



# Shifting the Flame

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**Category:** Romance, Paranormal

**Description:** She's got a clipboard, zero chill, and a deadline from hell. He's a dragon shifter with control issues, a crumbling festival, and no clue what gluten-free even means.

Danica Ulrich does not do distractions... especially not ones with smoldering eyes, ancient traditions, or scales. But when matchmaking legend Gerri Wilder sends her to rescue a small-town festival in the middle of nowhere Louisiana, Danica signs up for the chaos... assuming it'll look good on her resume, not change her life. Asher Ectorius is alpha, mayor, and deeply allergic to glitter. Planning parties isn't his thing. Neither is falling for a bossy, curve-hugging human who storms into his town like she owns the place. Too bad fate has other plans – and Gerri's already set the guest list. Now the banners are crooked, the fire dancers are missing, and the sparks between Danica and Asher might burn down more than the stage. Because when a dragon meets his match, even the best-laid plans go up in flames.

**Total Pages (Source):** 69

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:30 am*

ONE

DANICA

Danica balanced her phone between her ear and shoulder while furiously typing on her laptop. Sweat beaded on her forehead despite the blast of the air conditioner in her French Quarter apartment.

"Mr. Thompson, I understand your concern about the princess costumes, but I promise they'll be perfect for Lily's party. Your daughter will be thrilled." She stood up and paced across her living room, her bare feet padding against the hardwood floor. Her floral skirt swished around her knees with each determined step.

"Listen, Danielle?—"

"It's Danica," she corrected, forcing brightness into her tone.

"Right, Diana. Just make sure those princesses look exactly like the real deal. My Lily watches those movies religiously." Chad Thompson's voice dripped with the casual entitlement that came with being New Orleans' biggest real estate mogul turned reality TV star.

"The performers are professionals, Mr. Thompson. They?—"

"And about the bounce houses. Four isn't enough. Let's add two more."

Danica froze. "Two more? The party's in three days, and your backyard space?—"

"Listen, Donna, I'm paying you good money to figure it out. That's your job, right?"

Danica bit her tongue hard as she leaned down and typed a quick message on her laptop to her bounce house vendor. "Of course, Mr. Thompson."

The call ended, and Danica tossed her phone onto the couch. "It's Da-ni-ca, you self-absorbed jackass."

Her laptop immediately pinged with an incoming email from her bounce house vendor. The subject line alone made her stomach sink. "IMPOSSIBLE REQUEST - READ NOW."

Danica's phone buzzed with a text from her friend Melissa: Drinks tonight at Lafitte's? Girls' night!

Danica stared down at her phone blankly for a long moment. Another buzz followed: Hello? Earth to Danica? When's the last time you had fun?

Danica sighed and picked up her phone, typing back: Drowning in celebrity birthday party drama. Rain check?

She sat down on her couch and turned back to her laptop, clicking through to the vendor email.

"No way can we source two more houses on this timeline," she read aloud, running her fingers through her long brown hair.

Her phone rang again. The custom ringtone – "Rich Girl" by Hall & Oates – told her exactly who was calling.

"Mr. Thompson, what a surprise." She perched on the edge of her couch, her bare

legs crossed at the ankles.

"Denise, I've been thinking about the dessert table. My nutritionist says we need gluten-free and dairy-free options. My sister-in-law's kids are coming."

"I'll contact the bakery immediately," Danica said, mentally calculating how much extra this would cost – and how little of it would likely be covered by Thompson's budget.

"And make sure they're still colorful. None of those sad-looking health desserts."

"Vibrant, Instagram-worthy, and allergen-free. Got it."

After he hung up, Danica leaned back on her couch, staring at the ceiling. Her tiny apartment was a disaster zone of fabric swatches, vendor contracts, and half-empty coffee cups.

"This better be worth it," she muttered, visualizing the review she'd strong-arm out of Thompson once his daughter's eyes lit up at the party. His connections alone could transform her business from "up-and-coming" to "arrived."

Her phone buzzed with another text from Melissa: He's still calling you by the wrong name, isn't he?

Danica snorted and texted back: Today I've been Danielle, Diana, Donna, and Denise. I'm thinking of legally changing my name to just 'Event Planner' to make it easier for him.

The following forty-eight hours became a symphony of chaos that Danica conducted with one hand while putting out fires with the other. Her apartment disappeared beneath a mountain of contracts, supply lists, and hastily scribbled notes.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:30 am*

"No, Marco, I understand the bakery closes at six, but I need those gluten-free cupcakes by tomorrow morning." Danica paced her living room, her phone pressed to her ear, while balancing her laptop in her other hand. "I'll pay double your delivery fee. Triple. Just make it happen."

She hung up and immediately fielded call after call, while simultaneously firing off dozens of last-minute emails, well into the evening.

"Denise!" Chad Thompson's voice boomed through her phone at 11 PM. "The weather report shows a twenty percent chance of rain. We need tents."

"It's Danica, Mr. Thompson." She pinched the bridge of her nose. "And I've already arranged for a tent company to be on standby."

"Perfect. Also, Lily now wants unicorn princesses, not regular princesses."

Danica's eye twitched as she opened a new tab on her browser. "Unicorn... princesses. Got it."

When the big day finally arrived the next day, Danica pulled up to Chad Thompson's sprawling Garden District mansion in her compact car. Her blue sundress hugged her curves perfectly – professional yet comfortable enough for the inevitable running around she'd be doing.

"Dominique!" Chad called out, descending his marble staircase as Danica entered the foyer. His spray tan glowed unnaturally in the morning light. "The ice sculpture hasn't arrived."

"It's Danica," she replied with a practiced smile. "And the ice sculptor is setting up in the backyard as we speak. I arrived early to make sure everything is on schedule."

Danica moved through the mansion like a general inspecting troops, clipboard in hand. The princess performers – now sporting glittery unicorn horns – were practicing their routines. The bounce houses stood majestically on the lawn. The dessert table gleamed with colorful treats that looked too beautiful to eat.

Perfect chaos. Just how she liked it.

Three hours later, the party was in full swing when a tiny hand tugged at Danica's dress. She looked down to see Lily Thompson, her birthday crown slightly askew, looking up with wide eyes.

"Princess Elsa's horn fell off," the little girl whispered urgently.

Danica knelt down to eye level. "Well, that happens to unicorn princesses sometimes. Should we go fix her magic?"

Lily nodded solemnly.

Behind the dessert tent, Danica found the actress playing Elsa frantically trying to reattach her horn with rapidly melting glue.

"I'm so sorry," the performer whispered. "This humidity is killing the adhesive."

Danica reached into her emergency kit – a small purse that somehow contained solutions to every conceivable crisis – and pulled out double-sided fashion tape and a mini hair dryer.

"Crisis averted." She winked at Lily, who watched the repair with fascinated eyes.

"You're magic too!" Lily gasped.

"Just prepared." Danica smiled.

The moment of triumph was short-lived. A crash from the main tent sent Danica sprinting, Lily at her heels. One of the child guests had bumped the dessert table, sending a precarious tower of cupcakes tumbling.

"Everyone freeze!" Danica commanded with enough authority that even the adults stood still.

Thirty seconds later, she had rearranged the remaining treats into an even more impressive display, handed out the fallen cupcakes to nearby children as "special floor treats," and had the catering staff bring out the backup desserts she'd ordered just in case.

"Delightful, isn't she?" she overheard Chad saying to another parent. "What's her name again? Danielle? Diana?"

"Danica," Lily corrected her father solemnly. "She's the magic lady who fixes everything."

By sunset, as the last guest departed, Danica stood surveying the aftermath with satisfaction. Despite everything, the party had been perfect. Lily had experienced every childhood dream condensed into one afternoon.

Chad approached, phone in hand.

"Doreen—"

"Danica," she corrected automatically.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:30 am*

"Whatever. Check this out. My personal assistant just posted this." He thrust his phone toward her.

There on his Instagram account, which boasted millions of followers, was a photo of Lily hugging Danica, both surrounded by unicorn princesses. The caption read: "Best birthday ever thanks to @DanicaUlrichEvents #EventPlannerExtraordinaire #HireHer"

Danica's heart skipped. Already the likes were climbing into the thousands.

"You definitely saved my ass after that other planner flaked," Chad said, actually meeting her eyes for the first time. "My agent's already asked for your number for his holiday event."

Danica steered her car along River Road, the sunset painting the sky in pinks and purples outside her windshield. She'd left the Thompson mansion with the sweet taste of success but an aching exhaustion that burrowed deep into her bones. Her phone, connected to the car's Bluetooth, began to vibrate against the console.

"Unknown number," the car's system announced.

Danica tapped the steering wheel. "Answer call."

"Danica Ulrich? The event planner who managed to make Chad Thompson use the word 'thanks'?"

The voice on the other end belonged to an older woman, vibrant and sharp as a



diamond. Danica straightened in her seat, her professional instincts kicking in despite her fatigue.

"This is Danica. And you are?"

"Gerri Wilder, honey. I run the Paranormal Dating Agency."

Danica nearly swerved. Everyone in New Orleans knew Gerri Wilder—the matchmaking legend whose success stories were whispered about like urban myths. Celebrities, business tycoons, and mysterious clients alike sought her services.

"The Gerri Wilder? How did you?—"

"I just scrolled past that glowing Instagram post Chad Thompson's team published about you. Six unicorn princesses and not a single horn fell off until after the photos. Impressive."

Danica laughed. "Well, technically one did, but I?—"

"Fixed it with fashion tape and a travel hair dryer? I've used that clever wardrobe malfunction trick a time or two, darling."

The sky deepened to indigo as Danica processed how intuitive Gerri was. "So, Ms. Wilder?—"

"Gerri, please."

"Gerri. What can I do for you?"

"Two things. First, I need someone who can pull off miracles to save a festival. Second, I think you might benefit from meeting a very special someone while you're

at it."

Danica's grip tightened on the steering wheel. "I'm flattered, but I don't need matchmaking services. My schedule barely accommodates a decent night's sleep."

"Oh honey, that's exactly why you need this. Workaholics like you are my specialty. Besides, the festival needs you desperately."

Despite herself, Danica's interest piqued. "What festival?"

"The Founders Festival in Ectorius. Small town about two hours from New Orleans. Their current event planner has been distracted and inattentive, and they're looking at a disaster with barely anything prepared. They could really use your assistance and guidance."

"Ectorius? Never heard of it."

"That's part of its charm. Very exclusive crowd. But they're in crisis mode, and knowing how you must've handled Chad Thompson's demands, I believe you're perfect for this."

Danica's mind already raced with possibilities. A blank canvas. A town she'd never heard of. A challenge. Her fatigue evaporated like morning mist.

"When is this festival?"

"It starts in three days."

"Three days?" Danica barked a laugh. "That's impossible."

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:30 am*

"For most people, yes. For Danica Ulrich, who I'm sure created those six unicorn princess costumes overnight? No."

The compliment warmed her. Her adrenaline was already pumping—the same rush she got whenever presented with an impossible deadline.

"What's the budget?"

"Whatever you need. The town's founder—well, his family—is quite wealthy."

Danica's lips curved into a smile. "And this 'very special someone' you mentioned?"

"Let's just say Ectorius has some very interesting residents. Pack for a week, darling. I'll meet you there tomorrow and introduce you to everyone."

The rational part of Danica's brain screamed to decline—she needed rest, her apartment was a disaster zone, and her dry cleaning hadn't been picked up. But the larger part of her, the part that thrived on creating order from chaos, had already decided.

"Text me the address. I'll be there."

"Marvelous! Oh, and Danica?"

"Yes?"

"Pack something besides those work dresses. Something that shows off those curves

you hide under professional attire. You never know who you might meet."

Danica rolled her eyes but felt a flicker of something she hadn't experienced in ages—anticipation.

"See you tomorrow, Gerri."

As she disconnected, Danica's mind was already assembling lists, concepts, and contingencies. A week in Ectorius. A festival to save. And apparently, according to the legendary Gerri Wilder, a special someone to meet.

"Whatever," Danica murmured, but couldn't stop the smile playing at her lips as she accelerated toward home, toward packing, and toward whatever adventure awaited in a town she'd never heard of.

Later that night, Danica tossed a sleek black dress onto the growing pile in her suitcase, pausing to imagine the mystery man Gerri had hinted at. She pictured tall, dark, and handsome—the usual fantasy—then snorted at herself.

"Yeah, because that's worked out so well for you."

Her fingers traced the silky fabric of a red dress she rarely wore, its neckline daring. The cut was designed to showcase every curve she typically concealed beneath tailored work attire.

"Pack something that shows off those curves," she mimicked Gerri's voice while adding the dress to her suitcase.

Her laptop lay open on her bed, several tabs displaying festival planning templates and emergency checklists. She knew she should focus on preparing for tomorrow's meeting, but her mind kept wandering to the "special someone" Gerri had mentioned.

"Probably another shifter," Danica muttered, having heard enough about Gerri's famous paranormal clientele. "What would that even be like? 'Sorry, can't come to dinner, too busy howling at the moon.'"

She laughed at her own joke, but something fluttered in her stomach. For all her skepticism, the idea sent a thrill through her—wild, dangerous, and exciting.

"Like I have time for wild and dangerous," she scolded herself, checking her email inbox. Three event consultation requests had come in within the past hour alone. Chad Thompson's Instagram post was definitely working.

Danica grabbed a pair of heels and stuffed them into the suitcase corner. "Even if this mystery man exists, he'd need to understand that my work comes first. No clingy, needy types."

She paused, acknowledging the walls she'd built. Her last relationship had crumbled under the weight of her ambition. Her ex's parting words still stung: "You'd rather plan someone else's perfect day than yours."

"Maybe that's safer," she whispered to her empty bedroom.

With her bag packed, Danica settled at her desk and typed "Ectorius, Louisiana" into the search bar. Nothing relevant appeared—just random results and map queries suggesting she'd misspelled something.

"That's... weird." She tried variations, added "town" and "festival," but came up empty.

She pulled up satellite maps, scanning the area between New Orleans and Baton Rouge. Nothing resembling a town called Ectorius.

"A town that doesn't exist on Google?" Danica's investigative instincts tingled. "What exactly are you getting me into, Gerri Wilder?"

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:30 am*

She closed her laptop, excitement buzzing through her veins. A secret town, an impossible deadline, and potentially a mystery man—all ingredients for the kind of challenge she lived for.

TWO

ASHER

Asher Ectorius glared at the thick binder opened before him, its pages spilling with color-coded tabs, half-formed plans, and chicken-scratch notes that looked more like ancient hieroglyphs than actual planning. He ran his hand through his dark brown hair, his muscles tensing under his crisp white button-down shirt. His dragon stirred within him, equally frustrated.

"Two days," he muttered, leaning back in his leather chair. "Two damn days to pull together a festival that should have been planned months ago."

His spacious office—an elegant room with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the grounds of his ancestral mansion—felt suddenly confining. The morning sunlight streamed in, illuminating the disaster zone his mahogany desk had become. The Founders Festival planning had turned into a catastrophe of his own making, his natural tendency to procrastinate finally catching up with him.

The dragon within him rumbled with discontent. As Alpha, leadership came naturally to Asher—in battle, in business decisions, and in moments requiring swift action. But themeticulous organization of community celebrations? His inner fire wanted to incinerate the binder entirely.

"Maybe if I just canceled the whole thing..." he mused, knowing full well he couldn't. The Founders Festival was the highlight of Ectorius's social calendar—a celebration of their dragon ancestors who'd established this hidden sanctuary. Canceling would be an admission of failure.

His advisory council's words echoed in his mind: "An Alpha's mate traditionally oversees these affairs... but since you've shown no interest in finding yours..."

The implication being that he was shirking his duties by remaining single. As if finding a mate was as simple as ordering takeout.

"It would be easier if I could just order in a mate who could deal with this mess," he grumbled, flipping a page covered with vendor quotes that might as well have been written in Sanskrit.

A soft knock drew his attention to the doorway. Asher's head snapped up, his green eyes narrowing before widening in surprise.

Gerri Wilder stood there, a vision in a lime-green designer suit that should have looked ridiculous on anyone else but somehow suited her petite frame perfectly. Her white bob gleamed in the morning light, her blue eyes twinkling with mischief.

"Problems with event planning, Mr. Mayor?" Her voice held a musical lilt that belied the knowing look in her eyes.

Asher's heart lurched with unexpected hope. Gerri's reputation preceded her—not just as matchmaker extraordinaire, but as the architect of legendary gatherings across the paranormal community.

"Are you here to help me?" The words tumbled out before he could stop them, revealing a desperation he rarely allowed anyone to see.



Gerri's laugh tinkled through the room like wind chimes. "In a way. I'm here to give you exactly what you're looking for."

Asher's dragon perked up, intrigued by the double meaning that hung in her words.

"You look like a man who's spent too many hours chained to that desk." Gerri gestured to the door with a manicured hand. "Let's walk. The festival grounds need inspecting anyway, don't they?"

Ten minutes later, they strolled down Main Street, the morning sun warming Asher's shoulders. He'd discarded his suit jacket, rolling up his sleeves to expose forearms corded with muscle. The change of scenery already cleared his head, his dragon settling into a contented rumble.

"Morning, Mayor!" Mrs. Finch called from her porch, struggling with several grocery bags.

Without hesitation, Asher jogged across the street. "Let me get those for you, Eleanor." He relieved the elderly dragon shifter of her burden, easily carrying what had caused her to struggle. "How's that hip doing?"

"Better since you arranged for that specialist from Atlanta." She patted his arm affectionately. "Will you be lighting the ancestral flame at the festival?"

"Wouldn't miss it," Asher replied, carrying her groceries inside and setting them on her counter with gentle precision.

Back on the street, Gerri observed him with those all-seeing eyes. "The people sure love their Alpha."

"They deserve nothing less than my full attention." Asher nodded to the baker, who

was arranging fresh pastries in his window display. "Though at the moment, my attention is split between festival details I have no clue how to handle and my daily duties."

"What you need is someone who can transform chaos into order." Gerri's eyes flickered gold for the briefest moment. "Someone who complements your visionary nature with practical execution."

Asher snorted. "You offering to take over the planning, Gerri? Because I'd happily make a substantial donation to any charity of your choice if you do."

"I don't do event planning anymore." She smiled enigmatically. "But I excel at matching people with exactly what—or who—they need."

They paused at the town square, where scattered, half-assembled booths stood. Asher surveyed the scene, envisioning what it could be—strings of lights across the walkways, the scent of traditional dragon-spiced foods, and music and laughter filling the air.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:30 am*

"I can see it all in my head," he admitted, gesturing broadly. "But getting from this mess to that vision..."

"Requires someone who speaks both languages—the language of dreams and the language of details." Gerri stopped walking, fixing him with a penetrating stare. "Tell me, Asher, what would you give to have this burden lifted? To have someone who could not only handle this festival but stand beside you in all your duties?"

The questions stirred something primal in him. His dragon surged forward, interested in this conversation in a way Asher hadn't expected.

"I don't need a mate just to plan parties or share my duties," he growled defensively.

"Of course not." Gerri's smile turned knowing. "You need a mate because your soul craves completion. The festival is just... convenient timing."

Asher shifted uncomfortably at Gerri's accurate assessment. Her words had struck a chord his dragon responded to, even as his human side built defenses. He'd spent years telling himself he didn't need a mate—that the right match would come along eventually. Yet here stood Gerri, peeling away his excuses.

"I've managed fine on my own for a long time." His voice emerged deeper than he intended, his inner dragon pushing closer to the surface. "My clutch respects me and the town prospers."

"And yet you stand in half-assembled festival grounds looking like a man who'd rather wrestle an alligator than finish this project." Gerri's lime-green suit caught the

morning sun, making her glow with an almost otherworldly light.

Before he could respond, a familiar scent drifted on the breeze—jasmine and amber with an undercurrent of smoke. Dragon smoke. His nostrils flared slightly, his senses immediately identifying the source before his eyes confirmed it.

"Asher Ectorius, as I live and breathe."

The voice washed over him like warm honey—deliberately sweet and practiced. He turned to find Joni Maples approaching, her long red hair cascading over her shoulders and her body showcasing a form-fitting emerald dress that matched her dragon form perfectly. The last time he'd seen her, they'd been twenty-two, sharing a dorm room kiss goodbye before she'd headed off to graduate school.

"Joni." He nodded, maintaining his position beside Gerri. "This is unexpected."

Joni glided forward, her movements as fluid as ever. "I've been back for three weeks. Didn't anyone tell you?" Her green eyes flickered briefly toward Gerri before focusing entirely on him. "You've done well for yourself, Alpha."

The title on her lips carried weight—an acknowledgment of how much had changed since they'd dated. Back then, he'd been the heir apparent, not the Alpha who carried responsibility for everyone in Ectorius.

"Thank you." His response was measured and polite. "How was Stanford?"

"Enlightening." Joni moved closer, brushing imaginary lint from his shoulder. "But I missed home. Missed the clutch." Her fingers lingered on his bicep. "Missed certain people."

His dragon stirred, not with interest but with wariness. There was something

calculated in her approach that hadn't been there when they were younger.

"The clutch has welcomed you back, I hope." He stepped back casually, creating distance.

"Everyone's been lovely." Joni glanced at their surroundings. "Though I hear the festival planning isn't going smoothly. You know, I organized three charity galas in San Francisco. I'd be happy to help..." She trailed off, her meaning clear.

Gerri made a small noise that might have been a suppressed laugh.

"I appreciate the offer," Asher replied firmly, "but I believe I have things under control."

Joni's smile dimmed slightly. "You know, it's been five years since you accepted your position as Alpha. Most dragons would have chosen a mate by now." Her voice dropped to an intimate whisper. "Maybe what you need is someone who already understands our ways. Someone who already fits."

The boldness of her suggestion caught him off guard. They'd parted amicably a decade ago, both acknowledging they weren't fated mates. Her sudden interest felt wrong—like a puzzle piece forced into the wrong spot.

"I'm not looking for a mate right now, Joni." His voice carried the authority of his position. Not unkind, but final.

"Not looking?" She laughed, a brittle sound. "Or waiting for some sign that might never come?" Her eyes narrowed. "We had something good once. We could have it again—better, even. You need someone who understands what it means to be an Alpha's mate."

"What I need," Asher stated clearly, "is to focus on my town. When my mate appears, I'll know."

Joni's expression hardened for a fraction of a second before she masked it with a polite smile. "Of course. Just thought I'd... offer my assistance. Call me if you change your mind."

She turned with a graceful pivot and strode away, her posture stiff despite her attempt to seem casual.

"That was odd," Asher muttered once she was out of earshot. "We ended things cleanly back in college. Both of us agreed we weren't meant for each other."

Gerri's eyes twinkled with amusement. "Dragons can be possessive creatures, especially female dragons who've set their sights on power."

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:30 am*

"Power?" Asher frowned. "Joni and I were just college kids having fun together. She didn't seem to want anything from me back then. I mean, my eventual Alpha status piqued her interest but she didn't seem to care about power."

"And now, you're Alpha," Gerri pointed out. "A position that does have certain...advantages for whoever becomes your mate."

The realization dawned on him, bringing a flash of irritation. "So, she's interested in my power now and not me?"

"Perhaps a bit of both," Gerri shrugged. "Now, about this festival—and the solution I was about to offer before we were interrupted," she said, the summer sun catching the gold buttons on her lime-green pantsuit as she gestured toward the half-assembled booths scattered across the town square.

Asher followed her gaze, cataloging the disaster before him. Stage platforms with missing boards, banner poles with no banners, and food booths lacking even basic setup. His dragon rumbled with discontent at the chaos.

"I'm listening," he said, crossing his arms over his chest, the rolled-up sleeves of his white button-down revealing his muscular forearms. "Though if you're suggesting another attempt at matchmaking?—"

"You need help," Gerri cut him off with the bluntness only she could get away with. "Not just any help. Professional help."

Asher's eyebrow arched. "A therapist for my procrastination issues?"

"A planner for your festival issues." Gerri's blue eyes twinkled. "I've brought someone. She's waiting at the gazebo, ready to transform this—" she waved at the disarray, "—into the celebration your ancestors deserve."

His dragon perked up inexplicably at the mention of "she." Asher tamped down the reaction.

"And why would this mystery woman want to help our town?"

"Because she's the best at what she does." Gerri turned fully toward him, all four-foot-eleven of her becoming suddenly commanding. "And perhaps because you might treat her to dinner later to discuss... details."

Asher exhaled heavily. "Look Gerri, I'm drowning here. The festival's in two days, my quarterly budget proposal is past due, and there are two territory disputes to mediate as soon as possible."

"Which is precisely why you need her."

"I'm a great Alpha, you know," he growled, a hint of frustration escaping. "My people respect me and my strength. I'd burn down mountains for this town." He gestured at the scattered booths. "But this... this requires a different skill set I'm not accustomed to."

Gerri's hand came to rest on his forearm, surprisingly warm. "A leader must serve his people in times of peace as well as war, Asher Ectorius. Community isn't built only through protection and strength—it's forged in celebration and matters of the heart too."

The truth of her words settled into his bones. His dragon acknowledged it with reluctant agreement.



"You're not wrong," he admitted, his shoulders dropping slightly. "Fine. Let's meet your party planner."

They crossed the town square toward the white gazebo at its far edge, morning sunlight filtering through the ornate woodwork. Asher's steps slowed as a woman's profile came into view. Something primal stirred within him before he could even make out her features.

Then she turned, and Asher's world immediately changed.

She stood tall despite her petite frame, her tailored charcoal dress hugging curves that made his mouth go dry. Her long brown hair gleamed in the sunlight, framing a face of such striking beauty that his dragon surged forward with such force he nearly stumbled. She was looking down at a notebook, her elegant fingers toying with the pen in her hand.

Every sense sharpened impossibly. He could hear her heartbeat from across the distance. And smell her scent—lavender, sunshine, and something uniquely her that called to him like a siren song. His blood heated, turning from simmer to boil in the span of a single heartbeat.

Mine, his dragon roared, the single word drowning out all rational thought.

Gerri's knowing smile barely registered. "Asher Ectorius, that is Danica Ulrich, the miracle worker who'll save your festival." She paused, her voice dropping conspiratorially. "And yes, before you ask—she's exactly who you think she is."

"My mate," he whispered, the words escaping unbidden.

Gerri nodded. "I didn't just bring you a party planner. Though she is exceptional at that." Her eyes flashed gold momentarily. "Two birds, one stone—your festival crisis

solved, and your fated mate delivered. You can thank me with a generous donation to the children's hospital when you're satisfied with the outcome."

Asher barely heard her, his attention riveted to the woman whose eyes now lifted to meet his. Her warm brown eyes widened slightly as she took him in. Whatever she saw made her breath catch—he heard it, that tiny hitch that sent a thrill racing through him.

"A hundred percent success rate," he muttered, acknowledging Gerri's reputation even as doubt flickered through him. Could it be this simple?

But his dragon knew. His every instinct confirmed it. This woman—this human woman with a notebook, and curves that made his pulse quicken—was his. The one his soul had waited for all this time.

"She doesn't know," Gerri murmured. "About being your mate, I mean. She thinks she's here for the festival and to possibly meet a "special someone." Tread carefully, dragon."

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:30 am*

Asher squared his shoulders, his Alpha nature rising to the challenge. Whatever happened next, he knew his life was about to change.

THREE

DANICA

Danica glanced up from her notebook, spotting Gerri's lime-green pantsuit gliding toward the gazebo. She lifted her hand in a friendly wave, then froze mid-gesture when she registered who accompanied the petite matchmaker.

Six-foot-something of pure masculine perfection walked alongside Gerri, moving with the confident ease of a man who owned every inch of ground beneath his feet. His crisp white button-down had the sleeves rolled up to reveal muscular forearms, and his black dress pants hugged thighs powerful enough to make her mouth go strangely dry. Dark brown hair, neatly trimmed beard, and eyes—were they green? From this distance, she couldn't quite tell, but they seemed to immediately lock onto her with laser-like intensity.

A hot flush crawled up Danica's neck. His gaze made her feel simultaneously exposed and embraced, a sensation unfamiliar enough to set off alarm bells in her usually composed mind.

"Get it together," she whispered to herself, her heart tapping an embarrassingly rapid cadence against her ribs. "He's just a man. An unreasonably attractive man. In a small town. Who happens to be walking straight toward you."

Gerri's arrival couldn't come soon enough. Danica launched into speech the moment the matchmaker was within earshot.

"Gerri! I've been cataloging the festival area—there's significant work needed but nothing unmanageable." The words tumbled out as she flipped pages in her notebook. "The stage needs reinforcing, the vendor stalls need assembly, and whoever ordered these decorations clearly didn't know what they were doing."

She took a breath, refusing to acknowledge how the man's eyes traced the curves beneath her tailored charcoal dress. The appreciative heat in his gaze wasn't predatory or disrespectful—it felt more like admiration, like he'd discovered an unexpected masterpiece and couldn't look away.

"I've drafted three potential layouts based on what I've seen so far." She flipped more notebook pages, determinedly professional despite the warmth spreading through her body. "With proper delegation, we can?—"

"Danica," Gerri interrupted with a knowing smile, "allow me to introduce Asher Ectorius, the town mayor."

Danica's stomach performed an acrobatic flip. The man wasn't just gorgeous, he was in charge here.

"And Alpha of the town's dragon clutch," Gerri added with a glint in her eye.

Dragon shifter. Mayor. Alpha. The combination sent an electric current zipping down Danica's spine.

"Asher, this is Danica Ulrich. She's orchestrated events for top local businesses, several celebrity shindigs, and once salvaged a wedding after a hurricane destroyed the venue—with six hours' notice."

Danica blinked at the effusive praise. "That's a bit of an exaggeration?—"

"It's not," Gerri insisted. "She's being modest. Danica is the finest event planner in the South, possibly the country. Her creativity under pressure is legendary. You couldn't be in better hands for the Founders Festival."

The way Asher looked at her made Danica feel like she could organize the Olympics with a paperclip and dental floss. His eyes—definitely green, a deep forest shade that seemed almost luminous—studied her with an intensity that made her pulse flutter.

"Miss Ulrich." His voice was deep velvet that resonated in her chest. He extended his hand that dwarfed her own. "Your reputation precedes you."

The moment their fingers touched, a spark—not metaphorical, but an actual tiny static shock—jumped between them. Danica nearly jerked her hand back, but Asher's grip gently tightened, holding her in place for a heartbeat longer than courtesy required.

"I hope Gerri hasn't oversold my abilities," Danica managed, hyperaware of the warmth of his palm against hers. "Though I do love a challenge."

His mouth curved into a smile that transformed his already handsome face into something devastating. "I have a feeling Gerri understated them."

Wait. The pieces suddenly clicked together in her mind.

"Are you the current event planner?" she asked, glancing from him to the disaster zone behind him and Gerri.

Asher's shoulders—broad enough to block out the morning sun behind him—shifted in what might have been embarrassment.

"I excel at many things," he admitted, his gaze never leaving hers. "But festival planning isn't among them."

"Fortunately," Gerri interjected cheerfully, "complementary skills are the foundation of all great partnerships."

Danica caught the undercurrent in Gerri's words but focused on the task at hand. Working closely with this man would test her concentration, but the challenge only heightened her determination. This was a professional opportunity—nothing more.

Even if her body seemed determined to remind her that it had been far too long, if ever, that she'd felt this immediate attraction to anyone.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:30 am*

"Well," Danica said, squaring her shoulders and lifting her notebook, "let's see what we have to work with, Mayor Ectorius."

"Asher," he corrected, his voice lowering to a register that seemed to vibrate through her bones. "If we're going to save this festival together, I think we can drop the formalities."

As they walked down Main Street, Danica's initial optimism began to crumble. Her heels clicked against the cobblestone as she jotted notes in her notebook, circling problems and drawing arrows to potential solutions. She'd initially thought this would be manageable—challenging but doable. That was before Asher started sharing his vision.

"The festival should have fire dancers here," Asher gestured toward an empty patch of grass. "And over there, we need a thirty-foot maypole with ribbons that change colors every hour."

Danica stared at him. "A color-changing maypole? In two days?"

"The maypole represents the ancestral connection to our homeland," Asher explained, his broad shoulders squaring with pride. "And there should be a flight demonstration?—"

"A what?"

"A symbolic flight path," he amended quickly, "projected onto that building with lasers." He pointed to a tall brick building at the end of Main Street. "And we need

the stage big enough for all the elders to sit on while the younger clutch members perform the Ritual of?—"

"Let me stop you right there." Danica tapped her pen against her notebook. "I understand you have a vision, but we have forty-eight hours, probably less now. You've set up practically nothing except some wobbly tables and half-assembled vendor stalls."

Asher's green eyes narrowed. "I've been collecting materials for months."

"Collecting isn't assembling." She gestured to a pile of lumber. "Those boards aren't going to nail themselves together."

His jaw tightened. "I had plans drawn up weeks ago."

"Plans aren't execution." Danica felt her blood start to heat. Something about this man pushed her buttons—and not just the ones that made her hyperaware of the way his crisp shirt pulled across his chest when he gestured. "We need to be practical."

"Practical?" His voice dropped dangerously low. "This festival celebrates centuries of dragon traditions. It can't just be 'practical.'"

"I'm not suggesting a potluck in the church basement," Danica countered. "But color-changing ribbons and laser light shows? We'd need permits, equipment?—"

"I'm the mayor. I approve the permits."

"Okay, well, the equipment still requires operators. And the set-up takes time." She pointed to her watch. "Which we don't have a lot of."

Gerri stepped between them, her lime-green pantsuit a visual punctuation mark.



"That's why you're here, sweetheart—to save the day. To bring Asher's vision to life with a few of your own creative ideas mixed in."

Asher ran his hands through his hair, his frustration rolling off him in almost palpable waves. "I had a great vision for this festival, and I want it done that way. It needs to be perfect." He paused, a fierce determination flashing across his features. "Perfect for my clutch and my ancestors since this is the most important event of the year for our town."

He turned to face both women, his stance widening, commanding the space around them. "On second thought, this partnership just isn't going to work."

"Oh, now don't be so sensitive, Asher," Gerri chided.

"It's not about sensitivity," Asher growled. "The advisory council specifically said I have to do this myself. I really shouldn't be going behind their backs and getting outside help just because I'm a little behind schedule."

Danica opened her mouth to speak, but Gerri spoke first, her blue eyes twinkling with mysterious knowledge.

"You and I both know that's not all they said now, is it?"

The cryptic statement hung in the air. Danica glanced between them, sensing an undercurrent she couldn't identify. Whatever Gerri meant, Asher clearly understood. His shoulders dropped a fraction, resignation replacing defiance.

"Fine," he muttered, not elaborating further.

Gerri beamed victoriously, smoothing her pantsuit. "Well then, I believe my work here is done. Asher isn't allowed to have help from someone like me. So, I'll have to

excuse myself now and leave him in your very capable hands, Danica."

Before Danica could sputter a response, Gerri turned on her designer heels and strode away, her diminutive figure somehow exuding absolute authority.

"Wait—Gerri!" Danica called, but the matchmaker just waved without turning around.

Suddenly alone with Asher in the town square, Danica felt acutely aware of his imposing presence. The early afternoon sun caught his profile, highlighting the strong line of his jaw and the intensity in his eyes as he watched Gerri depart. Whatever silent communication had passed between them remained a mystery.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:30 am*

"What exactly did she mean by that?" Danica ventured, tucking her hair behind her ear.

Asher's gaze shifted to her, the full force of his attention making her heart race. His eyes traveled from her face down to her slender fingers clutching her notebook, then back up again with quiet appreciation.

"It means," he said, his voice a deep rumble, "that we have a festival to plan. Together."

Danica opened her mouth, but the words died in her throat as a splintering crack split the air. Twenty feet away, a team of volunteers struggled with an enormous wooden archway—the festival entrance. The structure wobbled precariously, tilting sideways as one of the main support beams gave way. A young man perched on a ladder scrambled for balance, his tools clattering to the ground.

Time slowed to a crawl as Danica watched the massive beam slide free from its moorings. It was falling—directly toward her.

Before her brain could fully process the danger, strong arms scooped her off her feet. The world spun in a blur of color and motion as Asher lifted her effortlessly, cradling her against a chest so solid it felt like a wall of warm granite. For a fraction of a second, her body registered his heat, the clean scent of his skin, and the powerful thud of his heart against her side.

Then he was setting her down gently beyond the danger zone, his movements precise and hurried.

"Stay here," he commanded, already turning away.

Danica barely had time to catch her breath before Asher lunged forward, his body moving with preternatural speed. He caught the falling beam in mid-air, his muscles bunching beneath his shirt as he took the full weight of the timber. The fabric strained across his shoulders, the seams visibly testing their limits.

"Down now," Asher barked to the blonde man on the ladder, his voice cutting through the chaos with absolute authority. "Joe, grab that brace. Sam—get me another rope."

The volunteers responded instantly, jumping to follow his directions without question. The man on the ladder scrambled down while others rushed to secure the structure. Danica stood transfixed, her pulse hammering as she watched Asher hold the massive beam steady with seemingly minimal effort.

His face showed no strain, just focused determination as he repositioned the timber with controlled strength. When one of the volunteers fumbled with a rope, Asher guided him with calm precision.

"Loop it twice around the joint—that's it. Pull it tighter."

Within minutes, the arch stood solid once more, and the welcome banner unfurled across its span in a flutter of bright fabric. The crisis had been averted so efficiently that several townspeople passing by hadn't even noticed the near-disaster.

The male volunteer with blonde hair approached Asher, his face pale. "Thanks, Alpha," he said, his voice slightly trembling.

Asher clapped him on the shoulder. "No one gets hurt under my watch." His tone was matter-of-fact, not boastful.

Danica remained rooted to the spot, her professional composure momentarily shattered. Her body hummed with residual adrenaline—and something else she wasn't ready to name. The memory of being held against that broad chest, lifted as if she weighed nothing... The sensation lingered like a physical imprint on her skin.

Asher approached her, concern evident in the slight furrow of his brow. "You okay?"

Danica forced herself to breathe normally, gathering the scattered fragments of her usual wit. "Remind me to stay on your good side," she said with a smile that didn't quite hide her racing pulse.

"I wasn't showing off," he said, misreading her expression.

"I didn't think you were." She glanced at the now-secure archway. "Though if that was your idea of thoroughly convincing me you need help with this festival, it was pretty effective."

His lips quirked up at the corners. "If I wanted to do that, I would have let the beam fall on the funnel cake stand."

"Destroying perfectly good carnival food?" Danica gasped in mock horror, then smiled. "That would've sold me for sure."

The tension between them shifted, warming into something that felt dangerously like attraction. Standing there in the dappled afternoon light, with the scent of sawdust and her own lavender perfume mingling in the air, Danica suddenly found herself unable to remember all the logical reasons why developing feelings for this man would be a terrible idea.

FOUR

## ASHER

Asher couldn't tear his eyes away from Danica as she stood there in that tailored charcoal dress, her long brown hair falling over one shoulder, looking entirely too delicate after nearly being crushed by the festival archway beam. His dragon clawed beneath his skin, demanding he keep her close and safe. The memory of her body against his chest—light, warm, and perfectly nestled in his arms for those brief seconds—sent a rush of heat through him.

"We should head to my office," he said, loosening another button on his shirt and rolling his sleeves higher. The physical effort of catching that beam had barely taxed him, but the surge of protective instinct it triggered left him overheated. "I've got the festival binder there, along with my laptop."

"Your office at town hall?" Danica asked, tucking her notebook into her purse.

"No, my home office. It's close by, and I can show you what I've put together so far."

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:30 am*

"Which isn't much," she teased, a smile playing on her lips.

"Which isn't organized," he corrected, returning her smile despite himself. "There's a difference."

He led her to the sleek red Porsche parked at the curb that he had his second-in-command Caleb drive over while they were surveying the festival grounds. He enjoyed the widening of her brown eyes as he opened the passenger door for her.

"Nice car for a small-town mayor," she remarked, sliding into the leather seat.

"Family money," he explained, closing her door and walking around to the driver's side, and sliding into his leather seat. "The Ectorius family founded this town. We've had some successful ventures over the centuries."

"Centuries?" Her eyebrows arched as he started the engine.

"Figure of speech," he said smoothly, pulling away from the curb. But his mind churned with thoughts that were anything but smooth.

Dragon shifters lived far longer than humans. Their matings were permanent, spanning centuries. If Danica truly was his mate—and every instinct screamed that she was—that complicated things exponentially. How did you explain to a human that they were destined to be with you for a lifespan far beyond what they'd ever imagined possible?

Worse, how did you protect a human mate? Dragons were built for combat, with

scales that deflected most weapons and strength that rivaled industrial machinery. Danica had none of that. No enhanced hearing to detect danger, no heightened reflexes to dodge falling objects, no natural armor, and no ability to fly away from threats.

She was fragile. Vulnerable. Mortal in ways that made his chest tighten with ancient fear.

"You're quiet," Danica observed as they drove through the tree-lined streets. "Worried about the festival?"

He glanced at her profile, memorizing the gentle slope of her nose and the fullness of her lips. "Among other things."

The short drive to his estate gave him time to reconsider his decision. Maybe he should send her away. Protect her from the dangers of his world by keeping her out of it entirely. His dragon snarled at the thought, rejecting it outright.

When they pulled up to the wrought iron gates of his property, Danica let out a soft whistle.

"When you said 'home office,' I wasn't expecting a mansion."

The gates swung open automatically, and Asher drove up the curved driveway lined with ancient oak trees.

"The family home has always belonged to the Alpha."

"Alpha," she repeated. "Gerri mentioned that. You're the leader of the local dragon... group?"



"Clutch," he corrected, parking beside the three-story colonial-style home. "It's what we call our community."

He led her inside, through the grand foyer with its crystal chandelier and up the curved staircase to his office. The mahogany-paneled room with its wall of windows overlooking the grounds was his sanctuary, though today it felt different with Danica in it—smaller, somehow, despite its generous proportions.

His eyes fell on the festival binder splayed open on his desk, pages of notes and sketches spilling out in disorganized chaos. Next to it sat his laptop with twelve tabs open to various event planning websites.

"So," Danica said, approaching the desk with an appraising look, "this is what we're working with?"

Asher shifted his weight to hide his embarrassment. "No, this is what you're rescuing me from."

Her laugh wrapped around him like warm silk. "I've seen worse."

"I doubt that."

She pulled out her notebook, flipping it open to reveal neat columns, sketches, and what looked like a comprehensive timeline.

"I thought we could integrate some of your bigger ideas—not the color-changing ribbons, sorry—but maybe we could project some images onto the town hall at night? Much easier than lasers, and still visually impressive."

As she spoke, gesturing with slender hands that somehow conveyed both strength and vulnerability, Asher felt his resolve crumbling. He needed her. Not just for the

festival, but in ways he wasn't ready to examine quite yet.

"You'll stay with me," he said, more statement than question. "I mean, to help with the festival."

Danica raised an eyebrow. "Did I ever say I wouldn't stay?"

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:30 am*

"It's going to be dangerous though," he blurted, then immediately regretted it.

"Dangerous? It's a town festival, not a monster truck rally." She tilted her head, studying him curiously. "Unless you're planning to set the maypole on fire?"

Asher moved closer, unable to help himself. "What I mean is... people around me tend to get caught in complicated situations."

"Like almost getting crushed by falling archways?" She smiled wryly. "Good thing you were there today."

"I'll always be there," he promised, the intensity in his voice surprising even him.

Asher saw the flicker in her eyes and heard the slight catch in her breath at his words. His dragon rumbled with satisfaction. She wasn't immune to him.

He cleared his throat and stepped back, suddenly aware of how close they stood. "For the festival planning, I mean. This week. I'll be there to help you with preparations."

"Good," Danica replied, recovering quickly and jutting her chin up. "Because we're going to need all hands on deck. And you need to be attentive and not procrastinate anymore."

Heat rushed to Asher's face—a sensation so foreign he almost didn't recognize it. No one in Ectorius dared speak to him that way. Not his council, not his staff, certainly not anyone in his clutch. As Alpha, his word and action were law. Yet here stood this five-foot-five human woman, challenging him as if she had every right to do so.

And damn it all, his dragon loved it.

"I don't procrastinate," he countered, guiding her behind his desk with a light touch at her lower back. "I strategize."

"Is that what we're calling it?" Her eyes glinted with amusement as she slid into the chair he pulled up beside his.

The space behind his desk wasn't designed for two. Their shoulders brushed as they settled in, and Asher caught the faintest hint of her scent. His dragon inhaled deeply, committing it to memory.

"Let me show you what I've got so far." He flipped through the massive three-ring binder with his scattered notes and printouts.

Danica's eyes widened. "That's... comprehensive."

"That's very diplomatic." He couldn't help smiling. "Go ahead, say what you're thinking."

"It's a hot mess," she admitted, flipping through the pages of half-formed ideas and unanswered vendor emails. "But there's potential here."

For the next several hours, they dove into planning, and Asher found himself both frustrated and fascinated by her approach. When she suggested bright jewel-toned tents instead of the traditional white canvas ones the festival had used for generations, he balked.

"The white tents are traditional," he insisted. "They've been part of the Founders Festival since the beginning."

"Traditional doesn't have to mean boring," Danica countered, sketching quick color swatches in her notebook. "Imagine emerald green, sapphire blue, and rich purple tents, with LED fairy lights woven through the tops after dark."

"Fairy lights?" Asher frowned. The irony wasn't lost on him—dragons discussing fairy lights.

"Trust me, the effect is magical." Her fingers brushed his arm as she turned to her tablet, pulling up examples. "See? It transforms the whole space."

The pictures were admittedly stunning, but Asher's resistance ran deeper than aesthetics. This was his clutch's heritage, and his responsibility to uphold.

"We'll consider it," he said noncommittally, turning the page to the food vendors.

"You've only got three food stalls listed," Danica noted. "A funnel cake stand, lemonade, and—what's this? 'Family food contributions'?"

"The clutch families always bring their traditional dishes to share," Asher explained. "It's part of our?—"

"Wait." Danica's hand landed on his arm, warm and disruptive. "Let me get this straight. You're making your own townspeople cook for your festival? The same people who are supposed to be celebrating?"

"It's tradition," Asher defended, bristling at her tone. "Every family contributes their specialties."

"And who gets to enjoy the festival while everyone's stuck behind serving tables?" She arched an eyebrow, challenging him directly.

No one in his entire life had ever questioned his judgment this bluntly. His dragon bristled, but something else stirredbeneath the surface—respect. She saw problems he'd been blind to, and questioned traditions he'd never thought to examine.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:30 am*

"What would you suggest?" he asked finally, surprising himself with his willingness to bend.

"Food trucks," she said immediately. "Invite vendors from surrounding areas. Pay them to drive in from New Orleans. Your people should be enjoying the festival, not working it."

Asher leaned back, studying Danica's animated features. She glowed with passion where others would have cowered. She challenged him when others would have yielded. And damn if he didn't find her absolutely magnificent for it.

His dragon purred in agreement. This was their mate—bold, brilliant, and fearless.

"Alright," he conceded, suddenly eager to see her vision come to life alongside his. "Let's try it your way, with some of my ways mixed in."

Her smile lit up her entire face. "Trust me, you won't regret it."

Asher already knew he wouldn't. Not a single moment spent with Danica could ever be regrettable.

Asher's stomach suddenly growled, the sound echoing through his home office like distant thunder. He glanced at the antique grandfather clock in the corner and realized they'd been working for over five hours straight.

"I think my body is staging a revolt," he said, leaning back in his chair. "Have you eaten today?"

Danica looked up from her tablet, blinking away the focused expression. "Food? I had... wait, did I have breakfast?"

"That settles it. We need dinner." Asher stood, stretching to his full height, feeling his dragon's restlessness beneath his skin. His protective instincts flared at the thought of her going without nourishment. "You need to eat something."

"You're right." She closed her tablet cover and gathered her notes. "Could you point me toward a good place in town? I'm sure you have other commitments tonight—clutch business or mayor stuff."

The thought of letting her wander into town alone made his dragon snarl. Ectorius was safe—for dragons. But Danica was human, and beyond that simple fact lay complicated politics. His clutch members would notice her immediately. Some might think she was his mate for helping him with the festival, stirring gossip he wasn't prepared to address yet. Others who didn't believe that might think he'd broken tradition by hiring an outsider to plan their sacred festival.

Either way, it meant everyone in his business before he'd figured things out for himself tonight.

"Stay," he said, the word coming out more command than invitation. He softened his tone. "I mean, why don't you stay here? My kitchen is fully stocked, and we can continue discussing plans over dinner."

Her eyebrows arched. "You cook?"

"I'm a dragon shifter," he replied with a smile. "Fire is kind of our specialty."

Asher led her downstairs to his kitchen, a sprawling space with gleaming copper fixtures, professional-grade appliances, and a massive island of polished black



granite. Floor-to-ceiling windows overlooked gardens bathed in the golden glow of sunset, casting amber light across the marble floors.

"This kitchen is bigger than my entire apartment," Danica marveled, running her fingers along the stone countertop.

Asher opened his industrial refrigerator, surveying its contents with a critical eye. "How do you feel about steak? Medium rare?"

"Perfect." She perched on one of the high stools at the island, watching as he pulled out ingredients with efficient movements.

He felt her eyes on him as he rolled his sleeves higher, exposing more of his arms. The primal part of him preened under her attention, wanting to impress his mate with his ability to provide.

"So, about the festival music," she began. "I was thinking we could bring in a fusion band that blends contemporary pop with traditional sounds. Something fresh but still danceable."

Asher shook his head firmly as he laid two thick ribeye steaks on the cutting board. "The Firebreathers have played our festival since my grandfather was Alpha. They practice all year for this."

"The... Firebreathers?" Danica's lips twitched.

"A bit on the nose, I know." Asher couldn't help his answering smile as he seasoned the meat. "But they're family. Everyone looks forward to their set. It's not just music for us—it's heritage."

"Fair enough." She made a notation in her notebook. "What about the fire dancers

you mentioned? That could be spectacular."

"They're confirmed. Though the real show happens after dark when we shift." His hands stilled on the knife he was using to chop herbs. He'd never discussed shifting so casually with a human before.

Danica leaned forward, her eyes bright with curiosity. "What exactly does that involve? Shifting, I mean."

"Shifting into our dragon forms is usually communal," Asher explained, measuring his words carefully. "Having regular times when we can all be in our dragon forms together strengthens our bonds as a clutch. It's not just performance—it's ritual."

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:30 am*

What he didn't say was how much it would pain him to shift among his people while his mate remained earthbound. The thought of Danica watching from below while he soared with his kind created an unexpected ache in his chest.

Some human mates developed the ability to shift after the mating bond was fully formed. The stories were rare but persistent—humans with latent shifter genes activated by their mate's magic, or those who somehow absorbed their mate's ability through their bond.

Asher caught himself mid-thought. What was he thinking? He'd known this woman less than a day. Fated mate or not, he wasn't about to rush headlong into mating rituals with someone he'd just met.

His dragon disagreed vehemently, scratching beneath his skin with impatience. Mine, it insisted. Now.

"You went somewhere else just then," Danica observed, tilting her head. "Dragon thoughts?"

Asher turned to the stove, firing up the cast iron skillet with a flick of his wrist. "Just wondering if you'd want to see the night shifting ceremony. It's usually just for clutch members, but as our festival planner, you might like to watch it."

FIVE

DANICA

Asher had turned to the stove and fired up the cast iron skillet for their steaks. The crisp white of his button-down shirt contrasted with his tanned skin, his sleeves rolled up high to expose his muscular arms. The top two buttons remained undone, offering glimpses of his chest that Danica found herself repeatedly drawn to.

When Asher had asked if she wanted to watch the night shifting ceremony at the festival, a thrill had shot through her body. She'd heard about shifters her entire life—they weren't exactly a secret in New Orleans—but she'd never actually witnessed a transformation. The thought of seeing Asher become something so powerful and primal made her heart race.

"I would absolutely love to see that," she replied, leaning forward on her elbows. "I've never seen someone shift before. What's it like? Does it hurt?"

Asher turned away from the stove completely, facing her with an intensity that made her breath catch. The black granite island between them suddenly felt like an unwelcome barrier.

"It's like..." he searched for words, "releasing something that's always there under your skin. It doesn't hurt—it feels like finally stretching after being cramped too long."

Danica couldn't help but smile at how animated he became when talking about his dragon side. The stiff, formal mayor from this morning had transformed into someone passionate and engaging. The awkwardness from their first meeting had melted away, replaced by a comfortable rhythm that felt strangely familiar.

"And you're actually flying? Not just, I don't know, hovering a few feet off the ground?"

Asher laughed, a deep rumble that did funny things to her insides. "We're talking a

wingspan wider than this kitchen. We fly—high and fast."

"That sounds..." Danica struggled to find the right word. Exciting? Terrifying? Sexy? "Exhilarating."

"It is." His eyes locked onto hers, seeming to penetrate straight through her careful exterior. "Most humans never get to see us do it. But you're different."

The air between them charged with something electric. Danica uncrossed her legs, suddenly feeling too warm in her dress.

"Different how?" she challenged.

Asher leaned across the island, closing some of the distance between them. "You don't back down. From anything. I can respect that."

Coming from him—this powerful alpha who commanded an entire community—the compliment felt momentous. Danica felt her cheeks warm.

"Is backing down something people do around you often?" she teased.

"Always," he admitted without hesitation. "It gets boring."

A thin tendril of smoke curled up behind him, but Asher seemed oblivious, thoroughly engrossed in their conversation.

"Um, Asher?"

"That's why this is..." he continued, gesturing between them, "refreshing."

"Asher, the steaks?—"

"What?" He followed her gaze over his shoulder. "Shit!"

He whirled around to find both ribeyes engulfed in flames. In a single fluid motion, he grabbed the skillet handle and moved it off the heat, then slammed a lid over it to smother the fire.

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:30 am*

The kitchen filled with the unmistakable scent of charred meat. When Asher lifted the lid, two blackened, smoking remnants stared back at them.

"Well, that was unfortunate." Danica bit her lip to keep from laughing.

Asher's shoulders slumped for a moment before he turned to face her. "I got distracted."

The admission sent a ridiculous flutter through Danica's stomach. She, Danica Ulrich, had distracted the Alpha dragon shifter enough to ruin dinner.

"I'm so sorry, Asher."

Instead of frustration, Asher's expression softened. He leaned against the counter, unveiling a dazzling smile that caused her chest to tighten.

"You should feel flattered," he said as his eyes traced her figure with unmistakable appreciation. "Between your brilliant festival ideas and that incredible body of yours, I didn't stand a chance."

Heat rushed to Danica's cheeks. She'd received compliments before—usually from clients trying to sweeten her up for discounts or men with fleeting interest—but Asher's sincerity and directness caught her completely off-guard.

"I..." she stuttered, cursing herself for the rare loss of composure. "Thank you."

Asher smiled wider, clearly pleased at her reaction. "I like making you blush." He

reached for his phone. "Let me call Rosie's. Best café in town, and the owner owes me a favor."

Fifteen minutes later, they sat across from each other, surrounded by fragrant containers of crawfish étouffée and sweet cornbread. Danica savored the explosion of aromas.

"This is incredible," she moaned around a forkful. "No wonder your town stays hidden. If people knew about this food, you'd have tourists swarming."

"Speaking of the town," Asher said, spreading out their planning notes beside their plates. "I've been thinking about those LED fairy lights you mentioned."

Danica perked up. "Really?"

"They could work strung across the tent ceilings," he conceded, tracing a pattern on the sketch. "And I suppose a few jewel-toned tents mixed with our traditional white ones would create visual interest."

Danica couldn't hide her surprise. The stubborn, traditional man from earlier was transforming even further before her eyes. "What happened to 'that's not how we've always done it'?"

"I'm not completely inflexible," he countered, his green eyes sparking with challenge. "But the town emblem stays prominently displayed around the festival, and we keep the ancestral fire ring lighting ceremony intact."

"Deal," she agreed immediately. "I'd never want to erase your heritage. Just enhance the experience."

As they ate, they continued refining ideas, creating a vision that honored tradition



while embracing innovation. Asher's willingness to meet her halfway stirred something deep in Danica's chest. Most clients either surrendered completely to her vision or fought her every step of the way. This collaboration felt different—balanced.

Their hands brushed as they both reached for the same sketch, and electricity jolted through her fingertips. Instead of pulling away, Asher's fingers lingered over hers, warm and steady. Danica froze, suddenly forgetting how breathing worked.

"I think we make an excellent team," he murmured, making no move to break contact.

"We do," she managed, her pulse thundering in her ears. What was happening to her? She'd met attractive men before, especially working with powerful executives and charming celebrities. But none had affected her like Asher.

They moved to his office, where stacks of planning notes gave way to their sprawling ideas. As midnight approached, their conversation flowed between the festival plans and her memorable event planning stories. Each accidental touch lingered longer than the last.

"Your creativity is extraordinary," Asher said, leaning close to examine her updated festival layout sketch. His shoulder pressed against hers, radiating heat. "You see possibilities where others see limitations."

Danica's body hummed with awareness. "And I admire your dedication to your people. The way you honor your ancestors while protecting their future—it's remarkable."

Their hands collided again, and this time, neither pretended it was accidental. Asher's fingers intertwined with hers, his thumb tracing patterns on her wrist that sent shivers

up her spine.

"Danica," he whispered, her name sounding sacred in his deep voice.

She met his gaze, drowning in those forest-green eyes. Her heart thundered in her chest as she fought the overwhelming urge to close the distance between them. This intensity defied logic—they'd just met this morning, for heaven's sake—yet felt as natural as breathing.

His gaze dropped to her lips, and Danica's entire body tensed with anticipation. The practical voice in her head screamed about professionalism and rushing in, but her body refused to listen, leaning imperceptibly closer.

Suddenly, the large grandfather clock chimed loudly, breaking the spell they were momentarily under. Danica jerked back, blinking rapidly as if waking from a dream.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:30 am*

"Midnight already?" she whispered, her voice husky with unspoken want.

Asher's expression shifted, his posture straightening as he reluctantly released her hand. "You're staying here tonight."

It wasn't a question. Danica widened her eyes at his commanding tone, but exhaustion hit her like a wave. The thought of walking to the town square in the dark and then driving to the hotel suddenly seemed impossible.

"I still have my suitcase in my car. But its parked near the town square," she said.

"I can go to the town square and get your suitcase for you." Asher rose to his full height. "You're in no condition to go anywhere tonight."

Danica opened her mouth to argue—purely on principle—but a yawn betrayed her. "Fine, but only because you have excellent food and comfortable chairs here."

Asher's mouth quirked into that devastating smile. "Wait until you see the guest beds."

He led her through the mansion's hallways, their footsteps echoing on polished hardwood. The guest room he showed her was twice the size of her bedroom at home, with a plush four-poster bed draped in rich burgundy.

"I'll go get your suitcase now," he said softly.

She reached for her car keys in her purse and handed them over to him. He turned and

headed toward the door. "Make yourself comfortable," he said, looking over his shoulder.

The moment he left, Danica's exhaustion hit full force. She sat on the bed, intending only to test its softness, but found herself sinking backward, her eyes drifting closed against her will.

She woke with a start at the sound of the bedroom door closing. Disoriented, she blinked in the dim room. Her suitcase sat neatly by the dresser and her keys were on the nightstand—Asher must have delivered them while she slept.

"So much for a polite thank you," she chided herself as she sat up. Her dress was wrinkled beyond salvation, and she desperately needed to change into something more comfortable.

A movement outside the window caught her attention as she stood. Through the gossamer curtains, she spotted Asher crossing the moonlit lawn. He glanced around furtively, then began removing his clothes.

Danica's breath caught. She knew she should look away, but her eyes remained fixed on him as he stripped down to nothing. His body was magnificent—sculpted muscle moving fluidly beneath tanned skin, broad shoulders tapering to a narrow waist, and between his legs?—

"Oh my," she whispered, her cheeks burning even as she couldn't tear her gaze away.

But what happened next drove all thoughts of his impressive anatomy from her mind. Asher's body began to shimmer, his form elongating and expanding. Within seconds, where a naked man had stood now towered a massive crimson dragon with scales that gleamed like rubies in the moonlight.

"Holy shit," Danica gasped, pressing her palms against the glass.

The dragon—Asher—unfurled enormous wings that blotted out the stars. With a single powerful thrust, he launched himself skyward, becoming a scarlet streak against the night.

Without conscious thought, Danica found herself racing through the mansion, her fatigue completely forgotten. She pushed through the back door onto a stone patio, tilting her head back to search the sky.

There—a flash of red against the moon. Danica's heart pounded with exhilaration. She'd known about shifters, but witnessing the transformation firsthand was otherworldly. Something primal stirred within her, a recognition that transcended rational thought.

A piercing screech split the night, and she spotted Asher's dragon form wheeling sharply, diving directly toward her.

Logic dictated fear—a creature that size could crush her with one foot—but Danica remained rooted in place, unafraid. Somehow, she knew with bone-deep certainty that she was perfectly safe.

The massive dragon landed before her with surprising grace, his wings creating a gust that whipped her hair around her face. His eyes—still that impossible forest green—fixed on her with intelligence and something far more complex.

Danica stepped forward without hesitation, her hand outstretched. "You're beautiful," she whispered.

Asher lowered his massive head, and Danica's palm connected with scales that felt warm and smooth, like sun-heated stones. Electricity sparked where they touched,

and she traced the elegant line of his jaw in wonder.

The air shimmered again, and suddenly her hand rested against human skin. Asher stood before her, gloriously naked in the moonlight, his eyes burning with intensity.

"You don't mind?" he asked, capturing her hands in his.

"Mind?" Danica laughed, her eyes traveling over him shamelessly. "You're the most incredible thing I've ever seen—in both forms."

Asher pulled her against his bare chest, one hand tangling in her hair as his mouth found hers. The kiss began gentle, almost questioning, before igniting into something hungry and demanding. Danica melted against him, her fingers tracing the hard muscles of his chest.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:30 am*

Abruptly, Asher broke away, his breathing ragged. "We should get to bed," he said, his voice low. "Tomorrow's full of festival preparations."

Danica stiffened, stung by what felt like rejection. She stepped back, wrapping her arms around herself. "Right. Of course."

"Danica." Asher reached for her hand, his touch sending sparks up her arm. "This isn't rejection."

"No?" She met his gaze, struggling to maintain her composure.

"If I did what I wanted right now," he growled, pulling her closer until she felt every hard inch of him pressing against her body, "we wouldn't leave my bedroom for days. And while nothing would make me happier than exploring every perfect inch of you, we have responsibilities."

His words sent heat pooling low in her belly. "Responsibilities," she echoed breathlessly.

"I want you—make no mistake about that," he continued, his thumb tracing her lower lip. "But when I take you to my bed, I want to savor you properly. Not rush because of this damn festival hanging over us. You deserve my complete attention."

Danica's irritation melted away, replaced by molten desire. "That's... surprisingly reasonable."

"I have my moments." Asher's mouth claimed hers once more, his kiss a promise of

things to come.

When they finally separated, Danica's legs felt unsteady. "Goodnight, then," she managed.

Asher's eyes glowed with intensity. "Sweet dreams, Danica. I know mine will be."

SIX

ASHER

Asher woke with the sunrise, an instinct as old as his dragon heritage. His body hummed with leftover energy from last night's encounter. The memory of Danica's fingers tracing his scales, the look of wonder in her eyes, and the softness of her lips against his sent a wave of heat through his veins all over again.

He stretched his muscular frame across the king-sized bed, the sheets tangled around his legs. Restraint had never been more difficult than when he'd walked away from her last night. His dragon had roared in protest, demanding he claim what was clearly his mate. But Asher prided himself on his control, or at least until last night. It's what made him an effective Alpha. Although with Danica around, he found that maintaining control was growing increasingly difficult.

Suddenly, an unfamiliar scent wafted through his open bedroom door. Bacon. Eggs. And was that... pancakes?

Asher's nostrils flared, inhaling deeply. His keen senses picked up another scent beneath the food – Danica's unique perfume mixed with something inherently her. His inner dragon stirred with possessive pleasure at the realization she was in his kitchen, making herself at home in his territory.



He sprang from bed, not bothering with a shirt as he pulled on a pair of black athletic shorts. The hardwood felt cool beneath his bare feet as he padded silently through the hallway, following the enticing aromas.

The sight that greeted him in the kitchen doorway stopped him cold. Danica stood with her back to him, humming softly as she flipped pancakes with expert precision. She'd changed into a light blue sundress that hugged every delicious curve of her body. The morning light streamed through the windows, illuminating her long brown hair which fell in loose waves down her back.

Something primal and ancient shifted in Asher. This woman – this human who'd fearlessly touched his dragon form – was moving around his kitchen as if she belonged there. And damn if she didn't.

His eyes tracked her movements, mesmerized by the gentle sway of her hips as she moved between the stove and counter. The dress dipped low enough in front to reveal the tempting curve of her breasts when she leaned forward to adjust the heat.

Mine, his dragon growled within him. Ours.

Asher realized with startling clarity that he wanted to see this every morning – Danica in his space, filling it with warmth and life. The revelation should have terrified him, this sudden certainty after knowing her for barely a day. Instead, it settled something restless inside him.

She turned suddenly, a plate of pancakes in hand, and jumped when she spotted him.

"Jesus!" Her free hand flew to her chest. "How long have you been standing there like some creepy, incredibly fit statue?"

Asher's lips curled into a slow smile. "Long enough to appreciate the view."

A becoming flush spread across her cheeks, but she recovered quickly, gesturing to the feast laid out on his kitchen island.

"Well, unlike someone who shall remain nameless," she said with playful emphasis, "I can actually cook without setting fire to perfectly good food."

No one spoke to him with such casual disrespect – no one dared. Yet from her, it felt like sunshine breaking through clouds he hadn't realized were there.

"Is that so?" He crossed the kitchen in three long strides, closing the distance between them. His eyes locked onto hers, drinking in the flecks of gold in her brown irises.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:30 am*

"Evidence speaks for itself, Mr. Mayor." She waved toward the golden stack of pancakes, crisp bacon, and fluffy scrambled eggs. "Not a burn mark in sight."

The teasing lilt in her voice, the domesticity of the moment, and the sight of her standing in his kitchen as if she'd always been there – it shattered his carefully constructed control.

Asher's hand curved around the nape of her neck, his thumb tracing the line of her jaw. "Forget the festival," he growled, watching her pupils dilate at his touch.

"What happened to responsibilities first?" Danica's breath hitched, her body swaying toward his like a compass finding true north.

"Some things can't wait."

Asher claimed her mouth with a hunger that surprised even him. There was nothing gentle in this kiss – it was possession, pure and simple. His dragon surged forward, demanding he mark her and claim her, make her understand that she was his in every way that mattered.

Before he had a chance to stop himself, his hands gripped her waist, and he lifted her effortlessly onto the kitchen island. Her legs instinctively wrapped around him. The light blue sundress she wore bunched around her thighs, and her breath hitched as he crowded into her space, his eyes dark with hunger.

"Asher," she whispered, her hands sliding up his bare chest. "I thought we weren't doing this yet."

"I can't wait," he growled, his lips finding hers again in a searing kiss that left no room for argument. His dragon roared inside him, demanding he take, claim, and mark. But he tempered it with the flicker of humanity that still tethered him. She wasn't just his mate, she was Danica, and she deserved more than his dragon's primal urges.

He broke the kiss only to trail his mouth down her neck, nipping at the delicate skin there before soothing it with his tongue. Her hands tangled in his dark hair, tugging slightly, and the sensation sent a jolt of pleasure straight to his groin.

"This has to go," he muttered against her skin, pulling at the thin straps of her dress. He needed to see her, all of her. The fabric slipped down to her waist, revealing her full breasts. Her nipples were already hard, begging for his attention.

Asher didn't hesitate. He captured one nipple in his mouth, licking and sucking until she gasped. Her hands gripped his shoulders, and her nails dug in slightly, the sting only fueling his need.

"Asher," she moaned, her voice breathless. "I've never—never done anything like this before. Spontaneous and reckless, on a kitchen island?—"

"Good," he said, moving to her other breast, his tongue swirling around the hardened nipple. "You can be reckless with me."

Her breath hitched, and she let out a soft laugh. Though it quickly turned into a moan as his hands slid up her thighs, pushing the dress higher. His fingers hooked into the edge of her panties, and he paused, looking up at her, his eyes blazing.

"Tell me to stop," he said, his voice filled with desire. "If you want me to stop, say it now."

Danica's eyes locked with his, her brown irises dark with desire. She shook her head, her lips curving into a wicked smile. "Don't you dare stop."

That was all the permission he needed. He slid her panties aside, his fingers finding her already slick folds. She gasped, her hips rocking against his hand as he explored her, finding the spots that made her writhe against him.

"You're so wet," he murmured, his voice low and possessive. "All for me."

"God, Asher," she breathed, her hands gripping the edge of the island as he dropped to his knees in front of her. His hands spread her thighs wider, and he leaned in, his breath hot on her skin before his tongue flicked out, tasting her.

Her head fell back, a moan escaping her lips as he licked and sucked at her sensitive flesh. Her hands found their way back to his hair, tugging as he worked her over with his mouth. The sounds she made—little gasps and moans—were music to his ears, driving him to push her further, faster, and harder.

He slid two fingers inside her, curling them just right, and she cried out, her hips bucking against his face. "Yes, yes, don't stop," she begged, her voice trembling.

Asher didn't stop. He couldn't. The taste of her, the way she moved against him, and the way she surrendered completely to the pleasure he gave her—it was intoxicating. His dragon preened, proud and possessive, but it was the man in him who wanted to make her feel good, who wanted to see her come undone because of him.

"You're close, aren't you?" he breathed, his voice muffled against her sensitive skin. "Let go, Danica. Come for me."

She didn't need to be told twice. Her body tensed and her back arched as her orgasm ripped through her. She cried outloudly, her thighs clamping around his head as he

continued to lap at her, drawing out every last wave of her pleasure.

When she finally collapsed back onto the island, breathing hard, Asher rose to his feet, his hands resting on either side of her hips. He leaned down, capturing her soft lips in a slow, deep kiss, letting her taste herself on his tongue.

"You," she breathed against his lips, her hands sliding down his chest, "are dangerous."

"Only for you," he replied, his voice thick with satisfaction.

Asher's hands gripped Danica's hips, her back pressed against the kitchen island, her sundress hiked up around her thighs. Her breath came in short, uneven gasps as he kissed her, his lips claiming hers with a primal hunger. His body burned with need, every nerve alight with the feel of her beneath him, her warmth, her softness, and her scent. His dragon roared inside him, demanding he take her.

He broke the kiss just long enough to yank his athletic shorts down, his large cock springing free, hard and aching. Danica's eyes widened, her lips parting as she took him in, her hands sliding up to grip his shoulders.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:30 am*

"Asher," she whispered, her voice trembling with a mix of desire and anticipation.

"Mine," he growled possessively. He positioned himself between her thighs, the tip of his cock brushing against her slick entrance. She gasped, her nails digging deep into his skin as she arched toward him, her body begging for him to fill her.

But just as he was about to sink into her, the sharp chime of the doorbell shattered the moment.

Asher froze, his body tensing with frustration. A low growl rumbled in his chest, and for a split second, he considered ignoring it. But the rational part of his brain—the part that wasn't consumed by the need to claim his mate—knew better.

Danica's eyes widened, her cheeks flushing as she quickly pushed against his chest. "The door," she whispered, her voice breathless.

"Damn it," Asher muttered, reluctantly pulling away. He yanked his shorts back up, his cock still throbbing with unfulfilled need. Danica slid off the island, her hands fumbling to adjust the straps of her sundress and smooth the fabric down over her hips. Her hair was tousled, her lips swollen from his kisses, and she looked so deliciously disheveled that it took every ounce of his willpower not to drag her back into his arms.

"It's probably the festival volunteers," he said, his voice rough with frustration. "They must've gotten the email we sent last night and want to go over some things."

Danica nodded, her hands still smoothing her dress as if that would erase the

evidence of what they'd just been about to do. "I'll let them in," she offered, her voice steadier now, though her cheeks were still flushed.

Asher shook his head. "I'm not exactly dressed for company." He gestured to his bare chest and shorts. "I'll run upstairs and throw something on. Be right back."

He started toward the doorway but paused, turning back to her. In two quick strides, he was in front of her again. His hands cupped her face as he kissed her hard and fast, pouring all his frustration and desire into that one searing kiss.

Danica's breath hitched as he pulled away. He gave her one last lingering look before turning and striding toward his bedroom, his bare feet silent on the hardwood. His mind raced as he took the steps two at a time, his body still thrumming with the need to finish what they'd started.

Mine, his dragon growled again, the word echoing in his mind. She's mine.

Asher shoved the thought aside. He needed to get dressed, deal with whoever was at the door, and then figure out how to get Danica alone again. Preferably somewhere with fewer interruptions.

He reached his bedroom and yanked open the closet door, grabbing the first shirt he saw—a simple black button-down—and pulling it on. He didn't bother with the buttons, leaving it open to reveal the muscles of his chest. He then put on his black dress pants that he'd left discarded on his bedroom floor last night.

As he turned to head back downstairs, he couldn't help but smile. Danica was in his home, and soon, she'd be in his bed. The thought sent a surge of possessive satisfaction through him.

SEVEN



## DANICA

Danica floated toward the front door of Asher's mansion in a pleasant haze. Her body still tingled from Asher's mouth and hands. Her cheeks felt permanently flushed, and she couldn't wipe the smile from her face as she padded barefoot across the polished hardwood floor.

The memory of Asher kneeling before her with his head between her thighs, his tongue working magic against her most sensitive flesh—it made her body heat all over again. Never in her life had she surrendered to such spontaneous pleasure, especially not with someone she'd known for barely a day.

What is happening to me? she wondered, running her fingers through her thoroughly mussed hair. This isn't like me at all.

Yet it felt right—natural, even. Something about Asher—his commanding presence balanced with his genuine care—made her feel simultaneously safe and wild, as if she'd discovered a part of herself that had always been there, patiently waiting.

Danica smoothed down her light blue sundress for the tenth time, the cotton fabric still slightly wrinkled from being bunched around her waist just moments ago. The doorbell rang again, more insistent this time.

"Coming!" she called.

When she pulled open the front door, Danica expected to see a group of eager festival volunteers. Instead, she found herself face-to-face with a woman who looked as if she'd stepped from the pages of a fashion magazine.

The stranger stood tall—at least 5'9"—with a waterfall of vibrant red hair cascading over one shoulder. Her skin had the perfect sun-kissed glow, and her athletic frame

was draped in a green wrap dress that accentuated every toned curve. But what struck Danica most were her eyes—a peculiar green-gold that seemed to flash with something primal when they landed on her.

"Oh! Hello," Danica said, her event planner persona clicking into place automatically. "You must be one of the festival volunteers. Asher just went upstairs to change, but he'll be right down."

The redhead's perfectly shaped eyebrows arched high, and her full lips pressed into a thin line. "I'm not a volunteer," she replied, her voice smooth as silk but with an undercurrent of steel. "I'm Joni. Joni Maples."

Something territorial flashed across the woman's face as her nostrils flared slightly, almost like she was...sniffing? Danica suddenly felt exposed, as if this stranger could somehow detect what had just transpired in the kitchen. Heat slowly crept up her neck at the thought.

Joni's gaze tracked slowly from Danica's tousled hair down to her bare feet, taking in every detail with surgical precision. Her smile never reached her eyes when she asked, "And you are...?"

"I'm Danica. I'm—" she hesitated, uncertain how much to reveal.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:30 am*

Before she could continue, Joni's nostrils flared again, and her expression shifted to something milder. "Is that bacon you're cooking? It smells divine."

Danica blinked at the abrupt subject change. "Oh! Yes, I made breakfast. Would you like to come in?" The invitation slipped out automatically—her Southern upbringing kicking in before her brain could catch up. Obviously this woman knew Asher well enough to visit his home unannounced. Perhaps she was a colleague from town hall or a childhood friend.

"How thoughtful." Joni's smile was picture-perfect but still didn't quite reach her eyes as she stepped inside. "Asher usually doesn't have guests cooking in his kitchen."

Is that a dig? Danica wondered, suddenly self-conscious about her casual presence in Asher's home.

"The food's probably getting cold," Danica said, leading the way toward the kitchen. "I made plenty if you'd like some."

"That's very...domestic of you," Joni remarked, each word carefully measured. "Have you known Asher long?"

The question carried weight, and Danica felt the woman's eyes boring into her back as they walked. Something in Joni's tone made her hesitate to reveal how new her connection with Asher truly was.

"Not very," she admitted cautiously. "We're working together on the Founders Festival."

Joni's smile tightened fractionally. "Are you? How interesting. I wasn't aware Asher was bringing in outside help this year."

The kitchen still carried faint traces of Danica's pleasure—at least to her awareness. She busied herself with the cooling food, situating plates on the island where three stools waited. "Would you like coffee?"

"Please," Joni answered, settling gracefully onto a stool—the exact one where Danica sat last night, she noted. The redhead placed her designer purse on the island and folded her hands primly. "So tell me, Danica, are you familiar with our little town's... unique community?"

Something in the way she emphasized "unique" gave Danica pause. Was she referring to the fact that they were shifters? Or something else entirely?

"I'm learning," Danica replied carefully, pouring coffee into a mug for their unexpected guest. "It's a beautiful place."

"Oh, it certainly is," Joni agreed, her voice honeyed. "And we're all quite protective of it. Especially Asher. He takes his responsibilities very seriously."

The words seemed innocent enough, but Danica caught the subtle emphasis on "responsibilities" and the proprietary way Joni said Asher's name. A flash of understanding hit her—this wasn't just any acquaintance dropping by.

"How do you know Asher?" Danica asked directly, meeting those gold-flecked green eyes.

Joni's smile widened, showing her perfect white teeth as she accepted the coffee mug. "Oh, Asher and I go way back. We've been... close for years."

Just then, Asher strode into the kitchen, and Danica's breath caught at the sight of him. He was now in black dress pants and an unbuttoned black shirt that revealed a tantalizing strip of his muscled chest. Her mind immediately flashed back to how that chest had felt pressed against her not long ago on this kitchen island in front of her.

His confident stride faltered when he spotted the back of Joni. The redhead sat perched elegantly on the kitchen stool, while Danica stood across the island from her in her rumpled blue sundress.

"Joni?" Asher's deep voice held unmistakable surprise. "What are you doing here?"

Danica's stomach knotted instantly. The familiar way he said the woman's name and the shock in his tone—a horrible thought crashed through her mind. Had she just spent the morning with someone else's boyfriend? Her face burned with suddenhumiliation. How could she not have asked such a basic question before letting him touch her that way?

"Asher! There you are." Joni rose gracefully, her eyes drinking in his half-dressed state. "Don't you look delicious this morning."

Danica's fingers clenched around the coffee pot she was holding. She set it down with deliberate care before she could drop it.

"Breakfast is getting cold," Danica said, trying to sound normal. "Will you join us, Asher?"

His green eyes flicked between the two women, and something unreadable passed over his face before he nodded. "Let me just..." He buttoned his shirt partway, leaving the top three buttons undone.

The three settled at the island, Danica feeling increasingly out of place as Joni leaned

toward Asher with practiced familiarity.

"Your little human friend is quite the domestic goddess," Joni remarked, fork poised over her untouched eggs. "Though I'm surprised to find her here so early."

Human? Danica's brow furrowed at the strange phrasing.

"Danica is helping with the festival," Asher said firmly, his eyes warming when they landed on Danica. "And she's my guest."

Something in his tone made Danica relax slightly. He didn't sound like a man hiding a relationship.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:30 am*

"Well," Joni continued, ignoring Danica completely, "you remember how good I was at those college mixers, don't you, Ash? I practically ran the social committee single-handed."

"That was a long time ago, Joni," Asher replied, taking a bite of bacon.

"Ten years," Joni sighed dramatically. "But doesn't it feel like yesterday? God, those nights in your college apartment..." She trailed off, shooting Danica a smug glance before continuing. "Best relationship of my life, honestly. The chemistry we had—off the charts."

Danica stabbed at her pancake, suddenly finding the maple syrup pattern fascinating.

"Stanford was good for you," Asher acknowledged neutrally.

"It was the right choice, even if leaving you was torture," Joni continued. "But moving to California was worth it. I've been organizing corporate events for the most prestigious firms in San Francisco these past few years. The client list would make your head spin."

Danica couldn't help herself. "So, what brings you back to Ectorius after all this time?"

Joni's perfect smile tightened. "Home is home. And I wouldn't miss the annual festival for anything." She touched Asher's forearm possessively. "Have you reconsidered my offer, by the way?"

"What offer?" Danica asked before she could stop herself.

Asher shifted uncomfortably. "Joni suggested we might?—"

"It's clutch business," Joni cut in smoothly, her green-gold eyes flashing. "Nothing that would interest an outsider."

Clutch business? Something wasn't adding up about Joni's sudden appearance after a decade away. The woman clearly had designs on Asher—that much was obvious.

Asher cleared his throat. "Joni, I should tell you something about Danica?—"

"Your breakfast is getting cold," Joni interrupted again, her eyes never leaving Asher's exposed chest. "And I must say, you look better than ever, Ash. Alpha life has been good to you."

Suddenly, Joni set her coffee mug down with a definitive clink against the granite countertop. "But I want you to know, Ash," Joni said, looking directly at him, "I'm happy you've finally found your true mate. I always knew you'd never truly settledown unless it was with someone who gave you that mate-level intensity."

The fork in Danica's hand froze midway to her mouth. "True mate?" she echoed, her brow furrowing as the eggs on her fork suddenly seemed less appealing. "What exactly does that mean?"

Joni's gaze darted between Danica and Asher, and Danica noticed how Asher's eyes widened in what might've been shock. Something like realization flashed across Joni's perfect features, followed immediately by a look that might've been embarrassment—if Danica believed this woman was capable of such an emotion.

"Oh! I'm so sorry," Joni fluttered, reaching for her purse with a graceful sweep. "I've



clearly said more than I should have." She stood up, barely having touched the food on her plate. "I really must get going. My parents are waiting for me at their place."

Before Asher could respond, Joni was striding toward the door, her designer heels clicking rapidly against the hardwood. "Lovely to meet you, Danica. Asher, we'll talk soon."

The front door opened and closed, and then a weighted silence descended on the kitchen.

Danica turned to Asher, who looked like a man caught in the headlights of an oncoming truck. "So," she said, folding her arms across her chest, "want to explain what 'true mate' means and why she assumed I already knew about it?"

Asher exhaled slowly, running his large hands through his short dark hair. His eyes met hers with a piercing intensity that made her heart race.

"Dragon shifters have fated mates," he said without preamble. "One person in all the world who's perfectly matched to us. Only the truly lucky ever find theirs."

Danica's mind raced to process this information. "And I'm... yours? Gerri knew that when she brought me here?"

Asher nodded, his jaw set in a firm line. "I felt it the moment I saw you. Every dragon does when they meet their mate."

"So that explains what Gerri meant yesterday," Danica said, pieces clicking into place. "About what else your advisory council said besides not allowing outsider help with planning the festival."

"They said I can have help planning the festival if that help comes from my mate,"

Asher confirmed, leaning forward on his elbows. "Which you are, so you're allowed to, and the council will approve."

He reached across the island, his large hand covering hers. The warmth of his touch sent electricity coursing up her arm.

"Since the founding of this town centuries ago, this festival has always been planned by the clutch Alpha... and his mate." A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. "Which is you, Danica."

She pulled her hand back, needing physical space to process this bombshell. "That's... a lot to take in. Finding out I'm your 'fated mate' after knowing you for all of one day."

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:30 am*

"I know it's overwhelming," he admitted, his voice softening.

"Maybe we should just focus on planning the festival for now," she suggested. "And deal with all this... mate stuff... later?"

Relief and something like hope flickered across Asher's face. "That would be perfect," he agreed, then hesitated. "But I'll need to introduce you as my mate, so the town understands I haven't broken my commitment by hiring an outsider. Would that be okay with you?"

Danica considered this. Playing the role of "mate" while she figured out her feelings seemed reasonable enough. "I can go along with that."

The change in Asher was immediate and startling. His entire face lit up with joy, as if she'd given him the most precious gift imaginable rather than a tentative agreement. In one fluid motion, he rounded the kitchen island, scooped her up by the waist, and spun her in a circle.

"Asher!" she squealed, grabbing his shoulders for support.

His laughter rumbled through his chest against her, deep and genuine. "You have no idea what this means to me," he said, setting her down but keeping his hands firmly on her waist.

Despite her reservations, Danica couldn't help smiling at his unbridled enthusiasm. His joy was contagious, his green eyes dancing with light. What was she getting herself into with this dragon shifter mayor? Yet somehow, the uncertainty didn't

frighten her as much as it probably should.

Before she could overthink it, Asher's mouth descended on hers in a passionate kiss that made her toes curl. His lips were firm yet gentle, claiming hers with searing intensity. This was a man—a dragon—who knew exactly what he wanted.

And apparently, what he wanted was her.

EIGHT

ASHER

Asher's mouth moved against Danica's, claiming her lips with a passion that left no doubt about his feelings for her. She responded with equal fervor, sending electricity coursing through his body. Her soft curves pressed against his hard chest as he pulled her closer, one hand cupping the back of her head while the other splayed across her lower back.

Though Asher knew Danica didn't fully grasp the gravity of their situation yet—the permanence of their bond and the fact that he'd never be satisfied with another woman again—he savored this moment of connection. Her light blue sundress rustled against his black slacks as he deepened the kiss, and he drank in her unique scent that called to him.

The doorbell's chime shattered their intimate bubble again. Asher reluctantly broke the kiss, his eyes blazing with intensity as he gazed down at Danica's flushed face. "Hold that thought," he murmured, his voice husky with desire.

As they approached the front door, Asher's mind raced. He prayed it wasn't Joni returning to cause more trouble. He took a steadying breath and opened the door, finding several key festival volunteers standing on his front steps.

"Alpha," a stocky man with salt-and-pepper hair greeted. "We received your email about the new plans."

Asher's posture straightened, slipping easily into his leadership role. "Come in," he said, ushering the group into his spacious living room. The volunteers' eyes widened as they took in the opulent surroundings—gleaming hardwood floors, plush leather furniture, and floor-to-ceiling windows offering a panoramic view of the lush forest beyond his mansion.

With a protective hand on Danica's lower back, Asher guided her forward. "Everyone, I'd like you to meet Danica Ulrich." His voice carried a note of pride as he continued, "My mate."

A chorus of gasps and congratulations erupted from the group. Asher could sense their curiosity bubbling beneath the surface, but he held up a hand to stave off questions. "We'll save the details for later. Right now, we need to focus on the festival."

As the group settled into the living room, Asher couldn't help but marvel at how naturally Danica fit in. She exuded confidence as she began outlining their plans, her enthusiasm infectious. His dragon preened with satisfaction, knowing he'd found such a capable and beautiful mate.

"We've redesigned the layout to incorporate both traditional elements and some fresh, modern ideas," Danica explained, gesturing to the sketches spread across the coffee table.

Asher leaned in, his arm brushing against Danica's as he pointed out specific details. "The Firebreathers band will still have their prime spot on the main stage. But we're adding some interactive demonstrations on a side stage to engage the younger crowd."

One of the volunteers, a petite woman with curly blonde hair, raised her hand. "What about the nighttime activities? Will there still be room for... you know?" She glanced meaningfully at Danica.

Asher's jaw tightened slightly. He knew they were referring to the night shifting ceremony, a sacred tradition for their dragon community. "Yes, we've allocated space and time for our usual evening rituals," he assured them, his tone brooking no further discussion on the matter.

As the meeting progressed, Asher found himself constantly drawn to Danica. The way her brows furrowed in concentration and the animated gestures she made while explaining her ideas—every little detail captivated him. He had to remind himself to focus on the festival, rather than imagining all the ways he wanted to explore their newfound connection, and her body.

"Alright, team," Asher said, clapping his hands together as they wrapped up the discussion. "We've got our marching orders. Let's make this the best Founders Festival Ectorius has ever seen."

The volunteers filed out, buzzing with excitement about the upcoming event. As the door closed behind the last person, Asher turned to Danica, his eyes smoldering with unspoken desire.

"Now," he growled softly, backing her against the living room wall. "Where were we?"

Asher's body thrummed with desire as he pressed Danica up against the wall. The scent of her—an intoxicating blend of lavender and something uniquely Danica—filled his nostrils, threatening to overwhelm his senses.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:30 am*

Without waiting for a response, Asher captured Danica's lips in a searing kiss. His hands roamed her curves, savoring the softness of her skin through the fabric of her sundress. Danica responded with equal intensity, her fingers tangling in his hair.

Just as Asher's dragon instincts began to take over, urging him to claim his mate fully, Danica pulled away. Her chest heaved as she caught her breath, her brown eyes wide.

"Asher," she panted, "we really need to stop. The festival starts tomorrow, and you promised we'd focus on the preparations."

A low rumble of frustration escaped Asher's throat. His inner dragon protested, demanding he continue, but the rational part of his brain knew she was right. Still, he couldn't resist one last indulgence.

"Just one more minute," he murmured, dipping his head to trail kisses along her neck. His teeth grazed her sensitive skin, eliciting a soft moan from her that sent a shiver through him.

With herculean effort, Asher finally stepped back, his hands clenched at his sides. "Okay, you're right," he admitted, his voice still rough with need. "Let's head to my office."

As they climbed the stairs to his home office, his mind raced. How was he supposed to focus on festival planning when all he wanted was to lose himself in her completely? The dragon in him bristled at the delay, but he knew his duties to the town came first.

In his spacious office, with its mahogany desk and floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, Asher settled into his leather chair. Danica perched on the edge of his desk, her legs crossed at the ankle. The sight of her there again in his personal space sent a thrill through him.

"Alright," Danica said, all business now. "Let's start with the food trucks."

Asher nodded, forcing himself to focus. He pulled out his phone, grateful for the distraction. "I've got connections in New Orleans. We'll get the best trucks here, no matter the cost."

As they made calls and sent emails, Asher kept finding himself constantly drawn to Danica. Every detail about her simply captivated him.

"Great news," Danica exclaimed after hanging up with a DJ. "We've got music for the side stage during the day."

Asher grinned, unable to resist reaching out to touch her face. "You're incredible, you know that?"

A blush crept across Danica's cheeks, and Asher's dragon preened at the effect he had on her. He leaned in, fully intending to steal another kiss, when his stomach let out an embarrassingly loud growl.

Danica laughed, the sound light and musical. "I think someone's hungry again. Why don't we take a break for lunch?"

Asher glanced at his watch, surprised to see it was nearly noon. The morning had flown by in a flurry of planning and stolen glances at Danica, whose sundress accentuated the curves he couldn't stop thinking about.



"You're right. I know a great little place in town," he said, straightening the cuffs of his black dress shirt, the top two buttons undone to reveal a glimpse of his tanned skin. "What do you say we grab a bite and then tackle the rest of the last-minute preparations?"

As they stood to leave, Asher marveled again at how naturally Danica fit into his life. His dragon hummed with contentment, knowing they'd found their perfect match. Festival planning or not, he knew one thing for certain—he didn't intend to ever let Danica go.

"Let's take the Porsche," he suggested, jingling his keys. Getting into town would serve two purposes: checking on the setup crew's progress and removing himself from the dangerous privacy of his mansion. Every moment alone with Danica was testing his restraint.

As they stepped outside his front door, Danica paused on the front steps. "Is that my car?" She pointed to her sedan parked in his circular driveway.

"I brought it back here last night when I went to get your suitcase," Asher explained, enjoying the surprise in her eyes. "Figured you'd want your own transportation at some point."

"You didn't have to do that," she said, tilting her head up at him.

"I wanted to." The simple truth resonated in him. He wanted to do everything for her and provide everything she needed. The alpha in him demanded nothing less.

The drive to town was quick, the powerful engine of his red Porsche purring beneath them. He couldn't help noticing how Danica's hair danced in the breeze from the cracked windows, and how she ran her fingers along the leather seat appreciatively.

The Italian restaurant, Bella Notte, sat nestled between a bookstore and a boutique on Main Street. As they entered, the owner, Giuseppe, broke into a wide smile.

"Alpha! And this must be your mate!" The elderly dragon shifter hurried over, clasping Danica's hand warmly. "The whole town is buzzing with the news!"

Asher placed his hand possessively on Danica's back. "News travels fast."

"When the Alpha finds his mate after all these years? Like wildfire!" Giuseppe led them to a secluded corner booth, away from prying eyes but still visible enough to satisfy the curious glances thrown their way.

They slid into the booth, sitting side by side rather than across from each other. Asher savored the feeling of Danica's shoulder brushing against his and the subtle floral scent of her perfume intoxicating him.

After ordering their lunch, Asher found himself opening up during a quiet moment. Their shoulders touched again as she reached for her water glass, and something in him gave way.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:30 am*

"I never thought I'd be Alpha so young," he admitted, his voice low. "I had other plans. Graduated college ten years ago with dreams of running my own furniture business."

Danica turned to face him, genuine interest lighting her brown eyes. "Furniture? You make furniture?"

"When I get the chance. Which isn't often anymore." He traced the condensation on his water glass. "I've got a workshop in the back of the mansion, but it mostly collects dust these days."

"Why don't you make time for it?"

"Being Alpha without a mate is... demanding." The admission cost him something, revealing a vulnerability he rarely showed. "There's always something that needs my attention. The load was meant to be shared."

Danica's expression softened. "If I really am your fated mate, I'd love to help share that load. So you can get back to doing what you love."

The words hit Asher with physical force. Not even Joni, during their years together, had ever offered to help him pursue his passion. She'd been more interested in the status of his eventual position as Alpha and what it would afford her. But Danica, who barely knew him, already understood what would truly make him happy.

His arm moved around her shoulders, drawing her closer in a gesture both protective and tender. The dragon within him purred with satisfaction at having her nestled

against his side.

"You're something else, you know that?" he murmured, his lips close to her ear. "I've never met anyone like you."

NINE

DANICA

Danica felt a blush warming her cheeks as she basked in Asher's words, her heart fluttering like a caged bird. His lips so close to her ear sent delicious shivers cascading down her spine.

"I've never met anyone like you either," she admitted, her eyes meeting his piercing gaze. The words she didn't say hung in the air between them – how he was the most intense, caring, and attractive man she'd ever encountered, all rolled into one perfect package.

She still couldn't believe that Gerri had failed to mention that Danica was Asher's fated mate. Then again, the matchmaker's 100% success rate wasn't an accident. Every moment with Asher confirmed what her body and soul already seemed to know – they fit together perfectly, like complementary puzzle pieces finally united.

Their chemistry was undeniable, unlike anything she'd experienced with any previous partner. Just thinking about their interrupted encounter on the kitchen island that morning made her thighs clench involuntarily. The memory of his impressive length pressing against her core remained branded in her mind, making concentration nearly impossible today.

"I can't believe I didn't ask earlier about what you did before becoming Alpha," she said, genuinely fascinated by this revelation about his craftsman side. "What kind of

furniture do you make?"

Before he could answer, Giuseppe appeared with two steaming plates. The aroma of garlic, fresh herbs, and tomato sauce wafted upward, making Danica's mouth water instantly.

"Buon appetito!" Giuseppe announced with a theatrical flourish.

Danica twirled her fork in the pasta and took a bite, closing her eyes as the flavors exploded across her palate. "Oh my god, this is incredible. Best Italian food I've ever tasted."

"Giuseppe's family has been making these recipes for generations," Asher explained, his arm still draped possessively around her shoulders. "Most businesses here have been operating for centuries. That's what makes the festival so important – it celebrates not just our dragon heritage, but the town's continued success."

Watching Asher talk about the town, Danica was struck by how deeply he cared for his community. His eyes lit up with the same passion when he soon described the furniture he'd crafted.

"I specialize in hardwoods – walnut, cherry, mahogany," he explained, gesturing with his free hand. "Tables mostly, but also chairs, cabinets, desks, bed frames..." His eyebrow quirked suggestively at the last item.

"I'd love to see your workshop sometime," Danica said, taking another bite of her pasta. "And some of your pieces."

"You've already seen one," Asher replied. "The mahogany desk in my office – I made that five years ago, right before I became Alpha, after my father passed."

Danica placed her hand over his on the table. "I'm so sorry about your father."

"He was a great man." Asher's thumb stroked the back of her hand. "He was proud of me. I was just about to launch my furniture business when he had a sudden heart attack."

"That's terrible," Danica said softly, squeezing his hand. "I promise I'll help you find a way to pursue your passion again, one way or another."

The vulnerability in Asher's eyes as he looked at her made her heart squeeze. "Nobody's ever offered to help me like that before."

"Well, get used to it," she replied with a playful nudge.

After they finished their meal, they stepped back out onto Main Street. The afternoon sun cast a golden glow over the storefronts. Danica's sundress fluttered around her knees in the gentle breeze as Asher guided her with his hand on her lower back.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:30 am*

"Let's check on the festival setup," he said, his thumb tracing small circles against her back through the thin cotton fabric.

Danica nodded, hyperaware of his touch as they headed toward the town square. She still couldn't get over how quickly everything had changed. Two days ago, she'd been a single event planner focused solely on her career. Now she was supposedly the fated mate of a dragon shifter Alpha mayor who moonlighted as a furniture maker.

And strangely enough, it felt absolutely right.

When they got to the town square, Danica noticed immediately that it had transformed dramatically since yesterday. White tents stood in neat rows, while jewel-toned canopies created vibrant focal points exactly where she'd suggested. Volunteers scurried about hanging fairy lights from the tent ceilings, creating the magical ambiance she'd envisioned. The main stage dominated one end of the square, while a smaller platform had been constructed at the opposite end.

"This is amazing," Danica breathed, surveying their collaborative vision coming to life. "I can't believe they've accomplished so much in such a short time."

Asher's chest puffed with pride as he took in the scene. "Dragon shifters work fast when properly motivated. And finding out their Alpha's mate is finally here is pretty damn motivating."

A group of townspeople waved enthusiastically as they spotted them, and Danica felt a surprising warmth spread through her chest at their genuine acceptance. An older woman approached with a basket of pastries, pressing them into Danica's hands.

"For our Alpha's mate," she said with a wink. "My special dragon-fire tarts. Welcome to our clutch, dear."

"Thank you," Danica replied, genuinely touched. "These look delicious."

After they examined the festival grounds more thoroughly, Asher squeezed her waist. "I need to run to town hall — council business. I'll be right back." His eyes darkened as he leaned down, his lips brushing against her ear. "Don't go far. I'm not finished with you today."

His possessive tone sent shivers through her. "I'll just check the street preparations," she managed, her voice embarrassingly breathy.

Asher pressed a quick, hard kiss to her lips before striding away, his powerful frame commanding attention from everyone he passed.

Danica took a deep breath to steady herself and continued down Main Street, clipboard in hand. The transformation extended beyond the square—storefronts were adorned with festive banners, and strings of lights crisscrossed overhead, ready to illuminate the evening celebrations.

As she rounded a corner, she spotted a flash of vibrant red hair. Joni stood directing a group of volunteers hanging garlands between lampposts. Gone was the sophisticated wrap dress from breakfast, replaced with a casual outfit that shouldn't have looked as stylish as it did—designer jeans that hugged her athletic frame and a simple white t-shirt that somehow screamed "expensive."

Danica paused, observing the woman who had seemed so friendly yet simultaneously dismissive this morning at Asher's mansion. Something about the way Joni commanded the volunteers reminded her of Asher's natural authority—it must be a dragon thing. Yet there was tension in Joni's shoulders that hadn't been there earlier.



Joni hadn't noticed her yet, giving Danica a moment to collect her thoughts. The dragon shifter had congratulated them on their fated mate bond. But something in Danica's event planner instincts—honed from years of reading people and situations—whispered caution.

Is she really that okay with her ex finding his fated mate in the past twenty-four hours? Danica wondered.

Danica stood on the sidewalk, rooted in place, watching Joni from a distance. She was impressed despite herself at how the dragon shifter moved and interacted with others. There was something magnetic about these dragon shifters—a natural grace and power that seemed to radiate from them.

As she observed Joni directing the volunteers with practiced efficiency, a hushed conversation behind her grabbed her attention.

"That's her? The Alpha's supposed mate?" a woman whispered, not quite quietly enough.

"Some human event planner," a man replied with obvious disdain. "She's not one of us."

"What could she possibly know about our traditions?" another voice chimed in. "Does she even have the strength or instincts to support an Alpha?"

"Or the loyalty our clutch needs?"

Danica felt her body go rigid, her cheeks burning with shame and anger. Her stomach twisted into a tight knot as the whispers continued, each word like a small dagger between her ribs. She'd faced difficult clients and handled countless stressful situations before, but this was different. These people were judging her very existence

and her worthiness to stand beside Asher.

Before she could decide whether to confront them or flee, a flash of red hair appeared at her side.

"Are you okay?" Joni asked, her green-gold eyes assessing Danica with surprising concern.

Danica's gaze flicked involuntarily toward the group of gossipers, who now stood awkwardly shifting their feet. Joni followed her look, and her expression hardened instantly.

"You worthless gossips," Joni snapped, her voice carrying an undercurrent of something wild and dangerous. "Is this how we welcome our Alpha's mate? With petty jealousy and backbiting?"

The group scattered like startled birds, muttering apologies as they retreated.

"They said I don't have the strength or instincts to be Asher's mate," Danica murmured, hating how small her voice sounded. "That I'm just 'some human' who doesn't belong."

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:30 am*

Joni sighed, flipping her long red hair over her shoulder. "Look, whether you were human or dragon, there'd still be jealousy. It comes with being the Alpha's mate." She placed a perfectly manicured hand on Danica's arm. "Dragons are territorial and possessive, especially about our town and our people."

"I didn't ask for any of this," Danica said.

"So, are you really up for it?" Joni asked, her tone gentle but her eyes penetrating. "Being an Alpha's mate isn't easy. The responsibility is enormous."

Danica swallowed hard. "I just want to focus on the festival right now. It starts tomorrow, and I promised I'd help. I haven't really given the 'mate thing' much thought yet."

"Hey," Joni said suddenly, "what's that by your foot?"

Danica looked down and saw a folded piece of paper on the sidewalk. She bent to pick it up and unfolded it, her blood running cold as she read the words scrawled in angry black ink:

A true mate wouldn't destroy what he was born to protect. The Alpha is blind. The town will never follow an outsider or a human.

The paper trembled in her hands. "What have I gotten myself into?" she whispered, her chest tightening. "I never asked to be anyone's fated mate or part of a dragon clutch."

Her mind spun with frantic thoughts. Maybe I should just leave. Go back to New Orleans. Forget any of this ever happened. I don't belong here.

Looking up, she spotted Asher striding purposefully toward them. Her heart did that ridiculous flutter again, even as panic clawed at her.

She was about to show him the note when Joni snatched it from her fingers, crumpling it in her fist.

"Don't worry about this trash," Joni said firmly. "And definitely don't burden Asher with it. He has enough on his plate already." Without waiting for a response, she strode away, taking the evidence with her.

Danica stood frozen, feeling utterly lost. Her car was back at Asher's mansion. She had no way to escape and nowhere to run. She suddenly felt trapped.

Asher reached her, his green eyes lighting up when he met her gaze. His hand settled possessively on her back, warm and steady.

"What were you and Joni talking about?" he asked, bending down to press a kiss to her temple.

She opened her mouth but couldn't find the words. How could she tell him some people were already rejecting her? That she was scared and confused and wondering if she'd made a terrible mistake.

But as she looked up into his eyes—eyes filled with hope and something that looked dangerously close to adoration—she couldn't bring herself to hurt him. Not yet anyway. She'd promised Gerri she would help with the festival, and she never went back on her word.

"Just festival stuff," she lied, forcing a smile. "Tomorrow is showtime."

TEN

ASHER

Asher reached Danica, his eyes lighting up as she turned toward him. The afternoon sun caught the highlights in her brown hair, making it glow against the light blue fabric of her sundress. Something about seeing her there, clipboard in hand, made his chest tighten with possessive pride. His mate. His woman. Here, standing in his town and helping his people.

He studied her face, noting the slight tension at the corners of her mouth. It seemed like she was hiding something from him. His dragon senses detected the subtle change in her scent—stress mingled with anxiety. But he wouldn't push. Not now.

"We don't have much time left," he agreed, keeping his hand resting on her back. "Just this afternoon until dark. Thankfully, the volunteers really stepped up this morning. It's coming together faster than I expected."

The council meeting had been brief but intense. Councilman Thorne, one of the elders, had objected to a human mate, as expected. But the others had quickly reminded him of the ancient texts. A true mate bond was sacred, regardless of species. Besides, as Councilman Garron had pointed out with a smirk, Danica might not remain human for long after their mating ritual was complete.

That thought alone made Asher's body tighten with desire. What would she look like as a dragon? Would she take on his coloring, or develop her own unique scales?

"What are you thinking about?" Danica asked, nudging him as they walked over to the main stage area. "You've got this intense look."

"You," he answered honestly, enjoying the blush that spread across her cheeks.  
"Always you."

They spent the rest of the afternoon moving through the festival grounds, making adjustments to decorations, approving the placement of vendor booths, and finalizing the performance schedule. Whenever another clutch member approached, Asher made sure to keep Danica firmly at his side, his arm around her waist or his hand resting on her lower back—a clear signal of his claim.

As the sun began to set, casting long shadows across the town square, Asher stepped back to survey their work. The festival grounds had been completely transformed into something magical—far beyond what he'd initially imagined. Colorful tents stood in strategic locations, breaking up the traditional white canopies. Fairy lights twinkled from every tree, creating a soft glow against the deepening twilight. The main stage was draped in cloth that transitioned from deep red to burnished gold, the colors of his dragon form.

"Dragon fire and golden treasure," Danica said softly beside him, nodding at the stage. "I thought it would be a nice tribute to you."

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:30 am*

Asher turned to her, stunned that she'd incorporated such a personal touch. Without caring who might be watching, he pulled her against his chest, one hand tangling in her hair as he tilted her face up to his.

"You are extraordinary," he growled, his voice lowering to a register that rumbled from deep in his chest. "I couldn't have done any of this without you."

She blinked up at him, genuine surprise crossing her features. "Really?"

"Really." He ran his thumb along her jawline. "This festival would have been a disaster without you. Your vision—your creativity—made it exceptional."

Around them, the last of the volunteers were finishing up, many shooting approving glances their way. Even Elder Markov, notorious for his skepticism of outsiders, gave Asher a grudging nod of respect as he passed.

"Everyone seems pleased," Danica observed, leaning into his touch. "Even your council members."

"They are." Asher's thumb traced the curve of her lower lip, delighting in the small catch in her breath. "And tomorrow morning, the whole town will see what we've created together."

Asher stepped back reluctantly, his dragon instincts craving more contact with his mate. The black dress shirt he wore felt suddenly restrictive across his shoulders, and he undid another button at his throat. The cooling evening air felt good against his heated skin as he watched Danica smooth down her light blue sundress.

"Ready to head out?" he asked, offering his arm in a possessive gesture that felt completely natural. Her delicate hand slid into place, and a primal sense of rightness settled in him.

They walked through the town square toward his red Porsche parked on Main Street, Asher hyperaware of every admiring glance Danica received from passersby. His dragon rumbled with satisfaction—let them look, let them see. She belonged with him.

"The Black Kettle has the best jambalaya in town," he suggested as he opened the passenger door for her, unable to resist brushing his hand against her back. "Or we could grab something from Rosie's if you're in the mood for something lighter."

"Jambalaya sounds perfect," Danica replied, her brown eyes sparkling up at him.

Asher slid behind the wheel, enjoying the purr of the engine as it roared to life. "Your wish is my command."

As they drove through the winding streets of Ectorius, Asher stole glances at Danica's profile. Her hair danced in the breeze from the rolled down windows. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt this light and this eager for what came next.

"You know," he said, navigating a turn with practiced ease, "I should probably ask if you'd prefer to go to the hotel tonight instead of crashing at my place again."

The words contradicted everything his dragon demanded—to keep her close, protected, and in his territory—but he forced himself to offer the choice. His knuckles whitened slightly on the steering wheel as he awaited her answer.

Danica turned to face him fully, her expression unreadable. "Is that what you want?"



Asher let out a low laugh. "What I want involves you sleeping in a different bed than last night." He paused at a stop sign, holding her gaze. "But it doesn't involve you leaving my place."

The blush that swept across her face was worth the momentary vulnerability. He pulled up to the Black Kettle, pleased to see her smile hadn't diminished.

Ten minutes later, they pulled into his driveway with aromatic containers of food. Instead of heading to the dining room, Asher grabbed a bottle of wine and two glasses.

"Follow me," he instructed, leading her through the mansion to the back door. "I have something to show you tonight."

His stone patio looked especially inviting. He'd had the foresight to leave a few hurricane lanterns scattered around earlier that morning, and now he quickly lit them, their golden glow casting dancing shadows across the flagstones. The night air carried the scent of jasmine and magnolia from his gardens.

"Give me two minutes," he said, disappearing into a storage cabinet and emerging with a handful of pillar candles. He arranged them on the wrought iron patio table, their flames steady in the still evening air.

Danica's eyes widened as she took in the transformed space. "This is beautiful."

Asher pulled out her chair, pleased by her reaction. As Alpha, he was accustomed to commanding respect, but her genuine appreciation kindled something deeper in him. He wanted—needed—to provide for her and to show her that being his mate meant being cherished.

As they ate, Danica gazed upward at the blanket of stars. "I never see skies like this in

the city. It's so much brighter and clearer here in Ectorius."

Asher followed her gaze to the constellation-filled expanse above them. "One of the benefits of living away from light pollution," he agreed. "Though I've never appreciated it quite as much as I do tonight."

His dragon preened at the soft smile that curved her lips. He'd put that there. He'd brought her pleasure. It was a primal satisfaction that ran deeper than reason.

Asher watched with satisfaction as Danica took her final bite of jambalaya, her eyes closing briefly in appreciation. The candlelight gilded her skin, turning it to liquid gold that made his dragon rumble with possessive pleasure. As Alpha, he was accustomed to commanding rooms full of powerful shifters, but this petite human woman had ignited something primal in him that no amount of power or position had ever touched.

"Would you like to take a walk through the gardens?" He rose from his chair, extending his hand toward her. "The night jasmine only blooms after sunset. The scent is... intoxicating."

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:30 am*

Much like you, he thought, as her delicate fingers slid into his palm.

"I'd love that," Danica replied, setting her napkin beside her empty plate.

The stone pathways wound through precisely manicured hedges and wild, untamed flower beds—a contradiction that pleased his dragon sense of order balanced with freedom. Moonlight spilled across the grounds, casting elongated shadows and turning Danica's blue sundress nearly silver in its glow.

"I designed these gardens myself," he admitted, guiding her around a corner where a marble fountain bubbled quietly. "Something about creating beauty from chaos appealed to me."

"Like ruling a town of dragon shifters?" Her question was perceptive, cutting straight through to a truth he rarely acknowledged.

Asher's laugh was low and appreciative. "Exactly like that. The past five years as Alpha have been..." He paused, searching for words that wouldn't sound like complaint. Leaders didn't complain. "Challenging. Running a town, protecting my clutch—there's a weight to it I wasn't prepared for."

His thumb traced circles on the back of her hand as they strolled beneath a moonlit arbor covered in climbing roses.

"Doing it alone has been the hardest part," he continued, the words emerging with surprising ease. "An Alpha traditionally rules with his mate at his side. The elders have been patient, but there's been... pressure."

Danica slowed her steps, her expression thoughtful in the dappled moonlight. "I'm not sure I'm what they had in mind." Her voice had lost some of its usual confidence. "I heard some people talking today when you were at town hall. They said I wasn't strong enough to be your mate. That I couldn't possibly have the instincts to support an Alpha. That I don't belong here."

The instant surge of protective rage nearly overpowered him. His dragon clawed beneath his skin, demanding he find those who had upset her.

"Who said that?" The question emerged as a growl, his free hand clenching into a fist.

"It doesn't matter." She shook her head. "But they're right, aren't they? I'm human. I'll never breathe fire or have super strength. I'm an imposter as your fated mate."

Asher stopped abruptly, turning to face her fully. He caught her chin between his thumb and forefinger, tilting her face up to meet his gaze. The intensity of his eyes locked on hers, unwavering.

"Those people are idiots," he stated flatly. "You're the strongest person I've ever met. You walked into a town of strangers, faced down a stubborn, territorial Alpha—who, I might add, was being a complete ass—and managed to put me properly in my place."

Her lips quirked at that, encouraging him to continue.

"You transformed our festival from a disaster into something magnificent in two days. You did that without claws or fire. You did it with sheer force of will and brilliance." His voice dropped lower, rumbling from his chest. "That's the kind of strength an Alpha needs at his side."

Danica's shoulders relaxed slightly. "You really think so?"

"I know so." Asher stepped closer, the heat of his body radiating toward her in the cool night air. "What we pulled off together these past two days proves we're worthy of each other. We work very well together."

"We do, don't we?" Her smile returned, tentative but genuine. "Though I still can't help feeling scared. I've never felt so... needed before. It's terrifying."

Asher's hand slid to cradle her cheek. "You think I'm not scared? Being responsible for an entire town, making decisions that affect everyone—the weight of it is crushing sometimes."

"You make it look easy," she countered.

"It's not. But having you here..." He paused, the vulnerability uncomfortable but necessary. "You make the burden lighter. For the first time in years, I feel like I can breathe."

Danica's hand came up to cover his. "You make me feel seen. Valued. Beyond what I can do or create."

The moonlight caught the moisture gathering in her eyes, and Asher couldn't wait another moment. He leaned down, capturing her lips with his in a kiss that started gentle but quickly kindled into something fierce and hungry. His arm wrapped around her waist, pulling her flush against his body as his mouth claimed hers completely.

The dragon inside him roared with satisfaction as she melted against him, her fingers threading through his short dark hair. He backed her against the stone pillar of the arbor, his body caging her smaller frame as his kiss deepened further. The taste of her—sweet wine and spices—inflamed his senses until rational thought retreated beneath primal need.

"I want you," he growled against her lips, hardly recognizing his own voice. "All of you. Now."

ELEVEN

DANICA

Asher's kiss was a wildfire that consumed her completely. Danica's fingers tangled further in his dark hair, pulling him closer as if she could fuse their bodies together. His strong arm around her waist was unyielding, his strength both thrilling and grounding. When he broke the kiss to lift her into his arms, she let out a breathless laugh, her heart pounding in her chest.

"You're not exactly subtle, are you?" she teased, her voice trembling with anticipation.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:30 am*

"Subtlety's overrated," he growled, his green eyes blazing with burning desire. "I've waited long enough today."

He carried her through the moonlit gardens, his steps sure and deliberate. Danica clung to him, her body humming with electricity. The night air was cool against her skin, but his heat radiated through her, a promise of what was to come. She buried her face in the crook of his neck, inhaling the scent of him—clean and cedar and something wild. It was intoxicating.

Inside his mansion, he took the stairs two at a time, his grip on her never faltering. His bedroom was a reflection of him—commanding yet warm. The dark wood furniture, the rich fabrics, and the faint scent of cedar and smoke. He set her down gently, his hands lingering on her waist as he stepped back to look at her.

"You're so beautiful," he said, his voice low and rough. "Every damn inch of you."

Danica's cheeks burned, but she held his intense gaze, her confidence bolstered by the hunger in his eyes. "You're not so bad yourself, Alpha."

He smirked, a flicker of amusement softening his intensity.

Before she could blink, he was unzipping her dress as his mouth crashed against hers with a ferocity that left her breathless. Her dress pooled to the floor and his hands roamed her body, exploring every curve as if committing her to memory. She fumbled with the buttons of his black dress shirt, her fingers trembling with urgency. When she finally pushed it off his broad shoulders, she couldn't help but admire the hard lines of his chest, the defined muscles that spoke of strength and power.

"You're staring," he murmured, his voice laced with amusement.

"Can you blame me?" she shot back, her hands sliding over his chest. "You're kind of a masterpiece."

He chuckled, the sound deep and warm. "You're the true masterpiece, Danica. I'm just the lucky bastard who gets to touch you."

His words sent a shiver through her body. He backed her onto the bed, his body following hers as he trailed kisses down her neck, her collarbone, and her breasts. His mouth was hot and insistent, drawing gasps and moans from her as he teased her sensitive skin. She arched into him, her hands gripping his broad shoulders as pleasure coiled tight in her core.

"Asher," she breathed, her voice trembling. "Please."

He lifted his head, his green eyes dark with desire. "Please what?"

She swallowed, her heart racing. "Don't stop."

A slow, predatory smile spread across his face. "I don't plan to."

He moved lower, his hands sliding down her hips. He removed her panties in one swift motion and settled between her thighs. The first touch of his tongue against her sensitive folds made her gasp, her fingers tangling in the sheets. He soon became relentless, his mouth and fingers working in perfect harmony to drive her to the edge. She could feel her pleasure building, her body tightening with every stroke and every flick of his tongue.

"You're so wet for me," he murmured against her sensitive skin, his voice thick with satisfaction. "So perfect."



Danica's breath hitched as he curled his fingers inside her, hitting a spot that made her vision blur. Her hips bucked against him, her moans growing louder and more desperate. She was close, so close, and he knew it. He increased the pressure, his mouth and fingers working in perfect sync until she shattered, her body convulsing with pleasure.

"Asher!" she cried, her voice breaking as the waves of ecstasy crashed over her.

He didn't stop, drawing out her orgasm until she was trembling, her body spent and boneless. When he finally lifted his head, his lips glistening, she could only stare at him, her chest heaving as she tried to catch her breath.

"You're amazing," she whispered, her voice hoarse.

He crawled up her body, his eyes never leaving hers. "You're the amazing one," he said, brushing her hair from her face. "But I'm not done with you yet."

Her heart skipped a beat as he kissed her again, his body pressing hers into the mattress. She could feel the hard length of him against her thigh, and a fresh wave of desire surged through her. She wrapped her legs around him, drawing him closer.

"Then don't keep me waiting," she murmured against his lips.

He didn't. With a growl that sent shivers down her spine, he rolled off her onto his back, his hands moving with practiced ease to remove his black dress pants and boxers. His large cock sprang free, hard and throbbing, and Danica's breath caught at the sight of him. He was magnificent, every inch of him radiating power and need.

"Come here," he commanded, his voice thick with desire as he pulled her on top of him. She straddled his hips, her body trembling with anticipation as she reached down to guide him to her entrance. The tip of his cock pressed against her, and she

gasped at the sensation, her body already slick and ready for him.

"Take your time," he said, his hands gripping her hips, his eyes locked on hers. "I'm not going anywhere."

Danica bit her lip, her heart pounding as she slowly lowered herself onto him. Inch by delicious inch, he filled her, stretching her in the most exquisite way. She gasped, her head falling back as she took all of him, her body adjusting to his size. He was so large, so intense, and yet it felt so right, as if they were made for each other.

"You feel incredible," he groaned, his hands tightening on her hips. "So tight and so perfect."

Her breath came in shallow gasps as she began to move, starting slow, savoring every inch of him as she rocked her hips. She could feel the tension in his body, the way he was holding back, and it only fueled her desire. She wanted to see him lose control, to feel him give in to the same primal need that was coursing through her.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:30 am*

"Faster," she whispered, her voice trembling with need. "Harder."

Asher's eyes darkened, his grip on her hips tightening impossibly further as he met her movements with equal intensity. His thrusts became more urgent and more desperate. Danica's moans filled the room as pleasure built inside her. She wrapped her arms around his neck, her fingers grabbing his hair as she urged him on, her body moving in perfect sync with his.

"Asher," she gasped, her soft voice breaking as the pleasure became overwhelming. "I'm so close."

"Let go," he growled, his voice thick with need. "Come for me."

His words were all it took. With a cry, she shattered, her body convulsing as wave after wave of pleasure crashed over her. Her inner walls tightened around him, and he let out a guttural groan, his thrusts becoming even more frantic. With one final, deep thrust, he spilled himself inside her, his release filling her completely.

Danica collapsed against his chest, her body trembling as she tried to catch her breath. She could feel his heart pounding beneath her, his arms wrapped tightly around her as he held her close. For a moment, they just lay there, their bodies still connected, their breaths mingling in the quiet room.

"That was..." Danica began, her voice soft and breathless.

"Intense. And perfect," Asher finished for her, his voice equally soft. He brushed a kiss against her forehead, his arms tightening around her. "You're everything,

Danica."

Danica smiled, her heart swelling with emotion. There was something about Asher that made her feel alive in a way she never had before. It wasn't just the physical connection, though that was undeniable. It was the way he looked at her, the way he touched her, and the way he made her feel like she was the most important person in the world.

"I've never felt this way before," she admitted, her voice barely a whisper. "It's like... like I've finally found where I belong."

Asher's eyes softened, his hand cupping her cheek as he looked into her eyes. "You do belong here," he said, his voice firm and sure. "With me."

Danica's heart swelled at his words, and she leaned in to kiss him, her lips soft and tender against his. Asher responded with equal tenderness, his hand sliding into her hair as he deepened the kiss. For a moment, they just stayed like that, lost in each other, the world outside forgotten.

When they finally broke apart, Danica rested her head on his chest, her fingers tracing idle patterns on his skin. "So," she said, her voice teasing, "what's next?"

Asher chuckled, the sound warm and rich. "Next," he said, his hand sliding down her back, "we take a shower."

Danica laughed, the sound light and carefree. "I like the sound of that."

Asher grinned, his arms tightening around her as he rolled them over, pinning her beneath him. "Good, because I plan to savor you longer," he said, his voice low and full of promise.

Danica's laughter turned into a gasp as his lips found hers again, and she knew that this was just the beginning. With Asher, she had found something she hadn't even known she was looking for. And she didn't want to ever lose it.

Asher soon lifted Danica effortlessly off the bed, her body still humming from the intensity of their lovemaking, and carried her into his massive bathroom. The cool air kissed her skin, but his heat was a constant presence, grounding her. He put her down gently, his hands lingering on her waist as he reached for the shower knobs. The dual shower heads sprang to life, water cascading down in a warm, steady stream.

Danica tilted her head back, letting the water soak her hair and run down her body. She couldn't help but smile as Asher handed her a bar of soap, his green eyes glinting with mischief. "Think you can handle washing me without getting distracted?" she teased, her voice light but her heart pounding.

He smirked, taking the soap from her and lathering it between his hands. "Distracted? By you? Never." His fingers trailed down her arms, the soap bubbles sliding over her skin in a slow, deliberate motion. His touch was electric, and she felt her breath hitch as his hands moved to her shoulders, her back, and her hips. When his fingers brushed the curve of her breast, she let out a soft gasp.

"You're cheating," she accused, her voice trembling as his touch ignited every nerve in her body.

"Cheating?" He raised an eyebrow, his lips curving into a wicked grin. "I'm just making sure you're thoroughly clean."

"Thoroughly distracted, you mean," she shot back, but her protest was weak, her body already responding to him. She reached for the soap, determined to return the favor, but her hands were unsteady as she ran them over his chest, his abs, and his shoulders. Every inch of him was hard and powerful, and she couldn't help but

marvel at the strength coiled beneath his skin.

Their playful banter soon gave way to something hotter and more urgent. The water pounded around them, but it was nothing compared to the heat building between them. Asher soon pinned her up against the cool tiled wall. His body pressed against hers as he claimed her soft lips in a fierce kiss. She wrapped her legs around him, her hands grabbing his shoulders as he entered her in one smooth, deep thrust.

"God, you feel so good," he growled, his voice thick with need. His hips moved with a primal urgency, each thrust driving her higher and closer to the edge. She clung to him, her nails digging into his skin as she matched his rhythm, their bodies moving together in sync.

"Asher," she gasped, her voice cracking as the pleasure built to a crescendo.

"Come, Danica," he commanded, his voice low and fierce.

She soon cried out as her body shattered, every muscle convulsing as the waves of pleasure crashed through her. He followed her over the edge, his powerful release filling her so completely, his grip on her tightening as he buried his face in her neck.

For a moment, they didn't move, their bodies still intimately connected, their breaths mingling in the steam-filled air. Danica's legs trembled, but she didn't care. All that mattered was the man holding her, the way he made her feel, and the way he always looked at her like she was his entire world.

"You're everything I've ever wanted and everything I never knew I needed," she murmured, her voice soft and breathless.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:30 am*

"I feel the same way about you," he replied softly.

When they finally separated, Asher turned off the shower and grabbed a towel, wrapping it around her. His hands were gentle as he dried her off, and she smiled uncontrollably.

He soon led her back to the bedroom, his arm around her like he couldn't bear to let her go. They climbed into bed together and the sheets were cool against her skin. Asher pulled her close, his body a solid, comforting presence against hers. She rested her head on his chest and listened to the steady rhythm of his heartbeat.

"This is definitely where I belong," she whispered, her voice soft but sure. "With you."

His arms tightened around her and he brushed a kiss against her hair. "You're my mate, Danica. I'm never letting you go," he said, his voice full of promise.

She smiled, her heart filled with emotion. She didn't know what the future held, but in that moment, she knew one thing for certain—she was exactly where she wanted to be—in his arms.

TWELVE

ASHER

Asher woke up with sunshine streaming across his face, but the true warmth came from the woman nestled against his chest. Danica's naked body fit perfectly against

his, her soft curves molding to his hard planes. He traced his finger along her spine, savoring the silky texture of her skin.

His dragon stirred inside him, possessive and satisfied. She was his – not officially marked yet, but claimed in every other way that mattered.

"Screw the festival," he muttered under his breath, burying his nose in her hair and inhaling her intoxicating scent.

Duty. The word echoed annoyingly in his mind. As Alpha and mayor, he had responsibilities. People counting on him. A town waiting for his leadership. But his body ached to stay entwined with Danica's, and to savor every inch of her again.

She stirred against him, her brown eyes blinking open. She gave him a soft smile that sent heat straight to his groin.

"Morning," she whispered, her voice husky with sleep.

"I want to keep you here all day," he growled, pulling her tighter against him. "Lock the doors. Turn off the phones."

Danica laughed, the sound vibrating against his chest. "Tempting, but I believe someone has a festival to start, Mr. Mayor."

"Being responsible is highly overrated." He captured her soft lips in a kiss that quickly deepened, his hand sliding down to cup her ass.

She pulled back, her eyes dancing with mischief. "Later. You promised your town a festival, and I promised them the best damn festival they've ever seen."

Asher sighed dramatically. "You're killing me."



"Consider it delayed gratification." She slipped from his grasp with surprising agility, wrapping herself in his discarded button-down shirt. "I need to grab my things from the guest room."

He watched her go, admiring the way his shirt barely covered her ass. Last night replayed in his mind – her writhing beneath him then straddling him, taking control with a confidence that had driven him wild. Then the shower afterward, her back against the cold tile as he claimed her again, her legs wrapped around his waist as he drove into her.

"Christ," he muttered, forcing himself out of bed. Duty called, much as he wished to ignore it.

He showered quickly, memories of Danica's wet body pressed against his making the task more difficult than it should have been. The light gray suit waited on its hanger – his mayoral uniform for official functions. He dressed methodically, each button and cufflink a step further from the primal man who had claimed his mate last night and closer to the leader his people needed today.

As he fastened his watch, he stared at his reflection – composed, professional, and controlled. But his eyes betrayed him, burning with an intensity he couldn't disguise.

She had awakened something in him – not just desire, but a connection he hadn't known he was missing. Their connection transcended the physical, though God knows that aspect had exceeded his wildest expectations.

He descended the stairs, pausing at the sight that greeted him in the foyer.

Danica stood bathed in the morning light, a vision in a yellow sundress that hugged every curve he'd explored with his hands and mouth just hours before. The color made her skin glow and set off the rich brown of her hair. The hemline showed just

enough leg to make his mouth go dry.

"You're staring, Alpha." Her lips curled in a knowing smile.

"Can you really blame me?" He crossed to her in a few long strides, his hands finding her waist. "You look good enough to eat."

"You already did that yesterday," she quipped, her eyes sparkling with humor. "Twice."

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:30 am*

Asher laughed. "And I'm already hungry again."

He bent to kiss her, intending a quick peck, but her lips parted beneath his and he was lost. His hands slid down to her hips, pulling her flush against his chest.

"We're going to be late," she murmured against his mouth, even as her fingers tightened on his lapels.

"I'm the Alpha," he breathed against her sweet lips.

"That's exactly why we can't be late." She pulled back, straightening his tie. "Come on, your town is waiting for you."

Asher steered his Porsche through the streets of Ectorius, the powerful engine humming as they approached the transformed town square. He couldn't stop himself from stealing glances at Danica beside him, her profile lit by morning sunlight and a small smile on her lips as she surveyed their handiwork through the windshield.

"It looks pretty incredible," he admitted, pulling into his reserved parking spot. The town square had metamorphosed from a half-planned disaster two days ago into something truly magical. Jewel-toned tents mingled with traditional white ones, LED fairy lights were strung between trees and inside the tents ready to glow at dusk, and there was a perfect balance of modern flair and dragon heritage displays and booths. The food trucks were stationed at one end of the square near the side stage, and the main stage was on the other end draped with the beautiful color-changing cloth alternating between red and gold.

Danica hopped out, already scanning the area with a critical eye. "There are still a few things that need adjustment before the official opening. The lighting configuration near the main stage needs tweaking, and that banner over the east entrance is slightly crooked."

"Let me help," Asher offered, falling into step beside her. "I'm the one responsible for this last-minute rush. If I hadn't procrastinated until Gerri had to rescue me..."

"You mean rescue us both," Danica laughed, her clipboard already in hand. "I never would have met you otherwise."

That comment sent a surge of possessiveness through Asher. The idea of never finding her, his fated mate, made his dragon stir uncomfortably.

"Split up to cover more ground?" she suggested, already mentally dividing tasks. "I'll take the east side and generator setup, you handle the west entrance and food vendors?"

"Perfect." He nodded, but hesitated before letting her go. "You've created something amazing here, Danica. In two days, you've pulled off what I couldn't manage in months."

She flashed him that confident smile that made his blood heat. "That's why they call me the best. Meet back here in an hour?"

They parted and Asher moved efficiently through his tasks, his authority evident as vendors and volunteers snapped to attention when he approached. But even as he directed, approved, and solved minor crises, his eyes constantly found their way back to Danica across the square.

She moved with purpose, clipboard in one hand, gesturing with the other, her yellow

sundress making her easy to spot among the crowd. Even from this distance, he could see her laughing as she charmed volunteers into following her vision. The sight of her taking command, being so completely in her element, stirred something primal in him.

Before long, he noticed her beside the large portable generator, trying to help three male volunteers lift it onto a wooden platform. His chest tightened. The men looked uncomfortable, clearly hesitant to let her help with the heavy equipment, but Danica was being her stubborn self, gesturing emphatically and positioning herself to lift.

"Dammit," he muttered, immediately changing direction. The generator had to weigh at least 300 pounds—nothing for a dragon shifter, but far too much for her human strength.

Asher quickened his pace as he saw the precarious angle of the generator. The wooden platform beneath it wasn't braced properly, and one corner started to dip as they attempted to position the heavy machinery.

Time slowed. The generator tilted, its weight shifting directly toward Danica.

His dragon instinct exploded through him. In three rapid strides, he closed the distance, his enhanced speed a blur to human eyes. He grabbed Danica by the waist, yanking her backward just as the generator slid. Without breaking momentum, he pivoted and braced his shoulder against the heavy metal equipment, stopping its fall with raw strength.

"Brace that corner! Now!" he commanded, his voice cutting through the panicked shouts. The volunteers scrambled to comply, wedging supports under the tilted side while Asher held the full weight steady.

Once the danger passed, he turned to Danica, his hands moving over her arms and

shoulders, checking for injuries. Her eyes were wide, her breath coming in short gasps.

"Are you hurt?" His voice was rough with barely contained emotion.

She gave him a shaky smile. "I guess I should've left the heavy lifting to the dragons."

Relief and frustration warred within him. The image of what could have happened—her crushed beneath hundreds of pounds of metal—made his dragon roar with protective fury. Just like with the wooden arch two days ago, she'd been seconds from serious injury.

"You were just trying to help," he said, forcing his voice to remain even despite the turmoil inside him. "Next time, don't be so damn stubborn and overdo it."

His hands were still on her shoulders, and he couldn't make himself let go. The thought of losing her—this woman he'd only known for two days but who had already become essential to him—was overwhelming. His fated mate. His Danica.

"I had it under control," she insisted, though her voice lacked its usual conviction.

"No, you didn't," he growled, pulling her slightly closer. The fabric of his light gray suit stretched across his shoulders as his grip on her tightened. "You could have been seriously hurt."

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:30 am*

Asher fought to control the tremor in his hands. How could he protect her when she insisted on putting herself in harm's way? The fierce need to keep her safe collided with his respect for her independence.

"You're not invincible," he said more softly, his thumb brushing against her cheek. "And I can't lose you. Not now. Not ever."

Asher became acutely aware of the growing crowd surrounding them. Dozens of eyes watched their Alpha console the human woman in the sunshine-yellow dress. He caught fragments of whispered conversations—concern about her fragility and questions about her capability. His dragon bristled at the implied criticism.

"Well, that was one way to make an entrance," Danica quipped, her laughter a bit forced as her heels shifted nervously on the grass. The embarrassment flickering across her face was subtle, but Asher caught it immediately.

He scanned the gathered faces—his people, his responsibility—and made a split-second decision. This wasn't just about Danica's pride or his authority. This was about establishing her place in their community.

Asher placed his steady hand on her back, his touch simultaneously reassuring and possessive. "Come on. You've done enough heavy lifting for one day."

His voice carried the unmistakable command of an Alpha, silencing the murmurs around them. He felt her hesitate near the edge of the crowd, her body tensing under his palm. The uncertainty in her stance was palpable—an outsider unsure of her welcome. His dragon hated seeing her doubt herself.

Without hesitation, Asher offered his arm formally, not as the town's mayor, but as her chosen partner.

"You belong at my side," he stated simply, his eyes holding hers. "I need my mate on that stage."

Danica's eyes widened. "But I'm not?—"

"You are exactly where you're supposed to be," he interrupted, his voice low but unwavering. "And everyone here needs to see that."

The Firebreathers finished their sound check on the main stage, the final guitar chord echoing across the square. The crowd's energy shifted, ready for the entertainment to begin and ready for their Alpha to officially open the festival that celebrated their heritage.

As they climbed the steps to the stage together, Asher felt the weight of his dual responsibilities—Mayor and Alpha—but for once, they aligned perfectly. His father's voice echoed in his memory: An Alpha stands strongest with his mate beside him.

Asher moved to the microphone, his presence commanding immediate attention from the gathered townspeople. Danica stood slightly behind him, but he reached back, taking her hand and drawing her forward to stand at his side.

"Citizens of Ectorius," he began, his voice lifting above the square, "welcome to our annual Founders Festival."

His gaze swept across familiar faces—families whose bloodlines traced back centuries, elders who had guided him after his father's passing, and younger dragons who looked to him for leadership.



"For generations, our clutch has thrived under the protection of the Ectorius name. My father carried that legacy with honor, as did his father before him." He paused, allowing the weight of tradition to settle. "Today, we honor that past while embracing our future."

He felt Danica's fingers tighten around his, a subtle squeeze of support that sent warmth coursing through him.

"Change can be uncomfortable," he continued, the words resonating with his own recent experience. "But sometimes, the most powerful transformations come when we least expect them."

His gaze returned to Danica, her yellow dress gleaming in the sunlight, making her seem to glow. His dragon stirred with pride.

"I want to publicly thank Danica Ulrich," he said, his voice softening with sincerity, "the spark that helped light this fire."

With practiced precision, Asher reached for the ceremonial torch, its handle cool against his palm. He held it aloft for a moment before lowering it to the central fire ring. Flames leapt upward, dancing in the morning air, reflecting in Danica's bright eyes.

A ripple of surprise and murmured approval spread through the crowd. Several of the town elders nodded, their expressions thoughtful. Even those who had whispered concerns now seemed curious, reassessing the human woman who had earned their Alpha's respect.

Danica's face flushed, the color highlighting her cheekbones. When she glanced at him, the connection between them was undeniable. His dragon recognized immediately what his human side was still processing—this bond was meant to be.

## THIRTEEN

### DANICA

Danica's face flushed with warmth that had nothing to do with the ceremonial flames from the central fire ring on stage. Asher's hand found her back as he guided her toward the stairs on the side of the stage. His touch burned through the thin fabric of her yellow sundress, sending a current of awareness up her spine. Every cell in her body recognized his claim.

"You didn't have to do that," she whispered as they descended from the stage, her heels clicking against the wooden stairs.

"Yes, I did." His voice rumbled low for her ears alone. "You deserve recognition for what you've accomplished here."

As they moved through the crowd, faces turned toward them. Some offered warm smiles, others polite nods. An elderly woman with silver-streaked hair approached them, her eyes bright with curiosity.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:30 am*

"So, this is the human who tamed our Alpha," she said, her tone inscrutable.

Before Danica could respond, Asher's arm tightened possessively around her waist. "This is the woman who reminded me what it means to lead with heart, not just strength."

The older woman's expression softened. "Well done, child." She patted Danica's hand before melting back into the crowd.

Danica's mind raced as they continued their circuit. She'd been in Ectorius for barely three days. Known about being Asher's mate for just one day. The weight of it all – being thrust into this position as the Alpha's chosen partner – pressed on her shoulders.

Last night's passion still lingered in her body—the memory of Asher's mouth, his hands, the way he'd claimed her completely. In bed, everything made perfect sense. Their connection had been primal and undeniable.

"You look worried," Asher murmured, steering them toward a quieter corner where festival goers hadn't yet gathered.

"Not worried. Just..." Danica searched for the right words. "This is a lot. These people depend on you. And now they're looking at me like I'm part of the package."

"You are." His tone brooked no argument.

"But I'm just an event planner from New Orleans. What do I know about being part of

a dragon clutch?" She adjusted the strap of her sundress, needing something to do with her hands. "I can organize a killer festival, but being someone an entire town looks to..."

Asher turned her to face him, his green eyes intense. "You're not just anything, Danica. You're extraordinary. And you don't have to figure it all out today."

His certainty was simultaneously comforting and overwhelming. If it had just been them – just Asher the man, not Asher the Alpha – this would feel simpler. Less like she was under a microscope.

"Right now," she said, squaring her shoulders, "I just need to make sure this festival runs smoothly. One task at a time."

A ghost of a smile touched his lips. "See? That's exactly why you belong here. You prioritize what matters."

Danica glanced at her watch, grateful for the distraction of practical matters. "The children's dragon dance demonstration starts in fifteen minutes. I should check that the costumes are ready."

"Always working." His thumb brushed over her bottom lip, sending a jolt of desire straight through her. "We'll continue this conversation later. Preferably with fewer clothes."

Before she could formulate a comeback, he dropped a quick, hot kiss on her lips that promised much more. Several nearby townspeople whistled and clapped.

"That's how an Alpha claims his mate," someone called out.

She felt heat rise in her cheeks but pushed her doubts aside. This wasn't the time for

personal crises. She had a festival to run, and she'd make damn sure it was the best one Ectorius had ever seen.

Danica moved through the festival with the precision of a battlefield commander. Her clipboard served as both a shield and weapon as she checked off tasks and directed volunteers with efficient grace. The children's dragon dance demonstration was her next stop, where she found a dozen kids already eagerly pulling on elaborate scale-adorned costumes.

"Are the wings secure?" She knelt beside a small girl struggling with her costume's attachment. "Here, let me help you with that."

"They're supposed to move when I wiggle my shoulders," the child demonstrated, beaming when Danica adjusted the straps to allow proper movement.

"Perfect! Now you're a powerful dragon." Danica winked, earning a gap-toothed smile in return.

As she straightened, she felt Asher's presence before she saw him. A warm hand settled on her shoulder, his touch both possessive and gentle.

"Running the entire festival single-handedly?" His voice had that gravelly edge that made her stomach flip.

"Someone has to." She tapped her pen against the clipboard. "Don't you have important Alpha mayor things to do? Hands to shake? Babies to kiss?"

Asher's mouth quirked. "I'd rather be helping you."

"I've got this covered." She fought the flutter in her chest at his proximity. "These people came to spend time with you, not watch you follow me around."

"They came to enjoy the festival we created together." His broad shoulders blocked out the sun as he leaned closer. "And I want you to enjoy it too. Not just work through it."

Danica tilted her head to meet his gaze. "I'll enjoy it once I know everything's running smoothly."

"Stubborn woman." The rumble of playful affection in his voice sent a warmth through her.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:30 am*

"Hovering Alpha." She countered with a smile. "Go mingle with your people. I promise I'll take a break... eventually."

His fingers captured her hand, bringing it to his lips. "One hour. Then I'm coming to find you, clipboard or no clipboard."

The heat in his eyes promised consequences she might actually enjoy. Danica swallowed hard as she watched his tall frame turn away and move through the crowd, people naturally parting as he approached.

She moved on to the food truck area, where savory aromas of Cajun spices mingled with sweet treats. The vendors greeted her with warmth.

"There she is—the infamous event planner and the Alpha's mate!" called a woman serving jambalaya. "Your invitation to have me serve at the festival is bringing in twice my usual business."

"Just doing my part to make this festival a success," Danica replied, though the words 'Alpha's mate' still sent a strange thrill through her body.

At the maypole, she helped untangle ribbons after an enthusiastic group of children had created a colorful knot. The adult supervisor thanked her profusely.

"The Alpha chose well," the woman said softly. "We haven't seen him smile this much in years."

Throughout the afternoon, Danica noticed the shift in how people regarded her—from

suspicion to cautious acceptance. When a children's game area became overcrowded, she swiftly created an impromptu overflow section, earning appreciative nods from parents.

Finally, she allowed herself a moment's rest beneath an ancient oak tree at the edge of the festival grounds. She slid off her heels and wiggled her toes in the cool grass.

"Wow, you're actually taking a break." Asher appeared with two glasses of lemonade, settling beside her on the grass with casual grace that belied his powerful frame.

"Just recharging." She accepted the drink gratefully. "Your people really love this festival."

"Our people," he corrected, his eyes intense. "They're warming up to you."

Danica watched the celebration unfold before them—families laughing, children running with dragon-shaped kites, and couples dancing to the band's lively music. The small town pulsed with a vibrant energy she'd never experienced in her events back in New Orleans.

"I get it now," she said quietly. "Why they're so protective of this place... and of you."

Asher's fingers interlaced with hers. "And?"

"They've built something special here." She turned to face him. "Something worth protecting."

"And something worth letting their Alpha share with the right person," he added, his thumb tracing circles on her palm.

Danica felt a complicated twist of emotions. "But I'm an outsider to them. I can see



why they'd be hesitant about me taking their Alpha's attention."

"You're not an outsider. You're my mate." The fierce certainty in his voice made her breath catch. "And a mate isn't someone who takes attention away—they make everything better." His hand slid to cup her face. "Like you've done with this festival."

The way Asher looked at her—like she was essential to his existence—made her throat tight with emotion. For someone who'd always kept moving and always looking toward the next project, the conviction in his eyes made her want to stay still for once.

Thirty minutes later, Asher got pulled away by a group of stern-faced council members. Danica watched him go, admiring how commanding he looked in his light gray suit and crimson tie, the fabric stretching perfectly across his broad shoulders as he strode away with reluctant backward glances.

She turned her attention back to the festival decorations, noticing that some of the cloths with the town emblem prominently displayed had come loose in the afternoon breeze. Climbing onto a stepladder, she stretched to reach the highest ones, the yellow fabric of her sundress billowing slightly.

"Need a hand with those?"

Danica glanced down to see Joni standing below her, looking up with a friendly smile. The woman's blue dress clung to her athletic frame, the neckline plunging daringly low while somehow managing to look elegant rather than tacky. Danica had to admit – Joni knew how to make an entrance.

"I've got it," Danica replied, securing the emblems. "But thanks."

As she climbed down, Joni handed her a glass of wine. "You deserve this after running around all day." Joni paused for a moment, as if contemplating something. "That speech Asher gave earlier was quite something, wasn't it?"

"It was," Danica agreed, accepting the drink and taking a small sip.

"A real testament to his devotion to you," Joni mused, leaning against a nearby post. "I've known Asher for years, and I've never heard him speak about anyone that way."

Something in Joni's tone – genuine, almost wistful – made Danica's usual guard drop slightly. "Can I ask you something?"

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:30 am*

Joni nodded, her red hair glowing in the fading sunlight like copper flame.

"What happens after tomorrow when the festival ends?" Danica sighed, the question that had been weighing on her finally surfacing. "I don't belong here, not really. I'm just... human. An outsider from the city who doesn't know the first thing about living in a dragon community."

Joni's expression softened unexpectedly. "You know, I saw how Asher looks at you. That's not just attraction – it's admiration. You've accomplished more in two days here than he was able to do alone in weeks."

"But that's just the festival stuff," Danica protested, picking at her sundress. "Planning events is what I do."

"Trust me," Joni said, touching Danica's arm lightly, "you fit here with him better than you realize. The way I'm sure you challenged him and pushed him to see things differently – dragons respect that kind of strength."

Danica felt marginally reassured, though doubt still lingered. "It's just happening so fast."

"That's how it is with fated mates," Joni nodded. Then she added, with a strange emphasis, "But you shouldn't feel trapped here just because Asher claims you're fated mates. We all have choices, Danica. Remember that."

"Thanks," Danica said, feeling oddly comforted. Maybe Joni really was over Asher and was just being a natural flirt at breakfast yesterday. Maybe she actually had a

potential friend in this strange new world. "I appreciate your honesty."

"What are friends for?" Joni smiled, raising her glass in a toast before disappearing back into the crowd.

As dusk descended, the festival transformed. String lights twinkled to life overhead, and paper lanterns glowed in warm hues of crimson and gold. The band on the main stage shifted to slower melodies, couples gravitating toward each other like moths to flame.

Danica watched from the periphery, her clipboard finally abandoned as the day's events unfolded without a hitch. Couples swayed together under the constellation of lights, their movements fluid and natural. She felt oddly separate from it all – until a familiar presence warmed her back.

"There you are," Asher's deep voice sent a ripple of awareness through her.

She turned to find him standing with his hand extended toward her, his green eyes luminous in the lantern light. He didn't speak, just offered his palm – an invitation in the simplest form.

Danica hesitated, her fingers fidgeting with the hem of her sundress. "I'm not much of a dancer."

"Neither am I," he admitted, the corner of his mouth lifting. "But I think we've proven we're good at figuring things out together."

His words melted her resistance. She placed her hand in his, his warm fingers enveloping hers completely. He led her to the edge of the makeshift dance floor, pulling her close with a gentle tug.

Their first steps were awkward – a bumped knee, a misplaced foot – but then Danica stopped thinking and simply felt. Asher's hand rested on her lower back, warm and steady, while the other clasped hers with surprising gentleness for such a powerful man.

"See? Not so terrible," he murmured against her temple.

Danica laughed, relaxing into his chest. "Only because you're leading."

"Funny," his breath tickled her ear, "I was thinking the same about you."

They moved together with increasing ease, their bodies finding a natural rhythm. Danica realized with a start that she wasn't mentally racing ahead to the next task, or the next challenge. She was simply here, present in the circle of Asher's arms, letting herself belong there.

When the song ended, Asher kept hold of her hand, leading her away from the crowd toward a wrought iron bench beneath an oak tree. They sat facing the town hall, where elaborate projections cast dragons in flight across its brick facade, the images shimmering and dancing in reds and golds.

Fireflies blinked in the darkness around them, nature's own light show complementing the festival's illuminations.

"Thank you," Asher said, his voice deeper than usual.

"For what?"

"For everything you've done. For the festival." He turned to face her, taking her hands in his. "For making me feel complete for the first time in my life."

The raw emotion in his voice stole Danica's breath. "I needed to hear that," she whispered, vulnerability surfacing despite her best efforts. "I'm still figuring out where I fit in all this."

"Right here," he said simply, raising her palm to his lips. "With me."

The tenderness of the gesture made her heart constrict. Maybe she could do this – could belong here with him and could push her doubts away about the rest of the town. For him, she would try.

The intimate moment fractured as movement caught her eye – dark shapes emerging from the shadows beyond the festival lights. Danica stiffened as she made out the silhouettes of enormous wolves, at least five of them, padding silently toward their bench with predatory focus.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:30 am*

"Asher," she whispered, her fingers tightening around his. "Those are?—"

"Wolves," he confirmed, his posture shifting subtly from relaxed to vigilant, though his expression remained neutral. "I see them."

Her pulse hammered against her throat. "Are they... friendly?"

The lead wolf's eyes gleamed yellow in the darkness, fixed unmistakably on her. Somehow, she didn't think they were.

FOURTEEN

ASHER

Asher felt the change in the air before he saw them—an intrusion into what should have been a perfect moment with Danica. His protective instincts surged as the five wolves materialized from the shadows, their approach calculated and deliberate. Wrong. He kept his outward demeanor calm, unwilling to alarm Danica further, but inside, his dragon stirred restlessly.

"No," he answered quietly, his eyes never leaving the approaching pack. "They're not friendly. And they seem to have their sights set on you."

The crimson tie at his throat suddenly felt constricting as his temperature rose. His dragon blood heated in response to the threat, ready to burn through his human skin.

"On me? Why would they?—"

"Stay behind me," Asher ordered, rising to his feet and positioning himself between Danica and the wolves. His mind raced. Wolf shifters never ventured this deep into dragon territory, especially not during a festival with hundreds of witnesses. This wasn't a territorial dispute—this was targeted. But why Danica?

The lead wolf—larger than the others with silver-tipped fur and eyes like molten gold—lowered its head, a growl vibrating through the night air. The beast's gaze remained locked on Danica, who had risen to stand behind Asher, her fingers clutching the back of his suit jacket.

"Is this normal? Some kind of shifter greeting ritual I don't know about?" Her voice carried a tremor she was clearly trying to control.

"Nothing about this is normal." Asher's voice dropped to a dangerous rumble. "When I move, you run back to the festival tents."

The lead wolf's muscles bunched, its intention clear in the second before it happened. Time seemed to crystallize as Asher's dragon senses heightened—he could hear Danica's accelerated heartbeat, smell the fear flooding her system, and calculate the precise trajectory of the wolf's attack.

"Asher—"

The wolf lunged, a blur of fangs and fury aimed directly at Danica.

Asher didn't think—he reacted. His transformation came in a violent rush of heat and power, his human form surrendering to scales and strength in the space between heartbeats. His light gray suit split at the seams as his body expanded, growing massive and terrible in its beauty. Crimson scales erupted across his skin, hardened plates forming an impenetrable armor. His jaw elongated into a fearsome muzzle lined with teeth like daggers, and elegant horns crowned his head.



The shift completed in seconds—fast enough to intercept the wolf mid-leap with a massive clawed foot. The wolf yelped as Asher pinned it to the ground, his wingspan unfurling to its full, impressive breadth. His tail whipped around protectively, creating a living barrier between the wolves and Danica.

His green eyes—still recognizably Asher's despite the transformation—burned with primal fury. A roar ripped from his throat, the sound reverberating through the festival grounds. All activity ceased as townspeople turned to locate the source of the commotion.

The trapped wolf struggled beneath his grip, but Asher increased the pressure, not enough to kill but sufficient to demonstrate exactly who controlled this encounter. The message in his posture was unmistakable—touch what's mine and die.

The remaining wolves circled warily, hackles raised. One feinted to Asher's left, attempting to dart around him toward Danica. Asher's tail lashed out with stunning precision, catching the creature mid-stride and sending it tumbling across the grass.

Through his peripheral vision, he noticed that Danica hadn't run. She stood frozen just slightly behind his right side, her yellow sundress catching the breeze. Her eyes were wide with shock and something else—wonder? She had seen him in his dragon form before, but not like this—not in combat, not with every scale and muscle devoted to her protection.

The lead wolf growled, an unmistakable challenge despite its compromised position. Asher responded with another roar, this one ending in a plume of smoke that carried the scent of brimstone and power. A warning—the next would be fire.

Festival goers had begun to gather at a safe distance, drawn by the spectacle. Asher could hear murmurs of surprise and concern, but his focus remained singular—Danica's safety.

"I'm okay," she whispered, somehow knowing he needed to hear it. "I'm right here."

The wolves seemed to realize they were now significantly outnumbered as more dragon shifters from the town approached and shifted to back up their Alpha. With a snarl of defiance, the leader twisted beneath Asher's grip, managing to free itself with a desperate wrench that cost it patches of fur.

The five wolves retreated, backing away with reluctant steps until they disappeared into the darkness. Only then did Asher turn his massive head fully to check on Danica, a low rumble of concern vibrating in his chest.

Danica came up directly next to his right side. Rather than showing fear, she reached out with steady fingers and stroked his scales. The touch sent electric currents through his dragon form - her small hand against his armored body, unafraid and intimate. She looked up into his eyes, her brown eyes silently communicating that she was okay and thankful for his protection.

Asher lowered his massive head in a gesture that invited her to climb onto his back. He wanted her with him, safe and close, away from whatever threat those wolves represented. He watched as hesitation flickered across her face for just a heartbeat before determination replaced it. With surprising bravery and trust, she climbed up his offered foreleg and settled herself just below his neck, her thighs gripping his scales.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:30 am*

"I trust you," she whispered, leaning forward to wrap her arms as far around his neck as they would go.

Her trust inflamed something primal within him. With a powerful thrust of his wings, he launched them skyward, feeling her gasp and tighten her hold. The sensation of her body pressed against him, riding his dragon form, created an even deeper connection between them. The festival lights grew smaller below them as he soared toward his mansion.

But one question burned in his mind. Why would wolves target his mate? Wolf packs rarely challenged dragons directly, especially not an Alpha dragon on his own territory. Something wasn't adding up. The wolves had focused specifically on Danica- not on him, and not on challenging his authority. They wanted her. But why?

Despite his worries, Asher couldn't deny the perfection of this moment. The way she moved with him, adjusting to every bank and turn without fear, felt like she was born to fly with him. Her yellow sundress fluttered in the wind, and her delighted laughter reached his ears even above the rush of air. He allowed himself to savor this moment, circling higher into the star-studded sky, giving her more time in flight than strictly necessary.

Her body melded to his scales as if she'd always belonged there. This was right. This was how it should be. He made a wide, swooping turn that caused her to squeal in excitement rather than fear.

When he finally descended into his backyard, landing with a graceful touch that barely disturbed the grass, she dismounted with surprising ease - sliding down his

side as if she'd done it a hundred times before. Asher shifted immediately, his form condensing and reshaping until he stood before her, human again and unapologetically naked.

In one fluid motion, he pulled her close, his eyes intense with determination. "I'll find out why those wolves were there and why they wanted you." His voice was a rough growl, his hands gripping her waist possessively. "Nobody threatens what's mine."

But she didn't seem too concerned with that situation at that moment. Her eyes were bright with lingering adrenaline. "That was—Asher, that was incredible! I've never felt so alive!" Her hands traced the contours of his bare chest. "The way you move through the air, the feeling of your scales beneath me, the wind in my hair—" She laughed, breathless and exhilarated. "I felt like I belonged there, on your dragon's back. Like that's where I was meant to be."

The combination of her words and her touch ignited something in Asher that couldn't be contained. She hadn't run from his dragon. She'd embraced it. Embraced him—all of him.

"You do belong there," he growled softly, pulling her flush against him. "And here."

His lips crashed against hers in a kiss that demanded everything. Gone was any pretense of restraint or patience. His hands tangled in her hair, angling her head to deepen the kiss as he backed her against the nearest stone wall. She matched his intensity, her fingers digging into his shoulders, pulling him closer rather than pushing him away.

"You're not afraid," he breathed against her lips, the realization striking him. "Not of them. Not of me."

"Never of you," she whispered back, her eyes reflecting the moonlight. "Your dragon

is magnificent, Asher. You're magnificent."

Her words sent a surge of primal satisfaction through him. His dragon rumbled in approval, a deep, possessive sound that vibrated through his chest. He pulled back slightly, his eyes locking onto hers, and without breaking their gaze, he lifted her off the ground effortlessly. Her legs instinctively wrapped around his waist, her arms looping around his neck as he carried her through the back door of his mansion and up the staircase.

The journey to his bedroom was a blur of heat and anticipation. His bare feet padded softly against the wooden floor, the cool air brushing against his naked skin, but he barely noticed. All he could focus on was the woman in his arms—her warmth, her scent, and the way her body molded against his as if she always belonged there.

Once inside his bedroom, he wasted no time. He set her down on the edge of the bed, his hands already moving to the straps of her yellow sundress. Her eyes never left his as he slid the dress down her body, letting it pool at her feet. Her whitebra and panties followed quickly, until she was gloriously naked before him.

"God, you're breathtaking," he growled, his voice low and rough with desire. His eyes roamed over her curves, taking in every detail—the softness of her skin, the way her chest rose and fell with each breath, and the way her brown eyes darkened with need. He wanted to savor her, to memorize every inch of her, but the urgency burning in his veins wouldn't allow it.

He guided her onto the bed, laying her down gently against the soft sheets. The moonlight streaming through the windows bathed her in a silvery glow, making her look ethereal, like something out of a dream. He joined her on the bed, his body hovering over hers. He claimed her lips once more, his hands roaming over her body memorizing every curve.

His fingers found her breasts, teasing her nipples until they hardened under his touch. Her breath hitched and her back arched, pressing herself into his hands. He deepened the kiss, his tongue tangling with hers as his hands moved lower, tracing the curve of her hips, the softness of her thighs, until he reached the wet heat between her legs.

"Asher," she gasped as his fingers stroked her sensitive folds, her hips rocking against his hand. She was already so wet and so ready for him, and the thought drove him wild. He slid two fingers inside her, feeling her inner walls clench around them as he moved with deliberate, measured thrusts.

"That's it," he breathed, his voice filled with need. "Let go for me."

Her body responded to his command, her hips matching his rhythm as he worked her closer and closer to the edge. Her breaths came in shallow gasps, her hands gripping his shoulders as her release built. When it finally hit, it was like a tidal wave—her body shuddered, her back arching off the bed as she cried out, her inner walls pulsing around his fingers.

Asher didn't give her a moment to recover. Before her tremors had fully subsided, he guided himself to her entrance, his cock thick and aching with need. Her eyes fluttered open, meeting his as he pushed into her slowly, inch by delicious inch.

"Damn, Danica," he groaned, his jaw tightening as he felt her tight, wet heat envelop him completely. "You feel so perfect."

She gasped as he filled her to the hilt, her hands gripping his broad shoulders as he began to move. His thrusts were deliberate, deep, and unrelenting, each one driving her higher and higher. Her legs wrapped around his waist, pulling him closer, her body meeting his with a desperation that matched his own.

"Harder," she begged, her voice a breathless whisper against his ear. "Please, Asher,

harder."

He didn't need to be told twice. He quickened his pace, his hips slamming into hers with a force that had her crying out in pleasure. The sound of their bodies coming together filled the room, a rhythm so primal and raw it left no room for thought, only feeling.

Her nails raked down his back, the sharp sting of pain only heightening his pleasure. He growled, his dragon stirring within him, urging him to claim her now. He thrust into her with a ferocity that left them both trembling, sweat slicking their skin as they moved together in perfect harmony.

"Asher," she moaned as her body began to tighten around him. He could feel her orgasm building, her inner walls clenching around his cock as she teetered on the edge. He reached between them, his thumb circling her clit, and that was all it took.

She came undone beneath him, her body convulsing as her release crashed over her. Her cries echoed through the room, her hips bucking against his as she reached the peak of her pleasure. The sight of her, completely undone, was enough to push him over the edge. With a low growl, he buried himself deep inside her, his own release surging through him as he filled her with his seed.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:30 am*

For a moment, they simply lay there, their breaths mingling as they came down from their shared high. Asher rolled onto his side, pulling her with him so she was nestled against his chest. Her body felt small and soft against his, her warmth a soothing balm to the storm that had just raged between them.

"That was..." she trailed off, her voice still shaky with the remnants of her orgasm. Her hand rested on his chest, her fingers tracing idle patterns over his skin.

Asher couldn't help but smile. "The best sex of your life?" he teased, his voice laced with satisfaction.

She laughed, a soft, breathless sound that made his chest tight. "Definitely," she admitted, her eyes meeting his. "But it's not just that, Asher. It's... you. Everything about you."

His heart swelled at her words. He leaned in, capturing her lips in a soft, lingering kiss. "You're mine, Danica," he murmured.

Her smile was soft, her eyes filled with a warmth that made his dragon purr in contentment. "And you're mine," she whispered back.

FIFTEEN

DANICA

Danica stretched languidly across the silk sheets of Asher's bed, her naked body still tingling from the memory of Asher's touch last night. Morning light streamed through



the half-open curtains, casting golden patterns across her bare skin. She smiled into the pillow, inhaling his scent—something clean and cedar and uniquely wild.

Last night had been... transcendent. The way he'd taken her and claimed her with such primal intensity—her body still hummed from it. Every muscle felt pleasantly sore, bearing the sweet ache of passionate use. She rolled onto her back, gazing at the ceiling and replaying how his massive frame covered hers completely as he'd driven into her with relentless precision.

"Who knew dragons were so... thorough," she whispered to herself, a delicious shiver running through her.

But it wasn't just the sex that had transformed her. Flying on Asher's back through the night sky had awakened something inside her she never knew existed until last night. The rush of wind against her face, the powerful muscles rippling beneath his scales, and the way she'd instinctively known how to balance herself—it was as if her body had always been designed to fly with him.

"It shouldn't feel this natural," Danica murmured, running her fingers over the sheets. "Three days. It's been three days since I met him."

The thought sent a flutter through her chest. Three days, and she felt connected to him on a level that defied logic or time. If Gerri hadn't called her about this festival—if the circumstances had been even slightly different...

She quickly pushed the thought away. That path led to an emptiness she couldn't bear to contemplate.

Danica glanced at the alarm clock. 7:15 AM. They'd set it for 7:30 to give them time to shower before heading to the festival. She reached across to Asher's side of the bed, finding it cool to the touch.

"Asher?" she called, lifting her head to peer into the adjoining bathroom. No steam escaped from the door. No sounds of running water or movement.

She frowned, sitting up. The absence of his powerful presence felt wrong, almost jarring after the intensity of their connection last night. Had he gone downstairs to make coffee? It seemed unlike him to leave the mansion without waking her, especially after the wolf attack last night. He hadn't let her out of his sight since that strange encounter.

Her fingers traced absently over a slight red mark on her hip—a testament to his passion and his need to possess her completely. The memory sent another wave of desire washing through her. She was already addicted to his touch and to the way his green eyes darkened just before he claimed her.

"Get it together, Ulrich," she whispered to herself. "You've still got a festival to run for a town full of dragons. They're depending on you."

Yet even as she tried to focus on her responsibilities, her mind drifted back to the sensation of soaring through night clouds, clinging to Asher's scales as they cut through the darkness together. That feeling of absolute freedom mixed with absolute safety—she'd never experienced anything like it.

"Where are you, Asher?" she murmured, glancing toward the bedroom door, expecting it to open and reveal his tall frame. "You can't just give a girl the best night of her life and disappear."

She slid from beneath the silk sheets, her bare feet touching the cool hardwood floor. She shivered slightly, the morning air caressing her naked skin. Where was Asher? The emptiness of his side of the bed still bothered her.

She padded over to his dresser, sliding open the top drawer to find a neat row of

folded t-shirts. Selecting a white one with a faded university logo, she pulled it over her head, the soft cotton cascading down to mid-thigh. The fabric carried his scent—that intoxicating blend of cedar, smoke, and something wild and untamed that was uniquely Asher. She brought the collar to her nose and breathed deeply, closing her eyes.

"God, I'm acting like a lovesick teenager," she murmured, but couldn't help smiling at herself.

She ran her fingers through her tangled hair, wincing at a particularly stubborn knot—a souvenir from last night's passionate entanglement. The memory sent another flush of warmth through her body.

"He must be making breakfast," she reasoned, remembering how she'd done the same for him days ago. It seemed like a lifetime had passed since then. "He's probably trying to return the favor."

She opened the bedroom door quietly and stepped into the hallway, her bare feet silent against the hardwood. The mansion was quiet in the morning light, every surface gleaming with understated luxury. She headed toward the stairs to go down to the kitchen.

Instead, she heard voices coming from further down the hallway—loud, insistent male voices coming from his office. She headed down the hallway but slowed her pace as she got closer to his office, hesitating a foot away from his office door.

"—need to address this immediately," a gravelly voice was saying. "After last night's attack?—"

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:30 am*

"I understand the urgency," Asher's deep voice responded, carrying that unmistakable tone of authority that made her stomach flutter. "But we need more information before we act."

Danica hung back. She didn't know he had an early morning meeting, but then again, why would she have? They'd only known each other for three days, despite the soul-deep connection they seemed to share. His schedule was still a mystery to her beyond the festival planning.

"The timing is suspicious," another voice added. "Just as you find your mate?—"

Danica's ears perked up at the mention of herself. She inched closer to the open door, careful to stay out of sight.

"Danica Ulrich is a liability we need to discuss," the gravelly voice continued. "She's not one of us. That makes her a concern for the town."

"A human mate for our Alpha," another council member added with clear disapproval. "She's a liability we can't afford."

Danica froze, the breath catching painfully in her throat. Her name. Concern. Liability. The words hit her like physical blows.

"I understand," Asher's voice came through clearly. "We need to minimize the risk."

Her heart clenched so tightly it hurt. Minimize the risk. The risk being... her? After last night's passion, after the way he'd held her and claimed her as his own? After

flying through the night sky on his back, feeling their souls intertwine?

The contradiction was jarring. Last night he'd whispered that she was his. Now he was discussing her like a problem to be solved.

Had the council pressured him? Was his duty to the town stronger than whatever he felt for her? She'd known from the start that he was the Alpha first and a man second, but after last night, she'd dared to hope...

Danica backed away from the door, her legs unsteady beneath her. A cold wave of reality washed over her. Of course—a dragon Alpha couldn't prioritize a human mate over his clutch. It was politics, plain and simple. She was an outsider. A liability.

The word echoed in her mind as she turned and headed back to his bedroom, each step heavier than the last. The t-shirt that had felt so comforting moments ago now seemed to mock her with its temporary intimacy.

When she got back to Asher's bedroom, she headed for the shower in a mechanical fashion. She turned on the dual shower heads, letting the hot water stream down before removing his t-shirt and stepping into the shower.

The first tears came silently, mixing with the cascading water until she couldn't distinguish between them. Her shoulders trembled as she pressed her forehead against the cool marble tile.

"God, I'm such an idiot," she whispered, the soap slipping through her fingers as she tried to lather up. "Three days. Three days and I thought we had something cosmic."

Steam billowed around her as she replayed the fragments she'd heard. A liability. Minimize the risk. And Asher's voice, agreeing with them.

She hugged herself under the spray, her skin pinking from the heat. "Did I imagine everything? That way he looked at me during the dance, the flight through the night sky, that way he held me close when he?—"

The memory of their bodies entwined sent an unwelcome spark through her veins, even now. That was the cruelest part—her body still craved him while her mind tried to protect her heart.

"What did you expect?" she muttered, gripping the shower caddy for support. "That centuries of dragon tradition would just evaporate because you made his dragon eyes glow? That his duty as Alpha would suddenly take second place?"

He had publicly thanked and acknowledged her, though. Called her the spark. Had that just been political theater?

The bathroom door opened, and Danica quickly wiped her face, blinking rapidly to clear her vision. She forced her breathing to steady as Asher's silhouette appeared through the frosted glass.

"Room for one more in there?" His deep voice carried over the spray, playful and utterly oblivious to her turmoil.

Danica swallowed hard, pulling her professional mask into place—the one she wore when dealing with difficult clients. "Always room for you," she called back, striving for lightness.

The shower door slid open, and there he stood in all his naked glory—six and a half feet of chiseled muscle and raw power. His green eyes gleamed with hunger as they swept over her wet curves.

"Morning, beautiful," he murmured, stepping in behind her. His strong arms encircled

her waist, pulling her close against his chest. His lips found the sensitive spot where her neck met her shoulder, and despite everything, her body responded with a shiver.

For a delirious moment, she forgot about the conversation she'd overheard. Forgot about being a liability and an outsider. All she knew was the feel of his skin against hers, the safety of those powerful arms, and the promise of pleasure his touch always ignited.

"You disappeared," she managed, trying to mask the hurt in her voice.

His hands slid up to cup her breasts, his thumbs circling lazily. "Council meeting. Some fallout from the wolf attack. Nothing you need to worry about."

Nothing you need to worry about. Because she was just a temporary visitor, not a true partner. Not someone entitled to know what happened in the inner circle of dragon politics.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:30 am*

"I see," she whispered, her voice nearly lost under the spray.

Asher turned her to face him, his expression darkening with concern as he tilted her chin up. "Hey. What's wrong? Your eyes are red."

She forced a smile. "Just got soap in them. You know how clumsy I can be." A teasing tone she didn't feel. "Remember that generator yesterday?"

Something flashed across his face briefly, and she thought she saw a flicker of recognition that cut through her practiced facade. He cupped her face in his large hands, and she thought he was going to ask her what was really wrong.

But instead, he leaned in and inspected her eyes closer. "You're not clumsy. I get soap in my eyes all the time. Happens to the best of us."

He reached for a towel, and she dabbed her face. "Thank you," she whispered.

SIXTEEN

ASHER

Asher adjusted his red tie as he watched Danica dart across the town square that morning. Her floral sundress swirled around her legs as she moved with purpose from one vendor to the next, her clipboard held against her chest like a battle shield. The festival's second day was even more packed than the first, with families filling every corner of the square.



"Your mate is something else, Alpha." Mrs. Finch handed him a glass of lemonade, her dragon-sharp eyes following Danica's path through the crowd.

"She certainly is." Pride swelled in his chest, expanding with each breath. His inner dragon roared with satisfaction at the sight of Danica commanding the festival like she'd been born to do it.

Asher straightened the cuffs of his navy suit and checked his watch—a timepiece that had belonged to his father. Another hour before the afternoon demonstrations. He scanned the crowd, constantly monitoring his territory while maintaining the easy smile expected of the town mayor.

Across the square, Danica defused a dispute between two food vendors with a few words and that winning smile that made his blood simmer. She hadn't once complained about being thrust into this role, despite the complexity of managing a festival for creatures she'd never spent any time around.

"Never seen the festival run this smoothly. Town's talking about nothing else," Councilman Davis clapped him on the shoulder. "By the way, congratulations on finding your mate. About damn time, Ectorius."

"Thanks," Asher replied, his attention fixating on Danica as she knelt to help a small child who had dropped her festival treat. Even from this distance, he could see her gentle smile as she replaced the fallen cotton candy for the girl.

"Even though she's human," Councilman Davis added, the words coming with a note of hesitation.

Asher turned, fixing Davis with a hard stare that made the older man take an instinctive step back. "She's mine."

With that, he strode away, the crowd parting before him like water. His temper had been hair-trigger since finding Danica—as though his dragon instincts had awakened fully after decades of slumber.

He paused at the main stage, where The Firebreathers were setting up. "Everything on schedule?"

The lead guitarist, a younger dragon named Charlie, nodded. "Yes, sir. Miss Ulrich already came by with the updated lineup. She's... impressive."

"That she is." Asher couldn't keep the possessive edge from his voice.

He moved through the festival, pausing to thank elder dragons, shake hands with council members, and listen to concerns from his people. All the while, he tracked Danica's movements, making sure he knew exactly where she was at all times.

When he finally caught up to her, she was directing a group of teenagers setting up for their performance.

"The spacing needs to be wider—we can't have you tripping over each other." She demonstrated with her hands. "Like this, see?"

"Are you always giving orders?" Asher stepped behind her, close enough to catch her scent but not touching her yet. "That's the Alpha's job, last I checked."

Danica spun to face him, her cheeks flushed from exertion. "Someone has to make sure your townspeople don't trip over each other and accidentally get hurt."

"Well, I appreciate your concern for my townspeople." He leaned closer, pitching his voice for her ears alone. "Speaking of my townspeople, everyone's talking about what an incredible festival this is—and what an incredible mate I've found."

Something flickered in her eyes—uncertainty?—before she smiled. "Good to know my professional reputation remains intact."

Before he could question that flash of vulnerability, she was pulled away by another crisis—this time involving the dessert competition judging schedule.

The day continued in this pattern. Asher fulfilled his duties as mayor and Alpha while he watched Danica shine in every interaction and every challenge. By late afternoon, his chest felt ready to burst with pride and something deeper, more primal—a need to claim her officially. He needed to ensure every dragon and human alike knew she was his.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:30 am*

"You've outdone yourself, Alpha." The elder dragons who had criticized him for years were now nodding with respect. "The festival hasn't been this alive in decades."

"The credit belongs to Danica." His eyes sought her across the festival grounds, finding her directing the setup for the evening's bonfire.

"She brings out something in you we haven't seen before." The elder dragon's eyes gleamed with approval. "Something the town has desperately needed for the past five years."

As sunset painted the sky in brilliant shades of orange and crimson, Asher surveyed the festival grounds with satisfaction. Lanterns hung from tree branches illuminated the pathways where townspeople strolled, laughing and celebrating. By any measure, the Founders Festival had been an unprecedented success – thanks largely to the woman in the floral dress directing a group of children on proper cleanup procedures.

Yet something wasn't right.

Asher's dragon instincts, honed over centuries of his bloodline protecting this territory, prickled uncomfortably. Danica had been distant since their shower this morning – efficient, professional, but emotionally withdrawn. Every time he'd tried to corner her for a proper conversation, she'd slipped away with a ready excuse about some festival emergency that needed her attention.

"We should head back and change for the closing ceremony," he said when he finally managed to catch her alone. "I want to wear the formal attire for tonight's shifting ceremony."

"Of course." Her smile didn't reach her eyes. "I'll just finish this checklist first."

At his mansion, she practically bolted for the guest bedroom, calling over her shoulder, "We don't have much time. I'll be quick!"

The bedroom door closed with finality, leaving Asher standing alone in the hallway, his jaw clenched tight. This wasn't the woman who'd challenged his every decision with a spark in her eyes. This wasn't the mate who'd matched his passion with her own last night.

His dragon senses flared with warning. Something was very wrong.

"I'm heading to my room to change," he called loudly. "Wait for me downstairs when you're ready."

He made a show of closing his bedroom door loudly. Then he silently moved to the banister overlooking the main floor, strategically out of sight. Five minutes later, Danica emerged from the guest bedroom, and Asher's breath caught in his throat.

The red silk dress hugged every curve of her body, and the low neckline revealed the smooth expanse of her skin. She looked beautiful and powerful. But something else caused his eyes to widen further. She was carrying her suitcase and rushing down the stairs toward the front door.

Asher's heart constricted. She was leaving. Without a word. Without explanation.

Not his mate. Not while he drew breath.

He vaulted over the railing, landing with feline grace directly in front of her. Danica gasped, stumbling backward, her brown eyes wide.

"Going somewhere?" His voice emerged deeper than usual, his dragon close to the surface. "I thought we agreed to wait for each other."

"I—I thought you were busy changing." Her fingers tightened around the suitcase handle. She smelled of lavender and fear, an intoxicating and troubling combination.

"That doesn't answer my question." He stepped closer, his eyes never leaving hers. "Were you planning to leave right after the closing ceremony? Or were you skipping the night shifting altogether?"

Tears welled in her eyes, but she remained silent, her lower lip trembling with the effort of maintaining her composure. The sight shattered something in his chest. His mate was in pain.

"Danica." He gentled his tone, reaching out his hand to touch her face. "Talk to me. What happened between last night and this morning?"

She looked up at him, a teardrop finally escaping to slide down her cheek, and Asher knew with bone-deep certainty he would move mountains, burn cities, or challenge the entire world to keep this woman by his side and wipe that sorrow from her eyes.

Asher's finger caught the teardrop as it slid down her cheek, the diamond-like droplet balancing on his fingertip. His dragon stirred under his skin, enraged that something had made her cry. Someone had hurt what was his, and that was utterly unacceptable.

"Tell me," he commanded softly, his voice a velvet rumble. His hand cupped her face, his thumb stroking her cheekbone. "Are you leaving now or after the ceremony?"

Danica's eyes fluttered closed, her lashes dark against her skin. "I don't know. I haven't decided yet."

The silk of her red dress shimmered in the light as her chest rose with a shuddering breath. Every instinct in Asher's body screamed at him to gather her close, and to wrap her in his protection and never let go. But he held back, sensing she needed space to speak.

"What's wrong?" He kept his voice gentle though his blood boiled with the need to fix whatever was wrong. "Was it the wolf attack? I know that was terrifying, but I promise you I'll never let anything?—"

"It's not just that." Her voice cracked like thin ice.

"Then what?" He stepped closer, crowding her space deliberately, using his height and presence to make her look up. He needed to see her eyes. "My world is different from yours, I understand that. But I thought... I hoped you'd at least talk to me before giving up on us."

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:30 am*

His dragon roared inside his mind, shrieking at the very concept of her walking away from him. It had been only days, and already the thought of her absence felt like a physical wound.

"You can tell me anything," he continued, his voice softening to a whisper. "I would never judge you for your feelings, Danica. Not ever."

She swallowed, her eyelids flickering as if gathering courage. "There are things I haven't told you."

Asher's heart hammered against his ribs. Whatever it was, he would fix it. He was Alpha. He was an Ectorius. A defender. There was nothing he couldn't overcome for her.

"Someone left me a note," she finally said, her voice so small he had to lean closer. "It said, 'A true mate wouldn't destroy what he was born to protect. The Alpha is blind. The town will never follow an outsider or a human.'"

A growl escaped his throat before he could stop it. His vision tinged with red at the edges, his dragon surging to the surface at the hostility against his mate.

"And then this morning," she continued, her gaze dropping to the floor, "I heard you with the council. They called me a liability. You said you would minimize the risk." The words tumbled out now, faster and desperate. "I understand. I'm not one of you. I'm just a human who plans parties, and your people need?—"

"Stop." Asher caught her chin, tilting her face up forcefully, his eyes burning into



hers. "We weren't talking about removing you from the town. We were talking about protecting you."

Confusion flickered across her features.

"The council was worried because I told them about the wolf attack," he explained, his thumb brushing away another tear. "And yes, we're aware that tensions in town are rising. Not everyone's happy with me having a human mate, and if someone wanted to make a statement, they might use you to do it."

Understanding dawned in her eyes, and Asher felt the knot in his chest loosen slightly.

"When I said we needed to minimize the risk, I meant I needed to increase your protection and minimize the risk to you." He stepped closer still. "Not push you out of my life. I would never want you away from me."

His voice dropped to a growl as he took the suitcase from her hand and tossed it aside. It hit the hardwood floor with a satisfying thump.

"I want you by my side forever."

The tension in her shoulders eased, her body softening toward him. Asher slid his arm around her small waist, pulling her flush against his body, relishing the feel of her curves against his body. He lowered his mouth to her ear, inhaling her sweet scent.

"Whoever wrote that note will answer to me personally," he promised, the heat of his anger mixing with desire. "And they'll learn what happens when someone threatens what belongs to an Ectorius Alpha."

SEVENTEEN

## DANICA

Danica felt a strange weightlessness as Asher's words washed over her. Forever. The concept had always seemed like a distant, theoretical notion—something she helped other people plan for, but she didn't have time to consider for herself. Yet standing here in his mansion's entryway, with his eyes burning into hers, forever suddenly felt... possible.

"You really want me here?" Her voice emerged smaller than intended, the red silk of her dress suddenly feeling too exposed and too vulnerable against her skin. "Even with everything that's happening?"

Asher's jaw tightened, the muscles in his neck straining against his crisp collar. "Especially with everything that's happening." His fingers traced along her waist, possessive and tender all at once. "A threat against you is a threat against me."

The heat from his palm seeped through the fabric of her dress, and Danica found herself leaning into his touch. The stubborn voice inside her head that had always warned her against dependence was suspiciously quiet.

"I shouldn't have tried to leave without talking to you." She glanced at the discarded suitcase. "I just heard those councilmembers, and it felt like confirmation of every whisper I've been hearing. That I don't belong here."

His eyes flashed with an inhuman glow. "You belong exactly where you are. With me."

The raw certainty in his voice ignited something in her chest—a bright, burning thing she couldn't name.

"Thank you," she whispered, reaching up to touch the perfectly knotted red tie at his

throat. "For listening. For understanding. For not being angry that I almost bolted back to New Orleans without explanation."

Asher caught her hand against his chest, where his heartbeat thundered beneath her palm. "I could never stay angry at you." His voice rumbled lower, vibrating through her fingers. "And I'll always listen to you, Danica. That's what mates do."

The word 'mates' should have triggered her flight response—it implied permanence and commitment, all the things she'd carefully avoided. Instead, a delicious shiver traveled down her spine.

"So the council is actually on our side?" she asked, needing to be sure.

"Most of them." His thumb brushed circles against her wrist. "The rest will learn to accept you because you're my fated mate. They will soon realize that what is best for me is best for everyone."

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:30 am*

"What now?" she asked, her fingers tracing the lapel of his navy suit.

"Now..." Asher's eyes darkened as they dropped to her lips. "Now I kiss you."

His mouth claimed hers with a hunger that stole her breath. This wasn't the tentative kiss of new lovers feeling their way—this was possession, declaration, and promise. His tongue swept against hers, and Danica's knees weakened. Her body remembered everything from the night before—every touch, every whisper, and every moment of bliss—and craved more with a desperation that shocked her.

Without thinking, she jumped up, wrapping her legs around his waist, the silk dress riding up her thighs. Asher caught her effortlessly, his large hands gripping her thighs, supporting her weight as though she were made of air.

"I want you," she breathed against his mouth. "Right now."

His green eyes flared with desire. "Then I won't keep you waiting." He nipped at her lower lip.

Danica's pulse roared in her ears as Asher carried her effortlessly to his living room couch, his mouth never leaving hers. The heat of his body pressed against her as she wrapped her arms tighter around his neck, the scent of him wrapping around her senses. She barely registered the soft leather of the couch pressing against the backs of her thighs as he set her down on the back of it, her legs still locked around his waist.

His hands slid up her bare legs, pushing the red silk of her dress higher, exposing the

lace edge of her panties. "You're overdressed," he breathed against her full lips, his voice rough with want.

She laughed breathlessly, her fingers already working at the knot of his tie. "Says the man still in a full suit."

Asher's answering grin was pure wickedness. He tugged the top of her dress down in one smooth motion, baring her breasts to the cool air of the room—and to his heated gaze. His thumbs brushed over her nipples, already pebbled tight, and she arched into his touch with a gasp.

"Better," he growled, before his mouth closed over one peak, his tongue swirling in slow, deliberate circles.

Danica's head fell back, her fingers tangling in his hair. Every flick of his tongue sent sparks shooting down her spine, pooling low in her belly. His teeth grazed her skin, just shy of too much, and she whimpered.

Asher chuckled against her skin, the vibration making her toes curl. "That's it. Let me hear you."

His hand slid higher between her thighs, his fingers tracing the damp lace of her panties before slipping beneath. She gasped as his fingers found her, already slick and aching for him.

"You're already so wet for me," he muttered, his voice rough.

She could only nod, her breath coming in short, sharp pants as his fingers worked her with devastating precision. One large finger slid inside her, curling just right, and her hips jerked forward.

"Asher—" His name tore from her throat as his thumb pressed against her clit, circling in tight, relentless strokes.

"Come for me," he commanded softly.

And just like that, she shattered. Pleasure ripped through her, wave after wave, her body tightening around his fingers as she cried out.

Danica slumped against him, her limbs liquid and her breath ragged. She blinked up at him through hooded eyes, her lips curling into a lazy smile. "You're really good at that."

Asher's grin was smug. "I know."

She slid off the couch, her knees only slightly unsteady, and dropped to the floor before him. His pupils dilated as her fingers worked at his belt, her nails scraping lightly over his abdomen as she freed him from his pants and boxers.

His cock sprang free, thick and throbbing in her hand. She licked her lips, meeting his heated gaze as she leaned forward, taking him into her mouth with a slow, deliberate stroke.

Asher's groan was pure sin. His fingers tangled in her hair, not forcing, just holding, as she worked him with her tongue. She hollowed her cheeks, taking him deeper, relishing the way his hips jerked forward.

"Christ, Danica—" His voice was strained, his grip tightening.

She pulled back, swirling her tongue around the head before sinking down again, faster this time. His thighs trembled beneath her hands, his breath coming in ragged bursts.

"Not like this," he gritted out, hauling her up before she could protest.

Danica barely had time to blink before he spun her around, bending her over the back of the couch. The cool leather pressed against her stomach as he hiked her skirt up, his fingers hooking into her panties and dragging them down.

"You're insatiable," she teased, though her voice wavered as his hands gripped her hips.

"And you love it."

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:30 am*

Then he was inside her, filling her in one deep, relentless thrust. Danica gasped, her fingers digging into the couch as he set a brutal pace, each stroke hitting that perfect spot inside her.

"Oh, yes," she panted, pushing back against him, meeting every thrust with equal fervor.

Asher's hands tightened on her hips, his breath hot on her neck. "That's it. Take me just like that."

The slap of skin against skin, and the way his body moved over hers—it was primal and intoxicating. She could feel the delicious tension coiling tighter inside her, her body trembling on the edge of release.

"Asher, I'm?—"

"I know." His voice was rough, his fingers digging into her flesh. "Come, Danica."

And she did. Pure pleasure exploded through her, her body clenching around him as she cried out. Asher's rhythm faltered. His own release soon slammed into him with a loud groan, his hips jerking against her as he spilled deep inside her.

They stayed like that for a long moment, both breathing hard, their bodies still connected.

Danica turned her head, catching his lips in a slow, lazy kiss. "We're going to be late," she murmured against his mouth.



Asher chuckled, pressing one last kiss to her shoulder before pulling away. "Worth it."

She straightened, putting her panties back on and adjusting her dress as he grabbed his clothes. Her skin was flushed, her body still humming with satisfaction.

A few minutes later, Danica studied her reflection in the guest bathroom mirror, dabbing at her smeared lipstick with a tissue. Her brown eyes sparkled with lingering satisfaction, and her cheeks flushed with a glow that makeup could never replicate.

"Quickie with a dragon shifter during an event," she murmured to herself, smoothing her hands down the crimson silk that hugged her curves. "Not exactly covered in the event planner handbook."

She reapplied her lipstick, then ran a brush through her tousled hair, trying to tame the telltale signs of Asher's eager fingers. Her body still tingled with aftershocks, tiny electric currents pulsing under her skin where he had touched her.

No man had ever made her feel this way—like she was burning from the inside out, consumed by a fire that only he could stoke. What terrified her wasn't the intensity, but how quickly she'd become addicted to it. To him.

She stepped back, examining the full picture. The red silk dress clung in all the right places, making her pale skin glow against the rich fabric. She'd never be able to wear it again without remembering how it felt bunched around her waist as Asher's hands gripped her hips.

"Get it together," she whispered, applying a final touch of mascara. "You have a festival to close."

When she emerged into the foyer, her breath caught. Asher stood waiting, his broad

shoulders filling out a perfectly tailored tuxedo. The red vest and tie beneath matched her dress exactly, as if they'd planned it. His green eyes darkened as they swept over her.

"Come here," he commanded softly.

Her body responded before her mind could process, drawn to him like gravity. When she reached him, he traced one finger along her collarbone, his touch feather-light.

"Every man at that ceremony will envy me tonight," he said softly, pulling her against the hard planes of his chest.

His mouth then claimed hers with devastating thoroughness, and Danica wondered if she'd ever get tired of the way he kissed her—like she was oxygen and he was drowning.

## EIGHTEEN

### DANICA

Danica's heels clicked against the sidewalk as they quickly approached the town square, her fingers interlaced with Asher's. "We made it with three minutes to spare," she whispered, leaning into Asher's solid frame.

Asher's mouth quirked. "If we hadn't gotten so... distracted, we'd have been early."

"I think we can both agree it was well worth it." She squeezed his hand, heat rising to her cheeks at the memory of being bent over his couch just twenty minutes earlier.

The crowd parted as they approached, smiles and nods greeting them from all sides. Danica was struck by how genuine most of the welcomes felt—a stark contrast to the

whispers she'd overheard a few days ago. She scanned the faces, looking for any sign of hostility or the person who might have left that threatening note.

"Mayor Ectorius!" An elderly woman with silver hair clasped his free hand. "What a wonderful festival. Best one in years!"

"Thank Danica for that," Asher replied, his thumb stroking the back of Danica's hand. "She's the creative genius behind it all."

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:30 am*

Danica's chest warmed at his praise. When they reached the foot of the main stage, Asher leaned in close, his breath tickling her ear. "Ready to close this out, mate?"

The word 'mate' sent a delicious shiver through her body. "Lead the way, Alpha."

His eyes flashed with heat before he guided her up the stairs to the main stage.

Standing beside Asher as he prepared to address the crowd, Danica observed the assembled townspeople. Their upturned faces glowed in the festival lights—mothers bouncing children on their hips, teenagers trying to look cool while clearly enjoying themselves, and elderly couples with hands clasped together.

Could any of them really have sent wolves after me?The thought chilled her despite the warmth of the night. She remembered the note's hostile words: "A true mate wouldn't destroy what he was born to protect."

Asher's voice pulled her back to the present.

"When we opened this festival yesterday, I stood here as your mayor and Alpha, talking about tradition, responsibility, and unity. But as this fantastic event comes to an end tonight, I now want us to keep something else in our hearts..."

As he continued his speech, pride bloomed in Danica's chest. The confidence in his stance and the genuine emotion in his voice—he was magnificent. When he reached for her hand, she gave it willingly, feeling the strength in his large palm.

"Danica reminded me what it means to trust, to adapt, and to lead with more than

strength. She showed me how to lead with heart and courage." He raised their joined hands. "We've built something special at this year's festival. Let's carry it forward to the future. Together."

The crowd's applause washed over them like a wave, and Danica blinked back unexpected tears. Three days ago, she'd arrived in this town as an outsider—hired help to solve a crisis. Now she stood beside its Alpha as his equal and his mate. The enormity of it stole her breath.

Asher leaned down to kiss her cheek before announcing, "And now, it's time for the night shifting ceremony."

He squeezed her hand once more before descending the stage with Caleb and eight other men. Danica watched them disappear behind the clearing, knowing they were removing their formal clothes before the transformation.

"First time seeing the flight?" A woman's voice startled her.

Danica turned to find an older woman with kind eyes. "Yes. I've never seen anything like this before."

"Nothing compares," the woman smiled. "Especially when it's your mate leading the flight."

Before Danica could respond, a collective gasp rose from the crowd. She looked up.

Ten magnificent dragons soared above the town square, their scales catching the moonlight. Asher's crimson form was unmistakable at the front—larger than the others, with emerald eyes that seemed to glow even from a distance. Caleb's blue scales shimmered beside him like sapphires against the night sky.

They flew in perfect formation, weaving complex patterns that left trails of starlight in their wake. The dragons twisted and turned in synchronicity, sometimes breaking apart into smaller groups before rejoining the main formation. Occasionally, one would release a controlled burst of flame that illuminated the sky in brilliant color.

Danica stood transfixed, her hand pressed to her heart. The fairy lights strung throughout the square, combined with the glow of lanterns and the natural light of the moon and stars, created a magical backdrop for the dragons' dance.

"It's beautiful," she whispered, though no one could hear her over the crowd's appreciative murmurs.

Asher executed a particularly daring dive, plummeting toward the earth before pulling up at the last moment, his wings spread wide. The maneuver drew excited shouts from the spectators.

That's my mate, Danica thought, dizzy with pride and wonder. That powerful, magnificent creature chose me.

Tears pricked her eyes as the dragons completed their final formation—a perfect circle with Asher at its heart. In that moment, every doubt she'd harbored about belonging faded away. This ceremony, this town, this man in his dual forms—they were becoming part of her world now, expanding it in ways she never could have imagined.

As the dragons made their final pass over the square, Asher's gaze found hers. Even in his dragon form, she felt the connection between them—primal and electric and achingly sweet.

Mine, her heart whispered. And I am his.

Five minutes later, Asher strode through the crowd, his massive frame commanding attention without effort. Danica's heart skipped when his intense eyes locked onto hers, that predatory focus making her feel like the only woman in existence.

"That was..." Danica's voice caught in her throat as he reached her. "Asher, that was spectacular. The way you moved up there—like you owned the sky itself."

His lips curled into a satisfied smile as he closed the distance between them. "So you liked what you saw?"

"Like?" She shook her head, her eyes wide with genuine wonder. "I was mesmerized. You were simply magnificent." She reached up, her fingertips tracing his jawline. "I never imagined dragons could be so graceful and powerful at the same time."

The pride radiating from him was palpable. "Most humans never get to witness a night flight."

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:30 am*

"Then I'm the luckiest woman alive." Danica stepped closer, her body responding instinctively to his nearness. "I'm proud of you—of who you are and what you are." Her voice lowered, intimate despite the crowd around them. "I'm happy to be your mate, Asher."

Something primal flashed across his features. In one fluid motion, his arms encircled her waist, and he pulled her flush against his body. "Say that again," he commanded softly, his breath warm against her lips.

A delicious shiver ran through her. "I'm your mate," she whispered, the words feeling right in ways she couldn't have imagined three days ago. "And you're mine."

Asher's growl of approval vibrated through her before his mouth claimed hers in a searing kiss. His lips were dominating yet tender, possessive in a way that made her melt rather than resist. When he finally pulled back, she grabbed his lapels to steady herself.

"Do that again and we won't make it through the end of the festival," she breathed, feeling the heat in her cheeks.

Asher's low chuckle rumbled between them. "Maybe that's exactly my plan."

The Firebreathers soon launched into their signature ballad on the main stage, the lead singer's raspy voice weaving through the night air, and Asher pulled Danica onto the makeshift dance floor. Danica leaned into Asher's solid chest, his arms wrapping possessively around her waist.



"I'd say we pulled off a miracle," she murmured, watching the crowd around them with satisfaction. "Three days ago this was a disaster binder on your desk."

Asher's lips brushed against her ear, sending tingles through her body. "We're great together." His voice dropped lower, just for her. "In more ways than one."

Before she could reply with something equally suggestive, Caleb, Asher's clutch enforcer, approached with a grim expression that cut through their moment of triumph.

"Sorry to interrupt," Caleb said with a meaningful look at Asher. "Need you for five minutes. Clutch business about last night's... incident."

Asher's jaw tightened. "The wolves?"

Caleb nodded.

"Go," Danica said, giving Asher's hand a squeeze. "I'll mingle with the locals, win over a few more hearts and minds."

Asher's eyes darkened with reluctance. "Five minutes," he promised, pressing a swift kiss to her temple before following Caleb toward a quieter corner of the festival grounds.

Danica watched him go, still marveling at how quickly everything had changed in her life. Three days ago, she was just an up-and-coming event planner from New Orleans. Now she was the mate of a dragon Alpha, subject of town gossip, and apparently, target of enemy shifters.

"You two are absolutely adorable together."

Danica turned to find Joni approaching, looking absolutely stunning in an emerald dress that complemented her red hair. There was something in her smile tonight that didn't quite reach her green eyes, but Danica pushed her unease aside. Joni had been nothing but supportive the past few days.

"Thanks. Though I'm still getting used to all of this," Danica admitted.

Joni glanced over at the VIP area where several older council members were seated. "Hey, I know you're kind of off-duty now, but the VIP table ran out of cold drinks and some of the council members are complaining. The food trucks are slammed and won't get to it fast enough. Think you could help me restock the table really quick? You know how to make things look nice and get things done fast."

"Of course," Danica replied, jumping at the chance to be useful. "Lead the way."

They navigated through the crowd toward the storage area behind the main tent. Joni handed her a tray of wine glasses while retrieving bottles from the portable cooler.

"Red or white for the council members?" Danica asked, arranging the glasses in a pleasing pattern.

"Red for Garron—he won't touch anything else," Joni said, carefully pouring. "The others prefer white."

As they finished preparing the drinks, something acrid tickled Danica's nose. She wrinkled her face, looking around for the source.

"Did you smell that? Like something burned or maybe spoiled?"

"Probably just the smoke from the grills," Joni replied smoothly. "Here, for all your hard work." She handed Danica a glass of red wine.

"Thanks, but I'll wait until we're done." Danica set the glass on the tray among the others, focused on finishing the task.

They carried the refreshments to the VIP section, Danica smiling as she approached Garron first—the oldest council member, his silver hair gleaming in the festival lights.

"Fresh drinks for everyone," she announced, distributing glasses from her tray.

## Page 48

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:30 am*

Garron took the glass she offered with a nod of approval. "Perhaps you're not so bad for our Alpha after all," he said with a wink, raising his glass in salute before taking a deep swallow.

His face contorted instantly. The wine glass slipped from his fingers, shattering on the ground as he clutched his throat. His eyes bulged, locked on Danica's face with shocked accusation before he collapsed, his body convulsing once before going terribly still.

For one frozen moment, no one moved. Then chaos erupted.

"Poison!" someone shouted. "She's poisoned Garron!"

Danica stood paralyzed, her mind struggling to process what had just happened. "I—I didn't—" she stammered, looking wildly around for Joni, who had vanished completely.

Two council members knelt beside Garron, checking for a pulse, but their grim expressions told the story. Another sniffed at the remnants of wine in the broken glass.

"Dragon's bane," he hissed, rising with fury in his eyes. "Dragon's bane mixed with nightshade. Deadly to any shifter."

"No," Danica whispered, backing away. "I was just helping with the drinks. Joni asked me to?—"

"Joni?" A woman frowned. "I saw you come alone with those drinks."

"That's not true! She was just here with me!"

The crowd began to gather, eyes filled with suspicion and fear. Whispers traveled like wildfire.

"Outsider..."

"Human..."

"Never trusted her..."

"Poor Asher..."

A mother standing nearby suddenly grabbed her young daughter, yanking the child behind her as though Danica was contagious. The little girl's eyes widened in fear as she peeked around her mother's legs.

That small gesture cut deeper than any accusation. Three days of work, of slowly building trust, of feeling she might belong—gone in an instant.

I've become exactly what they feared. A liability. A danger.

Murmurs grew louder around her, some defending her, others condemning. Danica felt the ground beneath her feet shifting like quicksand. Everything she and Asher had built together was crumbling before her eyes.

Where is Asher? she thought desperately, scanning the crowd for his tall frame. He'll know I didn't do this. He'll believe me.

But in that moment, Danica realized the terrible truth. Even if Asher believed her—and she knew without question he would—it might not matter. His position as Alpha depended on the trust of his people. How could he lead if he stood by a woman half the town believed had murdered his most trusted advisor?

She stood frozen, caught between the instinct to run and the knowledge that flight would only confirm her guilt in everyone's eyes.

NINETEEN

ASHER

Asher adjusted his platinum watch as he leaned against a lamp post, listening to Caleb's report on the wolf shifters they'd encountered last night.

"Border trackers found where they entered our territory," Caleb said, his blue tie fluttering in the evening breeze. "Pack markings suggest they're from the Delta clan."

Asher's jaw tightened. "Reginald Delta always did have an issue with my father's leadership. Seems he's passing that grudge to me."

"Want me to send a diplomatic warning or something less...diplomatic?" A dangerous smile played at the edges of Caleb's mouth.

Before Asher could answer, a wave of disturbance rippled through the festival crowd. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up – an instinctive reaction to brewing trouble. The sound of The Firebreathers' signature rock song abruptly cut off mid-chorus, replaced by a growing rumble of angry voices.

"Something's wrong." Asher straightened, scanning the crowd. His gaze swept over the area where he'd left Danica, finding nothing but empty space.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:30 am*

The primal part of him roared to life. Where is my mate?

People were converging toward the VIP section, where council members had been enjoying reserved seating. Now they stood clustered together, their faces twisted with shock and fury.

And in the center of it all – Danica.

Her red silk dress made her easy to spot in the growing crowd of agitated townspeople. Even from this distance, her body language spoke of fear. She stood frozen, her eyes wide with panic, like prey surrounded by predators.

Asher moved without conscious thought, cutting through the crowd with the authority of a natural apex predator. Bodies shifted automatically, giving way to their Alpha without question.

"What is happening here?" His voice cut through the chaos like a blade, low and controlled but carrying the undeniable weight of command.

No one answered immediately. Danica's eyes found his, filled with relief and something that looked disturbingly like guilt. She opened her mouth, but no words came out.

Asher stepped beside her, sliding a protective arm around her waist. The message was clear to everyone watching—she was under his protection. The dragon inside him, still buzzing with energy from the night flight, pushed toward the surface, eager to shield his mate with wings and fire if necessary.

"I asked a question." His words vibrated with barely controlled power. "And I expect an answer. Now."

His eyes swept the circle of council members, their angry faces illuminated by the festival lights. On the ground lay the crumpled form of Garron, the eldest council member, his lips tinged an unnatural blue. The unmistakable scent of death hung in the air, mixed with something acrid and familiar that made Asher's nostrils flare.

Dragon's bane.

He pulled Danica closer, feeling tremors running through her body. The watch on his wrist ticked steadily, marking time as his world threatened to implode.

"Someone," he growled, "had better start talking."

The silence grew heavier as accusations thickened the air. Asher felt Danica trembling against him. His dragon clawed close to the surface, desperate to break free and incinerate anyone threatening his mate.

Councilman Thorne, his silver hair blowing in the evening breeze, finally spoke. "Miss Ulrich was seen bringing the drinks to the VIP table alone." His voice quavered with a mixture of grief and outrage. "Serving them herself."

"I wasn't alone," Danica whispered, her voice barely audible. "Joni was helping me. She suggested we restock the table. She's the one who poured the wine into the glasses."

Councilman Davis stepped forward, his broad frame blocking the festival lights and casting a long shadow. "Joni isn't here. No one saw her with you. They only saw you handling the drinks that killed our most respected elder."



The crowd rippled with more angry murmurs. Asher's arm tightened protectively around Danica's waist, and he could feel her rapid breathing. His heart thundered in his chest while his mind raced through possibilities. Where the hell was Joni?

"We can't let this stand!" someone shouted from the back.

"Lock her up now!" called another voice.

"She's an outsider—probably working with the wolves who attacked last night!"

Davis seized the momentum. "We should detain her immediately. She's clearly a threat to every towns person in Ectorius."

Asher's vision went red. The shift itched beneath his skin, his temperature spiking as the dragon within demanded release. He fought for control, knowing that giving in to rage now would only make things worse.

"She's destroyed our unity," Councilwoman Reed added, her eyes brimming with tears. "We welcomed her, and she?—"

"ENOUGH!" Asher shouted, his voice penetrating through the chaos. The crowd fell instantly silent, years of conditioning to their Alpha's command impossible to ignore.

"You want justice?" His eyes swept across the gathered faces, challenging anyone to meet his gaze. Few could. "Then do this right. Not in chaos. Not in front of the whole damn town."

He released Danica, stepping forward to address the circle of council members directly. The crowd instinctively gave him space, sensing the barely contained power emanating from their leader.

"Garron deserves more than a spectacle." Asher gestured toward the fallen elder, whose body had been respectfully covered with a tablecloth. "And this town deserves leaders who think before they act."

Davis bristled. "What do you propose, Alpha? That we simply let her?—"

"Send her to New Orleans under watch," Asher interrupted. "Not as an admission of guilt, but to preserve our justice system while we honor Garron properly."

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:30 am*

The council members exchanged uncertain glances.

"We don't let grief and fear decide our law," Asher continued, his voice dropping to a dangerous rumble. "Garron deserves better. So does this town."

Though his face betrayed nothing, inside Asher's thoughts raced like wildfire. I know you didn't do this, Danica. Someone set you up, and I will find them.

After several tense moments, Thorne nodded reluctantly. "We'll postpone judgment until after the proper mourning period. A formal hearing will follow."

Relief coursed through Asher's veins, though he kept his expression impassive. He turned back to Danica, whose face had gone ghostly white in the moonlight. Her eyes were wide pools of confusion and fear.

He pulled her close one last time, bending to whisper against her ear. "I will fix this. You are my mate, and nothing will ever change that. I will protect you with everything I have." His lips grazed her earlobe. "Trust me."

He stepped back, a public show of separation that tore at his insides. His dragon roared in protest, demanding he sweep her into his arms and fly far from here. But centuries of dragon tradition demanded he stay with his people in their time of crisis.

A male clutch member named Hunter, who would maintain careful watch over Danica in New Orleans, materialized at his side. "I'll make sure she's safe, brother," he promised quietly.

Asher gave a nearly imperceptible nod as Danica turned to walk away from the festival. Her shoulders were hunched, and the festival lights caught the sheen of unshed tears in her eyes. His every instinct screamed to follow her, but he remained rooted in place, a statue of authority while his heart trailed after her retreating form.

The festival grounds emptied in somber silence, townspeople leaving in small groups, their whispers carried away by the night breeze. What should have been a night of celebration had become a night of mourning.

As the last lights dimmed, Asher stood alone in the empty square, staring at the spot where Garron had fallen. His fists clenched at his sides as he made a silent vow.

Whoever did this will burn.

The front door of the Ectorius mansion exploded inward, wood splintering as Asher's fist connected with it. He didn't bother with the lights. Darkness suited his mood perfectly.

"Goddamn it!" The roar echoed through the empty halls, a sound more dragon than human.

Heat pulsed beneath his skin, the shift threatening to overtake him. He welcomed it. Fire would be simpler than this agony gnawing at his chest.

Asher seized a crystal decanter from the entry table and hurled it across the room. It shattered against the stone fireplace, sending shards glittering across the hardwood floor like fallen stars.

"Three hundred years of dragon tradition and they can't recognize innocence when it's standing right in front of them?" His fist crashed into the mahogany-paneled wall, leaving a splintered crater.

Blood smeared the wood where his knuckles had split open, but Asher barely noticed. Physical pain was nothing compared to the hollow ache spreading through him.

He stalked into the living room, where just hours ago he'd held Danica after their moment of passion. Her scent still lingered there, now tainted with the metallic edge of his blood.

The memory of her face as she'd been escorted away, pale and stricken, flashed before him. He'd promised to protect her, and he'd failed spectacularly.

"She planned a fucking children's party for someone who couldn't even remember her name," he snarled to the empty room, sweeping an arm across the coffee table. Books and decorative items crashed to the floor. "And they think she's a murderer?"

His dragon clawed at him, demanding release. Demanding retribution.

Asher grabbed a framed photograph of the town council, Garron in the center, stern and dignified. The glass cracked under his grip.

"She has more compassion in her little finger than half this town put together."

He hurled the frame against the wall, glass exploding outward.

"She fixed my disaster of a festival." His voice dropped low, ragged with emotion. "Fixed me."

The shift rippled across his back – scales pushing against skin, seeking freedom. Asher breathed deeply, forcing the dragon back inside. Burning his own house down wouldn't solve anything.

His feet carried him to the bedroom without conscious thought. The space where

they'd shared passion and whispered confessions now felt cavernous and cold.

Asher yanked open the cabinet of his bedside bar, pulling out a bottle of bourbon worth more than most cars. He didn't bother with a glass.

As he sank onto the bed, something crinkled beneath him. A note rested on his pillow, folded neatly, in Danica's precise handwriting.

## Page 51

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:30 am*

His heart stuttered as he unfolded it, her familiar scent rising from the paper.

Asher, I didn't want to ever leave you. But I know you did the right thing by sending me to New Orleans while you grieve your beloved council member Garron.

I never wanted to make things harder for you, only better, because you deserve everything. I know you don't believe I could hurt anyone—and I'm grateful for that.

But right now, your town doesn't want me as your mate. They see me as a mistake and a threat to your perfect community. And I won't be the reason your leadership is questioned, or the reason your town fractures.

With each line, his grip tightened on the paper until his knuckles whitened. The words blurred as something hot and unfamiliar pricked behind his eyes.

I came here to help you, and now someone is dead. Whether I'm found guilty or not, I've become the center of something I don't fully understand yet, and that terrifies me.

You've always protected your people without question. Now I have to do the same for you—by walking away from us and what we have, no matter how perfect it is. Just know, I care about you more than I can explain. Maybe that's why I'm doing this. —Danica

"No." The word escaped him as a broken whisper. "No, damn it!"

The bottle slipped from his fingers, bourbon pooling on the hardwood. He barely

noticed.

She was leaving him. Not because she was afraid for herself, but to protect him. To protect his position.

His first instinct was to shift, to fly to New Orleans faster than any car could take him, and to find her and bring her home where she belonged.

His fingers were already fumbling for his phone when a colder, more rational voice whispered through his mind. What if she's safer away from him?

Dragon politics were lethal. Someone had killed Garron and framed Danica with practiced precision. That someone wanted him weakened and isolated from his mate. And as long as Danica remained tied to him, she'd be a target.

Asher sank to his knees beside the bed, crushing her note against his chest. The dragon inside him keened with loss.

"What kind of protector am I," he whispered into the darkness, "if I can't even keep her safe in my own town?"

For the first time since his father died, Asher Ectorius, Alpha of the Ectorius dragon clutch, wept uncontrollably.

TWENTY

DANICA

Danica stared at her reflection in the steamed-up mirror of her apartment bathroom, barely recognizing the woman who gazed back at her. Just twelve hours ago, she'd been radiant in her crimson silk dress that hugged every curve, her hair falling in



glossy waves past her shoulders, and her lips painted the exact shade of red. The woman who'd danced under the stars with Asher Ectorius, feeling for once like she truly belonged somewhere.

That woman was gone now.

She wiped a hand across the foggy glass, revealing puffy eyes rimmed with smeared mascara she hadn't bothered to remove last night. Her skin was blotchy and pale, and her hair was yanked back in a messy ponytail.

"So this is what rock bottom looks like," she muttered, tugging at the neck of her oversized Tulane University sweatshirt. "Six days ago, I was planning a children's birthday party for a man who didn't remember my name, and now I'm a suspected dragon murderer."

Her laughter sounded hollow against the bathroom tiles.

From the living room, her phone chimed with another email notification. Probably another potential client reaching out after Chad Thompson's Instagram post had gone viral. The irony wasn't lost on her—her career was finally taking off just as her personal life imploded.

Danica shuffled into the living room, nearly tripping over a mountain of crumpled tissues. She'd gone through an entire box since returning home last night, her tears seemingly endless. Her eyes caught on a photo frame beside her laptop—her and three friends from college, arms linked, smiling broadly at the camera.

"What would you all think of me now?" she whispered, running a finger over the glass. "Danica Ulrich, party planner extraordinaire, accused murderer, and heartsick over an actual dragon."

She sank onto her plush white sofa and opened her laptop, determined to distract herself with work. The screen illuminated with forty-seven unread emails, each one a potential opportunity that should have thrilled her.

Instead, she clicked on a blank document and stared at the cursor blinking like a heartbeat.

"Goddamn it all." She slammed the laptop shut. "Why?"

Danica pushed herself up and paced the length of her stylish apartment, the space suddenly feeling like a cage despite its trendy decor and floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the French Quarter. Outside her apartment building, Hunter, one of Asher's clutch members, was watching somewhere on the street below—making sure she stayed put until her hearing.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:31 am*

At least she wasn't in a jail cell right now. Asher had managed that much for her.

Her chest constricted painfully at the thought of him finding her note. Would he be angry? Hurt? Or perhaps relieved that she'd made the difficult choice for them both?

"You should be focusing on clearing your name, not worrying about a man," she chided herself, resuming her pacing. But it wasn't just any man. It was Asher—insufferably stubborn, impossibly attractive, and utterly devoted to her and his town. A natural leader who'd put his entire reputation on the line to protect her these past four days.

Her phone rang, startling her from her thoughts. Unknown number.

"Hello?" Her voice came out raspy.

"Miss Ulrich." The voice was deep and official. "This is Davis from the Ectorius Council. Your hearing has been scheduled for three days from now, following Councilman Garron's memorial service."

She swallowed hard. "Thank you for letting me know."

"The mayor insisted we provide you with proper notification." His tone made it clear this courtesy was Asher's doing, not the council's. "Hunter will escort you back to Ectorius on Thursday morning."

The line went dead before she could respond.

Danica stared at the phone in her hand, reality crashing over her like a tidal wave. In three days, she'd face a town full of dragon shifters who believed she had murdered one of their most respected elders. And for what? Because she'd been eager to help serve drinks to make everyone happy?

"I never should have left that note," she whispered, sinking to the floor with her back against the wall.

Her tears started fresh, hot tracks sliding down her cheeks. She was walking away from what they had to protect him, believing his position as Alpha was more important than their relationship. But now, alone in her apartment with nothing but her thoughts and a dragon guard, the magnitude of what she might have thrown away hit her with staggering force.

Maybe he'll still fight for me anyway, she thought foolishly to herself.

The soft knock at her door jolted her from her misery. Her heart leaped traitorously in her chest, a sudden wild hope flaring that Asher had come for her. That he'd somehow made this nightmare disappear. That his powerful arms would sweep her up and carry her back to where she belonged - with him.

Danica scrambled to her feet, tugging at her oversized Tulane University sweatshirt which had twisted awkwardly around her torso. She hastily wiped at her cheeks and tried to smooth down the messy ponytail that had half-escaped its elastic.

"Coming," she called, her voice embarrassingly thick with emotion.

She yanked open the door, a fragment of a smile already forming on her lips—only to freeze when she saw not Asher's broad shoulders but Joni's willowy frame filling her doorway.

"Well," Joni said, her perfect red lips curving into a sympathetic smile. "You look like absolute hell."

Joni stood there in a silky emerald blouse paired with tailored cream slacks. Her long red hair fell in glossy waves down her back, and she carried a small gift bag that smelled suspiciously of beignets from Café du Monde.

"Joni." Danica's brow furrowed. "What are you doing here?"

"I was in the neighborhood," Joni said breezily, though her eyes took in every detail of Danica's disheveled state. "Thought I'd check in on you."

Danica's arms crossed protectively over her chest, suddenly conscious of her shapeless sweatshirt and sweatpants. "That's...thoughtful."

"May I come in?" Joni tilted her head, her perfume—something expensive and floral—wafting between them.

Danica hesitated, her frustration at Joni returning. "What happened to you last night?"

A flash of something—annoyance?—crossed Joni's face before smoothing out. "Family emergency. My mother called me just as you were heading over to the VIP table with the drinks. I only heard about poor Garron this morning." She paused, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "And about you and Asher breaking up."

That last sentence made Danica's thoughts short-circuit. Breaking up? Nobody knows about that note except Asher.

"We didn't break up," Danica said carefully, studying Joni's reaction. "At least, not officially."

"Oh! I just assumed." Joni waved a perfectly manicured hand. "Because of the way you had to leave. Forgive me."

Danica knew she should probably close the door. Something felt off. But the weight of aloneness pressed on her shoulders, and the thought of having someone—anyone—to talk to about the nightmare of the past twelve hours overwhelmed her better judgment.

"Come in," she said, stepping aside. "Sorry about the mess."

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:31 am*

Joni glided into the apartment, her eyes expertly cataloging the stylish furniture, the floor-to-ceiling windows, and the eclectic art on the walls—and the mountain of tissues by the couch.

"Can I get you some water?" Danica asked, suddenly self-conscious about her hospitality skills. Even in her lowest moment, some part of her still wanted to be the perfect host.

"That would be lovely," Joni purred, settling gracefully onto Danica's white couch.

Danica escaped to the kitchen, her mind racing. Why would Joni think she and Asher broke up? And how did she know I had to leave? Did someone tell her everything? They must have. The dragon clutch members in Ectorius are a tight knit group.

She grabbed two glasses from her cabinet and filled them with filtered water, trying to collect herself. When she returned to the living room, Joni was examining the framed photo of Danica with her college friends.

"You have such a beautiful place here," Joni remarked, accepting the water with a smile that didn't reach her green-gold eyes. "So bright and open."

"Thanks," Danica replied, sitting across from her visitor in the armchair. "It's my sanctuary."

A sanctuary now invaded, she thought, watching as Joni crossed her long legs and leaned back against the cushions like she owned them.

Danica pulled her knees to her chest, sinking deeper into her armchair as Joni placed the bag of beignets on the coffee table between them. The powdered sugar dusted the waxed paper, and despite everything, her mouth watered at the familiar scent.

"Go on," Joni urged, pushing the bag closer. "Sugar helps heartbreak. That's scientifically proven."

Danica pulled out a pastry, not bothering with a plate. Powdered sugar dusted the front of her already-rumpled Tulane sweatshirt. "I don't know if science can fix what's wrong with me right now," she said, taking a small bite.

"Try me instead," Joni said, leaning forward with a sympathetic tilt of her head. "Sometimes talking helps."

Danica's eyes filled with tears again. "God, I feel so stupid."

"For what? Falling for Asher?" Joni's tone was gentle and encouraging.

"For falling so completely for him." Danica brushed sugar from her fingers, leaving white smudges on her gray sweatpants. "I've never believed in love at first sight or soulmates or any of that. I thought Asher was crazy with all his fated mates talk." She looked up, meeting Joni's gaze. "But then I spent more time with him."

"And everything changed," Joni finished softly.

"Everything." Danica's voice broke on the word. "I went from planning a five-year-old's birthday party to planning a dragonfestival to planning my entire future with a man I'd just met. Who does that?"

"Someone who found her fated mate," Joni offered, taking a careful sip of water.



"Four days." Danica shook her head, her messy ponytail swinging. "In four days, he rewired my entire outlook on life. On love. Even two days ago, I was still fighting it, still thinking this was just some ridiculous chemical attraction." Her hand pressed against her heart. "But now I feel like there's this... this gaping hole where he should be."

Joni nodded, her face perfectly composed in sympathetic lines. "That's the mate bond. It's powerful."

"It's terrifying," Danica whispered. "I've spent my entire adult life avoiding attachment, but with Asher... I didn't even get a choice. My heart just decided for me."

"And now?" Joni prompted.

Danica stared out her windows, watching clouds drift across the blue sky. "Now I feel lost. I've been accused of murder, exiled from a town I was starting to think of as home, and separated from the one person who makes my soul feel complete." Her laugh was bitter. "And the stupidest part? I still believe he can fix this."

"How?" Joni's voice sharpened slightly.

"Asher won't give up," Danica said, a spark returning to her eyes. "I know him. He's stubborn and protective and when he believes in something, he's unstoppable. He'll turn that entire town upside down looking for the truth, and he won't rest until he finds it. He's probably?—"

The sound of glass cracking interrupted her. Danica looked over to see Joni's fingers tightening around her water glass, her knuckles white with pressure.

"Joni?" she asked, suddenly alert. "Are you okay?"

Joni's face transformed, the sympathetic mask melting away to reveal something cold and hard beneath. "You think he's going to save you?" Her voice dripped with scorn. "You stupid, naive little human."

Danica's breath caught. "What?—"

"Four years!" Joni slammed her broken glass down, water sloshing onto the table. "Four years I'd been there for him. Supporting him. Building connections. Making myself the perfect mate for an Alpha, even though we weren't fated mates." She stood, looming over Danica. "And then you just waltz in, with your party planning and your human fragility, and suddenly he's falling all over himself because you're fated mates."

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:31 am*

Danica pushed herself deeper into the chair, her heart pounding. "Joni, I didn't?—"

"You didn't what? Mean to steal my future?" Joni's laugh was harsh. "Do you have any idea what it means to be an Alpha's mate? The power? The respect? The role in the community? Of course you don't." Her eyes flashed, turning from green-gold to pure molten gold. "You're weak. Undeserving. Just a passing fancy for Asher to play with before he gets bored and tosses you aside."

"He won't get bored of me," Danica managed, trying to keep her voice steady. "That's not how fated mates work."

Joni leaned closer, close enough that Danica could see the faint scales rippling beneath her skin. "I could kill you right now," she whispered, her breath hot against Danica's face. "Snap that delicate little neck before you even knew what happened."

Danica's mind raced. Where was her phone? Too far away, on the kitchen counter. Hunter was outside, but would he hear if she screamed?

Danica swallowed hard. "Then why don't you?"

"Because that wouldn't be enough." Joni's smile was terrible to behold. "Not for the town. They need a show of strength. Only then will they accept me as their new leader."

The truth crashed over Danica like a wave. "The poison," she breathed. "It wasn't meant for Garron..."

"Old fool got in the way," Joni snarled. "But no matter. It worked out even better this way. Less resistance."

Danica tried to push herself up, to run, but her limbs felt suddenly heavy. "What did you..." Her tongue felt thick in her mouth.

Joni's smile widened. "Oh, sweetie. Did you think I'd let you leave this room under your own power?" She gestured to Danica's half-drunk water glass. "The dose is very small. Just enough to make you compliant."

The water. When she was distracted talking about Asher...

The room began to tilt, colors blurring at the edges of her vision. Danica tried to call out, but her voice emerged as a whisper. She watched, helpless, as Joni pulled out a cell phone.

"It's done," Joni said into the device, her voice crisp and professional once more. "She's ready. Meet me at our hideout. We're doing this tonight as discussed."

Danica fought against the darkness pulling at her consciousness. Asher, she thought desperately. Help me.

The last thing she saw was Joni's triumphant smile as the world faded to black.

TWENTY-ONE

ASHER

The afternoon sunlight shone through his office windows as Asher stared at the photo on his phone. His thumb hovered over the screen like he could somehow reach through it and touch her. The candid shot captured everything—Danica's head thrown

back in laughter, her brown eyes crinkled at the corners, and the slight flush across her cheeks that appeared whenever she was excited about something. His own face looked almost foreign to him—relaxed, open, and alive in a way he hadn't seen in the mirror for five years.

Four days. Four fucking days and his entire world had imploded.

He tossed the phone onto his desk, where it landed among the scattered papers detailing Garron's memorial arrangements and Danica's upcoming farce of a hearing. The leather of his chair creaked as he leaned back, running his hands through his dark hair.

"This is bullshit," he growled to the empty room.

His office—once his sanctuary—now felt like a prison cell. The bookshelves that had witnessed their first real conversation. The chair where she'd sat with that damn notebook, challenging his every idea.

Everything in here smelled like her.

Asher's dragon stirred under his skin, restless and agitated. The beast wanted to tear through the sky and go to her, whisking her back to where she rightfully belonged.

"She's walking away from this," he reminded himself harshly.

His fist came down on the desk hard. The pain barely registered. Nothing compared to the hollow ache in his chest.

The council had been baffled by his restraint this morning. They expected rage, demands, and action—not this dangerous quiet. But what was there to say? Her decision to walk away from what they had together gutted him more effectively than

any physical wound could have.

"I should have fought harder for her last night. Fought for her innocence and her rightful place by my side," he muttered, his voice rough from lack of sleep.

But he was not used to this vulnerability and this weakness, not used to this feeling of needing to choose between his desires and his duty. For years, he'd prided himself on his independence, his control, and his ability to keep everyone at arm's length while still earning their loyalty. Then Danica had waltzed in with her notebook and her brilliant ideas, and her stubborn refusal to be intimidated by him. And suddenly he wasn't just Asher Ectorius, Alpha and mayor. He was a man with desires and fears and hopes.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:31 am*

He picked up her note again, the paper already worn from his repeated handling.

I care about you more than I can explain. Maybe that's why I'm doing this.

"That's not how this works," he said to the empty room, crushing the paper in his fist.

"You don't protect me by leaving me."

The silence mocked him. From the windows, he could see his groundskeeper performing his daily tasks of caring for Asher's property. Life continuing on as Asher's world had stopped turning.

His phone buzzed with another council group text about the hearing. Another reminder of the absurd accusation against his mate. His mate, who couldn't harm a fly unless it threatened someone she cared about.

Asher felt something shift inside him. The emptiness of the last twelve hours was weighing heavy on his heart and his body. At that moment, Asher realized with crystal clarity that life without Danica was unbearable—not just because of the loneliness, but because he was incomplete without her.

Fifteen minutes later, Asher stared at his phone as his thumbs hovered over the keyboard, mentally composing and discarding draft after draft. The formal email header "To: Danica Ulrich" mocked him with its cold professionalism. How the hell could he fit everything he needed to say to her into an email message?

He needed to tell her that he was coming for her. That he wouldn't let her sacrifice herself or her happiness for others. That they were stronger together than apart.

He typed furiously, then deleted whole paragraphs again and again. His dragon screamed at him now to hunt down his mate and to bring her back by his side—safe and protected.

"Fuck this," he muttered, rubbing his bearded jaw. "She deserves better than some half-assed email."

His town's expectations of him weighed heavily on his mind. If he left now to find Danica, the council would see it as dereliction of duty. The town needed leadership through Garron's death. Through the brewing conflict with the Delta pack.

But what good was a leader with half his soul missing? He was clearly weakened without his fated mate and probably not capable of leading alone anymore. He needed Danica by his side.

Asher started typing again, this time with absolute clarity:

Danica, I'm coming for you. This town can stand without me for a few days, but I can't stand another minute without you. You didn't do this. And I'm going to prove it.

His finger hovered over the send button when three sharp knocks snapped his attention to the door. Caleb appeared, slipping inside without waiting for permission. His blue eyes, sharp as glacial ice, immediately assessed Asher's disheveled state.

"You look like shit," Caleb remarked, shutting the door quietly behind him.

"Thanks for the update." Asher didn't bother hiding the phone. Caleb knew him too well. "Tell me you have something."

A grim smile tugged at Caleb's mouth. "Better than something." He pulled out his phone, his expression darkening. "I've been watching Joni since last night as you



requested. Caught her meeting with some friends of ours."

Asher straightened, every muscle going taut. "The Delta wolves?"

"Bingo." Caleb passed over his phone. "Security camera outside the Bayou Inn. About thirty miles south of town."

Asher took the device, his pulse quickening. The grainy footage showed Joni—unmistakable with her flame-red hair—surrounded by four men whose postures screamed predator. Even in the low-quality video, Asher recognized the wolf shifters' eyes from the attack on Danica.

The sound was patchy, but clear enough:

"—planted the poison perfectly. She'll either never come back, or she'll be convicted," Joni's voice said, smug and self-satisfied. "Either way, she's gone for good."

One of the men leaned forward. "As long as she's alive, Asher won't fully commit to a new mate."

"I've handled that," Joni replied. "By tomorrow night?—"

The audio cut out momentarily, then returned as one of the men nodded. "—Delta pack will be grateful. An Alpha with a human mate weakens all shifters. Sets a dangerous precedent."

The video ended, and Asher realized he'd cracked the screen protector of Caleb's phone with his grip.

"Sorry," he muttered, handing it back.

"Don't worry about it." Caleb's eyes gleamed with a dangerous light. "What are we going to do?"

A slow, predatory smile spread across Asher's face, his dragon rising closer to the surface. Heat flooded his veins, the urge to shift and tear through the sky nearly overwhelming now. For the first time since Danica left, he felt alive again—purpose burning through the fog of grief.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:31 am*

"Joni thinks she's taken everything from me." Asher stood, energy crackling off him in almost visible waves. "But she's about to learn what happens when you threaten an Alpha's fated mate."

Caleb matched his energy, leaning forward. "And the Delta pack?"

"They're going to regret ever setting foot in my territory." Asher glanced at his unsent email, then hit delete. He wouldn't need words anymore. "But first, we need to get to Danica."

"Before Joni does," Caleb finished, his expression grim.

The phone in Asher's hand suddenly felt like a ticking bomb. Time was running out. Whatever Joni had planned for tonight was already in motion.

"No one takes what's mine." Asher's voice lowered to a dangerous rumble as the dragon inside him roared in agreement. His green eyes flashed with primal promise.

Suddenly, Caleb's phone rang with a shrill tone that cut through the tension in Asher's office. Caleb glanced at the screen, his blue eyes narrowing.

"It's Drake." He answered with terse efficiency. "What do you have?"

Asher watched his second-in-command's face transform as he listened, the muscles in his jaw tightening with each passing second. Asher's dragon stirred, sensing the shift in energy.

"When?" Caleb demanded. "Are you absolutely certain?"

Asher's patience snapped. "Put him on speaker."

Caleb complied without hesitation, placing the phone between them on the heavy mahogany desk.

"Drake, repeat what you just told me," Caleb ordered.

"That tracking device we planted on Joni's car last night finally pinged," Drake's voice crackled through the speaker. "She's in New Orleans right now. Near the French Quarter."

A bolt of electric fury shot through Asher. "Why the hell are we just getting this now?"

"She must've jammed the signal somehow," Drake explained. "It only just broke through. But that's not all?—"

Asher was already heading for the door. "We move now."

"Wait," Caleb's hand shot out, gripping Asher's forearm. "Let's think this through. We don't know what we're walking into."

Asher's green eyes flashed dangerously. "My mate is in danger. What else do I need to know?"

Drake's voice interrupted from the speaker. "There's more, Alpha. One of our younger members, Ellie, was patrolling near the old mill early this morning. She overheard Joni talking with Reginald Delta."

The name hit Asher like a physical blow. Reginald Delta—Alpha of the wolves that had targeted Danica at the festival.

"What exactly did she hear?" Asher growled, his voice lowering to a dangerous register.

"Phrases like 'make her pay,' 'public display,' and 'midnight fire.' They've got some kind of hideout set up at the old mill. Ellie said it looked established, not just a one-time meeting spot."

"Midnight fire?" Asher asked, his voice filled with confusion.

Suddenly, something cracked wide open inside Asher's chest—a searing pain that wasn't physical yet burned through him with visceral intensity. He stumbled slightly, bracing his hand against the desk.

"Ash?" Caleb's voice sounded distant.

The sensation intensified—fear, panic, and desperation washing over him in waves that weren't his own. Then, clear as if whispered directly into his ear were two horrible words. Help me.

"Danica," Asher breathed, his hand flying to his sternum where the pain pulsed strongest. "The mate bond—I can feel her. She's calling to me."

Caleb's eyes widened. "But you haven't completed the mating ritual."

"Doesn't matter. She's accepting the mate bond now." A fierce pride mingled with his terror. Even in danger, his mate was strong and trusting enough to reach for him across miles. "She's scared, Caleb. They've got her now."

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:31 am*

Asher straightened to his full height, dragon fire rolling beneath his skin. His voice took on the unmistakable timbre of command that had made grown men and shifters alike quake.

"Get Theo, Marcus, and Jared. Anyone else you trust completely. We meet at the east field in thirty minutes."

"That's not much of a force against Joni's dragon, an alpha wolf shifter, and their followers," Caleb cautioned as they strode from the office.

"Half the town might fear what Danica represents, but the other half saw what she did for us. We might be able to round up some more clutch members with a little convincing." Asher's voice carried absolute conviction as they moved through the mansion's hallway. "I know the ones who stood with her at the festival will stand with her now."

Caleb matched his stride. "We'll need to convince them fast. If Joni's talking about midnight fire?—"

"They're planning to burn her at midnight." The words tore from Asher's throat, primal and raw.

"We need testimony first, Ash. We can't just rush in there."

"Fine. Joni dies last," Asher snarled, pushing through the front door into the fading afternoon light. "I want her confession before I tear her throat out."

They reached Asher's garage where Caleb pulled out his phone, rapidly texting contacts and coordinates. "Marcus is closest to the community center. He'll round up whoever's there for the memorial planning."

Asher nodded sharply, yanking open the door to his Porsche. "Tell them to come prepared for battle. This isn't a negotiation anymore."

As Caleb slid into the passenger seat, his phone buzzed with responses. "Theo's got eight at the training grounds. Jared can pull another five from patrol."

"That's twenty including us," Asher calculated as the engine roared to life. "Not enough against their combined forces, but we don't need to win a war. We just need to extract Danica."

The Porsche peeled out of the circular driveway. Asher's knuckles whitened on the steering wheel as another pulse of fear shot through the mate bond.

"Hold on, sweetheart," he whispered. "I'm coming for you."

TWENTY-TWO

DANICA

Danica woke up to the taste of rust and molasses in her mouth. Her head throbbed incessantly, and her vision still blurred slightly at the edges. She blinked several times, trying to focus on the shadowy space around her.

"What the hell...?" she murmured, the words coming out slurred.

That's when she realized she couldn't move. Her wrists burned, and when she looked up above her head, she saw they were bound with rough rope to what looked like an

iron crossbeam. Her ankles were also secured together and tied to another iron beam below her bare feet. She looked down past her feet, realizing she was suspended several feet above the ground against some kind of metal framework.

The ceremonial white dress they'd put her in—wait, who had changed her clothes?—fluttered in the draft coming through broken windows. The garment was thin, almost sheer, with embroidered symbols she didn't recognize at the edges. Some kind of ritualistic nonsense.

"Oh, dear god," she whispered, memories flooding back. Joni in her apartment. The water. The phone call.

The cavernous space around her was all crumbling brick and rusted metal. Massive iron vats lined one wall, ancient machinery stood frozen in time, and the sickly-sweet smell of decades-old sugar permeated everything. An abandoned sugar mill. Probably somewhere in the bayou where screams would attract nothing but bullfrogs and alligators.

Danica twisted her wrists, testing the restraints. The rope bit deeper, fresh pain blooming across her skin. Already her circulation was compromised, her fingers tingling unpleasantly.

"Asher," she whispered, her voice cracking.

Danica was always the one saving others from their crises. Now, she found herself desperately wishing someone would come save her. Specifically Asher. His fierce protectiveness, his commanding presence, and his absolute refusal to back down from a fight—she needed all of it now.

A strange warmth blossomed in her chest despite the terror. She closed her eyes and focused on it, somehow knowing it was connected to him.



Help me, Asher.

Outside, voices grew closer. Multiple sets of footsteps and hushed conversations. Danica's entire body tensed, alert for any opportunity or any weakness she could exploit. She might be a human in a supernatural world, but she wasn't going out without a fight.

The dilapidated metal door at the far end of the mill creaked open. Joni stepped through, transformed from the friendly woman at the festival into something altogether more sinister. Her long red hair fell over one slender shoulder, and the crimson dress she wore clung to her tall frame like a second skin, slashing to the thigh with a neckline that plunged almost to her navel.

"You're finally awake." Joni's smile was that of a predator watching wounded prey.

"Perfect. I was worried we'd have to start without you."

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:31 am*

"Kidnapping and drugging aren't exactly friendship bracelets, Joni." Danica kept her voice steady despite the fear coursing through her. "What's with the virgin sacrifice aesthetic? Not really my color."

Joni circled the metal structure, her high heels clicking on the concrete floor. "You know, I almost felt sorry for you when you first showed up in Ectorius." Her fingertips trailed along the rusty metalwork. "A little human party planner, so out of her depth. Playing with dragons."

"I wasn't playing."

"No?" Joni's laugh was musical and cruel. "You actually thought you belonged with someone like Asher? That's adorable." She stopped directly in front of Danica, her green-gold eyes glittering. "He's a dragon Alpha, honey. A king among monsters. And you? You're just a temporary distraction. A novelty fuck."

The words stung more than Danica wanted to admit. "You don't know anything about us."

"I know everything about Asher." Joni's smile sharpened. "I know exactly what he needs in bed. How wild he gets when his dragon is close to the surface. How he likes it rough and dirty and primal." She leaned closer, her voice dropping to a whisper. "You think your fragile little human body could ever handle what he truly wants to do? You'd break under the force of his passion."

Danica thought about Asher's powerful body moving against hers and the marks he'd left on her skin—marks she'd begged for. The memory gave her unexpected strength.

"Just let me go and no one has to know about this," Danica said, trying to sound reasonable despite her rising anger. "I won't tell anyone what happened to me or what you told me today."

Fresh blood trickled from her wrists where the rope had chafed her skin raw, but Danica kept her expression neutral. Whatever Joni had planned, showing weakness wouldn't help.

Behind her predatory smile, Joni's eyes burned with a jealousy so potent it was almost palpable. Danica realized with sudden clarity that this wasn't just about power or politics. This was about a woman who couldn't stand seeing someone else have what she'd convinced herself she deserved.

Joni finally scoffed, her perfectly manicured fingers flicking dismissively through the air. "Tell anyone? Honey, who would you tell? The dead don't talk."

She circled Danica like a shark, the crimson dress rippling like blood in water. "But let's not rush to the finale just yet. I think you deserve to know exactly why this is happening."

Danica pulled against her restraints again, wincing as the rope cut even deeper. "Let me guess—you're evil and crazy? Or is it crazy and evil? I always mix up the order."

"Cute." Joni's smile never reached her eyes. "No, what I am is ambitious. I don't just want Asher—though I'll certainly take him. I want Ectorius. The clutch. And eventually, the entire shifter community in the South."

"You see," Joni continued, running her fingernail down the metal framework, "as long as Asher is separated from you, he'll never be whole. He's weakened—physically and mentally. A broken Alpha is worthless in our world. The council will see it, the town will feel it, and they'll need someone to step up."

"And that someone is you." Danica's voice dripped with contempt.

"Smart girl." Joni's smile widened. "I was born to lead. Not Asher with his progressive ideas and human sympathies. And once I take control, I'll make him my mate for life."

Danica's stomach clenched. "He'd never agree to that."

"Agreement is optional." Joni's laugh echoed through the abandoned mill. "He'll do what I want, when I want. And trust me, I have very specific desires for that magnificent body of his."

Joni leaned in, her voice lowering to a silky whisper. "Every night, I'll have him pleasure me until I'm satisfied. I know exactly how talented that tongue of his is, and how those strong hands can make a woman scream. And you'll be nothing but a fading memory while I'm writhing beneath him."

The image of Asher with Joni sent white-hot rage coursing through Danica's veins. Her wrists burned as she strained against the ropes with renewed vigor. If she weren't tied up, she'd have launched herself at Joni's throat without hesitation.

"Asher is going to find out what you've done. That you planted the poison that killed Garron," Danica hissed.

"Oh, I'm counting on it. He is very clever and persistent." Joni traced a pattern on Danica's bare foot, her nails grazing the skin. "But by then, it'll be too late for both of you."

Danica tried to jerk away. "You know what I think? I think you're terrified. Because you know that what Asher and I have is real—and you'll never have that with anyone."

Something dangerous flashed in Joni's eyes. "What you have is a fantasy. A fleeting human delusion."

"It's fate," Danica countered. "Something no amount of scheming can replace or change."

Looking back, Danica realized all the signs had been there all along. Joni's too-eager friendship, her convenient appearances at critical moments, and the way she'd positioned herself between Danica and the truth at every opportunity. The note, the poison, the frame job—it had all been carefully orchestrated to drive a wedge between Danica and Asher.

And now here she was, trussed up like a sacrifice in a sheer white dress, waiting to die for the crime of falling in love with the wrong dragon.

"You won't win," Danica said, summoning every ounce of conviction she could muster. "Asher will find me."

Joni's smile was cold as winter. "I'm banking on it, darling. That's exactly the plan."

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:31 am*

She strutted in a slow circle around Danica, the hem of her crimson dress trailing across the dusty sugar mill floor like a bloodstain. Her heels clicked rhythmically, each step punctuating her gleeful monologue.

"You see, killing you quietly would be so... unsatisfying." Joni's voice dripped with pride as she examined her manicured nails. "A proper coup requires witnesses. It requires spectacle."

Danica's mouth went dry. "You're planning to kill me in public?"

"Precisely! A public execution to demonstrate my strength and loyalty." Joni's eyes glittered with manic excitement. "My followers need to see me eliminate the Alpha's chosen human mate with my own hands. That's how I prove I'm strong enough to lead."

Danica's stomach flipped, not from the grotesque image of her own death, but from the crushing realization that she'd never again feel Asher's arms encircling her, never taste his lips against hers, and never hear those three words she now desperately craved.

"In thirty minutes," Joni continued, reveling in her moment, "an emergency alert will go out to the entire town—well, minus Asher and his most loyal followers. Can't have them spoiling the surprise too early." She checked the delicate watch on her wrist. "The message will claim those wolves from the festival are back, threatening to invade homes. Everyone will be directed here for safety."

Danica's mind raced. "And instead they'll find?—"

"Me. Standing near your tied-up body on this metal framework." Joni's smile widened. "My followers inside, wolves positioned in the bayou trees outside, ready to attack on my command should anyone object. By dawn, I'll be Alpha of the Ectorius clutch."

A tall, bearded shifter appeared in the doorway, nodding to Joni, who brushed her hands together with satisfaction.

"Well, I need to prepare for my moment of glory. Get comfortable—though I suppose that's impossible in your position." Joni laughed lightly. "Consider this your wake. Reflect on your short, insignificant life."

As Joni sashayed toward the door, her crimson dress shimmering in the dim light, she paused to instruct the guard. "Watch her. If she makes a sound, gag her."

The heavy door slammed shut, leaving Danica alone with the silent guard who positioned himself by the entrance, his eyes fixed forward.

Desperate, Danica scanned the cavernous mill. Rusted machinery offered no salvation. The ancient beams creaked overhead, too high to reach even if she weren't bound. The guard maintained his distance, frustratingly beyond her ability to manipulate or attack.

Minutes ticked by, marked only by the steady drip of water somewhere in the darkness. Danica strained against her restraints until fresh blood slicked her wrists, but the ropes refused to yield.

The reality of her situation crystallized with terrible clarity. There was no escape. No last-minute rescue. No clever plan that would save her. Danica closed her eyes, trying to slow her frantic heartbeat. If these were truly her final moments, she wouldn't spend them in terror.

Instead, she focused on the strange, warm connection she'd felt with Asher from the beginning. That invisible thread that had drawn them together despite all odds. Fated mates, he'd called it.

"Asher," she whispered, so softly the guard couldn't hear. She concentrated on pushing her thoughts through that bond between them, willing her love to reach him across whatever distance separated them.

"I don't know if you can hear me," she continued in her mind, "but if you can... I love you. I love your strength and your gentleness. Your dedication to your people and even that little crease between your eyebrows when you concentrate."

Tears slipped silently down her cheeks as she poured her heart into this impossible connection.

"Thank you for seeing me—truly seeing me. For making me feel whole for the first time in my life. For showing me I'm capable of more than I ever believed."

The warmth in her chest intensified, a glow that seemed to pulse with each heartbeat.

"I wish we had more time," her thoughts continued. "I wish I could've woken up in your strong arms every morning for the rest of our lives. I wish I could've stood by your side for years instead of days."

The connection burned brighter and stronger, and somehow Danica knew—he was listening.

TWENTY-THREE

ASHER



Asher and Caleb crouched in the shadows, the powerful force of his loyal clutch members—eighteen dragons strong—at their backs. The abandoned sugar mill loomed before them, a decrepit monument to forgotten industry, its weathered exterior barely visible through the midnight fog rolling off the bayou.

"Three guards at the north entrance, two more patrolling the perimeter," Caleb whispered, his muscular form tensed beside Asher. "And those wolf shifters in the trees are making this complicated."

Asher barely heard him. The mate bond between him and Danica had ignited like wildfire in his chest, growing stronger with each step toward the mill. Her presence pulled at him, a desperate, yearning tug that made his dragon snarl and claw beneath his skin.

Thank you for seeing me... wish we had more time...

Her voice whispered across his consciousness, fragmented but unmistakable. Not afraid—something worse. Resigned. Heartbroken. Final.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:31 am*

"She believes she's going to die," Asher growled, his voice barely human. The thought of Danica suffering twisted his insides into knots of molten rage. "I'll tear apart anyone who made her feel that way."

His fingers lengthened into claws without conscious thought, scales rippling beneath his skin.

"Easy," Caleb cautioned, gripping his shoulder. "We need strategy, not a rampage."

"Strategy?" Asher's eyes flashed dragon-bright in the darkness. "My mate is in there. Strategy can go to hell."

Caleb didn't flinch. "And getting yourself killed helps her how exactly?"

Before Asher could protest, the night erupted with activity. Headlights cut through the fog as vehicles pulled up along the dirt road. Doors slammed. Voices called out in confusion and fear.

"What the—" Caleb started.

Asher narrowed his eyes as dozens and dozens of townspeople hurried toward the mill, their expressions panicked, many still in pajamas or hastily thrown-on clothes.

"Something's terribly wrong," Asher murmured, watching as elderly Mrs. Finch hustled past with her granddaughter in tow. "Why would over half the town come to an abandoned mill at midnight?"

A young man rushed past, phone clutched in his hand. "Emergency alert said to gather here! Wolf pack invasion coming—town's compromised!"

"Wolf pack?" Caleb scoffed. "There's no invasion."

Asher's tactical mind clicked into gear. "It's a setup. Joni's gathering witnesses."

"Shit. A coup?"

"Yes, a coup," Asher growled. "She needs the town to see her kill my mate."

Without another word, Asher melted into the stream of frightened citizens, his team following suit. They moved likeshadows among their neighbors, their faces lowered, and their instincts heightened.

The closer they got to the entrance, the stronger Danica's presence burned in his chest. Her emotions washed over him—determination undercut by resignation, love snarled with regret, and beneath it all, a quiet, unwavering strength that made his heart ache.

"When we get in there," he whispered to Caleb without breaking stride, "I'll create a distraction. You get to Danica."

"And what kind of distraction did you have in mind?" Caleb's blue eyes glinted with dangerous humor.

Asher's smile was all teeth and predatory intent. "The kind that will ultimately involve me ripping Joni's throat out in front of her loyal followers."

"Subtle."

"I'm done with subtle."

The entrance loomed before them, a yawning maw in the dilapidated structure. Inside, lights flickered—not the warm glow of safety, but harsh, dramatic spotlights focused on some central spectacle.

Asher shouldered past a cluster of confused elders, every muscle coiled to spring. The mate bond blazed ever stronger, a beacon guiding him through the darkness.

Hold on just a bit longer, Danica. I'm here now.

Asher stepped through the doorway of the old mill, his all-black clothing helping him blend with the shadows as he moved alongside the crowd of townspeople. What he saw inside made his dragon roar for blood, clawing beneath his skin with murderous intent.

Joni stood center stage in a sleek red dress that clung to her body like liquid flame, the plunging neckline diving shamelessly to her navel, a long slit revealing an expanse of tanned leg. The spotlights caused her hair to glow, turning it into a halo of blood-red fire as she gestured dramatically to her audience.

Behind her stood a half-circle of his own clutch members—faces he recognized, dragons who'd broken bread at his table, and who'd sworn loyalty to him—now aligned against him. Beside them stood Reginald, Alpha of the Delta wolf pack, with several of his wolf shifters flanking him, their eyes reflecting the harsh light like predators in the night.

But Asher barely registered any of them. His entire focus locked onto Danica. His mate hung suspended from an iron beam, wrapped in a sheer white gown that made her look like some ancient sacrifice.

The moment their gazes connected, the mate bond between them flared like a supernova. Relief washed across her beautiful face, followed quickly by fear—not for herself, but for him.

She's worried more about me when she's the one tied up like an offering. The thought made his heart clench painfully in his chest.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:31 am*

"—a weak Alpha who would throw away centuries of tradition for a human!" Joni's voice floated through the mill. "Who would choose this fragile, temporary creature over his own kind!"

Asher nodded imperceptibly to Caleb, who melted into the shadows, circling toward where Danica hung. Then he pushed through the crowd, striding into the open with the confidence that had made him Alpha in the first place.

"Is this what you've been reduced to, Joni?" His voice cut through the mill, silencing the murmurs. "Kidnapping? Drugs? Midnight theatrics?"

Joni whirled toward him, surprise flickering across her face before she recovered, her lips curling into a predatory smile.

"Perfect timing. The weak Alpha arrives to watch his human die."

Asher moved forward, commanding the space with each step. Every dragon instinct told him to shift and tear her apart, but strategy kept him human. For now.

"You're making a huge mistake." His eyes swept over the traitors from his clutch, then to the wolves. "Do you really think these disloyal dragons and Delta wolves will follow you after this? The woman I've known my whole life can't be that naive."

Doubt flickered in Joni's eyes, quickly masked.

"The only logical reason they'd back you," Asher continued, his voice lifting to every corner of the mill, "is to use you as a stepping stone. They'll let you do their dirty

work, then take you down the moment I'm out of the way. You'll never even see your first sunrise as Alpha."

Reginald, the wolf Alpha, shifted uncomfortably, exchanging glances with two of his lieutenants.

"You can't manipulate me," Joni snarled, but her eyes darted to the wolf shifters behind her.

"I'm not manipulating you, Joni. I'm telling you the truth. Something I've always done. Something Danica has always done." He paused for a heartbeat. "And unlike you, Danica is a true mate. Loyal, selfless, and considerate."

He knew instantly that the insult hit its mark. Joni's face contorted with rage, her skin rippling as scales threatened to break through.

"Well, your precious human mate won't be alive much longer!"

She whirled toward Danica, stalking closer, her body beginning to shift, green scales gleaming through her skin as she prepared to breathe fire at point-blank range.

"I demand Trial by Flame!" Asher's voice thundered through the mill, freezing everyone in place.

The ancient words hung in the air like smoke. Murmurs rippled through the crowd as every dragon present recognized the sacred challenge—one-on-one combat for leadership, as old as dragon kind itself.

Joni slowly turned back to him, calculation warring with fury in her eyes.

"You'd risk everything on combat? When I could simply kill her now and show my

strength?"

"If you were really fit to lead," Asher said, "you'd respect our traditions. Unless you're afraid to face me alone, without your borrowed wolves to hide behind."

The trap was perfect—refuse, and she'd lose all credibility with the dragons present. Accept, and she'd face him at his strongest, with nothing to hold him back.

A cruel smile spread across Joni's face as she stepped away from Danica.

"I accept your challenge, Asher Ectorius. And when I've broken you, I'll make you watch as I burn your human to ash."

The bloodlust in Joni's voice sent a wave of disgust through Asher's body. Her eyes glinted with malice as her skin rippled, emerald scales pushing through her flesh. The transformation was instant—bones cracking and reforming, limbs elongating into powerful forelegs as her elegant red dress split and fell away. Where the ambitious woman had stood now reared a dark green dragon with golden eyes burning with hatred.

Asher matched her shift with practiced precision, his human form dissolving into crimson scales and massive wings. His dragon form towered over hers, muscled and battle-scarred, his eyes the same fierce green they'd always been.

Keep Danica safe. Nothing else matters.

From the corner of his eye, he glimpsed Joni's subtle head tilt—a signal. Before he could react, chaos erupted. Her dragon followers roared and shifted while the wolf pack exploded into fur and fangs. The orderly Trial by Flame dissolved into a full-scale brawl, exactly as she'd planned the whole time.



The conniving bitch never intended to honor the challenge.

His loyal clutch members surged forward to meet the attack, creating a battleground of flames, claws, and thunderous roars. The air thickened with smoke as dragon fire scorched the ancient wooden beams. Panicked townspeople scrambled toward the exits.

Joni charged, her jaws snapping for his throat. Asher twisted, slashing with his claws, catching her across the shoulder. She howled in pain but pressed her advantage, spewing emerald flames that he barely dodged.

Danica. Find Danica.

His gaze darted to the iron beam where his mate hung suspended. Relief flooded through him as he spotted Caleb's blue-scaled form perched on the metal structure, working to free her from her bonds. Joni was too consumed with their battle to notice.

Hurry up, Caleb.

Asher circled Joni deliberately, keeping her attention fixed on him and away from Danica. He fought with calculated precision—not aiming to kill yet, but to subdue. He needed her confession in front of witnesses to clear Danica's name completely.

"You're outmatched, Joni!" he snarled in dragon-speak. "Yield now and save what little dignity you have left."

She answered with a vicious tail-swipe that he anticipated, leaping over it with a powerful beat of his wings. Mid-leap, he saw Caleb finally cut through Danica's bonds, catching her as she fell free.

That split-second of distraction cost him. Joni's claws connected with his side, tearing through scales, sending him sprawling across the floor. Pain lanced through him as he struggled to regain his footing.

"Asher!"

Danica's voice sliced through the cacophony of battle. She stood beside Caleb near the edge of the fray, her face streaked with dirt and tears but eyes blazing with

determination.

"I love you!" The words rang clear and true, washing over him like a healing balm.

Something completely shifted within Asher—not physical but profound. The mate bond between them surged with newfound strength, filling him with purpose and clarity. He rose to his full height, his dragon form seeming to expand with newfound power.

With a deafening roar, he launched himself at Joni, every movement precise and devastating. This was no longer a battle of politics or pride—it was the wrath of a mate defending his beloved. His jaws clamped around her wing, his muscles bunching as he slammed her into the ground, pinning her beneath his superior weight.

"Confess!" His dragon voice vibrated through the mill, silencing the fighting around them. "Tell them what you did to Garron."

Joni struggled, her golden eyes wide with fear as she realized her defeat was imminent. "I—I poisoned him! I planted it at the festival. The human had nothing to do with it!"

The confession echoed across the mill, council members exchanged shocked glances as the truth finally came to light.

Joni's eyes gleamed with desperate hope. "I've confessed. Now let me?—"

Her plea died as Asher's jaws closed around her throat, severing her windpipe with one decisive bite. He released her broken body, watching as her dragon form dissolved back into human, lifeless on the floor.

The fighting stopped instantly. One by one, the disloyal dragons lowered their heads

in submission, recognizing his victory. The wolves retreated, their Alpha backing away with grudging respect.

Asher shifted back to human form, standing tall and unashamed of his nakedness. Blood streaked his muscular torso from the wound in his side, but he paid it no attention. His eyes sought only one person.

Danica broke free from Caleb's protective stance and ran to him. Asher swept her into his arms, holding her as if she were the most precious treasure in existence.

"I love you," she repeated against his chest, her tears flowing freely.

Asher tilted her chin up, meeting her gaze with fierce intensity. "I love you, my mate. My heart. My everything."

## TWENTY-FOUR

### DANICA

Danica woke up to sunlight spilling in through the half-open curtains, her body deliciously sore in all the right places. She was exactly where she'd dreamed of being during those terrifying moments at the mill—wrapped in Asher's strong arms, her back against his muscular chest, and their naked bodies perfectly intertwined beneath his silken sheets.

His steady breathing warmed her neck, and she smiled, reliving fragments of their passionate night together—the desperate way he'd carried her through his front door, both of them tearing at each other's clothes before they'd even reached the stairs.

"I'm never letting you go again," he'd growled between scorching kisses, his words punctuated by actions that left no doubt about his commitment.

They'd made love with the frantic energy of people who'd nearly lost everything, then again with the tender reverence of those granted a second chance. Her body bore the delicious evidence—love bites across her neck and breasts, and the pleasant ache between her thighs.

"You're thinking too loudly," Asher murmured, his lips brushing her ear as he pulled her tighter against him.

"Just cataloging all the wonderful ways you kept me up last night." She turned in his arms to face him, tracing the dark hair along his jaw. "How's your side?"

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:31 am*

"It's fine." He captured her wandering fingers and kissed them. "Dragon-quick healing, remember?"

"Mmm, very convenient for you." She pressed her lips to the bandage anyway, her heart overflowing with gratitude and relief that he was alive, and that Joni was no longer a threat to them. "Ready for my official exoneration?"

His green eyes darkened as he rolled to hover above her. "The council meeting isn't for two hours."

"And exactly what do you propose we do with that time, Mr. Mayor?" Danica bit her lip, barely suppressing a grin as his large hand slid down her stomach.

"I have several ideas." He lowered his head to her breast. "All of them involve making you scream my name again."

Danica arched beneath him, wondering how she'd ever considered walking away from this perfect connection. "Promise you'll stay beside me today? No matter what they say?"

Asher's face turned serious, his thumb caressing her cheek. "I should have stood by you from the beginning. I failed you and it won't happen again." His eyes blazed with determination. "You're my mate, Danica. My heart. They'll accept that or deal with my wrath."

She pulled him down for a kiss that quickly spiraled into something more urgent and primal. The hearing, the town, the future—all of it could wait just a little longer.

"Show me," she whispered against his lips. "Show me how a dragon claims his mate."

And for the next hour, Asher did exactly that.

Two hours later, Danica stepped into the warmth of the sunlight wearing her light grey tailored sleeveless dress, smoothing her hands down the fabric. It had been her power outfit for intimidating clients who underestimated her, but today it served a different purpose—it matched Asher's suit perfectly, a statement of unity that wasn't lost on the townspeople who watched them emerge from Asher's red Porsche.

"Ready?" Asher's hand found her back, warm and steady.

"As I'll ever be." Danica lifted her chin, her hair cascading freely down her back.

They walked hand in hand down Main Street, the cobblestones uneven beneath her heels. Danica felt the weight of a hundred curious gazes as they passed the now empty festival grounds. Some faces were friendly, others wary, but none openly hostile. Progress, she thought.

"Mrs. Larkin made those raspberry tarts you liked," Asher murmured, nodding toward the bakery where an elderly woman waved tentatively. "She wants you to stop by later."

Danica's heart swelled. "I'd like that."

A small child darted forward, offering Danica a slightly crushed wildflower. "My mama says you helped the Alpha fight the bad dragon lady."

"Thank you, sweetheart." Danica knelt, accepting the purple bloom. "Your Alpha did most of the fighting, though."

"But she said you were brave too." The little girl beamed before being pulled away by an apologetic mother.

Asher's fingers tightened around hers. "You're the bravest woman I know."

The town hall loomed before them, its columns gleaming in the afternoon sun. Danica sucked in a deep breath, memories of Joni's cruel smile and Garron's collapse flashing through her mind.

"They'll listen," Asher promised, his green eyes fierce with determination. "And if they don't, I'll burn this whole place to the ground and build something better."

"No, you won't." Danica pressed a quick kiss to his bearded jaw. "But I appreciate the sentiment."

Inside, the council chamber hummed with tense energy. Seven members sat in ornate chairs arranged in a semicircle—three women, four men, all with the hard-edged look of dragons in human form. Their eyes tracked Danica's every movement as she took her place beside Asher.

"Council members." Asher's voice filled the room without effort. "I've called this emergency session to address recent events and clear my mate's name."

Danica stood quietly as he recounted everything—from Garron's poisoning to Joni's attempted coup. When he described finding Danica tied up at the mill, his voice lowered to a dangerous growl that sent shivers down her spine.

"I take full responsibility for not seeing the division growing among our clutch," he continued, his shoulders squared. "I failed to recognize Joni's ambition and the discontent she was feeding. That ends today."



He turned to Danica with such naked adoration that her cheeks flushed.

"This woman isn't just my fated mate. She's someone with new ideas, a kind heart, and fierce loyalty—exactly what Ectorius needs. The festival she planned brought humans and dragons together like never before. That's not weakness—that's strength."

When Asher stepped back, Danica approached the small podium, her heart thundering. A week ago, she'd been planning a princess party in New Orleans. Now she stood before a council of dragons, fighting for a place in their world.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:31 am*

Danica gripped the podium, her pulse racing as seven pairs of dragon eyes fixed on her. She took a steadying breath and let her gaze drift across their stern faces, finding surprising warmth in a few.

"Five days ago, I arrived in Ectorius as a stranger with a notebook and a desperate need for coffee," she began, earning a few tentative smiles. "Despite everything that's happened since, I'm genuinely grateful for how most of you welcomed me. You opened your festival, your traditions, and your town to an outsider, and I don't take that lightly."

She glanced at Asher, drawing strength from his unwavering gaze before continuing.

"I won't stand here demanding your trust. I intend to earn it through my actions, through proven loyalty to this community and its future." Her voice grew stronger with each word. "What happened to Garron was a tragedy, and I pledge to honor his memory by helping rebuild the unity that Joni tried to destroy. I believe the right celebration could bring this community closer than ever before."

The oldest council woman leaned forward. "What exactly are you proposing, Ms. Ulrich?"

"A gathering that honors both your dragon traditions and welcomes new perspectives." Danica's mind raced with possibilities, her event-planning instincts kicking into high gear. "Something that transforms pain into progress."

Asher stepped forward beside her, his tall frame radiating power and confidence. He placed his hand on her back, the heat of his touch sending warmth up her spine.

"The Phoenix Rising Festival," he announced, his deep voice resonating through the chamber. "A celebration marking this monumental time in our clutch's history – weaving our ancient traditions with fresh innovations." His green eyes were intense as he surveyed the council. "A time when we open our hearts to all who wish to join our community, regardless of their origins."

Danica felt a rush of pride at the perfect name he'd conjured. From the ashes of betrayal to something beautiful and new – just like them.

The tension in the room visibly dissipated. One by one, the council members nodded their approval. The eldest woman stood first, her silver hair sparkling in the light, as she approached Danica near the small podium.

"Danica Ulrich, this council formally clears you of all charges related to Garron's death." She extended her hand, her grip surprisingly strong. "We officially recognize and welcome you to Ectorius as our Alpha's mate."

Others approached, offering handshakes and cautious smiles. A council member with salt-and-pepper hair clasped her shoulder.

"My Eliza would love to help with the celebration planning. She owns the flower shop on Bayou Street."

"I'd appreciate that," Danica smiled, mentally cataloging the connection.

When they finally exited the town hall, the afternoon sunshine greeted them like a benediction. Danica's shoulders relaxed for what felt like the first time in days. A group of children ran past, chasing a ball across the square.

"Well, that went better than expected," she said, linking her fingers with Asher's. "I thought there'd be more fire-breathing."

"We save that for special occasions." Asher pulled her against his side as they walked toward the bakery. "Like wedding ceremonies."

Danica nearly tripped over a cobblestone. "Is that a proposal, Mr. Mayor?"

"Consider it advanced notice." He stopped, turning to cup her face. "I want you by my side, Danica. Planning festivals, rebuilding this town, and making little half-dragons—all of it."

Her heart thundered wildly. "We've known each other for five days."

"And I've waited my entire life to feel this way." His thumb traced her lower lip. "Tell me you don't feel it too."

"I absolutely do feel it too," she whispered, rising on tiptoes to kiss him properly, not caring who witnessed their public display.

TWENTY-FIVE

ASHER

Asher gazed up at the tapestry of stars blanketing the night sky. His arm draped possessively around Danica as they swayed on the patio swing. The gentle rhythm matched his heartbeat—steady and content—a rare sensation for a man who'd spent years running at full speed. The stone patio cooled beneath his feet while quiet cricket songs carried across his property.

His black t-shirt stretched across his broad chest as he shifted, pulling Danica closer against him. Her curves pressed against his side, the fitted cotton of her V-neck top revealing just enough cleavage to make his dragon stir with appreciation. Those tight jeans she wore hugged every perfect inch of her, making him silently thank whatever

cosmic force had delivered her into his life.

"See that constellation?" He pointed upward. "Ancient dragons believed that was the first of our kind, watching over us. Draco."

Danica leaned her head against his shoulder. "So even the stars have dragon stories?"

"Everything has a dragon story if you listen long enough." He inhaled her scent, letting it fill his lungs. Sweet, intoxicating, and entirely his.

The quiet moment settled around them, comfortable in a way Asher hadn't experienced in years. Five days ago, his life had been a lonely mountain of responsibility. Now, somehow, sharing that mountain made it feel less steep.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:31 am*

He stood abruptly, decision made. "I want to show you something."

"Right now?" Danica raised one eyebrow, her lips curved into that challenging smile that drove him wild.

"Right now." He pulled her to her feet in one fluid motion. "I've been keeping something from you."

"If it's another dragon secret, I should warn you my surprise threshold is pretty high after this week."

Asher led her across the expansive yard, his fingers laced possessively through hers. At the far edge of his property stood a building separate from the main house—a spacious workshop with large windows, dark now under the moonlight.

"Your furniture workshop," she whispered as recognition dawned. "You're finally showing me your secret lair."

"Not many people get invited in here." He unlocked the heavy wooden door, flipping on lights that illuminated the space.

The workshop came alive under the warm glow—tools meticulously organized on pegboards, the rich scent of sawdust and varnish hanging in the air. Across the space, finished pieces stood like silent sentinels. A mahogany dining table with intricate inlay work, a walnut bookshelf with dovetailed joints, and an oak rocking chair with curved lines that seemed to flow like water.

Asher watched her face carefully, searching for her reaction. This space was more than his hobby—it was the part of himself he'd been forced to set aside when duty called. The vulnerability of showing it to her scraped against his alpha instincts, yet felt necessary.

"These are incredible." Danica ran her fingers along the edge of the dining table. "You made all of these?"

"Most of them before I became Alpha." His voice roughened. "Haven't had much time lately."

"How long has it been since you worked in here?"

"Too long."

Danica wandered toward his workbench where a half-finished chair sat, its frame assembled but the seat unfinished, standing incomplete. "What about this one?"

"Started it about six months ago. Got called away for town business and never made it back in here." Asher's throat tightened as he approached the abandoned project. "Story of my life lately."

She traced the incomplete curves. "Could you teach me? Maybe we could finish it together."

Something ancient and protective surged in his chest—the desire to share this private part of himself with her, his mate. Nobody had ever asked before. Nobody had cared enough to want to be part of this side of him.

"You want to learn?" He moved behind her, his chest against her back.

"I want to understand the things that make you who you are." She leaned into him. "Besides, I've always been good with my hands."

Asher growled softly at the double meaning, nipping at her earlobe. "I've noticed."

He selected two sheets of sandpaper, handing one to her before positioning himself behind her again. Taking her hand in his much larger one, he guided her movements along the grain of the wood.

"Gentle but firm," he instructed, his breath hot against her neck. "Let the wood tell you what it needs."

They worked together in perfect rhythm, his body cradling hers as they smoothed rough edges into silken curves. The intimacy of teaching her, of sharing this passion, sparked something deeper than desire. A connection that he'd never experienced with anyone else before, a bone-deep soul connection.

"Now we apply the finish." He dipped a soft cloth into Danish oil, guiding her hand in circular motions across the wood's surface. "This brings out the natural beauty."

As they worked side by side, Asher felt a complete fundamental shift within him. This woman—this vibrant, fearless human—had waltzed into his life and naturally worked her way into his space, not just in his bed or his home, but in every corner of his existence. Even here, in his most private sanctuary.

When they finally stepped back to admire the completed chair, something clicked into place in Asher's mind. The chair had sat half-finished for months, just as he had been half-complete before Danica. Now both were whole.

"It's perfect," Danica whispered, pride evident in her voice.



Asher turned her in his arms, cupping her face with his large hands. "You're perfect. Not just for helping finish this—but for seeing parts of me that no one else bothered to look for."

Her eyes darkened. "I like all your parts, Alpha."

He leaned in and captured her perfect lips in a passionate kiss, pouring five days of revelation and years of loneliness into the connection. This woman—his woman—had broken through barriers he'd forgotten existed.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:31 am*

"I was incomplete before you," he whispered against her mouth. "Like this chair. Half-done, gathering dust."

Danica's fingers traced the dark hair on his jawline. "We make a good team."

"The best." Asher pulled her closer, their bodies fitting perfectly together like pieces of a handcrafted puzzle. "Two halves of one whole."

Asher deepened the kiss with a hunger that burned hotter than dragon fire. His hands roamed her body, tracing the curves he'd memorized but still couldn't get enough of. The workshop, his sanctuary, felt alive with the energy between them, the air thick with the scent of sawdust and desire. He broke the kiss just long enough to lift her effortlessly onto the sturdy workshop table, the same one where he'd crafted countless pieces of furniture. But tonight, it would serve a far more intimate purpose.

"You're my finest masterpiece," he murmured, his voice rough with need as he tugged her shirt over her head. Her bra followed, leaving her bare from the waist up. Her full breasts rose and fell with each breath, her nipples already hard and begging for his attention. He didn't make her wait. His mouth descended, capturing one taut peak while his fingers teased the other. She gasped, her hands tangling in his dark hair, pulling him closer.

"Asher," she moaned, her voice trembling. "You're driving me crazy."

"Good," he growled against her skin, switching to the other breast. "You've been driving me crazy since the moment I saw you."

Her hands moved to his chest, pushing his black t-shirt up. He straightened, letting her pull it off, revealing his muscular torso. Her fingers traced the ridges of his abs, and he couldn't help but smirk at the way her eyes darkened with desire.

"You're so damn perfect," she whispered, her voice filled with awe.

"Not as perfect as you," he countered, his hands moving to the button of her jeans. He made quick work of them, sliding them down her legs along with her panties until she was gloriously bare before him. She lay back on the table, her long brown hair fanned out like a halo, her body a work of art that put every piece of furniture he'd ever crafted to shame.

He stepped back just long enough to shed his jeans and boxers, his hard cock springing free. Her eyes locked on him, and he saw the hunger in her gaze, the way her body arched slightly, inviting him closer. He didn't need a second invitation.

Asher got on top of her on the table and positioned himself between her legs. Her hands found his shoulders as he entered her in one smooth thrust. She gasped, her body tightening around him, and he groaned at the sensation.

"You feel incredible," he murmured, his voice filled with need.

He took her hands, pinning them above her head as he started to thrust, his movements slow and deliberate. His lips found her neck, sucking and nipping at the sensitive skin, drawing out her pleasure with every movement.

"Faster," she begged, her voice breathless. "Please, Asher."

He obliged, his thrusts growing harder and deeper, his grip on her wrists firm but not painful. She moaned, her legs wrapping around him, pulling him even closer. Her breasts pressed against his chest, and he could feel her heart racing, matching the

frantic pace of his own.

"You're mine," he growled, his voice low and possessive. "All mine."

"Yours," she agreed, her voice trembling with the intensity of her pleasure. "Always yours."

He released her hands, and she immediately grabbed his shoulders, pulling him closer, her body arching against his. Her moans grew louder, more desperate, and he knew she was close. He could feel it in the way her body tightened around him, and in the way her breath hitched with every thrust.

"Asher," she gasped. "I'm so close."

"Let go, Danica," he urged.

Her body convulsed, her back arching off the table as her orgasm ripped through her. He felt his own release building, the pressure coiling in his gut. He leaned down, his hand pressing against her heart, his palm glowing faintly with the power of his dragon magic.

"Danica," he said, his voice steady despite the intensity of the moment. "Will you accept my mate mark? Will you be mine forever?"

"Yes," she whispered, her eyes locked on his. "Yes, Asher. Always."

His palm burned against her skin as the Ectorius family emblem—a crimson dragon in flight—etched itself onto her chest, just above her heart. At the same time, his release tore through him, his seed spilling deep inside her, sealing their bond. He groaned, his body shuddering with the force of his orgasm, his forehead resting against hers.

When the world finally stopped spinning, he pulled back just enough to look into her eyes. The mate mark glowed faintly before settling into her skin, a permanent reminder of their bond.

"You're mine now," he said, his voice filled with a mix of pride and possessiveness. "Forever."

"And you're mine," she replied, her voice soft but firm. "Forever."

He kissed her again, slow and deep, pouring all the emotions he couldn't put into words into the connection. This woman, this human, was finally officially his. Her body lay beneath him, her skin flushed and glistening with sweat, their bodies still intimately joined on his workshop table. The mate mark glowed faintly above her heart, pulsing with ancient magic that bound them together for eternity.

His dragon preened with satisfaction. Mine. Finally mine.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:31 am*

"Asher—" Danica's voice hitched. Her body suddenly tensed beneath him, her eyes widening. "Something's wrong. I feel... strange."

Alarm shot through him as she began to tremble. Her skin grew hot beneath his palms, far beyond normal human temperature.

"It burns," she whispered, panic edging into her voice. "My skin feels too tight."

Asher pulled back, studying her with sharpened senses. Her scent had changed—subtly at first, but now unmistakably. The sweet lavender undertone that he'd come to associate with her was shifting, taking on notes of smoke and spice that were distinctly...draconic.

"Holy shit," he breathed, realization dawning. "It's really happening."

"What's happening?" Her voice rose as another wave of discomfort washed over her, making her arch her back.

Asher moved with decisive purpose, lifting her naked body effortlessly into his arms. "We need to get outside. Now."

"Outside? Asher, I don't understand?—"

"Your dragon," he said, kicking open the workshop door and striding into the cool night air. "The mate mark—it's awakened something dormant inside you."

The yard stretched before them, bathed in silver moonlight. Asher carried her to the

center of the grass, far from any structures or trees. Above them, stars punctuated the velvet darkness, witnesses to the miracle unfolding.

"I don't have a dragon," she protested weakly, even as another tremor shook her frame. "I'm human. Always have been."

"Not entirely." He set her gently on her feet, keeping his arm around her small waist for support. "Some humans carry dormant shifter blood. When they bond with their true mate, sometimes—rarely—that blood awakens."

Fear flashed in her eyes. "I'm going to transform? Like you do?"

"Yes." He cupped her face, his thumbs stroking her cheeks. "And I'm going to be right here with you through every second of it."

"I'm scared," she admitted, trembling against him. "What if I can't control it? What if it hurts?"

"The first shift is intense," he acknowledged, his voice softening to a warm, commanding rumble meant to soothe and guide. "But you're strong, Danica. Stronger than anyone I've ever met." He pressed his forehead to hers. "Let it happen. Don't fight it."

She nodded shakily, gasping as another wave of heat rolled through her. "This explains a lot, actually. I've always felt so restless, like I needed to move, to fly?—"

"That was your dragon," Asher confirmed, his heart swelling with fierce pride. "She's been waiting for this moment."

Danica's back suddenly arched, her skin beginning to shimmer with a golden light. Asher stepped back, giving her space while keeping his eyes fixed on hers.

"Focus on my voice," he instructed as her body began to elongate. "Breathe through it. Your bones will stretch, your skin will change—welcome it."

Her transformation accelerated, skin hardening to scales that caught the moonlight like polished coins. Her neck extended, limbs reshaping into powerful legs and wings. Asher watched in awe as his mate—his beautiful, fiery, impossible mate—completed her first shift.

Where Danica had stood only moments before, a magnificent golden dragon now raised her head toward the stars. Her scales gleamed like captured sunlight, her wingspan impressive even for a female. Eyes the same rich brown as her human form blinked at him in wonder and disbelief.

"You're spectacular," Asher breathed. "A golden dragon—one of the rarest colorations."

He'd never seen anything more beautiful in his existence. Without hesitation, he triggered his own transformation, bones cracking and reshaping as his red scales emerged. Within seconds, he stood before her in his dragon form, his crimson hide a striking complement to her gold.

He approached her carefully, rubbing his snout against hers in an affectionate dragon greeting. Can you hear me? he projected into her mind, using the telepathic connection that dragon mates shared.

Asher? Her mental voice was startled but clear. This is... incredible. I can feel everything. The air currents, the ground beneath my claws... I can smell the bayou from here!

Ready to try those wings? he asked, extending his own with a playful flap that stirred the grass around them.



Yes. Oh, God, yes. I've waited my whole life for this without even knowing it.

Asher nudged her gently, showing her how to position her wings. Follow my lead. Trust your instincts.

With a powerful downstroke, he launched himself skyward, hovering as she mimicked his movements. Her takeoff was clumsy but effective, sending her rocketing up beside him with an exuberant mental whoop of joy that made his heart swell.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:31 am*

Together they soared above his property, above the sleeping town, climbing higher until they broke through a layer of clouds. The moonlight transformed the mist into a silver sea beneath them, their shadows dancing across its surface.

I love you, he projected, the emotion behind the simple words vast and overwhelming. I would have loved you as a human or a dragon or anything in between. But seeing you like this—free, powerful, and truly yourself—is a gift I never dared hope for.

She banked toward him, their wings nearly touching as they carved a path through the night sky. This is what I was always missing. This feeling... and you.

TWENTY-SIX

DANICA

Danica stood in front of the full-length mirror, her reflection almost unrecognizable from the woman who had first stepped into this guest bedroom three months ago. The ivory dress hugged her curves before cascading to the floor in elegant waves and the strapless neckline showcased the mate mark that shimmered faintly above her heart. She traced it with her fingertips, feeling the slight warmth that always radiated from the dragon emblem.

"Who would have thought?" she whispered to herself. "Danica Ulrich, forever in motion, finally standing still."

Her inner dragon stirred at the thought, a pleasant warmth spreading through her

chest. That side of herself—the magnificent golden beast that had been dormant for so long—now made perfect sense of her restless nature, her constant need for movement, and for challenge. She hadn't been running away from commitment. She'd been searching for something that could match her hidden fire.

And she'd found it in Asher. In his strength, his passion, and his unwavering certainty that she belonged by his side.

Through the window, the autumn landscape spread before her in a tapestry of crimson, gold, and amber, much like hers and Asher's scales. The garden below—Asher's pride and vision that she'd helped expand—looked like something from a fairytale. Ancient cypress trees draped with Spanish moss created a natural cathedral, where their wedding arch that Asher had crafted himself stood, adorned with burgundy dahlias and golden marigolds.

"Well, don't you look like every dragon's dream."

Danica turned to find Gerri leaning against the doorframe, dressed in a tailored sapphire suit that made her white bob and diminutive stature somehow more commanding.

"Gerri!" Danica moved to embrace the matchmaker, careful not to crush her dress. "Is everything ready?"

"Honey, I've been doing this longer than you can imagine. The question is, are you ready?" Gerri's eyes flashed golden for just a second as she studied Danica's face. "Though I must say, you were made for this life."

Danica smiled, glancing back at the window where she could see guests arriving, greeting each other with warm embraces. Her business clients mingled with dragon shifters as if there had never been a world where they were separate.

"I never imagined I'd find all this. My event planning business is thriving, I have a whole clutch of dragons who accept me as family, and Asher—" She paused, her voice catching with emotion. "Asher finally has time for his furniture workshop because I can share his burdens."

"Balance," Gerri nodded approvingly. "That's the secret ingredient I look for when pairing mates. Not similarity—balance."

"I have you to thank for all of this," Danica said, smoothing a hand over her dress.

"Nonsense! I just gave fate a little nudge in the right direction." Gerri waved her hand dismissively. "You two did all the hard work—arguing, fighting rogues, and discovering your inner dragon. I particularly enjoyed that last surprise."

"You weren't surprised at all, were you?" Danica asked teasingly.

"Let's just say I've seen a few humans discover their more... wild sides over my many years." Gerri winked. "Never gets old, watching someone realize they're so much more than they thought."

A knock at the door revealed Caleb, Asher's best friend and best man, his tall frame filling the doorway.

"Ladies, we're ready when you are." His eyes widened when he saw Danica. "Hell, Ulrich, Asher might actually combust when he sees you."

Danica laughed, feeling her dragon stir with anticipation. "That sounds promising."

Gerri straightened her jacket and winked at Danica. "I've officiated hundreds of weddings, but watching fated mates say 'I do' never gets old. The look on their faces—pure magic."

As Gerri left to take her position, Danica moved to the window one last time. The gardens that Asher had originally designed now bore touches of her influence—wilder arrangements among the structured beds, unexpected bursts of color amid the careful planning. Like them—order and chaos, finding harmony.

Her dragon purred beneath her skin, eager to join with her mate under the open sky. Tonight, after the reception, they would fly together above their territory, their home, their shared future stretching before them like the endless horizon.

"Time to get married," Danica whispered, feeling utterly, completely settled for the first time.

Danica felt as if she were floating down the aisle, each step carrying her closer to the most breathtaking sight she'd ever beheld. Asher stood like a monument of masculine perfection beneath the handcrafted wooden arch, his powerful frame accentuated by the crisp lines of his black tuxedo. The golden vest and tie that matched her dragon's scales shone in the late afternoon sunlight, making him appear almost illuminated from within. But it was his eyes—those intense green eyes—that held her completely captive, glittering with such naked emotion that her throat tightened.

Her dragon purred beneath her skin, recognizing its mate, and Danica clutched her bouquet of local wildflowers a little tighter to steady herself. The lanterns lining her path cast a warm glow that deepened as the sun began its descent, bathing everything in honey-colored light.

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"You've got this," she whispered to herself, her ivory dress flowing around her like liquid moonlight.

The faces of Ectorius turned toward her—shopkeepers, council members, and families who'd once been suspicious of the human event planner now beamed at their Alpha's mate with acceptance and pride. Her presence had changed this town, just as it had changed her.

As Danica drew closer, she could see Asher's chest rising and falling with rapid breaths. His jaw clenched with restraint, a muscle working in his cheek as he fought to maintain composure. This man who could shift into a massive, powerful dragon was coming undone at the sight of her in a wedding dress.

Caleb stood beside him, tall and alert as always, but with a grin breaking through his enforcer façade. He caught Danica's eye and delivered an exaggerated wink, then nudged Asher with his elbow. The Alpha shot his friend a brief glare before returning his gaze to Danica, his expression softening into something so tender it made her heart skip.

When Danica reached the altar, Asher extended his hand. The moment their fingers touched, electricity arced between them, the mate bond humming with recognition.

"You're absolutely breathtaking," he murmured, his voice deep and rough with emotion.

Gerri Wilder stood before them, her petite frame commanding the ceremony with natural authority. Her designer suit shimmered with subtle iridescence, and her smile

held the satisfied gleam of a master craftsman admiring her finest work.

"Welcome, everyone," Gerri began, her eyes flashing momentarily golden. "We gather to witness what the universe already knows—that Asher and Danica are two halves of one extraordinary whole."

As Gerri spoke about fate and choice, Danica couldn't take her eyes off Asher. His presence wrapped around her like physical warmth, his dragon energy recognizing hers despite her transformation being so recent.

When the time came for their vows, Asher took both her hands in his.

"Danica," he began, "Before you, I was a leader without direction. Strong, but incomplete. You challenged me, frustrated me—" The crowd chuckled, "—and filled every empty space I didn't know existed in me." His thumbs stroked the backs of her hands. "I vow to love you with everything I am, to protect you even though you're perfectly capable of breathing fire on your own—" More laughter rippled through the guests, "—and to lead beside you as my equal. You've made me whole, and I'm a better man, a better Alpha, and a better dragon because of you."

Danica's eyes stung with tears as she felt the truth of his words vibrate through their bond. Her turn now, she took a steadying breath.

"Asher," she said, her voice clear despite the emotion thickening her throat. "I came to Ectorius to plan a festival and instead found the missing piece of my soul. I promise you laughter, especially when you're being insufferable—" She winked as their guests chuckled, "—loyalty that will never waver, and a balance that lets both of us soar higher than we ever could alone. I promise to celebrate, even on our hardest days." Her voice softened. "I was incomplete before you, restless in a way I couldn't name. Now I understand—my dragon was searching for you all along." She squeezed his hands. "We're stronger together, and this town, our home, is stronger because of it."

When Gerri pronounced them husband and wife, Asher didn't wait for permission. He pulled Danica to him with Alpha possessiveness, one arm wrapping around her waist while his other hand cupped her face. The kiss was deep and claiming, a promise of the night to come that made Danica's knees weaken and her dragon rumble with anticipation.

"Mine," he whispered against her lips before reluctantly pulling back, his green eyes burning with desire and love.

The crowd erupted in cheers as Danica gazed up at her mate, her husband, her Alpha, knowing with absolute certainty that their story was just beginning.

Several hours later, when most guests had departed their wedding reception and the cleanup crew was quietly dismantling tables, Asher led Danica away from the area. They walked barefoot across the cool grass toward the small pond in their garden, a quilt tucked under Asher's arm. The sounds of the reception faded behind them.

"I'd never thought I would plan my own wedding," Danica mused as they reached the pond's edge. Fireflies drifted across the water's surface, mirroring the stars above. "I always thought it was an impossible dream."

Asher spread the quilt on the ground and pulled her down beside him. "Why impossible?"

Danica nestled against him, her white dress pooling around them like moonlight captured in fabric. "I never stayed still long enough. Never found anyone worth settling down for." She traced her fingers along his jawline. "And I didn't have family to share it with."

Asher grabbed her hand and pressed his lips to her palm. "You have family now. An entire dragon clutch."



"And my Alpha," she whispered, the weight of belonging filling her chest as she looked up at the man who had given her not just his heart, but a home, a purpose, and a legacy.

The fireflies danced above them as Asher lowered his mouth to hers, claiming her with a kiss that promised forever and tasted like coming home.