



A

*Pegasus*  
FOR  
*Christmas*

ZOE CHANT

# A PEGASUS FOR CHRISTMAS

SHIFTERS FOR CHRISTMAS BOOK 6

ZOE CHANT

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book stands alone. However, it's the sixth and final book in the heartwarming Shifters for Christmas series, featuring agents of the Shifter Patrol Corps and their mates. Each book features a new couple. If you'd like to read the series in order, the first four books in the series are:

*[A Griffin for Christmas](#)* (Rowan and Emilia's book)  
*[A Dragon for Christmas](#)* (Garrett and Georgia's book)  
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*[A Unicorn for Christmas](#)* (Declan and Callie's book)  
*[A Hellhound for Christmas](#)* (Noah and Willow's book)

Or you can buy the first three books here, in one convenient collection:

*[Shifters for Christmas Collection One](#)*

## PROLOGUE

*A*nother year, another Christmas. And another gray hair.

Hardwicke leaned over the sink in the office bathroom, examining his left temple. Once upon a time, his hair had been a glossy mane of pure jet black – but, he had to admit, those days were well and truly over now. As he'd gotten older he'd found his hair had gone from black to a far more decided salt and pepper shade – but now, there was no denying it at all. The gray hairs *far* outnumbered the black now, and it wouldn't be too long until they overtook his head completely.

*Vanity isn't very becoming*, he reminded himself as, sighing, he forced himself to turn away from the mirror.

Was it really vanity though, he asked himself as he pushed the bathroom doors open, heading out into the empty office. There was no one here but him – it *was* Christmas, after all, or at least the week before Christmas, and all the agents in his team had gone to spend time with their families – and their mates.

Hardwicke knew what the team said about him: that as a boss he was a hardass; that he'd only ever smiled once in his life and he hadn't enjoyed it; that he didn't sleep, he just reactivated himself every morning at his desk when it was time to start work.

Despite his reputation as having no sense of humor whatsoever, Hardwicke couldn't help but smile just a *little* as he found his way back to his private office. Well, all those things people said about him weren't exactly *wrong*, were they? It was a deserved reputation: he really *did* think about nothing but work. He really *did* expect the best from his team. And he really *did* smile only on the rarest of occasions.

He liked to think he was a strict but fair boss – and when it came to allowing his five-man team a vacation over Christmas to spend time with their mates, no one could ever accuse him of being a stick-in-the-mud about it.

In fact, he'd actively encouraged it in the past – if an agent under his control wanted some time to go be with their mate over a holiday, then he'd allow it, no questions asked. One year, he'd even signed and submitted Garrett's leave request *for* him, since it had been clear to Hardwicke that the dragon shifter had badly needed the time off, and he wasn't going to ask himself.

That was dragon shifters all over, Hardwicke thought, shaking his head. Bullheaded, stubborn, and fiery. Garrett had burst in almost ready to start an argument about it, no matter what Hardwicke's reputation was like for not taking any shit – but he knew Garrett had been grateful for it later, because the vacation he'd been sent on was where he'd found his mate, Georgia, and ever since then it had been obvious that Garrett had been deliriously happy.

As the years had gone by, all of Hardwicke's other agents had found their mates too – Rowan had found Emilia and her vast collection of rescue animals, Beau had found Annie and her talent for baking, Declan had found Callie dressed as an elf working for a mall Santa, and Noah had found Willow, with her home repairs business. Each of them had found the happiness every shifter hoped to find from the day when their parents sat them down and explained what a mate was.

A mate was what completed you as a shifter. A mate was what your life needed. A mate was your home, no matter how far you traveled.

That was what Hardwicke had been told as a child, and he'd always believed it as he'd grown up, waiting for the day he'd be old enough to meet his own mate and know she was the person he was destined to spend his life with.

*But things didn't work out like that, did they?* Hardwicke thought, feeling his lip twisting before he could stop it. He quickly wiped the grimace off his face, even though there was no one else around to see it. He didn't want to get out of the habit of keeping his face coolly blank. It was one of his trademarks, after all – he never got angry, he just got disappointed. Which, as everyone knew, was much, much worse.

Things hadn't worked out the way he'd dreamed they would at all.

Oh, of course he'd found his mate.

He'd been only twenty-three at the time, fresh-faced, bright-eyed. Back then, he'd really believed everything had worked out as it was supposed to.

*But then –*

Shaking his head, Hardwicke pushed the thought from his mind.

It didn't do any good to rake over old memories. That couldn't lead to anything except bitterness, and Hardwicke was already plenty bitter enough about how things had gone down.

There hadn't been anything left for him after that except to throw himself into his work – which he'd done, with gusto.

He'd been the most successful Shifter Patrol Corps agent of his generation – he'd been awarded, commended, praised and promoted. His own bosses back in the day had told him they'd never seen anyone so dedicated, so passionate, and so committed.

Of course, they'd been right – Hardwicke had been all of those things.

But what his superiors *hadn't* known was that all his dedication, passion and commitment to his job was covering up the wound in his heart – a wound that, to this day, still hadn't healed.

*But how does a shifter overcome the wound of being rejected by their mate?* his pegasus spoke up suddenly, shifting its wings restlessly. *It is impossible. It cannot be done. It's a wound that festers, and never heals.*

Hardwicke could feel his lips pressing together into a thin, hard line.

His pegasus was right, of course – but he hadn't really needed the reminder right at this juncture. He was *well* aware of the festering wound in his heart, and he had been for the last twenty-odd years.

*Or has it been even longer than that now?*

He shouldn't kid himself, though – he could remember to the day how long it had been since he'd seen his mate's face.

*Twenty-two years, seven months, two weeks and one day.*

He didn't even need to think about it – and it wasn't even as if he'd been keeping count. Somehow, he just *knew*, as if his heart itself was keeping score, without him consciously knowing it.

He couldn't think about this right now, though – he was the only one here, the one holding down the fort for the next two weeks, until his agents returned from their Christmas vacations. Losing himself in bitter memories wouldn't do anything except make him unable to focus on the task at hand.

Mentally shaking himself, Hardwicke let out a low, slow breath. He'd find his composure again in a minute – he always did. And it wasn't as if

anyone had ever guessed at the raging gouge that had torn through his heart all those years ago. He'd been able to keep his secrets, and not only that, keep them well.

And he'd go on keeping them for the rest of his life.

There was no other way, after all. His mate had rejected him, and he'd never wanted anyone else. All that was left for him was his work, and Hardwicke intended to remain the loyal, hardworking, dedicated agent he'd always been.

The soft *ping* of his computer pulled him out of the continued contemplation he had, despite his best efforts, been drawn back into.

Finally succeeding in dragging his mind back to where it should be, Hardwicke leaned forward, opening the email he'd just received and giving it his full attention. He didn't have time to be wallowing about in old memories now.

*Hardwicke – sorry, I know it's just you there for now, but we've had a report of some strange activities in the seaside town of Portsmouth – you can see the details of the location in the attachment, which will also have details of the mission. All your office's work can be redirected while you're carrying out your investigation – we need someone out there asap, and you're the closest. Besides which, I think we're going to need a shifter who can fly or swim for this one, and none of our amphibious shifter types are available. Respond when you get this. – Lausten*

Hardwicke's own boss, Harold Lausten, was efficient as always, Hardwicke thought. He appreciated that – he didn't like time-wasting himself. It had been a little while since Hardwicke had done fieldwork, though – they must really be desperate if they were coming to him, regardless of how close he was to the mission area. Of course, Hardwicke still ventured out of the office if one of his agents seemed to be in serious trouble, or when it was needed. But conducting an investigation on his own hadn't been something he'd done in a while.

*It will be good for us, his pegasus said, shaking its silvery mane and stretching its massive golden wings. We've been stagnating here – we must find new purpose, new life.*

This wasn't so much a new purpose as the rediscovery of an old one, Hardwicke supposed as he waited for his computer to finish unencrypting the details of the mission Lausten had sent him. And perhaps his pegasus was right. Maybe he'd been sitting here going over the past and digging up old

miseries because he hadn't had enough to do recently.

*A mission will take care of that*, Hardwicke said, smiling despite himself as the computer finally finished its work and the details of the mission popped up on the screen. *It'll be just like old times.*

And, hoping he was right, Hardwicke began to read.

## CHAPTER 1

*A* rgh. And there's another one.

And just for once, Celeste Williams wished she was talking about the gray hairs that had started to pop up, one by one, over the past few years.

Gray hairs weren't really a problem, though. She'd never really been one to care that much about her appearance, beyond wanting to make sure she was neat and tidy on the rare occasions when she was seen by other people. But even before she'd taken up her life of enforced solitude, she'd never really minded that much about how she looked.

Maybe it was because she'd always known she wasn't going to be out in the world much longer than her twenty-third birthday. Or maybe she would have been like that, regardless of the fate she was bound to.

Whatever the case, it wasn't the growing gray streak that was slowly but surely making progress across her temple to her forehead that was bothering her – in fact, Celeste thought, it would be quite wrong to be bothered by such a trivial thing when something much, much, *much* worse was going on.

The tremors had started rocking the tiny island she lived on only a couple of months ago. Really, it was kind of an overstatement to even call it an *island* – it was more a large rock about a mile off the coast of an island, which was itself a few hundred feet off the coast of the mainland. The only thing on her rock was a lighthouse, and that was where she lived.

Alone.

Just as she had done for the past twenty years.

*Well, twenty-two years, seven months, two weeks and one day,* Celeste thought ruefully.

She couldn't really say she *resented* it though – her parents and the rest of her family had been very clear about what was in store for her once she came of age. It was, after all, what everyone in her family who had been given the hereditary gift of magic had had to do. Her parents hadn't had it, and so they'd never been called up for the duty of living alone in the lighthouse, keeping the magic wards that protected it in place.

It had been Celeste's great aunt who'd been the last one to live here before her, until Celeste became old enough to be her replacement, and allow her Great Aunt Marian the rest she'd earned after a lifetime of isolation and loneliness.

Not that Great Aunt Marian had ever seemed to resent it – when Celeste had gone to stay with her as a little girl to learn from her what she'd have to do when she grew up, Marian had always seemed quite cheerful, jovial even.

She'd always made sure to tell Celeste that the life she'd have here at the lighthouse wasn't a burden: *It's an honor*, she'd said, nodding sagely. *It's something that's been passed down in our family for generations. You should see it as a carrying on of that tradition – that you, over everyone else in your family, were chosen for this. And let me tell you, when I think about going out into the world in this day and age, I think I'd rather just stick with my library and books!*

Celeste had to admit, Great Aunt Marian had had a point there. She supposed it was just lucky that she loved reading anyway – but spending most of her time reading when she wasn't tending the magical wards was not something she considered a hardship.

The generations of lighthouse keepers who'd come before her had amassed a seriously impressive library, after all, and Celeste honestly couldn't think of a better way to spend her time than curling up with a book under a threadbare blanket on one of the rounded couches that hugged the curved wall of the lighthouse, and simply losing herself in the story until it was time to sleep.

She didn't get any kind of TV reception out here, and the internet was spotty at best, so books were really what helped her to escape to other worlds, other lives. Other possibilities.

Celeste sighed. As much as she told herself that she didn't resent the fact she'd been chosen for this task, it was occasionally difficult not to let her thoughts wander to what might have been, had she not been the one who was chosen.

She might not have found it so difficult to keep her thoughts in check if it hadn't been for what had happened only a few weeks before she was due to seal herself away in here, to not want for anything else in her life except to carry on the duty her family had been entrusted with.

*If not for that, maybe I wouldn't have any regrets at all...* Celeste thought, before, quickly, firmly, she forced herself not to think about it anymore.

She'd gotten pretty good at that – not letting herself think about what she'd missed out on all those years ago.

If she wanted romance in her life, she had a treasure trove of books for that, everything from genteel regency-era literature to the most erotically charged bodice-rippers the 1980s had to offer, with as many bare-chested pirates and heaving bosoms as anyone could ever want. She couldn't, after all, have asked any man to share her burden – especially not any man she truly loved. She'd been prepared since she was a little girl for it, but to spring it on someone, no matter how much she loved them? Someone who didn't even know that magic – and what her magic protected – existed?

That, she would never do. Celeste could never have asked someone to cast off their entire life and join her here in the lighthouse for the rest of their lives.

*Who would have chosen that, anyway?* she thought, sighing. It was too much to ask of anyone.

And so, in the end, she hadn't.

But she'd never stopped thinking, stopped *dreaming* –

*But I can't think about that right now,* Celeste told herself firmly, cutting the thought off quickly.

Whatever had happened in the past had been just that: the past. There was no point in getting all maudlin about it now.

And it wasn't as if her life was *miserable*, anyway. She had her books, she had her purpose, her duty. And once a month, during the time of year when the weather wasn't too wild, she could take a boat over to the island to stock up on supplies of the canned food she needed to get her through the winter months and get the fresh food she ate during spring and summer, so it wasn't as if she *never* had anyone to talk to.

The locals of the island knew her by her cover story – she was just an eccentric author, who needed complete solitude to do her work. She'd inherited the lighthouse from her great aunt – that part, at least, was

completely truthful – but other than her trips into town to do her food shopping and to pick up a new book when nothing in the library was tempting her, she was a recluse.

It actually sounded like a pretty nice life when she thought about it, Celeste had to admit. And the people of the town seemed almost proud of having their very own eccentric living in a lighthouse, and always treated her with curiosity but kindness when she came into town, asking her how her work was going, or if she'd ever written a bestseller, or if anyone would ever make a movie of her books.

Of course, Celeste couldn't tell them what she was *really* doing out there – if she tried to explain to them about magic or wards or the secret of what was living under the rock on which her lighthouse sat, she'd be upgraded from *harmless local eccentric* to *certifiable lunatic* – so she usually just smiled and nodded and said things were coming along pretty well.

But now, they weren't.

Not with the books, of course, which didn't really exist anyway, but with the magical wards she was supposed to be guarding and maintaining.

And she had *absolutely no idea why*.

The tremors, when they'd first started, had barely been noticeable – Celeste had thought they were nothing more than especially strong gusts of wind rattling the windows. But then she'd noticed... oddities in the magic wards. She'd been here for long enough that she *knew* what they were supposed to feel like, without even really having to put much thought into it.

Magic was hard to explain to people who couldn't use it – Celeste had tried to tell her parents about it once when she'd been a girl, just after she'd gotten back from her first stay with Great Aunt Marian to learn how to channel her powers effectively.

*It's like a light, but you can't really see it, she'd said. You can only feel it, like you have your eyes closed, but you still know the sun is shining. It's like that! If the sun went behind a cloud, you'd still know it, even if you were inside or you weren't looking at it.*

Her parents had nodded and said they understood, but Celeste had known they hadn't really – and she couldn't blame them. Really, her explanation hadn't really *explained* very much at all. But that genuinely *was* what it felt like, especially here where the wards were at their strongest – or should have been, anyway.

Right now, things were definitely *not* as they should have been; it was as

if the sun had gone behind a cloud, and then it had just never come back out again. The glow of the magic that Celeste had felt warmly against her skin every day since she'd come here had cooled and dimmed, and nothing she could do seemed to bring it back.

And now, the tremors were getting worse.

*If the magic dims completely, then the – the thing that lives down there won't have anything to restrain it,* Celeste thought with a cold shiver.

She'd done everything her Great Aunt Marian had ever taught her about maintaining the wards to make sure they stayed strong. She'd pored over the books in the library that dealt with things like this, books that had been handed down for generations, and which had never failed all the previous guardians who had lived on this rock, long before the lighthouse had been built.

But nothing had worked – nothing seemed to make them strong again, and if something didn't change soon, Celeste didn't know what she was going to do.

In the end, she'd done the only thing she *could* do: she'd sent a desperate message to her Uncle Gordon, who wasn't *technically* her uncle... well, she supposed, somehow, in her twisted family tree he was *some* relation to her, and *uncle* was probably the closest thing to it. In any case, he was respected and well-known amongst humans who could use magic as the wisest and most learned of them all. He spent his days shut up in research, looking into ancient history and absorbing everything there was to know about magic. If *he* didn't know what the problem was, then it was likely no one did.

Celeste had written down everything she could in her letter to try to explain the situation, even though she didn't really understand it herself despite all her long years of living here. When she'd sent the letter, she hadn't known if she'd receive a reply, despite her trying to be as clear as possible about how dangerous and desperate the situation was becoming.

But to her surprise, Uncle Gordon's reply had been relatively swift – and very much to the point: *I will be there in one and a half weeks. I will meet you in the town.*

Celeste wasn't sure if the brevity of it was a comfort or not. The fact he'd replied so quickly made her think the situation was, probably, even worse than she had imagined, and Uncle Gordon's monocle – if he wore one, and for some reason in her imagination, he did – had popped right off his face when he'd received her note about the wards seeming weakened. She hadn't

seen him since she was a little girl, but even then he'd seemed a bit eccentric, always wearing tweed and huge red silk cravats. But, she realized, her calling anyone *else* eccentric was probably a little bit of a case of the pot calling the kettle black.

*Well... I have an image to maintain, as an eccentric and reclusive mystery author*, Celeste told herself as she wrapped a long, woolen scarf around her neck – one of her projects to keep her busy had been knitting everything out of every knitting pattern book she possessed. *And it's cold outside anyway.*

Since there was no *town* on her rock – just the lighthouse – Celeste had to assume that the town Gordon had referred to was Portsmouth, on the island. He hadn't specified a *place*, but given that Portsmouth didn't consist of much more than three or four streets of small, quaint buildings, she thought she'd probably be able to find him pretty quickly, especially given the way he dressed. He didn't exactly blend in – but then, nor did she.

By the date on his letter, Gordon would be arriving the next day, or so Celeste hoped. It was possible he was already there, furious with her for not keeping their appointment. Aside from his clothes, the main thing Celeste remembered about her Uncle Gordon was his short temper.

*I really would have preferred not to have to ask him for help at all*, she thought grimly as she descended the spiraling stairs of the lighthouse. *I can just tell he's going to be a real pain in the neck about it.*

But that hardly mattered. Right now, all Celeste *really* cared about was sorting out what was going on with the wards. She would have asked even the world's most pompous and annoying person for help if it meant things would go back to normal.

The wind howled around her as she stepped out of the red front door, closing it firmly behind her. It was winter now – *Oh*, Celeste realized with a jolt, *it's actually almost Christmas, I guess* – and normally she wouldn't make the crossing in her little boat from the lighthouse to the island at this time of year. But since she didn't have wings and she needed to find and welcome Uncle Gordon, she didn't have a lot of choice.

At least the sea, gray-green and choppy, didn't seem *too* wild just now. She'd have to hope the weather held – though even though the snows could get pretty heavy, it rarely stormed at this time of year. That was more common in the summer months. And no ships had passed on this route for many, many years, so it wasn't as if her lighthouse was even necessary

anymore, or else she wouldn't have been able to live there – well, not unless she was willing to have become a real lighthouse keeper, in addition to keeping the magical wards running! But luckily for her, she had no such responsibilities: while the shipping lanes here had been used in the past, now, the port here was closed, since the harbor was too shallow, and the massive cargo ships of the modern day didn't come anywhere near here.

After swinging her overnight bag into the boat, Celeste stepped into her little boat from the pier, waiting for it to stop rocking beneath her feet before she sat down, pulling her scarf up around her ears. The wind was biting cold, howling in off the sea and whipping it up into frothy white crests.

The motor started – eventually. She had to give it a few good pulls, but it finally roared to life, sputtering only a *little* as it got going.

*I'll have to get that seen to*, Celeste thought grimly as she began steering the boat away from the pier and out across the small channel that separated her from the main island. *It wouldn't be good if I got stuck over there because of a breakdown.*

If she had time, she'd get a mechanic to come and take a look at it, she decided, even though it would mean a small delay in getting Uncle Gordon back to the island if no one could look at the boat's motor right away. But she doubted he'd be happy to be stranded out there once he'd figured out what was going on.

*If he can figure out what's going on*, Celeste thought with a shiver. She just hoped nothing further would happen overnight, while she was gone. She'd strengthened the wards as much as she could before she'd left, but right now, she couldn't be certain of *anything*.

Still, she didn't have much choice, she supposed, as the boat rocked and pitched its way toward the tiny marina where the locals had their boats tied up. Portsmouth had once been a thriving fishing town, but now most of the people here only fished as a hobby – most people who wanted a job had left long ago. The town itself was mainly made up of people who insisted the only way to get them to leave was in a coffin, and new transplants who were either retirees who had dreamed of living by the sea, or people who worked remotely – and people who thought the idea of doing up a little fisherman's shack seemed romantic and exciting.

It was one of these renovated fisherman's shacks she'd be staying in tonight. The new owners only lived in it part-time over spring and summer, and the rest of the time they rented it out – though Celeste had a hard time

imagining the people who'd think Portsmouth would make a nice holiday over winter. Maybe people who preferred to spend all their time inside in front of a roaring fire, with no particular plans to venture out into the freezing cold wind? Even as bundled up as she was, Celeste felt as if her bones were being rattled around by the chill off the ocean!

Soon enough, however, she'd reached the empty berth that was reserved for her, the other small fishing boats bobbing on the waves. It wasn't a long walk into town from here, and, even carrying her bag, Celeste had made it into the outskirts of Portsmouth within ten minutes.

"Oh – it's our local celebrity!"

Celeste turned at the sound of the voice from the fence next to her, quickly plastering a smile onto her face to hide her pensive mood – or at least, she hoped so.

"Mrs. Eriksson," she said, lifting her free hand to wave in what she also hoped was a jaunty manner. "It's so good to see you."

Mrs. Eriksson always made sure to greet her if they ever bumped into each other during Celeste's visits to the island – secretly, Celeste thought she might have thought her life was more exciting than it actually was, and her eyes always seemed to glow with interest whenever they talked, as if Celeste's life was one of the crime novels she told everyone she wrote.

*One of these days, I am actually going to have to write a novel, just so the guilt doesn't eat me alive,* Celeste thought as she noticed the sparkle in Mrs. Eriksson's eyes, and she knew what was coming.

"So – how's the new crime thriller coming along?" Mrs. Eriksson asked, right on cue. "It must be so lovely, sitting alone and thinking up new twists and turns to delight your readers!"

"Oh, it's, uh, well, to tell the truth, I'm a little stuck on this one," Celeste fibbed, feeling guilt seeping through her stomach as she did. She never really had gotten the hang of having to lie, especially not to nice old ladies like Mrs. Eriksson, who were so kind, and seemed so genuinely interested in her supposed job.

"Oh, I'm sure you'll come unstuck soon enough," Mrs. Eriksson laughed. "You always do – I know you've had your troublesome books in the past, but you've always gotten through it!"

"Ha ha, yes, that's very true," Celeste said, feeling wretched. "I hope whatever it is that's holding this one up will... will come together quickly. That happens sometimes!"

*I wouldn't know! I don't know the first thing about writing a crime thriller!*

“Well, if you ever need anyone to talk it over with, I'd be very happy to help you untangle your plots,” Mrs. Eriksson said, with a confiding wink. “There'd be no need to even credit me as a co-author! I'd just ask for a free copy, that's all – or even just to find out your pen name!”

“Oh, Mrs. Eriksson, you know how shy I am about people I know reading my work,” Celeste said. It was another little fib she'd told people after word of her cover story had started to get around. People had accepted it a lot more easily than she'd expected – but then again, she supposed it probably sounded quite normal coming from someone who'd chosen to seclude themselves in a lighthouse for twenty years.

“Yes, dear, I know – please don't worry, it was just my little joke,” Mrs. Eriksson said with a laugh, her eyes still twinkling. “But I won't keep you out in this wind. It's freezing! You make sure you dress nice and warm!”

“Thank you, Mrs. Eriksson, I definitely will,” Celeste said, trying not to let her relief show *too* plainly in her voice. After all, it wasn't Mrs. Eriksson that was the problem here – that was *all* her. She just wasn't a very good liar – and she definitely didn't enjoy it.

*But what other choice do I have?* Celeste thought, as she waved goodbye as Mrs. Eriksson went back to her front door. *I can't tell anyone the truth – they definitely wouldn't believe me, even if I was allowed to.*

That was the other thing, she supposed: she was sworn to secrecy. With very good reason.

Sighing, her breath a puff of white in the cold air, Celeste carried on up the hill and toward the main part of town.

It didn't really matter if people would have thought she was a lunatic if she explained what she was really doing in the lighthouse. If she told anyone, she'd immediately be subject to censure by the other magic users who regulated its use. Her Uncle Gordon was only one of them. He wasn't the most powerful – though he probably *was* the most knowledgeable – but he did have quite a bit of sway. But that didn't matter, since if Celeste broke the rules, he, just like the other powerful men and women who oversaw magic, would definitely see to it that she was censured.

Celeste understood it perfectly well. Magic was something people would be frightened of if they knew about it, just like they'd be frightened if they knew about the other creatures that existed in the world, like shifters and fae

and elementals.

If it were up to her, Celeste thought, she wouldn't want to live in such secrecy. But it really wasn't her decision, and she didn't really think it was up to her to put other people in danger because she didn't like having to fib to sweet, kindly old ladies.

For the moment, she simply had to accept the situation as it was.

*Even if that means... what it means.*

Shaking her head, Celeste pushed the thought aside. She didn't have time to dwell on such gloomy thoughts. For some reason, they'd been crowding in on her today. Though that was probably just because she was worried about the wards, so she felt anxious and gloomy in general.

*Well, tomorrow Uncle Gordon will be here, and he'll definitely know what to do.*

With that thought firmly in mind, Celeste marched on up the hill, finally reaching the edge of town.

*Oh... I guess it really is close to Christmas!* she thought, pausing, momentarily dazzled by the sight before her eyes.

Since she didn't usually come into town over December, Christmas often passed her by completely, unremarked on, uncelebrated, unremembered.

*But... wow... clearly I've been missing out...*

Celeste had never *seen* Portsmouth looking so... so... *beautiful*.

It wasn't exactly what you'd call a glamorous town: the little cottages and shops were quaint, of course, and you could even say it was charming, since it was so old-fashioned and there weren't many places like it in the world. But the weather here was harsh, and the salty winds took their toll on the place, with rust and worn paint a feature of almost every building. But now, you'd never know how run-down the place could often look.

Now, it seemed every building was decked out in Christmas finery – fairy lights swayed in the ocean winds, and Celeste could see tinsel adorning some of the more sheltered porches and entryways, where there was less risk of it being blown away. Some brave souls had even ventured to put standees of Santa and his reindeer in their front yards, though Celeste had to imagine they'd secured them pretty tightly to the earth to stop them from flying away for real – and putting anything on the roof was completely out of the question.

But still, despite the limitations imposed by the weather, Celeste could see that Portsmouth had been determined to celebrate Christmas in style – and

they'd definitely succeeded. In the frosty air, each fairy light looked like a little golden star that had fallen to earth; the tinsel, defiant in the wind, like some kind of ethereal shining mist.

... Okay, well, *maybe* Celeste was romanticizing it a little bit, she had to admit. She was sure other, grander towns had *much* bigger and better Christmas displays. But she hadn't seen anything like this since she'd gone to live in the lighthouse, and she had to say that she was absolutely enchanted by the town's new appearance.

*It definitely makes a nice change from the usual*, she thought in wonderment, as she passed by Portsmouth's singular giftshop, featuring a window display of wooden elves working busily in Santa's workshop. Even the tiny little supermarket had a huge sign reading *SEASON'S GREETINGS!* with sprigs of holly stuck to its doors. And the bakery had clearly had some kind of Christmas-themed drawing competition for the local children, the results of which were now proudly displayed in the front window – each picture was a riot of color and imagination, with Santas, elves, reindeer, snowmen, ice witches, and... other things, which Celeste was less able to identify, but the important thing was that the kids had clearly had fun drawing them.

*It's so cute*, she thought as she wandered. *I wish I could spend more time here...*

Shaking her head, Celeste forced her mind away from the thought. It didn't do any good to start with that kind of wishful thinking. It would only lead to resentment in the end, and if she started to resent her duty – the thing she'd been *born* to do – then she'd only end up miserable.

She'd had to give up bigger things than being able to freely wander around adorable little towns, she thought with a sigh. She couldn't start getting bitter about it now. She had a job, a *duty* – the only thing she could do was accept it, and try to make the best of it. Or else, she'd go mad.

Still, she lingered wistfully a moment longer at the bakery window before she turned away, heading up the street to find the place she'd be staying in tonight to wait for the arrival of Uncle Gordon.

*And hopefully, he can help me figure out whatever's going on – and fix it. Fast.*

## CHAPTER 2

*T*his, his pegasus griped as Hardwicke guided his car off the ferry's ramp and onto solid ground again, *is undignified*.  
Hardwicke grimaced a little, ignoring it.

Everything that wasn't taking flight and dazzling every living creature within a one-mile radius with a blaze of sunlight on its golden wings was undignified, according to his pegasus. He'd just had to get used to its constant grievances and complaints about literally every little thing that it felt was beneath its station – which was pretty much everything.

It wasn't a surprise, really, that even driving a car to an island instead of flying to it, landing in the town square, and announcing *Lo! For I have come*, was upsetting his pegasus's sense of what was right and proper. According to it, the conveniences of modernity – not to mention the necessity of remaining inconspicuous in order to carry out his investigation – were things that a pegasus should simply not have to concern itself with.

*Well, it might be easier if things really did work that way*, Hardwicke thought grimly as he drove along the narrow road leading to the island's single town. Certainly, it might have helped if he could just rely on people being compelled enough by the sight of a pegasus to just do whatever he asked of them, no fuss, no mess. Hardwicke was a big fan of efficiency, after all, and he lived his life trying to get from A to B as quickly as possible. If there things he didn't like, it was wasted time and wasted effort.

But he also liked things to be done *right*, and starting off his investigation by revealing to all and sundry that both pegasi *and* shifters existed was, he thought, absolutely *not* going to achieve literally anything he had come here to achieve, not mentioning the fact that he'd be blowing the cover of shifters

everywhere.

Of course, *some* humans knew shifters existed – all of his team had human mates, after all, and all of them had told their mates about themselves and what it meant to be the mate of a shifter. But in general, their existence was still a closely guarded secret, along with the existence of all other kinds of supernatural beings. That was part of what the Shifter Patrol Corps did – making sure shifters weren't causing problems not only for humans, but other shifters too.

But it meant he couldn't reveal his shifted form. And it drove his pegasus *crazy*.

*A pegasus is a creature that is meant to be feared and admired*, it had told him many times, stomping its golden hooves in a flurry of self-righteous fury. *Is there any point to being a pegasus if there is no one who will revere us?*

Hardwicke had to admit... sometimes, it was tempting. Not that he'd ever *do* it – his pegasus form and special powers were for *helping* people, not for forcing them to venerate him – but occasionally he wondered what it would be like to just drop the pretense and reveal himself.

A small, wry smile crossed his lips as he drove. If his team – or anyone else – could see his thoughts right now, they'd probably drop whatever they were carrying in their shock. He was, after all, known to be as by-the-book as they came, a stickler for protocol and doing things the right way. They probably thought he never even *considered* doing something wild and crazy, and that he slept with a copy of the Shifter Patrol Corps rules and protocol handbook in the bed next to him.

*Which, honestly... would not be so far from the truth*, he had to admit, thinking a little ruefully of the times he'd nodded off, alone in bed, with the handbook still in his hands while he looked up some minor matter of procedure to make sure a case would go the way it should, and that everyone on his team was following the rules.

Well, that was how he'd been so successful, Hardwicke thought as he turned a corner, and the glimmering lights of Portsmouth came into view in the distance, shining through the misty morning haze. He knew his job, and he did it *well*. He'd never had a case go awry because of a technicality. Everything was *always* by the book.

*You simply find comfort in predictability*, his pegasus snorted dismissively, *because you let the only thing you've ever really wanted slip*

*through your fingers all those years ago, and now you think you can compensate by exercising control over everything else.*

Hardwicke gripped the steering wheel so hard his knuckles turned white, in his effort not to swerve the car off the road.

*Are you finished?* he asked the pegasus, as it shook its magnificent mane haughtily. It seemed, however, that it had said its piece – in revenge, Hardwicke assumed, for not letting it fly to the island instead of driving and then taking the ferry.

*You know we can't do that anyway,* Hardwicke said, releasing a deep breath as well as his stranglehold on the car's steering wheel. *We have luggage, and you don't have hands. How do you propose to carry a suitcase?*

The pegasus didn't have an answer for that, and retreated into sullen silence. It didn't like to be reminded that, as magnificent as it may have been, there were certain things it couldn't do.

*And besides which, it's blowing a gale out there. You saw the sea as we were coming over. You'd end up getting blown sideways into a hedge, and who do you think is going to reverse you then? Remember what happened to Rowan.*

The pegasus, having had enough apparently, shook its head once more, twitching its tail, and then, snorting, removed itself from the forefront of Hardwicke's mind.

The reminder of Rowan – a member of Hardwicke's team who'd met his mate when, in griffin form, he'd been too impatient to get to the scene of an investigation and had crashed through the roof of a shed in the midst of a snowstorm – had been enough to get it to back off.

*Though at least crashing through that shed roof meant that Rowan met his mate,* Hardwicke thought. It had been a one-in-a-million chance that the shed he'd destroyed had just happened to belong to the woman he was meant to be with, but then, that was what meeting your mate was: a once-in-a-lifetime thing.

Quickly, Hardwicke shoved the thought aside. He didn't know why he was dwelling on this so much right now – maybe because it was Christmas, and all his agents were off with their own mates, celebrating the lives they were building together. Hardwicke was sincerely happy for all of them; if he wanted to look at it with the cold, ruthless eye he'd accustomed himself to using over the past few years, he could tell himself it was because happy men made for more effective agents. But he knew that wasn't the whole reason.

*It's good to know that some people are experiencing the happiness I missed out on,* Hardwicke thought as he reached the first of the outlying buildings of the town. *I can't really begrudge anyone their happiness, or feel jealous about it.*

That, at least, was true.

But knowing how happy they all were definitely was a brutal reminder that he'd been rejected by his own mate, and he'd never know that kind of happiness himself.

*It's not the right time to sit and wallow in self-pity, though,* he thought, not that it was *ever* the right time to sit and wallow in self-pity.

He had a job to do, and he was going to do it. Christmas time or not, painful reminders of having lost the woman he'd loved more than life itself or not.

Portsmouth was hardly a big place, and there were really only one or two big streets. It was easy enough to find the place he was staying: a refurbished fisherman's cottage, small and cozy, and situated right by the sea, a little separate from the other houses – it'd be a good place for him to surreptitiously shift and fly out over the ocean, provided there was ever a break in the howling winds.

*If anyone sees, maybe they'll just think we're an extra-large albatross,* he thought, and, predictably, was given an outraged glare by his pegasus.

*Do you dare to make light of our magnificence?* it asked, as if Hardwicke had just suggested it was an oversized bird, or that its mother had been a pelican who'd laid an egg or something. Which she had not been, Hardwicke could vouch for that!

*It was just a little joke,* he told it, though he knew the pegasus wasn't in a joking mood right now – not that it usually was. It took itself *deadly* seriously, and it expected everyone else to do the same.

*Much like how most of my agents see me, I suppose,* Hardwicke thought as he turned the car into the drive of the cottage he'd rented. It looked just like it did in the photos on the website: the exterior was painted pale blue, while the roof was made of iron, and although it was new, it was already a little rusty from the harsh, salty air and strong winds. It seemed like you needed to be tough to live out here, and Hardwicke had to admit he admired the people who could make this place their home.

Still, there was something starkly beautiful about the place, he thought as he got out of the car – there were no trees that he could see, but even the

windswept, dark green grass and shrubs that seemed to be all that could survive the harsh climate were beautiful in their own way, as, of course, was the slate-gray sea he could see heaving and crashing against the coast, white foam spraying up against the dark cliffsides.

*Amazing to think this used to be a thriving fishing village*, he thought as he opened the trunk of the car, retrieving the wheeled suitcase he'd brought with him. It was small, but Hardwicke was used to packing light – he didn't need much in the way of creature comforts.

*I'd better go and get set up then, I suppo—*

That was as far as Hardwicke got in his thoughts.

As he turned, looking first one way up the street and then the other, he caught sight of a woman emerging from what looked like a shop a little farther down the way. Her hair was long, and, caught in the strong winds, it obscured her face with his dark waves – dark waves that had a few definite streaks of gray in them. She was taller than average, her figure mostly disguised by the thick coat she was wearing as protection against the wind – but still, as Hardwicke stared at her, he felt a sudden recognition surging up within him.

He didn't need to see her face.

He didn't need to see more details of her figure.

But it had been twenty years, and of course she wouldn't look the same as she had back then – and neither did he, for that matter.

None of that mattered, however. She could have changed entirely – cut her hair short, or shaved it off completely. Gotten plastic surgery to change the shape of her nose. Somehow grown taller or gotten shorter.

None of that would have mattered, because Hardwicke would have known her soul anywhere.

*It's her. I know it. It's her.*

At that moment, logic, reason, not even *sanity* meant anything. It meant absolutely nothing that this was possibly one of the most unlikely things ever to have happened to him. Nothing mattered, except the fact that Hardwicke *knew* he was looking at his mate.

The mate he'd lost twenty years ago, when she'd told him they could never be together – that it was impossible, and she hadn't given him a reason why.

*Celeste.*

He hadn't even told her then that she *was* his mate – he'd been courting

her, trying to show her that he could be a man she wanted to be with, without the pressure of revealing the mated bond, or even the fact that he was a shifter at all. She was human, after all, and she'd had no idea that things such as shifters could exist, let alone pegasi, unicorns, dragons, griffins or hippogriffs. He'd wanted to do things right and take things slow.

*But then she told me it was impossible. That she was leaving, and she couldn't tell me where. She only said it would be best for me to forget about her...*

But of course, he couldn't. It wasn't possible for a shifter to forget about their mate. Once they'd touched, it was as if that touch was forever branded on their soul.

That was how Hardwicke had felt, anyway. In all the years since then, he'd never forgotten about Celeste. He'd never stopped thinking about her, and wondering where she'd gone, and why she couldn't tell him where she had to go.

And of course, he hadn't wanted to reveal then what they were to each other. It would have been putting her in an impossible situation. She needed to leave, and Hardwicke had sensed she was telling the truth. Telling her that she was his mate and revealing the truth about shifters just to try to force her to stay by his side would have been nothing but selfishness, and Hardwicke had assumed that for a human, it was possible that the mated bond simply wasn't as strong as it was for shifters.

And so, he'd let her go.

*But here she is – I'm looking at her now. It seems impossible, but I know it's the truth...*

Hardwicke knew he'd been standing in the drive of the cottage for almost a minute now, stock still, simply staring as Celeste made her way down the street, apparently entranced by the window displays.

*It's Christmas, of course, Hardwicke realized with a jolt. Of course the shops were decked out in decorations, or at least as many as the howling wind would allow. Celeste seemed enthralled by them – when the wind swept her hair back and Hardwicke finally caught a glimpse of her face, gasping as he did so, her smile was just as beautiful, wide and unguarded as he remembered it.*

*But what's she doing here? And should I show myself to her? Should I try to talk to her?*

His pegasus rose up within him, imperious as always.

*Of course you must, it insisted. She is our mate. Even if we never told her – for some reason I will never understand – she will still know us. She will feel our soul calling out to hers.*

Hardwicke wanted to believe it. He wanted to think enough time had passed that Celeste would remember him fondly now as an old flame, and that if he spoke to her it wouldn't be an awkward and unwelcome intrusion.

*But how can I speak to her now... how could I ever hold myself back from telling her the truth after all these years...*

Hardwicke had almost made up his mind to quickly turn and go inside the cottage in order to sort out the turmoil in his head and heart in privacy... well, *relative* privacy, since his pegasus was stomping and screeching at the mere idea of running away – *Like a coward!* it bellowed – when the decision was taken out of his hands.

Maybe the pegasus had been right, and Celeste really *had* felt something stirring in her soul just from his presence. Or maybe she'd simply realized there was a guy standing a little farther up the street, staring at her with his mouth hanging open. But whatever the case, in the next moment, Celeste lifted her head from where she'd been peering into a shop window, looked over, and saw him.

Hardwicke froze as Celeste's face first went blank, and then her mouth fell open with surprise – or shock. Either way, the disbelief was clear on her face, her eyes widening a moment later, and she shoved the dark bangs that fell over her face out of her eyes, as if trying to make sure they weren't deceiving her.

“P— *Pierce?*”

Hardwicke almost winced. No one had called him by his given name for a long time. At the agency, it was always his family name, *Hardwicke*, ever since he'd been a junior agent. It wasn't something he'd ever insisted on, but somehow, it had stuck, and he'd decided to just go with it. It seemed easier, somehow – at work, he could shed the memories of the life he could have had with Celeste, and just become someone else: Hardwicke, the perfect agent, and then the strict, no-nonsense boss who ran his team with an iron fist.

Not *Pierce*; or at least, not *Pierce* in the way Celeste had used to say his name, her voice soft and full of what he'd thought was – or wanted to be – love.

Hearing it again now sent a maelstrom of emotions tearing through him. How could he see her again now, after all this time, knowing that he'd never

stopped loving her, never stopped thinking of her? What could he say to her? What *was* there to say?

“It *is* you, Pierce.” Celeste sounded breathless as she slowly made her way toward him, her eyes open wide. “I knew it – I don’t think I could ever forge— I mean, you haven’t really changed much at all. I just had the weirdest feeling, and then –” She stopped suddenly, cutting herself off, a shadow of doubt crossing her face. “It *is* Pierce, isn’t it? I haven’t just made a complete idiot out of myself, have I?”

“No, no, of course you haven’t.” Hardwicke finally forced his tongue and lips to work, wanting to reassure her that no, there’d been no mistake. “It’s me, Celeste. I just... never expected to see you here, of all places.”

Celeste laughed, but it sounded a little strained. “I know – what are the odds, right? Though it seems like Portsmouth has been becoming more and more popular with holidaymakers recently. I guess it’s pretty isolated, if that’s what you’re into.” She blinked, swallowing. “Is that why you’re here?”

“I guess you could say that,” Hardwicke said, aware he wasn’t being entirely truthful – and at once, his pegasus reared up inside him, snorting indignantly.

*Tell her now! Tell her everything!* it demanded.

*I can’t do that. I don’t know her circumstances, what she’s doing now. She might be married and have children – I can’t just barge in and make demands on her, or try to tear her life apart. If she’s found happiness since we knew each other, then I have no right to disturb that.*

Hardwicke found it difficult to believe that Celeste would have remained unmarried in all these years – she was beautiful, after all, kind, generous, and sweet-natured. He’d known all of that about her, and had been able to see it at a glance. Surely someone else must have seen those things in her too, and fallen in love.

*Whoever he is, he’s the luckiest man alive,* Hardwicke thought, with more than a little twinge of envy. From the raging splutter his pegasus gave, he knew it was only just stopping itself short of suggesting he go and find the man Celeste was married to and challenge him to a duel over the woman they loved – but thankfully Hardwicke’s words about Celeste’s happiness coming first seemed to have restrained it, if only just.

“Oh, are you here for a long or a short time, then?” Celeste asked, biting her lip as she spoke, as if she hadn’t been meaning to ask.

“Not too long,” Hardwicke replied. “Just long enough to –”

He glanced around suddenly. He'd meant to pat his hand on the handle of his wheeled suitcase, which was small enough to show he hadn't packed for a long stay. But when he lowered his hand, it found nothing but empty air.

Confused, he turned his head – just in time to see his suitcase, propelled by the wind, go zooming down the driveway beside his rented cottage, down the path that ran through the sparse garden, and then crash into the back fence. But this wasn't enough to stop it, and the suitcase spun up into the air on impact, tossing in the wind... before sailing over the edge of the cliff that lay beyond the garden gate, and then presumably plummeting into the churning ocean below.

Hardwicke stared. He'd only taken his hand off the suitcase for a moment!

*Well, I'm so glad we drove here, since I was so manifestly unable to carry the luggage that you have just hurled from a cliff,* his pegasus said huffily.

And unfortunately, Hardwicke knew he'd have to concede that point to it.

"Oh dear," Celeste said, following his gaze. "Was that, uh, your luggage?"

Hardwicke could hear just the *tiniest* amount of suppressed laughter in her voice – and, he had to admit, it *was* kind of funny. *Kind of.*

"I'm afraid so. I guess I'll be re-wearing things a bit more than I'd planned on doing," Hardwicke said, shaking his head. "Or I'll have to go shopping."

"I think you might be out of luck for now," Celeste said, and again, the smallest of laughs bubbled up in her voice – just the way Hardwicke remembered it had used to. The thought sent a pang of longing through his chest. "It's Sunday – and hardly anything is open in Portsmouth on a Sunday. You just missed the supermarket's opening hours. And the one and only clothes shop doesn't open at all. Not until Tuesday, actually."

"Right. I see." Well, it seemed that he'd just have to put up with wearing the clothes he drove here wearing for the next couple of days. Which, fastidious as he was, didn't really make Hardwicke feel all that happy.

*Not to mention how difficult it's going to be to keep my mind on the investigation if Celeste is here too...*

Now that his head had cleared a little, Hardwicke found himself wondering about the coincidence of it all. But then, Celeste had spoken as if she was very familiar with the town and the quirks of its opening hours – was she only vacationing here, or did she know it better than that?

*Is this where she's been all these years?*

“You sound as if you know the place well,” Hardwicke said, not sure whether he should ask any more direct questions. Just because Celeste had recognized him, spoken to him, didn't mean she might feel comfortable talking a lot about her life with someone she'd had what was – probably to her mind – a brief love affair with twenty years ago.

“Well, in fact I do,” Celeste said, after a short pause. “I live here. I've lived here for... for a while now.”

Although she was still smiling, there was something a little guarded about her answer that made Hardwicke decide not to push things. It would even be better if she *didn't* really want to have much to do with him – he had a case to investigate, and he didn't need his head clouded with thoughts of what might have been, or to get distracted every time she was in view. Things were already going to be difficult enough. How could he keep his mind on the job when she was suddenly once again so close to him, after so many years apart? How was he supposed to do his job when his heart was racing, his soul writhing within him, his pegasus demanding they confess everything to her immediately?

“It's a very beautiful place,” Hardwicke said, meaning it, though it was also a bit of a deflective pleasantries so he wouldn't accidentally say anything more personal.

“It is – I suppose some people might say it's a bit desolate, but I like it here,” Celeste said softly. Her eyes flickered up to his face, and Hardwicke thought – or maybe just imagined – he saw a look of wonder pass over her face. “I just... never imagined *you* would show up here. It's been so long – I'm shocked you even remember me, let alone recall my name. I must look completely different now.”

“No. You're exactly the same as you ever were. I'd know you anywhere.” The words slipped out of Hardwicke's mouth before he could stop them, and he internally cursed himself as Celeste's eyes widened as if in shock.

“I – I feel a bit the same way, I guess,” she stuttered, as if she too couldn't quite believe what she was saying. She bit her lip as if uncertain of what to say next, before she seemed to draw herself together, looking him in the eye again. “Look... I get this might be weird, and you can say no if you want to with no hard feelings at all, since you probably have your own ideas for how you want to spend your vacation. But... would you like to come get a drink with me, and... catch up a bit? I know *one* place that's open where we

can get a bite to eat and something to sip on. But like I said, no hard feelings if you don't have time. Or if you just don't want –"

"I'd love to." The words came out of his mouth in a heated rush, before he could think about it – and the smile that broke out over Celeste's face as they did made his heart pound in his chest.

"That's – that's great!" Her eyes twinkled just as he remembered they had back then, as dark blue as the twilight sky. "Then how about now? I mean, I guess you don't really have to unpack anymore or anything like that."

There was mischief in her voice, and Hardwicke found a smile tugging at the corner of his own lips. He couldn't help it – Celeste had always had that effect on him.

*Because she is your mate, and somewhere in her soul, she knows it too,* his pegasus said, sounding smug. *That's why she invited you out. That's why she's so happy to see you again, even after all this time. She knows. She just doesn't realize it yet.*

Well, his pegasus *would* say that, Hardwicke thought as he locked up his car to prepare to follow Celeste into town. It was certain about literally everything – doubt was a foreign concept to a pegasus.

"It's a nice little place, but I wouldn't exactly call it fancy," Celeste said, turning to him as they walked.

"That's all right – anything will do. I'm not a very fussy person." It came to Hardwicke then that he *was* very hungry – it had been a long drive, after all.

"Yes. I remember you basically would eat just about anything back then," Celeste said. "But you *were* always pretty fussy about your drink – what was it, expensive whisky on the rocks? I don't know if we can offer you that here on our humble island, though."

"That's all right – I don't drink anymore, or hardly ever," Hardwicke said. "That was just my wild and crazy youth, I guess."

Celeste laughed. "I'd hardly call a glass of whisky two or three nights a week wild *or* crazy. But shall we just go for something softer, then? I think we can manage that."

As something in his chest tightened, Hardwicke wondered if this had been a good idea after all. Being near Celeste again, even after all this time, was reminding him of how he'd felt about her – not that he'd ever forgotten, but he'd managed to keep it shoved into a corner of his mind for so long that he'd been able to deal with it. The scar in his soul would never heal, but he'd

learned to work around it, to not let it overcome him.

*But now... how can I stay sane, when she's right here, in front of me? With no idea about what she means to me, what she is to me?*

And how could he focus on his work – the only thing in his life that *had* meant something to him, without Celeste – if he could think only of her, of the way the corners of her eyes crinkled, of the silvery gray that now laced through her hair, of the beauty of her smile?

It had been a mistake to agree to the drink, Hardwicke decided. He'd tell her and say he'd forgotten he actually had something else he needed to do and excuse himself, just as soon as his pegasus stopped screaming and snorting at him that he'd do no such thing –

“Ah, we're here,” Celeste said, stopping outside what looked to be a small diner – it, like a lot of the other shops they'd passed, had tinsel up on the inside of the window, little fairy lights strung across the awning, and a wreath of holly on the door. “Like I said, it's not fancy, but it's a nice place to sit and talk.”

It was cozy inside, Hardwicke had to admit – a nice little haven out of the wind, with small, red leather booths lining the wall.

“There's no table service,” Celeste told him, “so I'll go up to the counter to order for you. Do you trust me?”

Hardwicke blinked at her. The first response that jumped into his mind was *with my life*, but it was possible that was just a little *too* much when Celeste was probably just asking if he didn't mind if she ordered for him, seeing as she knew the place.

Still, he found, he couldn't quite bring himself to say anything else – his pegasus simply wouldn't allow it, strangling all the other words in his throat before they could leave his lips.

“With my life,” he said, the words coming out sincere, heartfelt, earnest – everything he'd always longed to be with her.

Celeste's eyes went wide for a moment, and then she let out a quick, shaky laugh. “Oh – well, I'll try not to order anything that might endanger it, that's for sure! It's just that the cook here knows me, and she'll sometimes make off-menu stuff for me if she's not busy. Wait here – I won't be long.”

Hardwicke slid into a booth, and did his very best not to put his head into his hands.

*'With my life'. Really.*

*It is the truth*, his pegasus piped up, stomping its hooves. *Don't you*

*regret not telling her the truth all those years ago?*

Maybe so, Hardwicke thought. But it seemed like Celeste was happy now, as he watched her laughing with the woman behind the counter. Maybe it had been the right choice for *her*, even if it had meant he'd spent the last twenty years alone.

"So, I'll leave what we're having as a surprise," Celeste said with a twinkling grin when she returned to the table. "But I made sure Chrissy – that's the chef – knew you were an out-of-towner, so she'll cook you up something real good."

"Thank you," Hardwicke said, unable to stop himself from returning her smile. "I'm sure it'll be great."

"So... you're here alone then?" Celeste asked as she slid into the booth, sitting opposite him. "I mean, it's Christmas – will your wife and kids be joining you later?"

Hardwicke swallowed, a cold lump forming in his throat. He hadn't wanted to ask Celeste about whether she was married for fear of being intrusive, but now she'd introduced the topic herself.

"No wife, no kids," Hardwicke said. It was better to get things out of the way quickly, he supposed. "I'm just here by myself."

"Oh." Celeste seemed unable to hide her surprise. "I'm sorry for assuming, I just – uh, well, it's just that..." She cleared her throat, her face coloring. "It's just that you were such a *catch*, I assumed some lucky lady must have snapped you up years ago. I mean, not that that's any of my business..."

*She wants to know if we are available*, his pegasus insisted, crashing into his consciousness so strongly that for a moment Hardwicke found it difficult to think straight. *She is trying to find out if we will mate with her.*

*No, she's not. She's being polite!* Hardwicke insisted, once he'd managed to wrestle his pegasus under control again. But still – he had to admit, the question had stirred some dormant hope within him. *Was she asking because she might still be interested in him, even after all this time...?*

"And you?" he blurted, before he could second-guess himself. "You must be married by now yourself."

Celeste looked down, her dark blue eyes shaded by her long, dark eyelashes.

"Um. Well. As a matter of fact, I'm not," she said softly. "I just... I guess life didn't turn out that way for me."

Hardwicke didn't know how to name the emotion that burst through him. It certainly wasn't happiness at Celeste still being single – she'd spoken so softly, her eyes downcast, that it was clear she wasn't exactly happy about the situation herself, so Hardwicke could hardly be happy about his mate's sadness, even if it *did* mean that something may still be possible between them now. But despite his empathy for his mate's pain, there *was* still hope there.

*Could it happen – after all this time –*

“Here you are – just like you ordered!”

Hardwicke's thoughts were cut off abruptly by a chirpy voice from above. Feeling dazed, he looked up to see a smiling woman standing by their table, two trays loaded down with food in her hands.

“Usually I'd ding the bell at the counter to let you know your food was ready, but you two looked so engrossed in your conversation I thought I'd bring it over myself,” the woman continued after a moment, before putting the two trays down on the table. “Here you go – enjoy. It's not every day our resident author has a guest, after all, so I really went all-out!”

Hardwicke could tell – the food really did look magnificent. Even he, who usually only thought of food as the sustenance he needed to get through his day, could see that.

Curls of steam rose up from the gorgeously golden-brown potato hash, nestled next to a hearty-looking meatloaf. A massive, juicy-looking pickle sat on the side of the plate, alongside a crisp salad. To complete things, a glass of what looked like homemade lemonade sat on the tray next to the plate, a little sprig of mint tucked in next to the straw.

“Wow,” Hardwicke said, sincerely appreciative. “This looks incredible.”

“You wait until you taste it,” the woman – whom Hardwicke assumed was the cook here, Chrissy – said with a wink. “And now, I won't interrupt you two any further. Looks like you have *plenty* to talk about.”

As Celeste glanced up, Hardwicke saw Chrissy waggling her eyebrows at her, clearly demonstrating what she thought the nature of their conversation was. Celeste blushed a deep red – she'd always blushed easily, Hardwicke remembered – before pursing her lips at Chrissy in a clear signal to *go away*.

Hardwicke swallowed down his amusement – it wasn't really funny, he supposed. Chrissy had no way of knowing their past, or the pain it had caused Hardwicke, but then, neither did Celeste. She didn't know she was his mate; she didn't know that after her, he'd never loved anyone else.

Casting around for some way to break the awkward silence that had descended over their – truly delicious-looking – meal, Hardwicke recalled suddenly what Chrissy had called Celeste.

“You’re an author?” he asked, picking up his fork and tucking into the hash. “She mentioned you were the resident author here – so that’s what you’ve been doing?”

“Oh... I... well, I suppose people do say that,” Celeste said, picking up her own fork and shoveling an enormous piece of meatloaf into her mouth, as if that would excuse her from having to talk anymore.

Hardwicke had to admit he was a little taken aback. It had been an evasive answer, and Hardwicke had never known Celeste to be anything other than very forthright – sometimes even a little *too* forthright.

“I suppose the isolation must be good for a writer,” Hardwicke said, a little cautious, after he finished his mouthful of potato, which had tasted just as good as it looked.

“Mmmm. Hmmm. Mmhmm.” Celeste nodded, clearly taking her time chewing her meatloaf. Finally, after several moments of chewing, she swallowed. “Yeah. That’s... really, I guess it would be!”

It was another evasive answer. Hardwicke frowned, but it seemed like Celeste didn’t want to talk about it – and really, there were a hundred reasons why she might not want to discuss her job. He’d heard of writers who never talked about their books until they were done, for fear of jinxing themselves with writer’s block.

*But then again...*

Giving himself a mental shake, Hardwicke shoved his instinctive suspicion to one side. Celeste was his *mate*. He would have sensed it in a moment if something was wrong. He’d just been a Shifter Patrol Corps agent for too long if he was seeing something strange in Celeste’s answers.

“Oh, but what about you?” Celeste said quickly, as if to head off any more questions. “What do you do with yourself these days?”

Hardwicke blinked. *Ah.*

Usually, he’d come up with some easy and simple cover story – he was here for a vacation, just like anyone else who might have rented the refurbished fisherman’s cottage, or he was just passing through and, intrigued by the island, had taken a detour to check it out.

But none of the people he’d told such stories to to cover up the real nature of his work had been his *mate*, and Hardwicke couldn’t bring himself to *lie* to

her like that. Everything in his spirit rebelled against it – a mate was supposed to be someone you could share your whole self with, after all.

*So just be honest, then,* his pegasus snorted. *You already know she wants us. You'll need to tell her at some point anyway.*

That might have been true, *if* the pegasus was right, and there was still a chance for him and Celeste. But Hardwicke didn't dare bank on that, and he wasn't about to reveal the nature of who he was, *what* he was, and what he did right now, in the middle of a café, over a plate of meatloaf. It was a conversation for a private setting – *if* Celeste was willing to agree to such a thing.

*Don't forget, I still don't know why she left me the first time,* he cautioned himself. *I don't know what reason she had, and whether it still exists.*

All she'd said was that she needed to leave, that she had commitments elsewhere that it was impossible for her to deny – but here she was, and Hardwicke would stay here with her for the rest of their lives, if that was what it took to remain by her side.

*But for now, I have to figure out what to say.*

Inwardly grimacing, Hardwicke decided he'd just have to tell as much of the truth as he could.

"I'm here because there's been reports of some mysterious earth tremors over the past couple of weeks," he said. "I've come to check them out."

It *was* the truth, after all. He didn't need to explain the nature of the 'checking out', or that the Shifter Patrol Corps suspected something odd was going on, even by their standards.

Celeste blinked, her mouth dropping open – though in the next moment she'd covered up her surprise, even if it was a little poorly.

"Oh – those? I, uh, I just assumed they were... well, I guess I don't really *know*, but..."

She came to an uncertain halt, biting her lips as if trying to dam up the flow of her words.

"You've felt them, then?" Hardwicke asked, intrigued. Maybe he could find out a little more about them. "How frequently do they happen? Have they been getting stronger?"

"Oh... I guess... maybe like you said, a couple of weeks?" Celeste said uncertainly. "And... yes, I suppose they have been. Just a bit, though. At first they were barely noticeable, but lately I think they've been getting stronger and stronger, though not *too* strong."

Celeste seemed flustered, though Hardwicke couldn't figure out *why* she'd be that way. Intrigued, he leaned forward. "Is there anything else you've noticed about them?"

Celeste swallowed. "Um. Maybe? The truth is... Pierce, well, you see, I suppose I should explain a little... but I guess I don't really know *how* –"

"Ah. Good afternoon to you."

Celeste's words were cut off by the sound of a rich baritone voice from above them. Hardwicke had been so intent on Celeste that he hadn't noticed anyone approaching their table – unforgivable, for both a shifter and an agent of the Shifter Patrol Corps – and now he looked up to see an older man, balding, with what hair remained to him slicked down neatly against his skull, a curling mustache on his upper lip, and a truly *interesting* purple and green paisley tie tucked into his impeccable gray suit.

"Celeste, my dear," the man continued as Hardwicke stared up at him. "I do hope I'm not interrupting anything?"

## CHAPTER 3

“Uncle Gordon!” Celeste gasped, jumping to her feet. “You’re early!”

Guilt curdled in her stomach. If it hadn’t been for Gordon arriving at this very moment, she knew she would have blabbed out a lot more than she should have to Pierce – maybe even something that would have revealed the true nature of the earth tremors, and why she herself was on this island now.

*But he wouldn’t have believed you, even if you had,* she thought sadly, as Gordon carried on with some pleasantries or other in his posh, deep voice. *He just would have thought you were completely crazy.*

And why had she felt compelled to tell him anything anyway? It was true she hated lying and wasn’t very good at it, but she’d been managing to keep up her cover story here for *years* – so why had she choked on it now, when she’d needed to repeat it to Pierce?

She didn’t have a lot of time to think about it, though – Uncle Gordon had clearly just asked her a question while her head was in a whirl, and now she had to try to answer it... even though she didn’t really have the faintest idea what it was he’d said.

“Uh... thank you, yes, I’m doing really well! And how are you, Uncle Gordon?” she said, taking a wild stab in the dark.

In reply, Gordon only raised a single eyebrow, and Celeste gulped as she realized her guess must have been completely wrong.

“Well, I *am* glad to hear you’re well, but I’m not sure how that relates to the meatloaf,” Gordon said, casting an eye down to the plate with her half-eaten meal on it. “I suppose that’s what passes for the local cuisine?”

Celeste frowned. Somehow, Gordon seemed even more snobby than she remembered him – and he was *pretty snobby* in her memories.

“It’s really good,” she said, a little defensively. Chrissy was a good cook, and a good friend. And she’d been enjoying the meatloaf! And she thought Pierce had been too, before Gordon had showed up. “But... why are you here a day early?”

“I thought the sooner I arrived, the better,” Gordon said breezily. “And it seems like I came just in time.”

He looked down at Pierce with an unfriendly eye – and Pierce looked right back, just as unfriendly.

*Uh-oh*, Celeste thought. But surely... Pierce couldn’t think Gordon was – was – a *romantic interest* of hers, could he?!

The idea seemed ridiculous – ridiculous enough that Celeste almost wanted to burst out laughing at the thought. She didn’t think Gordon *had* any romantic interests – and even if he did, she certainly wasn’t one of them. She’d known him since she was a girl, and the only things he’d ever seemed interested in were books, loudly patterned ties, and waxing his moustache, in that order.

*But anyway, even if he was interested in me romantically, that doesn’t explain anything*, Celeste thought. What, was she just going to assume that Pierce would be jealous – after twenty years? After only meeting up again and talking for a grand total of about half an hour?

*Just how big-headed are you, to think he’d still be hung up on you after all this time?* she thought, wanting to shake her head at herself. Why had her mind jumped to that? It was true: *she’d* never stopped thinking about Pierce Hardwicke, even after all this time. But she had no reason to think the same was true of him.

“Well, I assume you’re just about to introduce me to your... *friend*, here,” Gordon said, into the awkward silence that Celeste now realized had grown.

“Oh, of course,” Celeste said, feeling flustered. *I have to get myself back under control!* “Uncle Gordon, this is, uh, an old friend, Pierce Hardwicke. We just ran into each other by chance, since he’s staying here. And Pierce, this is my uncle, Gordon Ledbeter.”

“Charmed to meet you,” Gordon said, holding out a hand for Pierce to shake – which he did, after a barely perceptible pause.

“Likewise,” Pierce replied, though his voice suggested he was anything *but* charmed.

“Well, Celeste dear, as much as I’d like for you to stay and finish your meal, I think we have things we need to discuss. Is this the kind of establishment where they’ll allow you to take your leftovers away with you in some kind of... doggy bag?”

“Um, yes,” Celeste muttered. “I’ll go ask about it now.” Still, as much as she knew Gordon was right, and it really *would* be best to get back to the lighthouse as soon as possible, she found herself reluctant to leave Pierce. *We hardly even got to talk...*

But then again, maybe it was for the best, she reflected. She’d already been about to say more than she should about the earth tremors, about what she knew about them. And whether or not he’d just write her off as crazy, she knew she couldn’t do that. Her family’s sacred duty in keeping the magical wards maintained at the lighthouse was a secret for a *reason*.

“Do... do you want to stay here, or should I ask for a box for you too?” Celeste asked Pierce, who was still sizing Gordon up as if he didn’t like what he saw at all.

“Yes, please, if it’s not too much trouble,” Pierce said, turning to look at her after a moment. “I have a few things I’ll need to do this afternoon myself. Maybe it’s for the best if I get going.”

The servings here were *huge*, anyway, Celeste thought, as, having grabbed two boxes from Chrissy, she scooped the remains of her meal into one of them. It was a shame, though – everything here really was better when it was fresh. And she was still hungry!

Well, she’d be able to finish it later, she supposed, as she wistfully sealed up the box. Whatever was going on at the lighthouse was more important than her rumbling stomach.

*But is it more important than catching up with Pierce, after so many years?*

Celeste shook her head. Of course it was! Whatever was happening there might be a cause of ruin to not just Portsmouth, but who knew how much else – she couldn’t put her passing nostalgia for the one who got away over all of that.

*Keep your head on straight, Celeste Williams! Remember who you are!*

“You’ll – you’ll be in town for a few days, right?” she couldn’t stop herself from asking as they left Chrissy’s diner, their boxes of leftover meatloaf and hash in hand.

From the corner of her eye, she could see Uncle Gordon’s head turn

sharply toward her, but she ignored him, focusing on Pierce.

“Yes,” he said, after a moment, his gray eyes looking down into hers in a way that made her breath catch in her throat.

He still had that power over her, even now. If Celeste had been asked twenty years ago if Pierce Hardwicke could possibly get any more handsome, she would have said it was impossible – but looking at him now, she had to admit that, if anything, she was even *more* attracted to him now than she had been when they were young. The graying temples suited him more than was fair, dammit!

“But I wouldn’t want to take up your time, if you have a guest,” Pierce said after a moment.

“Yes, I’m afraid we *will* be quite busy,” Gordon broke in, his tone politely acidic. “But it was very nice to have met you... Peter, was it?”

“If you like,” Pierce said, his tone just as acidic. “It was nice to meet you too, George.”

Celeste couldn’t hold back the traitorous little giggle that forced its way up her throat – but luckily, she managed to mostly swallow it down before it could come out of her mouth.

“But I hope I’ll see you in town,” Celeste said, ignoring the stare Gordon was sending boring into the side of her face. She was a grown woman, and she’d make a date with an old friend if she wanted to – she might have a sacred duty, but Gordon wasn’t in charge of her. He could think what he wanted.

“I hope so too, Celeste,” Pierce said, his voice returning to the rich, warm, deep tone she knew so well, and which never failed to send a delicious shiver down her spine. “Well, I’ll let you get to your business. I’m sorry if I interrupted anything.”

“Apology accepted,” Gordon said, before Celeste could get a word out. “Now, come along my dear. We should get started.”

Celeste cast a quick look over her shoulder, mouthing *I’m sorry* at Pierce as she and Gordon turned away. Pierce at least seemed to accept *her* apology, giving her a quick shrug and a small smile before he too turned away.

Despite herself, Celeste felt a flame of anger kindling in her stomach. Even if they were on an island and it wasn’t like Pierce was going anywhere, she was still angry at Gordon’s rudeness. It was true he was one of the most learned wizards in the world, but that didn’t give him the right to act like an ass and treat her as if she was a child!

“I invited you here to give me some advice, not to be so rude to my friends,” she snapped at him, as soon as she was sure they were out of range of Pierce’s hearing. “That really was incredibly bad-mannered.”

Gordon didn’t seem affected by the accusation at all – he simply sniffed. “Who even was that man?” he asked, peering back over his shoulder. “And what were you about to tell him when I walked in?”

Celeste’s mouth snapped shut. She had to admit, Gordon had her there.

“I wasn’t telling him anything,” she said, which was only a half-truth, she supposed. “But he said he was here to investigate the earth tremors, and he was asking me some questions about them. I was only trying to give him some answers, without revealing what I suspected.” *Or not too much of it, anyway.*

Gordon sniffed again. “So he’s a seismologist, is he?”

“Well, he didn’t *say* that, but I suppose so,” Celeste said, suddenly realizing she hadn’t really asked, either. She’d been too thrown by the fact that he was here because of the earth tremors – which she *knew* weren’t the result of unusual seismic activity in the area – to think of asking him for more details about his work. “I wasn’t going to say anything. Why would I? And just to remind you, I’ve been here for almost twenty years, and in all that time no one has ever found out anything about my work – I’ve never told a soul. So please remember that the next time you decide to start accusing me of... whatever it is you think I was going to do.”

“Point taken,” Gordon conceded, though he said it just as haughtily as everything else he’d said so far today. “I shan’t assume so much in future. Nonetheless...”

Celeste glanced at him sharply, but Gordon didn’t finish his sentence, instead lapsing into what she assumed was a thoughtful silence until they reached the pier where her small boat was moored.

“Well. I suppose I shouldn’t have expected much in the way of creature comforts,” Gordon said as, gingerly, he stepped into the swaying boat. “Honestly, Celeste dear, if I’d known the conditions you lived in I’d have sent you some help *long* ago. Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Because I don’t mind it?” Celeste said, all but jumping into the boat and making it sway in the water, just to see Gordon clutching the sides. She knew she was being childish, but she was annoyed by Gordon’s attitude about her living situation *and* about her curtailed... well, not *date*, because that wasn’t what it had been, but her meal with Pierce. “Really, it’s fine. You don’t need

to worry about me.”

“Hmmm,” Gordon said, as, rolling her eyes, Celeste started up the boat’s engine, before guiding them out of the harbor.

It didn’t take long to get to the mooring place at the lighthouse, even with the ocean as choppy as it was. Gordon seemed to have spent the entire ten-minute journey grabbing onto anything within reach for dear life, as if he expected the ocean to roll up into the boat and carry him away with it – but, Celeste supposed, he was an academic wizard, not a practical one. So he probably spent most of his time cloistered with his books.

“We’ll be inside soon,” Celeste said as she helped him up out of the boat, feeling just a little remorseful for snapping at him and then rocking the boat so much. He’d come here to help her, after all, no matter how irritated she was about having to cut things short with Pierce.

*It wasn’t meant to be back then, after all, she thought wistfully as she opened the red wooden door that led inside the lighthouse. And it’s probably not meant to be now. I mean, I’m still here in the lighthouse. And that’s where I’ll stay for the foreseeable future. It’s not like anything’s changed.*

She swallowed down the cold lump that had risen in her chest. Maybe it was for the best that Gordon had shown up when he did. Remembering just how much Pierce made her heart race, her spine tingle, her stomach clench... nothing good could come of that. He’d leave the island once his vacation was over, and she’d still be here. Nothing about what she had to do had changed since the day she’d been forced to leave him twenty years ago.

*I probably shouldn’t see him again, she thought, blinking back the hot tears that had sprung into her eyes. It’ll only make things harder. I could leave him back then... barely. I don’t know if I could do it again now.*

She didn’t have much choice, though – it wasn’t as if sacred duties just stopped having to be performed because the ex she’d never gotten over just happened to be in town.

“Anyway, my dear, you should show me up to where you’ve been keeping the wards,” Gordon said, breaking into her thoughts. He was looking around her humble home a *little* more appreciatively, at least – probably admiring the masses of books on her shelves.

“I keep them up in the tower,” Celeste said, crossing the room to the curving stairs that lead up to where, back when this had been a functioning lighthouse, the keepers had kept the light going to warn ships away from the rugged coast, with its jagged rocks. “Follow me.”

The climb was a long one, and despite the fact Celeste had assumed Gordon didn't get out much, he was barely puffing even at the top of the long climb up to the lantern room. The windows had been blacked out long ago, and so there was no chance of anyone seeing the faintly glowing magical wards Celeste tended to here from the island or from the more distant coast of the mainland.

They didn't *look* any different at all – just a faintly glowing screen, shimmering from orange to red to pink to blue, and then back again. But they *felt* different – just like the sunshine going behind a cloud, like Celeste had tried to explain it to her parents all those years ago. They were weakening, and no matter what Celeste did, she couldn't seem to strengthen them again.

*And what will happen if they weaken too much, or, even worse, fail altogether?*

She could see that Gordon could sense the problem as soon as he walked into the room. A deep frown crossed his face, and he seemed perplexed.

“Well, I certainly see why you were worried,” he said after a minute. “This is not very good at all. Not at all!”

“Is there anything you can do?” Celeste asked, as anxiety clambered up her throat. “I've been trying everything I know – everything I was ever taught – to try to bring them back up to full strength, but it seems like nothing I do works at all.”

“Yes, I can see you've been trying your best,” Gordon said thoughtfully, and though Celeste bristled at first, he didn't seem to be making any derisive comment on her abilities, but rather just making an observation. “I can see the history of the magic you've been using in the patterns the wards make. The shimmering here – that's where you did something very powerful. But it fades again. It didn't stick, it seems.”

Celeste couldn't see what he was talking about at all, but then, she supposed, that was why Gordon was the one she'd called. What he didn't know about magic could probably be written on a Post-It note.

“But you can fix it, right? And teach me what to do in case this ever happens again?”

Gordon was silent for a long moment, seemingly lost in thought. “Perhaps,” he finally said, his voice contemplative. “Perhaps. I must admit, my dear, that I have never seen something quite like this before.”

Celeste's heart sank. If *Gordon* didn't know what to do, then she was worried it was hopeless. But that *couldn't* be the case – her family had been

tending the wards for centuries. What would happen if they failed?

She shivered.

*I can't even let myself think about that possibility...*

“You are a witch of exceptional natural powers, and your education was outstanding – after all, I oversaw it myself. I myself am of course greater,” Gordon said, without a hint of modesty, “but I am not so proud as to not be able to admit that I believe I must consult my books on this case. You have done everything you were supposed to do – have no fear of that! – and yet the wards remain weakened, and are growing weaker. I know I will find the answer, but it means returning to my own library for a short time to seek it out.”

Fear clutched at Celeste’s heart. “You mean you’re going back home for a few days? But what if the wards fail in the meantime?”

“That shouldn’t happen,” Gordon said, though Celeste didn’t feel particularly reassured by his words. “And the fact remains unavoidable that I must consult my books for a historical precedent. So I don’t see that we have much choice. I *will* however cast a spell that should be strong enough to keep the wards from failing whilst I am gone. Observe.”

There wasn’t much *to* observe – just a quick flick of his wrist – but even so, Celeste felt the magic in the room grow immediately stronger, like the warm glow of the sun. As pompous, arrogant and annoying as Gordon was, she had to admit that his self-regard *was* at least well-founded: he truly was the best there was at what he did.

“There. That should hold until I return,” Gordon said, dusting off his hands as if there was any possibility they could have gotten even a particle of dirt on them. “And now, I shall leave you. I will return as quickly as possible. There is, however, one last thing.”

Celeste frowned as Gordon’s face turned pensive, his eyebrows drawing together, a deep furrow appearing between them.

“Your friend, with whom you were eating earlier. What is his name?”

“It’s – it’s Pierce, Pierce Hardwicke,” Celeste said, confused. “Why do you ask?”

“I find something deeply suspicious about that man,” Gordon said darkly, his eyebrows still furrowed. “Do you not find it strange, my dear, that he appeared *just* as these tremors began? And that somehow he knows about them, even though really, they are barely detectable to anyone but us? No one on the island has mentioned them, is that not correct?”

“Well... I mean, I suppose so...” Celeste said reluctantly. She had to admit, it *was* a pretty big coincidence. But she couldn’t believe that Pierce had anything to do with them. After all, she *knew* him... or at least, she *had*, twenty years ago.

She had to admit, something like that wasn’t going to sound very convincing to Gordon.

“Precisely, my dear. There is something else going on, which I currently can only guess at. And as I say, I must leave now. But I do not like it at all – not at all! I think it would be for the best if you were to return to the island for the time being in order to ferret out just what this Pierce Hardwicke is up to.”

“You mean... s-spy on him?” Celeste asked, her eyes going wide.

“I trust you have no objections,” Gordon replied, quirked an eyebrow at her.

*No, none, Celeste thought, except for the fact that I just swore I wouldn’t go near him again, for fear of not being able to give him up. And oh, yeah, I’m still in love with him. I mean, I think. Somehow. Even after all this time.*

She *wanted* to tell Gordon that she didn’t think it was possible for Pierce to have anything to do with whatever was going on with the wards, but she knew she had no reason to think so except her own gut feeling.

*But... he wouldn’t be involved in anything like that! I simply can’t believe it.*

Gordon was still staring at her, however, his mild confusion becoming something closer to suspicion by the minute.

“All right, I’ll do it,” Celeste said, with as much conviction as she could manage. She’d just have to harden her heart and... somehow survive being in close quarters with Pierce again. She didn’t have to *talk* to him, she supposed – Gordon had only told her to keep an eye on him. If she didn’t have to actually speak to him, maybe it’d be easier for her to forget what they’d once been to each other – what she’d had to give up when she’d taken on her duty here.

*Ha. Ha. Fat chance of that,* she thought miserably, as Pierce’s handsome, smiling face flittered through her memory once more.

But even as she thought it, she knew she didn’t have a lot of choice.

*Somehow,* she thought, gritting her teeth, *I’ll just have to make it work.*

She’d given him up once, after all – would it *really* be so hard to do it again?

*And if he does have something to do with what's happening here, Celeste thought, even though her soul rebelled at the suggestion, then he was never who I thought he was in the first place.*

## CHAPTER 4

*O*h, wonderful, Hardwicke thought as he opened the wardrobe. *This is just perfect.*

Celeste hadn't been mistaken when she'd told him that the clothes shop here in Portsmouth wasn't often open – he had seen its regular opening hours on the sign that was hung on the door. Right above the one that read *Gone for the holidays! Opening again January 5<sup>th</sup>.*

So it looked like he wouldn't be replacing his lost luggage anytime soon – but thankfully, the owner of the fisherman's cottage had gone to the trouble of making sure there were a few clothes in the wardrobe, *Since*, as the note Hardwicke had found on the kitchen counter had explained, *people often don't realize how cutting the wind is here on our humble island!*

Hardwicke, being as fastidious as he was, *had* in fact researched the weather thoroughly before his arrival and brought everything he'd need to deal with the island's sleet and freezing cold winds. But none of it was doing him any good now, being as it was that his luggage had probably drifted out to sea or been pummeled to pieces on the rocks at the bottom of the cliff.

But the wardrobe, did, as promised, have some clothes in it.

*Well, for certain values of clothes, I guess*, Hardwicke thought as he pulled what had to be *the* ugliest Christmas sweater he'd ever seen out of a drawer.

Maybe this was the owner's idea of a joke – or maybe they really *were* just a fan of sweaters with huge reindeer faces on them, complete with an enormous pom-pom of a red nose stuck to the front. Little knitted holly sprigs surrounded the reindeer's manically grinning face, and the words 'Ho! Ho! Ho!' filled all the space that was left over.

Hardwicke didn't consider himself a *fussy* dresser – well, except in the sense that he always looked neat and tidy, as was professional – but this... this he wasn't sure about.

*But it's really the only sweater that appears to be in here*, he thought, as, resigning himself to his fate, he slipped it on over his head.

There was at least a waterproof jacket hanging up in the wardrobe too, but it quickly became apparent that it wasn't really made for someone of his height or build. He could get it on – just – but it stretched uncomfortably tightly across his shoulders, and there was no way he was going to get it zipped up over his chest. But still, it was better than nothing, he supposed.

Thankfully, there was a little wider selection of pants available, and after trying on a couple which definitely *didn't* fit, Hardwicke finally found a pair of old, worn jeans that he could pull up over his thighs. They weren't exactly what he'd choose to wear, but perhaps it was better this way – he'd noticed yesterday that people on this island tended to dress down, so he'd be less conspicuous this way, or at least as inconspicuous as it was possible for an out-of-towner to be on this small island.

In any case, if everything went to plan, Hardwicke hoped to spend at least some of today in his pegasus form, flying high above the town and using his full shifter senses to figure out the source of the earth tremors that seemed to have the higher-ups in the Shifter Patrol Corps so nervous.

*Well, at least if the wind has died down a little*, he thought as he stepped out into the freezing cold air of the day.

It was at least a *little* calmer than yesterday – Hardwicke thought if he could find an isolated spot to shift he'd head up into the skies right away, and at least get a quick survey done. He already knew the only things around here were Portsmith itself and the lighthouse that stood on a rocky crag a mile or so off the island, but which hadn't actually been used as a lighthouse for decades.

*That might be worth a closer look*, he thought, as he made his way up the street that led out of town, into the rocky desolation that lay beyond. All he'd really need to do was find a nice big rock to shield himself from sight, make sure there was no one around, shift, and then launch himself into the skies. If he stayed high enough, no one should see him, he hoped –

“Pierce! Oh – I'm sorry, I really didn't mean to interrupt you if you're on your way somewhere...”

Hardwicke stiffened. Only one person had called him *Pierce* in the last

twenty years – not even he thought of himself that way anymore. But there was also the fact that, of course, he would know the sound of Celeste’s voice anywhere.

Inside him, his pegasus raised its head, snorting, its nostrils flaring.

*Our mate! She has returned! She wants to see us again – she has sought us out! As she always will!*

Hardwicke tried to ignore it. It was to be expected that the pegasus would get completely over-excited when Celeste was around, and he didn’t blame it. But right now, he thought reluctantly, he had a job to do. And trying to keep himself in check around his mate was *not* going to make doing it easy.

Still, his heart was pounding as he tried to prepare himself for seeing Celeste’s beautiful face again. But *nothing* could have prepared him for it, or the twist of pain and joy in his chest when he turned and looked at her.

“Celeste,” he forced himself to say, even as his throat tightened. “This is a coincidence! But a very welcome one, of course.”

“Uh, yeah,” Celeste said, laughing – and to Hardwicke’s ears, it sounded a little uneasy. “I guess... I guess it’s a coincidence.”

The clear note of uncertainty in Celeste’s voice gave Hardwicke pause. Perhaps it was just that, after all this time, things were awkward between them, though they hadn’t been so bad yesterday. Or perhaps –

*It is that man from yesterday*, his pegasus snorted suddenly, stamping its hooves and rustling its wings in agitation. *He practically dragged our mate away from us. He is the cause of our mate’s discomfort today. We are sure of it.*

Despite his pegasus’s use of *we* – which, really, could have been the royal *we* anyway, given how highly the pegasus thought of itself – Hardwicke wasn’t too sure about what it said... at least until he thought back over the events of yesterday, and how the man Celeste had introduced to him as Gordon Ledbeter had interrupted her in the middle of what she was saying, and then practically demanded that she come with him immediately, not even giving her enough time to finish her meal.

*Is he threatening her somehow?* Hardwicke wondered as he looked down at Celeste’s face. *No... maybe it’s not that serious. I can’t just jump to a conclusion like that. But still...*

But still, the fact remained that he didn’t much like the situation at all. There was something strange about this Gordon Ledbeter, and Hardwicke wanted to know what it was. *Especially* if he was doing something to threaten

his mate. Or even just make her uncomfortable, really.

“I’m sorry I had to race off so quickly yesterday,” Celeste continued after a moment. “It’s just that Gordon had only just arrived in town, and he doesn’t know his way around all that well, and – and –”

Celeste trailed off, her words coming to an uncertain halt as she stared, not at his face, but rather around the region of his chest. Alarm rose in Hardwicke’s mind – was something wrong? Was Celeste in some kind of trouble she wasn’t sure how to talk about yet? Was it that –

*Ah, Hardwicke realized after he glanced down at himself. No. It’s none of those things. It’s the sweater. Of course, it’s the sweater.*

It certainly did seem to be the sweater. Celeste was staring at the grinning reindeer with wide eyes – and, Hardwicke was pretty sure, a tiny, barely suppressed smile tugging at her lips.

“Um,” she said after a moment, finally raising her eyes to his and having the decency to look a *little* sheepish. “I was just... admiring your... uh. Well. I’m glad you had the time to buy some new clothes already, and that you’re getting into the spirit of the season!”

Hardwicke groaned inwardly. *Great, the second time I see my mate in twenty years, and I’m wearing the world’s most hideous Christmas sweater. This is perfect. Amazing.*

“I didn’t buy this,” he managed to get out after a moment. “It was in the cottage I’m renting. The clothes shop is closed until January, so I didn’t have any choice but to wear whatever they had there. I didn’t want to dress like this!”

He was aware, distantly, that he sounded like a petulant child who’d been forced into their Sunday best for their first day of school insisting to the other children that their parents had *made* them wear these clothes, and, with effort, he reined himself in.

“I mean... it’s not that I don’t *like* Christmas or anything like that,” he added. “But grinning reindeer are just not my first choice of things to go walk around town wearing.”

“No kidding,” Celeste said with a quick, mischievous grin. “I didn’t think it seemed like you. But then, twenty years is a long time. Maybe you’ve gained an appreciation for goofy sweaters since I last saw you.”

Despite the mention of the twenty-year separation, Hardwicke found himself laughing. Celeste had, after all, always been able to make him laugh, despite his serious nature.

“Well, give me a day. By the end of it I probably won’t want to give the sweater back.”

“I think it’s cute,” Celeste said loyally, her eyes twinkling. “I should get a matching one. Like a real coup—”

Celeste’s mouth snapped shut halfway through the word, as if she hadn’t meant to say it, and was now hoping to bite it back from the air and swallow it down again.

Hardwicke immediately felt a surge in his heart – had Celeste, albeit accidentally, called them a couple? Did she still think of them that way, no matter how long it had been? Was there still a chance that –

*Wait. Slow down.*

Hardwicke forced his racing mind to stop. He couldn’t let himself get carried away. He was here to do a *job*, not rekindle the romance he’d had long ago. No matter whether Celeste was his mate or not, he couldn’t simply neglect his duties.

*Nothing is more important than our mate*, the pegasus insisted, rearing up on its hind legs indignantly, plowing the air furiously with its front hooves. *Our mate is the only thing that matters! We must court her, since you allowed her to slip away from us the first time. Will you allow it again?*

Hardwicke loved how, to the pegasus, it was always *we* whenever it thought it should be given credit for something, but *you* whenever it was finding fault. But that was to be expected, he supposed. Pegasi tended not to admit to mistakes.

“Well, I don’t know if there’s another one back in the cottage, but there might be,” Hardwicke said, choosing, for the moment, not to insist that Celeste finish her sentence, even though he was burning up with curiosity to know how it was she really felt.

“Oh, don’t worry, I think I’ll be okay,” Celeste said, laughing with obvious relief that Hardwicke was pretending not to notice her slip-up. “But you know, if I ever happen to lose every other item of clothing I own, I’ll give you a call...”

Celeste trailed off, seeming to suddenly realize how suggestive what she’d said was – or at least Hardwicke thought so, given the way her cheeks and the tips of her ears were starting to pinken, just the way he remembered them doing whenever she got embarrassed – or surprised, or most other strong emotions. She’d always hated it, but Hardwicke had always found it *adorable*. Just like everything else about her.

But for now, he decided, clearing his throat and looking studiously away, it was probably better not to notice it – perhaps Celeste was just pink from the cold, and she *hadn't* instantly thought about what it would be like for them to lose their clothes somehow. Hardwicke definitely didn't think it would be a good idea to ask and find out – she did *not* need to know that that was definitely where his own mind had instantly gone!

*But she is our mate*, his pegasus said. *It's only natural we should find her the most desirable woman we have ever encountered. Have you ever seen anyone more beautiful? Have you ever felt an attraction like this to anyone else?*

Of course, Hardwicke thought, his eyes drawn helplessly back to Celeste once more, the pegasus was right. And it *was* only natural. She *was* his mate, after all. But that didn't mean he could just blurt these things out to her on the street! And besides which, Hardwicke had always thought of himself as rather staid, and not one to get carried away by passion. Even when they'd first met he'd been like that. He hadn't been prepared for the torrent of emotion she'd unleashed in him, and which had been very hard to dam back up once she'd told him their future together wasn't possible.

*Even if*, he thought, his eyes roving over her full, slightly parted lips, her softly pinkened cheeks, her bright blue eyes, *she really is beyond difficult to resist...*

“Pierce,” Celeste said suddenly, her voice a little breathless. When he looked into her eyes, he saw his own disordered emotions reflected back at him – he saw longing there, but also confusion and anxiety. Hardwicke wasn't used to having such muddled emotions – he'd developed the ability to cut things down to the essentials and make quick decisions based on logic and rationality long ago. He'd needed to. After he and Celeste had broken up, that was how he'd stopped himself from falling into a black hole of despair, after all – making sure he felt as few emotions as possible and throwing himself completely into his work. But now...

*But now... I have absolutely no idea how to deal with any of this.*

“Pierce,” Celeste said again, and this time her voice was hoarse, thick with emotion. “Pierce, there's something I need to –”

“Yoo-hoooo! Celeste! Is that you?”

Celeste jumped, turning at the sound of the voice from behind her, which had cut through the air like a laser, breaking into the almost dreamlike state Hardwicke had found himself drifting into as he'd gazed into Celeste's eyes,

waiting with bated breath to find out what she was going to say. The voice had come like a slap across the cheek, and Hardwicke wasn't sure he was able to keep the grimace of annoyance from his face, no matter how hard he tried.

"Oh, it is you, Celeste! I thought so!"

Hardwicke blinked, struggling to keep his face neutral, as an older lady bustled up the street toward them, her steely gray hair wrapped in a colorful scarf, knitted gloves with cats' faces on them covering her hands.

"Oh – Mrs. Shelby," Celeste said, blinking, though her voice still had a slightly breathless edge to it. "I'm sorry, I didn't see you there."

"Oh no, not to worry. And please, call me Darla!" Mrs. Shelby winked winsomely, a smile on her face. "I hope I'm not interrupting anything."

She darted a look up at Hardwicke, before raising her eyebrow at Celeste.

"No... no, it's okay," Celeste said, trying to gather herself. "I was just... um..."

"Celeste and I are old friends," Hardwicke said, hoping he was coming to her rescue rather than making things worse. "We were just catching up."

"Oh no, it seems I *am* interrupting something," Mrs. Shelby said, shaking her head regretfully. "But you *know* I wouldn't dream of doing something so rude if it wasn't *very* important."

Celeste opened her mouth, clearly about to ask if there was something wrong, but it seemed Mrs. Shelby was going to tell her whether she asked or not.

"Well, you know how I – well, actually you probably *don't*, given that you're such a *reclusive* type – but anyway, I've been organizing a fundraiser this year for my nephew's school over on the mainland. Every year we do it! It's for funding to cover the students' writing books for the year. But anyway, Celeste, *this* year I came up with the *amazing* idea of some of us here making hand-made clay mugs and things to auction off to the highest bidder. I know what you're going to say – *genius*, isn't it? But I have a problem. I *promised* that I'd provide twenty mugs for the auction. But wouldn't you know it, that Mrs. Taylor and her husband have left me high and dry! They pulled out at the last moment! Something about a *family* thing that had come up and having to leave town... oh, who remembers the details. *Anyway*, the *point* is that I'm short two mugs. And I really need them done today so I have enough time to get them fired and sent off before Christmas! But just as I was beginning to get so worried about what to do, here you are! So, what do you

say?”

Mrs. Shelby seemed to be looking expectantly at Celeste at the end of her monologue, as if it should be extremely clear what, exactly, Celeste should have something to say about.

Hardwicke wondered if he, perhaps, might have missed something, but one glance at Celeste’s face told him she was just as confused as he was.

“Um. I’m sorry, Mrs. Shelby, but I don’t really understand what you’re getting at,” Celeste said, a little hesitantly.

Mrs. Shelby shook her head, stopping only just short of actually rolling her eyes.

“Why, making a *mug* of course, silly!” she said, a little exasperated. “Really, I’m in a big hurry about it. But you have time to come to the pottery studio and throw a little something together, don’t you? Since you’re just standing here on the street?” Mrs. Shelby tutted Celeste into silence as soon as Celeste began to speak, rushing on: “Yes yes, I *know* you said you were catching up with your friend, but as I said, I need *two* mugs. So you can both make one each! Wouldn’t that be *fun*. You can talk while you make them!”

Hardwicke could see the mortified blush that was creeping over Celeste’s face as she glanced up at him, apology in her eyes.

*It’s okay*, he tried to mentally reassure her. In fact, he didn’t have time at all to sit around making a clay mug, and he didn’t feel good about abandoning Celeste to Mrs. Shelby, but he *did* need to find a way to get away to find somewhere isolated to shift and begin his investigations –

“But of course. We would be most honored to provide a piece of claywork. It would be our privilege to assist in such a noble endeavor. Most especially if it is with Celeste.”

Hardwicke heard the words coming out of his own mouth, in his own voice, but they weren’t words that he would ever actually *say* – no, they were pure pegasus. *It* would never consider changing the way it spoke to make itself sound more like a normal human – as far as it was concerned, the way it spoke was *fine*, and it was everyone else who was wrong.

“Oh... well, yes, I’m *very* happy to hear that,” Mrs. Shelby said, after a mildly awkward pause, during which Hardwicke had mentally berated his pegasus, which hadn’t cared at all what he had to say.

*You would leave our mate to face this challenge alone?* the pegasus demanded, somehow managing to look down its nose at him. *And you think yourself worthy of her hand, her trust, her bond? How you can look at*

*yourself in the mirror if you do not assist her now is quite certainly beyond me.*

Gritting his teeth, Hardwicke had to admit the pegasus might have had a point. Celeste was too sweet for her own good, and he knew she'd never turn down Mrs. Shelby's request – which, he assumed, meant spending a lot of time with Mrs. Shelby. Could he really abandon her to *that* fate?

Duty was tugging at him, but he'd committed himself now – he knew if he tried to back out, regardless of how much he wanted to rescue Celeste from Mrs. Shelby's company or simply spend time with her for its own sake, his pegasus would immediately take over his vocal cords again and allow no such thing.

So, he supposed, he'd just have to resign himself to his fate.

“Oh – Pierce, are you sure? Don't you have any plans for the day – like sightseeing, or just relaxing?” Celeste asked, blinking up at him. “I mean, of course I'd love to have your company, but I couldn't just ask you to drop everything and –”

“Now, now, Celeste, he's already agreed,” trilled Mrs. Shelby, taking Celeste by the arm. “There's no need to make things so *complicated*. You'll be done in a jiffy! They don't need to be great works of art! They just need to *exist*. Now come along, both of you. Time's a-wasting! Don't forget I need these *today!*”

Mrs. Shelby started off down the street, still chattering, tugging Celeste along by the arm. As Hardwicke began to follow, Celeste cast him a deeply apologetic look over her shoulder.

Hardwicke gave her a quick smile and shrug, hoping that he was effectively conveying *Don't worry about it – it's not your fault*.

In any case, since he had, ostensibly, agreed, he supposed he'd better make the most of it. And it was more time with Celeste, after all.

*But then again...*

Hardwicke wasn't sure he'd ever so much as touched a piece of clay in his life. He'd certainly never attempted to make anything out of it. Arts and crafts had never been his strong suit. Come to think of it, he wasn't even sure he'd ever even *drawn* anything.

He gulped.

*Just what have I gotten myself into?*

## CHAPTER 5

*Just what have I gotten myself into?*

Celeste looked, wide-eyed, around Mrs. Shelby's small pottery studio.

She knew Mrs. Shelby had had quite the career as a sculptor and potter at one time, until she'd retired here to the island. She still kept a small pottery studio now and her daughter sold things for her through an online shop, but that, as Mrs. Shelby had explained, was mainly just to keep herself busy, since she didn't need the money.

Celeste had to admit the studio was cute – it was nice and warm, and the walls were lined with shelves holding Mrs. Shelby's creations, all of which were obviously highly professional and extremely beautiful, everything from drinking mugs with little rabbits on them to dog bowls, to little ceramic dragons and tigers, glazed in brilliantly vivid colors.

*I can't make anything like that, though,* Celeste thought, as she gazed around the room. *I hope Mrs. Shelby isn't expecting anything too much...*

And then, of course, there was the fact that Pierce had been dragged into this too. Celeste felt bad about that – but she *also* felt bad about the fact that there was just the tiniest bit of her that was dancing a jig in pure joy.

*Which is very selfish,* she chided herself. She tried to remind herself that she wouldn't have even come looking for Pierce again if Uncle Gordon hadn't commanded her to keep an eye on him. And she hadn't even been sure *how* to do that – should she have asked him out for a drink, a lunch, a dinner? All of those things sounded way too close to *dates* for her to feel comfortable about. The last thing she needed to do was lead Pierce on – *As if he'd even be interested!* – or remind herself of how she'd never really gotten over him.

No, things had worked out for the best, she supposed. This wasn't a date, she could do what Gordon had asked, and she could spend some time with Pierce while telling herself there was no danger of giving anyone the wrong impression.

Grimacing, Celeste shook her head. She couldn't get caught up in these kinds of thoughts – she knew Pierce could read her face better than anyone, and if she started down this road, he'd definitely ask her what was wrong, and then she wasn't sure she'd be able to keep herself from blurting everything out.

She wasn't here to have a fun time reminiscing about things that would never come back – she was supposed to be here to keep an eye on Pierce.

*Could he really have something to do with the tremors, the weakening of the wards? Or know something about them?*

Even if she hadn't known Pierce, and, at one time at least, trusted him completely, Celeste would have had a hard time believing that as she watched him now, patiently listening as Mrs. Shelby patronizingly explained to him what *clay* was.

And then, there was also the fact that, as far as she knew, Pierce was a completely ordinary man – he definitely wasn't a wizard, or affiliated with any magical groups that she'd ever heard of. It was a very closed society, and everyone tended to know everyone else. If he was aware of these things, Celeste – or Gordon, certainly – would have known him.

*And then I never would have needed to leave him in the first place...*

No, Gordon was very clearly barking up the wrong tree, Celeste told herself firmly. But she *did* have a responsibility to do what he'd asked her to do.

“Now, let me just get you some *clay*,” Mrs. Shelby was musing as she opened up a large cupboard at the back of the room. “Of course, you'll have to come back in a few days after they've had their first firing in order to glaze them. But I'm *sure* that'll be no trouble, will it? No, of course not. But we can arrange that when the time comes!”

*Come back? In a few days?!*

Celeste shot a look at Pierce, mouthing, *I'm sorry*.

And once again, Pierce simply shook his head, giving her a small half-smile that Celeste remembered as meaning *Don't worry about it*.

Pierce had always been a pretty easy-going guy, despite his essentially serious nature. It had taken her a little while to crack through his hard exterior

herself, but, somehow, from the moment she'd met him she'd always had a sense that beneath his hard outer surface he was really just a big softie – and she'd been proved completely correct. Beneath all of that seemingly unemotional front, Pierce had been a die-hard romantic.

Celeste felt a small smile twitching at the corner of her mouth, before she quickly pushed the thought away, coldness washing over her. *Yes, he was. And then you broke his heart.*

The fact she'd also broken her *own* heart in the process was beside the point – it had been *her* actions, after all, that had done it, even if at the time she'd felt she'd had no choice.

“Now, I think wheel work would be a little too *complicated* for you two.” Mrs. Shelby's voice broke into her thoughts. “So let's just stick to hand-made mugs. Look, I've cut you off some *clay* – that should be quite enough. Let me show you some that I made for a client the other day –”

She broke off at the sound of her cell phone ringing – or at least, that was what Celeste assumed it was, since Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* suddenly burst into the room at high volume. Mrs. Shelby whipped the phone from her pocket, holding up a finger for quiet – even though neither Celeste nor Pierce had gotten a word in edgewise the whole time they'd been here – before answering.

“Why *hello!* Violet! Fancy hearing from *you* –” Mrs. Shelby's face darkened as she listened to an indistinct voice from within the phone. “Well, I *hardly* see how that's *my* –” she started to say, before being cut off.

Celeste raised an eyebrow. Was Mrs. Shelby actually speaking with someone who had a stronger will than her, and no qualms about cutting her off mid-sentence? Either way, Mrs. Shelby's lips pursed into a displeased frown.

“Well, of all the *demanding, impertinent...*” she muttered as she hung up on the call, shaking her head, before she composed her face once more, turning to Celeste with a brittle, artificial smile. “Well. Well. It seems I'm needed.”

Celeste could feel curiosity burning within her, but she was sure Mrs. Shelby would enlighten her without her having to ask – and sure enough, a moment later, she did.

“It seems that Violet Plumwood requires some assistance in packing up some of the vases I took to her last week, in order to send them to the mainland – I *gave* her all the boxes and tissue paper anyone could require, but

now she says she wants my help, as she doesn't want to be blamed if any of them break in transit. As if they would, if she would only do it properly! Just *how long* has that woman been *running* the post office, I ask you."

"Oh," Celeste said, blinking, a strange mixture of relief and regret filling her stomach. "Well, I'm sorry to hear that. I guess we can't make the mugs you need right now after all –"

"Oh, no, don't be *silly*, Celeste dear," Mrs. Shelby trilled, as if Celeste had just told her the funniest joke she'd heard all day. "Of *course* the two of you can remain here – you don't need *my* supervision just to make a couple of hand-thrown mugs, after all! *Nothing* could be simpler."

Celeste shot a glance at Pierce. Did *he* know what he was doing? Nothing in his face gave it away if so – he simply raised his eyebrows a little at her.

"Mrs. Shelby –" Celeste tried again. "I really don't think –"

"Now, now, I can't stand around here chatting all day," Mrs. Shelby said, as she grabbed her tie-dyed tote bag from where she'd left it on the table. "Violet sounds like she'll simply throw a *fit* if I don't get over to that post office right away. I'll leave you to yourselves – and your mugs, of course! Just use the clay I cut for you – it should be more than enough. And have a simply *lovely* time – I cannot *wait* to see what you create! Cheerio!"

And with that, Mrs. Shelby was gone, swishing out of the door of the studio and into the cold of the winter air outside.

Celeste blinked, feeling mildly stunned – but then, Mrs. Shelby tended to have that effect on most people she met. Swallowing, she glanced at Pierce again, wondering what he made of all of this.

"Uh," Celeste said, just to break the silence that had descended in Mrs. Shelby's wake. "I'm really sorry about this, Pierce. I truly didn't know Mrs. Shelby was on the prowl, looking for people to help her with her auction project –"

"There's no need for you to apologize," Pierce said, shaking his head. "It's for a good cause, after all. Though I really don't know how they could expect to auction anything I might make for actual money."

Celeste laughed, almost despise herself. "Me neither. I don't think I've so much as touched a piece of *clay* in my life, let alone tried to, uh, hand throw something. Even something as simple as a mug."

"It can't be too difficult, can it?" Pierce said musingly, as he walked along the wall of Mrs. Shelby's creations, picking up the first mug he came to. "Cup. Handle. It's not rocket science, is it?"

“No, I suppose it’s not,” Celeste said, as she took off her jacket and then rolled up the sleeves of her sweater. “And anyway, she was very insistent. I suppose we really don’t have much choice but to at least give it a go.”

“It might even be fun,” Pierce said, putting Mrs. Shelby’s mug down on the table in front of them, as if it would help them to keep in mind what a mug was supposed to look like. “Though... this clay she gave us is in a square shape. Do you think we ought to roll it flat?”

This time, Celeste really *did* laugh. “Wow, this is already going well. I can just see everyone lining up to get our mugs. The world’s first mug in the shape of a cube, no handle, no cup, no mug! Talk about abstract expressionism.”

Pierce joined in with her laughter – the soft quiet laugh she remembered so well and which had always made her heart flutter within her. “Well, no one can say it won’t be unique.”

“Come on, I assume we make the clay flat with a rolling pin or something like that – let’s see what Mrs. Shelby has in the way of equipment, and then we can get started.”

An hour later, Celeste had to admit that perhaps *unique* might not have been so off the mark when it came to describing the mugs she and Pierce had created.

“Hmmm,” she said, as she turned the... the... well, the *item* around on the table in front of her. It had a handle, at least. It *definitely* had a cup. But nothing else about it was really recognizable as something anyone would drink out of. The top was wobbly, the bottom was barely holding on for dear life. It bulged in places no mug should bulge. Celeste was pretty sure if she actually tried to lift it off the worktable, it would simply collapse into its constituent parts. “I think... I think I’m really not going to get anything better than this.”

Pierce glanced across at her. “Are you sure of that?”

“Hey!” Celeste yelped, putting her hands on her hips – remembering only a moment later that they were absolutely covered in clay. She yelped again, wiping them on the front of the apron she’d found, and hoping the clay would wash out of her sweater. “I worked really hard on this! And what, exactly, do you call *that*?!”

Pierce looked down at the *that* she’d indicated with her clay-covered fingers.

“What’s wrong with it?” he asked.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Celeste said, shaking her head. “I barely even know where to start. It’s only an inch tall, to start with.”

Pierce frowned. “I was trying to make an espresso cup.”

“Well, I suppose in terms of the fact people *will* have to drink it quickly before their drink leaks out of the gaping hole you have *here*, it’s pretty express,” Celeste said, poking at the spot where Pierce had apparently completely failed to join the upright part of the mug to the base.

Pierce’s frown deepened to an almost comical extent as he looked to where she was pointing. “I didn’t notice that.”

“Well, notice it or not, you’d better fix it,” Celeste said, leaning down to run her thumbs over the clay, trying to seal up the hole. “No one’s going to buy that, unless it’s for the novelty factor.”

Pierce laughed again – that laugh that made her heart flip-flop *every* time – and reached around to help her cover the hole. But as he did so, his fingers slipped in the damp clay, and briefly came into contact with hers –

Gasping, Celeste jerked her hands back, her skin tingling, like little electric shocks were coursing up and down her arm. It wasn’t just her skin that was on fire, however – suddenly memories burst into her mind too, the memories of how it had felt just like this every time she and Pierce had touched each other. She’d never known anything like it before or since – it was as if small lightning bolts had arced between them, making all her hair stand on end, her skin sizzle, her brain momentarily forget how to do everything that wasn’t gazing into his eyes, reaching out for him, *kissing* him –

Celeste broke out of the haze she’d wandered into as Pierce cleared his throat, blinking as if he was emerging from a haze of his own. As she gazed up at him, she could see his pupils were wide, and – and was that a *blush* creeping up his neck...?

“I, uh, I think I can manage the rest of it by myself,” Pierce said quickly, hiding his face by looking down at his mug, his fingers working at the clay – though he was mainly succeeding in making the mug even *shorter*, rather than fixing the bad join.

A little deflated, Celeste turned back to her own mug. Had Pierce felt what she’d felt? She couldn’t believe he hadn’t, but it also hadn’t seemed to be very welcome to him either.

Shaking her head, Celeste tried to focus. *Well, it shouldn’t be welcome to you either! Nothing has changed. Once Gordon returns and this weirdness*

*with the wards is sorted out, I'm going to have to go back to the lighthouse. I still can't ask him to give everything up to join me there. So what's the point in getting caught up in something that can never be?*

Morosely, Celeste tried to engross herself in fixing her hideous mug, but she wasn't really sure she was doing any good. The silence between them was awkward, but right now, Celeste wasn't sure what to talk about, or whether she even should. At least until Pierce broke the silence with a question she wasn't expecting at all.

"So... that man yesterday. Gordon, was it? He's your uncle?"

"Oh, yes... well, not by blood or marriage," Celeste said, suddenly feeling a little wary. Why would Pierce want to know about Gordon? "He's more of an old family friend, but I've always called him uncle. But he's visiting at the moment, and... well, I'm supposed to show him around..."

She came to an uncomfortable halt. She hated lying at the best of times, but lying to Pierce somehow felt even worse than it usually did. Nothing she'd said was an out-and-out lie, of course, but if she said any more she was going to have to start inventing things. And aside from anything else, she didn't want to have to remember what she'd said later if asked. Lying just wasn't something she was any good at at all.

"But he's not here today? Is he resting after his journey?" Pierce asked.

"Not exactly," Celeste said. "He's... he's on the mainland at the moment. He had some things he wanted to check out."

*There, that wasn't a lie! Just... not specifically saying what he's checking out.*

Pierce nodded. "I see. Well, I just wanted to be sure I wasn't interrupting anything. He seemed a little..." He trailed off, and Celeste never got to find out what Pierce thought Gordon was *a little* of, though she thought she could probably guess.

"He's... an academic," she said quickly. "He can be a little, uh, snobby, I guess you could say. He's not really used to talking to people – he prefers books. I think he forgets *how* to talk to people sometimes."

"Oh, an academic?" Pierce glanced at her. "What's his area?"

"Um. History," Celeste said. Which again was not, strictly speaking, a lie! "But, uh, he's an independent scholar. He doesn't work for a university or anything like that."

"Wow. It must be nice to be able to pursue your passion like that," Pierce said musingly. "And you're an author? Clearly intelligence just runs in the

family – though, as you said, you’re not related by blood.”

Celeste swallowed. “Well, you know. I have my calling.”

Guilt welled up inside her. The more time she spent with Pierce, the harder it was to keep up the walls of her secrets. Gordon had told her she had to keep an eye on him, but he had no idea of their history.

*And I really can’t believe he has anything to do with whatever’s going on with the wards, Celeste thought, watching Pierce’s face from beneath her eyelashes. But I guess I could just ask him a little more about himself. I want to know what he’s been up to anyway!*

“But I didn’t really get to finish asking you about your work and... and your life in general yesterday,” she said, aware her words were coming out in a rush, but not trusting herself to get them out if she didn’t do it quickly. “You said you came here to investigate the earth tremors, but they’re really only very small. Why are they so interesting to you? Or to... well, where do you work?”

She watched as Pierce swallowed, seeming suddenly intent on the lumpy espresso cup he was making. Or sort of making, anyway. It seemed to have acquired a few more unsightly bulges since the last time she looked at it.

“Well. Sometimes these small things can indicate something much... much larger going on,” Pierce said eventually. “I guess we just like to keep abreast of situations, in case they develop into something unexpected.”

“I guess I can see that,” Celeste replied. She was about to ask him for a little more detail, but as she watched him trying to sort out his bulge issues – the ones with his mug! – she found herself becoming mesmerized by the movements of his hands, slick with the moistened clay.

She’d always thought Pierce had beautiful hands, and now she found herself drawn to them once again. Sure, they weren’t the smooth, youthful hands she remembered, but they were still just as beautiful as they’d ever been, elegant and long-fingered. She couldn’t help but notice the way the clay had become embedded in the creases on his knuckles, the way the tips of his fingers slipped through the moisture, the little rivulets of water running down the backs of his hands and through the fine hairs on his –

“—este? Celeste?”

“Huh?” she said, shaking her head, pulled suddenly back into the real world by the sound of Pierce saying her name. She blinked, feeling just a little dazed. “I mean, sorry? Did you say something?”

“I was just pointing out you’ve kind of... crushed your mug a little,”

Pierce said, gesturing down to the table in front of her.

Gasping, Celeste looked down in horror at the mess that had once been her mug. *Did I do that?!*

She supposed she must have – while she was watching Pierce’s hands, she’d clearly had some kind of brain fade and gripped so tightly to the wall of her mug that she’d squashed it into some kind of horrible wobbly shape that no one would have been able to drink out of, no matter how hard they tried.

She stared at it in dismay. How had this happened? Had she *really* been so distracted by Pierce’s hands that she hadn’t even noticed what she’d been doing?!

“Oh my goodness,” Celeste murmured in despair, shaking her head. She hadn’t thought her mug was so bad before, but it was definitely a complete disaster now! “I – I don’t know what happened here. How am I supposed to fix this?”

“It’s not so bad,” Pierce said, scooting over to her side. “Look – we just need to smooth this section out a little.” He reached over, his fingers stroking down the crumpled section of the mug’s side. “I mean, I don’t want to do *too* much – you’ve seen what happens when I try to make these things – but I think if you can just sort this out, you’ll be back in business.”

Celeste swallowed heavily. Despite how his own mug had turned out, Pierce was doing a surprisingly good job of fixing up the section of hers where she’d ruined it.

“No, I think I get it now,” she said, lifting her own hands. “It’s just smoothing. I can at least try to get it back into shape.”

“You’ll get there – and if not, well, it’s certainly a very unique piece. More of an abstract sculpture than a mug.”

Celeste laughed, lifting her head to smile at him – and suddenly, it came to her just how close Pierce was standing by her side. Close enough that she could feel the heat of his body, feel the warmth of his breath against her ear. Unable to help herself, Celeste ran her tongue over her lips as she pulled her gaze slowly up over his chest – even covered by the *ridiculous* reindeer sweater it was still obvious his body had lost none of its youthful leanness or hard muscle – over his throat, his pulse visibly beating against the skin, until finally she met his eyes, the beautiful gray-blue eyes she remembered gazing into so many times, before everything had gone so wrong –

“Celeste,” Pierce murmured, his voice soft and hoarse, breaking into the reverie she’d drifted into. “Celeste, I –”

When she looked into his eyes, she found them clouded, as if hazed over with – with –

*Is it desire?* Celeste found herself wondering as she gazed, dumbstruck, at Pierce, feeling she couldn't have torn her eyes away from him even if she'd wanted to.

*But... no, of course it isn't,* she chided herself. Why would he be looking at her that way? She didn't flatter herself that she'd *ruined his life* or anything like that, but the fact remained that she'd broken things off with him with barely a word of explanation, and he couldn't possibly feel for her what he'd used to all those years ago, even if it was long ago enough now for him to be able to be friendly with her.

But even as she told herself this, even as she struggled against her own desire, Celeste couldn't help but wonder... what if...

*What if I just leaned up a little now... I could almost kiss him if I just –*

“Oh, why *hello* you two! How are we getting on with our Christmas mugs?”

Mrs. Shelby's voice was like a bucket of cold water being thrown directly into Celeste's face – cold water, and also, perhaps, a lot of very hard, very pointy shards of ice too. She jumped back from Pierce, her whole body shaking, eyes wide, her mouth dropping open and words crowding her tongue, as if she was a teenager who'd just been caught red-handed – *I wasn't – I didn't – nothing was happening!!!*

“I – oh, um, I –” she eventually managed to stutter out, *knowing* she was only incriminating herself further as Mrs. Shelby's eyes narrowed and her eyebrows shot up almost to her hairline.

“Celeste was just helping me sort out a few problems with mine,” Pierce said smoothly after a moment or two, obviously having recovered himself a little faster than Celeste had – though she thought she could still detect the *smallest* shake in his voice.

*Probably from relief,* she thought wretchedly. *Since Mrs. Shelby showed up and saved him from having to awkwardly tell me to stop trying to shove my tongue down his throat.*

Celeste could feel herself flush with heat at the thought, though she couldn't tell if it was more from the thought of kissing Pierce or from mortification at the fact she'd just tried to foist her attentions on someone who clearly wasn't interested.

“Oh – I *see!*” Mrs. Shelby trilled, brightening a little. “Well, show me

what you've got, then. I'm sure they'll be simply *marvelous!*

*Marvelous* was... not quite the word Celeste would have used to describe their work, and after actually seeing it, she was pretty certain it wasn't the word Mrs. Shelby would use either.

Mrs. Shelby pursed her lips as she gazed upon the two misshapen lumps of clay that resembled mugs only in the broadest possible sense, clearly trying to come up with something diplomatic to say.

"Well... of course they will look quite different after they've been *glazed*," she finally came up with after a somewhat long, awkward silence. "And... well, they certainly have a sort of *novelty* value."

"I'm sorry, I've never really done any pottery before," Celeste apologized – though really, she wasn't sure what exactly Mrs. Shelby expected. It wasn't like she'd volunteered herself for this!

"Same here," Pierce said, offering Mrs. Shelby a slightly sheepish smile. "But maybe someone will like them as a bit of a gag gift?"

"Well, let's hope so," Mrs. Shelby muttered, before she seemed to remember herself and fixed them both with a bright smile. "In any case, it's the thought that counts! I'm sure *someone* will be able to give these a good home."

"Well, I'm glad we could help you out while you were in trouble," Celeste said, hoping she sounded sincere – she *was* happy she'd been able to help someone in need, but really, she'd had just about enough of humiliating herself in front of an audience for now, either with her dreadful pottery skills *or* her unrequired desire. Maybe it would be for the best if she just went back to the lighthouse and stayed far away from Pierce no matter what Gordon had said, since it was obvious she couldn't trust herself around him. Sure, she'd had a lucky escape this time, but next time she wouldn't have Mrs. Shelby bursting in to rescue her! "But if you don't need us anymore, I think I might just –"

"Oh, you're not going *home*, are you, dear?" Mrs. Shelby asked, her eyes widening as if Celeste had just suggested something scandalous. "Not when the children of the island are about to have their Christmas parade? They've been working *so hard!* Surely you don't mean not to watch it?"

Celeste stared at her. "Uh... Christmas parade? I'm afraid I –"

"No, I know," Mrs. Shelby said, shaking her head. "You're not usually on the island for Christmas, are you? Always locked away in that lighthouse, writing, writing, writing!" She laughed, waving her hands as if to imitate

typing. “But all the *more* reason for you to come *this* year! You’re already here! It’s only a little way up the road – come now, Celeste dear. You simply *must* come and see what the children have done!”

Celeste bit her lip, glancing at Pierce. It was true, she was never usually around for Christmas, even if it wasn’t because she *wanted* to be anti-social. In fact, a Christmas parade sounded kind of fun. But she’d made just about as big of a fool of herself as she thought she could handle today. It might have been a *fun* idea, but was it a *good* one?

“Well – perhaps I could just come and have a look?” she finally ventured – and there, that was a good solution, wasn’t it? She’d come, but she wouldn’t stay for long enough to embarrass herself again.

“Of *course* you will, dear,” Mrs. Shelby purred. “The children really *have* done a wonderful job. As you know, there are no reindeer here – ha ha! – so they’ve been dressing up the horses from Linda Larsen’s property in... well, all kinds of things. Just between you and me, I think they may have gotten *slightly* carried away. I think they may have roped even the sheep into things – but I’m sure it’ll all be simply *delightful!* One must take care to nurture young minds, after all. Even if the young minds seem to want to drape a sheep in a tablecloth.”

“That does sound very interesting,” Celeste said, swallowing down a smile – and she had to admit, it kind of did. There weren’t that many children on the island, and most went to school on the mainland, catching the ferry across the short stretch of water every day before getting on their school bus. But now that they were on their winter vacation, they were clearly looking for ways to entertain themselves.

“And of course *you’ll* come as well, won’t you?” Mrs. Shelby asked, turning shining, eager eyes to Pierce. She seemed like she was practically salivating – but Celeste knew it was unlikely to be out of lust. It was more likely that Mrs. Shelby sniffed gossip, and wanted to find out any way she could just who exactly Pierce was, how he and Celeste knew each other, and why he’d come to the island.

Celeste held her breath. Her emotions felt as if they were at war inside her – one half of her desperately wanted Pierce to say *yes*, he would come and look at this parade of beautified sheep and horses. The other half of her just wanted to run away to lick her wounds and hope she’d never see him again.

“I would love to, but I’m afraid I can’t just now,” Pierce said, shaking his head. “I’m on vacation, but unfortunately I’m not quite free yet – I’ll need to

head back home in half an hour to finish up some work I didn't get done before I left. It's not much, but it's important."

As Mrs. Shelby cooed and sighed over what *rotten* and *terrible* luck that was that Pierce wouldn't be able to see the annual Christmas parade, Celeste took the time to try to sort out just how she felt about Pierce not going.

Disappointment had stabbed through her chest when he'd first said he couldn't go – but then, maybe it was for the best? She wasn't sure she could take much more of his presence. It was just too painful, too confusing. She needed to get her head on straight before she said or did anything else to embarrass herself or to make Pierce uncomfortable.

"I'm sorry you can't come too," Celeste managed to stammer out after a moment. "But... I hope we might be able to catch up again soon?"

Pierce seemed to hesitate before he spoke, opening his mouth and then closing it again. It was the closest to flustered Celeste had ever seen him, and her heart sank into her stomach. She *really* must have made him uncomfortable.

"I hope so too," he said after a moment. "I'd like that very much."

"Well then, I suppose it's all settled!" Mrs. Shelby said, seemingly oblivious to the awkwardness of the mood. "Celeste dear, let's put your... well, your *things* on a shelf for the moment – I'll get them into the kiln later today. And Mr. ... oh! It seems I didn't catch your name. What was it again?"

"Hardwicke," Pierce replied, a faint smile crossing his face.

"Ah well, Mr. Hardwicke. It was *very* nice to meet you. And *do* make sure you keep your promises to our Celeste – we *do* consider her one of our own, after all!" Mrs. Shelby gave Pierce a severe look, her eyes steely. Celeste knew she meant well, but it only made her wish even more fervently to just sink into the ground and never return.

It wasn't Mrs. Shelby's fault, of course – she probably thought she was just being sweet and protective of Celeste. But right now, the *last* thing Celeste wanted was for anyone to make any implications about her and Pierce's relationship.

"Well, I guess we should get going if we're going to see that parade," she said, forcing out a brittle laugh. "I'm sorry you can't come, Pierce, but I hope we'll catch up again soon!"

She was aware she sounded just the slightest bit manic, and it was entirely possible she looked that way too – the smile she'd plastered onto her

face was hurting her cheeks. Certainly, Mrs. Shelby looked just the slightest bit startled when she turned to look at her.

“Why... yes dear, of course,” Mrs. Shelby said slowly. “The parade starts in Linda Larsen’s paddocks, before going up the main street – I think they’ve even set up a *grill*, of all things, and some other little stalls. But that weather does *not* look promising, and so we should certainly make our way there as quickly as possible.”

Celeste didn’t know what inanities she chattered out until – finally – Mrs. Shelby had locked the door of the studio behind them, and they’d said their farewells. But despite her relief at finally having no further opportunities to make a fool out of herself in front of Pierce, she still couldn’t stop herself from glancing over her shoulder at him, her eyes drawn to the broad shape of his back as they walked away from each other.

She bit her lip and forced herself to turn her head to watch where she was going, and to nod and laugh along with whatever Mrs. Shelby was saying to her.

But the truth was she could barely concentrate on any of it – not above the chant in her head of her own brain, repeating *stupid*, over and over again. *Stupid, stupid, stupid.*

## CHAPTER 6

*S*tupid, Hardwicke thought. *Stupid, stupid, stupid.*  
*If you're hoping I'll contradict you, I most certainly will not,*  
his pegasus replied, its voice dripping with contempt.

Hardwicke ignored it, though he couldn't deny the annoyance that rippled through him. It wasn't really annoyance at the pegasus, though – in many ways, it was right, and he *didn't* deserve to get talked out of berating himself this way.

*I didn't know I wouldn't be able to control myself,* he thought in frustration. If he'd known, he would have found a way to gracefully back out of meeting with her, or of refusing Mrs. Shelby's... well, more-or-less unrefusable invitation to make the fundraising auction mugs. His had been a disaster anyway – he really couldn't see anyone bidding on it. So it hadn't even been worthwhile in that sense.

No, all he'd done was make an ass out of himself in front of Celeste, and obviously made her feel uncomfortable. But she'd suddenly been *so close* to him, and the scent that had risen from her hair had been just the same as he'd remembered from all those years ago – the same electricity had crackled over his skin at her proximity to him, as if he was more alive than he'd ever been just by standing near her.

If Mrs. Shelby hadn't chosen that exact moment to burst into the studio, Hardwicke knew he wouldn't have been able to resist taking her in his arms, kissing her, feeling her skin against his...

Hardwicke shook his head, trying to clear it. He couldn't let his senses become fogged with lust – or anything else, for that matter – and he certainly didn't want to put Celeste in any kind of awkward situation. The fact was,

she'd ended things between them. He had no right to force his feelings on her, just because he'd never been able to get over them.

*But then, no one just 'gets over' their mate. It's not possible. And even if I'd ever believed it was, meeting Celeste again would have proved me completely wrong.*

Hardwicke ran a hand through his hair, frustrated. But even without worrying about controlling himself around Celeste, he knew he also had other problems.

He hadn't started with his investigations into the earth tremors at all – he'd barely even thought about them. He knew he had a reputation for efficiency, and that Lausten would be checking in with him soon in order to hear an update on his progress.

The work he'd told Celeste and Mrs. Shelby about hadn't been a lie, at least, nor had what he'd said about it being important. What he *really* needed to do was find a quiet place in order to shift into his pegasus form and then take a survey of the area, and use his pegasus senses to scout for any hubs of unusual activity.

All mythical shifters had some kind of extra power that came with their shifted forms. For griffins, it was healing. For dragons, it was incredible physical strength. For hippogriffs, it was the ability to slow time for very short periods, though it took up so much energy that they almost never used it. All of his agents had been called on to use their abilities from time to time in the line of their work, and Hardwicke was no different.

His ability as a pegasus was to be able to detect the aura of danger or things not being what they should be – which was extremely useful in his line of work, but he could only access it when he was in pegasus form. He could *sense* danger a little in his human form, but the power was diluted, and nowhere near as strong as it was when he was a pegasus. If he wanted to figure out what was going on here, he'd need to find a safe place to shift.

He'd picked up on Mrs. Shelby talking about the children's Christmas parade – he hoped that meant that most of the people of Portsmouth would be there, supporting their friends and neighbors and helping out with grilling, stalls, and corralling the animals that the children were using as their 'reindeer'. It seemed like a fun activity, and Hardwicke felt a brief pang at not being there with Celeste, even though he knew that would be both neglecting his work and dangerous in terms of his self-control.

How long had it been since he'd thought of anything other than work,

though? How long had it been since he'd just done something simple, like go to a Christmas fair organized by the local school children?

*It's not too late to go, you know, his pegasus said, whisking its tail. It's not too late to find our mate, take her in our arms, and tell her that we never should have let her go in the first place. It's not too late for any of that.*

Hardwicke swallowed.

*Maybe you're right. But just now, we have a job to do, and no better time to do it in.*

The pegasus snorted in disgust, but it seemed to accept the answer, if only because it didn't expect any better from him. Pegasi, after all, were quite used to being their own masters – things like *jobs* and *duty* didn't mean much to his pegasus, but they had learned to live with each other over time.

*Now, come on. We need to find a place to shift.*

Hardwicke passed the cottage he was staying at, heading up the road to the outskirts of town. After the last of the houses petered out, there was really nothing there but paddocks, where sheep, horses and ponies grazed. Even though Portsmouth was mainly a former fishing town, Hardwicke supposed people couldn't live on fish alone.

He wanted to get as far away from the town as possible, just in case someone drove by or happened to look out of their window at the wrong moment. In the distance, he could make out a few scattered boulders standing in the paddocks around town – one of those would be perfect to shield him from prying eyes.

*And aside from anything else, we can finally get rid of this sweater...*

Hardwicke glanced down at it as he strode toward the fence of the nearest paddock. The reindeer grinned up at him, its *Ho! Ho! Ho!*s seeming to mock him as they floated around its head.

The fence was easily climbed – Hardwicke might be older than he had been, but he wasn't any less limber for it.

The wind off the ocean was cutting, the gray-blue waves hurling themselves against the dark cliffs and foaming with an unearthly power around the rocky crag the tall, white tower of the lighthouse stood on.

Hardwicke frowned as he looked out at it, a shadow flickering across his mind.

*There's something not right there, he thought, his eyes narrowing.*

It wasn't anything but a vague sense of unease that troubled him – he'd be able to sense much, much more once he was in pegasus form and flying

out over the ocean. But it seemed like the lighthouse was the place to start, if the strange, shadowy feeling he was getting from it was anything to go by.

*All right. Let's do this.*

Breathing deep, Hardwicke ducked behind the massive boulder – clearly too large to be hauled away even by a tractor or other heavy vehicle – and shifted.

He was used to it by now, since he'd shifted countless times over the years. But still, there was something refreshing about it – the new sense of power and strength that surged through him as his body changed from the relatively weak human to the mythological creature. His wings sprouted from his back, magnificent and golden, and his hands and feet became shining silver hooves. His skin became the dazzling, pure white pelt of the pegasus.

*At last!*

The pegasus *clearly* was not making any bones about the fact that it was pleased to finally be free.

Hardwicke supposed he couldn't really blame it – it had been a while since he'd shifted, and these days he was more often behind his desk than out doing field work.

*Literal field work, in this instance*, Hardwicke thought, unable to restrain a small –internal – smile as the pegasus took off at a gallop across the paddock.

*Do you believe that you are being amusing right now?* the pegasus asked, with a haughty toss of its head. *I assure you, that's not the case.*

Well, the pegasus never really *did* have much of a sense of humor, Hardwicke supposed. He'd thought his joke was pretty good, actually.

*We should only take off once we reach the cliff*, he cautioned the pegasus. He could already feel its wings twitching, as if it was eager to be in the air. *The wind is strong – we'd be better off launching from there rather than trying to take off from the ground.*

The pegasus gave another contemptuous snort, as if it was insulting to suggest that it should care about anything so petty as the wind conditions, but it *did* at least seem to heed his warning and stayed on the ground, its hooves beating against the firm earth.

Now that he was in pegasus form, Hardwicke could definitely feel there was something *not right* going on somewhere quite nearby. He couldn't actually see anything yet – no aura of darkness, no waves of magic – but he could definitely sense something strange.

*It's coming from somewhere over by the ocean, he thought. Near the lighthouse, just like I thought before.*

Hardwicke was so focused on training his senses on the dark cloud of magic he could sense over the sea that he almost didn't notice it until it was too late – a tug on his consciousness, and then the flash of color in his peripheral vision.

*Wait – stop –!*

His pegasus tossed its head, almost ignoring him – it was relieved at being finally free, and swiftly cantering to the edge of the cliffs where it could at last unfurl its wings and leap into the sky – but at the last moment, Hardwicke managed to gain control over it.

*Stop – we're not alone!*

*That* pulled the pegasus up short, halting mid-stride. And, sure enough, there it was – the thing that had been just a flash of color a moment ago resolved itself into the shape of two children in orange jackets, bolting across the paddock toward him.

“Stop! Horsey!”

He could see them more clearly now – one was a young boy, and the other was a girl probably in her early teens. Hardwicke paused, internally cursing himself. His encounter with Celeste must have scrambled his brains more than he'd thought. He'd *never* made a mistake like this before, allowing himself to be seen in his pegasus form. There was no way to hide now, and no way to shift back into his human form without them seeing it. They *had* to know he wasn't a regular horse – a regular horse didn't have wings, for starters – but maybe from this distance it simply hadn't registered to them yet.

Either way, he didn't think it was a great idea to keep going to the cliffs and then to plunge off them over the sea – he could fly, of course, but the kids didn't know that. It might be important that no one find out that pegasi existed, but he also had no intention of traumatizing innocent children to avoid it.

“Horsey! How did you get away from the parade?!”

The childish voices, carried to him by the wind, came to him again.

*Oh – I see.*

Hardwicke understood what had happened now, and why they'd come racing to try to capture him. They assumed he was one of the island horses who'd been roped into the Christmas parade and had managed to escape and

run off somehow – maybe that even explained why they weren't surprised by his wings. Mrs. Shelby *had* said the schoolchildren had been dressing up the sheep and horses – maybe they thought he was just a white horse that had been dressed up with wings.

Well, that illusion would be shattered if he allowed them to get any closer, he thought – it would be all too clear to them that his wings were very real. He couldn't shift in front of them, so he supposed he had no choice but to run.

*A pegasus does not run from anything!* The pegasus snorted out its disgust, plowing furiously at the ground with its front hooves as Hardwicke tried to convince it to get moving.

*It's not running, it's a tactical retreat,* he told it. *Come on – do you really want to get roped into a parade? Aside from revealing the existence of shifters to the world?*

Unfortunately, Hardwicke felt a small tug of interest on the pegasus's part.

*What kind of a parade?* it asked, just as Hardwicke finally managed to urge it to movement, wheeling their shared body around and heading back the way they'd come. Perhaps if he could make it to the rock he could shift again, out of sight.

*No such luck,* he thought grimly, as a couple more children appeared over the crest of the slight hill the rock sat on. Maybe a horse actually *had* escaped from the parade, and they'd been sent out to look for it.

Whatever the case, that way was closed to him now too. Changing directions again, Hardwicke realized his only option now was to head back toward the town. Maybe he could slip between two houses and shift there – it was risky, but right now, he didn't think he had any other options. He'd been careless, he thought, cursing himself. His brains must have been scrambled by his near miss with Celeste. This was the kind of rookie mistake he would have dragged any of his agents over the coals for, and yet, here he was, having allowed himself to be seen in pegasus form, running away from children, and having to take a massive risk in an attempt to fix his own stupid mistakes.

*Well, I can berate myself about that later,* he thought grimly, as he took off back toward the line of houses on the edge of town. *Right now, I have to fix this. Somehow.*

He could hear the children calling, but he ignored them. He could outpace

them easily at a canter, and it wasn't long before he was at the edge of town again. He didn't want to shift while standing in someone's garden, so he passed by the fences that ringed them, hoping that he'd come to an alley or something without any overlooking windows. But of course, Portsmouth just wasn't that kind of place – it wasn't a city, with darkened back alleys or secret lots where he could be unobserved. It was all pretty open, with small cottages and houses with open gardens. There weren't a lot of places to hide.

*But still, there has to be somewhere... there!*

Turning on a dime, Hardwicke wheeled around, the pegasus protesting about how *undignified* and *ridiculous* this was. Still, this was more or less exactly what he'd been looking for – an alley between two houses. There were balconies overlooking it with wide windows, and rather than risk someone looking out at the wrong moment, Hardwicke trotted on, his hooves clacking against the cobblestones, to where the alley doglegged a little –

“There you are! We've been looking all over for you!”

Hardwicke raised his head in startlement, only to find himself staring into a pair of steely, determined eyes.

These were eyes that were obviously not going to take no for an answer.

They were also clearly the eyes of a young child of about seven.

“Get the halter on him, Louie! We've got thirty seconds before we have to get moving, tops!”

In the end, Hardwicke broke first. He glanced down at the child's hands, which were, indeed, clutching a worn old halter that had, improbably, been bedecked in feathers and sequins.

There were, Hardwicke reflected dazedly, many times in his life when he had had to think his way out of an impossible situation within a split second. He never would have made it so far in his career if he hadn't been able to take out an enemy without harming their innocent hostage, or work out how to defuse a ticking bomb planted inside a convention center, or safely land a plane after the pilot had been knocked out cold by a bank thief who'd gone on the lam.

Suffice it to say, he had always prided himself on his cool head and ability to get out of any situation, no matter how sticky.

But this... *this*...

*What can I do?! I can't just kick them and run away! They're kids!*

His pegasus, it seemed, had nothing to say to that, and had in fact gone strangely silent in general. Perhaps the idea of being bound, even in such an

amateurish fashion that they could have easily broken free from if absolutely necessary, had spooked it.

*Some help you are*, he thought frustratedly. There *may* have been the slightest frantic edge to it, though he didn't like to admit it.

*Focus*, he muttered to himself. *You may just have to go along with it. You did spend several months undercover at one point, after all – you know that people are willing to look past all kinds of things that don't feel quite right if you just carry yourself with confidence and act like everything's normal.*

It seemed like he might just have to grit his teeth and bear it, at least until he could find the right moment to make a stealthy escape. If he'd wanted a life free of such unexpected indignities, he should've just taken a boring, regular office job, where the biggest thing he had to worry about was someone stealing his lunch from the fridge.

Not that he didn't have to worry about that kind of thing now, he supposed. Rowan had been on toilet-cleaning duty for a month after *that* particular incident, no matter how much he had pleaded that it was an honest mix-up, and that he'd only finished it off because he didn't think that Hardwicke would want to eat a chicken chow mein that had made indirect contact with Rowan's lips, and so he'd been doing him a favor, really.

There had been no need for an official 'don't eat other people's lunch' policy after that. It had been *known*, written into the psyche of everyone who stepped foot in the office.

The toilets had never looked so sparkling clean, though. Rowan had done an excellent job.

Hardwicke supposed that he might have been getting strangely hysterical, but then again, he had never had someone – let alone a small army of very young someones – fasten various things to him while in pegasus form. His pegasus was still keeping silent and not letting its feelings be known at all, which just added to his sense of unease. If nothing else, his pegasus could usually always be relied upon to let its opinion be known, no matter how unhelpful or irritating.

“Who made these wings, Kayleigh?” a squeaky, semi-broken voice piped up. “Was it you? I told you to use the silver glitter, not the gold! They look like crap! No one's gonna believe they're real!”

*Who dares say such monstrous things?! Who is this mere child, to speak of us in such an unbecoming manner? We are magnificence its very self! He should tremble before us, and beg permission to lay his eyes upon our*

*splendorous being!*

*Welcome back, Hardwicke said wryly. Glad you can be relied upon to show up when the true danger reveals itself.*

*Our wings are not crap! the pegasus bellowed. They are as unto the finest shimmering threads of gossamer! Has that whelp seen his own hair?! How dare he cast such aspersions!*

Strangely, the pegasus's unhinged rant calmed Hardwicke's nerves somewhat. If vanity was the biggest concern it had with this whole situation, then things couldn't be that terrible. Although he was already wondering whether he could justify leaving this... *interlude* out of his report to Lausten.

"Okay, Prancer, you're good to go," the girl – Kayleigh, he supposed – said, patting his flank gently. "Don't go trying to escape again, yeah? There's a whole basket of carrots waiting for you when you're done."

*Prancer? Who is Prancer?!*

Hardwicke looked around, taking in the situation more fully now that the children had completed their work. He noted with disappointment that he would not be able to make an easy escape, harnessed as he was to seven other horses, plus a confused-looking goat with a big red nose strapped to its face.

*Relax. At least we're not Rudolph. I don't think I could deal with having to wear that nose.*

*We should be Rudolph! All eyes should be upon us!! Why should that goat get all the glory?!*

Hardwicke let out the slightest hint of a sigh and started to trudge forward along the cobblestone streets, watching Dancer's tail swishing in front of his face.

This wasn't how he'd seen this mission playing out, to say the least.

However, there were very good reasons why he'd made it as far as he had in the Shifter Patrol Corp. He was an expert at blending in, at observing without being observed, and, he had to admit, he had just been given an excellent opportunity to investigate the streets of Portsmouth in his pegasus form. While he thought it likely that the tremors were originating from around the lighthouse, it would be good to rule out an origin from within the town itself. Perhaps this was a blessing in disguise.

He cast his gaze about, examining the town as he made his slow way down the road. There was nothing unusual to be seen, no sense of danger; just windswept gardens, tinsel-draped shopfronts, and sticky-faced children staring up at him with wonder and delight as he passed, waving their chubby

hands and calling out excited greetings.

His pegasus lifted itself into an even haughtier posture, if that were even possible. *As well they should! At least some of the children around here are showing our majesty the respect it deserves.*

He gave the comment the silence *it* deserved, and looked out over the scenery once more – the cheering townspeople, the ramshackle fishing huts, the plodding horses, the confused goat. In the distance, the ocean roared as it slammed against the rocky shore; up ahead, the *bwohnk* of an abused tuba drowned out the plaintive *baa* of a sheep that had apparently been dressed up as one of the Three Wise Men. The brisk breeze whipped up his mane, and brought the sweet promise of spiced hot chocolate from somewhere up ahead.

It was about as far as possible as one could get from his sterile life behind a desk at the Shifter Patrol Corp. If anyone had ever asked him if he wanted this kind of life, he would have politely but firmly declined, saying it was very much not for him. And he would have meant it, too.

But now... now, he wasn't so sure. Out here in the fresh open air, the smell of sea salt on the breeze, the laughter of children ringing out along the streets... he was having trouble remembering exactly why he was so married to his job.

It wasn't that he didn't love it – he did. Sincerely. There was nothing better than helping someone who needed it, and he also had to admit to a certain satisfaction in helping his team of agents become the people he knew they had the potential to be.

But it had become... *stale*. He worked. He went home. He did the requisite amount of housework required to keep his apartment in order. He slept. He went back to work.

He didn't do anything just for fun. He didn't do anything spontaneous. He certainly didn't prance about in children's Christmas processions.

*You should parade us about more often. The citizenry clearly love to see it.*

He never let his pegasus do what it wanted, either. True, it did need to be kept on a short leash, for everyone's sakes, but still. It was clearly relishing its time here in Portsmouth, and Hardwicke had to admit that he'd been neglecting it, keeping it boxed up behind a shiny desk in a shiny office in a shiny city.

Here, it was almost easy to forget exactly *why* he'd shut himself off from the world... and now it all came back to him at once.

*Celeste.*

It wasn't Portsmouth itself that had cracked his carefully built defenses, charming though it was; it was her. He never would have let his guard down without her being here, never would have allowed himself to do anything beyond exactly that which needed to be done.

It was a problem. The thought of going back to his desk and doubling down on the tightly controlled life he'd been living for the past twenty years was almost physically painful, but how else would he cope with having run back into the love of his life, only to lose her yet again?

*You should simply tell her already. Tell her that you are the one for her. She will know.*

*And you should mind your own business,* he snapped.

*It is my business. And you know I am right.*

He didn't have much to say to that – any reply he could possibly give, the pegasus would either bask in its own sense of superior smugness or go off to a corner to sulk, neither of which were appealing.

In any case, the parade appeared to almost be at an end – the already-slow pace was becoming slower still as they approached the town center, and the cheering was getting louder. Hopefully soon someone would unhitch him from the other horses and he could make his escape, then try to make his way toward the lighthouse unseen.

The whole thing had been a bit of a bust – no unusual activity detected, his actual plan delayed, and a bit of mild embarrassment on top of it all.

Maybe he could turn back to his human form briefly and grab a hot chocolate before flying off. He'd just realized that he was starving, and it *did* smell good –

His pegasus flared its nostrils, jerking its head up and stomping its hoof. It was all he could do to force it to keep walking before the horse behind him ran into him.

*What? What is it?*

The pegasus sniffed again, before nodding decisively.

*Magic.*

*What? Where?*

*Up there. Ahead, on the right.*

He strained his eyes to see, trying to look nonchalant and not like a spooked horse that was trying to make a break for it. But even before he saw it, he *felt* it.

He could feel his hair standing on end, and he forced himself to continue his slow amble forward even as he tried to see what was going on.

And – there.

The magical aura was unmistakable, a soft purple shimmer in the distance. Small, person-sized. Definitely not the menacing presence he was feeling from the direction of the lighthouse earlier, but enough to put him on high alert. At last, perhaps he would finally get some answers as to what was causing the tremors.

It was almost physically painful, not being able to rush ahead and find a place to observe the mysterious figure. Each slow step seemed to drag endlessly, the crowds thickening around him, and he was just starting to think that he would never get close enough to see the person when they turned to face him, and –

His heart dropped into his stomach.

*No. No, it can't be.*

Celeste stared at him, a gingerbread man held up to her half-open mouth. He could see the magic clinging to her, a soft, purple aura enveloping her entire being. She stared at him, her eyebrows scrunching up into a confused expression, as if she had seen something from a long time ago that she almost recognized, but couldn't quite place.

Hardwicke's instincts did battle with each other – to duck away and keep himself hidden from someone who may be a threat; to look at his mate and try to express all of his love for her with his eyes. In the end, he watched her from the corner of his eye; she was still staring at him, gingerbread man uneaten, looking as baffled as Hardwicke himself felt.

*Can she tell? How on earth can she tell?*

*She is our mate*, the pegasus said, though it sounded a little uneasy beneath its usual haughty tone. *She would know us anywhere.*

A queasy feeling settled into the pit of his stomach as he passed her. Was she connected with the tremors somehow? Did this have something to do with why she had abandoned him so abruptly all those years ago?

His heart told him that she couldn't be behind the tremors. She was his mate, and they knew each other inside and out. It was impossible.

But his head told him to tread carefully. He had been an agent for long enough to know that matters of the heart had no place in this kind of situation. He had to evaluate the situation logically, rationally.

He almost didn't notice as the children from earlier came up and

unhitched him from the other horses, leading him and the others to a field a small distance away from the main crowd where, he assumed, the animals would wait while the humans celebrated.

“Great job, Prancer!” Kayleigh gushed, removing his halter with a friendly smile. “Here’s those carrots I promised you.”

Hardwicke waited impatiently for her to leave, almost twitching with energy. He needed to get out of here. He needed to think. *It can’t be*, he told himself again, confusion sending his head spinning. *She’s my mate. I can’t believe she’d be involved in anything sinister.*

But he couldn’t deny it: he *had* sensed magic coming from Celeste.

He needed to find out how – and why – Celeste was involved in this.

And he needed to get to that lighthouse.

## CHAPTER 7

When Celeste had woken up this morning, she hadn't expected that she would end up stalking a horse.

Then again, nothing about today had really gone as she'd expected. The past few days had brought more excitement and confusion and – well, *other* feelings – than the previous two decades put together.

*But there's definitely something weird going on with that horse*, she thought as she sidled along a fence, eyes darting back and forth, trying her best to look like this was a completely normal and reasonable thing to be doing. *I wasn't imagining it. I'm not going crazy. But it's almost as if – as if –*

It was as if she had *known* the horse. Which, okay, was maybe just a *bit* crazy. She didn't spend nearly enough time here on the island to get to know any of the resident animals, and, even if she did, it wouldn't be enough to cause that weird feeling she'd felt in her stomach when she locked eyes with it.

Which was another thing! What kind of horse would hold a staring competition with a random passerby? And if she didn't know better, she would've thought that at one point, the horse looked almost... embarrassed? Which was impossible.

*It was just a horse! Get over it! You've got way more important things to be worrying about.*

And yet, here she was, sneaking about the backstreets of Portsmouth like a cut-price version of one of the detectives she was supposedly always writing novels about. If anyone spotted her snooping about, she would be in for one hell of an interrogation – even a reputation for eccentricity could only get her

so far before people started getting suspicious. And, she had to admit, her behavior right now was definitely not something to inspire confidence in the hearts of the locals.

She flattened herself against a wall and peered cautiously around the corner, nibbling absently on her gingerbread.

The horses were being led into a field, tucked away behind some houses. It was a pretty secluded area, with the only other people she could see being the kids who were leading the horses. Presumably everyone else was off enjoying the festivities at the end of the parade.

Part of her wished that she was doing the same thing, eating good food and having fun – or even just doing what she was *supposed* to be doing, which was investigating the tremors and keeping an eye on Pierce. But she hadn't exactly been able to come up with any kind of reasonable excuse to follow him back to his accommodation and interrupt his work, as much as she had desperately wanted to.

About the best she'd been able to manage was picking up a second gingerbread man on a whim and tucking it into her pocket, with some sort of vague thought about how she might give it to Pierce later once she caught up with him.

Thinking about it now, she cringed a little. What, exactly, would she say to him? *Hi, sorry I dumped you without explanation twenty years ago – have some gingerbread?*

But something about the festive green and red frosting had just reminded her of his ridiculous – yet somehow adorable – Christmas sweater, and she'd found herself picking it up and buying it before her brain could catch up with her.

*Oh, well. If all else fails, I'll just have to eat it myself to drown my sorrows. Though I'm sure he'd be gentleman enough to accept such a silly gesture, even if he secretly thought it was ridiculous.*

The sound of approaching voices snapped her back to her senses, but she quickly realized that it was just the kids heading back toward the party, their animal-tending duties ended.

Still...

*Oh, no! Not good! Not good!*

Those voices were definitely heading in *her* direction – and, looking around wildly, she realized that she had absolutely nowhere to go, and no reason whatsoever to be hanging around what was essentially a dead-end

street.

The voices got louder, excitedly talking about all the things they were going to eat, and Celeste did the first thing she could think of: jump into some bushes.

*Ow.*

Turned out that jumping into a bush wasn't quite as easy or painless as it appeared on TV.

Dragging her legs in, she managed to get herself more or less hidden from sight. She hoped.

She barely dared breathe as the voices approached, getting louder and louder as the agonizing seconds ticked by.

“Well, *I* heard that Mrs. McFadden's rum balls have so much rum in them, you can get drunk off eating just one!”

“No way!” The other kid sounded awed. “We have *got* to get us some of those!”

Celeste relaxed a little. The kids were clearly distracted, and her hiding place – no matter how ridiculous – was doing its job. Once they were gone, she could go track down that horse, and find out just *why* it was messing with her head. One good look at it, and she could reassure herself that it was just a regular old horse – albeit a beautiful and majestic horse, with the most amazingly convincing fake wings she had ever seen – and go about the rest of her day like a normal person who felt no need to jump into hedges.

“Are you okay, Miss?”

Clearly, her hiding spot wasn't quite as hidden as she'd hoped – and, sure enough, when Celeste raised her eyes, she could see two small, slightly concerned-looking faces belonging to two children of about ten years old, who were gazing down at her where she was crouching in the hedge, and clearly wondering if *she* might have over-indulged in some of the rum balls they'd just been discussing.

Celeste shot to her feet before her brain could catch up with the rest of her body, and she laughed, brushing herself off with frantic hands.

“Ha ha! Yes, I'm fine! I was just, ah,” she racked her brain frantically, “heading over to Mrs. Eriksson's house, and I tripped and fell into this bush here! But I'm all right now. Really.” She laughed again, and it sounded even more fake than before.

*Shoot me now. Oh my God.*

“Uh...” The girl was clearly trying to be diplomatic. “Mrs. Eriksson lives

over on Raleigh Road. It's three streets that way. But she's at the parade."

"Oh! Thanks!" Celeste stammered, plastering a grin on her face. "I'll just, uh, clean myself up, and then head over to the parade to go see her. Thanks!"

She barely managed to keep herself from making shooing motions towards the children, instead making a big show of extracting herself from the bushes and freeing her sweater from where it was caught on an errant twig.

"... Uh. Sure," mumbled the girl, and *finally* the two kids started to wander off toward town, glancing back suspiciously over their shoulders at Celeste, who gave them an awkward wave.

"That's that weirdo who lives in the lighthouse," she heard the boy say, followed by a knowing *ohh* from the girl. Like that explained everything!

Celeste tried very hard not to swear as she picked some twigs out of her hair. That had *not* been her finest moment! Although, to be fair, twenty years with only herself and a library full of books for company had probably not improved her ability to think on her feet when it came to interacting with other actual human beings.

*Next time, just go back the way you came or say that you're lost! You don't have to sneak around like a fool!*

In any case, the children had actually disappeared around the corner, so she was – hopefully – now free to go look at this horse, reassure herself that it was, in fact, a horse, and go back to her shack and die of mortification for having got caught up in such a silly situation.

Walking up to the field in a way that hopefully looked natural, she steeled herself and peered over the top of the fence, not sure exactly what she was hoping to see.

It was almost disappointing, how *normal* it all was: a bunch of older, sleepy-looking horses milling about and chomping down on apples and carrots. They'd obviously been chosen for their calm disposition, given that they'd been part of a parade for children, and their various Christmas decorations had been removed. It was nothing more than a collection of tired old horses that were eating up a hearty meal before taking a well-deserved nap.

Disappointed, Celeste shook her head. But really, what else did she expect? A majestic, magical horse that could see into her soul?

One of the horses wandered up to her, whinnying demandingly, and she noticed an apple that had fallen on the ground by the edge of the fence. She

reached down to pick it up and then held it out for the horse, who gobbled it up greedily, juice dripping down its chin.

*I need to have a good meal and a good lie down*, she thought with a sigh, petting the horse's neck and watching the other horses amble about without a care in the world. *These horses know what's good.*

She almost didn't notice the brush of magic at the periphery of her consciousness. Or, well, not *magic*, per se, but something in the vicinity of magic. It took her a moment to identify it, startled as she was – and then she gasped aloud.

*A... a shifter? Here?*

She looked about wildly, trying to identify where the feeling was coming from. She was unable to magically identify shifters in general – the only time she could ever sense them was when they were shifting from one form to another, as the action caused a disturbance in the magical fabric of the world around her. Great Aunt Marian had showed her how to hone her skills in this area, but she hadn't ever had any opportunity to use them in the wild. Life in a secluded lighthouse didn't exactly lend itself to a regular need to detect shifters, after all.

But now, it felt as if Aunt Marian was here beside her, whispering encouragingly into her ear, and Celeste turned her head, following the trail of magic back to its source.

*And – there.*

Her breath caught in her throat as she saw it – the horse from earlier. It was half-hidden in a small stand of trees over the other side of the field, but now that she had noticed it, she couldn't look away.

Especially since it was shimmering in a way that she knew meant a shift was imminent, and *especially* because its fake wings were still attached to its back. Except that they were stretching out and quivering in a way that no fake wings ever could – especially fake wings made by a group of schoolchildren.

She felt her mouth drop open.

*Whoa. Is that – is that a pegasus?!*

The only shifter she had ever met was an anaconda shifter who was a friend of her great aunt's, and who had happily shifted back and forth so that Celeste could work on her powers of detection. That had been a pretty cool thing to witness at the time, but a *pegasus* – well, that was some next-level shifting! She'd never met someone who could turn into a mythical creature, and, quite frankly, she had sometimes secretly wondered whether mythical

shifters were some sort of over-exaggerated fairy tale that had come about from regular shifters with big egos.

But this – this was *definitely* a pegasus. Even without the shimmer of its impending shift, it had a certain beauty, a certain *magnificence* that a regular horse just couldn't achieve. No wonder she had been drawn to it! And no wonder it had been staring at her as if it could communicate with her!

Why had it been staring at her? Did it know that she was a magic user? Did it have something to do with the tremors? Surely it was too big of a coincidence that it had shown up now, and... taken part in a children's parade?

She realized that she was climbing the fence without conscious thought, hauling herself up and over the wooden slats, before sprinting across the field toward where the pegasus was now less pegasus-shaped, and more human-shaped. She didn't know whether it was friend or foe, but she'd be damned if she'd let it escape without answering her questions first!

Gasping as much from anticipation as from exertion, she stumbled to a stop at the stand of trees, seeing the now-fully-human figure amongst them. She opened her mouth to say something – what, she wasn't sure – but no words came out, and her knees suddenly felt strangely weak.

In front of her, amongst the trees, there was a very familiar flash of red and green. A ridiculous pom-pom. The ugliest, stupidest Christmas sweater she had ever seen in her life.

“Pier... Pierce?”

Pierce whirled around, a look of shock that would almost have been comical in any other situation plastered across his face – his eyes wide, his mouth dropping open.

“Celeste?!”

They stared at each other in mute disbelief. Celeste *knew* she should say something, *anything*, demand answers from him, ask him what he'd been doing in the parade, ask him *how long* he had been a shifter – which would have been a stupid question since she knew full well that the only way of becoming a shifter was to be born one, and Pierce hadn't been bitten by a were-pegasus on a full moon or anything like that.

*But if that's true – then that means – the entire time we knew each other back then –*

“When were you going to tell me you're a shifter?!”

The words, hot and furious, were out of her mouth before she could stop

them, despite the fact she knew full well how utterly ridiculous they were. Pierce wasn't under any obligation to tell her anything, after all, and back then – back then –

*Back then, did I really give him the chance to tell me anything? We knew each other for such a short time... and yet, somehow...*

Celeste blinked, her eyes feeling suddenly hot. She bit her lip, wishing she could bite her angry words back from the air, but at the same time, she couldn't deny that she *was* angry. If Pierce had told her everything back then, then maybe they could have been spared all this pain.

It was with a shock that came like a slap across the face that Celeste remembered that Pierce wasn't exactly the only one who could be accused of keeping secrets.

"You *know* about us?" Pierce asked, once he'd collected himself and managed to close his mouth from where it had been hanging open. He blinked, then shook his head. "But of course you do – I *did* see the magic that was surrounding you." His eyes flickered up, his mouth suddenly setting into a thin, hard line that made Celeste gulp. "Just who *are* you, Celeste? What do you have to do with magic? And what's going on with the earth tremors around here – I assume you have to know about those as well."

Celeste bit her lip. Pierce's tone was a little cold, and she couldn't exactly say she blamed him. She knew that pegasi could sense magic – it must have been a shock for him to see its aura surrounding her.

"I –" she started, before she realized she had absolutely no idea what to say next. "I – don't know how to explain," she finally stuttered out. And more to the point, *should* she explain? Everyone in her family had always told her how important it was that she keep everything about magic in the utmost secrecy. She didn't think she should blurt out the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth just now, even if it *was* to Pierce.

*Who didn't even tell me he was a shifter, after all!*

"And anyway, I feel like *you* might have a bit of explaining to do yourself," she finally managed to snap out. "Why didn't you ever tell me about yourself? About what you are?"

Some of the cold look in Pierce's eyes evaporated at her words, though his jaw clenched visibly.

"I – I didn't know what you'd think at the time," he said, after a long pause. "I'd only known you for a few weeks. I didn't want you to think I was crazy. It's not exactly an easy thing to explain. And I didn't know at the time

you probably already knew what shifters are. Since you never mentioned being a magic user.”

Celeste clenched her fist. All right – *maybe* he had a point there.

“Well, the same goes for me too,” she said coolly. “You say you didn’t want me to think you were crazy – but maybe I was worried about the same thing. Like you said, how do you slot that into a conversation? ‘Hey, you’re the love of my life – by the way, did you know magic is real and I –’”

She cut herself off suddenly, both at the realization that she’d just called Pierce the love of her life, *and* that she’d been just about to blurt out her family’s secrets after having misgivings about doing exactly that. Maybe Pierce hadn’t noticed, though, because he was shaking his head in what looked like exasperation.

“All right – I can see that. But I didn’t want to corner you or make you feel obliged to me. I wanted you to want to be with me because you felt something for *me*, not just because you’re my mate –”

Now it was Pierce’s turn to cut himself off suddenly, blinking at her as if he was surprised by the words that had just come surging out of his mouth.

And to be fair, it took Celeste a moment to realize what he’d said herself, filled as she was with semi-righteous indignation.

“Well, I don’t know how I was supposed to –” she started, before her brain caught up with her ears, and she rocked back on her heels suddenly, gaping at him. “Wait – did you say *mate*? That I’m your... your *mate*?”

But she already knew what she’d heard – the look on Pierce’s face only confirmed it.

Shock churned though Celeste. Of course, she only knew in general terms what *mated bonds* meant to shifters; she’d read about it as part of her general studies, but she’d never had any reason to think about it much.

*Or so I thought...*

“You... you can’t really mean that,” she said after a moment, forcing the words out of her suddenly numb lips. “You can’t have known it back then, and then let me...”

She trailed off, staring at him. She’d read about shifters who, deprived of their one true mate, had pined away into nothingness. She’d read about the pain it caused them to be separated from their mates, how it was like a wound in their hearts that never truly healed. Had Pierce truly felt *that* these past twenty years, after she’d told him their future together was impossible? Had he really just *let her go*, knowing what she was to him?

Pierce shook his head again. “Of course I mean it, Celeste,” he said, his voice low and gravelly with pain. “I’d wanted to tell you, back then – I’d planned on it. On the very evening you told me you couldn’t see me anymore. And then it was too late.”

Celeste’s throat tightened. “But – you could have told me then, even after I said that!” She could hear her voice was wild, but she couldn’t stop it. “If you’d told me back then, I would have –”

“Exactly. I know you would have,” Pierce said, despair tinging his voice. “You’d already told me it was impossible – you didn’t say why, but I knew you wouldn’t be saying it if you didn’t truly mean it. What kind of man would I have been if I’d told you then about what I was, just to keep you with me? It would have been selfish – more than that, it would have been emotional blackmail. How could I have done that to you?”

Celeste’s breath caught in her throat as she stared at him. She knew what he was saying made sense. Hadn’t she done exactly the same thing, and made exactly the same decision? Hadn’t she decided that, even if she *could* have explained to him everything about her family and her duty to keep the magical wards strong, she couldn’t ask him to live with her in near-complete isolation on the rocky crag, with only books – and her – for company?

“Pierce,” she said, her voice coming out as a harsh croak. “I think... I think we have a lot to talk about.”

Pierce blinked at her, before shaking his head. “I think you can say that again.”

“Do you think we can do it somewhere other than in the middle of this muddy field, though?” Celeste asked, reaching up to brush her hair back from her eyes as the wind blew it in her face – and, *oh great*, she came away with a handful of leaves that had been caught up in it. She must have been standing here having one of the most important conversations of her life with leaves stuck in her hair, looking completely ridiculous.

Not that Pierce really had much room to talk about that – he was, after all, wearing one of the silliest sweaters ever devised by human hands, and, she realized, he had a feather stuck in his hair that must have been left over from his parade decorations.

*And just how did he come to get caught up in the Christmas parade anyway?!*

“I think that might be for the best,” Pierce said, his voice still a little tense. “But where do you think we should go? All the cafes are closed – or at

least, I didn't pass an open one during the parade. Besides which, we probably shouldn't discuss all of this in public."

"You're right." Celeste chewed her lip, a little uncertain. But she didn't let herself think for too long. Not telling the truth had gotten them into this mess. Right now, she didn't really care about Gordon hitting the roof if he found out she'd revealed the secrets that her family had hidden for generations – she only wanted Pierce to know everything, to finally know the truth.

*It's been so long, she thought, sadness creeping over her heart. And we caused each other so much pain. I don't care anymore. At the very least, I want him to know why I did what I did – and I want to know why he did what he did, too.*

"What about... the lighthouse?" she suggested after a moment. "I *do* live there, after all. I can be pretty certain no one else is going to be around."

Pierce stared at her, amazement writ large across his features. "You *live* there? Alone?"

Celeste nodded. "Yes – completely."

"Then the magic I sensed –"

"We can talk about it at the lighthouse," Celeste said firmly. "Come on – it's only about a half-hour walk back to where my boat is docked, and then the trip across the water is short. We can talk about it all when we get there."

"The sea looks a little rough today," Pierce said after a moment. "Are you sure it's safe?"

"I've taken the boat out in rougher weather than this," Celeste told him, as she turned to head out into the open field again. "It won't be an issue."

"Hmm." Pierce didn't sound all that convinced. "What if I said I had a faster – and safer – way to get us to the lighthouse?"

Turning to him with a frown, Celeste was about to ask him what he meant – and then realization crashed over her. "Wait – do you mean –?"

"I know we've been waiting twenty years to have this conversation," Pierce said, "so you'd think I could wait half an hour more. But to be honest, I think I want to have it as soon as possible."

"But... I only just found *out* you're a pegasus!" Celeste almost wailed. "You *can't* tell me just like that that you want me to ride you!"

"It's safe, I promise you," Pierce told her, looking up into the sky, clearly gauging the air currents, before glancing back at where the crowd – almost the entire population of Portsmouth – was still enjoying the grill, gingerbread,

and mulled wine. No one was paying any attention to them whatsoever.

“That’s not the point!” Celeste said, but she had to admit, the tiniest little part of her was curious. And more than a little tempted. When she’d first heard about shifters, she’d thought it must be incredible to be able to change your form like that, and the idea of mythical shifters had fascinated her. Becoming a mighty winged griffin, a unicorn, a *dragon*... she had to admit, she’d been a little envious, especially since *her* powers meant she’d only ever be able to guard the magical wards, and never do anything exciting with her life. The idea of riding a pegasus... well. She had to admit, it sent a shiver of anticipation rolling down her spine.

“Well... I guess it would be okay,” she said after a moment. “The sea *does* look pretty rough.”

“The winds are rough too, but I can handle it,” Pierce said. “And it’s only a five-minute flight.”

“Is that all?” Celeste said, as disappointment curled up through her stomach. “I mean... oh, that’s good. Nice and quick.”

“All right. I’ll shift again now,” Pierce said, before he glanced at her. “I guess you must know how this works? No matter what form I’m in, I’ll know who you are.”

“No, I understand,” Celeste said, nodding. “You don’t have to worry about me.”

Pierce only returned her nod, and then he began to... change.

Once again, Celeste felt the shimmer of magic pass over her skin, even as Pierce’s form began to shimmer, a silvery glow emanating from him as his human body transformed into that of a massive, pure white, winged horse.

Celeste couldn’t hold back her gasp – even though she’d seen him in the parade, he truly was magnificent in this form.

“Are you *sure* about this?” she asked, as she approached him slowly. She knew he wasn’t dangerous – she knew that shifters retained their human consciousness even in their animal forms. *But still... riding him...*

She couldn’t say why – or rather, she *could* – but the whole idea made her blush furiously.

*Come on. Grow up. He just wants to get us to the lighthouse as quickly as possible.*

That did certainly seem to be the case, Celeste thought as the pegasus pounded one of its front hooves on the ground impatiently – or she supposed, encouragingly – and tossed its head.

“Okay, okay,” she said, holding up her hands. “If you insist.”

She’d never really ridden a horse before, however, let alone a *flying* horse. She couldn’t really call herself a very outdoorsy person, to say the least. But still, she grabbed hold of a handful of Pierce’s silky mane, and he leaned down, bending his front legs so she could pull herself up.

“Okay... well, here goes,” she muttered, as she swung her leg up over his shoulders, settling herself just in front of his wings.

She was still gripping the thick, soft hair of his mane as Pierce rose to his full height again, glancing back over his shoulder at her with his silvery eyes, as if to check she was ready.

“I – I *think* you can take off now,” Celeste forced herself to say, knowing there was a tremble in her voice but unable to help it. She supposed that it was, in a way, reassuring that Pierce was checking she was okay – and, somehow, even in his pegasus form, she could *see* his concern in his eyes.

*It’s still Pierce in there*, she thought, as the pegasus began trotting down the slope. *And no matter what, I know he’d never do me any harm.*

She steeled herself for what she assumed would be lift-off as Pierce approached the fence, but to her surprise, Pierce merely jumped it, sailing over it with complete ease – but then, she supposed, a pegasus was nothing like a normal horse, and something that might have proved a challenge for a horse was nothing at all to him.

He picked up speed as he went, and Celeste gritted her teeth, waiting to be jostled and having to hang on for dear life, but the ride was surprisingly smooth – at least until she felt Pierce’s wings unfurl behind her, and then, with two massive beats, they left the ground and sailed up into the air, the wind buffeting against her.

“Whoa!”

Leaning forward as the icy wind cut into the skin on her cheeks, Celeste made completely sure she had a secure hold on Pierce’s mane, and squeezed her legs around his shoulders. He was surprisingly warm, though, and as she leaned in she felt the heat radiating from him, melting away some of the shocking cold.

She *knew* she shouldn’t look down – that was what everyone said when you were up somewhere high, right? – but somehow, she couldn’t resist it. But when she did, an amazed gasp left her lips, adrenaline singing through her veins.

She could see – *everything*. All the houses of Portsmouth, surrounded by

their little gardens; all the winding, crooked roads of the village; all the dark green of the grassy fields that surrounded it. She could see the ocean, dark gray-blue, foaming up whitely where it crashed against the rocky cliffs.

*This is... incredible!*

Far from being terrified, Celeste found herself surging with excitement and joy. She'd never felt anything like this before. She wasn't exactly young anymore, she knew that, but now, flying freely through the sky, she couldn't help but remember some of the carefree feeling of youth, before she'd had to drop her life to become the guardian of the magical wards at the lighthouse.

Unable to help herself, Celeste let out a sudden burst of laughter. *This is really what it's like to be free!*

Behind her, she could feel Pierce's massive, arched golden wings beating the air, carrying them easily through the ocean winds. He really hadn't been joking when he'd said this would be faster – as he wheeled around, she could already see the lighthouse where it stood on its rocky crag. They were approaching it fast!

Pierce was clearly an expert flier, and he began his descent well before they reached the lighthouse, banking his wings to slow them down. Still, he did one circuit of the tower, sailing around it, coming low enough that Celeste could taste the seaspray on her tongue, before he finally came in to land.

“Oof!”

He didn't jostle her, exactly, but still, the winds were strong, and he had to dip his wings and drop quite suddenly at the last moment of their descent. But still, Celeste realized, she'd felt completely safe the entire time she was on his back, even when they'd been flying over the small stretch of ocean between the island and the crag the lighthouse stood on. So safe, in fact, that now she found she was reluctant to climb down from his warm, broad back.

“I guess I better let you shift back into your human form, though,” she murmured. “Especially if we're going to have to have that talk...”

Swallowing hard, Celeste swung her leg over his now neatly folded wings, then dropped to the ground. She took a few steps back, watching as the body of the pegasus shimmered, and then, it was the Pierce she knew so well standing in front of her again.

“So. This is where you live?” he asked her after a moment, looking up at the tall white spire of the lighthouse. “Somehow... it suits you.”

A small smile tugged at the corner of Celeste's mouth. “Why do you say

that?”

Pierce frowned. “It’s hard to say why,” he said after a moment. “I guess I just never pictured you living any kind of conventional life – you know, a white picket fence in the suburbs, or something like that. I have to admit, a magic lighthouse *is* a bit of a surprise though.”

*Ah, right. That.*

Celeste sighed. She supposed they had to get it over with sometime.

“Come on,” she said, starting toward the bright red door leading to the lighthouse’s living quarters. “I feel like we both have some explaining to do.”

## CHAPTER 8

Celeste wasn't sure why it should matter to her what Pierce thought of the lighthouse, but as she unlocked the door, pushing it open before leading him inside, she found herself watching him a little from beneath her eyelashes as he looked around.

It was... *cozy*, she supposed, but that was about all she could say for it. She blushed a little as she noticed things that she'd become accustomed to as if she was seeing them for the first time: the loose threads on the knitted throw on the couch, the threadbare state of the couch itself. The stains on the rug. The way the bookshelves sagged a little, weighed down with all the novels she'd read at least three times each.

"I guess it's not much, but it's my home," she stammered after a long moment of silence, during which Pierce simply looked around him, his face unreadable.

"You live here all alone?" he asked after a moment, turning to look at her.

"Well... yes," Celeste said. "That's... that's sort of the deal with this."

Pierce frowned. "You still haven't actually explained what *the deal* is yet. Why does it mean you have to live all alone here? And where is the magical aura coming from? I could see it as we flew over – it's stronger magic than I've ever seen before in my life. Are *you* the one who controls it?"

Swallowing, Celeste shook her head. "Wait, wait. You're not the only one with questions." She laughed, but it was out of nerves rather than humor. "What are you, the police or something?"

"In a way," Pierce said levelly.

Celeste stared at him. "I thought you were a seismologist who was here checking out the earth tremors!"

It took her a moment to remember that actually, she *hadn't* thought that – that had been Gordon. She hadn't actually asked, and she realized now Pierce had been quite vague about what his actual job was.

To his credit, he *did* have the decency to look a little sheepish. “I’m sorry about that. I didn’t mean to mislead you. Well... not quite, anyway.” He shook his head, sighing. “Look. Let’s not talk about this like it’s an argument. That’ll get us nowhere. I’ll tell you everything – right here, right now. I’ll be honest. Like I always should have been.”

Celeste nodded numbly. “Do you think you’d like to be honest over a cup of coffee? And... uh...”

Frowning, she reached into her pocket, belatedly remembering about the gingerbread man she’d bought with the idea she might give it to Pierce when she saw him next. But that had been a whole jump into a hedge and pegasus ride ago. Who knew what state it was in now?

*Ugh.*

Sure enough – it was completely crushed. It was obvious even before she unwrapped it.

“Sorry about that,” she said, as she put shattered pieces of gingerbread covered in green and red frosting down on her tiny coffee table. “I got it for you, but I forgot all about it in my pocket. I guess it’ll still taste the same?”

To her relief, a small smile flickered across Pierce’s face. “I’m sure it’ll be delicious.”

“Well,” Celeste said, as she bustled over to the kitchenette that was attached to the living area. “I’ll put the coffee on. You get started with this honesty thing.”

And so, he did.

Celeste listened, forcing herself not to interrupt with questions as he started to tell her about his life and what he’d been doing over the past twenty years. She’d heard of the Shifter Patrol Corps, of course, if only because Gordon had told her that they dealt with shifter criminals – if she ever came across any in the course of her magical duty, she would have to refer the crime to them. But it wasn’t as if she was overrun with werewolf drug dealers or evil unicorns here at her lighthouse, so that had never been a problem.

“I... I see,” Celeste said, looking down at her now empty coffee mug. “But you’ve always known since the first time we met that I was... I was...”

“My mate.” Pierce’s voice was low and steady. “Yes. That’s how it works. From the moment our hands first touched, I’ve known.”

Celeste felt as if all the wind had been knocked out of her lungs. “But that was... when did that even...”

“You don’t remember?” Pierce asked. “I do. It was when we both reached for the same scarf at that shop – I don’t remember the name of it now, but I remember the way it felt when our hands brushed. I wanted to buy it for my mother for Christmas – it was that beautiful silk scarf, with the purple and blue pattern on it.”

Celeste blinked at him, amazed. “I... I *do* remember that,” she admitted after a moment. “And... then you ended up buying it for me.”

A small smile twitched at the corner of Pierce’s lips. “I knew I could find something else for my mother, and she already had about a hundred silk scarves. But you looked so enchanted by it – how could I not have given it to you?”

“It was really too expensive for me to have bought for myself anyway,” Celeste told him. “I just loved it and I thought I’d try it on and dream about it.”

She knew she still had the scarf, too – it was boxed up in the storage space below the stairs. When she’d been packing up to come here, she hadn’t been able to bring herself to get rid of it, but nor had she been able to bear seeing it every day either, and being reminded of Pierce.

“I remember you were a little suspicious of me when I gave it to you as well,” Pierce said, laughing softly. “What did you say again?”

The warm memory flooded back to her, and she laughed, a little embarrassed. “I told you I wasn’t *that* much of a pushover and I wasn’t going to accept it if there were strings attached,” she said a little sheepishly. “I guess I was a little more outspoken back then.”

It was true – she *had* become more of a pushover these days. Otherwise she might never have let herself be caught up in Mrs. Shelby’s ceramics auction plans.

“No, I didn’t blame you,” Pierce laughed. “I guess it was a little forward of me. But I already knew then – you were the one. I would have given it to you even if you never wanted to see me again after that.”

“And I guess I *did* turn out to be kind of a pushover after all.” Celeste joined in with his laughter. “Since I pretty much asked you out right away after that. Even though I’d been told by my mother that ladies didn’t ask gentlemen out.”

“It was just a coffee, though.” Pierce’s gray eyes were warm as he looked

at her, and Celeste felt a shiver run up her spine, memories briefly overcoming her.

“Coffee that turned into dinner,” she said softly. “And then a walk by the river. And then you walking me to the train station. And asking if you could see me again the next day.”

“Which you said yes to right away.”

“Which I said yes to right away.” Celeste laughed. “Well, I mean, you *did* buy me the scarf of my dreams, and it’s not like it was cheap!”

“I hope that wasn’t the only reason you said yes,” Pierce said.

“Well, I won’t lie and say it had *nothing* to do with it,” Celeste said, smiling. “Maybe I was hoping for another scarf.”

“That must have been a bit disappointing for you, then.”

“Oh, I don’t know. Flowers and chocolates are *also* pretty good.” Warmth welled up within her – she hadn’t really known what to expect, and she’d woken up the next morning half-thinking the man she’d met had been nothing but a dream until she’d seen the scarf draped over her doorhandle. She hadn’t been able to stop glancing at it all day, as she’d counted down the hours until the time she’d agreed to meet Pierce again, and make sure he really *was* everything she remembered.

The fact that he’d showed up to their second date with a bouquet of flowers and a small box of chocolates – nothing too fancy or over-the-top, just a considerate gift – had told her she hadn’t been wrong, but that hadn’t been the reason she’d fallen for him.

There had just been something *about* him, a connection she’d never felt with any other person. And now, she guessed, she knew what it was.

*I was his mate all along. But I never knew it. And he never knew that if he’d told me, I would have known what he meant.*

“I wish I’d known,” she said softly. “I wish you’d told me.” But then, biting her lip, Celeste shook her head. “No, that’s not quite fair. You were trying to do the right thing.”

“Maybe,” Pierce said. “But I wonder about it every day – I’ve asked myself over and over again if I should have done things differently.”

“Believe me, so have I,” Celeste admitted. Without being able to stop herself, she reached out for him, running her fingers over his hand. It was the first time she’d touched him properly since they’d reunited, and yet, it felt just the same as she remembered from all those years ago – the tingling of her skin, as if tiny sparks of electricity were running between them, even at this

gentle touch, fogging her mind and making it all too difficult to think straight. Or think at all.

It was hard to tell which of them leaned in first – all Celeste knew was that suddenly, *finally*, her lips were touching his, his hands coming up to cup her face, tilting it back. The kiss was slow and gentle at first, but then it was as if a dam broke inside her, and the kiss became hungry and fierce.

They had both been waiting a long time for this, she supposed, barely able to think through the dizzying spin of her head as she parted her lips, her back arching as his tongue swept into her mouth.

Sparks shot over her skin as Pierce's arms came up around her shoulders, pulling her against him. She was just as eager as he was, her hands clutching at his shoulders, wanting only to be as close to him as she could possibly get.

Just as she always had, Celeste responded to him instantly, feeling warmth pooling in her belly, heat sizzling through every nerve in her body. It was just like she remembered it, as if they'd never been apart at all – her need for him washed away everything except the feel of his lips on hers, his hands on her body, her hands on his. Nothing else mattered but this – and it was all too easy to simply let everything except sensation and desire fall away.

Her ancient sofa creaked as she lay back on it, pulling him down with her. Their lips parted momentarily, and Celeste found herself gazing up into his silver-gray eyes. She could see the hunger in them, and she knew he was seeing it reflected back at him in her own.

“Celeste, I...”

“Shh. Later,” she whispered, cutting him off. Right now, the last thing she felt like doing was talking. They'd waited so long to see each other again – she didn't want to think about that now, about how long they'd been apart. She only wanted to remember the time they'd had together. She only wanted to live in this moment, feeling desire thrumming through her, and knowing that his feelings for her had never changed. Just as hers for him had never changed.

A groan slipped from her lips as Pierce traced his hand over her cheek, before it trailed down the side of her throat.

“Are you sure about this?” he asked, his voice husky with need. “I don't want to –”

“Please, Pierce,” Celeste murmured as she arched up beneath his touch. “I appreciate that you're being a gentleman, but believe me – that is the *last* thing I want right now. And also...” She trailed off, as her eyes fell on the

ridiculous grinning reindeer that currently adorned his chest. “Can you please just take that off?”

A smile flickered briefly across Pierce’s face, before he sat up slightly, pulling the Christmas sweater – with its stupid manically grinning reindeer and *Ho! Ho! Ho!*s – up over his head, before tossing it aside.

“*Thank you,*” Celeste said, as her fingers, guided totally by instinct – and, well, *lust* she supposed – went to the buttons of his shirt front.

Of course, the trail of hair on his chest had grayed, just like the hair on his head had, but Celeste hardly minded that. She ran her fingers down through it, down over his stomach to the waistband of his jeans, where she paused, glancing up at him.

His eyes were filled with warmth as he looked down at her, clearly waiting for her to continue – but if truth be told, she kind of felt a little overdressed as she was. Somehow, however, he seemed to be able to read her thoughts on her face, and his hands went to where her blouse was tucked into her own jeans, gently pulling it up over her head.

“*Pierce,*” she gasped, as his fingers brushed over the bare skin of her stomach. She felt dizzy – the only thing she knew was how much she wanted him. She wanted him more than she’d ever wanted anything before in her life. Right now, nothing mattered except that – not even their long separation. She felt as if she was young again, his hands seeming to know just where and how to touch her, as if they’d never spent any time apart at all.

She moaned aloud as sparks of pleasure flew through her, heat gathering within her. She could see just how much he wanted her, too – the front of his jeans bulged, clearly barely able to contain him.

Breathlessly, Celeste cupped him through his jeans, marveling at the way he threw his head back, a groan leaving his lips. She had never considered herself a very bold person, but now, she allowed herself to touch all she wanted, her fingers trembling, delighting in every response he gave her.

But she knew as well she couldn’t go on teasing him – or herself – for much longer. She was already wet with need for him, and she shivered every time her thighs brushed against each other, sending her head spinning.

“Please,” she gasped out. “Please, Pierce – I really want – I don’t think I can wait –”

She hadn’t exactly been all that coherent in asking for what she wanted, but she knew Pierce would understand her all the same. He always had – it had been part of what had connected them to each other back then. They’d

just always seemed to be on the same wavelength, able to complete each other's sentences even after knowing each other for only a few short hours.

*It always felt as if we'd known each other for years,* Celeste thought vaguely, as she lifted her hips, allowing Pierce to push her jeans down her thighs.

Celeste could feel her pulse throbbing through her, her whole body alight. Running her hands down his sides, she shoved desperately at his own jeans, pushing them down his hips along with his boxer briefs. Perhaps she should be taking this slower, trying to savor it, but right now, she simply couldn't think of anything else except being as close to him as possible, in every way.

"Celeste," he groaned, when she finally took him in her hands, hot and hard against her palms. Her mouth went dry at the sound of the need in his voice – husky and desperate, as if she was the only thing in the world that mattered.

"Let's not hold back, not now," she said, as her fingers worked over him, coaxing him to even greater hardness. She knew, however, from the look in his eyes that she wouldn't have to ask again.

Heat roiled through her as he lowered his mouth to hers, kissing her as if he'd been waiting all his life to do it. Celeste let herself be overwhelmed by him – by the warmth of his mouth, by the passion of his kiss. She could feel the heat of his erection pressing against her, hot and hard and huge, as his thumbs traced over her hard nipples, making her gasp and squirm.

"*Pierce!*" she cried out, breaking the kiss as finally, *finally*, he pushed inside her. She was so wet, so ready for him that, even as big as he was, he slid inside her easily.

*As if we were made for each other,* she thought dizzily, barely able to breathe through the wave of ecstasy that pulsed through her from head to toe. She writhed beneath him, squeezing her thighs around his hips, urging him deeper, and pulling a long, throaty groan from his lips.

"Celeste," he murmured, looking down at her through the haze of lust that clouded his eyes. "I never should have..."

"Don't," she said, raising her hand to press a finger to his lips. "It's okay. Let's just... enjoy this."

*Enjoy* wasn't exactly the word for it, Celeste thought as she cried out at the first thrust of Pierce's hips against her. *Enjoy* could hardly begin to describe the sensation that tore through her, washing over her like a wave, drowning all her senses.

She arched up, meeting his every thrust with her own, lifting her hips to urge him deeper. Every cell in her body felt as if it had been turned into liquid fire, melting her from the inside out.

Pierce groaned as she clenched around him, and she could feel his movements briefly falter, as if he was completely overcome by the sensations that must have been filling him too – they trembled against each other, pressed close, as Celeste lifted her head to kiss him again.

*I'm his, she thought vaguely, as she clung to his shoulders. And he's mine. That's never changed, no matter how much time we've been apart.*

She knew it was true – and she knew, somehow, that Pierce felt just the same way. The years seemed to fall away as they moved together. None of that mattered anymore – the only thing that mattered was that they were together again now, with nothing between them.

*I'm his mate. And he's mine.*

Pleasure exploded through her body at the thought – it was true, and it always had been. Heat surged through her with every movement they made, every touch, every kiss, every thrust. She cried out again, digging her fingers into Pierce's hips as if to urge him to go faster, and then even faster again. She could feel the hard muscles of his back shifting as he moved, the sweat of his skin as it slid against hers.

Finally, he let out a long, desperate groan before she felt a pulse of heat inside her – and at the same moment, a wave of pure bliss rolled over her and made her cry out, throwing her head back, her back arching, every muscle going taut with ecstasy.

*"Celeste –"*

At the sound of Pierce desperately, breathlessly groaning out her name, Celeste felt yet another roil of pleasure flood through her, wiping out everything except the sensation that rocked her body, filling her with fire. Her nerves sparked, her skin feeling almost overstimulated with pleasure, until finally she collapsed back on the couch, Pierce still inside her, his body covering hers.

They were both utterly breathless, their heaving chests pressed against each other as together they came down from the height of their bliss, their limbs still tangled together. Celeste could do nothing but slowly trail her hands up and down the length of his spine, wanting only to stay where she was forever, and never, ever get up again.

*We're together again.*

It was the only thought in her head as she lay there, Pierce's breath ruffling the hair by her ear.

But truly, it was as if they'd never been apart. This was what had always meant to be – she knew it suddenly, with an unshakeable certainty. Perhaps they had missed those years together, but that didn't mean the future couldn't be different – that there wasn't a chance now for them to make up for lost time.

*To be what we always should have been to each other.*

But she knew they couldn't lie here forever – and it seemed that Pierce knew it too. Reluctantly, and with a deep groan of regret, he pulled away from her, lifting his head to gaze down at her face.

“That was amazing,” he said huskily as he gently pushed sweaty strands of hair back from her forehead.

“I feel like I'm the one who should be saying that,” she said, still slightly breathless. “But. Um. I think we might have gotten a little distracted.”

Mild confusion crossed his face, before understanding cleared it.

“Ah. Yes.”

“After all, you told me all about yourself and what you've been doing all this time,” Celeste said as she sat up slowly. She didn't want to stop touching him, but she knew that if they were really going to do this, she couldn't allow there to be any more secrets between them. She had to tell him everything – and she meant *everything*. It didn't matter what Uncle Gordon or anyone else thought.

*Pierce is my mate, she thought fiercely, as she let her eyes range over his body, lust stirring within her again, even though she thought she'd just gotten everything she wanted from him. I've already let my duty and my family come between us once. I won't ever let that happen again.*

“Uh, maybe you should... cover yourself,” Celeste said, forcing herself to tear her eyes away from Pierce's abs, glistening as they were with sweat. “You're kind of distracting.”

“Speak for yourself,” Pierce said with a small laugh, gesturing to her bare breasts and thighs.

Blushing, Celeste pulled at the knitted throw, pulling it around her shoulders. “Okay, okay!”

“I can't help it,” Pierce said, his voice still tinged with humor. “You're beautiful. You're just as beautiful as the first day I met you. You can't really expect me to keep my eyes to myself.”

“I feel like you’re just stealing *all* my lines today,” Celeste grumbled as she started buttoning up her shirt. “There – is that better?”

“As good as it’s going to get,” Pierce said. “But I’m sorry. I should have waited until we’d finished talking.”

“Don’t apologize for that,” Celeste said, shaking her head and shivering a little. Small aftershocks of pleasure were still tingling through her. “I’m just as much to blame. But yes... I really should explain everything now, I guess.”

She swallowed, chewing on her lower lip. She’d never had to explain any of this to anyone before – that tended to be the nature of secret, generations-old duties that had been entrusted to her family and her family alone. Generally, you tried *not* to have to explain them to anyone, for any reason.

*But... I guess there’s no way around it. Maybe it’s best just to jump straight in. With both feet.*

“Pierce,” Celeste said, steeling herself to overcome every lesson that had ever been hammered into her to never, *never* tell anyone about the sacred duty she’d been entrusted with. “Have you ever heard of the kraken?”

## CHAPTER 9

To be honest, Hardwicke hadn't thought it possible that anything else could surprise him today. From being led around in pegasus form as part of a Christmas parade, to finally being able to be honest with his mate and show her exactly how much she meant to him... he'd thought that he would be indifferent to any curveball Celeste threw at him.

*But this – this was... unexpected.*

So unexpected, in fact, that his pegasus was momentarily shocked into silence. A rare occurrence, indeed.

"The kraken?" he said, feeling his eyebrows rising of their own accord. "As in, the ancient sea monster? I thought that was just a myth."

"Well, it's nice to know that there are still some things that can surprise hotshot agent Pierce Hardwicke," Celeste said, her mouth twitching into a smile for a moment before settling back into a more serious expression. "But yes. It's very much *not* a myth. At least, I hope it's not – I'll be pretty annoyed if it turns out I've spent the last twenty-two years holed up in a lighthouse for nothing!"

"Let's backtrack for a moment so I can make sure I have this straight," Hardwicke said, holding his hands up. This was all a bit much, even for him. "You've been living in a lighthouse for the past twenty years because of... a kraken?"

Celeste pursed her lips. "It sounds ridiculous when you put it like that! I've been living in a lighthouse because it's my family's sworn duty to maintain the wards that keep the kraken at bay and protect the people of Portsmouth, and beyond." She shuddered almost imperceptibly. "The thought

of that creature getting free doesn't even bear thinking about. I've always been told it *has* to be kept where it is – it was sealed up centuries ago in a cave below the waterline, and that's where it's been ever since. It's my job to make sure things stay that way." She glanced up at him, apprehension clear on her face. "That doesn't sound crazy, does it?"

"Hmm." In the end, Hardwicke supposed it wasn't so surprising – really, he dealt with stranger things every day. It was just a bit weird to encounter something that he had always thought was a human folk tale. Maybe this was what it felt like, whenever a human encountered a shifter for the first time.

He reached out to take her hand, stroking his thumb gently over the back of it. Looking into her eyes, he saw uncertainty there, and he hated the idea that he had anything to do with it.

"Don't worry," he said, putting all of his love and reassurance into his voice. "I believe you. I was just a little taken aback, but I believe you."

She seemed to melt into his touch, turning and sliding down until she was leaning against his side, and he pulled her in close.

"It is such a relief to have heard you say that, you have no idea," she murmured, her eyes half-closing. It was as if a veil he didn't know had been hanging over her had dropped away. "I've been keeping this secret for so long, I'd forgotten what it was like to just be completely honest with someone. To not have to worry about checking every word that came out of my mouth before I said it."

His heart broke a little, hearing her talk like that. To think that she had not only been here by herself all these years, carrying her burden of sacrifice and self-isolation, but that she hadn't even been able to relax and have a normal conversation on the rare occasions when she *did* get to talk to someone!

If only he had been honest with her twenty years ago, she could have at least had one person to confide in... but the past was the past, and wallowing wouldn't change it. All he could do was make the present as good as possible. In that moment, all he wanted in the world was to see her smile.

"Is that why you told me you had to leave, all those years ago?" he asked softly, reaching out to cup her warm cheek with his hands. "Because – because –"

"Because I knew I'd have to give it all up and come here," Celeste finished for him. "I always knew that was what my duty was – to live here in isolation, making sure the kraken was sealed away. I only get to go out to Portsmouth a few times a year. And I couldn't have asked you to give up *your*

whole life as well to join me here. It was *my* duty, but I couldn't have made it yours as well. You used to talk a lot about how much you wanted to travel and see the world – it broke my heart, but I couldn't have asked you to give all that up for me.”

“I would have, though,” Hardwicke said, meaning it. “In a heartbeat.”

“See? That’s just what I’m talking about!” Celeste said, throwing her hands up. “I *know* you would have, and that’s exactly why I wasn’t – I wasn’t honest with you back then. I had the feeling even then you’d say that. And that was just what I *didn’t* want! How could I have asked you to give up all those things for me?”

Unable to help himself, Hardwicke leaned forward, sweeping her into an embrace. He understood what she was saying – and he knew that in her position, he would have done the same thing. He could feel the sobbing hitch of her breath against his shoulder, and he pulled her tightly against him, stroking his hand through her hair.

“It’s okay,” he murmured. “I understand – you don’t have to justify yourself to me. I know why you did what you did.”

“Thank you,” Celeste sniffled, pulling back, her cheeks damp with tears. “I just... I’ve always thought about it. Whether it was the right thing to do. And you know... I never really got over you. Just in case that wasn’t completely obvious. And I *hate* lying, even if it’s just lying by omission.”

Hardwicke smiled a little, raising his hand to wipe the tears from her face. “But at least you were able to be honest with the townsfolk about all those steamy erotic novels you were writing, weren’t you?”

“Hey!” She slapped playfully at his thigh and turned so that she was looking up at him, her eyes twinkling. “They were *mystery* novels. And no, I haven’t written any.”

“That’s a shame,” he said, and he found that he meant it. “I’m sure anything you turned your hand to would be wonderful.”

She shook her head, her expression fond. “You *would* say that. Thank you, though. I appreciate the thought.”

“I meant it.” He sighed, running his fingers through her hair, admiring the silver streaks that only enhanced its beauty. “I guess we need to get to the bottom of this... this kraken issue. Is it what’s causing the tremors?”

She grimaced. “I have to assume so – I can’t think of anything else it would be. My ancestors built this lighthouse centuries ago. Originally it served as an actual lighthouse, protecting ships from the rocks while also

keeping the kraken at bay. These days there aren't any ships passing by anymore, so I'm just here maintaining the wards."

"The wards?" He knew a little bit about wards, in a very general sense, but he didn't know any details. He'd never known any magic users... or so he'd thought, anyway.

"Yes." Celeste pushed herself up suddenly and turned to face him. "You know what – as much as I don't want to get off this sofa, I think it's just easier if I show you."

Hardwicke nodded. "That sounds like a good idea." He had no idea what to expect, really, and he wasn't sure an explanation would really do it justice. Better to just go straight to the source.

Celeste pulled herself up from the sofa, dropping the blanket to finish getting dressed, and he took a moment to appreciate the view. Knowing that he got to be with the woman he loved – whom he had loved for so long – was something that he knew he would never take for granted.

Reluctantly he watched as she pulled on her clothes, and – well. Some things that weren't *her* clothes at all.

"I think it looks better on you than me," he said, and meant it.

"Do you think so?" Celeste asked, looking down at the hideous reindeer sweater that was now stretching out in new ways to accommodate her curves.

"I know so."

"I don't know – I thought it was cute on you," she said, tossing his jeans at him. "Come on, get your lazy ass up."

No one had ever said anything had looked *cute* on him before, let alone called him lazy – and if anyone had ever tried, his brain would have probably rebooted itself in sheer confusion before he gave the offender one of his icier stares and delivered a suitably unpleasant punishment. When Celeste said it though, it was... nice. Not that he was about to say as much, but he found that it didn't bother him at all.

*Our mate may do as she pleases as far as we are concerned*, his pegasus said, sounding content – and also just a little bit smug.

But then, he supposed, it had earned the right to it – perhaps if he'd listened to it sooner things might not have gone the way they had.

Pulling on his jeans, he followed her up the winding stairs toward the top of the lighthouse. The sound of waves crashing on rocks carried faintly through the thick walls, and he realized once more what a different, desolate life Celeste had been living for the past twenty years. But the dull roar of the

ocean was... soothing, almost, and he found himself wondering for a moment if he was feeling pity for her, or for himself. On the one hand, there was the thundering of the waves, the cozy, curved walls of the lighthouse, the pitch-black night sky studded with dazzling stars; on the other, there was his daily commute, the constant low-level electronic buzz of his fluorescent-lit office, his deliberately impersonal apartment.

Not that he didn't sincerely love his job, or his team. Of course he did. But everything in his life that he had carefully constructed in order to keep thoughts of Celeste at bay was now being shown up as pale and lifeless, compared with how he felt now that, at last, he was with the person he'd always been meant to be with – the person who was made for him. He knew that he was going to have to think about all of this, and soon. Over the past few days, his life had been turned completely upside-down, and possibilities he had never allowed himself to think about were opening up before him, like the sun rising over the horizon...

*Later, though, he told himself firmly. For now, you have to focus on helping your mate and protecting the people of the town. We have a job to do.*

His whirling thoughts were broken by the strange, pink glow that crept down from the top of the spiral staircase above him. Curious, he quickened his pace, emerging out into the room at the top.

*Oh, wow.*

Hardwicke knew that he wasn't easily impressed. He'd seen a lot of things in his line of work, after all, many of which even the average shifter would find difficult to comprehend.

But this... this was new.

The entire room shimmered in an ever-changing array of colors, a blanket of gently pulsating light that seemed to wrap itself all the way around the insides of the blacked-out windows. It was almost like being entirely enveloped within a warm, glowing ball.

"It's amazing," he murmured, staring around the room. He pulled his eyes away from the display, bringing them instead toward Celeste, who looked almost ethereal as the light shifted from purple to a delicate blue. "You – you did all this?"

Celeste looked away, clearly embarrassed. "My ancestors did all this. I just make sure to replace the batteries every now and then."

"Don't sell yourself short," he said, cradling her cheek in his hand and gently turning her face so that she could look into his eyes and see the

sincerity of his feelings. “Out of all the people in the world, *you* are the one who has been entrusted to do this. That’s quite the responsibility.”

“Well, I was basically fated to do it, whether or not I was actually any good at it, but... sure.” She smiled. “I like to think that I do a decent job.” Her smile faded as quickly as it had come. “Except that now something’s gone wrong, and I have no idea what to do. Even Uncle Gordon doesn’t know what’s going on, and he knows more about these things than literally anybody.”

“Uncle Gordon...” Suddenly everything fell into place. “So *that’s* why things felt so off about that guy. Well, that and his complete lack of manners.”

Celeste laughed. “I can tell you, he felt exactly the same way about you. You both have good instincts, even if you were both actually on the same side in the end. He *can* be a bit pompous, though.”

*That’s putting it diplomatically,* his pegasus sneered.

*Like you can talk. You wrote the book on pomposity.*

The pegasus harrumphed. *I can assure you that I have no idea about what it is of which you speak.*

Celeste’s face fell. “He’s going to kill me when he finds out I told you all of this. I wasn’t living in a lighthouse for twenty years for the fun of it, you know! This is deadly secret family business. Emphasis on *deadly*.”

Hardwicke *hoped* that this was an exaggeration, but he knew how intense shifters could get about secrecy – it stood to reason that magic users could be the same. In any case, the biggest problem at this moment was that Celeste was upset, and so he pulled her close, pressing a kiss to her temple.

“I’m sure we can get him to come around. And if not, well, he’ll have to come through me.” He smiled. “Besides, I’m pretty sure I could just bribe him with a new cravat.”

He felt Celeste shake a little with laughter, the tension in her shoulders melting away. “That’s true. Throw in some mustache wax, and he’ll be yours for life.”

Hardwicke scratched at his chin, affecting a thoughtful air. “Hmm, tempting.” He gazed down at Celeste’s face, more beautiful now than ever. “But I have to tell you, I think there’s only one person I want to spend the rest of my life with.”

“I understand.” Celeste looked up at him with wide eyes. “I wish you and Uncle Gordon every happiness.”

Hardwicke opened his mouth to retort, but in that moment it was as if the world opened up and swallowed them whole. The lighthouse shook and groaned around them, the vibrations becoming more and more violent with each passing moment, and a mighty roar seemed to rise up from the very earth itself, drowning out all other sound.

*The tremors – this is surely far stronger than any that have come before!*

A juddering *booom* sent him staggering, reaching out for something to steady himself against.

His pegasus reared back, its front hooves lashing the air. *Our mate! We have to protect her!*

Another mighty lurch of the earth shook the room, and he turned just in time to see Celeste flailing wildly, trying and failing to keep her balance.

He shot across the room without a second thought, throwing himself to the ground beneath her and catching her in his arms, cushioning her fall. She stared down at him with wild eyes.

“The kraken!” she gasped. “It’s – it’s waking up! The wards aren’t strong enough to keep it sealed anymore!”

Hardwicke stared at her, horror creeping through him. He might only just have found out what the kraken was – or that it even existed in the first place – but he knew this was bad.

“What can we do?” he shouted to Celeste over the sound of the groaning lighthouse and the strange, high-pitched sounds that had suddenly started emanating from the wards. “How can I help?”

“I don’t know,” Celeste said, her voice tense. “This was why I asked Uncle Gordon to come – I couldn’t figure out why the wards had started to weaken like this. But not even *he* knew what was going on, and he had to return to his library to do some research. But he strengthened them before he left – we just have to hope they can hold for a little longer –”

At that moment, the wards fizzled and popped, sending a shower of sparks cascading down over both of them. Then...

Nothing.

Darkness.

Silence, except for the sound of their desperate breathing. Even the relentless crash of the ocean seemed to have subsided to an ominous stillness. He could feel Celeste’s heart beating wildly in her chest.

“Oh, no,” she whispered, her breath warm on his face. “I think – the wards – I think they just failed...”

Hardwicke could hear the panic in her voice, and he tried to keep his own unease under control.

Though *unease* might have been putting it mildly.

“Does that mean –?”

“Whatever you think it means, that’s what it means,” Celeste said. “It means that there’s nothing keeping the kraken at bay now. Except maybe it being a little... groggy after its nap.”

“Well, let’s hope it’s not a morning kraken,” Hardwicke said, though he realized the situation was hardly one to joke about.

*We have to get out there and defeat that kraken... or put it back to sleep. But how? I didn’t even know krakens existed until a few minutes ago!*

*We will find a way*, his pegasus said, its usual haughty tone replaced by something firm and reassuring. *We will always find a way where our mate’s safety is concerned.*

*You’re right*, he said... and for once, his pegasus didn’t respond with a sniffed, *Of course I’m right*. It meant business.

Hardwicke didn’t know exactly what he was going to do in order to protect Celeste... but he knew that he would work it out, or die trying.

## CHAPTER 10

Celeste's feet skidded on the wet stones as she stumbled out of the lighthouse, her heart pounding incessantly against her ribs.

It was suddenly horribly, terrifyingly clear to her that she had no idea what to do if the kraken actually *woke up*. Her magic was all about maintaining the wards and making sure the kraken stayed fast asleep; it was highly specialized, with one specific goal in mind.

She had no offensive magic to speak of – she had neither been trained in it, nor had she inherited any aptitude for it. Being the chosen one of your generation tended to mean being able to do one thing really well, to the exclusion of most other things. It had been so long since the kraken had been bound that her extended family had apparently assumed its permanent confinement was a *fait accompli*, so long as the wards were satisfactorily maintained. They'd never made any plans, never sent over any other magic users who were good in a fight.

*How did we get so complacent?*

She took in a deep breath, feeling the damp, dank air entering her lungs, and realized that everything just felt... *wrong*.

The wind, so omnipresent here that she usually barely even noticed it anymore, had dropped down to a foreboding stillness. Even more terrifyingly, the sea was almost completely motionless – it lay flat and glimmering like deep green glass, with just the slightest hint of undulation shifting the surface. Massive clouds had piled up in the night sky, glowing with a faint yellow tinge from deep within, and the air was heavy with moisture and the stink of old seaweed.

She was completely, utterly out of her depth.

*Where on earth is Uncle Gordon?! she thought desperately. Just when I need him to stick his nose into things, and he's nowhere to be found!*

She couldn't even call him – there was hardly any cellphone reception here, her landline was back upstairs, and Gordon didn't have a phone, anyway. She wasn't even sure he knew what a phone was.

*It's all down to me.*

*And Pierce.*

That last thought made her feel at least somewhat better, a slight ray of light cutting through the gloom. She glanced over to where he stood tall beside her, a slight tension in his fists and jaw the only sign of the danger they were facing. He was strong, calm, dependable, and his presence calmed the horrible churning in the pit of her stomach.

*As long as Pierce is here with me, maybe we can do it.*

“What should we do?” she whispered. She didn't want the kraken to show up – of course she didn't! – but the waiting was horrible.

Pierce turned his gaze toward her, his eyes shining in the eerie light. “To be honest, I'm not really sure. I didn't even know krakens existed until just now.”

*That's no help at all!*

Still, just knowing he was here was a comfort. If absolutely all else failed, she supposed that he could fly them away from here until backup arrived, and move to protect the townsfolk.

“Just how big *is* this kraken supposed to be, anyway?” he asked, staring back out across the ominous sea.

Celeste swallowed hard. “The stories never specified, but the implication was... *big*. Enormous, even, you could say.” She forced a laugh. “Though maybe it's actually just as tiny as, I don't know, a hermit crab or something, and its legend has just gotten blown out of proportion over the centuries.”

“Maybe so,” Pierce said, his eyes still scanning the ocean. “We probably shouldn't bank on that, though.”

“No, probably not,” Celeste sighed.

Sheesh, all this waiting was *not* doing her nerves any good. Couldn't the kraken just get on with it and attack them already?

She looked back at Pierce, for want of anything else better to look at, and something suddenly struck her. She hadn't noticed at the time, what with the tremors and everything, but Pierce was decidedly... under-dressed for the weather, you could say. She felt cold just looking at him!

“Uh... Pierce?”

“Yes?” he replied.

“Aren’t you cold? I mean,” she gestured broadly in his general direction, trying to indicate *him* in general, “you’re not, ah, wearing anything. On top, I mean.”

It was true. He’d pulled on his jeans when they went up to look at the wards, and then everything else had happened so quickly, he obviously hadn’t had time to grab anything else to put on. And she’d stolen his sweater! He must be *freezing*.

“Hmm? Oh,” he said indifferently, “that’s not an issue. Shifters run warm. A lot of what we wear is just for show, so we don’t stand out amongst the humans.”

“Oh,” she murmured. “I see. So, you could just be wandering around shirtless pretty much all of the time?”

Pierce raised an eyebrow. “Hypothetically, yes.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, then.”

Celeste supposed that if they were going to die here, then at least she might as well take in the scenery before everything started going to hell. He really *was* an awfully well-built man, still muscular and trim despite his advancing years. She despaired at all the time they had missed out on together, and swore in that moment that if they survived, she would spend every second of the rest of her life making up for it.

The very slightest feeling of vibration in the soles of her feet caught her attention, and her head snapped up, looking out over the ocean. The surface of the water quivered slightly, like a half-set bowl of Jell-O, and that was the only warning she got before the earth tore itself apart and the sea erupted, hurling both her and Pierce to the rocky ground.

This was no tremor – this was an outright *earthquake*, and it was happening right below them.

She closed her mouth and clung onto the ground for dear life as water poured over both of them, battering them, and the sea groaned and heaved around her. Amongst the maelstrom she was aware of Pierce’s hand reaching out for hers, and she gripped it with all her strength.

When the water receded and she had gasped in enough pained, sputtering breaths to regain her equilibrium, she summoned her courage, and looked up.

And up.

It took her several long moments to realize that the reason she couldn’t

see anything was that the monstrous shape before her was so large that it was blocking out the dim, yellow glow of the clouds. The sound of the water that was still pouring off it and crashing into the ocean was deafening, the spray washing over her.

*So... it's not like a hermit crab, then.*

It occurred to Celeste in that moment that, until now, she had never truly known fear in her life. She'd thought she had, but this was so far beyond anything she had ever experienced. This was pure *terror*, to the point where she thought she might exit right out the other side and enter a state of trance-like calm, her brain shutting down in the face of what she was seeing.

Because what she was seeing – or *not* seeing, in the darkness – was something beyond her comprehension.

Though, as she gazed upward, she found that her eyes were slowly adjusting... and she really wished they weren't.

The kraken glistened in the unearthly glow, a dark, looming, glimmering mass. Celeste realized with a shudder that the movement she could sense – and hear, a slick, slithering sound – must be its tentacles. Any one of those things could crush either of them in an instant. She couldn't see how even Pierce, with all the powers that came from being a shifter, could defeat that thing.

*I don't want to abandon my post... but is there any point in just dying here, when I might be able to at least raise an alert and send for help if I flee?*

*Unless... unless I...*

She frantically racked her brain, even as she was increasingly aware of the monster's *presence* rising up before her, seeming, impossibly, to get even larger with every moment. Then suddenly, through the panic, a thought came to her, clear as a bell.

*Maybe I'm not completely helpless, after all.*

Sure, she wasn't the one who had created the wards, but she *had* been their guardian for over twenty years. She knew more about them than almost anyone else on earth.

Yes, she had spent the past twenty-two years re-reading every book in the lighthouse... but that meant *every* book. Including the magical ones. She had kept up with her studies, written the occasional letter to Great Aunt Marian, and pondered things in a hypothetical way. She had never fiddled with the magic of the wards, not wanting to somehow mess it up with her tinkering,

but she had certainly thought very hard about how they worked.

To the point where, theoretically, it was possible – *possible* – that she just might be able to create her own wards.

The idea was terrifying. But, really, what other option did she have? To lie here and get turned into mincemeat by some kind of eldritch horror? To fail the people of Portsmouth, and potentially beyond?

No. She had to try.

She pushed herself up on shaking legs, reaching out for Pierce when she faltered momentarily. He was already on his feet, gazing up at the kraken with a look on his face that she couldn't quite read. It wasn't *defeat*, by any means, but she thought it was the look of someone who, maybe, had finally met a problem they didn't immediately know how to solve. Pegasus versus kraken didn't seem like a balanced match-up, no matter how powerful the pegasus was.

*But maybe I can even the odds.*

“Pierce?” she said, and her voice sounded oddly loud in the stillness. “I think I may have an idea.”

He turned to look at her, his expression grave. “I’m all ears.”

“What if...” She paused for a moment to gather her thoughts, intensely aware of the massive dark shape looming over them. “What if I... tried to create some wards directly around the kraken?”

Pierce’s eyebrows went up in surprise. “Would that work? I assumed that the wards acted from an external location, rather than surrounding the target.”

Celeste nodded. “That’s how they normally work, yes. But I’ve read a lot about wards over the years, and it seems like centuries ago, they *did* used to use them directly against threats. It fell out of fashion, because the external wards are much easier to maintain. Using them directly is more of a stopgap measure until external wards can be set up.” She nodded again, more confidently this time. “But it can be done. I’m sure of it.”

Pierce rested his hand against her shoulder, the weight of it strong, reassuring. “And is this something *you* feel comfortable doing? Because I don’t want to risk it if you’re not sure. I can fly you back to Portsmouth if you think it’s too risky.” He swallowed, a rare sign of apprehension from a man who was always so stoic and calm. “I’ve only just found you again. I don’t know what I would do if I lost you.”

*I have to do this. I have to try.*

Celeste took a deep breath, squaring her shoulders. “I’m going to do it.

It's my duty, after all. I couldn't live with myself if I didn't at least try."

Pierce looked searchingly into her eyes, as if looking for some sort of answer. After a long moment, he nodded.

"Okay. Let's do this."

Celeste sagged a little, feeling at least some of the tension releasing from her body. They were really going to do this, then.

But really, it was, at least, a little exciting. After over twenty years of near-total confinement and daily predictability, she was going to do something completely different. Sure, she would've probably preferred something a step down from *go head-to-head with a giant sea monster* for her first real step outside the confines of her predictable life, but, well, sometimes you just had to jump into these things feet-first.

At that moment, a horrible, overwhelmingly *loud* sound erupted forth, shaking the rock beneath their feet. It wasn't like the tremors from earlier – it was like a nails-on-a-chalkboard screech, but slowed right down until it was so deep that it made the very earth tremble.

"What was that?!" she gasped, pressing her hands over her ears. It did no good, though – the hideous sound seemed to pass straight through.

"I think it was the kraken," Pierce replied. And indeed, it seemed to be moving its enormous tentacles about, sending them slapping down into the water with an almighty force that sent spray flying in all directions. It was clearly done rising from the ocean, and now it meant business.

"What do you need me to do?" Pierce asked urgently.

"I think... I think I need you to fly me up near its head," Celeste replied, furiously thinking through her plan. "Wards are stronger the farther they are from land – that's why my ancestors created them at the top of a lighthouse. If you can get me up high enough, we might have a chance."

"Then that's what we'll do."

Before she could say another word, Pierce's body started shimmering – and then the pegasus stood before her once more in all its glory, its magnificent pure white mane almost seeming to glow in the gloom.

Without even stopping to take a breath, she hopped up onto his back, grabbing on to his mane, and before she could blink they were both shooting up into the air, circling the kraken as it *kreeeeked* and thrashed. Pierce dodged the flailing tentacles easily, but Celeste had an uneasy feeling that the kraken was just warming up. She knew enough about magical monsters to know that they could move with speeds that should not be physically

possible.

*This is it. Do or die. Now or never.*

She closed her eyes, feeling the magic flow within her, and cast her mind back to what she had read, what she had practiced. She had never let herself get to the stage of casting any spells, for fear of disturbing the wards, but she had gone almost up to that point, gathering the magic within her, visualizing where the ward would be, how she would allow the magic to flow from herself to the place where she wanted it to go. It wasn't *that* different from maintaining the wards; it was just... more. *A lot* more.

A gust of wind sent her damp hair flying as a tentacle whipped past her face, and okay, the kraken was definitely getting into its groove. Pierce was doing a fantastic job of getting her where she needed to be, and now she had to repay him by upholding her end of the bargain.

She felt the warm pull of magic within her, starting at her fingertips and toes and slowly building until her whole body was suffused with it. Keeping her eyes closed, she let her hands slide from Pierce's mane, knowing that he would keep her from falling, and allowed the magic to more fully spread through every last cell of her body.

In her mind's eye, she could sense the kraken's position beneath her, and it was that position that she centered within herself. Above it, she focused her thoughts on one specific spot, directing all of her magical energy into that one, tiny, infinitesimal space.

Vaguely, she heard the kraken shrieking again, and she was certain that it could sense the massive build-up of magical energy directly above it – but she blocked it from her mind, letting the sound wash over her without paying it any attention. Then, pulling her hands slowly away from each other, she drew the point of energy out in all directions until it formed a net, glowing pale blue in her mind's eye. Dragging it downward, slowly, carefully, she enveloped the kraken, which screamed and thrashed, hurling itself against the net with juddering *thumps* that reverberated up her arms and into her shoulders.

She quickly anchored the bottom of the net to the seabed around the kraken, digging it into the rocks and sand. It wouldn't last for long – the link with the ground was the weakest point, being closest to the earth – but it might hold for long enough for them to come up with a more permanent solution. She really didn't want to kill it if she could help it – she wasn't even sure if such a thing was possible – but she couldn't just leave it to run wild,

either. Maybe Pierce would have some shifter contacts who could help him out.

It took her a moment to realize that Pierce had touched back down on solid ground, and she dragged her eyes open, taking a moment to readjust, to see what the situation looked like through human eyes, rather than in the realm of magic. The kraken was almost *more* terrifying now that it was caged, pressing against the net with terrible force. She could *feel* the pressure within her – and she knew that she could not hold out forever. The wards should, theoretically, calm the kraken into a state of stupor, but she didn't know if something cobbled together at the last minute by someone as inexperienced as her would be up to the challenge.

“Are you okay?”

Pierce was back in his human form, his hands gentle, his expression concerned.

“Yeah. I'm okay. Just... going to take a moment to get used to. I've never done that before.” She almost swayed a little on her feet. It had been a long day, and it certainly wasn't over yet!

Pierce's firm, strong hands kept her grounded. “That was amazing, Celeste. I don't know what I would've done without you. Get slapped into the ocean at a hundred miles an hour, I suspect.”

Together, they stared at the kraken as it thrashed about within its cage. It certainly didn't *seem* subdued... though as she watched, she could see that its movements were slowly losing their power, the battering against her mental defenses becoming less overwhelming.

“... Now what?” she asked helplessly.

“Maybe I can get some signal and call my team,” Pierce muttered, pulling out his cellphone and pacing up and down along the craggy rocks, holding the phone up into the air, seemingly oblivious to the grumpy, sleepy sea monster giving him the hairy eyeball. Celeste stifled a hysterical giggle.

“Good luck with that,” she called out. “There's one rock right at the end – that slightly higher one over there – that you can sometimes get a bar of signal from, but usually there's nothing. I don't even know how to use a smartphone, let alone own one. I've just got my old Nokia that I haven't even used in ten years because there's no point.”

She watched, shivering in her wet clothes, as Pierce clambered up onto the rock and made a fruitless attempt to get some signal. There was probably nothing for it but to retreat to Portsmouth and try to get some help from the

Shifter Patrol Corp, maybe write another letter to Uncle Gordon and hope that he was home to get it. Who knew how long *that* would take to arrive, especially given the Christmas postal rush!

Celeste opened her mouth to call out to Pierce – but at that moment the ground shook again, the tearing, screeching sound booming out once more, seeming to vibrate through her whole body. She noticed with relief that Pierce had managed not to fall into the ocean from his precarious perch, but there wasn't a whole lot to be relieved about otherwise.

Although... the net seemed to still be holding, at least? That was something.

The *sound* roared out again, and this time, through the ear-rending pain, Celeste realized something.

Whereas before the sound had been a *kreeeeek*, this time it was more of a *kraaaark*. Similar, but not the same.

Was the kraken trying to convey a different message to them? Was this the specific sound it made before devouring its victims whole?

*Or is it... is it...*

She tried to take the thought back, but too late – the sea was already rising in the distance, terrible in its fury, and Celeste's heart dropped into her stomach.

*... It's another kraken.*

Before she could quite comprehend what was going on, she was on the pegasus's back once more and flying through the night sky, gathering up her mental reserves for one last strike. She knew that she didn't have the power to successfully subdue *two* krakens, even temporarily – even if she managed to successfully contain this new one, the other one would surely get free.

But she had to try. There was nothing else for it.

Mustering all her strength, she closed her eyes and pulled all the magic she could spare into the core of her being, feeling it pulsing within her.

In her mind's eye, she felt the kraken rushing forward to meet them, and she focused all of her concentration into one spot in the air directly above where the kraken would soon pass.

*And – there.*

She brought her hands together, took a deep breath, and –  
“Wait! Stop!”

Her eyes jerked open, her concentration destroyed. The magic frayed at the edges and fell away. Panic surged through her entire being.

*Who –? What–?!*

She dared to look down at the rocky island upon which the lighthouse stood, and there, far below, was a tiny figure, madly waving a – a –

*A cravat?*

*Uncle Gordon?!*

Sure enough, Gordon was jumping up and down, waving his arms madly.

“There has been a terrible misunderstanding!” he cried. “Please, cease your attacks upon these defenseless creatures at once!”

## CHAPTER 11

“Okay, you’re going to have to explain it to me one more time. Slowly. In small words, please.”

Celeste massaged her temples as Uncle Gordon launched into his explanation once more, only waving his arms about *somewhat* this time, the tips of his mustache drooping from all the excitement.

“The kraken was a willing prisoner, do you not see? It was suffering from an illness that no magic or science at the time was able to comprehend. It begged your ancestors to lock it up within the wards so that it would be put into a state of almost, shall we say, *suspended animation*, preventing it from succumbing to the illness while its *friend* here searched for the answers.” His mustache quivered. “It is all quite romantic, really.”

“And how long was it searching for these answers, again?” Celeste asked.

Uncle Gordon waved his hand dismissively. “Oh, what’s a few centuries when you’re an ageless beast? In any case, it was long enough that the story got muddled up as it was passed down through the generations, and we ended up with this whole kerfuffle we see here before us.”

“I see,” murmured Celeste. She wasn’t entirely sure that she *did* see – *seeing* would mean that she’d dumped her mate and spent twenty-two years locked in a lighthouse because of a romance story involving a dying kraken that had somehow got distorted via a centuries-long game of telephone.

“So that’s what the tremors were all about?” said Pierce, and while his tone was neutral, she could tell from his expression that his thoughts were running along similar lines to hers.

“Yes, yes,” exclaimed Gordon. “The other kraken came along to try and, shall we say, ‘bust out’ the original kraken, which woke that one up and

encouraged it to also free itself, now that it knew it could be healed. The wards were never designed to withstand the force of two krakens, especially with one attacking from the outside.”

Celeste sighed. She supposed it was a happy ending – certainly, she was glad that she wasn’t kraken food right now! But dealing with the shock of knowing that all her time here hadn’t been to protect humanity from the kraken, but rather protecting the kraken from... well, *itself*, she supposed, was going to take some getting used to.

*But it wasn’t all for nothing*, she told herself. *If what Uncle Gordon is saying is true, then we did save the kraken’s life. If it was dying and it needed our help, then that’s something, right?*

Celeste had to admit that, as shocking as it was, she kind of preferred it that way – or she would, once she got used to it. She’d never really liked the idea of a creature hell-bent on destruction lingering forever in a cave beneath the sea. A benevolent kraken who’d needed their help and whose life she had been saving all this time was vastly preferable, all things considered. But she knew that there would be an adjustment period.

“And not only that,” Uncle Gordon continued on after a moment, “but something else I discovered as I was plumbing the depths of my library is that the kraken is... shall we say, the protector of Portsmouth too. In times past, its presence ensured a better harvest of fish – or whatever people do with fish – and more clement weather in the winter months. It was something our ancestors wished to preserve, since they relied on their fishing and livestock to survive... though I suppose this is a less pressing issue in the current day and age, what with same-day delivery services and whatnot.”

“I suppose that’s true,” Celeste said slowly. “But still – that’s good, isn’t it? The winters here at least can be *brutal*, so anything that makes them more manageable would be nice. And I didn’t realize the kraken helped the town so much. That’s worth something too, isn’t it? Though of course, it’s a living creature, and it deserved saving in its own right too.”

A plaintive *kreeeeek* broke into the conversation, and she looked up, startled. Two sets of sad kraken eyes stared back at her.

“Oh, of course,” she said. “I guess I should free you, huh?” She supposed she wasn’t the only one who’d had a less than stellar time. At least she hadn’t been stuck in one place for centuries!

But to be honest, she couldn’t be *too* disappointed in her discovery of what her life’s mission had *really* been. Saving something’s life was better

than imprisoning it – and that was what she and her ancestors had been doing all this time, even if they hadn't known it.

Reaching into her mind, she pulled on the thread that held the net together, and watched as the whole thing fell away. Her mind felt immediately lighter, and she had to admit her heart did too, as the two krakens rolled and frolicked, tentacles intertwining, sending a series of small waves washing up around her knees.

“Okay, you two lovebirds,” Gordon said, gesturing grandly. “Be free! Go, with my blessing!”

The two krakens rolled about once more, then flipped over to face Celeste. Their eyes met hers, and she could have sworn that they were thanking her.

“You're welcome,” she said with a smile and a wave.

With one last backward glance, the two krakens plunged down under the surface of the ocean with surprising grace... and then, they were gone.

“Do you think anyone in the town might have seen... well, the two giant water monsters that just rose out of the ocean without explanation?” Celeste murmured, as she stared out over the water, watching as the sea started to move back into its normal wave pattern, feeling the wind begin to touch her cheeks once more. Who could understand the ways of such magical and mysterious creatures?

“Hmm. Well, I suppose it's possible,” Gordon mused, glancing back over his shoulder at the cliffs of Portsmith. “But I rather doubt it. As far as I could see as I sped through the town, most people were gathered in the main street, partaking of some kind of... grilling exercise. No one was anywhere near the cliffs. And since the kraken never rose to its full height, hopefully we were lucky enough that no one was wandering these cliffsides for the last few minutes.”

“Somehow, I think we'd know if anyone had been,” Pierce agreed, his tone a lot more civil than the last time he and Gordon had spoken to each other. “There'd be a crowd of screaming onlookers by now, surely?”

“You're probably right,” Celeste agreed, nodding. “As far as I could see, just about everyone in town was gathered in the one place for the parade and the Christmas festival. I think we might just have gotten lucky.”

Sighing, she shook her head. Suddenly, she was very, *very* tired, and her wet clothes were not only sticking to her, they were *freezing*. The combination of the cold water and the cutting wind off the ocean was doing

absolutely nothing for her mood!

“I suppose all’s well that ends well, then,” she said, shivering. Oh great, and now her teeth were chattering as well! “But, if you’ll excuse me, I think I’m going to find somewhere to get warm, and then spend tonight somewhere that *isn’t* this lighthouse.”

Pierce nodded. “Of course.”

Uncle Gordon raised one bushy eyebrow. For a moment Celeste thought that he was going to keep his mouth shut, but apparently he just couldn’t help himself. “Is there a reason why you felt it proper to battle not one, but *two* krakens without donning a shirt?”

Pierce slipped an arm around Celeste’s waist, and despite everything, it was warm. She leaned into it.

“When your mate needs you, you don’t stop to deal with petty things like appearances. You come running.”

Celeste really did regret that Uncle Gordon didn’t wear a monocle, as it definitely would’ve popped off at this point. But then, he chuckled.

“Ah, young love. I can only hope that I can find somebody who makes me as happy as the two of you clearly make each other.”

Celeste felt her mouth dropping open, as if she’d lost all control over herself – she definitely would’ve popped *her* monocle at this point!

*Who are you, and what have you done with Uncle Gordon?!*

“Ahem.” Gordon looked almost... *embarrassed*. “I must admit to my own fault in this whole scenario. It’s true that the problems with the wards prompted me to more thoroughly examine some untranslated tomes from centuries ago, but I had actually intended to re-examine the texts on the kraken several weeks earlier, to go farther back into the records than anyone has delved for a good long time. But I was a little, shall we say, *inconvenienced*.” He pulled out a smartphone from his pocket, even as Celeste felt her jaw dropping – again. “I have been seeking romance within the world wide web.”

“Okay, today just officially got too strange,” she muttered. She could deal with beasts from the deep just fine, but Uncle Gordon’s romantic online exploits were a bridge too far.

*I can’t believe I was communicating to him via letters all this time, when I could’ve been calling him! Oh my God. Tell the custodian of the kraken when you join the twenty-first century next time, why don’t you?!*

Pierce’s phone suddenly dinged. And dinged. And dinged. Celeste

suddenly realized that they were up near the phone reception spot.

“What the...” he muttered. “Sorry, hold on.”

He quickly scrolled through his phone, and let out a disbelieving laugh under his breath. “For the love of...”

“What is it now?” asked Celeste. She really couldn’t deal with any more surprises right now!

“That was my boss. He said that they detected the large tremors, and that when I didn’t pick up the phone, they scrambled a team of shifters to come out and deal with it. They’ll be here within half an hour.” He sighed and started climbing farther up the rock. “I’d better try and get a message through to him now and ask him to abort the mission.”

*What is it with everyone showing up after they could’ve been of use?* Celeste thought, though she kept the thought to herself.

That was it – she’d officially had enough for today.

She was tired, strung out, and she knew that at some point she’d have to deal with the mixed emotions she could feel swirling within her chest. But right now, there was only one thought she could deal with – and that was that it was officially time for bed. Everything else could come later.

*Much later.*

“I need to get out of these wet clothes,” she declared. “And Pierce... needs to *get* some clothes, I guess. I’m going to go upstairs and grab some things, and then we’re going over to Pierce’s accommodation, and I’m going to have a hot bath and then sleep for a year.”

“Would you mind if I stayed here for the night?” Gordon asked. “I would dearly love to examine the damaged wards, as well as the remnants of the wards you created.” His expression softened in a way she’d never seen before. “I must say, young lady, that you did an exemplary job creating those wards, especially under such pressure. I cannot be sure that I could have done a better job.”

That was high praise indeed, from Uncle Gordon. Today just kept surprising her in new and baffling ways.

Celeste forced a tired smile. “Thanks, Uncle. I’ll just go get those things.”

Clambering back up to the door of the lighthouse, she made her way inside and trudged up the stairs, her tired legs barely carrying her. Inside, she looked over everything: the curved bookshelves, the old rug, the well-worn sofa.

The lighthouse had been good to her, in many ways. And she knew that

she would come back one day, at least for a visit. But right now... she didn't want to see it again for a long, long time.

She grabbed a bag and threw some clothes inside, plus a few prize possessions and favorite books. She didn't have a lot that was *hers*, really.

*Maybe it's time to change that. It's time to start doing things for me for a while.*

With one last look, she exited the lighthouse and stumbled over to where Pierce was waiting for her – still shirtless, still seemingly completely unbothered by the cold, cutting winds off the ocean. She felt beyond exhausted, but still, her heart fluttered when he smiled at her. It was, right now, all she wanted to see in the world.

“Let's get you somewhere warm,” he murmured. “And as quickly as possible.”

“You have all the best ideas,” she muttered, reluctantly peeling herself away from his side – but, as if she'd read his mind, she already knew what he intended to do.

He was still smiling at her as he began to shift, taking on the form of the mighty, winged pegasus. As if he knew she didn't have the energy to climb up onto his back, he knelt down onto the ground, so all she had to do was swing one leg over his back – which she did, gratefully, snuggling up against the warmth of his neck.

“Let's go,” she whispered, and felt the strong beat of his wings behind her – and then nothing more, since she was asleep before his feet had left the ground.



**C**hristmas Day dawned cold, wet and windy, as so many days in Portsmouth did.

Not that Celeste minded – the important thing was that she was with the man she loved, her *mate*, and she was *free*.

Free to snuggle down under the covers with Pierce, burrowing deep and enjoying the warmth that he radiated. Free to wrap her arm around him and press kisses against the back of his neck. Free not to have to worry about anything or anyone else.

The last few days had been a blur of carefree joy – of wandering about

the town, sampling the various festive foods on offer, curling up in front of the fireplace with Pierce and a mug of eggnog, and watching the flames dance.

There had even been one incident involving a store doorway and some mistletoe. She would never have expected Pierce, of all people, to have a mischievous streak, but she'd found herself tugged into the doorway before she even knew what was happening.

Celeste felt lighter than she could ever remember herself feeling – certainly ever since she found out that she was destined to spend her days in forced isolation. It was as if a heavy weight that she hadn't even realized was there had been lifted off her shoulders. She wouldn't have been at all surprised if she'd just floated off into the sky, she felt so light.

And so much of it was due to this man lying here next to her, so warm and solid and dependable. She couldn't have done any of it without him.

They had so much lost time to make up. But they were, she thought with a slight blush, doing a very good job of catching up.

Pierce stirred a little, before rolling over onto his back.

"Merry Christmas, Celeste," he murmured.

"Merry Christmas," she said back, smiling. Really, he was just so gorgeous. By all rights he should have morning breath, or sleep in his eyes, or terrible hair – but he was just the perfect amount of disheveled, his bed-head looking as if it had been professionally styled.

*Is there anything about him that isn't perfect?*

Looking at him, feeling him, she decided that the answer was a resounding *no*.

She climbed on top of him, straddling him, and looked down at him playfully.

"Have you been a good boy this year?"

Pierce looked like he might actually be contemplating the question seriously. "I'd like to think that I've done a consistently good job at work over the past year, but I'm always open to constructive criticism."

Celeste rolled her eyes. "You're kind of taking all the fun out of this! But very well: you're on the good list. Here's your reward."

She leaned down and kissed him deep and slow, savoring the taste of him. She was never, ever going to get tired of this.

"If we're giving out Christmas gifts," Pierce murmured after they broke apart, "then I have a little something for you, too."

“Wait.” Celeste pulled back, feeling her heart sink just a little. “Do you mean an actual gift? Because I didn’t get you anything.” She hadn’t even thought of it. Christmas was something she was very, very out of practice with – it had completely slipped her mind!

*And we’ve spent most of the past few days in bed, after all. And on the sofa. And up against the kitchen bench. When did he even find time to go shopping in secret?*

“Don’t worry about it,” Pierce hurried to assure her. “It’s just something silly. And it’s for both of us, really.”

She still felt a *little* bad, but she had to admit that curiosity was starting to burn up inside of her. “Where is it? Can I open it?”

“It’s over there in that bag,” Pierce said, pointing into the corner of the room. “Be careful – it’s fragile.”

Scrambling off the bed, Celeste hurried across the room and picked up the bag, bringing it back to the bed.

Reaching inside, she carefully pulled out a small but surprisingly heavy package, which was wrapped neatly in cheerful green paper printed with miniature Santas. She could tell right away that Pierce had wrapped it – the precision of the folds had Pierce written all over it.

*When did he even have time to do this?!*

Carefully peeling back the tape, she found herself at a thick layer of tissue paper. Judging by the way the contents moved, she guessed that there were two objects inside.

She looked up at Pierce. His face was carefully schooled into an expression of encouragement, but there was the slightest hint of apprehension in the corners of his eyes. It dawned on her that Pierce Hardwicke – who faced down krakens without a second thought – was scared that she wouldn’t like his present.

It was touching, but also unnecessary. She knew she’d love it, no matter what.

Carefully pulling back the layers of tissue paper, she gasped when she got to the presents themselves – and then she laughed delightedly. Of all the things!

Gently, she pulled out the mug that she had made at Mrs. Shelby’s pottery studio, cradling it in her hands. It had been fired and glazed, and... okay, it still looked pretty silly, but she didn’t care. She *loved* it.

Placing it down on the bedspread, she reached in and pulled out Pierce’s

espresso cup. It still looked like it might fall apart in a stiff breeze. It was perfect.

Looking up at Pierce, she couldn't keep the grin off her face. "I love them! How did you even *get* them?"

Pierce visibly relaxed, a smile spreading across his face. "I called up Mrs. Shelby the other day and pulled some strings. Let's just say that in exchange for there being two fewer mugs than there were supposed to be, the school now has more than enough funds to cover their expenses." He coughed. "Also, I think she was glad to be rid of them."

"Well, it's her loss," Celeste said, admiring the mugs. "I'll just pop them over here on the dresser for safekeeping, but seriously, thank you *so much* – I can't think of a better Christmas present. I just wish I'd thought to get you something."

"You got me everything I could have ever wanted," Pierce said seriously as she sank back down onto the bed, stroking his fingers through her hair. He pulled it gently up toward his face, admiring the silver strands, and Celeste felt love surging in her heart.

It was almost unbelievable, how they had found each other again against all the odds. How they had loved each other more than ever. How they fit together like two pieces of a puzzle, even after all these years. The fact that she was a shifter's *mate* was just the icing on the cake, really. They had so much to catch up on. So much about each other that they could explore together.

Bringing Pierce's face in toward hers for a searing kiss, she thanked her lucky stars that he had come back into her life.

For twenty-two years, seven months, two weeks and one day, she had counted each day with a kind of weary resignation. But now, she had a new counter that had started fresh at zero, and each day was a new adventure just waiting to be experienced.

She couldn't wait.

## EPILOGUE

## FIVE MONTHS LATER

“*R*etiring?!”

Pierce looked at the five – slightly horrified – faces in front of him in turn as they chorused out the word he’d just said, as if they couldn’t quite believe their ears.

“To tell the truth, I thought I’d see a little more relief on your faces than this,” he said, frowning. “Aren’t you always saying what a tyrant I am when you think I can’t hear it?”

To their – slight – credit, his team of agents at least looked a little sheepish as they glanced at each other. Pierce knew them all well – Rowan, the griffin, Garrett, the dragon, Beau, the hippogriff, Declan, the unicorn, and Noah, the hellhound – and he knew they’d be fine without him. They were all competent, accomplished agents, and if he’d been hard on them at times it was only because he knew they would be able to withstand it and become better agents for it.

*Hmph. We were never hard on them. We simply had realistic expectations,* his pegasus said with a toss of its head.

That, Pierce decided, was something that he and his pegasus could agree on.

“I don’t think any of us ever said *tyrant*,” Beau finally managed to get out, after an extended pause. “Well, *I* didn’t.”

“Hardwicke is retiring, you don’t have to suck up to him anymore,” Declan laughed, before shooting a small, panicked look in Pierce’s direction. “I mean... that’s effective immediately, isn’t it? When you say retiring, you mean right now, and not in six months’ time, right?”

“Luckily for you, yes,” Pierce said coldly – but really, he was having to hold back the smile that was threatening to tug at the corner of his mouth. “So no, you don’t have to suck up anymore, as you put it.”

“But who’ll be taking over your role?” Rowan broke in. “I feel like I’ve gotten used to you now – I mean, I hope you won’t take it the wrong way when I say you’re a hardass, but you always got results. And you got *us* to get results. I don’t know who could take your place.”

Pierce had to admit, it was just a *little* heartwarming to hear them say

these things. Even if he *had* been a hardass at times – well, most of the time – he knew he had his agents’ loyalty, and they had his. He supposed springing his decision to retire on them like this must have come as a shock, but at the same time, Pierce didn’t really believe in sugarcoating things. It was best to just get these things done.

And besides which, he’d given the last twenty years of his life to this job. He thought he’d earned a little time to himself.

*Well, not entirely to myself...*

“That will be a decision for head office,” Pierce said curtly. “I don’t have any influence over that.”

But that was only a half-truth. Luckily, Pierce had earned enough of a reputation that when he’d gone to announce his decision to Lausten, Lausten had done him the courtesy of asking him who he thought should replace him – *Though really, Hardwicke, it won’t be a matter of replacing at all. You’re irreplaceable, after all.*

Pierce had thought long and hard about it, before deciding to recommend Rowan for promotion to his position – Rowan *was* the most senior agent after all, and with his mate, Emilia, expecting their third child, he’d thought Rowan could use a change of pace. Field work took him away from his growing family quite often – it’d be better for him if he could stay close to them, and help Emilia to take care of the children.

*But that can be a surprise for Rowan when he gets called in to head office tomorrow,* Pierce thought, smiling internally. Far be it from him to circumvent protocol – he’d always done things by the book, after all.

“I can’t believe I’m about to say this, but I think I’m going to miss you, Hardwicke,” Garrett said, his gravelly, rumbly dragon’s voice sounding a little less gruff than usual. “I mean... if you hadn’t sent me on that stupid Christmas vacation, I never would have met Georgia.”

“And if you hadn’t accepted my, uh, resignation, I never would have met Callie,” Declan chimed in. “And then *unaccepted* it when it turned out she was my mate and I didn’t have to make an arranged unicorn marriage after all.”

“If you hadn’t sent me to investigate all that flooding last year, I never would have met Willow,” Noah said. “I was new to the team, and you trusted me with a bigger assignment than I thought I was ready to handle. But it turned out it was more than even *I* thought it’d be.”

“And if you hadn’t trusted me to break up that gambling ring – even

though you *told* me I was being approved for vacation leave – I never would have met Annie,” Beau said, his eyes shining – but then, Beau, being a hippogriff, was a little more open with his emotions than the others.

Pierce looked around at each of them in turn, feeling pride swelling in his chest, though he made sure to keep his face neutral.

*No point in them thinking I’ve decided to retire because I’ve gone soft or something like that.*

But still, he couldn’t deny he *did* feel proud of them. He’d seen each of them find their mates, start their own families, and become stronger, better people for it. Of course, he’d never told any of them that he’d found his own mate long ago and then lost her – and now, had found her again. He wanted to keep just a *little* mystery around himself.

“Well, if you’ve finished, then I need to get going,” he said coolly. “I’m retired now – none of this is my responsibility anymore.”

“Just as long as you know... whoever they get to replace you, they’ll never live up to you,” Rowan said fiercely. “They’ll have their work cut out for them before they can impress *me*.”

Pierce pushed down his internal laughter – he wondered what the expression on Rowan’s face would be when he found out the person who’d have to work so hard to impress him was actually *himself*.

“Well, that’s appreciated,” Pierce said, finally allowing the faintest glimmer of a smile to pass across his face. “But if you’ll excuse me, I have a retirement to enjoy. Perhaps I’ll send you a postcard.”

As he turned and crossed the floor of the office, heading toward the elevators, Pierce wondered how they’d react if they knew the real reason he’d retired was because he didn’t intend to spend another moment apart from the mate he’d spent so long waiting for.

He couldn’t really say he’d ever thought much about Christmas or what it meant – and he *definitely* didn’t believe in Christmas miracles. The fact that each member of his team – or *former* team now, he supposed – had met their mates at Christmas hadn’t really meant much to him before.

*But now...*

The elevator *ding!*ed and the doors opened onto the foyer. Through the wide glass doors of the front entrance, Pierce could see Celeste standing on the sidewalk, the sun sliding through her hair, as she waited for him.

The smile that had long been threatening to break out across his face couldn’t be held back anymore as he looked at her, oblivious to his stare, as

she turned her face up to the sky, obviously glorying in the sunshine – but then, he supposed, she'd been shut up in a lighthouse for so many years, on a rocky crag that wasn't exactly known for its pleasant weather.

Half the fun of the last few months had been in watching Celeste be amazed by everyday creature comforts – or simply in having the freedom to do what she wanted, when she wanted to do it. There had been a period of time when they'd gone out to eat every day for a month, just so she could sample a new restaurant, a new kind of food every day. There hadn't exactly been a wide selection available to her at Portsmouth, after all, though Celeste had loyally said after every meal that nothing could really live up to her friend Chrissy's meatloaf.

*We can go back and visit them any time you like*, Pierce had told her with a smile.

*I'd like that*, Celeste had said, with a small, answering smile. *But for now, I'm ready to see the rest of the world.*

And so, that was exactly what they'd decided they'd do.

Celeste looked up as he pushed open the doors, and Pierce didn't think he'd ever get sick of seeing the smile that broke across her face as her eyes lighted on him.

*Of course not*, his pegasus huffed. *She is our mate. There is no part of her that is not completely perfect.*

"Pierce!" she said, laughter in her voice as she threw her arms around his shoulders before pulling back a little, her face growing more serious. "So... how did they take it?"

"Better than I expected," Pierce told her as he raised his hand to brush a few strands of hair back from her face. "A little surprised, but I can't really blame them for that. I did keep it quiet until the last minute."

"Well, I still think you should have given them a chance to say a proper goodbye," she said, cocking her head to one side. "You said it's a pretty tight-knit team, right?"

"That's true," Pierce admitted. "But you say that as if I'll never see them again. That's not the case – it's only for now, while we make up for lost time. I'm sure I'll be able to find a way to drop in and see how they're doing. At some point."

"At some point," Celeste echoed, laughing a little. "But for now..."

Pierce nodded. "For now, I don't intend on setting foot back here again for... well, when is our return ticket booked for?"

“December,” Celeste said. “Of 2025.”

Pierce laughed. “Sounds just right. And what’s our first stop?”

“Oh, it’s a surprise,” Celeste said, looking up at him mischievously. “After all, you *did* say we could go wherever I wanted to.”

“And I meant it,” Pierce told her, before leaning down to kiss her on the lips, unable to resist the cheeky look on her face. “Still, maybe you should give me just the smallest hint.”

“Hmm.” Celeste tapped her finger against her chin. “A hint, you say. Well, it’s warm, sunny, it starts with a T... and then there’s an A...”

“Tahiti?” Pierce asked, blinking at her. “Really? Or is it Tanzania?”

“It’s Tahiti – and come on! You *said* anywhere I wanted! And I’ve always wanted to see a beach you can actually swim at. One with golden sand, blue water, palm trees you can laze around under...”

“Okay, well, you’re doing a great job of selling it to me right now,” Pierce said, laughing. “I hope you packed me a swimsuit.”

“Oh, of course I did – the tiniest swimsuit I could find,” Celeste said, winking at him. “And it might even have a little reindeer face on it...”

“I hope that’s a joke.”

“I guess you’ll just have to find out.”

As Celeste winked at him again, Pierce found a laugh bubbling up inside him. And he couldn’t resist leaning down to kiss her again – a much, *much* more passionate kiss than the first one, heedless of the fact they were in broad daylight, and –

“Wooooo! *Yeah!* Get that retirement off on the right foot!”

Breaking away from Celeste, Pierce looked up in surprise to see a group of five heads leaning out of the open window on the third floor of the building – in other words, the floor he’d spent the last fifteen years of his life working on, and where he’d just left the five members of his team with news of his retirement.

All of them had manically grinning faces as they hooted their wishes for a happy retirement. One of them – Beau, Pierce made out after a moment – was even *waving* at him.

“Oh... is that your team of agents? Very professional agents?” Celeste asked, looking up, a smile on her lips.

“Yes,” Pierce muttered. “Unfortunately.”

But after a moment, he found that a traitorous smile was tugging at the corner of his mouth. Would it really be so bad just to give them a little wave?

*I think your mystique is well and truly broken now, if that's what you're worried about,* his pegasus cut in, a little sarcastically – but Pierce found he didn't really mind as he lifted a hand, waving slightly to the men above, who, finally, managed to get over the sight in front of them, and with a final *Enjoy your retirement! Send us a postcard, if you're not too busy!* pulled their heads back from the window, disappearing back inside the building.

“Really,” Pierce said, though amusement was still warm within him, and he couldn't say for sure he wouldn't start actually *laughing* at any moment. “I'm not gone five minutes, and discipline goes out the window. I'm going to \_”

“You're going to do absolutely nothing,” Celeste broke in firmly. “You're retired now, remember? The only thing you're going to do is get into the cab when it shows up, come with me to the airport, and get on a plane to Tahiti. Isn't that right?”

“That's right,” Pierce said, shaking his head. He supposed that whoever had yelled out that idiotic remark – and he had a feeling it was Beau – it was none of his business anymore. The only thing left for him to do now was...

*Spend the rest of our lives with the most beautiful woman in the world,* his pegasus said, just as, finally, the cab they'd been waiting for pulled up at the curb.

*That's right,* Pierce said, as he opened the door for Celeste, helping her with the bag by her side.

“Thanks,” she said, flashing him a grin. “You ready for this?”

Pierce nodded as he followed her into the cab. “As ready as I'll ever be.”

*Ready for the rest of my life,* he thought, as Celeste snuggled up by his side, resting her head on his shoulder. *The rest of our lives.*

And Pierce knew that, from that moment on, he couldn't wait to see how the rest of their lives would go.

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