

A Romantic Surprise

"Caelan, where are we going?" I asked as he skirted around the pack house instead of going inside.

I had assumed he was taking me to his bedroom, but as he raced through the packed parking lot, I realized he had something else in mind entirely.

"I have something a little more romantic planned for tonight," he explained, setting me down in front of a small pickup truck.

"Okay?" I replied hesitantly.

"It's a surprise, obviously," he replied, rolling his eyes teasingly.

"Why didn't we just shift?" I wondered as he opened the door and helped me up into the seat.

He shut it behind me, and I tried not to laugh at his eager expression as I watched him run around to the other side.

"I know that would've made the most sense," he admitted as he jumped behind the wheel. "But I really want to peel you out of that dress. Call me selfish, but I'm greedy when it comes to you."

"Greedy is the last thing I would call you, Caelan," I joked as he started the engine.

"I am when it comes to you," he said with a shrug. "And I'm not ashamed to admit it. I want you all to myself most of the time. It's only because we both have responsibilities and you deserve to have friends that I even entertain letting you out of my sight."

I felt the familiar burn spreading across my cheeks as we rumbled out of the parking lot.

"I'm greedy with you too," I admitted softly.

Without taking his eyes off the road, he reached over and grasped my hand, interlocking our fingers before resting them on my thigh.

"I get jealous sometimes of other mates like Ta y and Dillon. They got to be normal, without all the chaos and danger we've had to go through. Sometimes I wished we had that chance," I said.

Caelan sighed softly, his thumb running over the back of my hand.

"It's true we haven't had the most traditional start to our mating," he conceded. "And I do wish that I had done a few things differently. Like I wish I had ended that stupid choosing ritual as soon as I recognized that you were my mate. But we're here now, and that's all that really matters."

He brought my hand to his lips, pressing a kiss to my knuckles.

"Our story is ours, Shade. It's evidence of everything we've had to overcome to get here. There's been a lot in our path, but we've come out stronger on the other end. Could things have been easier for us? Yes, of course, but if that meant changing anything about us, I would choose this every time."

"Me too," I admitted without hesitation. "Whatever struggles our mating has brought us before and whatever it may bring us in the future, I will always choose you. Life doesn't seem so terrifying with you by my side."

"Agreed," he said with a soft smile as he pulled to a stop. "We're here."

He climbed out and rushed around to open my door for me. I giggled as he offered his hand, taking it and letting him help me out.

"We'll have to walk the rest of the way, but it should only take a few minutes," he assured me. "Would you like me to carry you?"

"Would you like to?" I teased.

"I'd love to," he mumbled, scooping me up and carrying me like a bride as he wandered deeper into the forest. "Careful, if I had my way your feet would never touch the ground."

"I always want to be in your arms, Caelan," I whispered against his skin, feeling his body vibrate as an eager growl rumbled through his chest.

After a few minutes, I heard the soft trickle of water.

The trees parted to reveal a babbling brook making its way down the mountainside. In its center, the stream split around a large flat rock. A perfectly made bed sprinkled with rose petals rested on the slab, a series of flickering, flameless candles placed all around it.

I gasped. "Oh, Caelan. It's beautiful."

"I thought this would be more romantic than just going back to one of our rooms," he replied. "Something special just for you. I hope you like it."

"I love it!" I assured him. "When did you have time to do all this?"

"I did it yesterday while you were getting ready. Fortunately, it didn't rain last night so everything was still set when I came out here earlier to make sure it was all good to go for tonight," he explained.

"How are we going to get over there?" I asked, not sure I wanted to get my dress wet.

"Just like this," Caelan remarked, kicking off his shoes without setting me down.

"But your pants," I protested as he marched into the brook, the bottom of his slacks submerging in the water.

"I don't plan to stay dressed for long," he retorted with a cocky grin.

I rolled my eyes but couldn't suppress the giggle that escaped my lips.

Caelan guided us expertly across, carefully setting me down as we reached the large, flat rock.

I smiled at the soft, romantic glow cast by the flickering LED candles. The fluffy pillows and silken sheets of the bed beckoned to us in the moonlight. Even the crickets seemed to serenade us, their song a delicate soundtrack playing in the background.

A copper bucket sat next to the bed, the long, foil-wrapped neck of a bottle sticking out through the ice.

"I thought we could toast our mating with some champagne," Caelan said hesitantly. "But I understand if you don't want to."

"One drink won't hurt," I said. "Besides, it's not like it will have time to hit us much anyway."

Caelan grinned, walking over and grabbing the two champagne flutes that had been tucked safely against the rock. He popped the bottle and poured each of us a glass before handing one to me. He lifted his, staring adoringly into my eyes as he spoke.

"Shade, my love, I want you to know that you are my heart and soul. I love you more than words could ever do justice. I love you more than I ever thought I was even capable of," he said in surprise.

I smiled, my heart swelling as he confessed his feelings for me.

"You're everything I could've ever dreamed or hoped for in a mate," he continued. "I know we've had to overcome some unique challenges, but I wouldn't have had it any other way. I'm honored to be your mate and beyond grateful that you're willing to be mine."

He clinked his glass against mine, the pure sound ringing out in the night. "To you, my love."

We each took a drink, and I stared up at him lovingly. I wanted to mirror his gesture with sweet, thoughtful words of my own, but I was at a loss for what else to say.

The old Shade would've grown anxious and upset that she couldn't offer her mate a loving speech in return. She would've worried that he might not understand how she felt because she couldn't put it into words like he had.

But those were the old Shade's problems, and I wasn't her any longer.

I was the new Shade now. The Shade who felt better about herself and had confidence in her abilities. The one who had learned to love herself and welcome the love from the people she cared about most. The one who was ready to be Caelan's mate.

The new Shade wouldn't overthink this moment as the old Shade would. The new Shade wouldn't let anything ruin an experience as special as this.

I took another long sip from my glass and looked my mate directly in the eyes, trying to convey all my love and desire for him into my gaze.

"Make me yours, Caelan."