



Charming the Orc's Mate (Silvermist Mates #2)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Even fate needs a little shelf-help sometimes.

Carissa

Inheriting a bookstore in a magical town was my childhood dream, but the reality of settling my great-aunts estate is more hell than happily-ever-after. Between chaotic finances and pre-booked events I cant cancel, Im counting the days until I can flee back to my ordered life in Seattle and a waiting job offer.

But selling the store gets complicated when one distractingly handsome orc from my past keeps showing up to help—and Im running out of reasons to say no.

Torain

Watching my brother find his mate left me hungry for my own. Then little Carrie storms back into my life, those prim lips curved in a shush, and my mate bond ignites with a roar.

The quiet girl who shared her cookies has grown into a goddess of fitted skirts and perfectly pinned hair. She wields spreadsheets like weapons, bringing order to chaos while every buttoned-up inch of her makes me burn to watch her unravel.

When a snake of a developer plots to steal her inheritance, theyll both learn that this orcs patience has limits—and Im not letting anyone write my mate out of our future.

But Ill savor showing her that the messiest stories make the sweetest endings.

Total Pages (Source): 11

CHAPTER ONE

CARISSA

The doors were supposed to be open.

A damp wind whipped down River Street, setting the hanging flower baskets swaying. The perpetual mist from the falls beaded on my windshield, blurring the view of the colorful Victorian and brick buildings that lined downtown. Tourist trap architecture at its finest.

I parked alongside Spines & Spirits and eyed the dash clock—eight forty-five A.M. sharp. The darkened windows of the bookstore stared back at me like a rebuke.

Quick clicks on my phone pulled up the employee schedule I'd updated remotely last week, though I already knew what it would say. Molly Verhoeven, opening shift, 8:30 AM. The number of available names had dwindled to just two after the fourth resignation email hit my inbox.

Speaking of resignations...

I shoved the snide little thought away. Between jobs. That's what I was calling it. Sounded better than "rage-quit after that prick Johnson took credit for my risk mitigation strategy." My color-coded five-year plan had crumbled in a fifteen-minute Zoom call, and didn't even have the good grace to do so before I missed the funeral.

I snatched up my purse and braved the misty morning air before the fresh wave of

grief could crash over me. An aneurysm, the doctors said. Nothing anyone could predict or prevent. Just a person-shaped hole where there were jokes and laughs and lavender tea.

The key stuck in the ancient lock, and I rattled it with increasing frustration as my heel slipped on the wet sidewalk.

The door finally gave with a protesting creak, and the musty smell of old books hit me like a punch as I stepped inside. For a moment, I was eleven again, hiding in the stacks and trying to forget Mom and Dad's muffled arguments.

A different sort of chaos spread out before me. The building's open two-story layout should have created an airy, welcoming space. Instead, books teetered in precarious towers on every surface—blocking the path to the wine bar that dominated one wall, cramming the reading nooks, even threatening to topple over the railing of the upper level.

Great-aunt Mags's organizational system apparently involved throwing paper at random surfaces and hoping for the best. The register drawer hung partially open, jammed with receipts like some rodent had made a nest inside. Papers covered every inch of the checkout counter, spilling onto the nearby community events board where a calendar showed more crossouts than actual appointments before someone stopped updating it altogether.

“For fuck's sake.” I slammed my purse down harder than necessary. The tower of books swayed ominously.

By 9:25, I'd managed to wrangle most of the receipts into some semblance of order. The drawer still wouldn't fully close and neither of my remaining employees deigned to answer their phones, but those were problems for later. Right now, I needed caffeine. And maybe a flamethrower for this hellscape of disorganization.

The bell above the door chimed. I looked up, half-expecting to see Aunt Mags's ghost come to haunt me for daring to reorganize her system of controlled chaos.

Instead, I found myself face-to-face with a blast from the past in sensible shoes and a cardigan that had seen better days.

"Little Carrie Morton!" Beverly Morris exclaimed, her eyes crinkling with delight.

"It's Carissa," I corrected automatically.

No one called me Carrie anymore—except Dad, in those awkward birthday phone calls that got shorter every year. I'd put my foot down about the nickname that last summer in Silvermist Falls, right after Mom won primary custody. New life, new name. The eleven-year-old who hid in these stacks while her parents fought wasn't me anymore.

Beverly barreled on as if I hadn't spoken. "My, how you've grown. I hardly recognized you without a book under your nose! Still as skinny as a rail, though. Mags always said we needed to fatten you up."

I forced a tight smile. "What can I help you with, Mrs. Morris?"

"Oh, just Beverly, dear. We're practically family after all those summers." She waved a hand airily. "And since I'm here anyway, I was hoping to check on my book club order. The girls are so looking forward to our summer reading list."

I blinked. "Book club?"

"Why yes, dear. Surely Mags mentioned it? We've been meeting here every other Friday for, oh, must be going on fifteen years now." She settled into one of the armchairs like a queen holding court, radiating calm expectation. "In fact, we have

quite a busy schedule planned for the next few months. I do hope you'll be keeping the store open?"

The implication was clear. Close the store, and I'd be disappointing not just Beverly, but an entire cadre of Silvermist's most formidable book lovers.

My temples throbbed. I should be in Seattle right now, interviewing for new positions, not dealing with my dead aunt's book club drama. And where was Dad? Too busy with his new family to deal with his sister's mess. Which left me, the responsible one. Always the responsible one.

My calendar stretched emptily ahead, mocking me with a future full of job searching and inevitably baking three dozen perfectly uniform snickerdoodles at two in the morning. At least in Seattle I had my own kitchen. Here I was stuck in Aunt Mags's cottage with its temperamental 1950s oven and drawers full of mismatched measuring spoons.

"I suppose we can keep the existing schedule for now." The words tasted like defeat. "Let me just... check on that order for you."

"No rush, dear. Do you remember how you used to help Mags shelve books? Such a precise little thing, even then. Everything had to be perfectly aligned."

I did remember. The summer everything fell apart, this store had been my sanctuary. Every spine in its place, every section in perfect alphabetical order. Control in miniature while my world spun apart. Now here I was again, trying to impose order on another mess I hadn't created but somehow inherited.

I dove behind the counter, grateful for the excuse to escape Beverly's knowing glances and wishing some of the stress-fixing had stuck after all these years. Where the hell would Mags have kept order forms?

“The romance section was your favorite,” Beverly mused while I searched. “Though you tried to hide it behind those big history books.”

My cheeks heated. “I was eleven.”

I unearthed a stack of papers that looked promising. Invoices were mixed with order forms, sticky notes, and what appeared to be... cocktail recipes?

“Mmhmm. And now here you are, all grown up and taking over the family business. Mags would be so pleased.”

I wasn’t so sure about that sentimentality. The eccentric aunt I remembered had been locally sourced this and organic that. None of the vendor names on past due notices sounded familiar, and all the addresses pointed to big cities with friendly tax schemes.

I shuffled through until I found a half-completed form with “Beverly’s Book Bitches” scrawled across the top. My eyes widened as I took in the detailed middle finger sketched at the bottom of the page.

Helpfully signed by the second resignee, three whole weeks ago.

“I’m not—” I shoved the order form into my blazer pocket before Beverly could spot the artwork. “I’m so sorry, but it seems there may have been some confusion with your order.”

“Not to worry, dear.” Beverly’s eyes twinkled with mischief. “I heard you were quite the successful businesswoman in Seattle. Surely managing a little bookstore isn’t beyond your capabilities? Why, Mags used to say the place practically ran itself.”

My jaw clenched. The place ran itself right into the ground was more like it.

“I’ll make some calls today and expedite a new order.”

“Wonderful! I’ll let everyone know the book club is still on for Friday.” She gathered her cardigan around her and rose with regal grace. “And Carrie dear? You might want to stock up on the Chardonnay—last time we discussed romance novels, things got rather... spirited.”

The bell chimed her exit before I could correct her. Again.

I slumped against the counter, my head throbbing. This was supposed to be a quick in-and-out. Settle the estate, maybe take a few weeks to get the place in order before selling. Not... whatever the hell this was turning into.

My gaze landed on the stack of invoices, and my blood pressure shot higher. With a deepening sense of dread, I gathered them and stalked up the stairs to the door of Mag’s office. One hard—and necessary—shove with my shoulder, and I stumbled inside.

Stale air tickled my nose as I hit the lights. A half-empty mug sat precariously close to the edge of the desk, its contents long past the best use date. Papers covered every surface like confetti after a tornado. Boxes stacked three deep against the walls bore cryptic labels in Mags’s spidery handwriting—“Maybe Important 2019” and “Definitely Important 20?—”

I dropped into the ancient desk chair, wincing at its protesting squeal. I’d thought the register drawer and counter were in a state. The real horrorshow lived in here.

“Past due... Final Notice... Payment Required Immediately...” Red ink everywhere. I shuffled through them faster, my heart rate climbing with each new total. The numbers danced before my eyes in an ever-growing parade of zeros.

The vendor list read like a who's who of publishing houses and distributors. All with hefty minimum orders. All demanding payment. And the wine suppliers... Gods and devils. The alcohol license alone would cost a fortune to maintain.

My hand shook as I punched numbers into my phone's calculator. The total made my vision swim.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck." The word became a mantra as I dug deeper. Tax forms from three years ago sat unfiled. A stack of bank statements showed a pattern of bounced checks that made my risk analyst brain scream. Credit card statements...

I couldn't even look at those yet.

The leather chair creaked as I leaned back. The estate lawyer had made it sound so simple—just a quaint little bookstore to liquidate. A few weeks to find a buyer, tops. But this? This was financial quicksand.

My fingers drummed against the desk. Maybe I could negotiate with the creditors. Buy some time to get the place in order before listing it. The property alone was worth a decent chunk given Silvermist's tourism boom. But who'd want to buy a business drowning in debt?

"For fuck's sake, Mags." I pressed my palms against my eyes until spots danced behind my lids. "What were you thinking?"

The door chime echoed from downstairs.

About fucking time. I grabbed another stack of papers to confront my wayward employee, knocking the ancient coffee mug in the process.

"Shit!" I lunged for the papers, yanking them away from the dark stain spreading like

an oil slick. Most were ruined anyway—ancient receipts and sticky notes covered in coffee rings. A bright yellow flyer caught my eye as I shuffled through the rescued stack.

Local Author Reading Series - 7PM!

Join us for wine, discussion & book signing

Featuring award-winning mystery author...

The words burned into my retinas like a neon sign of doom. The date was today. Because of course it was. And naturally there was zero evidence of preparation anywhere in the store. No display table, no extra chairs set up, not even any copies of the author's books set aside to sign.

I stormed downstairs, flyer clenched in my fist. The sight of Molly drifting toward the counter, iced coffee in hand and pink earbuds firmly in place, sent my blood pressure spiking higher.

"You're late." I planted myself in front of her. "Care to explain why the store was closed this morning?"

She blinked at me, pulling out one earbud. "Oh. Hi. You must be Carrie."

"Carissa. And yes, I am. The store opens at eight-thirty."

"Yeah, about that." She shrugged, somehow making the gesture both apologetic and completely unconcerned. "Jana quit last week. Gave me her keys and everything."

The words hit like ice water. "Jana... quit."

“Mmhmm.” Molly settled onto the stool behind the counter. “I figured she emailed you or whatever. She said something about toxic work environment and micromanaging? But like, she gave two weeks’ notice and everything, so...”

“Two weeks—” My eye twitched. “And you didn’t think to mention this in any of our weekly check-ins?”

“Oh, I haven’t really been checking those. The scheduling app kept crashing.” She brightened. “But I’m still getting my internship hours logged, right? I need the credits to graduate.”

I pressed my fingers to my temples. “Molly. There’s an author event tonight at seven. Please tell me you at least knew about that?”

“Wasn’t on my schedule.” She twisted a strand of purple-streaked hair. “Jana usually handled evening events. Besides, I have a study group tonight.”

“You can’t just—” Deep breaths. No evening staff. No event setup. And apparently no Jana, who I was quickly realizing had been the only thing holding this chaos together. “This is your job. We have commitments to?—”

A laugh boomed through the store, deep and rich as thunder. “Molls! Tell me my special order finally came in!”

“Shhh!” I whirled toward the door, ready to eviscerate whoever dared disturb my rapidly unraveling sanity.

The words died in my throat as I looked up.

And up.

And up.

The doorway framed a mountain of an orc, broad shoulders nearly brushing both sides. Black hair shaved on one side and flipped into a perfect mess on the other, small tusks gleaming as they peeked through parted lips, and warm brown eyes that crinkled at the corners when he smiled.

Like he was smiling now.

“Torain?”

The name slipped out before I could stop it. His smile widened, and suddenly I was eleven again, watching him carry boxes of books up to the second floor two at a time while I pretended to read and definitely didn’t stare at his arms.

Except he wasn’t gangly anymore. The awkward teenager who used to knock over display stands with his elbows had grown into his frame. Wood shavings dusted his flannel shirt, and his forearms...

I needed to stop staring at his tattooed forearms.

“Carrie?” His voice softened to what was probably his idea of a whisper—still loud enough to rattle windows. “Little Carrie Morton?”

“It’s Carissa,” I snapped.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:26 am

CHAPTER TWO

TORAIN

My whole world shifted on a harsh puff of air.

One heartbeat, I was just picking up my latest order of woodworking books. They weren't the same as training under a master carver, but they pushed my skills nonetheless. And with my brother still finding his footing as chief and mated orc, I couldn't even think of leaving for an apprenticeship.

Then her scent hit me—cinnamon and vanilla and mine .

Mate.

The word thundered through my blood like an avalanche. My fingers itched to touch her, to verify she was real and not another lonely fantasy. To see if her skin was as soft as it looked.

Damn. How many years had it been? Eighteen? Nineteen? She'd grown into those eyes that used to peek over the top of the massive books she picked after blazing through the summer reading program's selections.

"You two know each other?" Molly's gaze bounced between us like a tennis match.

"Yes," I said.

Carrie's words trampled over mine. "Old acquaintances."

Gone was the quiet girl who shared her cookies, though that stubborn chin lift hadn't changed. The severe bun only drew attention to the elegant line of her throat. And that snappy little skirt and blazer combo...

I wanted to mess up every perfectly arranged inch of her.

"Right..." Molly dragged out the word. "Well, your order isn't in yet. But Carrie here might?—"

"It's Carissa," she bit out again.

I blinked, struggling to process. Carrie—no, Carissa —was my mate. How many nights had I swiped through MythMatch, searching for what my brother found? And now here she stood, glaring like she wanted to stab someone with her stilettos. Probably me, given how I stared.

"Carissa." I tried the name out, tasting its shape. Precise. Elegant. Nothing like the mess surrounding us. "It suits you."

Her eyes narrowed slightly, like she was trying to decide if I was mocking her. I wasn't.

"I apologize for the delay with your order, Torain. Things are a bit..." Her fingers fluttered over a stack of papers. "...disorganized at the moment."

"No rush." I leaned against the counter, trying to appear casual while my entire being screamed to be closer. "You need time to get caught up, that's fine."

She spun toward Molly, who still watched the exchange with rapt interest. "Put down

the coffee and help me clear space for seating.” Carissa’s voice cracked like a whip. “We can shift the couches, but these books need to be shelved first. And every night before we close, yes?”

“Jana wasn’t kidding about the micromanaging.” Molly’s grumble carried perfectly to my sensitive ears. But she grabbed a pile of books and slouched upstairs, leaving her iced coffee sweating rings on the counter.

I trailed after Carissa as she moved through the store like a tiny tornado of organization in heels, straightening books and gathering scattered papers. The tight skirt restricted her stride, forcing smaller steps that only hypnotized me with the sway of her hips. My fingers itched to grab them, to feel if they fit my hands as perfectly as instinct screamed they would.

“I can’t believe—” I caught myself before my voice could boom through the quiet store again. I cleared my throat and forced my eyes up to safer territory. “You’re actually here. Last I heard you were in Seattle?”

“Yes, well.” She straightened her blazer, and my hands clenched with the need to pull her close. “Things change.”

Yeah, things changed. Father’s empty chair at the dinner table. The way Osen sometimes stared at where he’d stand to think through the latest problem the clan laid at his feet. The half-finished carvings in his workshop I couldn’t bring myself to complete.

“I heard about your aunt,” I said softly. “I’m sorry. Mags meant a lot to this place.”

Her hands stilled on a leather-bound volume. “Thank you. I... I should have been here sooner.”

“Sometimes timing just doesn’t work out.” The words tasted bitter with memory. The letter from Master Iazra still sat unopened in my workshop drawer, arrived the day after we burned Father’s body. “The plans that seemed so important the morning my father died were forgotten by that night.”

“Oh.” She glanced up, genuine sympathy softening her edges for a moment. “Torain, I’m so sorry. I didn’t know.”

“Yeah, well.” I shrugged, trying to ignore how my name sounded on her tongue. “Things change, right?”

She hummed agreement. The silence stretched a beat too long before she shoved the last book into its home, then grabbed the nearest teetering stack to begin the task all over again.

Those hips wrapped a leash around my neck and yanked me behind. I fumbled for a change of topic. Something casual and comforting. Something to ease the tension I saw in the tight lines around her mouth. Something to draw out that smile I remembered from lazy summer days.

Osen would have known exactly what to say. My brother always knew the right words, the perfect balance between strength and diplomacy that made him a natural leader. Even his mate bond with Miranda had started rocky as hell, but they’d fought through dark magic and near-death to find their way.

Meanwhile, here I stood, my fated mate right in front of me, and I couldn’t string two thoughts together.

Carissa’s scent of cinnamon and vanilla filled my lungs with every breath, making it hard to focus on anything but the way she moved through the familiar space. Like she belonged here. Like she’d never left.

“So, taking over Mags’s legacy?” I grabbed a stack of paperbacks before she could stretch for them.

“Something like that.” She snatched the books and reshelfed them with military precision. “Right now, I just need to get things in order.”

The vague answer stung, though it shouldn’t have surprised me. Osen said Miranda hadn’t felt the same immediate connection to him, either. But this was my mate. Did she not feel it, not even a little? The pull of fate drawing us together?

A strand of dark hair escaped her bun, curling against her neck. I tracked its fall, imagining how it would feel wrapped around my fingers. How she’d look with all that dark silk spilling free, wild and unbound.

“Well, if you need a break from organizing, you should come by One Hop Stop later,” I offered. “First round’s on me.”

“Vanin’s place?” Molly’s voice drifted down from the second floor. “Ooh, Vanin has arms . Like, I know all orcs have arms, but his are just...” She made an unintelligible noise.

I filed away that interested tone for later teasing. “Osen just finished a special batch to celebrate his mate. Dark ale aged in cedar barrels to celebrate his mate. It’s got this hint of?—”

“Look, Torain.” Carissa whirled on me, then took a step back to meet my eyes easier. “It’s been nice to see you again, but I really don’t have time to chat or get a drink. I have an author reading in—” She checked her watch and paled. “Three hours. With no available staff, no setup, and apparently no—” Her voice cracked. “No actual plan beyond hopes and dreams.”

The scent of her stress hit me like a punch—sharp cinnamon tinged with burnt sugar. Just like those days she'd show up at the store with red eyes, clutching a plate of cookies she'd baked alongside Mags as a distraction from her parents' messy divorce. Back then, all I could do was pretend not to notice and try to make her laugh.

But now...

"Let me help." The words spilled out before I could even think them into existence. My mate was hurting. She shouldn't smell of anxiety and overwhelm, and everything in me needed to fix it. "Moving furniture, setup, whatever you need. These arms are good for more than just carving."

"That's... kind of you." Her gaze caught on my forearms before snapping away. "But I couldn't impose."

"Not an imposition." I kept my voice gentle, fighting every instinct screaming at me to gather her close and soothe away the tension in her shoulders. "Consider it repayment for all those cookies you used to share."

Her lips twitched. "You remember that?"

"Best snickerdoodles I've ever had." I grinned. "I've only been nursing a craving for nearly two decades."

The almost-smile won its battle, curving her lips for just a moment before she caught herself. My heart stumbled at the sight. Gods, but she was beautiful when she let those walls crack.

"I suppose I could part with my recipe as payment." She crossed her arms, but the gesture lacked heat. "If you're determined to help, we need to clear all the boxes from the wine bar, set up chairs, and figure out where Jana stashed the author's books."

Assuming we even have any.”

I’d barely shifted the first couch when the bell above the door dinged. I caught the scent before I turned—expensive cologne barely masking natural sleaze.

“Ah, you must be the new owner.” Tate’s smile didn’t reach his eyes as he approached Carissa. “I’ve been hoping to catch you. Tate Gerrard, Silvermist Development Group.”

My hands clenched as he extended one manicured palm. I knew that predatory asshole. I’d seen enough of Tate’s “urban renewal” projects—buying up local businesses, gutting their character, and flipping them for maximum profit.

Carissa’s shoulders tensed, but her handshake was pure corporate precision. “Carissa Morton. I’m afraid I’m rather busy at the moment, Mr. Gerrard.”

“Please, call me Tate. And this won’t take but a moment.” He produced a business card like a magic trick. “Let me start by offering my condolences. Margaret was a pillar of this community and had my utmost respect.”

Which was why he used her given name instead of the name everyone knew her as, surely. I bit back a growl of annoyance.

The slime passed an assessing look over the store, and Carissa stiffened further. “I imagine inheriting all this responsibility must feel like a monumental task laid upon you. I’d like to make an offer that would take that burden off your shoulders.”

“I appreciate your interest.” Carissa accepted his card with two fingers, like touching it might contaminate her. “However, as I said, I’m quite busy preparing for an event. Perhaps we could schedule a meeting for another time?”

“Of course, of course.” Tate’s smile widened. “I’ll have my assistant send over some preliminary numbers. Just to get the conversation started.”

He’d barely slithered out the door before I rounded on Carissa. “Tell me you’re not actually considering selling to that snake.”

“I don’t see how that’s any of your business.” She straightened a chair with sharp movements.

“He’s been trying to buy up half of downtown.” I shoved aside the final box blocking the bar and stalked after her. “The coffee shop across the street? They refused to sell last month. Suddenly their pipes keep bursting. Health department shows up weekly.”

“I’m quite capable of handling my own business dealings.” Her tone could have frozen hell. “I don’t need protection from basic inquiries.”

“This isn’t Seattle.” The words came out harsher than intended, tinged with desperation. The mate bond screamed to make her understand. “Tate doesn’t play by corporate rules. He’ll promise whatever it takes to get what he wants, then?—”

“By the gods’ hairy balls, there you are!” Zral’s voice boomed through the store. “I’ve been waiting a half hour with deliveries. Did you forget how to tell time again?”

Shit. The furniture orders. I’d completely forgotten about helping with deliveries today.

“Sorry, I got...” My eyes darted to Carissa, who watched the exchange with narrowed eyes. “...distracted.”

“You’re always distracted.” Zral rolled his eyes. “Just get your ass moving. We’re already behind schedule.”

The dismissal in Carissa's expression hurt worse than Zral's words. That careful mask of professional distance had gained an edge of... disappointment?

"I can come back later," I offered quickly. "Help with the event setup or?—"

"We'll see." Her tone suggested exactly how much weight my word carried now. She turned away, that loose strand of hair a final taunt. "Molly, start moving those chairs. We have work to do."

The mate bond twisted as I followed Zral out. She thought I was unreliable. Flaky. Just like everyone else did. And maybe they were right.

After all, Osen would never have forgotten a commitment. Osen had his shit together.

I cast one last look through the window. Carissa had already turned away, another strand of hair falling free from that precise bun, with no use for someone who couldn't even keep track of time.

Mate bonds, it turned out, didn't come with instruction manuals.

CHAPTER THREE

TORAIN

“ I met my mate!”

The words exploded from my chest the second I burst through Osen’s door. A groan and rustle of clothing followed as my brother and his mate sprang apart on their couch.

“Unholy hell, Torain.” Miranda yanked her shirt back into place. “Haven’t you heard of knocking?”

“Knocking is for people who haven’t just had their entire world turned upside down.” I collapsed into the armchair, ignoring their disheveled state. “She’s perfect. And terrifying. And she probably hates me already.”

Osen chuckled, the sound rough with interrupted desire. “Who’s perfect and terrifying?”

“Carissa Morton. Mags’s niece? She used to spend summers at the bookstore.”

“Little Carrie?” Osen’s eyebrows shot up with recognition. “Gods, that was what, twenty years ago?”

“It’s Carissa now.” The correction came automatically. “And she’s not little anymore.”

Gus abandoned his perch on the windowsill to demand attention with imperious head-butts against my leg. The gray creature was no ordinary cat, and after witnessing him feast on the soul of a dark witch attempting to kill Miranda, I wouldn't dare say no to her familiar.

"She's all..." I waved my free hand, searching for words. "Corporate. Her bun was so tight it made my head hurt just looking at it. But then pieces kept falling out and curling against her neck..."

Miranda snorted. "I'm sure her hair was the first thing you noticed."

"No, first I noticed how she glared at me for being too loud in her store." Heat crept up my neck. "Which, fair. But then she turned around and... gods."

Osen's eyes softened with understanding. He'd felt it too, that moment when the whole world realigned to put her at the center. "You sound properly besotted already. So when's the handfasting?"

"There's no handfasting." I scowled at his brotherly shiteating grin. The memory of her dismissal stung. "She barely acknowledged my existence. And then I fucked up by forgetting about deliveries with Zral..."

"Smooth." Miranda curled into Osen's side, his arm wrapping around her automatically. "Nothing says 'mate material' like being unreliable."

I groaned and slumped further into the chair. Gus took advantage of my new position to claim my lap. "Then Tate showed up, and I don't know what would keep her in Silvermist?—"

"Tate Gerrard?" Osen sat straighter, dislodging Miranda. "At the bookstore?"

“Yeah, trying to ‘take the burden off her shoulders’ or some bullshit.” My lip curled at the memory. “Slithered in with his fake sympathy and preliminary offers.”

“So that’s where he plans to get the land.” Osen’s expression darkened. At both our confused looks, he explained, “Something the Silvermist mayor mentioned at our last meeting. Gerrard’s been giving the planning department hell since they rejected his condo proposal. Needs more parking or something.”

My blood ran cold. “You think he’s targeting Carissa’s store specifically?”

Osen’s fingers traced idle patterns on Miranda’s shoulder. “A downtown property that size would solve his problems.”

“I tried to warn her about him.” The growl rumbled in my chest before I could stop it. Gus’s ears flattened at the vibration. “She shut me down completely. Said she could handle her own business dealings.”

Miranda hummed thoughtfully. “Maybe try not charging in and assuming she needs protecting? Let her set the pace.”

“Right, because you’re the expert on taking things slow?” I rolled my eyes. “Didn’t my brother literally kidnap you?”

“And it worked out beautifully.” She grinned up at Osen. “Eventually. After I got over the whole ‘stolen from my bed’ thing.”

“You loved every minute of it.” Osen nipped her ear, and I fought the urge to throw something at them.

“The point is,” Miranda continued, swatting his wandering hands, “humans need time to process the concept of fated mates. We know it exists, but we don’t have the same

recognition others do. It's a big leap to take based on nothing but someone else's feeling."

"It's their inferior blood," Osen teased, earning an elbow to the ribs.

My mind spun as the laughter faded. I traced the tattoos curling around my wrists—swoops and curls meant to represent strength and wisdom. Right now they felt more like mockery. Every instinct screamed to claim what was mine, to sweep Carissa off those ridiculous heels and carry her back to my bed. To show her exactly how perfectly we'd fit together.

But Miranda was right. Humans needed time. If Carissa felt it at all, she wouldn't show it. Not with all that armor and formality. But she couldn't possibly deny it forever.

Could she?

"It'll be good having another human around," Osen mused, nuzzling Miranda's neck. "Someone to share the stares with you at clan gatherings."

Miranda's noncommittal hum spoke volumes. She pulled back just enough to give him a pointed look. "A bookstore's a bit harder to move back and forth than my apothecary shop."

The words lodged in my throat like splinters. I hadn't even considered... But of course she wouldn't want to live in Grimstone. She had a life in Silvermist Falls. A business. Responsibilities.

Could I leave the clan? It wasn't unheard of for an orc to live outside a clan. Uncommon, sure, but not impossible. Vanin left.

And got shit for it every time one of us walked into One Hop Stop when visiting Silvermist.

The thought of abandoning my duties, leaving Osen to shoulder everything alone... My stomach turned. But living without Carissa, existing in a world without her scent and her smile and the sound of her voice... that seemed a worse fate.

Fuck.

“You two are disgusting.” I threw a cushion at them as Osen’s hands started wandering again. “Some of us are having actual crises here.”

“Mmm.” Miranda’s eyes had gone heavy-lidded. “Crisis time’s over. Get out.”

“But—”

“Out.” Osen’s growl held no room for argument. His mate’s scent had shifted to something headier, and I really didn’t need to witness what came next.

I barely made it out the door before Miranda’s giggle turned into a moan. Gus darted out behind me, giving me a look that clearly said bipeds, right?

The walk back to my home felt longer than usual. Every step away from Carissa physically hurt, like someone had tied a string between us and was slowly pulling it taut. The mate bond was still new, raw, and demanding. It would settle eventually. Probably. Hopefully.

But for now, all I could think about was how she’d looked in that moment before Tate interrupted—almost smiling, almost softening. The way that loose strand of hair had taunted me. The vanilla-cinnamon scent that still clung to my clothes.

I needed to prove myself worthy. Show her I could be reliable and dependable. Someone she could trust with her heart.

First, though, I needed to figure out how to keep her in Silvermist long enough to try.

CARISSA

I checked the clipboard again, as if the numbers might magically change. Thirty-five confirmed attendees for Paint & Sip, and only twenty-eight wine glasses. Not counting the three I'd already broken trying to wash decades of dust off them.

"You're sure there aren't any more glasses in storage?" I called up to the second floor where Molly was supposed to be shelving an armful of books a customer had decided against at the checkout counter. Truthfully, I'd rather them handed over like contraband than left to be found two seconds before closing.

Molly, however, propped her hip against the railing and tapped away at her phone. "Nope."

"Could you maybe look?" The words ground between my teeth. "Instead of texting?"

"Already did." She didn't even glance up. "Jana told me last time that Mags switched to plastic cups after the Valentine's incident last year. Something about blood being hard to get out of the carpet?"

Perfect. Just perfect. I added source disposable wine glasses to my ever-growing to-do list, right under figure out why we're hemorrhaging money and hire new employees sans phone addictions .

I was going to murder my past self for ever thinking I could manage this place remotely.

I pinched the bridge of my nose and tried to find calm. As much as the little girl who loved losing herself in the stacks would have loathed to hear it, I missed Seattle's predictability. Nine to five shifts, healthy savings accounts, and perfectly calculated risk assessment. I liked knowing where every item was in a storeroom and how much was ordered at a time. Everything made sense. Nothing required guessing games.

The bell above the door chimed, and I spun with dread coiling in my stomach. If that was our first guest...

But no. It was worse.

"Little Carrie!" Beverly's voice rang through the store with the cheerful obliviousness of someone who'd never stressed a day in her life. "I hope you don't mind me popping in early. I wanted to make sure everything was set up properly."

My eye twitched at the nickname. "It's Carissa, Mrs. Morris. And I'm afraid we're running a bit behind schedule."

"Oh, nonsense." She waved a hand airily. "I'm sure you have everything under control. This event's been on the calendar for months, after all."

I bit back the urge to point out that if it had truly been planned for months, perhaps someone could have mentioned it to me before yesterday afternoon. But Beverly was already puttering around, tsking at the lack of setup.

"Now, where are the brushes? And the smocks? We can't have people ruining their nice clothes." She peered at me over her glasses. "You did remember smocks, didn't you, dear?"

Fuck.

I was saved from answering by another chime, and I spun to face whoever dared interrupt my spiral into madness with a tight smile. My breath caught as Torain ducked through the entrance, his broad shoulders nearly brushing both sides of the frame.

“Hope I’m not late. No one wants to fuck with geese when they block a path. Devil creatures.” He shook his head and his eyes danced with mischief. “Heard you might need help.”

I opened my mouth to politely decline. To maintain that professional distance I’d been clinging to since he first walked back into my life. Instead, what came out was an embarrassingly relieved, “You’re here.”

“Happy to lend a hand. Or two.” He held out his arms, and I definitely did not stare at the tattoos disappearing under his rolled cuffs. “Where do you want me?”

Everywhere . The thought ambushed me before I could squash the image of those strong hands on my hips, my thighs, my?—

“Easels,” I blurted. “We need to set up the easels.”

I busied myself with distributing canvases, desperately trying to ignore how easily Torain maneuvered the awkward stands into place. He worked quickly and efficiently, pausing only to tease me about my color-coded system for organizing supplies.

“You know,” he said, leaning in conspiratorially. “I’m pretty sure the purple paint will still work even if it’s not next to the other cool tones.”

I rolled my eyes, but couldn’t quite suppress my smile. “Mock all you want, but there’s a method to my madness.”

His voice dropped lower, sending a shiver down my spine. “Oh, I don’t doubt your capabilities.”

Heat bloomed in my cheeks. I busied myself with arranging brushes, praying he couldn’t see how flustered I was. “You seem to know your way around art supplies.”

“Occupational hazard.” He shrugged, the movement drawing attention to the play of muscles beneath his shirt. “Clan carver. Wood mostly, as the name would suggest, but I’ve been known to dabble.”

“Really?” I paused sorting the box of smocks Molly had unearthed from some magical dimension. “I had no idea.”

“Yeah, I was supposed to apprentice with a master in Vancouver, but...” He trailed off, then shook his head to clear his wistful smile. “Anyway. These days I mostly do whatever orders come through the clan’s weekend stall at Mist and Market.”

His casual tone masked the vulnerability in his eyes, but I caught it. He’d mentioned his father, but this was something else. Some dream derailed, a different future lost along the way. Maybe there was more to the orc I remembered than the easygoing surface he hid behind.

“Must be nice,” I said softly. “Having a creative outlet.”

Torain set down the last easel and studied me. “You don’t have one?”

“Unless you count baking those snickerdoodles you loved so much sometime between the hours of midnight and morning.” I forced a laugh. “Risk assessment doesn’t leave much room for artistic expression.”

“Sounds lonely.”

The gentleness in his voice scraped against my raw edges. I turned away, fussing with paint bottles that were already perfectly arranged. “It paid well.”

“Past tense?”

Saved by the bell—literally. The first guests arrived in a cheerful cluster, and I slipped into professional hostess mode. Name tags. Seating assignments. Carefully portioned wine in our dwindling supply of real glasses.

For exactly forty-seven minutes, everything ran smoothly. The local artist led everyone through basic brush techniques. Conversation and laughter flowed. Even Beverly seemed pleased, though she kept commenting on how ‘different’ things were.

Then Molly appeared at my elbow.

“We’re out of wine.” Molly’s whisper carried panic. “Like, completely out. And we’ve got two hours left.”

“Please be joking,” I hissed. “What about the bottles downstairs?”

“Gone. These ladies can drink.” She gestured to where Beverly’s inner circle had colonized an entire corner. “And Mrs. Peterson keeps ‘accidentally’ knocking over her glass and asking if Torain can clean it up.”

The grumbling started low but spread quickly. Beverly’s corner grew particularly animated, their stern looks in my direction carrying judgment I didn’t need translated. I’d seen that same expression in boardrooms across Seattle—the moment when someone realized you weren’t living up to expectations.

My heart rate spiked as I realized Torain had vanished.

One moment he was there, effortlessly charming the older ladies with compliments on their brush strokes. The next... gone.

“Start collecting empty glasses,” I ordered Molly. “I’ll figure something out.”

My nails bit into my palms. I would not let this place defeat me. I’d managed million-dollar accounts and navigated corporate takeovers. One small-town art event would not break me.

Just as I was considering the merits of serving paint thinner and hoping no one noticed, the bell chimed again. Torain shouldered his way through the door, arms laden with bottles.

“Special delivery from One Hop Stop.” He set them on the bar with a wink. “Vanin sends his regards. And hopes you’ll consider rebuilding some burned bridges.”

I could have kissed him. I settled for helping pour refills as quickly as possible, earning relieved sighs from the participants.

“Oh, Vanin’s house red!” Beverly practically floated over. “I do hope you’ll be serving this regularly again, dear. That dreadful imported stuff Mags insisted on was giving me terrible headaches.”

I blinked. “I’m sorry, what?”

“You know, when she switched suppliers.” Beverly waved a hand. “She and half the local vendors had some sort of falling out about six months ago. Started ordering everything from out of town. Vanin was particularly upset—they’d had such a nice arrangement for years.”

That explained the invoices with unfamiliar names. They weren’t just extra vendors,

they were her only vendors. My vendors. My very pissed off vendors. How many other relationships had Mags torpedoed? How much damage control was I going to have to do?

“Well,” I managed, forcing levity into my voice. “I suppose we have our hero to thank for rebuilding them.”

Torain’s smirk was unbearably smug. “Anything for little Carissa.”

I rolled my eyes, but couldn’t quite stamp out the warmth blooming in my chest.

He’d come through. Again.

The rest of the night passed in a blur of increasingly abstract paintings, spilled paint, and tipsy laughter. Even Mrs. Peterson’s “accidents” decreased, though that might have been because Molly started cleaning them instead.

As the last giggling participant tottered out the door, I collapsed onto the overstuffed couch tucked between Mystery and Romance. My feet and thighs ached. I could feel strands of hair tickling the back of my neck. There wasn’t much beyond threat on life or limb that would get me upright at that moment.

“Don’t even think about cleaning up,” I warned as Torain reached for a broom. I held up one of the leftover bottles. “A toast? To the most excruciating event of my life.”

He chuckled and settled beside me, accepting the bottle and taking a long pull. “Could’ve been worse,” he mused. “No one set anything on fire.”

I snorted. “Is that the bar we’re setting? Congratulations, you didn’t commit arson?”

“Hey, I’ve seen much rowdier crowds at clan gatherings.” He passed the bottle back.

“Though usually with less purple paint involved.”

I took a swig, relishing the burn. “Please. I bet orc parties are the height of decorum compared to what I just survived.”

“Oh really?” Torain’s shoulder brushed mine as he reached for the bottle. “Last winter solstice, my friend Zral tried to prove he could drink an entire cask of mead. Ended up proposing marriage to a pine tree.”

I couldn’t help laughing at his expression—part exasperation, part fond remembrance. “Did the tree say yes?”

“Sadly, their love was not meant to be. Though I hear they’re still friends.” He took another long pull from the bottle, and I definitely didn’t watch the way his throat worked as he swallowed. “Your turn. What’s next on the Carissa Morton world domination tour?”

“I don’t even want to think about it. I’m still trying to sort out the mess Mags left behind.” I groaned, letting my head fall back against the couch. “I just... I don’t know how I’m going to fix all of this.”

“You will.” The quiet conviction in his voice made me look up. “You’re smart. Capable. And stubborn as hell.”

“I prefer ‘determined,’“ I muttered.

His laugh rumbled through me, and I realized how close we’d gotten. Our thighs pressed together, shoulders brushing with each breath. When had that happened? I could smell wood and paint on his skin.

“Determined, then.” His voice had gone low, rough. “Point is, you’ve got this. And...

you're not alone. If you need help, I mean."

I traced the bottle's label with my finger as heat crept up my neck. "Is that what you want? To help?"

"Among other things." His eyes flicked down to my lips, lingering long enough to send shivers racing down my spine. "I want what Osen has with Miranda. That bone-deep certainty that you've found your other half. Someone who challenges you, supports you..." His fingers brushed my knee. "Drives you absolutely crazy in the best way."

I licked my lips, searching for words. "Sounds serious."

"I'm not interested in casual." The words rolled through me like thunder. "Life's too short to waste time pretending you don't know exactly what you want."

And oh, the way he looked at me then—like I was a masterpiece he couldn't wait to carve into existence. Like he saw past all my sturdy walls to the mess underneath and wanted it anyway.

I don't know who moved first. All I knew was that suddenly my hands were in his hair, and his tongue was in my mouth, and I never wanted it to end. His lips devoured me hungrily, dragging desperate moans from somewhere deep in my chest. My skirt had inched higher, baring more thigh as I straddled his lap.

Big hands cupped my ass, dragging me closer. Every inch of him pressed hot and hard against me. I could feel him everywhere, lighting a desire that spread through my veins like wildfire.

He nipped at my bottom lip, growling approval when I dug my nails into his scalp. Each kiss burned, deeper and hotter until I was a panting, writhing mess begging for

more. I needed his touch, craved the friction as he rocked up against me. The wetness pooling between my thighs soaked through my panties.

But no matter how much I arched into his grasp, he held back. Gentle, almost reverent kisses scattered over my jawline, teasing without satisfying.

“Have dinner with me tomorrow.” He pressed the words against my throat.

Every carefully constructed reason why this was a terrible idea dissolved under the hunger in his eyes. I had plans to sell the store. To return to Seattle.

But his other hand had found the hem of my blouse, and his callused fingers against my skin sent electricity dancing up my spine. And really, what was one dinner?

“Okay.” I barely recognized my own voice, breathless and wanting. “Yes.”

His answering grin could have lit up the whole store.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:26 am

CHAPTER FOUR

CARISSA

My heels clicked against the sidewalk in perfect rhythm with my racing heart. The morning sun filtered through the perpetual mist, casting a hazy watercolor glow over the downtown businesses. Had the air always smelled this sweet? Had birdsong always carried such promise?

My lips still tingled from last night's kiss.

I touched them absently, remembering the press of Torain's mouth, the scrape of his tusks, the way his hands... Focus, Carissa. You have a business to run.

But for once, that thought didn't fill me with dread. Sure, the filing system was a nightmare and half the inventory tags were missing. But I could handle that. I could fix this place and still make a profit. And maybe Beverly had a point about the imported wine. Maybe some bridges were worth rebuilding.

I was Carissa fucking Morton. Risk assessment queen. Numbers whisperer. And tonight? Tonight I had a date. With an orc. An unbelievably attractive, incredibly thoughtful orc whose lips felt like heaven against mine.

"Good morning, dear!" Beverly's voice rang out from behind me as I reached the store's entrance. I turned to find her approaching with her knitting bag, right on schedule. "You're looking particularly radiant today."

“Just the lighting.” I fumbled with my keys and swung the door wide, hoping my face wasn’t as warm as it felt.

Beverly swept past me to claim her usual window seat, settling in with the air of someone preparing for a long siege. “Mmhmm. Nothing to do with a certain tall drink of wine who left rather late last night?”

News really did travel fast in small towns.

“We were cleaning up after the event.” I busied myself with the morning checklist, deliberately not looking in Beverly’s direction. “Nothing more.”

“Of course not.” Beverly’s needles never missed a stitch. “Though Mrs. Peterson swears she saw quite the passionate embrace through the window.”

I dropped the clipboard.

“But don’t worry.” Beverly’s eyes sparkled with mischief. “I reminded her that her cataracts make everything look more dramatic than it is.”

The bell chimed with the arrival of my first real customer, and I seized the excuse to dodge Beverly’s knowing looks. But Beverly Morris was nothing if not persistent. She simply waited until the browser wandered deeper into the stacks before turning those all-seeing eyes back on me.

“Did you know Torain carved the new sign for One Hop Stop? Such talented hands, that boy.”

Yes, I could guess at the talent in those hands. And he certainly was no longer a boy.

I pretended utter fascination with yesterday’s receipts. “Did you need anything

specific today, Mrs. Morris?”

“Just enjoying the view, dear.” She returned to her project, needles clicking away. “Though not half as much as Mrs. Peterson last night. I swear she was going to pull out her opera glasses the next time your tall friend bent to clean?—”

“I should check the office,” I blurted. “Lots of paperwork to catch up on.”

Her laughter followed me up the stairs. I shut the office door and leaned against it, trying to slow my racing heart.

I sank into the chair and cracked open my laptop. The desk remained a disaster area, but I’d made progress sorting papers into piles that actually made sense. Invoices here, employee records there, an ever-growing spreadsheet with shifting priorities to rule them all. If I could just focus on the numbers instead of remembering the way Torain’s mouth had?—

The corner of the screen jumped with a new email notification. Tate Gerrard hadn’t wasted any time.

My stomach lurched as I opened the attachment. The offer wasn’t insulting. Actually, the number was... reasonable. Higher than I expected, given the store’s financial state. Room for negotiation, clearly. Tate knew what he was doing.

It was exactly the kind of straightforward business transaction I’d been hoping for when I first arrived. Clean. Simple. Profitable enough to satisfy any remaining guilt about selling Mags’s legacy.

So why did the thought of accepting make my skin crawl?

I shoved away from the desk, needing to move. To do something productive with my

hands before I spiraled into analyzing every heated look and lingering touch from last night.

The boxes piled next to Mags's desk offered an outlet for my restless energy. I attacked the chaos with perhaps more force than necessary, sorting receipts into piles and tossing half-empty pens into the trash.

A leather-bound book tumbled from beneath a stack of invoices. A sticky note in Mags's distinctive scrawl clung to the cover: Special order for T. Axebreaker .

My fingers traced the embossed knotwork sprawled across the front, all flowing lines and interconnected patterns. This was what he'd come to collect that first day. I imagined his huge hands caressing the binding, running reverently over the pages as he read. I pictured him hunched over his worktable, carving delicate details into wood. Creating. Breathing life into beautiful things.

My phone buzzed, an unknown Seattle number lighting up the screen. Probably another vendor calling about overdue payments. I answered with my most professional voice, "Carissa Morton speaking."

"Carissa! Thank goodness you picked up." Amelia Berdino's familiar voice burst through the speaker. She'd been my favorite coworker at my first job out of college. "I heard you finally left Grayson's firm in the dust."

I sat up straighter. News traveled just as fast in consultancy circles as small towns, it seemed. "Amelia? I'm... managing. How are you?"

"I heard about your aunt. I'm so sorry." She paused. "But listen, that's actually why I'm calling. You remember that idea we kicked around last year? About breaking away and starting our own firm?"

“Vaguely.” My pulse quickened. We’d gotten drunk at a corporate retreat and plotted our escape over stolen mini-bar scotch.

“Well, I did it. Or rather, I’m doing it. Already have three major clients lined up, and I need a partner I can trust. Someone who knows their shit.” She paused for effect. “Someone like you.”

The world tilted sideways. “Partner?”

“Full equity stake. Complete autonomy over your clients. No more kissing ass in boardrooms that didn’t want us there in the first place.” Her enthusiasm crackled through the phone. “We could build something that’s truly ours.”

Seattle’s familiar skyline beckoned—all clean lines and calculated risks. No nosy book club members. No nasty financial surprises lurking under every stray page.

“I...” My eyes fell on Tate’s email, still open on my laptop. “The timing is complicated.”

“Don’t tell me you’re actually considering staying in—where are you, exactly?”

“Silvermist Falls.”

Amelia barked a laugh. “The monster town? Come on, Carissa. You’re better than backwoods bookkeeper. You were born for bigger things.”

Isn’t this what I wanted? Get the estate settled, sell to the highest bidder, return to my real life?

My eyes dropped to the book still open on my lap and the intricate patterns that reminded me of tattoos trailing up strong forearms.

“I’d need to wrap things up here first.” I ran a finger down the edge of the book. One afternoon of signing paperwork and I could be free. Back to spreadsheets and projections and knowing exactly where I stood.

“Of course! You can have as much time as you need to get your affairs settled.” Amelia’s tone stayed bright. “But I’d appreciate an answer by the end of the week to plan around.”

I thanked her, promised to think it over, and hung up. The smart move was obvious—accept Tate’s offer, negotiate it up a bit, then take Amelia’s partnership. Clean break, fresh start, exactly what I’d planned.

The cursor still blinked on my empty spreadsheet. Numbers didn’t lie. Numbers made sense.

So why couldn’t I make them add up to the future I thought I wanted?

I had until the end of the week to decide. Surely I could allow myself one dinner first. One perfect night to remember when I was back in Seattle dealing with corporate mergers and hostile takeovers.

Just one night.

I touched the book’s spine one last time before forcing myself back to work. After all, I had a business to run.

For now.

TORAIN

“Take your pick.” I nodded between the neon pizza slice glowing in Lust for Crust’s

window and the Tilted Anvil's tasteful sidewalk canopy down the block. "Casual or fancy, up to you."

Carissa's eyes darted between the options, an adorable crease appearing between her brows as she weighed pros and cons. "Pizza sounds good, actually."

I sucked in a dramatic breath and shook my head. "You were supposed to pick the other one. Now the bribe's wasted."

"Bribe?" One perfect eyebrow arched as she reached into her bag. "I didn't know this place ran on bribes."

She pulled out a leather-bound book. My special order from Mags, had to be. She held it aloft, eyeing it from every angle.

"I wonder how much this would fetch on the open bribe market." A wicked grin played at the corners of her mouth. "Looks valuable."

My heart stuttered. Not at her teasing threat—at how the setting sun caught her hair, loosened from its severe bun after a long day. At how her eyes sparkled with mischief instead of stress. At how perfectly she fit into this moment, this street, my life.

She extended the book, but didn't let go when I grasped it. Our fingers brushed, sending sparks racing up my arm. "Where would you go?" she asked softly. "If it was just you?"

"One Hop Stop," I admitted. It wasn't fancy, but it was home.

But she brightened. "Perfect. Let's go there."

"You sure?" I hesitated, remembering Miranda's advice about taking things at human

speed. “There’s not much of a food menu.”

Carissa’s cheeks flushed pink. “I, uh, may have stress-baked an entire pan of brownies earlier. Dinner’s a lost cause anyway.”

I couldn’t help the grin that spread across my face. “Lead the way then, little baker.”

One Hop Stop welcomed us with its usual Friday night bustle. The exposed brick walls soaked up just enough sound to make conversation possible, while strings of bulbs cast warm pools of light between dark wooden beams. My home away from home.

Vanin caught my eye from behind the bar and nodded. He moved with the efficient grace of someone who’d memorized every inch of their domain. A scowl deepened the lines around his tusks as he glanced toward a corner booth where Molly held court with a gaggle of college-aged women.

Vanin glowered at Molly’s table for another heartbeat before turning his attention to us. “Welcome back to civilization,” he told me flatly then asked Carissa, “What can I get you?”

“First, my thanks for saving my event last night. The paint-and-sippers are apparently accustomed to drinking their body weight in wine,” she said smoothly. “Second, I heard there was a special dark ale available?”

Surprise bubbled up at her request. She’d remembered. One half-formed invitation she cut off at the knees, but she remembered. I’d heard the shifters talk about their inner beasties preening over their mate’s attention, and I fully understood the sensation. Every cell in my body seemed to dance with pride at taking up space in her head.

Vanin's tusked grin held a hint of warmth. "Consider it down payment on getting back to even terms. Mags did good business before..." He shrugged. "Well, before."

I tensed, ready to change the subject, but Carissa just nodded. "I've been finding invoices. Looks like she burned a lot of bridges."

"Not all fires stay lit." Vanin set two perfectly poured pints in front of us. "Especially in a town this size."

I gave Vanin a grateful nod and guided Carissa toward my usual corner. She slid into the booth and I caught a hint of cinnamon as she moved past. My fingers itched to touch her, to pull her close and breathe in that scent until it filled my lungs. But I kept my distance as I settled across from her. Her speed, I reminded myself.

"So." I stretched my arm along the booth's back. "Stress baking?"

Her cheeks flushed again. "It's a bad habit. Mags taught me. Said there was no problem a good batch of cookies couldn't solve." She took a sip of her drink, eyes widening in surprise. "Oh, this is good."

"My brother knows his stuff." I watched her lips press against the glass, remembering how they'd felt against mine. How they'd taste now, sweet with spices...

I cleared my throat. "You were close with your aunt?"

Carissa's fingers traced the rim of her glass. "Not really. We saw each other at holidays, exchanged birthday cards. But that summer..." She shrugged. "Mom was a mess, Dad was... gone, and Mags was my lifeline."

The loneliness in her voice made my chest ache. I curled my fingers around my glass to keep from reaching for her. Even at our worst, Osen and I had each other. Who did

Carissa have?

“Mags never promised anything she couldn’t deliver,” she continued. “If she said she’d teach me to bake, we baked. If she couldn’t watch me, she said so. No excuses, no pretty lies about ‘next time.’” She took another sip of ale. “I guess that’s why the store being such a mess hit so hard. It felt like she’d stopped showing up, too.”

Show up . The message rang clear as temple bells. My mate didn’t need flowery words or grand gestures. She needed someone who kept their word. Someone who proved their intentions through actions, not promises.

Someone who didn’t forget their obligations at the first pretty smile flashed their way.

“Well,” I said, keeping my tone light. “I solemnly swear that if you ever need someone to eat snickerdoodles at three in the morning, I’m your orc.”

That startled a genuine laugh out of her. “Careful. I might hold you to that.”

“Please do.”

Our eyes met, and for a moment, the rest of the bar faded away. There was only Carissa—brilliant, wounded, absolutely captivating Carissa. Her tongue darted out to catch a drop of foam clinging to her lip, and my cock twitched. By the gods, I wanted this woman. Needed to see her completely undone, gasping my name with pleasure.

“Refills?” I managed, grabbing our empty glasses before I did something stupid like drag her into my lap and kiss her senseless.

She nodded, and I made my way to the bar. I’d barely caught Vanin’s attention when I felt a presence on either side of me.

“Who’s your date?” Stella’s eyes sparkled with predatory interest.

I groaned internally. Of course the Moon sisters would be here tonight. Their matching grins promised trouble.

“She’s so pretty,” Luna chimed in. “Does she have a sister?”

“Or a brother?” Stella’s grin showed too many teeth.

I rolled my eyes. “Bad dogs. Humans are not for chewing.”

“Only if you do it wrong.” Luna’s laugh carried a hint of howl.

I was saved from having to answer by Vanin sliding our drinks across the bar. But as I turned to head back to the booth, my good mood evaporated.

Tate Gerrard loomed over our table, his expensive suit out of place among the regulars. Carissa’s shoulders were tight, her smile forced as she looked up at him.

I was across the room in three strides.

“—just need your signature,” Tate was saying as I approached. “The sooner we get this wrapped up, the sooner you can get back to your real life.”

Carissa’s shoulders were rigid, her spine perfectly straight. “As I said in my email, I need time to review everything properly. The estate isn’t even fully settled yet.”

“Come now.” Tate’s smile didn’t reach his eyes. “We both know this is just a formality. Your aunt and I had already come to an understanding before her unfortunate passing.”

“Everything alright here?” I kept my voice level and forced myself to set the drinks down gently instead of hurling them at his head.

“Just a friendly business discussion.” Tate’s tone dripped condescension. “Nothing that concerns you.”

“In the middle of a crowded bar?” I raised an eyebrow. “Seems like you’re the one who doesn’t understand the meaning of private.”

Carissa’s hand brushed my arm. A silent thank you, or a plea to stand down? I couldn’t tell. The need to protect her from the snake overrode all good sense and tinged my vision red.

“Tell her your real plans.” The words ground past my teeth. “Tell her what happens after she signs.”

“I don’t know what you mean.” But his pulse jumped, visible in his throat.

“You’ll tear it down,” I growled. “Just like the old theater. Just like the deli. Flatten everything that makes this town special and replace it with overpriced condos.”

“The theater was structurally unsound. Lieberman retired.” Tate straightened his tie. “Miss Morton, your aunt understood the reality of the situation. That building is worth more as part of our development project than as some quaint little bookshop. The sooner you accept that?—”

“The bookstore stays.” Carissa stood, matching Tate’s height in her heels. “I won’t sell.”

“Don’t be foolish.” Tate grabbed her arm. “You’re not equipped to?—”

I moved without thinking. One hand locked around his wrist, squeezing until he released Carissa. The other fisted in his expensive suit jacket.

“You heard the lady.” I lifted him off his feet. The bar went silent except for the scrape of chairs as patrons cleared a path to the door. “Time for you to leave.”

Tate’s feet dangled. His face turned an interesting shade of purple. “You can’t?—”

I could. And did.

The night air felt good against my heated skin as I launched him onto the sidewalk. He sprawled in an undignified heap, suit collecting grime from the concrete.

“Mark my words.” He scrambled up, brushing at his ruined clothes. His eyes locked on Carissa lingering in the doorway of the tavern. “You’ll regret this.”

The threat in his voice made my blood boil. But when I turned back to Carissa, her earlier warmth had been replaced by pale cheeks and rigid control.

“I should go.” She wouldn’t meet my eyes. “Early morning tomorrow.”

“Let me walk you?—”

“No.” The word came too quick, too sharp. She softened it with a forced smile. “Thank you for the drinks. And for... that. But I need some air.”

She fled before I could stop her, leaving only the ghost of cinnamon in her wake. I slumped against the brick wall, the mate bond aching with each step she took away from me.

Tate’s parting shot carried weight. The city council had already denied his permits

once. All those delays and redesigns had to be costing him a fortune. He wouldn't stop without a fight.

And my mate was caught in the crossfire.

CHAPTER FIVE

TORAIN

“That’s a gorgeous inlay pattern.” The woman traced the carved swirls adorning the jewelry box. Her pointed ears marked her as one of the local fae. “How long did it take?”

“Two days for the basic form.” I adjusted the display, showcasing how sunlight caught the copper accents. “Another three for the detailed work.”

“I’ll take it,” she said. She hauled her giant shoulder bag to her front and dug through the contents. “It’s a shame you don’t have a storefront here in town. My sister is visiting soon to plan her bonding ceremony, and I’m sure she’d love to browse.”

“We do have a website. Not much more than hours to find us here, unfortunately.” I tugged a business card out of its holder on the table, then turned to wrap the box in paper and twine.

Mist rolled off the river, wreathing the market stalls in ethereal tendrils and dreamy watercolors. Strings of lights twinkled overhead, more for atmosphere than illumination at this hour. The weekly Mist & Market had barely opened, but already the scents of fresh bread and coffee mingled with herbs from Miranda’s Brewed Awakening.

The clan’s stall drew plenty of admirers, even if they wanted more of our business on their demand. As much as even an online order form would bring us into the current

century, the heaping serving of shit Vanin still got for leaving Grimstone kept the idea behind sealed lips—and he wasn't the chief's brother. Between my position and the elders' reaction to the website, suggesting a permanent storefront would be like kicking a hornets' nest. Still, the commissioned pieces brought in good money, when we could fit them around the clan's traditional projects.

A warm weight pressed against my calf. I glanced down to find Gus weaving figure-eights between my legs, his fluffy tail held high like a banner.

“Gus!” Miranda's voice drifted from her booth. She didn't look up from measuring dried herbs into tiny glass vials. “Leave the poor orc alone.”

Gus ignored his witch, rubbing against my boots and purring loud enough to drown out the nearby musicians. His yellow eyes held ancient wisdom. And judgment.

“He clearly wants something.” Miranda leaned over our shared wall of displays, her knowing smirk too similar to her familiar's expression.

Don't we all, I thought, memories of Carissa's lips against mine sending heat through my veins. Her hands in my hair, nails scraping my scalp. The way she'd ground against me, desperate for friction...

Before Tate fucking Gerrard ruined everything.

My hands clenched, remembering the satisfying thump as I'd thrown him out. Fucker threatened my mate and her livelihood? A crumpled suit was the least of his worries.

The memory of her horrified retreat made my chest ache. But what were my options? Storm the bookstore? Corner her at the grocery store? My instincts screamed to claim what was mine, to show her exactly how good we could be together.

But Miranda's words about taking things slow with humans echoed in my head. Osen and his mate were disgustingly happy and perfectly matched. If listening to her advice got me even a fraction of that kind of contentment with Carissa, I'd gladly suffer through it.

"One hundred even." I turned back with the wrapped box. Her delicate fingers brushed mine as she handed over the cash.

"Worth every penny." The fae woman cradled her purchase like a newborn. "My daughter will adore this."

I managed a smile, though my mind wandered back to Carissa. Would she appreciate the subtle details? The way copper inlay caught morning light? Or would she smash it at my feet like Tate did to all my hopes and dreams?

"Quite the salesman." Zral's voice jerked me back to reality. He'd materialized beside me, shit-eating grin firmly in place. "Though you seem a bit distracted. Thinking of a certain human?"

I shoved him good-naturedly. "Shouldn't you be helping set up instead of running your mouth?"

"And miss the chance to fuck with you? Never." His grin showed too many teeth. "Word is you two got cozy at One Hop Stop before Tate crashed the party."

I growled. "Word needs to mind its own business."

"Please." Zral rolled his eyes. "This is Silvermist. Everyone's business is everyone's business." He held up an intricately carved box. "Speaking of business, where should I put the new stuff?"

“Back table.” I waved vaguely toward the storage area. Carissa would see the uneven rows and out-of-place items as a mess. “And reorganize the display while you’re there. It looks like a hurricane hit it.”

We fell into an easy rhythm, arranging new pieces and chatting with potential customers. The work was soothing and familiar. It let me ignore the ache in my chest, the constant pull urging me across town to where Carissa?—

Movement caught my eye. Mayor Weatherby had cornered Osen by Miranda’s stall, her pinched expression spelling trouble. When she glanced our way, the venom in her glare could have stripped paint.

Shit.

Osen’s expression stayed neutral as she spoke, but his shoulders tensed. Not good. Really not good.

“What did you do?” Zeal asked, following my gaze.

“Nothing that didn’t need doing.” I busied myself with inventory, pretending I couldn’t see Osen’s thunderous approach.

“Brother.” Osen’s voice carried the weight of command. “A word.”

I recognized that tone. It usually preceded lengthy lectures about responsibility and clan image that may or may not be deserved. “I’m kind of busy here...”

“Now.”

I ignored Zral’s delighted “ooooh” and followed him behind the stall, where curious eyes couldn’t watch the chief dress down his idiot brother. Again.

“Want to explain why the mayor is threatening to revoke our market permits?” Osen’s jaw clenched. “Something about potential assault charges filed against a member of my clan?”

“That smug motherfucker had it coming.”

“By the gods.” Osen pinched the bridge of his nose. “Tell me you didn’t actually assault him.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “Define assault.”

“Torain!”

“He grabbed Carissa.” The words shot out of my mouth at the memory of Tate’s hands on her and my blood boiling. “I simply removed him from the situation.”

“By throwing him onto the street?” At my silence, Osen’s expression darkened. “We cannot afford this kind of attention right now. You know how delicate things are with the humans after...”

He didn’t finish. He didn’t need to. One of ours killed one of theirs, and months of fury and condemnation followed. Savages. Murderers. They kill humans for sport.

And our father ultimately died because he turned the orc over and upheld human law. An honor duel, only there’d been no honor in the clan’s shaman whispering dark words in his challenger’s ear.

Shame burned in my throat. I’d proven every whisper about orcs right with one impulsive action. “I’ll fix it.”

“See that you do.” He squeezed my shoulder. “I know you meant well. But we have

to be better than they expect. Smarter.”

I nodded, properly chastised. The weight of clan expectations pressed down, making it hard to breathe. I’d make it right with the mayor somehow, but Tate could get fucked if he thought he could mess with my mate. Even if Carissa didn’t know she was mine yet.

A flash of white-blond hair caught my eye. Miranda gave me a sympathetic look over Osen’s shoulder before returning to her herbs. At least someone understood the need to defend mate and territory.

The morning crawled by in a haze of fake smiles and practiced sales pitches. My hands moved through familiar motions while my mind circled back to Carissa. Was she okay? Had Tate tried anything else? The need to check on her clawed at my chest.

“Great, you’re manning the booth.” Galan’s sneering voice broke through my brooding. “This afternoon just got worse.”

I bit back a growl. Just what I needed—more shit from my perpetually pissy cousin. “You’re not supposed to be here for another hour.”

“Thought I’d come early.” He inspected the display with exaggerated care. “Make sure everything was ready. You know how you are with deadlines.”

The dig struck deeper than he knew. I’d spent the night bent over my workbench, trying to carve away thoughts of Carissa’s hasty exit from the bar. About failing her when she needed backup. About letting my carelessness ruin everything.

Again.

“Your piece is done.” I nodded toward the wrapped carving without meeting his eyes.

“Three days early?” Galan’s laugh held no warmth. “I padded that deadline by a week, figuring you’d need the extra time to dream up excuses.”

Because I wasn’t reliable. I forgot commitments. Didn’t follow through. Couldn’t even defend my mate without putting the clan in jeopardy.

“It’s done,” I repeated through clenched teeth.

“Huh.” He lifted the piece, turning it in the morning light. His perpetual scowl deepened as he searched for flaws. “Miracles do happen.”

My hands clenched. One more smart comment and I’d show him exactly how much damage these “lazy” hands could do.

A plaintive meow drew my attention. Gus stared up at me, tail twitching impatiently.

“I’m taking lunch.” I grabbed my jacket before temptation won. “Try not to fuck up the booth while I’m gone.”

“Enjoy your afternoon delight!” Miranda’s voice sang out as I passed her stall.

I shot her a one-fingered salute without looking back. Her bright laughter mixed with Osen’s deeper chuckle as I lost myself in the market crowd.

But maybe a walk would clear my head. Help me figure out how to fix things with Carissa without pushing too hard or too fast. Because one taste wasn’t enough. I needed more.

I needed everything.

The bell chimed as I pushed through the door of Spines & Spirits. Carissa's scent hit me first—vanilla and cinnamon layered with stress. She stood behind the counter, fingers flying over a calculator. Her hair had escaped its severe bun in wisps that caught the afternoon light.

Beautiful. And completely focused on her task until the sound of my boots on hardwood made her head snap up.

“Oh!” A blush stained her cheeks as her pulse jumped. The hint of cinnamon in her scent spiked with something warm and sweet before she schooled her features into professional blankness. “I didn't expect you.”

“I wanted to check on you.” I kept my distance, though every instinct screamed to close the gap between us. “After everything with Tate.”

“I'm fine.” Her spine went rigid, voice holding nothing of the playful warmth of our date. But her eyes lingered on my arms, my chest, before darting away. “Just busy.”

The phone's shrill ring cut through the awkward silence. Molly emerged from between the stacks, phone already pressed to her ear.

“Spines and Spirits, how can I help you?” She bobbed her head as she listened, then grimaced. “One moment please.” She held out the receiver. “It's for the owner.”

Carissa's shoulders tensed. “Carissa Morton speaking.” Her lips pressed into a thin line. “I understand, but if you'll check your records, we had an arrangement—” Another pause, a shifty glance toward me and Molly, and she was on the move. “No, that won't be necessary. I fully intend?—”

She disappeared upstairs into the office, closing the door with a sharp click.

“That’s like, the fifth call today.” Molly slumped against the counter. “Pretty sure they’re all angry vendors wanting money.”

I felt my eyebrows climb. “That bad?”

“Between you and me?” She glanced at the office door. “I’m emailing my advisors to ask what happens if my internship closes.”

I rapped my knuckles on the counter, then stationed myself outside the office. Carissa’s voice rose and fell in frustrated waves on the other side of the wood.

“Yes, I’m aware of the outstanding balance, but—” Her voice tightened enough I imagined I heard her teeth cracking. “I understand you, too, have a business to run?—”

A pause, and my mind raced with all the possible bullshit the person on the other end spewed.

“No, that won’t be necessary. I can have payment by—” Another pause, shorter this time. “End of the week. Yes, I understand. Thank you for your patience.”

The phone slammed into its cradle, followed by a muffled groan. I imagined Carissa slumped over the desk, the weight of whatever was happening crushing down on her slim shoulders. The need to comfort her, to fix whatever was wrong, lit up every cell in my body.

The door flew open and Carissa stormed past, her delicious vanilla-cinnamon scent now sharp with distress. She snatched up a pile of abandoned books, shoving them onto shelves with more force than necessary.

I followed as she retreated deeper into the stacks. “What’s going on?”

She whirled to face me, eyes blazing. “What’s going on is some overly physical buffoon decided to play hero, and now I’m dealing with the fallout. Every vendor with an outstanding invoice suddenly needs immediate payment. Even the ones who offered me extensions last week.”

“Tate’s behind this.” It wasn’t a question.

“Of course Tate’s behind this!” She shoved another book into place. “Did you think he’d just let it go after that little display at the bar?”

Guilt churned in my gut. I’d acted on instinct—protect my mate, eliminate the threat. Which, truthfully, didn’t require my mate. Any asshole getting handsy deserved the same shove out the door.

But I’d only made things worse. For her.

“I’ll fix it,” I muttered.

Hopelessness and helplessness swirled in a dangerous mixture. I kept fucking up. With Carissa. Threatening the clan’s spot at Mist & Market. Gods, how fucking embarrassing that my cousin gave me padded deadlines and I still missed the mark.

“Don’t bother.” Carissa let off a harsh breath. “He’s just speeding up the inevitable. The store’s practically bankrupt anyway.” She yanked another book from the cart. “Might as well let Tate tear it down and build his condos or whatever.”

“There has to be another way.” I reached for her, but she stepped back. “We can figure this out.”

“We?” Her eyebrow arched. “There is no ‘we,’ Torain. I’ve had a job offer. I’m selling the store and going back to Seattle.”

My chest tightened. Imploded. Exploded. A whole fucking mess of no, no, no screamed inside me.

Leave? The very thought made my vision blur red at the edges and my lungs refuse to work.

“You can’t leave.” The words tore from my throat.

She drew herself up to her full height and glared. “I can do whatever I want. In case you and the rest of the town haven’t noticed, Mags is gone. I own this place, and I’ll do what I damn well please with it.”

She turned away, but I caught her wrist. One step had her backed against the shelves, her arm pinned above her head. Her pulse raced beneath my fingers.

“You misunderstand.” I pressed closer, drinking in her startled gasp. “I don’t give a fuck about Tate or the store.” My free hand cupped her jaw, tilting her face up to mine. “You can’t leave because you are my mate.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:26 am

CHAPTER SIX

CARISSA

I stared up at Torain, his words making my head spin. Mate? As in... fated mates? My heart pounded so hard I was sure he could hear it over the ambient music of the store.

“That’s... that’s not possible.” The words came out as barely a whisper. “I’m human. You’re...”

“An orc?” Torain’s lips curved into a wicked grin around his tusks. “And you’re still my mate.”

Torain pressed closer, the heat of his massive frame searing me through my clothes. My wrist burned where he pinned it above my head, his grip firm but not painful. The scent of sawdust enveloped me, making my head spin. Or maybe that was just the lack of oxygen as my lungs refused to work properly

“I don’t believe in fate,” I managed, hating how breathless I sounded. “That’s for fairy tales and marketing gimmicks.”

His laugh rumbled through me. “Says the woman who owns a bookstore.”

“Inherited,” I corrected automatically. “And that’s not the point. You can’t just decide?—”

His mouth crashed down on mine, swallowing the rest of my protest. This wasn't the soft kisses after Paint & Sip. No, this kiss left no room for questions, only obedience. It dared me to deny the attraction smoldering between us, to resist the temptation he offered. To say no to the ache building between my thighs.

I should have pushed him away. Told him he was crazy. Gone back to my neat, organized life in Seattle where things made sense.

Instead, I arched into his touch.

"Feel that?" He nipped at my lower lip. "The way your body calls to mine? That's the mate bond."

"It's just lust," I argued weakly.

But even as the words left my mouth, I knew they were a lie. This pull went deeper than mere physical attraction. From the moment I laid eyes on him—first crushes and reunions, both—I'd been drawn to him. Some part of me must have known, even if my rational mind couldn't accept it.

His hand left my face, trailing fire down my neck, across my collarbone. "Lust is part of it." His fingers teased the top button of my blouse. "But it's more. So much more."

My tongue darted out to wet my suddenly dry lips, and I watched his eyes darken at the motion. The knowledge that I could affect this big, powerful creature with such a small gesture sent a thrill through me.

"It's knowing you're mine. Feeling your happiness. Your pain." His knuckles grazed the swell of my breast, and I bit back a moan. "Wanting to give you everything."

I felt unmoored, adrift in unfamiliar waters with no land in sight. But it was the

certainty in his voice and eyes that sent a shiver down my spine. No one had ever looked at me like that—like they could see past every wall I'd built, every spreadsheet I'd hidden behind.

No one had ever claimed to give me everything.

“Torain...” It came out as a breathy plea. For what, I wasn't sure. To stop? To never stop?

“You feel it, too.” It wasn't a question. He nuzzled into my neck, his breath hot against my skin as he inhaled deeply. His lips ghosted over my pulse point, making me shiver. “Your body knows who you belong to, even if your mind's catching up.”

His teeth grazed my sensitive flesh, sending sparks shooting along my nerves. It wasn't fair how easily he could turn my legs to jelly, make my resolve crumble with a simple touch. I pressed into him, seeking more contact, more heat. More of this intoxicating feeling only he seemed able to awaken.

He rolled his hips against me, letting me feel exactly how much he wanted this. Wanted me. “Say it, Carissa. Say you're mine.”

Torain's hand ghosted up my thigh, bunching my skirt higher. Higher. Until his fingers brushed the edge of my panties. He traced the thin fabric, applying just enough pressure to drive me mad but not nearly enough to satisfy.

“Fuck, sugar. You're drenched.” With agonizing slowness, he pushed my underwear aside. A single finger traced my slit, gathering the embarrassing amount of wetness there. “All this for me?”

A whimper escaped my lips as he dragged his finger upward, circling my clit with aching precision. Every nerve ending seemed centered on that one, perfect point.

“Shh,” Torain admonished, though his eyes sparkled with mischief. “Unless you want the whole store to hear how desperate you are for my cock.”

My eyes widened as reality hit. We were still in the shop, surrounded by dusty stacks of books and random odds and ends. Anyone could wander upstairs and catch us. The idea of being discovered shouldn't have made arousal surge through my body. Shouldn't have made my pussy clench around nothing.

“We can't,” I protested weakly, even as my hips rocked against his questing fingers. “Someone might?—”

“Then you'd better stay quiet, sugar.” His grin turned positively victorious. “Wouldn't want anyone to see you like this. Wet. Needy.” He nipped my earlobe at the end of a low, dirty chuckle. “At my mercy.”

Then he slipped a finger inside me.

I bit my lip to hold back a moan as he filled me. I couldn't remember the last time I'd been with someone. Longer than I cared to admit, surely. Not that it mattered. No man had ever touched me like this, with such single-minded purpose. Like my pleasure was the most important thing in the world.

“Fuck, you're beautiful.” Torain's words were barely audible above my pounding heartbeat. “I want to see you come apart. Feel your cunt squeeze my fingers like they're my cock.”

Another finger joined the first, stretching me deliciously as he curled them forward. I buried my face in Torain's chest, breathing in his woodsy scent as I tried desperately to remain silent. My hips moved of their own accord, seeking more, harder, faster. Anything to ease the growing tension coiled within me.

His thumb found my clit, adding just enough pressure to send lightning bolts of pleasure crackling through my veins. Everything narrowed on him, on Torain—his fingers working their magic, his breath hot against my ear, his body surrounding me.

“Let go, sugar.” His voice rasped in my ear. “Show me how much you enjoy your mate’s touch.”

And I shattered.

He crushed his mouth to mine, swallowing my cry. The kiss was messy and desperate, all clashing teeth and battling tongues. I poured every ounce of need and confusion and longing into it, and he matched me stroke for stroke.

In a dizzying move, he lifted me. I wrapped my legs around his waist, gasping as he pressed me against the shelves. Books dug into my back, but I couldn’t bring myself to care. Not when the hot length of him was nestled against my center, separated only by the thin fabric of my panties and his jeans. Even through layers of clothing, the size of him was intimidating.

And arousing as hell.

I fumbled with his belt, desperate to get my hands on him. I’d never wanted anyone like this, never needed to feel someone inside me with such urgency.

Torain shifted me in his arms, one massive hand sliding down to help free his cock. The thick length sprang free, impossibly huge and gorgeously hard against my inner thigh. A whimper escaped my throat at the size of him.

His fingers teased along the edge of my panties. “Will you keep quiet, sugar?”

I glanced over his shoulder, eyeing the empty aisle. A handful of customers chatted

downstairs. Molly rang up a purchase at the register. Anyone could wander upstairs. Find us. See me spread open and desperate for him.

The thought only made me wetter.

I nodded. “I’ll be good.”

“Oh, you’re definitely not.” He smirked as he worked the scrap of silk and lace to the side. The blunt head of his cock slid along my soaked entrance. “My filthy mate can’t even wait for a bed to have me fill her.”

I opened my mouth to respond, but then he kissed me again, stealing every coherent thought. His thick cock stretched me as he pressed inside, the delicious burn making my breath catch. Pleasure sparked through me as he filled me inch by agonizing inch. My hands fisted in his shirt, clinging for balance as he lifted me higher against the shelves.

“Carissa,” Torain growled low in his throat. “You feel so fucking perfect.”

Something melted inside me at the way he said my name—not ‘sugar’ or ‘little Carrie’. Just Carissa, spoken like a prayer. Even now, buried deep inside me, he remembered what mattered. Showed up for me in the smallest ways that meant everything.

A shudder wracked my body. I’d never realized how lonely I was until that moment, holding onto Torain for dear life, his cock stretching me to my limits. There’d been dates. Hookups. Nothing serious.

I’d never belonged to anyone like this. Never felt truly seen or known. Certainly never had someone look at me like Torain did—with possessiveness and pride. And something deeper, almost tender, shining in his eyes.

He made me want to believe in fate.

He started to move, drawing himself out slowly before surging back into me. My head fell back, hitting the shelf as pleasure coursed through my body. I struggled to stay silent, biting my lip to stifle any cries as he fucked me.

“That’s right, sugar.” Torain’s voice was ragged. “Take it. Take all of me.”

“Someone could hear,” I whispered, even as my hips rolled to meet his thrusts.

“You like that, don’t you?” He nuzzled my neck, his tusks grazing sensitive skin. “The risk of getting caught. Makes your pussy squeeze me so tight.”

I whimpered, unable to deny it. The shelves creaked with each thrust, books threatening to tumble down around us.

“Unbutton your blouse.” He nipped my earlobe. “Take out those tits for me to taste.”

Heat crawled across my cheeks. But instead of arguing, my fingers obeyed, undoing each pearl button with shaking hands. Torain’s fingered tightened on my hips, watching hungrily as my breasts spilled free from the cups of my bra.

His mouth latched onto my nipple, sucking and teasing until I was near-delirious with need. I clutched at his head, tangling my fingers in his long hair, keeping him pressed against me. His tusks framed my breast perfectly, adding just the slightest bite of danger to the pleasure.

“Fuck, sugar. You’re even sweeter than I imagined.” He lifted his head, eyes dark with hunger. “I’m going to have you everywhere in this store. Bend you over every surface. Make you come so many times you forget about Seattle.”

My heart clenched. There was nothing for me in Silvermist Falls beyond bankruptcy and threats. Seattle was safe. Seattle was home.

“Stay, Carissa.” My full name again. Another prayer whispered in my ears. “Stay, and I’ll lay you out on that fancy wine bar. Taste every inch of you before sliding inside.”

My breath hitched. “Torain...”

“Or maybe I’ll fuck you in the office.” He punctuated the words with a particularly deep thrust. “Bend you over that desk while you try to balance the books. Make you forget all about those vendor calls.”

“Please,” I whispered, not sure what I was begging for.

“Stay, Carissa.” He dragged his tusks along my throat before planting a bruising kiss at the crook of my neck. “Give us a chance. And when you’re ready—when I have you spread out in our bed and begging—I’ll claim you as mine.”

Our bed. Ours. Something warm bloomed in my chest, chasing away the loneliness, filling the empty space with hope. I’d spent so long building order into my world, relying only on myself to get by.

Maybe it was time for chaos. Time to live a little, see where the cards fell.

Maybe it was time to choose hope over safety.

“Yes.” The word slipped out before I could second guess it.

His eyes lit up. “Yes what, sugar?”

“Yes, I’ll stay.” I tangled my fingers in his hair, pulling him closer. “Yes, I want to try.”

A rumble of pure pleasure vibrated against my chest as he captured my lips in a searing kiss. Then his pace quickened, the slick sounds of sex echoing in my ears as he slammed into me. Each thrust brought me closer to the edge, my pussy squeezing him like a vise.

“Come for me, sugar.” He breathed the words against my lips. “Claim your mate.”

And I shattered, stars bursting behind my eyes as the pleasure overwhelmed me. I buried my face in his neck to muffle my cries. His arms tightened around me as he fucked me through my release.

“Fuck, Carissa,” he groaned, his thrusts growing erratic. “I’m close. Where do you want me to?—”

I squirmed out of his arms, sinking to my knees before he could finish the thought. I wrapped my hand around the base of his glistening shaft, marveling at how my fingers barely met.

Without breaking eye contact, I took him in my mouth. The taste of myself on his cock made me moan, the vibrations drawing a strangled curse from above.

“Fucking gods,” he hissed. His hand dropped to my head, guiding my movements. “Like that, sugar. Just like that.”

I hollowed my cheeks, savoring his broken groans as I sucked him deeper. My head spun, drunk on power and desire. In only a few strokes, he stiffened, spilling down my throat with a guttural moan. I swallowed every drop, relishing the way he trembled above me.

We stayed frozen for a moment, both breathing hard. His hands were surprisingly gentle as he helped me to my feet, tucking my breasts back into my bra and carefully rebuttoning my blouse.

Our eyes met and held. Electricity zinged along my nerves, lighting up every spot where we touched. His thumb stroked the curve of my hip, sending fresh shivers of desire racing through me.

I had so many questions. So many uncertainties swirling in my head. Did I really want to stay in Silvermist Falls? Could I afford to keep the store open? What would everyone say about me giving the orc a chance?

But for once, the logical spreadsheets in my brain were blissfully silent. I sagged against Torain's broad chest, wrapping my arms around his waist. Breathing him in. Relaxing into the feeling of his arms banded around me.

"Carissa!" Molly's voice shattered our bubble. "Call on line two!"

With a sigh, I stepped out of Torain's arms. I smoothed my skirt and checked my bun as reality drew me from our secluded corner. At the end of the aisle, feeling my... mate's eyes on me, I glanced back over my shoulder. I smirked, then wiped the corner of my mouth with exaggerated slowness and licked my thumb clean.

Torain's eyes blazed with renewed hunger. "Tease."

The growl that followed me as I sashayed away sent a delicious shiver down my spine.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:26 am

CHAPTER SEVEN

TORAIN

“ T hanks again, Torain!” Poppy said as I hefted the new sidewalk sign into place. “This’ll catch so many more eyes than that ratty old chalkboard.”

I grinned, admiring my handiwork. The wooden A-frame gleamed with fresh varnish, ‘The Cooling Rack Bakery’ carved in flowing script along the top. “Anything for Silvermist’s best baker. Though don’t tell Carissa I said that—she’s been stress-baking enough to give you a run for your money.”

Poppy’s eyes twinkled. “My lips are sealed. Now shoo! I’m just here for you, and I’ve got to man my station again soon.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I gave a mock salute, my mind already drifting to Carissa as I ambled down Main Street.

It had been days since I’d followed her deeper into the stacks, days of stolen moments and heated glances. Every second not devoted to work found me at Spines & Spirits, ‘helping’ with inventory or deliveries. Really, I was addicted to the way Carissa’s eyes lit up when I walked through the door, to the quiet moments when she’d lean into me while poring over paperwork.

To the way she trembled beneath my hands when I pulled her into dark corners for a taste.

Fuck, I was in deep.

Still, Tate's pressure campaign continued to boil. Every day brought new "emergencies" for Carissa to handle. Surprise inspections. Suddenly due invoices. I'd even caught the snake lurking outside Spines & Spirits more than once, watching the place like a vulture eyeing its next meal.

But Carissa was tougher than he knew. And today, we'd show that asshole what happened when you messed with my mate.

"There you are!" Luna's voice snapped me from my thoughts. She and Stella flanked me as I crossed the street, matching my stride easily. "We were starting to think you'd chickened out."

"As if I'd miss this." The distant sounds of music and chatter reached my ears, but the source remained hidden behind the row of shops. My chest swelled with pride. We'd pulled it off. "How's it looking?"

Stella grinned, canines glinting in the afternoon sun. "Last few stragglers are being herded in now. Honestly, some people have no sense of community spirit."

"Yeah," Luna chimed in, "don't they know there's free food?"

"You two sound way too excited about hunting down our neighbors." I shot them a sideways glance. "Should I be worried?"

"Please." Luna rolled her eyes. "We're professionals."

"Exactly," Stella chimed in. "We only bite paying customers."

"So, when were you planning to tell your chief you're defecting?"

I nearly jumped out of my skin at Osen's voice. My brother leaned against a lamp post as we rounded the corner, arms crossed and expression unreadable.

The twins melted away, leaving me to face my brother alone.

Heat crawled up the back of my neck. I hadn't even told Carissa my plans yet. Hadn't quite admitted them to myself. But trust Osen to see right through me. "I'm not—" The denial died in my throat as he raised an eyebrow. "How did you know?"

He snorted and landed a brotherly punch to my shoulder. "Please. You've been in town more than the village lately. Taking on extra commissions. Scheduling everything around Silvermist deliveries. Ring any bells?" His grin widened. "Plus, you roped my mate into this whole scheme. Of course I know."

"I'm not defecting," I muttered. "I'm just... exploring options."

Osen's expression remained neutral. Waiting.

I stopped and turned to him, squaring my shoulders as I launched into the speech I'd been rehearsing. "Look, I've been thinking. The clan's woodworking could be so much more. You hear the customers at Mist and Market—they're always asking about regular store hours, a place to browse that loads faster than ten pixels per year." I took a deep breath. "I want to open a storefront. Here. In Silvermist."

Osen folded his arms over his chest and listened intently as I laid out the plans I'd picked over long into the night. A proper showroom for our larger pieces. A workshop where customers could watch carving demonstrations. Maybe even classes, get the humans and other supernaturals interested in orc craftsmanship.

I faltered as I reached the end of my spiel. Osen's silence stretched between us, and I found myself filling it. "I want to make this work," I admitted, the words coming

slower now. “I want to make this work with her.”

Something softened in my brother’s face. “What about the apprenticeship in Vancouver?”

I scrubbed a hand over the back of my head and winced. Of course he knew about that, too. Clan chiefs talked, even new ones like Osen. I’d been an idiot to think simply never mentioning the idea again would make it disappear.

“What, and miss your mate taking wrecking balls to the place? Not a chance.”

I tried to make light of it, to ease the weight settling on both our shoulders. But we both recognized the gravity of that long-ago decision. The fork in the road I’d chosen, sacrificing my own ambitions to support my brother. To support the clan.

“Torain.” Osen’s voice was quiet. “You didn’t have to stay for me.”

“I know. But you were taking over the clan, and I couldn’t just—” I rolled my shoulders, but the pressure just wouldn’t shake. “I wasn’t ready to say goodbye.”

To him. To our home.

The memory of our father.

“And all this?” He gestured vaguely toward the gathering crowd and tents lining the street.

My jaw clenched. “I won’t let that snake steal anything from her.”

“Why didn’t you come to me?” There was no accusation in Osen’s tone, just genuine curiosity. “I could have?—”

“I know.” I cut him off, struggling to put my thoughts into words. “I needed to prove I could do this. To myself. And to her.” I met his eyes. “Not as the chief’s brother. Just... me. That I can show up. Be reliable. Make things happen.”

Understanding dawned in his expression. He knew better than anyone how I’d struggled with that—being the flaky younger brother, the dreamer, the one who needed extra deadline padding.

Pride shone in Osen’s eyes, and he clasped my shoulder. “The orc you’ve become... Father would be proud.” He squeezed once before releasing me. “You take lead on this. Whatever you need from the clan, just say the word.”

I nodded, throat suddenly tight. I hadn’t realized how much I needed his approval until that moment. “Thanks, brother.”

“So.” He jerked his chin toward the gathering. “Ready to show your mate what you’ve been plotting?”

A grin spread across my face. “Let’s go save a bookstore.”

The past three days had been a whirlwind of secret meetings and called-in favors. Beverly’s book club mobilizing their considerable social influence. Miranda brewing specialty potions for Poppy’s baked goods. The twins strong-arming—sometimes literally—reluctant participants into cooperation.

All coming together for one spectacular “Save Spines & Spirits” block party.

Complete with local vendor booths, live music, and a silent auction featuring work from every artisan in town. Even Galan had contributed a piece, though he’d grumbled the entire time.

And Carissa had no idea.

Doubt suddenly gnawed at my gut. What if she hated surprises? What if this was too much, too soon? Fuck, what if she still wanted to leave?

I shook my head, banishing the spiraling thoughts. No. Carissa had agreed to stay and give us a chance. And I was going to show her exactly why that was the right choice.

The bell above the door chimed as I entered. Carissa's scent hit me immediately—vanilla and cinnamon layered with the earthiness of old books. She leaned over the counter, backend of a pen scanning along whatever legalese she read through. Her hair hung loose around her shoulders, the strands catching in the late afternoon light.

Gorgeous.

Her head whipped up, and I basked in the genuine smile that split her face. "Torain!" She glanced at the register clock, eyebrows shooting together. "You're early. Way, way early."

I crossed the room in two strides and pulled her against me. "Missed you," I murmured, nuzzling into her neck and breathing deeply.

She melted into me for a moment before startling at a particularly loud burst of music filtering through the windows. "What is happening out there? Did I miss the memo on another event?"

"Sounds like trouble." I fought to keep my expression neutral. "Want to check it out?"

She hesitated, eyeing the stack of papers. "I really should finish?—"

“The paperwork will still be here in an hour.” I wiggled my fingers. “Come on, sugar. Live a little.”

Her expression softened. She placed her hand in mine, letting me tug her away from the counter. “Fine. But only because you’re impossible to ignore when you get that look.”

I pressed a quick kiss to her temple and pulled her toward the door. “Smart woman.”

We rounded the corner, and Carissa gasped. The entire town square had been transformed. Colorful banners hung between lampposts. A small stage had been set up at one end, where the band was testing their sound equipment. Local vendors hawked their wares from decorated booths. Even Vanin had set up a small bar, advertising “Bookworm Brew” with a sly wink in our direction.

And everywhere, signs proclaimed “Save Spines & Spirits!”

“What...” Her voice cracked. She cleared her throat and tried again. “What is all this?”

“This?” I wrapped my arm around her waist, drawing her close. “This is Silvermist Falls showing up for one of their own.”

Beverly materialized from the crowd, brandishing a collection box. “There you are! I was beginning to think we’d have to start without you.” She stuffed a handful of bills into the box with a flourish. “We simply can’t let Tate Gerrard get his hands on our beloved bookstore. Why, where else would we hold book club?”

As Beverly wandered off, muttering about finding more cash, Carissa turned to me. “You did this? All of this?”

“The fundraiser isn’t the only offering,” I explained, leading her through the crowd. “I’ve been busy offering my carving services and cutting deals.”

Her eyes narrowed. “What kind of deals?”

“The kind that keep Tate from screwing you over.” I ticked them off on my fingers. “I’m your new local supplier for shelving and displays. Vanin’s keeping you stocked in booze. Poppy’s handling baked goods for events. Chelle’s doing weekly palm readings in exchange for you carrying her protective book covers.”

“They’re the shit,” Molly chimed in as she passed, arms laden with boxes.

I grinned. “And Miranda’s keeping your impulse buy displays stocked with candles and lip balms and other things she swears are necessary and not at all nepotism.”

Carissa slowed to a stop. When I turned, tears shimmered in her eyes. “Torain, I... Thank you.”

I pressed my forehead to hers. “I told you at Paint-and-Sip. Anything for little Carissa.”

She grabbed my shirt and pulled me down, crushing her lips to mine. I wrapped my arms around her waist, lifting her slightly as I deepened the kiss. Someone—probably the twins—whistled, but I couldn’t bring myself to care.

When we finally broke apart, both breathing hard, I pressed my forehead to hers again. “Ready to go save your store?”

She nodded, determination replacing the uncertainty in her eyes. “Show me where to start.”

The rest of the day passed in a blur of introductions and negotiations. I hung back, content to watch as Carissa worked her magic. She might think herself an outsider, but I saw how naturally she fit into Silvermist's rhythm. The way she lit up discussing books with Beverly's book club. How she actually laughed at Luna and Stella's terrible puns. The genuine interest she showed in Miranda's "definitely not magical" products.

This was my mate. Strong. Brilliant. Finally embracing the chaos and finding her place in our little community.

"Torain!" Zral's voice cut through the crowd. "We need your help with the stage!"

I started to decline, but Carissa squeezed my arm. "Go. I need to grab more flyers from the store anyway. Paint-and-Sip is already half booked for next month."

"You sure?"

She rolled her eyes and gave me a playful shove. "I think I can manage a quick errand without supervision. Go fix things before we have a disaster on our hands."

I caught her hand and pressed a kiss to her palm. "Don't take too long. I've got plans for you later."

Her cheeks flushed beautifully as she hurried away. I watched until she disappeared into the store before joining Zral at the stage.

The repair didn't take too long—but then a tent needed new stakes, and another booth had too much wobble for the owner's taste. By the time I took a breath free of someone's request, the sun had begun its descent toward the horizon.

I scanned the crowd for Carissa, frowning when I didn't spot her.

She should have been back by now.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:26 am

CHAPTER EIGHT

CARISSA

The street party's music followed me into Spines & Spirits, muffled but still audible through the old walls. I ran my fingers along a shelf as I walked, overwhelmed by the support Torain had rallied. No more faceless corporate vendors or distant suppliers. These were people who knew the store and cared about its survival.

People who remembered little Carrie Morton, and were willing to lend a helping hand.

I shook my head, smiling. For once, the nickname didn't sting. Maybe because Torain had orchestrated all this while respecting my preference for Carissa.

My throat tightened. How many times had I heard "I'll see what I can do" or "We'll figure something out" over the years? Pretty words that dissolved into disappointment. But Torain... he just showed up. Day after day. Solution after solution. Just steady reliability when I needed it most.

Movement caught my eye. A shadow passing across the upstairs windows.

I frowned. Everyone should be at the party. Even Molly had thrown herself into helping, though I suspected that had more to do with eyefucking Vanin than actual dedication to saving the store.

The office door stood open when I reached the top of the stairs. Papers littered

Mags's desk, drawers hanging open like hungry mouths. My heart rate kicked up. Someone had been searching for something.

"Hello?" I stepped closer, cataloging the mess. "Is someone?—"

Tate sat up from behind the desk.

I stumbled back, but two massive forms blocked the doorway. Fae males, by the look of their ears. Their clouded eyes were strangely unfocused and fixed on some middle distance.

"Miss Morton!" Tate's smile didn't reach his eyes. "Perfect timing. I was hoping we could have a drink. Business owner to business owner."

A hand clamped around my upper arm. One of the fae shoved me forward, forcing me into the visitor's chair. I struggled, but his grip was iron.

"Now, now." Tate tsked. "Let's be civilized about this. I've been working too long to let you ruin everything."

"Working on what?" I demanded, trying to keep the tremor from my voice. "Breaking and entering?"

He laughed, the sound like oil sliding across water. "Oh, this?" He gestured to the ransacked office. "Just making sure your dear aunt didn't leave any... inconvenient paperwork lying around. She had such a bad habit of that near the end."

The way he said it made my skin crawl. "What did you do to her?"

"Nothing she didn't agree to." He pulled a crystal decanter from Mags's bottom drawer. "We shared many pleasant evenings discussing the future of this property.

My special vintage was quite persuasive.”

The fae’s clouded eyes caught my attention again. Empty. Vacant. Like they weren’t quite there.

Cold realization hit. “You drugged her.” The words tasted like ash. “Was she the only one? Or have you been drugging everyone ‘sharing a drink’ with you?”

“Such an ugly word.” Tate poured amber liquid into two glasses. “I prefer to think of it as encouraging cooperation. A little drink here, a signature there. Soon she was practically begging to switch vendors.” His smile turned cruel. “The preliminary sale contract was just the beginning.”

One of the fae males shifted restlessly by the door. My muscles tensed as I tracked his movement. If I could just?—

“Everything was proceeding perfectly.” Tate continued, swirling the amber liquid in his glass. “Then that idiot mayor’s office denied my permits. Something about insufficient parking for luxury condos.” He sneered. “So I decided to take the whole block.”

The casual way he spoke about destroying people’s livelihoods made my stomach turn. But worse was the hard glint in his eyes as he continued.

“Though I must admit, your aunt proved... surprisingly resistant near the end. Started talking about changing her will, leaving everything to her dear niece.” He sighed theatrically. “Tragic how stress can affect the elderly heart, isn’t it?”

The pieces clicked into horrible place. The switched vendors and Mags’s erratic behavior.

My aunt hadn't died of natural causes. She'd been murdered. By this monster sitting across from me, watching my reaction with predatory satisfaction.

Rage burned through my veins, but I forced it down. I couldn't let him see how badly his revelation had shaken me. Not when I needed every advantage to get out of here alive.

The heavy ledger sat on the corner of the desk. One good swing...

"Then you showed up." Tate raised his glass in a mock toast. "The prodigal niece, come to ruin all my careful planning. Tell me, does your orc know what you really came here to do? That you planned to sell and run back to Seattle?"

"You're insane." I kept my voice steady, buying time as the remaining fae guard shifted his weight. "The police?—"

"Will what? Believe the outsider over a respected local businessman?" Tate chuckled. "Especially once you sign everything over. Which you will."

The guard near the door swayed slightly. Now.

I snatched the ledger and hurled it at his head. He stumbled, caught off guard by the projectile. I bolted past him, nearly falling as I rounded the corner and raced for the stairs.

"Get her!" Tate's roar followed me through the shelves.

I sprinted past History, past Biography, past rows of books I'd helped Mags organize that long-ago summer.

Heavy footsteps thundered down the stairs behind me. Closer. Ever closer.

My lungs burned as I neared the front door. The party's music grew louder. If I could just make it outside?—

A foot caught my ankle. I crashed down, skull cracking against the ground. The world spun sickeningly as I was hauled upright.

“Now that,” Tate's voice dripped with venom, “was extremely stupid.”

Blood trickled down my temple. I struggled weakly against the fae's grip, but spots danced across my vision.

“I really hoped we would do this the hard way.” Tate pulled a flask from his jacket. The metal caught the dim light, gleaming like scales. “Thank you for obliging.”

My vision swam, but something seemed wrong with his face. His pupils... were they narrowing to slits? No. Had to be the concussion playing tricks.

“Torain will know something is wrong,” I managed.

“Oh, I'm counting on that brute charging in without a thought in his thick skull.” Tate's smile stretched too wide as he unscrewed the cap. “And when he does...” Tate patted one of the fae's massive biceps. “Well, let's just say the town won't look kindly on a monster attacking a respected businessman.”

Horror dawned as his plan clicked into place. “You're going to kill him.”

“Eventually.” Tate grabbed my jaw, fingers digging into my cheeks. “But first, you're going to sign everything over to me. Then you'll tell everyone how the big, bad orc scared you into selling. How he threatened you. Attacked me when I tried to help.”

The flask moved toward my face.

Time slowed to a crawl as adrenaline flooded my system. I slammed my elbow into the fae guard's sternum. His grip loosened just enough. I twisted free and bolted for the door, my heels clicking against hardwood as I ran.

The late afternoon sun blinded me as I burst through the door. My heart hammered against my ribs, vision still swimming from the blow to my head. Blood trickled down my temple as I stumbled into the crowded street.

"Someone grab that woman!" Tate's voice carried over the crowd. "She's stealing valuable documents!"

I tried to scream, to warn everyone, but my voice caught in my throat. The world whipped around as one of the fae guards grabbed my arm and dragged me to a halt.

Then a massive green blur slammed into him.

Torain.

The sound of flesh hitting flesh rang out as his fist connected with the fae's jaw. The guard's clouded eyes cleared for an instant before rolling back in his head.

The second guard lunged, but Torain was ready. He caught the fae's wild swing and used the momentum to throw him into a vendor's table. Glass shattered. Someone screamed.

"What's the meaning of this?" Beverly demanded, stepping forward.

"Stay back!" I gasped out. "Tate, he—he killed Mags!"

The words hit like a bomb. The festive atmosphere evaporated as heads turned toward Tate. His perfect businessman facade cracked, rage twisting his features into

something inhuman.

Because it was inhuman.

Scales rippled across his skin like oil on water. His expensive suit split at the seams as his body elongated, stretching and twisting until a massive serpentine body towered over the fleeing crowd.

Holy shit. The town's biggest snake was literally a snake.

Tate's serpentine body coiled, muscles bunching. His jaws unhinged, revealing rows of needle-sharp teeth dripping with venom. I stumbled back, but my legs wouldn't work right.

He struck like lightning.

But Torain was faster.

He caught Tate's tail just before those jaws could close around me. With a roar that shook the windows, Torain yanked . Tate's strike went wide, his huge head crashing through the bookstore's front window instead of into me.

Glass rained down as the two clashed and grappled. Torain's muscles strained as he tried to keep his grip on the thrashing serpent. But Tate was pure muscle, writhing and twisting with unnatural speed. His coils wrapped around my mate's chest, squeezing. Torain's face turned red as those massive loops tightened.

No. No no no. I couldn't lose him. Not when I'd just found him.

"Hey!" The word tore from my throat before I could think better of it. "It's me you want, not him!"

Tate's massive head whipped toward me, jaws still dripping venom. His coils loosened just enough for Torain to drag in a ragged breath, and oh, fuck.

I scrambled backward, my heels catching on broken glass and splintered wood. The serpentine body unspooled from around my mate, moving faster than anything that size had any right to move.

My hip slammed into Chelle's overturned booth. Her protective book covers lay scattered across the ground among tarot cards and crystals. My fingers closed around leather as Tate's shadow fell over me, his head rearing back for the strike.

I threw my arms up, the book cover clutched between me and certain death.

Light exploded outward. The leather jerked in my grip like something alive. Where Tate's massive form had loomed, now only empty air remained.

The cover thrashed in my hands. A muffled, inhuman shriek echoed from within.

I dropped the book as disgust and fear drove ten thousand trucks down my spine. It jerked and writhed as something inside fought to escape.

I brought my heel down on the cover. Again. And again.

The writhing finally stopped.

"What is going on here?"

Mayor Grace Weatherby's voice cut through the chaos. She stood at the edge of the crowd, face pale as she took in the destruction. The shattered glass and overturned booths. Unconscious fae. The blood on my temple.

I met her eyes, still breathing hard. “Tate Gerrard has been drugging people to steal their property. Including my aunt.” The words burned in my throat. “He killed her when she tried to resist.”

Grace’s face drained of color. Her hand flew to her throat. “The bottle he sent for Christmas. He said it was a very fine vintage...”

“Yeah,” Torain grunted as he stepped beside me. “Might want to pour that one down the drain.”

I spun around, heart in my throat. Relief swelled through me as I saw Torain standing tall and whole. Bruises blossomed along his exposed forearms and dark stains marred his clothes, but he’d survived.

We’d survived.

I flung my arms around his neck, clinging tightly as the weight of everything settled heavily around me.

“Sugar.” His fingers ghosted over the cut on my temple. “You’re bleeding.”

“So are you.” I pulled back enough to examine his injuries. “Are you okay? When he started squeezing?—”

“I’m fine.” He caught my hands, stilling their frantic movement. “Takes more than an oversized garden snake to keep me from my mate.”

His arms tightened around me as the block party descended into chaos and cleanup. Grace barked orders into her phone about securing the scene. Vanin grumbled about everyone needing a drink after all the excitement. Beverly’s voice rose above the din, directing people to right overturned tables and bring brooms for the glass.

But all I could focus on was Torain's heartbeat under my ear. Strong. Steady. Here.

CHAPTER NINE

CARISSA

The gravel crunched under my tires as I pulled into the driveway. Exhaustion weighed heavy after the long drive back from Seattle, but something lifted in my chest at the sight of the rental house. Our rental house.

The thought still made my heart skip, even after signing the lease last week. This little craftsman might be temporary while Torain got his storefront up and running and I figured out how to run a bookstore that actually made money, but its weathered blue paint and crooked shutters already felt like home.

The screen door banged open and Torain bounded down the front steps before I could kill the engine. His massive frame filled my driver's side window, grinning down at me around his tusks.

I barely got my seatbelt off before he yanked open my door and hauled me into his arms. His scent—wood shavings and all the things that made up him —wrapped around me as he buried his face in my neck.

“Missed you,” he rumbled against my skin.

“It was only two days.” But I melted into him anyway, letting the stress of navigating Seattle traffic and finalizing paperwork fade away. This. This was home.

“Two days too long.” His hands slid lower, squeezing my ass. “Next time I’m coming

with you. No more letting you handle things alone.”

“You were there when we packed up my apartment last week.” I pulled back enough to see his face. “This was just boring legal stuff that couldn’t be done while we were there.”

“Still.” He nuzzled the spot behind my ear that always made me shiver. “Mates shouldn’t be separated.”

The possessive growl in his voice shot straight between my legs. But there was tenderness there too—the same steady support that had gotten us through everything with Tate and rebuilding the store.

“Come on.” He finally set me down but kept hold of my hand. “I’ve got a surprise for you.”

I tensed. “You didn’t unpack my boxes, did you?” The organizational system I’d implemented was essential for a smooth transition. Trying to unpack a bedroom and finding nothing but baking supplies was not on my agenda.

“Sugar, I’m not suicidal.” He snorted and pressed a kiss to my temple. “Your labels are safe.”

“Good.” I relaxed slightly. “Because?—”

“You’d color-code the body bags used to hide my bits?” He caught my hands and tugged me toward the house. “Come on. You’re going to love this.”

The front door opened to the organized chaos I expected. My neatly labeled boxes lined the walls, untouched as promised. But Torain filled the spaces between—a half-empty coffee mug sitting in the sink, sketches laid out on the table where he’d

considered variations on designs, his jacket draped over the back of a chair.

Through the back window, I could see the shed he'd claimed as his workshop. The doors stood open, revealing neat rows of tools in the process of being arranged. It wasn't my precise system, but there was a method to his madness.

Just like there was method to the way he'd quietly rearranged his life to make room for mine.

"Close your eyes," Torain said as we reached the bedroom door.

"What did you do?"

"Humor me." His fingers squeezed mine. "Please?"

I sighed, but obeyed. The door creaked open, and his hands settled on my shoulders. Warmth curled through me at his whispered instructions—step forward, step back, turn a little.

"Okay, sugar." Anticipation buzzed in his voice. "Open 'em."

I opened my eyes, and gasped.

A four-poster bed dominated the room. But calling it just a bed felt like calling the Mona Lisa just a painting. Dark wood gleamed in the afternoon light, carved with intricate designs that drew the eye up towering posts to a canopy frame. Vines and leaves twined around each post, so lifelike I expected them to sway in the breeze. And there, hidden among the foliage—books. Tiny carved volumes nestled in the curves of branches.

It was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

“When did you...” I stepped closer, running my fingers over the details. “How long have you been working on this?”

“Since you agreed to move in. I promised you a bed, didn’t I?” His arms slid around my waist from behind. “The basic frame didn’t take long, but I finished the details last night.”

“It’s perfect.” I turned in his embrace, emotion swelling in my chest. Our bed. Our bed. The one in which he planned to claim me as his mate. “It’s absolutely perfect.”

“Do you like it?” There was a thread of uncertainty in his voice, even as his gaze searched my face. As if I could ever doubt him. “I wanted our first real piece of furniture to be special.”

I framed his face with my hands, overwhelmed by the gesture. Not the grand, sweeping kind designed to win points or prove something. But the steady, reliable kind that showed up day after day. The kind backed by action instead of empty promises.

The kind that felt like home.

“I love it,” I whispered. “I love you.”

His eyes widened. We hadn’t said the words yet, though I felt it in every shared moment, every gentle tease about my labels, every time he showed up exactly when I needed him. But watching him pour his heart into this gift, seeing the physical proof of how well he knew me, how he’d carved our future into every detail...

“Say it again.” His voice was rough as he backed me toward our new bed.

“I love you, Torain Axebreaker.”

He growled, lifting me onto the mattress. “Again.”

I wrapped my legs around his waist, drawing him close enough to feel his heart thundering against mine. “I love?—”

His mouth crashed into mine, swallowing the words. I tangled my fingers in his hair as he pressed me back against the sheets. His hands slid under my shirt, calloused palms mapping familiar territory.

“I love you,” he breathed between desperate kisses. “My brilliant, organized, slightly terrifying mate.”

I laughed, then gasped as his tusks grazed my throat. “Only slightly?”

“Wouldn’t have you any other way.” He pressed a kiss to my sternum, his touch a promise. “Your color-coding.” Another kiss, lower, making me arch. “Your schedules.” Lower still, his breath hot through my clothes. “Your need to control everything.”

My fingers tightened in his hair as his mouth found my inner thigh. “I do not—oh!”

He chuckled against my panties. “You were saying?”

My protests died as he slowly slid the damp fabric down my legs. A low moan escaped as he gently parted my thighs, exposing my heat to his hungry gaze.

“Gods, look at you.” Desire roughened his voice. “So wet already, and I’ve barely even touched you.”

A shudder coursed through me as he licked up my slit. One broad swipe to gather my taste, followed by smaller teasing circles. His lips locked around my clit, tongue

lapping at the bundle of nerves. I moaned, hips rocking helplessly against his face.

“Torain.” I tightened my grip in his hair. “Please.”

“Begging already?” Amusement colored his voice even as he slipped one thick finger inside me. “Need to come?”

“Yes, fuck, I need?—”

“Soon, sugar.” He added a second finger, stretching me wider. “Got to get you ready first.”

Any retort I might have had dissolved into a strangled moan as he dove in. His tongue was everywhere. His fingers pumped hard. Every touch and breath sent stars bursting behind my eyelids.

“Don’t stop,” I groaned, fisting my hands in the sheets. “Please don’t stop.”

He hummed against me, the vibrations sending sparks shooting up my spine. Pleasure built low in my abdomen, coiling tighter and tighter with each thrust of his fingers, each swipe of his tongue. My thighs trembled. My breath came in ragged gasps. I was so close. So close...

“Let go, sugar.” Torain’s voice was rough with desire. “Come for me. Show me how good I make you feel.”

His fingers curled, hitting that perfect spot as he sucked hard on my clit. The coil inside me snapped. Pleasure crashed over me in waves as I came with a cry, my back bowing off the bed. Torain worked me through it, easing off only when I collapsed back against the sheets, boneless and panting.

He kissed his way up my body—hip, ribs, the underside of my breast. When he finally reached my mouth, I tasted myself on his tongue.

“Welcome home, sugar,” he murmured against my lips.

His mouth felt like fire against mine, igniting every nerve ending. My legs wrapped tighter around his waist, urging him closer as his hands roamed under my shirt. Those big, rough fingers left trails of heat in their wake.

“Too many clothes,” I panted between kisses. I tugged at his shirt, desperate for skin contact.

Torain chuckled and sat back on his knees. The muscles in his arms flexed as he stripped off his shirt in one fluid motion. My mouth went dry at the sight of his broad chest and sculpted abs, like always. Green skin pulled taut over powerful muscles that had featured in more than a few of my morning shower fantasies.

“Your turn, sugar.” His eyes darkened as I slowly unbuttoned my blouse. “Let me see you.”

I let the silk slide down my arms and fall to the floor. His breath hitched when I reached behind to unhook my bra. The lace fell away, baring my breasts to his view.

“Perfect.” He cupped the soft flesh, thumbs brushing over my hardened nipples. “So fucking perfect.”

I arched into his touch, moaning as he rolled the sensitive peaks between his fingers. Heat pooled between my thighs, my core clenching with need.

“Please.” I fumbled with his belt. “I need you inside me.”

A growl rumbled through his chest. He caught my hands, pressing them into the mattress above my head. “Patience, sugar. I’m not done playing with you yet.”

His mouth replaced his fingers on my breast. I gasped as he sucked hard, his tusks grazing sensitive skin. My hips bucked, seeking friction against the impressive bulge in his jeans. Another growl rumbled against my skin as he worked my skirt down my legs.

Then I was fully bare beneath him. Wantonly spread open, my wrists pinned under one large hand as he knelt between my thighs. He palmed himself roughly through his pants, drinking me in like he might devour me whole.

“Fuck.” Need roughened his voice. “Spread your pretty pussy for me. Let me see how ready you are.”

I obeyed, using my free hand to part my slick folds. My breath hitched as finally shed his jeans, his thick cock bobbing between us. The tip already glistened, and gods and devils, I needed him inside me.

He caught my gaze as he positioned himself at my entrance. “Say it again, Carissa.”

“I love you.” I reached for him. “I love you, I?—”

My words broke off in a low moan as he pushed into me slowly, giving me time to adjust to his size. The stretch burned in the best way, my body gradually adjusting to his size. He moved slowly, letting me feel every thick inch until he bottomed out.

“Perfect.” He dropped his forehead to mine, breathing hard. “So fucking perfect.”

He pulled back, the slow drag lighting every nerve ending on fire. I braced for a hard thrust, but instead he rocked into me achingly slowly. The new angle hit something

deeper, sending pleasure singing along my skin. Each controlled stroke stretched me wider, pushing me higher until I hung suspended on a knife's edge, seconds away from falling.

"Look at you," Torain growled. "My beautiful mate. Taking my cock so well. You were made for this, weren't you? Made to take every fucking inch of me."

I moaned at his words, arching into him. "Please."

His pace quickened, each thrust driving me higher. I wrapped my legs around his waist, pulling him deeper. His growls vibrated through me as I raked my nails down his back.

"Been waiting so long." His hips snapped forward, making me gasp. "Dreamed of marking you. Making you mine forever."

His rhythm faltered as I clenched around him. I was close again, pressure building with each stroke. His hand slid between us, thumb finding my clit.

"Come for me, Carissa." His voice was pure gravel. "Want to feel you come on my cock when I claim you in our bed."

Our bed. Our bed. The words echoed in my mind. I wanted this orc, wanted to build something together. Wanted it all—the family, the stability, the messy moments and sweet ones too.

All of it.

With him.

My thighs tightened around his hips, holding him close as he fucked me deeper,

faster. The tension in me wound impossibly tight. My back arched off the sheets. Stars exploded across my vision.

And then I fell.

Torain cursed as he lost the last threads of his control. His thrusts turned erratic, desperate. He buried his face in the crook of my neck, breath coming in harsh pants.

“Carissa,” he groaned. “Fuck, I’m close. I need—can I?—”

I knew what he was asking. What he needed.

“Yes,” I gasped out. “Do it. Make me yours.”

His teeth sank into the junction of my neck and shoulder. Pain lanced through me, but it only heightened the pleasure still thrumming through my veins. I felt the exact moment Torain found his release—the pulse of his cock inside me, the flood of warmth as he spilled himself deep.

We collapsed onto the mattress in a tangle of sweaty limbs, both panting heavily. Torain’s tongue laved over the spot he’d bitten, soothing the ache. I could feel our heartbeats gradually slowing, falling into sync.

After a long moment, Torain propped himself up on one elbow. His fingers ghosted over the mark he’d left. “You okay? I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

I shook my head, unable to keep the smile off my face. “I’m perfect.” I stretched, cataloging the various aches. “Though we should probably start unpacking.”

Torain’s chest rumbled with laughter. “Tomorrow.” He rolled us so I sprawled across his chest. “We’ve got a new bed to break in properly first.”

I traced idle patterns on his skin. “Multiple times?”

“Multiple times.” He caught my wandering hand, pressing a kiss to my palm. “In multiple positions.”

“Hmm.” I pretended to consider. “That does sound more fun than organizing kitchen supplies.”

“More fun than color-coding your closet?” His eyes sparkled with mischief.

“You take that back,” I said, mock scandalized. I swatted his chest. “Nothing’s more fun than color-coding.”

“Challenge accepted.” He flipped us again, pinning me beneath him. “Let me show you exactly how wrong you are about that.”

As his mouth claimed mine once more, I had to admit—some things were definitely worth disrupting my carefully ordered plans for.

Tomorrow could wait. Right now, all I needed was this. Him. Us.

Home.

TORAIN

The carved wooden sign along the back wall refused to hang straight no matter how many times I adjusted it. Scowling, I nudged the left side up a fraction of an inch. The morning sun caught the gold leaf inlay, making “Sombra Mountain Artisans” shine against the polished wood.

Not perfect, but not bad.

I surveyed the small storefront once more, stomach flipping. Sunlight poured through the front window, lighting up the dining set like some lost relic at the end of a trying quest. I’d spent weeks getting the details right—the way the grain flowed through each piece, the balance of traditional clan patterns with elements that would appeal to human customers. Custom shelving units lined the walls and displayed work from other clan artisans, carefully arranged to catch the light.

The bell above the door chimed. Carissa’s scent—cinnamon and vanilla—wrapped around me before I turned. She balanced a drink carrier from Bean Me Up in one hand and a box of Poppy’s pastries in the other.

“You’re early.” I grinned as she set everything on the counter. “Soft opening’s not for another hour.”

“Please. Like I’d trust you to arrange everything properly without supervision.” She pecked my cheek, then immediately began adjusting a display I’d spent twenty minutes perfecting. “This one’s crooked.”

I wrapped my arms around her waist, nuzzling the claiming mark on her neck. “Sure you’re not just making excuses to get me alone before everyone shows up?”

“That was one time.” She elbowed me playfully. “And we agreed never to do... that on the clock again.”

“Three times.” I nipped her ear, remembering how she’d writhed against the stockroom shelves, biting her lip to stay quiet as I filled her. The way she’d bent over the counter after hours, her skirt hiked up while I drove into her from behind. And fuck, the sight of her spread across my workbench, hair wild and tits bouncing with each thrust while she begged me to fuck her deeper. “But who’s counting?”

“Not you, obviously.” But she melted against me anyway, and her scent thickened with distractingly sweet arousal. “Anything I can help with?”

“I’m almost ready.” I glanced out the front window. The location near the town square hadn’t been cheap, but it gave me the visibility and foot traffic. I ran through the checklist in my head one last time—showroom straightened, website updated to work in the current century, flyers and social media posts advertising the location. Everything was in place for the clan’s next big venture.

Carissa excused herself to freshen up before everyone arrived, though not a hair had escaped her perfect twist. Pure Carissa—using a nonexistent imperfection as an excuse to calm her nerves. At least she hadn’t been up until dawn stress-baking like during the bookstore’s reopening following Tate’s attack.

I watched her disappear into the back, admiring how her pencil skirt hugged her curves. Even after mating, the sight of her still hit me like the first time. The sway of her hips had me considering following her, inching that skirt higher until?—

The bell chimed startled me from my thoughts. Osen’s massive frame filled the

doorway, Miranda trailing close behind. My brother's eyes swept the space approvingly, but Miranda's usual bright energy seemed dimmed. She offered a small smile that didn't quite reach her eyes.

"About time you let me in here. No more excuses about it not being tidy or fit for visitors." Osen moved between displays, nodding with approval. "Though I see you put my commission in the back corner."

"Best spot for it." I grinned at my brother's mock offense. "Draws people through the whole store."

"Tactical." He chuckled. "And here I thought you were just hiding it out of spite."

The easy banter settled something in my chest. Here was my chief, my brother, treating my store opening like any other clan milestone—expected, supported, celebrated. No grand speeches, just the same teasing we'd shared since childhood.

"Miranda!" Carissa emerged from the back, her heels clicking against the hardwood as she crossed the store. "Just the person I needed to see about that new display for the bookstore."

As Carissa drew a tired-looking Miranda aside, I pulled Osen toward the back. "Everything okay? Miranda looks like she's seen a ghost."

Osen's jaw tightened. "She sensed unfamiliar magic near clan territory yesterday. Too close to be the Silvermist coven."

Unease trickled through me. The timing couldn't be coincidence—not with the store opening, not when I'd chosen to build a life with Carissa in Silvermist Falls. My mind raced with everything that could go wrong while I was down here arranging displays instead of up there with my brother. What if the clan needed me? What if

something happened because I wasn't there to help Osen? The store suddenly felt like an indulgence, a selfish dream when I should be?—

“Stop.” Osen's grip on my shoulder tightened. “We're handling it. You focus on this. Let your chief worry about the rest.”

Before I could argue, heavy boots stomped through the door. Galan took one look around and made a sound like he'd bitten into something sour. But he still set one of his carved sword stands on the front table before retreating to demolish Poppy's pastries.

Zral bounded in behind him, already critiquing my display choices. “Do weapon racks really belong on the dining table? You might want to move?—”

“Touch anything and lose fingers.” I growled, but without heat. Having my clan here, even if just to give me shit, settled the last of my nerves.

I caught Carissa's eye across the store and grinned. She'd become such a natural part of my life that sometimes I forgot there was ever a time without her here. From the moment I'd mentioned opening the storefront, she'd thrown herself into supporting it—sharing her business experience, challenging my plans until they were stronger, believing in this dream as much as she believed in her own store. Hard to imagine this was the same woman who'd arrived in Silvermist with one foot already out the door, determined to settle her aunt's estate and flee back to Seattle.

Now here she was, my mate, making this town and our life here better just by being exactly who she was.

“Ready?” she asked softly.

I looked around one last time. At my brother and his mate. At Galan pretending not to

care and Zral rearranging displays when he thought no one was looking. At everything I'd built here.

"Yeah." I squeezed her hand. "Let's do this."

She flipped the sign to "Open" with a flourish, then immediately straightened it. I caught her hand before she could adjust it again.

"It's perfect," I murmured against her ear.

"Sap." But she squeezed my fingers. "Though Galan's sword thing is crooked."

I laughed and pulled her close, ignoring Galan's exaggerated gagging sounds. Maybe trouble was brewing in Grimstone. Maybe balancing clan and town would be harder than anything else I'd ever attempted. But I'd take every step with my perfectly organized mate at my side.

For now, though, I had a store to open. And if I occasionally got distracted watching Carissa fuss over crooked displays... well, that was just part of the charm.

"You're staring," she called over her shoulder.

"Can't help it." I grinned. "You're sexy when you're organizing things."

Her laugh wrapped around me like sunshine as my first customer walked in. I moved to adjust the display she'd mentioned, then stopped myself.

Some things were perfect exactly as they were.

Even if they weren't quite straight.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:26 am

The scent of vanilla and cinnamon hit me before I opened the door. Not her usual scent—this was stronger, and layered with butter and sugar. Carissa found peace in throwing together precise ingredients to produce exact, delicious results. But walking in to those scents before we even sat down to dinner meant something had gone wrong.

I found her in the kitchen, surrounded by cooling racks of cookies. Her hair had mostly escaped its usual severe bun, wisps clinging to her flushed face as she aggressively creamed butter and sugar.