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Eckford

GODDESS  
CHOSEN



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*Janet Eckford*

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For my mother, thank you for being so crazy even  
when it drives me crazy.



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# CHAPTER ONE

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Fae Patton walked briskly toward the glass doors of the high-rise building where she worked in downtown Los Angeles. A gust of cool winter air blew up the fashionable trench coat she was wearing, and she tugged it back down. Shivering slightly, Fae knew others might think she was a wimp because she chilled when temperatures dropped below seventy degrees, but winter in Los Angeles was still winter, and right now it was pretty cold. As she walked through the doors, she flashed her ID badge and smiled to the security guard on duty.

Listening to the heels of her four-inch stilettos click against the stone floor, she began to muse about what her day would have in store for her. In her opinion Mondays should be stricken from the workweek. It wasn't that she did much partying over the weekend, but she just found it hard to say good-bye to the two days of bliss she waited all week for.

After pressing the elevator door, she tapped her foot impatiently. As she watched the floor numbers descend, Fae stifled the urge to sigh. Not that she didn't enjoy her job—it was just the people she had to work with at times. Conall Technologies was one of the more cutting-edge security technology firms, and as

one of their top security specialists, she found her job rewarding. It just didn't help that she was one of the few women in the company who didn't make copies or serve coffee.

It had taken her five years to climb the corporate ladder at Conall. Her degree in computer technology made her an asset to any organization, but carving out a space in this company was a practice in patience and determination. The few friends she had always said she should quit, but she was far too stubborn and determined to turn tail and run.

Walking into the up elevator, Fae quickly pressed the button to close the doors. If she was going to have to spend her day with others, she might as well savor a little bit more alone time now. She adjusted her laptop bag and leaned against the elevator walls. Even the soft rock music playing in the elevator couldn't ruin the serenity of the moment. Once she got to her desk, there would be no down time, and she relished the little she had early in the day. Conall Technologies promised protection that made the governmental security measures of some countries seem inadequate.

Just as she was stepping off the elevator, her cell phone began to ring. Looking at the caller ID, she could see Garrick Conall, her boss and CEO of the company, was calling. She grimaced at the phone and

sent the call to voicemail. Taking a deep breath, she began to walk toward her office, determined not to let the call annoy her.

It was the same thing every Monday morning. Fae got to work at exactly 9:05 a.m. every day, and at exactly 9:05 a.m., Garrick would call her cell phone to ask why she was late. In the beginning Fae had actually been embarrassed and slightly concerned, as she was always a conscientious worker. She gave one hundred percent when it came to her job, and she wanted to make sure her boss knew that. But when she realized this was just another of his power trips, she quickly began to rebel. Garrick was never happy unless everyone was marching to his tune. Fae liked to remind him others preferred a different beat.

Walking into her spacious office and putting her things on her desk, she noticed she was getting an inner office call. She looked down at the caller ID and could see it was Garrick again. Pressing the button to send the call to voicemail, Fae smirked slyly to herself. She had to be honest—she got a devilish sense of joy from pushing the envelope. As an only child, she'd missed out on working the nerves of an older or younger sibling.

Sitting down, she began to power up her computer and start an internal countdown. Over the years she'd learned the exact number it took for

Garrick to walk from his office to hers. Just as she got to one, he stormed into her office. Looking up from her desk, she put on her most serene smile. The one that really ticked him off.

“I’ve been calling you. Why weren’t you picking up your phone?” Garrick asked with a note of irritation.

Sighing, she kept the smile in place and continued to look at him. She watched him watching her and began to wonder just how long he could hold out before he truly lost it. Fae had to admit that he was pretty attractive when he was angry. Hell, he was pretty attractive when he wasn’t angry. She was convinced he was probably pretty attractive even when he was sleeping. He exuded a type of confidence that made those who worked for him stand at attention awaiting orders. It was only fair she helped him learn a few life lessons, such as being a control freak wasn’t going to get him that far.

Steepling her hands in front of her, Fae tilted her head and watched a nerve begin to throb at Garrick’s temple. She waited a few more seconds before responding to his question. “Garrick, we do this every Monday. I know it ticks you off that I won’t let you consume my weekends with nonsensical work-related crap, but do you have to bombard me as I walk in on Monday mornings? Aren’t you getting the least bit

tired of this? I know I am,” she finished, waiting for the fallout.

Fae had to suppress a smile when she saw the nerve begin to beat at a faster tempo, matching the rate of his heart. Okay, today she was really pushing the envelope, but it had been the same routine for the last five years. She didn't know if she had finally hit her threshold, or maybe her cycle was coming, but she just couldn't take Garrick's Alpha crap today. He may have everyone else saying how high when he commanded him or her to jump, but Fae wasn't hired because she made a good puppet. She was hired because she did a damn good job.

Moving toward her desk so he could tower over her, Garrick looked down at her with an expression that probably would've made anyone else piss themselves. Luckily, she wasn't anyone else, which was why instead of pissing herself she leaned back into her leather office chair and crossed her legs. When she caught his momentary distraction caused by the movement, she didn't bother to hide her smile. Even though he was annoying the majority of the time, it was nice to know he could appreciate her feminine qualities.

Looking back at her, he deepened his scowl, planted both hands on the desk and leaned forward. “What I'm tired of, Fae, is your blatant disrespect for

me and my rules. Granted, your work has garnered you privileges other staff are not entitled to, but that doesn't excuse your continual tardiness every Monday. It's the beginning of the workweek and it's important that you, as a senior member of the staff, set the right example for those that work under you." He flared his nostrils.

Still leaning back in her chair, Fae began to rock her crossed foot back and forth. It was during these moments she wondered if Garrick did this because he had no one else who would challenge him in his life. Even though he came from money, he was a billionaire in his own right and extremely successful in the private security technology field.

Also, before he'd even started his company he had been some sort of special ops officer in the military, and he could've worked his way to the top of that food chain if obligations at home hadn't made him quit. It wasn't as if he surrounded himself with "yes men," but what Garrick said usually went as gospel. He was just fortunate he knew what to say the majority of the time. Fae believed that for a healthy work environment, there had to be at least one person that still looked at the words and asked "why."

Staring at the imposing figure of the man leaning against her desk, she also knew Garrick was never out-classed or out-ranked when it came to

securing the affections of women. She would be a liar if she denied being attracted to him at certain points in the five years they'd worked together. Even as annoying as she found his domineering nature, there was something so primitively appealing about a man who could take charge.

Well over six feet with the body of a well-muscled athlete, Garrick was most women's definition of eye candy. His thick auburn hair sometimes made her fingers itch with the need to stroke it, and his steely blue eyes were set in a face that would make Adonis jealous. Fae had seen many a woman do a double take. If he was sexy when he was being all caveman, he was definitely sexy when he turned on his killer smile. Garrick had the most adorable dimples that seemed out of place on a face usually so severe. The women in the reception pool started taking bets one year on who could get him to flash them.

Not breaking eye contact, Fae arched an eyebrow in a questioning gesture and took a deep breath. "Frankly, Garrick, I have never had any complaints from those who are under me," she said dryly.

Fae was actually a little shocked by the sexual innuendo of her statement after the comment registered for her, but when she saw Garrick's nostrils flare even more, she wondered if she was going to be singed by the fire she played with. She'd been passing

it back and forth with him for years now, but in the last several months there'd been more of an edge to the words spoken. Today seemed to be a tipping point into a place she wasn't sure she knew how to explore.

Realizing the usual Monday morning banter they shared may be getting out of line, she broke eye contact and used a more placating tone. "But I understand that you have your rules, Garrick, and I will try my best to be here at 9:00 a.m. instead of 9:05 a.m.," she said, looking down at the papers on her desk. Even if she was going to roll over and show her belly, Fae couldn't help the last little dig. She still had to keep the man on his toes.

Looking back up, Fae could see the nerve in Garrick's forehead wasn't throbbing as much. He pushed back off the desk as he assessed her new demeanor. She knew he was determining if he should push the issue or take the small but hollow victory she was offering him. For a moment she saw a spark flare up in his eyes, and she hoped he just might push a little more.

"We have a lunch meeting with a possible account. We're leaving at eleven thirty," he said, giving her a final onceover before turning and walking out the door.

Sighing, she watched him exit and turned to check her e-mail. She really didn't know what else she

should have expected from him. If he had capitalized on that momentary spark of heat between them, she might have been the one to freak out. They both had their places in life, and she knew the order was set for a reason. After all, what else did she think she was going to get from the Alpha of one of the strongest wolf shifter Packs in the country?

Definitely not a “thank you.”

# CHAPTER TWO

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Garrick really couldn't understand why he let Fae get to him so much. He would never accept that type of behavior from another member of his staff or his Pack. Striding back to his office, he fumed about the situation that had just occurred. Even when she'd finally apologized he'd known it was only half-hearted, and come next Monday morning she would do the same thing again. But he couldn't think of any other alternative. She was one of the best security specialists he had, a fact that never went unnoticed by the other staff. Her ability to gather information others couldn't even dream of getting often left him puzzled.

When she'd first applied at the company five years ago, he'd almost overlooked her resumé. Her degree in computer programming and specialization in security software was good but not impressive. She'd worked for some other U.S. security companies and had a strong skill base, but that hadn't wowed him either. Still, they'd needed someone immediately, and his lawyers said people would start to get suspicious if he didn't hire more women.

The mostly shifter staff was predominantly male, and in Garrick's world that was perfectly normal. He didn't feel females weren't capable of performing as

well as males in his corporation; he'd just never come across one who could. When he'd hired Fae, he'd thought she'd help quell some of the fears of his lawyers but was pleasantly surprised when she'd dismantled his own beliefs as well.

The rumor among the Packs was Fae was a witch, but she never smelled of the after-effects of magic like other witches he'd met. In fact, her scent was one of the most difficult for him to identify. She had a constant smell of warm vanilla and lavender Garrick attributed to her soap or perfume, but then there were faint traces of other things he could never pinpoint. At one point he wondered if she might be a shifter of some kind, but when she didn't respond to the subtle hints he and his kind recognized, he knew he was probably wrong. Still, he couldn't shake the feeling there was something else about her he just wasn't able to grasp. Garrick wondered if that tickling sensation in the back of his mind that she was something more was what made it hard for him to let her go.

Granted, she made him and the company large amounts of money because of the reputation she'd created, but the stress he felt in her presence didn't seem worth it most of the time. The last couple of months seemed the worst. He'd had to constantly keep his wolf from snapping at her.

Walking into his office, Garrick wanted to groan when he saw his brother lounging on the coach he kept in the room. After his encounter with Fae, he didn't need another emotionally taxing situation. Acknowledging his brother with a slight nod, Garrick walked over to the large mahogany desk situated in front of the panoramic windows in his office. It was those windows that had sold Garrick on the building when they were looking to relocate company offices. He could see all of L.A. spread out in front of him—when the smog was down, of course. With his growing responsibilities he spent less time out in the field, but if he was going to have to work in an office, he needed to at least have some of the outside both he and his beast craved.

“How was Fae?” Garrick's brother Garth asked mockingly.

Sitting down and gathering paperwork in front of him, Garrick refused to respond to the taunt his brother presented. He knew their Monday morning standoff was humorous to other members of the staff, particularly those who were Pack, which was one of the factors that motivated him to try and rein in her behavior. Garrick needed to have the respect of those he led, and her flagrant disregard for rules jeopardized that.

He knew she thought he was a control freak, but if he weren't strict about control there would be another wolf waiting in the wings to take his place. Looking up at the smirk on his brother's face, he knew who would be first in line for the challenge.

"You really need to get a handle on her, Garrick. If you would like some suggestions, I have a few," Garth said in the same mocking tone.

Gritting his teeth, Garrick worked to keep a lid on his anger. It didn't help he was riled up from the sparring match he just had with Fae. His younger brother considered himself an expert on all things female but usually found himself in situations Garrick had to bail him out of.

"Considering your suggestions would either get me sued or in jail, I think I'll pass. She's human, Garth, and I have to deal with her as I would any other human employee." He spoke with the patronizing voice his brother hated.

Barely contained rage played across his brother's features. Looking at Garth, he wished there wasn't so much animosity between them. He never could understand why his brother resented him so much. Growing up, Garrick had always longed for the type of relationship other brothers had in the Pack. But Garth either ignored or rebuffed his attempts. His brother always seemed to resent what he was able to

accomplish in life. Over the years, he'd had to stop extending the olive branch of peace.

As Garth worked to control the anger that threatened to spill out, Garrick began to check his e-mails. His brother was never very good at controlling his temper, and he knew his little jab was enough to push him over the knife's edge he constantly balanced on. All he needed was for Garth to lose control of his beast and change in the middle of his office.

Whereas Garrick's status as Alpha allowed him to help wolf shifters with less control from exposing themselves through change, Garth's deep resentment of his brother prevented there being any communication of control between the two. Others in the Pack warned him Garth was a ticking time bomb, but Garrick didn't like the only option for changing the situation: giving the order for the death of his brother.

"Well, since she's human, why don't you just use human modes of control and fire her. It's not as if she's that great anyway," Garth said, having regained his composure.

Looking up from his computer screen, Garrick gave Garth a leveling stare. Even though he worried about his brother, he didn't want him to believe his little tantrums could be used to control him. Questioning Fae's capability caused a possessive aspect of his personality he hadn't even known existed

flare up. He may complain about her, but he wouldn't tolerate others doing it.

When his brother began to fidget uncomfortably, Garrick turned and leaned back in his chair. He was faintly aware this was the same tactic Fae had used on him earlier, but he was too consumed with making his point and dismissing his brother to focus on how annoyed the realization made him feel. The female was the only person who made him feel he was being put in his place. If he was honest, he found it every bit as refreshing as annoying. He'd just never admit that to her.

“Garth, it's my decision what I do with both human and Pack staff, as it is my evaluation of their merits in the company that matter. Now unless you came for something other than to criticize my decisions, I suggest you tell me what you want or get back to work.”

“Mother always said we shouldn't play with our food, Garrick.” Garth glared at him before he turned and walked out of the room.

Watching his brother leave, Garrick wondered how the two men could have come from the same family. Garth knew his little remark would piss him off and was meant to make him worry about Fae. Garrick didn't share his brother's or other members of the Pack's philosophy on humans. He also wasn't stupid—

he knew some members of the Pack thought of Fae as his pet.

What often bothered Garrick was when it came to Fae, he didn't know what to think either. There was no denying that he found her incredibly sexy. She had a quick wit that was equal parts annoying and a turn-on. Not to mention a body that would send any male into overdrive. Which Garrick could attest to after a few sleepless nights following one of their interactions.

Her emerald green eyes enhanced her chestnut-colored skin. The contrast was both unnerving and fascinating at the same time. She usually pulled back her wildly curly black hair for assignments or sometimes straightened it for a different look. His fingertips often tingled at the thought of running his fingers through the lush locks. Fae's body was a work of art, with lean muscles and long legs that seemed to go on forever. A little less than six feet, she often wore heels that had her almost eye level to most of the males in the company.

Over the years he'd become used to their cat-and-mouse games, but what often bothered him was he never could quite figure out who was the cat and who was the mouse. He knew he had to maintain some type of balance, though, even if it was hazardous to his health.

Before he could muse over the subject any further, his assistant walked in with his agenda for the day. Garrick gladly immersed himself in work if it meant he wouldn't have to think about Fae. At least until he had to see her next.

# CHAPTER THREE

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Putting on her trench coat and grabbing her purse, Fae looked down at her watch. Eleven twenty-five. For a brief moment she thought of pushing Garrick's buttons again, but she knew it would only cause more trouble than it was worth. Walking out the door, she headed toward the elevators and wasn't surprised to see Garrick, some of his wolves, and Mark Roberts from New Accounts waiting for her. When she looked up at Garrick, she could sense he was relieved she didn't use the opportunity to rebel.

Smiling, she walked into the elevator as the doors opened. She always found it entertaining watching the wolf shifters trying to adhere to human codes of etiquette. Moving to the side of the elevator, she watched as Mark shifted to stand next to her. She doubted he knew the other males in the elevator were wolf shifters, but she figured a basic human survival mechanism made him feel uncomfortable with their presence.

Looking over at him and giving him a polite smile, she wondered how Mark made it past the intense screening Garrick used on male staff. While the human women at Conall Technologies varied in shapes and sizes, the males were often from the same

cookie-cutter mold. The Rambo meets G.I. Joe kind. Which Mark was most definitely not. About her height, just under six feet, Mark was a bit on the scrawny side. With pale blond hair, pale blue eyes, and a nondescript face, he didn't elicit an aura of masculinity and strength like the other males in the elevator, but he was a great paper pusher and number cruncher.

And those skills were becoming increasingly important as the company grew. Fae also appreciated how he made a point to expedite any paperwork she needed when working an assignment. She'd thought briefly he may have had a crush on her, but since he never made a move, she chalked his little extras up to him being a good guy.

She sometimes wondered, if he knew she wasn't exactly all that human, would he still be so comfortable in her company? Fae also questioned at times what the Pack would think, particularly Garrick, if they knew of her special gift—especially because she didn't quite know what to make of it herself.

Fae was a true shape shifter, which meant she could shift into the shape of any sentient being, a talent she'd had as long as she could remember. Unfortunately, it was also a talent she'd never had anyone to guide her through. She always found it ironic her foster mother named her after a type of

fantasy creature, not knowing the new baby she was taking into her home was just that.

“When I saw you with those large green eyes, dark skin, and all that curly dark hair, I thought you looked like something out of a storybook,” Olivia, her foster mother, would tell her when she asked about her name.

If it hadn't been for Olivia, Fae could have ended up dead, in a mental institution, or worse, on the slab of some examining table. When she'd first shifted at the age of two, into a puppy she saw on television, it was Olivia who'd talked her back into her true form. It was also Olivia who'd tried to do research on who and what she was.

The only info she was ever able to turn up was that Fae was dropped off in the emergency room of County USC on a particularly busy day in early summer. Hospital staff determined Fae, only a couple of months old, was healthy and quickly passed her on to a social worker to have the little baby set up in the system. Where Fae lucked out was that particular social worker on duty had happened to work with Olivia in the past.

When the social worker called Olivia about Fae, Olivia was a little hesitant. Well past middle age, she'd stopped taking in children for more than a couple of weeks at a time. She was starting to plan for her

golden years and couldn't see herself getting up in the night caring for a small baby, but when Olivia took one look at Fae, she knew she had to keep her. With Fae being just a baby, the social worker was optimistic that she would get picked up, but it never seemed to pan out. Fae had always wondered if it was her dubious past or her ambiguous racial makeup.

People interested in adopting wanted to make sure there weren't parents waiting to pop out of the woodwork to either take the child from them or make the process harder. Also, although Fae was told how exotic she was growing up, there were never exotic parents waiting to take an exotic child home with them. Fae couldn't complain, though—Olivia was the best parent she could have had, and her death when Fae was barely twenty left her feeling lost at sea for a time.

Realizing she was being watched, Fae looked to see one of the wolves staring at her. She locked gazes with him and waited for him to turn away. Just as the doors opened, he broke eye contact. Rolling her eyes, Fae thought how much she hated breaking the new ones in. Even though shifter females were revered in the Pack, it was more in a machismo kind of way. They were special because they provided the Pack with more shifter sons that kept it strong.

Working at the company, she blasted all of those ideas out of the water. She was female and she was good at her job. She was also thought of as human, which put her pretty far down on the food chain. Not that she didn't appreciate or utilize some of the archaic beliefs to her advantage—it just got annoying having to prove herself all the time.

Every time they brought a new shifter male on staff, she felt as if she was starting from scratch. When they realized they didn't have to protect her all the time, then they wanted to fuck her. Soon realizing that wasn't going to happen, they made a point of avoiding her. It wasn't until they worked a job with her and she nailed it that they'd revert to puppy status, following her wherever she went.

Garrick had to start a waiting list because of all the young shifter males who started at the company wanting to be on her team. The few human males had given up trying to sway her to their cause years ago. As for the few women, they were so mired in female competition for male affection they ignored her once they realized she wasn't going to play their games. It was fucked up, but she'd let it go years ago.

Making a point to leave the elevator first, Fae walked up to the valet attendant and smiled as he opened the back door of Garrick's Range Rover. If she really wanted to tick him off, she would have tried to

drive, but she was willing to wait and conserve energy for her next sparring round.

# CHAPTER FOUR

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Garrick was thankful the lunch meeting went better than he'd planned. The Foster Group was one of the largest pharmaceutical corporations in the country, and securing their business was a big deal. Looking at Fae ignoring Bradley in the rear mirror made the day even better for him. When they got to the office, he would have to instruct the new member of the Pack about human/wolf shifter relations.

It was this particular topic Garrick kept trying to point out to the Council. He was always frustrated at how the older members of the Packs still acted as if they lived in the Old Countries of their ancestors. If the Alphas that sat on the Council wanted to ensure the survival of their Packs, they were going to have to interact more with the human world.

Not all members held Garrick's liberal beliefs. Though the wolf shifters thought of themselves as superior to humans, they still carried the fears that had caused their ancestors to flee Europe. They could only keep their beast in check for so long, and even in human form, they were far superior to humans in strength and size. It was a difference they often used to their advantage. Many of the shifters who were socialized to feel comfortable around humans joined

professional sports teams or enlisted in the military, where exceptional strength and ability was seen as a positive attribute rather than abnormal.

Having only ever enjoyed sports in a purely recreational way, Garrick chose the military soon after high school. It was one of the best decisions he'd ever made, as he thrived in an environment not much different from the one he was raised in. It was only after his father's death and the urging of trusted friends for him to take his place of Alpha of his Pack that he reluctantly left. When he had the opportunity to open his own private security firm, Garrick felt he had the chance to recreate what he had in the military.

"You smell good, Fae. Let me guess—vanilla and lavender," Bradley said, leaning in to sniff her.

Garrick looked into the backseat and saw Bradley leering at Fae. If it had been any other human woman, he would have gotten Bradley's attention and stopped the behavior, but he figured he should learn sooner rather than later she wasn't someone to mess with.

"Amazing. You must have superior olfactory abilities," Fae said dryly.

Judging from his grin, Bradley wasn't cognizant of the fact she was mocking him. Simon, one of the Pack's top-notch computer specialists and Garrick's second, chuckled softly where he sat on Fae's other

side. Hearing him, Fae turned and gave him a wicked smile. Simon just smiled back and shrugged his shoulders to communicate he didn't know what to do with Bradley. Simon was a consistent member of Fae's team, and Garrick knew he loved watching her break in the newbies.

Observing the two, Garrick watched as Bradley tried to figure out what he was missing. When his father had secured him the position at CT, he'd expressed to Garrick his excitement to see what the buzz around Fae Patton was all about. Garrick was keenly aware of how Bradley had watched as she walked up to the elevator before they'd left for their meeting.

Garrick was sure that Bradley, like a lot of the newbies, had never seen anyone quite like Fae. It didn't really have anything to do with the color of her skin—it was more how she carried herself. Bradley came from a particularly small Pack in northern Montana where, as Garrick's father once said, "The males know how to be males and the females know how to appreciate it."

Sexist, maybe, but it was the way most shifters saw things. Fae took that notion and shoved it back into the face of most shifter males, and then she made them question why they'd ever thought it to be true. Hell, Garrick had to admit in moments when she

handled a newbie so well, even he wondered how good a belief like that was.

“Take a picture—it lasts longer, Bradley. Maybe you could send it back home to show them all the wondrous things you’ve seen and learned so far in the big city,” Fae said, still looking toward the front of the SUV.

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She didn’t know what she was more upset about—the fact she had to sit in the middle or the way Bradley kept staring at her. Mr. Cornfed had been mildly annoying in the beginning but was really starting to piss her off now. Having Simon in back with her was the only thing keeping her from going ballistic.

Fae had worked with him closely over the last year and knew he was someone she wanted to back her up. She’d hoped he would have driven so she could ride shotgun, but Garrick was still being a control freak and insisted on driving. Fae would rather be sandwiched between the two large shifters than have to ride up front with him. Also, she felt for poor Mark, who would probably piss his pants if he had to sit between the large males.

She could feel the sharp intake of breath Bradley took and the heat of anger radiating off him. Turning, she could see he was staring intently at her. Staring back, Fae added her own brand of menace to the look. The only way she was going to back down was if Garrick said something, and even then she would let her reluctance to cooperate be known.

Baring his teeth slightly, Bradley let out a growl she was sure only she and the shifters in the car could pick up over the sound of the radio. With a tilt of her head, Fae smiled snidely at the young shifter who was trying to intimidate her. If he only knew his little show of bravado didn't do anything to her. She wasn't scared of a wolf when she could shift into any large predator of her choice. Granted, her mass when shifted was comparable to her human form, but it was still impressive. Fae pushed hard because when they pushed back, she knew she could go even harder.

Leaning in, Fae whispered in Bradley's ear soft enough for Mark the human to miss but loud enough for Garrick and Simon to catch. "My, what large teeth you have. The better to eat me with?" When Fae saw the shocked look on Bradley's face, she knew she'd made a direct hit, but when his shock changed to a look of skepticism, she began to wonder if she'd taken it a little too far. She hoped she hadn't let too much slip in her anger.

Turning to look back out the front of the car, Fae pretended she didn't notice the three shifters staring at her. She had a particularly hard time trying not to meet Garrick's stunned gaze in the rearview mirror. *Way to go, Fae girl, her inner voice chided. Now you're going to have to do some mighty fancy tap dancing to get yourself out of this one.*

It was strange, though, because even with her feeling of forbearance there was also a sense of relief. She wouldn't have to keep playing nice all the time...well, as nice as she was capable of. There was a mischievous part of her that felt Garrick and his kind needed to know the supernatural community was more expansive than they imagined.

"Mr. Conall, when we get back to the office, do you think you have time to meet with me?" The mood in the car shifted at the sound of Mark's nasally voice.

"What?" Garrick asked, visibly distracted.

"Do you think you have time to meet with me when we get back to the office? I have something very important to discuss with you," Mark replied.

Fae was intrigued by the hint of desperation in Mark's voice and momentarily forgot about the deep water she was in.

"I actually have a full schedule, Roberts. You'll have to make an appointment with my assistant." Garrick turned back to the road.

“But this can’t wait for an appointment. I need to speak with you now. This is very important,” Mark said with a defiant tone.

Now Fae was really interested in what Mark wanted to talk about. For a man who usually barely spoke above a whisper, Mark’s firm demand was not only shocking to Fae, but she could see from Garrick’s profile as he turned to look at Mark he was also amazed.

Before the conversation could go any further, though, there was a loud explosion and the car began to roll. Fae heard the hysterical scream of Mark in the front passenger seat and felt Bradley reach out to grab her hand. The gesture actually shocked her, and she looked up and tried to make out the expression on his face as the SUV rolled.

It was this type of behavior that made being a part of Pack life so special, even if she was involved only in a vicarious way. The young shifter wanted to protect her in the moment, and regardless of whether it came from some archaic notion of gender roles, when the shit was hitting the fan she appreciated the sentiment. She didn’t have much time to think about that, though, because as the car rolled violently once more, Fae felt a sharp pain at the back of her head and the world went black.

# CHAPTER FIVE

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Sitting at the side of Fae's hospital bed, looking at her hooked up to a variety of tubes and monitors, Garrick kept wondering how this could have happened. He reached down to take one of her hands; he'd never noticed how delicate they were. If he thought about it, he'd never considered how delicate *she* was. Watching her lying in the bed, he felt his chest squeeze in an uncomfortable way. She was the snarky female security specialist who kept him on his toes. She got information and protected the privacy of clients in a way he couldn't understand but respected. Fae was not supposed to be lying in a hospital bed unconscious because he couldn't keep her safe.

"She suffered a severe blow to the back of the head, but we don't detect any other internal damage. Of course until she wakes up, we won't know if she has sustained any permanent brain damage," the specialist Garrick had requested informed him after the on-call doctor didn't give him the answers he wanted.

He played the doctor's words over again in his mind. He still didn't quite understand how this had happened. After the car stopped rolling, he'd quickly assessed the situation. Pulling Mark from the car to safety, he'd been so focused on Mark's wounds, he

hadn't thought to ascertain how the rest of his team was doing. Which spoke to how indestructible he had come to think Fae was.

"Garrick, I think something is wrong with her. She's not responding, but I don't see any blood," Simon said frantically.

Looking up, he could see Bradley was sitting on his knees beside Fae's still body on the ground. The look of horror on the young shifter's face set off alarm bells in Garrick's head. Shifters who came to work for him were expected to work well under pressure. He vetted all of his top employees himself. If Simon and Bradley were anxious, there was a problem.

"Keep your hand pressed on this wound and call 911," Garrick said, giving Simon instructions about Mark's wounds and moving toward Fae. By this time other motorists were stopping their cars and a few people were beginning to mill around the scene. Garrick was so focused when he got to her, he couldn't make out what the others were saying.

"What's wrong with her? She won't wake up, and her breathing is funny," Bradley said in a shocked voice. The younger shifter had a nasty gash above his right eye with blood oozing out, but it didn't seem as if he noticed, because he hadn't even bothered to brush some of the blood away.

“She may have a concussion. If she’s breathing, that means she’s probably going to be okay.” Garrick tried to comfort the younger shifter, but he really didn’t know what to think. When he heard the sound of sirens in the distance, he sent a silent prayer to keep her stable until the paramedics could get to her. Looking at her now in her hospital bed, Garrick sent out another silent prayer to have her open her eyes and be alright.

“They couldn’t save Roberts,” Simon said as he walked into the hospital room.

Garrick didn’t turn when he heard the sound of his voice. He was almost afraid if he took his eyes off her, she might slip away. It was a feeling that both frightened and saddened him. He really was far too attached to her but didn’t know if he wanted this to be the solution for undoing it.

He knew both Simon and Bradley, who had also entered the room, were waiting for a response, but he was too drained. Of course the three of them had walked away with minimal injuries, much to the doctor’s surprise. Which was quickly explained away by their positions in the car preventing them from sustaining any major damage. Garrick always relied on humans finding explanations for things that made them uncomfortable or were outside their realm of possibility.

“Have they said anything else?” Bradley asked in a whisper from behind Garrick.

“No. She’s stable and they’re just waiting for her to come out of the coma. I’ve requested an MRI to see if there’s been any significant change,” Garrick replied, trying to keep the emotion out of his voice.

“What could they find?” Simon brushed a hand lightly against Fae’s hand.

Before he realized he was doing it, Garrick let out a threatening growl. He didn’t know who was more surprised, him or Simon. From the way Simon quickly pulled his hand away, it was probably him. Garrick kept a steady rumble going until Simon moved farther back from Fae’s bed. Having always gotten along with the younger shifter, he couldn’t understand why he felt such a strong urge to protect Fae. Simon hadn’t made any move to harm her; on the contrary, his reaching for her hand was an example of the affection he felt for her.

Looking Simon in the eyes until he took a more submissive pose and dropped his gaze, Garrick realized it was Simon’s act of affection that elicited his territorial nature. Turning so he could have Bradley in his line of vision, he growled at him much in the same manner as he did with Simon. Now that he’d started, Garrick could feel the nature of his beast taking over.

Fae was his, and he needed to make sure both shifters knew the claim he had on her.

Bradley quickly averted his gaze and took the same position as Simon, becoming as submissive and non-threatening as possible. Their behavior was appropriate when around a Pack member grieving over his or her mate. Realizing that made his wolf calm but left his human nature in a state of confusion. He knew a mate was inevitable, but he'd planned to pick a female from a strong Pack, one who knew how to perform her role as the mate of an Alpha.

On a good day Fae could barely understand what he wanted her role as employee to be. He'd thought she could never comprehend the complexities of being his mate. Now if he could only make himself believe that as he stared at her where she lay unconscious in the hospital bed.

He stroked her hand softly, and his heart froze as the gadgets hooked to her began to beep and chirp. Garrick's wolf fought to push to the surface as a feeling of alarm spread through his system. While his human side struggled with what these new feelings for Fae may mean, his wolf knew what he wanted—his mate awake and safe.

Fae felt as if she were at the bottom of a deep well, trying to climb her way out. *I wonder if I can fly out. Yes, I bet I could get out of here faster if I could fly, but I don't know how wide this is. I'd better make sure I'm not too big. A raven. I'll be a raven.*

She had always liked the birds with their black velvety feathers. Picturing the creature in her head, she felt her body shift to its new form. Fae never knew what it was like for the other shifters, but for her it was a magically beautiful feeling. There was a tingling that spread all over her and a sensation of freedom. It was as if she was connected to everything in the universe but still somehow apart.

Olivia had always encouraged Fae's gift growing up because she'd known how happy it made the young girl. She could remember Olivia taking her on camping trips to isolated locations in California so she could shift without fear of being caught. It was on one of these trips she saw her first wolf shifters. They were in their human form, but Fae knew they were different.

It wasn't as if she could smell the difference the way they may have smelled it on each other; it was just a feeling she had down to her bones. They had a walk that seemed more grounded and connected to their surroundings. She also noticed they watched their environment with an intensity that most humans didn't possess.

When it grew dark, she followed the younger male shifter farther into the woods. Of course she wasn't in her human form, but instead a small sparrow. Perched upon one of the higher branches of a tree, she quickly shifted to a squirrel and watched as he transformed into a wolf.

It was one of the most beautiful things she had ever seen, and she regretted she had never been able to view her own transformation. She marveled at how his physical form appeared to break and remake itself in such slow, sweet harmony. He seemed to take longer than her to complete his change, but it didn't make it less awesomely beautiful. Horror movies didn't do justice at capturing what it meant to be reborn during a shift.

Sitting and watching him take in the scent of the woods, she froze when he spotted her in the tree. She moved slightly forward on the branch, wondering if he knew she was like him. But when he tilted his head, turned, and took off farther into the woods, she knew he didn't have the same connection. It was the first time she'd ever felt truly lonely and very "other."

When she got back to the tent she told Olivia of the experience. She wasn't surprised to see the older woman wasn't shocked by it, but she was actually more surprised by what she said. "Honey, it's probably better he didn't know about you. I think you might be

a little more special than the rest, and people usually fear what is different or more unique than them,” she said, stroking Fae’s hair softly.

As Olivia held her, Fae began to cry at the thought she would never be able to connect with another like the young shifter did with his Pack mates. Although Olivia tried to make a safe and welcoming home for her, at that point in her life Fae knew she had a secret she had to keep.

“Oh *mia*, it might not always be this way, but I’d rather you learn to be cautious first,” Olivia said in a soothing tone.

Now, flapping her wings as the transformation was complete, Fae opened her eyes. Looking around what she now realized was a hospital room, she could see the shocked faces of three wolf shifters staring back up at her. When she heard the fast approaching feet of nurses and doctors, Fae settled on the bed and quickly shifted back. She noticed she was naked but didn’t have time for modesty before the first nurse rushed in the room and stared at her in amazement. Clutching the hospital blanket around her body, Fae kept her gaze on the nurse as she rushed over to her bed. Fae knew now was the time Olivia’s theory would get tested.

# CHAPTER SIX

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Standing in his living room, Garrick took another swig of whiskey. He knew his metabolism's ability to process alcohol would require more than the decanter in his wet bar had to offer to get him buzzed, but the smooth, burning feeling of the drink helped him center himself. Garrick still didn't know what had happened, even though he'd seen it with his own eyes. One minute he'd thought Fae was going into some kind of distress; the next minute she'd turned into a bird right there in the hospital room and was flapping about. But if that wasn't weird enough, just as quickly she'd turned back into herself.

Being a wolf shifter, one would think he would have been accustomed to the idea of transforming, but he had never seen anyone shift so quickly from human to animal. If he hadn't been there, he wouldn't have believed it. What he did find odd was Fae was a raven shifter. He knew there were other shifters, but at most he had only ever seen a coyote or fox, and the way she transformed still seemed to bother him. Garrick's process took more than a blink of the eye, and once shifted, it often took him even longer to shift back.

He was so deep in thought and busy pounding down whiskey he didn't hear Simon enter the room.

“She’s settled and asleep in the guestroom. I’ve contacted the other Council members and they’ll be here shortly,” Simon said.

Looking up, Garrick gave him a curt nod. He poured whiskey into another glass and held it up for Simon to take.

“I’m sure you need this as much as I do,” he said with a weighted tone.

With a weak smile, Simon walked over to Garrick and the glass he offered. Finishing it in one drink, he sighed with pleasure as the fiery liquid went down his throat. Garrick could honestly say he’d had more excitement in the last twenty-four-hour period than he’d had in his entire life. Refilling Simon’s glass, he wondered how he was holding up. Even though it riled up his wolf to admit it, Simon and Fae were close, or as close as she was to anyone at the company. He wondered if the other shifter was as perplexed as he was—or did Simon have inside knowledge that Garrick didn’t possess?

When the nurses and doctors rushed in, Garrick and his men had been forced to leave. He’d had to rein in his wolf for a second time that afternoon because his other half was refusing to leave his mate. It was only when he saw the pleading look from Fae that he took it as his cue to leave. The rest of the time seemed

to fly by. The doctors couldn't see a reason to keep her, and with her insisting, she was released.

As they got into the car Garrick had waiting, the tension could be cut with a knife.

"You can just drop me off at home. I'll pick my car up later," Fae said, as if it were a regular work outing.

Facing her in the back of the limo, he stared in astonishment.

"I don't think so. The doctor said you need to be monitored, so you're going to come home with me," Garrick said, trying to will her to make eye contact.

"I have someone who can monitor me at home," she said, still not looking at him.

"Who?" he growled out.

His nerves were so frayed he was ready to snap at the thought of another male being even remotely near her.

"None of your business," she replied, finally meeting his gaze with a glare.

"Oh, it's very much my business. Would you like to have a discussion as to why?" he asked with his own glare.

Staring back, she finally looked away with a sigh. "No, not now." She sounded defeated.

He wanted to relish in his victory, but he still felt it was shallow at best.

“Some of the Council is arriving, sir,” Bradley said from the doorway.

“Show them in, Bradley.” Garrick put his glass down.

“Should I stay here?” Simon asked, finishing his glass and placing it on the bar.

“No, go get something to eat and some rest.” Reaching out, Garrick firmly squeezed Simon’s arm. “You deserve it.”

After looking at Garrick for a second, Simon nodded his head and left the room. Just as he exited, Council members began filing in. Taking a deep breath, Garrick gestured for the other three members of the wolf shifter Council to take seats. “Gentlemen, please have a seat. Is there anything I can get for you?”

“Garrick, we weren’t scheduled to meet for another three weeks. We’ve heard you were in a car accident but didn’t think that garnered an emergency meeting of the Council.” Steven Blake, one of the oldest members, fixed Garrick with a leveling stare.

Garrick knew Steven thought he was too young to hold the position of Western Alpha, but he was not in the mood to argue politics.

“Well, I’ll have a drink if you don’t mind, Steven. Whatta ya got, boy?” Reginald Lee said in his good old boy accent.

“I’m having whiskey, straight,” Garrick responded, raising his glass.

“Then pour me what you’re having,” Reginald said with a smile.

“I’ll have one also, Garrick,” Edward Grant said, moving to sit on one of the couches in Garrick’s impressive living room.

Smiling at the two men who’d supported him when he’d taken over his father’s position as Alpha and seat on the Council, Garrick proceeded to fix their drinks. This was going to be a difficult discussion, and knowing the two of them were there to support him bolstered his confidence.

“We heard that some of your people were injured. I hope everyone is okay?” Edward asked with genuine concern as he reached for the glass Garrick offered.

Sitting in one of the chairs in the modern-style living room, Garrick tried to think about how he was going to answer this. “We lost one person. A human.”

“Oh,” Edward said with a tone Garrick didn’t know how to decipher.

“We know how hard it is lose people. Especially those we care about. What can we do for you, Garrick?” Edward asked, now using a soothing tone.

Of the shifters on the Council, Edward was the more assimilated with human ways, but Garrick was a

bit surprised at how sympathetic the other members seemed.

“Well, I wouldn’t say I was particularly attached to Mark Roberts, but he was an efficient worker.” Garrick looked at each male.

“Oh. We thought Fae...Fae Patton was involved in the crash, and when you mentioned a human dying, we just...” Edward looked around at the other Council members for support.

Clearing his throat, Reginald spoke. “We know how fond you are of her, and well, we...well, I guess we don’t know what we thought.”

“Than what are we here to talk about, Garrick?” Steven said, now becoming impatient with the conversation.

“I think you’ve come to talk about me,” Fae said from the doorway, startling all four males.

“What’s going on, Garrick?” Steven rose from his chair and took a defensive stance.

Garrick was actually speechless. After she’d argued about going to his place, Fae had been pretty quiet during the rest of the drive from UCLA Medical Center to his home in Beverly Hills. When she’d eventually nodded off, he’d been relieved, as he’d felt too physically and emotionally drained to force conversation.

Now, as she stood in the doorway with the defiant lift of her chin he was used to, Garrick had to suppress the urge to run over and gather her in his arms. Now that she was up walking and talking, the severity of her near-death experience was beginning to weigh on him. He was so happy to have her alive he didn't really care at this moment if he didn't understand exactly what she was.

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“I think it would be better if I showed them.” Fae looked at Garrick for approval. Waiting up in the guest room, she'd felt like a coward. She wasn't ashamed or afraid of who she was, and she wasn't going to let a bunch of men dictate what would happen to her.

Seeing Garrick's nod of approval, Fae undid the terrycloth robe she'd found in the guestroom. She quickly dropped the robe to the floor. Standing in front of the men naked, she only briefly caught Garrick's look of appreciation before she shifted.

First she chose the raven Garrick had seen in the hospital. Then she did a cat and dog. Moving to larger animals, she quickly shifted to a panther and a wolf. She knew she'd have to go big to prove her point, but first Fae shifted back into her normal form. Picking up the robe, she put it back on, but before the men could

say anything she shifted into each member of the Council in rapid succession, ending with Garrick.

“I think I’ve proven why you’ve all been called here,” Fae said with Garrick’s voice. Shifting back into her normal form, Fae waited for the reactions from a group that could decide her fate.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

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Sitting in the large tub in the bathroom inside the guestroom, Fae let the jet bubbles relax her sore muscles. She'd really had the opportunity to test her abilities at shifting, and her body was giving its complaints. But even though she was pretty sore, Fae was happy the hardest part of the night was over. Resting her head on the ledge of the tub Fae began to replay what had happened only a couple of hours before.

"Incredible," Steven Blake said across the room from Fae.

She wasn't surprised to see that the older shifter she'd met on a few occasions at CT was completely ashen and clutching the back of the chair beside him. The other two males she didn't know both had wide-eyed stares and complexions not that different from the older male.

Taking a deep breath, Fae tied the robe more firmly around her and turned to look at Garrick. When she'd made the decision to expose herself, she'd hesitated briefly at the thought of what his reaction might be. Fae had always used Garrick's perception of her as human as a barrier between them. It wasn't until she'd accidentally revealed herself in the hospital

room that she'd realized that barrier was going to come crashing down. Now, meeting his gaze, she began to wonder if that was going to be a good thing or bad thing.

Garrick's expression wasn't much different from those of the other three shifters in the room. He was staring at Fae in complete disbelief and shock. Fae knew the little finale of her performance had probably contributed to his behavior.

"Incredible indeed, Steven. How long have you known about this, Garrick?" the middle-aged wolf shifter with a deep Southern accent asked with a tone of awe.

Not looking away from Fae, Garrick answered, "Today. Fae has been very good at keeping her true identity concealed."

Fae tried not to flinch at the accusatory way Garrick framed his reply. She could feel a knot forming in her chest and unaccustomed tears stinging at her eyes. Looking away from Garrick, she began to pull at the ties of her robes and willed herself not to cry. She was actually angry to find herself so weepy at the idea she'd disappointed Garrick in some way, but the feelings were there—along with a few more Fae had tried to keep under wraps during her time at CT.

"I thought it was all a myth," the other male said with a clipped East Coast accent.

“We all thought it was a myth,” Steven said, moving slowly toward Fae.

Standing her ground, Fae didn’t flinch when Steven Blake got close enough to touch her. When he reached out for her, both Fae and the other shifters turned sharply to look at Garrick. A deep growling sound emanated from his chest where he stood, still in the same spot. Looking back at Steven, she realized he was just as shocked by Garrick’s behavior as she was.

“Do not touch her,” Garrick said through clenched teeth.

“Garrick, have you claimed her?” the shifter with the East Coast accent asked with disbelief.

“She is not to be touched,” Garrick replied.

As he looked back and forth between Garrick and Fae, Steven’s mouth turned up into a secretive smile. “You will make her your mate, Garrick?” he asked, turning from Fae and walking back toward his chair. The phrasing of his question made the hairs on her arms stand up.

Trying to make eye contact with Garrick, she was annoyed when he refused to look at her. She looked at the other shifters and realized they were all focused on Garrick also. As her temper began to boil, Fae stalked further into the room. Planting herself firmly in front of him, she placed her hands on her hips.

“Hi, Garrick, this is Fae. You remember me, right? Is there something you would like to talk about?” She glared at Garrick and ignored the soft chuckle of one of the males behind her.

Garrick simply looked over her head and addressed the other males. “I have claimed her as my mate. She is now under my protection and governance,” he said solemnly.

Fae stared at Garrick in disbelief. She must have stepped into the twilight zone, because stuff like this did not happen in the real world.

“Excuse me.” She tried to calm the ball of rage attempting to force its way out of her body. Spinning around, she fixed the other males with a steady gaze. “Last time I checked, I was still standing in the room.”

“Be silent for once, Fae,” Garrick said with a hint of frustration.

Turning back around, she stared at him with her mouth hanging slightly open. She knew they liked to push each other’s buttons, but this was just over the top. Fae was about to give him a piece of her mind when he reached out and grabbed her by the arm. Pulling her close to his side, he continued to stare at the other males.

“Does she acknowledge you?” Steven asked with an inquisitive look in Fae’s direction.

“Um, hello, I’m standing right here. If you have any questions for me, I suggest you address me and not him,” she said, trying to loosen herself from Garrick’s vice grip. The more she tugged the firmer his hold got on her, and the firmer his hold got the more enraged she became.

“Yes,” Garrick said emphatically.

Fae stopped squirming briefly to stare at Garrick again in disbelief. “What the hell is going on here? Dammit, Garrick, look at me when I’m talking to you,” She was so angry she could spit.

“If you do not acknowledge Garrick as your mate, that means you’re eligible to be another shifter’s mate,” the male with the Southern accent told her.

Fae was actually happy one of the goons in the room was acknowledging her, but the meaning of his words weren’t lost on her. “And who might you be?” she asked through clinched teeth.

As if he was startled by her question, a slow smile began to form on the older male’s face. When he smiled he looked like Boss Hogg from the *Dukes of Hazzard*. All he needed was a ten-gallon hat and a badge.

“My apologies, my dear. I’m Reginald Lee, Alpha Council member of the southern region. This is Edward Grant, Alpha Council member of the eastern region, and I believe you’ve met Steven Blake, Alpha

Council member of the central region,” Reginald Lee said, gesturing to the other males in the room.

“We are just trying to ascertain if you accept Garrick’s claim to you as his mate,” he finished with a hint of humor in his words.

“Wow, I get a choice,” she said with her trademark sarcasm. “Pull at me one more time, buddy, and it will be the last thing you pull.” Fae fixed Garrick with a murderous glare. She was getting enough of his heavy-handed manner both literally and figuratively.

Turning back to the other Council members, Fae found herself slightly amused by the different expression of each male. Blake still looked pretty ashen as he stared at her in mute silence, Lee kept glancing between Garrick and her with a smile twitching at his lips, and Grant just appeared perplexed by the entire situation.

“Fae, if you do not accept my claim to you as my mate, that will make you available to any other shifter.” Garrick loosened his hold on her arm but didn’t release her.

“What if I don’t want to be anyone’s mate? This is the twenty-first century. I do have a say in whom my life partner will be. Of course, that’s assuming I even want to have one,” she said, not breaking eye contact with Garrick.

She was pleased in a childish way when she noticed the familiar vein throbbing at Garrick's temple and his nostril flaring. With his electric blue eyes becoming darker and his handsome face growing stern, Fae felt a thrill of electricity shoot through her body.

"Why must you test me?" Garrick said through clenched teeth.

"Why must you provoke me?" Fae replied sharply.

Fae felt her heart speed up in the familiar way she found she'd become addicted to. Dabbing her tongue across her bottom lip, she experienced a small rush of pleasure as Garrick's eyes followed her action.

"We will not argue about this anymore," he said with finality.

"Do you plan to cut out my tongue?" she replied.

Fae was stunned when Garrick stared at her and released her arm. When he moved away, her body cried out in protest.

"No. No, I don't," he said with a resigned tone.

Turning to look at the other Council members, Garrick's next words both irritated and stung Fae's pride. "I am mistaken. I retract my claim as her mate. She will not have me."

"I thought as much. I have never approved your place on the Council. You are too young and do not yet

have the abilities of an Alpha to control a creature like her,” Steven said in a dismissive tone.

It was Fae’s turn to stare in disbelief at Steven. She had never been so insulted in all her life. She couldn’t even see with the haze of rage clouding her vision. What sent her over the edge even more was the submissive demeanor Garrick took after the older male’s words.

“Well, aren’t you going to say something? You do know he didn’t just insult you, but me also.” Fae walked over to stand in front of Garrick with her hands on her hips. “I’m not schooled in the politics of your Council, so I suggest you say something before I light into him.” Tapping her foot in barely controlled anger, Fae stared at Garrick with a hard look.

“What would you have me say, Fae? You have denied me in front of the other Council members. You will not have me as your mate, therefore you don’t see me as strong enough or worthy enough to bear my children,” he said, sounding defeated.

“Oh my God. Did I just step into a portal and come out in medieval Europe? You’re joking, right? This is the most archaic and asinine thing I have ever heard you say.” Turning around and pointing her finger at the other Council members, Fae continued. “And if you think you are going to dictate whom I *mate* with, you have another thought coming, busters.

I am not some shrinking violet. I am a liberated woman who makes her own choices in life.”

Fuming, Fae stormed toward the door, yanked it open and stared at the group of males collected before her. “And if you don’t believe me, hear me roar.” Abruptly pulling off her robe, Fae shifted into a lioness and let out the loudest roar she could. Then she turned and sprinted back up to the guestroom.

Now, as she sat in the tub soaking, most of her anger had faded. Swirling the bubbles in her bath, she began to wonder just how her little exit must have looked. Never being prone to theatrics, Fae was a little surprised by her display.

As she leaned over to grab the scented soap on the bath tray next to the tub, Fae began to laugh—quietly at first, but when the males’ faces played in her mind she couldn’t help an outright laugh from escaping.

Well, she thought, go big or go home.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

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Having finally gotten the Council members and their entourage settled in the other guestrooms of his mansion, Garrick sat at the edge of his bed with his head in his hands. He felt as if his brain had gone into overdrive. How could he have been so mistaken? He knew his father wouldn't have made this kind of error.

Looking up at the photo of him and his father on his bedside table, Garrick longed for the older male's wisdom. It was moments like these that he wished he could have kept his life in the military. He'd had responsibility then, but it had followed an ordered pattern. As Alpha he often felt suffocated by the obligation of taking care of his people.

"I'm sorry I have failed you so, Father," Garrick said, taking the photo in his hands and rubbing his thumb pad over his father's face.

Putting the photo back on the table, Garrick lifted himself from the bed and began to pace his room. Even though Fae had denied him as her mate, he still felt this urge to protect her. He smiled softly; he'd known she'd make a big deal about the whole mate thing. He wished he had the time to talk to her privately and explain that it was for her own protection.

Even though the other members of the council had agreed to keep her gift secret from the members of their regions, Garrick knew it wouldn't be long before who and what Fae was leaked out. Rubbing his hand over the front of his face, Garrick felt as if every muscle in his body was tense. He was going to have to convince her somehow their union would be in name only.

As Garrick's brain began to rationalize the practicalities of the situation, his body put in a healthy dose of argument. Garrick sighed, knowing that even just the glimpse of her naked before she shifted had put his body on alert. He had never had such a visceral reaction to a female before. It was so outside of his realm of understanding.

"I need to take a shower. A cold one," Garrick said aloud as he began to strip his clothes and walk into his bathroom.

Focus. That was what he needed, he told himself as he walked into the bathroom and turned on the shower. If he could just clear his mind and focus, he would know how to handle the situation and Fae. But just as Garrick was filled with a swell of confidence, he couldn't help but recognize the feeling of unease that simultaneously played in his head. The little bit of dread that seemed to linger at the back of his mind warned him of so much more to come.

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Fae wasn't surprised to find food and clothes waiting for her when she stepped out of the bathroom. Toweling off, she slipped on the black lace bra and panty set sitting on top of the outfit left for her. Putting on the black shirtdress and buckling the wide belt, she began to wonder who had such good taste in the house. Maybe it was a leftover garment of one of Garrick's female friends. As she slipped on black ballet slippers, Fae paused to wonder where such a thought had come from.

Looking at herself in the vanity, she began to finger comb and fluff her mane of curly dark hair. As she stared at her own image, she knew there was a small part of her that did care if she was wearing the forgotten clothes of a discarded lover. Turning up her face, Fae tried to banish the image of Garrick with another woman.

She walked back to the bed and looked at the tray of food. When her stomach began to growl, she knew she was hungry, but caution prevented her from eating the food immediately. Picking up the salad, she began to sniff at it. As she looked at the tossed greens, she began to feel ridiculous. Fae knew if they wanted

to poison her, she wouldn't have the ability to tell the difference.

Taking a deep breath, she plunged her fork into the salad and began to eat. Once she'd finished the salad, she moved on to the steak and grilled vegetable plate. Fae felt absolutely ravenous. She always had an appetite after shifting, but this time she couldn't seem to get enough food into her system. Flushing down the triple chocolate cake with a glass of water, she realized she'd really pushed herself with all the rapid transformations.

As she appraised the dirty dishes, Fae was a little surprised when her stomach made a growling noise of hunger. Wow—she was still hungry. Fae began to debate whether she should go in search of more food. When her stomach growled in protest again, she knew she had no other choice but to go for it. Pausing before she opened the door, she began to wonder if Garrick had set up a guard for her.

Fae cracked the door and peeked out. She was a little surprised when she saw the hall was empty. So much for wanting to protect her, Fae thought dryly, but she had to admit if she knew Garrick at all after all these years, he probably had the place so locked down with security he could tell if a mouse sneezed.

Opening the door wider, she slipped out and began to walk softly down the hall. At the head of the

stairs she paused to listen to the noises of the house. Over the years Fae had learned to enhance certain functions of her body without having to shift completely. It really came in handy when she was doing her security work.

Confident there was no one in her immediate vicinity, Fae began to walk quietly down the impressive staircase. She had to admit Garrick had pretty good taste. She could see aspects of his personality in the warm earth tones of the walls and furniture. His presence seemed to be throughout the impressive mansion.

Walking by one of the large windows, she caught a glimpse of the outside gardens. She wasn't surprised the lawn was lush and well manicured and the grounds were completely secluded from outside view. Fae knew privacy was a big priority for shifters, and those with money had the ability to make it possible.

Continuing down a tiled hall, Fae followed the sounds of the house to the kitchen. She entered, slightly awed by the spacious room. She walked over to the stainless steel industrial refrigerator and stifled a squeal of delight. Some of her fondest memories growing up took place in the kitchen. She and her foster mother would buy recipe books and make a new dish every night. The memory made her smile as she rifled through the contents of the refrigerator.

Fae wasn't surprised to see a wide variety of meat in the massive appliance. She figured other shifters required a great deal of protein after transforming, just like she did. Pulling out a massive steak, she was please to see it was pretty fresh. Fae briefly wondered if Garrick relied on a butcher or had his own cattle ranch. She wouldn't be surprised if he took his Pack out for midnight raids.

"If you were hungry I could have had food brought up," Garrick said from the kitchen entrance.

She suppressed a startled yelp at the deep sound of Garrick's baritone voice. Slightly annoyed she hadn't heard or sensed his presence prior to his statement, she turned back to the kitchen cabinets to hide her feelings.

"I was going to go mad sitting in that room. Plus, I'm not used to having people wait on me," she replied.

Rifling through the nearest cabinet, Fae tried to locate a pan to fry the steak in. After finding a stovetop griller, she pulled it out and placed it on the range. As she moved about the kitchen to gather the rest of the things she needed, she tried to ignore Garrick's gaze boring into her.

"Would you like me to make a steak for you also?" she asked, not looking at the impressive male standing on the other side of the kitchen island.

Creating a light paste with butter and herbs, she massaged the mixture into her steak.

“Yes, please,” he replied.

She couldn’t help but look at Garrick after his humble statement. She didn’t bother to hide the surprise in her face or the shock. She had never heard words like *please* or *thank you* come from Garrick’s lips the whole time she’d worked for him. Garrick was the one who commanded while everyone else followed.

Nodding her head, she wiped her hands clean and walked over to the fridge. She pulled out a larger steak than the one she’d chosen for herself and began to season it in the same manner as hers.

“I’ve never had my steak cooked that way.” Garrick leaned over the island to examine what Fae was doing.

“Trust me, you’ll like it,” Fae said, still not looking at Garrick. She suddenly felt very uncomfortable with the intimacy of him watching her prepare a meal. She preferred the distance that the office and her desk provided when interacting with him. The thought of being in his home and preparing a meal for the two of them was far too personal for her frayed nerves and confusing feelings.

As if sensing her feelings, Garrick silently began to gather up the ingredients she had pulled out for the

salad. Not looking at each other or sharing further conversation, they started preparing their meal.

Even though the steaks were pretty large, Fae's sweet tooth was working overtime. While the steaks sizzled on the grill, she began rummaging around for the ingredients to make oatmeal cookies. Trying to ignore Garrick's eyes on her, she mixed everything together. She didn't realize she was humming until she heard Garrick speak.

"You have a beautiful voice," he said softly.

Startled out of her personal reverie, she finally looked over at him. Leaning against the kitchen island, he looked so sexy she couldn't help a shy smile from forming. She loved to sing, and while growing up with Olivia, music had been a huge part of her life. It was also something she didn't really get to share with other people. Looking at Garrick now, Fae began to realize just how lonely she'd felt since her foster mother's death.

"Um, thanks," she said as her face warmed with embarrassment. She quickly began to put the cookie dough on the pan before Garrick could see the emotion in her face.

"Do you sing often?" he asked with curiosity.

"Only when I'm doing something around the house," she replied, still too uncomfortable to look at him.

“Well, it’s nice. Do you want to eat in here or back in your room?” Garrick changed the subject.

“I’ll just eat in here. It will make it easier.” Fae dished food onto the two plates she’d pulled from the cabinet.

“Do you mind if I join you?” he asked hesitantly.

Shocked by his tone, she looked up from her task with a quizzical stare. “It’s your house, Garrick. Since when have you ever cared what other people want?”

Wincing at her harsh tone, he began to set the table.

She was completely thrown now. This was not the Garrick she had known for the last five years. The Garrick she knew would have barked out instructions without questioning where she wanted to eat. If Garrick had been in wolf form, she wouldn’t have been surprised to see his tail between his legs.

“Okay, what the hell is wrong with you? What’s with all the submissive bull? I’ve heard more deference from you in the last fifteen minutes than I’ve known from you in the last five years. What gives?” She tried not to let anger and frustration tinge her words.

This was exactly why she didn’t want him to ever know what she could do. If he was going to treat her with the damn kid gloves shifters used with their females, she was going to scream.

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Garrick could feel anger and frustration building up inside of him. He tried to show the respect she was due, and the blasted woman proceeded to berate him. It was bad enough she'd humiliated him in front of the other Council members by rejecting him, but now she was going to chastise him. Both man and wolf were getting fed up with the crazy female.

"I'm trying to show you the respect you are due," he said through clenched teeth.

"Well, what took you five years to figure out I needed to be respected? Because if you say it has something to do with my gift, I'm going to turn into a dinosaur and eat you." She glared at him, pushing back some of her wild mane of hair from her face.

"You can do that?" Garrick asked, momentarily distracted from the argument.

"No...well, um, I don't know," Fae said with a huff of frustration.

"What do you mean you don't know?"

"Why would I ever try and shift into a dinosaur?" she replied as if the question was just preposterous.

"Well, didn't your order teach you these things?" Garrick asked with curiosity.

“What order?” Fae replied with the same amount of confusion.

“What do you mean what order?” He was starting to feel confused as well.

“Garrick, obviously I don’t know what you’re talking about. Keep pissing me off, and though I can’t shift into a dinosaur, I’m pretty clever with a knife, and I just might use it on one of your eyes,” she said with steely calm.

Looking at the powerhouse of a female before him, Garrick couldn’t help the bark of laughter that escaped him. This was the Fae he was used to and loved. Shit. Where did that come from? Startled, he stopped laughing as he took a seat at the table where their dinner was getting cold.

“Hello, I’m still talking to you,” she said, annoyed.

“Well, seeing as I mastered the art of eating and holding a conversation at the same time early in life, I don’t want my steak to get cold,” he said as he cut off a piece to prove his point. He groaned in approval at the flavor and tenderness of the meat and started to devour the meal in front of him.

Looking up, he saw Fae’s lips quirk with a faint smile. “Fine, eat, you pig, but when we’re done I expect some answers.”

“You and me both,” he stated before he finished off his steak.

# CHAPTER NINE

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“I don’t understand how you don’t know anything about the Goddess or your order?” Garrick looked at Fae with amazement. Once they’d finished eating, they’d quickly cleaned up the kitchen and gone into his den. It was one of the less formal rooms in the main part of the house. With the large couches and floor pillows, it was the place where he and his closer members of the Pack came to relax.

“Garrick, I’m an orphan. You know that from my background check. Everything I know about myself I’ve learned through trial and error. Olivia was always afraid that if anyone ever found out what I could do, it might be bad.” She curled up into the corner of the couch they were sitting on.

“Well, that’s ridiculous. You are revered amongst the shape shifters. You embody the Goddess, the mother of us all,” Garrick said with awe.

“So I’m a goddess. Does this mean I get a raise?” she asked with a mischievous smile.

Laughing, Garrick just shook his head. He shouldn’t be surprised that Fae wasn’t taking this that seriously.

“You embody the Goddess, and no, you don’t get a raise, but I doubt you’ll be working with me that

much longer,” he said, feeling all of the humor drain from him. Packs waited years for the Goddess’s incarnate to be born and for her to choose one of their Alphas as her mate. When the news about Fae got out, he couldn’t imagine all that was going to happen.

“What do you mean I’m not going to be working for you that much longer?” Fae sat up straighter and her body tensed.

Sighing, Garrick tried to come up with the words to explain to her what was going to happen. Unfortunately, the more he thought about it, the angrier he got. If she had just listened to him once, they wouldn’t have been in this mess. Hell, if she had just told him from the beginning, he would have claimed her early on and wouldn’t have had to worry about some other male taking her.

“Dammit, Garrick, I’m talking to you. You can’t go all mystic on me and then clam up,” she said, with her usual flare of temper.

“Why didn’t you just accept me as your mate? Then we wouldn’t have this problem. Once the other Alpha shifters find out about you, it’s going to get pretty complicated,” he said, anger in his tone.

“For a people who worship a Goddess, you’re pretty chauvinistic,” Fae replied through clenched teeth.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” Garrick asked, genuinely confused.

Fae snorted with disgust. “Nothing. If you can’t figure it out, I can’t explain it.” She waved her hand in a dismissive manner.

“Don’t dismiss me. You have no idea of what your stubbornness is going to cost me.”

“*Excuse me. My stubbornness.* Let me tell you something, buddy...”

“No, you *will* listen for once instead of trying to bulldoze over me,” he said, getting angrier.

Both Fae and Garrick leapt from the couch and stood in front of each other as they began to argue.

He could tell Fae was furious with him, but she was acting like an insolent child.

“Me, bulldoze? Ha, that’s the biggest farce I have ever heard in my life. You, *Mr. Alpha in Charge*, are the one who tries to bulldoze over people,” she said, practically humming with anger.

“If it seems like I bulldoze, it’s because you can’t seem to follow simple rules and procedures. We wouldn’t be in this mess if you’d just told me in the beginning,” Garrick shouted back.

“Why the hell would I have to tell you anything? I’m not a part of your Pack. As for your rules and procedures, you are so worried about losing control that you want to put a muzzle on everyone. Well, I’m

not one of your pups, Garrick. You can't muzzle me," she shouted.

Garrick watched as the color rose in Fae's face. Pulling herself up to her full height, she was doing her best to intimidate him. If he wasn't so angry, he would probably have laughed.

"Well , it would have been my rules and procedures that would have made you safe. Now any asshole can try and claim you as his mate," he said with a pulse beating rapidly in his forehead.

"Over my dead body," she growled back.

Garrick didn't know what possessed him, but he reached out and crushed Fae to him. "Don't say that. *Ever.*" Breathing heavily, he looked into her shocked face. He didn't realize how tightly he was clutching her until she made a small whimpering sound.

"Garrick," she whispered, looking at him with confusion in her voice and on her face.

"Fae, don't ever say anything like that. I would rather see you mated away from me, know that you are whole and living, then live with the thought of you not in this world." He ached at the thought of her hurt or dead. Those hours she'd laid lifeless in the hospital bed still haunted him.

"If I were away from you, then I don't think I would be very whole or living to my full capacity," she said shyly.

Garrick searched her face to see if he may have mistaken her meaning. When she reached up and began to caress his face, he lost the small thread of control that he had. Pulling her body even closer to his, he crushed his mouth to hers with a demanding kiss. He put all of the frustration and pent-up passion he had stored for the past five years into that one gesture.

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They battled, each trying to assert dominance over the kiss, until a natural rhythm of equal strength and power established itself. It was as if they were separate and yet one. Fae didn't know how she had come to this point. One minute she was arguing with the most infuriating male in the world, and the next, with a few words of raw pain, she saw Garrick in a completely different light.

She would be a fool to deny she had always found him attractive and, in the deepest, darkest part of her psyche, had wondered what it would be like to be his. To have those strong, well-muscled arms holding her in a tight embrace, and that mouth that she found so irritating at times used to pull every last bit of passion she possessed from her body.

Moaning, Fae didn't realize they had moved back toward the large couch until Garrick gently laid her down without breaking their kiss. She was on fire, and yet her body felt chilled and sensitive to the touch. With his hands roaming over her clothed form, she felt as if she were going to combust. She needed him to touch her, skin to skin. Fae couldn't explain why, but it was important that there were no more barriers between them.

"I need you," she whispered, breaking their kiss. Looking into Garrick's eyes, Fae could see his beast was close to the surface. Instead of frightening her, the sight sent a chill of sexual awareness throughout her body. Moving to unfasten her belt, Fae tried to position herself so she could get out of her clothes as quickly as possible.

With a growl of primal frustration, Garrick ripped the front of her shirtdress open and devoured her body with his gaze. Fae had never felt so powerful or beautiful in her entire life. The look of raw sexual need and awe on Garrick's face was such an aphrodisiac, she was pretty sure she was going to climax, and he hadn't even touched her yet. When he leaned down and began to lave one of her nipples through her lace bra, her brain shut down.

Making mewling sounds, Fae continued to try and get out of her clothing even with Garrick's

ministrations. With each lick of his tongue she needed more of him. Pushing at his shoulders, she tried to communicate that foreplay was not something she was interested in. She growled softly as she shoved at his shoulders and used his brief imbalance to rip at his shirt. Growling back, Garrick grasped both of her wrists into one of his large hands and stretched her arms over her head. With a wicked smile of dominance, he went back to his previous task.

Wiggling under his large body, she tried in vain to regain some control of the situation. The problem was each time Garrick used his tongue to trace over her sensitized nipples, she felt as if she were losing the ability to speak. If she thought her body was burning before, it was definitely an inferno now.

“Dammit, woman, be still,” he said as he bit down gently on Fae’s left nipple.

Arching her body into his, Fae was pretty sure she was going to die from pleasure.

“Please,” she whimpered.

Climbing back up her body, Garrick reclaimed her mouth as he simultaneously released her hands. Now free, Fae began grasping at his remaining clothing.

“Babe, slow down. We have all night,” Garrick said softly against her lips.

“I need you now,” Fae said forcefully as she flipped both herself and Garrick over so she was straddling him.

The look of shock on his face was soon replaced with one of awe when he saw Fae was slipping her now ruined dress from her shoulders and also removing her bra. Reaching up, he fondled her breast, tweaking her nipples between his thumbs and pointer fingers.

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The two globes of flesh were so perfectly formed Garrick felt his body tighten with need. Leaning forward, he captured one of the erect brown nipples between his lips and bit and sucked. He listened to the savage little sounds Fae made in the back of her throat and felt as if the last of his reserve was going to snap.

When he'd first kissed her, he'd tried to rein in some of the baser instincts that were surging through his body. Garrick wanted to claim her and mark her as his own. Earlier, when he'd stated she would be his mate, he'd tried to fool himself into believing it was out of obligation to keep her safe. But now, with his mouth devouring her breast and her unique scent filling his senses, he knew she had to be his. With this realization, he matched the urgency Fae had exhibited earlier.

“Off. You need to take your clothes off now,” she said sharply.

Garrick looked up in surprise as Fae spoke. Actually, no—commanded. He was always the one who commanded. The one in charge. The predator but never the prey. But looking at Fae with her mane of hair tousled, her eyes glowing with an internal light, he felt as if he were going to be consumed. But what was most disturbing was that he didn’t care.

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Fae lifted herself from Garrick’s lap and pulled down her panties. Dropping to her knees in front of him, she began to remove his belt and work on getting rid of his pants. In the small part of her brain that was still functioning on a normal level, she was able to observe that he was watching her with an expression of wonder and sexual hunger. The combination was both heady and exhilarating.

When he was completely naked and reclining on the sofa with a look of raw passion on his face, she let out a moan of approval. Though she’d had lovers in the past, none could compare to the absolute perfection of the male in front of her. His combination of lean muscle and tan skin made her want to lick him from head to toe.

Looking at the spot that was going to play an integral part in bringing her to the heights of pleasure, she licked her lips in anticipation. When she heard Garrick suck air in through his teeth, she knew he was not as guarded as he liked to present himself.

Stalking him, Fae lowered herself flush against his body. Now that they were skin to skin, her senses went into overdrive. She felt as if she could feel everything, see everything, smell everything, hear everything, and as she leaned down and licked at one of his tight nipples, taste everything.

Without warning Garrick flipped them on the large couch, and Fae found herself trapped beneath his hard, hot body. Looking into his eyes for a brief moment, she knew she would never be able to separate herself from this male. She may have let her pride deny him earlier in the night, but now, in this moment, she would deny him nothing.

As if reading her thoughts, Garrick began practicing his unique magic on her body.

She was truly alive for the first time in her life. His lips spoke the story of creation upon her flesh. His tongue coaxed the secrets of the universe from her body, and his hands molded them back into the secret recesses of her soul. She was shattered and complete at the same time.

When he slipped inside of her, she felt her body welcome him and ask why he had been away so long. As their skin slid and melded into each other, she couldn't seem to get enough of him. Arching, she begged without words for him to drive harder, go faster, to complete what he had begun and only he could finish.

Legs wrapped around him, heart beating, hands grasping, and teeth nipping, she was spiraling. She was burning. She was his and he was hers. Mate. Mine.

# CHAPTER TEN

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Garrick was feeling pretty content and very smug. It was an interesting feeling to him—smugness, that is, not contentment. He had never had a need for the emotion because frankly, he was always right. Not in a conceited, egotistical way but in the confident, “I have the best decision” type of way. It was based in being methodical and action oriented in his thoughts. He observed all the angles of a situation and knew he had what was needed to resolve, execute, or avoid an action by himself or others. No, Garrick had never had a need for smugness—until he’d met Fae.

Looking down at his mate as she snuggled deeper into his arms on the couch they’d made into an impromptu bed, he marveled at how perfect she was. While she slept, he was able to savor the beauty of her face. Dark lashes fell upon high cheekbones that gave her face a regal countenance. Her wildly curly hair was made more unruly by his unrepentant hands sliding in and out of the wealth of texture. Her mouth, though slack in sleep, was no less sensual.

He could still feel the lush softness of her lips as they explored the contours of his body. The sleek feel of her tongue on his skin as she coaxed pleasure from him. Yep, Garrick was smug because this infuriatingly

beautiful female was his, and he was hers. He hadn't known consciously how important that was until he was faced with losing her.

Clutching her closer, he had to stifle a growl at the thought of some other male lying with her in his arms. He'd never believed the Council would have the ability to force a mate upon Fae, but the thought she might have consented to another made him and his wolf both irrationally jealous and unimaginably sad.

When she let out a little whimper, he realized he was squeezing her too hard. Releasing his hold a little, he smiled as he kissed the top of her head, taking a second to inhale the unique scent of her. Now that he knew about her ability, he understood how she could smell like so many of the Goddess's creations but not be just one in particular. He wondered if their cubs would have her unique ability or if they'd remain solely wolf shifters. Garrick smiled at the thought of their children and the unique blend of his lightness and her darkness they would possess. He didn't need to question where that thought came from—whereas in the past, thinking of procreating had sent shivers down his spine, the thought of having children with Fae made him feel right, centered.

“Watching me sleep is actually kind of creepy,” she whispered in a voice hoarse from sleep.

“Actually, it’s called devotion,” he said with a chuckle.

Pulling back just a little, she gave him a squinty-eyed look. “Okay, who are you, and what did you do with Garrick?” she asked with mock suspicion.

Rolling his eyes, Garrick released Fae and began searching for what remained of his clothes. There it was again—he was feeling smug. If the work he put into getting the feeling wasn’t so hard, he would really have loved how he felt.

“Omigod, you look smug—you never look smug. Annoyed, homicidal, incredulous, but never smug.” She gathered up the few articles of clothing that had survived their sexual mauling.

“Well, you look pretty sheepish right now, so it seems we’re both going for something different in our emotional vocabulary,” he said with a smug grin.

“Shut up. We will not speak of this,” she said, tersely pulling her dress on.

Not thinking of the consequences, Garrick immediately had her in a tight hold and was staring at her intently.

“You can’t take it back. I won’t let you. You’re my mate,” he said with a low growl.

“Okay, this I’m used to—demanding and domineering. It’s nice to know some things don’t change,” she stated, lifting one eyebrow.

Garrick didn't think it was funny. Granted, if she decided what they'd experienced was a mistake and she wanted to forget it ever happened, he'd have to respect that. It didn't mean he wouldn't do everything in his power to convince her otherwise. If she really didn't want to be his mate, he would have to respect that also, but it didn't mean he wouldn't maim every male who came into her vicinity and a few females too. As he'd said, devotion.

“Oh love, don't worry, not that, never that.” She cupped his face in her hands and looked back up at him with an expression he had never seen before. Both he and his wolf were soothed, and he leaned down to seal the statement with a kiss.

Their newly formed union may surprise some, but at the very core of his being, Garrick knew they'd always been moving toward this moment. Even without her great reveal to him and the other Council members, he was going to make sure Fae was always by his side. When he'd seen her lying in that hospital bed with the possibility of death hovering near, the need to have them connected body and soul had crept from the recesses of his unconsciousness and announced its presence.

Now, ending their kiss, he looked into her softly warm green eyes and saw the truth and rightness of them being together.

“Are you going to let me go now, or do you have some primal mating ritual you need to do to assure no one takes your property?” she asked sarcastically.

“Never property, Fae. As for primal mating rituals, what do you think we were doing throughout the night?” he said with a wink as he watched her blush. He was interested to see how their verbal game of cat and mouse was going to play out now.

“Sir, there are people here to see you,” Simon said from the other side of the den door.

Garrick might wonder what the other shifters in the house thought about his and Fae’s union, but he was certainly sure they’d heard it. Giving Fae a wicked smile, he couldn’t help chuckling and kissing the top of her head when she first looked sheepish, but then squinted her eyes at him in mock anger. She accepted his kiss, but punched him lightly in the stomach as she whispered “ass”—which only made him feel more pride for his mate.

“Give us a moment, Simon,” Garrick called out to his second as he pulled the remnants of Fae’s dress around her body. Though shifters were regularly around each other in various states of undress, his connection to Fae was still new, and even if the rest of his Pack would see her body at some point, he wanted to keep it private for as long as he could. A very irrational human jealousy, but his nonetheless.

“Ready to go out?” he asked her, implying more in the phrasing of his question.

“Please, like I’ve ever cared what others thought,” she said in a cavalier manner as she swatted him playfully on the chest.

Good—he just hoped the others thoughts were nothing *he* would have to care about.

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Fae headed in the direction of her room with Garrick at her side. When they opened the door, Simon was gone, probably to inform Garrick’s guest about his delay. As they got to her room, she was surprised when he kept walking.

“Hey, I need to go to my room and get ready,” she said, tugging on his hand.

They had made love throughout the night into the very early morning because Garrick had been insatiable. Okay, she’d been pretty over the top herself too. Needless to say, she was sweaty and sticky and could really use a shower, not to mention clothes that could button.

“Your stuff will be in our room,” he said as if that made perfect sense and she was daft for questioning the order of things.

“Why would my stuff be in ‘our’ room?”

“Because we’re mates. Where else would your stuff be?” He led her into the largest bedroom she’d ever seen in her life. It was decorated in the same style of the rest of the house, but there was something uniquely Garrick about it. The bold colors in the fabrics on the ebony-colored Mission-style bed caught her eye first. She admired the thick, rich rugs on the polished wood of the floor. There was a great contrast of stark sensibility and subtle sensuality that drew her in—quite like the owner himself. Garrick may try to portray the image of a Spartan warrior, but there was a depth and fullness to him that she saw reflected in his room.

“How does anyone know we’re mates?” she asked, realizing the room had distracted her briefly.

“How could they not?” he said with a smug smile.

Squinting her eyes, she wanted to give him a snappy comeback but was stopped by a quick kiss. Smug Garrick was intolerable, but affectionate Garrick was hard to resist.

“Let’s take a shower and go see what our guests want,” he said, effectively ending their conversation about the whole house knowing she was his mate.

“I’m surprised you’re going to let me out of the room,” she said as she followed him into the bathroom.

“Why wouldn’t I let you out of the room?” He turned on the shower and stripped out of his clothes.

Fae’s brain fogged over temporarily at the site of Garrick naked in front of her. He was definitely a sight to behold. His large frame was packed with muscles that didn’t seem to burden the lines of his body. She could tell his mass was from activity and manual labor and not from just lifting weights in a gym.

“If you keep looking at me like that, I probably won’t let you out of the room,” he said with a wicked grin.

“Ha, ha, Mr. I’m-So-Sexy,” she replied, taking her own clothes off and appreciating his look of approval.

“So if you aren’t going to lock me up, what was with the medieval doctrine you were quoting last night?” She picked up their previous conversation as she walked past him into the shower and stared in awe at another marvel wealth could produce. There were showerheads strategically placed to hit every part of her body that could benefit from the pressure of hot water. Fiddling with the heads of the nozzles, she chuckled at Garrick’s sigh of frustration.

“I was just following custom.” He reached for the shampoo over her head.

“Well, it’s stupid, and even if you hadn’t bespelled me with your sexual prowess, I wouldn’t have

mated with some random dude because your Council decreed it.” She lathered up a loofah with soap.

“I know that, but I was trying to avoid your little showdown with shifter kind,” he replied.

“Well, next time...oh, that feels so good,” she said with a purr.

“You like that?” he whispered into her ear as he massaged shampoo into her hair.

*Did she like it?* The feel of his strong hands massaging her scalp caused her entire body to tingle with pleasure. When he gently placed her head under the water to rinse, she hummed with satisfaction. She didn’t even want to know how he had her favorite scent as he began to massage conditioner into her hair, because then she would have been too weirded out.

“I love how this smells on you,” he said, abandoning her head to let his hands roam over her body.

“Um...” was the only semi-coherent thing she could articulate as he began to nip softly at her neck while his strong hands massaged her skin. The feel of his calloused fingers on her soft skin caused her body to come awake.

“I bet I could make you feel even better,” he said as he kissed up her neck and gently bit down on her earlobe.

The sensation zinged through her body and made her press herself closer to him. “How?” she asked, not even ashamed that she was so breathless with need. Chuckling, he showed her the advantages of having so many shower heads.

When they finally got out of the shower, it was considerably later than they planned. Fae didn’t even feign surprise at finding an entire wardrobe waiting for her in the massive walk-in closet—an entire wardrobe of new clothes and shoes. At her inquiry about her own stuff, Garrick just said they hadn’t had time to get it, so he’d had staff buy her new things. *Which made perfect sense, of course.*

Getting dressed also took longer because her clothes just didn’t seem to want to stay on her body, particularly her panties. It wasn’t until her stomach growled and she felt as if she was going to faint that she was able to get a reprieve. She realized it wasn’t just the sex that made it difficult for her to leave the room. Seeing this side of Garrick was intoxicating. He was witty and playful, but most importantly, relaxed. She was tempted to think it was the power of the great “P,” but she knew this was the Garrick who existed when others weren’t watching. Fae was so pleased he could be that person with her that she didn’t want the moment to end.

“Jesus, I’m surprised the girl can even walk,” a husky female voice said as she and Garrick stepped into the formal living room.

Fae was momentarily shocked by the bold statement, and she briefly thought being the helpless damsel tucked away in her room might not be so bad.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

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Garrick worked to avoid rolling his eyes at Dev Bellona's statement. Not only because her mate and Alpha wolf shifter Duke Baldwin would be upset, but mostly because Dev just wouldn't care.

"Hello, Dev, Duke, so good to see you," Garrick said, walking over to embrace the two. Duke was a close friend of his father and one of Garrick's strongest supporters for taking his role on the Council. His mate Dev was, well, Dev.

"Yeah, yeah, introduce me to the woman you suckered into mating with you," Dev said with a smile and a wink.

Garrick turned to look at Fae and was stopped by the look on her face. She was staring at Dev in shock. Turning to smile at the other woman, Garrick was struck by a similar expression on her face.

"Wow, Dev, you didn't tell us you have a secret love child," a voice with a dry tone said, breaking up the silence that had filled the room.

Blinking as if she was clearing her thoughts, Dev turned to glare at the person who'd voiced the comment—Harper Kirk. He always found Duke and Dev's adopted daughter Harper to be a little on the weird side. Like most geniuses, she never really knew

appropriate social etiquette—or, actually, more likely she just didn't care.

"I am not old enough to be her mother," Dev said through clenched teeth.

"She looks pretty young to me, and, well..." Harper trailed off.

"I should leave you by the side of the road," Dev said, but with less heat to her words.

"Dev, that doesn't work anymore. I know my way home," Harper replied with a faint quirk to her lips.

The two females may have not been biologically related, but they sure had the mother/daughter routine down. Looking back at Fae, he noticed she was uncharacteristically silent. Harper's statement made him re-examine the two females more closely.

Dev was in her early fifties, and aside from her short silver hair, she looked like a female much younger. Her brown skin had a healthy glow that suggested she'd spent some time in the sun recently and provided a unique contrast to her hair. Garrick had always thought her beauty was influenced by her inner strength of will and strong character. To Garrick, her brown eyes were her most interesting feature—he always thought they were so soft and caring for a person who mouthed off as much as she did.

Looking at Fae, he initially didn't notice any similarities aside from their brown skin, but as he

watched them watch each other, he could see there was something else below the surface.

“You’re like me,” Fae said with awe.

“We should speak in private.” Dev walked toward Fae.

“What do you need to talk about?” Garrick moved to stand next to Fae, feeling defensive.

“If I wanted you to know, I would have said it in front of you,” Dev said, staring at him.

“Dev, she’s his mate. He has a right to know anything you discuss,” Duke said patiently.

“Mate, not slave,” Dev replied.

Garrick did roll his eyes at that statement, mostly because Duke let out an exacerbated sigh. When Fae snorted in agreement, he let out his own sigh.

“Considering the warm welcome you gave her, I don’t think she plans to shank me when we get out of your sight,” Fae said sarcastically.

“I like you already. Come on—let’s go talk in the garden. Harper, move it. I’m sure your creepy child genius ways will work to our advantage,” Dev said, walking out of the room.

“Dev, I’m almost thirty,” Harper said, following her.

“Why does she get to go?” Garrick asked, feeling upset.

“Whining is not becoming.” Fae patted him on the cheek and winked at him.

All he could do was stare at them walking out of the room.

“Get used to it. Since you seem like the breeder type, when your daughters come I’ll make sure to take you out drinking regularly,” Duke said, coming up behind him. “Oh, and don’t think about sending a spy. Harper is always anxious to test her shooting skills.” Duke clasped him on the shoulder.

Staring in shock, Garrick could only focus on one word Duke had said.

*Daughters.*

\*\*\*

Fae was momentarily speechless as she walked into the room and saw the woman called Dev. Contrary to what the younger woman alluded to, it wasn’t because she thought Dev was her mother. Aside from skin color and a smart mouth, they didn’t resemble each other. What made Fae pause was the way she *knew* Dev was just like her. She couldn’t describe it to anyone else, but there was a link between them that spoke to Fae on a visceral level. She and this other woman were somehow the same; she just had to find out how.

Walking out onto the grounds, Dev lead their trio to a secluded area in Garrick's garden. Fae watched as Dev moved. She hoped that someday she'd have even half of his self-assurance. She particularly loved how Dev didn't back down when Garrick got all annoying Alpha. This was a woman she was going to love having around. Especially when any of the other Council members tried to start some shit.

"Okay, so tell me what you've got," Dev said, plopping down on a stone bench tucked in a shady corner.

"Aren't you concerned someone is listening?" Fae asked as she assessed the area.

"That's why I have girl wonder here." She nodded her head to the younger woman.

Looking over at her, Fae was about to ask a question when she was interrupted.

"Yes, I'm a wolf shifter," Harper said dryly.

"I wasn't going to ask that," Fae said, feeling both perplexed and annoyed that she was interrupted.

"Just wanted to make that clear. It's usually one of those things people think but never quite ask," Harper stated.

Fae could only look at the other woman. She was beyond odd. Taller than Fae's five-nine, she was probably around six feet barefoot. Her loosely curled golden hair was cut in a simple bob, which

complimented the dark frame glasses she wore. Her golden skin and height made her look more athletic than brawny, as if she should be on the cover of a fitness magazine. Harper was a brain with a body, and even though she was being very weird, Fae could see how under the right circumstances she could grow on someone.

“If you’re not going to make sense, please don’t speak,” Dev said with a sigh.

“Did you ever wonder if maybe I’m the one making sense, and the rest of you are confusing?” she replied, plopping down next to Dev on the bench.

Looking at the two women, she gave up trying to find the rationality of their banter and leaned against one of the large trees surrounding the area.

“I’m just going to assume you have surveillance under control and move on. As to what I’ve got, show me yours and I’ll show you mine,” she said with a mischievous smile.

“At least you don’t answer a question with another question,” Harper said with a bit of humor in her dry tone.

“What did I say?” Dev said to the young shifter with annoyance.

“Seriously, if we are putting cards on the table, I want to know what you can do. I *know* you. I don’t

know how to explain it in a logical manner, but I *know* you *here*.” Fae brought a fist to her chest.

Smiling, Dev stood up—and then she wasn’t there. Fae couldn’t help the sharp gasp that escaped, because this was so not what she was expecting. When Dev became visible, Fae couldn’t stop herself from stepping forward and touching the other woman.

“How do you do that?” she asked, tentatively touching her on the arm.

“You can’t?” Dev asked with disappointment.

Still feeling a bit shocked, Fae looked into Dev’s eyes. She felt her heart clench at the sight of pain buried in the depths of the brown.

“No, I do something else,” she said softly.

“Something else?” Dev asked with a mixture of curiosity and hope.

“Yes, but I have to take my clothes off first,” she said sheepishly. Stripping in a fit of anger was one thing, but showing what she could do in front of strangers off the cuff made her a bit uncomfortable.

“Will I require singles?” Harper asked with her usual dry tone.

Instead of annoying her, the comment made Fae laugh. Yeah, she was really going to like these women. Taking her clothes off so she remained only in her bra and panties, Fae shifted to look like Dev. When Harper

leaped from the bench to stand next to a gaping Dev, Fae said, “This is what I’ve got,” using Dev’s voice.

“Trump,” Harper said in a whisper.

The comment seemed to mobilize Dev, and she reached over and pinched the other woman. “Okay, you’ve proved your point. I do appreciate the demonstration, particularly the creative license you took with my body in my favor, but transform back before I develop a complex.”

Smiling, Fae transformed back into her own form and started putting her clothes back on.

“Can you transform into other things beside people?” Harper asked.

“Yeah, but as much as I’ve always wanted to try being a fly on the wall, I’m afraid of getting swatted or devoured by a spider,” she replied.

“I’m assuming Garrick knows?” Dev asked.

“Oh yeah, and it wasn’t in a way I would’ve wanted to reveal it. We had a car accident and I was injured and, well, he found out after I tried to fly out of my hospital room when I came out of my coma,” she said, buttoning her shirt.

“Fascinating,” Harper said with an unusual amount of sincerity considering her usual dry tone.

“She isn’t going to try and dissect me, is she?” Fae asked with equal parts humor and caution.

“I would say ‘no,’ but who knows what lurks in that overdeveloped brain of hers,” Dev answered, eyeing Harper.

“What? It is pretty fascinating. You look similar and have superpowers. Makes being a simple wolf shifter seem lame,” Harper responded.

Snorting, Fae rolled her eyes. “Well, those chauvinists on the Council sure thought I was special. They couldn’t decide if I was going to get cloistered off to some supernatural nunnery or put on the matting auction block.”

“Shit, that’s going to make this difficult,” Dev said with venom to her tone.

“What?” Fae asked, looking at the other women.

“Keeping your ability under wraps. I never let those control freaks know what I can do. Well, let’s just hope now that you’re mated they’ll back off. At least you don’t have to worry about the Goddess Chosen. Those bitches are real downers,” Dev said, shaking her head.

“You’re going to have to back up. Orphan raised outside the Pack structure, don’t know what you’re talking about,” Fae said, feeling frustrated that she was so outside the loop. Being a security specialist, she was always in the know, and if she didn’t have the information, she got it. ASAP.

“You’re an orphan too?” Dev asked, with a softer quality to her voice.

“Okay, maybe not mother and daughter, but possibly sisters. I’m going to need some DNA samples to do further analysis,” Harper said, staring off into the distance.

“Inside your head—keep the creepy thoughts inside your head,” Dev said in an exacerbated tone. Turning back to Fae, she continued with their conversation. “I’m an orphan too. Spent my childhood in L.A. County’s foster care system.”

“I had a foster mother, Olivia. She was a great woman,” Fae explained.

“Um, we’ll have to talk about this more later, but first let me get you up to speed on Pack stuff, considering you’re now a part of it. You should probably sit down, because this is going to take awhile.” Dev sat back down on the bench and patted a space next to her.

The gesture should have been comforting, except for the almost maniacal look in Dev’s eyes. Great, Fae thought—what had she gotten herself into?

# CHAPTER TWELVE

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Once the terror of having female children passed, Garrick realized Duke, Dev and their entourage hadn't trekked down from their home in Shasta County to shoot the shit. Turning away from the door, he headed toward one of the couches in his formal living room. Duke was like family, and he would have felt comfortable inviting him into the less formal meeting space, but because of the intimacy he and Fae had shared there recently, he really didn't feel ready to let anyone else in quite yet.

“As much as I enjoy your visits, Duke, I'm sure you came here for a reason beyond idle chitchat.” He leaned back on the couch.

The other male smiled and sat across from Garrick while Leiland Jacobs, one of his enforcers, stood to the back of his chair. Garrick hadn't noticed the other male when he came into the room, a characteristic he found annoying and Duke probably found beneficial. He should've known he was there, though—Leiland never left Dev's side. They had a history Duke was only vaguely familiar with but knew went deep. When Simon walked toward his back, he knew his second never forgot the male was there, and it made Garrick feel more at ease. Pack posturing and

politics was unfortunate amongst friends but still necessary for keeping peace amongst beings who could find it easy to succumb to their baser instincts, both human and animal.

“Do you remember how your father and I were researching the disappearance of wolf shifter children?” Duke asked, relaxing back into his chair.

“Not in great detail. I left the military before Dad could start involving me in Pack and Council issues,” Garrick replied with a shrug.

Though he was his parents’ eldest, it was never assumed he would take over his father’s Pack and seat as Western Region Council Chair. Garrick hated politics and was itching to get away and see something beyond the confines of his reality when he was younger. He was surprised when his father had let him go without a fuss. He’d probably thought he would have more time with his son, but unfortunately, time thought differently than Gerard Conall.

“Well, I’m going to give you a summarized version of what’s been going on then. About twenty years ago when I met Dev and the kids, we discovered Jett, Harper, and Mina were part of a group of wolf shifter children being kidnapped across the country. Usually from remote areas and from parents not connected strongly to a Pack. They were always siblings and one female and one male at least. It was

bizarre, but not bizarre enough to send up any red flags. We were able to track down the phenomena to one man named Melville Belial, but after some mind games, he killed himself in front of Dev and left us with nothing.” Duke paused at his last statement.

Garrick was actually taken aback by the look of pure rage that flitted across Duke’s face. He’d never seen the other Alpha so angry before, but now that he was mated himself, he could understand how the thought of his mate being harmed would send him over the edge.

“Garrick, we’ve been able to finally start connecting some dots because it looks like the murders might be starting up again, but in a different way. I know you were in a car accident—” Duke changed the direction of his narrative abruptly and looking at Simon.

“It wasn’t an accident,” Simon replied with a sigh. “I was planning to tell him after he and Fae had, well...” Simon trailed off.

Garrick fought the urge to turn and stare at the other male. Even though Duke was a family friend, it irked him someone else had information before he did. Particularly another Alpha.

“Garrick, I’m not here to cause discord but to warn you and possibly get your alliance,” Duke said kindly.

Garrick couldn't help smiling back at the other male. Duke was the type of Alpha he strived to emulate but often failed. He may seem like he didn't care about being an Alpha, but he had some of the best qualities of a leader, especially knowing how to read someone and simultaneously put them at ease.

“What is your warning, Duke?” Garrick asked.

“We've had Harper tracking weird phenomena in the wolf shifter network, and things keep going back to a company called the Foster Group. I know you just secured a contract with them, and also my cousin Timothy has been funding some experimental drugs for them for years. Specifically, the drugs help a shifter control their change. What Harper was able to ascertain after going through some very secure and very confidential files is the drugs aren't meant to control wolf shifters' changes, but to cause transformations in humans,” Duke said, with a heavy quality to his tone.

Garrick was speechless. Simon's whispered “Oh shit” basically summed up how he felt. He couldn't understand how he'd missed this, but he'd never thought to look that deeply into their business practices. Nothing had set off his Intel people's red flags, and now he was seriously wondering why.

“We have someone on the inside. That’s why you’re trying to warn me?” Garrick asked, feeling angry.

Before Duke could answer, Steven Blake barged into the room with Reginald Lee and Edward Grant trailing behind him with their own personal guards. Garrick worked to hide his annoyance. He’d hoped the other males were long gone but figured they’d at least respect the fact he’d mated with Fae and let it go.

“I should have known you were as power hungry as your father,” Steven said snidely.

“That’s really uncalled for, Steven,” Edward said before Garrick could respond.

“Gentleman, please have a seat.” Garrick indicated the empty chairs without rising.

“I will not sit. If you think this is going to hold, you’d better be prepared for a formal challenge,” Steven said, his face getting progressively redder.

Garrick was about to give his retort when Fae, Dev, and Harper walked into the room. He decided he would leave it to his mate to put the older male in his place. Mostly because the look on her face when she heard Steven’s statement indicated the place putting was going to be unlike anything they’d ever seen before.

Fae was feeling shell-shocked after Dev and Harper explained the intricate details of Pack politics. She was sure the wolf shifters thought all of their archaic rules and structures came from their unique biological status, but she could only see a human handprint on everything explained to her. Fae was pretty sure wolves in the wild didn't worry about the proper etiquette of addressing a Beta's mate after the Beta was dethroned by a challenger. She wasn't even going to comment on how most of the power structures in the Pack were controlled by males. Yep, she was pretty riled up, and walking in on Steven Blake discussing her as if she were a piece of property really sent her over the edge.

"Okay, let's get this straight. If anyone even thinks about challenging Garrick over me, I'm going to test the theory of me turning into a dragon and roasting the assholes. This topic ends now. I am Garrick's mate, period." She stared the three Council members down.

"And if you happen to get away before she can, I'll make sure to find you," Dev added with a particularly sinister gleam in her eyes.

Fae was a bit disappointed Dev's threat seemed to carry more weight, but she did have more years of scaring them. Having the supernatural world's best

assassin gunning for you could really make people rethink their priorities.

“This is completely uncalled for,” Steven responded with a little too much haughtiness in his tone, considering the hand of death was staring him down. Guess he really didn’t understand where his priorities were.

“Steven, let it go,” Reginald said with a sigh.

“Yes, Stevie, let it go.” Dev shifted forward slightly.

It looked as if Steven was going to contest some more, but it seemed his priorities finally got through to him, and he kept his mouth shut.

“I want to congratulate you both before I head back home and secure a promise for a visit. Elinor would be most charmed to meet you, Fae,” Reginald said with his best genteel Southern accent.

“I would like to second that. Harriet will be very happy to hear you’ve settled down, Garrick,” Edward added.

Everyone in the room turned to look at Steven, who appeared to have swallowed something particularly sour. It must have been the bullshit Pack politics that required he invite the new mate of a Pack Council member to his home to meet his mate and Pack. Yeah, real wolf like.

“Elizabeth and I would like to extend an invitation to visit our home when your schedule permits,” Steven said stiffly.

Fae couldn’t help smiling because the older shifter looked as if each word cost him a small fortune. Wanting to gloat and do a verbal victory dance, she was stopped by Garrick’s response.

“Fae and I would be honored to visit you all once time permits. Wouldn’t we, Fae?” He gave her a look that probably seemed casual to everyone else, but she knew it meant *please behave*. Well that’s what she was going to believe that twitch of his right eye meant.

“Yes, of course. We have a lot of mating to do. You know how big this house is, but once we get done we’ll gladly try out your places,” she responded with what she thought was a sweet smile—but the way Steven paled made her think it may have sent another message.

She couldn’t help grinning wider when she saw the customary vein throbbing in Garrick’s temple. It was nice to know that, even though they’d realized all that frustration with each other was sexual tension, some core facet of their relationship wouldn’t change. Mainly her doing and saying things to really shake up Garrick’s neatly ordered world.

“Trump,” Harper said to no one in particular.

“Shut up,” Dev said, not taking her eyes off of Steven.

“Well, I’ll be taking my leave then,” Steven said, making his way with his guards toward the exit.

When Dev didn’t move from his path, Fae worried there might be a showdown.

“It was good to see you again, Stevie. I’m going to make sure to keep my eye out for you. I wouldn’t want you to be a stranger,” Dev said in a tone that sounded pretty congenial on the surface but made the hairs on the back of Fae’s neck stand up.

She wanted to make sure Dev never felt the need to keep an eye on her in that manner. The way Steven seemed to shrink ever so slightly inward said he probably felt the same way. Yep, gotta love priorities.

Dev stared at him for another beat and then moved slightly out of his path. Enough to give him and his guards room to pass, but not enough to let them forget she was there.

“Okay, trump. Are you happy now?” Harper asked once the other males were out of earshot.

“Harper,” Dev said with a threatening tone that spoke more of affection than homicidal retribution.

“Well, you seemed to care,” Harper said as she walked over and sat on the edge of Duke’s chair.

Following her cue, Fae went and sat next to Garrick. She was a bit surprised when he lifted one of

her hands and kissed her palm. This was the private Garrick of last night and this morning. She smiled at the gesture and felt a warm tingly feeling begin to build inside of her when he smiled back with a very sexy grin and heat in his eyes.

“Can you two at least wait until we’re out of the room?” Dev asked, sitting next to her on the couch.

“I thought wolves went at it in front of each other,” she said, turning and winking at her.

“Okay, no, you’re tied,” Harper said in her customary dry tone.

“Shut up,” Fae and Dev said in unison.

“Amazing,” Edward said, still in his same position.

Fae didn’t like his tone, and the slight stiffening of both Garrick and Dev next to her confirmed they didn’t like it much either.

“Mind if I get a drink, Garrick?” Reginald asked, indicating he planned to stay.

“They’re not mother and daughter, and until I acquire some DNA samples, we can’t determine if they are sisters,” Harper stated.

Everyone turned to look at her in astonishment.

“What? Everyone knows that’s what they were thinking,” Harper said, as if she made perfect sense and everyone else was out of order.

“Harper, please, for the love of all that is holy, please shut up,” Dev said with a sigh.

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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Garrick tried to let the feeling of Fae in his arms soothe him, but there was too much going on in his head. Reginald and Edward had seen the similarities between Fae and Dev quicker than he was prepared for. So clouded by his own anger at his antiquated ideas being shut down, Steven had left in a huff before he could see how alike the two females were. As he was a stronger follower of the Goddess Chosen, it was to their advantage Steve had opted to go home.

“Cold?” Fae murmured as she lay across his chest.

“No,” he answered, kissing the top of her head and marveling at how quickly his life had changed in forty-eight hours. Deep down, he’d always known he was working toward having Fae as his mate, but the daily grind of denying it had made it hard for him to really acknowledge what was happening.

“Don’t worry, we’ve got this.” She kissed him softly on his neck.

They’d made love earlier, softly and sweetly, and were lying in each other’s arms waiting for sleep to claim them.

“When do you want to have children? We’ve used protection every time we’ve made love, and I’m

wondering when you wanted to stop?” he asked, stroking her back.

A heavy silence stretched out before Fae pulled away from him and sat up, pulling the blanket with her. Reaching out, she turned the lamp on by the side of the bed and just stared at him. He felt as if she was looking into the very recesses of his soul.

“That was good, I’ll give you that, but no dice, buddy. Throwing around the idea of us having kids isn’t going to distract me. Let’s talk about what’s got you thinking so hard I can hear it.” She frowned at him.

Lying on his back, he put an arm over his eyes. Garrick had always felt in control; even as a young male, before he’d joined the Army or claimed his father’s Pack, he’d felt in control. He had no mental or emotional preparation for feeling out of control.

“I don’t like this plan,” Garrick said, feeling helpless.

He heard the covers rustle and then felt the bed shift as Fae moved and sat to straddle him. When she moved his arm, he blinked at the sudden light.

“Babe, it’s not the best plan, but it’s our only plan. We have to do this now.” She looked down at him.

“We need to plan more,” he said stubbornly.

“We’ve had flimsier plans on some of the security jobs I’ve done in the past,” she answered, raising an eyebrow.

“Yeah, well, it’s different now. You’re my mate,” he said with a mournful sigh.

He could tell by her expression she thought what he said was bullshit, but it was the truth. She may have been a de facto member of his Pack as his employee, but she was his mate now, and he cringed at the thought of losing her. His wolf seemed to stalk his consciousness as if waiting to pounce at any danger—and this flimsy plan was dangerous.

Once they’d talked about Fae and Dev’s possible history, Duke had reintroduced the topic of missing children. Garrick shouldn’t have been surprised that Edward and Reginald were in the loop. Though Steven genuinely cared about their people in his own weird way, his rigid beliefs often made him ineffective in times of crisis. That was one of the main reasons Duke, Reginald and Edward had pushed for Garrick to join the Council. Having someone cowed by Steven’s personality would never see anything resolved. Considering the Priestess of the Goddess Chosen was the tiebreaker, everyone knew where favor would be shown.

Though Steven followed the doctrine of the Goddess Chosen with an ardent devotion, Garrick had

never had much problem with them. They were the historians of the shifter peoples and made sure the link between the Goddess and her people was constantly nurtured. They were often pragmatic in their decision-making, and unless something benefited shifters, they were the first to veto a decision. Especially if they felt it was the will of the Goddess.

What did surprise Garrick about this whole situation was the fact his brother was involved. He'd always thought Garth was a complete shithead coward, but he'd never thought he would do anything to harm the lives of children and their people. The supernatural community kept to themselves because humans could be very powerful and very resourceful when motivated by fear and hatred. That was something his kind had learned the hard way over the years. They knew for their survival, they would have to self-regulate themselves to keep off the radar, and when that didn't work, they always had The Phoenix.

Everyone but him agreed getting into Garth's home was the best way to finish connecting the dots and end the research once and for all. Unfortunately, the only way to get in was to send Fae and Harper. Dev appeared just as adamant about not allowing Harper to get involved as he was at preventing Fae, but neither female would budge. They were going to wait

for Garth to leave his home in Los Feliz, and than Fae would go in with Harper to hack any computer system he may have. It was quick, simple, and as likely to fail as it was to succeed.

“You’re my mate, and though I would worry about you doing something dangerous, I would have faith in your ability to do it,” she said, sounding frustrated.

“Come here.” He pulled her down for a kiss.

It was futile to argue—he knew that. He could spend the night isolating her or working to strengthen their very tenuous and new mate status. Deepening the kiss, he allowed her scent to override the thoughts of doubt permeating his brain. The feeling of her skin upon his gave him the clarity he needed to savor the moment.

Lips upon flesh, softness and firmness, the slick slippery feel of her center welcoming him inside. Her soft moans of pleasure as they remade themselves with each other again and again. This was what he focused on until it was the entirety of his consciousness, drowning out his fear and sorrow that this may be their last time together.

Fae was feeling particularly jittery. Her skin felt as if it wanted to crawl off of her body. This was not a bad plan, but it wasn't the best either. The window of time for them to explore the house wasn't that short, but it definitely wasn't as long as she would have liked. Beggars couldn't be choosers, though, so she had to work with what she had.

"This is too much like *déjà vu*," Dev said with a frustrated grunt.

"Considering you made it out alive, I don't really care," Duke replied.

Fae didn't know what they were talking about, but she knew it wasn't good. When she tried to get Dev's attention, Harper gave her a look of *not now*. Biting her tongue, she went back to pretending to read her paper. They were hunkered down in Griffith Park near Garth's house, waiting for Simon to give his all-clear. She and Harper were lounging on a park bench pretending to read while Garrick, in a ball cap, shorts and t-shirt was running back and forth pretending to play soccer with Dev and Duke. Fae thought he was doing a horrible job of looking engaged in the game. She could see the tension in the lines of his body. Just thinking of that body made her smile dreamily.

"Watching you two really reaffirms my strong desire to not mate, ever. Sex with strangers and

acquaintances is okay, but mating—I'll pass," Harper said across from her in a low tone.

When Duke stumbled slightly at her comment, Fae couldn't help chuckling silently. She hadn't quite decided if Harper said oddball things because she had poor social skills or because she had the best. Either way, her anxiety level seemed to drop.

"He's out," Simon's voice said through the earpiece they wore.

"Okay, going to start moving out." Fae rose from the bench and headed toward the car she was going to drive. They'd picked a day Garth was leaving for a charity event. Black tuxedos were easier to copy than casual wear. The late-evening light would also help mask any disparities between the original and the copy.

Currently disguised as a middle-aged Asian man, Fae walked to a car that was an exact replica of Garth's. Once she got to the car, she circled back and picked up Harper and drove to an area in the park that was closer to Garth's home but pretty deserted. She quickly changed into her newest disguise, and they headed out. Everything was timed down to the second, and they had to make sure they kept with the schedule.

Garth was only going to be at the charity event to make an appearance and would be back within a short

period of time. They needed to make sure their window of showing up after Garth left, then leaving to have Garth reappear, was spaced well enough to avoid curious questions from his servants. The one thing they had on their side was Garrick's brother's usually erratic behavior.

Pulling up to the gates outside of the house, Fae entered the code and gave a perfunctory look at the camera. When the gates opened, she pulled up and parked in the front of the house. Getting out, she walked toward the front door, hearing Harper behind her. When the maid opened the door, Fae quickly brushed by her.

"I'm in a hurry and you're in my way," Fae said with Garth's usual pompous air.

"So sorry, Mr. Conall," the frightened maid responded.

Fae added the woman's behavior to the list of things she was going to punish Garth for. Moving toward the back of the house where Garrick said Garth's office was, she opened the door quickly and scanned the room before she ushered Harper inside and followed. She closed the door and quickly began to help Harper search. They moved silently, hoping her program to disrupt the video surveillance feed in the office was working. They didn't risk speaking just in

case. When they heard a soft knock on the door, they both froze.

“Yes,” Fae called out in Garth’s voice.

“Anna said you were distressed, so I thought I would come and see how you were doing,” a young female voice said tentatively behind the door.

Looking over at Harper, she didn’t know what to do. They’d gone silent with outside communication, fearing the signal might get picked up, so she couldn’t rely on the rest of the team for help. Taking a chance, she responded.

“Yes, please come in,” Fae said.

When the door opened and the woman on the other side walked in Fae, felt as if she’d been punched in the stomach. She *knew* her the same way she knew Dev. From the look on the other woman’s face, she could tell she felt it too. Her large eyes that appeared black stared in amazement, and her, full pink-tinted lips formed a silent “oh.” Fae felt both terrified and happy at the same time; there was another like her and Dev.

The other woman had to be somewhere in her early twenties, with bone-straight black hair that fell to her waist and skin the color of rich earth that was as unblemished and beautiful as a porcelain doll. Fae and Dev may be thought of as striking or attractive, but this young woman was gorgeous.

“Abort, abort,” Simon’s voice yelled in her ear, breaking their agreement on no communication.

Turning to look at Harper, she couldn’t control the feeling of panic welling up inside of her.

“That new case of wine you wanted arrived—would you like to show it to your guest?” the woman asked with a musical voice.

When she nodded as if to indicate they should follow, Fae didn’t even question it. They *knew* each other, and it was going to be okay. As they made their way farther into the back of the house, Fae tried to hurry without seeming as if they were rushing. She could see they were almost to the door that led outside when they were stopped by two large guards entering, followed by Garth. The look on his face made Fae’s heart stop.

“Well, my pet, who do we have here?” he asked with a menacing tone.

Moving so she flanked Harper, Fae was briefly distracted by the lovely woman stepping between them.

“What’s going on? What trick are you playing, Garth?” she asked, looking between the two of them. Her look of astonishment seemed genuine enough, but Fae was able to see something briefly in her eyes before she turned back to look at the real Garth.

“Not me, my pet, not me. Take her to her room,” Garth ordered a guard to his right.

Fae knew they may not get another chance so, dropping low, she kicked out at the guard who had come up behind them as Harper lunged at the guard on Garth’s left. Somehow knowing they needed the added distraction, the woman who’d helped them let out a high-pitched scream and pretended to faint in the arms of the guard ordered to send her away. That just left Garth, and with Harper charging forward, they would be able to disable him before other guards came to investigate.

Time seemed to slow down, and Fae couldn’t seem to run fast enough as Garth pulled out a gun and shot Harper at close range. She watched as the strangely sweet young shifter continued to propel herself at Garth and push them both through the door. When they hit the ground, Fae knew Harper was dead. Temporarily immobilized, she looked over at the young woman whom she *knew*. She watched frozen as she restrained the guard next to her with mock fright and mouthed the word “Go.”

This was not right, this was not how it was supposed to be, Fae thought before she turned into a raven and went.



# *Janet Eckford*

Like most great superheroes (or super-villains, depending on who's telling the story) Janet Eckford lives a double life. By day Janet is a mild-mannered crusader for justice (or nefarious deeds, depending on who's telling the story) and by night an indestructible creator of prose (or pathological liar, depending on who's telling the story) while munching on her favorite cookies—oatmeal raisin. A native West Coaster who hails from the sunny state of California Janet, has loved the romance genre ever since she convinced her dad it was required reading when she was eleven. Janet believes love shouldn't have a color code and strives to create stories that represent that belief.

Send her your praise and adoration and she will return it in kind.

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