
Chapter 1

Petra Dalman had heard of Emmett O'Neill long before she'd met him. A person would be hard pressed not to, given the man had carved a swathe through approximately half the eligible females in the Apex River pack over the years, as well as some whose eligibility was questionable. She didn't really get the appeal—yet another cocky werewolf male, routinely having too much to drink and taking a pretty girl home, then going their separate ways the next morning. She'd never been much of one for one-night stands, though she'd had a few in her time—anyone who had an oversexed wolf living under their skin as a teenager had given it a try. Many of the werewolves continued the practice long after they'd reached adulthood.

Petra just wasn't built for keeping her emotions separate from a physical joining. She always found herself imagining what could happen between them in a future together, even if it was someone she'd only selected for physical satisfaction. The voice in her head that wanted *more*—at some point in the future, at least—always tried to fit the man she was with into the space of her imagined future partner.

At any rate, Emmett O'Neill was not someone she planned on needing to try to fit into that space, no matter how good-looking the other females in the pack said he was. She had no interest in a player, not after what had happened the last time she got involved with one, and from what she heard, he was a player of the first degree.

And then she met him.

And more importantly, caught his scent.

Incredibly inappropriately, they were in a hospital room at the time. Her friend Della, the partner of the new Blue Crescent pack Alpha, Leo Tyler, had come close to magically burning herself out during the fight for him to claim the role of Alpha. She'd been rushed to the hospital, even though there was little they could do other than keep her hydrated and comfortable as she recovered. Petra had come with her own Alpha, Simon, to visit Della, as well as pay their respects to the new Blue Crescent Alpha, who would not be removed from her bedside.

Emmett O'Neill had been with him.

She hadn't known who he was at the time. She'd rushed to Della's side, checking to see whether her friend had any obvious injuries, as Simon had greeted Alpha Leo. It was then, over her friend's unconscious form, that she'd caught the scent of... something. If she'd been in her wolf form, her nose would have twitched as she tried to drag more of it into her lungs. She worked to differentiate it from the hospital scents of disinfectant and many people, trying to catch the sweet-but-salty spiciness that taunted her, getting stronger with each breath.

"We didn't mean to interrupt," Simon had said.

"You didn't," Alpha Leo had replied. "Em was just leaving."

"I need to speak to the Alpha, wolf to wolf," Simon said. "Petra, if you wouldn't mind waiting..."

She'd half-heard him say her name, but her eyes had been following the path that her nose took toward the source of the incredible scent... which had led to the man standing at Alpha

Leo's side. She breathed in again, able to focus now on the intoxicating scent that seemed to be coming from him, but feeling the expression of confusion on her face that matched the one on his own. He was good-looking, his hair too dark to be honey-coloured, but too light to be called brown, and his eyes... his eyes were fixed on her, and he looked just as confused as she felt.

"Petra?" Simon said, reminding her that he'd all but asked her to wait outside.

"Yes," she said, hearing the confusion on her face echoed in her voice. "Waiting. I'll... I'll be outside." She took one step back from the bed, then another, unwilling to turn her back on the strange, beautiful man whose scent was so alluring. Finally, she had to, to leave through the door of the hospital room, though she heard Leo say, "I'll talk to you later, Emmett," then add, slowly, "And thank you."

Emmett. Was this *the* Emmett O'Neill, the male who had gotten into a punch-up with Pete Haverford after he tried to flirt with Pete's partner at the Deep Waters pub, barely a month past? Sure, he was good-looking enough to fit the legend and then some, but she'd been unconsciously expecting someone larger than life, maybe seven feet tall, to be capable of doing the damage he'd done to Pete and still taking a pretty girl home that night. Some mythical Hercules, to have had so many girls chasing him over the years. Though, maybe that was due to that impossibly delicious scent he gave off. Maybe he smelled like this to everyone, and that was the reason the females of her pack couldn't seem to stay away.

The door clicked open and closed once more as soon as she'd leant against the wall alongside it, and the man in question appeared, looking just as confused as she felt. She shrank back, trying to escape his notice, but he swung toward her immediately.

"You," he demanded flatly. "Who are you?"

"Me?" she asked, as though there was anyone else around

them. The one time she wouldn't have minded being interrupted by a well-meaning nurse, they all happened to be elsewhere.

"You," he confirmed, then seemed to notice the confrontational nature of his approach. He took a deep breath, followed by what looked like a shiver running through him, then softened his tone. "What's your name?"

"Petra?" she said, her voice tilting upward as though it was a question. She cleared her throat. "Petra Dalman. Apex River pack."

"Good, you're a werewolf," he said, in what sounded like relief.

Petra felt her head tilt to the side in confusion. "Could you not scent that on me?"

"I can't," he started, then caught himself, "I've never smelled anything like you. I didn't know if it was because you were... something else."

"Just a regular werewolf," Petra said with some discomfort. She bit her lip and added, "What... what do I smell like to you?"

"Flowers," Emmett said slowly. "Cinnamon. Berries. And... other things. I'm still working it out."

"That's... that's good, I guess?"

"It's better than good," he said. "It's... it's incredible. I've never scented anything like it. If I could bottle it, I'd have half the world begging for a sample."

"Thank you?" Petra managed.

He seemed to come back to himself. "I'm sorry. That was out of line. I'm Emmett. Emmett O'Neill. Blue Crescent."

"I work with Della," Petra offered. "I'm the one who asked her to come fight with us against... well, against you, I guess."

"That was our old Alpha's doing," Emmett said immediately. "Nothing to do with Leo. I'm sure he and Simon are already smoothing things over. Your Alpha has a reputation for being reasonable."

"He's a great man," Petra said, trying not to be obvious about

purposely taking in a deep lungful of Emmett's scent. "Very careful about always putting the good of the pack before himself. Your new Alpha could learn a lot from him."

"I'm sure that's the purpose of this conversation they're having over Della's unconscious body," Emmett said with a laugh.

"You know her?" Petra asked.

"Only by reputation, through Leo falling for her," Emmett said. "He met her at a meeting about her afterschool program thing, and *bam*. He was lost."

"I've been to a few of them when Simon couldn't make it," Petra said. "She's got some good ideas on the integration front." She took another deep breath, consciously stopping her eyes from rolling back in her head at the intensity of his incredible scent.

"Are you... are you smelling me?" Emmett asked suddenly.

"Um," Petra said, feeling her eyes widen at having been caught. "I might be."

"I thought... I presumed I didn't smell to you like you do to me," Emmett said.

"Not like flowers and cinnamon," Petra hedged. "More like... the sea. But sweet, too. I can't explain it. You just smell... good."

"Good?" Emmett asked. His voice had gone suddenly deeper, and when she glanced up, it was to find him standing in front of her, impossibly close. "Because you smell more than good to me, Petra Dalman."

"Oh," Petra breathed, her gaze trapped by eyes she now saw were a deep silvery blue and becoming more and more silver as she watched. "Yes. I mean... you too. More than good."

He braced his hands on either side of her head and leaned in so his face was just over the base of her neck, and Petra tried not to shiver as she felt him breathe in deeply. "It's even better here," he said softly, and she had to instruct her body not to melt into a puddle of arousal. His lips brushed her skin, and she thought she

might spontaneously combust right there. "You know what I want to know, Petra?" he asked in a tone barely above a whisper.

She shook her head, feeling her ponytail sway.

"I want to know if you smell this good anywhere else," Emmett said, his lips once again brushing her skin. "I want to know if you taste as good as you smell. I want to lick every inch of your body until I know, and then do it again, just to be sure." His own body brushed hers, the hard ridge of his cock against her stomach, and she sucked in a breath at the knowledge that he was just as affected by this bizarre interaction as she was. His scent intoxicated her like she'd sucked down a bottle or two of heavy-duty liquor. "You think you might let me find that out, Petra Dalman?" Emmett asked, his breath hot against her ear.

The door next to them swung open and they jumped apart like they'd been electrocuted. Simon appeared, looking down at the screen of his phone as he said, "Petra, they need me back home. Are you ready to go?"

She met Emmett's eyes for a fraction of a second, long enough for him to raise an eyebrow almost as though he was asking her to stay.

"Yeah," she said to her Alpha. "I'll come with you."

Her wolf all but howled in frustration as they walked away from that phenomenal scent. *Get more of that*, it seemed to be ordering her. *That one is mine*.

Emmett was in trouble.

He was aware that he was a privileged male. He had a kind, if slightly over-involved, family, great friends, a pack that was back on the straight and narrow now that they'd replaced their old Alpha. When it came to women, some might argue he spread his favours a little far and wide, but the truth of it was he found himself doing what he could only describe as falling for pretty

much every woman he took home. Em wanted the picket fence future someday, and unfortunately, his natural tendency seemed to be to presume that every woman he found attractive would want to fit into that future he found himself dreaming of. But most women didn't look to him for that, especially not on a night out at the bar, so he wound up falling for each girl at the merest suggestion that they might be amenable to the kind of future he wanted. That often turned into the kind of trouble that Leo had to talk their way out of, or otherwise the three of them—Emmett, Leo, and Raj—had to prove their prowess as three of the best fighters in Blue Crescent. He had more than a few scars that he could only blame on his foolish heart offering itself to every woman who sent him more than a lingering glance and the resulting scrapes that got the three of them into.

That was before, though. He'd stopped behaving that way some time ago, when it had finally sunk in that he couldn't keep falling for every girl he kissed. However, the legend of Emmett O'Neill, the One Night Stand Man still followed him everywhere he went, and it had gotten him—all three of them—into some fairly entertaining scrapes even after Em had stopped deciding every girl who bought him a drink was his future partner.

Maybe all that would have to change now that Leo was Alpha. Maybe Leo would have to be all responsibility, all the time, especially now he had a mate to protect. He was making a good start on it, what with this refusal to leave Della's bedside as she was recovering from her near burnout. Leo had been beside himself since the moment he'd met the witch, back when the old Alpha, James, had asked Leo as Beta to attend a meeting Della was running about afterschool groups to integrate humans and supernaturals. Leo had caught his mate's scent and even though he didn't, back then, believe in what he referred to as the "mate myth", he'd been unable to stay away from her. Which brought Emmett to the reason he was worried he was in even more trouble than normal.

He'd caught the scent of the female whom Alpha Simon of Apex River had brought with him to meet with Leo—*Petra Dalman*, his brain supplied, as though there was even a chance he wouldn't remember her name for the rest of his life—and since then, it was like a significant portion of his brain was dedicated solely to thinking about her. About her scent at the point where her neck met her shoulder. How smooth her skin had been against his lips. The gentle curves of her body under her clothes. How soft it had been pressing against his own. Gods, he'd even pressed his hard cock up against the softness of her belly. He'd never gotten hard so quickly in his life as he did in the moment he caught her scent, and clearly the removal of blood from his brain had taken most of his IQ points with it. For some reason, he'd thought it was appropriate to accost a member of the pack they were trying to convince not to hold a grudge for James' attempted invasion and start purring sexual innuendoes at her.

If his actions cost their pack an alliance with Apex River, Leo would be well within his rights to kick Emmett out of the pack altogether. Not that he would—Leo, Em and Raj had been best friends since they were kids, and just because Leo had taken on the mantle of Alpha, didn't mean he was going to turn into a different person. But still, if Emmett's actions reflected badly on the whole pack in the eyes of Apex River, he was going to have a lot of atoning to do for his spontaneous bout of hypersexuality.

He was trying hard not to let his incautious heart start drawing the parallels between him catching Petra's scent and the way Leo behaved when he first met Della. Because as much as Emmett wanted to believe in the truth of there being a mate out there for everyone and that someday he would find her... surely, this wasn't it.

Surely, whoever he was destined to be bound to, to fall in love with and protect and provide for, would actually want to be around him?

But other than admitting that he smelled good to her too

—*more than good*, she'd said—Petra Dalman gave no indication that she felt the overwhelming attraction that Emmett felt to her. None of the desperate drive that overcame him the moment he caught her scent and caught sight of *her*, to strip off her clothes and memorise every inch of her skin with his hands, then his tongue. To press himself inside her and claim her as his own, never let her walk away from him without his scent mixed with her own, so anyone who got close to her would know that they were bound. His body was aching for hers, a compulsion a million times stronger than the way he had responded to any of the women he'd thought might be his future in times past. Hell, he would settle for being *around* her, getting to know her, seeing the way she acted around people who *weren't* spitting sexed-up come-ons in her ear.

She hadn't exactly seemed repulsed by the sexual overdrive that had overcome him when they were together. Her body had shaken under his, had pressed closer to the push of his flesh against her own. Her hands had been shaking, almost as if she was about to reach out and touch him, right up until the moment her Alpha left the hospital room and interrupted them. Right up until the moment she'd walked away from him.

If it had been him, there would have been no way he could have turned his back on her. An army a thousand strong couldn't have dragged him away from the moment that was burgeoning between the two of them, the threads of attraction wrapping around his heart and tethering it directly to her. But Petra... she'd casually left with her Alpha, as though Emmett wasn't anything to her. As though she didn't feel an ounce of the attraction that was encouraging him to use his role as interim pack leader while Leo was caught up with Della's illness to find out everything about her, to *find* her. To find a way to be with her.

Surely, if she was his mate, she would have felt the same draw to him that he felt to her. Surely, she would have found it as

impossible to abandon whatever was growing between them as he would have in that moment. But she'd walked away.

So, Petra Dalman couldn't be Emmett's true mate.

So why the hell couldn't he stop thinking about her?

Instead, his entire brain seemed to be dedicated to *Petra Dalman* and imagining what the moment between them could have turned into, had they not been interrupted, rather than the discussion he was supposed to be having with Raj.

Raj and Emmett had decided without discussion that they'd cover Leo's ass until he was finished lurking by Della's bedside. Those issues that they could, they'd shoot through to him, but most things they knew they would have to handle themselves for the time being. They still didn't know which of them he'd name as his Beta, but Em wasn't particularly fussed whether it was Raj or him. As much as the achievement-focused wolf in him would love to receive the accolade, he'd seen the toll it had taken on Leo to be James' Beta, and if Leo decided that Raj would be a better fit, then Em would support them one hundred percent. The three of them would always be best friends, no matter which of them held the leadership positions in the pack, and honestly, Emmett far from envied Leo that he had to choose which of his best friends would be able to act as the better calming influence and brain's trust that a Beta was supposed to be.

"Em," Raj was saying from his position on Emmett's couch. "Are you losing your mind, or is something wrong? Is it Leo? Because I guarantee he'll be ready for full Alpha duties as soon as he's not terrified for his mate anymore."

"I'm not losing my mind," Emmett said. "And it's not Leo."

"Then what..." Raj halted, apparently biting his tongue, and suddenly his eyebrows shot toward his hairline. "Gods, you've done it, haven't you? You've found her?"

"Raj—" Emmett protested.

"You've found your mate," Raj said, and Emmett couldn't bring himself to protest. It would feel like a betrayal, to deny the

draw he felt to Petra, even if she didn't feel it back. Even if she felt nothing beyond finding his scent appealing, which honestly was not one-hundredth of the pull he felt toward her.

"Shit, man!" Raj crowed. "I told you the mate thing was real! I told the two of you for *years* that someday you'd find your mates, and would you look at that, look who was right!"

"I don't know that she's my mate, Raj," Em forced himself to say. "I just know that she smells insanely good. And who knows, maybe that's her perfume or something. Maybe she'll shower and I won't even be attracted to her anymore."

"If there's a perfume in the world that can make you this distracted, bro, I want a case of that shit," Raj said, still riding the high of seemingly being proven correct in his prediction that the mate "myth" was factual. "I'll spray it all over whatever girl I take home and ten-to-one odds, we'll be engaged by morning. So, who is she? Who've you been smelling?"

"Don't say it like that," Emmett protested. "You make it sound creepy."

"It is creepy. The entire premise is inherently creepy. You get so attracted to a woman's scent that you fall in love with her. It's creepy. That's how the mating thing works."

"Is it, though?" Em asked sceptically.

"Well, if you're doing it right. Maybe you're not smelling the right girl. What did she smell like?"

"Aw, fuck," Emmett said before he could stop himself and took a deep breath, remembering the way Petra's scent had wrapped around him like tendrils of smoke from a campfire. "Everything good in the world. Berries. Spices. Flowers. Sex. Home. Mine."

"And you're sure you weren't just smelling that you'd worked her up?" Raj asked. "I know how you are."

"I've pretty much lost interest in other women," Emmett admitted. "I used to look at them in the street and wonder if one

of them was my partner. Now I don't even notice them because they don't smell like her."

"And what exactly were you doing before you smelled this on her?" Raj asked. "Because I'll say again, I know how you are."

"Nothing like that," Emmett insisted. "It's... it's the female the Apex River Alpha brought to see Leo at the hospital, okay? Petra Dalman. All we did was stand outside the room together for all of about two minutes, and it's like an entire hemisphere of my brain has dedicated itself to thinking about her. I can't get her out of my head."

"Well, damn," Raj said. "That's not classic Emmett behaviour. I was expecting you to at least say you'd met her at the pub."

"No, nothing like that," Emmett said, choosing to ignore the dig about "classic Emmett behaviour", not least because it had been accurate for so long. "I saw her in Della's hospital room, then the Alphas asked us to leave so they could talk, and we talked outside the room for literally less than five minutes. Then her Alpha came out, and he asked if she was ready to leave, and she said yes. So clearly, she's not feeling what I am, so I'm thinking she can't be my true mate."

Raj blinked at him for a long moment. "Wait, what?"

"If she's mine, I'd be hers, wouldn't I? So, she'd feel the same draw to me that I'm feeling to her. And if she can walk away from me that easily, then what she's feeling can't be anywhere near as strong as what her scent does to me. Thus, not my true mate."

"Hmm." Raj looked thoughtful. "Nothing I've read has ever talked about a unilateral mating bond." Given his job as a librarian, Raj was without question the best read of the three of them. In someone else, that might have meant they took what he claimed was fact as likely to be true, but the big wolf had a history of making outrageous claims, insisting they were backed up by something he'd read, and he wasn't always right. His insis-

tence that each werewolf had a true mate out there somewhere had always been something Leo and Emmett viewed more as one of the fairy tales Raj read to children on their library days than the gospel truth that he insisted it was.

"Well, first time for everything," Em sighed. "She doesn't want me like I want her, man. I think that's pretty clear."

"What are you going to do?" Raj asked. "I remember what Leo was like after he met Della. You couldn't get him to think about anything else for more than a minute at a time. He was *frantic* with the need to get close to her. Are you trying to tell me you're not going to be the same the moment you get a minute to yourself?"

"Maybe I just have better self-control than Leo," said Emmett, who had been considering driving around Apex River territory until he identified Petra's scent and following it to her house, just to make sure she'd gotten home safely.

"No offence, man, but there's no way that's true." Raj laughed. "You've been distractible as hell all afternoon. Looks like I'm going to be running this pack on my own until Leo gets his ass in gear and you get your mate situation sorted."

"Gods, help us all," Emmett muttered, though he didn't deny what Raj was saying. He knew he'd been effectively useless all afternoon, so much of his brain had been stewing over Petra. Inventing scenarios where she came to him, told him that walking away from him was the hardest thing she'd ever done, and was there a chance he'd forgive her and be open to pinning her down under his body and claiming her as his own?

"There you go again," Raj said with amusement, running his hand over his beard. "What help are you going to be to me if you keep disappearing into your head like this?"

Em snapped back into reality, trying to school his body into calmness. "I don't know what to do about it. I can't just show up and inform her that she's my mate. Try to trap her with me for

the rest of our lives if she doesn't want me enough to even spend time with me. That's insanity."

"Everything about this situation is insanity," Raj said. "A wolf smells someone whose scent is so powerful, they'd cut off a body part just to spend time with them and wants to fuck them so badly, they fall in love? Everything about mating is insanity. Why not lean into it?"

"And what, show up at her house? Tell her I think she might be my mate, if she even believes in it, and could she please lie down and let me ravage her before my wolf goes insane?"

"Well, you could probably phrase it a bit better than that," Raj said with a grin, "But there's nothing in the rules that says you can't go out of your way to see her again. Nothing says you have to dive straight into bed. Why not take the poor woman on a date? If you're not convinced that she's your mate, treat her like you're trying to woo her."

"She said I smell good to her," Emmett recalled. "More than good. So maybe there's something there I could work with."

"There we go," Raj said encouragingly. "Now you're thinking productively. If nothing else, you have experience wooing women. If you can't talk this Petra Dalman into spending time with you, no one can. And once you've got her spending time with you, just keep doing nice things for her, and based on what I've read, she'll eventually fall for you."

"I don't think it's quite that simple." Emmett laughed. "There's more to it than just doing nice things."

"Oh? Like what?"

"Like..." Emmett paused, scrambling. "Like actually being attracted to each other. And building on it in between the nice things. You can't just keep bringing someone coffees and expect them to fall for you. You have to, you know, get to know them."

"Take her to dinner," Raj suggested. "Chat with her. It can't be that difficult to find opportunities to get to know a female."

"Depends on the female," Emmett replied.

"Like you would know," Raj said with a laugh. "The King of the One Night Stand over here."

Not necessarily by preference, Emmett wanted to say, but knowing Raj would just turn that into a joke too, he shrugged. "I know I don't exactly have a history of creating long-lasting relationships," he admitted. "Especially with a woman who doesn't actually demonstrate much desire to be around me, scent or no scent."

"I could recommend some books to you," Raj said, slightly hesitantly. "I haven't necessarily read them, but they're romantic stories. Might tell you how to go about it."

Emmett heaved a deep sigh. Did he have a better option? "Yeah, all right," he said. "But nothing creepy, okay? None of those ones where a woman falls in love with her kidnapper or something."

"Oh, so you have read some," Raj laughed.

"My mum used to, dickhead." Emmett shoved his friend with one foot.

"I'll find you some good ones," Raj said, undeterred. "Nothing creepy, I promise."

So, this was what he was reduced to, Emmett thought as their conversation turned back to the other pack issues they were managing in Leo's absence. Trying to learn how to woo a female from romance novels. Yeah, there was no way this could go badly.