

MAZZY J. MARCH



DELIVERED  
TO MY  
POLAR BEARS

MAIL-ORDER MATINGS

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Delivered to My Polar Bears

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Marney

I didn't mean to sign up for the Mail-Order Mating App. I swear. I was drunk, in my wedding dress, and my heart had been smashed into pieces by the man I thought loved me. Spoiler alert: he didn't even bother to text to let me know he wasn't planning to show up. Instead of the husband-and-wife hand-in-hand prance down the aisle, I did the walk of shame and horror.

I ended up drowning my sorrows in whiskey and rum while spilling my heart to the bartender. She was the one who downloaded the app on my phone. I meant to delete it. But I've heard that shifters mate for life and that their mates are their first priority.

I was never Claude's first priority.

Riggs

Ignacio and I have always known we would share a mate. But with our true natures being polar bears, we like to stick to our cabin in the mountains where the snow blankets are thick and there's always a fire in the hearth. The only thing missing is a mate.

We know she's out there, but going to bars or dates is the last thing we are interested in. One of Nacho's cousins suggested the Mail-Order Mating app.

It was worth a shot.

*Delivered to My Polar Bears is Book 6 in the super sweet with building heat Mail-Order Matings Series. Delivered to My Polar Bears features a human brise left at the altar, lonely polar bear shifters, an arranged mail-order mating with her, true love, and a twist. And of course, Mazzy promises a happy ever after. If you like true mates, Fate taking a hand, and shifters surrendering to love, one-click Delivered to My Polar Bears today.*



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Delivered to My Polar Bears

Mail-Order Matings Book 6

By

Mazzy J. March



# Chapter One

## *Marney*

Every time I closed my eyes I saw the scene. Me waiting in the bride's ready room, after all the days of preparation, weeks of planning. My hair in that hideous style, the dress and veil as fluffy as marshmallow instead of the sleek one I'd wanted. But when you love someone, you want to look your very best on your wedding day. And, to me, that meant the way he'd like me best. I let my mother-in-law-to-be send in her esthetician, even, although I rarely wore much makeup, and the petite woman with the clearly fake French accent had applied the stuff with a trowel. She'd extended my lashes, applied brows so heavy I felt like a neanderthal, and otherwise left me completely unrecognizable in the mirror. But it was only for one day, right? And for the pictures.

Marrying into this family was a privilege, I'd been informed, and the modest wedding I'd wanted with a little party at home afterward was completely out of the question. If I'd known Claude was so wealthy, and, worse, from old money with high expectations, I'd have never gone out with him. Evil mama might think I was after their assets, but she couldn't be more wrong. His pedigree was a check in the no column.

But he had so many in the yes column. A great sense of humor. He could hold up his end of the conversation on almost any topic, and concede a point with a smile. And while looks weren't my first criteria, I couldn't hate it when my friends made envious comments about my great catch.

All of which must have made me miss something about him because the time when I should have been walking down the aisle had come and gone, and I was all alone in the ready room waiting for my cue.

Creeping out to the back of the church, I found my bridesmaids looking up at the front to where my fiancé should have been waiting for me. No ushers were there at all, and a buzz of conversation alerted me to a problem. “What’s going on?” I asked, and my tulle-clad bridesmaids all turned such looks of pity on me, my heart sank into my toes. “He’s late?”

My maid of honor, the groom’s first cousin Genia, who I’d only met two weeks ago, shook her head slowly. “They’re about to make an announcement.” She faced forward again, giving me no more information, although the smirk visible in profile gave me a hint.

The officiant appeared from a side door and moved to the center of the altar area. “Thank you for coming, but the bride and groom have decided not to get married today. We apologize for the inconvenience and wish you a nice afternoon.”

I couldn’t breathe as people began to file past me. *The bride and groom have decided not to get married today.* No, I had not decided that. What was going on? Where was Claude?

“Don’t make a scene, dear,” Genia hissed, taking my hand and smiling at the people walking by.

“But I didn’t decide,” I wailed, far less afraid of making a scene than Claude’s family would approve of. In fact, if they’d talked him out of marrying me or even talking to me about it, I knew he would’ve told me. I saw his family and friends on



their phones gossiping with anyone who was not here, to make sure everyone knew. Clinging to the shadows, I still stuck out; so finally, I ran out the door to the limo, and opened the door for myself, hopped in the back, and told the driver to take me to a bar where nobody could find me. It wasn't until he let me out and I stood on the street that I realized I was still wearing a wedding dress. There were sure to be questions. But no tears.



## Chapter Two

### *Nacho*

“We already have six cords of wood, Ig,” Riggs said, stepping out in a pair of shorts. He had a soup ladle in his hand.

I picked up another chunk of wood and placed it on the stump where we split firewood. Slamming the ax into the round of oak, I smelled the carrots, onions, and elk simmering on the stove from out here. Riggs always kept a pot of soup on the stove once the snow stuck to the ground. It was his thing. “Not cutting it for the warmth,” I murmured, knowing he could hear me, even if I whispered.

“Yeah. Wanna go for a run?” he asked. “I can put off some things. Work later.”

It wasn’t like I couldn’t go for a run alone, but Riggs was my best friend. We usually ran together. “Nah, it’s okay. I’ll just finish this pile and be done.”

“Okay.” He went back inside, and I blew out a long breath and took off my shirt. The sweat on my shirt from exertion was turning to ice despite my hotter temperature. I inhaled deeply, taking in the smells around us. We were so far out in the forest the only other animals we saw were the random deer mama or the eagle perched in the tree above our home—the tallest tree in the area. She made her nest there and in the spring, we could see her and her mate raising their young.

Winter was well on its way. My bear was elated to be in the snow and running through the woods with the cold burning

the inside of his nose and his heavy paws making tracks wherever we went.

The winter for my human side was a reminder of how alone I was, physically and mentally. Yeah, I lived here with my best friend, but my bear and I craved more. So did Riggs. We knew from the time we were teenagers that we would share a mate. Our bears knew it. We knew it. Wasn't even a question. We'd tried to date in college but every time we did, the girl wanted one of us or the other, but never both. Some simply were turned off by the idea of being shared.

Our bears knew there was one female out there who wanted us both, but, with the way we lived, out here, among no one but the stars, finding a girl, a specific kind of girl, wasn't a small task.

There was a bar about a half hour away from the cabin, but the only people in that place were the couple who owned it and some old-timers who had lived here all their lives. It was a local spot. You didn't go in there to meet anyone new; you went in there to get a tepid beer and listen to talk about the incoming snowstorms and how things had changed since they were kids.

We went to the city once a month to go to Costco, but it wasn't the place to meet a woman.

We were screwed, and certainly not the way we wanted to be.

With enough wood split and piled for more than three winters, I made my way inside. The smell of the soup or stew that Riggs was cooking made my mouth water. While we

didn't hibernate like non-shifter bears, we packed on a bit extra fluff before the below-zero temperatures hit us.

“Want me to make bread? Or do we still have some?” I asked Riggs who was nursing what smelled like a vanilla cappuccino, homemade, of course.

“I ate the last two slices this morning for breakfast. You mind making another loaf?”

I shook my head. “Wouldn't have offered if I did. Plus, it gives me something else to do. I'm between books—waiting for edits on the latest one. I hate waiting on edits.”

I got out the bread flour, yeast, and all the other ingredients and made two loaves of bread. Our animals had a preference for whole food. In college, I'd tried to live off the typical ramen and whatever-I-could-grab junk food, but my bear was sick of me before the first semester was over.

Now that we were so far out, it made all kinds of sense to eat whole things—things that lasted.

“If you want me to read it after you go over the edits, let me know. I need to know more so I can get you some marketing designs ready.”

Riggs was in digital marketing for all kinds of people in all kinds of different careers. We both worked for ourselves and, while that was a blessing of sorts, it also boxed us in, in terms of meeting people and making human connections.

“Will do. Thanks.”

He sat back in his chair and pushed his coffee aside.  
“What's really wrong?”

My name was Ignacio, and that was the name on my books, but it had been ages since anyone called me by that name. “You know what’s wrong, Riggs.”

“Should we move? Maybe temporarily to the city? Find our mate?”

I blew out a long breath while I kneaded the bread. “And what? Find a city girl and then drop it in her lap that we are moving back to the middle of nowhere?” It wasn’t as though I hadn’t considered the idea but the logistics left something to be desired. Like having the girl not run screaming when we wanted to take her far, far away from civilization.

“Then what do we do? Stay here and die old and lonely?”

Riggs had a tendency to be dramatic. He could be a writer if he wanted to. “Are you just going to throw out ideas, or do you have a point? Sorry. I’m...I’m all twisted up. That’s no excuse to be mean.”

“What about that app?”

I knew that was where this conversation was going. An app or a website or one of those shifter match/mating services. Was it so wrong that I wanted to meet my mate the old-fashioned way?

It all seemed—forced.

“What if we try?” He asked.

I shook my head. “And what if it fails? What if we find no one and no one is interested in two polar bears?”

He shrugged. “Then we lose nothing. We are right back here—right where we are now. Aggravated and wanting and

needing a mate. Another winter with no one to hold onto.”

“I’ll think about it,” I said and tossed a kitchen towel over the bowl for the bread to rise.

“You said that before,” he quipped.

“I know. I promise to really think about it this time.”





# Chapter Three

*Riggs*

When Nacho got the notification on his phone that he had new email from his editor, our entire conversation and maybe even the bread was forgotten.

While he pretended to think about all the options for finding a mate, I, on the other hand, had been seriously researching and looking into the best option to use for our needs in beginning the search for her. We both needed to face the truth. There was no way on Earth, even with Fate's sly ways, that we were going to meet our mate, a mate we would share, by conventional means.

And I was tired of waiting around, pondering the what-ifs.

It was time to take action.

Nacho had the door to his office open. I could hear the clicks and then a few words typed. Those were the sounds of him going over edits. It was a tedious step in the publishing process, but one of the most important ones next to actually finishing the manuscript.

He would be in there for a while. I knew his process.

While my best friend's job was always a roller coaster of writing, editing, writing, and then publishing, mine was a different kind of ride. My job revolved around social media marketing and ads for all kinds of companies around the world. I'd never met a single client, but my reputation spoke for itself.

We were blessed to have flexible jobs.

But times like these, when things were steady, not hectic, gave us more moments to ponder life, and lately, the lack of a mate. We had designed and built a beautiful cabin, including a huge master suite but used the guest bedrooms. It didn't feel right to sleep in the den we'd created for our someday mate.

Once everything was checked off my list of chores, I got up and tended the everyday things I lived for. I had craved the simple life since I was a boy. The city life never called to me. It was too busy—too noisy. In our mountain home, I could hear the wind whipping the bare-branched trees and the subtle creaks of the roof adjusting to the temperatures through the day and night. Also, howls of wolves far and near. The gentle step of a doe as its hoof pressed into the fragile snow blanket.

This was home in terms of place and four walls.

Even so, my polar bear lamented the lack of a mate.

I got up after shutting my laptop, needing to stretch my legs. The bread had already risen since Nacho put it near the fireplace, and it was time for the forming of the loaves. He taught me how to do it, since he was sometimes deep in his work.

I pulled the dough and kneaded it until it turned smooth and pliable then rolled it into two loaves before tucking them into a pan for the second rise. Nacho cut all kinds of designs and lines into his loaves, but mine was simple.

The stew on the stove had thickened while it cooked, the potatoes and carrots now tender and ready.

Once my chores were done and I'd taken a long hike through the forest, I came back and wished for more work.

Something to keep my mind occupied.

A book kept me busy until dinner when Nacho came out. His hair was disheveled, and he grumbled about finishing the edits but it needing a second round.

He was tedious about the whole thing.

"That bad?" I asked, dishing up a big bowl of stew for him. I'd sliced up some bread and put it between us. I ate standing at the counter while he pulled up a stool on the other side.

"No. Good, actually. The editor caught some important things. This is good." He took a bite of the stew, burning his mouth on it. He wasn't patient.

"Thanks. It's from that elk we took down last week. We still have a ton in the freezer."

He nodded. "We need more for the rest of the winter? I could go hunt."

"We could probably use one more to be well-stocked. Just in case..."

"In case what?" he asked. We shared a look, being friends so long we could each guess what the other was thinking.

"In case it's a long winter."

He huffed out a laugh. "Yeah."

With not a lot else to do, I got on my laptop and checked to see if there were any fires to put out.

Nothing.

Before I shut it down again, I checked my emails. I usually glanced in the box where spam went, deleting all of it immediately, but one caught my eye.

An advertisement for the Mail-Order Mating app.

Wait, hadn't we just talked about this? The damned thing was listening to us.

I clicked on the link and looked around, dipping my toes into the water, when Nacho came back into the room.

"You're still working?" He let out a roar of a yawn.

"Nah. I'm all done now."



## Chapter Four

### *Marney*

The bar was the perfect place to drink my way into forgetfulness. The only place. Quite the party had been planned for our reception with fine wines and liquors, but I had to assume that if anyone was drinking them, it would not be me.

I picked up my phone and texted Claude for at least the fiftieth time since I had learned that I had been part of the decision to call off the wedding. He didn't need to marry me, but he damned sure could tell me why he decided not to at the last minute. I picked up the shot placed in front of me and tossed it back. It was not the first or even the second or third. I wasn't sure how many I'd had, but neither did I care. If I passed out right here, sitting on the barstool, at least I wouldn't be aware of the fact I was that pathetic caricature: a woman left at the altar.

Okay, I hadn't actually made it to the altar because if the groom isn't up there, why would the bride parade down the aisle at all.

"Owww, stop it!" Someone had stepped on my veil again, jerking my head back. I'd have taken it off long since, except it was attached to my head with so many pins and clips and product, I didn't know where to begin. I might have to shave my head later just to get it off. "Ouch! Bartender!"

"Yes, ma'am?" the young man who'd been pouring for me said. "Another?"

“Not ma’am,” I corrected. “Miss.” I might as well get used to the fact I’d be “miss” for a while, probably forever.

“Another?” He held up the bottle of tequila invitingly, and I registered that was what I’d been drinking. I was going to have such a headache tomorrow. Still, how much worse could it get?

“Sure.” I watched him fill it to the top. “But that wasn’t why I called you over.”

“Yes, ma—err, miss?”

“Do you have a knife back there?”

Alarm flickered in his gaze. “It’s not that bad. You will find love again.”

“What? Owwww. Stop it!” I clung to the edge of the bartop to keep from falling over as yet another person trod on my long, long veil. “I didn’t even want one,” I grumbled.

“A knife? But you asked...”

“A freaking veil. I did not want to be dressed up like a meringue about to top the cake instead of a person entering into a lifelong, loving partnership. But nooo...do you or do you not have a knife?”

His forehead, which had been wrinkled in concern or confusion cleared. He reached down and brought up a pair of long scissors. Shears maybe they’d be called? “I think this would work better, but are you sure you don’t just want to take it off? It looks expensive.”

“Don’t you think I would if I could?” My voice rose to Karen-like volume, and the people on either side of me shifted

away. I let out my breath in a whoosh. “I’m sorry. None of this is your fault and here I go treating you badly. I should leave.”

He set the shears down on the bar and patted my hand. “Judging from your outfit and the way you are knocking back those shots, you’ve had a very bad day.”

“But that’s no excuse to be rude to you.” I never behaved this way. If I’d actually gotten married into that family today, that snooty-high-society bunch of jerks, would I have begun to be like them in time? In self-defense? I shuddered at the thought, feeling a little less drunk than a minute ago. “Yes, it’s been a very bad day, but I’m already wondering if it’s for the best.”

“If he or she walked away from someone as pretty as you and as nice as I suspect you normally are, it is completely their loss.”

I laughed a little at that. “I’m going to give you a huge tip for putting up with me. You don’t have to say such sweet things, too.” His kindness had the tears I hadn’t wanted to shed threaten to fall. “Really. I don’t deserve it.”

“I think you do.” He waved the bartender over and spoke low to him. The man nodded and returned to serving customers. “Now, if you’d like a little help with the veil, follow me.” He picked up the shears and lifted the flip-up part of the bar at the end. “Coming?”

“Yes, please.” I hopped down off the stool, managing to tangle my feet in the thousands of yards of lace, going down in a poof of satin and tulle and silk and beads and other things I’d grown to hate.



I decided to just stay there, on the floor where someone had spilled something made with rum and also whiskey. Maybe everyone would just walk around me, respecting my misery until closing time when I could rip myself free of the sticky trap and crawl home to my apartment.

Oh gods. It wasn't my apartment anymore. I'd moved out a week before to avoid a new lease period. I'd been staying in the new house where Claude and I were to have lived happily ever after. I had nowhere to go. Sure, I had some money, but not enough for first and last and security on a new apartment. Pawing through the layers of skirt, I hunted for my phone. I had to reach him. He owed me something. An explanation at least.

Tears had begun to stream down my cheeks, and I'd had no luck finding the device when a hand thrust through the fabric and into my shadowed line of vision. "Let's go." The bartender to the rescue. "Before you end up on everyone's social media pages."

"Like I haven't already." I'd be in the newspaper, too. Not because of me, of course. I was nobody. But Claude was somebody. Old money was always that. But I took the bartender's hand and let him help me to my feet and around the bar toward a curtained doorway. "You should just leave me by the dumpster."

He chuckled, but it wasn't a mean one. "Now, now. A broken heart can always heal in time."

"That's just it. I don't think it's broken."

"What?"

He paused on the other side of the curtain, lifting a layer of veil from my face. “Then why were you getting married?”

“I have no idea.” And it all let loose then, a storm of sobbing and crying and otherwise making the kind of scene I’d judged other women for many times. “None.”

When he finally got me to calm down and sip a glass of water until I could breathe properly again, I found myself sitting on a folding chair in a storeroom filled with paper products of all kinds. “You good?”

I shrugged, hiccupping. “Probably not, but at least only you saw me do that.”

His look of pity told me otherwise. Dammit.

“What happened?”

“When you collapsed into, ummm, your sadness, you took the curtain down with you so a few people might have seen.” As in everyone in the bar, as in someone had already sold a picture of that to a tabloid, and wouldn’t my almost mother-in-law love having that made into a poster or maybe a dartboard.

“Could this day get any worse?”

“Never tempt Fate, but I suspect you’ve used up your supply of bad luck for the moment. Now, let’s get that veil off you.”

After he’d tried and failed to get it free of the multiple pins and clips and product holding it in place, he used the shears to cut it off at shoulder length then let it fall to the floor. Studying what remained, he went back to work and eventually had the tiara worked free. “I think it was just too heavy before.”

I wanted to hug him, but after wallowing on the floor, my pristine six-figure dress was stained and filthy. “I wish I had something to change into.”

“That part is easy.” He opened a cabinet and dug around, finally emerging with a T-shirt and a pair of leggings, both embossed with the name of the establishment. “We sell gear. I think these will fit.” Handing them to me, he glanced around and said, “I’m going to make sure Roger is doing okay out there. You just come out when you’re ready. Do you want a trash bag or something to put your dress and veil parts in?”

“Yes, but only so they can be disposed of.”

“Are you sure? I know the veil is trashed, but the dress can probably be cleaned. It looks expensive.”

“No, it’s worth nothing.” I managed to work my way out of the gown it had taken three bridesmaids and the dressmaker to get me into, but then they hadn’t been trying to rip off the satin-covered buttons or shred the bodice in the process as I was. If Claude’s mama wanted to return it, she’d have to go to the county landfill to find it. Not that she’d be able to anyway. Every stitch was custom, and I’d had many hours-long fittings in the process. That family could have saved themselves a buttload of money if they’d managed to get him to dump me sooner.

The high-heeled sandals were a bit out of place with the leggings and T-shirt, but I didn’t have any others to wear. Everything I owned was in the mini mansion where I did not live. I exited the storeroom and found a bathroom marked staff only where I did what I could with my hair, taking out all the pins and clips and finger combing it flat. Then I scrubbed my

face clean of all the layers of makeup. The esthetician had given me a jar of special remover, but of course I didn't have that with me. All I had was the wrist bag that had my wallet and phone in it—both of which I'd managed to lose in the past half hour or so. I didn't have house keys with me because there was always someone on duty at what should have been my new home, to answer the door. Security—rich people needed that. And I also did not have car keys because I had donated my ten-year-old “unsuitable” car to a worthy charity his family supported. “I'll get you a new one as soon as we get back from the honeymoon,” he'd said.

The bastard.

Returning to the bar took a lot more guts than I thought I had, but either people had lost interest in the drunken bride, or they didn't recognize me in my new outfit and without the hairstyle and makeup. Also, I was cold sober now, somehow. And glad I hadn't drunk that last shot.

“Wow,” the bartender who'd helped me, who I only now recognized wore a name tag said. Eugene, his name was. “You clean up good.”

The other guy, Roger, came to stand beside him. “Why did you have all that crap on your face before? You look twenty years younger.”

I rolled my eyes. “Thanks for everything. Listen, I lost my purse and phone in all the crazy. Can I pay you tomorrow for the drinks and clothes and everything after I get a new ID and go to the bank?”

He reached down and came up with my purse and my phone. “A patron handed them to Roger, and everything is on

the house.”

“No. I can’t let you do that.”

“See how packed the house is?” He waved around and I looked. It did seem busier than before.

“Uh-huh.”

“You are the social media sensation of the night, I’m sorry to report, and everyone wanted to see you. We’ve never made so much money.”

“Ugh. But they don’t seem to notice me now?”

“Nope. They’re onto some cat that can say mama now. I think. Your moment of fame is over. I also don’t think they recognize you from when you were in your role of the discarded bride.”

I winced but picked up my things. “I have to find somewhere to stay tonight. Any recommendations?”

They gave me the address of a decent motel nearby and I thanked and hugged them both. As I started for the door, Eugene called after me, “I downloaded an app for you. Forget whats-his-name and start fresh.”

A dating app.

I didn’t think so.

But when I was all alone in that motel room, my fingers bruised from sending texts to Claude that he couldn’t be bothered to reply to, I switched gears and opened the app.

Answering all the questions took a while, but I wasn’t going to sleep anytime soon.



# Chapter Five

## *Nacho*

“You don’t have a tree up yet?” Those were the first words out of my cousin Ivan’s mouth when he came in the door with his twin cubs in tow.

“Hello to you, too,” I said, reaching for my tiny niece. The other one was a boy, but both were rambunctious, as all good bear shifter toddlers should be. “My, look how you’ve grown, Matilda.” I held up the girl, who looked so much like her father, while she giggled in my arms.

“Hey, Nacho, Riggs.” Ivan closed the door, shutting out the wind that grew sharper and fiercer by the day. Winter was making herself known in a loud way this time.

“Where’s Anna?” I asked. His mate was the sweetest thing. He had gained weight since meeting her because she was such an amazing cook. He deserved to be spoiled though—and she fed us, too, every chance she got, but I was still jealous.

“She needed a break from the tiny monsters. They shifted last night. I think she’s still in shock.”

“You didn’t tell her about the other early shifters in the family?” Riggs asked, coming into the family room. He grabbed Merrick from Ivan’s hands and tossed him in the air a bit before hugging my Ivan. Our families had been friends long before we were born and so Riggs had been friends with him since we were cubs.

“I did, but seeing them shift at age three was unexpected,” Riggs said. “Hell, I was seven. Nacho was eight. These two aren’t even four yet.”

I shrugged and addressed the little one in my arms. “Matilda, did you turn into a bear yesterday? Did you scare your mama?”

Her answer was to show me her human fingers bent into claws and growl at me. Cutest damned thing I’d ever seen.

Riggs had been with me during my first shift and was jealous as all get out. He didn’t shift until thirteen. I was with him that night as well, talking him through it.

We’d been through everything together.

“They scared the life and death out of that dear woman. She’s rethinking more kids as we speak, I’m guessing. And you never answered me about a tree. You guys always have a tree.”

“Tree!” Merrick bellowed while getting his chubby fingers tangled in Riggs’ beard.

“We haven’t really gotten into the spirit of the season yet,” I answered. “But...” I cupped Matilda’s ears while Ivan reached for a cup of coffee still warm in the coffee maker. “We’re gonna give you the p-r-e-s-e-n-t-s before you leave so they will have them on Christmas morning.”

“They love getting those from their uncles. You know... I’d like to be an uncle, too.”

Gods, here we went again. This was the only thing we and everyone we knew apparently had to talk about.



“Don’t start, Ivan,” Riggs said. Merrick had found one of the blankets we kept on the back of the couch and was snuggling against Riggs’ chest. He soothed everyone that was around him. It was his thing. He didn’t do it on purpose. It was simply his way.

“I’m not starting anything but you two should. It’s no secret how I met Anna.”

“I, um, actually saw another advertisement for that app on my email last night,” Riggs shrugged.

“Why do I feel ganged up on?” I rummaged around in the pantry and found a gingerbread man for Matilda, but instead of eating it, she hugged it and kissed its icing nose.

“Because we all want you two happy. My parents. Your parents. Riggs’ parents, who I saw last week in the city. First thing they asked me was about Anna then you two finding a mate.”

I sighed.



# Chapter Six

*Riggs*

When we closed the door on Ivan and his beautiful cubs, I let out a long breath. On the other side of that door was the situation I longed for. Happiness and belonging with a mate and a family.

Honestly, I would be grateful for the mate even if we never had children. My bear and I knew that having her around would mean everything to Nacho and me.

Children would be a bonus.

“Want something simple for dinner?” Nacho asked, giving me a sympathetic smile.

“You cooking?” I asked. “I’m...I’m not in the mood. If you don’t want to, there’s still stew.”

I stared at the fire, wishing on its flames that this wasn’t what our entire winter would be like again. Eating. Cooking. Working. Rinse and repeat.

Ungrateful wasn’t a word I’d use to describe my situation. Hell, I was living in my dream cabin in the woods with my best friend.

“Ham and eggs?” He suggested our dinner on the nights when I didn’t want to cook.

“Sounds good.” I sat at the counter while he pulled out the few ingredients.

He stopped while slicing some ham steaks and cleared his throat. “I’m ready, Riggs. If you want to try this app thing, let’s do it.”

I barely quelled my excitement. In fact, judging by his smile and the way his eyes lit up, I was sure I didn’t. “Are you sure? What changed your mind?”

He waved the tip of the knife toward the door. “Seeing Ivan. I want that, Riggs. I want that for us. A mate. Someone to take care of. Someone to belong to. Cubs, maybe.”

“Let’s sign up after dinner, then.”

Nacho shook his head as he plopped two huge ham steaks into a hot cast-iron pan. “Can you go ahead and start while I’m cooking? My bear...damn it, he is as restless as ever. I am sure my ribs and muscles have claw marks.”

“I’m on it.” I slipped my phone out of my back pocket and downloaded the app while he finished cooking. A few minutes later, I’d created my profile and linked it to his after he handed over his phone. Nacho slid a plate in front of me piled with ham, over-easy eggs, and toasted bread. In my opinion, it was the perfect dinner. “Thanks. I made our profiles and linked them since we want to share a mate. Now comes the tedious part. I read in some forums that the questionnaires are complicated and long, but what else do we have to do?”

Nacho snorted while we took our plates to the living room. “Let’s do this.”

My best friend and I laughed as we took pictures of each other for the profile but had plenty of others to add to our shared photos. My bear was pleased with the progress, even

though he believed we should've just gone out into the world and hunted down our mate the old-fashioned ways. He was right about a lot of things, like trusting my instinct, but on this one, the beast needed me to help him move into the next century. It was a big world, after all, and I'd rather find my mate, our mate, this way than to pine after her for decades only to find her and lose her too early. Or she lose us too early.

“Whoa...” My friend shoved the screen of his phone in front of my face. “Those are some specific questions in this section.”

“I haven't gotten there yet.” I pushed it away, not wanting any more spoilers. “We can do that part together.”

There wasn't anything too personal since he and I had been friends forever.

“Should we talk about some of this?” I asked, knowing that it would be better to have this discussion now than in the throes of passion.

“We share a mate.” Nacho shrugged, as if it were that simple.

“What if she and I want to mate and you're not around or you're hunting or running. Can we not?” I asked.

“Of course you could. Just because I'm not here doesn't mean you can't mate with our female.”

I huffed out a breath through my nose. “That clears that up.”

We had a long discussion about other things while we answered the questions. Positions, preferences, all the things came up. I wondered about the mind of the person who made

up these questions. They were genius, obviously. But damn, some were surprising, even for me.

“There. What do we do now?” Nacho said. Our plates were empty of the food and the fire had begun to die down as the night went on.

“We wait for someone to send us a message or view our profile.”

He put his phone down only to pick it right back up. “But, we can look as well, right? We can scroll through profiles as well. Maybe send a message ourselves? We would have to agree, of course.”

“We could absolutely do that. And the profiles they show us are females who are wanting to be in a polygamous relationship. They’re not going to show us a woman who wants monogamy.”

I put on a movie while Nacho scrolled and oohed and ahhed over several, but none of them really called out to us. My polar bear was particularly loud when he saw a woman he liked, but it never went beyond that. We weren’t looking for a one-night stand or a short-term relationship. We were looking for a life partner.

My polar bear needed to be loud if he wanted her. Louder than he’d ever been.



# Chapter Seven

## *Marney*

I did end up back at the mini mansion, but only because I had nowhere else to go, and Claude's father informed me I had seven days to clean out my things before they would all be taken to the landfill when the house went on the market. I didn't ask why our lack of getting married should result in Claude selling the house he'd been so crazy about. I had wanted something smaller, something we didn't need staff to take care of. I'd thought his dad was the one who liked me all right, but he also told me to stop texting Claude because it was upsetting him.

Poor guy.

I refrained from pointing out that it upset me to be humiliated in front of everyone I knew and several hundred people I didn't. I needed the week to try to get my act together and figure out what to do. The "worthy" charity did not return donations. I asked. So I didn't even have the questionable luxury of living in a vehicle. Or enough money to live anywhere else. With the week drawing to a close, I opened one of the last boxes I'd packed when I moved in here and found my old Girl Scout camping gear, including a pup tent. "Home sweet home," I muttered.

Having assessed my belongings, I was faced not just with where I would live but what to do with them. Living simply was important to me, so I had far fewer things than most people I knew, but they were still more than I could carry on



my back through the city. I was either going to have to rent a storage locker and carry them through the city a couple of boxes at a time or get rid of nearly everything I owned.

Sitting here in this huge, echoing house, my stack of boxes looked so small and insignificant and I wanted to scream. He could have it all—heaven knew the house wasn't in my name—but I wanted my photo albums and my late mother's jewelry case and my grandma's teapot and my clothes. It was so unfair!

I stood up again to look through the dresser drawers where I had actually put some things away. I did not want to feel like his next woman, one approved by his mother, might find a pair of my Walmart undies when putting away her “worthy” panties. A mower starting up outside the window caught my attention as I was reaching for the last drawer, the second one, and I opened the one above it. It was Claude's version of a junk drawer, filled with seasonal cards he'd received, pens, odds and ends of mail, and anything else that probably belonged in his desk in the study downstairs but ended up on top of the dresser only to be swept into the drawer so the maid could dust. Or because he thought it looked messy more likely.

I started to close it, but a card caught in the drawer, and I had to work it loose before I could continue. About to toss it on top of the others, I stopped when a note fell out on the floor. Who even wrote notes and tucked them in cards anymore? It seemed such an intimate thing, something you'd only do for a family member or a very close friend or...

Bending, I scooped up the sheet of paper, folded in half, and sat down on the bed to read it.

*Darling...when will you be mine?* My throat swelled closed at that opening line. The handwriting was not a woman's. It was too bold, and as I read on, the words blurred together under traitorous tears. But they were not of sadness. As the writer went on about what a wonderful time they'd had out on Claude's boat one weekend in July. A weekend when he said he was going fishing with his best friend. Which, of course, he had. I knew who the signer would be before I got to the end of the letter. Carl. His buddy since childhood. Married to a woman for the past five years. He had two children. The letter I read was between two men who were not ready to accept something so important about themselves.

Damn. The tears that finally spilled onto the sheet of stationery were for the two of them. How long had they been in love? Had Carl known when he married Maria? I could accept that they were both bisexual but not that they were deceiving those around them. If Carl wanted him so much, in today's culture, why hadn't he proposed?

And why had Claude proposed to me? How screwed up was this whole thing? My faint inkling that I'd gotten lucky when the marriage fell through became a surety. He'd always been kind to me, tender in bed, and he'd defied his mother in small ways where I was concerned. I'd thought the very fact he was marrying me was a defiance, but in fact it was not that.

No wonder his mother didn't get him to leave me sooner. No wonder she'd put so much time and money into showing all her friends that her son was getting married. I might not

have been her first choice, but neither was I her last. And she hadn't convinced him to leave me. Probably his father had liked me.

Carl was her last choice. She could not accept her son for who he was.

And he'd almost let her get away with it.

Picking up my phone from the nightstand, I typed another message, this one of a whole different nature. The others had been angry or sad or demanding.

This one was two words. *I understand.*

And to this one, he responded. The phone rang. At the same time, I got a notification from the Mail-Order Matings app.

I'd forgotten about it after signing it up in the depths of despair. Now...did I answer the phone and talk to my past or click on the notification and talk to my future?



## Chapter Eight

*Nacho*

“There’s ten more,” I groaned, heading down the hall while Riggs walked the other way. “I forgot to turn the damned thing off, and it was beeping until two a.m. when I turned my phone off.”

My exuberance for the app and the possibility of finding a mate through this venue had quickly gone down the tubes. I stomped toward the back door and threw it open and exhaled as deeply as possible. I only had a pair of pajama pants on, but my bear welcomed the biting morning cold as it washed over my skin. The whipping winter gave me the adrenaline and wakeup a cup of coffee never could.

“There aren’t ten more,” Riggs said, coming out of the cabin and walking toward the pond only a few miles away. Our bears were big fans of the cold plunge.

“I saw them last night,” I replied, following him. My bear could use a dip as well.

“There’s twenty-three more.” I heard his feet crushing the thick snow beneath our feet. To my heightened hearing, every step was a million shards of glass crunching. I loved it. It sounded like home to me.

We shucked our pajama pants and shifted near the edge of the pond. There was only a thin layer of ice along the sides, but we easily broke it with our front claws before plunging in.

We swam and played until the sun came fully up.

Over breakfast, we looked through those who had viewed our profiles and some who had sent us messages, but neither of our bears called out any signs for one of them.

Still, I had hope somehow. Maybe it had blossomed in the night, or perhaps it was the rush of the morning swim, but I had an idea.

“I think Ivan was right,” I mentioned, already looking at the attic door while Riggs cut some steaks and salted them for that night’s supper.

“We already know he was right. That’s why we signed up for the app.”

I snorted. “Not that. I meant about the tree. What if one of these females is the right one and she wants to come up tomorrow or the day after that. Look around at the impression it’s going to give her.”

Riggs barely looked up from his steaks. Our attitudes had reversed a bit. I was now excited, and he was grumpy as a bear just out of hibernation. “It looks like two single men live here.”

“Exactly,” I replied and tugged on the string that opened the door to the attic. “We want her to feel comfortable and welcome here. Because we want this to be her home. Help me get the tree down.”

“Give me a minute,” he said and went back to sprinkling the salt all over the meat.

We pulled down the box that contained every Christmas decoration we owned. Pathetic at best.

“We need more. Plus, the comforter is thin and faded. We should get a new one. Something warm in case she’s human.”

My best friend grunted beside me while taking a peek into what would be one day our master bedroom—one that we would share with our mate.

“You want to go to the city? We could use a few things for the pantry. We should be stocked in case we are snowed in.”

I chuckled. “Again, you mean? We are always snowed in for at least a week. But this time it might be more...fun.”

A smile rose on my friend’s face. He got up and grabbed his coat, along with his wallet and keys. We hopped into our shared vehicle and in minutes, we were on the road and making our way to the city. We bought everything we thought a female would need. Things to make her comfortable. Things to show her that our home was hers as well.

For the dream of a mate—a lifelong companion and perhaps mother to our children—it was the least we could do.

“Did we get everything?” Riggs asked, sparing a glance into the back of the truck. It was packed full of all we needed and more. We hadn’t spent a fortune, only picking out high-quality things that would last.

“If we didn’t, then we will bring her to the city when we can and get her anything she desires.” I nodded, happy with our decision. It felt like moving forward. A step in the right direction.

“When we get home, I’ll go out and get a tree. I know the perfect one. I’ve been watching it grow since the spring. It will

make an amazing Christmas tree. We have the one in the attic, but this one will be so much better.”

Riggs chuckled. “Oh, how the mighty have fallen.”

I shrugged. “Doesn’t feel like falling. It feels like not being stagnant anymore.”

That night, we sat on the couch, looking over our hard work. The Christmas tree was a proud centerpiece of our entire living area. It was strung with lights and we’d done our best to make it sparkle with ornaments and tinsel despite the salesman saying it was out of style. I didn’t give two shits about fashion. We’d had it on my trees growing up, and I loved it. The light coming from the fire danced along the metallic strings, making me remember a time long ago.

We’d exchanged the master bedroom comforter for a warmer one perfect for sleeping in on a winter’s morning.

“There’s been notifications while we worked today,” Riggs mentioned and pulled out his phone.

“Let’s look at them.”

We flitted through all of them, none of the females catching our eyes until the last one did, the latest one. Her name was Marney. She had short platinum hair and a smile that made me want to kiss her lips.

“That’s her,” Riggs whispered.

“Yeah. It is.” I got my own phone out, ready for whatever was next. “What do we do now?”

Riggs clicked a button. “We can send her a message.”

“Should we? Is it too soon?”



Riggs shrugged. “Doesn’t feel too soon, Nacho. It feels not soon enough. What is your bear saying?”

I reached inside me, in the depths I couldn’t see, and communicated with my animal.

He approved.

Loud and clear.

“He’s game. Yours?”

Riggs typed up a message and hovered his thumb over the send button. “I’m ready.”



# Chapter Nine

## *Marney*

In the end, I did answer the phone. Before I was ready to look to the future, I needed to close out the past, and that meant giving Claude a chance to talk to me. It had been one hell of an awful time, the past week, but I couldn't imagine what it was like to live a lie.

“Hi, Claude.”

“Hi, Marney. Hate me much?”

“Not as much as you'd think. I found the card from Carl. Are you with him now?”

“No. I am on my own. He won't leave Maria because she is holding him to his commitment, but I couldn't do that to you.”

“You could have told me at any point, you know? Trusted me to get it? I felt railroaded into the big wedding with all the pomp and circumstance and stuff, but I did it because I thought you wanted it and afterward we could just go back to being us.”

He cleared his throat. “Did you really believe that?”

I considered. “I wanted to. But on some level I probably knew better.”

“Even if Carl is never free, promise me you will be yourself. I know it might cost you everything, but being yourself is pretty valuable.” Not that I could put myself in his

position, but the idea of masking the real me, of pretending to be something I was not sounded so painful.

“That’s why I’m not there. The house is being sold to show me what happens when I don’t toe the line. I know you’re in a tight spot, and it’s my fault, but I don’t have a whole lot. I’m cut off. Is there anything I can do for under a thousand dollars?”

“Actually, I need to get my stuff transported to storage. Can you do that?”

“That’s it? But where will you go? You don’t even have a car. And mine is leased through the family or I’d give it to you.”

“I’ll figure it out. You just take care of you. And, Claude?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you for not marrying me.”

He promised to have my stuff picked up and taken to the storage unit tomorrow, and we disconnected. I still loved him, even if I now realized I hadn’t been in love with him. He had so many good qualities it was nearly impossible not to have strong feelings for him. Hell, nearly every girl did. But this week, I’d spent so much time reliving our relationship, I’d begun to question every aspect of it. We were good together; we had fun. But how long had he been cheating on me with Carl? That was a question I didn’t want the answer to. We were no longer in a relationship, and it was no longer my problem.

It might take a bit of time to get used to that, but I was relieved to find hope for him to find a path forward in my heart. I'd never wanted to slap his mother more. She'd manipulated me while making her own son feel like his feelings were something to be ashamed of. There was a special level in Hell for people like her.

I went into the kitchen and poured a glass of water, drank it down, and stared out the window over the sink. While I'd truly wanted a small house that we could take care of and have privacy in, I'd also had visions of the garden I could create in that beautiful space out there. All the food I could grow. The flowers. Drawing pollinators of all kinds...

But that was part of a dream that had been a mirage. One I had to put behind me and take a firm step forward. We each had our own destiny to follow.

I turned my attention to the app, wondering if it truly held the future the bartender seemed to think it did. Had he called it "a sure thing" at some point? I'd been drunk for a lot of that time, so I couldn't be sure. But I needed a distraction, so I started going through the various profiles recommended to me. It soon became clear that someone in there thought shifters would be the best choice for me. I'd actually dated a wolf shifter in high school briefly before he left to move to another pack, and it had been a pretty good experience.

Why not, right?

I continued on, going from one to another, and then suddenly I was being shown pairs of men. I had checked the box that I was up for two men but that had been just a daring move. I didn't really think I'd be brave enough to go out with

them...and then there they were. A pair of polar bears of all things. I didn't even know there were polar bear shifters, and certainly not down in the lower forty-eight. And before I could second-guess myself, I sent them a message. They were looking for a mate to share, and their pictures completely beguiled me. Big, handsome guys standing in the snow in front of a cabin with trees all around? I couldn't think of a better place to live. As far from the city as possible, two guys completely different from Claude in nearly every way. I wasn't sure I still believed in love, but what did it hurt just to message them, chat a little, flirt a little... There was something more there, a reaction from deep inside me, but I wasn't ready to trust my judgment quite yet.



# Chapter Ten

*Nacho*

I wouldn't admit to anyone out loud how many times I'd looked at her profile after I went to bed. She didn't have many details about her life but what she did, I pored over, tattooing them in my memory.

I didn't want to fuck anything up with Marney. My bear was already smitten and had sent me messages through our bond. He wanted me to go get her right then and there.

He didn't understand life sometimes. Animal.

Up before the sun, I watched as the morning golds and tangerines lit the snow, a stage light for another perfect winter day. The snow glistened and glittered under the praise of the sun's rays, making me smile.

She hadn't responded to the message. The knowledge burned in my brain, but I also knew that we had sent her the note late in the night. Perhaps she was sleeping or had some job whose shift carried her early into the morning.

Everything I wanted to know about her, I didn't.

What I did notice was that her picture, rather what she was wearing in her profile picture, stoked questions about who she was. More specifically, why she was wearing a wedding dress or what resembled a wedding dress in her picture.

There could be a thousand reasons for her wearing a wedding dress, none of them having to do with her getting married.



Still, my bear and I didn't like it.

Not one bit.

Sleepy and groggy, I made my way to the shower and took a long one, not wanting to get out of the hot water even though the winter called to me, in all of its chill, its comfort and sharpness. When I finally did, Riggs was already up. I smelled oatmeal and bacon, along with espresso. We only made the strong stuff when we were on deadlines or hadn't slept at all.

I wondered if my best friend was plagued by thoughts of our maybe mate as I was. Plagued wasn't the word. Haunted? Yes, haunted by someone I'd never met in this life but who I was already emotionally tethered to.

"Morning," I said, standing next to Riggs who was stirring warmed milk into his almost-full coffee cup.

"Yeah," he grunted. His hair was disheveled, and sleep creases marked his face.

"Didn't sleep?" I asked, chuckling. I already knew the answer.

"Neither did you."

I poured myself a cup and stirred the oatmeal. We both liked it nice and thick with plenty of peanut butter and honey in it. Calories were a must up here. With the temperatures and our shifter metabolisms, we had to pack them in.

"She messaged back." He sipped on his coffee, nailing me with a stare.

“What did she say?” I asked, putting my cup down before rushing back to my bedroom for my phone. In my morning stupor, I’d been so caught up in my thoughts I’d forgotten to check the source of my overthinking.

“I didn’t check yet,” Riggs answered. “I...what if she doesn’t want us? What if she’s not interested? I’m working up to it.”

Oh, how the tables had turned.

“Riggs, you felt it, right? That instant attraction and longing when you saw her picture. We’d gone through hundreds of profiles, but hers was the only one that stood out. Why do you think that is?”

He laughed. “Because she’s stunning. Those eyes are mesmerizing, and I want to drown in her smile?”

“I thought I was the writer. You’re right but it’s more than that.”

Walking around me to check the oats again, he elbowed me. “Come on, Nacho. All of a sudden, you’re a believer in Fate?”

“It’s said she has her ways. Who are we to limit her to chance meetings at a bar or at the supermarket? Maybe this app is in her wheelhouse as well.” I stayed quiet while we made our bowls of piping-hot oatmeal and plates of bacon and fruit. “I’m checking the message.”

“She said it was nice to meet us and that she’s interested. She said very interested.”

“Are you serious?” My best friend’s face lit up like the times we won the three-legged race in school.

“What do I say?” I asked, knowing that Marney, our Marney, or so I hoped, would be waiting for a reply.

“Tell her that we want to video chat. Ask if she wants to.”

I typed out the message and had returned to eating breakfast when another beep came through. “It’s her.”

“Give her our numbers so we can text. If that’s...do you think she’ll be comfortable with it?”

“One way to find out.”

Marney’s message said that she wanted to video chat and that exchanging numbers would be great. She wasn’t at home but would text us as soon as she was. She was eager to see us in person, or over video, which was as close to in person as we could get right now.

“I can’t believe it,” I said, putting the phone down. “This is it. We might’ve found our mate.”

Riggs nodded. “We did. We found her.”

We made ourselves busy as we could, waiting for Marney to get home. I found myself smiling despite doing simple things like sweeping and mopping. Riggs and I were making sure our den was perfect for her. I didn’t think she was going to inspect our baseboards or above our refrigerator but that didn’t stop me from cleaning them all the same.

We bears took pride in our dens, even more so when our mate would be here soon.

I was getting the sticky dust from the top of the fridge when Riggs came in, breathing hard. “She’s home. She’s ready

to talk. Get your ass down from there, Nacho. It's time to meet our mate."



# Chapter Eleven

## *Riggs*

The first time she said hello, I was hooked. We both were.

“You’re even more beautiful than your pictures,” Nacho said as she came on the screen with a smile.

“Thank you. You must be Nacho. Ignacio, I’m assuming.”

He blushed. “It’s Ignacio, yeah.”

She giggled, and I swore the heavens quaked and the ground shook. “Not Iggy?”

My turn. “It used to be Iggy, but when we became friends, Riggs and Iggy were too easily confused. I started calling him Nacho and it kind of stuck.”

Marney nodded and pushed a tendril of platinum hair behind her ear. I wanted to be able to do that for her. She wore no makeup but was blaringly more beautiful than any female I’d ever seen. “Is Riggs short for anything?” she asked me. Gods, my chest seemed to ignite hearing her ask me a question, like a boy with his first crush. But this was no crush. My polar bear roared and bellowed from his place inside my body, calling out to her the only way he knew how without shifting right there on screen.

“No. That’s my given name. How old are you?” I asked. Nacho gave me a look. “What? Was that inappropriate? I’m sorry if I overstepped, Marney.”

She shook her head. “No. It’s not overstepping. But it’s on my profile, I thought.”

“Oh.” Of course. “I must’ve missed that.”

“What?” she exclaimed, but there was a glint of kidding in her eyes. “You mean you didn’t worship and scour my profile for every detail. Shame.”

Nacho let out a breath. “A sense of humor. Thank the gods. I did scour it. I’m just saying.”

This back-and-forth questioning went on for hours.

“If you were to come here...what is your job situation? Do you need to give notice or...” I started, still wondering if I was stepping over a boundary. But this woman, in my mind, was about to come here to be our mate. Asking about her job didn’t seem too personal.

“I’m actually between jobs right now. What about you two? What do you do for work?”

We explained our different jobs. Of course, she was fascinated by Nacho’s writing career. Most women and some men were. She wanted to know what his pen name was and if she could download all of his books but, once they were in the thralls of his genre, her eyes flicked to me. “Riggs, I’m sorry. Your job must be great as well. I’m just an avid reader and got excited.”

I shrugged one shoulder. “My job is not exciting, but all jobs don’t need to be. They pay the bills. That’s what’s important.”

“That’s very true. So...you two really live in the middle of nowhere? Please tell me the snow is as beautiful as it is in those pictures.”

I chuckled and took the phone, walking toward the front door. “See for yourself, female.” I turned the camera to face the back of my phone and did a one-eighty. “Winter is still hiding a bit, but this is the beginning.”

There was a gasp while I turned the camera back on myself. “That’s your tree? Is it real?”

Nacho took the phone from me and gave her a tour of the house. We walked her through but she said nothing along the way. I feared that she didn’t like the place or that we hadn’t done enough to make it nice. “You don’t like it, female?” Nacho asked as we sat back down at the table.

“I love it. The tree is right out of a dream. It’s a really beautiful place you live. Can I ask why you call me female? Is that a shifter thing?”

While we were sure she knew we were shifters since the Mail-Order Mating app was a place for shifters to find their mates, we hadn’t broached the subject of what we were.

Nacho came up with the answer before I did. “It is. You are a female after all. For us, the word female has more reverence than woman or girl. Eventually, when we get to know you better, we would come up with our own sweet names for you but will still probably call you female. It’s who we are. Does it bother you? You knew we were shifters, right?”

She nodded. “I did. I dated one in high school. But I’ve never met a polar bear shifter, much less two. I have no problem with you calling me female. It’s endearing, actually.”



“If I may, Marney, what are the boxes behind you? Are you moving? Or is someone else moving?”

My stomach swirled in anticipation of her answer. She glanced over at the boxes and while she did, her shirt slipped off her shoulder as though it were too big for her, or maybe she wore it like that on purpose. Either way, Nacho and I both sucked in a breath at the sight of those couple of inches of her bare body.

Who knew a shoulder could be so damned sexy?

When her eyes met ours again, her lips were pursed. “I’m moving out. There was...a big life change for me recently, and I have to move out.”

My bear bowed up, wanting to provide her shelter, whatever it took to make that happen.

“Where will you go?” Nacho asked.

I put things together in the few seconds while we waited for Marney to answer the question. She was between jobs. She was now between homes. Whatever this life event she had alluded to had to be something big—something life-changing.

After a shrug and a giggle, she admitted that she didn’t know where she would go. That she was looking for something she could afford but also something short-term so that if she needed to move again, there would be no lease holding her down.

“Marney, would you excuse us for a few minutes?” Nacho said.

She nodded. “Yeah. Go ahead. I’ll be here.”

I already knew what my best friend wanted to talk about—I would bet a lung it was the same notion churning through my head.

“Tell me you’re feeling like she’s ours,” he said as we stepped outside and he closed the door behind him.

“One hundred percent. Should we ask her to come here? Is it too soon?”

Nacho inhaled a great draw of winter air. “Is there anything too soon when a female is your mate?”

No.

Hell no.

“Let’s ask her. She could say no, but that doesn’t mean she’s not our mate. We might have to be more patient.”

Nacho nodded. “Let’s hope she’s feeling us as much as we’re feeling here. Here goes nothing.”

We went back inside and Marney was already on her Kindle, probably searching for Nacho’s books. “Hey, you two,” she said.

“We would like to ask you something, Marney,” I started.

She put down the Kindle and dramatized a serious face. Her eyebrows drawn down. Her lips puckered. Arms crossed over her chest. Her serious was seriously adorable. “Shoot.”

“If you think we’re what you want, would you want to move here with us and give it a real shot?”

Her walls broke. Her arms uncrossed. “Are you sure? You barely know me.”

“Are we sure?” Nacho asked. “Are you, female? Because we were sure when we saw your profile picture. Our animals both cried out for you. I know things are different for humans.”

He didn’t say the word mate, but it was implied, rightfully so.

“We humans might be different, but I’m more than sure. I woke up this morning hoping this would work out. When do you want me to come?”

I jumped to answer. Eager didn’t even begin to describe how much I wanted her here—yesterday. “As soon as you can. We will pay for the flight. Everything.”

A rose-red blush filled her beautifully rounded cheeks. “I can pay for my flights. I’m ready, guys. I’m ready for you both.”



# Chapter Twelve

## *Marney*

It seemed like a good idea at the time. Letting my boxes go into storage while I used most of the funds I had to buy a plane ticket to meet two complete strangers and see if we could make a life together. Two polar bear shifters.

I pictured the polar bears I'd seen in all those documentaries. Fierce predators of the north. That one town where they pretty much took over the place every year. What made me think I could just cross the country and move in with two men who spent part of their time in that form?

My high school boyfriend had never shifted in front of me or really even talked about it. I knew what he was, but we weren't serious, just casually dating, and it was easy to forget. But this time, I was going to be living under the same roof with them. And that...might be just a little bit scary.

I mean, what did I know about them? Bringing up the app, I looked at their profiles again. We'd been talking almost nonstop since I agreed to come, and they were so kind and funny and of course beyond hot. But did that mean it was a good idea to make such a big leap? Not that I had a lot of options, but was it fair to them to go based on that?

But it wasn't the whole reason, of course. No...I'd fallen hard for these two guys the first time we spoke, and I genuinely believed there might be something there for us. And when the plane landed, which it was about to do, they would be there waiting for me. I owed them at least a goodbye

before I... Did what? Begged the airline for a free flight back to where I had no place to go. Move into the storage unit with my boxes? I was pretty sure that was illegal, and I knew it would be awful.

I hadn't really gotten on the plane because of no place to go, and I couldn't let my nervousness make me forget that. If I was going to start a new life, with two men every single one of those bitchy bridesmaids from Claude's side of the family would kill me to get for themselves...where was I going with this?

The pilot turned on the seat belt sign and I tried some deep breathing. My new life was about to start, and now was not the time to lose courage. What would Nacho and Riggs think if they faced a shaking, pale heroine from a gothic novel? That was not me, had never been me. Sure, I'd made mistakes. Kind of big ones in fact. I'd allowed Claude's mother to bully me into the wedding of her choice instead of insisting on the small ceremony with only family and friends I'd dreamed of. Agreed to move into that behemoth of a house instead of the cottage I'd have preferred. Hell, even the flavor of the cake was her choice. I wanted chocolate and she picked lavender.

Floral cake? Who even did that? I did taste the sample and it was so heavy with the flowery flavor...then she asked for more! I wondered what happened to that cake. I didn't actually know what happened after I left. Maybe they donated all the food. I hoped they had. But that was none of my concern now. It might not even be Claude's if he valued his sanity. I didn't know if I'd have the strength to walk away from all that

money, but I liked to think I would. It certainly wasn't part of what had upset me when the wedding was called off.

We landed, taxied down the landing strip toward the buildings in the distance. This was not the town where my probably mates lived, but it was the closest airport serviced by the larger airlines. The smaller, closer one would have involved my coming to this one anyway then transferring to a very small plane, and Nacho and Riggs both discouraged that. They said they didn't mind the drive, and it would save me quite a bit of money.

That sort of consideration boded well for my life with them.

We were at the gate and the row in front of me was exiting into the aisle, so I stood up and reached for my carry-on. Shuffling along behind the others, I made my way to the front of the plane then onto the jetway. I followed the signs toward baggage, scanning ahead for the faces I'd seen in our video chats. The moment I emerged from the security area, there they were.

I'd never met a bear shifter of any kind, that I knew of, but I'd always imagined they'd be tall and broad shouldered. They were. Their heads were moving back and forth, scanning, and I immediately wanted them to find me. Darting around the mom with two kids and more carry-ons than should have been allowed, I surged toward them, free hand in the air, waving.

The second our gazes locked, I was one smitten kitten. How could I ever have wanted anyone else? How did I not

know that the right men for me were waiting—and how did I get lucky enough to find them all this distance away?

“Marney!” Riggs got to me first and lifted me into the air, the carry-on handle flipping through my fingers. “You made it.” He gave me a big squeeze and passed me to Nacho who repeated the process, along with a smacking kiss on my cheek.

“Finally.” He set me down and tucked me under his arm. “Let’s get your bags and go home.”

Home...

“Are you hungry? Thirsty?” Riggs asked.

“We’ll go through the coffee place on the way. They have great baked goods and sandwiches. Is that all right, Marney?”

It all went fast then, getting the bags, loading everything in the car, and zooming out of the airport. They were so excited to see me, chatting about the house and the area and how much they hoped I’d love their home. They bought me coffee and cake and a sandwich big enough for...well, for two polar bears at the drive-thru and then we were headed for “home.”





# Chapter Thirteen

*Nacho*

She was here. I thought the day would never come.

And she was mine. My bear cried out *mate* when she appeared with that heart-lighting smile on her face. He knew.

*Mate.*

“I thought we were in love—madly. But now that I know the truth, looking back, I should’ve seen the signs,” she said.

“What signs?” Riggs leaned up and ran his hand down her arm. It made her shiver but with the heat cranked up, I knew it wasn’t from the cold.

“I’ll explain. First, why my profile picture was in a wedding dress. It was from the photo shoot the day before. So, after I was left with no husband at the altar, the wedding was called off. He wasn’t there. The bridesmaids were ready. The church was packed. Everything was perfect. But I had no groom. I stood there while one of his cousins came out and tried to tell me to... I don’t even remember what she said exactly, but before I knew it, the officiant was announcing that the bride and the groom had decided not to have the wedding. A wedding is supposed to be the most important day of a person’s life and yet, it was all happening to me instead of me being in it. Gods, I’m not making sense.”

“You are.” I took her hand in mine and, to my surprise, she didn’t pull away. In fact, she placed her other hand on top and squeezed. Gods, she was shaking. The whole situation had

done a number on her. “It’s okay. Take all the time you need. We are listening.”

After a few long breaths, she swiped at some tears. If I wasn’t driving, I would’ve taken them from her. Riggs handed her a tissue from the back seat.

“I ran for it. Everyone was whispering, and some were snickering and looking at their phones, and some people I didn’t know snapped a few pictures of me while my world was crashing down around me. I remember looking for someone to anchor me. Someone to be on my side but when I turned, the only thing I saw was the door. Next thing I know, I’m stuffing myself in that godawful dress into the limo and telling him to go to a place where I could drink and no one would find me. The limo driver did as he was told. I ended up in a shifter bar, although I didn’t realize it at the time. The bartenders helped me. And somewhere between the shots of tequila and taking off my wedding dress in favor of leggings and a T-shirt with the bar logo, I somehow got signed up for the app.”

We stayed silent, letting her story hang in the air, along with its sadness and the fury I felt in my chest.

“Are you still getting over him?” Riggs asked. His eyes and mine connected in the rearview mirror. It was a fair question.

“No. Now that I know everything, I realize I was taking the steps but they weren’t mine. I was doing what I thought was expected of me. The god-awful meringue dress. The gaudy veil. The three-hundred-dollar-per-person plates being served at the reception. The way his cousin told me not to

make a scene. I was a pawn in their life when I should've been a queen in my own story.”

We got off the main highway and moved to a gravel road. “What happened? Why did he leave you?”

She smiled. “Claude left me for another man. The dream of his lover. A man who wasn't free to be with him. They were having a relationship while Carl, his lover, was still married to a woman, and they had children. I think Claude believed that if he didn't marry me that Carl would change his mind and divorce his wife. Hell, I don't know what he was thinking. But I'm glad he made the decision.”

“We are, too,” Riggs said. “Why are you happy about it?”

Marney looked out the window and commented on all the snow while a smile grew on her face. “Because we dodged a bullet. All the humiliation and shame I felt was better than having him marry me and years later realizing that it was all a mistake. Before we had children or established a family of our own. Not getting married was better than him realizing he resented me and himself for living a fake life.”

Gods, this woman was wise beyond her years.

The ride from that point to the cabin was silent. Once we turned onto the driveway, I let her know that this was the way to our home.

“It's gorgeous. All of it. And we haven't even gotten home—I mean to your home.”

“It's your home, too, now, Marney. At least, we hope you decide to make it your home. Here we are.”

I stopped in front of the cabin. Puffs of smoke came from the chimney since we left a fire banked that morning. It must've been only embers by now. From my view, it was perfect but I waited for her assessment, hanging on every word she said since she got in the car.

“This is where you live?”

Riggs unlocked the truck. “Where we live. Come on. Let's get you inside and fed. I can smell your hunger.” She had only eaten a bit of cake, telling them she'd eat the giant sandwich later. I was sure she'd have managed it in the car without making a big mess, but sometimes the females were dainty.

He walked around and opened the door for her while I grabbed her bags. Once we were inside, she stood right inside the door, turning in circles, her eyes wide. “It's right out of a movie,” she whispered. “You two built this, right? I saw that on your profile.”

Riggs nodded and took her coat. “We did. We have some roast and potatoes in the slow cooker. Why don't you take a seat?”

She made her way to the table and chose the seat in the middle—right where she belonged. “Oh, I can fix my plate.”

“No. You can't. We shifters like to make our...it's our honor to serve you a meal. It's important for us. I hope you don't mind.”

A laugh poured from her mouth. “Do I mind being served amazing-smelling food by two gorgeous men? Yeah, it's so much trouble.”

Riggs and I glanced at each other, but neither of us said a word about her calling us gorgeous. None of us left any food on our plates.

“I need to get more dough going tonight,” I remarked as we took the plates to the sink.

“Wait a damned minute. You baked that bread?” Marney asked.

I chuffed and may have puffed my chest out a bit, thinking she was happy with our lifestyle. “I did. We don’t get to the store much, so we had to learn to bake and make things from scratch. We keep a lot of ingredients but not a lot of processed things. Are you impressed, female?”

A soft smile graced her full lips. “I am.” A yawn followed her approval.

“Are you tired?” Riggs asked as he finished washing the dishes. “You must be exhausted.”

“I am. Would you mind showing me to where I’m going to stay? I hate to be a party pooper, but I can’t keep my eyes open.”

“We’ll have many more nights, Marney,” Riggs said, but no awkwardness came afterward.

“Thanks.” We showed her the master bedroom and where our bedrooms were in case she needed anything in the night. The master had its own bathroom, so she could make herself at home. For us, she was home.

“There are extra blankets here in the chest if you need them. I’ll start a fire.”

There was a fireplace in the master suite but I couldn't remember the last time it was lit. We simply didn't go in there.

“Thank you. Both of you. I feel like I'm being pampered a bit too much.”

Riggs walked over to her and rubbed a thumb down her cheek. “There's no such thing around here. Goodnight, Marney. Have a good sleep.”

We made our way out but, before I closed the door, I heard her whisper, “I must be dreaming.”





# Chapter Fourteen

*Riggs*

Despite the fact that I was nervous about what would happen between us and Marney, I'd never been more settled in myself than I was now. My bear rumbled a bit as I went to sleep, grumpy that we weren't in the bed with her, but for some reason, he quelled once I promised him that it would be soon.

The thing was, I believed the notion. Marney belonged to us. It was only a matter of time and patience before everything came to fruition and we were properly mated.

And marked, if I had my way.

I was already up once the sun rose. I threw off my comforter and ran for the shower.

It was no ordinary day.

Today was the first full day I got the honor of courting my mate.

Nacho and I nearly ran into each other in the hallway but, unlike me, he was already showered and dressed. In jeans.

Jeans.

"You're looking nice," I said, snorting. I had been witness to weeks where my best friend never wore anything dressier than his nice pajama pants and his rattiest sweatshirt. I called it his deadline sweatshirt.

“Shut it. I had to get up early to let the bread rise.” Nacho looked down at his jeans, maybe rethinking the choice.

“I’m starting the coffee and then I’ll shower and get ready.” We both had giddy smiles.

He shook his head. “I’ll start the coffee. You get showered and into the kitchen. Your scrambled eggs are creamier than mine. Bacon? Venison sausage? Oatmeal? Hashbrowns? Fruit? Yogurt?”

I chuckled at our excitement. “All of the above. See you in ten.”

I never showered faster in my life. I put on a T-shirt with jeans but didn’t bother with socks or shoes. Even if I went out, unless I would be around humans, I didn’t put on the facade of needing them.

While I cooked up enough breakfast for an army, I glanced at the hallway every few seconds. While I wanted her here with us, I was also comforted by the thought that she was getting good rest. People underestimated physical rest after going through something emotionally and mentally taxing. The body remembered those things and, without the proper repose, it would keep reminding us of those things until we took the time to heal.

And our girl had been through some things. There was no doubt about her in my mind or in my bear’s mind. She was ours. Mate. Mine. All of it. She belonged with us.

“What smells so good?” Her voice broke through the noises of the kitchen and cooking. Nacho was pulling out three

boules of bread as I slid the scrambled eggs onto a platter. Everything was ready.

She was right on time, and not just for breakfast.

“We cooked. I hope you’re hungry.”

She came in, wearing floral pajamas, and rubbed her eyes. Gods, I wanted to see her like that every morning. Hair tousled. Sleepy, sexy eyes. “I’m not *that* hungry. Are we having company?”

Nacho and I laughed. “No, female. No company. We may have gone overboard. We didn’t know what you liked.”

“All of this. Is there coffee?”

I slapped the table gently. “Sit down. How do you like it?”

“Splash of cream. Two sugars. How did you two sleep?” she asked and got comfortable, pulling her legs up on the chair.

“I slept like the dead. Riggs?” Nacho sliced into one of the loaves of bread. He always cut them before letting them cool all the way. That’s why there was always more than one made.

“Same. What about you, Marney? You didn’t get cold or anything?”

She accepted the cup of coffee and, our hands touched. She gasped softly and bit down on her bottom lip. Yeah, she felt it. Mates always felt a low buzz of electricity when they met their match—even humans, I’d been told, though they usually ignored it. At least, that was what I heard. “I knocked out as soon as my head hit the pillow and didn’t budge from

that spot until this morning. I've never slept like that before. I don't think I even tossed or turned."

"You needed rest, female. I'm glad you're getting it here. Now, tell me what to put on your plate." Nacho loaded her up with a little bit of everything and gave her a thick slice of his bread. I placed our homemade jams and jellies in the center, along with some local honey.

It did my bear good to hear that she had slept well and was warm and cozy in our home, and by our, I meant hers as well. My beast wanted his den welcoming for his mate—always.

We all dug in, but our movement stopped when a moan came from her mouth. "This is incredible. All of it."

"Eat your fill, female. There's plenty, and Riggs loves to cook." Nacho added some blueberries to her plate since she had eaten those first.

"We thought you'd like a tour and maybe a walk outside when we're done and cleaned up?"

She nodded. "I would like that."

We finished up and scooted her out when she tried to help clean. Eventually, we would fall into a routine with those mundane things, but like hell she was going to wash dishes on her first day here.

"I'm ready." I looked up to see her dressed in a red turtleneck sweater and fleece-lined overalls. "Is this warm enough? I mean, I know it's warm enough for you two, but me?"

We had already given her a tour of the house but, while it was roomy, it was a simple design and not much to show off. She asked why we had extra rooms and one master and once we explained, her blush came back like a roaring fire.

“Here,” I said, getting up to get a scarf from the coatrack. I nestled it around her throat as her eyes dipped down to my lips, so damned tempting.

“Can I ask for something?” She dropped the question, her voice raising at the end.

“Ask us anything,” Nacho replied.

“Can I see your bears?”



# Chapter Fifteen

## *Marney*

I didn't know where I got the boldness to ask, but I had wanted to do something to get to know them better, and I wasn't quite ready to do that in bed. But I'd forgotten one minor fact, since I was new to seeing shifters shift...

They had to get naked to do it. Or chance shredding their clothes. My old flame in high school told me his folks threatened to send him to school in his pajamas if he ruined another pair of designer jeans. But, knowing someone had to get *nekkid* and actually seeing it happen were two different things. Maybe that was why he never shifted in front of me. He told me shifters didn't care about nudity, like "ordinaries" as he called humans. Anyway...I was about to get the whole show, and I was just a little scared. The two sweetest guys I'd ever met of course agreed to shift so I could meet their bears.

I just had to get past being embarrassed when they undressed and terrified when they were gigantic bears with huge claws and teeth. But I could do this.

Later in the evening, we went out the kitchen door onto the back patio, me bundled in my coat. Even though they were way out in the country, I imagined they wanted privacy for this. Nacho picked up one of the chairs and carried it out into the middle of the yard, where moonlight made the white painted wood glow. "Come and sit here, Marney."

"All right." I settled in the seat, feeling almost like I was about to watch some kind of show. "Are you going to shift

now?”

“Right now, if you’re still sure you want to see?”

“I do. It’s a big part of each of you, and I want to meet your bears.”

They undressed, quickly and efficiently, not like they wanted to show off or anything, but in the brief moment before the shift began, I got a look at two men who could grace the cover of one of those hot-guy calendars if they wanted to. Then the air around them seemed to shimmer, and I blinked, unable to credit what my eyes told me to be true.

Of course, I knew they were shifters and would be making this change, but watching it happen in front of me was not something I’d been prepared for. Especially in duplicate. I wouldn’t ever be able to explain how it happened. I’d say you had to be there. They were both already tall, but they gained a lot more height as well as width before their faces extended into snouts, and then everything happened so fast. Fur sprouted, covering their skin in ripples like wheat in a windy field. They were glowing white in the moonlight, claws sprouting from their fingers, so much longer and sharper than I expected. Of course, my only experience with polar bears in person was at the zoo where they’d just been lounging around their pond, in the shade, and I hadn’t gotten a very good look at them. Those had been faintly green, too, something to do with algae growing inside their fur which was damaged by the concrete floor of their enclosure. The zookeeper assured us it didn’t hurt them, but it seemed a shame to me to keep such beautiful animals confined. But these bears were not behind a



chain-link fence. They weren't lolling around on pretend rocks and trying to get through their days in a pen.

No, they were standing right out here in the yard, in front of me, with every ability to take off and go if they wanted to, but why would they? This was their home. It was not easy to wrap my head around any of it. But I was still in awe of these creatures and what they represented. They were fully half of the men, and I needed to know this side as well.

Standing, I closed the distance between them and me. I was afraid of them, which made no sense because they were easily twice my height. But nothing about them menaced me. Their claws did not flex; they didn't growl or otherwise act threatening. Rather, they stood at ease, while I walked around them, taking them in from all sides. And I touched them, rubbing my palm over their fur, lifting their paws and tracing those claws. They were immense and could kill me with one swipe. But they wouldn't. I knew that. Somehow.

Then, without warning, they were shifting back, and now I was standing inches away from two naked hunks. They for sure could have taken advantage of the situation, but of course they did not. They moved away and put their clothes back on.

"We would have taken you out with us to run around, but it's kind of cold out, and we thought meeting the bears would be enough for one night," Riggs said.

"It probably was." I followed them inside the house and took off my coat, hanging it on one of the hooks by the door. "It was a lot, but it was amazing."

"Cold?" Nacho was watching me, brows lowered.

“A little...”

“Then I’m going to make us some cocoa while Riggs builds up the fire, and we can sit and sip and talk. I’m sure you have questions about what you saw.”

“I do have some about shifters and mating...”



## Chapter Sixteen

*Nacho*

“How about we start with what you think you know,” I suggested and put my arm along the back of the couch behind her. If Riggs was shocked that she asked about mating and how shifters mated, he didn’t show it on his face.

“I know that shifters mate only to their true mate or their fated mate. A human can’t be that to them.”

Riggs stopped her with his hand on her thigh before she could go any further. “That’s not true. Fate doesn’t care if our mate is human or shifter or even another paranormal species. Our true and fated mate can be human, Marney.”

“Oh.”

So damned adorable. She hadn’t shrunk away from our bears. I had met some other shifters who had stood back once they saw our animals. Even for polar bears, we were large and growly. But Marney didn’t seem to mind. When her hand ran through my fur, I nearly marked her right then and there.

“What else do you know?” I prodded, trying to relieve the awkward pause in conversation.

She considered. “Shifters mate for life. Once they find their mate, they don’t let go of them. They are faithful, at least, most of them.”

Riggs let out a low, humming growl before he tamed himself. “Shifters should never cheat. Ever. The males I know don’t even look at other females, in a romantic way, after

finding their mate or mates. I...we would never do that to our mate.”

She gave him a soft smile. “That’s pretty much all I know about shifters and mating. It’s kind of like humans getting married, right?” Her voice caught on the word “married,” and I knew the hole the man had left inside her and the hurt she felt were still fresh.

And yet, she’d come here, trusting us with this moment in her life, when she was most fragile.

“Humans divorce their spouses when things get tough. They put everything and everyone, including their careers and hobbies and even their smartphones, before their partners, the ones who are supposed to be by their side for the rest of their lives. I’m not saying shifters are better at that, but shifters are better.”

She laughed while reaching over me to grab a blanket. I helped her with it since it seemed heavy for her. Once she was cuddled up, she sighed.

*That’s right, female. Get all comfy and cozy right here in our den. Right where you belong.*

“I had a friend who was having trouble in the bedroom with her husband,” she said. “So, she got in bed naked one night and lay there, trying to get his attention. She said he watched some videos on Instagram for an hour and then leaned over and turned off the lamp. He didn’t even notice she was naked and needing him—so engrossed in other people’s lives to notice.”

I snorted. That sounded like humans. They got too comfortable in their marriages. “A shifter’s mate is their first priority. When we get mated, everything changes, probably even before that. Once we find our mate, she becomes the center of our universe. We work to provide for her. We give her what she needs in all areas of life. Our mate is our sun and moon and everything in between.”

Marney made a tiny *mmm* sound and snuggled in deeper. Between the plush pillows of our couch and the fluffy blanket, plus Riggs and I on either side of her, she had made quite the nest. Her shiny hair framed her face, and the light from the fireplace danced in those icy-blue eyes of hers. “I don’t know what it’s like to be someone’s priority. I never have been.”

“You deserve to be someone’s only priority, female. Two someones’ priority.” Riggs was right.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “How do you know when a female is your mate? Does your bear pinch you from... wherever he is inside you?”

I loved that Marney wasn’t shy about asking what she really wanted to know. I hated when people danced around subjects.

“Not a pinch,” I laughed, and Riggs joined me. “Mine is more of a clawing me open from the inside out. It isn’t painful, but I can feel what he’s doing. That’s not making sense. For someone who writes books, I’m mincing words. Riggs?”

“The clawing would happen to get our attention, mostly. But more than anything else, there would be images exchanged between the consciousnesses. He would say the

word *mate* to us. Yell it, actually. He makes himself known, and he tells me what, or in this case, who he wants.”

“Right away? Like love at first sight?”

Riggs blushed. “Not always right away. But in the first few encounters.”

The question she would ask next hovered above us, a welcome rain cloud threatening to pour. “You...he hasn’t told you anything about me?”

Despite feeling semi-prepared for the question, I wasn’t ready to answer it.

Or maybe I was. My bear knew she was the one when she approached us right off the airplane.

I wouldn’t lie to her. It simply wasn’t in me. “Yes,” I answered.

“And yours?” She turned to Riggs.

“Yes,” he answered.

After pushing a lock of hair behind her ear, she let out a long breath. “I’m sure about both of you as well. And that master suite is very big for one person.”

My heart thrummed faster than after running or jumping into a freezing lake. She was offering herself to us. Offering her body but, more than that, her life.

“Mating is not something we take lightly,” Riggs took over, and I was glad for it since my throat had constricted. “Sex with you...Marney, once we step into that bedroom, we would want you for life. You’re still recovering from a hurtful and traumatic event.”

“You think I’m here as some rebound romance?” she scoffed as sourness settled all around us.

“We didn’t say that, Marney,” I said, trying to take her hand, so she would be soothed, but she was all wrapped up.

“I’m offering you two...you know what? Nevermind. I’m going to the big, empty bedroom by myself to think for a while.”

“Marney...” Riggs started.

She turned. Tears welled in her eyes. “I might be human, but I know what I want. And it has nothing to do with being traumatized.”





# Chapter Seventeen

*Riggs*

“She’s not leaving,” Nacho said as we prepped dinner. Marney hadn’t come out for lunch, which upset us, but our bears were leading us at this point. We needed to give her all the time she needed.

My bear felt like his mate was still boiling, more than the egg drop soup on the stove.

With some extra time on our hands, we’d made chicken and vegetable hand pies, along with the soup for dinner.

“Who said she was? Wait, are you reassuring me or commanding?” Both of us were gruff and upset, since our mate had stormed into the bedroom. We hadn’t meant to hurt her. We knew she was ours but also that it was different for humans.

She also needed to understand that our desire for her would never trump her emotional needs.

“It’s all ready,” I said, ignoring his question as I painted broad lines of butter on the hand pies and sprinkled on sesame seeds for a finish.

“Do you think we’ve given her enough time?” Nacho’s bear was likely hurting as mine was.

“I think we need to go talk to her.”

Together, we walked toward the master suite and then knocked softly. At first, there was no answer, but we heard her steady breaths. “Come in.”

I opened the door. My bear wanted to run to her—gather her up in our arms and make everything okay again.

*Soothe mate. Heal her. Need her near.*

“Can we talk?” Nacho asked. She was sitting on the chaise in the corner of the room, covered in a fur-like blanket, a book in her hand. Her eyes were swollen and red, but she wasn’t crying anymore.

“Sure.”

We both took a seat on the floor next to her. Our bears wouldn’t have us so far from her any longer. “Marney, what has you so upset?”

We already knew, but talking through things was necessary for a good relationship. She should feel free to express her needs and emotions whenever she chose, without fear of repercussions. That’s how trust was built, as far as I knew.

“You didn’t want me. I think I’m your mate and you didn’t...” A fresh set of tears fell down her face.

“What?” Nacho bellowed. Even the flames in the fireplace waggled with the force of his voice. He shook his head in disbelief. “First of all, you are our mate. There is no question or thinking or wondering. Let’s put that out of the way. You are ours. Period.”

She swiped the tears from her face and put the book down. She flung the covers from her body and lowered herself to the floor. I sucked in a breath, wanting her in my lap, surrounded by my warmth. I made that happen by reaching

forward and taking her into my arms. Our mate melted into my embrace while Nacho rubbed her back.

“Then why didn’t you want to mate?” she asked, clutching my shirt in her fists.

I kissed her hair and then her temples, reveling in having her so near. “Because we didn’t want to rush you. I know you aren’t with us because of some rebounding but we want you to be sure. All we want is you, Marney, and we would wait for you to really be ready for this commitment before giving yourself to us.”

She nodded.

Nacho scooted closer so that he was behind her and moved to circle her waist with his arms. He placed kisses along the back of her neck.

“I’m ready. I am a big girl, guys. This isn’t something I’m taking lightly. Trust me when I say that what I’m feeling for both of you isn’t the result of some broken heart or an unfilled need. I never want to leave this place. I never want to be away from either of you. I’m all in.”

“It’s only been a day, Marney,” Nacho murmured while devouring her neck. She arched in my hold, pressing her breasts against my chest. A hint of a whimper came from her mouth. I couldn’t take it anymore. I had to kiss her.

“Maybe it only takes a day, Nacho,” she said.

“Once I kiss you, it’s over. There won’t be time to leave or run.” My gaze dipped from her eyes to her lips. She ran them between her teeth, making them even pinker. “You are ours, and we’re never letting you go.”

“Then you’d better kiss me,” she said while rocking her hips into me. Our mouths met, and a thousand explosions went off inside my brain. This was it. Kissing my mate was another level. Her taste was so sweet, strawberries bursting in my mouth. She moaned and broke the kiss. “I don’t know how this works. I’ve never been with two men.”

Nacho put his chin on her shoulder. “Don’t worry, mate, we’ll show you. But you’re hungry. Once you are fed, we’ll mate completely.”

“We’re not mating because I’m hungry?” She laughed.

“Your needs come first. Besides, we’re going to take care of one of those needs first. Can we touch you, mate?”

She nodded. “Anywhere.”

We removed her clothes slowly and then she got into Nacho’s lap, our positions reversed. They continued kissing while I paid attention to her back. Her shoulders flexed and relaxed while my mouth worshipped all her planes and valleys. My hands moved to cup and knead her breasts while Nacho did the same to her thighs. The scent of her arousal filled the room, infiltrating my lungs and raising me to heights I didn’t know was possible.

“I need,” she whimpered.

“What do you need? You need to come, baby?” Nacho asked. She nodded in response. One of his hands moved in between her legs and she gasped. She writhed against him, tilting her head back and to the side, kissing me while riding his fingers.

In seconds, she fell apart, calling out both of our names.

Although we had our clothes on, my bear was still. His mate was fulfilled, for the moment, and now it was time to feed her.



# Chapter Eighteen

*Marney*

How they could think of food at a time like this I'd never know, but that's how they were. "We can't concentrate on anything else if our mate has unmet needs." Nacho and Riggs were bustling around the kitchen while I sat at the table and watched. I was a little hungry, but despite what they'd just done to take the edge off, my other needs were crowding out anything food-related.

Still, I didn't mind the show.

Everything these men did was a turn-on for me, and it was quite flattering to have them going to so much trouble just to make me a meal. "I can help, you know..." Claude had never even made me ramen. If I wasn't home to cook, he just ordered out. "I can cook."

Riggs paused as he passed me with a bag of flour in his hands. He leaned in and kissed me. "I'm sure you can, and we'll gladly eat anything you make for us, but won't you humor us for now? It's important to our bears that we feed you a good meal. Especially tonight."

*Especially tonight.* Was he implying that I might need a lot of energy? My cheeks heated at the thought. "I-I'm not used to being waited on."

"Then you're going to have to get used to it." Nacho brought out eggs and milk and butter from the refrigerator. "Do you like waffles?"



“Waffles?” My stomach let out a rumble that had both of them chuckling. “Yes. But I’ve never had them made at home. You know how to do that? Isn’t it really hard?”

“It might be if we had to do it without this.” Riggs bent and pulled a pan out of a cabinet near the stove. It had a long handle and while I watched, he opened it to reveal the classic shape of a square waffle. “Just sit back and watch us in action.”

Nacho drew a carton of orange juice out of the refrigerator and poured a tall glass full. He placed it in front of me with a flourish. “You drink this, and we’ll have the waffles made in the blink of an eye.

It wasn’t quite that fast, but it was pretty speedy. They mixed ingredients in a big bowl without even a recipe, creating a smooth batter while the waffle iron heated on the stove. Then they opened it, greased it with a little butter, and poured the batter in. Halfway through, Riggs flipped it over. “That’s how we get it evenly browned on both sides. Another minute and…” He opened the iron and let the golden waffle fall onto a plate. “Get ready to taste heaven.”

He set the place on the table and filled the iron again before they both came to stand in front of me.

“I can’t eat while you two stare,” I asserted. “Aren’t you going to eat?”

“Oh yes.” Riggs turned the iron over. “But we want to make sure you like these.”

“If you don’t,” Nacho said, “we’ll make you something else.”

I was able to get them to look away while I took my first bite, and soon there was a whole stack of waffles on the table and all three of us devoured them with real maple syrup and butter. It satisfied one kind of hunger, but just sitting with them at the table, eating waffles drenched in that yummy syrup and talking about anything that occurred to us made me long for even more intimacy. When the last bite was gone, I stood up and held my hands out to them.

“I’m ready.”

“Sure?” Riggs asked. “We have all the time in the world.”

“Very ready. I want you both. I want to wear your marks so everyone will know I am yours.” I had a moment of doubt. “Unless you don’t want to?”

“Marney, you’re our mate. There’s nothing we want more, and I don’t have the willpower to resist you.”

“You’ve seduced us,” Nacho said, smiling, but his eyes held more than humor. And he proved what he meant by scooping me off my chair and carrying me out of the kitchen.

“What about the dishes?” I protested, not really concerned about them, but it seemed polite.

“We’ll get new ones,” Riggs growled, following us up the stairs to the master suite. They laid me on the bed and proceeded to remove my clothes with torturous slowness. The firelight cast their faces in shadow, but I already knew what they looked like, had already memorized their features. I welcomed their kisses and touches, their gentle urging of my legs aside as each of them filled me and made me theirs.

Nacho was gentler, and took his time, possessing me with a thoroughness that was mind-bending, whereas Riggs was faster, more of a roller-coaster ride than any experience I'd ever had. "We'll take you at the same time, one day soon," he murmured against my throat, sending me over the edge for at least the third time. I wasn't quite sure what that would look like, but at this point, I was up for anything. And when they'd both spilled inside me, when I lay quivering under them, they both marked me, sharp teeth sinking into my neck on either side and then licking the spot. They'd explained that their saliva would fix the mark, and I was already planning on never wearing a turtleneck again.

We all fell asleep together on the bed, one on either side of me. I slept better than I ever had, feeling safe and warm and cared for. And at home.



# Chapter Nineteen

*Nacho*

This Christmas morning, I had the best present ever, and she lay naked next to me, sandwiched between me and my best friend.

All unwrapped. No bow or tag needed. *To: Us. From: Fate.*

Hell, I didn't need another Christmas present ever again.

In fact, last night, on Christmas Eve, we'd had her next to the Christmas tree, by the light of the fire while winter threw her wrath around outside. Marney had only been with us a few months, but I couldn't remember how in the hell the two of us had made it without her. She made this cabin warm. She turned our house into a real den—a home.

I ran a finger down her face, her neck, and then down her body, enjoying the silken touch of her skin—the dips and curves that made her perfect in my mind. The swell of her breasts. The way her nipples hardened in response to our kisses. Lips that begged me to take them, have them wrapped around my cock.

I was drunk on her and never wanted to be sober again.

I'd reached her waist when her eyes flew open. She gasped and crawled over me, legs and arms everywhere while I laughed at her exuberance. My bear could feel her excitement, I just didn't know what for yet. We'd chosen not

to buy any presents because the love we shared was gift enough.

“It’s Christmas!” she shouted.

Riggs shot up out of the bed and was standing in an instant, eyes wide, looking for the danger she was shouting about. “What is it?”

“Our mate is excited and I think she loves the snow,” I chuckled, pointing to Marney who stood shivering, naked, in front of the window, her face plastered to the glass, oohing and aahing over the winter. I hoped she never lost that awe for us or this place.

“It’s Christmas!” she shouted again and shook her hips. “And I’m freezing!” She ran for the bathroom and turned on the shower. It wasn’t long before steam billowed out. Our mate loved her hot showers, and usually we helped her make them even hotter.

I got dressed while Riggs joined Marney in the shower. I’d already been up early, shaping and rolling the cinnamon rolls and then putting them in the oven on low to let them rise. My parents had made cinnamon rolls every Christmas morning and more than anything, I wanted those traditions to continue with my new family.

Marney came out of the bedroom first, dressed in her pajamas and my robe that practically swallowed her. “You didn’t join us in the shower. I missed you.” She came up behind me and splayed her hands on my abdomen.

“I was making breakfast for all of us. Why don’t you go get warm by the fire. I’m making peppermint mochas.”

She began to kiss my back but eventually moved to the sofa in front of the fire, grabbed one of her many books, and settled in. Riggs came in and asked if he could help, but I had it all under control. He walked around the place, turning on all the Christmas lights and dimming the room ones so that our living room was Christmas incarnate—minus the presents.

I wasn't bothered in the least. I was blessed beyond compare and not a strip of wrapping paper in sight.

“Christmas breakfast is served,” I said, bringing everything to the living room on a tray. I placed it on the table while sitting on the other side of our mate. She lay sideways on the couch, her feet in Riggs' lap and her back leaned against me. I noticed she had abandoned her book for her phone. She read on her phone, but that didn't require so many clicks. “What are you busy about, mate of mine?” I asked.

“I'm working on my Christmas present to you both.”

I stiffened next to her, and not in the good way. “We said no presents, mate. What are you talking about?”

She sat up. “See this?” Riggs came to sit closer to her. “All of these credits were refunded to me from what was supposed to be my honeymoon. It was an extravagant and overpriced trip with everything paid for.”

“How does that end up as presents for us? You lost me.” Riggs' voice was still muddled with sleep.

“We said no presents,” I mentioned as she excitedly showed me the phone.

“*You* said no presents. I feel like you two have given me everything, and I've only been taking.” Growls came from

both my and Riggs' chests. "Okay, okay. I gave you me, and I'm amazing but I wanted to do this for us. I took the credits and booked us a trip. Let's call it a mating moon."

A mating moon. This woman.

Riggs and I both looked at what she had planned. It was an all-inclusive trip to Alaska. A place we had always wanted to visit but never found the time.

"I can still refund it if you two don't like it..." Marney paled.

Ah, we were messing this up. "Mate, this is the most generous gift aside from your heart. We are very grateful and if you couldn't tell...surprised to say the least." I hugged her and placed a kiss on her temple.

"Riggs?" she asked.

"I've always wanted to go to Alaska. It will be even better with you."





# Chapter Twenty

*Riggs*

“There,” Marney said, stepping back from her masterpiece. She had insisted on setting up the tent herself, one that we went to buy once we’d decided where we would bring in the new year. We bought some sleeping bags, but they were only for her since we intended to spend the night in our fur, making sure we were all three warm through the night.

“You did well,” I said, placing a kiss on her neck while inhaling deeply. Her scent of pine and vanilla intoxicated me. “We’ll keep you warm.”

“Oh, I know you will. Are you sure this is the place? What if they don’t do fireworks this year?”

Holidays were important to my mate, we had discovered. We thought that it was only Christmas but, really, it was every holiday. She wanted to make a big deal of them and not in the expensive way, but in the way that made each of them meaningful. We already had plans for the spring equinox since those times centered around nature were the holidays we shifters valued more than the human ones. That only gave her more special days to enjoy.

“I’m positive, mate. Come get warm by the fire while we wait.” Nacho and I had come up days before and set up a rock firepit and placed some logs around it so that we would have a place to sit and enjoy the show.

Riggs had brought up champagne and, once the fireworks were over, we intended to bring in the new year in exactly the

way we'd hoped. The three of us—in the tent—not sleeping.

“Is that my phone?” She ran over to her backpack. We were glad she liked the outdoors and wanted to spend time here since it was our animals' favorite place to be—ours, too. “Hello?” As soon as the word was out of her mouth, her smile was erased. The lines in her forehead deepened, and her fist balled up at her side.

“Who is it?” I asked, stepping closer. Whoever was pissing on our holiday, unless they were dying or sick, would regret calling her.

Marney took the phone from her ear and pressed a button, changing the conversation to speaker so we could hear. Nacho moved to stand next to me; both of us crossed our arms over our chest.

Some woman named Genia was talking and her attitude was shit.

“The family paid for most of your wedding. We lost all of our money on the downpayments. We're in a mess, and it's your fault. We need half of the money back. After all, it was half your wedding.”

Marney cocked her hip out. “It wasn't any of my fault that Claude decided he didn't want to get married. I showed up in the white dress and intended on going through with it. Why don't you call him and ask him for the money?”

“Claude did nothing wrong. Besides...if you were more of a woman, maybe you could've changed his mind.”

Gods above, whoever this was clearly had no brains and even less manners.

“May I?” I asked Marney in a whisper.

“Genia, is it?” I asked.

“Who is this?” Her whiny voice pierced my ears.

“This is Riggs, her mate. Here with her other mate, Nacho. Our female owes you nothing, and you won’t see a single dime. If you’d like to continue harassing her, we won’t hesitate to file a protection order and harassment charges, since this call is being recorded. Claude has made his choice, whether you like it or not. Now, leave our mate alone. Are we clear?”

The woman hung up.

“Well, that was easy.” Marney explained who the woman was, and I regretted not giving her stronger words.

“People have balls the size of Texas, sometimes, but without the claws to back them up.”

That night, we shared hot cocoa, French vanilla this time. My girl loved new flavors of hot drinks. Tea. Coffee. All of them. And I loved experimenting for her. I hadn’t hit a flavor she didn’t love yet.

The fireworks burst forth on the stroke of midnight marking one year ended and another year began. We would never have another year like the previous—lonely and waiting for the one to complete us. She was here as the new year rang in, and no way in hell we were letting her get away.



# Chapter Twenty-One

## *Marney*

My mates were the best at celebrating holidays. I'd always loved to plan for them, but usually the people in my life thought I was overdoing it. Not Riggs and Nacho though. They loved my quirk and did everything to help our celebrations be bigger and better each time. We'd gotten through Christmas and New Year's, Valentines Day and St. Patrick's Day, and the spring equinox.

Every day with these men was a revelation. I had realized somewhere along the way that they really did derive pleasure from making me happy. I didn't mean to be sexist but based on past experience, I had begun to think that men who wanted to be with me were not the best kind of people. They expected women to get their happiness through pleasing them, and if we didn't, there was something wrong with us. Claude had been better than most, but even he had not been the most giving of souls.

These two? I had to keep telling them they had done enough, that I wanted to give back. If I wanted to make breakfast, I had to get up before the sun rose, or they'd be in the kitchen "assisting," which really meant taking over and making me sit down and relax and keep them company.

They were hard to give to, but I spent a lot of time trying to do just that. When you live with a successful author and someone who works in many other areas of the book world, you find yourself, or at least I found myself carving out a

niche in there for myself. A lot of that niche involved watching for places I could be helpful, like beta reading and doing some reaching out for support. There were so many independent bookstores around, all of whom were hungering for visits from a “big” author, and when I approached them, they about did backflips in appreciation and always ordered a whole lot of copies—which my mate’s appearance made fly out the door.

I also did housework and was working my way through every book on the shelves. By my calculations, I’d be done with them sometime next year and have to either start buying more or use my Kindle a whole lot. Not exactly a big problem compared to the situation I could have found myself in if Claude hadn’t finally decided to speak up for himself. At the last minute, but that counted.

If I hadn’t been upset, I wouldn’t have ended up in the bar that night where the bartender loaded the app into my phone and encouraged me to tap it. And then how could I have ever met these men who had become my world? When I brought that up, both guys assured me that Fate knew her business and fated mates would meet. But I wasn’t so sure. Just grateful that we had met.

It was early evening, and the sun was just now sinking low in the springtime sky. We’d had snow on the ground for a long time, and I was more than ready for the thaw that had just begun. Outside the windows, the *drip drip drip* of melting snow from the roof was constant, and Riggs had told me that I wouldn’t believe how soon it would be green out there. He actually had some sadness in his tone when he said it, but that’s what polar bears were all about.

This morning, we'd gone for a run in the woods, something we'd done often over the winter months. Their bears were so big that if we wanted to go farther than my human legs could carry me, one of them would let me ride them. I'd never imagined having a partner who I could climb on and go running over the mountains. Who would? But it was so incredibly magical, it made me almost want to weep.

"Marney, you're working too hard." Nacho came up behind me and kissed the back of my neck. "Come watch a movie with us."

"I will, just another fifteen minutes, okay?"

"I'm holding you to that." He caught my earlobe between his teeth and tugged. "Maybe we don't need to watch a movie?"

I shivered. "Ten minutes."

His laughter trailed behind him as he went off to make movie snacks for the three of us.

I returned my attention to my laptop screen where I was not working, as I'd told my mate, but finalizing the arrangements for our trip to Alaska. After I'd told them about it at Christmas, they hadn't mentioned it again, but I knew they'd have the most wonderful time. These men spent all their time making my life fantastic, and I'd grasped onto this vacation as a way I could not pay them back exactly but show them how much I cared about them and what pleasure it gave me to give to them.

I'd managed to get dates for the very end of the season up there, when many people would not want to go because snow



would likely be falling and it would be getting cold. But most people did not have two polar bears to warm their bed. And their hearts.

But they were waiting for me, and ten minutes was too long. I'd get back to this tomorrow. For now, I could smell buttered popcorn and spiced cider. My favorite.



# Epilogue

*Nacho*

Marney got tickets so we could be on shipboard for the autumnal equinox. It had been almost a year since she came into our lives, and I couldn't imagine a day without her. After the cruise, we'd be spending some time on land where our bears could run to their hearts' content, and we could truly see how polar bears lived in the wild.

Somehow Marney had contacted a den of polar bear shifters and asked if we could visit. Both our families had been living in the lower forty-eight all our lives and I'd never heard anyone express a desire to live anywhere different.

But as the ship slid past yet another gorgeous glacier, I found myself anticipating the two weeks we'd spend with those northern bears. Marney was so good to us. She'd not only paid for the trip she'd given us last Christmas but kept every one of the arrangements secret until the last possible moment, secret from us. My editor knew, and my publisher, and that knowledge explained some of the rushed dates for things on a book that wasn't going to come out for some time. They knew we'd be out of contact for a month or more, so they needed to cover these things, and while I grumbled, I went along with it.

Then, less than a week before our departure, she sprung the news on us. "We need to do some shopping before we leave." Just like that.

“Aren’t you coming out on deck?” Marney came out on the balcony and joined me. It was cold enough that few passengers were making use of the balconies, but Riggs and I had even slept out here on the loungers. In bear form. Marney pointed out that if we were spotted by a passing ship, it could cause a riot—and that the cabin steward still wanted to know how we’d managed to break two loungers so far. “The view is great there.”

“It’s pretty awesome here.” I brought her between me and the railing and opened my coat to bring her inside with me. She snuggled close. “Why don’t we call Riggs and find out where he is?”

“Hmm? I think he’s on deck.”

I nibbled the back of her neck. “Don’t you think he’d like to come to the cabin and say...take a nap?”

“A nap?” Her voice held incredulity. “While we’re passing some of the most beautiful glaciers on the whole cruise?”

I moved up the side of her neck to her earlobe. “I can think of something else beautiful I’d like to see.”

“Instead of glaciers?” She was weakening.

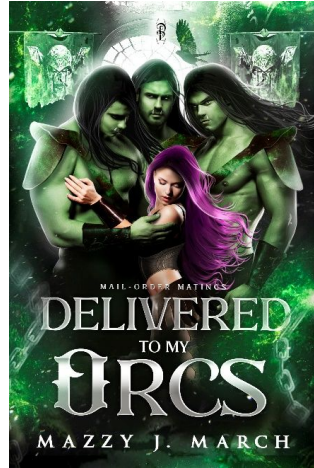
“We could all just do it out here and...”

“And break another chair?”

“It would be so worth it.” It would be more than worth it. “I’ll call Riggs.”

Thank you for reading *Delivered to My Polar Bears*. Next in the Mail-Order Matings series is [Delivered to My Orcs](#). And next up from Mazzy J. March is *Urban Academy: Semester 9*

## A Peek at [Delivered to My Orcs](#)



Iyla

I have worked in the family business since I was a teenager and planned to continue to do so for the rest of my life. But when my mom and dad died in a freak accident, the will listed my brother as the sole owner and CEO to avoid “dividing the assets.” His first act was to sell everything, including our warehouse and the storefront with the apartment upstairs where I live.

He’s always hated the janitorial supply business. It wasn’t showy or glamorous but it paid the bills for our family. The developer who bought the building is planning to tear it down in sixty days. I’ve lost my job and my home, on top of being overwhelmed with grief for my parents. They may have made

a bad decision in their will making, but I'd never stop loving and missing them.

I am desperate and in shock, and I need a new start and a new plan. Somewhere I don't drive past my brother's new mansion every time I go to the grocery store. Preferably before the new owner puts my stuff on the sidewalk.

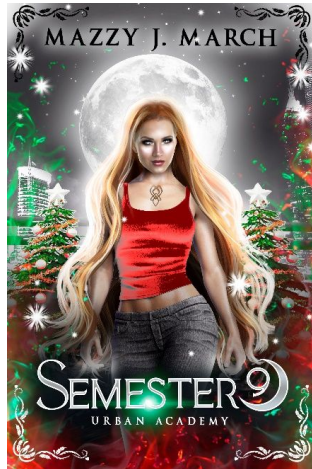
Menace, Saber, and Draven

Orcs don't have mates. We wait for someone to breed with and if we're lucky, she's likable. From what we've seen of other relationships among our kinds, mates never work out in the end, so when we decide to sign up for the Mail-Order Matings app, we do so with no expectations of love.

Who could love an orc?

*Delivered to My Orcs is Book 7 in the super sweet with building heat Mail-Order Matings Series. Delivered to My Orcs features a woman shut out of her legacy and ready to make a big change, orc alphas hoping for the best, an arranged mail-order mating, unlikely true love, and a twist. And of course, Mazzy promises a happy ever after. If you like true mates, Fate taking a hand, and monsters surrendering to love, one-click Delivered to My Orcs today.*

## A Peek at Urban Academy: Semester 9



With finals over, and the winter season upon us, we can all enjoy the holidays. Most of the students from the Urban Academy have headed home for a much-deserved break, but my mates and I have decided to stay and create a special Yule season together.

Jo, my boss at the Midnight, was a huge fan of the winter holidays and not only would I be able to work all the hours I wanted, but with Onyx and Raven committed to spending this time at Asher's family home—something both of them declared they'd pay a billion dollars to get out of—the bar would be shorthanded.

All was merry and bright at first, but of course in the urban jungle where paranormal crime abounds, nothing is ever as easy as it seems. Erik, the vampire who helped us take out my evil uncle Dean wants to find out who killed his lady Diana decades ago, and he's enlisted our help. He saw her briefly,

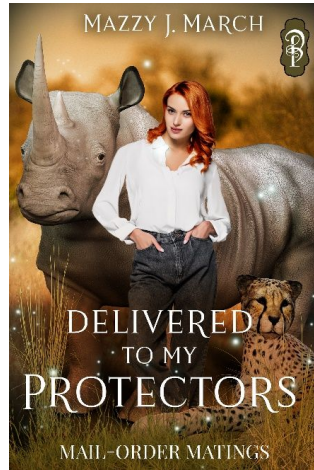


during our finally battle with my uncle, but she was gone before he had a chance to speak to her.

It would be easier if Onyx and the others were here. Maybe they'll come back early? But either way, we are to help. It's only fair. And how boring would it be just to sit around and drink eggnog with shifters and vampires and the fae?

*Urban Academy Semester 9 is the tenth story in the Urban Academy series by bestselling author Mazzy J. March. The first books follow the story of Valentina's new life in the city at the Urban Academy where she learns that the world is much broader and more varied than she ever dreamed and sometimes a human girl's fate may twine with that of another kind of being. Or three. In Semester 9, Valentina and the others are ready to relax and enjoy the holidays, but nothing is ever as easy as that for the students at the Urban Academy and their friends.*

An Excerpt from *Delivered to My*  
*Protectors*



# Chapter One

*Hazel*

The forest was my home.

Chipmunks rarely spend time anywhere else, given a choice. Our scurry owned a few hundred acres of “unimproved” forest land, meaning we did not cut down trees to create clearing in which to build. Because we were not only our animal side, we did need more than the branches in which to live, but rule number one was do not harm the forest in order to build your shelter.

That might sound hard, but in fact, we didn’t find it so. Our area had a lot of natural rock available as well as materials for creating things like adobe. Our homes were small and met our needs. As the world marched forward and our young people—including me—wanted to enjoy the benefits of technology, our elders embraced solar and other power sources, but we were always cautious. Natural meadows and open areas allowed us to use the panels and small wind turbines as well as growing some things.

And, yes, we did buy some food and other products we needed. Most of us worked at jobs that helped to pay for them. And we gardened and were blessed with some old orchards that gave us apples and pears and other fruits.

If anyone asked, I’d have asserted that we lived in the most beautiful place on the whole Earth. Not that I’d been very far, but why would I want to?

Once I finished college, I'd put my degree in forestry management right there on our property. All day, I roamed the lands, watching for any issues that might occur and, if I found one, looking at possible solutions for the problem. It was the best.

Of course, I didn't only go out during the day. There were many things better observed after the sun set, and as a responsible staff member of the scurry, I went out into the darkness once or twice a week.

This particular night, I had not planned on being outside. It was chilly, with a stiff breeze and dark, high-rising clouds overhead. The scent of rain hung in the air. And that was why I was trotting along the trail. The alpha asked me questions about rainfall and while I was not a meteorologist, I did know how to measure the amount of moisture received. Rain meters could be purchased at the local hardware store or on Amazon. They could even be made at home, but the price I paid for a case of them had been so reasonable, there was no good reason to go to the trouble to do anything else.

The only mistake I made was forgetting to set them out, something I was reminded of when eating dinner at the alpha house.

"The alpha is very interested to see how much rain we get tonight," Cece, the mate of one of the betas mentioned when passing me the roasted potatoes. "It's been so long since we've had any anything measurable."

Not that anyone had attempted to measure before, but her point was made. The alpha had given me a job, and somehow Cece knew I'd forgotten. At the least, she suspected.

“The weather report indicates an inch or more,” I replied, ignoring her implication. “But the humans don’t seem to be all that good at predicting.”

Hurrying to finish my dinner, I tried to remember where I’d stowed the box of meters. The storm was coming in quickly, and although I’d had a busy day, there was no good reason why I had not taken care of the task asked of me.

Fortunately, I did remember leaving the box under the counter in my shed/lab and was soon hurrying through the forest to the set them up in various places before the rain started. And I did get most of them in place, but as I was fastening the last one to an oak branch, droplets landed on my hands. Many all at once, from zero to downpour in 1.2 seconds.

I considered shifting, but that would have meant leaving my favorite sweatshirt and flashlight out here in the storm all night, and so instead, I took off at a dead run for home. The rain got even harder, occasional lightning showing the path before thunder shook the earth beneath my sopping sneakers. About the fifth bolt of lightning revealed movement in the distance, and by then, I’d lost enough track of where I was. I turned toward it, hoping I’d find myself at one of the many scattered homes of a scurry member.

The next flash had me sliding to a halt. *Weasels*. They weren’t supposed to be on our lands, and a flush of rage ran over me. I stomped toward the semicircle, wondering what they were all looking at. Nothing good, for sure. Within a half dozen steps of arriving in their midst, I stopped again, and this time slid behind a tree.

“I tell you, you’re not digging deep enough,” squeaked one. “Some animal is gonna dig it up before morning.”

“No they won’t.” Another, a tall man, smacked the first speaker on the head. “It’s raining too hard for animals to be out, and even if they were, we’re gonna drag this big log over on top of him.”

The rain abated just a little, enough for me to hear my rasped breathing and get a better look at the weasel shifters at their work. I didn’t know their names, but I’d seen them before. Alpha and the security team had chased them off often enough. But who were they dragging a log on top of?

“Okay, get him in there,” the tall one growled, obviously in charge of this burial party. My heart hammered so loudly, I was sure they’d be able to hear, but what could I do? I couldn’t leave...they’d hear me. Plus, what if they had hurt someone I knew? What if they weren’t...dead? I could help. I could wait until they went away then see if I could help.

They had flashlights, but not very good ones, and without thinking, I took a step closer, wanting to see who they had.  
*Please don’t let it be anyone I love.*

Then biggest flash of lightning of all revealed the victim. Sammi, the lead beta of our scurry, and he wasn’t hurt. He was 100 percent dead because you can’t live with your face shot off. My scream had them all turning to look at me.

“Hey, it’s some girl,” the guy who first spoke yelled. “She saw us.”

“Get her! She could tell someone. Then we’ll have to kill them all.”

I turned and ran, falling twice before I got enough traction to make any speed. Two of the weasels were after me, but I had enough distance ahead of them to fling myself under a bush and hide there until they ran past. And until morning.

I couldn't go home. If they followed me, they'd know who I was, and weasels were the worst. They'd never give up until they killed me and my whole family.

And that is how I ended up hitching a ride on the highway and leaving everyone and everything I knew behind.

## **Chapter Two**



## *Danger*

“I’m trying to work here, Danger.” My best friend and packmate Ramses groaned as I slammed down another large bag of chicken feed. I tossed another one down just for him, particularly loud this time. Because it was fun messing with him. “Really?” he asked and went back to the board where we kept the meticulous schedule of feeding the animals, along with the lists of what each would receive.

“Yeah. Really. I’m not over here knitting a sweater, Ramses. I have a whole truckload of food left if you want to help me unload it.”

He turned and sighed. There had been another new rescue added to our sanctuary the day before and, while we welcomed each with open arms, it was a strain on our system. Particularly Ramses’ system. He was as detailed as people came. It was once a coping mechanism for him but now, it was the reason this place ran so well. “I’m coming.”

He and I unloaded the fresh fruit, vegetables, and meats, along with chicken feed and a few other items from the list he gave me. Atticus and Ryker helped as well but like Ramses and me, we all had our parts to play at the sanctuary and in the pack. The Shrouded Shadow pack didn’t run like other shifter groups. We were made up of misfits, some who had gone rogue, others who were running from their past, and yet others whose sharp edges simply didn’t fit into society’s rounded cubbies. We worked and ran this place as a team. We all voted on big issues. We had started the rescue, so we naturally took

leadership positions here, but I would never take on the title of alpha and neither would my best friend.

I didn't want it.

Shrouded Shadows didn't need an alpha or the politics that went with one. We were doing just fine the way we were.

"How's she doing?" I asked about the fawn that had been brought to us. A human had taken it upon herself to put it in her truck and take a picture of it, the baby too naive to know better. When they decided they'd had enough for their social media posting, they set the deer back down but, by then, the little one scented like humans and the mother decided to abandon her. Or maybe had been scared too far away to find her by then. Her mews were pitiful the first night. I slept on a cot in her enclosure for several nights to calm her. Finally I was able to take rest in my own bed.

I didn't know which one was worse, sleeping on a stiff cot or in my cold bed with a stiff cock. Neither was my first choice, but such was my life.

"I know that look, my friend. It's going to happen. The right woman hasn't come upon our profile. Simple as that." Ramses cocked his head sideways and wiped away some of the dry eraser words with the side of his fist. "We're running out of room. I've made some changes, but it's inevitable. We need more enclosures. At least a dozen, and a nursery."

We had a tiny cinnamon bear mama who was due to give birth at any moment. She ran free on our land but came back to sleep and eat. She had been abused as entertainment for humans. Didn't know how to live in the wild, really.

“Are you sure it was a good idea?” I asked.

“We already voted on it as a pack, Danger. We have to have more enclosures. If we don’t take them...”

“I didn’t mean that. Of course we need to expand. The crew is starting in the morning. I meant about the mail-order app thing. I’m giving up hope, Ramses. Maybe we were meant to have this place and help others and”—the thought clung to my throat—“be alone.” I kicked at the ten-sack-tall tower of feed at my feet.

“I think it is our best shot.”

“You really think there’s a female out there who will want to be mated to a brute like me? Give to these animals the way we do? Forget the rhino part. I work fourteen hours a day for little to no pay. We give everything we have to these animals. What’s left for a mate?”

It wasn’t the first time I’d bitched and moaned about the subject.

Ramses clapped me on the shoulder. He’d done that since we were kids. “The right female will not only not mind our life but will blend right into it. Have a little faith in Fate. And for the love of the gods, please answer that damned phone. That’s the fourth time it’s rung in your pocket.”

My phone was ringing?

I’d been so damned lost in my own head that I hadn’t even heard it. “Yeah,” I barked after pressing the green button.

It was the vet in town. Ramses was a trained vet as well, but the one in town worked with humans but kept us abreast of things as we needed, or as he needed.

“I’m on my way.”

“Another one?” Ramses gasped.

“A chimpanzee. Male. not doing well at all.”

Ramses scrubbed a hand down his face. “Let’s go.”

“We don’t have the room,” I said, tipping my chin to the map of the sanctuary where everyone stayed.

“We’ll make it work, Danger. We always do. If we don’t take them, someone else might, and we don’t know what their intentions are.”

“Two minutes,” I said. “My truck.”

## **About Mazzy J. March**

Mazzy J. March is a fan of all things paranormal—shifters, vampires, witches...dragons and all the many creatures that inhabit the world beyond the ordinary. She has been plotting her Academy and RH stories for a long time and is thrilled to finally have them releasing and ever grateful to the readers who are offering such support and helping her dreams come true.

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