

Chapter One

A bird chirped.

The annoying sound tugged at Esme Valdez's consciousness. She'd always been a hard sleeper, but she couldn't block out the bird's...what was it, a mating call?

She mentally shook her head.

Whatever it was usually wouldn't have bothered her at all. After working overtime, yet again, she'd made a promise to herself. She would spend Saturday morning in bed and wouldn't let her feet touch the floor until she could no longer ignore the demands of her bladder. But the high-pitched sound was irritating enough to weasel into her dream. It had been a good one too.

Esme called it her "instant heiress to a fortune" dream. She had it at least once a month. It always started with Esme calmly walking into the biochemical laboratory where she worked and gave the handsy lead chemist her resignation letter. For the past year, she'd spent fifty hours a week working under a man whose eyes lingered too long on her chest and who'd whispered things into her ear that no peer should say to another. To top it off, her boss did nothing with the complaints she'd lodged.

Whenever she had a particularly hard day at work, she could bet on spending several blissful hours dreaming of kneeing him in the groin followed by frivolous spending and expensive vacations. That dream occurred like clockwork.

How many maids would I need for an eight-bedroom mansion?

Chirp! Chirp! Chirp!

Eight-bedrooms? No. I'll need at least ten to fit everyone comfortably.

Chirp! Chirp! Chirp!

She clenched her jaw, grinding her teeth together. The awful noise grated on her nerves. How was she supposed to pick out gaudy furniture under these circumstances?

Chirp! Chirp! Chirp!

And just like that, her dream faded.

Of course, there would be a noisy bird right outside her bedroom window. After working overtime and looking forward to sleeping in, this bird appeared set on ruining her night. Or was it the morning already?

Ugh. Esme groaned.

She'd been looking forward to waking up and not having to squint into a microscope or deal with her leering co-worker. But that's what she got for buying a house out in the middle of nowhere. The abundance of wildlife was one of the many reasons she'd bought the small two-bedroom bungalow at the end of the dirt road. She'd been drawn to the seclusion the wooded areas on both sides of her home provided. The twenty-four-acre lake that had come with the property had been a bonus. If it weren't for her job in the city, Esme would never leave her place.

Another bird joined the first.

Ugh.

Esme didn't know how she was ever getting back to sleep now.

Chirp! Chirp! Chirp!

The Game Warden's Mate

A.M. Griffin

Their chorus seemed...different. Odd even. And much louder than it should have.

If she didn't know any better, she would think the birds were directly over her head instead of behind concrete walls and sturdy windows. They should've sounded muffled, not crisp and clear.

Oh, well. No matter how loud the birds were, it was still better than being stuck in rush hour dealing with traffic jams, honking horns, pollution and all the high-stress irritation that came with driving into the city. She'd much rather stay in her little-wooded hideaway anyway. Esme could either let the noise ruin her morning or she could get over it.

Get over it. Esme quickly decided.

Another bird joined the two throwing a concert above her head.

Note to self. Hire someone to cut down the tree outside my bedroom window.

Esme rolled to her back and flung her arm across her face. It was a last ditch effort to reclaim the dream that had slipped away. It seemed that she'd quickly forgotten about one problem, only to have to deal with another.

The sweltering heat.

When had it gotten this darn hot?

Yes, La Loma, Tlalnepantla, Mexico was hot in June, but her air conditioner should've kept her room at a crisp sixty-eight degrees and at twenty-five she was too young to be having hot flashes. That left one alternative. Her air conditioner had broken.

Damn.

Esme stretched and splayed her limbs. It was so hot that sweat had made her usually comfortable bed prickly and wet. The air in her room was thick and humid, almost smothering. Even spread-eagle she couldn't find relief. Heat clung to her skin, reminding her why she preferred the air conditioner cranked on high. The summer nights were brutal, even for someone born and raised in central Mexico.

Please don't let it be broke. Please don't let it be broke.

A soft wind blew across her skin, leaving a cool undercurrent in its wake.

Esme let out a grateful sigh. *Ah, that feels a little better.*

All she needed was a few more gusts of cooling wind, the birds to stop making noises over her head and the snoring to her right to end then she could easily fall back to sleep.

Wait.

None of that sounded remotely right.

Esme opened her eyes with a start. Thanks to the shadowy outline of a tree with low hanging leafy branches directly over her head, one thing became immediately apparent. She wasn't in her bedroom.

What the hell? How had she gotten outside?

Her mind raced. Confusion and panic swelled in her chest. What happened the night before?

She couldn't fight through her alarm to hold onto a clear thought. Air rushed in and out of her lungs, making them burn. Each hard breath threatened to crack her ribs.

Calm down. Think.

Esme curled her hands. Her fingers sifted through the dirt.

It became all too real.

The Game Warden's Mate

A.M. Griffin

Had she been walking along the lake when she fell and busted her head on a rock? That could be it. It was one of the perils of living alone and in a secluded area. This wouldn't be the first time she'd gotten herself into trouble while alone on her property. But this would be the first time she'd done something that made her fear for her safety. She was sure Oprah had never taken a stroll while asleep and ended up outside.

That's because Oprah is smarter than me.

Be more like Oprah. She stated the mantra firmly in her head.

Some thought it was stupid for her to idolize Oprah. But to Esme, it had been what had guided most of the significant decisions in her life. Why wouldn't she look up to Oprah? Oprah had come from nothing and had ended up a multi-gazillionaire.

If Oprah could do it, Esme could too. And so far, asking herself, "What would Oprah do?" had, in part, gotten her to where she was today, a successful biochemist with an American Ivy League education.

What Oprah wouldn't do was buy a house in the middle of nowhere when she had a slight sleepwalking problem.

Esme stared at the night sky and *humphed*. Slight problem. Yeah, right.

Maybe she would take her *Abuela* up on her offer and let her move in. If Esme thought her love life was nonexistent now, she could forget about intimacy when *Abuela* Maria moved into the guest bedroom. She loved her, but like any other grandmother, hers swung from either no man being good enough for her granddaughter to "He's the one."

Another snore.

How had she forgotten about that?

Esme could easily explain away how she'd ended up outside in the middle of the night. But she couldn't think of a reason as to why someone else was with her.

Esme slowly turned to her side. Curled up and clutching a stick was a little boy who could've been no more than four years old. A pale arm flung across his body, haphazardly, but also possessive.

What the heck is going on?

Were these migrants who'd somehow found their way onto her property? There was no way she could leave them outside. In a split second she'd decided when she went into her house, so would they.

A deep voice cleared behind her. "Um, so, I don't want to freak out or anything. But is anyone up who can tell me who the hell you people are and where the heck I am?"

Esme's breath caught in her throat. She sat upright in a rush. A man stood not too far from her. Even though the only light available was from twinkling stars, she clearly saw his sun-kissed skin, dark hair with an abundance of unruly curls and dressed in black leather pants and a white t-shirt under a leather vest. He either had on mascara and eyeliner, or he was sporting two black eyes.

Esme narrowed her eyes at the stranger. She wasn't a fighter by any means, but if this guy made one wrong move, she would scratch as if her life depended on it—because it probably would. Esme glanced down at her clothes. Okay—the guy hadn't undressed her while she had slept. She still had on her work clothes; her favorite button-down shirt, slacks, and sensible shoes.

The Game Warden's Mate
A.M. Griffin

She lifted her chin. “What are you doing on my property?” she asked in a voice she hoped sounded confident and strong.

On an old episode, when Oprah still had her day-time talk show, she had on a self-defense expert. The minute an assailant—who the expert had described as a predator—sensed weakness, they would pounce. Esme shook her head at her question. Did it matter why he was trespassing and standing over her?

“Never mind. You need to leave. You’re on private property, and I have security cameras all over the place.” She’d only thought about buying cameras. Once. But he didn’t need to know the truth.

The man thrust multi-ringed fingers through his hair and cursed. “Listen, lady, I don’t know if you’re some deranged fan or not. But as long as you don’t hurt me, I won’t press any charges. I need a phone to call my tour manager. She’s probably losing her shit right now.”

Cell phone. That was a good idea. She should be calling the police anyway.

Esme fumbled her hands over her clothes. No phone. Then she spotted her purse on the ground next to her. She pulled her eyebrows together. Now, why had she taken it with her on this little sleepwalking expedition? She’d never taken it before.

“Cell phone?” the stranger asked.

Right. Esme reached into her purse and found her phone—all while keeping her eyes locked on the trespasser. She held down the power button. She always kept her phone off while she drove. She’d seen too many accidents during her commute and too many news stories about how most of those accidents had been the result of distracted drivers.

Her mom sent her Oprah updates all day. They both shared a love for the talk show host. Esme wanted to know what was on Oprah’s reading list, who was going to be on her next interview and what she’d said in her latest interview, but she didn’t want to get herself killed over it.

“You sound crazy. I didn’t kidnap you.” What was this guy talking about? Fan? Tour manager?

Her phone finally turned on. Full battery but no bars. Great. Just her luck she was stuck with a crazy trespasser and couldn’t call the police. Irritation had a headache quickly forming. Esme massaged her temples, hoping for relief. Her fingers met warm skin slick with sweat.

God. It’s hot.

“Then how did I get here?” He waved a hand at the ground and turned in a tight circle. “What about the rest of these sleeping people?” He stopped and held out his hands. “What did you do to us? You said this is your place. Did you bring us here and drug us all? Hey, I used to be into a lot of wild and crazy shit back in the day, but I’ve been clean and sober for the last five years. I’m not into this craziness anymore.”

Esme followed his hand. There were people *everywhere*. She opened her eyes wide. Where had everyone come from?

“I-I don’t know what’s going on.” With a grunt, Esme pushed herself to stand. Every muscle in her body sore from laying on the hard ground for only God knew how many hours. “This is private...” Her voice trailed off as she looked past the people.

The lake that was usually visible from anywhere on her property wasn’t in sight. On a clear night like tonight, the moon and stars should’ve reflected off of it. Big brown trees with an abundance of green leafy vines were replaced by skinnier, odd shaped looking things and the more

The Game Warden's Mate
A.M. Griffin

her eyes adjusted to the night, Esme noticed the leaves didn't look like leaves, and they sure weren't green. Esme turned in a circle, trying to keep her heart from jumping out of her chest.

"Property," she said, finally finishing her sentence. She didn't recognize anything. Not a God. Damn. Thing. "We aren't on my property." Her voice didn't sound right on her ears.

"So you didn't kidnap me and give me this fancy new BDSM collar?" He tugged on something about two inches wide and silver around his neck

Esme fumbled at her neck, finding a collar of her own. It felt like metal, not thick, but seemed sturdy and cold on her skin. Her fingers trembled as she followed around the circumference. There wasn't a way to unhook it. Her breathing picked up. Her chest heaved.

This was wrong. So very wrong.

The man shrugged. "I mean, if you're into BDSM, I won't judge you. But as I said, I'm through with all the weird shit."

Esme clenched her fists in frustration. Tears welled in her eyes. Her heart felt like it was one beat away from exploding. "Hey, nitwit, this isn't just about you. I think we're all in the same boat here. I woke up probably the same time you did and just assumed I was home, because," a hysterical chuckle left her mouth, "where else would I be on a friggin' Friday night?"

"Hate to break it to you, but it's Sunday night. I just played Comerica Park in Detroit."

Esme frowned and shook her head. "No, I'm positive. The last thing I remember is coming home from work and thinking about binging on Netflix. It's what I do every Friday night."

He snorted. "Well, that's sad."

"Hey! We all can't play at Comerica Park." She exhaled loudly. "What is that anyway and why are you dressed like an over the top rock star?"

She'd heard of Detroit, even visited once when she'd lived in the United States to attend college. Her mom had a distant cousin who'd live near the United States and Canada border, and she'd spent a Christmas with them instead of flying all the way home to Mexico.

The rockstar guy brushed off his pants and straightened his clothes. "It's called 'stage presence,' baby."

"Oh, my God. Can you guys keep it down? Some of us are trying to sleep," came a tired voice from a shadowy corner.

Rockstar guy held up his hand and pulled each finger down slowly.

New guy scrambled to his feet. He was a lot bigger than rock star guy and bigger than most men she knew. He had on army fatigues, military boots, and dog tags hanging from his thick neck. He scowled. "Wait. Where the hell am I?"

Rockstar guy smirked and dropped his hands. "And there it is."

The Game Warden's Mate
A.M. Griffin