



Knot My Boss (Fated Mates Collection #3)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Darby Matthews is an independent free spirit. Wanting to be close to her sister and her new nieces or nephews, she decides to move to the small shifter town of Padston, New York.

With her fathers approval, Darby quits college to open a tattoo shop specializing in paranormal art.

Determined to be successful, she has no time for men.

Arek Palmer, Alpha of the Palmer/Martin Sloth, wants nothing more than to find his mate and start a family.

Keeping his cousins and wayward Aunt in line is as important as the success of the family-owned and operated restaurant.

Finding out that his mate is headstrong, his total opposite, and wants nothing to do with him, turns his carefully crafted world upside down.

Trigger Warnings: mentions of pregnancy, third party, knotting, breeding, birth control tampering, Alpha-male, enemies to lovers.

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August

B ang!

The door to my shared dorm room slams closed. Frustration overwhelms me, and the lack of release means the door suffers for it.

Darby Matthews, my roommate, pops her head up in alarm from where she's seated on her bed, books scattered over the surface. Her gaze roams over my disheveled frame as she blows her pink-tinted bangs out of her eyes, this week's color.

"Your date went well?" she questions, laughter in her tone.

Tossing my purse onto my bed, I strip out of my denim miniskirt and lacy top to put on a short set to sleep in.

"Is there something wrong with me?" I ask sincerely, pausing mid-wardrobe change.

Darby laughs out right at my questions, holding her middle from the effort.

"Oh, you're serious?" she says, clearing her throat as her laughter trails off. "Can you be more specific?" Darby points to my half of the room.

My eyes ping-pong between the two halves of our room. Darby's side is a spectacular mess. Clothes, books, and food containers of all types are strewn everywhere.

The other side—my half—is tidy. Everything is sorted. My books are neatly arranged

on the desk, and everything is in its proper place.

“There is nothing wrong with you,” Darby states flatly, interrupting my perusal. Pushing her books aside and rising to her feet, she tosses clothes out of the way in search of...something.

Shaking my head at her antics, I return to my task of changing clothes.

“Ah ha!” Darby exclaims, obviously finding whatever she was looking for.

When I turn around, I do a double-take. Sitting in the middle of her bed, Darby holds a bottle of tequila. Patting the space next to her, she encourages me to sit next to her.

“Tell me what happened,” she orders, taking a swig from the bottle.

Reluctantly, I sit next to her and gulp down several mouthfuls of the foul liquor when she offers me the bottle.

Leaning back against the wall, I let my head fall backwards.

“Men suck,” I blurt after a moment of silence.

“Well, yeah,” Darby agrees sarcastically.

The tequila passes back and forth between us as I contemplate how much to say. As the alcohol flows through my system, long-repressed memories push to the forefront.

Dylan, my high school sweetheart and the one I thought was my forever, broke my heart right before graduation.

Deciding to surprise him one evening, I showed up at his house unannounced.

Roaming his parents' small farm in search of him, I discovered his betrayal.

Stepping into the barn, I found him balls deep into my best friend, Sally Jo.

Sally Jo and I had been best friends since we met in grade school.

Upon returning home that night, I made a snap decision. Instead of attending Penn State with Dylan and Sally Jo, I immediately applied to Stanford in California. The thought of running into them on campus was too much to contemplate.

Going to school on the opposite side of the country has its drawbacks, but relocating from Pennsylvania was necessary.

Snapping fingers in front of my face brings me back to the present.

"Hellllooo," Darby slurs.

Ripping the bottle out of Darby's hand, I gulp down more of the swill. Beer is my preferred beverage, but this will do in a pinch.

"What hap-happened?" Darby asks, hiccupping in the middle of her question.

"We got dinner at The Melt, which was fine," I say, taking another drink and watching Darby nod in agreement from the corner of my eye. She's barely coherent, and I hardly have a buzz—it's disappointing.

"After that, we went back to Joey's room."

Joey is a resident advisor, so he gets a room to himself.

"We started making out, and the clothes started coming off," I add.

“Okay, so far I don’t see the issue. Joey is a fine piece of man-meat,” Darby comments.

“Yeah, well, looks are about all he has going for him. His foreplay skills suck and the guy’s a two-pump chump,” I snark, downing more tequila in hopes of forgetting this night ever happened.

Darby doesn’t react for the longest time. Casting a glance her way, I see her in stunned silence, her eyes blinking owlishly.

“To add insult to injury,” I add. “As soon as he got his, he threw me out of his room.”

At this point, Darby loses her composure. In her inebriated state, she falls sideways onto the bed, laughing. Using quick reflexes, I grab the bottle from her just as she rolls off the side, still laughing.

Unable to help myself, I join Darby, laughing at the absurd situation. When she calms down enough to speak, I’m surprised to agree, although I don’t voice it out loud.

“You need a good fucking! A man who knows what the fuck he is doing,” she declares.

Yes, I do.

Now I just need to find a guy who can do it. The thought seems daunting, to say the least. There has to be at least one man who knows what they are doing between the sheets.

Right?

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My skin itches as restlessness settles into my bones.

Attending college seemed like the right step.

The next step.

If that's the case, why do I feel like I don't belong here?

Classes are done for the day, finally, and after a quick stop at the dorm to drop off my books, I head to my favorite place.

Stepping inside Ink-U, serenity washes over me as the buzz of tattoo guns fills the air.

"There she is," Benson calls out, causing his client to chuckle.

I have been keeping a secret from everyone. Although I am attending classes, I have also been honing my skills through an apprenticeship here.

My business degree, combined with the marketing minor I am pursuing, will help me achieve success when I open my shop.

Benson, the owner of Ink-U, has been a great help.

A bonus to all of this is that Benson is a shifter.

He has been emphasizing the technique for tattooing paranormals.

Since they heal so fast, there is a specific way to do it, so it sticks.

I've already completed all of the piercing requirements and have the necessary permits and licenses.

Now it's just a matter of toning my technique.

Drawing has always been a hobby of mine, one that I excel at.

"Get your station set up," Benson calls out over the sound of his gun.

Once a week, Benson draws an intricate design and presents it to me with practice skin and the parameters.

Sometimes, it's a portrait, wildlife, cartoon, fantasy, or possibly a combination of multiple styles.

My tests—as he refers to them—range from time constraints to a customer chickening out partway through the sitting.

All of the scenarios are real-life examples of what can happen during an appointment.

"Are you ready, kid?" Benson asks, stepping into my assigned area.

Before I can answer him, my phone rings. Holding a finger up in the air, I rush past Benson, pushing him out of the way. I'm not ready to answer questions about this, so the call needs to be taken outside these four walls.

"Hey, sis!" I say a little breathy, connecting the video call. It takes a moment to realize both my dad and Kali, Dayton's best friend, are also on the call.

“Hey, everyone,” Dayton says, as her chin wobbles. My brow furrows with concern. Dayton is the more emotional one of the two of us. I want to know who’s ass I have to kick for upsetting my sister.

“What’s wrong?” I blurt in anger.

The question hangs in the air, causing the worry and concern for Dayton to ratchet up.

“I’m pregnant!” Dayton yells, bouncing up and down, her excitement palpable.

Kali reacts first, squealing like a teenage girl at a Swiftie concert.

“I’m gonna be a grandpa?” my dad asks reverently.

“Yep,” Dayton confirms.

“Do you know the due date yet?” I ask, mentally calculating where I will be in the spring semester.

“According to Octavia, because of the shifter side, late January,” Dayton answers, biting her lip nervously.

“What aren’t you saying?” I ask sternly, knowing my sister’s tells.

“I’m having quadruplets,” Dayton answers after a long pause.

The three of us are speechless.

“Kid, are you coming to do this or what?” Benson barks from the doorway.

“Shit!” I exclaim. “Yeah, be there in a minute.”

“Who’s that?” Dad asks.

“My boss. I gotta go. Congratulations, Dayton. I’m happy for you and Kyle. I’ll call you this weekend,” I rush out, needing to get back in the shop.

Ending the call, I wander back inside with Benson hot on my heels.

“Everything okay?” he asks as I settle in, ready to start work.

“Yeah,” I answer before launching into the news of my sister’s pregnancy.

When Benson started working on my ink, I told him how my dad, Kali, and I had set my sister up with a paranormal mate.

That’s how I found out Benson is a shifter.

He didn’t volunteer what kind, and I knew better than to ask outright.

Benson lets out a long, low whistle.

“She won’t make it to term,” he says cryptically, causing my anxiety to spike.

Before he can elaborate, Benson gets called away, leaving me alone with my assignment and concern for Dayton.

My timeline just changed.

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I love my family, but days like today, I swear, they are going to drive me into an early grave.

Currently, the matriarchs of the town's founding families are holding court in the middle of our restaurant, Simmer Down.

When I say ours, I mean my family, the Palmers, and by extension, the Martins. My father, Altos Palmer, is the former alpha. He has one brother, Mycah Palmer, and one sister, Domella Martin.

Our family is easily the largest in town, thanks to the multiple births that occur so frequently among shifters.

"Arek, honey," Aunt Mitzi calls out to me as I cross the dining room. "Can you come here, please?"

Warily approaching the table where my great-aunt Mitzi Palmer sits with Glenys Hamilton and Kendyl Morris, I check over the table to see what's wrong.

"Ladies, is there something I can get you?" I ask. Too late, I realize they just set me up.

"We are having our weekly book club," Glenys informs me, tapping a paperback beside her plate. I suppress a cringe. The last time they did this here, the trio started asking every male that passed by if they were into spanking.

"How do you feel about kilts?" Kendyl asks, her eyes roaming over my six-foot-

three-inch frame.

“Why would I...?” My question trails off as soon as I realize my error.

“We are reading about Highlanders,” Mitzi announces.

“What’s that got... Ouch!” I exclaim, jumping backward out of Glenys’s and Kendyl’s reach as my pant legs fall back down. I rub my abused shin, where the hair got pulled in the process of them checking out my legs.

“You need to change the uniforms around here,” Mitzi orders, her eyes glued to the ass of one of our busboys. How far can her neck turn?

“This isn’t Hooters! Stop objectifying my staff,” I snap. “Also, we aren’t Scottish.” I hold up a hand as Mitzi starts to speak again. “We aren’t Irish either.”

Walking away, I shake my head. Soft laughter catches my attention. Narrowing my eyes on my cousins, I take my frustration out on them.

“Don’t encourage them,” I gripe at Jathen, Rhodee, and Daegyn.

“They’re harmless old ladies. Leave them alone,” Rhodee states, glaring at me. “You are too serious, Arek. You will be the first shifter with heart problems if you don’t loosen up a little.”

Refusing to get into an argument in the middle of the dining room, I stomp to my office.

They don’t understand. None of them do. As alpha, it is my responsibility to oversee the staff and the restaurant.

Pushing the office door closed, more forcefully than necessary, it's a surprise when there's no sound. Turning around, Daegyn fills the doorway, arms crossed over his chest, and a stern expression on his face.

"What?" I bark.

"Dude, you need to get laid."

"My sex life, or lack thereof, is none of your business."

"Rhodee is right. You are wound tighter than the skin on a bongo drum. Find someone and take the edge off," Daegyn urges.

Rolling my eyes and shaking my head at him, I pause.

"What if my mate shows up?" I ask him seriously. So many of our townsfolk are finding their mates.

Daegyn gets a confused look on his face at my question.

"You think she is going to walk in on you doing the nasty with another woman?" he asks, slightly outraged. "Or worse yet, do you think she is going to expect you to hold out until you find her? If you find her?"

"No," I answer, pinching the bridge of my nose. "What if my mate shows up and comes face-to-face with the woman I have been intimate with?"

"Intimate?" Daegyn's nose wrinkles. "You are an alpha, not dead. And Aunt Mitzi uses newer language than you do. Hell, maybe you will get lucky and your mate and side-piece will get along," he says jokingly. "You can have three-ways on the regular." Daegyn wiggles his eyebrows at me.

Grabbing the stapler off my desk, I hurl it at his head. He easily dodges the projectile as his laughter carries down the hall toward the front of the house.

“Asshole,” I mutter, falling into my chair, using work as a distraction.

Part of his statement has merit. I can’t remember the last time I was physical with a woman. Being alpha, I don’t have much spare time. Between running the Simmer Down, our restaurant, and keeping my many cousins in line, it’s exhausting.

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Now

It's strange being home, even if it is for a short break between semesters. Before Fiora flew back to Lancaster, I invited her to stop to see me in Padston over the holidays if she needed a break. Not all families are like mine, but you never know.

The house looks nice, decorated for Christmas, even though my mother hates it. She insists that Christmas is just a Pagan holiday created to appease big business. I do my best to ignore her rants, as we disagree on many things.

From the stories I have heard, Mom wasn't always like this.

The exact details are fuzzy, as my parents prefer not to discuss it.

I know that Dayton was an unplanned teenage pregnancy for them, and my dad did the honorable thing by marrying Mom.

Four years later, I was born. Living under my mother's demanding ways came to an end on my eighteenth birthday.

I got the first of many tattoos and piercings, and had streaks of red added to my light blonde hair.

Today, I have more ink and piercings, not all of them visible, and while I still add bold streaks to my hair, the color changes often depending on my mood.

Right now, I am packing my room. Kali and I leave tomorrow morning to spend

Christmas with Dayton and Kyle before the babies get here. After dinner, I want to talk to my father. If all goes well, I won't be coming home.

The slow grinding of the garage door indicates my dad is home, pulling his car inside. Butterflies dance in my belly as nervousness takes over.

"Darby," my mom yells up the stairs. "Your father is home. Come set the table for dinner."

For my dad's sake, I have been trying to keep the peace with Mom during the short time I will be here.

Mom knows about the babies but won't talk about them.

She and Dayton still aren't talking because of how Mom spoke to Kyle and his friend Deacon.

The fact that my sister finally stood up to our mother makes me proud of her.

Dinner has been awkward with significant gaps in stilted conversation. Rising to help clear the table, my mom waves me off. Dad rises to his feet, and I take a deep breath. It's now or never.

"Daddy," I start, my voice sounding small. "Do you, ah, have a minute? There's something I want to talk to you about."

"Why can't you just say what you want to say here?" my mom sneers, slamming the plate she was holding onto the table.

Glancing at my dad, he nods in support, and we both sink back down into our chairs. Using the table to hide my shaking hands, I bite the bullet.

“I want to stay in Padston. Move there,” I blurt, glancing sideways at my mother to gauge her reaction. Predictably, she crosses her arms over her chest as her face reddens with anger.

“Go on,” Daddy encourages.

“I wanted to ask if I could have the rest of the money you set aside for my tuition.”

“Absolutely not,” Mom yells.

“Lacene, I will handle this,” Dad says firmly, his eyes never leaving mine. “What do you plan on doing with the money, if I agree?”

“I want to open a tattoo parlor,” I explain, as my mother implodes. “I have a business plan, if you want to see it.” Hoping my words dissuade him from listening to her.

“Do you know how to tattoo?” Dad asks pragmatically.

“Yes,” I answer, my confidence builds since he is willing to hear me out.

“Do you remember the day Dayton told us she was pregnant?” After Dad nods, I continue.

“Benson, the guy you heard, my boss? He owns Ink-U, right off campus. I have been an apprentice of his since I started school. Not only do I have all of the licenses and certifications, but Benson has agreed that I can use the same name for my shop. It will be Ink-U2.”

“You are not wasting our hard-earned money on some crackpot scheme, flushing it down the toilet,” Mom yells, spittle flying from her mouth as her anger takes control.

“Lacene!” Dad yells. Mom shuts up immediately, mostly from shock at my father’s harsh tone. Mom huffs, returning to her task of cleaning up after dinner.

“You don’t want to finish school?” Dad asks, his tone softening and lowering to a volume Mom can’t hear from the kitchen over the clanging of dishes.

“It’s not for me,” I explain. “This has become a passion of mine. It’s something I enjoy. I understand my hours won’t be a normal nine-to-five day job, but that’s okay.”

Dad’s silent for a long time, musing over my explanation.

“Also, Benson is a shifter,” I whisper, fearing Mom will hear me and start another rant. “He taught me how to tattoo paranormals.”

His eyes widen in surprise at that statement.

“Here’s what I will do,” he says after a long silence.

“You can have the money”—I cut him off, clapping and bouncing in my seat—“But.” He interrupts my celebration.

“You must get to Padston first, find a space, and get set up. Send any bills you incur to me, and I will pay the companies myself. When you are ready to open, I will forward you whatever is left.”

Throwing myself at him, I wrap my arms around his neck.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you,” I gush, pressing chaste kisses all over his face.

“Unbelievable,” Mom gripes from the doorway to the kitchen. “You won’t get a

penny more from us.” She gives me a hostile look. “If you go belly up, don’t come crying to us about it.”

She is a stay-at-home mom, never working a day in her life. It’s remarkable how she is referring to it as their money. I guess it’s a married thing, something I have no intention of doing, thank- you-very-much. It might be great for others, but not for this person.

Releasing my hold on Dad, I straighten and run to my room. My car needs to be loaded with all of my belongings, now that I know for sure that I won’t be returning. I have never been more excited to be getting up at the crack of dawn.

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It's poker night at the Wildfire Casino.

Roderick Sereno, owner and operator of the Padston Wildfire, hosts the men for a private game in their special poker room at least once a month.

It's nice to get together and relax, and the camaraderie between the alphas is a bonus.

We trade stories and help each other resolve issues regarding their packs, at least the wolves do.

Bears call it a sleuth or a sloth. Tigers call their group a streak or an ambush. Lions refer to their group as a pride.

"Rod, what is going on with the food lately, man?" Crispin gripes, spitting out a bite full of cake.

"My pastry chef quit without notice," Roderick informs us. "I have no idea why, and while the kitchen staff is okay, it isn't the same quality it was."

Due to Crispin's reaction, we all avoid the display of baked goods on the buffet table. The regular patrons of the Wildfire might not notice the difference, but we paranormals have more sensitive senses.

"Where's Kyle?" Guri asks.

"Dayton's sister and best friend are arriving in the next day or two. He wants to make sure they are prepared," Chase answers, causing our heads to swivel in his direction.

“What?” Chase asks, and confusion is evident about why we are staring at him. “Oh, come on. Do the math, boys. Tianey works with Kyle. Her mates work with me.”

It takes a moment for all of that to sink in.

“Makes sense,” I say with a shrug, even if they sound like a bunch of gossiping women.

“Oh, Arek,” Chase announces, getting my attention as he folds, placing his cards face down and pushing them toward the dealer. “Do you know why a petition is circulating town to change the uniforms at Simmer Down to kilts?”

Groaning, I toss my cards into the center of the table, unable to concentrate on the game.

Grabbing a fresh drink from the bar, I launch into the story from earlier this summer, where the book club decided the uniforms needed to be changed at the restaurant.

After a period of stunned silence, every man in the room breaks out into raucous laughter.

Darby

“You look adorable!” I gush at my sister.

“I look like a blimp,” Dayton gripes. She’s reclining in a chaise lounge, sipping on a bottle of water.

“Is there anything you need?” I ask, taking a seat on the couch next to her chair.

“How do you feel about decorating?” she asks with a cringe. “I am struggling to get

into the holiday spirit without any decorations. And I want a tree, a live one.”

“Yeah, that’s no problem,” Kali answers, giving me a wide-eyed look before nodding toward Dayton.

Right.

“Uhm, Day...” I say, pausing to find the right words. “Do you know of any apartments and storefront space around here?”

Dayton’s brow furrows in confusion from my question.

“Yeah, Gypsy has an apartment above the Whiskey Genie. As far as I know, it’s empty, but you would need to check with her,” Dayton answers. “Why?”

“I am moving to Padston,” I announce, watching Dayton’s chin wobble as she fights back tears.

“Really?” she asks, before breaking down into sobs. Jumping to my feet, I rush to Dayton’s side, giving her a one-armed hug and trying to calm her down.

“Stupid hormones,” Dayton says, using her sleeve to wipe her eyes.

“Okay, how about I head into town so I can talk to...”

“Gypsy,” Dayton provides.

“Right, Gypsy,” I confirm, committing my potential landlord’s name to memory. “I will also get a tree, somewhere, and some decorations. This will give me a chance to scope out the town in the process.”

Dayton gives me a small list of things she needs while I am out, and with the list tucked into my pocket, I head toward the center of town.

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It doesn't take long to get into the heart of Padston.

Arriving last night, the quaint little town took my breath away.

Strings of lights hung between light posts not only parallel to the main thoroughfare but also across it.

The gazebo at the entrance to town hosts a large tree, decorated with lights, large ornaments, bows, and garland.

Extra lights and decorations are strung along the railing, making it look like something that should be on a postcard.

To top the scene off, there was a light snowfall.

Driving in snow will take some getting used to, having lived in Southern California all my life.

Deciding to start at the Whiskey Genie, I easily find it and get a parking spot right out front.

After locking the car, I step inside. Everything looks new, which is a little confusing, but I press on.

Weaving between tables, I slowly reach the bar at the opposite end of the room from the front door.

A woman with long, dark hair serving drinks calls out when she sees me.

“I’ll be with you in a second.”

Looking around the place, a soft smile graces my lips. In the corner, shooting pool, is a familiar face. Foregoing the bartender for a minute, I head in that direction to say hello.

“Holy shit!” Declan exclaims, tossing his pool stick down, rushing toward me. A huge smile spreads across my face as he picks me up, spinning us in a circle.

“Put me down, you oaf!” I laugh.

“You are a sight for sore eyes,” he exclaims, looking around the room. “Where’s Kali?”

“She stayed at the house with Dayton. I am running some errands for her and needed to stop and talk to Gypsy,” I exclaim as several other guys step up to join us.

“Darby, this is my brother, Daegyn,” Declan explains, indicating the guy to his right. “These two are my cousins, Gunnar and Hayder Palmer.” He points to the two guys to his left.

Damn, they grow them big here. I make a mental note to text Fiora.

She has got to come up here. Daegyn and Declan look identical, so they are obviously twins.

The other two are definitely related, as their features are similar.

We all shake hands and complete introductions before the brunette steps out from

behind the bar.

“What did you need, hun?”

“Darby Matthews,” I reply, holding my hand out to shake. “Dayton is my sister. Are you Gypsy?”

“Fuck, no,” she says, laughing. “Gypsy is in her office.” The woman tosses a thumb over her shoulder. “I’m Raven, by the way, sorry,” she adds, but I wave her off.

“Is it possible for me to speak to her? Dayton said that she has an apartment that I might be able to rent,” I explain, hoping to move this along.

“Wait,” Declan yells, “are you moving here?”

“Yeah,” I answer with a chuckle. “I want to open a tattoo shop as well, if you happen to know of any space I can rent.” All four men cheer loudly, attracting quite a bit of attention.

“I have been dying to get some ink,” Gunnar states, pausing briefly to step closer. His voice is almost a whisper, just loud enough that our small group can hear. “You can tattoo paranormals, right?”

“Oh, yeah,” I sing-song as a smile takes over my face once more. “My mentor was a shifter. I can do it all.” I wink.

“I’ll go get Gypsy,” Raven says as the guys start hooping a hollering. “Wait right here.”

Daegyn, I think, leans over the bar, grabbing several pens and what looks to be an order pad. Each of the guys scramble, scratching out tattoo ideas on the paper.

Shaking my head and laughing at their antics, I move back to the bar, waiting for Gypsy.

Arek

My chest rumbles, my bear is angry, and he's letting the world know about it.

Grabbing Declan by the arm, I drag him into my office, slamming the door closed behind us. Unable to help myself, I lean in and smell him. His chest, arms, and almost his entire body are covered in a scent that is nearly too delicious to resist.

"Dude, personal space please," Declan gripes, trying to back away from me.

"You smell like her," I growl. "Where is she?"

"What the fuck are you talking about? You've lost your damn mind," Declan yells as he scrambles away from me.

"Her!" I yell in outrage as my bear fights to take over.

"Her who?" Declan yells back just as the door to my office bursts open. I don't turn to look who it is, keeping my prey in front of me.

"What the hell is going on here?" Daegyn asks before closing the door again. "We can hear you screaming at each other in the dining room."

Good, maybe then I will get some answers.

"Arek has lost his fucking mind is what's going on," Declan gripes to his twin.

"He smells of her, and I want to know why. I also want to know where she is," I

grumble as dark, brown curly hair starts sprouting on my forearms.

“Her, who, Arek?” Daegyn asks in a calm voice.

“My mate!” I yell.

Silence fills the air as I continue to fight my bear for control.

“Wait a minute,” Daegyn says right as Declan starts to laugh. He laughs so hard that he is bent over at the waist, holding onto my desk for support. “Is he talking about...” Daegyn’s voice trails off as Declan nods furiously.

“You have met her too?” I grind out, whirling around on Daegyn. His focus is on his twin, not his angry alpha, only adding to my bear’s anger.

“Yeah, he has,” Declan says, causing me to spin around again to face him instead of Daegyn. He’s moved behind the desk, putting as much space between us as possible.

“Who. Is. She?” I grumble, biting off each word.

“Darby Matthews.” Daegyn earns a glare from Declan.

My brow furrows as my bear starts to calm down now that we have a name. Why is that name so familiar, though?

“Dayton Morris’s sister,” Declan informs me, filling in the blanks. “Kyle’s sister-in-law.”

As the information settles in, my eyes widen in surprise.

“What’s with all of that?” Daegyn says, indicating the large stack of material in the

corner behind my desk.

“My friends are assholes,” I say flatly.

For the past three days, one of them has left or mailed boxes of fabrics representing the plaids used to make kilts.

“Do I want to know?” he asks, causing me to pinch the bridge of my nose.

“Aunt Mitzi,” I answer.

“Got it,” he says dismissively. Declan is well-versed in our aunt’s antics, so no further explanation is needed.

“Tell me,” I start, changing the subject. “What is Darby like?”

Declan and Daegyn share a look, neither of them saying a word.

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Me : You HAVE to make time to come to Padston.

Fiora : I can try. What's up?

Me : There is a lot of man-meat here to get your freak on.

Fiora : What kind of man-meat?

Me : The six-foot-plus, paranormal variety. I bet one of them can rock your world.

Fiora : I'll let you know.

“Can you possibly put your phone down long enough to help with the decorations?” Kali gripes. She's petite and can't reach most of the tree. The lot offered delivery, so I got a massive Foxtail Pine. The cathedral ceilings in Dayton and Kyle's house allow for the height.

“What's the matter, shorty?” I tease.

I do it just because Kali is self-conscious about her height. Being just a couple of inches taller than her, at five feet seven inches, I should be nice.

Just as I start decorating again, the doorbell rings.

“I'll get it,” Kali calls out, already halfway to the door.

Soft muttering comes from the doorway, but I ignore it. Putting up the decorations is

more time-consuming than I remember. But the house is starting to look very festive and is helping to improve Dayton's demeanor.

"Ohh, who sent flowers?" Dayton coos, drawing my attention to the massive bouquet Kali is carrying. I can't see her face, it's that big.

"Not sure," Kali says, setting the vase onto the coffee table with a slight grunt.

"That's nice of Kyle to send you flowers," I state dismissively, returning to my task.

"Uhm, they're not from Kyle," Dayton says hesitantly, causing my brow to furrow. "In fact, Darby, these are for you."

"What!" Kali and I yell simultaneously.

Thoughts of decorating fly out the window as I approach the table.

Looking over the flowers, there are roses, carnations, lilies, filler, and two other blooms that I have no idea what their names are.

Standing there in stunned silence, my gaze moves over the bouquet, afraid that something is going to jump out at me if I get any closer to it.

"Who would have sent me flowers?" I wonder out loud.

"Is there a card?" Dayton asks from her spot in the chair.

"It's buried in the center," Kali answers, moving closer and fishing through the blooms. "Here." She holds the card out to me.

My hands tremble as I take the card from Kali. Taking a deep breath, I try to calm

myself down long enough to read the card.

My Dearest Darby,

I look forward to spending eternity with you.

Eternally yours

What. The. Fuck.

I drop the card and envelope, jumping away from it like it's poison.

"Who's it from? What did the card say?" Dayton asks in rapid-fire succession.

Nausea hits like a freight train, and I run for the bathroom. After losing what's left of breakfast, I rinse my mouth and splash cold water over my face before returning to the living room.

"I don't care," Dayton barks. "Get home."

Looking between Kali and Dayton, a look of confusion on my face, Dayton gives me a sympathetic look as she sets her cellphone on the arm of the chair.

"Kyle will be here in a little bit. Probably one of the deputies as well," Dayton says. Ah, she must have been talking to her husband.

"Here," Kali says, pushing a glass of wine into my hand as she ushers me to the couch.

Despite my empty belly, I gulp down the wine like I'm dying of thirst. Kali takes the empty glass from me, and halfway to the kitchen, the front door pushes open,

drawing our attention.

Kyle rushes in, immediately going to Dayton's side to check on her. Lingerin in the doorway is a tall man in a sheriff's uniform.

"Come on in," Kyle urges the man. "Ladies, this is Brady Galloway. He is the sheriff's brother and one of the town's deputies. Brady, this is Kali and Darby." He points to each of us as he does introductions.

Brady pulls a notepad from his pants pocket and starts taking notes.

"How long ago were these delivered?" Brady asks.

"Between twenty and thirty minutes ago," Kali answers.

"Dayton, you told Kyle there was a card?"

"Yes," Dayton answers, pointing to where the seemingly innocuous envelope is sitting next to the vase. Brady steps up to the table, picks up the card, and reads it over. He hums in bewilderment as he flips the card over, looking for more.

"And you have no idea who would have sent these?" Brady asks, addressing me.

"I have been in town for less than forty-eight hours. I have no idea who would be sending these or what that note even means," I answer as my voice begins rising in pitch, panic evident.

"Okay," Brady says. His voice is meant to be soothing, but comes out as patronizing. "I am going to take this with me, assuming you don't have any objections..." Brady's voice trails off as he looks at me, holding the note in the air.

“You can take the note and the flowers,” I snark, doing a full-body shudder.

“I don’t need the flowers, but you can always toss them in the trash,” Brady says, flipping his notebook closed and stuffing it, along with the note, back into his pocket.

“Give us a call if you get any more deliveries from your admirer. Someone will reach out if we have any questions.” He gives a quick wave before leaving.

Kyle blows out a heavy breath. Looking over at where he stands behind my sister, his concern is apparent.

“I will have my dad come over and sit with you until I am done with work,” Kyle informs us. “Let him answer the door, just in case.”

“What aren’t you saying?” Dayton asks, tilting her head back to look up at her husband.

“You aren’t paranormal,” Kyle says flatly, a sheepish look on his face. “If someone comes here, you are defenseless. My dad won’t be.”

Kyle and Dayton whisper in soft tones, and there’s not a doubt in my mind it’s me they are discussing. Giving up on decorating for today, I lock myself in the guestroom I’m staying in and face-plant onto the bed, determined to forget that the past hour hasn’t happened.

Arek

“Do you think she will like it?” I ask Declan.

“Don’t you think it’s a little early to be buying this?” Declan responds, gesturing to the tray of engagement rings displayed on the counter before me.

“No,” I say flatly, setting the ring in my hand down, unsure if Darby will like the rose gold colored band.

“Do you think she prefers white gold, yellow gold, or platinum?” I pick up another ring and inspect it.

Declan was dragged along because he knows my mate better than anyone. Especially since we have yet to meet.

“Arek, please tell me you are going to go slow with this,” Declan says.

“Do you think she might like a stone other than a diamond?” I ask, ignoring his skepticism.

“I think this is going to come back to bite you in the ass,” Declan deadpans.

“When’s her birthday?” I ask, looking over at Declan. He’s leaning against the counter next to me, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“How would I know this?” he asks. Several other customers turn to stare at us due to his loud tone.

“You know her better than me,” I say, as if the answer isn’t apparent. The guy behind the counter gives me a strange look that I ignore. Reflecting on the conversation, and considering that I am looking at engagement rings, I suppose our behavior might seem odd.

“If you are determined to do this today, just fucking pick something,” Declan grinds out through clenched teeth, speaking softly enough that only I can hear him.

“I’ll take this one,” I say to the guy behind the counter. The ring features a cushion-

cut diamond set in platinum, accompanied by princess-cut pink sapphires. Being that Declan told me Darby has pink streaks in her hair, I know she likes the color.

“Will that be all, sir?” the salesman asks, returning the tray of rings to the inside of the display case.

“Not yet,” I answer, looking around the store. “I want to get a few more items.”

“For fuck’s sake,” Declan murmurs.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:18 am

I've been in Padston for almost a week now. I have a signed lease with Gypsy to rent an apartment above the Whiskey Genie, but have yet to move in.

Why?

It's because, for the fifth day in a row, a package has been delivered to me. The gifts have ranged from gourmet chocolates to jewelry and personal care items. Oh, and let's not forget the flowers.

Each package has had a card attached to it, addressed similarly to the first one.

"Looking forward to eternity."

"Can't wait to spend eternity with you."

"Thinking of you."

Each delivery results in a call to the sheriff's office.

At this point, I have had the opportunity to meet each deputy and am becoming very close to the sheriff.

The consensus is that I should stay with Kyle and Dayton as a layer of protection, rather than living alone.

That is, until they can figure out who my stalker is.

Today's gift arrived about fifteen minutes ago, and we are waiting for someone from the sheriff's office to arrive before I open it. Heywood Morris is here, as he always is when Kyle needs to leave the house.

A knock on the door has me jumping—my nerves are shot. My life was supposed to be quiet, moving to Padston. Not whatever nightmare this is.

"Hello, everyone," a deep voice chirps from the door.

Glancing over my shoulder, I see both Chayce and Adyr Galloway. Chayce is the sheriff, Adyr is a deputy, and also Chayce's brother.

"Hi, guys," I say, defeatedly.

"Did you open it yet?" Chayce asks.

"No, I have been waiting for you."

Chayce and Adyr look over the packaging. There are no indicators on where it is being shipped from, just a plain brown box.

"Go ahead and open it," Chayce says as he and Adyr flank me on either side.

Taking a deep breath, I rip into the packaging, eager to get this done.

Under the plain brown paper is a plain brown box.

Suppressing a groan, I press on. Getting through the protective packaging, my breath catches.

It's a jewelry box. A sizeable one as well.

Made of solid wood, the piece features five drawers on the front.

“Don’t touch anything else,” Chayce says, reminding me that he is here. Both he and Adyr have gloves on, I presume, to preserve any evidence they can glean from the gift. Stepping back, out of their way, I wrap my arms around my middle, pacing the living room of Dayton and Kyle’s house.

“Holy shit!” one of the men yell. “Darby, you need to come here, please.”

Taking my time, I cross the small space, and dread fills my chest.

“Wh-what is it?” I ask, my voice cracking. Unable to see around the two large men, I step to the side.

“You have someone’s attention,” Chayce comments.

My jaw hangs slack as I peer inside the jewelry box.

While inspecting it, Chayce and Adyr opened all of the compartments.

There is a variety of pieces: rings, earrings, necklaces, and bracelets.

The selections are just different pieces, either.

Some are simply gold or silver, while others feature gems. The gems range from pearls, rubies, and emeralds.

“Did you find a note?” I ask, tears silently streaming down my cheeks.

“No,” they answer simultaneously.

Nodding my head, I head back to my room, closing myself inside. This situation is driving me crazy. I just want to move on with my new life, instead of being frozen in fear, afraid to leave my sister's house.

Arek

Pacing my office, my bear threatens to break loose and find our mate. Of course, I know where she is, but he wants to claim her.

Nothing has been said about the gifts I have been sending her. I hope she likes them.

“Hey,” Raelee says, interrupting my thoughts as she barges into my office without knocking.

“What do you need?” I ask, slightly more harsh than necessary.

Her eyes narrow in annoyance at me. “Never mind,” she says before leaving, slamming the door behind her.

Throwing myself into the chair behind my desk, I try to focus on the mound of paperwork that has accumulated. Darby has occupied every thought. Bills need to be paid and payroll needs to be processed before my family comes after me.

Needing a break, I stand, twisting my body this way and that. Several joints pop and snap as my muscles protest sitting in one spot for so long. Checking the clock, I am surprised to see that we are already in the midst of the dinner rush. Straightening my tie, I head for the dining room.

It's three days before Christmas, and we are packed. On route to the hostess stand, I weave between tables, picking up empty plates and greeting patrons along the way.

Aunt Domella, Aunt Marlee, and my mom, Natalia, are all at the hostess stand. My cousins and brothers are all where they are supposed to be, either waiting tables, bussing tables, or in the kitchen cooking. I'm sure my father and uncles are undoubtedly in the kitchen as well.

"Good evening, Ladies," I say in greeting to my family, kissing Domella, Marlee, and Mom on the cheek.

"Hey, Arek," they say in unison.

"Do you need anything?"

"No, honey," Mom answers. "We have things covered here."

"Okay, I am going to make the rounds. Come get me if you need me," I tell them before heading to the kitchen to make sure they are set for dinner.

Stepping into the kitchen, it's controlled chaos. The sizzling and popping of meat on the grill create a symphony, accompanied by the clanging of dishes, which adds a corresponding beat of its own. Rolling up my sleeves, I step in to help the dishwashers get caught up.

Getting lost in the mundane, I float between stations, assisting where and how I can. Once the kitchen is caught up, and I am confident they aren't in the weeds, I head back into the dining room.

Stepping through the swinging doors, my feet freeze in place as the delectable scent of my mate fills my nose. My bear becomes frantic, needing to see her. He threatens to take over, and it requires a great deal of strength to keep him under control.

Scanning the dining room, I follow her scent. Coming upon the table, the

conversation halts when my presence is detected.

“Hey, Arek. How are you?” Kyle Morris, tiger alpha, asks.

Focusing my gaze on him, I step closer to my mate.

“Good,” I answer on a growl, causing his face to pucker in confusion. Clearing my throat, I try speaking again, hoping to sound less intimidating. “How are you this evening?”

“We are okay,” Kyle answers wearily. “Let me introduce you to everyone.” His words cause my chest to flutter.

Flutter? Damn, I sound like one of the triplets.

“You, of course, know Dayton,” Kyle says, indicating his very pregnant mate. “This is Kali, Dayton’s best friend.” He points at the woman across from him. “This is Darby, Dayton’s sister.” He points to the woman across the table from Dayton.

“It is a pleasure to meet you both,” I say sincerely. Both women give cordial nods, muttering “nice to meet you” in return.

My brow furrows when I take a good look at Darby.

Her features are similar to Dayton’s—honey-blond hair, bright green eyes, and slender build.

It’s difficult to tell how tall Darby is, given that she is sitting down.

There are several undeniable differences between the sisters.

Dayton is normal looking. No, that's not the correct description. Ordinary? Plain?

Darby has bright streaks of pink through her hair, piercings in her nose, lip, and eyebrow, as well as numerous tattoos decorating her flesh. Taking a closer look at Darby, my spine stiffens. She looks run down, possibly stressed. The unknown cause has my bear on edge.

"Are you all right?" I ask Darby.

"Fine," Darby blurts.

"She has a stalker," Kyle says softly.

"What?!" My too-loud statement has the entire dining room going silent as heads turn our way. It's like a movie scene where a needle scratches across a vinyl record, halting everything. Darby sinks into her chair, trying to make herself invisible as her cheeks flush with embarrassment.

"Yeah," Kyle continues. "Someone has been sending her all kinds of gifts. Flowers, chocolate, jewelry, you name it."

My mouth opens and closes as sound refuses to come out. That is everything I have sent her. Did someone take my idea?

"The worst part," Kyle continues as my mind races to catch up. "Each item has come with a creepy message."

"I look forward to spending eternity with you," I babble, unable to help myself.

"It's you!" the table exclaims at the same time, drawing even more attention to our small group.

“Of course it’s been me,” I say, slightly offended. “She’s my mate!”

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“S he’s my mate!” the guy says, seemingly pissed as if we didn’t already know that bit of information.

“You are an asshole!” I yell, louder than necessary, as the weight of the past week falls off my shoulders like ashes blowing in the wind.

“Darby!” Dayton exclaims in surprise at my outburst.

“No!” I bark out, turning my head to glare at my sister.

“He scared the fuck out of me with his creepy, unsigned , notes. I haven’t been able to leave the house, most days, my room.

Heywood has been babysitting us, in case someone else showed up in person,” I continue to yell, giving the entire dining room a show.

Arek, as Kyle introduced him, stares slack-jawed at me as Declan approaches the table warily.

“Is, ah, everything okay over here?” Declan asks hesitantly.

“No, it is not,” I gripe. Declan’s lips twitch as he fights a smile.

“I told you so,” Declan says to Arek. Arek rolls his eyes in obvious annoyance.

“What is that supposed to mean?” I ask, and then change my mind.

“Forget it, I don’t want to know.” I rise to my feet and throw my napkin on top of my untouched steak.

“I hope everyone has enjoyed the show.” I turn away from the table.

Several patrons quickly divert their gaze, while others openly mock me.

“Where are you going?” Dayton asks.

“Anywhere but here,” I snap, glaring at Arek before storming out of the dining room. I do my best to ignore the looks. Many of them range from amused to shocked. I swear I hear a woman mutter “atta girl” right before the restaurant door closes behind me.

Stomping away from Simmer Down, I take long, slow, deep breaths to calm my anger.

The biting cold December air helps a lot.

Needing to escape somewhere, I wander the streets of the quiet town.

Snow has started falling, and before I realize it, I am standing in front of the gazebo, gazing at the pretty Christmas tree.

Squeezing around the tree, so I don’t knock it over, I pick a spot on one of the benches. Needing to talk to someone, I pull my phone from my pocket and dial Fiora.

“Hello,” she says, her tone off.

“Are you okay?” I ask, the dinner drama forgotten momentarily.

“I don’t think so,” Fiora responds.

Fiora

The ringing of my phone prompts me to pause just long enough to see who it is. My shoulders sag in relief when “Darby” flashes across the screen.

“Hello,” I say once the call connects, trying and failing to hide my emotions.

“Are you okay?” Darby questions.

“I don’t think so,” pausing to collect myself, I explain some of the details of today’s monumental occurrences. “I was helping my mom wrap some last-minute gifts.”

“Okay,” she volleys, drawing out the word, making her confusion evident.

“I found an adoption certificate. My parents aren’t my birth parents,” I confess, fighting back tears that start to fall, again.

“Holy shit!” Darby exclaims, stating the obvious. “I thought I was having a tough week.” I don’t think I was supposed to hear that last part. Needing a distraction, I press Darby for details.

“What happened to you?”

Darby launches into the tale of a guy named Arek. She explains about the random deliveries of gifts, accompanied by creepy notes. The story catches me off guard, and I can’t help but start laughing.

“What is so amusing? He freaked me the fuck out,” she argues.

“Weren’t you just saying that you could use a man who knew his way around your hoo-ha?” I question.

“Hoo-ha? What are you five?” Darby snarks

“You know what I mean,” I rebut, having grown up in the middle of Amish country in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, my language doesn’t get crazy out of habit.

“Whatever,” she grumbles.

“Is that invitation to come join you in Padston still open?” I ask, dropping my voice to a whisper.

“Absofuckinlutely!” Darby cheers. “How soon do you think you will get here?”

“Early tomorrow morning, I hope,” I tell her, glazing over at the bags I have packed so far.

“Sounds great,” Darby replies. “I will text you the address, just load it into your GPS. Be careful, we are getting some snow right now. Nothing too heavy, but you never know.”

“I know how to drive in the snow. Pennsylvania, remember?”

“Fuck you,” Darby says with a laugh, no venom in her words.

She ends the call, and I open my bedroom window, dropping bags out onto the lawn. I don’t want my family to know what I’m doing, so I need to be discreet. Hiding in my room all afternoon makes this a little easier to hide, since my family isn’t expecting me to come out and join them.

Humiliation, confusion, anger, shame, frustration - you name it, and you will find my photo next to it in the dictionary. I just hope that Darby can understand that she is my last hope. If she can't forgive my actions, I have no idea what to do next.

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Watching Darby's retreating form as she storms out of Simmer Down, my jaw hangs lax. Declan, the asshole that he is, reaches over, using one finger under my chin, pushes my jaw closed.

Gradually, the dining room returns to normal, with the low hum of conversation punctuated by the clanging of empty plates being cleared away or the clinking of metal silverware against the dish of a fresh meal.

Kyle glares at me briefly before turning to fuss over his mate. I feel bad for upsetting Dayton, but being this close to Darby caused all good sense to flee.

"Kyle, dinner is on us," Declan states, showing that at least one of us still has their wits about them.

"That's not..." he starts to rebuke.

"Yes, it is," I volley as Declan moves away from the table.

"You and me," Kyle says, narrowing his eyes at me. "Need to talk. Stop at the garage tomorrow. Nonnegotiable."

He grinds out the last part right before moving to help Dayton rise from her chair.

Kali is on Dayton's left while Kyle is on her right.

Both have an arm wrapped around Dayton's back, helping to support some of her weight.

Taking a deep breath in and letting it out slowly, I get a glimpse of what Darby will look like when she is pregnant with our cubs.

All of the blood rushes to my cock and I make quick work of escaping to my office before anyone notices.

I should have expected that Declan would be hot on my heels, not giving me a moment's peace.

"Are you proud of yourself?" he chastises, crossing his arms over his chest and leaning against the door, removing all hopes of my escape.

"Declan," I start with a weary sigh. "I am in no mood for I told you so's."

"I don't give a fuck. I warned you!" His voice gets louder, punctuating his point. "You asked me. Dragged me all over town. Hell, you bought a fucking engagement ring! What the hell were you thinking?"

Declan's chest heaves, and he pauses briefly to catch his breath before continuing his tirade.

"Did you even sign any of those notes?"

"Well, no—" I interject before getting cut off.

"Darby was freaked out and in the process of all this, you managed to piss off one of the other alpha's. One of your best friends. Kyle doesn't need this shit. His focus needs to be on his very pregnant mate!"

My mouth opens and closes, trying to come up with something to say without sounding like an asshole.

Yeah, I got nothing.

“You need to make this right, Arek,” Declan continues.

“I know!” I roar, slamming my hands on the top of the desk, startling Declan in the process.

Slumping into my chair, I scrub my hands over my face, muttering, “I just don’t know how.” Somehow, Declan hears me.

“Start by apologizing to Kyle, Dayton, and Darby,” Declan says flatly, stating the obvious.

“Yeah, I will go to the garage tomorrow morning and talk to Kyle,” I concede. Raising my head to meet Declan’s gaze, his features soften at whatever he sees the defeat in my eyes. “You just don’t understand.”

“You’re right, Arek. I don’t understand. Finding one’s mate is supposed to be the single most stimulating experience in a paranormal’s life. There’s no handbook on how matings are supposed to be, especially when your mate is a human.”

Declan moves away from the door, sitting in one of the chairs on the other side of my desk, facing me. Leaning forward, resting his elbows on his knees, his expression turns serious.

“Something you need to know about Darby, and Dayton, I guess. Their mother is quite a character. She had nothing polite to say about Dayton marrying Kyle. Lacene, their mom, is not a fan of paranormals either,” he heaves a heavy breath before delivering the final blow.

“Their parents got married because they felt they had to.”

He lets that information hang in the air while I process it. We sit in silence as my mind whirls. My head falls backward, and my eyes drift shut. Words tumble from my mouth without permission.

“I am well and truly fucked!”

Declan, the asshole that he is starts laughing. He takes a few minutes to get over his mirth before heading back out to the front of house, leaving me to wallow in my misery alone.

How the hell am I going to convince Darby to not only forgive me, but also accept our mating?

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Dragging my ass out of bed, I make my way to the kitchen for some much-needed caffeine.

“Morning,” Dayton calls out from her spot in the recliner.

“Morning,” I grumble in return.

After selecting the largest coffee mug Dayton and Kyle own and filling it to the brim, I move to join my sister in the living room.

“How are you feeling today?” I ask Dayton as I take my first sip of nectar.

“Like a beached whale,” Dayton answers tiredly as she rubs her distended belly. “How are you doing?” Tears pool in her eyes as pregnancy hormones get the better of her. “Sorry.” She wipes the moisture from her eyes.

“You look beautiful,” I say sternly, narrowing my eyes in her direction. “You are pregnant, not fat. As soon as you hold those babies, you will forget all about this.” I swirl my finger around, circling all of her.

My sister looks tired. These babies are sucking every ounce of life from her, but I won’t tell her that.

Dayton is already self-conscious, thanks to Lacene.

How I turned out so different from my sister, while growing up in the same house, is a miracle.

My phone rings, bringing both of us out of our thoughts.

Fiora's name flashes across the screen and I slap my head in an oh, shit moment, having forgotten all about her traveling to Padston.

"Oh, my God!" I swipe to accept the call, earning a strange look from my sister. "I am sooo sorry, I totally forgot to text you the address," I rush out, not letting her get a word in. "Where are you?"

Fiora chuckles, but there's no humor in her tone. "It's all right," she says. "I am at the Wildfire Casino."

"Oh, okay," I respond before rattling off quick directions on how to get to the house.

"We can grab some stuff and stay in my apartment." I rise to my feet while earning a questioning look from Dayton.

Holding a finger up in Dayton's direction, I quickly finish my conversation with Fiora before hanging up.

"With everything that went on last night, it slipped my mind that Fiora said she would be arriving this morning," I explain.

"You can stay here," Dayton says quietly.

Returning from the kitchen, after putting my mug in the dishwasher, I look at my sister, really look at her. Dayton's wan features cause me to move closer to her.

"Are you okay?" I ask, crouching down beside her

"I-I d-don't wa-want you to le-leave," she blubbers as tears streak heavily down her

cheeks.

“Oh, honey,” I coo, wrapping Dayton in a side hug. “It isn’t as if I am leaving town.” This seems just to set her off more, and her tears turn into full-on sobs.

Kali walks in, giving me a questioning look just as the doorbell rings.

“That should be my friend, Fiora,” I explain to Kali. “Can you please let her in?”

Soft conversation reaches me as I continue to comfort my sister. When Kali and Fiora enter the room, it’s apparent that we need to talk. My friend, while normally impeccably put together, looks harried. I’m not just talking about being travel-weary either.

“Dayton, this is Fiora Valenhardt. She was my roommate at Stanford. Fiora, this is my sister, Dayton Morris. Kali Monroe, who let you in, is Dayton’s best friend,” I explain, completing introductions.

“It’s nice to meet both of you,” Fiora says, looking uncomfortable.

“Please stay until Christmas, at least,” Dayton pleads softly, drawing everyone’s attention back to her.

“I can stay at the hotel,” Fiora says, pointing over her shoulder to the door.

“No,” Dayton says quickly, her voice breaking. “Please, I don’t want to leave the house if I can help it.” She points to her belly. “Having everyone here for Christmas would make me ha-happy,” she urges as the tears start up again.

Glancing at Fiora, it’s apparent that she is uncomfortable with this situation. Unfortunately, my sister’s feelings take precedence over those of my friend.

“You can take my room,” I state, addressing Fiora. “I will sleep on the couch.”

She hesitates, looking between the three of us. “Are you sure?” Fiora asks warily.

“Yes!” I say firmly, leaving no room for argument. “Either that or I can sleep on the floor in one of the nurseries.”

“I have an overnight bag in the car,” Fiora says, turning around. “Is it possible to get a shower and a nap? I have been driving most of the night.”

“Absolutely,” I chime in. “Do you need help with anything?”

“No, thanks. I can manage.”

Ten minutes later, the shower in the ensuite bathroom to mine, now Fiora’s room, runs. She looks exhausted, so I put the interrogation on hold. For now.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:18 am

Standing in Kyle Morris's office, I feel like a child again as he chastises me for not only upsetting Darby but also causing Dayton undue stress in an already tenuous pregnancy.

"How many times do you want me to say I'm sorry?" I ask, my attitude not helping with the situation. I came here, taking Declan's advice, to smooth things over with the tiger alpha. He just so happens to be one of my best friends, but also my future brother-in-law.

"Your behavior was callous," Kyle argues, crossing his arms over his barrel chest. "What were you thinking?"

"I wasn't, really," I respond sheepishly.

Falling into a chair in front of his desk, my head hangs in shame.

"I attacked Declan when he showed up at the restaurant smelling like her. It got worse when Daegyn met her before I did, too. My bear went off the rails, almost forcing a shift to track her down."

Kyle's eyes get as big as saucers at my confession.

"Seriously," he responds in an awed tone.

Silence fills the space, each of us lost in our thoughts.

"Look." I break the building tension, rubbing a hand across the back of my neck. "I

am sorry,” I say again, in my most sincere voice. “The last thing I intended was to upset your mate. Or mine, for that matter.” The moment he accepts my apology is evident as Kyle’s posture becomes more relaxed.

“Yeah, okay, just keep your stalking to a minimum, please?” Kyle asks, his lips twitching as he fights the building laughter. “You need to take these with you, though.” He points to the pile of items I had delivered to his house.

“Fuuucck,” I say on a groan.

“Dude,” Kyle says, now outright laughing at me. “Darby is going to be a tough nut to crack.” My bear rumbles in my chest, causing Kyle’s brows to rise toward his hairline.

“Ignore him,” I grumble.

“Is there anything else you bought, Darby, that I need to be prepared for?” Kyle asks, raising a single eyebrow in question.

Heat creeps up my neck and into my face, causing me to hesitate. After a brief moment of silence, I rush out my words, hoping that Kyle doesn’t understand them.

“Iboughttheranengagementtring,” I say, running the entire sentence into one long word.

Kyle stares at me, blinking owlishly, as his mouth opens and closes with no words coming out.

He tilts his head at an angle, staring at me.

The gears in his head are turning at a high rate of speed as he sifts through my words.

I can tell the exact moment he figures it out, right before his face shows surprise.

“You bought her an engagement ring?” he asks in bewilderment right before he starts laughing.

The prick laughs so damn hard that he falls out of his chair with a loud thud.

Cobi, Kyle’s sister and garage receptionist, rushes into the office to see what happened.

Her eyes widen in shock when she spots her brother rolling on the floor, tears of laughter streaking down his cheeks.

Shaking her head in bewilderment, Cobi leaves the pair of us alone, muttering under her breath, too softly for me to understand over the volume of Kyle’s laughter. I wait him out, picking at my fingernails.

“Are you finished yet, asshole? I have to get back to the restaurant,” I say flatly.

A hand pops up, just over the top of the desk, dismissing me with a wave. “Don’t forget to take your gifts ,” Kyle adds from the floor, emphasizing the word gifts. It takes me two trips to collect all the rejected presents I sent to Darby. My mind is already spinning on how to win over my mate.

Tomorrow is Christmas Eve, and we’ve been busy all day with people stopping by to grab a bite to eat or pick up gift certificates as a last-minute gift. It’s a nice reprieve, keeping my mind away from thoughts of Darby and how to make things right.

“Declan,” I call to my cousin on my way to one of the kiosks where we enter orders. “Can you make a delivery for me?”

“Since when do we make deliveries?” he snarks in return.

My shoulders sag in defeat. I shouldn’t have to explain myself damn it. “It’s to go to Kyle Morris’s house,” I state flatly. A variety of emotions pass over Declan’s face, but thankfully, he keeps his trap shut.

“Yeah, I’ll take it,” he says before walking away.

The overwhelming need to provide for my mate threatens to pull me under.

I know that there are at least four of them in the house, including Darby and Kali.

Unsure if they have any other company, I decide to send over enough food for eight people.

It’s overkill, I know, but if they have company, there will be enough to go around.

If not, they have leftovers and won’t have to cook another meal.

Without knowing what Darby might like, I place an order for a variety of menu options, including the meal they had ordered the previous evening. I add on twice as many dessert options, hoping to smooth over any lingering hurt feelings.

Twenty minutes later, Declan is moving through the dining room with a massive box in his arms.

“Dude, is there anything on our menu that you didn’t have made for them?” Declan grumbles, feigning to struggle under the weight of the large box.

“Just deliver it,” I gripe back, turning away from him as he heads outside.

Darby

Headlights flash across the front of the house, as if someone just pulled into the driveway. I get up to investigate, looking out the front window, just in time to see Declan struggling under the weight of a large box he is pulling out of the backseat of his car.

Rushing to open the door, I make it just as he juggles his parcel in an attempt to knock.

“What the hell?” I ask, stepping out of the way, allowing him to enter. The smell of grilled meat precedes any response he may have had.

“Compliments of your mate,” Declan says as he walks past me. Reaching the kitchen counter, he sets the box down. As he begins to remove the multitude of takeout containers, Kyle, Kali, and Fiora converge on the mini-buffet laid out on the counter.

“Arek sent this over. He wasn’t sure if you had company or not, so he sent extra,” Declan states, finally acknowledging my question. His gaze falls on Fiora, and a large smile spreads across his lips.

“Hello,” Declan says in a charming and flirtatious voice. “I don’t think we’ve met before. Declan Palmer.” He holds his hand out for Fiora to shake.

“Fiora Valenhardt,” she says sheepishly, quickly gripping his hand before releasing it as if she got burned. Declan gets a puzzled look on his face before giving his head a quick shake.

“Where’s Dayton?” Declan asks, changing the subject.

“She’s lying down, she isn’t feeling well,” Kyle responds, his concern evident.

“Hopefully this helps a little,” Declan volleys, offering Kyle a soft smile. “Well, I have to get back to Simmer Down. The place has been a madhouse all day.” Without a backward glance, he lets himself out of the house and leaves.

“These portions are massive,” Fiora states in awe.

“Kyle, go see if Dayton wants to join us or eat in bed,” I say, refusing to recognize the kindness of the delivered meal. “I will make up a plate for her.” While Arek gets credit for the kind gesture, this doesn’t let him off the hook whatsoever.

All of us are stuffed from consuming most of the obscene amount of food Arek sent over.

Through the course of the evening, we hang out in the living room binge-watching our favorite holiday movies, each of us picking one.

The snow has started to fall a little heavier, creating a beautiful aesthetic against all the decorative lights on the exterior of the houses in the neighborhood.

Dayton smothers another yawn, and Kyle declares it’s time for her to get some rest. We say our goodnights, and just before Fiora tries to escape, I grip her wrist, tugging her back down to the couch next to me. As soon as I know we are alone, I pounce.

“All right, I have given you time to settle in,” I say, turning slightly to face her, putting my back against the arm of the couch. “What happened?”

“What do you mean?” she volleys, refusing to make eye contact with me.

“I know you,” I say flatly. “You confront people who piss you off. When I spoke to you last night, I could tell there is more to your story and why you want to escape Lancaster, besides finding out you are adopted.” I narrow my eyes at her, patiently

waiting Fiora out as she squirms under my scrutiny.

“Fine,” she groans, adding an eye roll to punctuate her annoyance that I won’t let her blow me off.

“As I told you, I came across my adoption certificate when I was helping my mom wrap gifts.” Fiora pauses, and I wait her out.

If I rush her, she will spit out a very abridged version of events.

I need the whole story in order to help her with whatever issue she is running from.

“When I took it out to my mom, who was making cookies, she waved me off. Mom is she still my mom?” she asks herself before shaking her head and continuing to speak as if the issue isn’t something she can deal with at the moment.

“Anyway, Mom acted like it was no big deal. I mean, in the grand scheme of things, it doesn’t matter, right?”

“Trying to comprehend why it was this big secret, and then acting like me finding out and being upset was too difficult to understand, I bolted from the house. Somehow, I guess out of habit, I ended up at Dylan’s house.”

My nose wrinkles in disgust at the mention of that name. What Dylan and Sally Jo did to my friend is beyond despicable. Fiora nods at the look on my face before picking her story back up where she left off.

“Of course, Sally Jo was there.” Fiora rolls her eyes at that, and I feign a gagging motion in agreement. “I had arrived right after they did an early gift exchange of presents,” she sneers. She slumps, defeatedly, into the couch, pausing her story as if to collect her thoughts.

“The asshole had just proposed,” Fiora says, squeezing her eyes closed tightly, mentally envisioning the event again. “Sally Jo stuck her hand in my face as soon as she realized that I was there, flaunting the ring.”

“Good, they deserve each other,” I snark, causing Fiora’s lips to tip up in a smirk. “They, because I refuse to say their names, get to spend eternity, or until they get divorced, making each other miserable.”

Fiora takes a moment before her smirk converts to a soft smile. “Yeah.”

Cocking my head, I look at my friend. The only noise is the movie in the background.

“What aren’t you telling me?” I ask, pushing her for the rest.

Fiora closes her eyes, her head tipping back to rest on the edge of the couch cushion.

“I’m not really sure,” she answers as her eyes remain closed. Boring a hole through the side of Fiora’s head, I will her to just spit out whatever she is holding back. When she remains silent, I push, unable to wait any longer.

“What do you mean, you aren’t sure?”

“My brother, Michael, was holding me. The pungent smell of burning wood surrounded us. Smudges of soot were all over his face.” Fiora is rambling, her words disjointed.

“I’m confused,” I voice, causing Fiora to roll her head toward me, her eyes opening to meet mine.

“Welcome to the club,” she says with a humorless laugh. “Anger, hurt, so many emotions flooded me that I sort of blacked out. I remember stumbling backward,

wanting to leave. Home wasn't an option, as I wasn't ready to face my parents yet."

"Okaaayyy," I say, drawing out the word. Pieces of the puzzle are still missing. Either Fiora doesn't want to give them to me, or she is blatantly holding them back.

"Michael has to keep my secret now," she says as tears start to track down her cheeks.

"What secret?" I screech, cringing at the shrillness of my voice. Frustration is taking hold of me, and I squeeze my hands into fists to stop myself from grabbing Fiora by the shoulders and shaking the words from her.

"I set the barn on fire," she says, her eyes drifting closed again. "Michael saved me, pulled me out as the fire department arrived. He hid me, kept me safe, as we got lost in the chaos."

Opening and closing my mouth, I am stunned silent. What does a person say to that?

"Do you know for sure that you started the fire?" I ask, stating the obvious and speaking in a soft tone so as not to spook my friend. Her head shakes back and forth, still resting against the couch cushion.

"No, that's where things get a little fuzzy.

Panic overwhelmed me, but it didn't feel like it was mine.

Anger was also present, which was definitely mine.

It was almost as if I were having an out-of-body experience.

You know how people state that they are watching their bodies, either as if they are

floating above or from someone else's eyes? ”

“Yeah,” I quip, not entirely sure that I do. My voice gives me away as Fiora rolls her eyes at me, indicating she doesn't believe me for a minute, but doesn't bother to call me out on it.

“Anyway, that's what it was like. I was me but wasn't. I'm not sure how else to describe it.”

I want to summarize what Fiora just spewed at me, but she seems to have checked out. I turn my attention to the television, not wanting to make her uncomfortable as I sift through her story.

“I'm going to bed,” she announces, rising to her feet. “Good night.”

“Good night,” I volley, moving to get the pillow and blankets I stashed out here earlier.

I'm not used to the snow and cold, so while I typically run hot at night, layers are my best bet right now.

I make up the couch, and as soon as I am comfortable, or as comfortable as I am going to get, I shut the television off.

That night, sleep became elusive. Dreams plagued by fire had me tossing and turning all night.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:18 am

It's Christmas Eve, and the house is a flurry of activity. Having Fiora here has been a blessing, since Dayton has been relegated to her recliner. The weather has become relentless, dumping six inches of snow within the past twelve hours, and it's still coming down.

I have changed my mind, I no longer like the snow. Don't get me wrong, there's something to be said for a white Christmas, but I was content with the small amount we had yesterday. This shit is ridiculous.

The dining room table is decorated with red and white poinsettias accompanied by greens and tall white candles.

Offset against the red tablecloth, white dishes, and green plaid napkins, it's a stunning look.

A large turkey has been cooking all day, filling the house with mouth-watering scents.

That, with the combination of cinnamon and other spices, my stomach has been rumbling all day.

Kyle's family is here, and all of the women, save Dayton, are working like a well-oiled machine to get dinner on the table. For once, I am looking forward to being around people. The Morris' have welcomed me in as one of their own, and it makes my heart swell.

"Crap!" Dayton's exclamation from the living room has everyone freezing in place,

all attention on her. Dropping the dish I was holding onto the tabletop, I rush to her side.

My sister stands there with a stunned expression on her face, her arms held out to the side. Looking her over, I see a puddle of water on the floor at her feet.

“It’s just water,” I comment offhandedly. “I’ll get a towel. Sit at the table, and we can get you dinner.”

Octavia Morris is the first to move. “Kyle, call Tavan,” she barks out, like a drill sergeant giving orders. “Kali, you, Cobi, and Fiora start putting this food away and cleaning up. Heywood, you start the car.”

When no one moves, Dayton’s cry of pain sets everyone in motion.

“Today, people!” Octavia yells. “These babies are coming.” She claps her hands several times before moving to Dayton’s right. “Darby, you get on Dayton’s left.”

“Tavan is getting everything ready. He was at the Genie, so be prepared for a crowd,” Kyle informs us, heading our direction with Dayton’s coat.

It doesn’t take us long to get loaded into the SUV and drive into Padston. We pull up in front of a large, Victorian-style house that is all lit up both inside and out. A tall man is standing on the porch watching us as we assist Dayton out of the car and into the doctor’s office.

Foregoing introductions, he focuses on my sister as she cries out in pain from the contractions. While I know nothing about giving birth, I do know that her roaring is becoming more frequent.

As the trio disappears into the back of the building, I fall into a seat in the waiting

room area.

As Kyle predicted, several other people are indeed already here.

Everyone goes around the room, introducing themselves, causing my head to swim with all of the names.

A trio of mirror images walks in, and all I can do is blink at them.

When I find out they are Arek's cousins, my heart sinks.

Faint yells of pain can be heard coming from the long hallway that Dayton and Kyle disappeared into, and most of the younger women cringe in sympathy.

I understand that women are meant for this, but I still can't comprehend how something the size of a watermelon comes out of a hole the size of a golf ball.

Kali, Cobi, and Fiora rush into the waiting room a short time later, tripping over themselves at the large group assembled before them. More introductions go around the room, helping me relearn many of the names that I have already forgotten.

The door opens again, and my breath catches in my chest as Arek, Declan, and Daegyn walk in.

My eyes roam over his tall frame, giving me a better appreciation for his physique.

He's tall, maybe six feet, two inches, give or take, it's hard to tell sitting down.

His walnut-colored hair is cut short, and the close-cropped beard lines his sharp jawline.

His bright green eyes sparkle like emeralds as they bore into me.

It takes everything in me to hold back the urge to rub my chest as if his gaze chiseled a hole in it.

Stiffening my spine, I narrow my gaze at him, pushing my anger forward.

“Why are you here?” I bark, crossing my arms over my chest.

Arek’s mouth opens and closes, with nothing coming out, as if he is searching for the right words.

The door opening again has all heads swinging toward the newcomers.

Fiora’s sharp intake of breath diverts my attention.

Her eyes are wide, focused on the three men standing in the doorway.

All three men share similar features, hinting that they might be related.

One thing I have discovered in the brief time I have been in town is that multiple births within families are pretty common.

The guy on the right slowly moves in our direction, his attention focused solely on my friend. Dropping to one knee, he takes one of Fiora’s hands in his, placing a gentle kiss on the back as his eyes flash amber.

“My mate,” he whispers reverently as Fiora waves a hand, fanning herself as her face turns crimson. “My name is Brady Galloway.” He lowers her hand back to her lap, but refuses to let go.

“Fi—” she starts, clearing her throat before trying to speak again. “Fiora Valenhart.”

“Fiora,” Brady repeats reverently.

“Will you please talk to me?” Arek barks, drawing everyone’s attention.

Knowing he is talking to me, I give him a side-eyed glare, refusing to engage.

“What did our alpha do this time?” One of the triplets—don’t ask me which one—asks sarcastically, emphasizing the word alpha. The other two giggle, and all three earn a glare from Arek.

“Where do you want me to start?” I ask them, earning a glare from Arek.

Getting encouragement from Rhodee, Roree, and Raelee, I launch into the story of their cousin’s stalking.

Their rolling commentary and theatrics have me laughing as we all enjoy Arek’s misery.

Declan adds his comments to the conversation, as he was with Arek during many of the events leading up to the gifts.

“Enough!” Arek yells. His frustration at the situation growing more evident.

“No!” I yell back, jumping to my feet and standing toe-to-toe with him.

“I will not tolerate having a man control me. My mother controlled not only my father, but my sister and me as well. Growing up with that shit, I swore I wouldn’t put up with it,” I shriek.

My chest is heaving due to anger and embarrassment since I just aired my family's dirty laundry in front of a room full of strangers.

"What the hell is going on out here?" Kyle yells from the mouth of the hall.

Seeing Kyle, everyone jumps to their feet, peppering him with questions about the babies and Dayton.

"We have one girl and three boys," he says. "I would know a little more about their health, size, and weight if it wasn't for all of the screaming going on." Kyle's anger is palpable, and I feel guilty for taking away some of the attention that should be focused on his small family.

"That, that, Hellion..." Arek argues, pointing at me.

Half of the room is entertained by the show we have been putting on. The other half appears mildly uncomfortable from the display.

"Is my sister-in-law," Kyle bites out, bringing my attention back to him.

"She's my mate!" Arek yells back.

He moves faster than I expect, planting a shoulder into my midsection and tossing me over his shoulder. Moving to the door, one of the guys whose name I can't remember pulls it open, giving Arek a clear path out of the building.

"Put me down!" I yell, uselessly.

Arek marches us down the street, moving fast despite the amount of snow on the ground. We arrive at a small parking lot next to his family's restaurant, Simmer Down. Pausing to unlock the car, he sets me on the ground before pushing me inside.

“Put your seat belt on,” Arek bites out before slamming the car door closed.

He presses the button on the key fob, locking the car as he moves around to the driver’s side.

I unlock it just as he climbs in, and before I can escape, he grips my wrist, holding me in place.

Arek’s grip doesn’t hurt, but it is strong enough that if I try to pry myself away from him, I will hurt myself instead.

Resigning myself to being his hostage, for now, I cross my arms and sit petulantly as he backs out of the parking space and drives away from town.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:18 am

What the fuck was fate thinking, sticking me with a shrewish female like Darby Matthews?

Driving us to my house, I hope that some privacy will help me talk my way out of the hole I am in. Since Darby stormed away from me two nights ago, my bear has been miserable, threatening to take control so he can claim her.

Pulling into the driveway, the outdoor lights trim the large house.

Not wanting to displace my parents, when I took over as alpha, I built a new home.

Pressing the button on the garage door opener, I wait patiently to pull in.

Darby is difficult to read—her mind is a steel trap, and her face is expressionless.

My shoulders slump as disappointment fills me.

This isn't how I pictured things going when I brought my mate home for the first time.

After pulling inside, I shut the car off and climb out.

Reaching the door that connects the garage to the house, I press the button to close the door and shut out the cold.

Darby remains frozen in place.

Scrubbing my hands over my face, I enter the code to lock the door. No matter what she does, Darby is locked in. Do I feel guilty about taking such measures? Yes. However, it appears that it must be done, or we will never move past this.

Moving past the mudroom, down the hall to the primary bedroom, I strip off my clothes and head toward the shower. I smell like the restaurant and am offensive to myself, let alone my mate.

Washing quickly, I pull on a pair of sweatpants before leaving my room to check on Darby.

The house is silent as a tomb as I check the kitchen, dining room, great room, and the other three bedrooms. She is nowhere to be found.

Grabbing a beer on my way back through the kitchen, I check the garage.

Sure enough, Darby is still sitting in the car.

“Are you coming in so we can talk?” I ask defeatedly.

“I want to go back and see my sister,” she says petulantly. “You dragged me out of there before I even got to meet the babies. That’s my niece and nephews.” Darby fights back tears. Holding back the cringe, since she is right, I try a different approach.

“Please,” I say, pleadingly. “We need to talk. I promise to take you back to them as soon as we clear the air.”

Dangling that carrot in front of her might get her out of the car and into the house, but I have no intention of taking her anywhere tonight.

Propping a shoulder against the doorframe and taking a pull off my beer, I feign a relaxed posture.

After several minutes of just staring at each other, Darby reluctantly gets out of the car.

“Can I get one of those?” she asks, giving a chin lift in the direction of my beer.

“Help yourself,” I say, waving an arm in the direction of the kitchen and bowing slightly as if she is royalty.

Darby moves inside, passing by me as she flattens herself against the wall so as not to brush up against me. My bear is irritated, but I shove him down. The last thing I need is to freak my mate out any more than she already is.

Tracking her steps with my eyes, I keep some distance between us. Darby rummages around my refrigerator before coming out with three beers. Sitting them on the island in the center of the room, her eyes scan the open floor plan while popping open one of the bottles.

“Nice place,” she comments offhand.

“Thanks,” I remark, moving to get myself another drink from the refrigerator. “My cousins decorated the place.” I watch Darby nod in possible approval. “If there is anything you want to ch—” Holding a hand up in the air, she cuts off the rest of my statement.

“Hold it right the fuck there,” she states angrily.

“Look,” I say, defeatedly. “You are my mate. I only get one. I have no interest in trying to control you, although you could tone it down a little.” I wave a hand in a

circle, encompassing all of her.

“This is the exact bullshit I was talking about,” she yells. “If you can’t take me as I am, you can fuck right off.” Darby’s language causes me to cringe. This isn’t how an alpha’s mate is supposed to react. Or act, for that matter.

“How long are, were , you planning on staying in Padston?” I ask, changing tactics.

“Permanently.” She chugs down the rest of her beer and opens the second one. “I already have a lease with Gypsy, to rent the apartment above the bar,” Darby informs me as the alcohol loosens her tongue.

“If you need a job,” I start, before she cuts me off, shaking her head from side to side.

“I have a job,” she informs me. “I need a space to open my new business.”

My bear perks up at this as my mind whirls through possibilities. There are a couple of empty storefronts in town, one of which is across the street from Simmer Down. There’s a new law firm next door.

“What type of business are you opening?” I ask, expecting something feminine. The response I get has me spitting the mouthful of beer I just took across the room.

“Tattoo parlor with piercings.”

Darby’s confidence doesn’t waver, despite my reaction.

“You do know that this town is full of paranormals, right?” I ask.

“Yes,” she snarks, narrowing her eyes at me. “The guy I apprenticed under was a shifter. He taught me what needs to be done for paranormals.”

Holding my hands up in surrender, so I don't dig a deeper hole for myself, I step away from the counter, moving through the dining room to the great room.

The far wall features a large gas fireplace, serving as the focal point of the room.

I turn the fire on and then move to turn on the Christmas lights, including the large tree.

"Do you want to come and sit by the fire?" I ask, once again, changing the subject out of dangerous territory.

Darby guns the rest of her second beer, popping the third one open. Alcohol affects paranormals differently than humans. To get a buzz or drunk, we have to drink a considerable quantity, unless it is made with an extremely high alcohol content.

Taking a seat on the couch, my eyes track Darby's movements as she walks past me toward the built-in bookshelves flanking both sides of the fireplace.

Among the collection are some rare first editions of classics, including *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *The Scarlet Letter*, among others.

"I could suggest a few newer stories to add to your eclectic collection," Darby says, looking over her shoulder at me. It's the first time she has made any suggestion involving us, and a shiver runs through my body.

Stepping away from the books, she moves toward me, flopping down onto the couch. Turning to face me, I freeze in place as our knees touch. I'm afraid to move, unsure if she realizes what is happening.

"So," she says, drawing my eyes to meet hers. "What are you?"

My mouth opens and closes, unsure how to respond to her brazenness.

“I know, I know,” she says, taking a large pull from her beer bottle. “It’s not socially polite to ask, but you know. I’m your mate.” Darby sing-songs the last part, dropping her voice an octave to mimic me.

“Bear,” I blurt, my voice rough and harsh as my bear fights for control.

“Are we talking grizzly bear, black bear...what?”

“Brown,” I answer.

“Makes sense, I guess,” Darby volleys, pointing to the top of my head. “How are your cousins blonde then?” she ponders, her gaze becoming unfocused.

Saying nothing, I raise an eyebrow in response. Her hair is colored with streaks of bright pink—surely she already knows the answer to that.

“How does this work then?” Darby asks, dropping her head back on the top of the couch cushion as her head turns in my direction. My bear sits up as she gains his full attention.

“How does what work?” I volley, wanting to clarify what she is speaking about.

“You know,” Darby says, waving her hand back and forth between us. “The mating thing.”

Her disrespect for something so sacred has me cringing. Mentally chastising myself, I chant that she is human and just doesn’t know, trying to suppress my anger.

“The mating thing, as you so eloquently put it, is sacred among paranormals.” I

clench my teeth, unable to stop my reaction. “While I understand that you don’t comprehend that fact, I am doing my best to push that aside,” I say condescendingly, unable to help myself.

“Look,” Darby says, sighing heavily. “I have seen how Kyle and Dayton are together. It’s more than just face value.

I get it—something you need to understand, first and foremost. I have never had any intention of getting married.

” Darby holds a hand up to silence me as my mouth opens to speak.

“You freaked me the fuck out with your gifts and I am still angry at that. As far as mating, I will keep an open mind, but don’t get your hopes up. ”

I can’t help the disappointment that fills me from her words. My bear falls backward on his ass, hanging his head in defeat.

“I do need to ask something, though,” Darby says, pausing as if choosing her words carefully. “What about sex?”

“What about it?” I volley, confused by her question.

“Can we have it?”

“Yeah,” I say, dragging out the word.

Opening my mouth to continue speaking, Darby doesn’t give me the chance before she pounces. Her lips smash against mine as she takes advantage of my confusion, thrusting her tongue into my mouth. All coherent thought leaves me as all of the blood in my body rushes to my cock.

Wrapping my hands into her hair, I take control of the kiss, moving her head to an angle that gives me better access to her mouth.

A moan escapes her as Darby moves to straddle my waist. Having no shirt on, she has unfettered access to my torso.

Raking her short nails along my chest, a growl rumbles in my chest.

“Fuck, that’s hot,” Darby mutters as she pulls away from my lips, trailing kisses along my jawline, down my neck and further down my body.

Reaching between us, she frees my cock, squeezing me tightly as her hand moves up and down.

Darby pauses, causing my eyes to fly open.

When did they close? She pushes off me, causing my brows to furrow momentarily.

Rising to her full height, Darby begins to pull clothing off, tossing the pieces haphazardly around the living room.

My dick is painfully hard as more and more of her creamy flesh comes into view.

My fingers itch to touch her. When Darby gets to her bra and panties, my bear lets out a loud rumble of approval, causing her to smirk.

Slowing her movements down, reaching a hand behind her back, Darby unhooks her bra, letting the straps fall off her shoulders before letting the whole thing drop to the floor.

Watching her tits bounce has me salivating, wanting to suckle her nipples into hard

buds.

Continuing the striptease, Darby slips two fingers, one on each side, between the thin cotton material and her flesh.

Inching the fabric inch by inch, she bends in half, keeping her pussy out of sight.

I force myself to stay in place, letting her control the pace, but it's difficult.

After stepping out of her underwear, Darby stands upright, tossing her panties at my face.

A growl of approval comes from my bear as I hold them to my nose, inhaling deeply.

Strutting toward me, Darby places one hand on each of my knees, licking up my neck.

I quickly raise my hips, tugging my waistband down and freeing my cock.

She moves away from my neck, bending over more.

Sticking her tongue out, Darby copies the move she did on my neck on my cock, licking from the base to the tip.

After rimming the mushroom head of my cock, she takes me into her mouth, causing me to hiss in pleasure.

My hips busk of their own accord as Darby bobs up and down on my dick, taking more of me into her mouth on each downward stroke. It doesn't take long until I can feel my balls tighten, my orgasm imminent.

“Darby,” I pant. “I-I’m going to...to come,” I caution, but it only seems to urge her on. She hollows out her cheeks while moving one hand from my knee to fondle my balls. The slight tugging sensation is all it takes for me to detonate. My hips surge forward as my release spurts into her mouth.

“Holy fuck,” I say between pants as I sag back onto the couch.

Darby smirks as she resumes her place, straddling my lap. Her pussy rubs against my cock. Having her wet heat slide against me already has me hardening again, ready to go. Leaning forward, I suck one of her nipples into my mouth, holding it between my teeth as I tease with my tongue.

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A rek alternates between my nipples—sucking, biting, and teasing them in random patterns. My hands have minds of their own, roaming up and down his muscular form.

I can't remember the last time I was this turned on.

I can feel my pussy dripping down my legs.

My hips grind against Arek's cock. I want him in the worst way, consequences be damned.

We should probably stop. Why I put sex on the table is a mystery.

Although at the present moment, I want to feel him inside me.

Quell this uncontrollable urge that I have for him.

“Darby,” Arek says on a moan. His hands roam over my body as if to memorize each part of me.

With my patience running out, I lift off his lap, my lips capturing his as I grip his hard length in my hand before lowering myself onto him. Both of us moan in pleasure, and I sit in place for a minute, letting my muscles stretch to accommodate his size.

Arek lifts his hips off the couch, spurring me into action. Raising and lowering myself on him, I chase my release. Not wanting it yet, for fear of this ending too soon, but needing it at the same time.

Gripping my hips, Arek helps to move me while thrusting up from below. Snaking my hand between us, I rub my clit. So many sensations are going on at once, it triggers one of the most intense orgasms of my life.

“Arek!” I call out as my orgasm peaks.

The next few moments are a blur as I feel a sharp pinch where my neck and shoulder meet. It seems to trigger a second wave of my orgasm, causing my body to shake.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck!” Arek yells just before his hips stutter.

Something happens that I don’t understand.

His cock seems to swell, hitting my G-spot and triggering another, even more intense orgasm.

Arek slows his movements, pumping slowly in and out of me.

Whatever I feel, moves with him, causing aftershocks.

I can feel his release with each spasm of his cock.

That’s never happened to me before. Unable to stop, I rock back and forth on him until my body sags with exhaustion.

Moving to get off his lap, Arek holds me in place.

“You need to stay put for a few minutes,” he says cryptically.

Fighting my way through the orgasmic fog, I sit up, looking him in the eye.

“What do you mean? Why can’t I get up?” I ask, trying once more to rise.

“You are going to hurt yourself,” he admonishes. “Stay there.”

“Now you are just pissing me off,” I argue, trying and failing, once more to get up.

“It’s my knot,” he mumbles, causing my brow to furrow.

“Your what?” I ask incredulously.

“My knot,” he says flatly.

“Care to elaborate for those of us born human?” I snark, my anger rising by the minute.

“Some, not all, alphas have knots. When they are...with their mates, the knot swells. When we make love to our mates, it...locks us together,” Arek explains, vaguely, pausing periodically to search for the right words.

“What is the point of the knot?” I ask, narrowing my eyes at him as a silent threat to get to the point.

“It’s, ah...” Arek stutters, rubbing the back of his neck. “To, ah...aid in procreation.”

My brain sifts through the bullshit he just threw out. The relaxed state that I was in is long gone, anger taking over.

“Am I going to get pregnant now?” I ask, ready to react, depending on his answer.

“I don’t know.” Arek shrugs. “It’s a possibility, I guess,” he states with an aw-shucks attitude.

Pinching the bridge of my nose, putting a pin in the possibility of a baby, I try for patience.

“What did you pinch my neck with?” I question, unsure of what all happened at that point.

Wrinkling his nose, Arek shifts uncomfortably, with me still stuck on his dick.

“My, ah, bear...he claimed you,” he answers, cringing at the end of his statement. My hand flies to the spot where I felt the pinch. Pulling my fingers away, there is a trace of blood on them.

“He claimed me,” I say flatly, enunciating each word in order to avoid confusion.

“Yes.”

“What does this mean?” I ask sternly, wanting clarification on this.

“We are mated.”

Sitting there in stunned silence, all I can do is blink, words failing me.

I can feel the pressure against my G-spot lessen, and while Arek isn't paying much attention, I hop off his lap.

I can feel his release dripping down my legs as I dress quickly, foregoing my underwear since he has it hidden somewhere.

Yeah, I get it, it's the most disgusting thing on the planet, but desperate times call for desperate measures.

I need to get out of here before he fucks me stupid... again.

Arek is still on the couch, his soft cock lying against his thigh. I can feel the weight of his stare on me, but I ignore him. Moving quickly, I storm out what I hope is the front door of his house, punctuating my departure by slamming the door behind me.

I hear him calling my name as I run, as much as you can in a shit ton of snow. Arek must have opened the door, as his voice is no longer muffled as he calls after me.

“Darby, get back here. You are going to freeze. Come on, let’s talk about this.”

Continuing my rapid pace, I am confused about my location, still not being familiar with the layout of Padston.

After passing several houses, the door on a little red brick house opens.

An elderly woman stands in the doorway, waving me in.

As I hesitate, she glances down the street toward Arek’s home as his voice becomes louder, indicating he is approaching us.

Frantically waving me in, I take a chance and sprint down her sidewalk and into her home.

“Hurry up, into the shower, he will be able to track your scent,” she cautions, wrinkling her nose. “Especially with his scent all over you.” She guides me through the small bungalow. She starts the shower as I start stripping off my soiled clothes.

“Here, use this,” she says, pushing a lavender scented bar of soap into my chest before gathering up my clothes. “I’ll wash these while you wash yourself. Once I get this laundry started, I will find you something to wear.” She assesses me with her

gaze.

Pushing the evening's strange events aside, I do as instructed, washing my body multiple times to ensure all evidence of my lapse in judgment is gone.

After three passes over my body with the soap, I feel confident that Arek won't be able to find me by smell anyway.

I don't know how sensitive his nose, or his bear's, is.

Stepping out of the shower, I find a floral, cotton dress lying on the bathroom sink. Feeling like my night can't get any worse, I dry off and pull the frock on before retracing my steps.

My eyes widen as my feet come to a halt.

In my haste to get cleaned up, I ignored the home's interior.

I have stepped into a time warp. The couch is an off-white base with olive drab green and orange flowers, covered in plastic.

An orange-colored recliner sits at an angle next to it.

A large console television is on the other side of the room.

The carpet is a green shag that matches the color of the flowers in the couch and there is just clutter everywhere.

"There you are," the woman says from behind me, catching me off guard. "Are you hungry?" Not waiting for a response before she turns around and heads back in the direction she came from.

Trailing along behind her, I tuck my lips between my teeth as my eyes travel around the room, taking in more of the same design style.

“You are Arek’s mate,” she says, not phrasing it as a question.

“So he says,” I respond, falling into a chair at the small table in her kitchen.

“I’m Mitzi Palmer,” she says, introducing herself as she fusses about the stove.

“Palmer,” I mutter to myself, my brows furrowing in concentration. It takes a moment for the name to register. “You are related to Declan and Daegyn?”

“I’m their great-aunt,” she clarifies. “Along with Arek, Rhodee, Raelee, Roree, the rest of their cousins, and their parents, yes.”

Mitzi moves about the kitchen in practiced movements, filling the table with a variety of cookies, snacks, and cold cuts while water boils to make tea.

“Thank you for rescuing me,” I say sincerely, helping myself to a cookie, moaning at the taste. Stuffed pizzelles are my favorite cookies.

My eyes fall onto Mitzi, and I almost choke on my cookie as I take in her appearance.

She is wearing a Christmas sweater that says “Jingle My Bells” with large jingle bells over her nipples.

Well, where her nipples should be as her boobs are hanging down.

On top of her head, Mitzi sports a red cowboy hat trimmed in white fur with a replica of Santa’s belt separating the top section and the brim.

To top it off, she is wearing leggings that resemble those of a stripper elf.

The top section is green with glitter, trimmed in fur, and features lights strung around the thigh.

It is paired with thigh-high green and white striped socks topped with bells at the top.

“Here, drink this, it will help warm you up,” she says, interrupting my perusal of her attire. She steps out of the room, and I start to choke on my first sip of tea. At some point, she added whiskey. Staring down into the liquid, it’s difficult to tell how much is tea and how much is booze.

“Would you sign this petition for us?” Mitzi says, sauntering back into the small kitchen. She sits in the chair opposite me, while sliding a sheet of paper toward me across the table.

“What is it for?” I ask, noticing only women have signed this paper.

“We, the ladies of the book club, want Simmer Down to change the uniforms to kilts,” she says proudly, sitting back in her chair. My eyes widen in surprise as I blink at her, shocked into silence.

Scribbling my name on an empty line, I push it back toward her. Mitzi helped me, so the least I can do is help her. We chat at length about her family, the book club, Padston, and what it means to be a mate. The eccentric woman puts me at ease, answering any questions I might have.

After two hours of talking, I help Mitzi clean up and she shows me to a spare bedroom to sleep. It’s not three in the morning, Christmas Day, and I still haven’t seen my sister or her kids. I guess that’s a problem for tomorrow.

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My eyes bulge as Darby is tossed over Arek's shoulder and he storms off. Brady chuckles from where he sits next to me, among a room full of strangers. I'm still in shock at his declaration of being his mate.

"Are you okay?" Brady asks, placing a hand on my thigh, causing me to jump.

"It depends on your definition of okay," I answer cryptically.

Brady plays on his phone for a few minutes before returning it to his pocket. He takes my hand in his, helping me to control biting my nails from anxiety. It's a bad habit that I thought I had gotten rid of.

"Okay, everyone," a guy calls out from the hallway. "Everyone is hea—" He stops speaking in the middle of the word before focusing his attention on me. Brady rises to his feet, blocking me from view.

"Tavan, is there a problem?" Brady asks, his voice dropping an octave in resonance.

"Brady, step aside so I can introduce myself to my mate," Tavan, the doctor, says, and the room goes deadly quiet.

"We need some popcorn for this shit," a female voice says, breaking the growing tension in the room.

"She is my mate," Brady volleys to Tavan. Tavan steps around Brady as Brady looks over his shoulder to where I am sitting.

Words fail to form under the heavy gaze of these two gorgeous men.

Both men are tall—Brady is at least six feet four inches tall.

Tavan is at least two inches taller than Brady.

Tavan has a fit but slender build, whereas Brady, while also slender, has more muscle definition, to the point where the sleeves of his uniform shirt fit tightly around his biceps.

Resuming his seat, Brady retakes my hand, earning a glare from Tavan as he sits in the seat to my left.

Tucking a strand of hair behind my ear, he leans forward, sniffing me.

Stiffening, unsure what to do, my eyes move to the triplets.

Giving them an almost pleading “what do I do look” one of them has mercy on me, sort of.

“For fucks sake!” she exclaims, accompanied by an eye roll. “It’s inevitable, just say yes, and fuck their brains out. The rest will fall into place.” The other two women who make up the trio nod in affirmation before all three rise to their feet.

“It’s been fun, but I need some sleep,” she says around a jaw-cracking yawn.

With that, everyone leaves Tavan’s clinic one by one until only the three of us remain.

“What is your name, love?” Tavan asks, speaking softly as if trying to soothe a frightened animal.

“F-Fiora Valenhart,” I answer, stuttering slightly as nerves try to take hold.

“Can you tell us where you are from? Something about you?” Brady asks this time.

“You won’t want me,” I blurt, the weight of what happened at home weighing heavily on my shoulders.

“Don’t you think that’s for us to decide?” Tavan asks.

“Fine, but you asked for it.” I caution them, my tone taking a more antagonistic tone than intended. Rising to my feet, because there is no way I will be able to sit still during this story, both men reluctantly release their hold on me.

“I am from Lancaster, Pennsylvania. After I caught my boyfriend and ex-best friend in a compromising position, I applied and was accepted at Stanford, in California.” Telling the story of how I met Darby is the easy part, having glossed over the betrayal.

Worrying my hands together, I reach current events.

“A few days ago, I was helping my mom wrap some last-minute gifts. I stumbled upon my birth certificate and adoption papers.” Both men inhale sharply.

“Not sure what to do, I ran. Somehow, I ended up at Dylan’s, my ex’s, house.

Turns out I had arrived immediately after he proposed to Sally Jo.

She was flaunting her ring in my hand, boasting about what I lost. To me, I didn’t lose anything since he couldn’t be faithful.

But, I digress,” I mutter before continuing.

“I remember storming off...” My words trail off, and my hands begin to shake.

Tavan and Brady rise to their feet, but I hold my hand up to stop them.

They both sink back down into their seats, and I continue my story.

“The next thing I knew, Michael, my brother, was cradling me to his chest. The barn on the Montrose’s property, Dylan’s parents, was on fire.

Police, paramedics, and the fire department were all on scene.

Sally Jo was shrieking in the background that I tried to kill the two of them in a jealous rage,” I recommence, wanting to get my dirty laundry aired before I got my hopes up that these two men would want me.

“Michael is keeping my secret from my family, at my behest. It’s unfair of me to ask that of him, and hypocritical, since that is why I ended up in the barn in the first place,” I add, tears streaming down my cheeks as guilt swamps me.

“Darby had mentioned me coming to see her, if I had time, as she informed me she plans to move here. Needing to get out of Lancaster, I packed what I could, loaded my car, and here I am.” I finish my story, holding my arms out to the side.

Finally looking up to make eye contact with the guys, they share a look that has the hair on the back of my neck prickling.

“What are you studying in school?” Tavan asks, catching me off guard.

“Uhm, veterinary medicine, focusing on large animals,” I remark.

“There is room to add on to the building,” Tavan mentions, focusing on Brady.

“What about lobby space?” Brady volleys.

“Excuse me,” I say, as the two of them continue to make plans about my life, without my input. This process continues for several minutes as they map out the layout of the animal clinic, determine the location of the entrance, and decide on the ideal candidate for the receptionist position.

“Hey!” I yell, snapping my fingers in their direction. Both men startle at my outburst as I plant my hands on my hips. “How about asking me what I want to do?” They both look guilty of being called out like that.

“Right,” Brady says.

“Sorry,” Tavan adds.

Tavan and Brady stand, approaching me slowly. The pair of them tower over me, since I am at least a foot shorter than they are, at five feet two inches tall.

“Are you okay with this?” Tavan asks as Brady runs a hand down my spine, causing me to shiver.

Nodding my head several times, they share a look over my head.

“You two need to stop doing that,” I tell them. My words end on a squeal as they each crouch, placing one hand under each knee, while the other rests against my back, keeping me steady, lifting me off the ground.

Moving in tandem, they move through Tavan’s office to the back. Brady holds me steady as Tavan pulls a key from his pocket, unlocking the door. Once Brady breaches the threshold, Tavan locks the door, and we move upstairs.

The apartment is spacious, covering the entire second floor. Modern design and amenities decorate the space in neutral tones.

“Bedroom?” Brady asks, focusing my attention back on the men instead of the decor.

“Very end of the hallway,” Tavan answers.

Gently placing me in the center of the bed, Tavan is on my right with Brady on my left. Both men gaze at me reverently, as if memorizing every feature of my slight frame. I do my best not to fidget. Dylan and Sally Jo taunted me as far back as I can remember about my hourglass figure.

“You look like a pin-up model with all of your curves. I can’t wait to see you bare,” Brady says, causing heat to flush my cheeks.

“If we go too fast, or do something you aren’t comfortable with, you let us know,” Tavan adds, raising an eyebrow at Brady in challenge. Brady nods in agreement right before he begins peeling off his clothes.

My eyes widen in surprise as Tavan also begins to strip. I tuck my lips between my teeth as Darby’s statement from not too long ago pops into my head. “You need a good fucking!” Suddenly, my apprehension flies out the window.

Sitting up, I pull my sweater up over my head, grateful for the foresight of wearing a matching set of lacy undergarments. Tavan’s eyes flash red, fangs peeking out between his lips. Looking at Brady, his eyes flash amber, and his fangs also peek between his lips.

“Wha-what are you?” I ask, feeling slightly intimidated.

Tavan kneels on the bed, causing my body to jiggle as the mattress shifts beneath me.

“Vampire,” he says.

Turning my head to Brady as he assumes the same position as Tavan, his voice is gruff.

“Dragon.”

On my next breath, Tavan is nibbling on my neck as he unclasps my bra. The brush of his fangs causes me to shiver both in expectation and fear. Brady shifts to the foot of the bed and begins removing my shoes, socks, and pants, taking my panties too as he drags the fabric down my legs.

The way the two of them are looking at me makes me want to cover up the soft bits of my body. My insecurities are coming to life.

“You are stunning,” Brady growls as Tavan hums his agreement.

Tavan continues to lick, kiss, and nibble on my neck, drifting down to my chest while Brady starts at my ankles, slowly kissing his way up my legs to my core.

When Brady reaches my center he licks from the bottom up, sucking my clit hard.

My back bows off the bed, causing Tavan to wrap an arm around my waist, holding me in place.

“Shhh, easy now. Let us take care of you,” Tavan whispers.

They work together like a well-oiled machine, making me wonder how many times they have done this together in the past. How many other women have they shared? I must tense up or do something as they both stop and look down at me.

“What’s the matter, love?” Brady asks, using the same moniker Tavan used downstairs.

I bite my lower lip, afraid to voice what is going on in my head.

“This isn’t going to work if you don’t talk to us,” Tavan says in a serious tone.

Taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly, my eyes ping-pong between the pair. “I was wondering how many other women you have shared. The two of you are working my body so well together...” My voice trails off as Tavan smirks, and a smile spreads across Brady’s beautiful face.

“We haven’t,” Brady says, shrugging.

“You are our mate,” Tavan says, stating the obvious. “We can sense what you like and don’t like. I know that I like you feeling jealous.” He elicits a dirty look in his direction.

Brady uses action instead of speaking, sliding two fingers into my core while using his thumb to rub my clit. Tavan can’t be outdone, leaning forward and taking a nipple into his mouth. His fangs puncture my flesh, triggering an orgasm as I call out in pleasure.

“Fuck, that’s hot,” Brady boasts.

Our heavy breathing sets the backdrop to the squelching of his fingers sliding in and out of my body. My wetness runs down the inside of my thighs while Brady changes positions with Tavan. He pinches my nipples and sucks on my neck as Tavan settles himself between my legs.

“Are you ready, love?” Tavan says, his voice a lower octave than usual. His eyes are

completely red, not a trace of the standard blue they are.

“Yeah,” I rasp.

Without warning, Tavan thrusts into me, and I call out at the sudden intrusion.

A groan of pleasure escapes Tavan’s throat as his hips begin to move.

Brady continues to play with my nipples, alternating between them.

It’s becoming difficult to differentiate between the two men as they blur into one.

Tavan is long and thick, and as he hammers away at my body, I can feel another orgasm quickly approaching.

“Are you going to come?” Brady rasps. “Will you squeeze tightly on Tavan’s cock, milking it and forcing him to come as well?”

Damn, the dirty talk is doing something to me.

Tavan leans forward, his chest brushing against the stiff peaks of my nipples with each thrust of his hips.

Nibbling on my neck, his fangs scrape against my skin just short of being painful.

An uncontrollable urge washes over me, and I feel compelled to do the same to him.

Tavan’s rhythm is becoming ragged and more urgent.

Without warning, his fangs pierce my flesh, and I bite him as well.

The coppery tang of blood fills my mouth, and I let out a groan right as my orgasm peaks: Tavan's hips stutter, his movements slowing before he stills altogether. I release my jaw as embarrassment fills me.

"Look at me," Brady orders, something in his tone leaves no room for argument.

Turning my head to face him, his eyes widen at whatever he sees.

"Holy shit!" he says breathily.

"What?" I ask in a panic-laden voice.

"Do you have your birth certificate and adoption papers with you?" Brady asks cryptically as Tavan pulls away from my body.

"Yeah," I answer, drawing out the word.

"Good," Brady says before assuming his spot between my legs. He fills me in one thrust, the combination of Tavan's release and my own making it easy to slide inside me. Setting a punishing pace, it takes no time at all for another orgasm to start.

Brady leans forward, like Tavan did, this time on the other side of my neck. As he nibbles his way to where my neck and shoulder meet, the compulsion to do the same on him overwhelms me.

"Bite me, pretty girl," Brady rasps, his thrusts increasing in tempo and strength.

Unable to help myself, I do as he ordered, biting into his flesh. His blood fills my mouth, slightly sweeter in taste than Tavan's. Brady groans in approval as his fangs pierce my skin, both of our orgasms peaking simultaneously.

His hips slow as he comes down. Tavan gently grips my chin, turning my head to face him as his lips crash down against mine. Our tongues duel, and he moans, no doubt tasting Brady's blood.

He pulls away, and Brady takes Tavan's place. It feels wrong and right to have both of them. I startle when Tavan uses a washcloth to clean me up. Brady settles on one side of me, and when Tavan returns to the bedroom, he climbs in on the other side.

Now that my post-orgasmic bliss is wearing off, I turn to face Brady.

"Can you tell me why you asked about my birth certificate and adoption papers?" I ask as Tavan presses his front against my back, draping his arm across my waist.

"Because, sweet girl," Brady says, running a light finger along my jawline, the ghost of a smile on his lips. "I believe you are a dragon shifter, like me."

My eyes widen in shock, spots dance in my vision as I suddenly find it difficult to breathe. Both of their voices are muffled. It's the last thing I remember before it all goes dark.

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Christmas is usually my favorite day of the year. Spending time with family, relaxing since the restaurant is closed.

This year, however, was a complete shit-show.

Mitzi waltzed into my parents' house, mocking me. In front of the entire family, she chastised me for over an hour. It didn't help that my asshole cousins made fucking popcorn like it was a real-life movie from the Hallmark Channel.

Declan was the worst. His constant "I told you so's" got old, fast. Our fathers stepped in between us when I went after him. The day just spiraled out of control from there, as every single member of my family had a different opinion on how I should have done things with Darby.

Even though I claimed Darby, I suspect that this only complicates the situation.

Currently, I am catching up on paperwork between the lunch rush and dinner rush. Knowing we will be busy, since many people have December twenty-sixth off, it will be a constant stream of traffic throughout the day.

The door to my office flies open without warning, banging against the wall.

"What the fuck did you do to me?" Darby bellows from the doorway.

I jump up, pulling the door closed, hoping our voices don't carry to the dining room. My brows draw together in confusion.

“What do you mean? I didn’t do anything to you,” I state in outrage. The last thing I would do is hurt my mate.

Before I realize what is happening to me, Darby throws herself at me, jumping into the air and wrapping her legs around me. Pressing her lips against mine, I place my hands under her ass, supporting her waist.

Darby’s hands move at a furious pace, trying to unbutton my shirt. When she gets frustrated, she grabs the two sides, yanking them open, causing buttons to fly all around the room. Instantly, my dick is hard as she grinds against me.

Biting my neck and scratching her nails against my chest, I move us to my desk, setting her ass on the desk top while I slide my hands up her legs.

It’s only then that I realize she is wearing a skirt, and I let out a soft moan.

Darby’s hands start to work my belt, before lowering the zipper of my pants and freeing my cock.

“Fuck me,” she pants, as my hand moves to her center, finding her soaking wet for me. I tease her, unsure what brought this on. Darby gets impatient, moving to the edge of the desk. Wrapping her legs around my waist, she pulls our centers closer together.

Wanting to make my mate happy, I impale her on my cock, giving myself a moment to enjoy her wet heat wrapped tightly around me. Darby’s eyes drift shut as her head falls backward, exposing her neck. Leaning forward, I like my claiming mark, causing her to shiver in response.

“I said, fuck. Me.” Darby orders, shifting her hips in an effort to get me to move.

Pulling almost entirely out of her, I slam back in with a harsh thrust, and Darby moans in pleasure.

“Yes,” she moans.

Pulling out of her, I spin her around so her chest is on my desk, giving me a glorious view of that ass.

Uncharacteristically, I give her ass a hard slap as I slam back inside her, pushing her forward.

Papers, pens, and other items fall onto the floor, but at the moment, I couldn't care less. My mate came to me, wanting my cock.

My hips piston in and out of her as her pussy starts to flutter around me. Reaching around her waist, I tug and pinch her clit, triggering her climax. Feeling her pussy squeeze my cock like a vise has my knot swelling as ropes of cum fill her.

Knowing we are stuck like this for a while, I lift Darby at the waist, waddling backward to the small couch along the far wall. Falling onto the furniture, Darby moans as my knot rubs on her G-spot, causing her pussy to contract.

I want to ask what caused her appearance in my office, but with our history, I think better of it and stay silent. Our chests heave as we work to catch our breath. Resting my head against the wall behind the couch, I relish the feel of Darby in my arms, on my lap, and my cock.

Fifteen minutes later, just when I think she has dozed off, she stands, lifting off my still hard dick.

She glances at it before lifting her eyes to meet mine.

Narrowing her gaze at me, she seems to remember her anger suddenly.

Righting her clothes, she exits as abruptly as she entered, leaving the door wide open.

That's how Declan finds me. He takes one look at me sitting on the couch, pants open, shirt ripped apart, and my dick hanging out before he breaks into laughter, walking away. Scrambling to put myself back together, I am forced to put on a uniform shirt as mine is unwearable.

Entering the dining room, I get several looks, but I ignore them all. Tracking Declan down, he fights his smile as he gives me a once-over, breaking into raucous laughter at my appearance.

"Shut up, asshole," I mutter.

Darby

Inspecting the empty retail space across the street from Simmer Down, I had the strongest urge to see Arek. It was as if I was possessed and suddenly so fucking horny, I was breaking out into a cold sweat.

Barging into his office and fucking him, or him fucking me, wasn't my original plan, but once we had sex, my body was my own again.

The real estate agent gave me a funny look when I returned to her office, reeking of sex, to sign the lease.

I give her my father's information for the security deposit and first month's rent before returning home. Well, Kyle and Dayton's home.

Fiora comes stumbling in, looking awestruck, and I pause in my packing to sit and

have a heart-to-heart with my friend.

My mouth hangs open in surprise when she tells me about everything that happened in Lancaster, but also mating both Brady and Tavan.

When she informs me that Brady thinks she might be a dragon shifter, I almost fall over.

“Yeah, I am supposed to meet him later today, at the sheriff’s office, so that he can start some research,” Fiora says, her face pale.

“Are you okay with all of this?” I ask, keeping my voice soft, since she is already spooked.

“I don’t have much of a choice,” she quips.

“Guess not,” I say, wanting to slap my forehead for my blonde moment. “I am moving my stuff into the apartment above the Whiskey Genie. Do you want to come with? You can stay with me, unless you are moving in with Tavan or Brady?”

Cringing at the look on her face, I wrap Fiora in a hug. It’s obvious the three of them haven’t gotten that far yet.

Pulling away from me, her nose wrinkles in disgust. “You might want to shower first. You stink like sex.”

“How can you—” Stopping mid-question, my eyes flare. Only paranormals seem to have such sensitive senses. “Fuck,” I draw out, my head falling backward.

Grabbing a bag off the floor, I turn toward the door of my bedroom.

“I am going to start putting my stuff in the car, while you figure out what you want to do. I signed the lease on my storefront and now need to begin ordering equipment and supplies. Additionally, I have consultations scheduled with Arek’s cousins, as they are all interested in new ink.

“Okay, I will load my stuff in my car and follow you into town. I will meet you at the Whiskey Genie after I meet with Brady,” Fiora tells me, before heading toward the room she has been staying in.

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Daddy confirmed my supply order and added overnight shipping. Assuming they can travel the roads, I should start setting up my tattoo shop tomorrow and be able to accept clients in a couple of days.

Currently, I am sitting with Declan, Daegyn, Hayder, and Jathen, discussing tattoo designs. Hayder is Arek's brother, while Jathen is Declan and Daegyn's brother. Declan and Daegyn informed me that Arek's brother, Gunnar, who I haven't met yet, also wants to schedule an appointment.

"Can you pencil me in too?" Raven asks, looking over my shoulder at the design I am sketching for Hayder.

"Sure," I answer. "Just jot down a couple of ideas for what you want to get. I will take a look at it, then we can discuss it."

"Perfect," Raven answers, grabbing the empty beer bottles off the table before walking away.

"What the fuck is going on here?" an irate voice bellows from behind me.

"Slow your roll, dude," Hayder says, his posture turning rigid.

"You are with my mate!" Arek snarls, his voice now in a deeper tone, indicating that his bear is annoyed.

Rising to my feet, I spin around to face him, poking him the chest with my finger, punctuating each word. "I. Am. Working." Taking a deep breath, so we aren't both

angry, I let it out slowly. “This is what I do. You need to find a way to accept that,” I warn him.

“Your place—” Arek starts before I cut him off.

“Fuck. You!” I yell, knowing that everyone in the bar is watching the show we are putting on. This seems to be a pattern for us.

“Arek, you need to leave,” Declan says, stepping from around the table. Looking over my shoulder, every male here is angry. They stand behind me, forming a wall of muscle, arms crossed over their barrel chests.

Anger radiates off Arek as his bear rumbles in his chest. Staring down each of his relatives, retribution for their presumed betrayal is evident. A tense stand-off lasts for about five minutes before Arek backs down, spinning on his heel and leaving.

My heart cracks, and something inside me wants to chase Arek down. I take half a step before Declan wraps an arm around my shoulder.

“Forget about him,” he says sternly. “Let’s get back to tattoo design.”

What should have been a fun afternoon becomes strained, and we end up cutting our consulting session short.

Arek

How dare they!

Instead of going back to the restaurant for the dinner rush, I go home instead. The need to shift is overwhelming. It’s so bad that fur is sprouting on my arms as I race through Padston.

All of my cousins and my brothers, save Gunnar, are in for a rude awakening.

Pulling into my driveway, I leave the car parked at an angle, the door hanging wide open, and the keys still inside, I begin stripping off my clothes. Barely getting my pants off, my bear takes over. I'm surprised he let me get halfway across the yard before assuming control.

The shift is effortless and as soon as my front paws hit the ground, I take off through the tree line. Having the extra snow to deal with helps to burn off some of the rage. It still isn't enough, though, so we continue to run, and run, and run.

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Daegyn and Declan volunteered to help me set up my shop.

In preparation for, hopefully, additional artists, I ordered enough equipment for four tattoo cubicles and two piercing cubicles.

The reception area features a glass display case showcasing various jewelry, along with gauges for a variety of piercing options.

Large posters are waiting to be hung, most of them are old-school art.

My favorite is the anatomy of a tattoo gun.

Several photo albums need to be filled with flash designs, script options, and, of course, my portfolio.

Flash designs are easy, since they are pre-designed options available for anyone walking in off the street.

While they take hardly any time to do, they lack originality.

If someone gets a piece of flash, they might come across twenty other people who have the identical design. The only variation would be color.

“Where do you want this couch?” Daegyn asks, maneuvering it through the door by himself.

“In front of the window, to the left of the door,” I explain. “There’s a small table for

each end and a coffee table for the front.” I focus on setting up the computer. I still have to open a bank account for the business and set up my credit card machine.

I’m in the back, organizing supplies, ink, needles, and sanitation equipment, when yelling can be heard coming from up front. Stepping around the corner, I hear my name.

“Where’s Darby?” the man asks. It takes me a minute to recognize Gunnar Palmer, Arek’s brother.

“Right here,” I answer, drawing everyone’s attention. My eyes widen in surprise, seeing all of the Palmer and Martin cousins inside my small shop. “What’s going on?”

“Your mate has gone off the reservation, so to speak,” one of the triplets answers, looking at her nails in boredom.

Looking between the guys, Gunnar has mercy on me.

“Arek’s bear took control three days ago,” Gunnar says, pinching the bridge of his nose in annoyance. “He’s missing.”

I gasp, covering my mouth in shock. My emotions war between worry for his safety and anger since he has been stupid enough to take off for several days.

“You need to come with us, back to the den,” Gunnar informs me. “Hopefully, he catches your scent and returns.”

“The den?” I ask.

“It’s our area of town,” Declan chimes in with a shrug.

The triplets step up, one of them speaking as the other two start moving.

“Leave this to us,” she says, waving me toward the door. “We can try and get this in order. You go with the guys and deal with our alpha.”

“Are you sure?” I ask, warily looking at the multitude of boxes.

“We wouldn’t have offered if we weren’t,” she snarks. “Now go, it’s still hunting season for bears in some parts of the state. You never know what these stupid hunters might do if they cross Arek’s path.” My eyes widen in shock.

“Let’s go!” I yell, running out the door.

Fiora

Tavan is at his clinic, so he isn’t with Brady and me.

“Where are we going?” I ask as we continue to drive on slushy streets. The snow let up Christmas night, but enough of it came down that it’s going to take a while to melt.

“I’m conducting an experiment,” he says cryptically, lifting our conjoined hands, kissing my knuckles softly, before resting them on his thigh.

The three of us have done a lot of talking and had a lot of sex over the past three days. Tavan and I are moving into Brady’s house, using the apartment above his clinic as a rental property. It has worked for Gypsy, the owner of the Whiskey Genie, so it should work for Tavan.

Brady has been doing a lot of research, along with his brother Adyr, on my background. He is convinced that I am a dragon shifter. The truck jerks to a stop,

focusing my attention back on our surroundings.

“This is a field, Brady,” I say caustically.

“Yes, it is,” he says, smiling widely at me, before opening the door and hopping out.

“Come on,” he urges, staring at me through the windshield.

Begrudgingly, I climb from the cab and my legs get buried in the snow up past my knees. Brady starts to laugh at my predicament, but my glare quickly shuts him up, spurring him into action to assist me.

“Sorry,” he mutters, lifting me.

We walk to where the wind has blown a path in the snow, weeds and grass poking though. Once he’s sure I won’t be stuck in place, he sets me down.

“Here me out with this, okay?” he asks, turning very serious.

“You run hot, right? Booze does little to get you drunk? When we mated, all of us, you felt compelled to bite us just as we bit you?”

“Correct on all accounts, especially since we have already gone over this,” I say in frustration, flailing my arms out to my side, before dropping them as they hit my thighs.

“Right,” Brady says, looking a little sheepish. “Adyr and I have hit a dead end on your birth parents. But—” My groan cuts him off.

“But...we think it’s just a matter of making her feel secure, since you have suppressed her for twenty-two? Twenty-three? Years.”

Butterflies take flight in my belly and I feel like I am going to be sick as my mind imagines all sorts of plans he has for us out here in the middle of nowhere. Crossing my arms over my chest, I stare him down.

“I need you to strip down,” Brady says as he starts removing his clothing, tossing them onto the hood of his truck.

“Are you mad?”

“Baby, trust me on this,” Brady says, giving me a quick kiss before continuing to get undressed.

“Fine,” I grumble, as I begin to strip down until I am in my bra and panties. “Now what?”

Brady winks at me before stepping away, putting distance between us. I start to follow him, but he cuts me off. “Stay there.”

Grumbling under my breath, I realize that despite my lack of clothing, I’m comfortable.

Before I understand what is going on, the air around Brady shimmers and the next thing I know, a very large green dragon stands before me.

His eyes are the amber color I have seen several times now.

My chest heats suddenly, causing me to squeal in surprise.

Brady shocks me more, lowering his head so that his nose is even with my torso.

His nostrils flare before he spins around, looking into the sky. Shading my eyes with

my hand, I can see a large shape beginning to clear the trees. It's another dragon. This one is orange.

The orange dragon dips in Brady's direction, taunting him.

Brady launches up into the sky, using his hind legs to spring from the ground.

I watch with bated breath as the two dragons fly in what can only be compared to a military dog fight, with airplanes.

Orange is aggressive, breathing fire at Brady.

Concern fills me as my chest gets hotter. Is that smoke coming from my nose? Shaking off the optical illusion, I focus back on the two dragons and their aerial acrobatics. Numerous times, a shriek or gasp escapes my lips as the orange seems to get the upper hand.

Unable to help myself, I move forward, away from the truck. As I reach the clearing where Brady stood in dragon form, the orange grips Brady's neck between its sharp teeth.

"No!" I yell as my vision becomes unfocused. Jerking this way and that, when my vision clears, everything is clearer. I can see farther, smells around me become sharper. Spinning my head, it's that moment I realize that I am staring at the upper sections of the trees.

Opening my mouth, fire shoots out instead of words.

"There you are, love," Brady's voice fills my head.

"Wait a minute," I interrupt. "How can I understand you?"

“ Congratulations, Fiora, on a successful shift ,” a foreign male voice says in my head.

“ That’s Chayce ,” Brady adds. “ He’s our alpha. We can all hear him, if he wants us to, in shifted form .”

“ I shifted ?” I ask, stunned at their words.

“ Look down ,” Brady says, his voice full of laughter.

“ Holy shit! ”

Dual voices laugh in my head as the orange dragon flies off and Brady lands next to me. He snakes his neck around mine as a form of affection.

“ How do I shift back? ” I ask, beginning to panic since I’m not sure how I shifted into dragon form.

“Focus on your human form,” Brady says, causing me to look down at him. He is standing where his dragon was, in all of his naked glory.

Closing my eyes, I follow his instructions. I don’t open them until I feel his arms wrap around me.

“Well,” he says cockily. “I was right. We just proved it.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I say, afraid if I give him too much credit, it will make his head swell.

“Come on, let’s go tell Tavan the good news,” he says, gripping my hand and tugging me toward the truck.

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“ A rek...Arek...” I call out as we traipse through the woods.

The guys dressed me up in the warmest clothing they could find before hauling me out here. Trudging through the high snow is taking a toll on me and I am tiring quickly. We have been out here for three hours.

Walking through the woods isn't so bad, except we have heard gunshots echo through the hills the entire time we have been out here. I am on pins and needles, hoping and praying to any deity that wants to listen, that he is safe.

The guys had the idea that some of them should shift, hoping to communicate with Arek's bear, but with the threat of hunters, it was too risky.

“Arek...” I yell again, cupping my hands around my mouth, trying to project it farther.

It's getting dark, making it treacherous to continue. As we turn around, heading back to the den, noise comes from our right, halting us in place. The guys surround me, protecting me from the unknown. My chest swells with hope as a large brown bear clears the tree line.

I take a step forward, but Gunnar and Declan put their arms out, halting my progress.

“We need to make sure it's Arek,” Declan cautions.

The bear rears up on its hind legs, letting out a roar loud enough to rupture your eardrums, before it begins charging toward us.

“He’s so fucking dramatic,” Gunnar mutters.

“It’s him?” I ask expectantly.

Before anyone can answer, a loud bang sounds, immediately followed by Arek collapsing in the snow, as blood paints the snow red.

“Nooooooooo!”

Declan and Daegyn, grab me, picking me up as we run at full speed back toward the den. Meanwhile, Gunnar, Hayder, and Jathen go to Arek’s aid.

“Turn back!” I yell, pounding on Declan’s back. He has me tossed over his shoulder, one arm wrapped around my legs, just above my knee.

“We can’t,” Daegyn says, continuously looking back to see if we are being followed.

“I need to know,” I bellow, as tears stream down my face, well up since I’m upside down.

“They will let us know, Darby,” Daegyn informs me, sadness leaching into his voice.

The area where we left Arek lying, bleeding in the snow, is too far away to see now. Declan moves me to Daegyn as he takes off ahead of us.

“Where is he going?” I cry.

“He’s going to update the family and let Tavan know we are bringing Arek in with a bullet wound,” Daegyn answers.

“So he is okay?” I question expectantly.

“I don’t know.”

Tired of the round and round non-answers Daegyn and his twin keep giving me, I give up, slumping against him, the fight draining out of me.

Chaos.

That is the only word to describe what is going on right now.

Daegyn and I were almost to the den when Altos Palmer, Arek's dad, along with Mycah Palmer and Reznyk Martin, Arek's uncles, went whizzing by on some sort of ATV that had a small truck bed. Declan was wedged between them, directing them in the direction Arek had fallen.

Roree, Raelee, and Rhodee are taking care of me. Natalia, Arek's mom, is being consoled by Domella, the triplet's mom, and Marlee, Declan, Daegyn, and Jathen's mom. Aunt Mitzi is the only one not crying, pacing, or freaking out.

For some reason, my attention is drawn to Mitzi.

She is calmly sitting in the corner, crocheting...

something. My head tilts to the side, trying to figure out what she has on now.

Taking her in from head to toe, a soft smile stretches across my lips.

Mitzi, the eccentric older woman, is dressed like a twenties Flapper.

Her outfit is complete with a fringed dress, gloves to her elbows, fishnet stockings, a garter, heels, several lengthy strands of pearls, and, of course, the headband complete with feathers.

Unable to control myself, the absurdity of it has me laughing. I start softly, moving to a giggle, and gradually become so overcome that I am bent over in loud belly laughs.

One of the triplets follows my line of sight, a smile spreading across her face.

“Yeah, she has a way of breaking up the tension.”

Mitzi lifts her head, giving me a quick wink, before returning to her task as if nothing happened.

The doors burst open, and the Palmer/Martin men barge in, carrying Arek in a makeshift stretcher made out of blankets. Rising to my feet, I move to follow before Declan steps into my path, stopping me.

“Let Tavan take a look at Arek,” Declan says as the men begin filing back into the waiting area, from where they took my mate. “He’s breathing, but he has lost a lot of blood.”

“What about the guy who shot him?” I ask, using my anger to mask my worry.

Daegyn smirks, taking over for Declan. “Gunnar and Hayder have him hog-tied and are taking him to the sheriff’s office with poaching charges.”

The fact that they caught the shooter does little to soothe my nerves.

Arek

Pain.

So. Much. Pain.

My eyes flutter open, trying to get my bearings.

Gazing around the room, I realize that I am at Tavan's clinic. I shift, trying to get comfortable, when a pained groan escapes my lips. Giving up, I look down my body to take stock of my injuries.

Darby's head is resting on the bed at my side, her breathing even as she sleeps.

"She hasn't left your side," a soft female voice whispers in a shifter's register, too low for humans to hear. Looking to my left, I see my mom, looking weary.

"What happened?" I ask, my throat sore, like a cheese grater was taken to it.

"You were shot," Mom says flatly. "The boys took Darby into the woods after you were gone for three days, looking for you. They said that you started to make your way to them when a poacher opened fire. You lost a lot of blood."

"How long have I been here?" I ask, unsure how long I've been asleep.

"Forty-eight hours," Mom says, and I drop my head back onto the bed.

"The restaurant," I mutter.

"Is just fine," Mom bites out. "We have run it long before you took over."

"She loves you," Mom says after a brief period of silence, nodding her head in Darby's direction.

"I don't know about that," I argue. "I haven't given her many reasons why she should."

“You’re right, you haven’t,” Darby’s sleepy voice joins the conversation, drawing my attention to her.

“I’ll leave you two alone,” Mom says, rising from her chair. She kisses me on the forehead before leaving the room, closing it behind her.

“I’m sorry,” Darby whispers, tears running down her cheeks.

“You have nothing to be sorry about,” I argue. “I have messed this up from the beginning. I should have come to you, talked to you. Instead, I freaked you out, scared the hell out of you, and tried to control you.”

“Well, yeah, you have done all of those things,” she says with a watery smile. “I am not, nor have I been, perfect.”

Reaching over, I use my thumb to wipe the tears off her face. Darby leans into my touch briefly before sitting back in her chair.

“Arek, you need to understand something, and you need to listen ,” she says, emphasizing the word listen. “My parents have always had a strained relationship. While my mom stays at home, she micromanages everything and everyone.

“If my father didn’t listen to Kali and me, there’s no telling what kind of miserable life Dayton would be stuck in right now. Mom was grooming her to be a clone. The sister I see now smiles, has a beautiful home, a loving husband, and four beautiful babies.

“That isn’t me,” she says, causing my heart to sink.

“Kids can be on the table, later. I want to work, need to work. You need to understand that owning and operating a tattoo parlor means that I have to touch

people. I specifically learned how to tattoo paranormals, knowing that I wanted to move here and live here. My mother drove a wedge between Dayton and me. Slowly, we are chipping away at that, becoming closer.”

Darby pauses, and while so many thoughts are running amok in my head, I bite my tongue, waiting her out.

“I love you, Arek,” she says, shocking the shit out of me. “Being a mate is something that I need to adjust to, so you need to find patience. I will never fit into any type of mold, so don’t try.”

When it seems like Darby is done with her speech, I start my own.

“I love you too,” I say as she gives me a soft smile in return. “Thank you for coming to look for me. I will try harder and do better going forward, to not only communicate better, but be a little more...flexible.”

Darby rises to her feet, leaning over my bed, giving me a soft, deep kiss.

“Don’t expect me to play nurse once Tavan says you can go home,” Darby quips, reaching down to grab her bag and moving to the door.

“Where are you going?” I ask, somewhat outraged that we just had this breakthrough in our relationship and she’s already bailing on me.

“You are not my boss,” she jeers. “Although once you are healthy, be prepared to spend some time fucking me.” Darby winks before leaving the room, closing the door behind her.

I groan as my head falls back onto the pillow, a smile gracing my lips. My mate is a giant pain in the ass and I wouldn’t want her any other way.

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Epilogue

Darby

I don't feel good. Knowing what I need to make me feel better, I cut my appointment short. As I clean up my client, I apologize, pull my gloves off, and escort them to the receptionist's desk.

As soon as they leave, I lock the door, flipping the be back soon sign, and march across the street. It's just after the lunch rush, and I know where I can find Arek.

Heading straight to the back, I push his office door open, slamming it closed behind me.

"I'm going to have to call you back," Arek says, hanging up the phone before whoever he was talking to can respond.

Crossing his office, I start stripping out of my clothes. Arek knows what I am here for and begins removing his clothing. As soon as I reach him, Arek lifts me, setting my ass on the desk.

"Are you ready for me?" he asks, swiping a finger through my folds.

"Fuck me," I respond.

Slamming into me, I call out as both pleasure and pain fill my senses. My head falls back and Arek nibbles up my neck as his hips piston. My climax is quickly

approaching, my body already primed before I even walked through the restaurant's door.

Things fall off the desk, making thudding noises as they hit the floor, breaking glass among them, but we don't stop. We both moan in ecstasy, our climaxes reaching their peak.

"Yes! Yes! Yes! Arrreeekkk," I call out as my pussy spasms around him. I can feel his knot swell, knowing what to look for now, and it drags out my pleasure as it rubs against my G-spot.

"Arrrggghhh!" Arek yells as his hips stutter and then slow, before stopping altogether. He sits in his chair, taking me with him, so I straddle his waist.

Over the past three weeks, I have learned the triggers that let my body know when I need him. Arek told me that, had I been born a shifter, it would be referred to as a heat cycle. He slept on the couch that night.

The triplets have become great sources of information, and we have also become close, almost as close as Dayton and I are.

Speaking of Dayton, she and the babies are doing great. Kyle is surprised that their daughter is showing signs of being an alpha, whereas the boys aren't.

Dad is talking about leaving my mom and moving here to Padston once he retires. He still has about five years to go, but he wants to be closer to his grandkids.

Fiora has settled in nicely. Tavan and Brady have hired an architect, someone Rodney knows.

She is taking online classes to complete her veterinary degree.

We sat down together and she called Michael.

He assured her that no one was pressing charges regarding the barn fire, chalking it up to a lantern or something getting knocked over.

Hearing the incident was ruled an accident and no charges were being filed, Fiora seemed to relax.

Michael didn't understand her having two men in her bed, but assured Fiora that no matter what, she was still his sister and he would love her regardless.

Oh, he also told her that the day of Dylan and Sally Jo's wedding, Dylan caught her bent over a table, wedding gown pushed up over her ass, getting railed by one of the groomsmen.

Rumors are flying around town about the real reason he left the church.

Some speculation is that he is still in love with Fiora, pining for her to come back to him.

When she relayed that story to me, over a bottle of tequila, I laughed so hard, I snorted, causing the tequila to come out of my nose.