



Princess Seeks Dragon (Monster Brides Romance #35)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Sometimes a princess needs a dragon

Angela Argento is the stepdaughter of a mafia capo—something she only realizes after her parents meddling in her dating life turns obvious. They don't just hope she'll hit it off with good-looking, charming Vincenzo Genovese. They've already set their wedding date for early next summer!

Angela tries to protest, especially after Vincenzo makes it clear he's just following orders to unite two minor crime families to create a more formidable organization. He's not interested in Angela and he'll keep his string of lovers on the side.

What do you do when you need to be rescued from the prince of a mafia family? Who do you call when a royal pain threatens an unwitting and unwilling mafia princess?

Look for a dragon, of course— but Angela didn't expect to find a real one!

Graham Kane loves his only brother. That's why the dragon shifter agrees to house-sit and oversee the family business, even if the younger dragon really doesn't want to leave his bustling Los Angeles lifestyle to spend a few months in sleepy paranormal Pine Ridge. He's prepared for an uneventful spring—until he agrees to do a favor for an old friend and find someone's missing daughter.

Graham plans to (eventually) settle down with a female shifter to preserve the family bloodline. But when the missing daughter turns out to be the woman of his dreams, he's torn between duty and love. Can he prove that sometimes the princess is better off choosing the dragon?

Monstrous grooms and beastly brides? Don't be afraid of falling in love... it's super-natural! Explore the entire Monster Brides series, one tantalizing happily-ever-after at a time!

Princess Seeks Dragon is a steamy monster romance standalone set

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:57 am

“Graham. Graham, are you sitting down?”

I roll into a sitting position and push my tangled mess of black hair back from my stubbled cheeks. Usually, I pull it back when I go to bed. Must’ve lost the elastic band when I slept. Or maybe I was too smashed to put it in last night. “I’m sitting,” I say, perching on the edge of my rumpled bed.

“I need you to come to Pine Ridge for a month. Look after the business for me and mind the house.”

I blink and wonder if I’m still asleep, having a weird hangover dream. Pine Ridge is a perfect little place, a happy little paranormal suburban gem for the “nice monsters.” My brother is proof of that. He’s got a big red brick house, a garden shop, and a landscaping company with big, fat contracts from the local bigwigs and the neighborhood college. He’s got a sweet, pretty brunette wife.

A human wife.

There’s no way Mr. Perfect could need my help when he has the lovely and talented Vanessa, a woman he loves enough to turn his back on his own kind for.

“Why? What’s wrong?” I demand, my voice scratchy and my temples starting to throb. I stagger upright and look for pants, water, and the Kane amulet that I’m not supposed to take off—but I do almost every night. I don’t want my family mixed up in the dirty dealings happening in the California CrossRealms.

“Vanessa is pregnant—and he’s got dragon genes. He’s going to be able to shift, like

us!”

A spear of surprise sends me stumbling over the bathroom sink, nearly making me drop my phone into the basin. “What? How d’ye know?” The faint trace of an accent skitters out, and I cough it back down.

“Ultrasound shows the little one’s growing in a ‘hardened calcified sphere.’”

“An egg. Vanessa’s growing an egg ?” I demand. She’s a human. How is that possible?

“The doctor says it’s soft and will come out naturally with the afterbirth. The little one’ll break through it just like the amniotic sack.”

Maybe hearing this kind of talk isn’t the best after a long, smoky night filled with too much whiskey. My stomach whirls, and I beg the contents to stay down. “Why do I have to come home? How far along is she? When were you going to tell me, ye wee scunner?” Is she sick? I hope she’s not sick. My heart stutters. I gave Ian a hard time when he married Vanessa three years ago, but she’s been nothing but good to him—and somehow, she’s carrying his child. A dragon.

I thought Ian was a fool, condemning our bloodline to die out by marrying a human.

Well. Who knows if it’ll have all the capabilities of a full dragon?

Wait, if they can tell it’s dragonborn right now, can they tell if it’s well? What if the little one is sick?

“Sixteen weeks.”

“What??” I yelp. “That’s months, Ian!”

“You were so adamant that we both marry women of our own kind, you fool. I didn’t want to tell you in case the baby was just an ordinary human. Bad enough to have to listen to you rant at me for dooming our dying race without having to tell you that you were probably right. If Vanessa hadn’t needed this special scan, I probably wouldn’t have told you until he was born.”

“It’s a he? A boy?”

“Another Kane lad coming into the world. I’m taking Vanessa home to pick the amulet herself and have it blessed by the High King.”

“Can she fly in this condition? Why did she need a special scan? Wait, is this why you want me to come home?”

“Just to mind the business for a month until we’re home again. And she needed a special scan because her heart rate was getting a bit low and unsteady. Turns out, human women carrying dragonborn need high potency calcium supplements once the little one starts to get solid bones and the shell starts to thicken.”

“She’s going to be okay, isn’t she?” I ask, sitting down on the edge of the grotty little counter in my studio apartment’s minuscule bathroom.

“Ah, look at that. You do care. We’re going to name him after you, you know. Murdo Graham Lewis Kane. Lewis is Van’s father. You met him at the wedding.”

My heart swells—then hardens. “When are you leaving?”

“First of May.”

“I... I don’t know. I’ve got a lot of irons in the fire here.”

“In a CrossRealms? It’s hellfire, then. Graham, Mother wouldn’t want you near that place.”

“It’s not all bad. I’m in a legal business.” I mean... I’m muscle. I’m a repo man for someone quite shady, but it’s legal. The people who don’t pay their car loans get their vehicles taken back. It’s simple. Legal.

I don’t let myself think about the fact that my boss is an Incubus and that if he doesn’t get paid in cash, he’ll eventually take souls. That’s not my department. I would never...

I stop my train of thought. There’s a lot I said I would never do that I’ve done since I started working here. They say the longer you work in the CrossRealms, the more evil you become. It’s just a myth. I tell myself it’s just a myth.

“There’s legal work here, too!”

“There aren’t as many of our kind,” I snap. When Ian and I moved to Pine Ridge four years ago, it was because we’d heard tales of so many “monsters” finding their mates in Pine Ridge. After a year of running a business together, Ian was smitten with a human and hearing wedding bells. I was furious and felt betrayed. I didn’t stick around long after they tied the knot.

“You mean dragons? There must be nice dragonesses there, I’m sure, but I heard,” Ian drops his voice, “that a lot of them work for crime families or have been corrupted by the dark energy coming from the CrossRealms.”

“So? Dragons are fierce. We’re meant to protect and fight, not to work in garden centers.” The second I say it, I regret it. Our mother is a fierce dragon, but she was a ranger with the National Trust. It’s from her that Ian got his love for nature. It’s from our father that I got my stubborn streak. I always wanted to be out finding trouble or

creating it, the way he would constantly agitate members of other clans, the way he was always on about the Kanes' position in the High King's council, or always on about our land and how our we should have more, how it was our birthright.

“Aye, well, we're not supposed to be so fierce we get ourselves a bad name with every other clan in all of the British Isles, Graham. Wee Murdo will be a fresh start for the Kanes, and you're bloody well going to help. If you don't... Well. This is Pine Ridge. The people here don't fight between clans. I'll ask everyone in town to take a shift if I have to, but I will get Murdo his amulet, and I will have Vanessa and our baby blessed by the High King.”

Ian's fire sparks my own. I can feel the human skin I normally wear shifting to scales, feel talons emerging as my skin turns dark violet. In seconds, I'm in my halfling form (a humanoid dragon for those not in the know), and there's only a shred of calm keeping me from turning into a dragon proper—the kind with a wingspan and lashing tail that would destroy my little apartment.

“I'll see if I can get away, but don't count on me. You're the older brother, not my clan elder, not the High King.” I throw the phone onto the bed as I stalk past and grab my long leather trench coat from the heap of clothes where it lives.

Scaring the shite out of someone when I go to claim their car might put me in a better mood.

And maybe I'll even figure out why I'm so angry in the first place.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:57 am

“Princess, help me decide . The gold or the silver?”

I stand in my mother’s closet, which has a raised circular platform surrounded by three full-length mirrors. It looks like the inside of a couture fashion house. Then again, that's my mother's new life: Clothes. Trying on clothes. Spending money on clothes. Spending money, period. Buying things with her new husband's money is her passion, her hobby, and her career.

Don't get me wrong, I'm happy for my mother to be spoiled. My dad was the definition of a lousy, no-good, rotten deadbeat. The hell he put my mother through meant I was more than happy for her when she found someone who would treat her right, especially since I want to live my own life without worrying about her rattling around in New Jersey all on her own while I'm going to... well, I don't know what I'm going to do exactly.

“I’d go with silver. What's the occasion?” I ask my mother.

Ronnie has some big business meeting tonight, and I have to go with him. He really wanted you to come along, sweetie. He said, ‘Angela should come. She’d love Joey’s family. Lots of good-looking boys.’”

The way my stepfather talks about his business associates reminds me of some cheesy ‘80s mobster movie. Not the mainstream ones. The ones that were on television as reruns on Saturday afternoons. If I didn't know better, I'd think he was in the mob.

“You never come to Ronnie’s work dinners. You never stick around when we have

dinners here.” Her voice goes into a nasal whine that I swear is a “rich trophy wife” affectation. She never had it when we lived in New Jersey, and that’s saying something.

“Well, Mom, I’ve been busy.”

She looks at me with pursed lips and a glare that would freeze flame. “Oh, really?”

“Really.” It’s a lie. I busy myself lining up several pairs of stilettos that would match her dress.

I’m not busy. I want to be busy, but even if I were bored and dying for something to do, I would still avoid Ronnie’s overly friendly business pals. Even though I’m sure all of his friends are just a little bit quirky, we have nothing in common. They seem to be from a pocket dimension where time stopped somewhere in the 1950s, and their wives fell out of hairspray ads from the 1980s. Whenever I’m in the room, the women cluck over me and try to fix me up with their sons, cousins, or other handy male relatives. The middle-aged men ogle me, while the older, wrinkly ones pat my cheeks and tell me what a pretty wife I’m going to make someone someday. The younger ones look at me for too long—and not at my face. I have to bite my tongue every time and remind myself that my stepfather is a lot older than my mother, and maybe his friends just haven’t moved with the times. My mother is content and getting every luxury she had to do without while she was working two jobs to support my father, his three six-packs a day habit, and his career of betting on losing horses.

“Busy doing what? You finished school. You don’t have any papers to write. Why is your head always buried in your laptop these days?”

“I’ve got to get my grad school applications done as soon as possible.”

“Oh baby,” my mother frowns at me and drops the discarded gold dress carelessly to

the velvet side chair that sits in the corner of her lavish closet-slash-dressing room. “Angela, sweetie, you don't need to bother with that anymore. Ronnie has been very generous to both of us. You don't need to look for a job or go back to school—slaving away over those books that give you so much stress and make your skin break out.” Mom pouts at me and puts her hands on my cheeks.

I roll my eyes at my mother. “You've been hanging out around Ronnie's friends' wives way too much. You always told me that education was my ticket out of a bad situation.”

“You're not in a bad situation! And... And maybe I was wrong. All those years, I tried to take online classes... All the money I could have been saving for a good lawyer... No, all I needed was some good shapewear and the right eyeliner to snag Ronnie,” Mom says with a sudden flash of anger in her eyes.

This is quite unexpected. I've only seen her deliriously happy ever since Ronnie Argento walked into the diner where she waited tables and swept her off her feet three years ago.

“I didn't have some fancy degree! Ronnie loves me—and you. He even adopted you, legally, even though you were already an adult. He wanted to make sure you were his legal daughter so your father could never bother you, and so you'd have all of his money if something happened to us.”

“Mom! I love Ronnie. I was happy to sign the papers, okay?” I rub her back gently, silently realizing this is a parenting gesture, the child soothing the mother, something I've been doing for far, far too long. “This has nothing to do with how much I love him. I can't just sit around filing my nails and spending someone else's money. Even if I didn't want to go back to grad school, I'd want to work. Even part-time.”

“Well, that's no problem! Ronnie's friend, Zooley? You met him at the Christmas

party? He says you can model for him any day. His work is always very tasteful. I saw his work in Mature Swimsuits just this month.”

I refrain from commenting on the name of my stepfather's photographer friend. Any guy who wants to use me as a model is not a legit photographer. I'm too short and too round to be a model. My figure might be hourglass, but that's like saying a Shetland pony and a thoroughbred are the same. Everything on me is short and plump. Cute but dumpy. And okay, maybe I have finally let my mother give me some fashion tips that make the most of my squat little hourglass. On a good day, you could call me sexy... but I know I'm not a traditional photographer's dream.

And I think I'd die if I were in Mature Swimsuits at twenty-six.

My mother grabs a pair of silver pumps to go with the dress she selected and comes over to give my chin a little squeeze.

“Don't work yourself so hard, sweetie. You promised me you'd go to New York with me next week. Remember?”

“Yes, Mother,” I say, dropping a curtsy with the sides of my fluttery tank top. “I'm looking at a couple of grad schools, though. You said we could visit some campuses.”

“And we have tickets to three different shows! All musicals, all sold out!” Mom squeals like an excited toddler.

“Knock knock. Joanne, are you decent?”

I have to smile at the way Ronnie enters his own bedroom. When he sees my mother in her frilly fuchsia dressing gown, he staggers back and then rubs his hands.

“Oh my Lord,” Ronnie exclaims, putting his hands to his cheeks. “How is it that I

married the most gorgeous woman in the world? Angela, how did a retired old coot like me end up married to this hot young thing?"

"I'm the lucky one, baby," Mom gushes, and they rub noses.

"And I have one beautiful young lady as my daughter. You know, it won't be long now before I'm going to be hearing some lucky young man saying the same thing about you." Ronnie beams with pride at me.

I blush. "Aw. Thank you." I have to admit, his compliments make me feel good. I've been single for a while now, though not for a lack of trying. I've had a string of dates that never turned into anything serious. Maybe it's all my mother's old-fashioned advice or Ronnie's sweet smile that prompts me to say, "Well, if you know anybody..."

"My Angel! I thought you'd never ask! When we go to New York next week, you've got to meet an old family friend of mine. His son is so handsome and such a respected businessman! I know you two would hit it off." Ronnie flings open his arms. "You two sit next to each other at the theater, okay, Angie?"

Sometimes I think Ronnie believes any woman will be happy with a handsome man who gives her some attention. "He's a respected businessman" has never been high on my list of turn-ons.

But I'm only in New York for a week. I've already got a bunch of tickets to Broadway shows. It might be nice not to be the third wheel... "I thought the shows were all sold out?"

"That's not an issue." Ronnie shakes his head. "If you will be his date for the evening, this young man will be able to get a ticket. He's extremely well-connected. If you two should hit it off... You will make your mother and me very happy—and do

yourself a favor. Joey's son, Vincenzo, will see that you want for nothing."

"All right, Pops. Sounds good," I say, giving Ronnie a playful hug as I pass. "But let's not jump the gun. Dinner and the theater? Sure. Wanting for nothing? That's marriage stuff."

"Angela, you're not getting any younger. You don't want to end up missing a golden opportunity or, worse, marrying the wrong person like I did, just because he's exciting and talks a good game. You should let your father and me help you find a sweet man who will really love you and spoil you like Ronnie spoils me," my mother purrs, wrapping her arms around Ronnie's neck and running her fingers through his silver hair.

"That's my cue to leave, lovebirds." But as I walk back to my own room in the gorgeous Bayside house that I now call my home, I can't help but wonder if she's right. It wouldn't be so bad to find the kind of love that my mother and stepfather have. I've never seen people so happy together. Maybe it is old-fashioned, but why shouldn't it be? Love has been around for thousands of years.

And maybe since I'm single at twenty-six, with no job, no clear career path, and no boyfriend, I should let someone help me. A little.

I drag out my suitcase when I get back to my room. Instead of just packing my normal leggings and sweatshirts, I go to my closet and start browsing through all the designer labels my mother has brought me over the last year. Yes, I have to admit I have enjoyed being pampered and spoiled by Ronnie's bank account. I take out a few of the most flattering (and tightest) dresses that I own.

"Vincenzo, hmm?" Could he be Italian? Italian-American? I hold up a pale pink dress that's cut lower and slit higher than anything I'd normally wear, wondering if I should pack it. I picture a handsome man with dark hair, a sensuous mouth, and

intense dark eyes. I picture a faint Italian accent, even though I know I'm stereotyping left and right. Ronnie says he's a businessman. Suit and tie. Sharp haircut.

Maybe looking to settle down and spoil someone?

I could still work! Go to school. I could be someone's girlfriend at the same time. I could even be someone's wife.

I press the dress to my body and wonder if Vincenzo and I will hit it off.

Do I want us to?

I pick out another dress, a slim little black number by some ungodly expensive designer. Mom says it brings out the caramel notes in my skin and makes my dark hair look more lustrous. I drop the pink dress and hold up the black one.

It gives off "Very Available" vibes.

Well. You are very available, Angela.

Maybe it's time I start putting my eye-catching wardrobe to good use...

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Vincenzo makes all of New York City go silent. The hustle, the bustle, the horns, the lights—they all fade away when he steps out of a black SUV sporting a midnight blue suit, white shirt, and eyes only for me.

Ronnie and my mother hug and gush over him while I hang back, suddenly tongue-tied and shy, the little girl who hugged the wall at the eighth-grade dance all night.

Get it together, Angela. You've had a fabulous day out in New York, you're about to go see a sold-out Broadway musical—and there's a man who looks like a cross between a young, hot George Clooney and the sexy guy who sells perfume that costs more than your car payment staring at you.

“You must be Angela. I'm so glad Ronnie talked you into coming. When he and my father talk business tomorrow, you have to let me give you a tour of the city. Lunch? Shopping? A museum?” Vincenzo's voice is low and smooth, and there's a trace of the city in it as he bends his head over my hand.

Thank God I had my nails done...

“I—Thank you.” I giggle and pray for a sudden dose of suaveness to grace me.

“Charming. So charming. I like her, Ronnie.” Vincenzo looks at me with twinkling eyes and keeps a hold of my hand as he looks into my eyes, then over his shoulder at Ronnie.

“Oh, I think that's a mutual assessment,” Ronnie chuckles, hands spread. He puts his arm around Mom and gestures to the long line spilling across the wide sidewalks

under the theater marquee. “Princess, ladies first,” he says, and gestures for me to get in line.

“Oh, my dates don’t wait in line at the theater,” Vincenzo says with a quiet command that makes my knees unexpectedly buckle. “That’s the kind of leadership you can expect from us, Ronnie.” His smile is broad, and he sweeps us to the head of the line. “Carlo.” He nods to the man in a burgundy vest, and we slide right in.

“Impressive,” I find my tongue and make sure there’s a little hint of teasing in my voice.

“You’re Ronaldo Argento’s daughter. Of course I’ll impress you,” he whispers, bending down so his face is close to mine, lips behind my ear. The scent of his cologne hits me hard, in a good way. Spicy and smoky, with vanilla, bourbon, and citrus.

“Well, thanks for making a business trip so much fun,” I manage to choke out, trying to compose myself.

“With you, business would always be a pleasure. Perhaps we can talk about that tomorrow when you come to dinner?”

“Dinner? Tomorrow?” I admit it. I have the whole “swept off my feet” thing going on. Rich, powerful, gorgeous, and asking to see me again five minutes into date number one?

“You’ll be there, won’t you? Without you, business loses its pleasure, lovely one.”

Lovely one. A pet name. An elegant pet name, right from the start.

Sue me, I swooned. “I’d love to come to dinner.”

“See, Angela? I told you that you two would hit it off! It’s fate.”

As we walked into the glamorous lobby with its plush atmosphere of red velvet and gold, I thought I caught a scowl on Vincenzo’s face, a hardening of his features.

It only made him look hotter.

Fuck, the hidden craving for bad boys. It has to be genetic. Or maybe it’s because he sort of looks like David Bonetti, my ninth-grade crush. New Jersey and New York are prime “hot, dark, and Italian-American” ground, after all.

“I suppose you could call it fate, Mrs. Argento. My father and your husband might like the title,” Vincenzo laughed, good humor and perfect smile suddenly back to the forefront.

We collect our programs, and the crush of bodies all around us, swarming to get to their seats, threatens to undo me. “I guess they did bring us together,” I laugh, eager to be witty and charming and gorgeous.

Vincenzo nods, smile fixed. “Insisted on it. But, to be fair,” his voice drops as we file into the long, well-dressed line, two abreast, walking down the aisle to our prime seats, “it’s my father more than yours. Your father just handles the money. My father handles the products.”

“Oh? And you’re going into the family business?”

“As if first-born sons ever have a choice.” This time his laugh is bitter, but so silky. His hand lands on my hip, but lightly, guiding me into a seat, tripping over pumps and glittering skirts as we take our place in the center of the row.

A dangerous gentleman.

Dangerous? Really?

Nah. Powerful, maybe, but harmless.

“Talk more later, you two! It’s starting!” My mother hisses, waving her program.

“T HAT WAS MAGICAL,” Mom sighs and spins. “Take my picture, babe. And then one of Angie and Vincenzo. And then one of mother and daughter. Should we get one of the two boys, Ang?”

“Mom, please. You’re acting like a total tourist.”

“I am not! Everyone takes selfies, honey.”

Vincenzo pulls me under the glittering lights and puts his arm around me. We have big smiles, and my cheeks hurt from laughing at the musical comedy we just watched. I beamed, I cried, and I grabbed Vincenzo’s hand at intermission as we were tripping and stumbling back to our seats. It was a fairytale night.

“Wanna get some coffee on the way back to my hotel?” I ask as my mother finishes a frenzy of flashes. “I mean... Me, going to my hotel. Not you—”

“I know. That’s not a requirement of this whole deal,” he sighs. He looks down at his watch, an expensive gold piece with a dark lapis face and tiny diamonds set around it.

Damn. Loaded.

I’m not shallow... but I guess my mom’s tastes have started rubbing off on me in the last couple of hours.

“I can’t, I’m afraid. I have a few calls to make. But I’ll see you tomorrow, Angela.” He kisses my cheek, then my lips, soft and swift, blurring the lines between gentleman and flirt.

“Thank you for a wonderful time,” I whisper.

He cups my cheek and nods at me with a seriousness that I don’t fully understand.

“My stomach is all in knots,” I tell my mother as he leaves in his shiny black car.

“It’s butterflies!” she squeals. “Ronnie, tell her. It’s butterflies.”

“Butterflies, Angie. I’m telling you, Vincenzo is the man for you. He’s a good man, mature. Not like some of the young things you’ll find on campus, sniffing after a pretty rich girl like you.”

“I’m not rich! You’re rich .”

Ronnie stops fawning over my mother to cup my face in both hands, standing back with narrowed eyes, his face full of sincere admiration. Even love.

“You are my daughter . What’s mine is yours and your mother’s. I had a hundred gals I could have married, a hundred chances to get someone knocked up and carrying my kid. I’m glad I waited, Angie. You’re the best daughter a man could ask for—and Vincenzo’s gonna treat you right. I know it.” He drops his hands and steps back, clearing his throat. “Because if he doesn’t, Papa Bear is gonna make it so he never walks again, capiche ?”

“Aw, Dad. Stop it. I can take care of myself.”

Ronnie’s mouth drops. My mother squeals and spins on her stilettos. People stare.

“Shh, Mom, what’s the matter with you?” I hush, hurrying over and forcing her arms down. “People will think you won the lottery or something! We’re gonna get mugged.”

“That’s the first time you’ve ever called him Dad,” Mom whispers, tears filling her eyes.

“Now, that calls for butterscotch sundaes for my girls,” Ronnie claps his hands together. “C’mon, the night is young and so are we!”

Oh, wow. I guess it is. I haven’t called anyone Dad in... wow. A long time.

I guess travel really is broadening. I stop worrying for a little bit and just enjoy the life Ronnie is giving me. Theater tickets, hot dates, and sundaes as a midnight snack. He’s a good dad. I let him put his arm around my shoulders while his other drapes around my mother’s back, and we stroll like one happy little family.

“J OANNE, JOEY WANTS us there around five.”

“But, honey, dinner is at seven,” my mother steps out of the shower in the hotel suite.

Ronnie paces, rubbing his hands. “Business, honey. Put on your party face. Angie, are you wearing something pretty? Vincenzo’ll be there.”

“He’s a sweet boy,” Mom gushes, hurrying to the closet, selecting a flowing red dress with blousy, transparent sleeves. “How’s this, Ron?”

“Joey’ll be drooling—and that’s good.” Ronnie nods and paces, fist coming up to his chin. He rests his head on his clasped hands. As he paces, I see him take a few swings

at the air, starting to shadow box.

“What’s the matter, Pops? You and Joey have a touchy contract to negotiate?” I asked.

“Ohh, it’s the same old thing. He always gets antsy after taxes. Doesn’t like someone else handling his books. Wants better security. Doesn’t like that my cousin is going to leave me the business.”

I slip back into my room of our palatial suite and pull off the sweatshirt and leggings I wore during my campus tour. “What business? What cousin?”

“My cousin in New York, Angie. You’ve never met him. He’s semi-retired. We’re in the same business. Don’t you worry about it, sweetie, it’s just that I’m going to take over his share of the business, and no one expected that. Didn’t think I had the killer instinct to be a success.”

“You’re not a boxer! You don’t need killer instincts. You can go a long way in life being kind and respectful,” I call back, considering that designer pink number I packed but was afraid to wear last night.

What the hell? It might be nice if Vincenzo drooled over me. I grab my control-top briefs that I always wear to hide my pouchy belly and slip them on, followed by the dress.

“Mom! Does this look okay?” I run back out of the room, and Ronnie stops pouring himself a whiskey.

“Yowza.”

I giggle. “That’s old man for good, right?”

“That’s old man for ‘Vinnie is gonna propose’!”

“Vinnie? Eww, no, not Vinnie. Vinnie and Joey? It sounds like Joe Pesci and Danny DeVito are going to show up to turn dinner into a bad mobster movie. Vincenzo is so elegant.”

“Vinnie, Vincenzo, whatever. Joanne, come see your daughter! I think Vincenzo’s going to propose on the spot when he sees her in this dress.”

My mother leans out of the bathroom, a curling iron in one hand. “Oh, sweetie! That’s stunning! That’s from that new fashion house you wouldn’t visit with me. We’re going to go back there and this time you’ll come and try things on, won’t you?”

“If I’m not at college, sure, Mom.” I roll my eyes. I mean, I can play at being a pampered princess for this week, I guess, but I’m sure it’ll get old.

I think it’ll get old.

I wish the annoying little voice in my head would shut up—the one that’s whispering, “You are getting a life that a million people would kill for. A life of shopping, dressing up, wining, and dining. You could volunteer! You could do charity work. That’s an important job, you know. Raising babies. Bringing up a family. Kids are so bratty these days. Someone to really spend time with them and mentor them, to be that good role model...”

Yeah. I think that little voice in my head has been taking lessons from my Mom. Maybe Mom has a few points. Just a few.

“ANGELA, WOW. WOW, THAT’S some dress. You look stunning.” Vincenzo kisses me on both cheeks and takes my hands in his as we arrive at his father’s mansion in the city.

I didn’t even know people could have mansions in the city if they weren’t a movie star or something like that.

“My father is in the library, Ronnie. Go ahead in. Joanne, my mother is in the kitchen. Why don’t you go on in? I’ll take Angela on a tour of the terrace and the garden.”

“Oh, I’d love to see the garden,” I gush. I do love flowers and gardening. “Back in New Jersey, I used to make Mom plow up most of the lawn to—”

“Angie, not now.” Mom waves me to silence with an embarrassed titter. “Vincenzo doesn’t want to hear about some little tomato stand you had when you were a kid.”

“Lemonade stand?”

“No, a tomato stand. I grew the best Roma tomatoes and these big heirloom beefsteaks that were so juicy...” I lick my lips at the memory, and I love that Vincenzo laughs and beams.

“I love it,” he enthuses, leading me away.

The terrace is lovely, long and white, with graceful urns full of overflowing ornamental grasses and flowers. The garden is small (it is NYC, and space is at a premium), but it’s exotic and even has a greenhouse. “I love it,” I gush, heading into the lawn, not caring about my strappy sandals.

“Good. Good. Look, we’re going to end up here, so... The garden can be yours. My

mother likes it for looks, but she never comes out here. Dad couldn't care less, he just thinks it's a status symbol to say we have a gardener."

I nod politely, but I'm confused. "End up here? Mine?" I shake my head now, confusion deepening. "Like, some flowers from it?"

"No. When the deal is all done." The charming smile fades. "Some racket, huh? I don't like it any better than you."

I want to ask a million questions, but for once, just for once, I wonder if playing dumb will get me better answers. "What do you think we should do?" I ask softly.

"Thank God you're not the little innocent airhead Dad said. Look, I think it's purely political. Ronnie's just a capo. No one expected him to become the boss of the Argento family, but..." he spreads his hands. "What are you gonna do? A heart attack at fifty-one, my dad said. Otherwise, Ronnie's cousin would be taking over. Anyway, I think it's just protection, but in this world, protection is valuable, right?"

"Right!"

"I'm not ready to settle down yet. To be honest," Vincenzo slides up to me and puts his arm around my waist, "I have a little business I can't just abandon—her name's Gabrielle, and she's not the kind of woman you just walk away from—no offense! If things had been allowed to happen between us naturally, you know? It might've worked."

"But our parents..." I lead, heart quickening, palms sweating. What the fuck is a capo? He has another woman? Why is he telling me this?

"Mom has her heart set on a June wedding, which I said you'd never go for. Don't have to take a honeymoon unless you want one."

I lean on one of the expensive marble statues dotting the border of the garden path, mind reeling.

Wedding.

Honeymoon.

What the actual hell?

“Excuse me, Mr. Vincenzo. Lemonade? Iced tea?”

“Thank you, Carlotta.” Vincenzo takes two glasses from the uniformed maid. She could be a model—probably on some X-rated website with her little black dress and honest-to-God frilly white apron. As she passes, he gives her a long, lecherous look, and she deliberately brushes against him.

“Lemonade. Just made with Mom’s old recipe and it’s delicious.” He walks out to meet me on the path, but his eyes keep zooming back to Carlotta and her lambada-worthy curves as she saunters back inside.

“Thank you. I thought you said her name was Gabrielle?”

“Hm? Oh, you caught me. Look, if I have to get married to give Argento a fair shake, I’ll do it, but I told my old man I’m not done sowing my wild oats. I shouldn’t have to take a wife until I’m older, closer to when I’ll take over the business.”

“Well... I agree! We don’t need to get married.” Maybe Vincenzo’s nuts. Maybe I’m nuts. Or in a bad dream. I take a quick swig of cold lemonade (and it is as delicious as he said), and—nope. Not dreaming.

“I’m not saying that! I’m just saying you’re not like the other little princesses I’ve

met. You seem less sheltered, more mature. Might as well be honest instead of lying to you and keeping the mistresses on the side.”

“Other princesses?”

“You know how some of the old Dons are. They send their little girls to all-girl Catholic schools, have a guard on them twenty-four-seven, and won’t let them leave the house unless it’s to go to mass or shopping with their mamas. A bunch of innocent little ‘yes, sir’ ‘no, sir’ virgins who don’t know which end of a cock is up.”

I’m no prude, but I’m disgusted by the way he speaks just now. “I’m sure they don’t choose that life.”

“And neither did we, right? But we don’t turn down the money.” He laughs and drains his glass with a sigh.

“So, I’m suitable?”

“Yeah, Angela. I’m amenable to a roommate sitch... for now. And like I said, you don’t seem like those scared little mice I see at ‘family funerals.’ I figured we might as well talk for real before the parents take over. Then it’ll have to be all lovey-dovey or my mother’ll pitch a fit.”

“What about my mother?” I whisper, more to myself. Does she know about this? Are these clues spelling out what I think they are? Dons and bosses, family business... I’m in the middle of some mafia drama, and I can’t turn the channel.

“Exactly why I’m treating you right. I know you’re Argento’s only child. I promise you, you’ll never want for anything. We can stay here, we can get our own little place. My wallet is your wallet.” The charming smile is back, and even though I don’t like a lot of things about this side of Vincenzo, I have empathy for him. He might

have more power, but he's still under his dad's thumb, and he's still getting forced into a marriage to a woman he doesn't love.

"You're being awfully gallant about this, but this isn't the 1600s. You don't just marry off your kids to—"

"You're new to this, aren't you?" Vincenzo cuts me off with a harsh scowl. "Families like ours are the kings of this world. We have more power than presidents, more money than princes. An alliance through blood is the only kind of insurance we have that we won't turn on each other—or that we'll stick together. My family's bigger in the business than yours, but Ronnie could do bigger. This alliance will combine our houses, and boom. We'll be one of the biggest dogs in the junkyard. You get it?"

"I get it." We're both pawns, but Vincenzo doesn't mind too much, because one day he'll be big. He'll be the king on this bloody chessboard of organized crime.

"Your dad is too nice. This is my dad's way of keeping him in line, too. How could anyone refuse to follow orders when this is at stake?" Vincenzo asks, his hand boldly reaching out and cupping my chin, lifting my face to his like he's going to kiss me.

At the last second, he stops and steps away. "Not that we'll have any problems."

"No. We certainly won't."

Because I'm getting the hell out of here the first chance I get!

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:57 am

“Too cheap to use a plane, huh?”

“Shut up.”

Of course, to the people below, the beating of our wings probably sounds like thunder or a jet engine. I’ve heard we’re often mistaken for small planes.

“How’d you get all your stuff in that bag?”

“Traveled light. Sublet my apartment. I’m going back as soon as you’re home.” My claws tighten around a big duffle bag, the kind you see soldiers carrying on leave. It’s army surplus but covered in hundreds of patches from local bands that I’ve seen in LA.

Ian snorts, and soft wisps of smoke come from his nostrils as he circles under me, his iridescent, silvery scales shining in the starlight above the pines.

“You’re the conspicuous one, if that’s what you’re worried about,” I point out. I’m dark violet, almost black in some places, almost lavender in some others.

“I’m not worried about anything except making sure you don’t land on my neighbor’s lawn. All these McMansions look alike. Come on, follow me.”

“Like I couldn’t latch onto you? I moved, I didn’t stop being a dragon,” I huff back.

In his pure dragon form, Graham is the size of a 1960s Buick Skylark. I know, we measured. I, on the other hand, prefer to think of myself as three Harleys, end-to-end.

Ian moves with silent flaps of his wide wings, gracefully swooping lower with each beat. I haven't flown in this form much before this last week, and my wings are aching, but I won't tell him that.

"This one! The one with the greenhouses!" he calls over his shoulder, and I watch him shift in mid-air, changing to his halfling form as seamlessly as water turns to steam.

I change on the ground, grabbing my long leather coat and wrapping it around me as I switch from dragon to halfling to human in three blinks of an eye. Ian is still striding around in the buff, his wedding tackle hidden inside his scales in his halfling form. "You'd better sort those scales out before the missus sees you," I groan, rubbing my shoulders.

Ian just looks at me, head cocked. "The right one loves you in your scales as well as your skin. In all your forms."

"Do you mean loves you or just accepts you?" I ask, partially because I'm the annoying younger brother and partially because I'm curious. There's no way a human woman would ever want to make love to me in that form—I'm scaly with long, curling horns, fangs, a tail—and let's not forget the wings. I'm sure those are ever so popular in the bedroom as they crash into everything. And in full dragon form? Forget it.

Graham hits me on the elbow. "Don't be a pervert."

"See? This is why I'm waiting for a dragon. I want—"

"I meant I'm not going to tell you details of our sex life," he hisses, "not that it doesn't happen. Wait for whatever you want, but I'm telling you—marry the person you love. You're going to be building a life with her personality, her sense of humor,

her smile, not so much her genetic code and her race.”

“Honey! Graham! Oh my gosh! It’s so good to see you!” Vanessa is suddenly racing toward us through the back door, a cute little bump making her light blue pajamas strain at the front. She kisses Ian, then throws her arms around me and squeezes. “I have breakfast ready. Pancakes and cranachan!” she carols.

I smile and hug her back, trying not to let the feelings of envy take over.

“She spoils me rotten.” Ian beams. “Honey, you should be resting!” He places a scaly hand on her belly, and she squeezes it affectionately.

“I made breakfast, not a water feature, Ian!” Vanessa giggles and clings to my brother like he’s a treasure.

Nauseatingly, he clings back, one wing spreading over her shoulder, his tail curling around her waist as they walk. Even the arrow-shaped tail tip taps and strokes against her pregnant belly.

Hoarding. All dragons develop a hoard of something precious to them. All I have at the moment is my love of money and band patches from smoky underground band concerts.

Ian found his treasure, his precious things to hoard. That woman and his child.

“It was a long, long flight across the country. Took two days of flying, plus camping out overnight. I think I’ll get a shower and a nap, if that’s okay.”

Ian nods, nuzzling Vanessa’s cheek. “Guest bedroom at the top of the stairs, right-hand side.”

“Thanks, Ian. Night, Vanessa.”

I climb the stairs, ignoring the giggling I can hear coming from the kitchen. I’m happy for my brother. Really.

This could have been yours if you’d stayed, fool.

And marry a human? No, thank you. I know my duty.

Your duty? You mean your rebellion. Stubbornness? Vanessa’s having a dragonborn. Your mate could do the same for you, especially if you claim her as your treasure, mark her as yours.

I don’t want to think about my brother and his wife being intimate, but the way she wraps herself around him, the way his tail curls around her like there’s nothing even remotely unusual about a scaly, fangy monster cuddling a human? He’s marked her and mated with her in at least two of his forms, and you can’t convince me any different.

Because love is what matters, not genes, not looks, not money, y’ young wastrel. I can hear my father’s gruff voice in my head, feel the rapping of his knuckles on my horns.

Enough. Turn the brain off and look at the room I’m staying in—in the house that could have been mine.

It’s gorgeous. It’s a little apartment, really, just missing a kitchen.

There’s a king-size bed, a shower, and a tub that would just about hold Ian in his dragon form if he squeezed himself up tight... Huge. Rich.

Traitor.

Traitor to his own kind.

What could possess a man to do such a thing?

Aye, well. I only have to think about it for a month or so.

“SPRING IS THE BUSIEST time. I’ll never complain about the pregnancy, but this trip—this trip could have been planned better. But, we’re on Murdo’s timetable, not ours. Best to travel now. If we wait until things die down a bit in the winter, he’ll be here.”

“Ian. I ran this garden center with you. I remember how busy spring... is...” My mouth hangs open as my brother’s mud-spattered green truck pulls into Kane Garden and Landscaping.

The little building we started with years ago has doubled in size and added a fenced-in lot that must be half an acre. Forklifts and pallet loaders are zooming about. Trucks with riding mowers chained to their flatbed trailers take up the first five spaces near the automatic door of the garden center itself.

“We have fifteen employees now, not counting Vanessa and myself. Honestly, we’re looking to hire a few more, at least for the season. We go down to a skeleton crew in the winter—no pun intended, we actually did have a Ziburini working here last summer—Lithuanian exchange student at the high school.” Ian moves around easily, hopping from the truck, plucking a withered petunia from a hanging planter, waving at a man sporting a fluorescent green shirt, and handing him a handful of cash with instructions to “Gas up your truck when you’re done with the football field at the

high school! And don't forget the baseball diamond!"

"Aren't you Mr. Captain of Industry?" I say with a gasp, hand on my chest.

"And don't you look like something that escaped from a punk rocker's garage sale?" Ian snaps, tugging on my ponytail and flicking the collar of my long leather duster. "Sporting enough silver on your fingers and in your ears to tempt old Mrs. McInnerny to part with her teacakes! Is this your hoard, laddie?"

"Don't call me 'laddie.' You're not Dad, and I'm not a terrier." But I have to smile. Mrs. McInnerny was a fierce old dragon who lived on the hill above us, and she hoarded two things—silver and Tunnock's Tea Cakes. "Just tell me what you want me to do. Push a mower? Help carry parcels to the cars?"

"Manage the place and sub in when anyone calls out sick, or with school or vacation plans. Don't let us go bankrupt or burn things down. Today, I'll go over the bookkeeping and payroll software with you, then tomorrow we'll go over the work schedule, and we'll have a quick lunch meeting with Ezekial—he's second-in-command for lawn and landscaping, and then Winnifred, who is second-in-command in charge of garden center and floral."

"Second-in-command? Who's in charge? Shouldn't I talk to them?"

"You're going to be the one in charge. Normally, it's me for lawn and landscaping, and Vanessa for garden center and the floral department, but with us out of town..."

My stomach twists. My brother's built an empire, not a massive one, but one just the right size for a modern, modest dragon. Big enough to bring in the gold, small enough to be cozy and to protect without a clan surrounding him.

I don't want to break it, especially since I'm all the clan he has over here, and I didn't

stay to support him.

“You going to be all right, Graham? Honestly, the place runs itself. I’ve got the schedule fairly well set up until June, but still, emergencies come up, new clients call to get on our books... I ought to hire a proper assistant, maybe an assistant manager, especially because Vanessa intends to stay home with Murdo, at least for a while. But we’ll conduct all the interviews and post the job this summer when we come home.”

My brother is talking, explaining, lost in a fog of responsibility.

No way I’m jealous of all the worrying he must be doing about his wife, his business, his child...

Being a repo man is so much easier—and it works with the rage I feel all the time. The feeling that someone has something I need and they’re hiding it, or it’s right under my nose and I’m too stupid to find it.

Or worse, I missed it. Maybe it was right in front of me all along, and I just missed it.

It’s easy to drop out of the human face and slide into my halfling form, hiss and snort, blow a little ash in their faces, and bare my fangs.

“You’re not listening. I said I paid all the utilities for May. Payroll is set up for you to plug the hours in. I’m putting you in at a manager’s salary, all right?”

“Manager? I’m the default owner twice over!” I snap.

“You get room and board, free run of the house and everything in it—but you touch that bottle of Glenfiddich and I’ll break your horns clean off,” Ian growls. “Fine, manager’s salary plus 30 percent—ah, don’t be greedy. I know you weren’t making half as much in California.”

“You have no idea what I made.” My smirk is sinister, but Ian doesn’t look impressed.

“Aye, and I don’t want to. Likely what you made is trouble and bad company. You can use my car or the work truck while you’re here, but leave Van’s little red car alone. It’s her first baby, and she’s a bit sentimental about it.”

I roll my eyes. “I got it, I got it. Proper hold she has on you, doesn’t she? Right by the short and curlies.”

My brother shakes his head. “You sound more stupid every time you open your mouth, Graham. You were the clever one growing up, and I was the one plodding along, happier with a spade in my hand than a book. You’d never know it now.”

He knows how to cut me, my brother, but I can’t complain. I’ve been doing the same thing to him. I’ll be glad when he goes on his trip and happier when he returns, hopefully before I succumb to death by suburbia.

“Is Jax Alley still open?” I ask, remembering the sketchy roadhouse outside of town as the only place where you can walk the line between “good boy” and true dragon without feeling out of place in Pine Ridge.

Ian glares at me. “I’ll not have you getting soused and coming into my place of business pickled like a herring,” he snaps.

“You sound like Mom.”

“Mother would have a few choice words to say to you if she knew you were only hanging out in a CrossRealms hoping to put your seed in some dragoness—any dragoness! And what kind of daughter-in-law would that be, Graham? What kind of wife? Some crime lord’s muscle... Innocent blood on her hands...” Ian stalks around

his desk, muttering.

I swallow down a retort. I like being muscle. I like knowing that there are dragon females watching me hold my own, proving myself in the darkness of a CrossRealms, where there are more evil monsters than innocent ones. True, most humans don't know they're walking around with monsters, but the energy of being at the intersection of the mortal realm and a hellish realm eventually makes most humans angry and dark, anyway. "Not everyone in a CrossRealms is bad. Remember, most of them are just normal people."

"Near enough everyone! I know what a CrossRealms does to a person. You like it, you adrenaline junkie."

"What other jobs let a dragon act like a dragon?" My skin itches, and I see scales starting to form on my arms. How can Ian stay so calm? I'm ready to lash out.

"What d'you think a dragon is, laddie? We are honorable, noble defenders, scourges of the great attack armies, guardians of the flocks, allies of the gargoyle and Orc, enemies of the—"

"My God, would you listen to yourself? You're telling yourself fairy stories, Ian. There's nothing and no one to defend these days. There are precious few women of our kind who even let their dragon out—and that's the kind I want. Fierce. Accepting of my true forms. Able to bear the next generation."

Ian shakes his head sadly. "Not all dragonnesses are dragonborn. Some human women have iron scales under their soft skin. You're just too impatient to see it."

I'm fuming, but I don't say anything. Hard to pack an argumentative punch when I'm starting to wonder if he's right.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:57 am

“What are you doing up so late, princess?” Ronnie blinks at me when I emerge at one in the morning, startling him as he holds a tumbler of bourbon in his hand.

“Couldn’t sleep.” I’m not lying, but that’s far from the whole truth. I’m not asleep because I’m planning my getaway. Like, my actual getting away from this place, these people. I can’t marry some mobster who doesn’t even love me!

“Ah, you know what they say, Angie. Can’t eat, can’t sleep, it’s love. You barely touched your food at dinner.”

“It’s a lot to take in.” I’m choosing my words carefully. I’ve always seen Ronnie as a loving, gentle, sometimes quirky guy. Was it all a lie? If I tell him what I know, am I going to end up “sleeping with the fishes” in concrete shoes in the best pulp fiction tradition? I shudder.

“Vincenzo told me that you’ve won his heart. You can stop worrying, sweetie. The attraction is mutual,” Ronnie says softly, downing the rest of his drink, letting the ice shift and clink in his glass.

“Really? Because...” Every syllable could be the one that tips me from beloved stepdaughter to liability.

“What?”

“Because he told me that his dad is pushing him into this because you two are going into business together, and you want to uh... You want to be a big contender, and there’s a bigger rival company. But I guess Joey is paranoid, huh? And he’s worried

you'll sell him out or go to the other guys?" I don't look at Ronnie while I talk, fiddling with items on the little bar in the living room, rearranging the remotes on the coffee table.

"Oh? He told you that, huh?"

"So he's like the king of one kingdom, and you're the king of the other. You have a daughter, a princess, to marry off to his son, the prince. It's a political marriage in modern day, isn't it?" I conclude in a whisper, taking one of the tiny glass bottles of club soda. I open it and listen to the hiss of the carbon escaping, listen to the crackling of millions of tiny bubbles in a tight space while Ronnie stares at ice cubes and says nothing.

"He doesn't love me, Ronnie," I finally whisper.

"I don't— He might not love you yet, Angie, but a lot of people have marriages made by matchmakers who want what's good for them. Your mom and I love you, and we want you to be happy with a man who'll protect you and cherish you. And I know Vincenzo will do that, or he'll answer to me."

Smiling, funny Ronnie isn't smiling now. His face is sad, dark, and haunted. "I have a cousin—in the same business," he says quickly, "and he has a daughter. Sweet girl, Janine, but it's like you say. I'm sort of the king. Don't want to be. Didn't start out to be. But kings rule kingdoms and take care of their people, and believe me, sweetie, Vincenzo will take such good care of you. You'll grow into love, I know it."

My arguments collect in my mouth, along with angry questions and pointless, incoherent screaming.

"I don't have to marry him, though."

Ronnie puts the glass down. “Not right away.”

“Ronnie, I...”

“Look, give it three more days. Better yet, spend another week in the city, go out with Vincenzo a couple of times. You’ll see what he’s like. He’s a good guy, gonna make a good husband. You know, if you two hit it off, Mom and I might rent a little place out this way. Come up and see you once a month. You could take classes at one of these campuses you’re interested in...”

Words ring hollow. As a child schooled in watching her biological father make empty promises that were never kept and listening to conveniently worded half-truths told to my mother, I know that’s all Ronnie is giving me. Half-truths. Well-placed lies.

“Okay. Another week won’t hurt. I like that he was honest with me,” I whisper, and slowly turn back toward my bedroom. “Oh. Ronnie?”

“What is it, honey?” His voice is tired, and the youthful face finally seems its full sixty-something years.

“Does Mom know how ‘political’ these dates are?” I ask, not sure which answer I want. If my mother knows about his mafia connections... I’m going to be so angry at her for putting us in the line of fire, line of crime, or retaliation, or line of whatever happens when your husband is in the mob. If she doesn’t, I’m going to be relieved and worried at the same time. How can she be so naive? She knows Ronnie better than I do. How could a wife not know her husband’s secrets? What does that say about either of them?

My head is going to explode.

“Joanne doesn’t know, no. I’ve always tried to keep my work from interfering in her

life, but... But your mother isn't as focused on clothes and shoes as you think. I get the inkling that she wants to ask questions sometimes, but she doesn't."

Why, Mom? Why?

Ronnie answers. "Who could blame her? Your father, no offense, honey, was such a loser, always involved in some scam, always in trouble with bad people. After what her first husband put her through, why would she want to burst her bubble and pry into my affairs as long as I kept you both happy and in the lap of luxury? God knows I don't want that bubble to burst, either. If I could 'retire' and spend my life as a beach bum with Joanne, I'd be happy, Angie."

My smile matches his, weary and uncertain. Is he lying to me? He's not telling me any direct lies; he's just not telling me the truth, and if his work could put us in danger, he has a good reason.

Except this whole thing is terrible.

He continues. "She thinks Mrs. Genovese is just a visionary matchmaker and that Vincenzo is ready to marry. That's it. What exactly did Vinny say about his family business?"

"Just that you're both looking to expand." If he can lie, I can lie right back.

"Good. Good, because I don't want you mixed up in my work. It can be pretty cutthroat sometimes, Ang." There's a hard note in his voice, and he looks at me with sad, tired eyes. "The Genovese family... Well, let's say it's better to be on their side than not. They'll keep you safe. Keep your mother safe."

Safe from what? I want to ask, but I don't.

Just like your mother, huh, Angela?

No. Not like Mom. She stays and waits with her questions, letting her pampered life continue while she wonders.

Well, I know. And I'm going to get away. Get out. I know too much, and Mom's ignorance is a happy shield right now.

"I guess I should hit the hay if I'm going to take your mother to have Breakfast at Tiffany's. Did you know that's a thing? All these years, I thought it was a movie title, but no, the second she found out about this business trip, she started going on about visiting Tiffany's. Gonna buy her something pretty from there—let her pick it out herself. She's always dreamed of going to Tiffany's, you know."

"I know." And dad could never take her, and a divorced single mother working full-time and part-time on top of it could never afford that. Could barely afford to dream.

I go over to Ronnie and kiss him on the forehead as he puts his glass on the coffee table. "You go and spoil that woman, Ronnie. I'm glad you make her so happy, Pops."

"Vincenzo's gonna make you just as happy, sweetie."

"I'm sure he'd try." I give him a hug.

One last hug.

"J O, LET HER SLEEP. Come on. My gold card is burning a hole in my pants, babe. You know what we're going to do after breakfast? Gonna get you something for

every part of you. That pretty neck. Those sweet little wrists. Your earlobes—which will make ‘em hard to nibble, but I’m a man who sacrifices for his wife.”

“Ronnie, you’re wonderful—and so bad. Okay, okay, we’ll let her sleep. Probably would have to bump off someone to get a third seat, anyway. But we’re going to buy her a present.”

“Anything you want to buy her, honey. Just not a ring. I think that’ll be Vin’s job.”

In the midst of squealing, giggling, and some long pauses that are probably filled with R-rated whispers and kisses, my parents leave the hotel suite.

I’m next.

I’ve been awake almost all night, planning on the best way to do this, to make it look like something happened to me unexpectedly, not like I planned this.

My note is written on a torn piece of notebook paper.

Hi Mom and Ronnie,

Going to tour two campuses, one in the morning, one at two. Don’t let me interfere with your plans for dinner. I’ll text you, but my signal’s been spotty on the subway.

Love,

Angela

What would I take to go to two college campuses and be out all day in the city? My purse, my designer backpack, and maybe my laptop in its hard-shell case.

That's good, because that's enough to carry a couple changes of clothes, my wallet, my birth control pills, and allergy meds, which are always in my purse when I travel anyway, and some toiletries, but not enough to make it obvious I'm leaving.

They're going to panic. They're going to think you got killed. Kidnapped.

But if I tell them the truth, am I going to be hunted down and forced into marriage? If they knew where I was, would my parents be getting threats to talk and reveal my location?

No, no. It's better to get away, then find a way to contact them.

"Okay, keys, phone, wallet..." I take the SIM card out of my older model phone, one that I refused to upgrade. I'm happy now, because later, I'll just pop that baby into my new phone—once I get one. I'll be passing a hundred corner shops and sketchy stands where I can buy a cheap pay-as-you-go phone. My phone is going to get "dropped" on a southbound subway train. My credit cards will stop pinging. My debit card...

Sigh. I'm glad Ronnie insisted on giving me an "allowance," even though I never touched it. Every time I left the house for the past three years, he's handed me anything from a few twenties to a wad of cash and said, "Have a good time, here's money for gas." He gave me California spoiled brat money, and since my idea of a splurge was a convenience store soda, a new novel from the bookstore, and a full tank of gas, I still have most of it.

How can such a kind man be involved in something so brutal as the mob? They move drugs and guns. They might even move people. I shudder.

No, I'm running. I grew up poor, I can go back to it. They can try to catch me, but I'm going to keep moving until they do.

I survey what's left in my hotel room. Most of my clothes. Most everything. It looks like I'm coming back, and that's the goal.

I remember when my mom grabbed me out of my bed in the middle of the night because my father had some "friends" over who wanted their money back. She scooped me up and put me in the car with a blanket and my sneakers.

"You can cry when we get to a safe place," she whispered, driving away from my dad and the raised voices and thrown punches.

"I'll cry when I get to a safe place," I repeat her words and grab only what I need.

M Y PHONE GOES ON A southbound subway while my debit card hits ATMs at six different locations, one in each direction. I'm not chasing my tail, I'm leaving a trail in case they decide to follow it.

Would they call the police?

No. I'm counting on the fact that mafia capos (a word I looked up at the New York Public Library this morning) do not want the police to get involved in their business. Once they start digging, there wouldn't be a way to stop them.

At four in the afternoon, I finally board a northbound regional rail train. I don't know where I'm going. Somewhere cheap. I paid for my ticket in cash, and I can get off wherever I want.

My new phone is the kind they market to seniors, with big numbers and a tiny screen that doesn't connect to the internet. It's not going to be any help in researching where I'm going.

They'll expect you to go somewhere you're familiar with. California. Back to New Jersey.

Far away.

They'll never expect you to stay in New York.

I take a seat up front, near a surly-looking man in a regional rail uniform, who glares at me and dares me to speak.

I dare. "You're familiar with all the stops on this line, right?"

"Fourteen years on this line. What's wrong?" he demands.

"If you wanted to recommend a cheap town with safe neighborhoods, where would you recommend?"

"Cheap and trashy would be easier."

"Affordable, then. Looking at the ratio of average income to average housing cost," I say, thinking about internet searches I want to make—and can't right now.

"Affordable and nice. Well..." he scratches his head, the surly look fading (probably because I asked him a question that plays to his expertise and didn't spout off complaints about things he can't do anything about). "Well, Binghamton or Ogdensburg, I'd say. There are some little towns up in the mountains, too. Most of them don't have stops on this line, but if you get off at Binghamton, you could get Susquehanna and Western Rail up to Pine Ridge, or even cross over into Pennsylvania and hit Antonia. Nice little college towns, both of them."

College towns.

My directionless heart leaps, then falls. I can't enroll in a college. Not yet. I have cash, but not enough to pay for graduate courses.

Someday. This is temporary. I'm not running and hiding forever, just until I'm no longer someone's gift with purchase.

God, I hope I'm doing the right thing. The smart thing...

"Which one did you say was in Pennsylvania?" I ask.

"Antonia. Real small place. Surprised it has a train station, to be honest. Pretty sure they only put it in for leaf peepers and the college crowd. Ha. More like a college trickle."

That might be too small of a place. Won't I stand out?

"Can you tell me what time the train for Pine Ridge leaves Binghamton?"

He doesn't even have to look it up. "Eight tonight. You have time to spare." He gives me a stern look as he stops speaking. "Not a place known for its nightlife, though."

"Oh. Darn." Good. I don't need to get mixed up with any sleazy guys or bad boys. And really, if he says there's no nightlife in a college town, he probably just doesn't know where to look. I'm sure there will be coffee houses and a few bars. I'll find a hotel for the night and figure out what to do in the morning.

"W HAT THE HELL KIND of college town is this? Mayberry," I grumble, happy I packed light, mentally already shopping. My feet hurt. There are no cabs to hail, I don't have cell service up in the mountains with this stupid phone, and it's very...

rural. After walking all over New York, my cute but not very supportive sneakers feel like flat pieces of cardboard on my sore feet as I hike from the train station (a concrete platform with two benches) towards town.

Things rustle in the woods and swoop in the air. Big things. Like giant bats.

You're going to get murdered by banjo-playing mountain men. Is that a thing? Or do I mean a bloodthirsty lumberjack?

No. If there were lumberjacks, there wouldn't be so many damn trees in the way and I could see further ahead! I should have come in the daylight.

I sigh and stop tormenting myself. Well. I guess I have a choice of being murdered in the woods in podunk Pine Ridge or being murdered in some mafia shootout in my plushy mansion.

My feet stab me, and I'm leaning towards the plushy mansion.

Sure. Yeah. Where you get to watch your husband groping Carlotta and packing his bags for a weekend with Gabrielle? Where you wonder if there's ammo in the pantry or poison in the soup?

The two-lane road that I've been walking on connects to a street, and I see signs of life up ahead! Cute little brick storefronts. A soft spring breeze, much cooler than California, much cooler than the city, for that matter, brushes my cheek.

My trudging feet become light and springy again as cars pass me, and I spot knots of people moving along the neat gray sidewalks ahead.

Clean and cozy. People are laughing and talking as they stroll, their body language relaxed and open.

This is clearly not a big crime area, or people would walk fast, with a purpose, their heads down, hands clasped on their bags.

Great, it's cute. What's that get you? Wide-eyed, I scan everything in sight, trying not to think about how my mother is panicking, what Ronnie is probably confessing to her right now.

Is he accusing the Genovese family of kidnapping me or worse?

Is my mother sobbing in some police station?

My eyes fill with tears, and I wipe them away with an impatient snap of my wrist.

"Ow!" My shout has a twin. Not only did I just walk into the large green sign that proclaims, "Pine Ridge: A Town With a Heart as Big as the Great Outdoors, but my angry arm flail connected with a pregnant blonde in paw print scrubs and scuffed black Doc Martens covered in silver studs.

"I'm so sorry!" we both cry out, turning to face each other.

"Pregnancy brain! I'm going to milk this excuse as long as I can," she giggles, rubbing her shoulder.

"My fault, I... I don't have a pregnancy to use as cover, I'm just new here." I manage a smile and weak laugh, internally berating myself for admitting I'm new.

"Ooh, summer courses start in a couple of weeks, don't they?" Pregnant with Paw Prints smiles. "I'm in the veterinary medicine program myself."

"I'm...not. No. I'm not a college student. At the moment. I have a degree and I'm looking for work. For a fresh start." What the hell? She opened up, and I kind of

decked her. I guess I can be a little open, too. At least I didn't say, "I'm looking for a fresh start so I don't end up as some mafia moll in an arranged marriage."

"Pine Ridge should seriously change its name," Blondie sighs. "It should be called Second Chanceville or something like that. You'd be surprised how many people come here for a "fresh start." There's a lot of energy around this place. How you use it, positively or negatively, depends on the person."

"Oh. Cool." Great. Next, she'll tell me to mosey on down and get my palm read. Maybe tell me my aura needs a cleansing.

"Where are you staying in town? Country Pines?"

"I'm not sure. Is Country Pines a good hotel?"

"It's the only hotel—unless you want to rent a room at the White Pines estate. They usually only do that if you're here for a work conference or something."

"Which one's closer? Or cheaper?"

"Is money an issue? Because—"

"No, I'm just trying not to spend my savings before I have money to replace them," I wave off her concerned face with a laugh, but my insides suddenly hurt with a new layer of pain. Such genuine care and concern from a stranger makes me miss the relationship I used to have with my mom, when it was just her and me, alone against the world. Before she became the capo's queen and stuck me in the role of confused-as-fuck princess.

"When you say fresh start, you mean like living here?"

I nod as we start walking toward the noisiest spot on the block. I don't know if I'm just stopping for the night or for the foreseeable future, and it's probably smart to keep my plans close to my chest. A harmless fib or two is in everyone's best interest. "I'm staying if the rent isn't too steep and work is available."

"Work is usually available."

Her sentence hangs, like there might be an explanation as to why work is so easy to come by, but she doesn't add any other information.

"I'm Libby Angelakis. My husband works at the Night Market. He makes the coolest things out of metal. See?" She lifts a pendant from her neck and shows me an intricately forged anchor on a silver chain. "He made this for me before we got engaged. Because he's my anchor—and this place is my safe place."

Apparently the "energy" around here equals oversharing.

Apparently it's catching, too. "A safe place sounds amazing. I'm not on the run because of anything I've done! Just... I need to get away from someone who wants me to do something," I conclude with a hopeless shrug. "Running away doesn't solve any problems, does it?"

"You'd be surprised. Sometimes you have to run in order to fight. It's called a strategic retreat." Libby slips a protective arm through mine. "Country Pines is a few miles out of town, but I'll drop you off there if you want to stay in a hotel for the night."

"Oh, I can walk—" The words hang.

"Sure, but I wouldn't recommend walking in the dark. It's hard to see, and if you don't know the area... Yeah, why don't you let me drive you? Or we'll find you a

ride.”

I hesitate. Sure, she has a point. I don’t know the area, and it’s dark, even with a bright moon in the sky. Women walking alone at night on the highway... Hello, horror movie.

Don’t trust overly friendly strangers.

Don’t walk alone in the dark. Don’t go to isolated little towns in the mountains, idiot.

“Um. Why don’t we go to the Night Market first?” Libby asks. “I have to drop off my husband’s dinner and pick up our cats. You can meet some of the folks around here, get a feel for the place, see if anyone is hiring. What kind of work are you looking for?”

“Wish I knew,” I mutter, wriggle my blistering toes, and let myself be led toward the bustling center of the avenue. Up ahead, half hidden by the shops in front of it, is a large lot covered in stalls and vendors and lit by strands of fairy lights. Behind the lot is a solid mass of pines, a black-green strand standing between civilization and the rising hills that lead toward small, rocky peaks in the distance.

“I see why it is called Pine Ridge.”

“I’m taking this history course at the library with Milo—that’s my husband—and we learned that pine trees are symbols for birth, renewal, life, longevity, and even immortality.”

“That’s cool.” It is, and my miserable insides perk up a little. “I love facts like that. Too bad you can’t major in obscure trivia or plant parenting.”

Libby chuckles. “No, but you could get a job at Onyx Farms or Kane Landscaping

and Garden Center.”

Is that what I want? A life on the run, in hiding, working around lawn mowers and potted plants?

“Maybe.”

THE NIGHT MARKET REMINDS me of the St. Anthony’s Christmas Bazaar. My mom, grandmother, and I would go every year, at least twice, because it ran for the whole first week of December. The same good vibes—everyone knowing everyone else. Libby’s husband is a huge dude in the biggest Metallica hoodie I’ve ever seen. His stall is flanked by two gray cats who sit among daggers and necklaces like living bookends. All the men in Pine Ridge are tall—at least the ones who Libby hails with a friendly smile. Before I know it, I’m holding a 20% off coupon from Chloe’s Curiosities (a secondhand stall), a fudge sample that rivals the copper kettle fudge sold in Cape May, a cup of lemonade, and a bag of buttery, salty popcorn.

“Why are people so nice here?” I finally crack and ask the crowd that’s now tagging along with Libby, Milo, and me—two hulking men who hang back and talk trash about each other’s canasta skills, and their wives, Claire and Melinda.

“You have to rely on each other around here. The town sees some harsh weather,” Genesis says.

“College kids come and go, you get close with your neighbors,” Georgie, the third tall drink of water, shrugs, his deep voice gruff.

“There aren’t any big department stores in the town itself, just on the highways leading out of it,” Milo adds. “So everyone has to shop in the same little places, get to

know the same servers and staff...”

“Because nice people live here,” Melinda says firmly, tossing her long red waves. “Honey, we have a date night to get back to,” she hooks Genesis by the elbow, and even though he’s so tall I have to crane my neck to look at his dark, craggy features, he practically simpers and follows like he’s on a leash. “Welcome to Pine Ridge, Angela! You’ll love it here.”

I hope she’s right.

LIBBY DROPS ME OFF at the motel and shows me how the place works. Vacant rooms accept cards in slots, and you get your room at the touch of a button. In my case, the room’s pin pad has a cash slot, and I insert three twenties and get a ten-dollar bill spit back at me.

“That’s new,” she mutters. “I thought they just accepted cards. Oh, well. The Country Pines Motel has a local legend around it.”

“Not haunted?” I ask, suddenly aware that there are no other cars in the lot but hers. Oh, yep. If this were a horror movie, the ax murderer would be emerging from the woods right about now...

“No, no. But whoever spends a night here gets just what they need.”

“A million bucks and a plane ticket under my pillow?” I joke. I realize I could have had both things, probably, if I’d gone along with the idea of being someone’s princess plaything. “How’d the legend get started?”

Libby shrugs. “Something about the owners being kind people, I think.”

I push open the door, half-wincing. For fifty bucks a night, I'm expecting something squalid. Hell, I'm still half expecting to turn around and see Libby's giant of a husband with a chainsaw and a ski mask.

But the room is beautiful—softly lit with beige and pink accents, and complimentary slippers that look like cotton clouds are just inside the door. With a little cry, I peel my sneakers off but pause when I get to my socks, realizing I still have an audience.

“I'll leave you to it. In the morning, you can get a ride to town with your rideshare app.”

I waggle my “dumb” phone at her. “No apps.”

“Oh, man. A classic,” Libby giggles, and then rummages in her purse. She pulls out a veterinarian office's business card and writes a number on the back. “That's my cell. Let me know if you need a ride tomorrow.”

“Libby, thank you, but I—”

“It's not a big deal,” she waves me off. “I moved here a couple of years ago, and people took me right under their wings. The least I can do is return the favor. Have a good night. I hope you find what you're looking for.”

Libby drives off, and I hear my mom's voice in my head. You can cry when you get somewhere safe.

This seems safe. And there are slippers waiting. And a big comfy bed...

Exhausted sobs slip out of me, but they're mixed with relief.

Safe for now.

AFTER A LONG, HOT BATH in the way too big for one person tub and raiding the basket of snacks the motel left out (I don't see a sign saying how much I'm going to be charged, so I assume they're free), I open my laptop and connect it to the internet using the guest password posted above the nightstand.

My head feels clearer, even though my eyes and feet are puffier. I'll get in touch with Mom via email and tell her not to find me. Tell her to keep it a secret. Can I do that? Can they trace my location through an email? I mean, you can send an email from anywhere with internet, right?

I chew my lip and open my email, breath catching when an email from my mother is sitting right at the top, simply labeled "Hi Honey."

My insides freeze. I was stupid to leave her behind, wasn't I? What if they're forcing her to send this email? What if...

I open it and read it a few times, confused, and then hopeful.

Sweetie, Ronnie told me everything. You were right to leave. Joey Genovese is furious and thinks this is some kind of power play. I can't say much here, but big shake-ups are coming, and I might not be able to get in touch for a while.

I'm going to tell you three things, and I want you to promise to do them.

If you're safe, write me back and say Okay, Mom . Tell me the name of grandma's cat in the subject line of the email so I know you're really safe. Based on how furious Joey is, I know he doesn't have you. I think you ran off. Now that I know what I know, I'm glad you did.

After that email, give me a month before you try to get in touch. I will reach out first, but it may not be from this email. That's all I can say.

Take precautions. Stay in safe places with witnesses around you. Genovese has bad, bad men in his operation and he's not all there up top. Don't underestimate him. That can make him more dangerous. He's looking for you. Tell the local police you need protection.

I'm so sorry all this happened, Angie. I should have seen the signs, but I turned a blind eye because I was in love and I was happy. For the first time, I didn't have to worry about money or giving you the lifestyle you deserved, my sweet little princess. I could finally offer you a happy fairytale life after we were stuck in the cinders for so long. Ronnie's sorry, too. No matter what he's done, I believe he has a good heart, and he's on our side with this.

We'll be together soon. I promise.

Love, Mom

With blurry eyes and shaking fingers, I type in Murgatroyd, the name of my grandmother's stubborn old tabby, and write my note back.

Okay, Mom. I love you. Stay safe, too.

Flopping back on the bed, I close my laptop and slide it to the side.

Bad men are looking for me?

Well, yeah, I thought that might happen.

Tell the local police. Stay where there are witnesses...

At least a real princess has knights and a tall tower to protect her from the bad guys. I have a pregnant vet student and her overgrown husband, who makes weapons to sell at a flea market.

Hm. Maybe that's not a bad place to start.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:57 am

“W hen are you coming back?”

I blink at the warm, creamy yellow light that slides into the guestroom where I’m sprawled. I roll over and my wing flails drunkenly, falling over my face. I realize I didn’t even make it under the covers; I’ve just been lying on top of them all night—or a couple of hours.

What time is it, and whose annoying voice is grating in my ear?

“Hello?”

“Graham! When are you coming back to town?”

My brain is addled from last night’s excesses at Jax Alley, but the shady roadhouse has nothing on the bars in the CrossRealms. I played too much pool and drank too many whiskeys. There were no fights. No vampires trying to lure humans away. No succubi plying their trade in the parking lot.

I’m in halfling form, and I don’t know why. It’s unsettling, and it’s taking me forever to understand what the voice in my ear is asking or who it is. “Who is this?”

“This is Lawder.”

“Mr. Lawder, hi.” Mr. Lawder is my boss’ right hand man, a human who doesn’t know a damn thing about magic, even though it surrounds him.

“The new guy sucks. He got beat up on his first job, and the client legged it.”

“I’ll be back sometime in June. Sorry the new guy sucks. I don’t have any pointers for him.” Because he’s a human. I’m a dragon. Even in human form, I’m stronger. When things get bad, talons pop out, and switching forms is always an option.

I look at my arms, at the dark purple scales that are slowly returning to human skin. I never fall asleep in halfling form.

Because you’re not safe in the CrossRealms, ass. You hide who you are so that worse powers don’t find you.

“Well, the boss is pissed that you went without any warning, and he wants you to do him a favor, or he says you can’t come back on the payroll.”

I sit up with rage bursting in my chest. It's not wise to mess about with a hungover dragon at the best of times, but for some two-bit local crime lord incubus to threaten to take away my job when I've worked for him without complaint for months? No. Scales ripple as they burst through human skin and replace soft, smooth beige with a coating that runs from aubergine to lilac. My wings are no longer lazy sails but stand up proud and armored, living battle shields. I don't need to be threatened. I can't very well tell this puny human that an incubus has nothing on a dragon in terms of brute force, but it's true.

Tell him to stick his threats where the sun don’t shine, that’s my first instinct.

And do what? Stay here and play the doting uncle?

Go home and admit you need help? Beg the clan elders to arrange a match for you?

I sigh. “What does he want me to do?” I ask.

“Nothing big. The boss has a friend, Joey Genovese, who is trying to get a little piece

of the California market from the Argento family. You know them?”

“Nope.”

“Mafia, small time. Genovese’s son is supposed to marry the Argento girl, but she ran off, and it’s making Genovese look bad. In my opinion, it makes Argento look worse. What kind of man can’t control his daughter?”

My tail lashes. Dragon women would shred his hide for that remark. They’re never controlled. They act out of loyalty. Win a dragoness’ heart, and she’ll burn the world for you.

My cocks ache, both of them that I have in this form, both seeking the warm embrace of flesh on flesh, or the rough drag of scale on scale. Give me a woman who’s soft for me, but shows her tough skin and her claws to everyone else...

“What am I supposed to do about it?”

“Well, you know the boss has some friends in low places. The girl left Manhattan yesterday afternoon, and old Argento says she’s run away. What’s more, he’s not helping hunt for her. All his soldiers are suits and fronts, pudgy old men with cigars and deli bellies, smoking in the back rooms and cooking the books.”

I snort at the image he conjures up. I don’t like Lawder, but he has a way with words. “So Genovese asked our boss to help him find the girl?”

“Like I said, friends in low places. Best we can tell, this pretty young thing got cold feet and took a train into Binghamton last night. I made a couple calls, and nothing but regional rail departures went out last night or this morning. She has to be in the tri-state area, and you... Well, I think you’re useless. A repo man, just muscle. But the boss said you’re supposed to look for her using your special gifts. He said if she

disappeared near your old stomping grounds, you'd find her. So get on it, or you're on his shit list and off the payroll. Got it?"

"I got it." I hang up, puzzled.

I know that my boss didn't hire a private detective to track the girl. He's using magic, calling in favors from beings that associate with him, probably none of them on the side of good. Binghamton is the local travel hub. Pine Ridge is too small to have an airport, but we have a train station, and we're right on the regional rail line. If this little mafia princess escaped, and suddenly an incubus' evil friends can't "see" her? There's really only one possibility.

That's why he had Lawder call me. He knows she stepped into magical "protected" airspace.

Pine Ridge.

Pine Ridge, home of one of the smallest but most powerful covens on the eastern seaboard. Pine Ridge, where the monsters have united to form a Night Watch and go around playing happy suburbanites by day and warding, charming, and hexing the balls off of anything evil that sets foot over the city limits by night.

Shit, she's here .

I'll find her, talk to her, calm her down, and get her back into the arms of her mafia prince. I'll keep my job and ask for—no, demand—a big fat bonus, too.

I wrap my fist over my amulet, slipping easily into human form. "I call upon the clan's powers," I mutter. My father would have been ashamed. The powers of the amulet are for protection, and calling on them for selfish needs would earn such a scolding, an entire sermon.

But I already do things a member of an honorable clan shouldn't do.

Guilt nibbles, and I push it away. "I call upon the clan's powers. Virtute Mac Catháin. Strength of the descendants of Kane, the warriors. Grant me luck instead of strength today. Help me find the girl."

A voice in the back of my head scoffs. Like you believe in that. You've asked that amulet to help you find a bride, a mate, for over a year.

Not to find love. Just a mate, a different, bitter-sounding voice points out.

Well, I'm in Pine Ridge now. I'll have better luck with all the Ley Lines singing underneath me, I think, hurling myself out of bed. I have to go to work, to the landscaping business I once planned on running with Ian. Put in an appearance and then go to the coffee shop. If anyone new has come to town, someone at The Pine Loft will know.

"I T'S BEEN A LONG TIME since you've been home," Georgia, the bubbly blonde who runs the coffee shop with her brother, greets me with a smile and a wave. I notice that one hand now sports a glittering wedding band set.

This place ought to be named Noah's Ridge—everyone pairs up, two-by-two.

"This isn't home for me. Just filling in for Ian and Vanessa. One large, black."

"Anything with that?"

"Are those scones in the case?" Ian's money burns a hole in my pocket.

“With clotted cream and lemon curd, \$5.50.”

“Damn it. I can’t resist that. It’s bloody difficult to get a good scone where I’ve been staying. Not that I crave them or anything.”

I don’t. I pull the coat of my collar up tighter and feel my amulet sting against my skin. You could tell Georgia you miss scones. You could say that you remember having them with your mother, that she’d always make them on your birthday, and that you’d kill for a good Victoria sandwich with nice, light golden sponge and far too much whipped cream.

You don’t have to be tough here.

Well, rather... You don’t have to prove it. Here, people seem to rest in their softness a bit.

Which is rubbish. Not for me. What’s the point of being a monster if you can’t show it off?

“Just the one?” Georgia asks, setting a plate in front of me, a perfectly golden, shiny-topped scone with two little tubs beside it, one with sunny yellow curd and one with a dollop of cream.

“Yes, just the one.” Don’t get soft. Don’t get spoiled. “Seems to be a fair number of newcomers who can... see the sights,” I whisper, looking around the coffee shop. There’s a rusalka wrapped around some buff guy in workout clothes. Bryce Frobisher, the yeti who plays hockey for the local minor league hockey team, has a human girl in his lap and a tourist’s guide to Brazil in one massive, furry hand. And then there’s the thick, sexy piece of confection—a round little brunette with a bottom that I’d like to bite into—kissing the Orc chef on the cheek as he brings out a fresh tray of doughnuts.

“You’re not kidding. I mean, a few people a year. I suppose it’s surprising if you look at the world as a whole, but not at Pine Ridge. People who spend more time with the paranormal have more chance of getting up close and personal with it.”

The rusalka behind me lets out a breathy little moan that sends chills of desire up my spine. It’s been way too long...

“Some more close and personal than the others. Forgive Marina. She’s permanently set on high heat,” Georgia chuckles.

“Any newcomers who’ve arrived in the past day? I’m supposed to meet a friend of a friend—pretty, brown hair, expensive clothes?” I hold out my cell phone and show Georgia the picture that Lawder sent.

“Ooh, a special friend of a friend?” Georgia hints.

“Not even a little. Have you seen her? I know that this place has more news than cable.”

“I don’t recognize her, but—Claire, come here, sweetie.”

I groan inside as the delicious brunette who kissed the Orc comes up to me—and she’s even more beautiful in person.

“This is my sister-in-law, Claire. Claire, this is Graham Kane, Ian’s younger brother. He used to live in Pine Ridge and help run the landscaping business.”

I swallow and nod, trying not to drool, viciously reminding myself that I don’t want a human woman—and I surely don’t want this one. She belongs to Georgie Fenclan, a grumpy green beast of a man who would gladly skin me and serve dragon souffle if I made eyes at his gorgeous, plump little wife.

She'd be a perfect mouthful...

Claire saves me from death by irate Orc by catching sight of the screen I hold towards her. "Oh, Angie! We met her last night."

"Angie Argento is a friend of a friend. I heard she was coming to town and might need help."

"She didn't say what was going on, but yeah, I get the feeling she was in a tight spot." Claire nods. "Libby and Milo took her under their wings. I told her she'd come to the right town for a fresh start. I did, and look how it turned out." She beams and leans against Georgia.

"That's marvelous. Any idea where she's staying or how I can get in touch?"

"There's only one motel in town, Graham. Country Pines."

"But humans..." I trail off, aware of a line forming behind me.

"Libby took her there. Libby's husband is Milo," Georgia says, and to an outsider, it wouldn't make sense, but to me, it does.

Libby's husband is a minotaur. She can see him, so she must be able to see the magically shielded Country Pines.

"I'll see if I can catch her there. Thanks, ladies." I bow and take my plate and mug to a window table. I'd love to savor this scone, but who knows how long my prey will wait in the trap?

And what am I supposed to do if she doesn't want to go back to her boyfriend? I have a business to babysit.

Call Lawder. Have someone else handle “convincing” her. All I have to do is locate her.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:57 am

My laptop buzzes and dies, the bottom of it red hot. It's done this before, but not in a long time. Back home, I have an expensive cooling pad with fans that keep the processor humming along under the onslaught of fifty open tabs.

"My applications," I hiss, carrying my faithful old friend to the table by the front door so it can cool down. Since I woke up a couple of hours ago, I've done everything I can to take my mind off my situation. Compartmentalizing, they call it.

Unhealthy, the guidance counselor at my middle school called it.

Anyway, whatever they call it, I was doing it, sitting in the marshmallowy soft bed and using the perfect pillow as a lap desk as I filled out applications to work at the campus cafeteria, the elementary school after school program and summer camps, as a checker at the grocery store, and as a sales associate at Kane Garden Center.

But if I get hired, I have to use my real name, fill out tax forms... Can the Genovese family find me that way? Do they have an "inside man" on the police force? If they do, why did Mom tell me to go to the local police? How would she know who I can trust when she was married to a mobster for years without catching on?

I groan and start getting ready to leave. I figure if this place is like most hotels, I have to leave by eleven.

And then I'll walk to town. Two miles or whatever.

I need a car. I have a car. I have a car and a mini-mansion in Bayside, and a closet full of designer clothes...

I take a deep breath as a wave of pettiness washes over me. I don't like all those things as much as I like freedom, honesty, and not being involved in a family that runs drugs or smuggles weapons, right? I like having a choice in who I love and when I get involved with someone. I don't need a car. Millions of people live without a car.

Out of the half-sobbing breaths comes a calm smile. A smirk. I had my name legally changed to Argento a few years ago, but I still have my old college ID. Still have my old driver's license, and it's not expired. I'll apply for jobs with my old identification cards. Find the post office and get a P.O. box. Get my computer to work again and go back to looking up apartments for rent.

I'm a survivor. A tough Jersey girl who knows how to be a princess or a pauper. I can do this. I can—

Wham! Wham, wham, wham. Someone pounds on the door of my hotel room and reminds me I have other skills, too.

I can almost pee my pants and drop to my knees in a fraction of a second. "Shit, what do I do, what do I do?" I mouth to myself, crouching down low.

It could be a bad guy.

It could be the hotel manager.

Maybe I was supposed to check in someplace and not just use the funny little keypad by the door.

Mobster or maid service?

Maybe if I just stay quiet, they'll go away.

“Angela, even if you don’t open up, I’m still going to come in.” The voice is masculine and has a faint lilt to it. It sounds vaguely impatient, even a little exasperated.

I think mobsters would just sound mean.

What do you know? You never saw Ronnie raise his voice in three years!

“I’m a friend of Milo’s! And a friend of a friend of your dad!” the voice shouts.

With shaking knees, I slowly get up and grab the pretty brass fruit bowl off the table, dumping it out and sending apples and pears rolling across the carpet. “Why are you here?” I ask through the door.

“I’m here to help!”

Well, that’s fucking vague.

I keep the door’s security chain on and pull the door open just a smidgen.

The man outside the door makes Vincenzo Genovese look like a prepubescent teenager.

I don’t mean he’s handsome and polished. He’s handsome and dangerous, and if there were vampires in the real world, he would be one of them, with his long black hair and his stubbled jaw, and the intense eyes with dark shadows around them. When he smiles, his look softens, but I swear there are tiny fangs.

The mob has vampires?

Angela, get a grip, it’s a sunny day in May! Vampires wouldn’t be out—even in a

calf-length black leather jacket that screams Bad Boy.

“Angela? Would you come outside so we can talk?” he asks softly. “I’m Graham, and I’m not going to hurt you.”

“Why are you here?” I blurt. I’ll have manners later.

“I got a call from a friend of a friend that you were in town and your family is worried sick.”

My lips seal, and my mind races. How did they know where I was? And if Mom is worried sick, why did she send that email? She could be worried sick and want me to stay safe, but then why send this guy?

Unless... “Are you my protection?”

Graham blinks, and his hand briefly rests on the flat silver disk dangling in the center of his chest. “Am I your what?”

“My bodyguard?” I whisper. “Did my parents send you?”

“Yes.” He nods, eyebrows arching high on his elegant forehead. I’ve never seen someone look so refined and so ready to bust skulls at the same time, but this guy pulls it off.

“Come in, then,” I hiss and pull the chain back, letting the stranger inside. I don’t put down the fruit bowl, my weapon of choice. Not yet.

“Look, Angela, the situation is just a misunderstanding. Your parents—”

“I don’t know how Mom traced my reply to her email, but I’m glad she and Ronnie

sent you.” I wave him to silence and start packing. “She said to contact the local police, but who is on Genovese’s payroll, huh? I don’t know. She didn’t even know my father was in the—was mixed up in anything,” I explain over my shoulder.

“That’s right. He has friends all over the place.”

Graham pauses, but doesn’t add anything further to his sentence, so I keep going. “I’m sorry, this must put you in danger, too. What’s the plan? Do we have to leave Pine Ridge?”

“Not yet.” He cocks his head. “Your mother told you I was coming?”

“Well, no, but if you’re friends with Milo and Libby, I figured you were local. Knowing my Mom, she probably got one of Ronnie’s friends to trace the IP address or something, then contacted local security companies.”

“I worked security in Creek Valley, California. But this situation is different.”

“I’m sure it is. The main thing is that Genovese and his people can’t find me and can’t know that Mom knows where I am. If anything happens to my mother...” I trail off, putting my hand on my chest.

“I thought you and the Genovese boy were engaged?” my bodyguard asks, confusion switching from his face to his voice.

Even confused, his voice has that beautiful touch of an accent, but it’s got a soft, deep quality about it. Like far-away thunder, which has always been a sound that helped me sleep.

“Engaged? I guess. I just didn’t know about it. That’s why I ran. I don’t want to be forced to marry someone I don’t even like. I mean, he’s handsome, but he has other

lovers. I'm not the sharing type." I finish stuffing my things into my bag.

"No. I can understand that. But... But sometimes you have to preserve the family line. Or business," Graham protests.

I don't know what his game is, but I'm not playing. "Would you honestly want to spend your entire life with someone who didn't love you? Just to... I don't know, produce an heir or make two little kingdoms into one big one?"

"Duty," he mutters.

"I'm not talking about protecting my people from war, I'm talking about my stepdad dealing with a dude with a big ego and even bigger trust issues. I'm not a pawn. This is not chess. Don't you already know all this?" I snap, collecting up the apples off the floor.

Graham bends and scoops up pears and bananas. "They don't tell the grunts much." He smiles, a twisted little grin that speaks volumes.

"Well, to me, you're the hero, not a grunt." We put the last of the fruit into the brass bowl that I've finally relinquished, fingers brushing. "I'll try not to cause any trouble and make this easy for you. You're a friend of Milo and Libby's. You're local?"

"For a month."

"Oh, right—until Mom gets in touch and tells me... something." I put my head in my hands for a moment, then shudder and stretch. "I thought I should try to blend in. I have my old license, so I could look for a job under my old name. I don't know if I could even find someone who pays under the table... I normally wouldn't do that, you know, but for this one circumstance..." I trail off, not sure if I'm saying too much, too little, if I should ask to see some kind of badge, or what.

“Do you like flowers?”

“I like tomatoes better, but yeah.”

“I’ve got a truck outside. We’ll talk on the way.”

“Hey, Kane Landscaping! I was going to apply to the garden center today,” I say with a smile. That’s too much of a coincidence. There are a lot of coincidences. Too many. I have a feeling I should connect the dots better, but I don’t seem to be able to. Maybe it’s stress or fear, or just a crappy dinner of motel room snacks and popcorn, but things feel a little slippery here in Pine Ridge. “My brain isn’t working as well as it should,” I mumble. “Something about this place—or maybe the stress of running away and putting my life on hold has really messed with my mind.”

“It’s the stress.”

“Wait, why do you have one of the Kane trucks?” I ask, holding onto the door frame as Graham exits my room.

“Because I’m Graham Kane, and I’m the manager.”

“You’re the manager and my bodyguard?”

“You’d be surprised at how well I can protect.”

Without warning, he scoops me up in one arm and slams the door with the other. “Strong.” He crosses the parking lot in the time it takes me to blink. “Fast.”

I find myself sitting in his truck and blinking to clear my head as he climbs in next to me and beams. “Full of tricks. Come on, I’m taking you to my place. You can stay there or come to work with me at the garden center.”

“I’ll decide once my head stops spinning,” I groan, closing my eyes and lying back against the seat.

C OLD FEET, MY TAILS and scales! Angela Argento is no bratty little girl running away from her lover in a fit of pique. She’s not a scared bride who isn’t sure about saying yes. She’s a strong, articulate person who looks like she might break down and sob at any moment, and maybe I would do the same if I were “sold” into marriage.

I’m a lot of things, but I’m not going to force an innocent woman into domestic slavery—more like sex trafficking—under the guise of an arranged marriage. “I guess your groom-to-be took it pretty hard when you walked out on him?”

“Huh? Oh, no. We only met this week. I thought my parents were just trying to nudge me into having a social life. He didn’t want to marry me, either. He has a girlfriend. And a mistress.”

“Yikes.”

“I didn’t even know any of this was going on. I thought they were just trying to fix me up, but no. Or, well, yes. Fix me up in the permanent way.” She rubs her temples, her dark hair falling out of a messy ponytail.

She’s so cute.

For a human.

And short and curvy, the kind of woman you can sink your teeth and talons into—if she were a shifter, like me.

“It’s crazy that they thought they could just pair us up because he’s a mafia ‘prince’ and I guess I’m what they call a ‘princess.’ Or the closest thing my stepdad’s family has to one, anyway. Like, who does that?” She flings up her hands, but the double cab pickup is wide, and she doesn’t smack into me. “That’s like saying just because you put a man and woman together, they’re going to fall in love. We’re not animals. I don’t even know if animals vibe like that...”

“Yeah, I don’t know.” I squirm in my seat, her words and Ian’s lectures closing in on me like a net.

Was I doing the same thing? Waiting for my dragon “princess” to magically waltz in and set up shop as a wife and mother? For what reason? I’ve always said it was to stop our race from dying out. Sure, that’s noble.

But Vanessa and Ian proved it didn’t have to be that way. “Some people are stupid,” I mutter. Am I in that club? For years, I’ve thought my brother was the foolish one.

“You know what’s funny? I know my stepdad was mixed up in this, and it’s bad, but I still love him. I don’t think he wanted to do this. I think he was kind of forced into it. I guess... I guess those Genovese guys are bad news.”

Considering that Genovese knows someone who can contact a literal demon?
“You’re right.”

“Where are we going?”

“My brother and his wife are visiting our family in Scotland, but their house has an amazing security system. That’s where I’m staying while I’m in town. It has a whole guest suite you can use.”

“Won’t that put your brother’s family at risk?”

“No. Because they’re not going to find you,” I say firmly.

“You sound really confident. Too confident.”

“It’s the tricks up my sleeve,” I remind her. I’m tempted to flash scales for a second, but I decide not to. I’m going to be busy playing the prodigal son this afternoon and calling in favors.

“Elaborate?” Angela requests, but I’m not fooled. She’s going to jump out of the truck and run if she doesn’t like my answer.

My smirk sneaks back. I like that about her.

“Well, you met Claire, and Milo and Libby?” I offer, thinking fast.

“Yes, and Genesis and his wife—Melody? Melinda? You know, the pretty nurse with long red hair?”

I’m frozen on mute for a second. Genesis? Genesis the gargoyle? I can’t very well ask her, but how many Geneses are there in a town of this size—or even in the world? “Genesis got married? How about that?”

“You sound surprised—and like maybe you’re stalling.”

“No, no, just surprised.” I really am. Genesis is one grumpy old piece of flesh and stone, and from what I knew of him, he didn’t just want to marry a gargoyle, he found human women quite repulsive. She could be something other than human, but Angela’s description makes me think maybe he caved. Or maybe he decided love supersedes race and kind. “Love is a strange thing,” I hum, turning off on Ponderosa and heading toward the lush development of McMansions that my brother calls home.

“You were asking who I knew?” she prompts.

“Oh, right. You’ve met a handful of the locals. This is a very civic-minded town. There’s a neighborhood watch that’ll double the patrols in our area once I let them know it’s needed. The police have time to devote to helping locals, and I know for a fact that at least one of them is not in Genovese’s pocket. And uh... Uh, some folks are a wee bit superstitious. I think we’ll have the house blessed.” By the pastor and the coven. Doesn’t hurt to put up two layers of protection.

“That’s it? A civilian patrol, a friendly local cop, and a blessing?” Angela bites her lip.

Something sings my insides. It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell her not to bite that full bottom lip that creates a delectable, rounded heart, naturally pink in an oasis of buttery caramel . Let me bite it for you, little runaway wren, flying fast. The big dragon wants to catch you...

Graham, stop that. No, you don’t. You can listen to Ian and Vanessa, listen to Angela—and still hold out for what you want. Love—with one of your own kind.

We turn into Pleasant Pines and weave around expensive-looking houses with their fenced yards and swimming pools until we find Ian’s house. “That’s not entirely it.” I hop out of the truck and walk into the shadows of the three-car garage. In the dark, she can’t see me shift, calling on Halfling strength. My clawed hands slip under the silver fender and clasp the body of the truck. I tug, gritting my teeth, eyes watching Angela’s expression change from worried to stunned as I pull the truck into the garage. “There’s also me. Strong. Fast. Tricky. Satisfied?”

I shift back as Angela nods and pushes open the door, her mouth in a soft circle of shock.

“Did... Did... How did you just do that?” she asks, gesturing to the truck. “You pulled a truck. A big truck!”

“Yep.”

“Wow. You’re hired. Are my parents paying you enough?” Her voice shakes as she swallows a couple of times.

Her parents aren’t paying me anything. I’m going to lose my job in California.

She walks past me, heading for the door in the garage that leads into the house, and her scent hits me so hard that my insides ache. Her hip brushes my leg as she scoots into the darkness, and I can feel the flames that aren’t supposed to exist in my human form licking my gut.

“I’m getting paid plenty,” I croak.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:57 am

“Y ou want to be paid under the table? How about this?” Graham walks to the fridge in the huge kitchen and drains a quart of orange juice, drinking from the glass bottle.

I can’t help but notice that he downs it all in two long swallows, then licks his lips. He pushes his hair out of his face as he puts the bottle in the sink.

Mundane things seem so sexy on him.

This is not the time to get interested, Angela!

“Uh, yes. I mean, I’ll need money.”

“For room and board, and to pay the bodyguard, right?”

“Uh. Right. Are my parents—”

“Look, you come to work with me each day and work the register or work in the nursery section. I’ll keep you under my wing—I mean, keep an eye on you. I’ll pay you cash at the end of the day. Fifty.”

“Won’t you get in trouble?”

“No. And it’s not enough long-term, but it’ll be enough for this month, because you’re going to stay here and eat here. My guest.”

Or prisoner. I tense for a minute, then relax. I was going to be a prisoner anyway, wasn’t I? “Okay, for short-term, but what about later?”

“Let’s take this one day at a time, a month at a time. In a month, my brother will come back and work out your permanent pay rate, or you’ll know if you have to keep running.”

“My mom said she’d be in touch by then, too.”

“So, short-term is what we’re working with. In a month, I’ll be back in California.”

“Mm. I wish I could go with you. That’s where I’m from. Where all my stuff is.” I let out a sad little chuckle as I trace the edge of the sparkling granite countertop.

“I know the people you’re dealing with. I’d stay clear of that place for now.”

“I know.” I climb up on one of the stools that surrounds the counter and sit my too-hippy ass on the wicker seat. “You know, last week I just wanted to get into grad school. Now, I’m worried about being some mafia dude’s Stepford wife—only with cheetah print spandex and an eighties perm.” I fold my arms and flop my head into the nest I’ve made. “This doesn’t seem like reality.”

“Yeah, well... Reality is stranger than most people think.” Graham pats my back in passing, and I hear dishes rattling and the pantry opening and shutting. “Eat some cookies and milk. It helps.”

“I’m not Santa,” I snap.

“But you’re going to be on my naughty list if you don’t sit up, eat something like a good girl, and let me go make some calls.” Graham slams a carton of milk down next to my head, and I jump.

“Sorry,” I stammer. “I’m not... I’m not having a good day.”

“It could be a worse one. I’m sorry I was stropky. I wish I could fix things for you, that’s all. All right, the guest suite is up the stairs, first door along. You get settled, and then we’ll go play about in the flowers.” He gives me a wink and a slight smile.

When he walks away, he sheds his long coat, and the irresponsible urges I’m feeling don’t go away. They get worse at the sight of a tight white t-shirt and slightly slouchy jeans that still show off his ass.

I absently grab a cookie from the plate he set beside me. “Maybe I have low blood sugar,” I murmur to myself. Yeah. That’s it. The racing thoughts about how sexy Graham is and how much I love his accent, and especially the way his voice turns into a growl when he’s irritated...

Totally caused by skipping breakfast.

“A RAS.”

“There you are, you scaly fiend.” My boss laughs, and I can picture him sitting alone in his dark office in the back of the bar he owns. Knowing him, some half-drained college girl is lying across his lap or sprawled out on the futon he uses as both his bed and his snack bar. “Did Lawder explain the situation?”

“He did, but I’m not sure he understood it. The girl doesn’t want to be married.” I hold my breath. I know there are a lot of bad guys in the CrossRealms, but there are also a lot of “gray guys.” Guys like me. We lean one way or the other, but we’re not evil. I lean light, Aras leans dark. He’ll take a sip of someone’s soul if they can’t pay back what they borrowed, but to me... Well, that’s fair play, isn’t it? You knew the risk of making deals with demons (and there are some quite demonic humans, believe me). I know he sleeps with willing women. If he saps their sexual energy, I don’t

think they mind. I've heard the noises coming from his office. Women are more than happy to lend him sexual nourishment in exchange for the multiple orgasms he dishes out.

I think Aras will grudgingly admit that I'm in the right this time.

"I think she'll grow to appreciate the position of wife. She'll be spoiled like a Persian show cat."

"Perhaps, but the man made no effort to court her. He has a mistress and another lover besides. She's not having it."

Aras pauses. "That's tricky. Genovese is getting older. In a few years, his son will have to take over. The old man is starting to show a little... a little trouble with his faculties, let's say. One of the issues I've heard a friend of a friend mention is his sudden bursts of aggression. I don't need my club shot up."

"He wouldn't go that far. It's not your fault you can't find a missing girlfriend. They weren't even dating," I hiss, looking back over my shoulder.

"You seem to know a lot about it. Was I right when I told Lawder she'd entered your neck of the woods?"

I pause again. "Temporarily."

"Well, temporarily bring her to Manhattan, and Genovese's men will escort her to her new home. That's all you're doing, Graham. Delivering a package. You're not going to hurt the girl."

Damn it. "If I bring her there, she could get hurt. You said it yourself, the old man is aggressive. He wants to get his son established as the head of the family with a wife

at his side?”

“Exactly. It’s his way of handing over the reins while he can still navigate the road, so to speak. One of his last great acts, one of the final moves on the chessboard before he abdicates.” Aras’s tone is silky, full of poetic imagery.

He’s always been a good salesman. Today, I’m not buying.

“I won’t be handing her over. She’d be forced and threatened into agreeing to a marriage she doesnae want,” my accent slips out as I feel my temper rise. I’m angry at Aras, and at Genovese, and mainly at myself. Should never have gotten mixed up with these characters.

But if you didn’t—who would protect Angela? No one. She’d be wandering around on her own, and who knows who might snatch her up?

My free hand tightens into a fist. The thought of her running to someone else makes my insides droop like a sun-starved rose. The image of someone snatching her up, forcing her at gunpoint into a dark car, holding her mother hostage to force Angela to say “I do...” Rage burns so hot that my vision blurs, and the world is red and black for a second.

“Oh, yes, Graham, how horrible. Forced to live on the Upper West Side in a charming home with a handsome husband who can shower her with jewels, cars, and clothes. She’ll get over it. These little mafia princesses are all the same—meek little mice until they’re wived up, and then they’re breeding stock, getting fat assess and fatter hair. Trust Aras. She’ll adjust. In a few years, she’ll have a little boy to dote over and a little girl to dress up. She’ll forget she ever wanted to say no.”

His voice is thick with thrall, the lulling, soothing tone that’s a thousand times more dangerous than him yelling. For a moment, I sway where I stand, picturing Angela

with teased hair and a tight dress, a miniature version of herself at her side, a cherub of a little girl with dark ringlets and pink cheeks.

Another little princess, waiting to be married off to a man she doesn't love, just to preserve their kind—mafia kings.

“You know,” I breathe out shakily, smoke curling from my nostrils as I feel my horns starting to bud through my scalp, “there are old fairy tales about dragons capturing princesses. Eating them up.”

“Hey, what you do with her is your business, as long as you hand her over in a condition to say ‘I do,’” Aras laughs, a sinister, self-satisfied note in every syllable.

“This dragon isn't like that.”

The laughter dies at once, and cold steel replaces it. “Oh, lie to yourself some more, Kane. What do you think you are? Some noble Highland knight? Real brave, very valiant, helping me take scared little humans for every penny they're worth, and their souls on top of it when they can't meet the terms they agreed to.”

His words sting and slice, all too true.

“You couldn't protect a fly from a spider—especially since this spider knows where you like to hide.”

“I'm not hiding. I'm protected . And so is she. Tell Genovese to find another playmate for his son,” I spit, and hang up.

I slam my fist into the wall, easing up on my thrust at the last second so I don't crack the plaster.

“That was probably a stupid call to make, laddie.”

“Y OU WERE WISE TO CALL me, Mr. Kane.”

Mr. Minegold’s voice is always warm and yet has this regal note to it. Someone told me he was a teacher once. Maybe he’s used to commanding attention. “I’m afraid someone’s going to try to come into town and hunt her down.”

“We cannot stop most humans from entering, but once they’re in, we can find them and bespell them to leave and never come back. A few years ago, there was a nasty spot of trouble with a violent ex-boyfriend. Alan Wymark cursed him so that he could never set foot in the town again unless he had kind and peaceful intentions. He’s never been back.”

“Can someone come over and bless the house? Ward it up? Put some sort of spell on her?”

“The first two, yes. The third? A protective amulet or charm would be better. Bring her to Madge’s tonight and let her choose something.”

“She doesn’t know about all the paranormal mumbo jumbo.”

“Then say it’s a welcoming present, or buy one for yourself and say there was a buy-one-get-one-free sale. Use your head, young Mr. Kane.”

I snort. Young Mr. Kane. “I’m twenty-seven.”

“And your brother is only thirty, but he acts much older, doesn’t he?” Minegold continues, unperturbed. “You don’t happen to have a lock of hair or a drop of blood

from this Genovese fellow, do you?”

“No, and I doubt he’d come to town personally.”

“Pity. All right, well, the Night Watch will patrol in your area and the garden center. The coven will have to spice up their monthly wards, I suppose, to include threats of organized crime. That’s a new one...” he mutters.

“Sorry.”

“Oh, pooh. There’s nothing to be sorry about. You helped an innocent woman. You are the very embodiment of our unspoken code—to live kindly and peaceably among humans, to protect the innocent and drive out the wicked.”

He says unspoken, but I have a feeling the monsters around here speak it quite a lot, despite just carrying on their normal, dull-looking lives most of the time.

Minegold coughs gently. “I’ll need your help, most likely.”

“Name it.”

“Could you spare some scales? Powdered dragon scales are absolutely essential in a good protective spell.”

I wince. The only time shedding scales doesn’t hurt is when I’m in full dragon form, and Angela’s probably going to notice if there’s a big purple dragon sitting in the backyard, scraping at his sides with his back claws like a dog chasing fleas. “Uh. Yeah. Would tomorrow morning be okay for that?”

“Leave them in the mailbox. I’ll collect them before dawn. I’ll go call Ardy and see what the police can do about putting up a ‘speed trap’ checkpoint on the main roads

into town. Ooh, and maybe Sera will lend me her grimdaw to watch the train station. He'll report back if any harbingers of death hop off."

My head swims, but I'm relieved to have help. I'm almost more relieved than angry that I got myself into this mess in the first place.

"Sounds great. Thank you again. I'll have those scales for you before dawn," I promise, and hang up. I rub my temples, then drag my hand across my eyes. This was not how my day was going to go. Not at all. It's the first full day I'm officially in charge of the family business, and I was there for half an hour. I was supposed to do a quick favor for my boss and ended up getting on his shit list—and someone else's hit list. I look in the mirror and wince. I'm pasty, with dark circles under my eyes, and my hair... I don't want to talk about my hair.

I put my amulet carefully on the bed and head to the shower for a quick scrub and shave. "What the hell is a grimdaw again? Someone needs to make some sort of paranormal people directory..."

I CAN'T HEAR WORDS , but I hear a lot of "noise" from upstairs. I stay put in the kitchen at first, wondering if I should trust this situation—and I know, if I were going to have second thoughts, the time to have them was right around the time I left the motel with him.

But while I'm here... I take a minute and try to settle myself, try to stop the whirlwind of anxiety by looking around and grounding myself.

A big scroll carved out of wood and painted white and green proclaims Ian and Vanessa, United in Love, and has their wedding invitation in glass set into it. There are pictures on the fridge of Graham and his brother in their wedding gear—and why

did I never think men in kilts were sexy before? They completely are.

I slide from the stool and tiptoe through the kitchen, dining room, and living room, trying to get a feel for the people who live here—and if I can trust Graham.

Stacks of gardening books.

Stacks of pregnancy books.

Beautiful photos of a dark-haired man and woman on their wedding day and what I assume is a tropical honeymoon.

A giant silver coat of arms hangs over the fireplace, with a framed parchment sheet beside it. I read it, murmuring aloud as I try to block out worried questions I don't have the answers to, anyway. "The Kane Coat of Arms. The son of the warrior, anglicized from the names of ó Catháin or Mac Catháin. The name Kane is mainly found in Irish ancestry, but has several Scottish associations and branches, especially around the Cairngorms, where many dragon clans currently reside. After the dragons more closely allied themselves with the Orc clans and the gargoyles of Tulloch—"

Wait, dragons? Orcs and gargoyles? Like the statue things and those guys from Lord of the Rings? Dragons ?

I blink and try to find that section again, but I can't seem to. It's like it was never there, and my eyes keep going back to the Kane family genealogy and a long, boring section about how different branches have slight variations on the crest.

"Maybe I need to lie down. Or have a panic attack," I whisper. I grab my bags from the kitchen and run upstairs. "First door, he said."

“H OLY HUGENESS,” I WHISPER when I open the door at the top of the stairs. The hall is long and has five doors, including one at the very end that stands open. I don’t even have to go in to know that’s the future nursery. It’s so sweet and sunny, some enchanted place. I was almost tempted to pass the guest suite Graham offered and explore the other rooms, but manners kicked in at the last second.

I’m glad they did.

This place is beautiful, done in whites and light blues. Dark violet accents, watercolors of purple irises, and soaring gray and green dragons done in oils give the room just the right balance between masculine and feminine. And the bed! The bed must be two queen-sized beds shoved together. There’s a fireplace and a minibar...

“Luxury,” I whisper, feeling guilty for noticing it. Feeling guilty that I like the memories it brings up. I put my stuff on the bed and turn to face the large mirror over the dresser—and wince.

My hair looks like I styled it with a weedwacker. My skin is starting to breakout on my forehead where my hairline meets my face. Wonderful, stress acne, here we come.

Good. Maybe Vincenzo will say I’m too ugly and tell his dad to throw me back and pick a new one.

I know I’m supposed to worry about things like life and death, but I have a momentary pity party where I think about all the gorgeous stuff I left behind. The little black dress. The flowy pink one. The new strappy sandals. The first set of real pearls I ever owned. Ronnie gave them to me for my 23rd birthday, right after he and Mom met.

With a little miserable cry, I sit down on the bed—and find my hand on a pendant

that looks just like Graham's. It looks like the big silver art piece over the mantle downstairs.

"Oh, it's the Kane family crest. I wonder if this is like some rich, royal people thing? Instead of fruit baskets, do they give you these family coat of arms necklaces to wear when you're a guest?" I undo my hair and slide the necklace over my head. "Most people just have a guestbook, but no, they give out jewelry. Nice touch."

I lay back on the bed and clutch the wide silver pendant in my palm. It's warm from lying in the sun that streams through the blinds and sheer, soft blue curtains. It makes me feel safe for the moment.

"You really are a fucking princess. You don't want to cuddle a teddy bear. You cuddle a piece of jewelry. Be better," I mumble to myself, and feel slumber grab me. I don't even try to fight it.

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I step out of the shower and swallow a curse.

Angela is lying on my bed. Sound asleep, curled up with her knees to her chest.

Tiny, wee thing. Okay, not so tiny to my human form, but to my dragon form? She'd be gone in three bites.

But why is she in my room? I told her first door along—

Yes, you numpty, because that's always been the guest room—and you're the guest. You were here first.

I slide back into the bathroom, towel more firmly wrapped around my waist.

It's no big deal. They have other rooms. I'll collect up my things and move down the hall.

But I need clean clothes. The jeans I threw on last night probably smell of cigarettes and spilled beer since I wore them to the roadhouse.

As quietly as I can, I move to the dresser and hold still while Angela rolls and moans softly in her sleep.

My heart speeds up the longer I watch her, and I don't know why I suddenly have such a strong urge to go over and kiss my mate, wake her up in ways that'll have her screaming in delight.

“Mate?” I mouth to myself, wondering where the bloody hell that idea came from.

Until I see it.

My amulet. My amulet around her neck, resting right between her perfect breasts.

“Fuck!” I hiss.

Angela’s eyelids fly open, and she gasps, sitting up with a frantic look on her face.

“Graham!” she gasps.

“I forgot I left my luggage in here,” I explain.

“Wait, was this your room? There’s a bathroom?” Angela cocks her head, and her mouth drops as she cranes her neck. “That’s a huge bathroom! Why is everything here so big?”

All the better for the dragon to fuck you with my dear, I think, but I mercifully keep my mouth shut. “I told you the wrong room, I’m sorry. I should have sent you to the first door on the left .”

“Oh, I can move my stuff, it’s no problem. And it’s really nice that you guys give out souvenirs—oh, shoot. I’m so stupid right now,” Angela puts her hand on the amulet and begins to lift it off from around her neck. “This must be yours, huh?”

I cross the room in one bound and pin her wrist to her throat. “Don’t take it off. It’s... It’s bad luck,” I say.

She nods, silent, wide-eyed.

“I’ll move my things,” I whisper, releasing her.

“Mine’s still packed,” she squeaks and scurries out the door. Across the hall, the other bedroom door slams shut.

“Oh, hell,” I wheeze, sitting down, my ribs feeling three sizes too small. “Angela’s wearing my amulet.”

Dragons aren’t supposed to take them off, but I break that rule all the time. I’ve only ever heard of a dragon letting another wear his amulet when they’re on their deathbed. They usually take it off and place it on their youngest dragonborn, or maybe on the eldest child, to symbolize their new place as leader in the clan.

As I stumble into undershorts and a clean pair of jeans, I call the one person who already knows how badly I’ve screwed up, how badly I’ve disgraced the family name, and still loves me.

“Ian?”

“Graham! How are you?”

“Um. Everything is fine. The business is fine. I’m home for lunch and then I’ll go back,” I tell a half-truth.

“Grand! We’re meeting the High King tonight at the May Festival. Vanessa looks beautiful. Mother gave her great-gran’s amulet and had it refined in her own fire. It’s gorgeous.”

“Oh, good. How beautiful,” I stumble over the words, but they’re the perfect doorway into this conversation. “And little Murdo will be gifted an amulet tonight?”

“That’s the plan. Unless someone does something incredibly stupid before the party.”

“Uhhh. Well.”

“Graham, no. What did you do?” My brother’s voice drops a full octave and reminds me why I used to be afraid of him. Reminds me of why sometimes I still am.

“I didn’t do anything!” Technically true. I did not give Angela my amulet. She put it on herself. Of course, I did take it off , but that’s not the real issue. “You know more about the logistical nature of things,” I fawn. “How do amulets confer protection to their owners?”

“Hm? Graham, that’s stuff we learned when our wings were still wet.”

“Tell me again!” I snap, resisting the urge to hurl my phone across the room.

“Well, all amulets are made from the family’s hoard, usually a choice piece of gold or silver. The High King blessing them is a bit of a formality, but it does mean you want your clan to be allied with all the other clans in case of threats.”

“Right, right, right,” I roll my wrist, urging him to speed up. “But now... what happens if a dragon takes his amulet off?”

“Well, he’s not protected.”

Duh, Ian. “I mean, suppose he took it off and someone else put it on?”

“Well, our family wouldn’t have that problem. Each family puts their own protections on their amulets, don’t they?”

“Do they?” I should have paid attention when I was younger, but no, I wanted to

sneak off and watch repeats of McGyver .

“Yes! Like, for our amulets, the silver burns the skin of anyone who tries to steal them. The only way someone could wear one of our family’s amulets would be if it were given as a gift and taken with pure intention.”

Like a sad, innocent human thinking our family magnanimously leaves necklaces lying around. I suppose Ian has splashed his money about a little with this house...

“I don’t know why you’re worrying about this now. And of course, the only time our amulets can be gifted is to our mates or children. Now, it’s different if the original owner has passed on, which is why Vanessa was able to take Gran’s amulet. Perhaps she would have been able to anyway, since she’s carrying blood kin. Hm. I’m not sure.”

Mate? Or child?

“Mate?” I repeat.

“Yes. I mean, some people think it’s terribly romantic, don’t they? When you give your mate your amulet, you’re saying you put her life above your own, and you’re covering her in the strongest protection you have. I suppose it’s going to become a popular trend again, since we live in fairly peaceful times and dragons aren’t at risk of walking into battles at any given moment.”

“W-what if you want to break the betrothal?”

“What? Graham, are you seeing someone? What the heck happened to Pine Ridge not having any of your own kind? You aren’t bringing some California crime dragon into my home, are you?” he hisses, fury and shock in his voice.

“No! I just wanted to know!”

“Well, good luck getting it back! As far as I know, she has to wear it until you’re married and she is given her own by the family or granted one when she carries her first child. That’s if you even have a family old enough to have amulets. Graham,” Ian’s voice is so low I can barely hear it, tight and stressed, “you know not all families have amulets, and those that do treasure each and every one. Most have been passed down. Ours are from Hugh and Herbert, the twins lost in the Battle of the Somme.”

Oh fuck. Guilt sledgehammers into me as my great-grandmother’s shaking voice plays in my head. “Your great-uncles, my bairns, that you’ll never meet in this world. Both lost providing cover for McCrae’s Battalion of the Royal Scots, the Highland Light Infantry, God rest their souls.” My throat is a steel trap now. Air isn’t getting in. Words aren’t getting out.

“Graham! I said, ‘You still have Herbert’s amulet, don’t you?’ You dinnae give it to some one-night stand you got your leg over? No. No, you couldn’t have. It’d burn some common slag.”

“You’re overreacting. Panicking. I was just curious.”

“I suppose you could get it back if you tell her you will no longer protect her or she refuses the offer of the Kane dragons’ protections... But who would do that?”

Who would do that? Not someone who might be kidnapped and forced into a sham marriage with a drug-trafficking, arms-dealing mafioso. Even if Angela did say that, I couldn’t let her take it off now! It might reverse any protections conferred on her and leave her a sitting duck! Blood on my hands. More blood on my hands...

“Right. Got it. Go and have a good time. I have to go... see about some mulch,” I

blurt, and end the call.

“Ohhhh. Oh, God.” I groan and collapse back on the bed. “What’ve I done?”

Angela’s scent instantly overwhelms me. Not the smell of the products she uses on her hair and skin, but Angela’s actual scent. I breathe in, and my chest expands. All the tension leaves it in one long rush.

She smells like wind. Like flying.

Because she’s your mate.

Unless there’s a mistake.

“Oh, yes. There’s a mistake. And I made it...”

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“I can give you your necklace back,” I say, voice timid.

Graham hasn’t said two words to me since we got in the truck. He’s grunted a few times, but he looks like he’s fighting a case of lockjaw.

“I’m sorry, I thought it was a gift. I think I’ve been spoiled by living with rich people. I didn’t grow up that way. Sorry, you must think I’m really... I don’t know what. A mess. You, with your big house and everything.”

“I live in a one-bedroom in California in a town where the crime rate is so high, the rent is often low. Lived there. I’m not going back now,” he snarls, knuckles white on the wheel.

“Did something bad happen?” I gasp.

“Genovese knows I’m protecting you, and my boss is pissed. I’m fired.” The growl is deeper now, and the knuckles on the steering wheel turn light purples and a net-like pattern of lines pop out on his skin, traveling up his arms.

“Hives?” I squeak. Those are unlike any other hives I’ve ever seen.

“What? Oh, shit!” Graham jerks his hands off the wheel, and the truck jerks off the highway, fortunately into a grassy area along the two-lane road that leads from his brother’s house through town. “You can see that?”

“See what? Hives? Yes, I can see purple hives!” They’re already fading.

“It’s the amulet. Gotta be.”

“Amulet?”

“The necklace. It’s... It’s for protection. It’s been in my family for a long, long time. It’ll stop almost everything—except a direct hit from enemy aircraft. I’m so sorry, Hughie and Herbie.”

“Are you drunk?” I scootch farther away in my seat, my hand on the door handle.

“No, I’m a dragon,” he hisses.

The silence returns to the truck as Graham lets out a hard sigh through his nose and steers us back onto the highway.

Dragon?

Like that line about dragon families on that really confusing-looking parchment?

Like the dragons in the watercolor paintings in the guest room?

“Um. Dragon? Like a strong and powerful person who—oh my God!” I screech and push myself back in my seat as far as possible as we pull into the garden center, and I spot a—an alien, a furry black alien walking towards us.

“Oh, fine, now,” he grumbles. “It works on all things paranormal, does it?”

“What does? What is that?” I point frantically through the windshield.

“That’s a mothman. My brother mentioned White Pines hired one as a gardener. Glad to see we still get some of the estate’s money.”

“It’s the necklace? What’s in it?” I paw at the braided leather cord and tug on it, wanting to get it off my skin. “Does it have hallucinogens seeping into my skin or something?”

“Taking it off won’t help. Now that you’ve seen the supernatural, it’ll stick with you. We’re fucked. Ian’s going to kill me.” Graaham opens the door of his truck but doesn’t get out of it, letting his head come to rest on the steering wheel with a thump.

The giant black furry thing walks up with a cheery wave. “Oh, hey! You must be Graham! Ian told me his brother was coming in to cover for him. You guys need any help, just say the word. I’m Lennox, by the way, the gardener and floral designer at White Pines. It’s wedding season, but I can always help early on the weekdays.”

“Pleasure,” Graham mumbles, head still down.

Lennox looks at him for a second, and then his bright red eyes fix on me.

Please don’t bite me, I pray silently.

“Hi, there! I’m Lennox! You’re Angela, aren’t you? The girl who came to town for a fresh start?” Lennox sticks out his hand but drops it when I just stare.

I am? I mean, yes, I am, but how did he know that? “Huh?”

“Sorry, I was talking to Cindy—my wife, who works with Claire and Georgie. And then I saw Mr. Minegold’s text about the Night Watch being on extra alert.”

I repeat, “Huh?” This time, my voice is bordering on hysterical.

“Oh, don’t worry. My home burned down last year, and I came to Pine Ridge with a tarp and a duffle bag. A year later, I’m married to a beautiful woman, my brother is

thinking of moving to town, and I have my dream job. Don't be afraid to dive right in—the people here will catch you.” He smiles, and his antennae twiddle happily.

“She's not used to seeing us as we truly are,” Graham moans from the depths of his clenched hands, now pulling his hair. “Angela's probably about to scream. Or pass out.”

“I am not!” I lie. I reach across Graham's hand and yank Lennox's palm into my own, shaking it once before releasing it and trying not to shudder. It wasn't icky. It was feathery soft. Velvety. Lavish.

But he's like a cryptid, or something. A mothman! Graham says he's a dragon , and I can see his scales, and it's all because of this stupid, toxic necklace! I lift it off my chest, and halfway over my head—and it feels like the air vanishes from my lungs.

I can hear my heartbeat pounding in my ears. The lights fade, even though it's a sunny May afternoon. Everything around me is dark and going out of focus.

Beside me, I feel Graham's hands on mine, hear his voice speaking, but the words don't make sense.

The heavy, comforting weight of the amulet sinks onto my sternum, and lights, air, and sound come rushing back.

“I don't feel so good,” I say weakly. “When I tried to take that off—”

“It's safer not to,” Graham says, lips thin.

“But I'm seeing things.”

“I doubt it'll change. Once a person sees through the Mist that clouds most human

eyes, they rarely go back to being their happy, oblivious selves.”

I whimper in confusion. “Mist? It’s sunny. I don’t—”

“Look, you can’t take that off for now,” Graham whispers. “I promise I’ll explain later. Soon.”

“I do feel better with it on,” I confess in a woozy voice, keeping my eyes on his face as it swims back into something solid.

“I was afraid of that. Don’t worry, I know there’s a way to get it off. Right now, you’re bound to me—as in, you’re under my protection. When the threat is gone, it won’t hurt to take it off,” Graham reassures, nodding while his eyes slide past mine and struggle back.

A NGELA SLIDES SEAMLESSLY into working at the garden center, her eyes lighting up when she sees the rows and rows of starter flats, long columns filled with baby tomato, squash, and green bean plants. I work beside her, checking the inventory that someone else has already provided for me.

I just want to be near her.

This is awful.

I watch her water plants and take beetles outside, scolding them not to return. Her stress and fear seem to melt near green and growing things—like mine used to.

You don’t want a human.

She doesn't love you. She's running away from an arranged marriage. It won't matter to her who arranged it, a man, her parents, or some ancient amulet. She'll hate the idea.

It's all a mistake.

There's got to be a way for her to safely reject the bond and not put herself in harm's way. She'd surely reject me as a dragon—especially now that she can see paranormal creatures.

"This is so much fun." Angela buries her face in blue hydrangeas and turns them so they get an even amount of sun. "Thank you for the job. This is pretty easy work, though. I'm sure there's something I need to do. Something harder?"

"Just wait until Saturday morning and Sunday afternoon when this place will be packed with harassed parents and their children who want to play in the ornamental ponds." I shrug. "You'll earn your keep."

"I can never earn enough to repay you for helping me. I'm sorry you lost your job over it. The one in California," she says, her voice so soft and sweet.

It's not cloying. It's comforting. Without even thinking about it, I start speaking. "I don't really mind," I confess. "I thought I did, but I found out a lot of bad things about my boss today. A lot of bad things about myself. I'll be glad to get away from them when I think about it."

"You're not a bad person!" Angela defends me, heat in her voice. "You're wonderful."

"Funny thing for a princess to tell a dragon," I tease.

“Oh, I’m still not convinced I’m not on an acid trip, but,” she shrugs, “I’m not really convinced the last three and a half years of my life weren’t an acid trip, either. Within two months of my mom meeting my stepdad, we went from a crummy little apartment and thinking splurging was a movie at the theater with popcorn we didn’t smuggle in, to thinking limiting our shopping on Rodeo Drive to every other week was a hardship. Well. Not me, so much, but my mom. Okay, and me. I got dragged into the fashionista lifestyle because we left everything behind in Jersey. We didn’t have any friends but each other. I put off looking for a job because I wanted to help her get settled—and because a little tiny part of me thought it was too good to be true. I wanted to keep an eye on things so my mom didn’t get hurt again.”

“That’s a good reason to put your life on hold—to look out for others.” I put my life on hold to sulk and look out for myself. Left Ian on his own with a growing business and a new bride in a newish town because I didn’t find a wife waiting for me, because I was convinced my perfect dragoness was in some other supernatural hot spot.

“I guess. I feel kind of dumb. I had a scholarship to Rutgers, Mom killed herself to pay for fees and books, and I walked out with a degree in human resources that I’ve never used.”

“Oh?”

She gives me a sheepish look. “Everywhere I’ve tried to work has made me start at the bottom before getting into management. Guess what? I always quit before I make it to management because of how badly I get treated.”

“That seems like a vicious cycle.”

“It is, and I think a lot of companies keep it that way. I wanted to get a degree in human resources so I could be a good manager, a compassionate person who helped employees after seeing the crappy way my mother got treated at every job she ever

had.”

I’m sorry. I...” I stare into space for a moment, wondering if I can dare to mention the thought I just had.

“Hey, I’m spilling my guts. It’s your turn.”

“My sister-in-law will want to be home with the baby.” I pause as I picture my brother with his family. There will be way more than one child if the looks Vanessa and Ian give each other are any indicator. “She’s the manager of the garden center and the floral department. He’s the manager of the landscaping and lawn care business. His place has expanded like mad, and he was talking about getting an assistant manager to fill in for Vanessa while she’s on maternity leave. It’s something to think about.”

“Think about staying here? In this town?”

“It’s not a bad place, especially if it has what you’re looking for.”

“Then why did you leave? What were you looking for?”

I have to smile. Her directness and honesty would make her worthy of a Kane dragon—well, another Kane dragon, one who isn’t a screw up like me. The way she rolls with the constant blows life is dealing her... “It didn’t have a mate. A dragoness.”

“Oh. Oh, you have to marry someone like you?”

Is it just me, or did Angela’s voice fall with sadness?

“I don’t have to. I wanted to. Thought I wanted to. Because dragons are dying out.”

“Makes sense. Deforestation?”

I shake my head. “Not like that. So many dragons have lost their ability to transform over time, and when they marry humans, there is a good chance the child can be fully human. Just... Just like genes being bred out, I suppose you could say.”

“Oh, so your sister-in-law’s baby... ?”

“Vanessa is having what we call dragonborn. That means my brother’s genetics win, I guess.” Or is it something in Pine Ridge, I suddenly find myself wondering. Are children conceived in magical places more likely to hold onto their magical traits?

“I’m asking too many questions, aren’t I? You’re easy to talk to. And I’ve never met a dragon before.”

“Oh, this isn’t what a dragon looks like, love. Not really. If you saw me in my more ‘protective form,’ you wouldn’t like it.”

“Why not?”

“Well... Because it’s scary. I’m a monster—a good one, but still. Well, good ish . But that wouldn’t matter. Most human women wouldn’t accept a monster as their mate, you know.”

“That sucks. I’m sorry people are so shallow. I promise if you show me your real form, I’ll try to be brave.” Angela pats my hand and rises to refill her watering can.

Suddenly, I can’t wait to show her. It’ll end things once and for all, and I’ll be able to stop obsessing about how easy she is to talk to and how very easy she is on the eyes.

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On the run from an arranged marriage to a stunningly handsome, wealthy criminal or trapped by a magical necklace with a sexy, dangerous bodyguard who can turn into a dragon?

“Both sound like cheesy romance book plots. My mother would eat them up with a spoon,” I mutter, stepping into the extravagantly huge bathroom next to my temporary bedroom.

I’m sweaty and I smell like tomato plants, which is oddly grounding for me. Both of the aforementioned scenarios make no damn sense, but the earthy green smell of tomato plants and the memory of their little yellow flowers with green fruit turning red? That’s undeniably real.

I look down at the amulet as it dangles between my bare breasts, water dotting my skin.

Holy shit. Tomatoes equal reality, and that means...

Graham is really a dragon, and I’m on the run from Mr. Mafia.

I’m not stuck in one cheesy romance novel, I’m stuck in a two-for-one special.

No matter how hard I scrub (and the body wash is really nice and there’s a new loofah in a little net bag for me), I can’t wash off the growing realization that I’m stuck in some alternate dimension where magical creatures are real—and a bunch of them hang out at the local lawn and garden center.

I have to get out of this place. Away from Graham.

“CAN I COME IN?” GRAHAM knocks on the door of my room as I’m still in my towel, having belatedly realized that I only have two sets of clothes with me, and both are dirty. My great escape is going to have to wait until after I can do a load of laundry.

“Um. I’m not exactly dressed, but that’s not going to change.” I dump out my bag in desperation, but that’s just further proof I’m not thinking straight. I know what I packed. Aside from a spare pair of socks and panties, there’s nothing to wear. “Can I use your washing machine? I packed light. Maybe too light.”

“Surely, but in the meantime, I think you might fit into something of Vanessa’s. Hold on.”

In a few minutes, he’s back outside the door. “I have some sweatpants and one of her shirts.”

“Thanks. Come in,” I open the door, and he steps through it, invading my space. “What’s up?” I ask, voice tight.

“I imagine you’re thinking this is all some sort of dream.”

“Well, maybe a little.”

“And I’m thinking you’re wrong about what you said, even as sweet as you are, as easy to open up to as you are,” Graham says in a rush, voice almost bitter and expression angry.

“Uh...”

He seems to swell with anger, shoulders flexing. “Dragons are real, not that anyone will believe you. That’s a monster’s greatest protection these days. Most humans can’t see us unless they’re forced to by some strange chance, and once they do—who can they tell? Everyone would think they were drunk or off their heads.”

I back up and sit on the bed, nodding. “Okay.”

“But we are real, and you think we’re not scary?”

“I just meant I wouldn’t be scared of you because I know who you are,” I protest, still trying to figure out why he sounds so upset. Does he want me to think he’s scary? Did I insult his pride? Or has he been hurt by others rejecting him for how he looks?

“Because you’re so sweet, Angela. So kind. But you’d never make a dragon’s mate. A dragon’s true form would repulse you. You’d hate having a husband who could turn into something like me.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. What’s this about marrying a dragon? I just said I wouldn’t be scared.”

“And I’m just trying to explain why I have to marry a dragoness if I want to be able to keep my powers, my identity. The dragons who marry humans are the ones who can’t shift, or the ones who slowly stop shifting, stop being able to after years of hiding their true forms for months at a time, or never leaving their human skin. They’re weakening our kind. Ian got lucky—but I’m the smart one.”

“Not so sure about that,” I mumble as he carries on, wondering why in the world he’s telling me all this. My stomach tenses with nerves as he paces once, a short, tight line in front of the doorway. What if he’s right? I’ve never seen a dragon. I’m picturing

some majestic thing with jewel-like scales, big wings, and maybe the ability to breathe fire. What if that's the fairytale, and the truth is much uglier? Slimier? Or all teeth, claws, and bloodlust?

It's only now that I realize Graham's feet are bare and he's wearing his long leather coat in the house, held shut across his waist. Is he naked underneath?

That's unsettling, right? Him barging in, naked underneath black leather, while I'm naked underneath pale peach cotton?

So why am I not too unsettled?

"Sometimes I let myself believe that I could have what my brother has," he says, voice a low snarl. "Better to stop fooling myself early on, don't you think?"

I nod, not sure what to say, not sure how I'm tied up in all this.

But then Graham begins to change as he stares at me in silence.

His skin ripples as rows of purple scales form and fall into place like waves of silent dominoes. His fingers lengthen, and the knuckles become more pronounced. Talons. Claws. The face—

That handsome face turns into something almost cruelly beautiful, with little ridges of scale-covered bone forming on his cheeks and horns curling up from his dark hair.

In ten seconds, it's over. The transformation is complete, and the coat is on the ground at his high-arched feet that end in claws.

The sight of Graham in his halfling form makes my insides squeeze and my lungs seem to stop working. Dark coils of muscle, covered in scales. Wings. Horns. A tail.

“What’s the matter, Princess?” The brogue comes out with a hiss, mocking me along with the tips of his white fangs. “Scared?”

I can’t answer, but if I could, the answer would be no. Turned on. So very, very turned on.

He bends to retrieve his coat, face closing over. When he rises, the anger is gone, and all that’s left is a sad somberness that’s plain even under the violet hue and the scales. “I’m sorry, Angela. Petty of me to prove it this way, but sometimes I’m stubborn. Sometimes I’m a fool.”

Graham turns to leave, and I bound across the room so fast my towel almost falls to the ground, sagging way down in back and only holding on because I’m clutching it in the front. I snag Graham’s arm with my hand.

He turns. Looks down at me.

Fingers tighten and tug. Don’t leave.

“Angela?”

My hand journeys up, fingers splayed to catch the texture of his scales as they seem to glimmer, iridescent in some places, dark and hinting at lost light in others. They’re smooth and hard, like a snake’s skin, an armor made of tiny purple plates that range from almost black to lightest lavender.

“Gorgeous,” I whisper.

Graham’s large hand wraps around my wrist like he intends to push me away, stop me from touching him.

I shouldn't touch him. Not my right. He's someone I owe, not someone I own .

“Dragon keeps the princess, not the other way around,” I whisper, fingers slowly curling into my palm. “I won't touch you again. I'm sorry. I was rude. I just... you're real. And so...”

“Fierce? Frightening?”

“Insanely beautiful.” I let my fingers out of their prison as he drops my wrist, one of his eyebrows arching. “You could be frightening, too, I know.”

“Wait until you see me in my true form. The full dragon,” his snarl is still there, but softer.

“O-okay. That's okay with me. I'm not scared,” I whisper—although that's not totally true. I'm scared that this is happening. Scared that I believe my eyes.

Scared that I'm not only okay with how he looks, but that I like it way too much.

I T DOESN'T HELP THAT Angela's only wearing a towel. It doesn't help that every time her arms move, the towel shimmies a little lower, revealing more of the deep natural tan of her skin, deepening the line of her cleavage. Doesn't help that in this form, my senses are heightened, and I can smell that windswept, about-to-rain smell that reminds me of soaring through low-hovering clouds—and the sensual smell of her arousal under it. Just the faintest hint, but it grows when my tail moves closer to her bare ankle, the tip flicking along the curve of her calf like the thing has a mind of its own. She gasps, pupils expanding and nostrils flaring in surprise for a split second before she bites down on her lower lip.

The noise she makes is almost inaudible, but I can hear it.

“I can hear every little noise you make like this. And this hide is like armor. These wings,” I flap them wide and she tries to withdraw from my grasp, startled, her towel barely clinging to her damp body now, “could carry you high, where enemies would never reach you. Dragons have been soldiers. Mercenaries. Protectors and ravagers.”

My nostrils quiver, and my tail coils around her leg like ivy on a castle wall.

“Did you ever kidnap a princess and keep her in a tower?” she whispers, her lips glossed by her tongue.

I hold onto her so tight because my senses are reeling. I’m dizzy with wanting her, and I don’t know if I should fight the urges or beg her to share them with me.

One of her hands plants on my chest.

Maybe she already shares them.

“The only time a Kane dragon has taken a lady of noble birth to a high tower was as his bride. Mate.” The word escapes as a hiss, but that is all I will allow to escape. The intrigued light in Angela’s eyes is corkscrewing its way into my heart. The feel of her hand over my heart is like a brand. In seconds, something has changed. I want her to stay.

I tell myself it’s for her sake, too. “Say what you will about this form, but dragons make elite bodyguards. After all, a dragon guards what is precious to him. His hoard. His treasure. No one can take it from him while he breathes. And you are worth treasuring, Angela. I can tell.”

Angela launches herself up on her tiptoes, lips turned upward to find mine. I fold my

wings and arms around her, feeling her towel fall as her skin slides against my scales.
“You are mine now, princess,” I growl.

The way she’s kissing me, her hand sliding up my face and reaching for my horns?

I don’t think she objects.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:57 am

I don't usually make out with strangers. This guy is a stranger. I've known him for one day.

On the other hand, people know each other for dinner and a movie and then go at it like rabbits, right?

"It's not too fast, little wren. You were made to be caught by someone who could protect you. Take you under his wings," Graham chuckles as he seems to read my mind. His breath perfumes the few inches of air between our lips, a sweetly smoky scent like the memory of grilling herbs. It tingles in my nostrils as his tongue sweeps across my throat and flickers over my lips.

A perfect, tiny inverted V shows the slight fork in his tongue. He's fascinating, like the rare plants I used to see on our high school's annual trip to Longwood Gardens.

Is that why you like him? Because he's a distraction, something you can use to take your mind off your troubles? Does a hot bodyguard and a dangerous situation equal falling into bed?

Or because he makes it sound like he wants you, and only you? You're his treasure, his hoard, his precious, whereas with Vincenzo Genovese, you'd just be one of his harem.

"I'm a mess, aren't I?" I murmur as his wings rub against my bare back.

"Oh, lass. If you knew the steaming pile I've been. Helping you is only the second thing I've managed to do right in over a year."

“What’s the first?”

“Coming to Pine Ridge to help my brother and his wife,” he confesses. “There’s... There’s a lot you don’t know about me. But I’ll tell you later. When things are safer.”

“There’s a lot you don’t know about me, either. How could we know each other well after only a day together?” I swallow.

Graham stops kissing my shoulder. “Shall we stop?”

“Sure. Yeah. That’s smart.”

But neither of us let go.

I T’S THAT OLD GAME .

You hang up.

No, you.

No, you .

Only this isn’t a call that I can end. The pull of treasure drives a dragon to madness. “I don’t want to let you go,” I confess.

“Good. I don’t want to let you go, either. I was trying to be sensible,” Angela confesses. “I didn’t want you to think I was slutty.”

My tail lashes and wings flare back in anger when she talks about herself like that.

“Never speak about my mate like that!”

“Mate sounds primitive—and permanent.” Angela’s voice is a squeak as I survey her naked curves as she steps away from me. Steps toward her bed.

I wish she wouldn’t do that. Look so timid. Between her posture that screams “prey,” her body that screams “mate me,” and the amulet that declares “Mine!” I’m barely making words.

“Did you want someone to cast you aside when he was done with you?” I growl.

She shakes her head.

“Don’t you deserve forever?” I stalk closer, feeling the ridges of scales that hide my cocks starting to split apart, waiting to let them out.

“I... I want forever, but with the right person.”

It’d be so much simpler if I could tell her that the amulet chose her for me, if I could explain how sacred that bit of silver dangling between her plump, perfect breasts is. “Grant me the chance to prove it. If I guard ye, protect ye, and please ye... you’ll be mine to protect and treasure for always?”

She likes the idea; I can see it in her starry eyes, in her awed expression. “But... We just met.”

“And you’d just met your Mr. Mafia, too,” I counter, hand reaching for her, landing gently on the wet curl of hair that falls to her shoulder. “And he didn’t offer to lay his empire at your feet and cast all other consorts aside?”

“No. Not at all.”

Hmph. Human men don't know a damn thing about courting.

"That sounds fair," she says in a hoarse voice. "An offer I don't want to refuse."

I don't tell her that less than an hour ago, I was sure she'd greet my halfling form with cries of terror or disgust, and I'd been ready to gloat over my being right about how inferior human women were.

Her hand lands on my thigh as I stand by the bed, and my thoughts shatter apart. The only thing I can focus on now is her.

Sweet, soft butterscotch skin in contrast to the purple scales she's touching. "Really not afraid?"

She shakes her head.

I arch one eyebrow as I reach a careful talon down to trace over her face. Her eyes close in bliss as I drag my thumb across her lower lip. "Does the princess prefer the dragon?" I breathe.

A single nod as her lips close around my thumb and send me cloud-high, the tickle of her tongue on the armor of my scales so intimate, so erotic.

"I'm different than other men," I warn, immediately wishing I hadn't. It sounds so obvious.

Angela smiles up at me, kissing my thumb before releasing it. "I noticed and I approve." Her short, perfectly manicured nails drag down my hip. "You feel amazing. Sensory overload in the best possible way."

"Well. Um. There's one other thing. Actually, two other things." I grunt as the battle

between my cocks and my self-control is lost. The cocks are the winner, sliding out in a shimmering purple rush. The upper phallus is thick and long, shaped like a human's, just more curved at the tip—and a dark lavender. The second is smaller and has a more rounded head, dangling just beneath the bigger member.

Angela's eyes widen. "Oh, wow. That's... How does that work?"

"Oh, the possibilities are endless," I sigh, relaxing further when she doesn't recoil. "Would my mate like to see some options?"

"You should stop calling me that," Angela protests faintly as I leap lightly onto the bed, pulling her into my arms as I pounce.

"Why don't you wait until I've finished the first round and see if I can earn the right?"

FIRST ROUND, GRAHAM says. That implies multiple rounds. With multiple cocks.

It's insane how wet I just got.

Graham's forked tongue flits across my nipples as his head burrows between my breasts. His scaled palms grasp and grope, setting my skin to singing on every touch. I can't describe it. It's sort of like one of those lightly textured massagers is targeting every inch of me at once as our bodies weave together.

But my smooth, shimmery lover leaves our tangle of limbs, kissing his way down over my belly, nuzzling into the neat patch of trimmed curls between my thighs.

I'm happy he's the kind of guy who knows how to give, but I don't expect the absolutely sinful moan that he lets out. "Did you come?" I ask, totally startled.

"You go first," he winks up at me, parting my thighs.

"But that noise—"

"I get to taste you. What sort of noise did you think I would make?" Graham demands.

His tongue darts out and lashes at the apex of my outer lips as his fingers spread me apart. I'd be squirming and self-conscious except for the fact that Graham falls forward and buries his face in my pussy like he's starving.

"Your scent and your arousal are aphrodisiacs to your mate, you know."

I don't point out that I wouldn't know. I don't want to think about all the crass comments I've heard men make about how women taste or smell. All I can do is reach for his long, thick black hair—and wrap my fingers around his horns instead.

"Yes," he purrs. No, rumbles. His wings spread, and his tail lashes. I have to laugh, even as he starts to lap at me in earnest.

My bodyguard is like a big, happy kitty who just got into the catnip.

"You're so cute," I sigh.

He grunts. "That's not what a dragon likes to hear when he's trying to please his mate."

"But you are—ooh. Ohhh, what the—"

I forget what I'm trying to say. Claws dig into the plump padding of my mound, and those delectable scaly lips wrap around my clit, drawing several inches of my folds in along with it. That would be enough to send me over the edge in a minute, but the cool, slender object that just slid deep into my slit?

My thighs go rigid. "What is—"

"Tails are so useful. They can be as deadly as a bullwhip," Graham says between sucks, his voice complacent, "or perfect little pistons to please your puss." As he says those words, I feel his tail slipping in and out, smooth and solid, twisting around inside of me on every short thrust.

"That's incredible."

He lifts his head and smiles up at me as I clutch my breasts, thumbs rolling across nipples. "I could watch you like this for hours. Taking my tail in your sweet little cunny. And you quite like when my talons kiss your thighs."

My cheeks flush as I feel him dig his claws into my inner thigh.

"But I think I'd like to see your face when I stroke your clit. Play with this little jewel. This is going to be my favorite treasure to hoard," he gloats, smiling wickedly at me as one hand squeezes the hood of my clitoris back and exposes the sensitive head to his scaled thumb. He bends down to lick it, sending shudders through me. He draws back, then bends in again, this time leaving me sloppy wet so his thumb can glide across my clit in wet circles—while his tail is still fucking me, building the pace each second.

The friction on my clit combined with the sharp stings of his claws, and the tail that suddenly plunges in and rocks back and forth...

My legs try to slam shut as my orgasm crashes into me like a wrecking ball. I've never come like that, so fast, so hard, not just turned on in my body, but turned on by the way Graham talks to me. By the way he gets in my head.

"No, Angela. I gave you this gift. I want to see you take it," Graham hisses, pinning my thighs down and watching my pussy squeeze and spasm on his twitching tail.

The command in his voice. The way I struggle and buck as pleasure courses through me, and he doesn't move an inch except to kiss my knee...

I let out a half-sob of pleasure and dig my fingers into his wrist. "So good!"

Graham lets me go with a pained sound. "Watching your walls fuck my tail instead of my cock is torture."

He has a filthy mouth, and I'm so not complaining. "Cock? Not plural?"

Graham crawls up next to me, letting the twin erections brush against my shaking thigh as he nuzzles me. "I didn't want to presume you'd want both."

Who wouldn't want both? "That was sweet of you. But wouldn't your mate want to take both?" I ask, potentially putting myself in hot water.

"Yessss," he breathes out, and the sweet, smoky smell curls around me once again. "But a dragoness is bigger in her shifted form. Two would be perfect for her. For you..." He licks his lips and lazily drapes his tail over his shoulders, the tip coated in my essence. "This filled you up nicely, and it's much more narrow."

I lean up on my elbow, eyelids lowered as if I'm deliberately overlooking any inhibitions I have. My mouth opens, and I run my tongue slowly over the tip of Graham's tail, hearing his sharp intake of breath. My lips close around it, and I suck

softly, slowly.

“By God, woman...”

I ignore him, my hand pushing past his to reach the first, larger cock. It's easily the size of one of those thick Italian salamis my mother would get every Christmas, maybe eight inches, maybe more. The one behind it is smaller, the width of two fingers, and a few inches shorter.

I release Graham's tail and ignore his questioning noise as I slide down the bed, settling my head on one of his muscular thighs. My hand works around the bigger cock while my mouth gently engulfs the smaller one.

“Fuck,” Graham whimpers.

“Big bad dragon,” I tease, switching places, my mouth tackling the pointed head of his thicker member.

“Don't tempt me, princess.”

“Or you'll lock me in the tower?” My eyes move upwards to catch his rapt expression.

“Or I'll pound your ass and pussy until you'll need your faithful dragon to carry you everywhere,” he snarls. “Perhaps everyone will think you're too spoiled to walk.”

“Maybe they'll think you're too greedy with your treasure to share me,” I counter.

The words leave my mouth and so does Graham's cock. He's a whirl of wings and fangs, pinning me under him before I can cry out. “I don't share my treasure. I don't want your sweet little cunt wrapped around anything but me for the rest of your days.

It's just a matter of whether you want to try one at a time, one per hole, or if you'd like to start small and work your way up," he grunts, rubbing the wider cock through my wetness.

I'm so soaked I can hear the sound of him moving against me, so wet that his smaller cock slides into me, and both of us cry out. I wrap my legs around his, hands scrabbling at his waist. "I just want you," I beg. I'm desperate for him, for pleasure, to just look at him and touch him.

Never felt like this before—and the thought of feeling this way with anyone else makes me feel sick.

Maybe I am the dragon's mate.

M Y TREASURE. MY MATE . Her body pulls me in and holds fast, rippling pink walls clutching me. I almost spend immediately, but I don't want to. I want both cock in her at once.

Greedy with my treasure is right. Selfish? Possibly. Swept off my feet, shocked to my core? Definitely.

A few clumsy thrusts help us align, my much smaller, softer jewel nestled under me as she takes my cock as deep as it will go while the larger one rubs against her belly, leaving silvery trails of pre-cum all across her skin. Without my asking, one of her hands comes down and grips it, warm fingers tugging me in time with the velvety clasps of her pussy.

"You spoil me."

Her smile is lazy, high on pleasure. “I’m glad.”

I lean down to kiss her, easily holding myself up with one arm. I pry my cock away from her hand and rub the head against her opening. It sticks at first, but with a straining sound from my mate, I push past her resisting muscles, sped onward by how wet she is.

Angela’s eyes squeeze shut, and she breathes out in tight puffs for a minute as her body adjusts. “That’s a lot,” she hisses, biting her bottom lip.

“Too much?”

“I’m not sure—ohhh. Ohh, no, not too much.” Her body opens up, taking more of me in with one hot, wet rush, walls clamped so tight that I’m afraid to move in case one of us tears something.

Angela pulses on me, hips wriggling, then shifting, moving herself on me.

It’s probably wrong to fall in love with someone’s body before their soul, but I’m utterly captivated by the feel of her, the way she looks under me, the way she moves around me.

Scales and tails were the only things that I thought would ever excite me like this—but the contrast between her soft, cushiony body and my hard, plated one... “Salty and sweet,” I muse aloud, brain following rabbit trails while my body is in paradise.

“What is? Me?”

I think of her delectable little quim. “That, too. No, just how good you feel. How we blend together,” I groan as I feel her muscles give, letting me move more freely

inside of her. Together, we bounce, most of my cock stretching her, and her plump hips and breasts juggling on each thrust. “Mesmerizing,” I sigh.

H E THINKS I’M MESMERIZING ? I’m so lost in watching him. Why wouldn’t I be? I’ve never seen anything like him before, and he’s so hot. Every inch is muscled. Every bit of him looks wicked and dangerous, and yet I feel the threat is directed towards others.

Maybe we had it all wrong in the fairy tales. The handsome knights were the wicked ones. The dragons breathing fire were the protectors, standing up against armies, swords, and shields. All to save the princess, not trap her.

The rocking of his hips to mine builds and turns pressure into pleasure, every nerve ending inside of me rubbed and pressed. His second cock slips and slides, nudging my asshole, making me jump on every other thrust, but that only serves to scrap my clit against his long, lithe body as he takes me so thoroughly.

The dragon ate the princess.

And then he fucked her, consumed every inch. Every hole.

“Can’t tell if you’re inviting me in, Angela,” Graham whispers.

I can’t tell up from down at this point, I’m just in a cloudy spiral of pleasure, squeezing against him for all I’m worth, desperate to come again.

“You don’t stop that, and I’ll fill your pussy up right now.”

No one’s ever come inside of me. That’s what condoms are for. I think about telling

him to pull out, but my tongue goes on strike.

Graham licks two of his fingers and slides them down between my legs, rubbing them over my clit in firm circles. “I can’t come until my lady does,” he whispers.

“Are you going to come inside of me?” I ask, pussy tightening in anticipation, trying to fight off the wave of orgasm as it builds.

Graham looks down on me and moves his hand, trailing it up over my belly, his claws leaving soft white lines. “Every time.”

“But—”

“I’ll make sure you’re handsomely rewarded for taking every drop in your pussy.”

I swallow and give up. “Graham,” I moan.

“Mmm, I can feel you letting go. My sweet little wren. You like when the big dragon draws the pleasure out of you again and again. You like the secrets a forked tongue tells.” One of his hands clutches my shoulder and I feel all his weight shift as he tenses and stills, buried as deep inside as he can go, his second cock sliding down between my cheeks.

No escape from the pleasure, the pressure, his talons, his tongue... The spiral explodes inside of me and I come, silent and shaking, lips gasping as I watch his golden irises taking in the spectacle he makes of me.

There’s a shaking in his limbs that builds to a long, low roar, the kind of rumbling vibration that shakes every cell in your body and the pictures on the walls. I feel him pop inside of me, a hard spasm that’s followed by a flood, silky wet fluid trapped inside of me by his cock.

“Oh, fuck,” I breathe out as I feel it puddling between our bodies and coating my pussy. It dribbles down my thighs and coats his second cock where it nestles between my ass cheeks. Still inside of me, he rocks, the room silent except for his heavy breathing and the obscenely wet squelching.

“Reward?” he asks.

I could ask what it is. But I swallow and nod. Whatever it is, it’ll be good.

The second cock lines up in the slick mess, aiming at my tight backdoor.

“I can make you come again. Have you ever had an orgasm with a cock in each hole?” he asks, already rubbing my buzzing clit.

“No.” Never had anything in there besides a finger, but I don’t tell him that. One of my boyfriends tried to be adventurous, but he failed. Miserably. My insides squirm in nervous excitement. I’m confident Graham is going to erase all memories of other lovers.

“Is my little mate worried that it won’t feel good?”

“We just did a lot. You just came. Aren’t you tired?” I ask.

“Not in the slightest.”

I LAY WITH MY MATE , her thigh up over my hip, my tail preparing her for my cock as I massage her breasts. My softening cock is still inside of her, trapping my seed. Angela rocks herself to peak after peak on my thickness while my talons help by toying with her puffy clit.

Soon she moans as my tail plunders her ass, the slippery floods of my cum making excellent lubricant. There's only a momentary gasp when I replace the slender tail tip with my smaller cock. "There you go, my love," I soothe. "That's not very big, is it? And it feels good when you relax."

In seconds, Angela is pushing back against me as if she's eager to capture more and more of my narrower length in her tighter hole. My other cock begins to wake back up, and in moments, I'm giving Angela the promised reward I originally planned, stuffing both of her holes at once and fucking her thoroughly. I watch her eyes widen as she realizes that now I'm driving back against her and the little anal massage has turned into pussy and ass fucking, her little body pinned down by two dragon cocks.

"This is my reward?" she whispers, licking her lips.

I roll her onto her back and push her wrists above her head, my hands trapping each one on the mattress so I have full leverage over her. "I was hoping to teach you to squirt in pleasure, but I'll be satisfied if you reach your peak for the ... what is this? Sixth time?"

"I think so."

"Maybe I can charm your heart like I've charmed your body," I suggest, pressing into her to hear her groan, to feel her struggle to take all of me. Angela doesn't shrink away from it, but rather lifts her hips to mine.

"Hungry pussy." I smirk, doubling my speed, grinding into her, chasing the sensation I've come to love, the squeezing of her walls, the sudden fluttering as they dance around my cock in orgasm. While her vaginal walls flutter, her backdoor just tightens and clamps, trying to work against me. I'm so lost in sensations that one of her hands slides from my grasp and tugs my horn, directing our mouths to meet. My tongue wraps around hers, a lazy battle that's the opposite of the ones our hips are waging.

“Ye-esss! Fuck, yes!” Angela ends our kiss with a cry, ripping her lips away to screech when she peaks, and I burst right after her, in awe that this sexy human with her abundant curves just fucked me until my wings are weak and my legs collapse.

“You are magical,” I groan, lying limp across her.

She just sighs and strokes the ridges of bone above my cheeks.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:57 am

I shower while Graham remakes my bed—then I fall asleep.

When I wake up, my little burner phone shows it's almost two in the morning.

I slept through dinner. I slept hard—so hard, I didn't notice Graham wasn't beside me anymore.

"Graham?" I whisper, fear racing through me. I clutch the amulet around my neck and instantly feel better. "I need to get a gross of these things," I mutter, swinging my feet over the edge of the bed, rising, and gasping in pain at once.

Holy fucking sore pussy and ass. Tender from the boobs down. Thigh muscles burn. Legs feel like gelatin.

If I weren't worried that some hitman had shot my boyfriend, I'd be smiling and singing as I stagger painfully down across the hall to his room.

Nope. Not there, either.

I limp down the stairs, calling his name, and stop when I look out the big sliding door that leads to the backyard.

There's a dragon outside.

A giant dragon, the kind that you'd see flying high in fantasy movies, the kind wrapped around towers on the covers of fairytale picture books.

“Graham?” I hiss, and wince as the door squeaks open. His head raises at once, eyes wide.

Is he like... an animal now? Can he talk? Can he—

“Awake so soon, my little wren? I thought you’d sleep until sunrise.” The voice crosses the lawn, deep and slow, filled with hisses and warbles.

“Oh, wow. You can talk.”

“In all forms, yes, but only certain humans can understand us. Why do you think so many of us have been slain? Why we stopped appearing in this form?” Graham asks, then rakes the claws of one back foot against his side.

“Oh my goodness. That makes sense, actually,” I cry and try to run towards him. I fail. The best I can manage at the moment is a fast hobble.

“Are you sore?” Graham asks, rising and coming over to me. His steps make the damp grass quiver under my feet.

I once got to stand right next to an elephant at the zoo. Graham is bigger. He’s maybe the size of three elephants standing end-to-end. But even in his giant form, he lowers his purple head and rests it on my cheek. “It’s a good kind of sore,” I explain, stroking his massive jaw that’s easily as long as my entire upper body. “You’re huge.”

“And I make an excellent alternative to commercial planes. No waiting in line. No babies crying on board. No snoring neighbors.”

I laugh and continue to stroke his face. “Still handsome, too.”

“You are a rare one. Most women wouldn’t see past the reptilian nature to the mythical beauty underneath,” he chuckles.

“Well, it’s still you,” I say with a flustered shrug. He is handsome. He’s not human, but I know he has a human form.

My insides are all confused now.

“I can read your expressions very easily, little wren. You can admire all you’d like, but don’t worry. No human would be compatible with me in this form.”

I let go of his cheek, and Graham settles back in the grass. I wander down the length of his body, pressed close. I keep one hand on him, and he rumbles low and soft.

“Are you purring?” I ask.

“I’m contented,” he says, as if that answers everything. “But move, Angela. I need to remove some scales.”

“Why? Spa day?” I ask. “Exfoliation?”

His talons rake over his skin, but only a few glittering amethyst-colored scales fall. “Dragon scales are a strong protective magic. The people of Pine Ridge are mostly human and largely oblivious, but the ones who aren’t have agreed to help keep you safe—especially if I restock their supply of dragon scales.”

“Doesn’t that hurt you?” I demand. It looks like it would.

“It’s not painful so much as it is time-consuming. Scales are like chain mail and, as such, don’t like to be removed. Talons are strong, but not as clever as fingers,” he says. Graham holds up one of his front feet (hands?), and I can see that they have

opposable thumbs, one claw pointing out to the side. “I could pull from my face and neck, I suppose.”

“But you don’t. Because...”

He sighs. “Tomorrow, I will have cuts wherever the scales were taken. I don’t need to go into work and attract attention.”

“What if I pull just a few so you don’t hurt yourself so much? How many do you need?”

Graham flicks his tail tip over an empty mason jar. “That should do it. There are some in the grass we can retrieve, of course, but I imagine I’ll still need another thirty.”

“Thirty cuts on your skin? How big?” I ask, horrified.

“Small. Paper cuts. Think of it as nicks from shaving,” he says with a lazy swing of his neck, the dragon equivalent of shrugging, I guess.

“You’d cut yourself for a potion or something that will protect me? Why? I thought I had this thing for that.” I hold up the amulet, guilt running rampant. “I don’t want you to hurt yourself for me! That’s not right.”

A cloud of smoke, stronger and more noticeable than the faint whiffs I caught yesterday, flows from Graham’s fist-sized nostrils. “I didn’t know you’d pick up my amulet yesterday,” he confesses.

“Oh. So... Wait, this wasn’t part of the plan? I mean, I know I picked it up by accident, but if it’s strong protection, I thought... Wouldn’t you have given this to me anyway?” I ask, eyebrows drawing together.

Another wave of smoke. A heavy noise that makes me lean on his haunch for support. “Would you like the truth?”

“Always.” I chew anxiously on my lip, waiting.

“That amulet is very strong protection. I wouldn’t have offered it to you right away, though. You see... You see, a dragon’s amulet is rare. There is usually only one for each member of the family, and they’re not usually shared. They are taken off when someone is dying and handed to another family member. If a clan expands more rapidly than expected or there are none available, a new one can be made if there is still treasure left in the clan’s horde.”

My eyebrows must be hitting my hairline by now. “Whoa. So I grabbed the equivalent of the crown jewels?”

“A bit.”

“Then why won’t you let me give it back? Are you putting yourself at risk?”

Graham is silent for a moment. “You won’t be angry with me?”

“I hope not. Even if I am, you could barbecue me, couldn’t you?” I cross my arms and hope my voice sounds playful enough to conceal my worry.

“Kane amulets are protected from theft. They can be given as a gift from one heart with pure intentions to another. When you took it up, it was because you genuinely believed it was for you—and when I took it off, subconsciously I must have been hoping someone special would take it up.”

“Aww, honey. That’s sweet. You’re an awesome boyfriend, scales and all. Why would I be mad at that?” I blush, realizing that’s the second time I’ve called him

boyfriend—once in my head and once out loud.

“It’s a bit more serious than that, Angela. I called my brother once I realized you were wearing the amulet like it was made for you—and he said it very well could be.”

Graham suddenly seems to shrivel under my touch, and in seconds, the sexy human I first saw is standing naked beside me in the dark, hand cupping my cheek, small streaks of crimson like cat scratches all down his side. “My amulet is intended for my mate.”

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“But if I take it off, we break up?” she asks after a long silence I can’t decipher. “If that’s the right word?”

“I suppose. But you could expose yourself to terrible danger like that, Angela. Don’t take it off until we know Genovese has turned his attention to something else.”

“You want it back so you can give it to your real mate?” Angela asks, her head twisting away from me. “Like... All the feelings we shared, the stuff we did—Oh, God. That was like a spell?”

“No! No, no, no. No.” I reach for her, but she pulls her hands back. I think of all the convoluted explanations I could offer. I could tell Angela more about my reservations about humans, or how the way the amulet is working overtime to find my mate, or my sketchy connections to a guy who knows a guy who knows Genovese, or even the ancient lore from my family or dragons in general—but I skip all of it. “I want you to keep it on because I want you to be my mate. My... wife. My wife.”

Angela’s head whips up so fast that I wince, imagining her fragile human bones snapping.

“But I know that you’d never agree to that so quickly. You are on the run from one arranged marriage, you wouldn’t launch into another so soon, not that this is exactly arranged. Assisted. Amulet assisted matchmaking,” I babble.

“That was different. He didn’t want me. I didn’t want him.”

That’s different, she says. Does that mean she does want me? “I want you,” I

reassure. “I’ll prove it to you.”

“I... I don’t know what to say.” Angela clutches the amulet, but her eyes are starting to fill with tears while her lips tremble into a smile. “Are you serious?”

I slowly change back into my full dragon form, causing her to jump back a little, avoiding my sudden shift in size. “I asked for the right to call you mate. I freely give you the strongest protection I have. I would tear the scales from my side.”

Angela smacks into my side, arms wide, too-small body hugging my too-large side. “Okay, okay, you’re serious!”

“And tomorrow night—we’ll go to the mall. Okay, princess?” I offer. “I will court you in words and deeds. In return, you accept me in all of my forms.”

“That doesn’t seem like an entirely fair trade.” Angela’s hands massage over my hide, catching on some loose scales. With a hard tug, she wrenches one off, then massages the skin around it. “All I have to do is accept you while you save my life?”

“That’s for now. Until I woo you and win you on my own, amulet or no,” I say. “Then, I want something else. Something even more precious.”

Angela looks at me as she runs her hands over my hide, slow and sensuous. I have an idea that if I told her that I wanted her in any and all of my forms, she’d agree. I’m sure there are ways a couple could enjoy each other even with such mismatched sizes, but I shelve those thoughts for now. I rake my back talons down my side, loosening scales, and Angela goes about tugging them free. Each time she pries one loose, she pecks the skin beside it.

So gentle. So sweet. My flightless wren, my wingless angel.

God, I'm smitten.

Angela plinks the scales into the jar, then holds it up high to admire the moonlight on the shining scales as they pile like purple jewels in the glass.

“What could be more precious than someone you love? At least, that's what I think marriage is supposed to be about—love.”

“Agreed, but for a while, I focused on a match with a dragoness and nothing else. Love didn't even enter into it. I didn't think I should even consider a human mate because it would hurt the family line.” Honestly, when I think of my time in the CrossRealms, when I think of all the fights my father had with other clans in the region, we've probably done more to hurt the family than marrying a human ever could. “I realize that's silly now. I have a human form, too. What really matters is... Would my wife accept me in every form? Would she accept the risk of having a child that's not fully human?”

Angela is quiet. “Is that all you want someone for? To have your kids? Pass on your genes?”

Her questions hit me like an arrow in my exposed side. “I think it was .”

“Oh. I see.” Her voice grows calm and cold, but her hands are still gentle, and her soft kisses still fall.

“I thought it was the best thing I could do for my family. I'm a disappointment to my clan, you know.”

“What? Why?”

“I took after my father. Hot-tempered and impulsive. Smart, but refused to go to

university. Willing to start a business, but didn't stick to it. Came to this nice little paranormal community of Pine Ridge, which is full of British expats, and couldn't even stick it." My head droops, and I stretch out in the grass, the image of a miserable, worthless dragon. "But if I had a son or daughter for my clan—they'd make up for all my failings, see?"

"Oh, babe. That's a lot to put on a kid. And what's to say that he or she would turn out any better if you feel like such a failure?"

"You're right. But when I think about my future... I pause, and my body shrinks as my heart swells. I stop at halfling form and lie in the grass. Angela slowly kneels beside me, the glass jar in her hand. "When I think about the future, I think about a family."

Angela lies across my chest. "Why?"

Why?

I wrap my arm around Angela, and everything inside of me that I've been missing surges up, all the dragon instincts I've berated Ian for "abandoning" as he lives a simple, successful life are bursting forth. The desire to protect and defend. The feeling of honor and loyalty.

You don't have to defend the entire castle—just your own particular princess.

My talons score her shoulder lightly as I kiss the top of her head. "Because after twenty-odd years of searching for my treasure, I've found it, and now I can't get enough." I roll on top of her in the dewy grass and resist the urge to take her again. "I want you and the children that come from you. My children. Our children. Our treasures. If they don't come, they don't come, but you said to be honest." I nudge my abdomen to hers. "I covet you, and I want to be the one who claims you as a mate. I

want to be the one who sires your children.”

She doesn’t slap me. Doesn’t push me off.

“You save my life, so you get to spend it with me?” Angela sums up the deal.

“Yes.”

I can feel the amulet growing hot between us. I swallow hard and wait. I’ve said so much. Probably too much.

Angela rubs the spot on her chest where the amulet rests. “Is it just this thing making me want to say yes?”

I wish I knew the answer to that.

BEFORE DAWN, MINEGOLD collects the jar from the mailbox. I get dressed, too full of adrenaline to sleep, rampant like a horny bull below the waist, and aching with dozens of tiny cuts above it.

I feel confident (maybe falsely so) that nothing untoward can happen with the supernatural community on high alert and Angela wearing my amulet.

Your job is to convince her to give you a chance to do more than just protect her.

What does one do to win a mate?

A heroic battle would be nice. But in the meantime...

How about a moonlight flight?

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“Should I cook or something ? I feel bad that I’m not contributing.”

“Don’t you guys have a cook?” Graham asks, flipping steaks in a cast iron pan.

“A maid, yes. A cook, no. My mom still loved to cook, and Ronnie said she was the greatest cook in the world. He liked to cook, too. They’d make big Sunday dinners every week, even if it was just for the three of us.” I finish setting the table and sit heavily in the chair. Working at the garden center is a good distraction. Looking at Graham is a good distraction. Thinking about what we did yesterday and might do again tonight is an epic distraction.

But then there are these lulls in the action, and I picture my mother running from thugs with guns, or being tied to a chair like a damsel in some old movie. I wonder if Ronnie will go to jail one day and break my mother’s heart. Will she end up in prison, too, on some kind of aiding and abetting charge?

I picture them in tiny cells, never cooking together again. Never even seeing each other again, and a sob spasms out of my chest in a single harsh burst.

Graham is at my side in less time than it takes to reach for a napkin. “Love, what’s wrong?” he asks.

I appreciate the sweet, protective side that he shows, looking around like he’s challenging the whole world to make a move on his mate. “I’m worried about my parents. What might happen to them. I... I want to be mad at Ronnie for being in this mess, and I am, but I’m also more worried about the fact that if he gets caught or killed, it’ll break my mom’s heart. She had so little happiness until she met him. He

worshipped her. He doted on me.” I wipe my eyes and let myself go limp against Graham’s shoulder as he scoots a chair close to mine and holds me. “You two are similar in some ways. You want a wife and family so badly. So did he. He had never been married before, never had a kid. It was like at sixty he got a whole new lease on life, and so did my mom.” My fingers curl into a fist and then slam on the table. “Fuck it. My running off ruined everything for them.”

“Wheest, woman, you have a big heart there, but let’s not throw out all sense. Your mum wouldn’t want you to be miserable to save her happiness. She wouldn’t be happy if you were in some paper marriage with a pretty boy who slept around. She already had a rough first marriage, isn’t that what you told me?”

I nod.

“Aye, well. She wouldn’t wish that on anyone, then. She’d want you to marry a man who would make you steak and jacket potatoes, then take you on a romantic sightseeing tour of the mountains.”

I perk up a little. “Sightseeing? Tonight? It’s already after seven.”

“Then it’s a good thing the steaks are done so we can be in the air by eight.”

“Oh, sure. I—wait, in the air?”

I WRAP MY TAIL AROUND Angela’s waist, and this time, I can pick her up with it. I’m in my full dragon form once again, but this time, I’m not trying to hide it from her by turning in the middle of the night. This time, I lift her up gently and set her up high on my back, between my wings.

Angela shifts and shimmies on me, and I try to keep my thoughts on pure and innocent matters—but it doesn't work. I can feel her gloriously curvy cheeks rubbing against my spine, feel her breasts on my back as she pulls herself into a comfortable position. I want to make love with my mate again. I want to feel her taking my cock and every drop of my cum like she did last night. If I breathe deep, I can still smell her arousal and my scent lathered all over her, the most powerful aphrodisiac ever known to dragonkind.

Finally, Angela finds a suitable spot, curled up between my wings and shoulders. "Oooh, I thought you'd be cool and cold, but you're like a cozy blanket."

"In this form, I do more than blow smoke; I can make fire. With a dragon, you'll always have heat, a fire in the winter, a light in the dark."

"You don't have to sell me on you like some used car," Angela laughs and rubs her fingers down my neck. She moans slightly, and I purr. "I love your scales."

"That's why you're my perfect mate. Fools don't appreciate them." With a stretch of my neck and a beat of my wings, we rise. "Hold on and stay low. We're not going to go too high—just enough to clear the trees."

"Whoa, shouldn't I have a saddle or reins or something?" Angela cries.

"The ridges that run along my neck might make good handholds," I suggest, and Angela immediately clamps on.

It's all I can do not to moan. The bony spurs she holds don't usually feel soft, warm hands latched around them. She turns me into putty, this woman.

I'd best impress her so I can keep her.

“W E’RE GOING TO BUY those aviator goggles when we land, okay?” Angela shouts over the rush of wind my beating wings create.

We fly low and slow, probably being mistaken for a small plane or hovering helicopter. “Goggles? Why?”

“So I can enjoy flying without my eyes leaking so much! Graham! There’s something down there in the river.” Angela’s voice is shrill with excitement. “Are those dolphins this far inland?”

I look down. “Oh, no. Selkies.”

“What now?”

“Beings that can become seal or human. The selkies around here are an awfully tight-knit bunch. Like to live off the grid, but they’d come to help in an emergency. I ought to ask them if they can keep an eye out for suspicious watercraft, I suppose.”

“People can turn into seals?”

“And bears. Dragons. Pretty much any other animal, it just depends on your magical ancestry.”

“Do all humans have magical ancestry?”

“No, not really. And most magical types like to marry other magical types to keep a lower profile.”

“One day, you’re going to tell me all about this magical origin stuff, okay?”

I wind my long neck back to smirk at her. “One day, this is going to be part of your story. Okay?”

I love it when she blushes.

M Y LEGS DON'T HOLD me when I slide off of Graham's neck. I stand, then topple to my knees, face windburnt, eyes leaking, laughing with a joy I never thought I'd feel again.

He is magical. He makes me forget the dangers around me.

He also plans the best dates. I sailed over the tippy tops of pine trees and felt mist on my face as I made a shadow on the moon. Saw selkies swimming up to the lake behind the woods of the White Pines estate.

“I'm dreaming, right? I was asleep and dreamed I rode a dragon through the sky, spoke to seal ladies, and touched some low-flying clouds?”

Graham picks me up, now in human form and wearing his long, battered black coat, but still so strong. He beams down on me. “Nope, you weren't sleeping—but it is time for bed. It's after midnight, and we have work at seven.”

I DON'T KNOW WHAT I was thinking would happen when Graham carried me in the house and up the stairs, all without huffing or puffing. His hand grabbed a possessive hold of my rear, and he gave the biggest contented sigh, which made me feel pretty damn good about the thing I've always been most self-conscious about.

“Would my little wren sleep in my nest tonight?” Graham asks at the top of the stairs.

“Sure,” I whisper, throat suddenly tight with anticipation. It’s been a day without more than a kiss and some sensual touches. I’m not sore anymore—just eager.

And curious. Will it always be Graham shifting into scales and horns? I wouldn’t complain.

But does the drop-dead gorgeous badboy want me, too? I’m cute, but... Well, that’s it. I’m cute, and I have a considerable amount of junk in my trunk. “Am I too heavy?” I blurt.

“What? You’re a little peanut of a thing.”

“I have a fat ass,” my inner saboteur becomes my outer saboteur.

“Oh, yes. You most assuredly do.” Graham sets me down, and this time he’s biting his lip in what I can only think is a lustful smile. He pulls his long, wind-tangled hair back in an elastic band from his coat pocket.

“And that’s okay with you?” I ask, stepping back.

The dragon man steps with me. I move left, and so does he, his smile growing. “Is my wren trying to fly away?”

“N-no. Aren’t wrens little, delicate birds?”

“Like my mate. Like my Angela,” he breathes out, catching my hands.

“With this butt?” I cry, one hand slapping down on my hip.

Graham's smile suddenly snarls. "Did you see me complaining the other night?"

"Well, no, but—"

"That is prime real estate. Thick, luscious, grabbable ass. And it's attached to the softest, warmest thighs. And I don't know if you know this—" he pushes me lightly to the bed and drops to his knees in front of me, "but flying up that high makes my ears cold, and I'm in dire need of a way to warm them up."

O H, MY LITTLE WREN makes the best noises when I bury my head between her thighs and devour her. I don't have a tail to please her with in this form, but two fingers and an adoring mouth seem to work just fine. "Greedy little thing," I purr as her walls grip my fingers. "Sucking on me like that. I'm pretty sure that means you'd like something bigger inside."

"I want you inside," Angela groans as I hammer my fingers inside of her, determined to get her to the peak before I give her my cock.

"Patience," I tell both of us.

Angela squirms back from me, and I let her go with a frustrated huff. "I wasn't done," I insist.

"Cock. Mouth. Now." She lies back and pats the space beside her head.

"But I'm not—"

"You're never going to be a good manager if you don't learn how to multitask," Angela laughs and pulls my hand. "You keep doing what you're doing while I return

the favor,” she explains.

“Ohhh.” My face lights up. “I’m not usually so slow on the uptake. I’m just pussy drunk.” I give her a crooked grin and lick my lips, swinging my hips towards her head.

Angela smoothly swallows down my cock, which is smaller than in my dragon form, but still on the above average size for human men.

I don’t know if this is supposed to happen, but when Angela runs her tongue over my tip and drags her teeth lightly down the skin as her mouth moves up and down, my brain cuts out. Snaps off.

Angela could ask me for anything right now, and I’d say yes. “I love that,” I gasp. “Love you.”

I hear her splutter, but I don’t care, too busy returning to my work between her legs, now at a different angle. I suck on her clit as she sucks on my cock, both of us seemingly determined to get the other to combust—and I’m far too close for comfort on that score. In a few moments, I crash back to the bed and pull Angela on top of me, sitting her soaking pussy down on my length, making sure she takes every inch, feeling her heavy cheeks slapping against my thighs.

“Ohhh,” she lets out one long moan, and then starts rocking herself on me, guiding my cock to the place she wants me.

I slid one hand to her breast and one hand down to keep rubbing that soft, warm pussy that’s now one of my favorite spots on earth. “You know why I love you?” I pant as she rides me with short, shallow thrusts, more like gyrations.

“Why?” Angela pants, face a mixture of pleasure and confusion.

Maybe my brain isn't disconnected. Maybe it's finally focused on what matters. "When I'm with you—I'm a better person. When I'm with you, I think about what's good in this world, instead of how it screwed me over. You make me happy. You bring back the warmth and softness dragons so often trade away." I look into her eyes and let my hand knead the spot over her heart. "The best part is... this is only the third day I've known you. Can you imagine how much more I'm going to love you in a week? A month? A year?" I sit up and drag her down to me, kissing her hard in my excitement.

"People fall out of love, too," Angela warns, but she doesn't stop kissing me.

"That's people," I say. "Not dragons."

"I'm a people! A person."

"But you're no ordinary person. You're my treasure."

"I—"

"Don't make me bite you, Angela," I warn, rolling her underneath me. I can't pin her down as effectively as I did in halfling form, but I keep her trapped under me with a smile. I nibble at each breast as I give her what she wants—fast, deep strokes that make her hips buck to mine. "You're my treasure. Say it."

"Fine, fine! I'm treasure."

"Nope. Say, 'I'm Graham's treasure.'"

"I'm Graham's treasure."

"Now, say you're my mate."

“Graham—”

“Say I’m your mate, or I’ll stop fucking you.”

“Wicked dragon,” she hisses as I suck her nipple deeply into my mouth.

“Say it, and tomorrow afternoon we’ll leave work early and go to the mall. You need new clothes anyway.”

“I’m not that pampered princess. I’m a smart, college-educated woman who wants a career. And a family,” Angela argues, but I can feel her trying to move against me to finally reach the orgasm that’s been building since I carried her upstairs.

“You are my pampered princess, and I’m your dragon. Now say you’re my mate, damn it.” I thrust into her hard and aim up, letting her find the last drop of pressure she needs to hit her climax.

Her wail of pleasure makes it hard to understand words, but after the first fractured gasps, I hear it.

“I’m your mate. Your princess. Graham’s treasure,” she whimpers in delight.

Her words unlock me. I can’t resist marking my mate, filling her with a treasure of my own, a copious flood of silver and pearl. “Mmm. Indeed you are.”

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“Angela, can you help with a field trip?”

I look up from the geranium I’m repotting. “You want me to load up the tomatoes and cucumbers and take ‘em to the zoo?” I ask.

“No,” Graham rolls his eyes. “We have the Bright Stars preschool bringing in their pre-k class. Jerry is going to give the talk, and then he and the teachers will help kids plant their seeds. Can you just be crowd control? I have to call Manny at the garage and see if he can squeeze in one of our trucks. It sounds like it has a bad serpentine belt.”

“Sure, honey,” I say, and Graham stops beside me, frozen with the widest smile I’ve ever seen on his face.

He walks off, whistling.

I think he might actually be in love. And me? I’m... I’m thinking about it. I know my body is in love with the best sex I’ve ever had, with two gorgeous cocks, with a magical world and dragon rides across starry skies...

But I don’t think I should jump into anything while my life is so up in the air. Right?

Then you shouldn’t have said you were his mate. You shouldn’t have gotten all goopy and soppy and started thinking about the pitter patter of little feet—or the flapping of little wings, either. I don’t know what life is like in Scotland, but how in the hell would you raise a little magical kid here?

I get my question answered at eleven when eighteen kids troop into the back of the garden center and sit down on the concrete pad that makes up the floor. The kids are all cute, don't get me wrong—but some of them aren't entirely human-looking.

One little boy is blurry with speed, another is too pale to be normal, and one little girl has elf ears if I ever saw them.

And no one says a thing about it. Maybe they can't see it, or perhaps in this town, no one cares.

All I know is that by one in the afternoon when they leave... I want one someday.

“Baby fever. It's stupidly strong when you marry a Pine Ridge resident or work with cute kids,” one of the teachers catches my dreamy-eyed look as we herd kids onto the small yellow bus. “The guys here are so protective, you know? So dedicated to their families.”

And devoted to practicing making one, I think, but I don't say it aloud to the nice teacher lady. “Yeah? Well, I don't know too much about Pine Ridge. I'm new here.”

“Oh, yeah? I'm Izzy Walsh. Officer Walsh's wife. Are you the girl who... who's staying with the Kanes?” she whispers.

Crap, all the rumors about small towns are true. “Yeah, that's me.”

“My sister lives next to you! Alban and Harper Wymark? You could not be safer. Alban's a badass warlock, and the police force here always gets their man,” she mutters from the corner of her mouth.

“Does everyone in town know I have some kind of target on my back?” I squeak.

“Oh, no. Just the magical community. But that’s a good thing. This place is peaceful, and we like to keep it that way. No bad guys survive here.”

I swallow. “Survive? Does that mean people who come here to commit crimes d—”

“Gotta go! Max, slow down, honey, you’re going to trip in the gravel!” Izzy doesn’t answer my question, too busy helping Speedy Junior get through the parking lot. “Wind sprite father,” she says with a roll of her eyes and a bemused smile—like that means something to my rattled brain.

“Bye! Come again!” I wave and then sit down in one of the lawn chairs we have on sale.

“Three days on the job and you look like you’re about done in, young lady.” Jerry, the kindly senior gardener, offers me a water bottle. “You get overheated?”

“No, no. Just overwhelmed. So many cute kids.”

“Yep. I’m going to be a grandpa soon. Look at this.” Jerry whips out his phone and scrolls through. “See this? My daughter sent it to me last week.” He holds out a blurry ultrasound photo. “I’m going to be Poppy Jerry by November. Think I’m going to tell Ian that I want to cut back my hours so I can babysit.”

“That’s awesome that you’re going to be so involved in the baby’s life. I bet your daughter is glad.” I manage a smile, but I’m suddenly missing my dad. Not my birth father, the jerk, but Ronnie.

Hell, he would have spoiled my babies rotten, not just with material things but time and energy. He made my mother and me his whole world—and now I’ll never get to share it with him.

“Oh, hell, I’m sorry, Angela. Did I touch a nerve? My wife says I talk too much.”

“No, no! That’s great news, Jerry. I’m happy for you. I just miss my stepdad. He would have been a great grandfather, too.”

“I’m sorry. When did he pass?” Jerry asks, sorrow on his tanned face.

I swallow hard. Hopefully not yet. “He’s just got... got a condition that’s keeping him from traveling to be with me right now,” I croak, and excuse myself.

I BARGE INTO IAN KANE’S office, which is currently where his brother is making phone calls and talking about hemi engines. I wait impatiently, arms crossed and pacing.

Graham hangs up and looks at me. “Some afternoon delight, princess? Or are you just eager to get to the mall?”

“You have connections with someone who knows Joey Genovese. You have magical friends. Can’t you find out what’s going on?” I beg. “Without tipping them off as to where I am?”

Graham opens his mouth, then closes it with a heavy sigh. “My boss knew someone who knew Genovese. My boss in the CrossRealms was an incubus.”

“A sleeping sex demon thingy?” I ask. “Those are real, too?” Well, duh, Angela. Why wouldn’t they be when dragons are?

“I thought he was a harmless one. I mean, some things which people call demons are not from Hell, or aren’t inherently evil. So...” Graham paces as I sit on the edge of his

desk. “Genovese and a lot of people involved in bad things are very superstitious. They believe in curses, the evil eye, all that. I’m not sure how much Genovese knows or believes, but they were able to trace you to Binghamton, and then... You dropped off of magical radar. The people he knew called up the people they knew to find someone who knew about Pine Ridge.”

“Pine Ridge? This tiny little dot on the map?”

“It’s a paranormal-friendly community. It’s not undetectable or anything, but the fact that people using magic could find you, and then they couldn’t... It looked like you went to a place where bad forces couldn’t easily penetrate. Where were you staying the first night you came to town?”

“Country Pines, that motel on the edge of town,” I explain with a frown. “You know that.”

“I do. But Country Pines is for people with magical abilities. It’s cloaked. You wouldn’t have been able to see it if someone in the know hadn’t taken you right to it. By staying there, you made it where any regular Joe would be stumped trying to find you.”

“But you’re not a regular Joe.” My mouth feels dry. “Your boss sent you to find me? You were working for someone who knew my father, all right, but it was one of his enemies!”

“I was already in Pine Ridge, and he knew where you might be. But, Angela, listen!” Graham runs to me, grabs my elbows, and blocks me when I try to leave. “They told me you ran away from your boyfriend. A case of cold feet before the wedding. They didn’t tell me it was some arranged marriage that you had no say in! When I found out, I did everything I could to help and protect you. I swear on my life. On my amulet. Little wren, please believe me.” Graham lets go and steps back. His voice and

eyes are entreating me, and even though I'm upset, I know he's telling the truth. He looks too miserable to be lying.

"You should have told me this earlier," is all I can say.

"I know. But then you might not have trusted me, and I wanted to protect you. You needed help, and I... Even before you put on the amulet, you made me realize I wanted to be a better man. When I saw you, I was immediately drawn to you. You didn't become my mate when you put on the amulet; you could claim my amulet because you were meant to be my mate. You are the person who made me a true dragon, not again, but for the first time." Graham grips one of my hands in both of his and brings it to his lips. "You made me shed all the murky parts of my past with one look, Angela."

"I did?"

"I swear it."

"Then tell me the truth—is there a way you can find out what's going on with the Argento and Genovese families? Is there some turf war? Is Genovese just going to pick Bride Number Two, whoever that might be? Am I really safe here?"

Graham rubs his chin and sighs. "You are safe here, at least from any dark forces Genovese wants to send. You're heavily guarded and as cloaked as can be, thanks to the work of the Pine Ridge coven and a dozen other things. As for what he's doing... I can ask Ardy Walsh, the police officer who is also a Pooka. He might be able to find something out without tipping others off that we're looking into it."

I nod, making a mental note to look up Pookas later.

"Can I still take you to the mall?" Graham asks in a timid voice that doesn't match

the magnetic, larger-than-life personality he has.

“Sure. And grocery shopping, too. I want to cook tonight,” I say. “Lasagna. I need comfort food.”

“Anything you want, my princess.”

“Would you please stop being so irresistible?”

“See, that’s how I know you’re my mate. My brother says I’m insufferable, and you say that I’m irresistible. We’re meant to be.”

Graham sounds so happy and peaceful when he says it that I’m starting to believe him.

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“If I buy you things, I get the final say on some of them. Just some. Say ten of them?”

Angela squints at me. “That’s controlling red flag number one. I’m dressing how I want.”

“No, no.” I turn the truck into a parking spot and look at the bustling mall entrance, currently filled with high schoolers who just got out of school. “I mean, since I’m buying, I get to pick out ten things I want you to wear, in addition to the things you want.”

“I... I just need some jeans, shorts, and shirts. Okay, and underwear. And pajamas. Shoes.”

“Don’t need pajamas,” I mutter. “Okay, five things.”

“Three.”

“Only you would talk me out of getting you more gifts.” I roll my eyes and fight down my urges to pull her into the backseat of this double cab monstrosity and ravish her. “Stubbornness is very attractive in a dragon,” I finally confess as Angela looks at me, one dark brow arched and lips pursed.

“Oh, then honey... You’re going to want to invest in another cup of coffee because I can stubborn all night long,” Angela teases.

Suddenly I have the vision of me teasing my curvy mate, keeping her on the edge of

peaking, giving her pleasure, then stopping cold—to see how long her stubbornness lasts. And maybe when she sees the three things I have in mind for her, that will be the plan for the night. Maybe every night for a week. Or a month...

S HOES. SNEAKERS AND flats. Leggings and jeans. Plain cotton shirts. I keep a running tab in my head. I have to pay him back someday. I could use the cash in my wallet, but I have a feeling Graham will growl and maybe even blow smoke out of his nose if I try.

He follows behind me. “This is pretty.” A black cocktail dress. “I like this!” A cute blue sundress. “You didn’t get a purse. Don’t women need handbags to match dresses?” Graham follows me like a puppy with a shopping fetish, tripling the cost with everything he picks up, and I can’t even tell him to leave because he’s technically my bodyguard. Speaking of which...

“Anything from Ardy Walsh?”

“Nope. But he says that’s a good thing. It means no big showdowns have occurred or anything like that. No one has spotted any unusual newcomers in town. The Country Pines Motel is vacant—and that’s normal, apparently.”

I nod and get lost in my own thoughts as I let Graham tug me where he wants to go in the small mall that looks like a holdover from the early 1990s. Just as I’m wondering if the greater Pine Ridge area has pockets of time warp, Graham’s voice breaks into my thoughts.

“Which one would you pick?”

“Which what would I—oh. Oh!” My eyes focus on rows and rows of glittering

jewels. Rings. “I don’t want a ring,” I stammer.

“It’s one of my three things. I want you to have a ring.”

“Graham! No.”

Graham comes behind me, his arms full of shopping bags, and whispers in my ear.

“You promised. I’m paying.”

“I don’t want a ring,” I repeat.

“Because you don’t want me? Or you don’t want it now? Or something else?” he hisses.

“I’m not ready. I... I don’t deserve this.” The words spring out and catch me unawares. I want love! I want a man who supports my dreams—as I try to figure out what the hell they look like in reality. “I shouldn’t act like some spoiled little rich girl. I played along for my mom’s sake, got to the point where I kind of believed, and then it all blew up in my face. Princesses don’t seem to actually be very happy people, do they? Not in the real world.”

Graham accepts that with a sad inclination of his head.

“Look, I love the idea. I do. But good things don’t just fall into my lap like this. If they do, they come with bad things, too,” I explain more gently.

Graham nods slowly and moves me along the display cases until he stops in front of one bright amethyst in an opal shape. It doesn’t scream engagement ring, but we both stare at it.

“It matches you,” I say, voice quivering. I suddenly want that thing on my finger

more than I want my next breath.

“If I give this to you—I will take all the bad that comes wi’ it. I promise ye,” Graham hisses, voice low and accent thick.

“Graham...”

“At least let me see if I can convince you to wear it after tonight?” he wheedles, and I cave. How could I not? I’ve never had anyone share so much of himself with me, had someone literally and figuratively take me under their wings like he has. “All right.”

“Good. Now, we just have one more stop to make.”

I HAVE NO PROBLEM WITH items two and three that Graham wants me to wear—a pair of pink high-heeled slippers with the fancy fluff above the peep-hole toes, and a satin babydoll nightgown in a matching shade. The ring sits in a box next to my bed—and a purple beast with horns and fangs lies on top of it.

Graham strokes both cocks as he watches me enter the room, his devilish smile widening. “My treasure in her pretty wrapping. Will you take what’s in this pretty box?” He sets the dark plum-colored velvet box in the middle of his rippling abs, still pumping, massive hand wrapped around his thicker, fuller cock and the smaller one as well. For a moment, I imagine what it would be like to have both of them inside of me, to feel the friction of them pulsing inside of me while rubbing against each other. Stuffed so full... feeling both loads bursting in my pussy.

With a snap, the box opens, and Graham entreats, “My angel. My princess. My sweet little mate. Put this on your finger and say you’ll be mine.”

“Baby, don’t rush me. I want to make sure some crazy thing doesn’t rip us apart,” I say, sashaying over to him. I love the way he looks me up and down, eyes starving and lips parted as he takes in the sight of me.

“A crazy thing brought us together. I’m sorry I fell in love so hard, so fast.”

Oooh, direct hit to my heart. “Never be sorry for that. Just know I’m going to take a little longer to get to where you are.”

He puts the ring off to the side. “You won’t mind if I try to convince you to reach that point a little sooner, will ye?”

“No, I won’t,” I say with an indulgent smile. I lean down to kiss him and find myself suddenly crushed against his chest, muscular arms and wings making a purple prison as his tongue dances with mine. “Can we do this every night? The sex, not the shopping?”

He laughs, a sweet, smoky sound in my ear. “Almost every night but Friday. That is when I’m supposed to go to the Night Market and run the stall for Ian.”

“You have a whole brick-and-mortar store and a thriving business. Why do you need to run a stall at a flea market? Admittedly, the nicest flea market with the coolest stuff I’ve ever seen, but still?”

“It’s more of a service, pet,” Graham says as he strokes his talons lightly over my skin, setting my spine to tingling. “Some people in Pine Ridge can’t move safely by day. They need the moonlight or the darkness to let them do their shopping. My brother has an entire section of night-blooming plants. Jasmine, cereus, hellebore, phlox, jasmine, and more. I’ve got to run the stall on Friday nights until late. You want to come with me or stay home? I can ask one of the neighbors to stay with you.”

“Alban Wymark, the badass warlock?” I query.

“How did—”

“People in this town know each other’s business way too much—but they don’t seem nasty about it. I’d rather go with you than stay home.” I nuzzle my cheek against his chest. “We can have a quick dinner of leftover lasagna.”

“You’re the best cook in the world,” Graham says, nibbling my ear. His fingers reach beneath the fluttering hem of my nightgown, and he uses his talons to lightly stroke my puffy nether lips. One tip scrapes gently over my clit and makes me gasp, a rush of wetness flooding me. Graham dips his finger easily inside and starts to stroke in and out while his mouth dances over my throat.

“Oh. Oh, that’s nice,” I sigh.

And then he stops. “You know, there’s not much Italian food in this town? That was a rare treat tonight. The chef over at the River House used to keep a few Italian specials on rotation, some pasta dishes, but nothing like that lasagna. Mm. My mother couldn’t make such a thing unless it came out of a box in the freezer section. Mind you, my father was never much for pasta to begin with.”

“That’s the way it is in some families, I guess,” I say with a puzzled shrug. “But we weren’t talking about food, were we?”

“Mm, you’re right. Although I seem to have neglected my dessert.”

Graham picks me up and stands me on the bed as he scoots down, his wings open against the pillows propped on the headboard. “Glorious sight,” he sighs, looking up my dress and guiding me to stand over his mouth. “Built-in handles, love.” He taps his horns, and I cling to them as he pulls me down to sit on his mouth.

I've never done face-sitting before, and all I can say is that all women should have partners with built-in handles. The first strokes of his tongue make my toes curl and my knees buckle. I fall off my fancy slipper-heels, and Graham's hands catch me, digging into my ass as he moans.

He switches from sucking, to licking, to running his fingers around my clit and then plunging inside of me, keeping me on a tilt-a-whirl of almost-climax.

"Would you like to keep the slippers off and put the ring on?" he asks.

"Honey," I whine as his tongue leaves me.

It doesn't return. Soft little pecks and nibbles replace the thorough tongue fucking I was getting.

"I just thought I'd check," he says innocently and eases me back onto the bed. "Such a needy wet puss," he croons.

"Your fault."

"Proudly." Graham settles over top of me, and his smaller cock nudges its way inside, the thick, heavy upper cock rubbing my clit on every stroke.

"More. I want more of you," I beg, reaching for his cock, only to have his hand snatch mine back.

"Patient. We'll enjoy it more if we wait."

But that's a one-sided opinion.

For the next ten minutes, Graham teases me with his smaller cock, letting it do most

of the work, then briefly dipping the larger one in, surprising me by pushing it all in on one stroke, sending my pussy muscles into ecstasy, and then returning to languid cuddles where he barely penetrates me.

It's nice. It's loving. Tender.

It isn't what I was expecting. "Are you feeling okay?" I ask.

"Mmhm. Are you?"

"I was hoping for a little more time with the extra special package," I admit.

"Ohhh, I can oblige my mate." Graham nods and switches gears, taking me on a roller coaster ride.

First, his thicker, longer cock splits me wide, and I feel like my pussy is swallowing him whole—all the pressure builds and sends me racing to the edge. And then the smaller cock takes its turn, still a decent size, but confusing my muscles. If only he would pick one and stick with it, but no, he's on some quest to please me with both. If he does it long enough, he'll succeed.

But in the meantime, I'm going crazy. I want him in. I want both. "I want both cocks. Let's try both," I pant, fingers tangling in his hair.

I hear his excited intake of breath, feel his muscles tensing. Then he stops and settles for kissing me hard. "Later, love," he says. "I want to take my time."

"But you're so hard. I can feel how bad you want me." I tug him by the horns, keeping him pressed against me. "And can't you feel how badly I want you?"

Fingers slide in me, followed by a tail. This dragon owns every inch of me and wants

to remind me—but then he stops short of delivering. “Want me to beg, is that it?” I laugh. “Well, I will. Please give me your cocks.”

“Please wear my ring,” he counters.

“Graham!”

“Where do you want them?” he asks. “In your pussy? One in each? Your tight little bum? I don’t think they’ll fit, love.”

“My pussy,” I moan as he rubs both against me, sliding through my soaking folds and over my clit. “Both, please.”

Graham’s hand grips both of his cocks, compressing them. With a grunt, he lines them up at my entrance and feeds them in, slowly, pushing past the limits of what I’ve ever experienced, making me wince in pain and then lose myself in pleasure as I feel my pussy throbbing around them.

They pulse, too, trapped in my heat. “That’s so incredible,” I gasp. “So full.”

“Like it?”

“Mmmm, yes.”

“I was hoping to deprive you of such pleasure. Keep you on the edge all night, little mate,” Graham whispers.

“Huh? You were?”

“But I can’t resist you. I wanted to see if I could torture and tease my way into your heart—and get my ring onto your finger.” Graham’s shoulders drop, and he pushes

inside of me, burrowing in deeper and beginning the steady rocking motion that builds and builds like nothing else. “But I could never do that to you. Even in fun, I can’t stand to leave you needing anything—especially not me.”

He always wants me to have him.

He wants me to want him. He wants to be the only one. I would get three incredible beings in one, and all he would get is me... and that’s all he wants? “The way you love me? Is why I love you back.” I stare steadily at him, hands stroking down the sides of his surprised face. “And that’s why I want to wear that beautiful ring—because it is from your beautiful heart.”

“Oh, my Angela! My treasure!” Graham grabs for the box, misses, and falls off the edge of the bed, taking me with him. I land on top, his cocks popping free and both of us making noises of discomfort. “Oh my wings.”

“My butt,” I gasp, moving gingerly.

“Worth it,” Graham grunts, grabbing the box successfully this time. He slides the ring over my finger and holds my hand to his chest. “My mate. My wife.”

“I can’t believe it. I turn down a proposal from a stranger this week only to end up accepting one from a dragon,” I giggle.

“I won’t even tell you what my week was like,” Graham snorts.

“Can we go back to the delicious double-stuffing now? Please?” I flutter my fingers under his nose, showing off my ring.

“Abso-bloody-lutely.” Graham pounces on me and turns me onto my knees.

With a little screech of pleasure, I feel his tongue slide across my clit and through my soaking entrance as he holds my thighs apart with his talons, and then he sheaths himself inside.

In this position, all of his dragon strength and size come into play. One hand grips my hip and the others shove his cocks inside my entrance, the girth making me cry out. My knees spread as my mind spirals, and the only thing registering is the buzz of pleasure that comes every time he moves.

“Such a perfect pussy, made to wrap around me in both forms,” Graham crows.

I sneak a look back at him as he throws his head back, hair streaming back between his horns, forked tongue lolling. “What about your third?” I tempt, panting as I push back against him, because yes, I am a glutton for punishment.

“Oh, I doubt there’s any way that you could accommodate me as a full dragon, love. But if my treasure would ever sleep naked against me, I’d keep you warm, tucked under my wing, and my heart would be full.”

Such a beautiful speech, and It’s all I can do not to be crude and say, “Not as full as my pussy.” By a sheer miracle, I don’t. I don’t even know if I could make words at this point. Graham slams into me harder and faster as I loosen around him, and I feel a mixture of our essences leaking from me, coating my inner thighs. “We’re ruining the carpet,” I say. Or at least, I try to say. It comes out as jumbled mush and moaning.

“I’ll have it professionally cleaned. I’ll have the place covered in grass seed and make an Eden for you, treasure of mine,” Graham cries and plugs me, locked in deep.

I almost collapse under him, thighs and knees giving out as the spiraling, buzzing pleasure seems to suddenly pop. I spasm and feel an echoing twitch from Graham before I’m absolutely flooded.

“Wow,” I whisper, sinking down, stretched out like a yawning cat.

“How soon can I add a gold wedding band to your finger?” Graham asks.

“Impatient wing-a-ling,” I giggle.

“You like my wings. They can take us on a honeymoon anywhere this side of the Atlantic, after all.”

“We can’t get married until I know where my mom is going to be. Or Ronnie. Or your brother and sister-in-law. Oh, God, what if they hate me? I just ruined their carpet!”

“We ruined the carpet. I guess from now on I can only claim you in our own bed. In our house.”

“Which will be... where?” I ask.

“Oh, Pine Ridge, I imagine. Picture it, Angela...”

Graham paints a picture, but I’m drifting away as he picks me up and carries me back to bed.

He’ll partner with his brother again, who always wanted him to come back to the family business, and back to the family, period. We’ll have little ones to play with baby Murdo Graham Lewis Kane. We’ll have a home of our own... Not so very grand.

My castle will be smaller, but I’ll always be his princess, he says.

“You’ll always be my dragon,” I promise, then fall asleep with my hand curled

through his.

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“Hi, Mr. Minegold. Good to see you. Hi, Robbie. Hi, Jesse. Oh, Genesis, I heard you got married—to a human, no less!” I greet the three vampires and the gargoyle as they approach the stand, then shake hands all around. Angela’s off getting us something to eat, heading over with Libby to get Chinese takeaway from the Jade Forest.

“It’s Mother’s Day this Sunday. Got to get my daughter-in-laws something. This is Charlotte’s first Mother’s Day as a mother, you see,” Mr. Minegold says with a proud look at Robbie. “A boy.”

“And Sophie and I had a girl! Father of two, can you believe it?” Jesse whips out his phone.

“Melinda and I are waiting a while,” Genesis proclaims, but his phone comes out, too. I’m lost in a sea of baby pictures and wedding pictures that would melt a heart of stone. Fortunately, I have a dragon’s heart, and I can get away with a few manly sniffs.

“I’ve got happy news myself, but I couldn’t get hold of Ian and my mother to let them know, so mum’s the word,” I say in a hushed voice.

“That brunette beauty? Ahh, I thought so. I am getting a sixth sense about these things. Whenever someone new moves in near Pine Crest Avenue or stays at Country Pines, I mentally prepare my welcome wagon,” Mr. Minegold says, picking up a deep black flower. “What’s this, Graham?”

“A New York Night Single Hellebore, Mr. Minegold. Sophie would love it. Now, for

Charlotte, I think something brighter. Take a look at this new crossbreed phlox,” I direct Robbie’s attention to a spray of pink and white flowers.

“Excuse me. Excuse me, have you seen this woman?”

My attention turns and tingles at the words. The older man holding out a phone seems distraught, his voice frazzled, bordering on hysterical. Mr. Minegold and his “sons” stiffen beside me. Genesis gives me a quizzical look and moves away, back to his stand in the third row of stalls, closest to the pine forest that borders the lot. He can’t change form, and I suppose he thinks it’s safer not to be spotted by the man. Sometimes those teetering on the brink between madness and sanity see more than the average eye.

“Ohh. Um. I think I have seen her somewhere here tonight.” A kindly woman that I don’t know scans the crowd and guides the old man away as he clutches at her elbow.

“Thank you! Thank you, where?”

“Is she lost? Is this your daughter?”

“My daughter-in-law.”

“I don’t... I don’t like this.” I rub my chest. My gut feels off.

“Jesse, go get a look at that screen,” Minegold instructs.

“I... Rob, watch the stand for me?” I ask, voice barely audible. I look back to the third row and see Genesis talking to Milo, the big minotaur metalworker with a stand beside his. Libby isn’t with them. Angela isn’t with them.

They’re still getting food, just across the street, down the far side of the lot, I tell

myself, breaking into a slow jog. I shouldn't have let Angela out of my sight.

But there she is. She's in my sight now, coming along arm in arm with the very pregnant Libby. Each of them carries a big brown bag with a printed Chinese dragon on it, a Lung. Maybe it's a lucky omen. A sign that I'm being paranoid.

"There she is, sir. That's your daughter-in-law coming across the lot with that blonde lady."

"What?" I gasp.

Everything happens at once.

The doddering and distressed old man straightens up and strides ahead, iron in his spine as he leaves the helpful older woman behind him. "Miss Argento," he calls out.

Angela freezes, and I break into a run. For all I know, I plow through people and knock over stands and stalls. Angela is all I see.

I change into halfling form as I run, clothes tearing as wings burst free and tail lashes out. I have my coat back at the stand, but I couldn't care less about ending up naked. All that matters is that I get to Angela first.

Angela's running, too, pulling Libby with her, back toward the Jade Forest.

"Stop running, Miss Argento, before someone gets hurt. Your father should have come to get you, but he's... Well, he's disappeared, hasn't he?"

Angela freezes again. "Ronnie?" I can hear her weak voice ask, see her tears forming before they fall.

All at once, something snaps in my pretty princess, and she moves forward, running like a dragon about to take to the air. “What did you do to my father?” she screams, her manicured claws out.

“Maybe your mother will still be alive to make it to your wedding,” the man says, far too calmly.

That’s when I notice that men are coming toward him. Men that I don’t recognize. Human men, who wouldn’t set off any magical wards or protective charms.

Ordinary thugs with guns are near my mate—and in my town.

“Genovese!” I thunder, running toward him, talons ready to rip and tear—but someone beats me to it.

Chloe, the little banshee who owns the secondhand shop and has a stall right up front and center, whacks him with a vase, earning a curse and a cry of rage accompanied by the audible cocking of a gun.

Fuck, he’s going to shoot innocent people.

And I... I’m sorry about that, but Angela matters more. With a screech that sends smoke rolling and owls flapping out of the tall pines, I make it past Genovese with a flap of my wings and snatch Angela by the arm, hauling her into the air.

“He killed Ronnie,” she sobs, burying her head in my arm. “He has my mom. I know he has my mother, did you hear what he said?” she wails. “He has men with him, men with guns, Graham!”

“I know, but—” I look down as I fly higher, and see blue flames bursting into the middle of the Night Market. “But he’s not going to get away with it.”

M Y MATE IS TOO HYSTERICAL to comprehend what's going on, and her vision is limited by human sight, but I can see for nearly a mile, and what I see now reminds me that Pine Ridge isn't peaceful because it's boring. It's peaceful because people are willing to keep it that way. "We're going to win," I tell Angela, holding her tight as I move us back to the pines that line the lot.

"Huh?"

"Trust me."

The blue flames surround Toby, a Reaper who's got his three-headed cerberus-corgi mix herding thugs like an expert sheepdog. Ordinary folks, shopkeepers, and citizens are herding each other to safety while the three intruders with guns learn that you don't mess with peaceable monsters.

Three sets of crimson eyes tell me Minegold and his boys are not above using their fangs tonight. Milo's got his own weaponry in each hand, not to mention the fact that he could stomp a person into a puddle with one hoof. And Genesis? Genesis doesn't have time for theatrics. He uses his whip of a tail to take Genovese to his knees and then bangs his head onto the asphalt, knocking him out cold.

"Come with us to the woods, please," Minegold commands to the thugs who remain standing, his voice frigid. "Ah—and put your guns on the ground and pick up your boss. I don't typically kill humans, but I'm not above biting them."

"Angela, they're coming this way with the Genovese and his men. We can ask where your mother is. We'll get her back, I swear it," I say, rubbing her back as she sobs. "I know we can't get your father back, but we will save your mother, wherever she is."

My Angela just huddles in abject grief. “He wasn’t a good man, but he was such a good dad. Oh, God. This is all my fault,” she weeps.

“Baby, you didn’t get him mixed up in this. He got you mixed up in this. If you remain free of it—he won’t have died in vain,” I whisper, swooping cautiously toward the ground—and halting in mid-air when three black SUVs with flashing rooflights barrel through the woods.

“This is the FBI. We have a warrant for Joseph Genovese on counts of money laundering, illegal use of a firearm, and drug trafficking,” says the first man out of the car, his badge held high in one hand, the other on his belt.

“Then I believe you will want this man, here,” Minegold motions to Genesis, and the gargoyle drops Genovese like a sack of garbage. “You will also want these men for disturbing the peace and attempted kidnapping.” Robbie and Jesse throw the other men down, and they wisely stay on their knees.

“Kidnapping of whom?”

“A Miss Angela Argento,” Minegold replies. “She was chased through our community’s Night Market, but she ran to the safety of the woods, and we were able to stop these thugs.”

“Where is she?” The FBI agent is joined by more of his ilk, piling from the first two cars with crackling radios and handcuffs flipping open.

“Sweetie, I’m going to have to put you down and go get some clothes, or they’re going to lock me up for indecent exposure,” I whisper. “You have to be strong and stay with the guys for a minute, okay?”

With a sobbing hiccup, she nods.

“I’m just going to set you down, go and get my coat, and be right back,” I promise with a kiss on her temple. I ease down into the third row of trees, and then slip silently away on foot as I hear her cry out,

“Here I am, officer. I’m here! You need to arrest him for murder, too. He killed my father, Ronnie Argento!”

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Some of the hardest words I've ever said are barely out of my mouth when the third black SUV starts to shake with the screaming and pounding coming from inside.

"Angie! Angela!!"

"Mom? Mommy! Oh, my God, Mom!" I forget the police, or FBI, or whoever they are. I race toward the car, and my mother falls out of the back seat, into my arms.

And Ronnie leaps out behind her.

My throat shuts down and my heart stills, then rushes up in a single bound, fueling my incredulous, sobbing cry. "What? You're alive! You're alive? They said you disappeared, and that's mafia for dead, right?" I screech.

For a moment, no words make sense. I'm hugging my parents, my real parents, the only dad I've ever really had. We are a sobbing, snotty, incomprehensible mess, until someone with a deep voice barks, "HEY!"

We freeze, clutching each other.

The FBI agent in charge loses his severe look. "Miss Argento, come this way. Out of earshot, please."

As my three would-be kidnappers are piled into the first two cars, the FBI agent leads us farther away. "Mr. Argento has turned state's evidence, providing years and years of accounts that prove the Genovese and Argento families were heavily involved in organized crime. Multiple members of those families will face long prison sentences.

Mr. Ronald Argento and his wife, Joanne Argento, are being placed in the Federal Witness Relocation program in exchange for their cooperation. Mr. Genovese thought your father ran, hoping to avoid confrontations after you left the city. After that, his increasingly erratic behavior seemed to get worse. He got sloppy, and we tailed him to Pine Ridge earlier this evening.”

I nod, relief swirling through me. “You don’t have to go to jail?” I whisper to Ronnie.

“Nope. Finally doing the right thing for my girls. Being the husband and dad I should have been. And look, Angie, they’ve got places in Oklahoma, Montana, and even New Hampshire! You and Mom pick out the place, and we’ll start over. I’m sorry it won’t be such a lush lifestyle anymore, princess,” Ronnie says, cupping my cheek. “But your mom said you wouldn’t mind.”

“I won’t. But I... I can’t leave. I... Graham! Officers, Mom, Dad, this is Graham Kane. My boyfriend. I mean, fiancé. He protected me and helped me more than you can ever know. I can’t leave him behind.”

“Well... I guess he’s gonna have to come with us,” Mom says, looking over Graham with startled eyes. His long, dark hair is mussed, his shirt and pants are torn, and he’s in his long black leather coat—without shoes.

“Or you could stay here,” Graham offers, spreading his arms wide as if to encompass all of Pine Ridge.

The FBI agent shakes his head. “No, no. They need to be in the WITSEC program. Argento will have a price on his head.”

“We have a very active neighborhood watch,” Mr. Minegold pipes up, still standing back by the first car, giving his statement to another agent, I guess.

“And some of us have very good hearing,” Graham adds with a nervous chuckle. “Angela, they have to do what they have to do. We’ll visit.”

“No, you can’t.” My mom’s eyes overflow again. “They said you have to come with us, Angie. That’s the only way we can stay together. Once we’re in the program, we can’t have contact with anyone who knows us. This case is too big. Too dangerous.”

I swallow. Stay, and never see my parents again? Leave, and never see Graham again?

He’s silent.

I can’t talk over the lump in my throat.

Ronnie is the one who talks, rubbing my back lightly as he does so. “You know, I think those members of the local neighborhood watch did a pretty good job. Don’t you, Jo?”

My mother nods slowly.

“And Graham here kept Angie safe. Didn’t you, son?”

“My life is hers,” Graham says in that beautiful accent, and my mother gives me a look that clearly screams, “Yes! Snag him, honey!”

“This is a little bitty place. Out of the way. And I’ve got some legitimate money that I’ve always kept for a rainy day. I think... I think we’ll stay here. I want to be with my family.”

“Sir, you’re putting your family in danger,” the head FBI agent says.

“Yeah, well, I’ve been doing that for years, because I was scared, a selfish coward who thought I’d never have a family, never have a kid who would have to join this lifestyle. But I’m getting out now. I have a daughter to think of. Maybe some grandkids one day. They’re going to know that their old man was no coward.” Ronnie crosses his arms and gives one firm nod. “That is, if Joanne says it’s okay.”

My mom wraps her arms around Ronnie’s waist, snuggling into him with an adoring look. “It’s okay!”

“You’ll still have to testify, Mr. Argento. That’s part of the deal and the only way you’ll escape a long prison term.”

“Then I’ll testify.”

“We’ll go with him that day,” Graham says staunchly. “He will be under the Kane family’s protection.”

“What’s that? Some other crime family?” the agent asks in alarm.

“No. We’re just a bit fierce.” Graham says. “But Angela is my bride, so her parents are my parents. I won’t let any harm come to them—as long as they stay where I can protect them.”

“Oh, God. Spare me from a bunch of local yokel vigilantes. Fine, fine. I can’t force you to make the smart choice, but you’ll still have an agent assigned to you for the duration of the case, Mr. Argento, and we’ll be in touch. Don’t try to run off. We’ll find you, but maybe not before some of your enemies do.”

“I’m done running. We’re all done running,” Ronnie says, one arm around me, one arm around my mom. “Me and my girls are staying here in this nice little place.”

R ONNIE AND JOANNE SIT at my brother's table in matching blue bathrobes, holding hands. They look much older than I thought they'd be, but then again—almost losing your life and your daughter will do that to you.

“This is a lovely, lovely home, Graham,” Mrs. Argento says.

“It's not his, Mom, and I don't care about the size of the house where I live. Money doesn't matter to me.”

“Well, sweetie, it can't matter to us too much now, either. Still, we have a good chunk in the bank. Enough to live on until we find work. Put a down payment on a little place.”

Angela bites her lip. “Oh, Mom. No. I'm so... I'm so sorry.”

I know she's thinking about how hard her mother worked and slaved all those years. I can tell by Ronnie's face that he's thinking about it, too.

“You're still my queen, Jo,” he whispers.

“I know that, honey. I don't care about the work.”

“What about selling the house in Bayside?” Angela asks. “Surely that's—”

“An asset the FBI will be liquidating, along with pretty much everything else. Even if we could go back, I wouldn't risk it,” Mrs. Argento sighs. “Ronnie says he wouldn't be surprised if the place blew sky high if we were to go back. No, better to sell the place and save the neighbors. I'll miss all my shoes. And my earrings.” She smiles, the corners of her eyes wet. “But I would rather have you two than all the earrings in

the world,” she concludes with a shuddering sigh.

For a minute, there’s silence. I don’t know what to say. “The taxes here are very low. And the rents are good, too. My brother and I came over a few years ago with nothing but money for rent, a truck, and some tools. But look at us now. Of course, Vanessa’s money helped buy this house. That’s my sister-in-law.”

“Oh, sweetie. She looks so sweet. Such a pretty girl. I’ve always wanted Angie to have a sister. This is the next best thing!” Mrs. Argento sounds genuinely cheerful.

“You know what I always wanted to do?” Ronnie says, one hand propped under his chin, eyes distant.

“What, Dad?” Angie asks, rubbing his hand that rests on the table.

They beam at each other every time she says that. “You forgive me, kiddo?” he whispers.

“Yes. But if you get killed, I’m going to be mad at you,” Angela answers, voice thick.

“Hear, hear.” Joanne bangs on the table. “Now, what is it, Ron? What did you want to do?”

“Open a nice little Italian place. You know the kind with checkered tablecloths and candles in wine bottles? Sixteen tables, only open Thursday through Sunday, something like that. A hobby restaurant, where we make and serve good food. Your mom’s lasagna, Angela. My nonna’s veal marsala.”

“You know, this town is wonderful, but as I was telling Angela, it doesn’t have any Italian restaurants unless you count the pizza place near the college.”

Ronnie's face lights up. "Is that right? Well, we'd do pizza, too, but the real wood-fired stuff."

"The only one lit by dragons," Angela laughs.

"What, honey?" Ronnie asks.

"What, Angie? Her mother raises her eyebrows.

"Sweetheart. They've had enough for one day. We'll tell them in June," I lean down and whisper in her ear.

"What's in June?" Angela asks.

"Our wedding."

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Ronnie throws off his apron and pulls on his suit coat. “You’ve got the legs for it, son,” he whispers.

I smile at my father-in-law as I adjust my kilt. “Thanks, Dad. You’ve got a little chocolate on your thumb, careful.”

“Mm,” he licks it off, then wipes his hand on his handkerchief. “I’m glad someone else made the big cake, but no daughter of mine is getting married without a little tiramisu in the mix.”

“It’ll be an amazing reception.”

“Your lips to God’s ears. Joanne’s worried about someone ‘uninvited’ showing up. She didn’t invite her family in case this turns into something other than a wedding,” he sighs.

“Oh. It’ll be fine.” I look out at the chairs in the lawn of White Pines. “There are sixteen Kane dragons in those seats, in addition to my father and brother standing up front with me. Anyone tries anything... Well. I have never seen my father bite someone’s head off, but I wouldn’t be surprised if he did today.”

“Good to know. Stay clear of Papa Kane.”

“He’s in a good mood today. Both of his sons are finally hitched, and one is about to have a son. The Kane line lives on—and I have my treasure.”

Ronnie pats my arm and goes to take his place with Angela and Joanne (who I can

hear sobbing in the gazebo all the way across the lawn, even without supernatural hearing).

I have my treasure. My Angela. A whirlwind romance that's now lasted through an entire month, two cross-country moves, two new jobs, and one new set of parents in a town that sometimes makes you feel a little claustrophobic.

And in August, Tiramisu opens. That's the name of Ronnie and Joanne's new little restaurant next to the grocery store.

"You okay?" Ian asks me as I take my place by the minister.

"I have my treasure. So many treasures, so fast," I whisper, shaking my head in disbelief.

"Yeah, well. Here comes your crowning glory, the heart of your hoard," Ian whispers as Angela's entrance music plays.

"The heart of my heart," I reply, and watch my bride walk to me.

"I LOVE YOU." I LOOK up at the man swinging me around the dance floor, his long black hair in a short, glossy braid, every inch of him looking like some beautiful Highland vision in a crisp black jacket and subtly patterned Kane kilt.

"Are you happy?" Graham asks. He asks me every single day, as if he's worried I'll change my mind and vanish.

But I won't. "I'm incredibly happy. After all," I lean forward and whisper in his ear, "I'm the princess who got the handsome knight— and the dragon."

If you enjoyed this story, keep reading for more sneak peeks from

Monster Brides Romance and from S.C. Principale's Pine Ridge.

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I look at what's left . An army surplus blanket, one of my speckle-covered notebooks with a pen tucked inside, and whatever is in my old canvas book bag. I haven't even used it in months. I don't know if there's anything valuable inside.

Marlow hasn't fared much better. He has his leather Harley-Davidson vest, a tarp, and whatever he has in a big blue gym bag. His is probably better stocked. He travels more—which might be a blessing right now.

"Damn." Marlow looks at where we used to live. The lightning strike struck the biggest elm in the strand, and the bare trees, dry and tough from a historically dry winter, went up like matchsticks.

"It's gone. The whole strand. The whole woods!" My throat is full of tears. I don't care. It wasn't just home. It was my work, my hobby, my passion. It's not like anyone pays me to take care of the trees, but as a mothman, it isn't like I could go over to the West Virginia Department of Forestry and hand in my resume, either.

"Well. It's a big state. Spring is coming. Plenty of trees in the woods. Race you to see who can make a new nest!" My brother pounds me on the arm, his steely gray feathers at odds with my crow-black ones.

"Make a new nest? Here?" I shake my head, red eyes blinking back tears. "Marlow, no. This place isn't for us anymore. It's... stagnated. The humans know it, too."

Marlow's face is tight. "Humans are all idiots, and you know it. Let 'em leave. Then we'll rule the woods like we used to."

My antennae droop. My brother is the stupid kind of fearless. As our mother used to say, he's missing the bone in his head that tells him to avoid danger.

"We mothmen won't reclaim the area. The mining companies will move in. If not them, the mega marts and mall complexes. The new developments. Whether it's progress or purgatory, we're going to lose."

Marlow gives me a long, cold look before laughing. "You read too much, smarty wings. 'Progress or purgatory.' Ha. So what are you going to do? Make yourself your final cocoon and wilt away?"

I take a deep, patient sigh. Being the brains of the family (what's left of it) has some benefits. I'm used to dealing with Marlow's childishness. I've always been the mature "older brother" even though we're the same age.

"I think I want to go to a community that welcomes our kind."

Strong fingers tighten on my wrist before I can even cry out in pain. "You will not go to a CrossRealms, you idjit."

Whoo. Idjit. When the country drawl pours out like that, I know Marlow is close to losing his tough facade—and his temper.

"I'm not looking to fight evil vamps and demons! I like to prune trees, not whittle stakes. I was thinking someplace peacefully paranormal friendly."

Marlow snorts. "Not too many places around here like that. Thinking of crossing the ocean and hiding out in the Hebrides? I'd love to see you scrounge up money for airfare. Or did you plan on those wimpy little wings carrying you over the Atlantic?"

Yes. He's being a jerk. He's being a jerk because he's scared and upset. I try to

remember that. I try to count to ten, but I can only make it to three before I snap out, “No! Like Moonlight Bay or Pine Ridge! Yeah. Pine Ridge. It’s a little closer and a little warmer.”

My brother’s wings flare open, gray and red and angry. The markings on his wings are like eyes, black and crimson scowls on gray. They’re subtle enough that in the darkness of a moonlit night or a dense forest, humans just see flashes of shadow.

“You’re going to leave our home? Coward! Deserter!”

Calm. Calm. Calm.

“There is nothing for us here. Come with me. Come with me and help me start a new home. We aren’t going to thrive here. What happens when there’s only one of us left? We just die out?”

“We’ll meet someone. Someday.”

“Out here, we’re monsters. Up there, we’d be citizens. You know. Eventually.” My antennae flatten down to my head, and my wings droop. Mothmen aren’t social creatures. The idea of making friends and interacting scares me so much I could molt.

Marlow says nothing.

He knows I’m right. There is no chance of us saving our kind out here. No chance of mates. There are other mothmen and mothladies out there, scattered few and far between, but all of them have fled the cryptozoologists, crazy hunters, and curiosity seekers that have chased us to the edge of extinction and deeper into hiding.

Why have we stayed here in the wildest wilds of West Virginia?

I'm too scared to go.

He's too stubborn to leave.

What's more, Marlow isn't afraid to mix with people. Of course, he can only do it a few times a year, late at night during the huge festivals where they come to "celebrate" the mothmen most attendees don't truly believe in. People dress up like us (well, like bad imitations of us), watch grainy footage of turkey buzzards, and have parties. Marlow waits until these conventions have turned into bacchanals of monster fans and girls wearing tight tank tops with catchy slogans like "I'm Mad for Mothman" and "Mothman's Monster-Fudging Mate" and stuff like that. Then, he slips into the crowds. People love his "costume."

And if you believe his stories, those mothman chicks love it when he "keeps the suit on" while he satisfies them.

I would die. What if it was a trap? What if those girls find out it's not a suit and I end up dried and preserved on the world's biggest pushpin in the mother of all butterfly collections?

I'm dying right now, just thinking about making a move far from everything I've ever known, far from tradition, roots, and maybe...maybe someplace in this state, there's one of my kind that I haven't discovered yet. If I leave, I never will.

A shower of sparks and a loud crash startles both of us. Charred trees are crashing and falling like dominoes in the wind as drenching rain begins—too late to do any good.

"There is nothing left here," I repeat firmly.

"You are a quitter and weakling." Marlow glares.

“You aren’t going to out macho me! If I don’t ‘quit’ this place, our whole family will die out. Up there—there might be one of our kind.”

“Like she’d pick you.” He snorts, scoffing at my timid hopefulness.

“Yeah, I’m sure she’d rather have you, stud. Why don’t you come with me? See what kind of mothman the ladies prefer?”

“Don’t you try that dang smartass reverse psychology on me, Lenny.”

“Don’t call me Lenny. I hate that. And it wasn’t reverse psychology, you idiot! That’s what you do when you don’t want the person to do what you said! I do want you to come with me! That was bait .” I turn away in exasperation, my dark, solid black wings fluffed up in anger. “Hillbilly hick with wings.”

A hard tackle takes me down.

“Heard that!”

As our home and world crash down around us, my brother and I fight in the wet mud, beating the tar out of each other until we’re laugh-cry-cursing in the chilly late February air.

“Damn. Where was this rain hours ago when it would have saved us?” I shiver, wiping mud from my face.

Marlow lies next to me, panting. “I know, right.”

We both sit there, getting drenched. It’s the only way we’ll get clean.

Finally, Marlow yanks me up. “Aw. Go if you want. Yankee.”

“Don’t you do that. You know we’re not northern or southern. We’re mothmen. Come with me, Mar. Please? I really don’t want to leave you behind.”

“Lenny.” He heaves a deep sigh that ripples the feather-like hairs that make up our “fur.” “If I don’t stay, there won’t be anything to come back to when you can’t stick it up there in New York, with all those eight million people.”

I wince like he landed a blow. “Eight million? Are you sure?”

“Heard it on the television in the back of the bait shop.”

Another tree crashes, this one revealing an eerie orange glow. The fires are still burning, even in this wet, misty fog that’s covering the mountain. Another lightning bolt sizzles the air, and we have nowhere to hide, no nests, no nothing—not anymore.

Unless I’m brave enough to make something new.

“I’m going. If I don’t come back home by Christmas, you gotta come up there and find me, okay?”

“Deal.”

We stand, awkwardly gathering our stuff as the rain starts to come down harder and faster. “Do we hug?” I ask, arms dangling like limp windsocks.

“You big sap.”

But Marlow hugs me anyway.

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“U gh! Ugh! Ugh! Oh my God! Ohhhh. God!”

Will this loser please finish already?

Why do I keep doing this?

“Oh, yeah, baby! Who’s your daddy?”

I’m glad I’m facing away from Frat Boy. Rolling my eyes while he’s clearly giving his best pornstar-wannabe performance is probably rude. I don’t answer his question. It’s a turn-off. Hell, this whole night has become a turn-off.

It occurs to me that I’m doing a disservice to my fellow women. This guy is probably nineteen or twenty (old enough to be at the Pine Ridge campus of NYU), and he still doesn’t know how to have good sex. He’s rushed and clumsy, but he’s not giving off “this is my first time” vibes. If I hadn’t been soaking through my black fishnets since the moment I walked into the party a couple of hours ago, his attempts at athletic fucking would be mildly uncomfortable. And he thinks outdated phrases like “Who’s your daddy?” sound hot?

I am doing nothing for my fellow women in terms of training this bozo. That is probably rude—on my part.

And yes, having time to have deep introspective thoughts during passionate sex is also a sign that it’s not good. Passionate is a misnomer.

Faking does nothing for either of us.

I pull away.

“H-hey!” Bozo is handsome enough, and yes, I know his name isn’t Bozo. It’s Brad or Bert or something. Right now, he looks like a stunned, breathless Adonis-in-training.

“This angle isn’t working. You’re not hitting my G-spot, you’re totally neglecting my clit, and you didn’t go down before moving right to home base. Also, ‘Who’s your daddy?’ Ew, no. You don’t know if I even have a daddy-kink. Which I don’t.”

Bozo blinks. “Well...You have a fat ass!”

“I know.” I beam and pat my generously padded posterior. “And if you had been good, you probably would have gotten to fuck it on some future date. But this isn’t a date. This is a party hook up, and I’m horny. Now, you’d better make me come, or I’m leaving. Want me to show you how?”

Bozo splutters. “I k-know how to have sex, skank!”

“Oh, God. Your poor, poor future wife. Learn to take directions.” I pull my dress back down and leave whatever abysmal dorm room I’m in, walking past dozens of other couples who are spilling out of other rooms, making out in halls before they end for the night or take things inside and move to the next level.

As I get to the top of the stairs, a red plastic cup full of watermelon vodka splashes me in the back of the head.

I turn slowly. My lazy, psycho bitch smile spreads even slower. Bozo, holding up a pillow in front of his semi-adequate junk, gulps and slams the door shut.

Outside, I stand in the chilly mid-March air and let out a deep, guttural groan. It’s

more than sexual longing. It's sexual frustration. I slip into my car and roar away from the dorms.

Back at my apartment, I head into the shower with my favorite toy—but then stop as my phone buzzes.

Cathy: Are you up?

Cathy works at The River House restaurant. My fellow waitress is also my primary bestie. Claire, who used to be a waitress, is my secondary bestie. She's now my part-time boss. She and her almost-hubby own a bakery and coffee shop, and I help out when they have catering. When the bakery side of the business opens, they've offered me a full-time job.

Cindy: Yes. Just had the most unsatisfying sex I've had in months. Called it quits, and now I'm getting into the shower with something long, thick, and suction-y.

Cathy: TMI

Cindy: Why are you up?

Cathy: How do we throw Claire a bridal shower without her knowing when she works at the place where we want to have it?

Cindy: This is what keeps you up at night?

Cathy: Also the plight of children in need, human suffering, and global warming. Oh, and the threat of nuclear war.

I put my head in my hand and nearly blind myself with my OctoPussy, my delightful teal tentacle toy.

Cindy: I'll ask Georgia to help. We'll say we're catering for some other person, but it'll be for her.

Cathy: But then she'll do all the work!

Cindy: It's late. I'm horny. I will have more plans tomorrow.

Cathy: Don't you ever want to find just one nice man to love and sleep with?

My heart hurts. Yes, I do. But I don't know if I can find that.

Cindy: Sure, but in the meantime, I'm keeping sex toy manufacturers gainfully employed.

Cathy: You're a mess and I love you.

Cindy: I love you, too.

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Pine Ridge, New York .

Marlow acts like New York is a world away, but I just fly diagonally up Pennsylvania, spend the day hiding out-slash-napping in the mountains surrounding Antonia, Pennsylvania, and then work my way toward Pine Ridge. As the tractor-trailer drives, it's about seven hours. As the crow flies, probably five. As I fly—around six. (Crows don't worry if someone sees them. I do.)

In case you're wondering, no, mothmen do not have a fancy built-in GPS in our antennae. I just took one of those complimentary folding paper road atlases from the Wheeling Travel Plaza, and then I darted down low enough to read road signs every now and again.

Sorry if it's not as mysterious as you thought—and you can see why I won't be putting my flying skills on display any time soon.

Once I get to the Binghamton area, my senses start to tingle in a way I've never felt before. Oh, maybe a flash here and there, but this time, it's like my whole body is lighting up from the inside out. Magic. Supernatural power. Paranormal beacons.

Ley Lines, in other words. Pine Ridge is a paranormal-friendly place because there are three intersecting Ley Lines. A supernatural powerhouse.

“I've gotta be close.”

You would think that would spur me on, but it doesn't. I find a dense area of trees and land to have a quick pep talk and work on my hyperventilating.

What if I can't do this?

Marlow is right. I'm a coward. I'm timid. I'm shy. I'm...not good at things. I don't have skills. I mean—unless you have a sick tree. I'm good at woodlore, and I know a lot about plants. I know how to survive in the wild, on my own.

So why the heck did I decide to fly to a place where I'll need new skills I've never honed?

I wince as I see the sign in the glow of my red eyes, "Welcome to Pine Ridge, New York! The town with a heart as big as the great outdoors!"

Pine Ridge may be considered a small town to humans, but by loner in the West Virginia wilderness standards, it's intimidating.

Flying over it, my cowardly self-preservation instinct kicks in.

Well, Marlow says it is cowardly, but if I don't stay hidden, how will our species survive?

If I do stay hidden, how will our species survive?

"Six of one, half a dozen of the other," as my grandpa used to say.

There are thick snags and strands of pines everywhere in this town. I need to be near water. I want to be near enough to observe people and the magical beings who supposedly live among them.

Supposedly is a big, frightening word that makes me want to turn around and fly south, back home.

What if the rumors that trickled down over the past two centuries are just that? Rumors?

I decide to stay hidden until I have proof that Pine Ridge isn't just paranormal—it's paranormal- friendly .

I fly past the town, stomach churning as I see all the lights, and some are even scattered far into the hills. I'd like to fly further, but flying this many hours in two days, carrying all the stress of leaving home after watching it burn...

It doesn't surprise me when my body finally quits, wings fluttering limply until I touch down several miles from the last point of light, deep in a thicket of snow-covered boughs.

Cold, far from home, and alone.

Exhaustion and depression make a good sleeping pill.

“Y ou look... tired.”

Claire is polite and sweet and I love her. When I show up to help paint the bakery that will one day take the world by storm (Cakes by Claire, remember it), I don’t look fabulous.

The only consolation is that I don’t have work at The River House or classes today. Last night’s failed frat party kicked off Spring Break.

“Why is Spring Break not even in spring?” I whine, grabbing a cup of the famous Cinnamon Streusel coffee that Claire and Georgia have gotten me addicted to. It’s the perfect thing for a late February pick me up—especially if you’re an idiot who barely got any sleep as you tried to chase a certain erogenous high that you just couldn’t catch. “I can’t afford to go to Florida, and I’m definitely not going home to Ithaca—they got thirteen inches of snow this morning! Whatever zany madcap fun I have will have to be around here.”

“Ohhh, that explains why you look so beat. Late night Spring Break bash?” Claire pulls her long brown waves up into a red bandana and pulls on one of her fiancé’s old white t-shirts.

Claire’s honey is perfect for her, being a chef with a heart of solid gold—and ridiculously drool-worthy. Georgie is this gorgeous blonde Nordic-looking god with a chest like a whiskey barrel that worked out, and he’s about seven feet tall. Even on Claire’s very pumpkin-shaped physique, his shirt hangs loose like an old smock, becoming the perfect painting outfit.

“Not so much a bash as a crash,” I say, pulling my own sandy blonde hair up into a sloppy bun. “You look like Rosie the Riveter’s much hotter twin.”

“Thank you! You look cute, too. Um. Are you sure you’re up to painting?”

“Hey, I want the job as your assistant. The sooner this place is up and running, the sooner I can transition out of waitressing and into... something else. This, I guess.”

“You don’t sound very excited.” Claire pulls out rollers and painter’s tape, giving me a sidelong glance.

“No! I am! It’s just that in three months, I’ll graduate—after forever-and-a-half. This is my last Spring Break. Ten days of freedom before ‘freebie’ vacations are a thing of the past. I guess at twenty-five, it’s about time.”

“Hey, my timeline was the same—but for different reasons. I guess Georgie and I won’t see you for a few days, huh? You’ll be living it up—or laying low.” Claire laughs with a wink.

I know she’s probably picturing me having an endless loop of swinging singles’ fun in my apartment or living at Jax Alley, which is a sexy-skeevy roadhouse bar outside of town. “Haha. No. Probably not much.”

I don’t want to tell Claire about how pathetic my love life has gotten. I’m supposed to be the sexy adventurous one, the one who is self-assured and brimming with confidence. Claire and Cathy don’t look up to me, exactly, but they’re the mild to my “wild.” Claire wouldn’t be happily engaged without Cathy and me. We told her to go for it and make a move when she met the hunk of hot chef who hides out in the kitchen.

I want that. Not necessarily the tall, beefy drink of water Claire has, but—

Oh, who the hell am I kidding? Yes, I want that. I want a big, strong provider and protector to wrap me in his arms and tell me that it's okay that I've putzed around with my life for so long and that I don't know what I'm doing. That it's okay that I don't know what to do with a freaking liberal arts degree, and who understands how much I dread moving back home just to be shunted along into my parents' plumbing business.

"I really do love working with you. I love working in catering, and I would be crazy not to stay here and help out in this bakery. With your flavors and designs, it's going to be big."

"Maybe. It sure popped In December and January when you helped out at Jan and Diana's wedding. We got lots of people lined up for tastings. If only we can get them to commit. If only we can get Cakes By Claire trending again once I actually have a bakery open and I'm not just working in Georgie's kitchen where the coffee shop prep takes up most of the space! And a website. And social media. Oh, God..." Claire puts her head in her hands.

"Hey! Hey, hey. You should worry about your wedding day, babe. Leave the social media and web stuff to Georgia and me."

"Oh! The catering department, too..."

"You. Georgie. Happily ever after. Wedding bells a-ringing. White dress. Fancy shoes. Tux."

"He'll be in a kilt." Claire looks glazed.

I go over and firmly take her hands. "Ooh. I like. I thought he had Viking blood."

"Orc."

“What?”

“No-rth! Northern Scotland. The Hebridean area,” Claire stammers and stumbles over the words.

“Cool. Focus on that, okay? That’s what really matters in life.” I give Claire a big hug, expression pained where she can’t see it.

Love and a lifetime partner. A passion to follow. That’s what really matters.

Yeah, that’s right. That’s what I said. That’s what I meant.

“You’re right, Cindy. You’re totally right. I’ve got the person I love most in this world, and we’re getting married—and we have the money to make this place shine. We have the friends to help us. Oh, gosh. I’m going to start crying!”

I swallow a sigh and laugh instead as Claire hugs me and cries a couple of happy tears on my shoulder. I pat her back and roll my eyes heavenward.

No, not because this is a Hallmark moment.

Because I’m mad at myself.

Dang, I can dish out advice, but I sure as hell never learned how to take it.

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One Hell of A Deal:

A Monster Brides Romance

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A Monster Brides Romance coming in June, 2025

Chapter One: Max

I should be crying . After all, I was his best friend. The truth is, we were more like brothers. We were so young when we met that I don't even remember the day. But Garrett Banks has always been the only constant in my life, so it would only make sense for me to shed buckets of tears at his funeral. But I can't.

When I glance over at his Cassandra, his gorgeous new, and quite pregnant wife, I'm too preoccupied with the odd circumstances of his death to feel anything other than bewildered curiosity. Of course, I am angry too. But that's an emotion I am well-practiced at burying.

The church is packed, everyone in their suits and dark dresses, almost all of whom are Garrett's business associates. Other than Cassandra, I doubt anyone here knew him or loved him, like I did. His mother did, but she chose not to come to the service. It was all too much for her, and although I think I understand, her absence makes me sad. Just not sad enough to cry.

As the minister drones on and on about Garrett's accomplishments, I drift away. My

mind replays the night before his wedding on a constant loop.

We were both a little drunk. The night before his wedding had been jam-packed with a formal rehearsal dinner where we all downed a lot of expensive wine. It was followed by a smaller group of us guys hopping around from bar to bar for several hours to celebrate his last night as a free agent.

We behaved ourselves, which I found a little disappointing. Maybe as the designated best man, I should have ordered a stripper-gram to show up in his penthouse, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. I've always thought the whole bachelor party thing was borderline disgusting.

He didn't seem to mind the fully clothed conclusion to the evening. At least he never complained. It was around two in the morning when the last guests stumbled out, leaving the two of us on the balcony, finishing our cigars.

My buzz was finally subsiding, and I stared out over the New York City skyline, in awe of how far we had both come. "Can you believe all of this?"

He snorts and puts out the cigar in his whisky glass and nods. "We're definitely a long way from the Sliver."

Our old trailer park, crammed between two state highways, was a hell I was glad to escape. "Thanks to you. I was military-bound when you offered me the job. I owe you everything."

"It's a shame it all comes with a high price tag." He runs a hand through his dark mop of hair, and his brow is furrowed.

"What do you mean, man?" I say with a chuckle. "You are about to marry an absolute gem. She's a damn ten in every way, man. You live in one of the best penthouses in the city, are president of a billion-dollar marketing firm, and you aren't even thirty

years old. Your life seems damn good to me. What am I missing? Are you having cold feet?"

"She's pregnant, you know," he says in a low voice. I'm taken aback by his lack of joy in the announcement. He's always said that he wanted to have children. He wanted to give kids a stable family that he never had. "We found out a few weeks ago."

"That's amazing, Garrett. Congratulations."

He turns to face me, and his eyes are stretched wide, and he's wringing his hands. I've never seen him so unraveled, and I find it confusing. "It's not, though."

"What?" I say, searching his face for any clue as to what he's working through. "You are having a child with your new wife. You get to have your perfect family that you always wanted. How you say that isn't amazing?"

"Because I won't live long enough to see him born."

Without intention, a laugh erupts nervously from me. He's going through something. I figure it must be the booze, but I'm not too concerned. He's being crazy, but as his best friend, I'm determined to get to the bottom of this. "I think you are out of your mind, man. You look as healthy as a damn ox to me. Is there a hitman after you that I need to know about?"

He doesn't answer, but starts to pace, wringing his hands maniacally. His silence is beginning to freak me out. "Garrett? Answer me. What aren't you telling me?"

He stops pacing a couple of feet in front of me and stares into my eyes. I don't remember him ever looking so serious. He opens and shuts his mouth several times before he finally starts speaking. "What I am about to tell you sounds unbelievable, but I promise it's the one-hundred

percent truth, and you need to believe me.”

He has never lied to me before, which I am aware of, so I nod, intrigued by this madness. “Go on.”

He takes a deep breath, rambling as he exhales. “Almost ten years ago, on the graduation trip that you couldn’t go on because you had the flu, I made a deal with a crossroads demon. All of this,” he says, flailing his arms and spinning in a wobbly circle, “was in exchange for my soul.”

I think he may need to see a doctor. “I think perhaps you’ve had a bit too much to drink tonight, buddy. We really should be getting you inside and...

“I’m not fucking lying Max!” His shouts startle me. He’s not one to yell. Ever. “Now listen to me. This is important.”

Unsure of what else to do, I deflate. “I’m listening.” I’m scared for his mental health, but at the very least, this should be entertaining. He waves me inside, and I follow him to the living room in silence, taking a seat across from him. He looks so tired. Worn.

“Now I get how ridiculous this all sounds. Really, I do. But I need you to know, and I’m going to need you to promise me something too.”

“Let’s hear the story first,” I say, fighting to remove any trace of condescension from my voice. I owe him at least that.

“We never should have stopped in Jackson,” he groans. “But we had been driving for so long and needed a break. Our plan was to hit the road early and be in New Orleans by noon. We pulled into the city around midnight, and Frank had the brilliant idea to try out our fake ID’s before finding a room for the night. We drove around for a while, finally settling on a little hole-in-the-wall called Marlow’s Place. It was dark

and in the shadier part of the city, but for whatever reason, we all thought our greatest odds of success would be there.”

“Did they serve you?”

He laughs. “We didn’t even have our asses in the stools before the bartender started shouting at us, telling us to get our kiddie asses out of there before he called the cops.” He pauses, smiling and staring off, lost in the memory. But his joy quickly fades. “We should have just gone straight to a room then, but you know how the guys were. They didn’t plan to give up so easily. On our walk back to the car, this tall, skinny, creepy guy approached us and said he knew a place about twenty minutes out of town, where they serve anyone and everyone. Caught our attention. Mikey

pulled out the map and he pointed to the intersection and said we would recognize the place by the blue lights on the porch.”

I cringe, perplexed at their naivety. I don’t know where his story is going, but there isn’t a chance in hell that I would have trusted some weirdo sending us to the middle of nowhere.

“I know what you’re thinking,” he says, nodding slowly. “How could we be so stupid, right?”

“Right.”

“We planned to drive out there and scope it out. We would only go in if it looked safe.”

“Still, sounds pretty dumb,” I say, shrugging. “But go on.”

“It turned out to be a cool place. They never even asked to see our IDs, the beer was cheap, and the atmosphere was super chill. Blues on the stage...pool table and

darts...people dancing...it was a great vibe. A couple of hours passed, and while chilling at the bar, we had been talking to this fat dude with wonky eyes. He was funny and wanted to hear all about our life in Pennsylvania. We told him about the Sliver, how tough things were, and our lack of any hopeful

plans for our futures. Looking back, it was a bit odd how curious he was, but none of us thought much of it at the time.”

He falls quiet again, and I wait patiently for him to find his next words.

“That’s when he started telling us all about a supposed ancestor of his, the famous jazz musician, Robert Johnson. Told us how he became a musical virtuoso by making a deal with the devil at the crossroads. Then he said we could do the same thing and have the best life we could ever dream of. I am paraphrasing, of course.”

“Of course,” I repeat.

“We asked him if it was a true story, then why didn’t he make a deal himself? He said it was because he would never mess with anything to do with the occult.”

“Sounds smart to me,” I say, shrugging.

“Once again,” he says, shaking his head, “hindsight is twenty-twenty. Mikey and Frank were smart enough to shrug the man off, but I was glued to his every word. You have to understand, I had no options. No money for college. No prospects for any kind of stable future. Shit, I couldn’t even get into the military because of my damn knee. Plus, I was slightly intoxicated, so there is that.”

“So, you actually tried to summon a demon?” The words coming out of my mouth are perplexing. “What the hell were you thinking?”

“I was thinking it was worth a try. I hated what my future looked like, and if I had an opportunity to make it better, I was gonna take it.”

I raise my voice, annoyed by his carelessness. “I can’t believe you tried to summon...”

“I did summon her,” he interrupted, and I snapped my mouth shut, frozen. “And she made a deal with me. Sealed it with a kiss, and poof, she was gone.

“Not that I believe any of this, but what was the deal?”

“I asked to be wealthy and successful in every endeavor. Work, love, health, everything.”

“Way to shoot for the stars.” I collapse against my chair, trying to absorb his nonsensical

story. “And what did you have to pay for this arrangement?”

“My soul. I’m allowed to enjoy my life for ten years, and then I am taken.”

“Taken?” I sit up. “Taken where?”

He looks at the floor, and his voice cracks. “To hell.”

My mind races. I’ve never heard such a wacko story in my whole life. Garrett’s always been so logical. There’s no way he can believe he made a legitimate deal with some kind of demon. Surely, his success has been from luck or being in the right place at the right time.

“Garrett, I’m sure your current success has more to do with hard work and luck than some drunken deal you think you’ve made. Maybe you believed in it so much, you

made it all happen. You know, like a placebo effect.”

“I’ve grappled with that for years, Max.” He exhales a loud breath. “But the deal was real. And I am running out of time.”

I scooch closer and lean in. “How do you know?”

“Weeks ago,” he says slowly, “I started to dream of hellhounds coming for me. It is so real. It’s like I can feel them scraping at my skin.”

“But those are only dreams,” I say, not sure if I’m worried more about his supposed demon deal or his mental sanity.

“Yeah, well, the last few days, I can hear them while I am awake.” He stares me hard in the eyes, and his face is painted in terror. “They’re coming for me, Max. And there is nothing I can do about it.”

We sit quietly for several minutes. I don’t know what to believe. I’m beyond tired, and this whole thing has been a new level of outrageous. My head spins, but I’m too perplexed to sort it out. I decide it would be best to sleep on it, hopeful for clarity after a good night’s rest. But then I remember something. “Say that I do believe you. Say you are going to be dragged to hell soon. What is the promise you need me to make?”

He looks at me warmly with a half-smile, but it doesn’t hide the worry in his eyes. “Just promise me that you will check in on my mom once in a while. I know she’s a mess, but you have been like a son to her, you know? Cassandra and my baby will be fine. She comes from a huge family. But my mom? It’s her that I worry about.”

I shake my head and roll my eyes, pulling in a deep breath. I don’t feel right catering to this nonsense, but in case this craziness is somehow real, I want him to find some peace about the whole thing. “I promise.”

A ringing bell snaps my attention back to the present funeral service. I stare at the casket, and a rage-filled realization bubbles within me. I don't know how it's possible, but I think Garrett must have been telling me the truth. It's the only thing that makes sense at all, even though the thought of it seems too fantastical to wrap my head around.

He has never made up stories or lied to me. And he's never had a creative imagination, so I don't think he could have conjured up such a tale if he wanted to. But the deciding factor for me to buy into his story is that I don't believe for one second that he threw himself off the balcony. Or that the claw-like scratches found all over his body happened on the way down.

I believe he made a deal with a demon and was dragged to hell. And I intend to make that demon pay.

I just need to figure out how I'm going to do that.