



# Bah Humbug Mate

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# BAH HUMBUG MATE

A SMALL TOWN GRUMPY/SUNSHINE SHIFTER  
ROMANCE

MYSTIC RIVER SHIFTERS



DELTA JAMES

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*This book, as are all the rest, is dedicated to*

*My Two Best Friends:*

*Renee and Chris, without whom none of  
what I do would be possible and to the Girls,  
who bring joy to my life every single day.*

*And to my readers who love my  
characters and stories almost as much as I do!*

*Leave reality behind and*

*Welcome to My World!*

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# CHAPTER 1





## DASH

### *M*ystic River, Alaska United States

Dash Samuels made his way down the stairs from his apartment over The Workshop to check-in with the morning staff and do some bookwork. It was still relatively early, but Dash had learned there was money to be made in the breakfast trade.

He liked owning The Workshop. It provided him with the closest thing he'd ever had to a family. Many thought it was unnatural for a caribou shifter to live on his own, but it was all Dash had ever known.

### *Northwest Territory, Canada*

#### *Twenty-Odd Years Ago*

*The forest snapped and crackled as the flames leapt from tree to tree, bringing light and death to everything around him. Dash had shifted from human to caribou to go for a run in the forest. Dash loved to run—leaping and bounding over the Canadian landscape. His parents forbade him from doing it, considering it too dangerous for a child to go wandering around or exploring on his own. They might have been right for a human child of ten, but the same age in his caribou form*

*was fully mature. It was the odd juxtaposition most shifters faced.*

*He wasn't sure how the fire started. All he knew was that by the time he was aware of it, the fire had engulfed the tinderbox that characterized the trees and undergrowth at this time of year. A wall of flame now separated him from his family and his herd.*

*Dash charged to the top of the ridge to watch the fire burn—the acrid smell of smoke and destruction filled his nostrils. The little boy inside cried out for his parents. The caribou into which he'd shifted knew he and the boy were in danger and turned from the flames, bounding away to safety.*

*By the time it had been safe to return, there was nothing left but rubble. His family and herd were dead. Death permeated the air and the child within hid in the corner of the caribou's mind and grieved. The caribou turned east and headed away from where the herd wintered. The child would not be safe until he had grown into a man.*

*Until then, the caribou would keep him safe.*

## ***Mystic River, Alaska***

### ***Present Day***

“Well, if it isn't the reindeer-shifter,” called one of his regular patrons.

Dash had grown tired of trying to correct people politely. “I'm not a reindeer. I'm a caribou. My kind have always been caribou, not some childish fantasy that flies around the world, drawing a sleigh with a fat man and a bag of toys.”

“Nah, this time of year, you're a reindeer,” said the man who was already inebriated.

Dash looked to his bartender who gave him a nod, indicating he was aware of the situation, had the guy's keys, and would ensure he didn't drive himself home.

“Nope. Caribou. Do you see any fucking tinsel on my antlers?” The phone rang in the background. “No, you do not.”

“Dash? It’s for you. Guy says it’s important.”



## ***Toronto, Ontario***

### ***Canada***

That had been three days ago. Now he sat in the waiting room of a lawyer’s office in Toronto, waiting to meet a man about a grandmother Dash had never known.

*Grandmother? If I have a grandmother, where the hell has she been the past twenty years? Why didn’t she seek me out any time during what was a lonely and frightening childhood?*

Dash slipped his finger inside the collar of his button-down shirt. The shirt his friend Derek Grayson had insisted he had to have. In fact, Derek and his mate, Tess, had insisted on dragging him to Seattle to buy a proper suit for this meeting. Dash hadn’t seen the need. After all, the lawyer had requested his presence in Toronto for the reading of his grandmother’s will.

Dash took in his surroundings. From the look of it, his grandmother must have been loaded to afford a lawyer with such posh surroundings. Everything seemed dark and opulent—from the dark paneled walls to the dark furniture to the dark, oriental rug. Places like this gave him the heebie jeebies. They were designed to impress and intimidate. They exerted control and power. Dash was used to Alaska—the last great frontier.

The people weren’t much better. They were all done up, unfriendly, and seemed to know his suit was off-the-rack. It was an expensive rack, but Dash was fairly certain that the guy shooting him daggers with his eyes from across the room was well aware of that fact. The man’s florid complexion and red nose indicated a man who indulged in far too much booze—

owning a tavern, Dash knew the type. Dash's keen sense of smell told him that the man, and the frightened-looking woman sitting next to him were shifters—most likely caribou shifters. But the man's body language practically screamed 'don't ask.'

He wondered again what he was doing here and why he cared. He could answer the first part. The paralegal he'd spoken to on the phone had indicated his grandmother had named him in her will. He'd hinted that as a beneficiary, it would behoove him to come, as the will had a few conditions before he could inherit some undisclosed amount. Considering the plumbing work that needed to be done at The Workshop and the gathering storm of the Shadow League, an inheritance couldn't have come at a better time.

Dash stood and approached the receptionist. "Excuse me. Is this going to take much longer? I was requested to be here by ten and it's now ten-thirty."

"Mr. Nelson will be with you shortly," she said, without ever looking up or making eye contact.

"Well, you can tell Mr. Nelson he has fifteen minutes before I leave this office and head back to Alaska."

"Why don't you just leave now?" asked the man in the custom-tailored suit.

*Why does he want me to leave? Could he be a second beneficiary, and if I'm not here, I get disinherited, and he gets everything?*

Whatever the reason, the exchange seemed to get the receptionist's attention. "I am so sorry. Mr. Nelson is usually very punctual. I'll go check on him and see what's the matter. Can I get you a cup of coffee?"

"Is that what you call that weak, tepid cup of weasel piss you gave me earlier?" asked Dash. Harsh words, but the stuff had been truly appalling.

The receptionist giggled. "It is truly awful, isn't it?"

Before she could leave her desk, a tall, large man came out from the private office off the lobby, extending his hand to

Dash. “Clifford E. Nelson; my friends call me Blitz. I take it you’re Dasher Samuels.”

“It’s just Dash. My mother named me for Dashiell Hammett, the author who wrote hard-boiled detective novels.”

The lawyer’s bushy eyebrows shot up as if he meant to dispute that but thought better of it. There must be enough money involved that the guy didn’t want to make an enemy of Dash.

“My mistake,” said the lawyer, trying to cover.

“He doesn’t even know who he is. How could you and my grandmother be so sure he’s the rightful inheritor,” said the man in the suit.

“That’s enough, Rudy,” admonished the lawyer. “Your grandmother had been searching for him for years and became convinced Dash was her daughter’s son. I did my own research and came to the same conclusion. “You’ll have to forgive Rudy.”

“Will I? Why don’t we just cut to the chase, and you tell me what this is all about?”

“Let’s step into my office, and I’ll be happy to answer any and all of your questions.” The man the lawyer had identified as Rudy stood. “No, Rudy. Why don’t you head home? If you’re needed, I’ll give you a call.”

Rudy sputtered but was silenced by one look from the lawyer, who showed Dash into his office.

Sitting down, Dash jerked his thumb over his shoulder back towards the lobby. “What’s his problem?”

“I think Rudy, along with many others, expected to inherit the bulk of your grandmother’s fortune.”

“Fortune? What kind of money are we talking about?”

“In terms of cash?” The lawyer named a sum of money that made Dash’s head spin. “If you liquidated everything? About triple that.”

Dash sat back and emitted a low whistle. “No wonder Rudy is pissed. I have no reason to own anything in Canada; why don’t you just turn everything into cash and send me the check.”

“I’m afraid it’s not quite so easy.”

“Sure, it is.”

“You would turn your grandmother’s whole herd off the property they have lived on for years and which has been home to generations of reindeer...”

“Caribou,” Dash corrected.

The lawyer smiled. “I stand corrected. Generations of caribou have inhabited?”

“Well, fine. Then liquidate what you can without displacing them and send me what’s left.”

“Again, it’s not quite so easy. Your grandmother had a couple of provisions.”

“What are they?” Dash asked, letting his annoyance bleed into his tone.

“Well, the first was that you come to Toronto to meet with me. I think your grandmother was hoping you’d feel some kinship to this place.”

“Why? I’ve never been to Toronto before. My family and herd were killed in a devastating fire a long time ago in the Northwest Territory. Why is it my grandmother is only now looking for me? The days of my needing her or her herd have long since passed.”

“Your grandmother had been looking for you or any sign of you since she learned you had survived.”

“Doesn’t matter. But I’ll tell you upfront if one of the conditions is I stay here in Toronto, you can tell Rudy it’s all his. My home, and those I call family, are in Mystic River.”

“You remaining here was a wish of your grandmother’s, not a condition of your inheritance.”

“So, how many conditions are there to this inheritance? Granted, it’s a large sum of money, but I’m not inclined to disrupt my entire life just to get my hands on it.”

The lawyer chuckled. In spite of himself, Dash was beginning to like the lawyer who’d indicated he preferred being called Blitz. He was sure there were some who saw it as a rugged name, but Dash was willing to bet it was short for Blitzen.

“Your grandmother and I were friends long before your father drove your mother away from her origin herd and took her to the far north. There were those who worried that it would destroy the legacy, but it didn’t. I can tell you both your grandparents wanted your father’s head mounted on a wall. Your father truly loved your mother. It was said they were fated mates.”

Dash smiled. He hadn’t allowed himself to think about his parents for years. “They died when I was so young. I barely remember them, except for my mother telling me they were fated mates, and I should wait for my fated mate to appear and then hold onto her with everything I had. Sweet story, but we all know that whole fated mates legend is just that—legend. I think it’s something the apex predators made up to justify their kidnapping and subjugation of the females they force into pair bondings.”

“Spoken like a young man who has never been in love,” said the lawyer with an indulgent smile. “Take it from an old man who has been blissfully mated to his wife for longer than you’ve been alive, legend or not, the phenomenon of fated mates is real.”

“Or maybe just a man who likes to indulge in romantic fantasies.”

“Maybe. That’s the worst thing about all of this. I wish you had the time to find your fated mate and to fall in love, but a time limit is also part of the condition.”

The small hairs all along the back of his neck started to rise. Dash was beginning to get a bad feeling about this. “So, how many conditions are there?”

“Basically two. The first, as I said, was to come to Toronto.”

“And second?”

“You are to take a mate.”

“Fuck this. That’s what you dragged me all the way from Alaska for? Are you fucking serious? Was my grandmother out of her ever-loving mind? She can’t make that a condition of her will.”

“I assure you, she can. I can also assure you Rudy is counting on this reaction. He wants to inherit so he can flex his muscles and become leader of the herd. The herd will not flourish under his leadership. Your grandmother could be a hard woman, but she never made decisions without putting the well-being of the herd first. I can assure you that will be the last thing on Rudy’s mind.”

“How long do I have to stay married?”

“I’m sure her hope was forever, but the will stipulates a minimum of ten years.”

Dash rolled his eyes and groaned. This was the most insane thing he’d ever heard, but still something about what the lawyer said about Rudy struck him as truthful. He might not know those in his grandmother’s herd, but could he really just walk away and leave them hurting?

“And there is a deadline for when this has to be accomplished,” continued the lawyer.

“Of course, there is,” said Dash, closing his eyes and leaning his head back. “What is it? Valentine’s Day?”

“I’m afraid not,” said the lawyer. Dash opened his eyes and looked at the lawyer. “The winter holiday. This winter holiday.”

“What do you mean I need to be mated by the winter holiday? Are you kidding me?” Dash said standing before beginning to pace back and forth in Blitz’s office.

“Look, Dash, I didn’t write the damn will. Well, I guess technically I did, but your grandmother was very particular.



Even after all these years, she was still angry your mother left the herd. So, if you want to inherit what is rightfully yours and protect your family's legacy, you need to be married by the holiday deadline."

Which is?"

"December 24<sup>th</sup>."

"You aren't serious."

"I'm afraid I am. Your grandmother took these kinds of things seriously."

"For heaven's sake, Blitz, where the hell am I supposed to find a comely, female caribou-shifter..." he glanced at the calendar on the wall "...and convince her to marry me before the deadline?"

"Honestly, I don't know, and there are provisions that will have you tied to this girl for at least ten years."

Dash plopped down in the chair. "A decade? I have to spend a decade with some girl I don't even know?"

"I'm sure you know lots of girls," said the attorney.

"And none of them I'd want to marry."

"If I wasn't married, for that kind of money and to save your grandmother's legacy, I'd marry Godzilla."

Dash grinned at him, "Do you have her number?"

## CHAPTER 2



## DASH

Dash shook his head as he left the lawyer's office. Rudy was waiting for him as he exited out onto the cold and gray Toronto streets.

"Well?" he said without preamble, stepping into Dash's personal space.

This city caribou had picked the wrong man on the wrong day to try and get intimidating. Dash grabbed him by the lapels of his very expensive suit and put him into the side of the brick building. "Not on my watch, asshole. Come hell or high water, I'll be married by Christmas Eve. You've lost the money and my grandmother's herd will remain in their homes."

"And you'll stay here to ensure that happens?" taunted Rudy.

"No need. There was no stipulation in the will about where I'll reside. I've tasked Blitz with keeping an eye on you and ensuring things go according to plan. Alaska isn't that far away and if I have to come back to deal with you, I won't come alone. And my friends are all apex predators."

"How would you even know?"

"First, as I said, I've asked Blitz to make sure you stay in line. And second, I have a good friend who has the most amazing intelligence network. I mean to enlist his help as well. Trust me, asshole, I'll know, and it won't go well for you if you try anything. Now get your metrosexual self out of my sight and stay there."

Dash hailed a cab and headed back to the airport. He pulled a list of names that Nelson had given him from his inside pocket. All of the names were those of herd masters who had eligible females from whom he could pick.

It was going to be a long trip back to Mystic River.



### *Mystic River, Alaska*

Dash was behind the bar. His regular, and most popular, bartender had cut back her hours. She had a new mate and was deeply involved in the resistance. While he was happy for the arctic fox shifter, it meant he had to cover more of her shifts. Thankfully, Nova could order inventory from home and had agreed to keep up with that for Dash.

He was wiping down the bar, which seemed to be an endless task, but one which was oddly soothing in its mindless simplicity and rhythm. He'd returned from Toronto last night and needed to catch up on the bookwork. Perhaps his new mate, whoever she was, would be able to take that on.

He wondered if he ought to think about buying a nice place here in town or finding a piece of land up in the hills surrounding Mystic River and building something. Perhaps he should just gut the four apartments upstairs and create a grand apartment above the bar. That would be the most convenient in terms of living but on more than one occasion, his business partner, Colby Reynolds, the lynx-shifter alpha, had found the need to stash someone there. Besides, Dash still liked the idea of having places to offer to those who had been displaced for one reason or another.

Maybe it was best to wait until he found a mate and convinced her to throw in with this crazy scheme and elicit her opinion.

Dash listened as patrons of The Workshop engaged in lively conversation and shared an easy camaraderie. It was one of the things he liked best about Mystic River—people cared about one another. There might be petty disputes among them

now and again, but for the most part, those who lived here felt a responsibility to look after each other. The vote to join the resistance against the Shadow League had been unanimous. The whole town, and that of Otter Cove over on the mainland, had thrown in and vowed to bring down the dangerous and evil League.

Colby entered the bar, waving to Dash and stopping at various tables to say hello. For years, Colby had been considered the area's leading gangster, but more and more his layers were being peeled away to reveal the true man. One very few had known existed.

"Dasher," he called.

"Don't start," groaned Dash.

"Oh, come on. 'Tis the season. Can't you just pretend for the rest of us that you're a reindeer and you know how to fly?"

"Do I look like I know how to fly? Do I look like I want to?"

Colby shook his head. "What you look like you should be is a grinch-shifter. I swear I've never known anybody who disliked the holidays more than you."

"Well, we can't all want to be fucking Santa Claus."

"True. I've talked to the jolly old man about that, and he seems disinclined to retire. Besides, I think my fated mate prefers a trim and healthy mate with abs of steel."

"Do you have a fated mate? Isn't there some clause about gangsters having to forfeit?"

Colby leaned in and whispered in a conspiratorial stage voice, "We both know I'm not a gangster, and yes, I have a fated mate. I've seen her in my dreams."

"Oh, good god. You're worse than the rest of them."

"Then tell me about what happened in Toronto."

Dash chuckled. This was just the kind of thing Colby lived for. The lynx-shifter seemed to genuinely enjoy gossip—the juicier the better. "It seems I had a grandmother. My mother's

mother. The lawyer said she ran off with my father. They were fated mates, and despite my grandmother's protestations, they left her origin herd never to be heard from again."

"Your parents and the rest of your herd were killed in a forest fire, right?"

Dash nodded. "I don't think about it much, and the way I grew up doesn't really bother me, but it was kind of nice to know that once my grandmother knew I survived, she looked for me. She only figured out who and where I was a couple of weeks ago and by then she was too sick. She did, however, leave her entire estate to me, including the land, mansion, and buildings the herd had occupied for centuries. I told the lawyer to separate that, as well as the income and holdings. I don't want to leave them with nothing."

"That was generous of you."

"Trust me. I'm still set to inherit a bundle. There's just one teensy weensy condition."

"What's that?"

"I have to find a mate and get married by the 24<sup>th</sup> of this month, or all of it, including what I designated to stay with the rest of the herd, goes to a nasty piece of shit named Rudy."

"Rudy? As in Rudolf the red-nosed reindeer?" Colby cackled. "I'm not sure which I like better, the fact that you have to find a mate and be married by Christmas Eve, or that the bad guy in the piece is that insipid character from the song and cartoon." A shadow crossed over his face. "Damn, I wish Kyra was here. This is just the kind of thing the two of us used to laugh about."

"You've got the word out. It'll get to Kyra and Scott. If they come back, we'll protect them."

Colby nodded. "I know Graeme is looking too. If they end up in the Highlands with him or he hears anything, he's promised to let me know." He shook his head. "I should have told her. I thought she'd be safer if she didn't know."

Dash placed his hand on Colby's shoulder. "You did what you thought was best."

“You’d think I’d learn not to do that,” Colby chuckled.



When the door burst open and the beautiful young woman stumbled in, Dash couldn’t be sure if he felt as though he’d been hit over the head with one of the massive beams in the tavern’s ceiling or punched in the gut by a heavyweight champion boxer. But to say the effect was profound would be putting it mildly.

Colby was closer and got to her before Dash could even get around from behind the bar. Colby helped her to a bar stool where she sat down and began taking off layers of clothing and trying to untangle herself from a string of Christmas lights.

“Noel? Noel Brooks, right?” asked Dash. She wasn’t exactly a regular, but he’d seen her around town a couple of times. Mostly she and the rest of her herd kept to their Christmas tree farm located on the Alaska Peninsula north of Otter Cove.

“Yes, that’s me. I’m so sorry about the dramatic entrance. Just as I was opening the door, it was like some giant form of energy just gave me a big shove from behind.”

“Are you all right, Noel?” asked Colby, solicitously.

*Why do I suddenly want to punch Colby in the face, if not outright kill him?*

“I’m fine, Colby. I was just starting to set up our annual holiday shop and tree lot, but it’s really chilly out there, and I didn’t have breakfast. I remembered The Workshop and that it was warm, had a huge fire, and made the best burgers. I took a look at the weather; there’s a nasty storm brewing.”

Mystic River had become a mecca for hardcore holiday shoppers all over Alaska and northern Canada for homemade ornaments, stunning holiday trees, and homemade goods of all kinds—quilts, foods, and the like. The town hosted an art show, craft fair, and other tourist attractions. Many of those in

Mystic River depended on the income they created during the winter holiday to see them through the rest of the year.

“There is, indeed. You might want to think about staying here in Mystic River. I could put you up at Windsong, or there’s Trudy’s B&B, or Dash has some lovely apartments upstairs, don’t you, Dash?”

Dash nodded.

*What the hell was Colby up to?*

“I do. You’d be more than welcome to stay. I’m not sure how full Trudy might be and Windsong is so far outside of town. One of the apartments upstairs might be more convenient. Let’s move you down to the other end of the bar...” *away from Colby* “...by the fire. I’ll get you a burger started—fries or rings?”

“Fries. I remember thinking your fries were the best I’d ever tasted.”

He moved her closer to the fire and further away from Colby. He put in her order and went back to give her the cup of hot cocoa she wanted. Hot cocoa? In a pub? He flirted with her, more out of routine than any real interest. The girl was wearing Christmas lights, for god’s sake, and Dash hated the holidays. Hated them. When her order was up, he served her and then moved back down to Colby.

“Pretty girl.” Dash nodded. “You know, she could very well be the answer to your problem.”

“What problem?” asked Dash.

“The problem of your grandmother’s stipulation that stands in the way of you inheriting what I assumed to be a substantial sum.”

Dash looked up at Noel, watching how the firelight seemed to dance and create light and movement in her hair.

“I know her herd has been having a hard time of it,” continued Colby. “Their machinery is outdated and breaking down. Having an influx of money could really help.”



Dash looked between Noel and Colby. She certainly was easy on the eyes. Underneath all those layers, she had a comely, delicious figure with full breasts and a small waist that flowed into hips that looked perfect for a man to hold on to as he enjoyed all that her lush body seemed to offer. Her ginger hair tumbled down her back, the snow having made it wavy. Dash felt arousal kick in and begin to surge through his system.

Giving Colby a sly grin, he said, “I do believe you might be right.”

Dash wandered back down to where Noel was sitting, wiping down the bar and bussing the other tables as he went. Colby was right. He’d heard the same thing—that her herd was struggling financially. It actually made sense, as more and more people were buying fake trees. They were easier, both to care for and to use for more than one holiday season.

That might make her and her herd amenable to his proposition. Sure, it was ten years, but he’d be willing to sign a contract that said he’d look after them for life. Bringing her another cup of cocoa, he leaned against the backbar.

“I’ve heard everyone complaining about sales being down. A lot of people aren’t sure if the holiday season will be enough to pull them through. You guys doing all right?”

Flipping her hair behind her shoulder, she looked at him suspiciously before taking a sip of cocoa. “We’re doing fine—maybe not as many preorders as last year on the trees, but we’ve seen an uptick of sales in our handmade ornaments and decorations.”

For reasons he would never question later, Dash inhaled her scent deeply. The same feeling of being hit over the head and punched in the gut he’d felt earlier assailed him again, only this time it made sense. Colby was wrong. Noel Brooks wasn’t just the solution to his problem. She was so much more than that. She was his fated mate.

Dash ran his finger along the back of her hand and smiled as she shivered before drawing her hand back. He called back over his shoulder to get one of his staff to cover the bar.

“Let’s you and I go sit in the back booth. I think I may have a solution to both of our problems.”

# CHAPTER 3



## NOEL

With just the slightest hint of trepidation, Noel allowed Dash to escort her to the back booth where both he and Colby Reynolds were known to do deals. She couldn't imagine what Dash Samuels might want with her. She just hoped she didn't make a damn fool of herself. She'd had a crush on Dash for the longest time and had sometimes even imagined he might be her fated mate, but he seemed so set against fated mates and Christmas. Who could be opposed to either?

He waited as she slid into the booth.

“Okay. I want your word that you'll hear me out before throwing your cocoa in my face, punching me in the nose, and/or storming out of my bar.”

“I'm not generally predisposed to do any of those.”

“You haven't heard my proposal yet.”

“Well, then, I'm all ears.”

“I don't know how much you know about me, but I pretty much grew up on my own. My parents and our herd were all killed...”

“Dash, I'm so sorry. Where did you go? How did you survive?”

“My caribou took care of me. I lived for years mostly in my altered form. At first it was because I was too frightened to shift back. After that, it was just easier to accomplish basic survival.” He didn't really want to get into it. He neither

wanted nor needed her pity. “I found out recently that my grandmother had been looking for me for years. By the time she found me, she was dying. By the time I found out about her, she was dead.”

Noel reached out and placed her hand over his, saying nothing.

“In any event, she left her entire estate to me. I had the attorney split off what has always been the herd’s home and territory as well as any income provided by it. The rest will come to me as long as I meet the stipulation of the will. If I fail, it all reverts to a distant cousin named Rudy who doesn’t give a damn about my grandmother’s herd.”

“That’s awful,” she said. “What’s the stipulation? How can I help?”

“The stipulation is a bit out there, and you can help.”

“Tell me what I can do.”

“Marry me,” he said simply.

“Wh... what?”

He grinned. “You heard me; marry me. My grandmother’s will stated that if I am to inherit, I must be married. Not only that, I must be married by December 24<sup>th</sup>.”

“As in, this Christmas Eve?” Her eyes grew wide as Dash nodded. “That’s crazy. I mean, we’re not strangers, but we know very little about each other.”

“I know I find you attractive, intelligent, and you and your herd are having money troubles...”

Noel pulled back, “I’m not for sale.”

Dash shook his head. “I’m sorry. This is awkward, to say the least. As you can see, I don’t have a lot of time.”

“I don’t think I can be involved in a sham marriage.”

“It won’t be a sham, or at least I hope it won’t. The will stipulates that the marriage has to last at least ten years. I would be earmarking part of my inheritance to provide for you and your herd—not just for the ten years. After that, regardless

of what happens between us, you and your herd would be provided for, and when I die, you would inherit everything I have—the remainder of my inheritance, The Workshop, all of it.” Dash took her hand. “I know it sounds crazy, but this could work.”

Noel leaned back, withdrawing her hand, finding his physical touch not unpleasant but distracting. “I don’t know Dash...”

“I understand, but honestly, this is a win-win-win situation. Think about it, you and your herd will get the money you need, I’ll get my inheritance, and my distant cousin won’t be able to oust my grandmother’s herd.”

“I understand, but you’ve really come out of left field at me.”

“I know. I can only imagine how crazy I must sound, but I have to tell you, the more I think about it, the better I like the idea. Plenty of people have married for reasons other than love and have been able to have happy, successful marriages. I’m not going to try and rush you into my bed, although having an intimate relationship as part of a ten-year marriage would be my preference, but this is really about all the financial advantages to both of us and the people we care about.”

“I don’t know,” she said slowly, pondering the idea.

He wasn’t wrong. It did make some sense. The idea was tempting, and he was right about why people had married for something other than love for millennia. The tree farm and the seasonal store the herd ran hadn’t been doing as well recently as they had in the past. People seemed to be leaning more and more toward fake trees. Ones they could put up and take down pre-lighted. And hand-crafted items seemed to be becoming a thing of the past, despite what she might have told Dash. People were willing to embrace fakes at half the price as opposed to paying someone for the time and creativity they put into creating something.

Dash could be on to something, and he brought more than money to the table. The herd and other reindeer-shifters had been floundering for years. Theirs had once been a proud

legacy but with fewer and fewer people believing in Santa Claus and even Christmas itself, there was talk that the days of traveling around the globe in a single night might be approaching its end.

It seemed every place Dash touched brought warmth and arousal in its wake. She'd been around Dash plenty of times, but for some reason, she found herself drawn to him in a way she never had been before. Was there something there—something that required further exploration? Could a marriage based on a financial need lead to something more?

With all of the pros and cons swirling in her mind like the maelstrom of a shift, something settled within her, but she wanted to be smart about this. Putting on her best business face, she said, "Let's talk specifics and terms."

That caught him by surprise. He hadn't been expecting that.



The town's holiday party was held a week later. Dash had invited his distant cousin, Rudy, and his mate to be their guests. Dash had agreed to fly Noel and Nicole Wells, Asher Wells' mate, to Seattle after the party to do some preliminary looking for a wedding dress. Noel had yet to explain to anyone in her family or herd what was happening and what she was contemplating.

Noel was now living in one of the apartments over The Workshop. As far as anyone knew, she and Dash had become an item and were living together in one apartment. It wasn't true, but if they were going to pull this off, they needed to be a couple who had fallen head-over-heels for one another. They had both privately told close friends and family that they believed the other to be their fated mate.

Tonight was important. It was the annual Mystic River Holiday party. Everyone would be in attendance. The plan was to announce their engagement and give no one any reason to think that the relationship wasn't genuine. Noel had been

working at the herd's holiday shop and was tired when she trudged up the stairs. If they hadn't had things all planned out, she would have preferred to grab a burger and beer, gone up to her apartment, maybe watched a little television and then curled up in bed.

When she entered the apartment, she saw the most glorious deep plum dress laid out on the bed and a note placed at its center. She now recognized Dash's handwriting. The note said:

*I thought you might like something new for the party. If you don't like it, don't feel obligated to wear it. The store in Seattle said it was 'on trend,' whatever that means.*

*We both know what we have to do, but let's try and have fun doing it.*

*I'll meet you in the center hall.*

*Dash*

The dress was a gorgeous plum silk, burned-out velvet. It was probably shorter with a more plunging neckline than she might have chosen for herself, but the long sleeves with the ruffle and the feel of the material made her brush such thoughts away. It was gorgeous, but more than that, it was a thoughtful thing to do.

Noel took a quick shower, applied makeup, and put up her hair. Slipping the exquisite dress on, she sighed happily. Never had she owned anything that was anywhere near this fine. Once she was ready, she joined Dash in the center hall where the four apartments converged.

"You look stunning," he said as she left her place.



“Thank you—not only for the compliment, but for the dress itself. I’ve never owned anything even close to this beautiful,” she said, spinning before him.

He smiled indulgently. “We’ll have to see about fixing that,” he said, taking her hand, tucking it into his elbow, and leading her down the stairs.

What waited at the bottom was beyond anything she ever might imagine—a magnificent sleigh drawn by a matched four-in-hand team and a driver who tipped his top hat.

“Your chariot awaits. The party won’t really get into full swing for at least an hour. I thought we might take a sleigh ride and then arrive fashionably late.”

“I like the way you think,” she said, letting him help her into the sleigh and then covering her with a warm blanket.

They wove their way through the village of Mystic River as well as the surrounding countryside. One hour turned into two and as Dash had predicted, their fashionably and stylishly late arrival missed no one’s scrutiny. Dash merely nodded to Rudy before leading Noel out onto the dance floor where they danced several dances together.

Taking a glass of champagne from one of the circulating catering staff, Dash used a butter knife to clink on the rim of the glass, garnering everyone’s attention.

“May I have your attention?” People stopped talking and focused on Dash. “It is with great pride and a humble heart that I announce to all of you that after a whirlwind courtship in which I swept Noel off her feet, I have asked her to marry me, and she has said yes.”

At first there was a bit of a surprised silence and then everyone seemed to speak at once and congratulate them. Noel had never been one for crowds. Oh, she handled customers at the holiday shop well enough, but that was business. This was personal. This was people crowding all around her—pressing in—giving her little room to breathe, much less move. Dash must have sensed her discomfort as he wrapped his arm around her, pulling her close. Somehow close to Dash was

different than close to anybody else. Close to Dash she felt safe, protected, cared about.

The band struck up one of those holiday songs they played in the shop. Years later Dash would tease her about not remembering the name of the song to which they'd first danced—the first time when he had held her close—the first time he ever kissed her. Noel could feel herself falling for this man, longing for a real relationship instead of something that was being done to financially benefit them both.

Dash led her around the dance floor smoothly, flowing like the river did in the summer—quietly, purposefully, gracefully. She felt a little like a young fawn trying to find its footing on ice, but he managed to make her feel beautiful. She was looking up at him when he lowered his head, his lips brushing across hers at first before settling on them. Her hands tightened—one in his hand, the other at his waist and she melted into him. She felt like chocolate when it got too close to a flame—melted, gooey, delicious.

Noel couldn't hold back a moan when his tongue traced the seam of her lips, his hand disengaging from hers to tangle in her hair, tugging her head back to give him better access. Her mouth softened, parting as his tongue surged in, seeking the warmth of her mouth, his tongue tangling with hers. His hand at her waist drifted down to the curve of her ass, pulling her closer and holding her gentle curves against the hard planes of his body.

She would never be sure how long they danced or what went on around them. For now, it was enough to be with him, to wonder if the fantasy that was beginning to form might not be fate, allowing her to feel and see the destiny that lay before her.

Someone tapped Dash on the shoulder, drawing his attention away from her. Sanity and reality returned in a brutal rush. Feeling much like Cinderella must have at the stroke of midnight, Noel pulled away, freeing herself from him. And like the fabled princess of old, she turned and fled into the night.

# CHAPTER 4



## DASH

She'd been gone for a week. Seven whole days where no one had seen her. She hadn't been to the shop; nor had she been to the apartment over the bar. Not wanting to give anyone a clue that she was missing, he'd said she'd come down with a nasty virus and that he had insisted she rest and do nothing, but that excuse was starting to wear thin. Dash brought in one of his servers and tasked her with running Noel's shop. By all accounts, the server was doing a crackerjack job and having a ball. But that didn't alter the fact that he had no idea what had happened to his fated mate and fiancée.

With Noel missing, Dash had wondered why he'd never really noticed Noel before now. How had he missed her loveliness? Her kindness? The way she quietly illuminated a room just by entering it? Perhaps the timing had to be right before the whole recognition of one's fated mate kicked in. Could it be one-sided? Had she not felt it that night at the dance? Did she not know? Did she not want to?

He picked up his cell and tried hers again. Phone calls went straight through to voice mail and texts went unanswered and unseen. There were things he needed to know. Was she planning to come back? Was their arrangement still on? Had he done something so egregious that she couldn't find it in her heart to at least talk to him about it? But more than any of that, was she all right? Where was she?

Laying his cell phone on the back of the bar, he went about his business, looking to the phone every few minutes to see if

it had rung and somehow, he'd missed it. The phone rang when he was at the other end of the bar, and he damn near killed himself getting to it, slipping on a small wet spot on the floor.

He thanked whatever powers controlled these things that his brain registered the fact that the caller ID identified the caller as the attorney, Blitz. How the hell did anyone get Blitz as a nickname? Nothing about the name Clifford could be boiled down to Blitz.

“Hey, Blitz. What can I do for you?”

“You can tell me everything is still on track. Rudy just left here after spending an hour gloating that the marriage is never going to happen and that I should be preparing to file the paperwork invalidating you as the major beneficiary of the will. He says based on what he's seen, he thinks it's all a sham and that the court will recognize it as such and rule that you have not fulfilled the conditions of your grandmother's will.”

“Can he do that? Would it hold up in court?”

“People can file pretty much whatever they want with the court system. Would it get thrown out on its face? Maybe, but then again, maybe not. There are a lot of judges who try to look at the intent of something versus just the strict letter of the law. Would he prevail? That's more of a crap shoot.”

Dash thought for a moment and then said, “If it comes to that and you think he might win, I want you to negotiate a deal. He can have everything that is coming to me, but he leaves my grandmother's herd and their territory alone.”

“What about the arrangement you have with Noel's herd?”

“I'll see that they're taken care of. I don't care what it costs me personally, I want to make sure that Noel and her people and my grandmother's people aren't harmed by Rudy. But that's a worst-case scenario. Rudy is wrong. There is no sham or fraud.” He needed to give Blitz cover as well. “Noel and I are fated mates.”

“Dash, the last thing you need to do is lie to your lawyer.”

“I’m not. You’ll see how wrong Rudy is when Noel and I are married. I’m going to expect you to come to the wedding.”

Blitz chuckled. “I’ll be there with bells on.”

This had gone on long enough. He needed to find Noel and he needed to do it now. If she’d had a change of heart, he needed to know. He’d need to find someone else to marry. Even the thought of that made him feel sick to his stomach. Any marriage other than one to Noel would be a sham, a fraud, a travesty. No; he’d been right to tell Blitz if it came to anything that had to do with Rudy, he wanted to protect his grandmother’s herd. She may not have been there for him, but she had tried. She just hadn’t found him in time.

Picking up the phone, he tried calling her yet again. No answer. He sent another text.

Rudy is threatening to challenge the validity of our marriage and the will. There is more at stake here than just you and me. I don’t understand. Talk to me. You owe me that.

AND FINALLY, A REPLY:

You’re right. I’ll be at the shop tonight after it closes. We can talk then.

“I don’t know what you’re thinking,” said Colby, who had managed somehow to slip into the bar and be looking over Dash’s shoulder, “but I’d go with romantic and pleading versus whatever sick revenge scenario you have playing in your head.”

“You don’t know what I’m thinking.”

““You owe me that?” Doesn’t make me think hearts and flowers.”

“I would point out you don’t have any romantic interest in your life.”

“I do, but she’s being difficult, which is another problem altogether. But I will tell you that if I were you, I’d pull out all the stops—moonlit sleigh ride, gourmet treats, bottle of wine, engagement ring, the whole shebang. Unless of course you

fancy either giving up your inheritance—and I don't just mean the money—or marrying someone else in order to get it.”

Pure anger flowed through Dash's veins. The problem was, Colby was right. The thought of marriage to anyone other than Noel was abominable. Dash chuckled. “Abominable... as in snowman.” Yeah, he could see Rudy as an abominable snowman.

“What the fuck am I supposed to do?” asked Dash.

“Fight for her—not like with your fists or a knife, but let her know you aren't the Bah Humbug mate she's afraid you might be. Your mate is a woman who believes in the miracle of Christmas. She believes in Santa Claus, for fuck's sake. But the point is, she believes. You need to make her believe in you.”

Dash nodded. “You're right. She was delighted with the sleigh ride the other night. That's a good idea.”

“I do have them occasionally,” chuckled Colby.

Dash spent the rest of the day getting things ready. The sleigh was available for another private commission.

“If you're looking for something romantic, we could go up to the Point,” suggested the driver. “We could also use the smaller sleigh. It has just two horses but is easier to maneuver and is so pretty. It's like right out of a fairytale.”

“That sounds like what I'm thinking. What's the Point?”

“It's a spot up above the town that overlooks Mystic River and the ocean. We have a really nice firepit with a kind of heated booth behind it so that you can light a fire, snuggle up, and have the most beautiful view. It's romantic and peaceful and really encourages intimacy. The path up to the point is more meandering, but it's worth the trip.”

Hanging up, Dash called a flower shop down in Kodiak. Flowers at this time of year could be expensive and hard to find—especially the roses Dash wanted. He spent more than two hours in the back booth locating and arranging for delivery of two dozen of the exotic tea rose hybrid Osiria, but more commonly known as the dragon rose. That might not

sound romantic, but the beautiful white petals tipped with deep red were gorgeous.

*Flowers: check.*

Now onto the gourmet goodie basket and wine. He called Nicole Wells, an event planner who could work miracles, especially where love and romance were concerned.

“Nicole? It’s Dash Samuels.”

“Dash. How’s Noel?”

“To be honest, we had an argument of sorts, and I’m planning a romantic evening to make amends.”

“What did you do?” she asked.

“I’m not sure, but whatever it is, I’m really sorry, and want to make it up to her. You’re good at this kind of thing and seem to be able to make things happen that no one else can.”

She laughed. “I do love a good challenge. What do you need?”

“Two things. The first I think you can probably accomplish pretty easily. I’m taking Noel for a moonlit sleigh ride. I want to have some nice goodies to munch on.”

“Tonight?”

“Yes.”

“Men,” she snorted. “I can make that happen, but it won’t be cheap as someone is going to have to bring it directly to you as soon as I get it put together. What’s the one you don’t think will be easy?”

“A ring. It occurs to me we’re telling everyone we’re getting married, and she doesn’t have a ring. I want something amazing for her, but Noel isn’t a flashy ring kind of girl.”

“Oh, you’d be surprised. She might not go for colored stones and the like, but that girl of yours loves sparkle. I can probably do that in less time but with a whole lot more money. I take it you want to give it to her on your romantic sleigh ride.”



“That’s the plan.”

“What’s my budget?”

“I haven’t a clue. I think you know I’m fairly well off—not Colby-rich...”

“Dash, nobody is Colby-rich.”

He chuckled. Nicole was a true gem. “Can you help me?”

“I think I can. In fact, I may know just the ring. Not huge or colored, but it sparkles like there’s no tomorrow and has a vintage feel. I think there may be matching wedding bands for you and her, also. It’s a gorgeous round-cut diamond set in a nature-inspired platinum setting with a swirling pavé diamond bypass.”

“You do know I have no idea what any of that means.”

Nicole laughed. “It means the ring is stunning and she’ll love it.”

“Sounds good.”

“Best news is that it is here in Kodiak, and I can send it with the gourmet goodies.”

“Nicole, you are a lifesaver.”

*Sleigh Ride Snacks: Check.*

*Ring: Check.*

He realized the tree-lighting ceremony in the town square was tonight. They’d have the sleigh ride. He’d give her the ring up at the firepit, and they could end the evening there. God, he hated the holidays, but the true wooing of his mate was about to commence.

# CHAPTER 5



## NOEL

When the last of the customers left, she closed up the shop, turning the sign over, locking the door and turning out the lights. When Dash arrived, she'd go out to meet him, arming the alarm system and relocking the door.

She took a deep breath. He was right; they needed to talk. He hadn't deserved her running off like that. That kiss had scared her to death. She'd been kissed before, but nothing had prepared her for what it would be like to be kissed by her fated mate or, for that matter, Dash Samuels.

Word of her engagement had made it back to the mainland and her herd. To say they were not happy might just qualify as the understatement of the year, if not decade.

*"Have you lost your mind? Dash Samuels?" her father had shouted while her mother wailed.*

*Noel had run back to her herd when Dash's kiss had rattled her. She had thrived in the herd system. Even when your parents were angry with you there was always someone to talk things through with. That had not been the case this time. No one—not a single person—had been willing to even talk to her.*

*"Well, at least you came to your senses and came home," her father had snarled.*

*"I haven't 'come home.' I've come to get my things to move them to Mystic River. Dash is my home now. He's generously offered to help the herd and I can continue to work in the shop during the season and do the marketing the rest of*

*the year,” she’d said, digging in her heels and refusing to tell them the true circumstances of her engagement.*

*“If you do this, there’s no coming back.” Softening, her father took her hands in his. “How can you want to tie yourself to him? He won’t even call himself a reindeer. He denies his legacy with every breath he takes.”*

*“You’re wrong. Dash doesn’t even know he has a legacy. His family and entire herd were wiped out. His grandmother searched for him for years and didn’t find him until it was too late. She left everything to Dash. He’s modified that to ensure her herd is provided for and will continue to have the territory that is rightfully theirs.”*

*“He calls himself a caribou.”*

*“I know he does. He doesn’t understand. I can help him with that.”*

*Her father shook his head, dropping her hands.*

*“No. I forbid it. You will remain with the herd.”*

*“I won’t.”*

*With her mother crying and the herd gathering outside their home, Noel had packed her things—at least those things she could take with her—and prepared to leave. Her heart was breaking, but at the same time, it was building anew.*

*Dash was her fated mate. He might not know it; might not believe it, but he was. They were destined to be together. She’d just have to believe enough for both of them until he could see the light for himself. Then and only then would she try to convince him of the true inheritance and legacy his grandmother had left him.*

*She walked through the small house and headed for her snowmobile and the small sled attached to it. Her mother was nowhere to be seen; her father turned his back and wouldn’t even look her way.*

*As she secured the load to the sled, her mother’s sister grabbed her arm and said, “She couldn’t bear to see you*

*leave. I hope you're happy that you broke your mother's heart."*

*Noel had really had it with her aunt and the rest of them. "Maybe. And maybe none of you will ever speak to me again, but somehow, I think when that money hits the bank accounts none of you will be in favor of sending it back."*

*She wrenched her arm away from her aunt, slung her leg over the snowmobile, started the engine, and headed toward the ferry that would take her back to her new life. The life that always was supposed to have been.*

So now she waited. Too nervous to simply stand around and do nothing, she began to tidy things up in the shop—not that they needed tidying, but her mind was in too much of a tizzy to do nothing. She hadn't meant to let it go a week. Every day she ignored the texts and phone calls, thinking herself a coward for doing so.

Finally, earlier today, she couldn't stand it anymore. She'd responded to his text. Instead of berating her, he'd offered to pick her up so they could spend some time together. She knew they needed to act engaged. If she was going to help her ungrateful herd and help Dash protect his herd's great legacy, they needed to make this marriage work. Ten years was a long time.

Maybe it would be all right. Maybe this misunderstanding—for lack of a better word—was just a stumbling block. All mates had their travails and trials, right? She had almost convinced herself they could get things back on track. When she heard the *'sleigh bells jingling, ring ting tingling too,'* her spirits lifted. It was *'lovely weather'* for a sleigh ride with Dash.

She headed outside after setting the alarm and locking the door behind her. The sleigh was smaller than the one he'd used on the night of the holiday dance. This one was pulled by two horses and reminded her of the one from the films made in the 1940s and 50s. Noel was a sucker for films like *Christmas in Connecticut*, *White Christmas*, and *Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street*. She

watched them every year. For her they were part of the holiday.

She waved, feeling rather silly as the sleigh came into view. She was all smiles and sentimentality until she saw Dash's face. This was not the face of a happy reindeer-shifter. He seemed grumbly and his body language indicated he was on edge, but as he caught sight of her, his mood seemed to lift. He all but fell out of the sleigh in his haste to get to her and wave the driver off.

"That wasn't as suave as I intended," he said, drawing her in for a brief but intense kiss.

He seemed uncertain and went to take a step back. This is where she'd lost him the last time. This time—far more sure of him and her feelings—she stepped into him, bringing her hands up to frame his face and pulling him back down for a far more lengthy and intimate kiss. It only took a fraction of a second for Dash to exert his dominance and take control of the kiss.

He was far better at this stuff than she cared to admit, and Noel sighed happily as she realized how much she had missed him. As he pressed his lips to hers, arousal flashed through her system. The kiss wasn't overly sexual in nature, but it was deeply sensual and she could feel her toes curling in response. There was something intoxicating, and, she suspected, addictive about Dash Samuels. She wondered if he knew that—he was so clueless about other things. And stubborn. He was stubborn about not knowing the things he didn't know.

Dash's tongue slid over hers as his hand came up to tangle in her hair. She felt trapped in his embrace and in this situation, but oddly safe and optimistic at the same time. It made no sense whatsoever, and she didn't care. She was just happy to be back in his arms.

"I missed you," she said as he ended the kiss.

"I missed you too," he said awkwardly.

Noel realized he, too, was swimming in uncharted waters. They were in this together and neither of them had any

experience, but all that mattered was that they were not alone. He helped her into the sleigh, teetering on the edge and almost falling backward. Noel reached for him to pull him inside, making him land in her lap.

“I hoped you were falling for me, but this wasn’t really what I had in mind,” she teased.

Dash chuckled and got to his feet, tucking a luxurious robe around them both as he took his seat beside her. “I am, you know. Falling for you.”

Noel didn’t think there was anything he could have said that might have made her happier. It was not some undying protestation of love. There would be time for that, but it was a step in the right direction. They might have gotten off course, but it seemed as though they were both back on the same path.

She wrapped her arms around his, tucking her hands into his coat pocket. “I’m never sure in situations like this if I should be sitting in the sleigh or pulling it.”

Dash stared at her for a minute and then began to laugh. At first, it was a quiet, rumbling chuckle, but it began to increase in volume and mirth until she could hear it echoing through the snow-covered canyon walls.

Shaking his head, he leaned into her and said, “I feel the same way.”

That seemed to settle and relax something between them. The sleigh ride was enjoyable with the driver pointing out various landmarks and talking about the legends attached to them. It seemed only to enhance the experience.

“Are you hungry?” he asked.

“I am. I probably should have thought to bring us something.”

“No. I fixed it—actually, that’s not true. I called Nicole Wells, and she arranged for it.”

At least he was honest. “What’s in it?”

“I haven’t a clue,” he said as he reached down and pulled the basket from in front of them. “Let’s find out.” He opened

the basket and grinned. “Nicole did good.”

“Let’s see,” she said, beginning to rifle through the contents. “Oh, yum. There are three different kinds of chocolate-covered pretzels: white, dark, and milk; mixed nuts with cashews, almonds, walnuts, and pecans; mixed dried fruits with apricots, cranberries, pineapple, banana, and what looks like papaya; some kind of cheese cracker mix; and—oh my god—I haven’t seen this stuff since I was a kid: reindeer snack mix.”

“What?”

“It has popcorn, nuts, caramel, chocolate. It’s amazing.”

“She has a warped sense of humor.”

“How so?” she said, glancing up and not particularly liking the shadow that seemed to cloud his eyes.

“We’re caribou, Noel, not reindeer. Reindeer is just a cutesy nickname for a caribou.”

“That’s not true. You don’t really believe that, do you?”

“Look it up. They are not two different species.”

“They kind of are. Caribou are our purebred versions; we are reindeer. There are two important differences that separate us.”

“What are they?” he asked in a sarcastically indulgent tone of voice.

She reminded herself he had grown up alone. A frightened little boy with only his shifted self for help or guidance. The fact that he had grown into a strong, kind man spoke volumes about who he was at his core. The fact that he didn’t know the legacy of that core, where it came from and how it differed from other reindeer shifters damn near broke her heart.

“For one thing, we can shift. And for the other, reindeer can fly.”

“You don’t really believe that, do you?” he scoffed.

“Are you telling me you don’t know how to fly? That you’ve never shifted and taken to the skies?”



“Of course not. That’s just silly.”

She leaned forward. “Driver, can you stop for a minute?”

“Noel, what are you doing? This isn’t necessary.”

“Oh, but it is. Driver, please stop. If you don’t, I’ll jump out.”

The driver halted the horses and before Dash knew what she was about, she flung back the lap robe and sprang out of the sleigh, rushing to a stand of several boulders and trees. She quickly pulled off her clothes and called forth her reindeer, who came through the chaotic storm of snow, ice, sizzling lightning, and swirling colors, making the distinctive, snorting noise as it bounded over the rocks and charged up the hill, gaining momentum and speed as she did so.

This was the moment Noel loved most. Most shifters enjoyed the charged energy that came from the maelstrom of a shift. But not Noel. For her it was the moment her hooves began to leave the earth. Redoubling her efforts, she began to climb higher in the sky and she turned around and flew back over the sleigh, scaring the horses. *I’ll need to apologize to them for that.*

Higher and higher she climbed, galloping through the air, using the charged particles that gathered beneath her hooves to race across the sky. This was when she felt free, when she felt in touch with her most true self. She had never thought to experience being a reindeer in any other way. That had all changed from the moment Dash had captured her mouth with a kiss.

She dashed through the sky, charging through icy clouds and back out into the sunshine. She had found freedom in Dash’s kiss; she would give him the freedom of the skies. She glided back to earth, touching down and trotting back behind the rocks. It had made her heart happy to see both the driver and Dash gobsmacked by what they had seen.

Noel quickly shifted back and changed into her clothes. She jogged back to the sleigh and hopped in, burrowing close to Dash as he tucked the lap robe around her.

“You flew,” he finally said. “You really fucking changed into a reindeer and flew.”

She nodded. “See? Reindeer really do know how to fly.”

# CHAPTER 6



## NOEL

Dash looked straight ahead. It was as if he couldn't stand to look at her. Did the idea that she could fly repulse him? Had she pushed his belief system just a little too far?

He turned to her. "Holy shit," he said, starting to laugh. "You really can fly."

She grasped his hands in both of hers. "You can, too. You've just forgotten how or may not have ever known."

"Maybe you and your herd, but there's nothing that says my grandmother's herd..."

She shook her head. "You really don't know. You really think your grandmother's legacy, your inheritance, is just money."

"No; there's property and business, although I left those with the herd."

"This is kind of mindboggling to me."

"What?"

She smiled. "Nothing to worry about. I'm just feeling better about what I'm bringing to the marriage."

"Are we still getting married?"

She had just assumed that. Maybe she shouldn't have. "Don't you want to?"

"Of course, I want to. You just took off, so I wasn't sure."

“And I am so sorry about that. I will never, ever do that to you again. I felt so much when you kissed me that I was overwhelmed. I should have talked to you, but instead I took the coward’s way out and ran away. Ironically, it was my father forbidding me to marry you and my aunt cursing at me that settled the last lingering doubt...”

“I never meant to come between you and your family and herd.”

She shook her head. “You didn’t. Tell me something, as much as I hurt your feelings, as much as you didn’t know what was going on with me, were you ever just tempted to turn your back on me?”

“Of course not.”

“That’s because you are my home. You are my family and my herd. My people either come around and accept our pairing, or they don’t. That is up to them, and I will respect their decision. Although I have to tell you, if they don’t want me in the holiday shop, we’re opening one of our own.”

Dash tipped his head back and laughed. “They turn their back on you, Noel, and I’ll build you the biggest and best holiday shop in the world.”

“As long as I have room for my origami originals, it’ll all be good. And I’m going to insist we carry this reindeer snack mix. Try it. It’s fabulous.”

She handed him a clump and instead of taking it from her to put into his mouth, he simply plucked it from her fingers with his lips before moaning. “Oh, damn, that’s incredible. Where has this been all my life?”

Noel bumped him with her shoulder. “Stick with me, Dash, I’ll teach you all about the magic and wonder it is to be reindeer.”

He sat back and regarded her with a serious, intent expression on his face. She thought again she might have pushed him too far. Instead, he grinned. “You know what? I’m beginning to believe you will.”

Wrapping his arm around her shoulders, he pulled her closer and they enjoyed the rest of their ride up to the Point. They talked about their pasts, their hobbies, and their dreams for the future.

“You two wait here,” the driver said, reining in the horses, getting out and setting the hitching weight on the ground before tethering the horses to it. “I’ll get that fire started. Looks like we’re going to have clear skies and a gorgeous sunset.”

“I know you’re involved with the resistance,” she said as soon as the driver was out of hearing distance.

“Noel, we don’t need to talk about that, and you don’t have to be involved.”

“Don’t be a chauvinist reindeer. I’ve been working for Colby for more than a year. I’ve ferried messages back and forth, and on more than one occasion, I’ve spirited someone away by letting them fly on my back.”

Dash shook his head. “I’m not sure who I’m more surprised at about that—you or Colby.”

“If you’re impressed, it’s me; if you’re pissed, it’s Colby.”

“I think we ought to make that a rule—if it’s good, it’s one of us; if not, it’s Colby’s fault.”

Noel laughed. “I think that’s an excellent idea.”

The driver returned. “You’re all set.”

“Thanks so much,” said Dash, getting out and helping Noel down from the sleigh.

She walked up to the two horses, who regarded her warily. Noel made soft chuffing noises and shared her breath with them. They seemed to settle and were soon licking and chewing, an indication that they had released any stress or fear and were now much more comfortable in her presence.

Taking her hand, Dash led her to the Point. At first, they stood in front of the fire, allowing it to warm them and taking in the panoramic view of the forest and the landscape that fell away into the sea. He helped her up into the warm,

comfortable, clam-booth-style seating that overlooked the fire and the magnificent view beyond.

“It’s almost like we have the entire world to ourselves, isn’t it?” she asked, leaning into him.

“It is. The funny thing is, I run a bar. I love people, but right now I know that if the whole world ended tomorrow, as long as I was with you, I’d be okay.”

“I feel the same. We’re just right. However, we got here, we are where we are meant to be.”

They sat for several minutes not saying a word but enjoying one another’s presence.

“What was it you wanted me to know about my grandmother?”

“Do you know her name? Other than ‘grandmother?’”

“I think it was Victoria.”

Noel shook her head. “No; not Victoria...”

“Blitz said they called her Vic...”

“Not Vic, Vix as in short for Vixen. And who is Blitz?”

“The family and herd’s lawyer.”

“Blitz?” she asked with a grin.

“Blitzen?” he asked, confirming his worst fear about the lawyer’s nickname.

She nodded. “There’s plenty of money and land, but the real legacy, the real inheritance of your family, is their association with Santa Claus and their ability to fly fast enough that they can bend time, slowing it so that it seems to stop so they can circumnavigate the globe in a single night. There are some who know we can fly—it’s not a huge secret—but the fact that your herd can bend time and space and are far faster than anything known to man is a closely guarded secret.”

“You can’t be serious,” Dash said, searching her face for any sign of a joke.

“I’m afraid not. Your mother was named for her, wasn’t she?”

“Yes. How did you know that?”

“Because Vixen hasn’t flown with Santa and his sled in a number of years. Your grandmother had grown too old, her magic was fleeing.”

“Are you trying to tell me...”

“You’re Dasher,” she said slowly and firmly. “You are Santa’s left wheel reindeer, but without you and Vixen in the team, their power has been diminished. It’s why people are losing their belief in Santa Claus. The song and the story got it wrong—you fly the left wheel or rear. Vixen flies in the right front. With your grandmother and mother gone, the legacy of being Vixen will fall to your fated mate.”

“Do you expect me to believe this...”

“Would it be nice? Yes. Do I expect it? Not right off the bat, but an hour ago, you didn’t believe reindeer could fly at all. Just think about it.”

“And Rudy?”

“That charlatan? His ancestors invented the whole guiding light/red nose thing. It never happened, but it made for a great story. He was banished from Santa’s herd, not because of his red nose, but because of his and his family’s duplicitous natures. They were also stripped of their ability to manipulate time.”

“I want to just kiss you, dismiss all of this, and get on with our life, but I can’t.”

“Damn, I was hoping for another kiss.”

With a quick efficiency that took her breath away, Dash pulled her to him and kissed her passionately before setting her back. “If we’re going to make the tree lighting ceremony down in town, we probably ought to get back.”

“And being seen there together is important.”



“It is. I told people you’ve been sick, so I’ll have to keep you close and dote on you.”

“That doesn’t sound too bad.”

“No,” he said with a smile. “It doesn’t.”

They headed back into town, arriving just in time to join the massive crowd around the majestic tree. As crowds go in big cities, they might not be much, but it was pretty much everyone who lived there. As the tree began to light slowly from the bottom to the top, Dash turned her in his arms, tilting her head back and lowering his mouth to hers. He was definitely a member of Santa’s herd—all that existed for Noel was Dash. Time stopped and the cheer of the crowd as the star on top lit faded away to nothing.

“Move along, you two,” said Deputy Derek Grayson with a smile. “We can’t have these public displays of affection in the village square.”

“That’s bullshit, Derek. I’ve seen you and Tess lip locked many a time here in the village square. Just because Tess isn’t home and you’re having to do without doesn’t mean the rest of us have to.”

The deputy flashed a bright smile at Noel. “He might have a point.”

Noel laughed as she and Dash linked arms and meandered back up to the tavern and the apartments above it. She was hoping that they would be sharing one—or at least a bed—tonight. They went up the outside back stairs in order to avoid the teasing catcalls they knew would be coming their way.

“It’s been a while since I’ve been with anyone,” said Dash.

“Me too, but I’ve been on birth control for forever.”

“Bad menstrual cramps?”

“Nope,” she said with a grin as they reached the upstairs center hallway, closing and locking the door. “Ever the optimist.”

Dash laughed, unlocked the door to his place and swung her up in his arms. Noel thought she might swoon from the

sheer romanticism, especially when he didn't groan or act like he'd hurt his back.

"You were right. We belong together, and we're right where we need to be. I don't deserve you, but I'm going to do whatever it takes to ensure you don't regret this."

She was tempted to ask him if he would fly as part of Santa's team but thought it might be better to wait.

"I need you more than my next breath," he said, setting her down on the floor and beginning to undress her.

His head came down so his mouth captured hers, and she responded by melting into him. There was nothing else she could do. She was completely and totally enamored of him, but more than that, she knew him to be her fated mate and she was falling for him. Once he had her naked, he lifted her onto his bed and then quickly removed his clothes before stretching out beside her.

She hadn't seen much but what she had seen had been nothing short of amazing. In keeping with their kind, he was longer and leaner than say the sheriff or his deputy, both of whom were bear shifters. And although he didn't carry as much bulk or weight, he had broad shoulders that led into a well-sculpted chest, tapering down to a set of washboard abs and those sexy hip notches that served to direct her attention to his large, hard cock.

Dash's hand covered her breast before capturing her nipple between his thumb and forefinger, twirling it between them before giving it a tug. His hand left her breast, and he covered her mouth with his. He might not have been with anyone in a while, but the man knew how to kiss. It wasn't just a means to get to something else; it was an end unto itself.

She felt him check his impulse to have at her and instead he seduced her with long, lazy kisses that left her wanting more from him. He placed his flattened palm on her belly before moving his hand down to cover her soft mound, cupping it possessively. His hand continued down to slip between her legs, his fingers finding her clit without any need for direction or encouragement from her.

Gasping and not wanting to do anything to make him stop, she clutched the bedclothes beside her. Breathing seemed to have become a voluntary thing—not at all mandatory—as his thumb took over from his fingers, circling around and down on her clit. His fingers moved toward her pussy, splaying her labia as he did so. A single digit traced the rim of her pussy before slipping inside.

His lips came back to hers as his finger and thumb found a rhythm that perfectly harmonized with his tongue. Noel moaned and squirmed beneath his sensual ministrations. He gave her clit a sharp pinch and shook his head when her eyes flew open. She relaxed and he went back to pleasuring her. Adding a second finger to the one already inside her made her relax and open herself to him. His thumb pressed down as if it were the ignition switch to her orgasm.

Her body tensed, innately understanding the pleasure he would bring her. He continued his sensual assault on her body and senses, and she felt the moment her soul took flight over the abyss. She'd had sex before, had climaxes before, but nothing had ever compared to flying as a reindeer and that was nothing compared to the pleased abandon that overwhelmed her as she sailed off the edge. She tried to call his name; he rolled on top of her, his mouth covering hers and drinking her cries of fulfillment.

He made a place for himself, his cock poised against the opening to her core. Even through the sensual haze of her climax, she could admire his cut body and gorgeous face. Dash rolled up onto his knees, lifting her hips in his hands as he pressed his cock inside her. He felt even larger than he looked. He impaled her, drawing her body to his as he forced his way inside.

He began to move in a hard, fast rhythm, thrusting in and out as his groin ground against hers on every downward stroke. Noel let her head fall back as she clutched his forearms. Over and over, he pounded into her. She wanted to do more for him, but he seemed intent on having his way. Her orgasm crashed over her, rendering her breathless and limp.

She watched his face as he gave himself over to his own pleasure.

Dash's eyes closed as his head dropped back, giving her a last, brutal thrust as he held himself hard against her, his body grinding out his orgasm as he called her name. No sound had ever been sweeter.

# CHAPTER 7



## DASH

The following morning, he was afraid to open his eyes, afraid that Noel wouldn't be lying next to him; afraid that the night before had been nothing more than a fantasy. He couldn't feel her warmth beside him and there was no sound from the bathroom indicating she was there. Had it been a dream? Did she regret what had happened between them?

Before his imagination could run wild with every bad scenario that was possible, he heard the door to his apartment open and smelled coffee—deep, rich, dark coffee—the elixir of life. She entered the room dressed in a pair of sweatpants and a tank top, carrying two handmade mugs of liquid life.

“I thought you left me,” he said, trying to sound like he was teasing her.

“Never. I promised you that. With all my things being right across the hall, it just seemed easier. I probably should have left you a note.”

“It's okay. I didn't even think about your stuff being next door. We should probably fix that.”

“Probably, but I don't want you to feel rushed.”

“I don't, but we do have a deadline to make if we want the money.”

“If?” she asked.

He rolled out of bed, took the mug he thought was most likely his and kissed her soundly. “If. If the choice is the

money or losing you, I choose you. We'll find another way to help your herd and my grandmother's."

She searched his face as if seeking the truth. When the smile broke across her face it was as if he was seeing the first sunrise after the world had been created. "Better yet, let's beat that deadline and tell old Rudy he can shove it."

"Come on, let's go make breakfast. For some reason I'm starving."

"Poor baby," she said, rising up on her tiptoes to brush his mouth with hers. "You worked hard last night."

He chuckled and led her into the kitchen. "Mystic River throws an annual Christmas Eve ball—complete with fancy dresses, tuxedos, champagne, the whole lot. Nicole suggested that it might be easier to sort of abscond with the party, pay for all the food and everything, and have the wedding there. That way, we'll make the deadline of Christmas Eve."

"Are people going to be okay with you usurping their party for our wedding?"

"I think so. People in Mystic River are very supportive of each other, and we do love a good wedding. You look like you don't want to do that..."

"It's not that..."

"Then what is it, Noel? I can't help if I don't know."

"I'm just not sure what you want out of this wedding."

He came around the island, moving between her legs, fisting her hair, tugging her head back and bringing his mouth down on hers. There was nothing sensual, casual, or entreating. This was demanding, carnal, predatory, and dominating. His tongue took possession of hers as it surged in, invading, commanding, and possessing.

Dash lifted his head. "How can you even ask me that? Last night was amazing, monumental, life-changing."

"How life-changing?" she asked seriously, but in an easy, non-threatening, non-challenging manner.

“As life-changing as it needs to be. Is there something you need me to do to prove what you mean to me?”

He was concerned that she wanted to hear the ‘L’ word or some profession that she was his fated mate. He felt like a coward not being able to say both to her. He knew he was in love with Noel. There was no doubt in his mind about that. He also knew she was his fated mate. Why the hell was it so hard for him to tell her?

Before she could answer him, there was a knock on the door from the interior stairs. The fourplex over the tavern could be accessed from an exterior set of stairs or an interior one that led up from the pub below.

“Damn it,” he left her, making his way out the front door to his apartment, across the center hall and snatching open the door that came up from the bar. “What?”

“Good god, Dash, don’t snarl at poor Jeannie,” said Nicole as she came up the stairs holding the bottom of a long garment bag. “She’s doing us a favor. Noel saw this dress when we were in Seattle, but it had been made for another bride. Said bride cancelled her wedding, so Jeannie called me.”

Dash looked at the woman Nicole had called Jeannie and realized she was holding the top of the garment bag. From behind him, he heard Noel squeal as she pushed past him, turned around, and gave him a kiss and turned back to Jeannie. “Can we just chalk it up to Dash suffering from pre-wedding jitters? Nicole, do you think we could co-opt the Christmas Eve Ball?”

“I was going to suggest that. I already talked to Autumn. She has said she’d be happy to let us use the clinic.”

“I love that place,” breathed Noel. “I remember her wedding. It was so pretty.” She turned back to Dash. “See, babe, leave it to the women. We got this.”

He chuckled indulgently and leaned down to kiss her. “You do, indeed. I will leave you ladies to do whatever it is you need to do. I’ll be downstairs if you need me. I’m going to



send something up for Noel for breakfast. She hasn't eaten. Can I have something made for either of you?"

"I'd take one of those cranberry muffins," said Nicole.

"Oh, me too," said Jeannie.

"That makes three," said Noel.

"You can have your muffin, but you're also getting something with a bit more substance. Ladies," he said, retreating back into his apartment and smiling as he heard the three of them moving toward Noel's.

He thought about going downstairs, but he'd brought in extra staff so that he could spend the day looking for Noel or trying to persuade her that they had a future together. She, however, had come to that conclusion all on her own. Thinking about what she'd said about him being able to fly, and wondering if it might be true, Dash decided to head out of town, shift, and see what he could figure out.

Nicole had also alluded to the fact that his grandmother and her herd had been a pack of magical reindeer that not only knew how to fly but were Santa's legendary flyers who could stop time and bend space in order to circumnavigate the globe distributing toys and joy to everyone who believed. Was believing integral to being able to fly and create magic?

He headed out to Windsong. Sure, there were lots of places he could shift and run, but only one place he felt safe enough to shift and try to fly. He approached the main gates, and as the guards recognized him, they waved him through. Dash headed to one of the furthest outbuildings, parked, removed his clothes, and shifted.

He often forgot what it felt like to shift, as he did it so infrequently. Finding his caribou—the thing glared at him. Okay, fine. Finding his *reindeer*, he called the animal forward. Normally when he did that, the big deer just made a lazy trot towards him, and the shift was nothing really special. From what he had seen of Noel's shift, there should be a whole lot more.

*'I think I may have done you a disservice all these years. You protected me.'*

The caribou stopped. *'I was only trying to keep us alive.'*

*'I realize that now. She says we can fly.'*

*'Not until you cease thinking of us as caribou. We are reindeer, and come from a long, noble, and proud line, but you did not want to see that.'*

*'It was too painful.'*

*'I know. They were my family, too.'*

Dash suddenly realized the disservice he had done to his shifted form. Once he'd been old enough to defend himself as a human, he'd all but dismissed the beast, letting him out only often enough and for long enough that he didn't wither and die.

*'Forgive me,'* said Dash.

*'Forgiven. We are one. We are Dasher, the left wheel of Santa's sleigh.'* The animal seemed to grow stronger before his eyes. Realizing Dash was beginning to see the truth, he said, *'We can do anything you believe we can. She is our fated mate. She will take her place at your side in life, and as the right lead on the sleigh as your mate. Since your mother's death, there has been no Vixen. As your mate, Noel will become the team's Vixen. With Santa's reindeer team once more complete, we will begin to restore the belief in the miracle of the season.'*

Dash grinned at his counterpart and called him forward. Standing straighter than he ever remembered seeing him, the enormous reindeer bounded forward, leaping into the air to take control. For the first time in a very long time, his shifted self was strong, resilient, and magnificent. The swirling mist that had always surrounded him now became a maelstrom of color, lightning, thunder, and magic. Dash could feel the magic surging through his veins, calling to life something he thought had been left in the fire and perished with his family.

The chaos faded away and Dash breathed in the scents of his environment. Everything was sharper, clearer, more

focused, and vibrant. Had he been denying himself and his legacy all this time?

*'I don't know how to do this,'* he whispered to his reindeer.

*'That's all right; I do.'*

His reindeer-self began to race over the hills, kicking his hind feet out, shaking his head, rolling his shoulders, and generally working the kinks out. He felt glorious. They galloped over the hills, down the cape and onto the beach, thundering through water, rock, sand, and soil. Dash couldn't remember ever having felt like this.

They began to charge up the hill, gathering speed. Dash could feel them lifting off from the ground, galloping on air and beginning to climb higher and higher.

*Holy shit! We're flying.*

# CHAPTER 8



## DSSH

S ometime later, after flying over all of Windsong, Dash felt much like he had as a child with his shifted-self admonishing him that the exhilaration of flying could only be outweighed by the exhaustion that would follow. Reluctantly, Dash headed back to his vehicle, touching down at a gallop and then coming gradually to a halt. Exhaustion, muscle fatigue, and mental weariness beset him almost immediately. Choosing not to put his reindeer through the stress of a shift, Dash settled down in his altered form to rest.

Eventually he thanked his reindeer for the most amazing afternoon and asked him to retreat, which he did. Dash struggled into his clothes, his limbs having trouble doing what his brain told them to do, climbed into the truck, resting his head on the wheel for a moment. He decided to close his eyes just to rest them and was jarred awake by a knock on his window.

“You reindeer types do pick the oddest places to take a rest,” said Colby with a grin. “You look like you got hit by a Mack truck. Scoot over.” Colby turned to his own driver. “I’m going to take sleeping beauty here back into town. Why don’t you head into town and wait for me at The Workshop. We’ll be along shortly, and you can drive me back to Windsong.”

With Colby shoving and manipulating Dash’s body, Dash was able to sort of roll into the passenger seat. “I can fly, Colby. Did you know that? I can fly.”

Colby chuckled. “I suspected as much. You really didn’t know? About any of it?”

“What do you know?”

“I know that your grandmother’s herd has special abilities very few outside the herd and even fewer outside the reindeer-shifter community know about.”

“But you know.”

“Yes, and before you get on your high horse, when I found out, I dispatched two units of my men to keep them safe. Dash, you’ve been involved enough with the resistance to realize what the ability to bend time and space could do if it fell into the wrong hands.”

“What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking your cousin Rudy is far more dangerous than any of us thought. I don’t think Santa’s herd is safe on their ancestral lands. I know you want time with Noel, but you’re going to have to steal that where you can. We need to get that herd to safety, and you, my friend, need to lead them.”

Dash groaned. “I knew getting involved with you was a bad idea.”

Colby laughed. “So, you know I’m right.”

“Unfortunately. I hadn’t even thought of what could happen to them if the League learned of their abilities. I’m hoping you’ve thought of someplace we can move them.”

“Yes, but I think we’re safest to move them temporarily to Windsong. Once we can secure and fortify a place for them, we can move them there.”

“Where is it?”

“The western side of the island, about halfway between Mystic River and Otter Cove. It’s an old, abandoned fort and trading post at Angels Falls. That way they’ll have backup from both communities. Once we have them safely out of Ontario, we can figure out if we need to station a security force there.”

“You seem to know them better than I do. Do you think they’ll join us?”

“I think there’s a chance. I don’t think I have to tell you the edge it would give us to be able to bend time like that, but that is something they and you will have to decide for yourselves. No one will force them to share their secret.”

Dash groaned. “How the hell did I go from being a confirmed bachelor caribou to a flying reindeer with the ability to manipulate time, a fated mate, and the alpha to a bunch of reindeer I’ve never met? This is not going to go over well.”

“Probably not, and there may well be a challenge to your leadership. But you are Dasher. Your ancestors have always led the herd and showed them the way.”

“I thought Rudolph was the one who led them with his bright red nose.”

“Think about that—what self-respecting reindeer is going to follow a clown with a big red nose? Nice story to tell the kiddos, but it would be a real disadvantage in a fight.”

“Do you think Rudy is one of them—the League, I mean?”

“It makes the most sense. Talk to Noel. Trust me when I tell you, your fated mate is an intelligent powerhouse.”

They pulled up in front of The Workshop. Dash pointed at the sign. “That was my shifted self’s idea, you know. He insisted the tavern be called The Workshop.”

“Just trying to keep you in touch with your roots.”

“Thanks, Colby.”

“When’s the wedding?”

“Christmas Eve. We’re co-opting the annual Christmas Eve Ball.”

“Excellent idea. I’ll try to make it.”

“You don’t think you will?”

“I have business of my own in Seattle. I might not make it home in time.”

“Thanks for the lift, and if you need help in Seattle...”

“I won’t. It’s more of a personal issue.”

Dash strode into the tavern, his strength increasing and his exhaustion abating moment by moment. He was headed to the back stairs that led up to the apartments.

“Dash!” called Nicole from the back booth, waving him over. “Jeannie is going to be staying upstairs so we can get the dress fitted perfectly. Noel’s going to make such a gorgeous bride. But why the hell isn’t she wearing her ring?”

“Oh, shit. I forgot it. It’s upstairs in my apartment. Is Noel up there?”

“Noel? You mean the hardest working reindeer-shifter I know, present company included?”

Dash chuckled. “Yeah, that would be the one. She’s at the shop, isn’t she?”

Nicole smiled benignly. “Yes.”

“Let me go upstairs, take a shower, and then go put a ring on her finger.”

He made his way up the stairs and knocked on one of the two doors that wasn’t his or Noel’s. No answer. Well, it was a fifty/fifty shot. When he knocked on the remaining door, Jeannie came and opened the door.

“I was a jackass this morning, and I hope Noel convinced you I’m not always that bad.”

Jeannie smiled. “Everybody thinks it’s only the brides who get nervous and lash out. Trust me, I’ve seen more than my share of groomzillas.”

“Thank you. And thank you for doing this for Noel. She really had fallen in love with the dress.”

“I’m happy to see it going to someone who loves it.”

“Well, order anything you want from downstairs or anywhere around town. Mystic River is pretty safe, but you can have anything delivered, or any of the bouncers downstairs will be happy to escort you.”

“Thank you, Dash. I appreciate that. Is that Dash as in Dashiel Hammitt the novelist?”



Dash smiled. “No, that would be Dash as in Santa’s left wheel.”

Jeannie giggled. “Well, of course. At this time of the year, what else could it be?”

Dash hurried into the apartment and took a quick shower. He went to the antique chifforobe and opened the drawer where he was certain he had left the ring. It wasn’t there. In its place was an exquisite origami reindeer in flight, with a note:

*Remember who you are.*

*Always,*

*Noel*

*P.S. My ring is gorgeous. I love it, and you, too.*

Changing into clean clothes, he set the origami reindeer and the note inside his wall safe. There were few things more precious to him than that reindeer, the note that went with it, and the woman who had created both.



Normally, he would have walked to the holiday shop, but his body reminded him if he wanted to make love to his beautiful bride-to-be, he needed to conserve his energy. Getting inside his SUV, he drove down to the shop and parked. He smiled as he approached the bay window that was decorated for the holiday. Normally the fake snow and frost, twinkle lights and dangling ornaments of all kinds just annoyed him. But today, they made him smile. Like it or not, he was a part of this now.

Peering in, he saw Noel leaning over a small boy showing him how to fold the beautiful shapes as the child’s mother beamed. Wrapped around Noel’s neck was a ridiculous Christmas light necklace. From her ears hung blinking snowmen earrings and on top of her head, holding her hair back was the silliest set of reindeer antlers he’d ever seen. She was gorgeous and she was his.

The little bell over the door rang as he stepped in. Noel looked up and smiled. “Hey, you,” she said, wagging her fingers at him.

“Is this your fiancé?” asked the mother.

“Guilty as charged, although I’m not very good at it.” He walked up to the little boy and knelt down next to him, so they were at eye level. “Let me give you a piece of advice, one man to another.” The little boy’s eyes got as big as saucers. “When you find the love of your life, you ask that person to marry you. Then you seal the deal with a gorgeous ring, and you tell that person how much you love them.”

“You do, huh?” laughed Noel.

Dash nodded and stood. “You do. And when you fall short, you ask her to forgive you, tell her how much you love her and want to spend the rest of eternity with her, and pray she’ll decide you’re worth it regardless of what a dunderhead you are.”

“Good lord,” said the boy’s mother. “I don’t know what he did, but that has to be the best apology ever and if you won’t forgive him, I’ll divorce my husband and take him for myself.”

“Mother!” exclaimed the little boy, not really concerned.

“Well, you remember what he said.”

“I will,” said the boy, clutching his ornament.

The woman was holding two bags which seemed to be filled with things from the shop. “How much do I owe you for that one?”

“Not a thing. It’s on the house. Happy Holidays!”

# CHAPTER 9



## NOEL

### *C*hristmas Eve

It was the dawn of her wedding day. The whole town had seemed to think it was a great joke to ensure she and Dash did not see each other after midnight. The thing that woke her was a gorgeous bouquet of dragon roses with a note that simply said: *'Always, Dash.'*

She was just walking out of the bath when there was a knock on her door. She opened it to find Jeannie and Nicole.

“Good morning,” said Noel. “Can I interest anyone in some coffee and maybe something to eat?”

“Not for me,” said Jeannie. “I want to get the dress to the venue and start getting it and your veil ready.”

She bustled into the bedroom where the dress had been hanging from a hook and then vanished down the stairwell into the tavern.

“The caterers are already onsite, and I told them just to fix food and feed people all day,” said Nicole. “You ready to go?”

“No,” Noel replied in mock horror. “I need to get my hair fixed and my makeup on.”

“No, you do not. I have people waiting for you in the staff lounge at Autumn’s mill. They’re going to take care of you. All you need to do is show up, let everyone wait on you, and get married to your fated mate.”

“Has Cousin Rudy showed up?”

“Not yet, Jax has tasked some of Colby’s men to keep anyone not invited to the wedding outside of town. Mystic River is effectively closed for the day.”

“The judge?”

“Judge Freeman is already at the venue, playing poker with the boys. By the way, I’ve cut the lot of them off. When I got there this morning, they were all about half-blitzed. All, that is, but Dash. At first, I thought he was the drunkest of the lot, but then I realized he was stone-cold sober. He’s just really, really happy. Asher says he’s never seen Dash so at peace. It’s as if finding you allowed him to let go of his past and embrace his future. Your family?”

“Still refuse to come. Colby tried, as did Dash, but that’s the choice they made, and I will respect it. My new family and herd are here in Mystic River until we move the herd to Angels Falls.”

The wedding was set for four in the afternoon as the last rays of the sun disappeared over the horizon. As the darkness began to gather and settle in for the night, their guests would be treated to a night sky that was predicted to be clear and full of shining stars as well as a wraparound porch strewn with twinkling fairy lights.

She made her way into the staff lounge, which had been turned into a luxurious bride’s room. Hanging from a hook in the ceiling was her dress. It was a bit unconventional, but that had been part of its appeal. There were contrasting layers of tulle, lace motifs, and Chantilly lace in the colors of ivory over champagne. The sheer bodice had a deep V-neckline and scoop back with long illusion sleeves accented in 3D floral lace motifs. The hemline had been constructed using horsehair so that the tulle ballgown’s skirt had a luxuriously rigid structure. The back closed with dozens of covered buttons over a hidden zipper closure. Jeannie had created a gorgeous matching veil that was attached to her backswept hair with an ornate and bejeweled hair clip.

Noel took a last sip of champagne and then shoed everyone out. Just as she reached for the door, her phone

signaled she had a text:

I love you, and I can't wait to be married to you.  
Dash

She would never be able to recall who was where during the ceremony. All she could see was Dash. It was as if a light shone all around him, illuminating his loving spirit and eclipsing everything and everyone else. She walked down the aisle to join with her mate and her destiny.

Casting convention aside, Dash met her halfway down the aisle.

“I get the whole, I’m making this choice and doing this on my own thing. And while the choice is yours, I will never leave you to face anything alone.”

“God, for a grumpy caribou-shifter, you sure have become a dashing, romantic reindeer-shifter.”

He smiled, tucked her hand into the crook of his arm and together they faced the judge and took their vows. Vows exchanged; the party began. The feeling of joy not only in the season but in their joining permeated the room and the celebration.

The cake had been created by Erik Hutchinson, who everybody called Hutch, a master baker who’d bought the Northern Lights Bakery. Hutch had crafted a tall, tiered wedding cake made of red velvet cake, with white chocolate and cream cheese filling and a magnificent vanilla buttercream frosting. The entire cake had been decorated with handmade, edible dragon roses and topped with a stunning crystal sleigh, drawn by reindeer lifting off into the sky.

The ball was just gearing up as the clock approached midnight. Noel’s cell rang and she stepped outside to answer. Within a few moments, she returned to Dash and said, “We’re going to have to cut this short. They need us up North.”



## EPILOGUE



They called her the Ghost. In the dark underbelly of the Shadow League, she thrived—a notorious, unknown assassin whispered about in fearful reverence and haunted by the specters of a violent past and the countless lives lost that had been accredited to her skill and cunning.

She had never failed, not once, but this time was different. Her target, Erik Hutchinson, was a decorated warrior; a hero. A man who had seen too much and yet who'd had the courage to find a different way as a master baker in a small village on Kodiak Island.

“Why? Why this one?” she asked the man who had plucked her out of obscurity—a puppet master who seemed to be pulling all the strings.

Most believed the Shadow League was still controlled by those on the Ruling Council. They were wrong. The man in the shadows controlled the entire chessboard—each person being nothing more than a piece to be played or sacrificed.

“That is not your concern. You have been tasked with his death. I expect you to do as you're told.”

The threat was unspoken, but there, nonetheless. The Master must have forgotten who she was, where she came from, and that she owed no allegiance to anyone, not even him.

The League wanted Hutchinson dead. Why? Having more questions than answers, Nora began to formulate a plan to throw those from the League who would hound her off her



trail. She would make her way to the far reaches of the north—  
to Mystic River—to find out for herself.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE



I hope you enjoyed reading Bah Humbug Mate (Mystic River Shifters)! The next book in the series is [Hidden Mate](#).



Can a woman who has spent most of her life alone and a man who just wants to be left alone find common ground before everything they love is incinerated?

Nora Blake, known only as the Ghost, is an assassin who thrives in the shadows. When she refuses to kill her current target, the Shadow League sends another assassin to kill her as an example to others.

Erik Hutchinson retired from the military is looking for peace and quiet. He bought the Northern Lights bakery in Mystic River and settles down as the new baker in town. When he intervenes to save Nora from being killed, their destinies become inextricably linked in a dangerous dance of passion, danger, and dark desires. For Hutch, the dangerous allure of Nora is a seductive force that he cannot resist.

Navigating the perilous labyrinth of the Shadow League's power struggles, Nora and Hutch find themselves falling into a forbidden love that defies all logic and reason.

As the danger escalates and enemies close in from all sides, Nora and Hutch must confront their own demons and

make unimaginable sacrifices to protect each other.

1-Click [Hidden Mate](#) Today!

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# ABOUT DELTA JAMES

**Other books by Delta James:** <https://www.deltajames.com/>

As a USA Today bestselling romance author, Delta James aims to captivate readers with stories about complex heroines and the dominant alpha males who adore them. For Delta, romance is more than just a love story; it's a journey with challenges and thrills along the way.

After creating a second chapter for herself that was dramatically different than the first, Delta now resides in Florida where she relaxes on warm summer evenings with her loveable pack of basset hounds as they watch the birds, squirrels and lizards. When not crafting fast-paced tales, she enjoys horseback riding, walks on the beach, and white-water rafting.

Her readers mean the world to her, and Delta tries to interact personally to as many messages as she can. If you'd like to chat or discuss books, you can find Delta on Instagram, Facebook, and in her private reader group <https://www.facebook.com/groups/348982795738444>.

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