate tonight.

"Of course," Adam said. "You focus on her and don't worry about anything else. Foley tried to come against us, but we survived without any losses. Tonight, we can celebrate that win because it matters. The war isn't over, but we won this battle."

Brick nodded and settled back in the chair next to the hospital bed. Adam wished him well and returned to Cinder's room to watch over her. Brick stared at the empty doorway and then turned his attention to Jade.

He lifted her hand and kissed it. "Baby, I'm right here. You're not alone and you're safe. Doc's going to get you fixed up and I'm going to keep you safe no matter what. You're the best thing that ever happened to me."

His voice choked with emotion and he closed his eyes and held her hand, waiting for Doc to return.

Chapter

Twenty-One

Brent Foley was furious and aggravated. Not only had his people failed to grab the damn woman mated to the second-in-command of the pack so she could be used for bait to lure the beast to his death, but Paul practically spilled his guts to those beasts on the roadside!

Brent had been watching the scene with a drone, and clearly, Paul remembered he was being watched and clammed up.

If he hadn't, he would have for sure told them where the headquarters was now and how to find him and the rest of the Northern Ohio branch of Humans Against Shifters.

Brent had alerted the police to a huge accident so they would be forced to intervene and get his people away from the wolves, and then he'd mobilized another group of H.

A. S. members, who'd chased the cops down and killed the members.

He'd lost his number two, but the man was leaking like a sieve, and Brent knew he didn't have what it took to keep his mouth shut.

"How many did we lose?" he asked as he sat behind his desk, his phone on speaker and lying next to his laptop.

“Seven. The wolves killed two. We took out the remaining five.”

“Good.” He sighed. It wasn’t good, but it was what it was. He stared at the cell phone. Joey was ruthless and didn’t bat an eye at killing any H. A. S. members. He was loyal to a fault.

“What now?” Joey asked.

Brent rolled his neck in frustration. “Come back to headquarters. Make sure you’re not followed. Meet me in my office. I’d like to make you my new number two.”

There was a pause, and Joey said, “Thanks, Brent. We’ll be back shortly.”

The call ended and Brent rubbed his eyes.

He was tired. So damn tired. But he was not going to give up.

He’d come to Northern Ohio for a reason and he was going to finish the job.

The wolves might have used witch magic to protect their borders, but they couldn’t stay there forever.

He’d figure out a way to get to them, starting with the high ranked ones and their women.

He rose to his feet, too on edge to stay seated, and paced the length of the dimly lit office.

He was determined not to let the beasts’ small victories deter him.

Three setbacks were nothing compared to the vision that burned in his mind of a

world free of shifters and their supporters.

Humans were supposed to have dominion over beasts, and he was going to ensure that happened.

He was angry at the failure tonight, at losing people, but the war was going to rage on. He would regroup and recalibrate, using Joey's expertise in warfare, and strike the wolves again. Harder. Smarter.

One way or another, the wolves would perish.

Jade woke to the soft hum of medical equipment and the sterile scent of antiseptic. She opened her eyes and found herself staring at a white tile ceiling with dappled sunlight dancing on the surface.

Brick leaned over her. "Jade, you're awake! You're in a clinic that's run by our pack doctor. He's been taking care of you. Doc!"

She tried to move, but everything ached. Not terribly, but badly enough to make her wince and freeze. Brick noticed her wince and said, "You're still recovering. Lemme move the bed for you so you can see."

There was a whirl of a motor and the head of the bed slowly lifted. She found herself in a hospital room. Sunlight poked around the edges of blinds that covered a window on one wall. She frowned. How much time had passed? It had been nighttime when they'd been on the way home from their double date.

Cinder!

"Is...is everyone okay? You? Cinder? The baby?"

Brick gave her hand a squeeze. “I’m fine, and Cinder and her baby are too. And Adam, hell, everyone is okay. You were the only one we were worried about.”

A male wearing a polo with the Whalen Family Clinic logo on the pocket and a stethoscope around his neck walked in. “Nice to see you’re awake, Jade. I’m Doc, and I’m not only the pack doctor, but I also run the clinic here. How are you feeling?”

“Confused.”

He smiled. “I’m sure it’s disorienting. Brick can fill you in on everything that happened, but I’ll tell you the medical things.

You came into the clinic unconscious last night.

I ran bloodwork and discovered you’d been injected with a drug called Lupios⁷.

It’s a synthetic compound created by some very unsavory people in a lab in another country and it’s actually illegal to have it in the States.

It attacks a shifter’s heightened metabolism and nervous system and suppresses the ability to shift.

It induces unconsciousness and lingers in the bloodstream for hours.

You would have eventually regained consciousness without my intervention, but you were dosed with a high concentration of the drug, and my guess is it would have been a half day or longer.

” The treatment had been two-fold: he’d had Brick donate plasma, which he’d used to bolster her natural healing and help her body neutralize the drug, and then he’d used a saline solution with an herbal compound that included milk thistle, which accelerated

toxin breakdown.

The IV was still in her arm, the bag nearly empty.

“You’ll need to stick around until the drug is completely gone from your body, probably a few hours from now.” He walked to a counter and returned with a bottle of blue electrolyte drink. “This will help replenish what you’ve lost. I’ll check on you in a little while.”

“Thanks, Doc,” she said.

“Thanks,” Brick said.

Brick opened the drink for her and she took a few sips before putting it back on the small table next to the bed and settling against the pillows with a sigh.

He kissed her hand and breathed out shakily. “I thought I was going to lose you, sweetheart.”

“It’s a blur,” she said. “What happened?”

He told her about rescuing her from the anti-shifter group’s attack, learning that Foley had targeted her to use as bait to lure him to his death, and how Foley had taken out his own people after the police had taken them into custody.

“Holy crap,” she said. “He’s really crazy, isn’t he?”

“Yeah, and dangerous.” His eyes got bright and his brow furrowed. “Jade, I’m so sorry.”

“For what?”

“You could have been taken from me. You could have died. I said I’d keep you safe and I failed.” His voice got low and rough at the end and she could see him struggle with emotion.

“You didn’t fail.”

“But—”

“No buts,” she said. “Yes, they came after us again, but you saved my life! You stopped them from taking me. You defended me, not to mention the alphas. There’s no telling what might have happened if they’d gotten me away from you, but I wouldn’t be here, in the clinic, on the mend if it weren’t for you. You. Saved. Me.”

He closed his eyes and pressed his forehead against her hand. “I only want you to be safe.”

“I’m safest with you.”

And that was the damn truth. She’d been yanked out of the SUV and injected with a drug that made her helpless almost instantly.

If it wasn’t for Brick being stronger and faster than the humans who attacked them, she might be dead.

She wanted to cry and scream at the unfairness of it all, but the truth was she was supremely lucky that she had a mate who was a badass and could keep her safe.

He’d come to her rescue like some comic book superhero.

She was the luckiest female in the world.

Sitting up enough to lean against him, she kissed his neck and whispered, “I fucking love you, Brick. Thank you for saving me.”

“I love you too, Jade. With my whole heart.”

By the time dinner rolled around, Jade was back to full health and feeling like herself again. Cinder and Adam stayed at the clinic until Jade was discharged, and she appreciated them being so kind and supportive.

Over the course of the afternoon, Brick and Adam had talked about the changes to the pack and town and that they were all on lockdown for the foreseeable future.

They all hoped that Foley would think twice before coming after the pack again, but she was very sure that he wasn’t done, and the others agreed.

He was a maniac and fanatical in his belief that shifters should be eradicated and humans the dominant species on the planet.

Adam and Cinder drove them to the garage apartment, promising to check in on them the following day.

Brick set her on the couch. “I’ll get you some water. Or another sports drink? Doc said you should keep drinking stuff with electrolytes in it.”

“Water’s fine for now. You’re hovering, by the way.”

“Damn right, I am. Get used to it.”

She smiled at him.

A knock on the door interrupted them, and Brick called that it was open. His parents

walked in, carrying covered dishes.

“We heard what happened and thought you two could use some dinner,” his dad said.

“And maybe some company, too, if that’s okay,” his mom said.

“Of course, come on in,” Jade said.

They set the covered dishes on the coffee table and Sophie gave Jade a hug.

“Are you okay? You had us worried,” Ryan said.

“I’m great, thank you so much.”

Sophie walked into the kitchen area and returned with plates and silverware, then filled a plate with mac and cheese and half a ham sandwich. “Here you go, honey. I’ve got other types of deli meat if you’d like something else.”

Jade hadn’t been hungry until she smelled the mac and cheese. Then her stomach growled. “This is perfect, thank you.”

Sophie filled plates for the rest of them, and the four of them sat together and shared quiet conversation about the situation with the anti-shifter people and how the pack continued to come together to protect their people.

The warmth of his family and the security she felt in that small apartment, was a stark contrast to the terror of last night.

As they were leaving, Sophie said, “If you need anything at all, just holler out the door. We mean it, anything.”

“Thank you,” Jade said.

“Take care of her,” Ryan said to Brick, giving him a pat on the shoulder. “And yourself too.”

“I will,” Brick said. “Always.”

They left and when the door closed behind them, Jade’s eyes stung with tears.

Her whole life, she hadn’t had anyone really care about her, not like she had experienced in Thorn Hollow with Brick and his family and pack.

Not only had they fought for her with that dangerous male who’d come for her, but they’d stood up to an entire anti-shifter organization to protect her.

She was humbled to the core by what she’d witnessed since she’d come to town, and how very blessed she was to be so cared for by so many people.

Brick sat next to her and held her close.

“I’m just....,” she said through the soft sobs that made her voice catch, “I’m just so happy to be part of your family and pack.

You’ve made Thorn Hollow a home for me. I just realized that I never really felt at home anywhere before.

I never felt like I was part of anything.

But you make me feel like I belong, like I’m part of a real family now. And I feel so safe with you.”

Safe. Protected. Wanted.

All the things she'd ever craved in her life she finally had, because she'd escaped her old pack and taken a chance on a new life.

"You are safe, Jade. I swear on my life that I'll keep you and our future pups safe. You're the most important thing in my life. I don't want to ever get that close to losing you again."

"You're the most important thing in my life too."

She turned into him and closed her eyes.

Pushing everything that had happened to the back recesses of her mind, she focused on the present and her mate, and the future and the hope that it brought.

The weight of the past lingered, but here, in Brick's arms, it didn't feel so oppressive. He traced lazy patterns on her arm and she felt the tension slowly seep away.

"We're in this together," he said. "You and me, hell or high water."

She tipped her head up to smile at him. "Together."

And for the first time in her life, she knew she wasn't alone and she never would be again, thanks to her wolfy mate.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:56 pm

The late afternoon sun lit the backyard of Brick and Jade's new home, where laughter and the scent of grilled food drifted through the air.

He manned the grill laden with burgers and steaks, watching Jade sit around a firepit, chatting with Cinder and Alli.

Picnic tables were set up around the patio, and their closest friends and family members milled around the yard.

They'd worked their asses off over the last week cleaning up and moving into the house a few doors down from his parents.

It had been left empty after the couple who'd lived in it previously moved to another pack out of state to be closer to family.

The four-bedroom house had a great backyard with the woods at the back for privacy, a master suite, and a living room with a built-in bookcase that Jade had already half-filled with books after a delivery from a used bookstore in the next town.

Jade caught him staring at her and gifted him with a radiant smile that made him feel warm even in the July heat.

Damn, he loved her.

And he loved that they had a place of their own now. He'd liked living at the alphas' house, but it wasn't exactly the kind of place for a new couple to get to know each other, or the late night snuggle-fests, as Jade liked to call them.

Adam joined him at the grill.

“Everything looks great,” he said. “Congrats from me and Cinder with the new house. How’s your week off been?”

“Thanks,” he said. “Great, but busy. Having the housewarming was a good motivation to get moved in.”

“Do you miss the big house?” Adam took a drink of beer and smiled.

“Yes and no. I definitely miss your mom’s cooking and being so close to everything, but I absolutely prefer being in a place that’s just the two of us.”

“I get that,” he said. “Cinder and I have it a little different since we’ve got the whole floor to ourselves, but having other people in the house can be stifling.”

Like late night snuggle-fests anywhere the couple wanted.

He glanced over his shoulder at the house and smiled. It was a symbol of the next chapter of his and Jade’s life together. She was his and he was hers, and all of this was theirs to share.

Adam slipped away to mingle and Leo walked up.

“The house looks great. Congrats, man,” Leo said, clapping Brick on the shoulder.

“Thanks a lot.”

“How’s domestic life treating you?”

Brick clicked the tongs and flipped the steaks. “You know what? I love it. Freaking domestic bliss is where it’s at. Happy mate, happy life, I tell you what.”

“I really never thought I’d see the day when you’d be manning a grill and hosting a housewarming.”

Brick grinned. “I don’t know how I got so lucky, but I’m not questioning it.”

Leo shook his head. “It wasn’t luck. You both fought for each other. She went through hell to get here and you went through hell keeping her safe.” He waved his free hand toward the house and yard. “You two earned this.”

“I couldn’t have done it without the pack. You guys are family to me, just as much as my parents.”

“I’m happy for you, but I’m also jealous as hell. I don’t know when I’ll find my true mate.”

“Trust me,” Brick said, looking at Jade as she laughed at something Cinder said, “she’ll show up when the time is right.”

“I hope it’s soon.”

Brick did too, actually. Leo was one of his best friends, and he hoped he would find his mate soon. And Solan too. They both deserved all the happiness.

The food was served with help from his mom and aunt, and they all found seats at the picnic tables. Before they enjoyed the meal, his dad stood and raised his drink.

“I’d like to toast Brick and Jade. May your new home be filled with love, laughter, and just enough mischief to keep your lives interesting. Cheers to a sweet future and a lifetime of happiness.” He raised his glass higher, then said, “To Brick and Jade!”

The group cheered and echoed, “To Brick and Jade,” as glasses clinked.

Brick gave Jade a kiss.

She smiled at him, her eyes sparkling with happiness. “This is the best night. Our pack is here, our family. I really, really feel like I belong and it’s because you opened your life and heart to me.”

“I love you, sweet wolf,” he whispered.

“I love you too.”

As they ate, conversation flowed around the tables, the backyard filled with the hum of chatter.

“How’s things going with the pack and the new safety measures?” Brick’s dad asked.

Even though Brick had been off for the last week, spending time with Jade after their mating and getting the house ready, he’d been part of the new security measures they’d implemented around the town and pack’s hunting grounds.

Adam cleared his throat and the group quieted.

“I’m happy to report, just as a general update, that it’s been quiet this week.

No signs of H. A. S. or Foley. Our territory is secure with our new safety measures and the Wiccans’ protection wards are holding strong.

After everything we’ve been through the last couple of weeks, it’s safe to say we can take a breath and focus on what matters most: moving forward.

Of course, it doesn’t mean we let our guard down, but our pack has proven time and again that we can face down threats to our own and we’re stronger because of it. ”

“Unbreakable,” Cinder said.

“Exactly. I’m proud to be alpha of this pack, and I’m thankful that my cousin finally has a mate to soften his rougher edges.”

Brick grinned.

He freaking loved his pack and family.

And he loved Jade more than that.

His heart was so damn full.

She leaned on his shoulder and sighed. “I’m so happy, Brick.”

“Me too, sweetheart.”

By the time the last guest had left and the last dish had been put away, Brick and Jade were able to sit on the back porch in a pair of wooden Adirondack chairs and stare up at the stars.

“I always thought I’d live in the alphas’ house,” he said.

“Oh?” Jade asked.

“Yeah,” he said, looking thoughtful. “When Adam took over the pack and asked me to move into the house with him and his parents, I thought it was just where I’d always be. I figured I’d get mated at some point and have kids, and they’d grow up in the alphas’ house.”

“What made you change your mind?”

“You asking me for a place for us to have privacy.”

She smiled. Privacy wasn't too forthcoming in the alphas' house, especially with well-hearing shifters running around.

She liked being in their own place where they could be as loud as they wanted and do what they wanted without running into anyone else.

Even something simple like watching TV in the alphas' house wasn't so simple if someone else was already using it.

“It's nice we're close to them though,” she said. “We can walk to their house if we want. Our kids can grow up together.”

“Like me and Adam.” He gave her one of his sweet smiles that made her whole body light up. “I love that idea.”

She tilted her head back to look at the sky again, then at Brick. “I wouldn't change a thing, you know.”

“About what?”

“About the road here. People always say they wish they could change their past, but my past brought me here to you, the same way that your past kept you in Thorn Hollow so we could find each other. I hate that I never knew my mother or that my father was so distant, but the pack I grew up in shaped me into the female I am, and without that, I might never have come to Ohio. I can't imagine my life without you in it.

All the bad stuff, the scary stuff, brought us together, and I'm grateful for the road that led us together. ”

He turned his head to her, a smile tugging on his gorgeous lips. “I’m thankful for the road that brought us here too. The only thing I want is a lifetime of happiness with you.”

“Me too.” Jade leaned into him, lacing their fingers together.

Brick squeezed her hand and she could feel through their connection as mates that he was just as content as she was, even though neither of them really needed to say it.

In that quiet moment, she felt like the future was wide open, just waiting for the next chapter of their lives to start.

Thank you so much for reading Brick .

I hope you enjoyed hanging out with the Thorn Hollow Pack! The next book in the Northern Ohio Shifters series— Leo —will be out in 2026.