

BOUND

TO

YOU

ALYSSA BRANDON



A SWOON READS BOOK

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# CHAPTER 1

“Megan,” said Sorelle, my best friend in the world and the pack Beta’s daughter. “Stop fantasizing and get your tight ass in a dress. You need to be perfect tonight.”

It was my eighteenth birthday and my dad was throwing me a party in the hope I would find my mate. Omega wolves usually found their mate at sixteen, and it happened around that time for most female alpha wolves too. But I’d gone through both sixteen and seventeen without finding him. For a werewolf, even an alpha, I was dangerously close to slipping into old maid territory, which was something no female wolf wanted.

I couldn’t *wait* to meet my mate. I so badly wanted someone to love, someone who would love me back. A guy who would hold my hand and tell me I was beautiful. Someone to walk on the beach with. To cuddle with. Someone who was just mine, who’d always care about me and put me first. He’d be strong, an Alpha or Alpha-to-be, and he’d always love and protect me.

“Mmm,” I said, turning back to look at Sorelle rather than the ocean just visible from my bedroom window.

Sorelle was very beautiful. She was blond, slim and tall like a model, and had the bluest eyes I’d ever seen on anyone—werewolf or otherwise. Compared with her I sometimes felt average, even if I—with my waist-length black hair, tan skin, and curvy body—was a total knockout. Sorelle was simply radiant. If I didn’t know she was a werewolf, I’d suspect she was an angel exiled to earth for the crime of being too beautiful. Or too bossy. Or foulmouthed.

“Wear this one; it’s just the right mix of skanky and classy,” she said, pulling out a black number that had been one of the top three Mom and I had narrowed my closet down to. “And your hair will be up for once.”

“You don’t think the blue will go better—”

“No.” She held out the dress. “Put it on.”

So I dropped my robe, quickly slipping on the black dress. Usually being nearly naked in front of Sorelle wouldn’t be a big deal; werewolves learn early to be cool with nakedness since transforming while wearing clothes isn’t a good idea. But I had put on a lacy red bra-and-underwear combo, hoping I’d make love to my mate tonight. And I knew Sorelle would quickly pick up on it, since I normally only wore plain black and white undies.

“You gonna do the guy tonight?” she asked, eyebrows raised. Sorelle had found her mate two days before her seventeenth birthday, about fourteen months ago. Despite that, she hadn’t slept with him yet, because she was waiting for their “moment.”

“No,” I lied, and turned so Sorelle would be able to zip me up. “I

just read this thing about how what kind of underwear you wear will change how you act. So if I wear sexy underwear, I'll feel sexy."

"Really?" Sorelle sounded like she would sooner believe that little green men might storm into the room yelling, *We come in peace; give us your Mars Bars.*

Eager to change the topic, I asked, "You really think he's here?"

She finished zipping the dress up and I turned to her. She smiled. "You look totally hot!" She paused for a moment, looking toward the door. "And he's totally here. Your dad invited every wolf on the East Coast and then some. He has to be here."

"Yeah. He has to be," I echoed.

Half an hour later, after Sorelle finally got my hair arranged to her liking, we headed downstairs. The party was already in full swing, which made me feel a little bad. This was my party, after all, although I think my dad was also using it to broker some sort of peace treaty between the Boston and New York packs. My dad is this sort of super powerful Alpha—some people even call him the Alpha of Alphas because he is in control of most of the Alphas east of the Mississippi. And since most wolves are omega and follow their Alphas happily, he was pretty much in charge of everyone. I was technically an alpha wolf too, but as an unmated alpha female I was kind of outside the pack hierarchy, so the whole alpha status thing wasn't as important to me.

"Wow," Sorelle said, snagging a bottle of beer from a table. "Your dad really pulled out all the stops for this."

"Yeah," I agreed absently, distracted by my younger sister Rose. She was on a sofa in the corner, reading. Rose was sixteen and had

just found her mate a few weeks ago. Said mate, Carter Thorn, was sitting next to her, looking resigned and bored. I reached out and stole the beer Sorelle was sipping and took a swig. Rose had a mate, the thing I wanted most, and she was acting like he didn't even exist! But even though she was acting like an idiot, he was still there and trying to be with her. So unfair. Life sucked.

"Incoming," Sorelle said, taking the beer bottle back and nodding toward a cute blond guy. I'd never seen him before, but then again, that was the point. Most wolves here tonight were strangers, since it was pretty clear my wolf was not interested in picking anyone from my own pack or the other local one.

"Hi," the guy said, stopping in front of me. "I'm Eric."

"Megan," I said, offering him my hand to shake. I didn't quite like the way his eyes immediately dropped to my chest, but I tried to stay positive. Unfortunately, my wolf had no reaction at all to him.

"Nice house," he said, looking around. "Big."

I nodded. It was the pack house and had a lot of large open rooms ideal for gatherings and parties. The great hall, the biggest room in the house, was half the size of a football field and two stories high. I figured it would probably be possible to cram most of our guests into it if we needed to. Possible but not comfortable.

"I like to think it's just the right size," I said, turning away a little, hoping that someone else would come and try a meet and greet. Scanning the room, I spotted Oscar heading my way. He was Sorelle's stepbrother and liked to make crude jokes and ruffle my hair like I was five. "I was actually going—"

"So you're eighteen, huh?" Eric continued, even though I was

turning away from him. "You sure you're really the Alpha of Alphas' daughter? It just seems like—"

"Hey, Eric, why don't you take a hint and piss off," Oscar said from behind Eric. Eric tensed—werewolves, especially more dominant ones, don't like anyone sneaking up on them—and turned around, eyes flashing.

"Oscar," Sorelle growled, her voice a low warning. But neither Oscar nor Eric were paying attention to us anymore. Male alpha or beta wolves from different packs tend not to get along. Something about protecting their territory and yada yada. And Oscar was in line to be our pack's Beta, which meant extra tension. He couldn't ever be seen as weak because that would reflect badly on him and his father and our pack.

"Dad," I called, hoping he was somewhere nearby. I also tried to send the message of trouble through the pack bonds. Wolves can't talk to one another through their pack bonds, not with words, but sometimes we can send impressions and images.

"Fucking great," Sorelle swore as Eric launched himself at Oscar. Both of them started throwing punches at each other even as they were transforming into their wolf forms. People drew back to make room for the fight. Clothing tore. Eric got clocked mid-transformation, right in his half nose, half snout. A minute later the guys were both fully changed and circling each other in wolf form. Oscar's coat was reddish and long while Eric's was gray and brown.

"Kyla is going to be pissed he ruined that suit," Sorelle said with a smile that was big enough to rival the Cheshire cat's. "He's like a little kid when it comes to keeping clothes whole."

"At least he's not getting his ass kicked," I noted as Oscar pinned Eric's back leg to the floor. In most werewolves' eyes, getting into a fight was all right as long as you won it.

"There is that," Sorelle said, and linked arms with me. "Let's go."

I let her tug me away, since I wasn't interested in watching whatever this was turning into, and even though Eric's refusal to leave me alone was technically the cause of the fight, I knew they no longer cared if I stayed. It was about the two of them, their need to put the other one in his place and prove who was the better fighter, defending rank and showing that your pack was strong. Mostly, though, it was about kicking the other guy's ass. So really it was pretty much just like when human teenage boys get into fights . . . except with fangs and claws.

I couldn't help but smile along with Sorelle as I glanced over my shoulder. My dad had just shown up and was breaking up the fight, thankfully before either one of them got the chance to do any real damage to each other or to the hardwood floor (although Oscar's suit was no more).

As the Alpha of Alphas, my dad can pretty much just tell other wolves to stop fighting and they do. It's like some weird compulsion forces more submissive wolves to obey, which for my dad was pretty much everyone. Not all alphas have it and most of the ones who do are not as strong as my dad. This was the reason we were able to host more than twelve different packs at our house tonight without World War III happening. There was still a lot of tension.

"Lots of people," I said as we walked through the great hall. I felt like a mix between a juicy steak and a doll being displayed behind

a glass window no one could touch. Or talk to. "Why aren't they, like, coming up to talk to me?" I whispered to Sorelle.

"Don't know, but don't worry," she said fondly, squeezing my arm. "There's, like, a couple of dozen hotties around here. One of them is bound to be to your wolf's tastes, right?"

"Right," I agreed.

"I'm going to see if Scott can get us some drinks," she said. Scott, her mate, was six years older than her, always wore suits, and worked at, like, an investment firm, but he could still party and was almost always willing to let us join in.

I wanted to tell Sorelle not to leave me, but I wasn't that kind of girl. The kind who had to have her best friend standing next to her to function. At least I liked to think I wasn't. I'd gotten quite a bit of practice during our senior year because I'd been in lots more AP classes than Sorelle. I was going to get even more practice at college. I'd applied and gotten into my first-choice school: Caltech. I just hoped my mate, when I found him, was open to moving to LA for a few years. Only I had to start talking to some of the wolves and actually find my mate before I could ask him about that.

So I smiled at a guy nearby, which seemed to break the bubble around me, and before long I was in the center of the room, surrounded by lots of guys. Guys who were way too old, way too grabby, way too nerdy, way too smooth. There were even a couple of guys who were way hot, and I tried to convince myself they were yummy, but none of them caused my wolf to sit up and take notice.

"You feel anything yet?" Sorelle asked as she returned a few

minutes later. She handed me a red drink with a little umbrella. "When I first felt Scott, it was like a tingling in the air. But some girls claim they smelled their mate before anything else. Others that their voice was like angels singing. Any of that going on?"

"No," I said with a sigh, taking a sip of the red liquid in my glass. It tasted alcoholic and too sweet. "Nothing. What if he isn't here? What if he's—"

"Hello, gorgeous," a deep male voice said from behind me. Both Sorelle and I spun around.

The guy was built, and while his voice was way too deep to belong to an angel, his face sure looked like it could have belonged to some kind of god.

But when the guy reached forward, took my hand, and kissed the back of it, I felt nothing special. There was no tingling or wonderful smell coming from him. I mean, he was possibly the hottest guy I'd ever seen, hot enough I should be totally into him even if he wasn't my mate. But I felt nothing for him.

He was just like all the other wolves I'd greeted tonight.

The guy seemed to realize there was no bond between us, although his eyes said he would be more than happy to take me to bed despite that. But I wasn't interested. Even if he was super hot.

I pulled my hand from his. "Excuse me."

From the corner of my eye, I saw Sorelle give Mr. God Face another look before she followed me. Sighing, I made my way to the back of the room toward the dining room, which held a big buffet. Or it had an hour ago; now most of the food was gone.

"Gaw," I moaned as I leaned against the wall. "Why couldn't my

mate just come find me?! My feet are starting to hurt and my cheeks are going to get sore from all this smiling."

"Hey, you are the one who's been dreaming of this since kindergarten," Sorelle said, raising her hands in mock-defense.

Suddenly little voices began to whisper in the back of my mind. *What if I was broken? What if I had some strange defect and I'd never find my mate? What if I was destined to be alone forever? What if destiny wasn't all I'd dreamed it would be? What if, what if . . .*

I knew I was being silly and overreacting, but I'd so hoped to just walk down the stairs and find him. Like a magical path would open up among the guests to guide me to him.

"Sorelle!" Kyla, Sorelle's stepmother, suddenly called from our left. "Your brother just told me you were drinking beer? What's that in your hand?"

Sorelle groaned and quickly put her drink on a side table. "You'll be all right while I deal with the stepmonster?" she asked.

"I'll be fine," I said with a little wave. "I think I'm going to go and get some air."

Sorelle nodded and headed for her stepmother, who was looking disapproving. But then again, disapproving was her standard face when dealing with Sorelle.

I slipped into the kitchen. There was a handful of wolves from my pack there acting as cater waiters (it wasn't like we could have humans do that because of the high risk of them seeing or hearing something they shouldn't). I barely managed not to collide with one of them before I raced through to the connecting mudroom to the door leading to the beach.

The night outside was still, only the soothing sound of waves disturbing the quiet. I headed for the water. It would be fairly cold despite the fact that it was summer, but at that moment I wouldn't have cared if it was the arctic sea I was stepping into.

I smiled as I left my shoes behind, glad my dress was short so I could walk knee-deep in the water.

The ocean was like a security blanket to me. Ever since I was just a pup. I'd come out here to watch the ocean and feel it slosh around my feet when I was upset.

It was *my* place.

Then I heard the sound of a lighter being clicked open behind me. I stiffened and tried to catch a scent, but the soft ocean winds weren't favoring me. I turned, slowly, so I wouldn't fall into the ocean.

The man was standing next to my shoes, taking a drag of a cigarette. The smell was horrible, sticking in my nose. I'd never known a wolf who smoked.

But that wasn't something my brain was able to focus on right then. Because looking at him, even across the dozens of feet that separated us, I knew.

The stranger on the beach was my mate.

I moved toward him, my feet nearly slipping as some force seemed to reach out from within me. It was like a rope of air had curled from me to him. The rope was visible, bright white and slightly shimmering for about two seconds, and then it was gone. Only it was still there. I could somehow feel the rope connecting us; binding us together. Forever joining us.

“Oh hell,” the stranger—my mate—said. His first words to me . . . not the romantic declaration I’d been hoping for.

I took several more unsteady steps toward him, unable to take my eyes off him. I could only see that he was tall, six feet at least, and broad shouldered. Dark hair. The rest of him was obscured by the moonless night.

When I finally reached the shore I was glad, glad because this close my night vision allowed me to see him. He looked a little older than me. Maybe twenty-two or twenty-three. Not surprising. Most alpha wolves in the house had been older than me as well, since male alpha werewolves often had trouble finding mates. Mostly because an alpha will normally only accept another alpha as its mate and alpha females are rare; only about three in ten of those born with the alpha gene are female.

My mate’s skin was pale, his features were appealing, and despite the cigarette, he smelled great. But it was his eyes that captivated me. They were the color of spring leaves, of growing things. Of beauty and new life. I just couldn’t look away from them.

“We’re . . . ,” I started, my throat feeling dry, “. . . we’re mated.”  
“Fantastic,” he said flatly.

# CHAPTER 2

James

He'd been about to light up his first cigarette in ages when the girl had come running out. It had seemed odd, so he'd gone after her, followed her the few hundred feet to the beach. Not into the water, of course; he didn't like the ocean and was a terrible swimmer.

He supposed he should have known something wasn't quite right when he got the crazy notion to follow her. He was not the type to follow any female, anywhere. In fact, if it was possible, he'd move to an island where there were no females allowed.

He watched her take her shoes off and step into the water. She walked out, and for a moment, he wanted to call to her to be careful. That should have been the second clue. He didn't do concern.

Instead, he lit his cig. The sound made her realize he was there, although he was a bit surprised she hadn't already known. He always knew as soon as anyone was within fifty feet of him. But then

again, she wasn't a warrior wolf, as he was, so maybe he shouldn't have been surprised by her failure to detect him.

She turned, and for a moment everything was still. Then it happened. The bond connected. Connected the way only an alpha bond did. The cord, the bond, the light, the magic surged into him. Into her too, he supposed.

They were mated.

He swore.

She walked, no, glided through the water toward him. For a moment he could see her, the beautiful golden skin, the dark mane of hair, and the eyes that reminded him of silver come alive. Then she turned into another woman, a woman he hated. A woman with tanned skin and black hair just like her. He had killed that woman, so the rational part of him knew that this girl wasn't the one he had hated with such passion. Still hated. No. It was just his mind playing tricks.

She stepped close then, looking up at him, young and expectant once more. She was the birthday girl, had to be. The one Robin had been so eager to meet when James's father had ordered them to attend this gathering. Eighteen. God, she was young. He wanted to swear. Then, with the same expectant look still on her face, she'd doomed them both with the true words, "We're mated."

"Fantastic" was all he could manage. *Fucking fantastic.*

## CHAPTER 3

There was silence—even the ocean seemed to be still and quiet—as I looked at him and he at me. He seemed detached, unconcerned. Unimpressed. Like finally meeting his mate, the love of his life, was about as interesting as buying socks. I wished there was a mirror so I could make sure a great big zit hadn't shown up on my forehead. Why wasn't he kissing me? Or at least looking somewhat turned on? Holding my hand? Telling me he was glad to meet me? Something?

Abruptly he turned, dropping his cigarette as he walked off. I quickly bent to pick it up. There was no littering on my beach.

"Wait," I called after him as I picked up my shoes in one hand. Putting them on would make following him a lot harder.

I caught him only because he'd stopped outside the door I'd burst through a minute earlier.

"What's your name?" he asked as he turned to me, his hand on

the doorknob. There was a faint trace of a British accent when he spoke; at least I think it was British.

“Megan,” I said, feeling kind of breathless. And not because of the run from the beach. His eyes were just so green, and the weird bond thing was kind of making me feel dizzy. As if someone had messed with my equilibrium, making my body confuse what was the ground and what was the sky. Making me feel like he was my center of gravity and I was rotating around him rather than being connected to the earth, which rotated around the sun.

“What’s your na—” I began, but he’d pushed through the door, leaving me behind. I swallowed, trying to ignore how much his lack of interest hurt, before following him into the house.

It soon became clear to me that he’d been to my house before, because he was walking quickly and without hesitation straight toward my dad’s office. Through the kitchen, up the stairs, down the deserted upstairs corridor. Boy, his legs were long. And his butt was cute too.

I hurried to catch up with him and when I did I said, “Hey.” Loudly.

He stopped for, like, a microsecond but then just kept on going down the corridor. I wanted to pout and yell at the world, because this was not how this was supposed to go, this was not how my first meeting with my mate was supposed to go, but I managed not to.

Instead I rushed forward and I poked him in the back.

That got his attention; he stopped and spun around. He looked fierce, angry even, and though part of me suddenly felt like a

quivering ball of fear, part of me was pleased he was at least paying attention to me.

“Did you just poke me?” he said, taking a step closer to me. His voice was a mix of pissed off, annoyed, and a tiny bit amused.

“Maybe,” I said, even though I was the only viable suspect.

“It’s a yes-or-no question, short stuff,” he said, taking another step toward me, attempting to scare me with his size. Except he was my mate. He wasn’t scary. He was rude and not what I was expecting, but nothing to fear.

Still, he was more alpha, and that made me automatically give ground. I stepped back some more until my shoulders were against the hallway wall. His eyes were glowing slightly, green-green, so intense. I wondered if he had green eyes in wolf shape.

He put his hands on either side of my shoulders, trapping me, but not touching me. I wanted him to touch me. Meeting his eyes, I tried to tell him that without words.

“Yes or no?” he whispered, meeting my eyes and holding them, rather than forcing them away. He could have done that easily. He was very alpha, very dominant.

“Huh?” I said, then remembered. I’d poked him and that pissed him off. I smiled sweetly and lied, “No. It wasn’t me.” Just to see what he’d do.

He growled, eyes still unnaturally bright. He leaned a little closer. I thought it more likely that he’d bite me than kiss me but I hoped for a hot make-out session. And with him it would be hot.

But before something, anything, could happen, we were rudely interrupted.

"Well, this looks cozy," a voice said a little way down the corridor. I glanced to the side to see Mr. God Face from earlier.

My mate growled and his eyes kept on glowing but he dropped his hands and backed away from me.

"Hi," Mr. God Face said, walking closer to us and offering me his hand. "I'm Robin. James's Beta." My mate, James, growled as I took Robin's hand.

"Hi," I said, feeling a bit unsteady. "Megan. I'm Megan."

"*Mine*," James said in a low voice, and Robin dropped my hand like it was a hot potato. I glanced to my mate. This was the first matelike thing he'd done or said so far.

"I'll be damned," Robin said, clearly speaking to my mate. "You found your mate."

"So it seems," James said. I looked between the two males. Both seemed way tense for the situation. Then again, my mate had been totally weird since the moment I met him.

"Congratulations," Robin said.

"Thanks," I said when James said nothing. Robin looked at me with an amused expression on his face.

"Let's go," James said, turning to march down the corridor to my dad's study.

My hearing is plenty better than a human's, but it still took me a few more steps to hear that a conversation was taking place in my dad's study.

That there was a meeting going on wasn't really surprising. I knew part of this party was about Dad getting some sort of peace treaty figured out for the New York City and Boston packs. There

had been some trouble in both cities: rogues, territorial attacks, a suspicious alpha challenge, and whispers about exposure. My dad was trying to figure out a way to make everyone get along, with as little bloodshed as possible.

I could hear my dad and the Boston pack's Alpha, Jordan, talking. Jordan was a fairly frequent visitor, at least as of late. Something was going on with him and I'd overheard (it's hard to have truly private conversations in a house full of werewolves with supernatural hearing) my parents talking about possible replacements for him. They didn't want Jordan in charge of the biggest US pack besides ours.

The voices quieted as we got closer, probably hearing our footsteps, so all I managed to catch were a few words: *exposure, GPS, missing, government*. Those words didn't sound too good.

Instead of knocking like a normal polite person, my mate simply opened the door to my dad's office and marched us in. Him first, then me, and then Robin.

My dad's study was nice, and pretty cozy for an office. His desk was big and solid, as were the chairs for visitors. Behind the desk, Dad had a big, soft, and worn leather chair. There was a corkboard with pictures of our family, postcards, and some drawings my sisters had made. There was a worn brown leather sofa to the side.

There were two wolves, Alphas, who were vaguely familiar on the sofa. Jordan was standing in the middle of the room, his cheeks flushed with anger. My dad was standing up behind his desk, also looking rather pissed.

"Alpha of Alphas," my mate said to my dad, not bothering to dip

his head a little in respect. Which was weird because everyone usually bowed to my dad. He was, as my mate had just said, the Alpha of Alphas. I expected my dad to growl or do something to force James to show respect, even outright challenge him for his disrespect, but he did nothing.

“James,” my dad said to my mate, giving him a little bow. That was even more surprising, shocking even, because my father didn’t bow to anyone. At least I’d never seen him do it before. Another Alpha of Alphas thing. Normally no alpha would bow down to someone younger and weaker than him unless he’d lost or forfeited a challenge. And my dad was *more* than any other alpha.

That bow made me wonder . . . Was James more alpha, more dominant than my dad? That was the only real explanation for James’s tone, and the worry and doubt flashing across my dad’s face. It felt strange to think my dad wasn’t the big bad in this room. My so-far-unfriendly mate was.

“Out,” my dad said, clearly speaking to the three other wolves in the room. The two on the sofa looked relieved to be out of there, while Jordan glared at my dad but couldn’t hold his eyes for long. That Jordan could even try to challenge the Alpha of Alphas with his eyes like that was proof how alpha Jordan was. After a few seconds, he growled a little but then pushed past us, bumping into Robin, leaving the office.

My dad studied James for a few seconds and then turned to me. “You mated a warrior?” he asked me, looking worried. But there was also that gleam in his eye my dad got when he was plotting something. When he was trying to turn a situation to his advantage.

"No," I said, perplexed. James wasn't a warrior. He couldn't be, could he? The warrior wolves were a fierce class of wolves who once protected our race against wraiths, shadowy creatures that had hunted werewolves. But there were no wraiths anymore, and no one had seen any warrior wolves in ages. "The warrior class doesn't mate with . . . eh . . ." I searched for the right word; normal wolves? Civilian wolves? Regular wolves? In the end I settled for, ". . . us."

"That's actually not true," Robin said helpfully from my right. "We used to take civilian mates into our pack, even though we prefer females with warrior blood. This is quite exciting."

"Why exciting?" I couldn't stop myself from asking as I looked around at the three hard-faced males.

"It's been nearly thirty years since a wolf from the warrior class took a mate," Robin said. "This is a great day. You've just become the new mate to the last warrior alpha."

James glared over my head at Robin. I felt so confused. This wasn't at all going the way I'd imagined it. There were no nice words, no kisses, no nothing. Instead I'd apparently become the mate to a warrior wolf. I knew very little about warrior wolves, but I figured Rose might. She was into magic and books and stuff. I'd have to make sure to have a talk with her.

"Is this a private party or can anyone join in?" my mom voice said from the doorway.

I smiled and turned, feeling immediately better. Mom and I are very similar; we have the same kind of humor, taste in food, books, music, everything, and we look enough alike to be sisters. She's my favorite person in the family.

"Isabella," my dad said to Mom, nodding to my mate. "This is James, acting Alpha of the Cold Hunt Warriors."

Mom raised an eyebrow as she walked into the room, studying James. "Trist's son?" she half stated, half asked. My dad nodded. I saw surprise in my mate's face. Mom saw it too. "Yes, I've met your father."

James studied Mom for a few moments and then nodded, broke eye contact, and bowed his head to her. I opened my mouth in surprise. James hadn't shown my dad, the Alpha of Alphas, proper respect, but he had to Mom, who most alphas ignored.

Mom smiled at him before heading over to sit on the corner of the big desk. She was fairly short, like me, so her feet were up off the ground. The fact that she stayed on my side of the desk, rather than join Dad behind, it was an important distinction. It meant she thought there were two clear sides here and she wasn't taking either one just yet.

"She's coming with me," my mate declared after a few moments of silence. But it was not *I want her so much I can't stand the thought of being away from her*. No, there was more of an *I'm the boss and this is what's going to happen* vibe to it. Overall it just made me feel weird. Like this was something I had no say in. Which wasn't what I wanted. I wanted . . . I wasn't sure what exactly anymore, but knew this wasn't it.

"Not tonight," my dad said. "Stay a week or two."

"Coming with you where?" I asked, having a feeling it wasn't anywhere near LA.

"Megan," my dad said in a tone that I knew meant *shut up*. Which

surprised me. I mean, my dad wasn't always the nicest of guys, but he usually listened to me when it mattered.

"Canada," James said.

"As in maple syrup and hockey?" I asked.

"We got lots of bears and pine trees too," Robin offered helpfully.

"What about LA?" I asked, looking at my dad.

"What about it?" he asked, like he didn't remember at all.

"Caltech," I said. "I got in, remember?"

"Right," he said, and I wondered if he had forgotten. That was a depressing thought, so I did my best to push it away.

"And we're very proud of that," Mom said, then focused on my mate. "How you feel about LA, James?"

"I can't be away from my pack," he said without even pausing for a second to think about possibly moving to LA. Which sucked, but wasn't totally unexpected. I'd always known this might happen, that my mate might be a guy who wouldn't be able to drop everything so I could study at my dream school. Which was why I'd applied to a lot of different schools in different cities. Except no one had told me I needed to look at universities in Canada too.

"Mmm," Mom said, while her eyes narrowed.

"We'll be returning home tomorrow," James continued.

"Tomorrow?" I echoed. "But summer isn't over yet." I turned and focused on my mate, figuring I might try my puppy-dog eyes on him. I do pretty awesome puppy-dog eyes. But before I even could get myself in a position where puppy eyes might work, he side-

stepped me, as if getting too close to me might be hazardous to his health.

"This is not a debate," James said, focusing right back on my parents. "My wolf has chosen her and we both know me staying in your territory for much longer would be bad for you." Not a threat but simple fact. I could tell from his tone. "And you know I have business back home that won't keep."

"That business is exactly why we would like to keep our daughter here for a few more days," Mom said. I frowned, wondering just what this *business* was all about.

"It's not ideal," my dad said, and I think it was more to Mom than anyone else. "But I agree that you can't stay and therefore neither can Megan."

"Unless she wants to," Mom said. "Megan, you have a choice—"

There were ways of breaking a mating bond between two omega wolves, but I'd never heard of it for alphas. Mom's words made me think it might be possible, though. Except I wanted a mate more than I wanted Caltech. Which I knew wasn't very modern-woman-hear-me-roar of me, but it was the truth. I'd wanted someone to belong with for as long as I could remember, and now finally I had. No way was I giving that up.

"No," James said, not looking at me. "She doesn't. Warrior bonds work differently."

Now I *really* had to talk to Rose. This warrior wolves stuff seemed like something she would have written a paper on, and she might even know something about warrior mate bonds. And if

she didn't, I was sure she at least could clue me in on some stuff. Like what was the difference between a warrior wolf and a normal one? There were stories about magic healing, immortality, poisonous fangs, and even a story that some of them had three heads when they changed, like that mythical Greek dog.

"It's fine, Mom," I said, even though I wasn't quite sure what I was saying okay to. Or what was going to happen. I just knew that this was what I'd wanted so long, waited for. I needed to see it through. Besides, my wolf recognized something in James. I felt something, through the faint link that was our mate bond. Something that was just . . . right. Even if most everything else felt wrong, I was going to hold on to the part that felt right. "I'm sure I'll find a good school in Canada."

Mom turned her sharp eyes on me, probably trying to decide how I felt. I wished her luck with that because I wasn't totally clear on that myself.

My dad nodded and looked pleased. "It's settled, then."

"I'll trust you to keep her safe for one more night," James said gruffly. "But tomorrow, you will make sure she's packed and ready to leave. My wolf wants her safe, in my territory."

"Understood," the Alpha of Alphas said. "But now you must be presented. It's tradition."

MY FATHER GUIDED us to the second floor's balcony, which overlooked the great hall, while Mom and some other members of our pack herded all the wolves in other areas of the house toward the

hall. It really was a huge room and it looked like I had been right about all our guests fitting into it.

James was walking stiffly on my father's other side, about as far away from me as he could get. My father had my arm in a tight grip, as if he was worried I'd bolt. But I wanted this—more, it seemed, than both my mate, who hadn't looked directly at me since the whole poking incident, and my father, whose face was in that eerily calm mask he wore when his emotions were churning. He'd worn it that time when I totaled his Mercedes back in seventh grade and when Cordelia, my older sister, had declared she was in love with a human boy and was running away with him (thankfully she hadn't gone through with it).

Once we reached the balcony, my father stopped. I was sort of glad, having had to rush to keep up with them. They both had a lot longer legs than me.

I glanced at my mate. I wanted to see his reaction to all of this, to being presented. Did warriors have a different kind of ceremony for introducing a newly mated couple, or did they have their own rituals? Did this seem strange to him? Was my father embarrassing him? I could read nothing on his face. It was passive, almost bored-looking.

"Silence," my father said, his voice barely above normal speaking level. But the whole room below us went as quiet as the grave and the wolves all turned their attention to us. I forced a smile, feeling strangely cold inside.

Wasting no time, my father held up James's arm, moving him slightly forward, closer to the balcony railing. "I present to you

James, son of Trist the Great, of the Cold Hunt Warriors, and now mate to my daughter.”

He kept hold of James’s arm as he turned to me. “I present to you Megan Ross, daughter of my beloved mate, Isabella, daughter of my own flesh, and now mate to James, son of Trist the Great,” he said as he tugged me forward, raising my arm close to James’s.

James and I both kept our arms up as my father let go. The ceremony wasn’t complete. James was clearly familiar enough with our customs to know that, which was good. A second later my father pulled a bloodred satin ribbon from his pocket. He looped it once around my wrist, then once around James’s, before tying the ribbon, and us, together. James’s wrist was, however, covered by the cuff of his black shirt. That wasn’t really proper. The ribbon was supposed to be against his skin.

But before I had a chance to point out the mistake, my father pushed us forward and said in a booming voice, “I give you the mated pair James, son of Trist the Great, and Megan Ross.”

The crowd erupted in applause, cheers and hollers mixed with a few wolf howls. I could see Sorelle smiling, Scott’s arms wrapped around her. I wanted that. I wanted arms wrapped around me.

I turned to smile at James as we lowered our arms. “I guess we’re stuck with each other,” I said in a tone I hoped was light and teasing, nodding at our still bound wrists. It was tradition to stay tied together for the remainder of the festivities, so I’d hopefully get the chance to get to know him a little.

“You need anything else from me?” my dad asked James, sound-

ing tired and old. I'd never thought of him as old before. "You and yours could stay here—"

"No," James interrupted. "We have a secure location." I felt my eyes get big. No one interrupted my dad when he was talking. My father's eyes only narrowed; he didn't lash out at James. And James . . .

James was untying the ribbon that had tied us together.

"But what about . . .," I started to argue about the ribbon, but it was already off our wrists and in his pocket. I wanted to argue about everything. Wanted to protest and yell that it was all wrong. But I just couldn't get the words out.

## CHAPTER 4

“I’ve been thinking,” said Sorelle, who was helping to fold the last of my clothes and put them in my suitcases. It was about nine forty-five the morning after the party. “This might actually be better.”

“What might actually be better?” I said, deciding I didn’t want to bring my I BITE T-shirt and putting it in the huge reject pile I had going on, on the bed next to my suitcases. I actually wanted to throw all the neatly packed things on the floor and stomp on them. Real mature, I know. But I didn’t. Because I had no reason to be upset, but I kind of was anyway. It was all happening too fast and not the way I’d hoped.

“Canada is a lot closer than California,” Sorelle said, pushing some blond hair back from her face. “At least as long as it’s, like, the eastern bit of Canada. Is it?”

“I’m not sure. Probably. I mean, if it was Vancouver, we’d be flying, right?”

“So, like, not super far,” she said, nodding and licking her lips.

“So we’ll still be in the same time zone and it’ll be totally easy to drive and see each other.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, “that’s true,” before reaching for my extra cell phone bag. It was a specially designed one. You could change the straps so that it either worked like a cell phone shoulder bag or as a mini backpack for when you were in werewolf shape. That way you’d never have to leave your cell phone or cash or stuff behind if you had to change quickly.

“Still fucking sucks that we won’t get to go to even one end-of-summer party this year,” she said, sitting down on a tiny bit of the bed that didn’t have clothes on it.

“Yeah, it’s not at all happening the way I was expecting it to,” I said, closing one of the suitcases to make room so I could sit next to her. “I mean, I wasn’t expecting chocolate and a declaration of undying love the first night.”

“Don’t lie, you were so expecting that!” she said with a grin.

I giggled. “Okay, maybe a tiny bit, but what I really wasn’t expecting was . . .”

“Mr. Asshole?”

“He’s not an ass,” I said defensively, even though I had no real clue what James was. So far all I knew was that he was distant and bossy. But who knew? Maybe once we spent some time alone, he’d turn into a teddy bear.

“He sounds like one to me,” she said, bumping her shoulder against mine. “It’s going to be weird. I mean, I’m sort of prepared because you were leaving me for movie stars and frost-free winters—”

"Hey, my second-choice school was MIT," I said. Sorelle was going to art school in Boston and so I'd applied to several universities there. Part of it was that Massachusetts had a whole lot of good schools for engineering, but the idea of having my BFF around had been a big bonus. "I can't help that I was awesome enough to get into Caltech."

"I'm pretty sure MIT is more awesome than Calte—"

"Maybe, but LA's got way nicer beaches—"

"Boston's got the Red Sox—"

"Oh, please, you don't even like baseball—"

Our play arguing cut off, both of us glancing toward the door. Someone was coming up the stairs to the second floor; we could hear it and knew what it meant. Time was up.

Sorelle reached forward, wrapping her arms hard around me. I held on to her just as tight. She sniffed some but I knew she wouldn't cry. During all the years I've known her I've never seen her cry, not even as a kid.

"Canada isn't that far away," she whispered close to my ear. "We'll visit all the time."

"Yes," I said, still hugging her, not willing to let go. Sorelle had been my best friend, the one person I talked to and shared more with than anyone in the world, for so long. It was really hard to imagine life without her.

"You ready?" my sister Rose asked from the open doorway. Good. I'd been wanting to talk to her since last night.

"I guess it's time," I said, pulling away from Sorelle's hug. She

was so warm and familiar, and letting go of her was a lot harder than it should have been. Letting go of her was like letting go of everything that was familiar and safe.

"Guess so," Sorelle said, brushing some blond hair away from her face. We both stood.

I wiped at a tear that I hadn't been able to stop escaping and forced a smile. "I need a minute with Rose, 'kay?"

"Sure," Sorelle said, smiling tightly. "I'll see you outside."

I waited until Sorelle's footsteps had faded away.

"Spill it."

"Spill what?"

"Everything you got on warrior wolves," I said. "I know you're dying to tell me. This is, like, your field of expertise; magical and weird."

I'd tried to find her last night, but she hadn't been anywhere and there had been so many people wanting to say how pleased they were, lots of people I wanted to say good-bye to, so this was my first chance to talk to her about everything.

"I'm . . .," Rose started, seeming a bit unsure. "I was never all that interested in them."

"Great," I muttered, but I figured she still had to have more info than me. "What do you know, then?"

"Well," she said. "Warrior wolves all have the alpha gene." Wolves are born either with alpha or omega genes. Alphas are leaders while omegas are happy followers. But the biggest difference is that alpha wolves can change form from birth, while omega wolves

don't turn until they are sixteen. Generally alphas have alpha children, but Rose and our youngest sister, Johanna, were omegas, so it wasn't 100 percent certain all of an alpha's children were born alphas. "But they also have another gene that makes them warriors."

"Yeah, but what does that actually mean? Am I mated to Superman or the big bad wolf?" I asked, taking a step back to lean on the bed.

Rose thought hard for a few long seconds. Something seemed to be bothering her. Maybe the fact that she didn't have answers. She liked knowing, being the one who could always hook you up with the boring intel you needed.

"I don't know," she said. "Not really. I don't think they're that different. Other than the fact that they're faster and stronger and live longer than most weres."

"Live longer?" I asked. "Are they, like, immortal? Because I heard a story about that once."

"As long as the pack lives, the one wolf lives," she said, as if that should make everything make perfect sense.

"Wow, that's helpful," I said, standing.

"It means the warrior packs have more magic—from their warrior gene, maybe—and that what makes them more than most wolves," she said. I thought about that. I guess it made a little sense, even though I still felt kind of confused.

"All right," I said. "What else?"

"That's all," she said, a bit sullenly, like I was being an annoying bitch, not just asking some friendly questions. "Can we go?"

"I guess," I said, and picked up one of the suitcases.  
"Good." Rose took the other one. "They're waiting."

AT LEAST JAMES'S car was nice. A black SUV no more than a year old. Not a fast, flashy car, but a good solid one that would get you where you needed to go. Lots of horsepower too. There was a second, almost identical SUV parked on the street. I guessed both cars belonged to James's pack.

"So this is weird," my older sister, Cordelia, said as she hugged me, her hair tickling my nose. "I never figured you'd move out before me."

"Yeah," I agreed, sniffing a little. I'd promised myself I wouldn't cry—suspecting that if I started, I wouldn't be able to stop.

Sorelle slid up to us and gave me a big hug. Cordelia took the hint and headed over to her mate.

"He's hot," Sorelle said, glancing over at James, who was talking to my dad. "In a kind of tough-guy way. And his Beta? Totally yummy! Beyond yummy, even."

"Hey! Aren't you afraid of damaging my fragile male ego?" Sorelle's mate, Scott, said playfully from over by the door. Sorelle rolled her eyes at him, and looked appreciatively over at Robin again.

Sorelle turned her attention back to me. "You'll be all right. You're tough. And you'll be able to practice your insane driving up on those country roads without anyone giving you a ticket," she said, and squeezed my shoulder.

"Yeah, sure." I smiled. "And I'll call you every day."

"You better!" She hugged me again, then went over to Scott. Scott smiled and waved at me before pulling Sorelle closer. She was so lucky to have a mate who lived three blocks away and really, really loved her.

Next were Melody, Johanna, and my dad. Melody was ten and Johanna seven, and both were monsters disguised as cute kids who liked glitter, princess stuff, and squeaky toys way too much for me to ever take them seriously. I mean, I loved them and all, but they were still annoying brats. They both looked bored, which I guess was understandable since this was just a whole bunch of grown-ups standing around.

"Baby—" my dad started, but Johanna tugged at his sleeve, making him turn his attention to her. "What is it, Anna?"

"If Megan is leaving, does that mean I can have her room?" Johanna asked. Johanna and Melody were currently sharing a bedroom (even though there were half a dozen free bedrooms in our house) because they needed to learn to get along better.

"You're so not getting her room," Melody cut in, puffing out her barely there chest. "I'm getting it. Right, Dad? You said that once Megan left home I'd get her room and not have to share with—"

"No, he didn't . . .," Johanna said.

They began fighting. And let me tell you this: a ten-year-old and a seven-year-old can make a lot of noise and inflict a lot of pain when they are fighting. I rolled my eyes. I was pretty sure neither one of them was getting my room.

"Break it up," my dad said, grabbing hold of Melody's hand just

before she scratched Johanna's face. "Hug your sister good-bye and then we'll go inside."

I hugged them quickly, Melody first, then Johanna. Then I hugged my dad, holding on to him hard, even as the girls began arguing again.

"I'm so getting the room."

"No, you're not."

"Am so!"

"Are not."

"Are too. . . ."

"Stop it," my dad said, pulling away from me and turning to them. They both glared at him and then at each other. I half expected Melody to wolf out right then and there or to start yelling and crying. They were good at getting everyone to pay attention to them.

"Bye, Dad," I said, and he gave me a second, much quicker hug before starting to herd the fighting girls back into the house.

I kind of wished he would have stayed to wave me off, but Johanna and Melody were still kids and needed him too. There had always been someone who needed my parents more than I did. That was life in a big family. You learned to adjust your expectations.

Rose had left my bag and then scurried off somewhere, which didn't surprise me. She didn't do emotional. Still, she could have said bye at least.

Mom came over and pulled me close to her. "I love you, sweetheart," she said. "And we're only a phone call away."

"I love you too." We hugged for a minute. I managed not to cry

even though when I pulled back I felt a little weepy. Mom's eyes looked suspiciously shiny too. "I'll call once I get there."

Reluctantly I turned and headed over to James, Robin, and another guy who I guessed was part of James's pack too.

The strange wolf put out his hand for me. He was big, about as tall as Robin, who was an inch or so taller than James, but a lot bulkier than both James and Robin. He was like a weight lifter or wrestler or something. His hair was dark and closely shaved and he had a tattoo on his forearm of a big tree. "I don't believe we've had the pleasure. I'm Tobias."

"Megan," I said as we shook hands. I stared at James the whole time, half expecting him to react to this other male, touching me like he'd done with Robin yesterday. But the only thing he did was to cross his arms and yawn.

"Well then," Robin said, clapping his hands together. "How about we get this show on the road!" He smiled broadly. His smile was so breathtaking my mind went blank for several seconds. I'd never seen anyone so beautiful. He was even more gorgeous than Sorelle, which was a little weird since he was a guy. Most guys weren't breathtakingly beautiful—they were handsome or attractive. But Robin was totally beautiful.

"Yeah," I said when I could speak again. "Let's go."

Robin and Tobias headed for the second black SUV at the curb, leaving me alone with James for the first time since the hallway last night. Maybe this car ride was my chance to get him to open up a little. I mean, road trips were made to bring people together, right?

"This is a pretty sweet car," I said. Guys tended to like when you

complimented their wheels, and I was hoping that maybe it could be my in. If I could get him talking about cars, that'd be something, and it wasn't like I minded talking about cars. "It's the sports edition, right? With the LED roof lights? Air suspension?"

James only grunted and opened the driver's-side door and got it. Since my bags had already been loaded up, all I had to do was walk around and get in. The seats were a lot higher than what I was used to, leather and very comfy. The interior was minimal but stylish. There was a high-tech nav system and a digital touch display to replace the analog dials.

I gave a little whistle as I closed the door. "Nice." The car purred to life. "Can I drive?"

"No," he said, and pulled out of our driveway.

The car *had* air suspension. The ride was super smooth. I wondered how it did off-road. I think the car had a compressor assist because it accelerated quickly. I also wondered if he'd hacked the car to remove the speed limiter most new cars had that prevented them from going above 155 mph.

James said nothing. I admired the car for a few moments longer. I was dying to drive it but I was pretty sure it wasn't happening today. But tomorrow was another day.

"So," I said as we hit a bigger street. "This is a little weird, right?"

He said nothing, just focused on driving.

"It's weird for me," I continued when it became clear he was not going to say anything. "I don't know anything about you. Well, other than you're a warrior wolf. And you live in Canada."

James kept on ignoring me.

"And you're rude." That made his lip twitch a little, which could have been a suppressed smile or a suppressed growl. "How about I tell you about me, then? Since you don't seem to want to share."

I took a deep breath. "I'm Megan, which you knew already. I'm really good at mechanical stuff. My gramps loved old cars and he taught me all about fixing them. I love the ocean. I've been best friends with that blond girl back there since I was three years old. I suck at walking in high heels and I have blisters from doing it last night. I have four sisters."

I glanced over to him, hoping he'd say something. But his only response to this was to reach over and turn the radio on. Which really said it all.

"HE TOOK A big bite and it was just gone," Tobias said while Robin shook his head. Right now we were stopped for lunch at a roadside diner, eating cheeseburgers and having a nice chat. Well, me, Robin, and Tobias were. James had eaten, glared at me, and said he'd be outside.

"Your brother ate your finger?" I asked, because the story was just so unbelievable. I mean, I'd heard of werewolf kids chewing up shoes and sofas and stuff, but not fingers.

"Like it was candy," Tobias said, wiggling his little finger with its missing top joint as if to make sure I hadn't forgotten what we were talking about.

"That's not what happened," Robin said.

"It's not?"

Tobias smiled sadly. “No, it was actually an unfortunate accident that occurred when I was helping to build houses for the homeless—”

“That’s not what happened either,” James said from behind me. I jumped a little in my seat, not prepared for him being there. He was sneaky and quiet. Usually I could always tell when someone was sneaking up on me.

“What, then?” I asked, giving him a little smile.

James ignored the question. “Are you done yet?” he asked, looking at the half-eaten hamburger on Tobias’s plate. It was his second double supersized bacon cheeseburger.

“In a minute,” Robin said, giving the waitress behind the counter a wink and wave to get her attention. Which had been totally unnecessary because she’d been drooling over him since we all walked in.

“Hurry it up,” James said, giving me an extra glare, like it was my fault Tobias wasn’t done eating.

I did not understand that man.

At all.

# CHAPTER 5

James

Why did he still have the ribbon?

He stared at it, rubbing the red satin between his forefinger and thumb in the hand that wasn't holding the cigarette he wasn't smoking. It was just a red ribbon. It didn't mean anything.

So why did he still have it?

Why hadn't he thrown it away yesterday, or even left it with Megan? He was sure his eager little mate would want it. It would be important to her. Was that why it was important to him? Why he couldn't drop it or let the wind catch the ribbon and take it far away?

"I thought you'd quit?" Robin said, coming around the corner of the roadside diner they'd stopped for lunch at.

"I'm not smoking," James said, quickly hiding the ribbon and his free hand in his pocket. He didn't want Robin to see it, ask about it. He didn't want to give a stupid answer. Or worse, have no answer to why he still had the red ribbon.

“Right,” Robin said, coming to stand next to him, watching the smoke rise from the cig. Shrugging, James offered Robin a cigarette from the fresh pack he’d bought at the mini convenience store at the gas station next to the diner. His beta shook his head no.

“She seems cool,” Robin offered, clearly speaking of Megan. “A bit gullible, maybe.”

“Hadn’t noticed,” he said, dropping the cigarette on the asphalt. He felt like Robin would be able to see right through him. See everything James was feeling, everything he was trying not to feel, and attempt to “help.”

“Attractive too,” Robin said, making James fist up his hands. “Can’t say you haven’t noticed that,” his beta continued with a smile. “But I expect that’s part of what’s bothering you.”

James glared at Robin. “Go see what’s taking them so effing long. I’ll be by the car.”

He stalked off, pulling out the pack of cigarettes again. He knew it wasn’t the cancer sticks his body was craving. It was the girl, his mate. Both his wolf and his body were telling him *mine*. Insisting that she was his and that he needed to complete the bond show her that. Show everyone that. But that wasn’t happening.

Robin showed up with Megan a few minutes later. They all looked cheerful. Irritatingly so. This was not a fun day. It was a day of driving for hours upon hours. A day he was being forced to spend essentially imprisoned with his mate.

“Robin,” he said, needing a reason not to be alone with Megan. “With me.”

Robin stopped for a second, nodded, and then tossed the keys

to the second car to Tobias. Megan, who had stopped next to James's car, looked between the two SUVs; then, as Robin turned to walk around to the passenger seat of James's car, she turned toward the second car.

"Where are you going?" James said, taking a step to follow her.

"You smell like cigarettes," she said, turning to face him while wrinkling her nose. "And you don't seem to want to hang with me anyway."

"Hang?" he parroted, not quite familiar with the phrase.

"Yeah, be around me? Listen to me?" She shrugged and bit her bottom lip. He wanted to bite it too. "Share stuff?"

"So?"

"So? I think I'll just go ride with Tobias."

"Fine," he said. He didn't care if she drove with Tobias. He didn't care about her at all. She was just . . . He wasn't sure what she was, but he was glad to be free of her chatter. Of her eyes, which wanted, it seemed, to burrow into him. To figure him out. To fix him. Like that was a possibility.

Tobias was already jumping into his car and looked mighty pleased about his new traveling companion.

James took a step after Megan, suddenly not liking that smug smile on Tobias's face. Not liking how happy Megan seemed to be to get the chance to away from him. She was *his*. And even though he didn't much like that, he somehow liked the thought of her with Tobias in that car for hours upon hours even less.

Without giving it any more thought, he caught up with Megan and grabbed her arm, turning her around.

"What are you doing?" she asked, struggling a little with his grip. He loosened it some, but didn't let go of her.

"I changed my mind," he said, pulling her with him toward his car. "You're with me."

"I thought you said it was *fine*," she said, but she wasn't struggling with him. "And I can walk on my own."

He resisted the urge to growl at her as he opened the door to the back seat. She scowled at him, as if opening the door for her was the most offensive thing he'd done so far.