



Frost and Felines (Saltwater Grove #5)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: She wanted a quiet winter. Instead, she got snowed in with a fake husband — and real feelings she never saw coming.

Mallory Gale is a storm witch with a reclusive streak, perfectly content hiding in her cliffside home with a cup of tea and her grief. But when a blizzard traps her on the wrong side of a collapsed bridge, she finds herself stuck at the Hearthstone Inn with nowhere to go and no desire to be around people.

Enter Kieran Striker: inn owner, tiger shifter, and very much in need of a wife... or at least the appearance of one. To save his business and fend off a rivals sabotage,

Kieran makes a wild proposal — pretend to be his bride until the storm passes.

Mallory wants nothing to do with town gossip, fake affection, or Kieran's easy charm. But the longer they share hot chocolate, cozy fires, and stolen moments, the harder it becomes to remember this is all pretend.

He's trying not to fall for the woman who saved his Christmas.

She's trying not to fall for the man who's thawing her heart.

But when real sparks fly in a fake marriage, there's no storm strong enough to keep them apart.

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MALLORY

Mallory curled deeper into her oversized armchair. She drew the thick wool blanket tighter around her shoulders as she gazed through the glass-enclosed deck at the distant horizon. The December wind whistled through the tiny gaps in the weathered frame, creating an oddly comforting melody. Dark clouds gathered far across the water, their shapes morphing and twisting like ink dropped in water. The sight sent a familiar tingle down her spine - a storm was coming, and a big one at that.

"Well, isn't that just perfect timing," she muttered, taking a sip of her now-lukewarm tea.

Her pantry supplies would last maybe three days, and with a winter storm of this magnitude approaching, that wouldn't be nearly enough. The last thing she needed was to be trapped in her clifftop house without proper provisions.

The thought of venturing into Saltwater Grove made her stomach clench. She pulled the blanket tighter around herself, as if it could shield her from the inevitable social interaction awaiting in town.

The wind picked up and rattled the windows. The house creaked in response as its old bones settled into the gusts. She had chosen this spot precisely for its isolation – no nosy neighbors, no unexpected visitors, just her and the endless view of the churning ocean below.

She stood up and pressed her forehead against the cool glass, watching her breath fog up the pane. The waves below crashed against the rocky shore with increasing intensity, sending white spray high into the air. The empty house creaked louder around her, its sounds somehow more hollow in December's grey light.

"You're being ridiculous," she told herself firmly. "It's just the grocery store. People don't actually care about your existence." She paused, considering. "It's a quick supply run. In and out. No need for small talk."

But even as she said it, memories of her last trip into town flooded back. Mrs. Henderson's endless questions about why such a "lovely young woman" lived all alone. The pitying looks from the grocery store clerk. The whispered conversations that stopped the moment she walked past.

"Maybe I could just... hibernate?" She glanced around the empty room, her voice echoing slightly. "No, that's not a thing storm witches can actually do. Unfortunately."

She crossed her house to the coat rack and pulled down her heavy winter jacket. The wool was worn from years of use, and the familiar scent of sea salt clung to it. She caught her reflection in the window - her platinum hair falling in waves past her shoulders, her light blue eyes rimmed with shadows from too many sleepless nights.

"Right then," she said, squaring her shoulders. "Quick trip. Essential supplies. No stopping to chat if you can help it, no matter how many times Mrs. Henderson tries to set you up with her nephew." She paused, then added, "And try not to talk to yourself either. People already think you're strange enough."

The wind picked up outside, rattling the windows harder as if in response to her words. She glanced up once more at the sky. The darkening clouds crept closer, and she felt that familiar pull, that connection to the approaching storm that both thrilled

and terrified her. There was no putting it off any longer. Time was running out. She grabbed her emergency duffel bag and her laptop bag, erring on the side of caution.

She stepped out onto her front porch, the wooden boards creaking beneath her boots. Delicate snowflakes drifted down from the steel-gray sky, melting as they touched her skin. Her breath formed little clouds in the frigid air as she pulled her coat tighter.

"And here we go," she muttered, fishing her keys from her pocket. The familiar jingle reminded her of Eli – he'd always teased her about the ridiculous number of keychains she collected.

Her SUV sat waiting in the circular driveway, a practical dark blue model that blended with the coastal landscape. As she settled into the driver's seat, the leather cold against her back, she could almost hear Eli's voice: "You know, for someone who can control the weather, you sure complain about the cold a lot."

"I don't control it," she said to the empty car, starting the engine. "I just... encourage it. Sometimes. When it feels like listening."

The drive to Saltwater Grove stretched before her, a winding road hugging the coastline. Waves crashed against the rocks below, their rhythm as familiar as her own heartbeat. The radio remained off – she preferred the sound of the ocean and her own thoughts, even if those thoughts weren't always the best company.

Two years. Had it really been that long since Eli? The memory of his laugh still echoed in her mind, clear as the day she'd first heard it. He'd been the only one who hadn't run when her powers manifested during their first date – a sudden downpour that had soaked them both to the bone.

"Well, that's one way to make sure I remember you," he'd said, grinning as rain plastered his dark hair to his forehead.

Mallory smiled at the memory, then noticed the snowfall increasing. She took a deep breath, forcing herself to relax. The flakes immediately lightened.

"Sorry," she whispered to the sky. "Got a bit carried away there."

The road curved inland, away from the coast. Signs for Saltwater Grove began appearing – first the population count, then advertisements for local businesses. Each marker brought a fresh wave of anxiety.

"Just groceries," she reminded herself. "In and out. No different than facing down a category four hurricane." She paused. "Actually, the hurricane would be easier. At least storms don't try to set you up on dates."

The snow continued to fall in gentle flurries, matching her carefully maintained calm. She'd learned the hard way that emotional control meant weather control. One panic attack during her college years had resulted in a freak tornado that still made the local weather stations' highlight reels.

As Mallory guided her SUV through Saltwater Grove's streets, the snow started to thicken. She flicked on her wipers to a faster setting, trying to keep her visibility clear through her windshield. Quaint storefronts decorated with twinkling holiday lights passed by in a blur of red and green. The local coffee shop Cauldron & Cup's warmth beckoned through frosted windows, but she kept her eyes fixed ahead.

She soon passed Madame Rosa's Fortune Telling parlor, where the elderly psychic waved enthusiastically from her doorway. "I don't need another prediction about my 'tall, handsome stranger' future today."

Finally, the grocery store parking lot loomed ahead, already filling with other last-minute shoppers preparing for the incoming storm. Mallory pulled into a spot far from the entrance, away from the cluster of cars. A gust of wind rocked her SUV, and

she watched snowflakes swirl in mesmerizing patterns across her windshield.

"Well, this is moving faster than expected." She tapped her fingers on the steering wheel, contemplating the dark clouds overhead. "At least I'll have an excuse to stay home for a few more days."

The thought of her cozy house, perched on its lonely cliff, brought a smile to her face. Her latest article on "Maximizing Small Spaces with Minimal Effort" was due next week, and she had three new novels waiting on her bedside table. One was a murder mystery that had been taunting her for days – she'd been dying to find out if the butler really did do it.

"Let's see," she said, pulling out her phone to check her to-do list. "Write about throw pillows, solve a fictional murder, and get snowed in by a storm that may or may not be partially my fault." She paused. "Sounds like a perfectly normal weekend."

A strong gust of wind shook her vehicle as she glanced at her reflection in the rearview mirror. "Okay, Mal. Time to channel your inner ninja. Get in, get supplies, avoid Mrs. Henderson's nephew stories, and get out. Simple."

The snow continued its relentless descent, transforming the world outside into a winter wonderland. Or a winter nightmare, depending on one's perspective. Either way, Mallory knew she would soon be tucked away in her sanctuary, safe from both the storm and social obligations.

"Just think," she told herself, gathering her courage to leave the car, "in a few hours, it'll be just you, a cup of hot chocolate, and your cozy mystery novel."

Mallory navigated her cart through the grocery store's fluorescent-lit aisles, her boots squeaking against the linoleum floor. The store radio crackled with an old Christmas song about silver bells and winter wonderlands. She checked her list, focusing on

essentials: coffee, bread, soup, and batteries.

"Let's see, where did they move the—" Her words cut off as she passed the bakery section. The scent of fresh-baked cinnamon rolls hit her like a wave, and suddenly she was back in her kitchen two years ago, Eli dancing around with flour on his nose.

"You're supposed to put the flour inside the rolls, not all over yourself," she'd teased him that morning.

"But then how would you know I'm the baker?" He'd grabbed her waist, leaving floury handprints on her shirt.

The wind howled loudly outside and jolted her back to reality. Through the store's front windows, she watched the snow falling harder – her emotions bleeding into the weather again. Mallory took a deep breath, forcing herself to focus on her shopping list.

"Paper towels, laundry detergent—" She paused, her hand hovering over a box of Earl Grey tea.

The elderly woman sorting through canned goods in the cart next to her shot her a concerned look.

"Just practicing my list out loud," Mallory explained, offering what she hoped was a normal-looking smile. "Helps me remember things better."

The woman nodded slowly and wheeled her cart away, probably to tell everyone about the strange witch talking to herself in the tea aisle.

"And this is why you typically shop online," Mallory muttered, dropping the tea into her cart anyway. It had been Eli's favorite. Sometimes she bought it just to smell it

steeping, remembering lazy Sunday mornings when he'd bring her breakfast in bed.

Her cart wheels squeaked as she turned down the soup aisle. The metal shelves groaned under the weight of countless cans, their labels a blur of reds and whites. She'd need at least a week's worth, just to be safe. The approaching storm felt big – the kind that could knock out power lines and keep roads closed for days.

"Perfect excuse to avoid the winter festival," she said to herself, selecting several cans of chicken noodle soup. "Sorry, Mrs. Henderson, can't make it to meet your nephew. Snowed in. What a shame."

Outside, the wind gusted harder, and the fluorescent lights flickered overhead. A few shoppers glanced nervously at the ceiling, but Mallory just sighed. At least when she was alone in her house, she didn't have to worry about her emotional weather patterns inconveniencing anyone else.

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KIERAN

Kieran balanced three boxes of Christmas ornaments in his arms while navigating through the inn's crowded lobby. The scent of cinnamon and pine needles filled the air, mixing with the warmth from the crackling fireplace. His tiger purred at the festive atmosphere, even as his human side fought to keep track of the million tasks ahead.

"And don't forget the Wilson family needs their room switched," Charlotte called out, her sensible shoes clicking against the hardwood floors as she followed him. "They specifically requested a view of the garden, not the street."

"Already handled." He set the boxes down near the twelve-foot Christmas tree dominating the corner. "Moved them to room twelve this morning while they were at breakfast."

"The caterer called about the Christmas Eve dinner."

"Let me guess - another price increase?" His muscles flexed as he reached up to hang a glittering silver ornament.

"Actually, they're short-staffed and might not be able to handle our event."

The ornament nearly slipped from his fingers. "You're kidding me. We're three weeks out!"

"I have three other catering companies on standby." Charlotte adjusted her reading glasses, consulting her ever-present tablet. "Though they're all significantly more expensive."

"Of course they are." Kieran ran his hand through his auburn hair, his tiger bristling at the mounting challenges. "What else?"

"The holiday craft fair needs more vendor space, the Santa we hired called in sick, and Mrs. Henderson complained about the carolers being too loud last night."

"Mrs. Henderson complains if people breathe too loudly." He grabbed another ornament, this one a delicate glass snowflake. "Tell the vendors we can use the sunroom, I'll fill in for Santa - did it last year anyway - and the carolers can move to the back garden for now."

"You're going to be Santa again?" Charlotte's eyes crinkled with amusement. "Last time you made three children cry."

"They were tears of joy."

"They were tears of terror. You growled at one of them."

"He was trying to pull my beard off!" Kieran protested, though his lips twitched with the memory.

Charlotte shook her head, but her smile remained. "Sometimes I forget you're actually running this place and not just charming the guests."

"I can do both." He winked at a passing family, earning giggles from the children. "It's called multitasking."

"Speaking of which, the mistletoe delivery arrived but they sent twice what we ordered."

"Perfect - hang it everywhere. Maybe it'll help some of our guests find their holiday spirit." His tiger rumbled with delight at the thought of spreading some romantic cheer, even if his own love life had been deliberately quiet lately.

Later that afternoon, Kieran balanced on a ladder, weaving pine garland along the dining room's exposed wooden beams. The scent of fresh evergreen mixed with the warmth from the stone fireplace in the corner, creating that perfect cozy atmosphere his guests loved. His tiger's enhanced senses picked up the sounds of children laughing in the lobby and the soft Christmas music playing through hidden speakers.

Charlotte's footsteps approached, her usual confident stride hesitant. That caught his attention immediately.

"What's wrong?" He didn't bother turning around, focusing on securing the garland with invisible wire.

"We need to talk." Her voice dropped low. "Privately."

The serious tone made him pause. He descended the ladder in fluid movements and led them to a quiet corner. "Spill it."

"The heat's out in the east wing." Charlotte twisted her hands together. "And before you ask - no, it's not normal wear and tear. Someone tampered with it."

His tiger surged forward, a growl rumbling in his chest. "Like the 'accidental' power surge that fried our reservation system last week? Or the delivery truck that mysteriously got our holiday supply order mixed up?"

"Chase is already working on it. He says he can have it fixed within the hour."

"Gregory is definitely behind this." The words came out as a snarl. "That pretentious chaos witch thinks he can mess with my inn?"

"We don't have proof-"

"Don't need it." Kieran's fingers flexed, his claws threatening to emerge. "First he tries to poach my staff with ridiculous salary offers, then starts spreading rumors about bed bugs, and now this?"

"Keep your voice down," Charlotte warned. "We have guests."

"You're right." He forced his tiger back, though anger still simmered beneath the surface. "But I'm done playing nice. If he wants to fight dirty-"

"No retribution." Charlotte's stern look reminded him why he'd hired her. "We handle this professionally. Besides, the holiday season is our busiest time. We focus on our guests, not petty rivalries."

"There's nothing petty about sabotage." But he knew she was right. He exhaled slowly. "Fine. But I'm installing security cameras."

"Already called the security company." Charlotte's tablet chimed. "Chase says he found traces of chaos magic around the heating system."

"Of course he did." Kieran's jaw clenched. "That smug-"

The words died in his throat as a familiar scent hit his nose - expensive cologne mixed with the distinct tang of chaos magic. His claws itched beneath his skin as he watched Gregory and Vivian sweep into the lobby like they owned the place, their

designer winter wear a stark contrast to the inn's rustic charm. Kieran's jaw tightened as Gregory's gaze landed on him.

"Kieran, my dear fellow." Gregory's voice carried across the lobby, drawing attention. "I couldn't help but overhear around town about your heating troubles. Such a shame, especially during the holiday season."

His tiger wanted to leap across the room and wipe that smirk off Gregory's face. Instead, Kieran matched the fake smile with one of his own. "Nothing we can't handle. Just a minor hiccup."

"Of course, of course." Gregory's hand rested on Vivian's lower back. "But please, if there's anything we can do to help..."

"That's so generous of you." Charlotte's voice dripped with sweetness that didn't reach her eyes.

Vivian's perfectly manicured hand pressed against her chest. "It must be so difficult, running this place all by yourself." Her gaze swept over him, lingering. "If only you had a partner to help shoulder the burden. But then again, settling down was never your strong suit, was it?"

His tiger growled internally. The scent of her rune magic - sharp and metallic - mixed with Gregory's chaos magic, making his noise itch.

"Gregory and I make such a wonderful team at the Lux Grove." Vivian's voice floated across the lobby. "Our guests always comment on how having a stable, committed couple running things creates such a trustworthy, family-friendly atmosphere." She beamed at her husband. "Isn't that right, darling?"

Gregory's arm slid around her waist. "Indeed. Nothing says reliability quite like a

proper family establishment."

Kieran's muscles twitched as he walked over to the front desk. The jabs about his personal life and his inn snapped something inside of him. His tiger roared, demanding action, and before he could stop himself, the words tumbled out.

"Bold of you to assume you know anything about my marriage status, Vivian."

The silence that followed was delicious. Gregory's perfect smile faltered, and Vivian's perfectly sculpted eyebrows shot up toward her hairline. The scent of their confusion mixed with the pine and cinnamon in the air.

"Marriage status?" Gregory recovered first, though his voice held an edge of disbelief. "Are you suggesting-"

"I'm not suggesting anything." Kieran leaned against the front desk, projecting casual confidence while his mind screamed at him to shut up. "I'm just saying assumptions can be dangerous things."

Vivian's eyes narrowed, her magic crackling in the air. "How interesting. We'd love to meet this... wife of yours sometime."

"Yes," Gregory's smile turned predatory. "Do bring her to our New Year's gala. We'd be delighted to get to know her."

The couple swept out of the lobby, leaving behind the lingering scent of their magic and suspicion. Kieran waited until the door closed behind them before dropping his head into his hands.

"That went well," Charlotte said dryly.

"Don't start."

"Oh, I'm starting." She crossed her arms. "Where exactly do you plan on getting this wife of yours? The Build-A-Bride Workshop?"

Kieran lifted his head, flashing her a desperate grin. "How do you feel about playing pretend?"

"I'm more likely to pass as your grandmother than your wife, and you know it." But her expression softened. "Though having a wife - even a fake one - wouldn't be the worst idea."

"What?"

"Think about it." Charlotte gestured around the inn's cozy interior. "We're trying to attract families and create a wholesome atmosphere. Your reputation as the town's most eligible bachelor-"

"Former eligible bachelor."

"Still follows you. A wife would show stability and maturity. The kind of thing investors love to see."

Kieran's tiger paced anxiously under his skin. The logic made sense, but the implementation? "So, I just need to find someone willing to fake being married to me, fool Gregory and Vivian - two powerful witches, by the way - and convince the entire town I've secretly tied the knot. Simple."

"Well, when you put it that way..." Charlotte patted his arm. "At least you have four weeks until the gala to figure it out."

"Thanks for the reminder." He pushed away from the desk. "I need a drink."

Kieran poured a generous splash of whiskey into his hot apple cider, the spicy-sweet aroma mixing with the kitchen's perpetual scent of baked goods and herbs. His tiger prowled restlessly, still agitated from the confrontation with Gregory and Vivian. The afternoon sun streamed through the kitchen windows, catching dust motes in its golden rays as he leaned against the granite counter.

Chase's boots announced his arrival before he appeared in the doorway, wiping grease from his hands with a red shop rag. "Heat's back up and running. Found traces of chaos magic wrapped around the main valve - clever bastard tried to make it look like natural wear and tear."

"Gregory's getting bolder." Kieran took a long drink, savoring the burn. "Want one?"

"Nah, but I wouldn't say no to coffee." Chase helped himself to the fresh pot. "Charlotte mentioned something about you acquiring a wife?"

Kieran's groan echoed off the copper pots hanging overhead. "I may have implied I was married to get under Gregory and Vivian's skin."

"May have implied?" Chase's eyebrows shot up as he doctored his coffee with cream. "How do you 'may have' imply marriage?"

"They were taking shots at my reputation, suggesting the inn needed a 'stable couple' to run it properly." His tiger hissed at the memory. "So I might have hinted that my marriage status wasn't what they thought."

"Smooth." Chase's grin widened. "Real smooth. And now?"

"And now they've invited my non-existent wife to their New Year's gala." The

whiskey wasn't helping as much as he'd hoped. "I don't suppose you know any women willing to fake being married to the town's former playboy?"

"Your exes might be up for it."

"Right, because nothing says 'I'm a changed man' like asking one of the women I used to sleep with to pretend to be my wife."

"Could ask one of the staff-"

"Absolutely not." Kieran's tiger bristled at the thought. "I'm trying to be more professional, remember? Dating employees is off the table, fake or otherwise."

"Then I guess you're screwed." Chase's amusement filled the kitchen. "Should've kept your mouth shut."

"Thanks for that brilliant insight." Kieran dumped the rest of his drink in the sink.

3

MALLORY

The fluorescent lights buzzed overhead as Mallory pushed her cart down the baking aisle. She grabbed the last bag of flour, adding it to her growing collection of winter supplies.

"Looks like everyone's stocking up," a young mother commented beside her, wrestling with a squirming toddler in her cart.

Mallory managed a tight smile. "Winter's coming." She moved to step around them, but the little girl caught her eye.

"Pretty hair!" The child reached out toward Mallory's platinum strands.

Despite herself, Mallory softened. "Thank you, sweetheart." Children had always been easier to deal with than adults. They didn't expect small talk or judge her solitary lifestyle.

The mother apologized, but Mallory waved it off. "It's fine. She's adorable."

Moving through the store, she added a stack of new paperbacks to her cart. The covers promised cozy winter mysteries - perfect for staying in during the storms ahead. More shoppers crowded the aisles now, their carts bumping and voices rising. The press of bodies and noise made Mallory's skin prickle. A familiar tension built in her chest as her magic responded to her discomfort. The lights flickered again.

"I need to get out of here," she muttered, heading for the checkout. Eli used to squeeze her hand in moments like this, grounding her when the magic threatened to spiral. Now she dug her nails into her palm instead.

The checkout line snaked through the store. Mallory took deep breaths, focusing on the book titles in her cart rather than the chattering crowd. A child somewhere started crying, and the wind outside picked up speed.

"The weatherman says this storm's gonna be a big one," the elderly cashier commented as he scanned her items.

"So I've noticed." Mallory kept her responses clipped, willing the conveyor belt to move faster.

The last thing she could afford was for her magic to cause a scene in the middle of the grocery store. The wind whipped even harder against the windows. Several customers muttered about the weather, and Mallory felt their anxiety feeding into her own. She needed the sanctuary of her quiet house, away from all these people and their emotions that tangled with hers.

"Stay safe out there," the cashier called as she hurried toward the exit with her loaded cart.

"You too," she managed, pushing through the automatic doors into the gusty afternoon.

The automatic doors whooshed shut behind her as she stepped into the swirling snow. The wind whipped her hair across her face, and she struggled to keep her grip on the shopping cart.

"Oh, come on," she muttered, pushing against the gale that threatened to send both

her and her groceries flying. "This is definitely not helping my anxiety."

The cart rattled across the parking lot, its wheels catching on patches of ice. Her SUV sat in the furthest spot possible - she had deliberately parked away from other cars to avoid social interaction. Now that decision seemed less brilliant.

"Eli would be laughing his head off right now." The thought brought an unexpected smile to her face. She could almost hear his teasing voice: 'Maybe next time park closer, storm girl.'

Snow pelted her face as she transferred the bags from the cart to her trunk. The wind swirled again, and a particularly strong gust sent the empty cart careening across the lot.

"Sorry!" she called to no one in particular, watching it crash into a snowbank. She quickly walked over to retrieve it and tucked it into a nearby cart corral.

Once inside her vehicle, Mallory gripped the steering wheel and took several deep breaths. The SUV rocked in the wind, and she knew her heightened emotions weren't helping the weather situation any.

"Okay, Mal. Get it together." She closed her eyes, focusing on happy memories. Eli teaching her to make hot chocolate from scratch. Curling up with a book by the fireplace. The view from her cliffside house on clear days.

The wind eased slightly. Not much, but enough that she felt confident about driving. She started the engine and cranked up the heat. She flicked on the radio mid-weather report.

"...unprecedented storm system moving through the area. Residents are advised to stay indoors..."

Mallory switched it off. "Yeah, thanks. I'm aware."

She maneuvered carefully out of the parking lot, her windshield wipers working overtime against the heavy snow. The bridge to her house was only a few miles away, but in these conditions, it might as well have been a hundred. At least the roads were mostly empty now.

"Just get home," she told herself firmly. "Then you can have hot chocolate and pretend this whole day never happened."

Red and blue lights soon pierced through the curtain of snow, reflecting off her windshield like a disco gone wrong. Her stomach dropped at the sight of sawhorses blocking the bridge entrance.

"This can't be happening right now." She slowed to a stop as a tall figure approached her SUV, his flashlight beam bouncing off the falling snow.

The officer bent down slightly to her window level, and she rolled it down reluctantly. His badge read 'Sheriff Blackmane,' and despite her rising panic, she couldn't help but notice he looked more like he belonged on a romance novel cover than directing traffic in a snowstorm.

"Evening miss. I'm afraid the bridge is closed. Part of it collapsed about twenty minutes ago."

"Collapsed?" Mallory's voice cracked. "But I live on the other side. Will it be fixed soon?"

"Not until this storm lets up, and even then we're looking at several weeks of repairs." He shifted, snow collecting on his broad shoulders. "You'll need to head back into town."

Perfect. Just perfect.

"Several weeks?" She gripped the steering wheel tight. "But all my things are over there. My house, my work setup, my-" She cut herself off, realizing she was starting to babble.

"I understand it's inconvenient, but-" A particularly strong gust of wind rocked her vehicle, cutting him off. "Miss, you really shouldn't be out in this weather anyway. It's getting dangerous."

Mallory bit back a laugh. If he only knew she was partially responsible for that growing danger. "Right. Yes. Of course." She tried to calm herself before she accidentally turned this storm into a full-blown blizzard. "I'll just... go back to town then."

"Drive carefully." He tapped her car roof twice before stepping back.

Mallory executed a careful three-point turn, her headlights cutting through the thickening snow. As she drove away, she caught sight of the sheriff in her rearview mirror, now directing another car to turn around.

"Well, Eli," she muttered to herself, "I could really use one of your terrible jokes right about now." The silence that answered made her throat tight. She blinked rapidly, focusing on the road ahead.

The snow fell harder, driven by her churning emotions. Somewhere in town, she would have to find a place to stay. The thought of being surrounded by people, trapped in close quarters, made her magic surge again. A nearby tree branch cracked under the weight of accumulating ice.

"Calm down, Mallory," she whispered, easing off the gas as she navigated the

winding road back to town. "One crisis at a time."

Once back in Saltwater Grove, Mallory circled the town square three times, her windshield wipers fighting a losing battle against the snow. The quaint buildings blurred together in the storm, their holiday decorations twinkling like distant stars through the white haze.

"This is what I get for not coming into town a lot lately," she muttered.

She soon passed by an upscale hotel called Lux Grove. Even if they had rooms available, the chrome and glass monstrosity looked about as welcoming as a dentist's office.

Then she spotted it - The Hearthstone Inn. The stone building sat on a quiet corner, warm light spilling from its windows onto the snow-covered sidewalk. Window boxes, empty for winter, hung beneath each pane, and a wrought-iron sign swung gently in the wind.

"Well, it's not home, but..." She pulled into the small parking lot and grabbed her emergency duffel bag and groceries from the trunk. "At least Eli's boy scout mentality is finally paying off."

The inn's lobby wrapped around her like a warm blanket. A fire crackled in a stone hearth, and the air smelled of pine and cinnamon. Overstuffed chairs clustered around coffee tables, and watercolor paintings of local landscapes dotted the walls.

A young woman looked up from the front desk, her name tag reading 'Amy.'
"Welcome to The Hearthstone! Nasty weather out there, isn't it?"

"You could say that." Mallory brushed snow from her wool coat. "Please tell me you have a room available."

Amy's fingers flew across her keyboard. "You're in luck! We just had a cancellation - one small room left, second floor. How long were you thinking of staying?"

"Two weeks, if possible." Mallory pulled out her credit card, trying not to wince at the expected cost. "The bridge is out, and apparently it's going to take a while to fix."

"Oh no! Were you trying to get home?" Amy's genuine sympathy made Mallory's throat tighten. "That's terrible timing with this storm."

"Story of my life," Mallory said dryly. She signed the registration form, accepting the old-fashioned brass key Amy handed her.

"Room 214. The stairs are just around the corner, or there's an elevator down that hallway. Breakfast is served from seven to ten in the dining room." Amy's smile brightened. "And we're decorating more for Christmas tomorrow if you'd like to help!"

"Thanks, I'll... keep that in mind." Mallory hefted her bag, heading for the stairs. The thought of participating in group activities made her magic stir restlessly, and a gust of wind rattled the windows.

She had barely taken two steps toward the stairs when raised voices caught her attention. Back at the front desk, two red-faced men loomed over Amy, who kept her professional smile despite her obvious discomfort.

"What do you mean you can't upgrade us both?" The taller man slapped his hand on the counter.

His companion jabbed a finger at the computer screen. "This is ridiculous. I demand to speak to your manager."

Amy's smile wavered. "I'm sorry, sir, but as I explained, we only have one suite available-"

"Then give it to me," both men said simultaneously, then turned to glare at each other.

Mallory felt the wind pick up outside, rattling the windows in response to her rising irritation. The last thing she wanted was to get involved, but watching these men bully the young receptionist made her think of all the times Eli had stood up for others, even at his own inconvenience.

"You'd have done something," she muttered under her breath. Taking a deep breath, she marched back to the desk.

"Gentlemen." Her voice cut through their bickering like an icy wind. "Perhaps I can help solve this dilemma."

They turned, startled by her intervention. The shorter man opened his mouth, but Mallory held up a hand.

"You're both acting like children fighting over the top bunk. This lovely receptionist has already explained the situation. One suite. Two of you. Instead of harassing her, why don't you flip a coin, and the winner buys the loser a drink?"

The men blinked at her, then at each other. The taller one's mouth twitched.

"That's... actually not a bad idea."

His friend chuckled, tension draining from his shoulders. "I could go for an old fashioned."

"Heads," the tall one called as his companion pulled out a quarter.

The coin flipped, glinting in the lobby's warm light. Tails.

"Looks like I'm buying." The tall man shrugged good-naturedly. "Sorry about the fuss, miss." He nodded to Amy, who beamed with relief.

As the men walked away, Amy mouthed 'thank you' to Mallory. Outside, the wind had calmed to a gentle swirl.

"Eli would be proud," Mallory thought to herself, a small smile tugging at her lips as she finally headed for the stairs.

4

KIERAN

Kieran leaned against the doorframe of his office that was hidden from view but with a perfect vantage point of the lobby. The platinum blonde at the front desk commanded attention without even trying. Her presence drew his gaze like a magnet, watching as she deftly handled the two bickering men with a cool efficiency that made his inner tiger purr with approval.

A coin flip. Such a clever solution to their petty argument over the last suite upgrade. The way she'd stepped in, taking control of the situation with quiet authority - it stirred something in him. Not just attraction, though there was plenty of that. Her light blue eyes had flashed with determination as she'd made those grown men shuffle their feet like schoolboys and apologize to poor Amy.

"Now that's interesting," he murmured to himself. He stroked his chin as he observed her gathering up her impressive collection of shopping bags and what looked like enough groceries to survive an apocalypse.

Charlotte appeared at his elbow. "What's interesting?"

"I noticed on my computer a few minutes ago that the woman over there just booked a two-week stay."

"And?"

"And she just solved our squabbling guest problem in under two minutes." His mind raced with possibilities. "Plus, I think she's new in town. No one here seems to know her..."

Charlotte's eyes narrowed. "Kieran Striker, what are you plotting?"

"Nothing." He grinned. "Yet."

"That's your 'I have a terrible idea' face."

"My ideas are never terrible. They're creative."

"Like telling the Simmons you have a wife?"

"Actually..." He straightened, watching as the blonde headed toward the stairs for the second level guest rooms. "This just might solve that particular problem."

"You can't be serious."

"Think about it. She's staying for two weeks anyway. She's clearly capable and level-headed. And she's..." He gestured vaguely in the direction she had gone.

"Gorgeous?" Charlotte supplied dryly.

"I was going to say 'professional.'" But his tiger was definitely appreciating the other aspects too. "What's the worst that could happen? She says no?"

"She could sue you for harassment."

"Please. I'm much too charming for that." He pushed off from the doorframe. "Besides, desperate times call for desperate measures."

"And desperate men seem to make desperate choices," Charlotte muttered.

He bounded up the stairs, taking them two at a time to catch up with the blonde guest. His tiger prowled beneath his skin, urging him forward as she struggled with her abundance of bags.

"Here, let me help you with those." He reached for several bags that threatened to spill from her grip. "I'm Kieran Striker, owner of this fine establishment."

She paused on the landing, studying him with those striking blue eyes. "Mallory Gale. And thank you."

The scent of rain and ozone clung to her, different from the usual perfumes he encountered. Natural. Intriguing. "Did you buy out the whole grocery store, Ms. Gale?"

"It was supposed to be a simple supply run." A hint of frustration colored her voice. "But the bridge to my house collapsed in the storm."

"Ah, the old Miller Bridge?" He shifted the weight of her bags, deliberately letting his arm brush against hers. "That's quite a ways out. You must like your privacy."

"I do." Her tone carried a note of warning that only made his tiger more interested.

They started walking down the hallway toward her room, and he seized the opportunity to learn more about her. "Your husband must be worried, stuck on the other side of that bridge without you."

"No husband." She adjusted her grip on the remaining bags. "No boyfriend either, before you ask. Just me and my books out there."

His tiger practically purred at this information. Single, beautiful, and clearly capable of handling herself - she was becoming more interesting by the second.

"Books?" He peered into one of the bags he carried. "Ah, I see you raided the bookstand. A woman after my own heart."

"You read?" The skepticism in her voice made him laugh.

"Don't let the muscles fool you. I have quite the collection myself." He flashed her a grin. "Though I prefer thrillers to..." He tilted his head to read a cover. "Interior design?"

"I write articles for an interior design magazine." She stopped at the door of her room. "And I'd prefer to keep my things intact, if you don't mind."

"Your wish is my command."

He watched her unlock her door, his tiger's instincts picking up on every subtle detail - the graceful movement of her hands, the way she kept her spine straight despite carrying so many bags, and that intoxicating scent of rain and ozone that made him want to lean in closer.

"Look, I know this is going to sound completely insane." He followed her into the room, setting the bags on a nearby table. "But I have a business proposition for you."

She turned, one eyebrow raised. "A business proposition?"

"I saw the way you handled that situation downstairs with those two guys arguing at the front desk." He paced the room, running his fingers through his auburn hair. "That's exactly the kind of presence this place needs right now. Especially with the Lux Grove trying to steal our business every chance they get."

"The hotel down the street?"

"My biggest competitor. Run by Gregory Simmons and his wife." His jaw clenched at the memory of their earlier encounter. "They're... let's just say they play dirty. And earlier today, I might have implied something to them." He paused, studying her face. "That I was married."

Her eyes widened slightly, but she remained silent. The scent of rain grew stronger, and through the window, he noticed the snow falling harder.

"Here's the thing - this inn? It's everything to me. But my reputation around town isn't exactly..." He searched for the right words. "Family-friendly. I used to be a bit of a..."

"Player?" she supplied, her voice dry as desert sand.

"I prefer 'selective dater.'" His tiger preened at her small snort of amusement. "But yeah. And now it's affecting business. Families want stability. Investors want maturity." He stepped closer, close enough to catch the slight intake of her breath. "What I need is someone to play the role of my wife. Just for a couple weeks, while you're here anyway."

The silence stretched between them. Mallory stood frozen, her light blue eyes wide with shock, and her lips slightly parted. Outside, the wind howled against the windows.

"I know it's crazy," he added quickly. "But you're seemingly new in town, no one really knows you, and you clearly have a knack for handling difficult situations. Plus..." His inner tiger urged him to close the distance between them. "We'd make a very convincing couple."

He watched her stunned silence stretch on further, his tiger growing restless under his

skin. The scent of rain intensified around her, and he could practically taste the electricity in the air.

"Let me sweeten the deal." He leaned against the dresser, crossing his arms. "I'll upgrade you to our best room - the one with a separate living area, a bathroom bigger than this entire room, a private balcony, and a jacuzzi. The room will be complimentary with room service included, of course. All you have to do is play along when we're in public."

"And I won't cross any lines," he added quickly, noting how she tensed at his proximity. "No funny business. Just enough to convince certain... interested parties that we're happily married."

Her fingers twisted the hem of her sweater. "I'm not exactly new in town."

That caught him off guard. His tiger's ears perked up with interest.

"I live out on the cliffside," she continued. "I just... prefer to keep to myself."

"The old Victorian?" He had driven past it countless times, always wondering about its mysterious occupant. "That's quite the property."

"Some people find it strange." Her voice carried a defensive edge that made his protective instincts flare. "The isolation, I mean. They talk."

"Let them talk." He waved his hand dismissively. "Small towns always do. But that actually works in our favor - the reclusive wife finally emerging to help her husband with his business? It's perfect."

Thunder rumbled outside, and she jumped slightly. He noticed how her eyes darted to the window, watching the storm intensify.

"I don't know about this." She wrapped her arms tighter around herself. "It seems..."

"Crazy? Unconventional? Perfect for throwing Gregory and his wife off balance?" He flashed her his most charming smile. "Think about it overnight. Give me your answer in the morning."

His tiger didn't want to leave her alone, but he forced himself to step back. "Room 112 if you need anything. Day or night."

He moved toward the door, pausing with his hand on the handle. "And Mallory? Thanks for considering it."

The storm outside grew stronger as he left. He couldn't shake the feeling that somehow, it was connected to the mysterious woman he had just propositioned to be his fake wife. His tiger rumbled with satisfaction - either way, things were about to get very interesting at The Hearthstone Inn.

5

MALLORY

After Kieran left, Mallory paced the small room. Her boots sank into the plush burgundy carpet with each step. The snow pelted against the window in thick sheets, a direct reflection of her turbulent thoughts. She paused at the window, pressing her palm against the cold glass.

"This is insane," she muttered to herself. "Absolutely insane."

Her groceries sat untouched on the wooden table, a reminder that she should be home right now, putting everything away in her own kitchen. Instead, she was stuck in this cozy but foreign room, with a proposition that made her head spin.

"Be his wife." She let out a sharp laugh. "Right. Because that worked out so well for me the first time."

The memory of Eli's warm smile flashed through her mind, making her chest ache. The storm outside intensified, and she inhaled deeply, trying to calm herself. A crack of thunder punctuated her anxiety.

"Pull yourself together, Mallory," she chided herself, moving to unpack her groceries. "You're not actually doing this."

But as she placed the items in the mini fridge, her mind kept drifting back to Kieran's confident stance, the way his auburn hair had fallen across his forehead when he'd

leaned in to make his proposition. The way those blue eyes had sparkled with mischief and determination.

"Their best room for free," she mused, dropping onto the edge of the bed. "And room service."

The practical side of her brain started making calculations. Two weeks in this room would already cost a fortune. A premium room would be completely out of her budget, but free? That would help significantly with this unexpected stay in Saltwater Grove.

She flopped backward onto the mattress, staring at the ceiling. "What would you say about this, Eli?" The question slipped out before she could stop it. "You'd probably laugh yourself silly."

The wind howled loudly outside, rattling the window panes. Mallory sat up, wrapping her arms around herself tighter. Playing pretend wife to a gorgeous inn owner she'd just met? It sounded like something out of one of her romance novels, not real life. Certainly not her life.

"I don't even know how to be a fake wife," she said to her reflection in the mirror above the dresser. Her platinum blonde hair was slightly windswept from the storm, and her blue eyes wide with uncertainty. "And he's so... everything. Confident. Charming. Probably used to dating supermodels or something."

Mallory curled up in the armchair by the window, watching the snow create intricate patterns against the dark glass. The storm outside matched her inner turmoil, each gust of wind echoing her conflicted thoughts about Kieran's proposition.

"He's certainly... different," she murmured, remembering how he'd swooped in to help with her bags, those blue eyes sparking with interest even before his wild

suggestion. Not just charming, but genuine in his care for the inn and its people.

She pulled her knees to her chest, her sock-covered toes curling against the chair's fabric. The room suddenly felt suffocating - barely enough space to think, let alone live for weeks. The thought of being confined here made her chest tight.

"What am I even considering?" She pressed her forehead against the cool window. "Pretending to be married to a complete stranger? Have I lost my mind?"

Thunder crackled outside, and Mallory forced herself to take deep breaths. The last thing she wanted was to make the storm worse with her mounting anxiety.

"I'd have to touch him," she realized, her cheeks warming at the thought. "Hold his hand, maybe even..." She shook her head, unable to complete that train of thought.

Her wedding ring from Eli sat heavy on her finger. She twisted it absently, guilt gnawing at her insides. "It's not real," she reminded herself. "Just pretend. Like acting in a play."

The tiny bathroom door caught her eye, reminding her of the cramped quarters she'd be stuck in if she declined. The larger room Kieran had mentioned had a separate living area, a bathroom bigger than this entire room, a private balcony, and a jacuzzi.

"Eli would want me to be practical," she reasoned, then laughed at herself. "Right, because pretending to be married to the inn owner is the practical choice."

But there was definitely something about Kieran - beyond his obvious alpha male presence and striking looks - something that made her want to trust him. The way his entire demeanor had softened when he said the inn was everything to him and talking about making it more welcoming for families.

Lightning illuminated the room, casting dramatic shadows across the walls. Two weeks minimum in this shoebox of a room would drive her crazy. Not to mention drain her savings.

"I'll need rules," she decided, already mentally drafting a list. "Clear boundaries. No... unnecessary touching. No pet names. Nothing that could blur the lines."

The storm outside intensified, and Mallory knew she'd made her decision, for better or worse.

Before long, Mallory lay in the unfamiliar bed, the sheets cool against her skin. The storm outside had settled into a steady rhythm, matching her calmer thoughts. She'd made her decision, yet sleep eluded her as her mind wandered through the implications.

"It's just business," she whispered to the darkness. "A mutually beneficial arrangement."

The moonlight filtered through the curtains, casting silver shadows across the room. Kieran's confident smile flashed through her memory - the way he'd leaned against her dresser, all casual authority and charm. She'd never met anyone quite like him before. Even Eli, as wonderful as he'd been, had been gentler and more subdued.

Rolling onto her side, she traced patterns on the pillowcase. "What would you think of this scheme, love?" The familiar ache in her chest wasn't as sharp as usual when she thought of Eli. "You'd probably say I'm overthinking it."

The wind whistled through a gap in the window frame, making her smile. It almost sounded like Eli's laugh - the one he'd use when she was being particularly stubborn about something.

"I know, I know," she murmured. "You always said I needed to get out more."

Her wedding ring caught the moonlight, and she twisted it thoughtfully. The guilt she'd expected to feel didn't come. Instead, she felt something almost like... anticipation?

"It's not real," she reminded herself firmly. "Just pretend. And those people at the Lux Grove hotel sound awful enough to deserve a little deception."

Lightning flickered outside, but for once it wasn't from her turbulent emotions. The storm was natural now, which meant her magic was settled. She was making the right choice.

"Besides," she reasoned, "Eli would hate the thought of me being stuck in this tiny room for weeks when there's a better option available." She pictured his face, the way he'd always encouraged her to take chances. "You would want me to live, wouldn't you? Not just exist?"

The answer came with surprising clarity. Of course he would. He would want her to grab onto any chance at happiness - even if it was just the temporary comfort of a larger room and the company of an intriguing stranger.

Mallory sat up, suddenly energized despite the late hour. She grabbed her notebook from the nightstand and started writing her list of boundaries. By the time she was done, the storm had calmed completely, and she felt at peace with her decision.

"Well, Kieran Striker," she whispered, finally settling back against her pillows. "Let's see what kind of husband you make."

Sunlight streamed through the window, casting a warm glow across Mallory's face. She blinked awake, surprised to find her heart beating with an unfamiliar rhythm -

excitement. The storm from last night had cleared, leaving behind a pristine blanket of snow and, oddly enough, a smile on her face.

"What are you doing?" she asked her reflection as she pulled out her emergency clothes. Her fingers traced over the soft cashmere of her favorite cream sweater. She had shoved it into her emergency duffel bag, along with her best-fitting jeans on autopilot yesterday.

The bathroom mirror revealed a woman she barely recognized - cheeks flushed and eyes bright. She reached for her makeup bag, another emergency essential she rarely used anymore.

"This is ridiculous," she muttered, but still found herself applying mascara. "He's not even that..." The image of Kieran's confident stance flashed through her mind, the way he'd filled the doorway of her room last night, all broad shoulders and easy authority. "Okay, maybe he is that impressive."

She brushed her platinum blonde hair until it shone, falling in soft waves past her shoulders. The cream sweater hugged her curves in ways her usual oversized clothes didn't, and the jeans actually fit properly instead of hanging loose.

"You're dressing up for a business arrangement," she reminded herself sternly. But her reflection betrayed her, showing a woman who looked more alive than she had in years. "This is just practical. A better room. Free food. Nothing more."

Her stomach fluttered as she remembered the way Kieran's blue eyes had sparkled when he'd made his proposition. How his presence had seemed to fill the entire room with an energy she couldn't quite name.

"Stop it," she chided herself, dabbing on a touch of lip gloss. "He's probably like this with everyone. Mr. Charming Inn Owner, remember?"

But she couldn't deny the spring in her step as she opened her door, or the way her pulse quickened at the thought of seeing him again. It felt like... possibility.

6

KIERAN

Kieran paced the length of his office early that morning as the sun streamed through the frost-covered windows. The snow had finally stopped, leaving behind a pristine blanket of white that covered everything in sight. His tiger instincts made him restless, wanting to prowl through the fresh powder, but his mind kept circling back to Mallory and his impulsive proposition yesterday.

"You're going to wear a hole in that carpet," Charlotte said from the doorway, a steaming mug of coffee in her hands.

"I may have done something incredibly stupid." Kieran ran his hand through his hair. "Remember that woman in the lobby yesterday afternoon?"

"The blonde? Hard to forget her." Charlotte settled into one of the plush chairs. "What did you do?"

"I actually asked her to be my fake wife. Who does that? She probably thinks I'm completely unhinged."

"Considering the mess you got yourself into with the Simmons yesterday, it's not the worst idea you've had." Charlotte's eyes crinkled with amusement. "Though I'm curious what made you choose her specifically."

"You saw her yesterday. She handled those guests with such control and efficiency.

Plus, she's gorgeous, smart, and has this... presence about her." Kieran leaned against his desk, remembering Mallory's no-nonsense demeanor. "She could stare down a charging rhino without flinching. And those eyes-

"Focus, Romeo." Charlotte swatted him on the arm. "Tell me more about her background. What did you find out?"

"She lives alone in that old Victorian on the cliff outside of town. No husband or boyfriend in the picture." He straightened his button down, trying to appear casual. "She's staying here because the bridge collapsed in the snowstorm, and she can't get back home until they fix it."

"That house is quite isolated." Charlotte raised an eyebrow. "Sounds perfect for what you need - someone who won't have obvious conflicts in their story."

"If she agrees," Kieran said, his voice tinged with skepticism. "Which she probably won't because who in their right mind would say yes to pretending to be married to a stranger?"

"A practical woman who's stuck here for weeks and being offered free room and board?" Charlotte smiled knowingly. "Don't sell yourself short. You can be quite charming when you want to be."

"I'm always charming," he protested.

"And humble too." Charlotte patted his cheek. "Now stop brooding and go do some actual work. She'll find you when she's ready."

Kieran adjusted a crooked wreath on the wall of the main hallway. His tiger instincts suddenly picked up a familiar scent before he even turned around. Vanilla, rain, and ozone - an intoxicating combination that made his inner beast purr. He spun to find

Mallory approaching, and his carefully prepared greeting died in his throat.

The cream cashmere sweater she wore hugged curves he hadn't noticed yesterday under her winter coat. Dark jeans highlighted long legs that seemed to go on forever. Her platinum hair fell in waves around her shoulders, and those crystal blue eyes fixed on him with fierce determination.

"I've thought about your proposition," she said, cutting straight to the point.

His pulse quickened. "And?"

"I'll do it." She crossed her arms, drawing his attention to the way the sweater stretched across her chest. "But I have conditions."

He forced his gaze back to her face, grateful his tiger genes gave him better control than most men. "Name them."

"First, no physical contact beyond what's absolutely necessary to sell this charade."

"Agreed." Though his tiger disagreed vehemently.

"Second, I keep my own schedule. I won't be at your beck and call for every little event or dinner."

"Within reason." He stepped closer, using his height advantage to make his point. "If we're supposed to be newlyweds, we need to be seen together regularly."

A slight flush colored her cheeks, but she held her ground. "Fine. But I need advance notice."

"Anything else?"

"Yes." She tilted her chin up. "When this is over, we go our separate ways. No complications."

"Deal." He grinned, unable to contain his satisfaction. "Now, how about we get you moved into that larger room I promised? We can discuss the finer details of our arrangement there."

"Lead the way, husband." The word dripped with sarcasm, but Kieran's tiger preened at hearing it from her lips anyway.

"After you, wife." He gestured down the hall, admiring the view as she walked ahead of him. This arrangement might be fake, but his attraction to her was becoming very real.

Kieran soon swung open the double doors to the Moonlight Suite with a flourish. "Welcome to your new temporary home."

The tiger in him preened at the way Mallory's eyes widened as she took in the spacious living area. Rich hardwood floors stretched beneath plush area rugs in deep blues and silvers. A stone fireplace dominated one wall, while floor-to-ceiling windows offered a panoramic view of the snow-covered cliffs.

"This is... excessive," Mallory said, but her fingers trailed appreciatively over the velvet armchair near the fireplace.

"Wait until you see the bedroom." Kieran grabbed her bags before she could protest. The scent of vanilla and rain wrapped around him again, making his inner beast rumble with satisfaction. "Through here."

The bedroom featured a king-sized bed draped in high-thread-count linens and a private balcony. But it was the ensuite bathroom that drew a genuine gasp from his

fake wife.

"Is that the jacuzzi?"

"Complete with therapeutic jets." He set her bags down, enjoying her obvious appreciation. "The bathroom's bigger than some of our standard rooms."

"I can see that." Mallory ran her hand along the marble countertop. "This must be your most expensive suite."

"It is. But my wife deserves the best." He winked, earning an eye roll that somehow managed to be both exasperated and amused.

"Your fake wife," she corrected.

"Details." Kieran wandered to the windows, giving her space to explore. "I bought this place five years ago. It was run down then - more haunted house than cozy inn. Took almost two years to renovate."

"You did all this yourself?"

"I had some help from some excellent contractors, but the vision was mine." Pride colored his voice. "I wanted somewhere that felt like home, not just another cookie-cutter hotel."

"You succeeded." Mallory settled onto the window seat, tucking her legs beneath her. The casual gesture made something in his chest tighten. "It's very... warm."

"That's the goal." He leaned against the doorframe, careful to maintain the distance she had requested. "We host everything from family reunions to romantic getaways. Next week our holiday events start - the tree lighting ceremony, a gingerbread house

competition, and carol singing, just to name a few."

"Sounds very festive."

"Speaking of which, we should probably discuss-"

"Not yet." She held up her hand. "Let me settle in first. Process one life-altering decision at a time."

He chuckled. "Fair enough. I'll leave you to it then."

He headed for the door, pausing for a moment. "Thank you for agreeing to this. I know it's unconventional."

"That's one word for it." A hint of a smile played at her lips. "I'll see you later... husband."

His tiger practically purred at the word, even spoken in jest. This fake marriage arrangement might prove more challenging than he had anticipated.

Later that afternoon, Kieran balanced the tray of food in one hand while dialing Mallory's room with the other. His tiger instincts made multitasking effortless, though his heightened senses picked up every nuance of the fresh-baked bread and herb-roasted chicken he'd had the kitchen prepare.

"Hello?" Her voice carried that same no-nonsense tone that had first caught his attention.

"Hope you're hungry, wife. I've got lunch and figured we could hash out the details of our arrangement."

A pause. "I could eat."

"I'll be there in five." He hung up before she could protest, grinning at her clipped response.

When she opened the door, the scent of vanilla and rain hit him full force. His tiger rumbled appreciatively at finding her in yoga pants and an oversized sweater now, her platinum hair pulled back in a messy bun. She had made herself at home - her laptop open on the coffee table and books scattered across the couch.

"I brought enough for two." He set the tray down, clearing space among her work. "Though my tiger appetite might challenge that claim."

"Your what?"

"Figure of speech." He arranged the plates, mentally kicking himself for the slip. That conversation could wait. "So, specific ground rules. Public displays of affection?"

Mallory settled cross-legged on the couch, maintaining careful distance between them. "Minimal but necessary. Hand holding, maybe an arm around my waist. Occasional kiss on the cheek to sell it."

"That's... acceptable." He passed her one of the plates of food, trying not to notice how the afternoon sun danced across her soft features.

She sampled the chicken, her eyes widening slightly. "This is good."

"Chef Marcus takes pride in his work." Kieran stretched his arm along the back of the couch, not quite touching her but establishing his presence. "I'd also appreciate your help with some of the inn's daily operations. Nothing major - just greeting guests and hosting some events. Charlotte handles the heavy lifting."

"I can manage that." She took another bite, considering. "As long as I'm not expected to run the place like you."

"Just be your naturally charming self." His grin widened.

"I don't do charm."

"No, you do efficiency and command. Even better." He leaned forward, his voice dropping. "Trust me, watching you take control was incredibly attractive."

A flush crept up into her cheeks, but she met his gaze steadily. "Careful, Mr. Striker. This is a business arrangement."

"Of course." Kieran cleared his throat. The tiger in him urged him to ease her embarrassment. "Let me tell you more about the Simmons - they're the reason I'm in this mess in the first place."

"Your competition you mentioned yesterday?" Mallory took another bite of chicken, her shoulders relaxing slightly.

"Gregory and Vivian Simmons. Like I said, they own the Lux Grove hotel down the street." His jaw tightened. "Yesterday, our heating mysteriously failed. Before that, our online booking system crashed. Small things, but they add up."

"And you think they're responsible?"

"Gregory's a chaos witch. These 'accidents' have his magical signature all over them." Kieran stabbed at a piece of chicken with more force than necessary. "But that's not even the worst part. One of our biggest investors, Daniel Sterling, is staying here this week."

Mallory's eyebrows rose. "Hence the urgent need for a wife?"

"The Simmons play up their perfect marriage angle. Meanwhile, I'm..." He gestured vaguely.

"The charming playboy?" A hint of amusement colored her tone.

"Reformed playboy," he corrected, his tiger huffing at her subtle teasing. "See, Sterling's old-fashioned. He likes stability, and family values. The whole works."

"And you think pretending to be married will convince him?"

"It can't hurt." Kieran leaned back, watching her methodically clear her plate. His tiger approved of her healthy appetite. "Plus, it'll drive the Simmons crazy trying to figure out when I got married without anyone knowing."

Mallory's lips twitched. "That part almost makes it worth it."

"Just almost?" He gathered their empty plates, stacking them neatly on the tray. "And here I thought my charming company would be the main draw."

"Don't push your luck."

Kieran stood, satisfied with how the conversation had gone. His tiger wanted to stay, to bask in her presence and that intoxicating scent, but he knew better than to overstay his welcome. "Thank you again for agreeing to this. I know the whole situation is not ideal for you."

"We'll see how everything goes." She walked him to the door, maintaining that distance between them.

"Get some rest. Tomorrow, we start our grand performance." He winked at her before heading down the hall, his steps lighter. Maybe, just maybe, this crazy plan would work after all.

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7

MALLORY

Mallory stepped into Kieran's office the next morning. The scent of pine from the decorations in the hallway followed her inside. The room matched the rest of the inn's cozy aesthetic, with dark wood furniture and a small, crackling fireplace in the corner.

"Ready to become Mrs. Striker?" Kieran lounged in his leather chair, his auburn hair catching the morning light streaming in through the window. His presence filled the room, commanding yet playful.

"As ready as I'll ever be." Mallory perched on the edge of the visitor's chair, smoothing her sweater. "Though I'm still not sure how we're going to pull this off."

"Simple. We fell madly in love and couldn't wait." He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the desk. "The question is how we met."

"Something believable. Not too elaborate." She tapped her fingers against the armrest. "Maybe at a café?"

"Too cliché." Kieran's blue eyes sparkled. "What about an art gallery? You were critiquing the same painting I was."

"And disagreeing with my opinion, I'm sure."

"Naturally. I said it was profound. You said it looked like something a toddler finger-painted."

A laugh escaped her before she could stop it. "That does sound like me."

"Then I convinced you to get coffee, where you proceeded to tell me everything wrong with my taste in art."

"And somehow that worked for you?"

"I love a woman who has her own passionate opinions." His gaze held hers, making her chest tighten. "So, three months ago, right before your big move to Paris for school, I couldn't bear the thought of waiting..."

"So we eloped." Mallory finished, trying to ignore how her heart skipped. "Simple ceremony, just us."

"Perfect explanation for why no one saw it." He grabbed a notepad. "Now, favorite color?"

"Are we really doing this right now?"

"Mrs. Striker would know these things about her husband."

"Green," she sighed. "You?"

"Blue. Like your eyes." He winked, and she rolled her eyes in response. "Favorite food?"

"Thai. Specifically pad thai with extra peanuts."

"Good to know for future room service orders. I'm partial to steak, medium rare."

They spent the next hour trading details, building a life that never happened. Mallory found herself relaxing despite herself, drawn into the easy back-and-forth of their conversation. It was almost fun, creating this alternate reality where she wasn't alone, where someone knew her favorite book and how she took her coffee again.

"Think you can handle being married to me?" Kieran asked.

"I suppose I'll manage. As long as you remember I hate mushrooms and love dark chocolate."

"Already noted, dear wife." He stood, stretching. "Ready to face our adoring public?"

Kieran's arm settled around Mallory's waist, warm and solid, as they walked through the inn's winding hallways. The contact sent tiny sparks across her skin, unfamiliar yet not entirely unwelcome. Each step brought a fresh wave of sensations - the brush of his fingers against her hip, the subtle strength in his grip, and the way he unconsciously drew her closer when they passed other guests.

"The tiny library is my pride and joy," Kieran said, guiding her through the carved door. "Took me six months just to source all the vintage books."

Mallory's breath caught. Floor-to-ceiling shelves stretched upward, filled with leather-bound volumes. A stone fireplace dominated one wall, flanked by oversized leather armchairs. The scent of old paper and wood polish wrapped around her like a familiar blanket.

"This is incredible," she whispered, fighting the urge to run her fingers along the spines.

"Go ahead." His breath tickled her ear. "I saw how many books you bought from the store. You're practically vibrating trying to hold yourself back."

Heat crept up her neck. "That obvious?"

"Like a kid in a candy store." His thumb traced circles on her hip. "The restoration work nearly broke me, but worth every penny."

She wandered closer to the shelves, his arm still around her. "These are first editions?"

"Some. Others are just beautiful copies." His chest rumbled against her back as he reached past her to pull down a book. "This one's my favorite - complete collection of Greek myths, illustrated."

The leather was butter-soft under her fingers. "You did all this yourself?"

"Every detail," he said, the pride evident in his voice. "From picking the wood stain to choosing which chair went where. Drove my contractor crazy with the specifics."

She glanced around the room again, seeing it through new eyes. The careful placement of reading lamps, the hidden outlets for laptops, and the way the afternoon sun streamed through the windows at just the right angle.

"You've built something really special here."

His arm tightened around her slightly. "That means a lot, coming from someone who writes about interior design." The air around them seemed to crackle with electricity as he met her gaze. She pulled away suddenly, needing to put some distance between them.

Kieran cleared his throat. "Do you want to see the garden room now? It's got a glass ceiling - perfect for watching storms roll in."

The mention of storms made her stomach clench slightly, but his enthusiasm was infectious. "Lead the way."

The garden room took Mallory's breath away as well. Glass panels stretched overhead, revealing the stormy sky above. Light snow drifted down, creating a magical scene as it collected on the transparent ceiling. Potted plants and climbing vines lined the walls, creating an indoor oasis despite the winter weather outside.

Kieran's phone buzzed suddenly, interrupting her admiration of the space. His expression darkened as he read the message.

"Trouble?" Mallory asked.

"Burst pipes in rooms 204 and 206. Charlotte says the guests are about to come to blows over repair priority." He slipped his phone back into his pocket. "Care to join me, Mrs. Striker?"

The title still felt foreign, but Mallory nodded. They made their way to the front desk where two men in business suits were red-faced and shouting.

"My presentation is in three hours!" The taller man jabbed his finger at the desk. "I need to prepare!"

"And I have a Zoom meeting in thirty minutes!" The other man's voice rose higher. "Do you know how important this client is?"

Kieran stepped forward, his presence commanding immediate attention. "Gentlemen, I understand your frustration. We have two maintenance teams-

"I don't care about teams! I was here first!"

Mallory watched as Kieran's jaw tightened, though his voice remained steady. She could practically feel his patience wearing thin. Before he could respond, she stepped forward.

"You both have important meetings." She kept her voice calm but firm. "The conference room on the first floor has excellent Wi-Fi and complete privacy. Why don't you both use that space while maintenance handles your rooms simultaneously?"

The men stopped arguing and just stared at her for a moment.

"The conference room has a better setup than your rooms anyway," she continued. "Dual monitors, proper lighting for video calls, and a coffee station."

The tension in the lobby deflated like a punctured balloon.

"That... actually sounds perfect for me," the taller man admitted.

"I'll have someone bring your materials down immediately," Kieran added, shooting Mallory an appreciative glance.

As the men walked away, chatting about sharing the space, an older woman approached. Her silver hair was elegantly styled, and she carried herself with quiet authority.

"Nicely handled," she said, extending her hand to Mallory. "I'm Charlotte Anderson, the inn's manager. You must be our new Mrs. Striker."

"Mallory," she replied, shaking Charlotte's hand. "And thank you."

Charlotte's eyes suddenly widened as she glanced out the lobby window. "Looks like we have more trouble - the Simmons are heading this way."

Mallory followed her gaze to see a well-dressed couple approaching through the snow. The woman wore high heels despite the weather, while the man's expensive coat flapped in the wind.

"Perfect timing," Kieran muttered, his hand finding the small of Mallory's back. "Ready to meet the competition, darling?"

Mallory's muscles tightened slightly. "Do I really have a choice, dear?"

Mallory watched the Simmons approach them, the couple's matching plastic smiles making her skin crawl. Gregory's expensive wool coat shed snowflakes onto the floor while Vivian's perfectly coiffed hair remained unmoved despite the winter wind outside.

Kieran's arm wrapped around Mallory's waist, pulling her closer. The heat from his body seeped through her sweater, steadying her as Gregory's gaze swept over them both.

"Well, well," Gregory's voice dripped with false warmth. "This must be the mysterious Mrs. Striker we've heard about."

"Mallory." She extended her hand, keeping her face neutral as Gregory's grip lingered a moment too long.

"We simply had to come see for ourselves," Vivian said, her diamond bracelet shimmering in the light as she waved her hand. "After all, our dear Kieran has always been so... selective with his affections."

Kieran's fingers flexed against Mallory's hip. "When you know, you know." His voice carried a hint of a growl. "We met at the Rothschild Gallery downtown. Mallory was critiquing this awful modern piece-

"It looked like a toddler's finger painting," Mallory added, remembering their earlier conversation.

"Love at first argument." Kieran's smile held genuine warmth as he looked at her. "Three months later, we couldn't stand the thought of being apart before her graduate program in Paris started. So we eloped."

Gregory's smile tightened. "How... impulsive. Speaking of impulsive decisions, I heard you're having some trouble with your pipes. Such a shame, especially in this weather."

The temperature in the lobby seemed to drop several degrees. Mallory felt Kieran tense beside her.

"Nothing we can't handle together," Kieran replied smoothly, glancing at Mallory.

"Oh, you're so brave," Vivian directed at Mallory, her voice saccharine. "Taking on not just the inn, but Kieran's... colorful past. I mean, the stories I could tell you about his conquests-

Mallory felt her patience snap like a rubber band stretched too far. The snow outside whipped against the windows. She stepped forward, breaking contact with Kieran's warm grip.

"That's about enough." Her voice cut Vivian off. "If you're not here to book a room, I suggest you leave."

Vivian's perfect smile faltered. "I beg your pardon?"

"You heard me." Mallory crossed her arms, channeling her inner storm into her words instead of the weather. "My husband has built something incredible here. Every detail of this inn shows his dedication and vision. I won't stand here and listen to your thinly veiled insults."

Gregory's face reddened. "Now see here-"

"No, you see here." Mallory's blue eyes flashed. "I'm proud to stand beside Kieran. He's transformed this place into something special and genuine - unlike your soulless luxury hotel." She gestured to the warm wooden beams above them, the crackling fireplace, and the comfortable chairs where guests sat reading. "This is what hospitality looks like. So like I said, unless you're planning to book a room, the door is right there."

The Simmons stood frozen, their matching smiles completely gone. Vivian opened her mouth, closed it, then tugged at Gregory's sleeve. Without another word, they turned and left, the door closing behind them with a satisfying thud.

Kieran's laugh broke the silence. "That was magnificent." He pulled her against his chest, his warmth enveloping her. "I think that's the first time I've ever seen them speechless."

Mallory allowed herself to relax against him, just for a moment. His presence felt solid and grounding. "Someone needed to say it."

"And you did it perfectly." His breath tickled her ear. "This partnership is going to work better than I thought."

She looked up at him, caught off guard by the intensity in his blue eyes. The raw

appreciation in his gaze caused her chest to tighten.

"Just doing my wifely duties," she managed, trying to keep her voice light.

"Well, Mrs. Striker," he grinned, "how about we celebrate your first victory over the Simmons with lunch in the garden room?"

"As long as there's chocolate for dessert."

"Dark chocolate," he winked. "I remembered."

8

KIERAN

Later that evening, Kieran wandered aimlessly around his suite, his tiger restless inside of him. The memory of Mallory standing up to the Simmons earlier today played on repeat in his mind. The way her platinum hair had shone in the lobby lights, and how her spine had straightened as she'd put them in their place. His tiger softly purred at the thought.

"She's just pretending to care," he muttered to himself. "This is strictly business, plain and simple."

But his tiger disagreed. The beast inside recognized something in her - strength, intelligence, and a hint of vulnerability she tried to hide. The combination was intoxicating.

He stopped at his window, watching the snow continue to fall. Today's sudden snowstorm showed no signs of letting up, which meant Mallory could be here even longer. The thought pleased him more than it should.

"What do you think, Charlotte?" He soon spoke into his phone. "Would asking her to dinner in my suite be crossing a line?"

"You mean your fake wife?" Charlotte's laugh crackled through the speaker. "The one you barely know?"

"She handled the Simmons perfectly. Did you see how they practically ran out?"

"I saw. I also saw how you couldn't take your eyes off her, or your hands."

Kieran's tiger preened at being caught. "She's... different."

"Different than the socialite girls you usually date? Thank goodness for that." Charlotte paused. "Just remember she's doing you a favor. Don't mess this up by thinking with your tiger instead of your head."

"But my tiger has excellent taste."

"Your tiger also thought dating twins was a good idea last year."

"That was completely different." Kieran rubbed his neck. "Mallory's not like that. She's... real."

"Real and probably not interested in being another notch on your bedpost."

His tiger bristled at the suggestion. "That's not what this is."

"Then what is it?"

Kieran stared at the snow, remembering how Mallory's eyes matched the icy blue of winter. "I don't know yet. But I really want to find out."

"Just be careful," Charlotte warned. "We still need her help with the inn."

"I know." He ended the call and resumed his pacing.

His tiger wanted to go to her suite right now, to invite her to dinner, to learn

everything about her. But Charlotte was right - they needed Mallory's help, at least until Daniel left. He couldn't risk scaring her off by coming on too strong.

Still, as he watched the storm rage outside, he couldn't help wondering what she was doing right now, and if she was as aware of him as he was of her.

A half hour later, Kieran's tiger prowled close to the surface as he stood outside Mallory's suite door. He knocked before he could talk himself out of it.

The door opened, and there she stood in an oversized sweater and leggings, her hair loose around her shoulders. His tiger approved.

"Have dinner with me." The words came out more like a command than a question. He softened his tone. "In my suite. We should go over the holiday events."

Mallory hesitated. "I don't know if that's-

"I already ordered your pad thai. Extra peanuts."

Her eyes widened. "You remembered?"

"I pick up on things." Like how her eyes sparkled when she was surprised, or how she tucked her hair behind her ear when she was thinking extra hard.

"Fine. Let me grab my phone."

In his suite, they sat at the small dining table near the window. The snow continued to fall outside, creating a cozy atmosphere that his tiger thoroughly enjoyed.

"So, these events," Mallory said between bites. "What exactly am I getting myself into?"

He leaned back, watching her savor the food. His tiger purred at providing for her, even if it was just room service. "Tomorrow we deck the halls. There's that twelve-foot Christmas tree in the lobby that needs its star."

"It's twelve feet?"

"Go big or go home. Then on the fifth, we do carols in the lobby. Hot chocolate, games, the works." He watched her face carefully. "Christmas Eve is special - we deliver treats to every room, and there's a dance in the foyer."

"A dance?" She set down her fork.

"And New Year's Eve..." He paused. "We throw quite a party. The Simmons usually have their gala that night too, but ours is better."

His tiger noticed how she tensed at the mention of the dance and parties. Interesting.

"I know it's a lot to ask," he said, "but I'd really like you to stay through New Year's. The suite's yours as long as you need it."

The silence stretched between him and Mallory as she stared out at the snow. His tiger wanted to push, to convince her, but he held back.

"I'm sorry," he said finally. "I know this isn't how you planned to spend your holidays."

She turned back to him, those ice-blue eyes unreadable. The storm outside seemed to intensify, but that was probably just his imagination.

Kieran's tiger suddenly went still as Mallory twisted the ring on her finger, the diamond catching the lamplight.

"I haven't really celebrated the holidays since Eli died," she said softly. "Two years ago. It was so sudden - one day he was fine, the next..." She shrugged, but Kieran caught the slight tremor in her shoulders. "The holidays lost their shine after that."

His chest tightened. The wedding ring. How had he missed it? His tiger, usually so observant, had been too caught up in her scent and her presence, to notice this vital detail. He'd been practically hitting on a widow who was clearly still grieving.

"I'm so sorry," he said, fighting the urge to reach across the table and take her hand. "I had no idea. And here I am, asking you to pretend to be married to someone else." His tiger growled at his own insensitivity. "That was thoughtless of me."

"No, it's..." Mallory's fingers stilled on the ring. "It's actually nice to have something to do. The holidays are harder when you're alone."

The snow fell harder outside, and Kieran wondered if there was a connection between her emotions and the weather. He had noticed the storms intensifying whenever she seemed upset.

His tiger wanted to protect her, to chase away that sadness in her eyes, but he tamped down the urge. She wasn't ready, and he wouldn't be that guy - the one who tried to rush a widow into moving on.

Instead, he straightened in his chair, letting his natural charm surface. "Well then, Mrs. Striker - temporarily speaking - I'm making you a promise right now." He tapped the table for emphasis. "This is going to be the best holiday season you've ever had."

"You don't have to-"

"It's already decided." He flashed her his signature grin, the one that usually made

women swoon. "No take-backs. We're going to deck these halls until they shine brighter than Times Square. And you'll be sick of hot chocolate and Christmas carols by the time we're done."

A ghost of a smile touched her lips. "Is that a threat?"

"That's a guarantee." His tiger preened at drawing that small smile from her. "And I always keep my promises."

He soon walked Mallory back to her suite across the hall, his tiger hyper-aware of every small movement she made. The soft swish of her sweater against her leggings, the quiet pad of her feet on the plush carpet, even the gentle rhythm of her breathing - his heightened senses caught it all.

"Thank you for dinner," she said, stopping at her door.

His tiger wanted to pull her close, to shelter her from whatever storms raged inside her mind. Instead, he kept a respectful distance. "Thank you for being honest with me about Eli."

She twisted her ring again - a nervous habit he now recognized. The movement caught the hallway light, making the diamond sparkle.

"You know," he said, keeping his voice light, "I meant what I said about making these holidays special for you. No pressure, just... fun." His tiger purred contently at the tiny smile that tugged at her lips. "Maybe we could start small. Hot chocolate in the garden room tomorrow morning? The snow always makes it look magical."

"You don't have to entertain me."

"Who said anything about entertaining you?" He leaned against her doorframe,

crossing his arms. "Maybe I just want hot chocolate with my fake wife. For appearances, of course."

A soft laugh escaped her - the sound made his tiger want to howl with joy. "At what time?"

"Nine? Unless that's too early for the woman who was up reading until three AM last night."

Her eyes widened. "How did you-"

"I could smell the coffee through my door. Four cups, if I'm not mistaken." He tapped his nose.

"That's..." She shook her head, but her smile remained. "Slightly terrifying."

"Sweet dreams, Mallory." He straightened, fighting his tiger's urge to lean in closer. "Try to get some actual sleep tonight."

"Goodnight, Kieran."

As she slipped into her room, Kieran's tiger memorized the soft click of her door, and the lingering scent of her shampoo in the air. He'd make damn sure she had reasons to smile every day she was here, even if it meant putting his own growing attraction on hold.

His tiger didn't like that last part, but some things were worth waiting for.

9

MALLORY

Mallory watched as Kieran's face transformed from excitement to devastation as he opened the storage boxes containing his cherished Christmas decorations the following morning. Her heart clenched at the sight of the shattered glass ornaments scattered throughout the containers.

"These were my grandmother's." Kieran lifted a broken crystal angel, its wings snapped clean off. His jaw clenched and his forearm muscles flexed beneath his tanned skin as he gripped the storage container. "She gave them to me before she passed five years ago."

Charlotte picked through another box, her expression grim. "The star is missing entirely."

"That star's been on our tree for three years straight." Kieran's voice grew rough. "Ever since I opened this place."

Outside, the snow picked up intensity, whipping against the windows in harsh gusts. Mallory tried to steady her breathing, knowing her emotions were feeding the storm. But seeing Kieran's broad shoulders slump as he surveyed the destruction made her chest ache.

"Those bastards." Chase kicked an empty box. "This has Gregory written all over it too."

Amy held up a twisted string of antique glass beads with tears in her eyes. "Who would do something so cruel? These were beautiful, and one of a kind."

Kieran's hands clenched into fists. "I'm going to kill him."

"We need to focus on solutions," Charlotte said, ever practical. "Though I don't see how we can replace these in time for tonight's lighting ceremony. The roads are completely snowed in right now."

The wind howled louder. Mallory wrapped her arms around herself, trying to contain both her magic and her growing anger at the Simmons' malicious and heartless attack.

"Even if we could get to the stores, nothing could replace these." Kieran picked up a mangled ornament, his voice thick with emotion. "My mother painted this one herself. Each ornament had a story."

Mallory stepped closer, placing a tentative hand on his arm. His muscles were coiled tight beneath her touch. "I'm so sorry, Kieran."

He covered her hand with his own, and the simple gesture sent warmth spreading through her chest. The storm outside intensified further, the visibility dropping to near zero as her emotions swirled like the snow.

"The ceremony for the guests starts in three hours," Amy said quietly. "What are we going to do?"

Kieran straightened his shoulders, though Mallory could still see the pain in his eyes. "We'll figure something out. We have to."

Mallory stared down at the broken pieces of crystal and glass in the storage containers, her mind racing with possibilities. Years of writing about DIY projects

and creative upcycling suddenly clicked into place.

"Wait." She carefully picked up a handful of the shattered ornaments, the fragments catching the morning sunlight streaming through the lobby windows. "What if we could make something new from these? Something that honors the old while creating fresh memories?"

Kieran's blue eyes locked onto hers. "What do you mean?"

"We could use resin to create new ornaments, embedding these pieces inside. Mix in some fresh elements, maybe some pine needles and berries from the courtyard." Her hands moved as she spoke, already arranging pieces into a pattern. "The broken bits would catch the light even more beautifully than before."

"That's actually brilliant." Kieran moved closer, his presence warm at her side. "But do we have what we need to make them?"

Charlotte's eyes lit up. "The craft store down the street delivers even in snow. I'll make some calls."

Within an hour, they had spread supplies across three tables in the empty dining room. Mallory demonstrated the technique, showing them how to layer the fragments with the new elements.

"Like this?" Amy held up an ornament where she'd arranged broken pieces of a painted cardinal around fresh cranberries.

"Perfect." Mallory smiled, surprised by how natural it felt working with others. "The old and new complement each other."

Kieran worked beside her, his movements precise despite his large hands. He had

rolled up the sleeves of his henley, revealing corded forearms as he carefully arranged pieces of his mother's hand-painted ornament.

"This is actually pretty therapeutic," he said, glancing at her. "Though I'm still going to murder Gregory."

"Murder is so messy." Mallory's dry response drew a genuine laugh from him. "Besides, look what we're creating instead."

They worked for another hour, the conversation flowing easily. Charlotte shared stories about past Christmases at the inn. Amy sang Christmas carols under her breath. Even Chase got into it, though he complained about getting glitter all over himself.

For the star, they gathered the most meaningful pieces. Mallory guided them in creating a mosaic pattern that incorporated fragments from every broken heirloom.

"It's more beautiful than before," Kieran murmured, standing close enough that his arm brushed hers as they admired their work. "Thank you, Mallory."

The warmth in his voice made her heart skip, and outside, the snow began to fall in more gentle, peaceful flakes.

Mallory watched as Chase soon balanced precariously on the ladder, reaching to hang one of their handmade ornaments near the top of the towering Christmas tree. The resin caught the lobby's warm lighting, sending rainbow prisms dancing across the walls.

"A little to the left," Amy called up, directing him from below. "Perfect!"

Charlotte arranged the lower branches with practiced precision, weaving the

twinkling white lights between the newly created decorations. "These really are stunning, Mallory. The way you layered the old pieces with the fresh elements - it's like they're telling a story."

"The cranberries were definitely the right choice," Mallory said, adjusting a crystal-embedded ornament. "They add just the right pop of color."

Kieran emerged from his office, his auburn hair slightly disheveled as if he'd been running his hands through it. His eyes locked onto Mallory immediately, and a smile spread across his face. "Ready for the grand finale?"

He held up their mosaic star, the fragments of his grandmother's and mother's ornaments gleaming within its carefully crafted layers. Without waiting for an answer, he strode over and wrapped an arm around Mallory's waist, pulling her close against his solid frame.

"Care to do the honors together?" His voice rumbled low near her ear.

Mallory's breath caught at his proximity, but she managed a nod. Together they approached the ladder, and Kieran's strong hands steadied her as she climbed. At the top, she felt him press against her back as they positioned the star together.

The lobby filled with guests for the lighting ceremony, their excited chatter creating a festive buzz. Mallory spotted Daniel, the investor, near the front of the crowd.

"Three... two... one!" Charlotte called out.

The tree blazed to life, and collective gasps filled the room. The handcrafted ornaments sparkled like captured starlight, each one unique and somehow more magical than traditional decorations would have been.

"This is extraordinary," Daniel said, adjusting his glasses to peer closer at a nearby ornament. "The artistry involved - it's absolutely inspired."

Kieran's arm slipped around Mallory's waist again, drawing her against his side. His chest rumbled with satisfaction as he surveyed their handiwork. "My wife has quite the creative touch."

The praise brought heat to Mallory's cheeks, but she couldn't deny the surge of pride. The tree did look magical, especially with their star crowning it, catching and reflecting light in a thousand directions.

"You've really outdone yourself," Kieran murmured, his lips close to her ear. "Thank you for saving Christmas for me."

His genuine gratitude warmed something inside her that had been cold for far too long. Mallory leaned into his embrace, just a fraction, allowing herself to enjoy the moment of triumph and connection.

Suddenly, the warmth of Kieran's arm around her waist felt like a vice. Mallory's chest constricted as the memory slammed into her with brutal force - Eli's laughter as he tangled himself in Christmas lights, his dark eyes sparkling as he lifted her to place the star. The way he'd spun her around their tiny living room, both of them covered in glitter and pine needles.

Her throat closed up. The room spun. She couldn't breathe.

She wrenched herself from Kieran's grip and fled, barely registering the concerned voices calling after her. Her boots thudded against the hardwood as she sought refuge in the library, its leather-bound volumes and mahogany shelves offering familiar comfort. She curled into one of the oversized armchairs, drawing her knees to her chest as tears spilled down her cheeks.

Heavy footsteps soon approached, and Kieran's masculine scent - pine and earth - wrapped around her before his presence did. He knelt beside her chair, his broad shoulders blocking out the rest of the room.

"Talk to me." His voice was gentle but firm. No pity, just quiet strength.

"I'm sorry." Mallory swiped at her tears. "It's stupid. The tree just... reminded me of my first Christmas with Eli. We were so happy."

Kieran's large hand engulfed hers, his thumb stroking her knuckles. "Nothing about grief is stupid."

"We couldn't afford proper decorations that year." The words tumbled out between hitched breaths. "We made paper chains and strung popcorn. Eli kept eating more than he strung."

A ghost of a smile crossed her lips even as fresh tears fell. Outside, the snow began to swirl more forcefully against the windows.

"He sounds like he was a good man." Kieran's fingers tightened around hers.

"The best." Mallory's voice cracked. "And I miss him so much it physically hurts sometimes."

"I know." He shifted closer, his free hand coming up to brush a tear from her cheek. "And that's okay. You don't have to hide that from me."

The simple acceptance in his words broke something loose in her chest. Mallory leaned into his touch, letting the tears flow freely as Kieran stayed steady beside her, his presence an anchor in the storm of her grief.

When her breathing finally steadied, she whispered, "Thank you for coming after me."

"I always will." His blue eyes held hers, intense and sincere. "Whatever you need, whenever you need it. I'll always be here for you."

10

KIERAN

Kieran watched Mallory arrange marshmallows into perfect pyramids at the hot chocolate station the next afternoon. Her platinum hair caught the warm lobby lights, and his fingers itched to brush back the strand that had escaped her practical bun. Instead, he adjusted the candy cane centerpiece, positioning himself closer to her.

"You know, those marshmallows aren't going to stay that neat once the kids get here."

"Let me have my moment of order before chaos descends." A smile tugged at the corner of her mouth, and his chest swelled with satisfaction. Making Mallory smile had become his favorite game.

"Speaking of chaos..." He reached over and deliberately toppled one marshmallow. "Oops."

She swatted his hand away. "You're worse than the children."

"I prefer to think of myself as young at heart." He caught her hand before she could pull it back. The touch sent a spark through him, and he noticed her slight intake of breath. "Want to help me test the hot chocolate? Quality control is very important."

"Is that your way of saying you want first dibs?"

"Maybe." He grinned, already reaching for two mugs. "But sharing with my beautiful

wife makes it a legitimate business matter."

The word 'wife' made her tense slightly, but he pressed on, determined to keep things light. He filled their mugs with the rich chocolate mixture, adding a generous dollop of whipped cream to hers.

"Here's to quality control." He clinked his mug against hers.

Mallory took a sip, and her eyes widened. "This is amazing."

"You sound surprised. I'm wounded." He clutched his chest dramatically, and there it was - a real laugh, soft but genuine. The sound warmed him more than any hot chocolate could.

"The marshmallows really complete it," she said, picking one from her mug with her teeth. A dot of whipped cream landed on her nose.

Without thinking, Kieran reached out and wiped it away with his thumb. Their eyes met, and for a moment, the bustle of preparation around them faded away. Then someone dropped a box of games nearby, shattering the moment.

"I should finish setting up the game stations," Mallory said quickly, stepping back.

"I'll help." He wasn't ready to let her retreat completely. "Though I must warn you, I'm unbeatable at Christmas trivia."

"We'll see about that." That hint of a smile was back, and Kieran felt like he had won another small victory.

An hour later, Kieran stood at the front of the packed foyer, ready to welcome everyone to the caroling event, when the lights flickered and died. His tiger senses

picked up the collective intake of breath from the crowd, along with the acrid scent of Gregory's chaos magic lingering in the air.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he projected his voice across the room, letting a hint of his natural alpha authority seep through. "Nothing to worry about. Just a minor technical issue."

A child whimpered in the darkness. Kieran's eyes adjusted quickly, catching worried glances between parents.

"My dear guests," he started, but Mallory's clear voice cut through the darkness.

"Silent night, holy night..."

The simple melody floated through the air, and Kieran's breath caught. He hadn't expected her voice to be so pure yet so haunting. A moment later, an elderly woman joined in, then a young father holding his daughter. Soon, the entire foyer rang with impromptu harmony.

"Charlotte," Kieran whispered, touching his manager's elbow. "The LED candles from the dining room."

"Already on it," she murmured back. "Amy's gathering them now."

Kieran slipped through the crowd as they moved onto "Deck the Halls," their voices growing more confident. He caught Mallory's eye across the room. She gave him a slight nod, never missing a beat as she conducted the impromptu choir with subtle hand gestures.

The carolers were starting "O Come All Ye Faithful" when Kieran returned, his arms full of battery-operated candles. He distributed them quickly, the soft LED glow

creating pools of warm light throughout the room. The effect was magical – better than their original lighting plan.

"This is so romantic and inspiring," he heard one guest whisper to another. "Like something out of a movie."

Kieran made his way to Mallory's side, sliding an arm around her waist. She leaned into him slightly, still leading the group in song.

"You're brilliant, you know that?" he murmured in her ear between verses.

"Just quick thinking," she whispered back. "Though I suspect your rival's behind this?"

"Gregory won't know what hit him when I track down proof." His tiger stirred, his protective instincts rising. "But right now, I'd rather focus on how perfectly this turned out – thanks again to you."

The corners of her mouth quirked up. "Are you going to sing then, Mr. Striker, or just stand there looking pretty?"

"Both," he grinned, joining in as they started "Joy to the World," his deep baritone complementing her clear soprano.

Kieran soon carried another armload of LED candles into the dining room, his tiger senses easily navigating the dim space. The soft glow caught Mallory's pale face as she arranged the candles on each table. His inner beast purred at the sight.

"Let's set up Christmas trivia at this table." He placed his candles down, purposefully brushing against her arm. "Unless you're afraid of losing to the master?"

"Master?" Mallory's eyebrow arched. "That's quite a claim."

Charlotte chuckled as she distributed card decks at the next table. "Don't let him fool you, dear. His ego's bigger than his knowledge."

"Is that a challenge I hear?" Kieran pulled out a chair for Mallory. "Care to prove me wrong?"

"Since you asked so nicely." Mallory settled into the seat, a hint of mischief in her eyes.

The game started, and Kieran's competitive nature surged. He knew every answer about Santa's reindeer and Christmas movies, but Mallory matched him point for point. Her quick wit and sharp memory impressed him more with each round.

"Final question," he announced, leaning forward. "In Victorian England, what Christmas treat was considered good luck to eat on each of the twelve days of Christmas?"

"Mince pies," Mallory answered without hesitation. "And the superstition said you'd have twelve months of happiness."

"That's..." Kieran checked the card, his tiger bristling at being bested. "Correct. You win."

Mallory's excited laugh rang out, clear and genuine. The sound hit him like a physical force, making his chest tight. He'd gladly lose a hundred games to hear that laugh again.

"Don't pout," she teased, reaching across to pat his hand. "You're still the master of... something, I'm sure."

"I excel at being a gracious loser." He captured her hand before she could withdraw it. "And at knowing when I've met my match."

The candlelight caught her blush, and Kieran's tiger preened at the reaction. Around them, guests moved between tables, their enjoyment filling the room with warmth despite Gregory's attempted sabotage.

"Well played, both of you," Charlotte said, dropping more card sets on their table. "Now, how about helping me teach Uno to that family over there?"

"Ready to lose again?" Mallory stood, tugging Kieran up with their still-joined hands.

"With you?" He squeezed her fingers gently. "Always."

Kieran walked Mallory to their rooms later that night, his tiger prowling beneath his skin with satisfaction at how the evening had played out. The LED candles had created an ambiance no electrical lighting could match, and the spontaneous a cappella caroling had brought everyone together in a way his planned program never would have.

"You truly saved the night," he said, pausing between their doors. "That singing was so inspired."

"Me?" Mallory's eyes sparkled in the hallway light. "You're the one who kept everyone calm and turned it into an adventure instead of a disaster."

His inner beast preened at her praise. "We do make quite the team."

"We do." She twisted a strand of hair around her finger. "Though I still say I'm the brains of the operation."

"As long as I can be the brawn." He flexed playfully, drawing another of those rare laughs from her.

"Goodnight, Kieran." She slipped into her room, the door clicking shut behind her.

Kieran stood there longer than necessary, his enhanced hearing picking up her soft footsteps as she moved around her suite. Finally, he forced himself to enter his own room, though every instinct screamed to follow her.

He sprawled across his king-sized bed, not bothering with the lights. The ceiling fan spun lazy circles above him, but he couldn't focus on its movement. All he could see was Mallory's face illuminated by candlelight as she led the caroling, the way her eyes had lit up when she won at trivia, and how naturally she fit against him when he'd guided her through the crowd.

His tiger rumbled in agreement. She was perfect - sharp-witted enough to match him, strong enough to stand up to Gregory, yet carrying a gentleness that made him want to shelter her from the world. The way she handled both guests and staff, firm but fair, showed the natural leadership his mate should have.

Mate. The word echoed in his mind, and he groaned, pressing the heels of his hands against his eyes. He couldn't think of her that way. She was still grieving her husband and still raw from that loss. She didn't need him pursuing her, no matter how much his tiger insisted she belonged with them.

But damn if he wasn't falling for her anyway.

11

MALLORY

Mallory stood at the front desk sorting through guest requests when Kieran's deep laugh echoed through the lobby. The sound sent an unexpected warmth through her chest, and she caught herself smiling. Again.

"Earth to Mallory." Charlotte waved a hand in front of her face. "You were staring."

"I wasn't staring. I was... thinking about the Christmas Eve dance preparations."

"Mhmm." Charlotte's knowing look made Mallory's cheeks burn. "That's why your eyes haven't left our handsome innkeeper since he walked in?"

Mallory busied herself with the papers. "I don't know what you mean."

"You're allowed to like him, you know." Charlotte's voice softened. "Being alone isn't some kind of penance you have to serve."

Before Mallory could respond, Kieran strode over, his presence filling the space between them. "Ladies, what's the secret conversation about?"

"Nothing," Mallory said quickly.

"Really?" He leaned close, his breath warming her ear. "Because you're blushing."

Her heart skipped. When had that started happening? When had his teasing started affecting her this way?

"I'm going to check on the kitchen," Charlotte said, retreating with a smile.

"How about some lunch?" Kieran's hand found the small of her back, the touch sending tingles up her spine. "I got that soup you liked yesterday."

"You remembered that?"

"I remember everything about you." His blue eyes held hers, intense yet sincere. "Like how you scrunch your nose when you're annoyed, or how you tap your fingers when you're thinking."

The lobby suddenly felt too warm. "Kieran..."

"And how you're trying not to smile right now." His thumb traced circles on her back. "But failing miserably."

She was smiling, damn him. These past few days, he had been doing that more and more - making her forget why she had built her walls so high in the first place.

"Fine. Lunch. But only because I'm hungry."

"Of course." His grin was pure satisfaction. "Nothing to do whatsoever with my charming company."

As they walked to the dining room, Mallory realized with startling clarity that she was in trouble. Because pretending to be Kieran's wife wasn't feeling so much like pretending anymore. And that terrified her more than any storm she had ever created.

Later that evening, Mallory helped Amy sort through the stack of reservation cards when the inn's front door swung open, bringing in a gust of snow and the distinct scent of magical coffee. Nina Youngblood swept in, her constellation-speckled apron twinkling under her jacket even in the soft light. Two large boxes floated effortlessly beside her.

"Nina!" Mallory's face broke into a warm smile.

"There's my favorite storm witch." Nina guided the boxes down with a wave of her hand, purple sparks dancing from her fingertips. "I brought extra - something tells me you'll need it."

"You're a lifesaver." Mallory moved to hug her friend, breathing in the familiar scent of starlight and coffee that always clung to Nina's clothes. "I can't believe our entire shipment of hot chocolate disappeared this morning."

"Disappeared, or was helped to disappear?" Nina's eyes twinkled knowingly.

"I'm thinking the second one." Mallory lowered her voice. "Gregory Simmons has been-"

"What's this about Gregory?" Kieran's deep voice rumbled from behind them. He placed a possessive hand on Mallory's waist, drawing her closer. The heat of his palm seeped through her sweater, making her pulse quicken traitorously.

Nina's eyebrows shot up at the gesture, and Mallory felt her cheeks warm. "Nina, this is Kieran, my... husband." The word still felt foreign on her tongue. "Kieran, this is Nina, owner of the Cauldron & Cup located on the other side of town, and one of my oldest friends."

"Husband?" Nina's mouth formed a perfect O. "When did this-"

"Three months ago," Mallory cut in quickly. "We eloped. It was very private."

"I see." Nina's knowing look made Mallory's stomach flip. Of course Nina would see right through this charade - she was one of the few people who knew about Eli and about Mallory's self-imposed isolation.

"Have dinner with me tonight?" Mallory asked, partly to change the subject and partly because she genuinely missed her friend. "We have so much to catch up on."

"I'd love to." Nina's smile was warm.

Kieran's arm tightened around Mallory's waist. "I'll have the kitchen prepare something special for you both."

"That's not necessary," Mallory started, but Kieran's eyes locked with hers, intense and determined.

"Let me take care of my wife and her friend." His voice was soft but brooked no argument. He pressed a gentle kiss to her temple, and Mallory's breath hitched at the unexpected tenderness of it.

Nina watched this exchange with barely concealed amusement. "Well, this should be an interesting dinner conversation."

Mallory soon settled into the plush armchair in her suite, watching Nina inspect the room with appreciative eyes. The smell of roasted herbs and garlic wafted through the air as the room service attendant wheeled in their dinner - a spread that made Mallory's mouth water.

"Well, someone's certainly pulling out all the stops," Nina said as the attendant unveiled herb-crusting salmon, roasted vegetables, and what looked like chocolate

lava cake for dessert. "Your 'husband' has excellent taste."

Mallory's stomach fluttered at the word 'husband.' "He's... attentive."

"Mhmm." Nina's eyes sparkled with mischief as she poured them both wine. "So, tell me everything. Last I knew, you were holed up in your cliffside house writing about throw pillows and area rugs."

"I still am. Or was." Mallory took a long sip of wine. "The bridge collapsed in the big snowstorm last week."

"The bridge leading to your house? That was quite a storm." Nina's gaze turned knowing. "Your doing?"

"Not entirely, or at least not intentionally." Mallory pushed a piece of salmon around her plate. "I was... frustrated with the last-minute shoppers."

"And now you're here, married to the most eligible bachelor in town." Nina leaned forward. "Want to tell me the real story?"

Mallory sighed, setting down her fork. "It's temporary. The marriage thing, I mean. Kieran needed someone to pretend to be his wife to help the inn's image while an investor is here. I needed a place to stay. It's a business arrangement."

"Does this business arrangement involve him looking at you like you hung the moon?"

"He does not-" Mallory's cheeks warmed again. "He's just playing the part."

"Sweetheart." Nina reached across the table to squeeze her hand. "That man is not playing anything. But that's not what worries me. Are you okay with this? Pretending

to be someone's wife after..."

The question hung in the air, heavy with unspoken concern. Mallory stared down at her plate, her throat tight. Outside, snow began to fall hard against the windows.

Mallory drew a deep breath, the wine glass cool against her palm. "At first, I wasn't sure I could do this," she admitted, meeting Nina's understanding gaze. "Playing someone's wife after Eli..." Her voice caught, but she pressed on. "But Kieran's been different than I expected. He notices when I need space and respects my boundaries. Yesterday, he saw me getting overwhelmed by a crowd in the lobby and created this ridiculous diversion about a 'ghost' in the kitchen just to give me a moment to breathe."

Nina's purple sparks danced across her fingers as she smiled. "And?"

"And he's building something truly special here. You should see him with the guests, Nina. The way he remembers everyone's names and their stories. He turned this place into a home for people." Warmth spread through her at the memory of Kieran comforting a crying child yesterday, his strong hands gentle as he fixed the little girl's broken toy.

The thought of those same hands on her waist earlier sent an unexpected shiver down her spine. Mallory pushed the dangerous thought away, but it lingered like honey on her tongue.

"The Simmons, though." She wrinkled her nose. "They're trying to destroy all that with their fake smiles and sabotage."

Nina's expression darkened, purple energy crackling around her shoulders. "Watch yourself with those two, especially Vivian. Gregory's chaos magic is nasty, but Vivian?" She leaned forward, her voice low. "That woman's rune work once turned a

rival's entire house inside out - with the family still in it. They lived, but..."

"Noted." Mallory's storm magic stirred beneath her skin in response to Nina's warning. "I'll be careful."

"Will you?" Nina's knowing look cut straight through her defenses. "Because I see the way you look at him when you think no one's watching. The way your magic calms around him instead of churning like it usually does with others."

Heat crept up Mallory's neck. Was she that transparent? The realization that she had grown fond of Kieran - his laugh, his protective nature, the way his eyes softened when he looked at her - sent panic fluttering in her chest. This wasn't supposed to happen. She wasn't supposed to feel anything. No complications, remember?

"It's just temporary," she whispered, more to herself than Nina. But as she said it, her traitor heart skipped at the memory of Kieran's kiss on her temple earlier, so gentle it had nearly brought tears to her eyes.

12

KIERAN

Kieran found Mallory in the garden room the following morning. Her platinum hair gleamed in the sunlight as she arranged fresh flowers in a vase. His tiger stirred at the sight of her, and he pushed down the urge to wrap her in his arms. This fake marriage was becoming harder by the day.

"Morning, beautiful." He approached with two steaming cups of coffee. "Black, two sugars."

"You remembered." A small smile played on her lips as she accepted the cup.

"I remember every detail about you." The words slipped out. He cleared his throat. "Listen, I need a favor. Daniel wants to have lunch tomorrow. Would you join us?"

Mallory's fingers tightened around the coffee cup. "I don't do well in formal settings."

"You've been amazing with everything else." He stepped closer, catching the faint scent of rain that always seemed to surround her. "I'll be right there beside you. We can even practice some small talk tonight if you want."

"Practice small talk?" She arched an eyebrow. "That's not exactly reassuring."

"Come on, you handled the Simmons like a pro. Daniel's a teddy bear compared to them." He touched her elbow gently. "I wouldn't ask if it wasn't important."

"And here I thought you just enjoyed my sparkling personality." Her dry humor made him grin.

"That's just a bonus." He winked. "Seriously though, I can't thank you enough for everything you've done so far. This whole arrangement... you've made it easier than I ever expected."

Something flickered in her ice-blue eyes. "It's not entirely selfless. The suite is quite nice."

"Is that all I am to you? A luxury hotel provider?" He grabbed at his chest in mock hurt, delighting in her quiet laugh.

"And occasional entertainment." She set down her coffee cup. "Fine, I'll do lunch. But you owe me."

"Name your price, Mrs. Striker." The fake title still sent a thrill through him.

"I'll think of something." She gathered up her gardening tools. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have more flowers to arrange."

Kieran watched her go, his tiger restless inside him. This woman who'd stumbled into his life was becoming far more than just a convenient solution to his problems. And that thought terrified him because he didn't know what to do about it.

Later that afternoon, Kieran knocked on Mallory's suite door, blueprints tucked under his arm. His tiger paced restlessly, eager to be near her again. The door opened, and there she stood in a form-fitting sweater that made her look soft yet extremely sexy. His tiger more than approved.

"I need your professional opinion." He held up the blueprints. "Got some time?"

"Depends. Are you actually going to listen to my suggestions?" Her eyes sparkled with amusement.

"When have I not listened to you?" He stepped into her suite, catching her intoxicating scent. "Your DIY ornaments and star are still getting compliments."

They spread the blueprints across her coffee table. He watched as she studied them, her finger tracing potential changes. His tiger rumbled contently at having her full attention.

"The lobby needs more natural light." She circled an area. "And this wall? Perfect spot for a stone fireplace. It would add warmth, literally and aesthetically."

"Show me more." He leaned closer, not entirely focused on the blueprints.

"The dining room could use better flow." Her hands moved animatedly as she spoke. "See how this layout creates dead zones? But if we opened it up, added some booth seating along here..."

Kieran found himself mesmerized by her enthusiasm. The usual guard she kept up had fallen away, replaced by genuine excitement. "You really know your stuff."

"I've written enough articles about it." She sketched quick changes on the margins. "This could be really amazing, Kieran. The bones are already perfect, it just needs..."

"You?" The word slipped out before he could stop it.

She stilled, her pencil hovering over the paper. "I won't be here for the renovation."

"But you could be." His tiger pushed him to press further. "The inn could use a permanent design consultant."

"Kieran." Her voice carried a warning. "We agreed. After the holidays, we go our separate ways. No complications."

"Maybe I like complications." He grabbed her hand, his thumb brushing her knuckles. "Maybe I like the way you light up when you talk about design. The way you handle every crisis like it's nothing. The way you fit here."

She pulled her hand away, but not before he felt her slight tremor. "I can't."

His tiger growled in frustration, but he made himself step back. "Just think about it. The inn needs you." I need you, he added silently, watching as she turned back to the blueprints, her walls firmly back in place.

He watched as she bent over the blueprints for several more minutes, her platinum hair falling forward like a curtain. His tiger paced restlessly, wanting desperately to brush those silken strands back.

"So why an inn?" She suddenly glanced up at him through her lashes. "What made you choose this particular path?"

The change of subject was obvious, but he'd let her have this one. His tiger settled as he dropped onto her plush couch, stretching his long legs. "Would you believe me if I said it started with my grandmother's cookies?"

"Cookies?" A smile finally tugged at her lips.

"Best damn snickerdoodles in Saltwater Grove. Everyone knew it." He leaned back, memories washing over him. "She'd bake these huge batches, and people would just... show up. Our house became this gathering spot. Even strangers felt welcome."

"Sounds pretty special."

"It was. Mom was the same way – had this gift for making everyone feel like family." His chest tightened. "We lost Grandma five years ago. Mom just recently. But they showed me what community really means."

Mallory set down her pencil, giving him her full attention. His tiger preened under her gaze.

"The first year here was rough," he admitted, his voice low. "Banks weren't exactly lining up to fund a twenty-five-year-old's dream of turning this old building into something special. But I knew – knew in my bones – that people needed a place like this."

"And now?"

"Now?" He gestured around them. "Every Christmas card from guests, every wedding hosted here, every kid who comes running back year after year – it proves I was right." His tiger rumbled with pride. "Though I'll admit, there were nights I questioned everything. Especially when the roof leaked during our first major event."

"Oh no." Her eyes widened.

"Oh yes. Right onto the birthday cake." He chuckled. "But you know what? The guests helped clean up, someone ran to the store for a new cake, and it turned into this impromptu party in the kitchen while we waited."

"That's... actually amazing."

"That's The Hearthstone." He leaned forward, his voice dropping lower. "It's not just about providing beds and breakfast. It's about creating moments and memories. A place where people feel like they belong."

Mallory's fingers traced abstract patterns on the blueprints, her expression thoughtful. Kieran fought the urge to capture those delicate hands in his again. His tiger wanted to show her exactly how well she could belong here too, but he forced himself to stay put. She obviously wasn't ready for that. Not yet.

Mallory shifted on the couch, her fingers still tracing the blueprints. "You know, I have to admit something."

Kieran's tiger perked up at the softness in her voice. "What's that?"

"When I was stuck in that storm, I passed by the Lux Grove before ultimately choosing The Hearthstone." She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "Something about it just... called to me. It felt like coming home."

His heart thundered in his chest. His tiger purred at her words. "Yeah?"

"What you've built here in five years – it's incredible, Kieran." Her ice-blue eyes met his, sincere and warm. "The way you've created this sanctuary for people, how you've poured your heart into every detail. It really shows."

Kieran fought the urge to pull her into his arms. His tiger demanded he claim her right then and there. But he held back, knowing she wasn't ready for something like that.

"That means more than you know." He leaned in closer to her, unable to help himself. "Especially coming from you."

"From me?" She blinked, genuine surprise crossing her features. "I'm just your temporary fake wife."

"You're not 'just' anything, Mallory." His voice dropped lower, rougher. "You've

become essential to this place. To me."

A blush crept across her cheeks, and his tiger preened at the sight. She opened her mouth to respond, but he pressed on, needing her to understand.

"The way you handle things, how you've connected with the staff, and your vision for making this place even better." He gestured to the blueprints between them. "You belong here."

"Kieran..."

"I know you're not ready to hear it." He caught her hand in his, his thumb stroking her palm. "But I'm not giving up on convincing you to stay. Not when you fit so perfectly here."

The way she looked at him then, vulnerable and yearning, made his tiger roar with satisfaction. Maybe, just maybe, she wasn't as determined to leave as she claimed. And Kieran would spend every day until then proving to her that she had found more than just a temporary home at The Hearthstone.

13

MALLORY

Mallory smoothed down the navy silk dress that she borrowed from Amy as she sat in The Hearthstone's finest dining room. Crystal chandeliers cast warm light across the white tablecloths while a fire crackled in the stone hearth. The investor, Daniel Sterling, dabbed his mouth with a napkin.

"So tell me," Daniel said, swirling his wine glass, "how did you two meet? I must admit I was surprised to hear Kieran had finally settled down."

Kieran's arm slid around her shoulders, pulling her close. The heat of him seeped through her dress. "We met at the Rothschild Gallery downtown," he said, his voice carrying that playful tone she'd grown familiar with. "Mallory was critiquing the awful modernist paintings."

"They were hideous," Mallory said, falling into their practiced story. "All squares and circles with no soul."

"I overheard her tearing apart this piece that cost more than my car," Kieran continued, his thumb tracing her shoulder. "And I knew I had to meet the woman brave enough to speak that truth in a room full of art snobs."

Daniel's eyebrows rose. "Love at first sight then?"

"More like love at first argument," Mallory said, earning a genuine laugh from Kieran

that made her stomach flutter. "He tried to defend that monstrosity."

"Only to keep the conversation going," Kieran admitted, pressing a kiss to her cheek. The casual affection sent warmth flooding through her body.

"How romantic," Daniel said, though his tone suggested he found it anything but. "And now you've postponed Paris to help with the inn?"

"Family comes first," Mallory said, laying her hand over Kieran's where it rested on the table. His fingers immediately interlaced with hers, strong and steady. "Besides, who could resist spending Christmas here? The Hearthstone feels magical this time of year."

She meant it too, which surprised her. The inn had worked its way under her skin, becoming more than just a temporary shelter. Or maybe it wasn't just the inn.

"Indeed," Daniel said, his gaze calculating as it moved between them. "Though I imagine running an inn with your new bride isn't quite the honeymoon you imagined, Kieran?"

"On the contrary," Kieran's voice deepened, becoming possessive. "Having my wife by my side while building something meaningful together? That's better than any honeymoon."

The conviction in his voice made Mallory's heart skip. For a moment, she could almost believe this wasn't pretend.

Mallory watched as Daniel's expression softened, his weathered face creasing with joy as he started to describe his forty-year marriage. The investor's hands moved animatedly while he spoke about surprising his wife with a trip to Venice for their anniversary.

"Nothing quite like sharing life's adventures with the one you love," Daniel said, dabbing his mouth again with his napkin. "What about you two? You must have some wonderful moments together, being newlyweds and all."

Kieran's hand tightened almost imperceptibly on hers. Through their joined fingers, she felt the slight tension in his muscles. His usual smooth charm faltered for just a heartbeat.

"Well," he started, his thumb gently brushing her knuckles. "There are so many to choose from..."

Mallory's heart raced as she watched him grasp for details. The pause stretched a fraction too long. Daniel's eyebrows lifted slightly, interest sharpening in his gaze.

The scent of roasted chicken and cranberry sauce wafted from their plates, mingling with the pine and cinnamon that perfumed the dining room. Outside, snow continued to fall in thick flakes, coating the window panes in delicate patterns. The fire seemed to crackle louder in the hearth near their table.

Kieran shifted in his seat, his broad shoulders straightening as he prepared to speak. His auburn hair caught the warm light from the chandeliers, and Mallory found herself mesmerized by the way it highlighted the strong line of his jaw. Even in this moment of uncertainty, he radiated confidence and strength.

"The thing about Mallory is," he began, his deep voice carrying that hint of possessiveness that made her pulse quicken, "she constantly surprises me. Like when we..."

Daniel leaned forward, clearly invested in hearing their story. The crystal glasses clinked as a server topped off their wine. Mallory felt the weight of the moment pressing down, knowing their entire charade could unravel with one wrong word

here.

Mallory squeezed Kieran's hand, pushing down the ache in her chest as she suddenly launched into the story. "Actually, one of my favorite memories is from just after we got engaged," she said, her voice steady despite the storm of emotions inside her. "Kieran insisted on cooking me dinner - said he wanted to prove he could take care of me."

The memory of Eli's proud grin as he'd presented his attempt at duck confit flashed through her mind. She forced herself to keep smiling, though her heart felt like it was being squeezed in a vice.

"I came home to find the kitchen looking like a war zone," she continued, watching Daniel lean in with interest. "Flour everywhere, pots and pans scattered across every surface, and this gorgeous man standing in the middle of it all with sauce splattered across his cheek."

Kieran played along perfectly, running his free hand through his hair in mock embarrassment. "In my defense, French cuisine is harder than it looks."

On the table, his other hand squeezed hers gently, as if he sensed the tremor in her voice that no one else would notice. The warmth of his touch anchored her, keeping the threatening tears at bay.

"The duck was completely burnt on the outside and raw in the middle," Mallory said, forcing a laugh that sounded natural enough. "But he'd gone to so much trouble, trying to recreate this recipe his mother used to make."

"So, what did you do?" Daniel asked, completely invested in the story.

"We ordered pizza," Mallory said, the words catching slightly in her throat as she

remembered how Eli had kissed away her giggles that night. "And spent the evening slow dancing in the kitchen while he promised to stick to grilling from then on."

"Some promises are worth keeping," Kieran added smoothly, his thumb tracing soothing circles on her palm. The gentle motion helped steady her racing pulse.

Daniel raised his glass. "To kitchen disasters and the wives who forgive them."

As they clinked glasses, Mallory felt Kieran's concerned gaze on her face. She kept her smile firmly in place, even as her chest constricted with the effort of not letting the grief show. The memory of Eli's laughter echoed in her mind, mixing with the sound of Kieran's voice beside her, creating a discordant melody that threatened to break her carefully maintained composure.

Mallory's heels clicked against the polished floors as she and Kieran finally left the dining room. Her shoulders relaxed slightly now that the pressure of maintaining their charade for Daniel was over. The scent of Kieran's earthy cologne lingered as he walked close beside her, his hand resting protectively at the small of her back.

"That went well, I think-" she started, but a sharp voice cut through the air.

"Kieran Striker, you absolute bastard!"

A woman with perfectly styled dark hair and designer clothes stormed toward them, her face twisted with fury. Mallory felt Kieran tense beside her.

"Tina," he said, his voice dropping to that low, controlled tone she had noticed he used when dealing with difficult situations. "This isn't the time or place."

"Oh, I'm sorry, am I interrupting something with your latest conquest?" Tina's gaze raked over Mallory dismissively. "What's this I hear about you being married? We

were together just a year ago!"

Mallory's stomach dropped. Through the dining room's open door, she could still see Daniel finishing his wine. If he heard any of this...

"Tina, please lower your voice," Kieran stepped forward, using his impressive height to try and shield Mallory from his ex's venom. "We can discuss this privately in my office."

"Discuss what? How you apparently got married without telling anyone? How you're parading around with this-" Tina gestured at Mallory, "-this nobody?"

Thunder rumbled outside, matching the storm building in Mallory's chest. She forced herself to take deep breaths, knowing her magic could spiral out of control if she let her emotions take over right now.

"That's enough," Kieran growled, his shoulders broadening as he took another step toward Tina.

Mallory touched his arm. "Kieran, go check on the dining room. I'll handle this."

He turned to her, his blue eyes fierce with protective instinct. "Mallory-"

"Trust me," she said softly, meeting his gaze steadily. After a moment, he nodded, though she could see how much it cost him to walk away.

Mallory turned back to face Tina, who looked ready to continue her tirade. Behind them, she heard Daniel's chair scrape against the floor. Whatever happened next would determine whether their careful performance had been for nothing.

Mallory suddenly gripped Tina's elbow. Her heels clicked against the marble floor as

she steered the protesting woman toward the inn's front entrance. Thunder rumbled louder outside, matching the storm of emotions inside her. The silk of her borrowed dress whispered against her legs with each determined step.

"Let go of me! You have no right-" Tina's voice pitched high enough to make nearby guests turn their heads.

"Actually, I do." Mallory's tone remained level as she pushed open the heavy oak door. "As Kieran's wife and co-owner of this establishment, I have every right to escort disruptive guests out."

The icy December air hit them both as they reached the covered entrance. Snow swirled beyond the overhang, creating white curtains that danced in the wind. Mallory released Tina's arm and stepped back, crossing her arms.

"Look," Mallory softened her voice. "I understand you're hurting. Break-ups are never easy, and finding out an ex has moved on can feel like salt in the wound."

Tina's perfectly lined eyes widened, clearly not expecting sympathy.

"But this bitterness?" Mallory continued. "It's not hurting Kieran - it's only poisoning you. Let it go and move forward."

"I..." Tina's shoulders slumped slightly. "You don't understand-"

Movement beyond the snow caught Mallory's eye. Gregory stood near his black Mercedes, his signature false smile firmly in place as he watched the scene unfold. The pieces clicked into place - Tina's sudden appearance during the investor meeting couldn't be a coincidence.

"Excuse me," Mallory said, stepping past a stunned Tina and into the swirling snow.

Her bare arms prickled with cold, but anger kept her warm as she marched toward Gregory. Her designer heels sank into the fresh powder with each step.

"Mr. Simmons," she called out, her voice carrying over the wind. "I see subtlety isn't your strong suit."

Gregory's smile faltered. "Mrs. Striker, you'll catch a cold out here without a coat."

"And you'll catch worse if you don't back off," Mallory stopped inches from him, tilting her chin up. "This petty feud? It ends now. The next time you try to sabotage my husband's business, I won't be so pleasant about it."

Thunder cracked loudly overhead, emphasizing her words. Gregory took an involuntary step back, his perfectly greased hair dampening in the snow.

"Are we clear?" Mallory asked, her light blue eyes boring into his.

"Crystal," Gregory muttered, his facade cracking as he hurried into his car where Tina already waited.

14

KIERAN

Kieran balanced the tray of steaming beef stew and fresh-baked bread as he knocked on Mallory's door. He had noticed her ordering it twice this week - clearly a comfort food favorite. After the emotional roller coaster of reliving memories during lunch and then dealing with Tina, she deserved something warm and comforting.

"Come in," Mallory called from inside.

He pushed the door open with his shoulder, finding her curled up in an armchair by the window. Snow still fell outside, coating everything in white. The suite's warm lighting cast a gentle glow across her face, softening the tired lines around her eyes.

"Thought you might be hungry after everything today." He set the tray on the coffee table. "And I wanted to thank you for handling Tina. That could have gone south fast if the investor had heard."

"It's fine." Mallory waved off his thanks, but her eyes lit up when she saw the stew. "Though you might want to know I saw Gregory lurking outside right after. He definitely sent her here on purpose."

Kieran's jaw clenched. The tiger in him wanted to march down the street and show Gregory exactly what happened when you messed with what was his. But he made himself take a calming breath. "That snake is getting bolder. First the decorations, then the power, now this."

"Will you join me?" Mallory gestured to the chair across from her. "There's plenty here for two."

He settled into the plush armchair, watching as she took her first bite of stew. The small sound of contentment she made sent a wave of satisfaction through him.

"How are you holding up?" he asked softly. "That memory you shared at lunch seemed... personal."

Pain flickered across her face before she could hide it. "I'm okay. Just... wasn't expecting to have to dig up old memories today."

Kieran leaned forward in his chair, his tiger instincts making him hyper-aware of Mallory's every movement as she stirred her stew. "I'm sorry you had to use your memories with Eli like that. It wasn't fair to ask you to pretend they were about me."

Mallory's spoon clinked against the bowl as she set it down. "You didn't ask. I volunteered."

"Still. Could you tell me about him?" The request slipped out. His tiger growled at the thought of another man, but he pushed that possessive instinct down. "How did you meet?"

A small smile touched her lips, making something in his chest tighten. "I was at this tiny bookstore downtown. He reached for the same book I did - some pretentious poetry collection I can't even remember now."

"Let me guess - he let you have it?"

"Actually, I grabbed it first and told him to find his own copy." Her laugh was soft but genuine. "He asked me to coffee after that."

Kieran found himself grinning despite the jealousy simmering beneath his skin. "Smooth move."

"It started pouring during our date. Absolutely drenching everyone. But Eli just..." She traced patterns in the condensation on her water glass. "He didn't run for cover like everyone else. He just stood there in the rain with me, smiling like it was the most natural thing in the world."

The longing in her voice made Kieran's chest ache. He wanted to reach across the space between them, grab her hand, and chase away that sadness in her eyes. But he kept still, letting her share her story.

"He understood me in a way no one else ever had," she continued. "Never pushed me to be more social or different than I was. Just... accepted me." She looked up at Kieran. "Do you know how rare that is?"

Kieran did know. He had dated enough women to recognize how special that kind of connection was and how hard it was to find. The tiger in him recognized it too and was increasingly interested in forming that same kind of bond with the woman sitting across from him.

He shifted in his chair. "I am jealous of that," he admitted, his voice rougher than intended. "That kind of understanding. That acceptance."

He twisted his fingers in his lap, trying to find the right words. "I spent years dating socialites and party girls. Always chasing the next thrill, the next conquest. My mother used to tell me I was running from something, but I never listened."

Mallory's blue eyes met his, steady and nonjudgmental. It made something in his chest loosen.

"When Mom died last year, it hit me hard. Really hard." His fingers tightened on the armrest, his claws threatening to emerge. "She was the only one who ever called me on my bullshit, you know? Made me face who I really was versus who I was pretending to be."

The snow fell harder outside, creating a cocoon of white around the window. His tiger paced, wanting to bare everything to this woman who listened so intently.

"I took some time after that. Stopped dating completely. Started really looking at what I wanted." He leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. "I realized I needed someone who could match me. Not just keep up with me at parties or look good on my arm, but really match me. Someone strong where I'm weak. Someone who could ground me when I get too caught up in my own head."

His voice dropped lower, more intimate. "Someone who could see past the charming act and call me out when I need it. Like you've been doing this past week."

The admission hung in the air between them, heavy with implications he hadn't meant to voice. His tiger let out a low rumble of satisfaction at finally speaking the truth, even as his human side worried he had said too much.

Mallory's fingers traced the rim of her water glass. "You're a good person, Kieran. With a good heart." Her voice was soft but firm. "You'll find your match someday. You deserve to."

Kieran's tiger rumbled in his chest, wanting to tell her she was wrong. He had already found his match. She was sitting right across from him, her platinum hair catching the warm light of the suite, and those storm-blue eyes seeing straight through his carefully constructed walls. She was everything he wanted - strength wrapped in vulnerability, sharp wit tempered with kindness, and a beauty that went far deeper than her striking features.

But the lingering sadness in her expression when she spoke about Eli told him everything he needed to know. She wasn't ready to hear that. Maybe wouldn't be for a long time. His tiger growled in frustration.

"Thank you," he managed instead, his voice rough. The urge to pull her into his arms and show her exactly how good they could be together was almost overwhelming. His tiger prowled restlessly beneath his skin, demanding action.

But Kieran had learned patience this past year. Had learned that the best things were worth waiting for. And Mallory? She was definitely worth waiting for.

He watched as she took another bite of stew, savoring the way her expression softened with simple pleasure. Such a small thing, but it made his protective instincts surge. He wanted to feed her, care for her, and chase away that loneliness that clung to her like a shadow.

"The stew is getting cold," she said, nodding to his untouched bowl.

Kieran picked up his spoon, grateful for the distraction. "Can't let that happen. Charlotte would never forgive me for wasting good food."

Her quiet laugh eased some of the tension in his shoulders. For now, this would have to be enough - sharing a meal, trading stories, and building trust. His tiger could wait as long as it took for her to realize what it already knew - they were absolutely perfect for each other.

15

MALLORY

Two weeks had passed in a blur and Mallory found herself falling into an easy rhythm at The Hearthstone. Each morning brought new challenges, but somehow, they felt less daunting with Kieran by her side. The way he commanded attention when he entered a room, the confident set of his shoulders as he dealt with difficult guests - it all spoke to a natural leadership she couldn't help but admire.

"Mrs. Striker!" a guest called out as Mallory passed through the lobby. The title still made her heart skip. "The fireplace in the library isn't working."

"I'll take care of it," Kieran's deep voice came from behind her, his hand settling on her back. The warmth of his gentle touch seeped through her cream sweater. "Why don't you handle the cookie decorating station, sweetheart?"

The endearment rolled off his tongue so naturally now. Mallory tried not to think about how right it felt, or how his blue eyes sparkled when he looked at her.

"Already on it," she said, ducking away from his touch. "Try not to burn the place down while fixing that fireplace."

"Your faith in me is overwhelming." His laugh followed her down the hallway.

The days seemed to merge in a whirlwind of holiday activities. Mallory taught children how to make paper snowflakes, helped elderly couples find their rooms, and

mediated disputes between stressed-out families. All while Kieran prowled the inn like the protective owner he was, fixing problems before they could escalate.

"You're a natural at this," he told her one evening as they shared hot chocolate in the kitchen after hours. "Running an inn. Being around people."

"I'm just good at pretending," she replied, focusing on the marshmallows melting in her mug.

"No." His fingers caught her chin, lifting her face to meet his gaze. "You're good at caring. At seeing what needs to be done and doing it. At calling me out when I'm being stubborn."

Mallory pulled away, her heart thundering. "Someone has to keep your ego in check."

"And you do it so well." His voice held a hint of something deeper, something that made her skin tingle.

She busied herself with cleaning up their mugs, trying to ignore how perfectly they balanced each other. How he seemed to know exactly when to step in and when to let her handle things. How his strength complemented her practicality.

But those were dangerous thoughts. Thoughts that led to places she wasn't ready to go, no matter how right they felt.

Mallory watched intently as Kieran paced his office the next afternoon, his shoulders tense with barely contained fury. Another "accident" had occurred - this time some trees outside the front entrance had mysteriously caught fire. Thankfully, they'd contained it quickly, but the damage to the trees and Kieran's patience was evident.

"I'm going to tear that smirking bastard apart," Kieran growled, his blue eyes flashing

dangerously.

"And give him exactly what he wants?" Mallory raised an eyebrow. "The minute you lose control, Gregory wins."

"He's already winning!" Kieran slammed his hand on his desk, making the coffee cups rattle. "Every day it's something new. The fire, the burst pipes, the missing deliveries..."

"We've handled everything he's thrown at us," Mallory reminded him, keeping her voice steady despite the storm brewing inside her. Her magic stirred restlessly, responding to her rising emotions. "The guests love how we've adapted. Remember how they praised the handmade ornaments?"

"That's not the point," he rumbled. "He's trying to prove I can't protect what's mine."

The possessive tone in his voice sent an unexpected shiver down her spine. "Then prove him wrong by staying calm and collected. Show him he can't rattle you."

"That's easy for you to say. You're always so composed." He stopped pacing to look at her. "How do you do it?"

"Years of practice and discipline," she said dryly. "Besides, getting angry is exactly what Gregory wants. He's trying to make you look unstable in front of the guests and investors."

Kieran's jaw clenched. "I know. But watching him strut around with that fake smile while he systematically tries to destroy everything I've built..." He trailed off, his hands curling into fists.

Mallory stood and approached him, placing a gentle hand on his arm. "We'll figure

something out. Something better than property destruction and assault charges."

He covered her hand with his, the warmth of his tender touch spreading through her.

"We?"

"Well, I am your wife, aren't I?" She tried to keep her tone light, ignoring how natural the words felt now.

His expression softened as he looked at her, and for a moment, Mallory forgot how to breathe.

A few hours later, Mallory sat in the kitchen, surrounded by the warm chatter of Charlotte and Amy as they shared coffee and pastries. The simple act of belonging somewhere hit her unexpectedly, warming her from the inside out.

"I swear, if Mrs. Chen asks for another towel change today, I might scream," Amy said, dropping onto the stool beside Mallory.

Charlotte patted Amy's shoulder. "At least she tips well. Unlike the Robertsons in 204."

"The ones who demanded their entire room be redecorated?" Mallory sipped her tea, hiding her smile. "I handled that this morning. Moved some furniture around, added a few throws. They're happy now."

"You're a miracle worker," Charlotte declared. "This place runs so much smoother with you here."

The praise made Mallory's chest tighten. She had forgotten how nice it felt to be needed, to be part of something bigger than herself.

Amy leaned forward conspiratorially. "Did you see how Kieran practically growled at that contractor who was ogling you yesterday?"

Heat crept into Mallory's face. "He was just being protective of the inn's reputation."

"Oh honey." Charlotte's knowing look made Mallory squirm. "That man stares at you like you truly hung the moon. Fake marriage or not."

"He's just a good actor," Mallory protested, though her heart fluttered traitorously.

"Actor nothing." Amy snorted. "I saw him nearly take Chase's head off when he made that comment about your dress at breakfast."

"That was just-" Mallory's defense was cut short as Kieran himself appeared in the doorway, filling it with his broad shoulders.

"Ladies." His deep voice carried authority, but his eyes softened when they landed on Mallory. "Mind if I steal my wife for a moment?"

The way he said 'wife' sent shivers through her. Charlotte and Amy exchanged meaningful looks that Mallory pointedly ignored as she stood.

"We'll finish this conversation later," Charlotte called after them, making Mallory's cheeks burn.

As she followed Kieran down the hallway, Mallory realized with clarity that she had found more than just a temporary arrangement here. She had found people who actually cared about her and wanted her around. The thought should have frightened her and should have sent her running back to her solitary existence. Instead, this place somehow felt like her home now.

Mallory turned the corner and followed Kieran to the dining room where the Andersons, a lovely elderly couple celebrating their 45th anniversary, waited for them. The soft glow from the chandelier cast warm shadows across the oak table, making the holiday decorations shimmer.

"Here's my beautiful wife," Kieran announced, pulling out her chair. His hand brushed her shoulder as she sat, sending tingles down her spine. "The Andersons were just telling me about their first Christmas together."

"Oh, it was a disaster," Mrs. Anderson chuckled. "The turkey caught fire, and Tom here tried to put it out with egg nog."

"In my defense, the fire extinguisher was empty," Mr. Anderson protested, his eyes twinkling.

Mallory felt Kieran's knee press against hers under the table, a silent signal of shared amusement. "How did you salvage the evening?"

"We ordered Chinese food and ate it on the floor of our tiny apartment," Mrs. Anderson said. "Best Christmas ever."

"What about you two?" Mr. Anderson asked. "Any holiday disasters yet?"

Kieran's hand found hers on the table. "Well, several weeks ago, my lovely wife here saved Christmas when our decorations were ruined."

"He's exaggerating," Mallory demurred, though warmth bloomed in her chest at his praise.

"Not at all." Kieran's eyes locked with hers, filled with genuine admiration. "She turned resin and broken glass into magic. My wife's quite the creative genius."

"You helped," she reminded him, surprising herself with how natural it felt to lean into his touch now.

"Only because you ordered me around so effectively." His grin turned playful. "She's quite bossy when she wants to be."

"Well, someone has to keep you in line," Mallory shot back, making the Andersons laugh.

"That's what makes a good marriage," Mrs. Anderson nodded approvingly. "Finding someone who complements and challenges you."

Mallory caught herself thinking how right that felt - how Kieran's strength balanced her caution, how his playfulness drew out her hidden smile. How perfectly their hands fit together, still linked on the table.

"More wine?" Kieran offered, his voice a low rumble that sent pleasant shivers through her.

"Always," Mallory answered, letting herself enjoy the way his eyes crinkled when he smiled at her.

For just a moment, she could pretend this was real - that she deserved this kind of happiness again. That the storm inside her could be calmed by his steady presence.

The rest of dinner passed in a blur of laughter and shared glances, each moment feeling more natural than the last. When had pretending with him become so effortless? When had Kieran's touch started feeling like everything she's been missing?

Mallory lay in her plush suite bed that night, staring at the intricate crown molding

while snow drifted past her window. The mattress cradled her like a cloud, but sleep remained elusive. Her thoughts kept drifting to Kieran - his infectious laugh, the way his auburn hair shone in the firelight, and how his strong hands steadied her when she stumbled this morning.

"You're being completely ridiculous," she whispered to herself, rolling onto her side. But the empty space beside her only emphasized what her heart already knew.

She had fallen for him. Hard.

The realization sent a jolt of electricity through her body, making the wind outside howl. Mallory forced herself to take deep breaths, trying to calm the storm that threatened to build with her rising emotions.

"One week," she reminded herself. "The bridge will be fixed in one week, and this fairy tale ends."

But the thought of leaving caused her chest to suddenly ache. The Hearthstone had become more than just a temporary shelter. The staff truly felt like family with Charlotte's motherly wisdom and Amy's sweet enthusiasm.

And Kieran... God, Kieran. The way he commanded everyone's attention without trying, how his presence filled every room he entered. How he could switch from playful banter to fierce protectiveness in a heartbeat. The gentle way he touched her, like she was precious but not breakable.

"Stop it," Mallory scolded herself, burying her face in the pillow. It still held traces of his cologne from when he'd sat there earlier, going over the week's events.

Lightning flashed outside, illuminating her room. Her magic reacted to her inner turmoil, making the air crackle with electricity. This was exactly why she couldn't let

herself fall deeper. Her powers were too dangerous and too unpredictable. She lost Eli - she couldn't bear to lose anyone else.

"I won't risk hurting Kieran," she whispered into the darkness. "I won't risk destroying everything he's built here."

But even as she made that promise, tears slipped down her cheeks. The thought of returning to her empty house, of never seeing Kieran's bright smile or feeling his steady presence beside her - it hurt more than she had expected.

Sleep finally came, but her dreams were filled with blue eyes and the echo of a laugh that made her feel like she was coming home to where she belonged.

16

KIERAN

The crash outside made the lobby windows rattle. Kieran's head snapped up from where he had been reviewing the daily itinerary with Mallory at the front desk. Through the glass windows, he saw sparks dancing across fallen power lines.

"Everyone stay inside!" He vaulted over the desk, pressing a hand to Mallory's shoulder as she started to follow him. "Stay here."

The bitter December wind hit him as he burst through the front door. A massive utility pole lay sprawled across the parking lot, its wires still crackling with live current. If it had fallen just a few feet to the left, it would have crushed Mrs. Chen's minivan - with her kids still inside.

His tiger instincts bristled at the near miss. This wasn't just petty sabotage anymore. This was getting dangerous.

"Oh dear, what an unfortunate accident." Gregory's smooth voice drifted from down the sidewalk. The chaos witch stood there in his expensive wool jacket, not a hair out of place despite the wind. "I do hope your insurance covers Acts of God."

"Cut the crap, Gregory." Kieran's voice came out in a growl. "You could have killed someone."

"Such accusations." Gregory pressed a hand to his chest in mock offense. "I'm merely

a concerned neighbor checking on the commotion."

The front door swung open, and Mallory stepped out despite his command for her to stay put. "We should call Sheriff Blackmane."

"No." Kieran shook his head. "I've got this handled. Please go back inside."

"Kieran." Her voice held an edge of frustration. "This isn't just about broken pipes anymore. Someone could have died."

He turned to face her, catching the determined set of her jaw and the calculating look in her eyes. She was planning something - he could practically see the wheels turning behind those ice-blue eyes.

"What are you thinking? Other than calling the authorities." he said softly.

She glanced between him and Gregory, then back at the downed power line. That clever little smirk he had grown to adore tugged at her lips, but uncertainty flickered in her expression.

"I might have an idea," she said carefully. "But I'm not sure you're ready to hear it."

"Try me." He stepped closer, blocking Gregory's view of her face.

She opened her mouth to respond, but hesitated for a moment, casting another wary look at their unwanted audience. "Let's go back inside and call the utility company first. Then, meet me in my suite," she said, low enough so only he could hear.

Kieran soon ushered Mrs. Chen and her family back inside, his protective instincts on high alert. After making the necessary call to the utility company, he paced the lobby, ensuring guests stayed clear of the windows and stayed inside until the crew arrived

to handle the downed line.

"Please remain indoors and in the common areas away from the front of the building," he announced, his tone holding that natural authority that came with being both an alpha and an owner. "We'll have this sorted shortly."

Once the utility workers had the scene secured, he made his way to Mallory's suite. His knuckles had barely grazed the door when she called out.

"Come in."

She stood by the window, wringing her hands. Her familiar scent of rain and ozone clung to her - a smell he had noticed since day one but had never quite placed until now.

"So," he said, closing the door behind him. "What's this brilliant idea of yours?"

"I need to tell you something first." Mallory turned to face him, those ice-blue eyes filled with apprehension. "I'm a storm witch."

The corner of his mouth lifted. "I had a feeling you might be. The weather's been matching your moods a little too well since you arrived."

"So you knew?" Her eyes widened.

"I suspected. The day you handled those arguing guests? Thunder rolled right as you approached them." He stepped closer, drawn to her nervous energy. "It's pretty impressive, actually."

"Well, I know some protection spells," she said quietly. "Strong ones. But my magic... it can be overwhelming. Dangerous even."

"Hey." He grabbed her fidgeting hands in his. "I trust you. And I've seen how capable you are. Whatever power you've got, I know you can handle it."

Relief flooded her features. "You're not... worried?"

"Worried?" He laughed. "Mallory, you're magnificent. Having that kind of power and still choosing to help and protect people? That makes you even more amazing in my book."

A smile formed on her lips. "So you think I should try the protection spells?"

"Absolutely." He squeezed her hands. "Show Gregory what happens when he messes with The Hearthstone's power couple."

"Fake power couple," she corrected, but her smile grew wider.

"Right." Kieran ignored the way his heart skipped at her smile. "Let's see what you can do."

Kieran led Mallory through the back door of The Hearthstone, his tiger senses on high alert for any sign of Gregory or his wife. The winter air nipped at his exposed skin, but his focus remained on Mallory as she surveyed the building's perimeter.

Her platinum hair whipped around her face in the strengthening wind. The air crackled with electricity, making his fur stand on end beneath his skin. His tiger prowled closer to the surface, drawn to her raw power.

"I'll need to place anchors at each corner," Mallory said, pulling crystals from her coat pocket. "The spell should recognize magical signatures specific to chaos and rune magic."

"Should?" Kieran arched his eyebrows.

"Magic isn't an exact science." She shot him a look. "Unless you'd rather I didn't try?"

"No, dear. By all means, show me what you can do." He grinned, enjoying the way her cheeks flushed at the endearment.

Mallory moved to the first corner, kneeling to press a crystal into the frozen earth. The wind picked up, swirling around her like a cocoon as she whispered words in an ancient language. Lightning flickered in the clouds above, responding to her call.

Kieran's breath caught as he watched her work. Power radiated from her in waves, wild and untamed. His tiger purred in appreciation. This was what a real witch looked like - not the manufactured perfection of Vivian Simmons, but pure, natural force.

"The anchors will trigger defensive strikes if they detect hostile magic," Mallory explained as she placed the second crystal. "Lightning, wind gusts - nothing lethal, but enough to discourage them."

"Remind me never to get on your bad side." Kieran followed her to the third corner, staying close enough to catch her if she stumbled in the deepening snow.

"Too late for that." But she smiled as she said it, the kind of smile that made his heart flutter.

When the final crystal was placed, Mallory stood in the center of the building's shadow. She raised her hands, and the wind roared to life around them. Lightning split the sky, connecting with each crystal in a blinding flash before sinking into the ground.

"There." She lowered her arms, swaying slightly. "That should hold them off for a

while."

Kieran steadied her with a hand at her waist. "That was incredible. You're incredible."

"It's just magic," she mumbled, but he could see the pleased flush in her cheeks.

"No," he said softly. "It's not 'just' anything, it's who you are. And it's remarkable."

Before long, the inn's kitchen filled with the sweet aroma of vanilla and cinnamon as he measured ingredients with mechanical precision. His movements were sharp and tense, lacking their usual fluid grace. Every few minutes, his gaze darted to the windows, searching for any sign of Gregory's interference despite Mallory's protection spell.

"You're going to break that measuring cup if you grip it any harder," Mallory said softly, placing her hand over his. The touch sent warmth through his skin, easing some of the tension in his broad shoulders.

Charlotte looked up from her bowl of cookie dough. "These snickerdoodles have survived three generations of Strikers. They'll survive whatever those two try to throw at us."

"Your grandmother would be so proud," Amy added, rolling dough balls in cinnamon sugar. "Though maybe not of how you're mangling her recipe with all that brooding."

Kieran growled low in his throat. "I'm not brooding."

"You absolutely are." Mallory bumped his hip with hers. "And you're getting flour everywhere except in the bowl."

She was right - a fine dusting of white covered his black t-shirt. His tiger bristled at

being called out, but the playful light in Mallory's eyes made it impossible to stay irritated.

"Whatever happens tomorrow," she continued, her voice pitched just for him, "I'm not going anywhere. We'll handle it together."

The simple statement loosened something in his chest. "Thank you. For everything."

"Don't thank me yet." A mischievous smile curved her lips as she flicked a pinch of flour at his face. "I haven't shared all my secrets."

Kieran blinked, surprised by her playfulness. Then he grinned, slow and predatory. "Oh, it's like that, is it?"

Before she could retreat, he grabbed her around the waist and pulled her against him, thoroughly dusting her sweater with the flour from his shirt. Her shriek of laughter echoed through the kitchen.

"Children," Charlotte scolded, but her eyes sparkled with amusement. "The cookies won't bake themselves."

"You started it," Kieran murmured in Mallory's ear, loving how she shivered at his proximity.

"And I'll finish it too." She twisted in his arms and dotted his nose with cookie dough.

The kitchen dissolved into chaos after that - flour flying, dough being stolen, and laughter bouncing off the walls. Kieran's heart swelled watching Mallory throw her head back in genuine joy, all traces of her usual reserve gone. This was who she really was under all those careful walls - bright and beautiful and free.

Kieran paced around his suite late that night, his tiger restless. Mallory's scent still clung to his clothes from being near her earlier, making his heart race. He paused at the window, watching the snow drift past in the darkness.

"You're being so ridiculous right now," he muttered to himself. "You know she needs time."

But his tiger disagreed, suddenly becoming impatient, wanting to claim her, protect her, and shower her with the affection she deserved. The way her eyes lit up when she laughed today in the kitchen had nearly undone him. Her walls had crumbled just enough to show the vibrant woman underneath.

He flopped onto his couch with a groan. "She's not ready. She's still grieving Eli. How many times do you have to remind yourself?"

The sound of her laughter echoed in his memory, along with the way she had felt in his arms, soft and warm and perfect. The tiger in him purred at the thought.

"I'm in love with her," he admitted to the empty room. The truth of it settled in his chest, both terrifying and liberating. "Completely, totally in love with her."

A crack of thunder outside made him smile. He wondered if she was thinking about him too.

"Soon," he promised himself. "I'll tell her everything."

17

KIERAN

The first rays of dawn painted the snow-covered landscape in shades of pink and gold. Kieran's tiger purred with delight as he watched Mallory expertly wield her shovel, her platinum hair escaping from beneath her wool hat. Even bundled up in winter gear, she moved with a grace that captivated him.

"You're staring again," Mallory called out, not looking up from her work.

"Can't help it. You make snow shoveling look like an art form." He grinned as her cheeks flushed a light pink. Whether from the cold or his compliment, he couldn't tell.

"Better than making it look like a disaster." She paused, leaning on her shovel. "Did I tell you about the time I accidentally created a mini blizzard during my college graduation?"

His tiger perked up at the prospect of learning more about her. "No, but I'm dying to hear it."

"Picture this - I'm already nervous about walking across the stage, right? Then my heel catches on my gown." She demonstrated with her hands. "Next thing I know, there's snow falling inside the auditorium. Only over the stage though."

Kieran laughed, the sound echoing across the parking lot. "What did you do?"

"Pretended to be just as shocked as everyone else. Blamed it on the air conditioning system going haywire." She shook her head, smiling. "The dean bought it, thank goodness."

His shovel hit a particularly stubborn patch of ice, and he used his brute strength to break through it. "Any other entertaining mishaps?"

"Oh, plenty. There was the time I got so excited about getting published that it rained in my living room. Just my living room." She chuckled. "Eli thought it was hilarious. He just grabbed an umbrella and sat on the couch reading until I calmed down enough to stop it."

Instead of the usual sadness that accompanied mentions of her late husband, her eyes held fond amusement at the memory. Progress, Kieran thought, even as his tiger rumbled possessively.

"The weather's been surprisingly stable lately," he noted, moving closer to help her with a heavy drift.

"Maybe I'm just... content for once." Their eyes met, and something electric passed between them.

The moment stretched, full of possibility, until Mallory cleared her throat and returned to shoveling. Kieran watched her work, his heart full. Every day, every moment with her made him more certain - pretending wasn't enough anymore. He wanted this to be real.

Kieran's tiger bristled as Mallory's next words hit him like a bucket of ice water.

"The town crews are over there across the street. I think I just overheard them saying they can start bridge repairs in a few days," she said, her voice deliberately casual as

she attacked another snow drift. "And something about taking only a week or so, with the weather cleared up."

His shovel bit into the snow with more force than necessary. The thought of her leaving made his chest hurt. These past weeks, watching her charm guests and staff alike, seeing her quick mind at work solving problems, hearing her laugh at his jokes - it had become as natural as breathing.

"That's... good news," he managed, though his tiger protested. The parking lot suddenly felt too small and too confining.

Mallory nodded, not meeting his eyes. "Right. Good news."

The silence stretched on between them, broken only by the scrape of their shovels against the pavement. Kieran watched her, memorizing the way she moved, the determined set of her jaw, the wisps of hair that escaped her hat. His tiger paced, urging him to say something, anything, to make her stay.

But what could he say? Their arrangement had always been temporary. He had no right to pressure her to give up her solitude and her independence, just because he had gone and fallen in love with her.

"This place won't be the same without you," he said finally, trying to keep his tone light despite the ache in his chest.

"I'm sure you'll manage." Her voice wavered slightly. "You did fine before I showed up."

His tiger disagreed vehemently. Nothing about The Hearthstone would be the same after she left. Who would help him deal with difficult guests? Who would catch his eye across the room and share silent jokes? Who would make him want to be better,

stronger, and more worthy?

"Yeah," he said, focusing on clearing another particularly stubborn patch of ice. "But it was never this good before."

The admission hung in the crisp morning air between them. Mallory's shovel stilled, and for a moment, Kieran thought she might say something. Instead, she turned away, attacking the snow with renewed vigor.

His tiger rumbled unhappily. They'd both gotten used to having her here, to having her in their life. The thought of going back to how things were before seemed impossible now.

He noticed how Mallory's shoulders slumped ever so slightly as she dug her shovel into another drift. His tiger grew restless, hating to see her sad in any way. The pristine snow covering the parking lot sparked an idea in his mind.

While she was focused on her task, he quietly packed a perfect snowball. His enhanced reflexes made his aim true as he launched it, hitting her square between the shoulder blades.

Mallory whirled around, her mouth agape. "Did you just-"

He grinned, already forming another projectile. "What are you going to do about it, storm witch?"

Her eyes narrowed playfully. "Oh, it's on."

His enhanced speed gave him an advantage, but Mallory's precision with her throws made her a worthy opponent. She pelted him with rapid-fire snowballs while ducking behind a car.

"That the best you got?" he taunted, shaking snow from his auburn hair.

"Not even close!" She popped up from her hiding spot, launching a barrage that had him dancing backward.

His tiger delighted in the chase, in hearing her laugh echo across the lot. He circled around, using his supernatural stealth to sneak up behind her.

"Gotcha!" He wrapped his arms around her waist, spinning them both into a snowbank.

They landed with a soft thump, Mallory sprawled across his chest, both of them breathless with laughter. Snow soaked through his coat, but Kieran couldn't care less. Not with her dusted with snowflakes, her cheeks flushed pink, and her eyes sparkling with joy on top of him.

"I haven't had a snowball fight since I was a kid," she admitted, making no move to get up.

"See what you've been missing out on?" He brushed a snowflake from her cheek. "Sometimes a little spontaneity is exactly what you need."

"Is that your expert opinion?"

"Absolutely. I'm very wise." He affected a serious expression that made her laugh again.

Mallory rolled off him onto her back, both of them staring up at the winter sky. "We should probably finish shoveling."

"Probably," he agreed, not moving. His tiger purred contentedly, savoring these last

precious moments with her. "But five more minutes won't hurt anyone."

Kieran's tiger protested at leaving their comfortable snow nest with Mallory, but the cold seeping through his clothes couldn't be ignored. He sprang to his feet in one fluid motion, then extended his hand to help her up. Her small, gloved hand fit perfectly in his larger one.

"You're soaked," he noted, watching droplets of melted snow trail down her neck.

"Because someone thought a snow fight was a brilliant idea." But her eyes sparkled with playfulness as she retrieved their abandoned shovels.

Together they made quick work of the remaining snow, their movements synchronized as if they'd been working together for years instead of weeks. His tiger preened at how natural it felt beside her.

"Race you inside?" he finally said playfully.

"Not a chance. I've seen you run."

They hurried through The Hearthstone's front door, their boots squeaking against the polished floor. Kieran's clothes clung uncomfortably to his skin, and his tiger's fur would have been standing on end if he'd been shifted. Mallory didn't look much better.

"We should get changed before-" Kieran started.

"Kieran!" Charlotte's voice cut through the lobby. "The Christmas Eve preparations-"

"Can wait ten minutes while we get out of these wet clothes," he finished firmly, his tiger asserting its dominance.

Mallory attempted to wring out her coat sleeve, creating a small puddle on the floor.
"I think I've got snow in places snow was never meant to be."

His tiger's mind went places it shouldn't at that comment. Kieran cleared his throat.
"Let's head to our rooms before we flood the lobby."

They squelched their way down the hall, leaving a trail of melted snow in their wake.
Mallory suddenly burst into giggles.

"What's so funny?"

"Us. We look like we got into a fight with Yeti and lost." She gestured to their bedraggled appearance.

Kieran's tiger preened. "Speak for yourself. I think I pull off the drowned rat look rather well."

18

MALLORY

Mallory's teeth chattered as she fumbled with her room key. Her coat and clothes were dripping puddles onto the hallway carpet when she finally got her door open. The snowball fight had been worth it though - she couldn't remember the last time she had that kind of spontaneous fun. A quick glance over her shoulder showed Kieran disappearing into his own suite across the hall, leaving wet footprints behind him.

She had barely changed into dry clothes when a knock echoed through her room. Opening the door revealed Kieran, changed but still shivering.

"My heat's out," he said, threading his fingers through his damp auburn hair. "Mind if I warm up in here for a bit?"

"Come in before you freeze." Mallory stepped aside, trying not to notice how his white henley clung to his broad shoulders.

She busied herself building a fire while Kieran settled onto her couch. Soon flames crackled in the hearth, casting moving shadows across the room.

"I'll make some hot chocolate," she offered, needing something to do with her trembling hands.

"You're a lifesaver." His blue eyes followed her movements as she worked in the kitchenette.

Minutes later, they sat side by side on the couch, steaming mugs in hand. The fire's warmth seeped into her bones, making her feel drowsy and content.

"So, besides the renovations we talked about, what other plans do you have for this place?" she asked, curling her feet under her. "For yourself?"

Kieran took a slow sip before answering. "I want to keep building on what makes this place special - that sense of belonging people get when they stay here. Maybe add more community events, make it somewhere families look forward to visiting year after year."

His voice softened. "And speaking of family... I'd like one of my own someday. The right partner, a couple kids running around causing trouble." He gave her a crooked smile. "Probably sounds silly coming from a former playboy."

"It doesn't." Mallory's heart squeezed. The image was all too easy to picture - Kieran teaching his children to bake cookies in the inn's kitchen and reading them bedtime stories by the lobby fireplace.

"What about you?" he asked quietly. "Any dreams you're keeping to yourself?"

She stared into her mug, watching the marshmallows slowly dissolve. "I used to think isolation was what I deserved, what I wanted. Now..." She trailed off, surprised by the longing in her own voice.

"Now?" Kieran prompted gently.

"Now I'm not so sure."

Mallory shifted on the couch, grateful when Kieran cleared his throat and changed the subject.

"So, what are you reading these days? I've seen you with different books every time I pass by."

The tension in her shoulders eased. Books were safe territory. "I just finished this fascinating historical romance about-

"Wait, let me guess." He leaned closer, his presence warm and solid beside her. "Something with a brooding hero and a feisty heroine who saves him from himself?"

"Actually, it's about a lighthouse keeper's daughter who..." Mallory caught his teasing grin and rolled her eyes. "You're impossible."

"I'm right though, aren't I?" His blue eyes sparkled with mischief. "How many books have you gone through since you've been here? Ten? Twenty?"

"Seven, thank you very much." She took another sip of cocoa, fighting a smile as he whistled low.

"Seven books in three weeks? Is reading all you do up in that cliffside house of yours?"

"Well, when you're alone a lot, books make excellent company." The words quickly slipped out.

Kieran's playful expression shifted to something more intense. He turned to face her fully, one arm draped across the back of the couch. "Why do you feel like you need to be alone, Mallory?"

The question hung in the air. Mallory's heart stuttered as she stared into those searching eyes. He wasn't asking to be nosy - she could see genuine concern there, mixed with something else she wasn't ready to name. The fire crackled, sending

shadows dancing across his sharp features, highlighting the gentle set of his mouth.

She opened her lips to deflect, to change the subject like she always did when people got too close to discovering the truth. But something about the warmth of the room, the easy companionship they had built, made her pause. The words stuck in her throat as she wrestled with whether to let him in just a little bit more.

She clutched her mug tighter, the ceramic burning against her palms. The warmth grounded her as memories threatened to overwhelm her. Kieran's presence beside her felt solid and safe - dangerous thoughts for someone like her.

"My magic..." The words caught in her throat. She swallowed hard. "It's not just making storms. Sometimes I lose control, and they become something else entirely."

Kieran shifted closer, his knee brushing hers. "What do you mean?"

"Ten years ago, I created a tornado that nearly destroyed half the town." Her voice dropped to a whisper, and she looked off into the distance. "People still talk about it. The 'freak storm' that came out of nowhere on a clear fall day."

"That was you?" His tone held no judgment, just quiet understanding.

"I was in college at the time and highly emotional. Someone said something cruel and I just... snapped." Her fingers trembled around the mug. "After that, I stayed away from people for a long time. It was safer that way."

"Until Eli?"

"Yes," she said softly, not meeting Kieran's eyes. "With him, things were different. Better. He had this way of keeping me calm and more centered." A tear slid down her cheek. "I thought maybe I could have a normal life after all. Then he got sick so

suddenly and..."

More tears fell. Kieran gently took the mug from her shaking hands and set it aside.

"I'm cursed, Kieran. Every time something good happens, it gets taken away. My power makes sure of that." She wiped at her face. "I don't deserve-"

"Stop." Kieran's voice carried the commanding presence of his alpha nature. He cupped her face in his hands, forcing her to meet his intense gaze. "You are not cursed, Mallory. You're powerful, yes, but that doesn't make you dangerous. It makes you extraordinary."

"But-"

"No buts." His thumbs brushed away her tears. "I've watched you these past weeks. You're kind, brilliant, and far too special to spend your life hiding away. The world needs more of you in it, not less."

Mallory's heart thundered in her chest. No one except Eli had ever looked at her like this - like she was something precious instead of something to fear.

His touch left trails of warmth across her skin, and her breath caught in her throat. The firelight danced across his strong features, highlighting the intensity in his blue eyes.

He leaned closer, and time seemed to slow. The scent of pine and earth that always clung to him filled her senses. His gaze dropped to her lips, and Mallory felt herself swaying forward, drawn by some magnetic pull she couldn't resist.

But then reality crashed back like a splash of cold water. She jerked away, nearly tumbling off the couch in her haste. "I should probably get ready for tonight."

Kieran's hands fell away, leaving her skin cold where his warmth had been. He stood, his movements fluid and controlled, but Mallory caught the flash of disappointment in his eyes before he masked it.

"Take your time," he said as he moved toward the door. "Tonight's going to be busy."

The door clicked shut behind him, and Mallory collapsed back against the couch cushions. Her heart hammered against her ribs like it was trying to escape. Outside, snow began falling again - her magic responding to her turbulent emotions.

"Stop that," she muttered to herself, forcing the snowfall to ease. But controlling the weather was easier than controlling her racing thoughts.

The undeniable truth hit her like a lightning bolt - she was in love with Kieran Striker. Not just attracted to him, not just enjoying his company. Full-blown, heart-racing, stomach-fluttering love. The kind that made her want to throw caution to the wind and kiss him senseless. The kind that terrified her.

"This wasn't supposed to happen," she whispered to the empty room. The fire crackled in response, as if mocking her predicament.

She pressed her fingers to her lips, still tingling from the almost-kiss. What would it have felt like if she hadn't pulled away? Would his kiss be gentle like his touch, or demanding like his presence?

She shook her head, trying to dislodge the dangerous thoughts. She couldn't afford to wonder about things like that. Once the bridge was fixed, she needed to leave. Return to her solitary life where she couldn't hurt anyone. Where she couldn't lose anyone else she loved.

But as she touched the spot where Kieran's fingers had brushed her cheek, she wasn't

so sure she was strong enough to walk away.

19

KIERAN

Kieran balanced the basket of treats in one arm while keeping his other hand at the small of Mallory's back as they moved down the hallway that afternoon. The scent of cinnamon and sugar from the fresh-baked cookies mingled with the pine garlands decorating the corridors. His tiger was content at having her so close.

"Room 212," Charlotte called out, consulting her clipboard. "The Williams family."

"I've got this one." Mallory stepped forward and knocked. The door opened to reveal two excited children who squealed when they saw the candy canes.

"Merry Christmas!" Kieran looked on as Mallory bent down to their level, her blonde hair catching the warm hallway lights. She handed each child a cookie and candy cane with such genuine warmth that his chest tightened.

"You're really good with kids," he murmured when she rejoined him.

"Don't sound so surprised," she replied dryly. "I did teach piano lessons before..."

She trailed off, that familiar shadow crossing her face. Kieran squeezed her hand. "Hey, want to hear about the time I accidentally set the kitchen on fire trying to make gingerbread men?"

Her smile was worth every bit of embarrassment from that story. "How did you

manage that?"

"Pure talent." He winked. "And possibly some very flammable bourbon in the recipe."

They continued down the hall, trading stories between stops. Chase and Amy had gone ahead to the next floor while Charlotte brought up the rear, making notes about which rooms still needed visits.

At the next door, an elderly couple cooed over them being "such a lovely young married couple." Kieran felt Mallory tense slightly beside him, but he just smiled, wrapping his arm snugly around her waist.

"Thank you," he said smoothly. "I'm a very lucky man."

The words felt too true. He caught Mallory's gaze and for a moment the air crackled between them, just like in her room earlier. His tiger urged him strongly to close the distance, to finally taste those lips that had been tempting him for weeks.

But he held back. She had to be ready. Had to want it as much as he did.

"Next floor?" she asked softly, breaking the moment.

"Lead the way, sweetheart." He followed, content for now just to be near her, even if his heart yearned for more.

Several hours later, Kieran hefted another string of lights while watching Mallory arrange poinsettias on the tables. The way she bit her lip in concentration made his tiger rumble with approval.

A sudden flash of movement outside the window caught his eye.

"That sneaky bastard," he muttered, spotting Gregory's expensive wool coat as the man crept toward the utility area.

Mallory's head snapped up. "What is it?"

"Gregory. He's going for the breaker box." Kieran dropped the lights and headed for the door. "Coming?"

"Right behind you."

The freezing air hit them as they burst outside. Gregory stood by the electrical panel, chaos magic crackling between his fingers like dark lightning.

Kieran's tiger surged forward, demanding release. He gave in, his bones cracking and reforming as fur rippled across his skin. In seconds, a massive Bengal tiger stood where the man had been, muscles coiled and ready.

Gregory's eyes widened. The chaos magic fizzled out as he stumbled backward.

Kieran stalked forward, a low growl rumbling in him. His tiger wanted to teach this pest a lesson about threatening what was his.

"I suggest you leave," Mallory's voice rang out clear and sharp. "Next time you show up here uninvited, I'm calling the authorities. I'm sure they'd love to hear about all your little pranks."

Gregory scrambled away, nearly falling in his haste to escape. Kieran watched until he disappeared around the corner before shifting back. His clothes, specially enchanted, reformed with him.

"So..." He turned to Mallory, suddenly uncertain. "I'm a tiger shifter."

To his surprise, she was grinning. "That was breathtaking! I've never seen a shifter transformation up close before." Her eyes sparkled with genuine fascination. "The way your magic flows through the change is beautiful."

His tiger preened. "Most people aren't quite so... enthusiastic about it."

"Are you kidding me? It's amazing." She stepped closer, reaching up to brush her fingers through his hair where his fur had been moments before. "You're amazing."

The touch sent electricity down his spine. His tiger strongly urged him to pull her close, to show her just how amazing he could be. But he settled for capturing her hand and pressing a kiss to her palm.

"We should get back inside," he murmured. "Still have a dance to set up."

"Lead the way, tiger." Her teasing smile warmed him more than any fire could.

Kieran adjusted another centerpiece, his tiger unsettled beneath his skin. The event space gleamed with twinkling lights and evergreen garlands, but something felt off about the placement of?—

"If you move that flower one more time, I'm going to freeze it to the table."

He spun around and what he saw before him took his breath away. Mallory stood at the base of the staircase in a deep blue satin dress that hugged her curves before flowing to the floor. Her platinum hair cascaded over one shoulder in elegant waves. His tiger growled low in appreciation.

"Amy's dress?" he managed, drinking in the sight of her.

"Charlotte's, actually." Mallory crossed to him, the dress swishing softly. "You need

to stop fussing. Everything looks perfect."

"I just want?—"

"To control everything?" She raised an eyebrow. "The party's already started. Come enjoy it with me."

His inner tiger preened at the invitation. "As my fake wife commands."

"Damn right." She slipped her arm through his, and the contact sent electricity through him. "Now, show me off to your guests like the proud alpha owner you are."

Kieran laughed, leading her toward where the guests mingled. "Using my own nature against me? That's fighting dirty."

They made their rounds, stopping to chat with various guests. Mrs. Hudson from room 204 gushed over them being "absolutely perfect together" while her husband nodded approvingly. The Taylors insisted on hearing their fake love story again.

"You two remind me of me and my Harold when we were young," Mrs. Taylor sighed. "Such chemistry."

Kieran felt Mallory tense up beside him, but he just pulled her closer against his side. "I'm so lucky," he said, meaning every word.

"Oh, stop," Mallory muttered, but he caught her small smile.

They continued circulating, and Kieran found himself relaxing into their easy rapport. His tiger settled contentedly each time she laughed at his jokes or touched his arm. When she leaned in to whisper commentary about particularly outrageous guest outfits, he had to resist the urge to nuzzle her neck.

"See?" she said after they finished chatting with the Wilsons. "Much better than obsessing over centerpieces."

"You might be onto something." He grinned down at her. "Though I still think that one by the punch bowl is crooked."

The band shifted to a slower melody, and Kieran's tiger purred at the opportunity. He turned to Mallory, extending his hand with a playful bow.

"Dance with me?"

She hesitated, those crystalline blue eyes searching his face. "I'm not much of a dancer."

"Neither am I. We can be terrible together." His grin widened. "Come on, I promise not to step on your toes. Tiger's honor."

"Well, when you put it that way..." She placed her hand in his, and his tiger rumbled in satisfaction at the contact.

He led her to the dance floor, pulling her close against him. One hand settled on her lower back while the other clasped hers. The satin of her dress was cool beneath his palm, but her skin radiated warmth.

"See? Not so bad," he murmured, guiding them in a slow circle.

"The night's still young. Plenty of time for toe-stepping." But she relaxed into his hold, her free hand resting on his shoulder.

The scent of her perfume – something light and floral – mingled with her natural storm-touched essence. His tiger wanted to bury its nose in her neck and breathe her

in. Instead, he settled for drawing her fractionally closer.

"You look beautiful tonight," he said softly. "Blue suits you."

A slight flush colored her cheeks. "You clean up pretty well yourself."

"Pretty well? That hurts." He spun her out and back, catching her against his chest. "I'll have you know I spent hours picking out this tie."

Her laugh vibrated through him where their bodies pressed together. "Ten minutes, tops."

"Fifteen, actually."

They swayed together, and Kieran found himself mesmerized by the way the lights caught her platinum hair, how her eyes sparkled when she smiled. His tiger stretched lazily beneath his skin, perfectly content to have her in his arms.

The music swelled, and Mallory's fingers tightened on his shoulder. "Kieran?"

"Hmm?" He looked deeply into her eyes, caught by the intensity in her gaze.

"Thank you. For making me laugh again."

The simple honesty in her voice made his chest tighten. He wanted to kiss her right now, to show her exactly how much she meant to him.

Instead, he squeezed her hand and twirled her again, delighting in her surprised giggle.

"Anytime, storm witch. Anytime."

Kieran guided Mallory through the quieting halls of The Hearthstone, his tiger still purring from their dance. The satin of her dress whispered against his fingers where they rested on her back. His inner beast wanted to pull her closer, to breathe in more of that intoxicating storm-touched scent that was uniquely her.

"You were right about the party. It was perfect," he admitted, enjoying her satisfied smirk. "Though that centerpiece was definitely crooked."

"You're impossible." She bumped his shoulder playfully.

They rounded the corner toward their rooms and Kieran's keen eyes caught sight of something green hanging from the ceiling. His tiger's attention snapped to full alert – mistletoe. Charlotte must have hung it when he wasn't looking. That crafty woman.

Before he could decide whether to point it out or tactfully guide Mallory around it, she came to a stop directly beneath the sprig. Her blue eyes lifted to the ceiling, then met his with an intensity that caused his breath to catch.

"Mistletoe," she said softly.

"We don't have to—" he started, but she was already rising on her toes, one hand sliding up to cup his jaw.

The first brush of her lips against his was tentative, questioning. His tiger surged forward with a possessive growl and Kieran deepened the kiss, pulling her flush against him. She tasted like punch and possibilities, her mouth warm and willing under his. His hand tangled in her hair as he angled her head to better claim her lips.

Mallory made a small sound in the back of her throat that drove him wild. His tiger wanted to back her against the wall and show her exactly what she did to him. Instead, he gentled the kiss, pouring all his unspoken feelings into the press of his lips

against hers.

When they finally broke apart, both breathing heavily, Kieran rested his forehead against hers. His tiger rumbled in delight at the flush in her cheeks, and the slight swell of her lips.

"I've been wanting to do that for weeks," he murmured.

"Me too." Her fingers played with the hair at the nape of his neck. "I just wasn't sure I should..."

"I'm sure." He brushed another soft kiss across her lips. "More sure than I've ever been about anything in my life."

20

MALLORY

S unlight streamed through the frost-covered windows and cast prisms across Mallory's bed. She burrowed deeper into the plush comforter, her fingers touching her lips where she could still feel the phantom pressure of Kieran's kiss from the night before.

"What was I thinking?" she whispered to herself, though a smile tugged at her mouth. The memory of his strong arms around her waist and the way his hand tangled in her hair pulling her closer when their lips met, sent pleasant shivers through her.

Rolling onto her back, she stared at the ornate ceiling of her suite. The kiss had been... electric. Different from Eli's gentle pecks, Kieran had kissed her with an intensity that made her toes curl. He'd tasted like cinnamon and promises.

A knock at her door made her jump.

"Housekeeping, Mrs. Striker!"

The title made her stomach flutter. Even if it wasn't real, even if it was all pretend, something about being called Mrs. Striker felt right in a way that suddenly terrified her.

"Just a minute!" she called back, though she made no move to get up. Instead, she touched her lips again, remembering how Kieran had looked at her after the kiss - like

a starving man who had just discovered a feast.

The weather outside had calmed significantly since last night. Her magic hummed contentedly under her skin, at peace for the first time in years. She knew she should feel guilty about kissing another man, about wanting more kisses from Kieran, but somehow she didn't. Maybe it was time to stop punishing herself for being alive.

"You're overthinking this," she muttered, pulling the blanket up to her chin. "It was just a kiss under the mistletoe. That's what people do at Christmas."

But she knew that wasn't true. That kiss hadn't been just anything - it had been everything. The way Kieran had cupped her face, how his thumb had stroked her cheek, the small growl that had rumbled in his chest when she had pressed closer...

Another knock, more insistent this time. "Mrs. Striker!"

Mallory groaned, throwing an arm over her eyes. "Coming!" How was she supposed to face Kieran now? What if he regretted it? What if he didn't?

Her heart raced at both possibilities.

Mallory soon tugged on her cream sweater and dark jeans and smoothed her hair down. She opened her door to find Maria, one of the housekeepers, holding fresh towels.

"Good morning, Mrs. Striker! There's a note for you." Maria pointed to a red envelope propped against the wall.

Mallory's heart skipped as she recognized Kieran's bold handwriting. She waited until Maria bustled into the bathroom before opening it.

Meet me in the Rose Room for breakfast. Merry Christmas, beautiful. –K

The simple note caused warmth to spread throughout her entire body. She slipped on her boots and headed downstairs, her steps quickening as she approached the private dining area.

When she opened the door, she let out a soft gasp. Kieran had transformed the intimate space into a Christmas wonderland. Twinkling lights draped the ceiling in swooping arcs, casting a soft golden glow. Pine garland wrapped with red ribbon framed the windows, and the table gleamed with fine china and crystal glasses.

"Merry Christmas." Kieran's deep voice came from behind her. He stepped close, his presence solid and warm at her back. The earthy scent of his cologne made her want to lean into him.

"You did all this?" She gestured to the decorations, trying to ignore how her skin tingled where his hand rested on her shoulder.

"I had some help." His chest rumbled with amusement. "But the concept was mine. Come over here."

He guided her to the table, pulling out her chair with a grand flourish. "Today, you're getting the full-service treatment. No arguments."

"Is that an order?" She raised her eyebrows at him, enjoying the flash of heat in his blue eyes.

"Consider it a very strong suggestion." He winked, then lifted a silver dome to reveal fresh croissants and perfectly scrambled eggs. "I remember you mentioned these were your favorite breakfast items."

The fact that he had remembered such a small detail from one of their conversations made her throat tight with emotion. She watched him move around the table with fluid grace, arranging her plate just so, and pouring coffee into delicate cups.

"You really didn't have to go to all this trouble," she said softly.

Kieran paused in his preparations to fix her with an intense look. "Yes, I did. Now hush and let me spoil you today."

Mallory savored each bite of the perfectly flaky croissant, watching as Kieran devoured his third one. His appetite matched his tiger nature - fierce and unrestrained. Every so often, his knee would brush against hers under the table, sending sparks of awareness through her body.

"I haven't had breakfast this good since Paris," she admitted, taking another sip of the rich coffee.

"High praise indeed." His eyes crinkled at the corners. "But I've got another surprise planned. You better bundle up."

Minutes later, they stepped out into the crisp morning air. The town square sparkled with fresh snow, and Mallory's breath hitched at the sight of a magnificent sleigh, complete with two chestnut horses pawing at the ground.

"You didn't."

"I did." Kieran's hand settled on her waist, warm and possessive. "The Hendersons do this every Christmas. I may have called in a small favor."

He helped her into the sleigh, then climbed in beside her, immediately pulling a thick wool blanket around them both. The close quarters meant she was pressed against his

side, their thighs touching. Heat radiated from him, and she found herself unconsciously leaning into his warmth.

As they glided through the streets, Mallory saw Saltwater Grove through new eyes. The bakery where Mrs. Chen was setting out fresh gingerbread. The bookstore where Mr. Patterson waved from behind frost-covered windows. The town square where children built snowmen and threw snowballs.

"Look at that display," Kieran pointed to an elaborate window at the flower shop. "Daphne outdoes herself every year."

"I've never actually seen it before," Mallory admitted. "I usually just grab what I need and go."

"You've been missing out." His arm tightened protectively around her shoulders. "This town has so much heart."

The sleigh rounded another corner, and Mallory's chest tightened with an unexpected yearning. She wanted this - not just the sleigh ride, but all of it. The community, the connection, and the way Kieran made everything feel possible and right. For the first time since Eli died, she wanted to be part of something bigger than her solitary existence.

"What are you thinking about?" Kieran's breath was warm against her ear.

"Just that I've been hiding for too long," she whispered, watching a group of carolers practice on a street corner. "I forgot how beautiful this place could be."

His fingers intertwined with hers under the blanket. "It's never too late to start fresh."

Mallory's boots crunched in the snow as she and Kieran made their way back to The

Hearthstone. Her cheeks still burned from the cold air and the lingering warmth of being pressed against him during the sleigh ride.

"I can't believe you arranged all that," she said, watching his profile as he walked beside her. The way he carried himself, confident and assured, caused her heart to skip a beat.

"I can be very persuasive when I want something." His blue eyes flickered to her face, intense and heated. "Or someone."

Before she could process that loaded statement, Charlotte burst through the front door of the inn.

"There you are! The kids are getting restless waiting for Santa."

Kieran's eyes widened. "I completely forgot about that."

"Don't worry, I grabbed your suit." Charlotte thrust a red bundle into his arms. "They're all in the main sitting room."

"Come help me entertain them?" Kieran asked Mallory, already heading toward the bathroom to change.

"What exactly would I be doing?"

"Being my beautiful Mrs. Claus, of course." He flashed her a wicked grin before disappearing into the bathroom.

Ten minutes later, Mallory found herself perched on the arm of a plush armchair while Kieran, now sporting a remarkably convincing Santa suit, listened to children's Christmas wishes. His natural charm had them all giggling and excited.

"And what would you like for Christmas?" A little girl with missing front teeth asked Mallory.

"Oh, I..." Mallory faltered, caught off guard.

"Mrs. Claus already got her Christmas wish," Kieran cut in smoothly, his voice pitched lower behind the fake beard. "She got me."

The children laughed while heat crept up Mallory's neck. The worst part was, he wasn't entirely wrong. Somehow this ex-playboy tiger shifter had worked his way past all her carefully constructed walls.

After the last child had been sent off with a candy cane, Kieran pulled her into his suite. The beard and hat came off immediately, but he kept the rest of the suit on as he collapsed onto his couch.

"That was actually fun," Mallory admitted, settling beside him.

"Everything's fun with you." He tugged her closer until she was practically in his lap.

She laughed, relaxing against him. "Thank you for making this Christmas special."

His arms tightened around her waist. "It's not quite over yet."

He suddenly sprang up from the couch with unexpected agility, reaching behind an antique armoire. "Close your eyes."

Mallory complied, her heart fluttering. The rustle of paper and his footsteps approached.

"Okay, open them."

In his hands was a stack of leather-bound books, tied with a red velvet ribbon. Her fingers trembled as she untied it, revealing first editions of several classic gothic romances she had mentioned loving.

"How did you..." She traced the gold lettering on the spine.

"I may have called in a few favors from that bookstore owner you like." His eyes sparkled with satisfaction at her reaction. "These were in his private collection."

"They're exquisite. Thank you, Kieran." She suddenly jumped up from the couch. "Wait here!"

She rushed across the hall to her suite, and soon returned with a large, flat package wrapped in brown paper.

Kieran's eyebrows rose as he sat down and unwrapped it. The hand-painted wooden sign showed The Hearthstone Inn's facade in warm, inviting colors, with intricate Celtic knots framing the edges. "You made this?"

"I had some art supplies in my shopping bags when I got stranded here." She bit her lip. "Do you like it?"

Instead of answering, he set down the sign and pulled her onto his lap, his arms wrapping around her waist. "It's perfect. You're perfect."

"Thank you for making me feel alive again," she whispered, meeting his intense gaze.

His blue eyes darkened with desire. "Mallory..."

He closed the distance between them, pressing his lips to hers. She responded immediately, one hand tangling in his hair while the other pulled him closer. The kiss

deepened, and she felt herself melting against his solid chest.

Kieran pulled back slightly, his breathing ragged. "Are you sure about this? We can slow down."

"I've been hiding from life for too long." She traced his jaw with her fingertips. "I want this. I want you."

21

MALLORY

Kieran's arms tightened around her, and before Mallory could process what was happening, he lifted her effortlessly off his lap. She let out a surprised laugh, her arms instinctively wrapping around his neck.

"You're very... commanding," she teased, her voice breathless as he carried her toward the bed.

"Only for you," he shot back, that trademark smirk playing on his lips. He laid her down gently, the plush comforter soft beneath her back. His hands braced on either side of her, caging her in as he leaned down to kiss her again.

Her heart raced as his lips moved against hers, slow and deliberate, as if he had all the time in the world. His hand slid down her side, tracing the curve of her waist, and she shivered at his teasing touch.

"Still okay?" he murmured against her mouth, his voice low and steady, but there was a flicker of uncertainty in his eyes.

"Yes, keep going," she breathed, her fingers tangling in the soft fabric of his shirt.

He growled softly as his hand drifted lower, his touch possessive but reverent. His fingers grazed the hem of her sweater, and he paused, raising an eyebrow in question.

"May I?"

She nodded, her breath hitching as he tugged the sweater over her head, leaving her in just her bra and jeans. His eyes darkened as he stared at her, his gaze raking over her body like she was something precious and beautiful.

"You're stunning," he said, his voice rough with desire.

She blushed, heat creeping up her neck. "You're not so bad yourself."

He grinned, that playful glint returning to his eyes as he leaned down to kiss her again. His hands worked quickly, undoing the clasp of her bra, and tossing it aside. Her breath caught as his lips trailed down her neck, leaving a trail of fire in their wake.

She trembled when his mouth found her breast, his tongue swirling around her nipple. A soft moan escaped her lips as he lavished attention on her breasts, his hands roaming her body with a confidence that left her weak. When he finally moved lower, kissing a path down her stomach, she couldn't help but squirm.

"Kieran," she breathed, her fingers threading through his hair as he settled between her thighs.

He looked up at her, his blue eyes gleaming with mischief and something deeper, more intense. "Should I keep going?" he asked, his voice a low growl.

"Yes," she whispered, her heart pounding in her chest.

He didn't need to be told twice. He pulled down her jeans and underwear in one fluid motion. His mouth soon found her most sensitive spot, his tongue sliding against her in slow, deliberate strokes. Her back arched off the bed, a cry escaping her as

pleasure shot through her.

"Oh, God," she gasped, her fingers tightening in his hair.

"That's it," he murmured, not slowing down.

She laughed breathlessly, the sound turning into a moan as he worked her toward the edge. When she finally fell apart, her body trembling with pleasure, he didn't stop. His tongue continued to lap at her, drawing out every last shudder until she was a boneless heap on the bed.

He kissed his way back up her body, his lips brushing against her heated skin. "You doing okay?" he asked, his voice soft but laced with concern.

"More than okay," she said, her voice shaky.

He smirked, propping himself up on one elbow as he looked over at her. "Good. Because I'm not done with you yet."

Her breath hitched at the promise in his tone. "What did you have in mind?"

He leaned down, his lips brushing against her ear. "I'm going to make you forget everything but me."

"Bold words," she teased, her heart pounding.

"I'm a bold man," he replied as he quickly removed his clothes, and moved his body on top of hers.

Her laughter turned into a gasp as his lips found hers again, his body pressing firmly against hers. She clutched at him, her mind spinning with a mix of desire and

something deeper, something she wasn't ready to name just yet. But for now, she didn't need to think. She just needed to feel. And with Kieran, she felt electric.

He pulled back from her lips, hovering over her. His auburn hair fell slightly into his eyes as he looked down at her with a mix of desire and intensity. His body was warm and solid against hers, the weight of him grounding her in the moment. She could feel the hard length of him pressing against her.

His eyes locked with hers, searching for any sign of hesitation. "Still sure about this?" he asked, his voice low and gravelly, sending a shiver down her spine.

She nodded, her breath catching in her throat. "Yes," she whispered, her voice barely audible.

He didn't need any more encouragement. She felt the tip of him press against her, and then he was slowly, deliberately pushing into her. She gasped as he filled her, inch by inch, until he was buried deep inside her. The stretch was intense, overwhelming, and yet so incredibly right. She could feel every ridge, every pulse of him as he held still, letting her adjust to his size.

"You feel amazing," he murmured, his voice thick with need. His hands gripped her hips, holding her steady as he began to move.

At first, his thrusts were slow and deliberate, each one drawing out a breathy moan from her lips. Her fingers clenched the sheets beneath her, her body arching into his as he set a steady, unhurried pace. She could feel the pleasure building with each stroke, a delicious tension coiling in her core.

"More," she gasped, her voice trembling. "Faster, Kieran."

He growled in response, his thrusts quickly picking up speed. The sound of skin

against skin filled the room, mingling with their ragged breathing. Her head fell back against the pillows, her body rising to meet his with every powerful thrust. The pleasure was overwhelming and consuming, and she felt herself teetering on the edge.

"Let go, Mallory," Kieran growled, his voice rough and primal.

Her body obeyed without hesitation. She cried out as the orgasm tore through her, waves of pleasure crashing over her in relentless succession. The room seemed to pulse with her release, and somewhere outside, a crack of thunder echoed her heightened state of ecstasy.

Kieran's movements became erratic, his breath hitching as he thrust into her one final time. She felt him shudder above her, his release spilling deep inside her as he let out a low, guttural groan. For a moment, they stayed like that, connected, their bodies trembling with the aftershocks of their shared climax.

When he finally pulled out, he collapsed beside her, his chest heaving as he caught his breath. She turned to face him, her body still humming with pleasure. Without a word, he wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close so that her head rested on his chest. She could hear the steady rhythm of his heartbeat, a stark contrast to the wild storm that had just passed between them.

"Are you okay?" he murmured, his hand gently stroking her hair.

"Better than okay," she replied, her voice soft and content.

She nuzzled closer against his chest, her body still tingling from their shared passion. His steady heartbeat beneath her ear and the warmth of his arms around her created a cocoon of safety she hadn't felt in years. Outside, the night was peaceful - no storms, no thunder, just the gentle fall of snow. Her magic, for once, felt completely at peace.

"You've given me such a magical Christmas," she murmured, tracing lazy patterns on his chest. "I never thought I'd feel this way again. Thank you."

His arms tightened around her possessively. "I should be thanking you." His voice rumbled through his chest. "Do you know how empty this place felt before you came here? How incomplete I felt?" He shifted, tilting her chin up to meet his intense blue gaze. "You've made everything whole."

"Even with my storm-causing baggage?" she teased, though there was a hint of vulnerability in her voice.

"Especially with your storms." He pressed his lips to her forehead. "They're part of who you are, and I want all of you. Besides," he said, his lips curving into that signature smirk, "I like a little thunder with my lightning bolt."

She laughed softly, the sound muffled against his skin. "That was terrible."

"Made you laugh though, didn't it?" His fingers traced down her spine, making her shiver.

Her body hummed contentedly, feeling sleep start to pull at her consciousness. "You're impossible sometimes."

"Impossibly adorable," he corrected, pulling the blankets up around them.

As she drifted off in his arms, Mallory realized that for the first time in years, she wasn't afraid of what tomorrow might bring. The loneliness that had been her constant companion seemed to have vanished, replaced by something warm and bright and hopeful. Her last thought before sleep claimed her was that maybe she wasn't cursed after all - maybe she had just been waiting for the right person to weather her storms with her again.

22

KIERAN

Kieran leaned back in his leather office chair as he watched the sunrise paint golden streaks across his desk. His tiger lounged contentedly inside him, completely at peace. The memory of Christmas night with Mallory still made his skin tingle - her soft moans, the way she had trembled beneath his touch, and how perfectly they had fit together.

"You're grinning like an idiot again," Charlotte said from the doorway.

"Can't help it." Kieran stretched, his muscles loose and relaxed. "Everything's just... right."

"I haven't seen you this happy since we opened." Charlotte dropped a stack of papers on his desk. "Though I'd appreciate if you two would stop making eyes at each other during staff meetings. It's getting distracting."

"We do not make eyes."

"Please. You practically growl when anyone else talks to her now."

His tiger rumbled with agreement. He couldn't deny his possessive instincts had kicked into overdrive since Christmas. Just yesterday, he had nearly shifted when a male guest had gotten too friendly while asking Mallory for directions.

"She's my mate," he said simply. The truth of those words resonated through his entire being. "I've never felt anything like this before, Charlotte. It's like she completes something in me I didn't even know was missing."

"And here I thought the playboy tiger would never be tamed." Charlotte's eyes softened. "She's good for you. The whole inn feels more balanced with her here."

A knock at the door interrupted them. Mallory poked her head in, her hair falling in waves around her face. "Sorry to interrupt, but I've got a situation in the kitchen."

Kieran was out of his chair before she finished speaking, drawn to her like a magnet. As he passed, he couldn't resist brushing his fingers along her waist, delighting in her sharp intake of breath.

"My hero," she said dryly, but her eyes sparkled. "Coming to save me from the great coffee machine disaster."

"For you? Always." He pressed a soft kiss to her temple, breathing in her crisp rain scent. His tiger purred. It's been four days, and he still couldn't believe he had actually claimed her. Now if he could just convince her to stay with him.

Later that morning, Kieran looked on as Mallory balanced precariously on a ladder, hanging silver and gold streamers along the inn's front porch. His tiger prowled nervously, urging him to stay close in case she slipped. The late December wind tousled her hair, carrying her rain-fresh scent to him.

"You know, I could do that for you," he called up, moving closer to steady the ladder.

"And deprive me of the satisfaction?" Mallory glanced down, her blue eyes dancing. "Besides, someone needs to supervise the fireworks setup."

"I'm supervising something alright." His gaze traced the curve of her legs. Since Christmas, touching her had become addictive. His tiger wanted to mark every inch of her as his.

"Eyes up here, tiger." She tossed a bundle of tinsel at his head. "Or these decorations will never get done."

Kieran caught the tinsel with shifter reflexes and grinned. "Can't blame a man for appreciating the view." He steadied the ladder as she descended, his hands finding her waist. "Especially when it's his wife."

"Fake wife," she corrected, but leaned into his touch.

"For now." The words slipped out without thinking. His tiger rumbled in approval - they both wanted her to stay, to make this arrangement permanent. The inn felt more alive with her here, and so did he.

Mallory's cheeks flushed pink. "We should check the firework setup."

He kept his arm around her waist as they walked to where the staff had laid out the New Year's display. The winter sun caught the frost on the bare trees, making everything sparkle. Just like the night they had first kissed under the mistletoe, magic seemed to crackle in the air between them.

"You know," he said, pulling her closer, "I was thinking we could add some permanent lighting out here. String lights in the trees, maybe some architectural spotlights. Really make the place glow year-round."

"That would be beautiful." Her eyes lit up the way they always did when discussing design. "We could do warm white lights to match the cottage aesthetic..."

His heart swelled at her use of 'we'. She belonged here - running the inn with him, making it more beautiful and more welcoming. Making him better.

Kieran soon watched with pride as Mallory charmed Daniel over their farewell lunch in The Hearthstone's finest dining room. His tiger preened every time the investor laughed at her witty observations or nodded appreciatively at her suggestions for future improvements to the inn.

"The DIY Christmas decorations were so inspired," Daniel said, dabbing his mouth with a napkin. "Such creativity under pressure - that's exactly what this business needs."

"Mallory's full of surprises," Kieran said, sliding his hand over hers on the table. The touch wasn't just for show anymore - not since Christmas. His tiger growled contentedly at the contact.

"Which is why," Daniel pulled out his checkbook, "I've decided to double my investment. The Hearthstone has never looked better, and your partnership clearly works." He began writing figures that made Kieran's eyes widen. "You've got something really special here."

"We're grateful for your faith in us," Mallory said smoothly, squeezing Kieran's hand.

After they bid Daniel farewell, Kieran pulled Mallory into his office, lifting her onto his desk. "You were amazing with Daniel at lunch. Have I told you how incredible you are?"

"Only about twelve times today." But she was smiling, that rare full smile that made his heart race.

"I mean it." He stepped between her legs, breathing in her rain-fresh scent. "These

past four weeks... you've transformed this place. The staff adores you, and the guests respect you." He traced her jawline with his thumb. "You truly belong here."

His tiger urged him to say more, to beg her to stay permanently. But he held back, not wanting to pressure her. She'd been through so much, lost so much. He would give her some more time to realize on her own that The Hearthstone could be her permanent home.

"We do make a good team," she admitted, playing with his tie.

"The best." He kissed her forehead, savoring her closeness. "Now come on - we've got a little celebrating to do."

Kieran stood next to Mallory, watching with pride as his staff crowded around her, their excited chatter filling the private dining room. His tiger rumbled with delight at how seamlessly she fit into their little family, how naturally she commanded respect while still maintaining that sharp wit he'd grown to love.

"To doubling our investment!" Charlotte raised her glass of champagne. "And to the dynamic duo who made it happen."

"Here's to Mallory showing Gregory what real class looks like," Amy chimed in, making everyone laugh.

Kieran's arm tightened around Mallory's waist as she tried to hide her face, a slight blush coloring her cheeks. His tiger hummed contentedly at her modest reaction - so different from the socialites he used to date who would have preened under the attention.

"I just did what needed to be done," Mallory said, but Kieran could hear the pleased note in her voice.

"You did more than that," he murmured in her ear. "You made this place better. Definitely made me better."

The staff broke into smaller groups, sharing stories about their favorite Mallory moments. His tiger practically jumped up and down hearing how she'd helped Amy handle difficult guests, how she'd taught the kitchen staff new organization techniques, and how she'd even gotten shy Chase to open up.

"Remember when she told off those teenagers who were harassing the housekeeping staff?" Charlotte said. "I thought their eyes would pop out of their heads."

"Or when she redesigned the lobby display in an hour after Gregory's 'accident' with the previous one," Amy added.

Kieran watched Mallory interact with their staff, her genuine smile lighting up her face as she traded quips with them. His tiger paced desperately inside him, wanting to make her understand this was where she needed to be - with him, with their family at The Hearthstone.

But logically, he just had to be patient. She was still learning to trust in happiness again. For now, he was content to hold her close and watch her bloom in the warmth of their makeshift family's love.

"You keep staring," she whispered, turning in his arms.

"Can't help myself." He pressed his lips to hers, claiming her mouth with a fierce yet tender kiss.

The shrill fire alarm pierced through Kieran's blissful moment with Mallory, making his tiger bristle at the interruption. The taste of champagne still lingered on his lips from their kiss when Charlotte burst through the door, her usually composed

demeanor shattered.

"Fire! The roof's on fire!" Charlotte's voice carried over the alarm's wailing.

Kieran's protective instincts surged as he grabbed Mallory's hand, leading the charge outside with his staff close behind. The December air hit his face, carrying the acrid smell of smoke that made his sensitive tiger nose twitch.

Orange flames licked up the side of his beloved inn, casting demonic shadows across the pristine snow. His tiger roared inside him, demanding action, but he forced himself to pause and assess the situation. The fire seemed concentrated on the eastern corner of the roof, right above the newly installed electrical system.

"Gregory," he growled, his voice dropping to a dangerous octave. The chaos witch's scent still lingered in the air, mixed with the distinct tang of chaos magic.

Mallory squeezed his hand, her platinum hair reflecting the flames' glow. "We need to act fast before it spreads."

The sight of his mate's determined expression, combined with the horror on his staff's faces as they watched their home burn, made Kieran's blood boil. His tiger clawed at his insides, desperate to protect what was his.

"Charlotte, call the fire department," he ordered, his tone holding the authority of an alpha. "Everyone else, get the guests out. Now."

The flames crackled mockingly above them, sending sparks dancing through the air like twisted fireflies.

"This ends tonight," he murmured, his eyes reflecting the fire's glow. "No more games."

23

MALLORY

Mallory's expression hardened as she watched the staff's faces contort with horror. The Hearthstone wasn't just Kieran's home - it had become hers too over these past weeks. Her protection spell should have prevented this. Gregory must have found a way to disable it, or he was more powerful than she had anticipated. The thought made her stomach clench.

Taking a deep breath, Mallory reached for her magic. The familiar electric tingle coursed through her veins as she focused on summoning just enough rain to douse the flames licking at the eastern corner of the roof. Not too much - she couldn't risk losing control. A small, concentrated cloud formed above the burning section.

"Look!" Charlotte pointed toward the side of the building. "There's Gregory!"

Before Mallory could blink, Kieran shifted. His massive tiger form bounded across the snow, his powerful muscles rippling as he tackled Gregory to the ground. Gregory yelped as Kieran's massive paw pinned him down.

Relief soon flooded through Mallory as her targeted rain cloud extinguished the last of the flames. For once, her powers had cooperated perfectly. The small victory filled her chest with warmth.

"Get your filthy paws off my husband!" Vivian's shrill voice cut through the night air as she stormed toward them, her designer boots crunching in the snow.

"Your husband just committed arson," Mallory said, moving to stand between Vivian and Kieran. "He's not going anywhere."

"You have no proof," Vivian sneered, her perfectly manicured hand clutching her designer purse.

"Besides the fact that multiple witnesses just saw him running from the scene?" Mallory crossed her arms. "I'm sure the security cameras caught everything too."

Gregory squirmed under Kieran's paw, his usually impeccable suit now covered in snow and mud. "This is assault! I'll sue!"

Kieran growled, a deep rumbling sound that made even Mallory's spine tingle. He pressed his paw down a little harder, making Gregory wheeze.

"Careful, darling," Mallory said to Kieran, though she couldn't help smirking. "We wouldn't want to wrinkle his suit any further."

Vivian's perfectly painted lips twisted into a snarl. She yanked a crystal pendant from her neck, ancient runes carved into its surface glowing an eerie blue. "You think you're so clever, don't you?"

The air crackled with magical energy as Vivian traced patterns in the air. Suddenly, the ground beneath Mallory's feet shifted and buckled. She leaped back just as spikes of ice erupted where she had been standing.

Thunder rumbled overhead as Mallory's anger built. She tried to keep her emotions in check, but seeing Vivian attack the place she had grown to love made that difficult. Wind whipped around them, catching Vivian's designer scarf, and sending it flying.

"My Hermès!" Vivian shrieked. She slashed her hand through the air, sending a wave

of force that shattered the inn's front windows.

Glass tinkled to the ground as Mallory's control slipped further. Lightning crackled across the sky, illuminating Kieran's massive tiger form still pinning Gregory down. His blue eyes met hers, full of concern and trust.

"Stay back!" Mallory called to Charlotte and the staff. "And someone call the police now!"

Vivian's runes pulsed brighter as reality warped around them. Tree branches twisted into grasping claws, trying to snag Mallory's clothes. The snow beneath her feet turned to quicksand.

Drawing on her power, Mallory summoned a gust of wind that lifted her clear of the trap. Lightning struck the transformed trees, reducing them to ash. Her hair whipped around her face as the storm grew stronger.

"You're nothing but a temporary distraction," Vivian spat, conjuring more magical traps. "Once you're gone, The Hearthstone will crumble."

"Lux Grove will never be as special as The Hearthstone and you know it." Mallory's voice floated on the wind as rain began to fall. She could feel her control fraying at the edges, the storm wanting to grow wild and destructive.

Kieran growled encouragement as Mallory faced off with Vivian. His tail lashed back and forth, clearly wanting to help but unwilling to let Gregory escape and join forces with Vivian.

Lightning crackled through Mallory's fingertips as she deflected another of Vivian's attacks. The rune witch's spells glowed with an eerie blue light, but Mallory matched each blast with her own power. Her storm magic surged through her veins, stronger

than she had ever felt it before.

"Is that the best you can do?" Mallory taunted, summoning a gust that sent Vivian stumbling backward. For once, she didn't fear her own power. The Hearthstone needed protecting, and she would do whatever it took.

Vivian snarled, her perfect makeup running in the rain. "You think you're so special? Watch this."

Before Mallory could react, Vivian's runes flashed brilliant white. A beam of energy struck Kieran, sending him flying backward into the inn's stone wall. His tiger form crumpled to the ground with a pained roar.

Something snapped inside Mallory. The careful control she had tried to maintain her entire life shattered like glass. Thunder boomed overhead as dark clouds swirled into existence, transforming the night sky into a tempest of her rage.

"You shouldn't have done that," Mallory growled. The strong wind whipped her hair around her face as lightning forked across the sky.

The storm responded to her fury, pelting Vivian with hail and buffeting her with gale-force winds. The rune witch tried to shield herself, but Mallory's power overwhelmed her defenses. Windows rattled in their frames and shutters banged against the inn's walls.

"No one hurts him!" Mallory yelled over the howling wind. She thrust both hands forward, channeling all her fury into one massive blast of lightning.

The bolt struck Vivian square in the chest. The rune witch's eyes rolled back as she collapsed into the snow, unconscious.

Only then did Mallory notice Kieran struggling to his feet. She had to stop this storm before it hurt anyone else. Closing her eyes, Mallory reached deep inside herself, gathering every scrap of willpower she possessed. Slowly and painfully, she reined in the tempest, forcing the winds to die down and the clouds to dissipate. Her whole body trembled with the effort, but she didn't stop until the last rumble of thunder faded away.

Mallory's legs were still trembling as she watched the paramedics load Vivian into the ambulance. Her hair hung in wet strands past her shoulders, and her clothes were soaked through from the storm she had created. The decorations she and Kieran had spent hours arranging earlier lay scattered and broken across the snow-covered ground.

But it wasn't the property damage that made her stomach churn. It was the way people stared at her - mothers pulling their children closer and onlookers whispering behind their hands, their faces twisted with fear and suspicion. The same looks she had received after the tornado incident.

"Did you see what she did?"

"Such destructive magic..."

"Someone could have been killed..."

Each whispered comment felt like a knife to her chest. She wrapped her arms tightly around herself, trying to make herself smaller as the familiar weight of isolation pressed down on her shoulders.

Some neighbors from the town backed up as Mallory passed, and the action sent a fresh wave of pain through her. This was exactly why she had chosen to live alone. Why she had built walls around her heart. Getting close to people only led to

destruction.

The deputy sheriff finished taking her statement, his pen scratching against his notepad as he cast wary glances her way. Even he kept his distance, as if afraid she might suddenly unleash another storm.

"Mallory." Kieran's deep voice cut through her spiral of dark thoughts. He limped toward her, still favoring his right side from where Vivian's spell had thrown him. Despite his injuries, his blue eyes blazed with intensity as he reached for her.

She stepped back, shaking her head. "Don't. I'm dangerous. Look what I did to your inn, to everything we worked for."

"You protected us," he growled, closing the distance between them despite her retreat. "You stopped them from burning down The Hearthstone."

"But at what cost?" Her voice cracked as she gestured to the frightened onlookers. "Everyone's terrified of me. Just like before. I shouldn't have stayed, shouldn't have let myself care-"

She turned and fled into the inn, her boots clicking against the polished floor as she raced through the lobby. Her chest felt tight, each breath burning as she fought back tears. The frightened whispers of the townspeople followed her like ghosts, reminding her of every reason she had chosen isolation in the first place.

"Mallory?" Amy called out from behind her, but Mallory couldn't stop. Couldn't face another person looking at her with that mixture of fear and pity.

She rushed down the hallway to her suite. Behind her, she heard Kieran's distinctive stride, hurried yet slightly uneven from his injury. The sound made her heart clench.

"Mallory, wait!" His deep voice called out, commanding and urgent.

She glanced quickly over her shoulder and caught a glimpse of Kieran's face - his blue eyes blazing with determination, and his jaw set in that stubborn way she had grown to love.

Love. The word sent another wave of pain through her. She had been so foolish to let herself fall in love with him, to imagine she could have any kind of normal life. The destruction outside proved what she had known all along - she was too dangerous to be around others.

Reaching her suite, her hands shook as she fumbled with the key. She could hear Kieran's footsteps growing closer. Of course he wouldn't give up easily - the tiger shifter was nothing if not persistent.

Once inside her room, she grabbed her duffel bag and started throwing clothes into it haphazardly. Tears blurred her vision as she worked, but she couldn't stop. She had to get out before she caused any more damage, before she hurt anyone else.

"I knew better," she whispered to herself, wiping roughly at her eyes. "I knew better than to think I could have this."

A knock rattled her door. "Mallory," Kieran's voice was rough with emotion. "Open the door. Please."

She pressed her hands over her ears, trying to block out the sound of his voice. The weather outside responded to her turmoil - wind howling incessantly against the windows as dark clouds gathered once again.

"I have to leave," she called back, her voice breaking. "I can't stay here."

24

KIERAN

Kieran lay sprawled across his king-sized bed staring at the ceiling as his tiger paced incessantly inside him. The scent of Mallory still clung to his sheets, a mix of rain and lightning that caused his chest to constrict. His fingers traced the spot where she had slept, the spot where she belonged.

"Damn it," he muttered, rolling onto his side. The curtains rustled with a gust of wind - probably Mallory's emotions affecting the weather again. He had tried texting her, calling her room phone, and even slipping notes under her door. Nothing.

The memory of her face when she had run away from him still haunted him. That look of horror and self-loathing didn't belong on someone who had just saved his life. Sure, a few windows had shattered, some trees lost branches, and some decorations were ruined, but who cared? The Hearthstone was insured, and frankly, Vivian had deserved worse for attacking them.

His tiger growled at the thought of Vivian. The rune witch's magic had felt like acid burning through his fur. If Mallory hadn't stepped in...

"You protected me," he said to the empty room. "You protected all of us. Why can't you see that?"

He pushed himself up, pacing the length of his suite. The sound of distant thunder made him pause at the window. Dark clouds gathered over the inn, matching

Mallory's mood. His tiger wanted to break down her door, to wrap her in his arms and not let go until she understood how incredible she was.

But he knew better. Mallory needed space to process everything. Pushing her now would only make her retreat further into herself. Still, every protective instinct in his body screamed to go to her.

"You're not a monster," he whispered, pressing his palm against the cool glass. "You're beautiful and fierce and exactly what this place needs." What I need, he added silently.

A crack of lightning split the sky, illuminating the damaged grounds below. Kieran's jaw clenched. To hell with the decorations. To hell with what anyone thought. He would rebuild it all twice over if it meant keeping Mallory here in his arms.

The question was: how could he convince her to stay long enough to see that?

Kieran soon prowled around his office, his tiger's restless energy making it impossible to sit still. The police report lay open on his desk - Gregory and Vivian Simmons, charged with multiple counts of vandalism, property damage, and attempted arson. Their mug shots showed them both looking considerably less polished than usual. Vivian's perfectly coiffed hair was singed at the ends from Mallory's lightning.

"Serves you right," he muttered, a satisfied growl rumbling through him. The charges would stick - they had dozens of witnesses, security footage, and Gregory had been caught quite literally red-handed. The Simmons wouldn't be bothering anyone for a long time.

But the victory felt hollow without Mallory here to share it. His tiger whined, missing her scent, her quiet strength, and the way she fit perfectly against him.

She thought she was dangerous and out of control - but all he had seen was her fierce protection of what mattered.

Thunder rolled outside again, and Kieran moved to the window. Dark clouds continued to swirl above The Hearthstone. His fingers pressed against the glass, wanting to reach out to Mallory.

"You saved us all," he whispered. "You're not cursed, sweetheart. You're a gift."

His heart ached knowing she was alone, probably convincing herself that isolation was the right answer. He wanted to show her that she didn't have to face life's storms alone anymore. That he would weather any tempest by her side, help her find balance, and be her anchor when things got rough.

"I love you," he said softly to the storm clouds. "Lightning bolts and all."

An hour later, Charlotte found Kieran slumped over his desk. Papers were scattered everywhere, and his hair was a mess from running his fingers through it repeatedly. His tiger's agitation showed in the constant tap of his foot against the hardwood floor.

"You look terrible," Charlotte said, setting a cup of coffee in front of him.

"Thanks for the confidence booster." He grabbed the coffee, inhaling the rich aroma. "What am I supposed to do, Charlotte? She won't talk to me."

Charlotte settled into the chair across from him, her motherly concern evident. "Give her some extra time to process. That girl's been carrying guilt and fear for so long, it's become a shield."

"A shield I want to tear down." His tiger growled with agreement.

"Patience, Kieran. Show her you're not going anywhere." Charlotte's eyes softened. "But don't give up on her either. Sometimes people need to be reminded they're worth fighting for."

Kieran stood abruptly, his chair scraping against the floor. "You're exactly right. She needs to hear that."

He strode through the halls of his inn, determination in every step. Outside Mallory's door, he caught her scent - rain and lightning mixed with sadness. His tiger whined.

"Mallory?" He pressed his palm against the door. "Please open up. Just for a minute."

Silence answered him, but he could smell she was close to the door. His heart pounded.

"Fine, I'll talk through the door then." He leaned his forehead against the wood. "What happened yesterday? That wasn't destruction - that was protection. You saved my life. Saved all of us actually."

Thunder rumbled outside, matching the emotion in his voice. "You're not dangerous, sweetheart. You're incredible. The way you make everyone feel like they matter, and the way you stand up for what you believe in." His voice cracked. "The way you make me feel whole."

The storm intensified outside, but Kieran pressed on, his words thick with emotion. "You don't have to be alone anymore. I'm right here, and I'm not going anywhere. Whatever storms life throws at us, we'll weather them together. I'll protect you, stand by you, and fight for you."

Tears pricked at his eyes, his tiger howling inside him. "Just please, don't shut me out."

His heart leapt when he heard the soft click of the door unlocking. Slowly, it creaked open, and there she was. Her blonde hair was tangled, and her blue eyes rimmed with red. She looked like she hadn't slept at all. Kieran's tiger rumbled softly in his chest, a mix of relief and frustration. She was here, but she was pulling away. Again.

"Kieran," she began, her voice trembling. "Thank you. What you said... it meant a lot. But you don't understand. Yesterday, I lost control. Again. And it's because I care too much. About this place. About the people. About... you." Her eyes welled up, and she looked away, her hands balled into fists. "The bridge will be open after New Year's Eve. I'm leaving then. It's for the best."

His stomach dropped. "What? No. Mallory, that's not—you can't just?—"

"I have to," she interrupted, her voice firm despite the tears. "I'm dangerous, Kieran. I hurt people when I lose control. And I can't risk that again. Not with you."

He stepped forward, his tiger's urgency bleeding into his voice. "You saved us. You protected everyone from Vivian. You're not dangerous, Mallory. You're powerful. There's a difference."

She shook her head, her arms crossing tightly over her chest. "Power like mine is a curse, not a gift. And you're better off without me."

"The hell I am," he shot back, his voice sharp. His tiger snarled inside him, demanding he close the distance, wrap her in his arms, and never let go. But he held himself back. Barely. "You're not a curse, Mallory. You're the best damn thing that's happened to this inn—and to me."

She let out a bitter laugh, tears spilling over. "You say that now, but what happens the next time I lose control? What if I hurt someone? What if I hurt you?"

"You won't," he said, his voice softening. He reached out, brushing a tear from her cheek. "Because I'm not going anywhere, sweetheart. I'll be here to help you through it. To remind you that you're not alone. That you don't have to carry this by yourself."

She pulled away, her face crumpling. "You don't get it, Kieran. I can't risk it. I won't."

Before he could respond, she stepped back and closed the door, the soft click of the lock echoing in the hallway. Kieran stared at the door, his jaw clenched so tight it hurt. His tiger was pacing, restless and furious, demanding he break it down and drag her back out where she belonged—by his side.

But he didn't. Instead, he leaned his forehead against the door, his voice low and rough. "You're wrong, Mallory. You're not cursed. You're not dangerous. You're amazing. You're strong. You're everything I've been looking for. And I'm not letting you go. Not now. Not ever."

He pushed off the door, his mind racing. She was leaving. After New Year's Eve. That gave him less than forty-eight hours to convince her to stay. To make her see that she wasn't a curse—that she was his future.

And if she thought he was going to let her walk out of his life without a fight, she didn't know him very well. The tiger in him huffed in agreement. This wasn't over. And he had no intention of losing the woman he loved without giving it everything he had.

25

MALLORY

Mallory folded her last remaining sweater with trembling fingers before placing it in her duffel bag. The soft cashmere reminded her of the way Kieran's hands had felt against her skin. She swallowed hard and turned to grab another item from the dresser.

"This is the right thing to do," she whispered to herself, her voice echoing in the empty suite. "The only thing to do."

The room felt colder now, stripped of the little touches that had made it feel like home these past weeks. No books scattered on the coffee table, no half-drunk tea cups by the window seat where she had spent hours watching the snow fall. Just bare surfaces and hollow spaces.

A burst of laughter filtered in from somewhere nearby as the staff prepared for tonight's New Year's Eve celebration. Mallory's chest tightened. She would miss Amy's sweetness, Charlotte's steady wisdom, and the rest of the staff's warm friendship. Most of all, she would miss...

"Stop it already," she commanded herself, zipping the duffel bag forcefully. "You knew this was temporary from the start."

But it hadn't felt temporary when she had kissed Kieran under the mistletoe, or when they had curled up together by the fire, or when he had looked at her like she was

something precious instead of dangerous. The memory of his touch sent phantom tingles down her spine.

Thunder rumbled loudly outside, responding to her turbulent emotions. She forced herself to take deep breaths, counting slowly to ten. She didn't need to cause another storm right now.

She walked to the window, pressing her forehead against the cool glass. The Hearthstone's grounds stretched out below, dusted with fresh snow. The damaged decorations had been cleared away, but she could still see the scorch marks on the roof where Gregory's fire had burned.

Her mind drifted back to that fateful night when she had lost control.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, though no one was there to hear. "I wanted so badly to belong here."

A tear slipped down her cheek. Outside, the clouds darkened ominously. She quickly wiped her eyes and stepped back from the window. She had to maintain control for one more day. Just one more day, and then she could return to her solitary existence where she couldn't hurt anyone ever again.

Even if the thought of never waking up in Kieran's arms again made her heart feel like it was being torn in two.

Suddenly, a sharp knock rattled Mallory's door, making her jump. "I'm not leaving until you open up," Kieran's voice carried through the wood, deep and determined. "I'll camp out here all night if I have to."

Mallory pressed her lips together, knowing full well he meant it. The tiger shifter's stubborn streak matched her own. After a moment's hesitation, she opened the door to

find Kieran filling the frame, his auburn hair slightly disheveled as if he'd been running his hands through it.

"You're going to be late for the party," he said, his blue eyes sweeping over her casual attire of jeans and an oversized sweater.

"I wasn't planning on going." Mallory crossed her arms, trying to ignore how good he looked in his dark suit. "I think it's better if I stay here."

"Not a chance." Kieran stepped into her space, his presence overwhelming her senses. "This is your goodbye party too, whether you like it or not."

"Kieran..." She glanced away, heat rising to her cheeks. "After what happened with the decorations?—"

"The decorations?" He caught her chin with gentle fingers, turning her face back to his. "You mean the cheap paper streamers and tinsel that took us all of two hours to replace? That's what you're worried about?"

"I lost control," she whispered, though her body betrayed her by leaning into his touch.

"No. Like I said before, you protected us," he replied, his thumb brushing across her cheek. "And even if every decoration, window, and tree had been destroyed beyond repair, it wouldn't matter. Things can be replaced, Mallory. You can't."

Her heart stuttered at the intensity in his voice. "I?—"

"Come to the party," he said, gentler now but no less commanding. "Let me show you off one last time, if that's really what your heart wants. Just don't hide away in here thinking you're not wanted."

The warmth of his hand on her face and the earnestness in his eyes made her resolve waver. "Fine," she conceded with a small smile. "Just let me change first."

Mallory slipped into the bathroom, leaving Kieran prowling around her suite's living area. She unzipped the garment bag containing Amy's black cocktail dress, her fingers trailing over the silky material. The dress hugged her curves perfectly when she put it on, the sweetheart neckline elegant without being too revealing. Her blonde hair fell in waves, and she touched up her makeup with trembling hands.

"You still alive in there?" Kieran's deep voice filtered through the door.

"Just finishing up," she called back, smoothing down the dress one final time.

When she emerged, Kieran's eyes darkened as they swept over her. He crossed the room in three long strides, reaching for her hand. "You look absolutely stunning."

Her cheeks warmed at the possessive gleam in his blue eyes. "Thank you."

He guided her through the inn's corridors, his large hand pressed against her lower back. The familiar touch sent a shiver through her. As they approached the event room, excited voices and music drifted out. Kieran pushed open the double doors, and Mallory gasped.

The entire ceiling was draped with handmade paper snowflakes and twinkling lights. Origami cranes hung in graceful chains between crystal-looking icicles crafted from clear plastic. Pine boughs wrapped in silver ribbon decorated every table.

"We took a page from your book," Kieran murmured in her ear. "Remember how you saved Christmas with your DIY decorations?"

Before she could reply, Amy bounded over. "Look what I made!" She pointed to an

intricate paper lantern.

The rest of the staff soon crowded around, each eager to show off their own creations.

"I never would have thought of using coffee filters for snowflakes," Chase said, grinning up at his handiwork.

Mallory blinked back tears as warmth bloomed in her. These people, who she had grown to care for so much, had taken her ideas and made them their own.

Charlotte appeared at her elbow, wrapping her in a motherly hug. "You saved this place, you know. Not just from the fire, but from becoming just another hotel. You made it special." She pulled back, fixing Mallory with a stern look. "And don't you dare think for one minute that you don't deserve to be loved and surrounded by people who care about you."

"I don't know what to say," Mallory whispered with tears in her eyes, overwhelmed by their acceptance and love.

"Say you'll dance with me," Kieran rumbled, pulling her close against his broad chest.

Kieran swept Mallory onto the dance floor, his strong arms guiding her into a perfect dance frame. The band played an upbeat jazz number, and Mallory soon found herself smiling as Kieran spun her expertly through the other couples.

"I didn't know you could dance like this," she said, admiring how confidently he moved.

"I was trying to keep it a secret." His blue eyes sparkled with mischief as he pulled her closer than strictly necessary. "Though I must admit, having such a beautiful partner makes it hard to hide."

Heat crept into Mallory's face at the compliment. The way he looked at her, like she was the only woman in the room, made her heart flutter traitorously. She tried to focus on the string lights twinkling overhead instead of how perfectly their bodies fit together.

"You're not so bad looking yourself," she quipped. Kieran flashed her that devastating smile of his and dipped her low, making her gasp.

"Show off," she muttered when he pulled her back up, though she couldn't hide her own smile.

They danced through several more songs, falling into an easy rhythm together. Mallory found herself relaxing despite her best intentions, letting herself enjoy these final moments with him. The warmth of his hand on her lower back, the subtle scent of his cologne, the rumble of his laugh when she made a sarcastic comment about the drunk couple stumbling nearby - she tried to memorize it all.

"Thirsty?" Kieran asked after their third dance, though he didn't look the least bit winded.

"A little," she admitted.

"Stay right here." He pressed a gentle kiss to her temple before striding off toward the bar, moving with the fluid grace of his tiger form even in human shape.

Mallory watched him go, absently touching the spot where his lips had brushed her skin. She knew she should maintain more distance, make leaving easier tomorrow. But Kieran had a way of demolishing all her walls without even trying.

The band switched to a slower song, and Kieran returned with two champagne flutes. "Perfect timing," he said, handing her one before pulling her back into his arms. "One

last dance before midnight?"

She nodded, unable to resist the tender look in his eyes. She rested her head against his chest as they swayed together, listening to his steady heartbeat. For just this moment, she let herself pretend this wasn't ending.

The crisp winter air nipped at her face as the party spilled out onto the snow-dusted grounds. Kieran's suit jacket draped warmly around her, carrying his earthy scent. Her heart ached knowing these were their last moments together.

"Five minutes to midnight!" Charlotte called out, distributing sparklers to the gathered crowd.

Mallory turned to face Kieran, his blue eyes reflecting the dancing lights around them. "Thank you for dragging me out here tonight. It was... perfect."

His large hand cupped her cheek, his thumb brushing across her skin. "Stay."

"Kieran, please." She placed her hand over his. "Let's just... let's just have this moment."

A low rumble vibrated in his chest, but he nodded. "You're right. But know this - you will have a home here, Mallory. Always."

She blinked back tears, determined not to let her emotions trigger a storm. "These past weeks with you, with everyone... they've meant everything to me."

"Three minutes!" someone shouted.

Kieran pulled her closer, his arms wrapping possessively around her waist. "Then let's make these last minutes count."

She relaxed against his chest, memorizing the steady thrum of his heartbeat. Around them, guests chatted excitedly, and staff members arranged the fireworks. The air crackled with anticipation.

"One minute!"

"Kiss me like you mean it, tiger," Mallory whispered, tilting her face up to his.

His eyes darkened with desire. "As my wife commands."

"Ten! Nine! Eight!"

Kieran's grip tightened.

"Seven! Six! Five!"

Mallory's fingers curled into his shirt.

"Four! Three! Two! One!"

"Happy New Year!"

He captured her lips in a searing kiss that caused her toes to curl. Fireworks exploded overhead, painting the sky in brilliant colors, but she barely noticed. All she could focus on was the heat of his mouth on hers, the strength of his arms around her, and the way her heart seemed to beat in perfect sync with his. For a brief moment, she let herself believe in forever with him.

26

KIERAN

Kieran and Mallory's kiss soon broke, but the tension between them didn't. He could feel her breath hitch, her body pressed flush against his, and her hands still gripping the fabric of his shirt like she was afraid to let go. The fireworks outside had faded, but the spark between them was blazing. He leaned in, his lips brushing the shell of her ear, his voice low and rough with need.

"If this is our last night together," he whispered, the words barely audible over the distant hum of the party, "let's make it one we'll remember."

She hesitated, her light blue eyes searching his face. For a moment, he thought she would pull away, and retreat into the safety of her isolation. But then she nodded, a small, almost imperceptible movement, and that was all the confirmation he needed.

He didn't wait. He took her hand, leading her through the inn, and into his suite. The moment the door shut behind them, the air shifted. It was electric, charged with something raw and undeniable.

Their hands soon moved in sync, desperate and wanting, tugging at buttons, zippers, anything that stood between them. Kieran's shirt was gone in seconds, and her fingers traced the lines of his chest, sending tingles through his entire body. He returned the favor, peeling her dress off her, and letting it pool at her feet.

He stepped back for just a second, taking her in—her platinum hair tumbled over her

shoulder, her eyes dark with desire, and her body trembling ever so slightly. She was breathtaking.

Kieran let out a low growl, the sound almost primal, as he lifted her off the ground and pressed her up against the wall. Her legs immediately wrapped around his waist as his hand roamed over her curves, her skin warm and soft under his touch. His lips found her neck, trailing hot, open-mouthed kisses along her collarbone. She gasped, her fingers digging into his shoulders.

"Kieran," she breathed, her voice barely a whisper, and it was all he needed to hear.

He adjusted his grip, his hands firm on her hips, and then he was inside her, both of them letting out a shared moan. It was desperate and hungry, every movement filled with a sense of urgency, as if they both knew this might be the last time.

Kieran's thoughts were a jumble—Mallory's name repeating in his head, the feel of her around him, and the way she clung to him like he was the only thing keeping her grounded. He wanted to tell her everything—how she had changed him, how he didn't want this to end, and how he couldn't imagine the inn or his life without her.

But words were beyond him now. All he could do was show her, with every thrust, every kiss, and every touch.

Her nails scraped down his back, and he hissed, the sharp sting only fueling his desire. He pressed harder and deeper, his rhythm steady but unrelenting. Her breath came in short, uneven gasps, her body tightening around him, and he knew she was close.

"Look at me," he breathed, his voice thick with need, and her eyes snapped open, locking onto his.

It was then that he felt her come undone. Her body shuddered against his as her orgasm washed over her in waves. He followed her over the edge, his own release hitting him like a tidal wave, wild and unstoppable.

They stayed like that for a moment, their bodies pressed together, and their breathing heavy and uneven. Slowly, Kieran lowered her back to the ground, his hands lingering on her waist.

She looked up at him, her cheeks flushed, and her lips swollen from their kisses. "That was..." she started, but her voice trailed off, as if she couldn't find the words.

"Yeah," Kieran finished for her, his voice still rough from his desire, but there was a softness in his eyes. "It was."

She gave him a small, almost shy smile, and he felt his heart clench. He wasn't quite ready for this to end.

He looked at her naked body, still breathless from their encounter. The warm glow of the suite's living room lights cast a soft hue on her skin, and he couldn't help but admire her—how she fit into his space, his life, even if it was only temporary. The thought of it being their last night together gnawed at him, but he shoved it aside, determined to make this moment count.

"You look like you could use some relaxation," he said, his voice warm and teasing, though his eyes held a serious edge. He reached out, brushing a strand of hair from her face before gesturing toward the jacuzzi tucked in the corner of his suite. "What do you say, Mallory? Let's soak for a bit. You deserve it after... well, everything."

She glanced at him, her blue eyes glinting with something he couldn't quite place. After a moment, she gave him a slight nod, the corners of her lips twitching into the faintest smile. "Alright, tiger. Lead the way."

He grinned at the nickname, his chest swelling with pride. "Careful with the pet names," he said as he took her hand, leading her toward the jacuzzi. "Might give a guy ideas."

She chuckled softly, and the sound made something in him tighten. He loved that laugh, loved that he could coax it out of her.

He turned on the jets, the water bubbling to life, and they stepped in together, the heat immediately soothing their muscles. Mallory sank into the water with a soft sigh, her head tipping back against the edge and her eyes closing. Kieran watched her for a moment, his chest tightening. She looked so damn beautiful, so at peace, and the thought of her leaving tomorrow—walking out of his life—was almost too much to bear.

But he wasn't going to let that thought ruin tonight. Not now.

He moved closer, the water swirling around them, and slid an arm around her waist, pulling her into him. Her eyes fluttered open, and she tilted her head to look up at him, her expression soft but curious.

"You're still tense," he murmured, his hand running up and down her back under the water. "Thought you were supposed to be relaxing."

She arched a brow, though her lips twitched. "Maybe I'd relax more if you weren't so... distracting."

He smirked, his alpha instincts kicking in. "Distracting, huh? I'll take that as a compliment."

Before she could say anything, he leaned in, capturing her lips in a slow, lingering kiss. Her hands immediately went to his shoulders, her fingers digging into his skin as

she kissed him back. The heat between them flared up again. Kieran didn't fight it—didn't want to. He deepened the kiss, his tongue sliding against hers. His hands roamed over her body, pulling her closer until there was no space left between them.

"Kieran," she breathed against his mouth, her voice full of need.

"Yeah?" he murmured, his lips trailing down her neck. "What do you want, Mallory?"

She didn't answer with words. Instead, she turned him, pressing his back against the wall of the jacuzzi, and climbed into his lap, her legs straddling his hips. His breath hitched as she reached between them, her small hand wrapping around his hard length, and guided him to her entrance.

Slowly, she sank down onto him, her body tight and warm around him. Kieran growled low, his hands gripping her hips as she began to move. Their pace was steady at first, a slow, almost torturous rhythm that had him gritting his teeth, his entire body coiling with tension.

But then she leaned in, her lips brushing against his ear, her breath hot and uneven. "Faster," she whispered, and it was all the encouragement he needed.

He thrust up into her, their movements growing desperate and hungry again, the water sloshing around them as they moved together. Kieran's hands roamed over her body, cupping her breasts, sliding down her back, and gripping her hips as he drove into her, each thrust bringing them closer to the edge.

"That's it," he growled, his voice rough with need. "Let go."

Her breath hitched, and then she was coming, her body convulsing around him, her hands gripping his shoulders as she cried out. Kieran followed her over the edge, his

own release hitting him hard. Waves of pleasure crashed over him as he spilled inside her, his arms tightening around her as they both gasped for air.

For a moment, they just stayed like that, their foreheads pressed together, and their breathing uneven. Kieran's heart was racing, his mind a jumble of emotions—satisfaction, desire, and something deeper.

When she finally pulled back, her cheeks red and her eyes bright, she gave him a warm smile.

Kieran felt a surge of pride. He might not be able to keep her, but he had made damn sure she remembered him.

MALLORY

The morning light filtered through the sheer curtains of Mallory's room and cast a soft golden glow on the now empty space. Her packed duffel bag sat by the door, the books Kieran had given her for Christmas tucked safely inside. She ran a hand over the dresser, her fingers lingering on the polished wood. The room had been her temporary haven, but now it felt like she was about to leave a piece of herself behind.

Kieran stood by the door, his broad shoulders filling the frame. He crossed his arms, and his blue eyes locked onto her with an intensity that caused her stomach to flip. "You sure you don't want to stay for breakfast? Charlotte made pancakes," he said, his tone light but his gaze heavy.

Mallory forced a smile, though her chest tightened. "Tempting, but I should get going before the roads get busy." She grabbed her duffel bag and slung it over her shoulder, the weight of it grounding her. She needed to leave. She had to. Isolation was her sanctuary, her safety net. But part of her wished Kieran would argue and tell her to stay. Instead, he just nodded and stepped aside, his jaw tight.

They walked down the hall toward the lobby, the scent of fresh coffee and pancakes wafting through the air. Mallory's heart ached with every step. She hated this. Hated the way her resolve wavered every time she looked at him. Last night had been... everything. And now she was walking away, pretending it didn't matter.

Kieran reached for her bag. "Let me carry that."

"I've got it," she said, pulling it closer.

He raised an eyebrow, the corner of his mouth quirking up. "Still stubborn, huh?"

"Always," she shot back, though her voice lacked its usual bite.

Mallory's heart sank as they reached the lobby. The warm space had become so familiar – the crackling fireplace with its ornate mantle, the holiday garlands still draped across the reception desk, the antique grandfather clock ticking away in the corner. What had once felt like a strange place now felt like home, and leaving it behind felt like ripping off a piece of herself.

Charlotte stood near the front desk, her eyes already glistening with unshed tears. The older woman had become almost like a mother to Mallory over the past month, always ready with advice or a cup of tea when things got overwhelming.

"There you are," Charlotte said, her voice wavering slightly as she crossed the room and pulled Mallory into a tight hug. "I was afraid you might sneak out without saying goodbye."

"I wouldn't dare," Mallory replied, returning the embrace. The manager smelled like cinnamon and fresh laundry. "You'd hunt me down."

"You know I would," Charlotte confirmed, patting Mallory's cheek affectionately. "The door's always open if you change your mind, dear."

Amy hurried over from behind the desk, her red curls bouncing. "I made you snacks for the road!" She thrust a paper bag into Mallory's hands. "Those chocolate chip cookies you liked so much, and some of those weird healthy granola things you pretend to enjoy."

Mallory laughed despite herself. "They're not weird, they're nutritious."

"Same difference," Amy insisted, pulling her into a hug. "Please don't go. Who's going to help me deal with cranky guests now?"

"You're perfectly capable," Mallory assured her. "Plus, you have Charlotte and Kieran."

Chase stepped forward awkwardly. "The inn won't be the same without you, Mrs. Striker." He still used her fake title, which made this even harder.

"Just Mallory," she corrected gently. "And thank you for everything, Chase. Keep an eye on that northern pipe for me."

When she finally turned to Kieran, Mallory found him watching her intently, his powerful frame radiating tension. His blue eyes burned into hers, and for a moment, she forgot everyone else was there.

"So," he said, his deep voice rumbling in his chest. "This is it."

Mallory swallowed hard. "This is it."

He stepped closer, his presence filling her space in that way only he could. "Thank you," he said, "for everything you've done here."

"Thank you," she countered, "for letting me be part of this place, even temporarily." Her voice caught on the last word. "I'll never forget my time at the Hearthstone... or with you."

Kieran's jaw tightened, and without warning, he pulled her against him, his mouth capturing hers in a kiss that made her knees weak. It wasn't gentle or polite – it was

possessive and demanding, a statement more than a goodbye. Mallory found herself responding despite her better judgment, her fingers gripping the front of his shirt.

When they broke apart, she could see the stubborn determination in his eyes, but he said nothing more as she picked up her bag and turned toward the door.

This was for the best, she told herself as she stepped outside. The cold January air hit her face, stinging her eyes – or perhaps those were tears. Either way, she didn't look back.

Mallory kept her chin up as she marched toward her SUV, each step taking monumental effort as she fought the urge to collapse into tears. Her keys dug into her palm, the physical pain a welcome distraction from the emotional hurricane brewing inside her. She had made the right choice. The responsible choice. So why did it feel like she was tearing her own heart out?

The parking lot stretched before her like a vast, empty wasteland, her dark blue SUV waiting faithfully at the far end. Just get to the car, she told herself. Don't look back. Don't think about his smile, or the way his eyes crinkled at the corners when he laughed, or how perfectly your head fit against his chest...

"MALLORY!"

The deep, commanding voice cut through her thoughts like lightning. Heavy footfalls pounded the pavement behind her, growing louder with each second. Mallory froze, her breath catching. She didn't turn, couldn't bear to see him one more time. It would break what little resolve she had left.

"Mallory, wait." Kieran's voice was closer now, slightly breathless. "Look at me."

She turned slowly, her heart slamming against her chest. Kieran stood barely a foot

away, his broad shoulders heaving, his auburn hair disheveled. His blue eyes burned with an intensity that stole what little breath she had left.

"What are you doing?" she managed, hating how her voice trembled.

"Something I should have done days ago." He closed the short distance between them in one stride, his hands gripping her shoulders. "You can't leave."

"I have to?—"

"No." The single word was like a command, brooking no argument. "You're running scared, and I get it. But you're dead wrong if you think you're meant to be alone."

Mallory shook her head, snowflakes beginning to drift down around them. Perfect timing, as always. "Look," she said, pointing upward. "It's already starting. I'm not safe to be around."

"A little snow never hurt anyone," Kieran said, brushing a flake from her cheek with his thumb. "You're not a curse, Mallory. You're a blessing. Do you have any idea how much better a man I am because you crashed into my life?"

"Kieran—"

"I can't do this without you." His voice dropped lower, more vulnerable than she had ever heard from the typically confident tiger shifter. "I don't want to. Every room in that inn will echo with your absence."

The snow fell faster, circling them in a private little storm. Mallory closed her eyes, feeling her control slipping.

"What if I hurt someone else? What if next time it's much worse?"

"Then we'll face it together." His hands moved to cup her face, forcing her to meet his gaze. "Don't you get it? We're stronger together. Whatever comes, whatever storms—literal or figurative—we can handle them."

Mallory's heart twisted painfully. Even now, even after seeing what she could do, he wasn't afraid.

"If you truly can't stay here," he continued, his thumbs stroking her cheekbones, "then I'll come with you. I'll pack up right now. The inn, the business—none of it matters if you're not in my life."

The snow slowed its descent, hovering midair around them in a picture-perfect moment. Mallory stared at him, stunned by the conviction in his voice, the rawness in his expression.

He really just offered to give up his entire world for her.

"You can't give up the Hearthstone," she finally said, her voice but a whisper. "This place is your dream. Your creation."

Kieran's blue eyes blazed with fierce determination. "And you're more important than any of that."

His words hit her like a powerful physical force. No one had ever put her first like this—not since Eli. The realization crashed over her, completely washing away the walls she'd built around her heart.

"That's the most idiotic, wonderful thing anyone has ever said to me." A laugh bubbled up from somewhere deep inside her, and the snowflakes around them began to drift gently downward again—but this time, they sparkled with sunlight breaking through the clouds above.

"I mean it," Kieran said, his hands warm against her cheeks as he still cupped them.
"Inn or no inn. I choose you."

Mallory shook her head gently. "No. You don't have to choose."

She saw confusion cross his face, those striking features tensing as he tried to understand. A warmth spread through her chest, melting the last of her reservations.

"I don't want you to leave this place," she continued, placing her palm against his cheek. "I want to stay here... with you."

Kieran went still. "Say that again."

"I want to stay," Mallory repeated, stronger now. "This place, these people—you. It's become my dream too."

His answering smile was blindingly beautiful. Without warning, he lifted her completely off the ground, spinning her in a circle as a triumphant laugh erupted from his chest. The sound echoed across the parking lot, pure joy in audio form.

"Put me down!" Mallory protested, though she couldn't stop her own laughter.

"Not a chance." But he set her down anyway, keeping her firmly in his arms. "You're never getting away from me again." His voice dropped to that low, possessive rumble that sent shivers racing through her.

"Is that so?" She arched an eyebrow, trying for skepticism despite the smile she couldn't suppress.

"That's most definitely so."

The morning sun broke fully through the clouds, bathing them in golden light as Mallory realized she had never felt so sure and so right about anything. This incredible, stubborn man who refused to let her isolate herself even when she had tried her hardest to push him away.

He leaned down, his mouth claiming hers with a possessiveness that made her entire body weak. His kiss was a declaration, a promise, and a claim. And Mallory returned it with equal fervor, her hands sliding into his hair.

When they finally pulled apart, Mallory felt light-headed, as though she might float away if Kieran's strong arms weren't anchoring her to the earth.

"Welcome home, Mallory," he murmured against her lips.

28

KIERAN

Kieran woke before dawn on Christmas morning, his body instinctively curling around Mallory's sleeping form. The scent of her hair—fresh rain with a hint of ozone that marked her storm magic—filled his senses. A year together, and still every morning felt like a precious gift.

He pressed a kiss to her shoulder and slipped out of bed, careful not to wake her. The Hearthstone needed its daily inspection before he could truly enjoy Christmas with her.

The inn hummed with holiday energy. Kieran moved through the halls with quiet authority, his tiger instincts alert for any problems. Charlotte had outdone herself with the decorations this year—evergreen garlands studded with twinkling lights, red velvet bows, and the massive tree in the lobby topped with their special mosaic DIY star from last Christmas.

"Morning, boss." Amy beamed from behind the front desk, handing him a clipboard. "Everything's on schedule. The Christmas breakfast starts at eight."

"Perfect." Kieran scanned the list, making mental notes. "Any issues with the Johnson family in Room 201?"

"Not since Mallory talked to them yesterday. Whatever she said worked—they haven't complained about the heating once."

Kieran grinned with pride. "She can outmatch even my most demanding guests."

After finishing his rounds, Kieran returned to their suite with two mugs of hot chocolate. He found Mallory sitting cross-legged on the floor by their small Christmas tree, already dressed in a soft blue sweater that matched the winter sky outside.

"Merry Christmas, beautiful." He set the mugs down and pulled her up into his arms, lifting her slightly off the ground with ease.

"Careful, tiger." Mallory's eyes sparkled as she wrapped her arms around his neck. Gone was the woman who had been afraid to feel anything for fear of triggering her powers. Now she channeled her emotions with growing confidence. "I've been practicing something special."

She held out her palm where a tiny, perfect snowflake formed and hovered, glittering with controlled magic.

"Look at you." Pride surged through Kieran. "From hiding in isolation to crafting individual snowflakes in our suite."

"All thanks to you." She closed her hand, the snowflake disappearing. "Amazing what happens when a stubborn tiger refuses no for an answer."

Kieran pulled her close, his voice low and possessive. "Best decision I ever made, chasing after you that day. The Hearthstone has never been more successful."

"Because my decorating skills are superior to yours?" She raised an eyebrow.

"Because you belong here, with me." He brushed his thumb across her cheekbone. "You were brilliant yesterday at the investor meeting. Remember their faces when

you demonstrated your controlled weather system for the outdoor gardens?"

Mallory smiled, a touch of her old vulnerability showing through. "It feels good to use my power to create beauty instead of destruction."

"You never destroyed anything that couldn't be rebuilt." Kieran nodded toward the pile of presents under the tree. "Should we?"

"Breakfast duties first." Mallory tapped his chest with one finger. "Charlotte will have our heads if we're late."

"The staff can wait." Kieran caught her hand, bringing it to his lips. "I'm not letting you go anywhere until I've properly celebrated having you in my life for a full year."

"You're impossible." But Mallory's smile told him she wouldn't have it any other way.

Kieran and Mallory settled on their plush carpet, the small Christmas tree casting multicolored shadows across her face. He couldn't help the predatory satisfaction that surged through him as she leaned against his shoulder. A year ago, she had been ready to flee back to isolation for good. Now she was his, completely and utterly.

"Ladies first," he said, pushing a neatly wrapped box toward her.

Mallory's fingers deftly removed the wrapping paper, revealing a first-edition copy of her all-time favorite novel. Her gasp of delight sent warmth curling through his chest.

"How did you find this?" Her eyes widened with genuine surprise. "I've been searching for years!"

"I have my sources." Kieran tapped the side of his nose, enjoying her reaction. "A

tiger always hunts down what his mate desires."

She rolled her eyes at his possessive tone but couldn't hide her laughter. That was what he loved most about the new Mallory—she no longer fought to conceal her emotions. Her laughter came freely now, her smile unrestricted.

"Your turn." She pushed a rectangular package into his hands.

Kieran tore through the wrapping with less finesse than she had shown. Inside was a handcrafted leather-bound journal with the inn's logo embossed on the front.

"Open it," Mallory urged.

Inside, she had sketched designs for The Hearthstone's expansion—the outdoor gardens they'd been planning, complete with her annotations about weather-resistant materials and seasonal plantings.

"You've been holding out on me." Kieran traced the detailed drawings with appreciation. "These are remarkable."

"I may have consulted with a few professionals," she admitted, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

They continued exchanging gifts—a new watch for him, cashmere sweaters for her, books they'd mentioned wanting to read, and small tokens that proved how well they had come to know each other's tastes. With each present, Kieran's fingers brushed against the small box in his pocket, his heart rate increasing incrementally.

When the last visible gift had been opened, Mallory began gathering the discarded wrapping paper.

"We should really head out now. Charlotte will be expecting us to make an appearance at breakfast." She started to rise, but Kieran's hand shot out, catching her wrist.

"Not yet." His voice was firm, brooking no arguments. "There's one more."

Her eyebrows furrowed in confusion as she settled back onto the floor beside him. "You're being mysterious."

Kieran reached into his pocket, his fingers closing around the small velvet box.

"Close your eyes," he instructed.

"Demanding," she quipped, but complied.

Kieran's heart hammered now in his chest as he held the velvet box in his outstretched palm. The room suddenly felt too warm, his tiger instincts heightening every sensation—Mallory's gentle breathing, the pine scent of their Christmas tree, the distant sounds of holiday cheer from the inn's lobby.

"Okay, open your eyes," he commanded softly, his voice deeper than usual.

When Mallory's eyes fluttered open, widening at the sight of the small box in his palm, Kieran studied every flicker of emotion that crossed her face. The slight parting of her lips, the catch in her breath, the tears forming in her eyes. He wanted to remember this moment perfectly.

"Kieran..." she whispered.

With deliberate movements, he flipped open the box, revealing the platinum ring with its center diamond surrounded by smaller blue stones that matched her eyes.

"A year ago, you tried to run from me," he said, his blue eyes never leaving hers. "And I decided then that I would never let that happen again." He reached for her left hand, holding it firmly within his. "You were meant to be mine from the moment I first saw you in the lobby of my inn."

A smile spread across her face. "Is this your way of making our fake marriage real?"

"This is my way of finally claiming what I knew should be mine all along." He took the ring from its cushion. "I was a man without direction before you. Running an inn, chasing meaningless things." He shook his head. "Then you stormed in—literally bringing your powerful weather with you—and everything changed."

Mallory's eyes glistened. "I thought I was so cursed."

"You were never cursed. You just hadn't found your true home yet," Kieran said softly, sliding the ring onto her finger with possessive satisfaction. "You and me, here together, we balance each other perfectly." His fingers tightened around hers. "Will you marry me, Mallory?"

A single tear escaped down Mallory's cheek, and above them Kieran noted that a small cloud had formed near their ceiling, sprinkling gentle snowflakes that evaporated before reaching them.

"Yes," she said softly, her fingers closing around his. "Of course, yes."

Kieran pulled her into his arms, and held her close, a rumbling sound of satisfaction emanating from deep within him. "All mine," he murmured against her hair.

"All yours," she agreed, then pulled back slightly. "But if you think this means I'll stop correcting your ridiculous choices for the inn, you're mistaken."

Kieran laughed, lifting her completely off the ground and spinning her once. "I wouldn't want it any other way." He set her down and brushed her cheek. "I love you, Mallory. Every lightning strike and every raindrop."

"And I love you, Kieran. Every growl and every stubborn declaration."

Kieran pulled Mallory closer against him, his fingers threading through her hair as he captured her lips with his. The kiss was fierce and claiming, a physical declaration of everything she meant to him. The diamond ring glittered on her finger—his mark, his promise, his future secured at last. The tiger within him purred with delighted satisfaction, the predatory need to claim his mate finally fulfilled.

"Forever mine now," he breathed against her mouth, tasting the saltiness of her happy tears.

Mallory melted against him, her slender frame fitting perfectly against his larger one. The small cloud above them expanded slightly, dusting them with more delicate snowflakes—a sure sign of her heightened positive emotions. Kieran smiled against her lips. He loved how her storm magic responded to her feelings, especially when those feelings were for him.

"I've wanted to do this since last Christmas," he admitted, pulling back just enough to see her face, but keeping her firmly in his arms. "The first time we exchanged gifts, I knew you were the woman I would marry."

"Yet you waited a whole year." Mallory's eyes sparkled with mischief, snowflakes catching on her eyelashes.

Kieran's thumb traced the curve of her cheek possessively. "I needed you to be absolutely certain." His blue eyes darkened with intensity. "You tried to run once. I wasn't taking that chance again."

"As if I could go anywhere." Her fingers played with the hair at the nape of his neck. "You've made yourself quite impossible to leave, Mr. Striker."

"That was my plan all along." He grinned, lowering his head to nip at her lower lip. "Trap the beautiful, stubborn woman with a fake marriage, make her fall madly in love with me, and then keep her forever."

Mallory laughed, the sound like music to his ears. "Such deviousness from the charming inn owner."

"A clear business strategy." He shrugged one powerful shoulder, drawing her closer until their bodies aligned perfectly again. "Identify what you want, pursue it relentlessly, and claim it completely."

"And am I just another acquisition?" she teased, the tiny sparks in her eyes matching the static electricity that crackled around them.

Kieran swept her completely off her feet in one fluid motion, cradling her against his chest with effortless strength. The snowflakes intensified above them, but neither paid them any attention.

"You are the centerpiece of my entire existence." He spun her around once, delighting in her surprised gasp. "The Hearthstone Inn might be my legacy, but you, Mallory Gale, soon to be Striker, are my life."

Her arms tightened around his neck. "I never thought I'd have this again. After everything..."

"You were always meant to be mine," he said, setting her gently on her feet but maintaining his hold. "Everything led you here, to me."

29

KIERAN

Kieran straightened his tie for the third time, surveying himself in the mirror. The custom-tailored grey suit hugged his muscular frame perfectly, complementing his auburn hair and making his blue eyes stand out even more. In less than an hour, Mallory would be his wife. Officially his, in every way that mattered.

"Looking good, boss." Charlotte appeared in the doorway, clipboard in hand as always. "Everything's set up in the outdoor gardens. The flowers look incredible."

"They better. Mallory and I have been planning, designing, and laboring over them since January." Kieran turned to face his manager, his chest swelling with pride. The outdoor gardens had been their first major project together—a vision they had crafted during those long winter nights after their engagement.

A low rumble of thunder interrupted his thoughts. Kieran's head snapped toward the window. Dark clouds gathered on the horizon, rolling in from the east. His tiger instincts heightened instantly, sensing the change in air pressure.

"That's... unexpected," Charlotte said carefully. "The forecast promised perfect weather."

Kieran moved to the window, his jaw slightly tightening. "The forecast doesn't account for storm witches."

This wasn't nature's doing. Those clouds carried Mallory's signature—the particular electric blue tinge at their edges, the way they moved against the wind rather than with it. After a year of watching her practice and master her abilities, he recognized her magical signature immediately.

"Is she having second thoughts?" Charlotte asked quietly.

"No." Kieran's response came instantly, a territorial growl underlying his certainty. "Something's bothering her."

For the past year, Mallory had maintained remarkable control over her powers. They had worked through her fears together—her old beliefs that she was somehow cursed and didn't deserve happiness. The storm clouds hadn't appeared unexpectedly in months. Whatever was causing this had to be significant.

"I need to go to her." Kieran moved toward the door, his protective instincts surging.

"But tradition says?—"

"I don't give a damn about tradition." He grinned, the charming smile that had once won him a reputation as Saltwater Grove's most eligible bachelor. "I've never been a traditional man."

Charlotte sighed but didn't try to stop him. "She's getting ready in her old suite."

Kieran nodded and strode through the inn's corridors with purpose, his presence commanding attention from guests and staff alike. The Hearthstone hummed with wedding preparations—floral arrangements in every corner, champagne being chilled, and the kitchen bustling with activity. Their special day, meticulously planned down to the last detail.

Outside, another rumble of thunder confirmed his suspicions. The storm was growing stronger. Mallory was upset about something, and nothing—not tradition, not superstition, not anything—would keep him from going to her.

As he rounded the corner toward her old suite, Kieran slowed his pace. He wouldn't barge in demanding answers. Whatever fears troubled her, he would soothe them away with the same patient determination that had won her heart in the first place.

Kieran soon reached the door of Mallory's old suite. Amy stood guard outside.

"Boss, you can't—" Amy's eyes widened as she took in his determined expression. "The groom isn't supposed to see?—"

"Amy," Kieran cut her off with a smile that combined charm and authority in equal measure. "I appreciate your dedication to tradition, but I need five minutes with my bride."

The young receptionist hesitated, glancing nervously down the hallway.

"Charlotte will forgive you," he assured her, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "And if she doesn't, I'll handle it."

Amy's resistance crumbled. "Five minutes," she conceded, stepping aside.

Kieran slipped into the room, closing the door quietly behind him. Mallory's familiar fresh rain scent mixed with the unmistakable crackling energy that always surrounded her when her magic was active. Through the window, he could see the storm clouds gathering faster now, lightning flickering between them.

He about lost his breath when he caught sight of her. She stood by the window in her wedding dress, a vision in classic white satin that hugged her slender form before

flaring out at the hips. Her hair was swept up in an elegant arrangement, tiny crystal pins catching the light like stars. She hadn't noticed him yet, her light blue eyes fixed on the storm brewing outside—the physical manifestation of her emotions.

"If you're trying to water the gardens before the ceremony, there are easier ways," he said softly.

Mallory whirled around, her hands instinctively flying up. "Kieran! You're not supposed to see me yet!"

He walked over to her and clasped her hands in his. "When have we ever done things the way we're supposed to?"

Despite her obvious anxiety, a small smile formed on her lips. "You know, you're impossible, right?"

"And you're creating a thunderstorm on our wedding day." He brushed his thumbs across her knuckles. "Tell me what's wrong."

Mallory's eyes darted away. "Nothing's wrong. I'm just..."

"Look at me," he commanded gently, lifting her chin with his finger. "Remember our deal? No more hiding. Not from each other."

She drew a shaky breath. "What if it's too soon? What if I'm not ready?"

"Then we don't do this today." His answer was immediate and firm. "We can wait another month, another year. Whatever you need."

"It's not that I don't want to marry you," she rushed to clarify, her fingers tightening around his. "I love you, Kieran. More than I thought possible. And I know—" her

voice caught slightly, "I know Eli would have wanted me to be happy again."

"But?" he prompted.

"What if I disappoint you?" The vulnerability in her voice made his chest ache. "What if I'm not enough for you?"

Kieran nearly laughed at the absurdity of her fears. "Sweetheart, that's impossible. You could never disappoint me, and you are more than enough for me."

"And what if—" her voice dropped to a whisper, "what if I lose you like I lost him? I couldn't bear it, Kieran. I couldn't survive that grief again."

Now he understood the storm clouds. The recognition of her greatest fear hit him like a physical blow. Kieran felt a primal need to protect her radiate through his core. This woman—his heart—stood before him with fears that he could crush with his bare hands if only they were tangible.

He cupped her face between his hands, his blue eyes locking on hers. "Listen to me, Mallory Gale. I'm not going anywhere if I can help it. Tigers mate for life, and I've chosen you to be my mate." He pressed his forehead against hers. "You're stuck with me. For better or worse."

He felt her tremble slightly beneath his touch, and outside, the thunderclouds paused their advance, hovering uncertainly.

"My kind doesn't surrender what belongs to them," he continued, his thumbs gently stroking her cheekbones. "And make no mistake, you belong with me now. Just as I belong with you."

Vulnerability crossed her features. "But Eli?—"

"Was taken by something beyond his control or yours," Kieran said firmly. "I'm not planning on getting sick or leaving you, sweetheart. In fact, I've got about a hundred years of plans that involve waking up next to you every single morning."

The smallest of smiles quirked at the corners of her mouth. "A hundred years?"

"At minimum." He grinned, the predatory confidence returning to his expression. "My grandfather lived to a hundred and twenty-eight. I've got excellent genes."

A laugh escaped her, light and surprised, like sunshine breaking through clouds. Outside, Kieran noticed the storm beginning to recede.

"Now there's my girl," he murmured, brushing his lips against hers. "The woman who faced down a rune witch and saved my inn. The woman who rebuilt me when I didn't even realize how broken I truly was."

He kissed her then, deeply and thoroughly, claiming her mouth with unrestrained possession. His hands slid down to her waist, careful not to disturb her wedding dress but making it clear that nothing would separate them—not fear, not the past, not even death itself when it eventually came.

When he finally pulled back, the storm clouds had disappeared completely, leaving only the brilliant blue sky he'd paid a meteorologist to guarantee.

"I'll see you at the altar," he whispered against her lips. "Don't keep me waiting too long or I'll come find you again."

Her eyes opened, that perfect light blue that reminded him of summer skies after rain. "Promise?"

"Always," he said softly. "In this life and whatever comes after."

With a final quick kiss, Kieran slipped back toward the door, pausing for a second to say over his shoulder, "Oh, and Mallory?"

She looked up, her expression open and trusting in a way he had spent a year and a half earning.

"I expect at least three dances at the reception. And zero storms unless they're the kind we make together." He winked and disappeared through the door before she could respond, hearing her laughter follow him into the hallway.

Kieran watched with fierce pride as Mallory glided down the aisle toward him. The afternoon sun cast a golden halo around her platinum hair, and her light blue eyes never left his. Not a single cloud marred the perfect sky above their outdoor ceremony—a testament to her control and her happiness.

His chest swelled with possessive satisfaction. This remarkable woman had chosen him, just as he had chosen her. The tiger inside him rumbled with contentment, recognizing its mate.

When she reached him, he took her hands in his. The scent of her—rain and lightning and something uniquely, perfectly Mallory—filled his senses.

"You look absolutely breathtaking," he whispered, his voice a low growl meant only for her.

"You clean up pretty well yourself, tiger," she responded with that dry wit he adored.

The ceremony passed in a blur. Kieran barely registered the officiant's words, focused entirely on the woman before him. When the time came for his vows, he spoke from the heart, his voice carrying across the assembled guests.

"Mallory, when you walked into my inn last winter, you changed everything. I was a man who pretended he had it all figured out, but really, I was lost. Now I know I was just waiting for you." His thumb stroked across her knuckles. "I promise to be your shelter in every storm—whether it's one you create or one life throws at us."

A few chuckles rippled through the crowd, all familiar with Mallory's unique abilities.

"I take you—stubborn independence, magical outbursts, and all—as mine to protect, cherish, and love until my last breath." His voice deepened with conviction. "And probably beyond that, because I'm too stubborn to let even death separate us."

Tears glistened in Mallory's eyes as she delivered her own vows, promising to stand by him through everything. When they were finally pronounced husband and wife, Kieran didn't wait for permission to kiss his bride. He pulled her to him with gentle force, claiming her mouth with a kiss that balanced possessiveness with tenderness.

The reception that followed was everything Kieran had imagined. The Hearthstone's gardens had been transformed into an enchanted wonderland, with twinkling lights strung between trees and flowers blooming in abundance.

"Your mother would have loved this," Charlotte said, appearing at his side with two champagne flutes. "And your grandmother would have told you it's about time you settled down with a good woman."

Kieran accepted the champagne with a half-smile. "They would have adored her."

"They would be proud of the man you've become," Charlotte added, squeezing his arm before moving away to handle some minor crisis with the catering staff.

Kieran's gaze found Mallory across the reception, laughing with Nina and some of

the inn staff. Happiness radiated from her, and he felt an answering pulse within his own chest.

He crossed to her in a few purposeful strides, sliding an arm around her waist. "Mrs. Striker, I believe you owe me a dance."

As he led her to the dance floor for their first dance, Kieran felt complete in a way he never had before. The playboy tiger had found his mate, the charming inn owner had found his equal partner, and the man who had always feared settling down had found the one person who made him want forever.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 4:10 pm

Mallory swayed gently as she checked the reservation log at the front desk. Ethan's warm weight was against her chest providing a comfort she never would have imagined possible two years ago. Her and Kieran's one-year-old was miraculously asleep despite the bustling activity in the lobby of The Hearthstone Inn, his little hand curled against her collarbone.

"Mommy's little helper," she whispered, planting a kiss on his downy head.

The Autumn Enchantment Fair had transformed Saltwater Grove into a supernatural hotspot, and The Hearthstone was booked solid. Mallory glanced up to see Kieran effortlessly managing a group of elvish tourists, his auburn hair shining in the golden light streaming through the glass windows. The sight of her husband – confident, commanding, yet utterly charming – still made her heart skip after all this time.

"Sheriff Blackmane's room is ready," Amy whispered, sliding a key across the counter. "And Mrs. Striker, your son is officially the cutest baby at the fair."

Mallory laughed. "Don't let Fiona hear you say that. She thinks little Rowan hung the moon."

As if summoned by the mention of her name, Fiona, Luna of the Eclipsed Moon pack, swept into the lobby, her husband Caleb at her side. The fire witch's red hair was braided elaborately with autumn leaves woven through it, and her eyes lit up when she spotted Mallory.

"There's my favorite storm witch!" Fiona called, hurrying over. "And the most adorable little cloud maker in existence!" She cooed at Ethan who chose that moment

to wake, blinking sleepily.

"Careful," Mallory warned with a smile. "Last time you got him too excited, it rained in the kitchen for an hour."

"So worth it," Fiona declared, tickling Ethan's chin. The baby giggled, and a tiny puff of cloud appeared above his head, drizzling gentle raindrops that evaporated before they hit the ground. "He's got his mama's gift."

"And his father's stubborn streak," Mallory added, watching as Kieran finished with the elves and strode toward them.

Her husband's blue eyes locked with hers across the room, possessive and proud. Two years together and that look still made her stomach flutter. When he reached them, he slid an arm around her waist, pulling her against his side with Ethan nestled between them.

"Hey, Kieran." Caleb nodded respectfully to Kieran.

"Caleb," Kieran returned, his voice rumbling in that way that always sent shivers through her. "Room to your liking? Anything else you need?"

"It's perfect," Fiona answered for them both. "The room, the inn, everything. No wonder you've won all those awards."

Mallory felt a surge of pride. They had built this together – taken The Hearthstone from an average inn to a five-star destination. The "Most Feels Like Home" award hung prominently behind the front desk, a testament to how far they had come.

"Speaking of perfect," Sheriff Blackmane approached with his artist wife Tabitha. "That new east wing addition is impressive, Kieran. You've outdone yourself."

"I just provided the vision," Kieran said, squeezing Mallory closer. "My brilliant wife designed every inch of it."

"And modest as ever," Mallory retorted, but leaned into him, savoring the heat of his body against hers.

She gazed around the lobby filled with supernatural guests from across Saltwater Grove and the world – Archer and Daphne chatting with Logan and Serena near the fireplace, a group of merfolk admiring the water feature she had designed last spring, and a family of fox shifters checking in at the desk.

Two years ago, she had believed herself cursed to eternal isolation. Now her life overflowed with love, laughter, and connection. The storm that had raged inside her for so long had finally found its peace.

Ethan cooed and reached up to touch her cheek, a tiny spark of lightning dancing between his fingers.

"Someone's getting hungry," Kieran murmured, his lips brushing her ear. "Let me take him while you finish up here."

"Are you sure? The Moonlight Suite still needs?—"

"I've got it covered. You've been on your feet all morning." He carefully extracted Ethan from the carrier, settling the baby against his broad chest with practiced ease. "Come find us when you're done here."

A few hours later, Mallory was back at the front desk updating the reservation ledger when the scent hit her—earthen spices and starlit mist swirling through the air before its source even entered the lobby. She glanced up to see Nina breezing through the front entrance of The Hearthstone, her constellation-speckled apron twinkling under the ambient lighting. The powerful witch balanced two floating cups that trailed

spirals of steam while her hands remained free to wave at several guests.

"Someone looks like she could use a pick-me-up," Nina called, directing one of the cups to hover just above the front desk.

Mallory reached for the cup gratefully, inhaling the rich aroma of her favorite Storm Chaser Brew—a concoction Nina had perfected just for her that smelled like thunderclouds and tasted like liquid courage.

"You're an actual lifesaver," Mallory sighed as the first sip warmed her from the inside out, tiny sparks of energy dancing through her fingertips. "How'd you know?"

Nina's laugh lines deepened. "The weather forecast called for clear skies, yet there's been a tiny rain cloud hovering exclusively over The Hearthstone for the past hour."

Mallory glanced out the window and noticed the miniature cloud that had indeed formed outside. She hadn't even realized her exhaustion had manifested through her magic.

"Busy day?" Nina asked, perching on the edge of the desk.

"We are booked solid through the weekend with The Autumn Enchantment Fair in town." Mallory took another long sip. "Amazing how 'isolated storm witch' wasn't exactly preparation for 'hospitality co-owner.'"

Nina's dark eyes sparkled with something that looked suspiciously like maternal pride. "Yet here you are, running this place like you were born for it."

"Here I am," Mallory agreed, her gaze drifting to where Kieran was helping a family of rabbit shifters with Ethan nestled snugly against his chest. Her heart swelled at the sight of her husband's powerful frame so gentle with their son. "Sometimes I still can't believe it."

"You're happy." It wasn't a question.

Mallory touched the tiny cloud ring on her right index finger—Kieran's wedding gift to her. "Happier than I ever thought possible." The little rain cloud outside had transformed into a perfect, sunny day. "Two years ago, I was convinced I was destined to be alone forever. Now I can't imagine life without all of this—without them."

"Some storms are worth weathering," Nina said, her fingers sparking with purple energy as she gestured toward Kieran and Ethan. "You found your shelter."

"And an entire community that doesn't run when the forecast gets a bit rough." The lump in Mallory's throat surprised her. "Thank you for being a part of that. For believing I could have this."

Nina squeezed her hand. "You always deserved this, dear. You just needed to believe it too."

Later that evening, Mallory sank into the plush sofa, watching as Kieran juggled their son—quite literally—into the air. Ethan's delighted giggles filled their private suite, his tiny hands sending small puffs of cloud dancing through the air with each laugh. The soft evening light filtered through the curtains, casting silver shadows across their cozy living space.

"If he starts a rainstorm inside again, you're cleaning it up and calming him down all by yourself this time," Mallory warned, though she couldn't keep the smile from her voice. The memory of last week's indoor shower—when Ethan had gotten overexcited during bathtime—was still fresh. Books had needed drying, cushions airing out, and Kieran had spent an hour blow-drying every surface while she'd worked to soothe their little storm-maker.

Kieran caught Ethan against his broad chest, his auburn hair falling across his

forehead as he gave her that intense gaze that never failed to make her breath catch. "I handle all the indoor precipitation in this family," he declared, the absolute certainty in his voice making it sound like a royal decree. "Don't I, little man?"

Ethan responded by patting his father's face and producing a tiny lightning bolt that crackled harmlessly between his fingers.

"Takes after his mother," Kieran said proudly, crossing the room to settle beside her, their son nestled between them.

Mallory traced a finger down Ethan's chubby cheek. "Poor child. Cursed with my weather and your stubbornness."

"Blessed," Kieran corrected, his arm coming around her shoulders with possessive ease. "And it's called determination. Something our son will thank me for someday."

She leaned into his warmth, marveling at how comfortable this had become—this closeness and this family they had built. Two years ago, she'd been convinced she was meant to live alone forever, too dangerous to be loved. Now she had a husband who challenged thunderclouds without flinching and a son who made rainbows appear when he was happy.

"What are you thinking about?" Kieran asked, his voice a deep rumble against her ear.

"That bridge," she said softly, watching as Ethan's eyelids grew heavy. "That ridiculous collapsed bridge that forced me to stay here for a month."

Kieran's laugh was low and intimate. "Best structural failure in the history of Saltwater Grove." He shifted, laying Ethan carefully on the soft play mat between them and the fireplace. "Without it, I'd still be chasing meaningless relationships, and you'd be holed up in that isolated house."

"Instead, I'm chasing a one-year-old who can make it rain indoors." Mallory pulled her legs underneath her, watching as Kieran built a small fortress of pillows around their dozing son. "And somehow, it's everything I never knew I wanted."

She felt a profound gratitude wash over her as she looked around their suite. The space reflected their shared life— Kieran's collection of adventure novels mixed with her design books, Ethan's toys scattered across handwoven rugs she'd selected, and the family photos proudly displayed on every surface. This was home—not isolation, not loneliness—but warmth and belonging.

"You know what I was thinking earlier?" Kieran settled back beside her, pulling her legs across his lap. "That we should celebrate the anniversary of that blizzard."

"Celebrate a weather disaster?" Mallory asked skeptically. "That's very on-brand for us, I suppose."

"Every year," he insisted, his fingers tracing patterns on her calf that made her skin tingle. "We'll call it our Fate Day."

"You're impossible." She laughed, but the thought of celebrating the event that had changed everything warmed her. That fateful day that had brought her out of isolation and into this unexpected life filled with warmth, acceptance, and love. "Though I suppose if anyone should commemorate a blizzard, it's a storm witch."