



THE TWELVE DATES OF CHRISTMAS

# The Wonky Wishlist



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Wishlist*

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To all of those that feel a little 'less'. This one is for you.

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About the Author

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# New Member Profile



Welcome to Love-N-Shenanigans, the last dating app you'll ever need. Your best match (or matches) are just a few clicks away!

## ***B***asic Information

**Name:** Emerson (Em) Whitlock

**Age:** 33

**Species:** Witch

**Marital Status:** Single As Fuck

**Dependants:** None (adorable, bossy nieces don't count right?)

**Describe yourself using 10 words or less:** Chaotic, Fun loving, easy natured, late, and always on the move.



**Person who referred you:** Katrina DuBois (Bossy big sister, mom to bossy niece)

**Additional Information**

**Sexual Designation:** Female

**Sexual Orientation:** Pan

**Are you Monogamous, Swinger, Polyamorous?** Open to all

**Are you willing to date outside of your species?** Of course.

**Hobbies:** All my artistic outlets are things I love to do, so I guess work counts as one. And singing. I ADORE singing. I'm pretty good too.

**Do you have any kinks you would like to have taken into consideration?**

Uh... take a girl out to dinner first? At least bring a pizza and then we can chat.

**Please describe your perfect partner/partners:** Someone who looks at the person I am inside FIRST. I'm no ugly stepsister, but I have some flaws. I need... no I *deserve* someone that will take the time to get to know me and love me completely.

**Additional Notes:** I'm a chaos witch. You should probably know that straight off. My magick sometimes takes control and does crazy things.

# Chapter 1

## Emerson Whitlock

**A**nd... done!  
I smile like an absolute maniac at the purchase confirmation screen on my laptop.

Take that, Katrina DuBois!

You're not the only one that can get her shit in order. I don't even care that it's December first and that my big sister Kat probably had her shopping all done before she flipped her calendar to November. I'm just proud that I finished mine before Christmas Eve this year.

I walk to the kitchen with my coffee mug for a refill and hum along my merry way.

An acute sense of accomplishment courses through me. That cute new rug I've been eyeing for ages is finally coming to me. All of my holiday shopping is done. A profile made for this new dating app everyone is going on about. *And* I just finished off the last little bit of shopping with my niece's— *unique* wishlist. It wasn't easy finding everything on her list either... who wants a

vegetarian Zombie, a one-eyed polar bear, and a unicorn with a broken horn anyway?

Let me tell you who... My stunning, ornery, cute as fuck niece, Sabrina, of course.

If I'm lucky, that dating app profile will help tick some things off *my* wish list.

I am two seconds away from pouring some re-heated, *possibly* only an hour old, coffee into my mug when the scent of paint hits my nose. A quick glance down into my cup shows me streaks of blue along the inside of the pink mug.

Dammit!

Not again.

The one big downfall to being a painter was that you always had to triple-check your coffee mugs. I can't count the number of times I have taken a big gulp of coffee-flavored acrylic paint water.

Thankfully, I learned quickly not just to spit it out, or more than just one of my paintings would have been ruined over the years.

Sighing to myself, I dump the tiny bit of bean juice into the sink and fill the mug with water to soak before grabbing a fresh cup.

There's still a fair bit of self-praise going on, even if I almost had some paint with my morning cup of lifeblood when my gaze lands on the clock hanging over my kitchen counter.

Well, fuck!

How in the ever-loving donkey nuts had it gotten to be almost lunch? I chug down the too-hot beverage, relishing the taste even while bemoaning the burn down my throat. Looks like I'm in for a rushed afternoon. There was only an hour left before the appointment with my agent.

My breakthrough showcase is only—*EEK*—twenty-four days away, and I

have to finalize the details and try and give the poor man an estimate on how many pieces I will be showcasing. The problem, though... I haven't been able to paint, sculpt, sketch, or doodle anything for over a month now. My small pile of paintings and the meager store of sculptures will never be enough for an entire showcase. And even though my chaos magick, once unleashed, will work wonders, I actually have to be inspired before anything ever happens when it comes to my art.

The hot water rushes over my bunched shoulders in the tiny shower as I contemplate the best creative excuse to give Diego when I sit with him today. After lunch, he's supposed to take me back to the gallery to brainstorm the best placement for the pieces.

You know... the pieces I don't have done.

*Yet.*

I am not excited about this meeting in the least, which is a significant letdown considering how long and hard I've worked for this chance. Until this break, I've not done badly. I've sold enough pieces through my online shop to keep me in sexy underwear, hot coffee, and a roof over my head—the basics, of course.

If this show goes well, though? It would definitely allow me to breathe easier.

The performance anxiety probably has a lot to do with the creative block. The hot water adds a comfort as I try to talk myself down. The worry over the show is causing my magick to build up, and I can feel the faint buzzing under my skin, getting ready to explode.

Now is most definitely not the time.

Annoyed with myself, I stamp my foot on the shower floor. The wet, slippery shower. The second my foot hits the tiled floor underneath it, my

magick whooshes out of me, creating a small kickback and pushing my leg out from under me.

Before I know what's happening, my ass is in the air, my head resting against the shower wall, my neck at an awkward angle. Probably not an attractive look, and if the ache I feel against my temple is anything to go by, I'm most likely sporting a new war wound.

Great stuff.

The next twenty minutes are a blur. Cleaning the new gash on my face takes up the time I would have used to put on the little bit of make-up I sport for important meetings. And taming my mane of ridiculously wild, light almond curls takes up the rest of the time... Okay, so maybe it takes up more precious minutes than I can afford, but I'm just vain enough to spend it anyway.

A quick glance at my phone to check the time shows me a missed call from Kat, a text from Diego, and proof that I'm only running ten minutes behind schedule. My hand disappears into the cavern I call a handbag, finally unearthing my car keys. I say a quick prayer to whichever goddess is listening today before turning the key in the ignition.

It starts on the first take. Finally, it seems something is going my way! With the music blaring from my speakers and the wind blowing through my artfully messy locks, I'm excited to be on my way.

And then... my cute little red VW Beetle splutters... and dies.

“Are you fucking kidding me?!”



“Kat! Please!” I cry out in desperation. Kat finally answered my call to remind me that she was in the middle of her lunch rush and would not be able to pick me up and take me to my meeting with Diego.

“No, Em. Phone a tow truck. Or Triple A. Better yet, phone your agent and tell him to fetch you. Now I love you, babe, but you gotta sort this one yourself.”

I stand there staring at my phone, listening to the beep-beep-beep at the end of the disconnected line.

Dammit!

It’s fine. I got this.

After a quick Google search, I pull up a number for the closest towing company. I don't hold back the snort that escapes me at the name on the listing, but you can't ignore the five-star rating, so here goes nothing.

"The Horny Bear Shop. This is Mack. What do you want?"

A shiver runs down my spine at the sound of the sexy, gruff voice that barks at me over the phone.

"Hi, Mack. I need you," I blurt in a breathy response before turning a shade only slightly less than tomato. Clearing my throat, I try again. "Sorry, I meant I need a tow. And a lift. My car broke down with an awful amount of steam coming from it."

The man on the other end of the line grunts in response before asking me for the location. After giving him the directions he hangs up on me, without a further word.

Wow. What a charmer.

# Chapter 2

## Emerson

“Hello, miss. I’m Charlie from The Horny Bear. Here to get you towed and taken into the shop.”

A charming, bent with age, older man thrusts out his hand in greeting. His grin shows he’s missing more teeth than he still has in his mouth, and his skin is so weathered with time I’m worried he might hurt himself while hooking up my car. However, when I clasp hands with him, I discover his grip is surprisingly firm, and a quick flash in his eyes clues me in on the fact that he’s not human.

“Thanks, Charlie. I’m Em. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

The cute older man flirts mercilessly while he connects the beetle to his scary-looking hook and finally directs me to the front seat of his rig. Inside, he continues to regale me with all sorts of funny stories from his younger years. As he talks, I send a quick text to Diego explaining my situation and tuning back into a story about a raccoon and a bar fight. Just as Charlie pulls into the parking lot of a rather large mechanic’s garage, I get a response from my agent, letting me know he’ll meet me at the gallery instead.



My empty stomach now regrets that I opted for another coffee over breakfast in my mad dash out the door, but there is nothing I can do about it now. Charlie, ever the charmer, opens my door, helping me out of the truck before leading into the front office.

My artist's eye takes in the front of the shop first, though. A huge sign over the door depicts a sizeable polar bear bent over a generic-looking truck. A truck that has a huge ass silhouette of a unicorn on it.

Well, isn't that just the cutest thing?

My lips are still stretched into a huge grin when I enter the bright reception area. Charlie's words flow over me as he directs me to the front counter, and I'm pretty sure he's introducing me to the man standing behind it, but I can't concentrate enough to listen to what he's saying for the life of me.

Because the second I step into that damn office space, my heart stops. The man standing there, staring at me with an unblinking gaze, is one of the most enormous, most intimidating creatures I've ever seen. But he doesn't intimidate *me*. Oh no, I only want to climb that big man like a tree. Cling to him like a koala. Hump him like a sloth.

Why the weird animal analogies?

Fuck if I know.

I just can't stop staring at him. I realize there is probably something else I should say because he and Charlie are staring at me expectantly. It's too bad my brain is not what it is thinking right now.

"Em, darlin', this is Mack. I was tellin' you about him," Charlie says expectantly, and I finally tune into the conversation. The way he's staring at me tells me that he's probably repeated himself at least once. Shrugging it off, I smile in response before stepping closer to them.

Mack is delicious, like a pirate crossed with a large bear, crossed with

creamy caramel that begs for a lick. His tall frame is filled out quite nicely with some tasty-looking muscles, but somehow, his imposing size doesn't frighten me. Instead, I just feel... safe.

His face is a glorious mess of scars, and for the first time in weeks, my fingers are itching for a pencil so I can sketch down the lines and planes. The long, stunning mess of coffee hair is bunched on his head in a man bun that very few can pull off.

His left eye is the same dark brown as his hair, and the right, with its scar and sightless white pupil, takes me in from head to toe. He makes rugged look sexy. It is pretty clear that Mack is a man who can pull off anything.

Even my clothes.

Fuck, *especially* my clothes.

I turn up my smile and hold out my hand to him. "Hi! I'm Em. Apparently, you're the man to speak to about having my baby all fixed up."

Mack looks at my hand for far too long before finally taking it. Another delicious shiver runs up my spine at the feel of his large, rough hand engulfing mine. His grip tightens the slightest bit before he breaks contact as if my touch burned him.

"Here," he grunts, grabbing a clipboard with some papers on it before shoving it in my direction. "Fill in these. We'll phone you within a day to give you a quote."

Unperturbed by his rude demeanor, I take the paperwork from him and hold out my hand for a pen. When he stands there staring at it, I mime writing with something, and the tanned-skinned man blushes before quickly grabbing a pen from behind the counter and practically throwing it at me.

"So... Are you the horny bear, then?" I ask, tongue in cheek, unable to help myself.

Charlie lets out a huge guffaw, bending forward and slapping his knee in his amusement.

“Well, now, Em! I think that is my cue to leave. It was lovely meeting you, but I sincerely hope I don’t see you again anytime soon... unless you want to bring me something nice to eat.”

The cute older man looks between me and Mack before chuckling again as he walks out a door in the back I hadn’t noticed until now.

Mack is still standing there, staring at me like he’s swallowed a disgusting bug. Guessing that he isn’t a fan of my brand of flirting, I shrug it off, even if it does sting, and focus on the paperwork instead.

There is no point in worrying about a man who clearly is too dumb to see a good thing standing in front of him.

He mumbles something about getting something from the office and slips out the same door that Charlie had just disappeared through.

As I finish the paperwork, the bell behind me jingles again. Something tells me to look up, and I never ignore my instincts, so I turn to face the door.

For the second time today, I’m shocked. Rendered utterly speechless. This is not a common occurrence for me, but I firmly believe I can’t be held accountable for my actions if Fate decides to keep throwing these delicious hunks in my direction.

Standing in front of me is the definition of rock star perfection. He’s slightly shorter than the hunk of a man who ran away from me just a few minutes ago, but that is where the similarities end. Where Mack was gruff, rugged, and manly, this stunning creature is dirty, naughty, and sexy in a way that begs you to hide in bed with him for a week.

Sign me up.

The dark black of his roots bleeds into the most impressive royal purple

hair, long enough to grab hold of but not as long or thick as I suspect Mack's to be. From this distance, I can't quite tell if his purple eyes are the product of contact lenses or if he might be a supe. My gaze travels down to his thick, luscious lips, making me bite down on my own, imagining their feel and taste.

His mouth turns up at the corners, and by that smirk, he's checking me out, too. And he likes what he sees.

My slightly bruised ego is now a little more appeased at the apparent attention from the handsome stranger, so I stand a little taller.

"Hi! I'm Em." I greet him with a warm, inviting smile.

"Hello, hot stuff. I'm Sydney. Syd for short." He looks down at the paperwork in my hand before bringing his gaze back up to mine. "See, you're here for some business. Hopefully, by the time that's done, I can convince you to change that over into pleasure."

He winks at me, and even though I usually roll my eyes at the obvious pick-up line, my undeniable attraction has me smiling in response this time.

"I think that could be arranged."

We continue to flirt, but even though I'm having fun with the charmer, I can't help but feel a twinge of regret that Mack hasn't returned to the front by the time an Uber arrives to pick me up for my now very late meeting with Diego.

However, I have a promise from Syd that I'll hear from him soon. First, in regards to my car, and then about a date.

Somehow, I can't find it in me to be upset about running late anymore.

# Chapter 3

## Macklin Barlowe

What a fucking day. There I am, minding my own business, trying not to roll my eyes when I notice the time. Syd is late again. Big fucking shocker. I swear my best friend and co-owner of The Horny Bear will probably be late even if he wakes up an hour earlier every morning.

Just thinking about the name of our successful business venture, has a smirk tugging at my lips. That fucking asshole thought he was so hilarious. We had a nice, business-like name all set. I was busy, so Syd had to file the paperwork solo. Apparently, our first choice was taken, so that fucker came up with the name all on his own. He was so damn smug about it too.

The Horny Bear.

Sounds more like a strip club than a mechanic shop. But it doesn't stop the steady flow of business coming in the doors, so it's nothing I dwell on.

So I'm wallowing in my irritation with my business partner when the air gets knocked right the fuck out of me.

In steps in this stunner of a woman. She's got hair for days—hair I want to grip and tangle my fingers in—and a soft heart-shaped face so open and

carefree that she takes my breath away. Her eyes—one bright green and one ice blue—not only give me a sense of camaraderie but add to her unique and wild beauty,

And then, her fucking scent hits me. Instant boner.

My immediate reaction is to growl and pounce on her, but she would probably freak the fuck out and call the cops on me. I'm forced to hold a conversation with this beauty while my bear is screaming and demanding me to claim her.

*Mine!*

The asshole beast inside is adamant she's his—no, *our*—mate. This is obviously insane because there is no way that the fates would bless me with a mate, let alone one as absolutely stunning as she is. I have long since proven what a fuck up I am, and there is no way I deserve a happily ever after like that.

And then she smiles at me and flirts.

With *me*.

Charlie is no help whatsoever and leaves me alone with her. With my heart beating in my ears and my damn palms clammy with nerves, I do the only thing I can do. I run and hide in the fucking office like the coward I am. Acting like an inexperienced schoolboy is not a good look.

Trying to get some courage together to go out and face her again—someone has to help her with her damn paperwork after all—I can't help but let out a relieved breath when my advanced hearing picks up the sound of Syd making his way into our reception area.

Good. He can deal with her. And when she comes back to pick up her car when I'm done with it, he can also deal with it.

Their voices carry to me in the office when Syd walks in and greets her. I

shouldn't be surprised at the instant flirting happening between the two of them. It is, after all, exactly who he is. Ever the ladies man, Syd can't help but charm anything in a skirt. And sometimes even the skirt isn't a requirement.

My bear is riding me hard to storm back in there and throw Syd around a bit, though. No matter how hard I try to tell him that she's not our mate, he won't listen, and by the time Em's car arrives to pick her up, sweat is breaking out over my forehead because of my internal struggle with my beast.

I look down at where my white knuckles and nails are digging into my desk hard. Fuck I have got to get myself together. It does feel like I'm going through puberty again. I haven't had to fight so hard for dominance since my first shift happened. The office door opens, drawing my attention from the paperwork I resorted to shuffling around aimlessly for the last ten minutes.

"You're late. Again," I growl, unable to contain the annoyance in my voice. I'd long since stopped fighting with Syd over his poor timekeeping. He was co-owner, after all. This aggression was solely thanks to the damn, fucking polar bear that's barely being contained at this point.

Syd's 6ft2 frame leans against the office door, his one ankle crossed over the other as he gives me an unimpressed look.

"Yeah, and?" He has this self-satisfied smirk on his face that my bear—and I—want to wipe right off.

"And it would be nice to have a partner that actually shows up for work on time every once in a while. I've got things to do, too, you know?"

Sydney, the damn cocky unicorn shifter I've been friends with for way too long, steps into the office and pulls out the chair opposite my desk.

"And what all-important business did you have to do this morning that my

tardiness has got your panties in a bunch?” he asks me before sitting back and putting his feet up on my desk. “Know what? Today, I don’t care. No matter how much grumpy asshole bullshit you throw my way today, you’re not getting me down.”

My eyes narrow as I stare at his scarred boots resting on my paperwork. “Yeah? Why the fuck not?” The question leaves my mouth without me even realizing I would indulge him.

“I’m so glad you asked, old friend.” He laughs as I knock his feet off the desk and sits forward, leaning his elbows on his knees. “That gorgeous creature you left in reception by herself? Turns out...” he pauses for dramatic effect, drawing an involuntary growl from me. “She’s my mate.”

What. The. Fuck.

I can’t do anything but stare at him. Physically, I’m incapable of even moving a muscle. Because if I do, I’m convinced my beast will break free and tear my best friend to pieces.

“What? Cat got your tongue? I’m telling you that I’ve met my one and only mate, and you’re staring at me like I imparted the latest weather forecast.”

He’s starting to look a little disgruntled at me, and if it were any other woman, I would have been overjoyed for him.

If anyone deserves their happily ever after, it’s Syd. He’s always been with me. Always supporting me, and he even opened this damn shop with me so I wouldn’t have to do it alone.

But he’s sitting there. Telling me that the woman my bear has claimed as ours is his mate. *His*.

“Mine!” I finally manage to growl out. My entire body is shaking with the effort to control myself.

“Like fuck,” Syd scoffs at me, pushing the chair back as he jumps up.



A deep growl rumbles through my body as I feel the shift starting to roll through me. My claws dig into the palms of my hand with the hope that the sharp bite of pain will help me suppress it. This office isn't big enough for me to lose control in.

"Don't you fucking growl at me, you overgrown teddy bear!" Syd shouts at me, leaning over my desk, his face almost against mine.

"You can't have her!" I shout out. "She's mine, dammit!"

Pushing my desk forward helps relieve some built-up tension, and I hardly pay attention to all the stuff falling to the floor.

"Like fuck she is!" Spittle comes flying out of Syd's mouth as he returns my tirade.

We're both stopped from jumping at each other when there's a loud bang. With large eyes, I gaze at the door where the sound has come from.

Charlie is standing there with a baseball bat in his hands and a large dent in my office door.

"Fucking nitwits," he barks out as he scowls at us. "Acting like a bunch of toddlers fighting over a toy."

My shoulders immediately hunch in shame at his words.

"But she's mine," Syd whines, earning him another scowl from our employee. Even though Charlie technically works for us, we both saw him as a bit of a father figure.

"Quit it!"

Syd hangs his head before looking up at me, his eyes filled with turmoil.

"You're fucking idiots. A girl like that walks in here, and your reaction is to fight over her?" He rests the baseball bat against the wall, shaking his head at us.

"You boys never heard of sharing? You're pretty much a fucking pack

already. And honestly... I'd have been surprised if you didn't have the same mate."

With his words, he turns on his heels and walks out the door. But not before throwing a parting shot our way.

"Y'all better get your shit in order. I have a feeling that one will give the two of you a run for your money."

Charlie leaves us there, staring at each other. The lost look in Syd's eyes no doubt reflects mine as we try to figure out what the fuck is going to happen next.

# Chapter 4

Sydney Hart

I feel like a scolded little kid.

A thought that both amuses and annoys me at the same time.

Charlie is right, though. Mack and I are acting like idiots.

I won't lie. At first, when I realized his bear was getting pissed at my proclamation that I found my mate, I thought it was jealousy. That fucking hurt.

Mack and I may fight from time to time, but he is my brother. Granted, from a different fuzzy mother. And a far better one than mine, that's for damn sure.

Just thinking about my mom brings back that first stab of rejection. It was the hardest one to swallow, and it started a fucked up pattern of people fleeing from my life just when I dared to feel anything. Mom couldn't stand being tied down by a needy kid who wanted too much attention. I was five years old when she finally decided to leave me at school one day. I assumed she had just forgotten. Or got busy. Even as a kindergartener, I had learned that I would never be a priority for her.

However, being left behind entirely? That was an especially hard pill to swallow. When I love someone, it is with my whole heart. I don't know any other way. It has always and will always be all or nothing for me. Even if I sometimes have trouble showing it. Let's just call it a personality flaw.

Heather Barlowe, one of the sweetest shifters I have ever met, saw me making the three-mile trek back home alone and offered me a ride. When we got there, I didn't have to even walk inside the shitty trailer to feel how empty it was. It was like the bare, sheet-covered windows proclaimed abandonment.

Mack's mom insisted on walking me inside when she didn't see the usual motorcycle parked out front. Walking inside only confirmed what I had suspected. But it was still a punch to the gut.

Looking back, I realize I had a very grown-up outlook on life. I probably had *her* to thank for it.

I don't know how she managed to do it, but the trailer was empty. Granted, the furniture was all still there, as well as everything in my tiny room. But every sign of *her* was just... gone.

It was too much to keep bottled up. I remember turning my tiny body into Heather's open arms and sobbing. The tears continued to fall while we packed the things I wanted. From that day forward, I moved in with the Barlowes.

That wasn't the first time a woman pulled a fast one on me. There were far too many mornings when the girl who had been warming my bed for months had gotten bored. Maybe it was the dwindling pheromones I would pull back on toward the end of the relationship.

To be fair, the pheromones were an instinctual thing. At least, at first. It was no different than getting a boner... this kind of boner gave everyone else a

boner, too. It has led to some fascinating situations and forced me to come fist-to-face—my face, to be exact—with a pissed-off Mack and Charlie on far more than one occasion.

Now, at the beginning of a relationship, having all these pheromone-hyped feelings flying around is fine. Both parties enjoyed the high of it all, and in the excitement, I would sometimes forget to pull them back. As things progressed over time, that little voice would start nagging me. What if they're only with me *because* of the pheromones? Because they can't help but feel turned on all the damn time and not because they *want* to be with me?

Those thoughts always lead to me consciously putting a damper on my influential aroma. I'm not sure what is worse. When the chemistry dies down immediately, they tuck tail and run, or when they lull me into this false sense of security only to pack up and leave when I'm not looking. No goodbye. No fuck-you-text. Not even a forgotten pair of panties in my bedroom. Nothing.

So am I freaking the fuck out right now that maybe I just influenced my first interaction with my fated mate and possibly ruined it?

Why yes. Yes, I am.

Alright, Syd, deep breaths, buddy.

If what Mack says is true—and I have no reason *not to* believe him—he's Emerson's mate, too.

The thought of sharing a mate with my best friend, my brother, actually has my lungs relaxing and breaths coming easier.

This is big. Like fucking epically huge, and knowing that I won't be completely going through it alone is everything.

Mack has always been my brother, and while we never *officially* considered ourselves a pack or whatever, I guess that doesn't make it any less true. We are in business together. We hang out together. Hell, we even live together.

Well, sort of. Mack has the house, and I have the apartment above the garage, but it's close enough.

So why can't we share a mate?

The idea settles my nerves like a balm. The rightness of it makes me relax even more.

However, I know I won't feel complete until I claim our girl.

Mmm...

The thought of my teeth sinking into that creamy flesh and binding us has me rock hard. I bite my bottom lip and lean back in my desk chair. We have a strict rule about shenanigans at work, but maybe if I just quietly take care of things, I can...

"Fucking hell, Sydney! Get your shit together!" Mack's sudden exclamation echoes down the hall from his office and makes me jump up, nearly knocking over my chair in the process.

Once the initial fright wears off, I laugh. I don't mean to affect people all the damn time, but when it accidentally happens to my grumpy bear bestie... Well, that shit is just too fucking funny.

So I guess the next step is just telling a relative stranger that you have been waiting for them your whole fucking life and want to commit yourself to them forever.

Yeah, that doesn't sound creepy at all.

Especially since I am pretty sure that mate isn't a shifter herself.

Oh fuck. We're in for a fun ride.

That means she most likely has no fucking clue she is our mate, if she even knows anything about shifter mates at all. What if she isn't a supe? Or even worse...

What if she rejects us?

That's a permanent thing. Fate doesn't just give you a do-over. It's not like dating, where you can simply choose someone else. Once a shifter finds their mate, that's it.

I've heard horror stories about shifters who have gone mad when their fated mate rejected them. Remembering the solemn details my adopted mom shared with me and her cubs has me shivering. I had nightmares after she told us, for a fucking week.

So then, what the fuck am I supposed to do?

Well, if we are a pack, I guess we should start acting like one.

Taking a deep breath, I shore up my defenses. I can't believe I'm about to do this, but here goes. Each step closer to Mack's office has my nerves building until I finally reach my destination. I swallow my anxiety as I slowly shut the door behind me, drawing his attention from the papers he's pretending to work on.

"So, big guy. How are we going to get our girl without scaring her off?"

Mack's eyebrows raise on his good eye, and he looks around the room like I'm talking to someone else. "What the fuck makes you think I know what to do?"

I roll my eyes. "Well, seeing as we're a pack and all, I figured we needed to devise a plan together. And I can't just sit in my office, getting a boner every five minutes because I'm excited, while you sit in here and... *Mack*." I gesture to—well, all of him, hoping to convey what I mean.

"*Mack*?" He has no idea what I'm saying based on the extra scrunch on his forehead.

"Yeah, you know. Grump ass and try to mean mug the situation into submission."

He holds his breath, and I brace for a fight, but he surprises me by blowing

out a huge breath and letting his head fall forward, thumping it lightly on his desk. He makes some noises, but I can't tell if he's growling or grumbling so low I can't decipher the words.

I sigh and plunk down in the chair across from him, bringing his head back up. He looks—if I didn't know Mack any better than I do, I would say the guy is terrified.

“I have no fucking clue what to do or how to handle any of this.” Mack's admission has me swallowing hard. If he *really* doesn't know what to do, then we are seriously fucking hopeless.

Who knew that a tiny spitfire of a woman could render a sexy, suave unicorn and a grumpy polar bear helpless?

Hold on to your sweet ass Emerson. If there is one thing I know about Mack and me, it's that nothing stops us. Not even being scared shitless.

I just hope no one ends up losing an eye or a horn this time.



# Chapter 5

## Emerson

I push through the heavy antique wood doors and take a moment to appreciate the intricate carvings and the decorative glass panels.

If I look hard enough, I will find the tiny imperfections left behind by untrained hands, but it was a project of pure love. It was also one of the first—and last if she has anything to say about it—projects my sister and I ever did together.

I fucking love it.

Pushing inside, I take a deep breath and inhale all the glorious smells. The decor inside is the perfect match for the unique door. Rehabbed woods and dark metals create a boho chic feel. But the menu?

The food at *A Taste of Magick* is nothing less than orgasmic. The supe community knows that Kat is an extremely talented kitchen witch. She uses her skills to imbue her magicks into her house's specialty spice mixes, oil blends, and dip concoctions. Humans and supes alike come by on the regular. No one ever leaves hungry.

Which reminds me.

I approach the bar and hand Tammy, the friendly server, a twenty. She smiles, and without a word, she slides the money into the till before moving to the chalkboard sign and adding a handful of soups and coffees.

The board was my niece Sabrina's idea. Kat loved it so much that she agreed instantly. Now, anyone who needs a warm cup or bowl and can't quite afford it can come in and place an order on *Sabrina's Tab*.

I go to the farthest corner of the restaurant and slide into the last booth. From here, you can see into the kitchen when the doors swing open and shut. It's my favorite spot. I love watching Kat work. She is a genius, and I have always admired my big sister's abilities.

My stomach growls, and the kitchen door swings open. As if summoned by the sound of my hunger, Kat sets down two plates of colorful noodles and joins me. Not one to get hung up on greetings, Kat fills her fork and shoves it into her mouth. I can't suppress the grin that slips across my face when she moans in pleasure at the taste of her own food.

Not wanting to be left out, I twist a bite of noodles onto my own fork and pop it in my mouth. My tongue comes from the explosion of flavor.

"Fucking hell, Kat. That's amazing."

She nods enthusiastically as she finishes chewing. She takes a quick sip of the water Tammy brings over for us before finally talking to me.

"I know. I was sold on his work instantly. He's a fucking prodigy, I swear."

I slightly panic as I rack my brain to decipher who she is talking about.

Katrina doesn't have men in her life. Not since she lost Oliver two years ago. Sabrina's daddy and Kat's husband died in a car accident on his way to my first gallery event. I still can't let go of that guilt, even though Kat only holds anger for the drunk driver who left half her heart missing.

So who the fuck is the *he* that Kat is talking about?

Glancing back at my sister's face after twirling more noodles onto my fork, I realize I'm busted. I must have been taking too long to respond because her smirk shows she knows I am so fucking lost.

She sighs and points her fork at me. "If you hadn't been having such a crazy fucking day, I might take offense that you always seem clueless about the happenings in *my* life." I simply smile at her and quickly pop the forkful in my mouth.

Yes, it's a cowardly move that prevents me from having to guess.

No, I don't care, and I know my big sister loves me anyway.

"My new sous chef. You were here last week when he auditioned with that amazing French dip."

Ah! Now, food I will never forget. Especially food that I pledge my undying love to.

"Oh my Goddess, that was amazing."

"Yeah, I know. The few bites I got before you and Sabrina absconded with it were enough to get him hired. Anyway, he started this week and has been a damn rockstar. He has even been asking to play with new recipes. This is one of them, and I can't wait to make it the Saturday special." She hums in approval while sticking the last bit of noodles into her mouth.

We sit in a quiet companionship while we finish our food. From time to time, we enjoy sharing space. No expectations. Just taking comfort in being with the one other person who understands us completely. Maybe that's because all we have is each other. Well—and Sabrina, of course.

Not that our parents are dead or anything. They are just—well, very self-absorbed. They have only seen their granddaughter a handful of times since she came into being. And the reason behind that? They are both so stuck up in each other's asses they don't care about anything else.

Even as kids, Kat and I pretty much took care of each other because our parents generally forgot we existed. They still do.

I appreciate my deep bond with my sister, though, so it doesn't bother me like it did when I was a kid. Nowadays, I prefer that they just stay away. Kat and Sabrina love me for who I am and don't spend the first twenty minutes of their visit bragging or the last twenty belittling me and my life before rushing off for some more important plans.

So yeah, it's just me, Kat, and Sabrina, and that's okay with me.

I open my mouth to finally fill Kat in on all the details after my car broke down earlier when the kitchen door swings open, and I nearly bite off the tip of my tongue.

I don't know what it is about today that has all the hottest men around presenting themselves to me like a damn charcuterie board... but Momma is a hungry bitch. And I want a bite of them all!

When his eyes latch onto mine, he stops and stares. My heart thrashes around in my chest like a bird frantically trying to escape its cage, and I'm frozen in place. I can't blink or move under his focused observation as those sapphire-blue eyes peer into the depths of my soul.

Thankfully, our staring contest is broken by Kat's cough. "Well, not that it isn't awkward sitting here in silence while you two eye-fuck each other. But, Em, this is my sous chef, James Donovan. James, this is my nutty and currently available in all the naughty ways, little sister Emerson."

James brings a hand up to cover his smirk, and I melt to the floor in a tragically embarrassing death thanks to my sister and her big mouth.

"It's lovely to meet you, Emerson," James says with a wink that ignites my lady bits and has my puddle form suddenly bursting back to life in a sexy

vessel that... I am now realizing is impossible to convey sexy body language when trapped in a booth.

“Hi, James! Your noodle is so fucking good.” Uhh... That did not come out right.

If Kat’s full belly laughter is anything to go by, what I think I said is definitely what came out of my mouth. Can I not have magick time-traveling powers instead? How hard would it be to rewind the day and start *all* over again?

Great, so my interaction with Mack was shitty when he rejected me. Then there was Syd, and yeah, okay, that went great. But now, faced with the dashing James, I have lost all semblance of functionality.

I’m a fucking mess.

Kat’s hand casually covers mine, bringing my attention to the table and the water glass with a growing crack.

Fuck!

My chaos magick.

It has been wonky as shit today.

I take a deep breath and work on pulling it back in while James addresses Kat.

“I just wanted to let you know I got everything cleaned up back there and ready for the floor guys.”

“Thanks so much, James. I know this isn’t the best time to close for two days, but these floors have to get done before the holiday rush, and those two banquets come through next week. It’s now or risk getting sued when someone breaks an ankle on that crack by the lady’s restroom.” James nods at her and offers me another swoon-worthy smile before disappearing into the kitchen.

Kat grips my hand hard and shakes it to get my attention, and when I look at her, she seems concerned. “Em, are you ok? Your heart is racing, and umm...” She trails off by releasing my hand to gesture at our tableware. Both glasses and plates are sporting various cracks. And each of our forks has odd twists in the handles.

Proof that I didn’t get a quick enough hold of my fucking chaos magick.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Just flustered, I guess.” I try to laugh it off, and while Kat doesn’t push, she doesn’t seem to believe me. That makes two of us.

“Alright, hit me with all the deets from your meeting with the gallery before Sabrina gets home from school. I want to get the restaurant shut down so we can spend some time together.” Hearing how excited she is to spend quality time with her daughter makes me smile. Only a tiny bite of it might ignite my little green monster, but I would never tell Kat that.

“The gallery meeting went great. But first, I need to tell you what happened after my car got towed...”

She smiled like a maniac, and we laughed like horny teens as I told her all about meeting Mack and Syd.

# Chapter 6

James Donovan III

I barely manage to hold my shit together until the kitchen doors swing closed behind me, putting a barrier of sorts between me and the wild beauty that also happens to be my new boss's little sister.

After a nice deep exhale—even though the action is entirely voluntary—I drop onto the last high bar stool I have left to put away before leaving. My brain sputters as I sit there, staring down at my hands.

To help focus my brain and give me something other than a set of mismatched eyes to focus on, I inspect my left pinky finger. Other than the constant visible black veins that run through it, there are no additional signs of necrosis.

I know I'm lucky. Most people with my affliction are in far worse condition. Some aren't even functional anymore. Hell, I probably wouldn't be if I hadn't been addicted to the oil blends made by one Katrina Dubois.

However, I don't think her intention with the spicy Mediterranean olive oil blend was for it to work like an appetite redirection for zombies. Or that by

eating a diet lacking in meats and infused with her exquisite magicks, I could essentially stop my minute signs of decomposition.

Is it vain that I fear decomposing?

Being changed sucks. Being changed into an undead creature that slowly decomposes as time passes on sucks even more. The other zombies I know of who were changed around the same time I had all lost a limb or two at this point. So, I don't care if caring about it makes me a little vain. Given the circumstances, I think it's a normal reaction.

What's *not* a normal reaction for me?

A raging boner.

Yeah. My dick is more rigid than it has been since that fucking Wendigo bit me and proved to me that zombies *really* are a thing. Although, maybe I still have some pixie in me, which prevents me from craving meat. Or worse... brains.

I shudder at the thought.

Thankfully, grossing myself out seems to deflate my cock, and I sigh in relief. How the fuck did that *thing* come back to life? After *twenty-five* years?

I mean, it's always been there, but it's lacked functionality for *certain* bedroom activities.

Not that I haven't done everything in my power to ignite some kind of passion in this lifeless body of mine. It started with the nipple piercings. They didn't do a damn thing, but I actually liked the way they looked, so I kept them. When my attempts to cure my zombie E.D. resulted in a Jacob's Ladder that looks hot but still couldn't wake mini James from his slumber, I completely gave up hope.

I left the dick piercings, too, because at least I looked sexy naked. And the rods give an illusion that my dick is at least half-hard.



So then, why—or rather *how*—am I suddenly able to “rise to the occasion” when meeting a random stranger? As my mind replays what happened, the sound of her laughing creeps into the kitchen.

Then suddenly...

Boom!

It happens again. My dick is hard, throbbing, and trying its fucking best to break through my pants. I shouldn't be able to get hard, sexually frustrated, or turned on so much that the thought of her has my mouth watering.

And yet, here we are.

Sitting in the kitchen of my new workplace, fighting the urge to whip my dick out and stroke it.

That's just great, James—really bloody classy. You would think I was the twenty-seven-year-old pixie with perfectly styled hair that I work diligently to appear as, not the suddenly horny fifty-two-year-old zombie-ish dude I really am.

The buzzer chimes above the oven and saves me from embarrassing myself further.

I pull out the tiny lava cake I had made for my new boss to thank you for taking a chance on someone lacking the credentials she was searching for. Well, that and the creamy truffle risotto already boxed up and ready. Letting the lava cake chill, I pull out the powdered sugar and the mint sauce. Once I am satisfied with the final compilation, I place a mint leaf on top, followed by the container lid.

After placing the boxes in a small bag, I bring them to the dining room and find Katrina and her sister approaching the front. The sight has me rushing forward in a panic that I can't even begin to understand.

When the ladies see me approaching, they stop talking, but not before I

catch Emerson saying she will pick up a pizza on the way home. The saddening report of her dinner prospect has my body moving before my deadened brain catches up.

Awkwardly, I thrust the bag in Emerson's face, startling her back a few steps.

Smooth, James, real fucking smooth.

"I ended up with extra, so please let me save you from the shitty pizza they sell at Lucy's." She opens and closes her mouth a few times before taking the bag. A small smile pulls at the corner of her lips, and I swear I see a blush forming.

"Thanks... uh... James. That was really sweet." I return her smile but end up stuck there. Just staring at her. Again. I'm working hard not to move a muscle and secretly hoping she doesn't see my raging hard-on that's back with full force.

I forgot how inconvenient boners really are.

Thankfully, her sister breaks the silence. "Right, okay, Em. You need to get home and get going on some of those gallery pieces."

Emerson frowns, and it has to be the cutest thing I have ever seen.

"Yeah, I guess. I might pick up some wine to go with this, though." She lifts the bag and gestures with it. "Thanks again for this. It smells great."

"No problem," I reply lamely.

She turns and heads out the door. I don't even manage to say 'bye' because, apparently, my brain is far more dead than I realized. When I return my attention to Katrina, she shakes her head and laughs. Surprisingly, her laugh, yet similar to her sisters, does nothing for me.

She pokes me in the chest for punctuation. "Two things. Don't hurt her, and don't fuck her in my kitchen." She laughs again and moves around me,

heading towards the back, where she has a private entrance to her apartment above the restaurant.

Two things are glaringly obvious as I work to get my body under control. First, just the thought of hurting Emerson makes me feel physically ill. Second, I wish she had said nothing about fucking in the kitchen because now that is all I can think about.

I sigh and scrub my hands down my face.

Guess it's time to go home and try to figure out why my dick is suddenly working again and what I am going to do with it.

I groan at my dirty thoughts.

Guy gets his first boner in a few decades, and suddenly, that's all he can think with.

Figures.

# Chapter 7

## Emerson

I'm pretty sure I look like a circus act stepping into my apartment. I wedge the cheap bottle of wine I grabbed at the corner store underneath my armpit while I juggle the bag of food James gave me. The key to my small place is stuck in the damn hole, and no matter how I jiggle it, the stupid thing won't come out. And to top it all off, I'm desperate for the damn toilet.

My dance of embarrassment becomes one of futility as the key decides it will not budge. With a huff of annoyance, I leave it hanging in the door as I rush into my kitchen to plop down the food and wine. After a quick visit to relieve myself, I stomp back to the front door to make the damn key my bitch.

Unfortunately, the day seems to be just too much for my fucking magick. As I pull at the jammed piece of metal one last time, I feel the shiver of magick that runs up my spine as I lose control.

A large spark erupts from my fingertips, and the damn key finally comes loose. But that's not all, folks. Nope. Now I have about fifty more copies of the damn thing lying on my floor.

What the fuck am I supposed to do with all of them? Shrugging off the annoyance at the loss of control, I bend over to pick it all up. There's nothing I can do about it now. It's not like I'm not used to the crazy shit my chaos magick can do.

At least I have a decent meal and a massive glass of wine to look forward to. With that happy thought, I return to my kitchen and deposit all the spares from my pockets into one of the junk drawers. I suppose it doesn't hurt to have extras. You never know what might happen. There was that one time I accidentally melted my copy.

I grab a large glass of wine and the food in its takeout containers and go over to my large, ugly, super comfy sofa. Kat keeps trying to convince me to get rid of it, but I've passed out on it too many times after a late-night painting or sculpting even to consider throwing it out. It might not suit her fancier tastes, but my ass and back certainly thanked me each time I sunk down into it.

Debating whether or not to continue the latest episode of my favorite reality TV show or grab a book to read, I plop my feet up on the coffee table and let out a huge sigh of relief as the sofa cushions hug my exhausted body.

Just as I've made up my mind and I'm about to grab the television remote, my ass beeps. And then beeps again. Oh boy, and again.

Accustomed to Kat's insistent version of messaging, I dig into my back pocket to grab my phone. Only to be brought up short by the notification on the home screen.

It isn't a text from my annoying older sister. Nope. It's three separate tags on that damn dating app I signed up for the night before. Huh. That was nice and quick. And three matches already. It seems like my holiday plans are looking up already.

Thoughts of mindless TV long forgotten I click on the notifications to open them while taking a long sip of my wine.

First up...

Thankfully, I manage to swallow the wine in my mouth instead of spitting it out.

This has got to be a mistake. I rub my eyes with the hand holding the wine and end up spilling some down my front. Frowning at the growing red stain, I decide to try cleaning it out later.

Because at this moment, the fact that none other than Mack, the sexy mechanic from *The Horny Bear*, is one of my *perfect* matches feels like a kick in the... well, ass.

How can the growly, rude giant be one of my perfect matches? He quite clearly isn't interested in anything I have to offer him. Idly, I wonder if he could pick up on the fact that I was missing a particular attribute, and maybe that's what turned him off.

That self-conscious fear bubbles up, but I quash it down with my determination.

You know what? If he noticed, fuck him.

I don't want a man who's bothered by anything *unique* about my body. I am a fucking survivor, dammit. If any love interest of mine can't deal with the fact that I had one of my breasts removed to get rid of the cancer eating away at my body... then they can just go fuck themselves.

Realizing that I'm in the middle of an internal rant without knowing if that was even his problem, I take a concentrated breath and look back at my phone.

As the saying goes, there are plenty more fish in the sea. And this witch has two more fishies on the line. I close out of Mack's profile on the app, not

feeling up to falling for a man who so easily rejected me. I return the wine glass to my lips for another sip before opening up my following match profile.

And this time, I actually *do* end up spitting the wine all over the damn phone.

This has got to be some cruel joke. Or a prank? Right? Yes, Kat is pranking me. I have no clue how she even managed it, but that is the only logical explanation.

I wipe the wet phone screen on the side of my leg before dialing my sister's number.

"No, it's against all kinds of laws for me to give you James' number," Kat's opening remarks have me pulling the phone away from my ear so I can look at the screen. Yes, I recognize her voice, but why on earth is she talking to me about her sexy sous chef?

Deciding to change gears, I push the button on my screen to change the call to a video chat. It doesn't take long for Kat to accept the request.

"I'm not phoning for your employee's details."

Kat lifts one perfectly sculpted eyebrow in question, and if I didn't love my sister as much as I do, I might be tempted to reach into the phone and wring her neck.

"You know perfectly well why I'm calling you."

"I do?"

"Yes, how did you do it?" I bite out, annoyed and impressed by her skills at the same time.

"Honey, Em, you're not making any sense right now. How about you spell it out for me, and I'll see if I can answer your cryptic questions for you."

"The damn app," I say, rolling my eyes. "How did you get them to match

me with the men I met today?”

Her eyes grow huge with shock and confusion. “You matched with James? I wasn’t even aware he was dating at the moment. He was very adamant in his interviews he’s chronically single.”

I shake my head in denial, but that little voice in the back of my head told me not to be so quick to say no. I do have three matches.

“Wait a minute, I need to check something,” I mutter as I take a huge gulp of wine, realizing the glass is empty. I wiggle my fingers, and for once, my magick behaves. The bottle appears on the coffee table in front of me.

I do some masterful juggling as I fill my glass again while clicking on the dating app again.

“Are you seriously placing me on hold after *you* called *me*?” Kat’s annoyed voice reaches my ears, but I am incapable of taking in anything at the moment.

Because there. Right there. My third match is none other than James freaking Donovan the third.

“Em! Dammit, Emerson, answer me, or I will be forced to pack Sabrina into the car so we can come check on you.”

She finally cuts through my stupor at the mention of my niece. I quickly open up the video call with her again and stare at her in shocked silence for a while.

Clearing my throat, I finally find the words to explain. “That dating app you made me sign up for. I have three matches.”

Her furrowed brow contradicts the warm smile. “That’s good though, isn’t it?” I nod absentmindedly as she continues to prattle on. “It’s always good to have choices, Em. And maybe a more poly lifestyle would be better for you



and your magick. I mean, if that's something you and whoever is interested in want, of course."

"You don't get it," I interrupt her slowly growing excitement. "It's the three hot men I met today. All three of them. Mack, Syd, *and* James."

"Oh."

That's all she says. 'Oh'.

Like my entire love life hasn't just been completely turned upside down.

# Chapter 8

## Emerson

**K**at finally talks me down from the mad spiral my mind went on. She's right, though. This is a good thing. I had an instant connection with all three men. And at the very least, all three indicated that they are interested in poly relationships. So I don't have to choose right away.

Maybe I don't have to choose at all. Perhaps I'm that lucky witch who can have her cake and eat it, too.

The thought of having all three men—and the cake, if I'm being honest—has my mouth watering.

After orgasming over the amazing risotto dinner gift, I swallow down the last of my cheap wine and head to the bathroom to run myself a nice big tub of bubbles. I'll have a nice soak and see where the night takes me. I'm not quite ready to hit the 'accept' button on any of the three profiles, but I can definitely fantasize about them for a little while longer.

After luxuriating in hot, bubbly bliss for too long, I crawl my way out of the bath and opt for a work-free night. My body is loose, relaxed, and I'm in no mood to get myself worked up again should the muse decide to be an illusive

bitch tonight. Instead, I scroll through the three profiles until my eyes finally drift shut.



My body is naked. Rough, firm hands knead at all the sore muscles as hot, wet mouths explore every crevice. It's been some time since I've been woken by a man giving me tender love and care. I have to admit I've missed it.

Most guys see the massive scar on my chest and the missing body part and run to the hills. Or ask all kinds of invasive, awkward questions about why I haven't had my breast reconstructed yet. No one cares that I prefer to keep my body as is. It's a badge of honor.

*I fucking survived.*

My eyes instantly shoot open at the realization that the firm hands are moving over my scarred, *naked* torso. Soft, tender kisses soothe the aches I

usually get in the cold, where the scar stretches across my chest.

When my eyes zero in on the person kissing and loving on me, I let out a terrorized squeal. It's a fucking unicorn head licking me. And the hands working their amazing magic on me? Well, they're huge ass bear paws.

And the strangest thing? The tiny little fairy-like creature flying around this huge monstrosity. I'd have said it has to be a pixie, but it looks like a fucking zombie from that stupid scary apocalyptic show.

Before the unicorn with his huge horse teeth can take a bite out of me, I opt for the only plausible resolution.

I pinch myself.

Shooting up in bed, I take in deep gulping breaths as I try to steady my heart rate. Talk about fucked up dreams. As things settle down I feel the unmistakable zing of my magick making itself known. Tendrils of color furl from under the covers and race towards my bedroom door.

Looks like my damn magick has finally decided to come to the party and have a fucking date with my muse. Eager to get to work, I jump out of bed without considering that I don't have a single piece of clothing on.

When the muse strikes, simple things like shirts and pants become optional. My fingers fly through the tubes of paint, and the different-sized canvases, and my mind quietens to that mystical point where everything becomes crystal clear.

My mind relaxes into a serene state when my magick is in perfect sync with my actions. The feeling almost resembles brain fog, which terrified me for a while. The last thing I want is the action that brings my soul to a state of bliss, being sullied by the all-too-clear memory of chemo brain.

I'm not sure how much time I lose to my art. Honestly, I don't really care because it feels so good just to create again. The bold, colorful faces that fill

my vision demand to be let out, and I'm a slave to my craft. I'm aware of taking small breaks to refuel on the left over take out and to gulp down bottles of lukewarm water, but nothing penetrates the haze of inspiration until I hear Kat's voice buzzing around in my ears.

"Seriously, Em. You could open a window at least," Kat scolds as she walks past me to the large windows behind my canvases. "If you're not going to die of starvation, you're bound to pass out from the paint fumes."

I blink my eyes, and the room slowly comes into focus. A quick peek at the clock shows me that the battery on the damn thing died again.

"It's two PM. Two days after you phoned me all hysterical about your multiple boyfriend situation." Kat is still walking around the room, opening windows and straightening the room as she moves. I think she's incapable of helping herself, and I'm certainly not going to stop her if she wants to clean up my place.

Her words sink in, and I send a rueful smile her way. "Two days, huh? Damn. It's been a while since it hit me quite so hard. Not since the chem—"

I stop myself from saying it, but I still see Kat flinch. Talking about how close of a call we had is something she can't handle yet. Not after losing Oliver. Thankfully, she recovers quickly and continues shuffling around, tidying up as she goes.

My stomach grumbles as if waiting for the cue, and I grin at my older sister again.

"What are the chances you brought something to eat with you?"

Her response is to roll her eyes at me as she flounces—who even still flounces?—to my kitchen. Belatedly, I notice the bags and bags of groceries lined on the counter.

"I bought some ready-cooked meals to put in your freezer, and I have the

makings for some salad here, too. Want me to heat a full meal, or will a salad do for now?”

“No baked goods?” I push my luck while plopping my ass down on the lone stool at my kitchen counter, thankful when I realize I must have dressed at some point. The mate to my seat has long since said its farewells to our world, and I’ve been too lazy to get them replaced.

“Who the fuck do you think you’re talking to? Of course, there’s baked goods. Sabrina and I have been having a field day with the restaurant closed. I’ve got cookies, muffins, and fresh loaves of bread.”

I extend my arms and make grabby hands. “Cookies!”

My big sister rolls her eyes at me as she unearths a container with giant chocolate chip cookies. I grab it like the starved witch I am and quickly stuff my mouth with one of them. Kat sets about starting a pot of coffee while I devour three of her delicious cookies, one after the other. They’re imbued with her magick, so even though I’ll still have to contend with the high sugar content, I know they’ll also give me the nutrients I need.

While the coffee continues to percolate—and before I can decide on a fifth cookie—Kat plucks the container from my arms. Taking advantage of my still stuffed mouth, she shoes me into the bathroom to shower. “You smell just terrible, sister-mine. As much as I love you and am incredibly excited that you have your groove back, I can’t deal with your stench and strong chemical smell. Now get so that I can ogle your newest pieces.”

The shower is exactly what I need.

Clean, refreshed, and not starving anymore, I follow my nose to the kitchen, where Kat has a massive mug of coffee waiting for me. I scold my mouth as I take the first life-affirming sip, but it’s definitely worth it. Even just a cup of joe made by Kat’s hand has an extra kick.

The witch in question is busy thumbing through the massive stack of canvasses that weren't there just two days ago. In one huge session, I've done at least a third of the pieces I'll need for my showing.

It might have been the weirdest sex dream ever, but something about it gave me precisely what I needed to get the creative juices flowing.

Kat's keen eyes zero in on me where I'm leaning against my door jamb.

"So. You painted about five different versions of James?"

I mean... I know that. But damn. Five?

"And is it safe to assume the other two faces featured on these portraits belong to the other mystery men from the dating app?"

Before I can answer her, my phone rings. I'm shocked it still has juice after being left for two days, but when I unearth it, I am not surprised to see it plugged into its charger—good old Kat.

When I see the name on the caller ID, I'm almost tempted to throw the phone back down on the table.

*The Horny Bear.*

What are the fucking odds?

# Chapter 9

Macklin

“D ammit, Syd, put down the phone,” I growl at my partner and best friend. He’s been trying to get hold of Emerson Whitlock for the last ten minutes, and at some point, he has to realize that continuously calling her until she answers isn’t the way to get the woman’s attention. “You’re just coming across as a needy creep. Stop calling,” I try to reason with him again when he rolls his eyes at me before redialing her number.

“No. That’s why I’m calling from the shop’s phone. If she answers and sounds annoyed, I can just talk about her car.” He sounds reasonable. But I’ve known the unicorn shifter for a very long time. I can sense the manic underneath the smooth, calm surface he puts up for everyone.

Ever since we agreed to court Emerson together, he’s been itching to reach out to her. I’d forced him to hold out for a few days, so we didn’t appear pushy. But he is totally blowing it now.

We don’t need anything else counting against us, either. Em would already be reluctant after the way I’d acted when we met. You can’t really blame a



bear for being a little surly when fate smacks him in the face with his fated mate, though, can you?

I wouldn't say I thought it was out of my realm of possibility. My parents were fated mates, and my early memories are filled with love and affection freely shared between them.

But I'd also seen how devastated my mother was when my dad was ripped from us in a car crash. She tried to put on a brave face and be strong for me, especially as I'd lost my dad, too, but I could see the pain and heartbreak underneath the surface.

Syd likes to think my mom saved his life when she took him in. The truth of the matter is that he saved us both. Both Mom and I were just going through the motions of caring for my two younger sisters, secretly struggling to get through the darkness, when she showed up at home with the scrawny, underfed kid.

Of course, I kicked back a bit. I was dealing with the grief of learning without my dad. I didn't want a younger brother with scraggly purple-tipped hair. Nor did I want to compete with him for my mom's attention. Those first few months were *hard*. He had so much attitude, even at the tender age of five. And I had this massive chip on my shoulder.

Mom was a saint. Thinking back on it, I would have killed us for how we'd acted, but I think it gave her purpose again. The twins were just young enough for the loss not to impact them as much as it had Mom and I.

Hell, I still can't remember what exactly turned the tide between us, but by the time we went back to school in the fall after Syd came to live with us, he was my little brother from that moment on. I protected him from the bullies at school who made fun of his strange hair and purple eyes. And as we grew older, I had to finish a fair few of the fights he started, too.

To date, I can only remember the one time we physically fought ourselves. The fight had resulted in me losing my eye and him breaking his damn horn.

That doesn't mean that I don't still want to cuff him upside the fucking head when he does something idiotic. Like, call our fated mate ten times in a fucking row.

"What if something is wrong with her?" he asks me, eyes wide, the cocky swagger long gone as worry for Emerson runs over his features.

"And what do you want to do about it if she is, Syd? We don't have her address, and she knows we're just two creeps who won't stop calling her. She's just as likely to have us locked up as open her door for us, even if we knew where she lives." I try to reason with him, but from the glint in his eye, I can tell he's not taking in a word I'm saying to him.

"She gave us a PO Box on her intake forms. And we have another cell number for a next of kin in case we can't get hold of her. Try calling her sister," the lunatic orders me, and I growl in response.

"I'm not going to fucking call her sister! Sydney. Stop. Listen to me." I slam down my hand on the counter in front of us to punctuate my point, and he finally pauses to look at me. "I know, okay. *I know*. We've met the person we're supposed to spend the rest of our lives with. The yin to our yang, and you're terrified she will slip from our grasp. But buddy, we have *the rest of our lives* with her. This isn't some big race to the finish."

He looks down at the unanswered phone in his hands. "But what about that damn app? We both got the matched notifications. What if she has more matches?"

"Then we deal with it. She's meant for *us*, Syd. You know how rare it is to find your destined mate. We won't lose her."

I say these words to him, but I'm not sure I believe them. Why on earth

would she choose to pick someone like me? If she had options, wouldn't she rather go for a softer-spoken, chiseled man without so many scars and hang-ups? Someone more like Syd.

As I watch my friend war with the feelings inside him, I silently vow to step back if being with me is ever a deal breaker for Emerson. I will give up my shot at happily ever after if it means my friend... *my brother* gets his.

"One more time," Syd vows before trying to get through to Emerson's number one last time. Suppressing the urge to sigh at the lost cause, I sit back in my chair and lean against the wall, pretending not to care if she answers.

"Em speaking, hello?"

Like the pathetic sap that I am, I push away from my perch and take a step closer to the phone.

"Uh... hi! This is Syd from The Horny Bear. How are you doing?"

There's a pause before she answers, and in the five seconds it takes her to respond, I'm pretty sure my heart stopped beating and jumped right out of my fucking chest.

"Is there something wrong with my car?"

I want to smack my head on the counter at her hesitant question. Of course, that's her first thought. That's precisely what I'd warned Syd about.

"Well... I was." Syd pauses and clears his throat before trying again. He shakes off his nerves, and I can see the cheeky charmer persona settle over him again. "Actually, darlin', Mack and I were wondering if you were free for a date this evening?"

His question is met with a deafening silence. Then there's some rustle of fabric as if she's put the phone against her body to cut out the sound. My shifter hearing is useless when on the other side of a phone call, so Syd and I

are forced to wait it out. After what feels like five years, but it is probably closer to five minutes, a soft feminine voice comes back on the line.

“Syd? This is Katrina, Emerson’s sister. Listen, she’s a little overwhelmed at the moment. Can she reach you at this number later, or do you want to give me your personal line?”

Syd rushes to read our cell numbers before the efficient Katrina cuts the call and leaves us hanging.

“Well, I guess that could have gone worse,” Syd says before grabbing his bike keys and heading for the door.

“It could have gone a whole fucking lot better, too,” my pessimistic self whispers to the empty room when the door swings shut behind him.

# Chapter 10

## Sydney

I keep from slamming the door shut behind me, but just barely. Once I make it outside the shop, though, swallowing down the urge to shift, run, and scream out, my frustrated stupidity is almost overwhelming. I can't help getting excited about things. When those moments come in spurts through your life, you learn to embrace them.

Yeah, maybe I embrace them a little too hard, but damn. Emerson is my *soulmate*. Something I have daydreamed about for years. If I am being honest with myself, it's something I assumed was pretty much out of the picture for me.

I felt confident about my actions, regardless of how surly my grumpy packmate was being about it. What harm is a phone call? No, I don't count the other sixteen attempts to get through to her line. Why? Because she didn't answer. It only counts when they pick up. Although, if tossing her phone at her sister is any indication, Emerson certainly disagrees with my line of thinking.

The overwhelming rush of nerves when her voice filled my ear was enough for me to nearly lose my cool. Once I recovered, though, all I got was silence. Well, that and her sister's curt response.

Regardless of how it all went, Emerson has my number now. She can text or call when she's ready. The ball is in her court now.

Why the fucking hell is that thought so stupidly terrifying?

The bottomless, unacknowledged fear bubbles to the surface, pushing the unwanted tears past my guard. This inky black, painful feeling in my chest is intense enough to have me rubbing at my chest.

Rejection.

Terrible, heart-shattering rejection.

That's what I fear. Waiting for Emerson to make the next move gives her an opportunity to refuse me. Deny our bond. What if she turns her back on her soulmate? She is the only woman in the world with the power to break me. And if she does? I don't know if I am capable of recovering this time.

Stuffing my head into my helmet and quickly swinging my leg over my bike, I waste no time turning the keys and revving the engine. The growl and purr of my sleek black and purple Ducati underneath me has my nerves settling. Giving the engine another quick rev and flipping the kickstand in place, I maneuver my way out of the back lot of the shop. As soon as the tires hit the open road, my grip on the bars relaxes.

Cars always feel too confined to me. It's probably because of my natural need to run. Living in a community with just as many humans as supes, though, kinda makes public shifting impossible. So I use my bike. It's not the same as feeling the wind rushing through my mane when I gallop, but it's damn close.

My mind only lets me relish the calm for a short while before the intrusive

thoughts crowd me again. Despite my feelings for Emerson, I would never force her to be with me. I know that. But the battle inside me, the need to have her choose me, is overwhelming. Or us, I suppose, since Mack and I have this whole pack thing going now.

What if she only wants one of us?

Can I *really* live and watch her life flourish and grow with my brother?

“Fuck!” I shout out into the air, rushing toward me.

Deep down, I would be happy for them, but my heart is fragile. The moment she breaks it, I will have no choice. As much as leaving Mack and my life behind will hurt, I would need the solitude and space to cope with my unrequited love. That would mean losing not just my soulmate but also Mack, our shop, and my home.

That realization has my stomach rolling, forcing me to pull over.

I nearly drop the Ducati as I fling my body away from the bike and toss my helmet. My breath heaves with labored breaths, and no matter how hard I try, my stomach won't settle. My hands shake with the effort it takes to keep hold of my shift, but the harder I try, the more painful it becomes. The tingle of the shift runs across my skin, the fire so intense, until I finally give over and let the change roll through me.

My unicorn is a fiercely protective beast; clearly, it doesn't trust me to handle things right now. I say a silent prayer of thanks that I'm wearing nothing more important than a T-shirt and jeans, ones I have many of. Still, when I hear the unmistakable shred of leather, I swallow down the tears at losing my second favorite pair of boots—one drawback of being a huge shifter stuck in a small human body.

My beast chuffs off the reaction to the simple necessity I spend too much money on.

As I complete the change, I feel the ground under our hooves and the wind blowing like the caress of fingers through our mane. I allow myself to sink into the tranquility and simplicity of my beast's needs, and I give complete control over my unicorn for the second time in my life. I don't care how long or far we run. I don't give a flying fuck who sees us. I just want a moment of peace from my pent-up anxiety.

When it sets off through the open field beside us, I curl into myself and allow my consciousness to drift off to sleep.



Macklin



I shouldn't have let Syd run off on his bike. He tries to play it calm and cool when he leaves the office, but I know my brother. I can see the pain in his eyes. The fear. The same fear I have that Emerson might reject one or both of us.

She isn't a shifter, after all, and pack mentality is not something many understand unless you are in one. I get that now. This means there is a good chance that she knows nothing about mates and another good chance that she is not interested in any type of relationship. Let alone a polyamorous one.

I have never been more grateful for Charlie's impressive hearing and empathy. As soon as he sees me looking at the line-up for the shop, he tosses my keys at me and tells me to go after him. Hiring him was the best choice Syd had ever made for our business.

Once I clear the city limits, I take a left and head out into the open stretch of road I know Syd likes to take. It's a straight span of asphalt that stretches for miles with only a few dips. It doesn't take long before I spot the Ducati my best friend has spent so much time on.

Slowing the truck, I maneuver the beast in front of Syd's ride. I spot what looks like a pile of clothes in a tattered mess and can only assume that my brother needs to run.

As I manhandle the bike onto the truck bed—thank you, supe strength, for making that task easy—I shake my head at the leather scraps. I know how he feels about his shoes, so no matter how he felt when he shifted, he's going to be pissed that it cost him a pair.

With the bike secured, the fabric and leather bits all cleaned up, and my hands on the wheel, I take a big breath.

Deep down, a tiny part of me was terrified that I would find him under the bike. Not that he's usually reckless. But when Syd's hurting, he tends to act a

bit more... wild.

# Chapter 11

## Emerson

A coward. That is what I'm being. Granted, it *is* shocking to have Sydney call *right* as Kat and I talk about him. Well, then, but still. There was a fleeting thought that it might be about my car. But then he asks me out. So what if I freeze? That's what big sisters are for.

Inside my head, I am saying loads of things. Mostly freaked out or excited cuss words. But it is still more than I'm doing on the outside. I stand there with wide eyes, opening and closing my mouth, but no sound comes out.

Thankfully, Kat is here to save the day. With her level-headed attitude, she takes the phone from me—yes, I am ignoring the bit of begging I might have done before that point—and calmly collects the guy's numbers and ends the call.

When she passes me a scrap of paper with Syd and Mack's numbers and James's, I might do a little happy dance. There might also be a squeal that escapes me as I clutch the paper to my chest.

“You’re lucky I love you, you know?” Kat scoffs at me as she rolls her eyes.

Hey, what can I say? My magick isn’t the only thing that’s chaotic, okay?

With my mind whirling through myriad emotions, Kat leans her hip against the wall, crosses her arms, and gives me *the look*. You know. That one that says she knows what I am thinking before I even say it. I open my mouth to defend myself, but Kat holds up her hand and stops me.

“I’m not going to tell you what to do, Em. I won’t even tell you that meeting up tonight is a rushed decision. I’m excited for you. Truly. All I am going to suggest is that you give it a day. Call them, or one of them, or however you want to tackle this, in a few hours and invite them to take you out *tomorrow*. You have had a chaotic few days,” I roll my eyes when she pauses to laugh at her own pun, “and you need to give yourself a chance to relax. Plus, it’s always good not to look too excited there, Em.” She punctuates her statement by pointing to where I have the paper held firm against my heart.

She’s right. I know it’s been a while since I’ve been on the dating scene, but that doesn’t explain why I am so damn giddy about this. Not even my close call and recovery would account for the butterflies doing cartwheels in my stomach when I see all three of the guys’ names. Together.

Hmm...

“You’re right! I am going to call all of them right now and make them take me out tomorrow night together.” When I reach for my phone, Kat wraps her arms around me and laughs.

“Make me a deal?” When I just blink and try hard not to wiggle free, she finishes her proposal. “Just wait to call them until after your phone is done

charging. It will give all of you a chance to calm down and give us time to chat.”

The idea of needing a cool down is preposterous, but I can't pass up the offer to spend time with her. Besides, if *she* is offering to chat, it means she has something she wants to talk about. I cast one longing glance at my phone before taking a deep breath and stuffing the paper in my pocket.

“That sounds great, Kat.”

She beams a big smile at me before dragging me to the couch, where she has coffee, some sandwiches, and a plate full of treats laid out for us already. Yeah, this definitely sounds like a great plan.

“So, let's start with Sabrina first.” My heart hiccups in panic at the mention of my favorite girl's name, and I pull the steaming coffee mug away from my mouth. It must also show on my face because my sister pats my leg. “Nothing bad, I promise! Well, bad for my complex, maybe. I now feel old because—get this—our little Nugget has a boyfriend.”

My mouth falls open in shock. “What? Who is he? Does he get good grades, at least? Have you even met his parents, Kat?” I am sitting here in full panicked horror at the information, and my sister looks like she is about to piss herself from laughing so hard. I know I'm not Sabrina's mom, but that kid has my whole heart. She is the closest thing I will ever get to having my own kids now, and Kat doesn't even seem to care that some snot-nosed little brat is trying to steal her from us.

“What is so fucking funny?” I growl at her. My show of irritation doesn't even phase Kat, who takes the time to dab her eyes with a napkin before addressing my concerns.

“Well, my darling sister, there are times when we are so polar opposite that I can't help but wonder if you are, perhaps, adopted. But then you act like

that—after I snuck into the bathroom and did a full social media dive on the parents of the seven-year-old very normal, very *human* child my daughter has proclaimed as her boyfriend—and I see the resemblance.” We share a silent stare before we both burst into a fit of laughter this time. That poor girl will be terrified of us when she actually hits the age where she is dating.

After a few minutes and sore sides, we finally calm down, and I can drink some of my coffee. As my thoughts settle, something my sister has said catches my attention. “*Human* boy? Eww. Hopefully, she doesn’t get too attached.”

My sister nods. Most of the time, youthful love is like a firecracker. Loud, fast, and over before it even starts. But there are those rare times when those sparks dig deep and cause a fire. Under the right circumstances, that fire can keep building and burning. Not only do supes have vastly longer life spans than humans, but being in a mixed relationship with one can have disastrous outcomes. In fact, once Sabrina hits puberty, she will have to be homeschooled so that we can also train her to control and hone her abilities. A witch in puberty has wild magick that will make it dangerous for her to be around humans with their fragile bodies. Kat’s words cut through my thoughts.

“Yeah, thankfully, I don’t think I have much to worry about. The father seems obsessed with hunting, and the mother enjoys baking. Although, based on her pictures and the faces of those eating her creations, she is probably best suited for that baking show that features humans flopping and struggling with basic instructions.” Kat cringes at the mention of the show. Nothing grosses her out more than when someone who does not fare well in a kitchen insists on throwing themselves into it, especially for money.

“Yikes. Yeah, I think we are safe there.” I chuckle and take a big bite out of

the sandwich. Kat's magick washes over me, and my eyes nearly roll back in my head from bliss. Her talent never ceases to amaze me. I take another big bite and almost spit it all out with my sister's next line of chatter.

"James was asking all sorts of questions about you yesterday."

I quickly swallow the food and plop my sandwich back on the plate to give Kat my full attention. "What did you tell him?" My voice comes out in a panicked squeak that has my sister raising her eyebrow.

"Calm down. I didn't whip out the naked baby pics or anything. He mostly asked about your tastes. Your favorite drink, vegetable, fruit, meal." Kat pauses, tapping her finger against her chin. "Come to think of it, it was all about food. But, to be fair, that is kind of his passion. So, I humored him and answered questions while we worked. His attention was divided between me, the oils we were bottling, and Sabrina.

"She took to him immediately, and he was so sweet with her. Anyway, once we were done, he just said his goodbyes and left. Didn't pressure me for your phone number or anything." Kat returns her attention to her coffee and selects a treat from the plate.

My sandwich still rests, only half-eaten, on the plate, but I can't seem to move more than taking tiny sips of my quickly cooling coffee.

There is a war going on inside of me now. One side finds it sweet that he was so good with my little Nugget.

The other side is pissed that he didn't even try to get my number from Kat.

# Chapter 12

James

**D**ark gray walls with a deep magenta-trimmed cove ceiling. That's all I have been staring at for the past three hours. My body is exhausted, and I should rest in my soft, extra-wide king-sized bed. But my stupid fucking brain refuses to shut off. It's been reeling since working with Katrina yesterday.

Katrina is my favorite boss by far. She's easy to get along with, and I find I can work with her while chatting or in companionable silence while enjoying both. Yesterday, though, I couldn't shut the fuck up. Her daughter was sweet and super protective of her mother, which makes me like her even more. I was initially a little nervous that her sweet smell would cause issues for my former tastes. She doesn't smell like a supe yet, which makes me even more nervous. But there is something to her scent that makes me see Emerson's glorious smile. The scent, the company, and the activities finally had me at ease.

I haven't always been the greatest guy. After all, when a zombie first changes, they are insatiable. While I can't recall ever having done the



unthinkable and snuffed out a life so young, I find myself grateful that those first two weeks are a complete blur with memories that have not once attempted to resurface.

If Katrina noticed my initial hesitation around her daughter, she certainly didn't let it show. Granted, while she knows I am a supe, she doesn't exactly know the extent of my current *condition*. If she does, she certainly wouldn't have me working for her, or around her daughter, or answering the questions that seemed to spew out of my mouth regarding her little sister.

My mind replays the things Katrina told me about Emerson. She loves coffee, but her favorite drink is sweet lemonade. Noodles are her favorite dish, and she adores chocolate-covered strawberries but is very excited about gingerbread season. I bite my lip as I lie naked under the sheets and think about all the things I want to make for Emerson. If I make her some, will she let me feed her the chocolate-covered strawberries?

My imagination runs wild, and I groan as my dick hardens, something it has been doing more and more these past few days. I can see her in my mind as I close my eyes. Her luscious lips press against the hardened shell of chocolate. Pearly-white teeth bite through the crunchy shell into the juicy berry inside. As she pulls away, a tiny drop of berry juice falls from her lips, and I waste no time leaning in and licking it off her sweet skin.

She quickly chews and swallows the treat before her lips crash into mine. Our tongues wrestle for control, and my mind goes blank when the flavor of her mouth hits mine. No food in the world can compare to the taste of Emerson. I stroke my cock lazily, picking up speed as the imaginary Emerson's hands explore my flesh, thankful for the piercings adding a delicious vibration to the experience. With my free hand, I reach up and gently tug on my nipple ring.

To my shocked surprise, the sensation zings through my chest and has my dick exploding, covering my thighs and the sheets in my cum.

I've lost my irritation at changing the sheets or my pants these last few days. But the awed expression I see reflecting down from the mirror mounted above my bed proves to me I'm not crazy. I *did* feel that in my nipple. I slowly reach my hand back up and give the opposite nipple ring a tiny tug.

Nothing.

That's... well, I guess no weirder than the rest of this, I suppose.

When I give a tiny tug on the same nipple I did before, the zing of lust shoots through me again.

What the fuck?

Ok, so now I have a working dick and a working nipple?

My mind whirls with what this could mean. I have tried so hard to swallow my excitement and hope, but I can't stop my mind from wishing that this is the beginning.

Who knew the cure to being a zombie would be finding the soulmate to my latent pixie side? The side that is clearly holding on to every scrap of hope it can.

Standing up, I rip the damp sheet off the bed and plod across the wood floor to stuff it into the hamper. With the three others. I have got to stop fucking up my sheets every five minutes. I should also get these washed up, but when I look back at the bed, I only think about how badly I want a nice, cool shower.

Shrugging my shoulders, I move to the ensuite and turn on the rainfall shower. Sometimes, being an older, successful zombie has its perks. And living long enough to have enough money to afford the little luxuries is one of those perks.

While the rest of my house is open but simple, my bedroom and bathroom

are where I splurged. However, the most recent renovations include updates throughout and a kitchen that can easily compete with the one at *A Taste of Magick*.

I don't wait for the shower to heat and simply step into the cool falling water, much like I have many times before. With no heart beating in my chest, I tend to run cold anyway, so the cooler water doesn't phase me. Imagine my shock when the cold water on my dick has me jumping back.

No longer able to cope with the massively growing list of weird shit happening to my body, I shut off the shower and quickly towel off before throwing on some grey sweatpants and a white tee. I snatch the laundry hamper and toss the contents into the washer, setting it to do its job while I go out to the living room.

Snatching my book off the coffee table, I flop down onto my comfy sofa and prepare to relax while my mind hides away in another world. As I reach the part where the gang is about to figure out who is selling everyone's hair, a vibrating noise pulls my attention.

Fuck!

Where did I put the damn thing again? Oh!

I dash to the table by the door and check the bowl where my car keys are. The vibration from the device sounds like it could break the glass bowl. No one calls me, so I am confused as I snatch it up and stare blankly at the screen.

It's a number I don't recognize, and I know I should send it to voicemail, but something has me pressing the green button and bringing it to my face.

"Hello? James?" Emerson's sweet voice fills my ears as my mouth falls open, but all that comes out is a pained groan. I clench my hand against my chest and try again.

THUMP.

The hard beat against my fist is so painful it makes my vision go black as I fall to the ground.

THUMP.

More pain as my consciousness wavers. From the spot near my head, I hear Emerson's quiet voice as she apologizes before hanging up.

# Chapter 13

Emerson

“Ugh!”  
My heart stops at the sound of the groan coming through the phone. Is he... Did he... Did James answer the phone while jerking off?

Nothing else but some labored breathing makes it through the line.

“Uh... sorry. This is a bad time. Bye!”

The phone drops to the couch beside me as I throw my head against the backrest. I shouldn't be turned on, right? Was he even playing with himself? In hindsight, that sounded an awful lot like he was in pain. Maybe he's the kind of guy that likes it to hurt?

My nerves and residual lust settle as I take another deep breath. I can always call back a bit later. Once he's... done. There's always the other two I still need to contact. But which one? Both at the same time?

“Dammit.”

Choosing to phone James first was easy. I knew I wouldn't potentially upset someone else because no one else would need to know. Now I'm

regretting that move. If I'd stopped being such a coward, I wouldn't have heard... what I heard.

And I still have to choose.

The unmistakable tingle of my magick letting loose zings from my heart through my fingers and into my phone. The damn thing lights up with a conference call to the other two numbers. A damn video conference.

For fuck's sake!

I watch myself in the bottom corner of the screen and make a concentrated effort to stop biting my lower lip. And quickly wipe at the smear of porno-purple paint on my cheek.

My attempts to rid myself of the impromptu makeup only make things worse, and before I can get rid of the ever-growing splotch, both men answer on their end.

"Emerson." Mr. Growly Mc Frowny-Face greets me at the same time his sexy friend does. "Hey, Em!"

My hand continues to scrub at my face, even though I know it's a lost cause.

"Hi! Uh... Sorry. Is this a good time?" I ask before finally giving up. To their credit, neither man comments on the paint nor looks at it for too long.

"Great time!" Sydney speaks up first before shoving something to his left. When he does, there's the slightest nudge on Mack's side.

"You two are together?" My heart rate spikes as I wonder if I'm stepping up on someone's territory. It's like just after seven a.m. I'd promised Kat I wouldn't call until today. I just didn't promise her what time.

"No!" Mack practically shouts in response, shoving back to the other side. There's noticeable movement this time as Sydney almost falls over as his friend pushes him. "We're not... a couple or anything like that. We're,"

Mack pauses and shoves his free hand through his hair, only to get his fingers tangled in the mess of curls. “We’ve very recently realized we’re a pack. Or well... a pair?”

The big, growly man clears his throat, and if I’m not mistaken, his cheeks look a little pinker.

“So you’re both shifters?” My interest is peaked now. Thanks to the handy dandy hidden function on the dating app we’d signed up for, I’d already confirmed they were supes. It just didn’t say what kind of supe they are.

I guess you have to leave something for the date conversations, right?

“Uh-huh.” Syd nods his head in answer. He opens his mouth to say something else, but before he can, a large hand covers it.

“Sorry. He tends to get ahead of himself,” Mack explains. He looks to the side, and the glower he sends Syd’s way is probably supposed to be frightening, but I find it adorable.

I shrug. “That’s fine. I have that tendency, too. Kat, my sister... You spoke to her yesterday? Well, she has to caution me to take a breath all the time, too. Anyway, I wanted to reach out because, uh. Well, I matched with three guys on that silly dating app. And I’m sure you both know that I matched with you two... but I like the third guy too, and I guess what I’m saying is... I *really* want to go on a date with all three of you. At the same time.” The words all tumbled from my mouth at a speed I don’t even think I could keep up with.

“There’s another guy? Mother fucker.” Syd blurts out before placing his own hand over his mouth. “I mean... that’s totally fine. No issue whatsoever.” He shakes his head, talking from behind his hand. He looks to Mack. “Right, Mack?”

The man in question is now glowering at me, but I still can’t help but find it

adorable.

“*Right, Mack?*” This time, Syd’s voice is more insistent.

The big man nods in response, and I release a breath I didn’t realize I’d been holding in. I guess I was apprehensive they wouldn’t agree to a group date.

Now, I only need to get hold of James and see where he stands on the whole polyamory deal. A small part of me—who am I kidding, a considerable part of me—is terrified he’ll tell me to get lost.

“Is tonight good for you?” I try not to sound too hopeful since this is all kinda last minute.

Both men agree, and we quickly settle on a time and place. As it’s one of my favorite places and it’s typically booked way out in advance, I offer to make the reservation.

“My sister and I did him a huge favor a while back,” I say, referring to the place’s owner. “So I’ll grab us a table for tonight if that’s ok?”

“Fucking-A!” Syd says, his smile huge. “I’ve been wanting to eat there forever.”

“Great! I’ll uh... see you there. Bye!”

I cut the call before I can be even more of an idiot and take a big, steadying breath.

Knowing I have to try James again—and sincerely hoping he is done with his...umm...*business*—I redial his number before my magick can take control and toss me into another impromptu video chat.

The phone rings. And rings. And rings.

Maybe that was a pained groan? What if someone had broken into his house and knocked him over the head *just* as he answered my call?

Before I can freak out even more and probably talk myself into cutting the



call and reaching out to the police, he finally answers.

“Hello?” His voice cracks as he greets me.

“Are you okay?” I blurt it out, but I’m honestly concerned.

There’s a long pause before he answers, causing my heart rate to skyrocket. After a shuffle, James finally speaks up again.

“Yes, sorry, Emerson.” He clears his throat before starting again. “I’d like to apologize for earlier. I was immeasurably rude.”

My cheeks warm and I scrub my hand down my face.

“No, please! I obviously called at a bad time.”

We’re both quiet again, and the silence stretches until it becomes a tad too awkward.

“So. Is this a better time?” I break through the tension.

“Yes! How can I help you?”

“I take it you got the notification on Love -N- Shenanigans?” I ask, hoping to get through this conversation without a ridiculous amount of word vomit.

James grunts in response. It still sounds a little *rough* around the edges, but I push through.

“See, the thing is, I matched with two other guys, too, and I was wondering if you’re open to a kind of group date thing tonight?”

Not quite as smooth as when I practiced, but definitely better than the conversation I had with Syd and Mack.

“That sounds great.” Oh wow. He certainly sounds better now. “Where and what time?”

Giving James the details for the evening, I try my best not to rush through the rest of the phone call, but the second we both hang up, I jump up and do a little happy dance in the middle of my living room.

My magick, as crazy as it is, chooses that moment to do exactly what it

always does when I'm overwhelmed, overjoyed, or excited. It bursts from me in a huge wave. A large shower of flowers falls over me, raining down on me in a cascade of colors.

Giving in to the chaos, I spin in circles and giggle like a maniac.

# Chapter 14

## Emerson

**M**y tiny bedroom looks like a fashion fairy let loose in it. I'm a little unsure how it happened. One minute I'm digging through my closet trying to find the perfect 'first date' outfit, and the next, my damn, fucking, chaotic magick lets loose.

Again.

The last few weeks, it's been all over the place, but since I met those three sexy hunks, I've not been able to control it. Now I have dozens of spare keys, paintings out the wazoo, and so many outfits I'll never find the place to store it all.

First-world problems, right?

Without questioning my motives too hard, I grab my phone and hit speed dial 'one.'

"Em, baby sister, aren't you supposed to be getting ready for your date?" Kat's smooth voice soothes my frayed nerves instantly.

"I can't decide on an outfit."

Her warm chuckle fills the line, and if I wasn't so freaked out, I would have joined her in her laughter. I can never decide on an outfit. At best, I just grab random bits of clothing, and if they don't work together, I pretend I'm rocking that weirdo artist vibe.

“What do you have that's clean?”

Huffing out a frustrated breath, I pull the phone from my ear and snap a quick pick before sending it off to her.

“The question is... what don't I have?”

There's a shuffle on the other side of the line as Kat presumably looks at her phone. And then, the ever smooth, ever graceful Katrina Dubois drops her fucking cell phone.

How do I know this?

I hear a loud noise before Kat's full belly laugh follows it. More shuffling noises, and then her snort reaches me.

“Sorry! Fuck, sorry. I dropped the phone. Holy shit, Em! You don't do things halfway, do you?”

“Are you going to help me or not?” I bite out, tapping my foot on the floor while waiting for her response.

“Are you going to donate those after you've taken your pick?”

Huh.

Well. Wouldn't you know? Kat to the rescue again. Not that I'll ever tell her that.

“Of course I am. I considered taking it down to the women's shelter on Third Street.”

Wiping some of the clothes onto the floor, I make a spot to sit down while waiting for Kat to respond.

“Good. Good. Okay, let's keep it simple. Some black leggings, your leather

boots, and look for a sparkly top. Not black. Your large hoop earrings and the chunky beaded necklace Sabrina made you for your birthday,” she orders in that efficient way of hers. Before I can thank her, she carries on. “Oh, and Em, darling, hair up. You don’t have enough time to tame your mane, and I can’t come over right now to do anything with it, so do a big messy bun in that way that makes me envy your hair. Now go show them how amazing we all know you are.”

And the witch hangs up without as much as a goodbye.

The next twenty minutes are a blur. I find a sparkly, purple—okay, dark purple, but it isn’t black—top, unearth the accessories my sister suggested, and by the time I have my boots on and makeup applied, I’m already running five minutes behind.

And I can’t find my favorite scrunchie.

The alarm on my phone goes off again as I dig through the mountains of discarded clothes, reminding me that I should have already been in the car. Rushing to the front door, I grab one of the bazillion spare keys, a paintbrush, and my car keys. With a quick flourish, my hair is up in a semblance of an updo, with the paintbrush keeping it in place.

My apartment door slams shut behind me, but before I make it down to the car, my phone starts ringing. It has to be one of the guys checking in with me. The only problem was the phone is ringing inside the damn apartment.

“What the hell else can go wrong?”

I should know better than to ask the universe a question like that. Really, I should.

It snaps off the second I turn my house key in the lock. The ringing of my cell phone stops for a beat before it picks up again.

“Fuck it,” I shrug before making a mad dash for the car. The restaurant is

only a few minutes away. Driving down there will be quicker than trying to get into my apartment right now. That can be a problem for the future Emerson.



“I apologize, Ms. Whitlock. I don’t know what to tell you. You don’t have a reservation tonight.”

The tall, lithe blonde fae looks at me with a smidge of disdain. They’ve got that sexy androgynous look down pat, and if I wasn’t so annoyed with the situation right now, I’d take the time to convince them to model for me.

“But I made a reservation! Check with your boss.”

I hate that I’m saying that. I despise people who call the manager or the owner. But I have three very handsome, nervous men standing behind me.

There hasn't even been time to greet them properly, because the moment I stepped into the restaurant I saw James arguing with the maitre'd.

The smooth-skinned, charming chef looks a smidge red in the face, so I opt to jump in instead of leaving him to deal with my mess.

But now I'm getting upset, too.

"I'm sorry, ma'am. I don't know what you want me to say. You *do* have a reservation. It just happens to be this exact date next year."

The paintbrush in my hair clatters to the floor as I dig my hands into my messy hair while trying to soothe the pounding headache building behind my eyelids.

"Why the hell would I make a reservation a year from now?!" My exasperated tone grates on my own nerves.

Before I can get any more worked up over just one more show of my inaptitude, Sydney steps forward and offers me his hand.

Taking a deep breath, I give in and place my palm against his

"I have the perfect idea. Why don't we have a picnic? No reservations needed, and I have the best spot." His smile is sweet and sincere. Nothing about his expression makes me think he's annoyed or put out.

"Oh!" James pipes up excitedly. "I can grab some stuff from *A Taste of Magick*. Kat and I have been testing stuff for a new menu, and since they're still working on the floors, everything is just sitting there in the kitchen."

My stomach growls at the thought of food from Kat's kitchen. My body knows that Kat's magick is precisely what I need to fix what ails me. Her special spices and oils always work wonders to soothe me. My gaze travels to Mack to check in with the large, quiet guy.

"It's probably better. More private."

A man of few words who still manages to get his point across. I like it.

My lips stretch into a reluctant smile before I nod my agreement.

“Come on,” Mack grunts. “We’ll take my truck.” And he turns on his heel and kind of just... storms out of the door.

“You’ll get used to it,” Syd warns, squeezing my hand. “He can’t help himself. Being an asshole is so deeply ingrained, he struggles to let go of it sometimes.”

“Nah,” I shrug. “I like it. It’s honest. Real. There are so few people like that these days.”

We follow Mack, stepping out into the cool night air, where a crazy wind whips past us, forcing my hair into my face. A cute ginger cat takes that moment to wind its way through my legs. Luckily, before I could find myself face first with a mouth full of asphalt, two strong arms wrap around my waist and set me straight. My brain works through it. Syd’s still clutching my hand like a lifeline, so he obviously didn’t come to my rescue, and James was still behind us.

My eyes move up to the tall giant wrapped around me. So very, *very* close.

“Are you always this clumsy?” Mack asks me, his voice low.

“It’s my hair,” I respond in a whisper.

Mack’s brow furrows into a fierce scowl before he releases me and digs into his back pocket. He twirls his finger until I turn around so my back faces him.

Then the big, one-eyed man teases through the tangles and does a quick but effective braid that grabs all the loose hairs in that way only Kat can do.

“There,” he whispers, his mouth so close to my ear it sends shivers down my back. “You can keep the hair tie. I have more.” My nipples pebble and my long-forgotten pussy clenches at the tone and the feel of his hot breath on my now-naked neck.



“Well, whenever you two are done doing...whatever that is...how about we grab the food and get this date going?” Syd snarks, and even though his words have a bite, his tone is filled with a fondness and light that draws a smile from me.

“Sounds great.” Somehow, I manage to get the words out, even after seeing the heat in Syd *and* James’ eyes as their gazes rack down my body.

Tonight is going to be very interesting indeed.

# Chapter 15

## Macklin

She's the most stunning creature I've ever laid my eyes on—a study in contradictions.

Her two different colored eyes draw you in, and don't let go until they've had their fill of you. Her large, slightly askew smile is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen, and the apparent lopsidedness of her chest makes her one intriguing woman.

I'm curious about her breasts... or well, breast, but this is only our first date, and I can't come right out and ask about it, especially as I haven't said more than a few sentences myself. But I noticed that one side was just one of those pre-filled bras when my arms grazed past as I steadied her waist.

Syd is doing his best to keep the conversation going on the drive to the same clearing I'd found him in the other day after he was forced to shift. It really is the perfect spot. Quiet, secluded, and downright stunning. And if things go well, maybe Syd and I can introduce our beasts to her.

James clears his throat and shifts in his seat, reminding me about his presence. He's so quiet and unnaturally still that I'd have thought he's a

vampire if it wasn't for the fact that I can hear the faint heartbeat stuttering in his chest.

The delicious scents wafting from the basket in the back tantalize and tempt in a very similar way Emerson calls to me. The rumble of my stomach can be heard over the roar of the engine, and Emerson's sexy, throaty laugh cuts through the worst of my embarrassment.

"I don't blame you," she says, smiling at me from the passenger seat where I'd insisted she sit. "Kat's ingredients are magickal. Like, for real. She's a kitchen witch, and all her spices and oils enhance her food with magickal abilities." She shrugs and puts her head against the rest. "And it tastes fucking fantastic, too," she says with a sigh.

Suppressing the urge to take her small hand in mine, I grip the gear lever, the knuckles of my fingers going white. My need for this woman is only increasing the more time I spend with her, and if I don't keep a careful hold on my beast, he might come rumbling to the surface already.

Before I can do or say something I'm bound to regret, I spot the turn-off to the clearing. "We're here."

Emerson and Syd both sit forward in their seats, faces eager. James, on the other hand, remains stoic. He's a hard nut to crack, but I know with a bit of patience and resilience, Syd will break through his walls.

"Oh, this place is beautiful! How did you find out about it?" Emerson turns around in her seat to ask Syd. The asshole smiles and preens under her attention.

"I accidentally came on it one day when I let my animal out for a run."

Emerson opens her mouth to say or ask something else but gets cut off by me putting the truck into park.

"I'll grab the blanket and lanterns. James, can you bring the food?" I ask in

an attempt to be inclusive and polite before climbing out, but I don't wait for him to answer.

Syd and Emerson get out, and he takes her hand before leading her to the middle of the meadow. Together, James and I make short work of setting things up before we all find our spot on the large blanket.

“Uh... so this isn't awkward at all...” Emerson says after all four of us sit and stare at each other for one minute too long. “I probably need to warn you so we can get this out of the way now.” She bites down on her bottom lip before taking a deep breath, but honestly? I'm not worried about whatever she has to say. Nothing would make me turn her away.

“I'm sure you saw on my profile that I'm a witch.” She waits for us to react and, after a beat, continues. “I also made sure to put on there that I'm a chaos witch, but not many people understand what that really means. Basically, my magick reacts in weird and unpredictable ways. When I was a teen, Kat worked with me, and now I'm able to channel it into my art... most of the time, but when I'm stressed, overwhelmed, or incredibly emotional, things tend to go a little... wonky.”

Her eyes shift between us, clearly uncertain how we'd take the news of her potentially disruptive magick. The beast inside me urges me to soothe our mate, make her feel better. And fuck her while we're at it. And bite her. Claim her. *Mine*.

“Does it bother you?” I ask, as blunt as ever, pushing through my beast's urges.

Her large, miss-matched eyes blink up at me. “No?”

I shrug. “So then, why would it bother us? Does my blind eye bother you?”

Again she stares at me like I've lost my damn marbles.

“Of course not!” She rushes to say when she realizes she's been too quiet

for too long. “Honestly, I think you’re way too sexy. It’s better for my health and hormones if you’re more perfectly imperfect.” It takes only a second for her brain to catch up to her words, and she blushes a little, but I know my usual smirk has spread into a cocky smile.

My missing eye, the scars on my face, and my too-big body haven’t bothered me in a long time, but it’s a relief to hear that my fated mate finds me attractive. Warts and all.

“Good,” I grunt before turning to James.

“So, James... Tell us more about you.”

I’m determined to get past this awkward silence as I paw through the picnic basket, looking for something to eat. But it seems like everything he’s taken is meat-free. My bear is not impressed.

The man in question glances between us, looking a little like the deer caught in the headlights.

“Uh. Well, I’m a pretty simple guy. I am the sous chef at Katrina’s restaurant. Fifty-two years old, vegetarian, and currently learning to cope with a few things I never thought I’d have to deal with again.”

The man’s heart rate spikes, and I wonder what he said has his nerves increasing, but before I can ask, Syd jumps up and grabs a water bottle from the basket. Downing it all in one go, he closes the cap and sits back on his haunches before declaring. “Let’s play spin the bottle. But instead of us kissing each other, whoever it lands on has to play truth or dare.”

Emerson’s brilliant smile lights up her face. Fucking Syd. How the hell am I supposed to shoot down his idea when she looks so stupidly excited by it?

James nods his agreement, and all three look at me expectantly.

“Fine,” I say, barely suppressing the urge to roll my eyes at them.

“This is going to be so much fun,” Emerson rubs her hands together and has

pure glee shining in her eyes. Syd sits forward and places the bottle in the middle of the picnic blanket before giving it a good spin.

The white cap spins around and around before slowing its trajectory and pointing directly at James.

“Ah! The mysterious third man. Truth or dare?” Syd asks, adding an eyebrow waggle for flourish. “I get to ask you as I came up with the idea, but then you get to do it with the next person.”

“Truth,” the other man answers before sitting back to wait for Syd’s question.

“Oooh. Okay, if you could be any flower or plant, what would it be.”

James’ cheeks redden before answering. “A cactus.”

“Oh!” Emerson exclaims. “Why?”

James responds with a sly smile. “Tut, tut, tut, beautiful. That’s not how the game works.” He bops her on the nose before grabbing the bottle and giving it a good spin. We all watch in silence as the cap does its business before landing right on Emerson.

“Well, beautiful. What will it be, truth or dare?”

The curly-haired goddess shrugs and then answers. “Truth. I’m not quite ready to trust you all with a dare yet since I always find it nearly impossible to pass one up.”

So many questions run through my head, all the little things I want to know about Emerson, but it’s not my turn. And if we want to have a successful polyamorous relationship, we’re all going to have to learn to share and wait our turn.

“What are you thinking right now?” James asks Emerson, and her cheeks turn the most delightful shade of pink.

“Oh, this is going to be good,” Syd crows, and before I cuff him behind the

head again, he ducks out of the way.

“Well...” she starts, looking down at her hands. “I was picturing you all naked.”

Before we can react, there’s a strange buzzing in the air and a tingle running over my skin.

A soft gasp rings through the clearing, and it takes me a moment to realize the sound came from Emerson, who is wide-eyed with her hands covering her mouth.

And then... *then* I realize that I’m as naked as the day I was born.

Except for my scars and tattoos.

# Chapter 16

Sydney

**D**id I want to get naked with my fated mate?  
Of course!

Did I want her to magickally zap mine and the other two guy's clothes off within the first twenty minutes of our *first* date?

Listen, what I want is beside the point here. What I am trying to say is poor Mack looks embarrassed as hell. And then James... well, James doesn't seem to notice.

But Em? Oh, she notices, alright. She may be covering her mouth and quickly flicking her gaze everywhere with those wide eyes, but there is no hiding the smell of her arousal in the air. I try not to make it evident that I can smell her excitement at all the bare flesh surrounding her, but it is truly impossible to hide the fact that my dick is ramrod straight when I'm naked. I have many talents, but making my cock invisible is not one of them.

And if I lean back just a tad to give our mate a little show...well, she started it. Right?



When I glance over, Mack still has his arms crossed his chest and is now glaring at me. It's not my fault we are naked. That is all on Em.

She snickers, and when I turn my gaze in her direction, I see her hiding her whole face behind her hands, and her shoulders are shaking with the effort to contain her laughter. Even James is smirking at the entire situation.

Mack sighs loudly and throws his hands in the air. "I'll grab the spare clothes from my truck."

Completely unshy about his naked physique—like most of us shifters—Mack simply stands up, nearly pokes Em in the cheek with his donkey dick, and balls bouncing makes his way towards his truck and the spare clothes. Em doesn't miss a beat, and I'm almost afraid her eyes might literally fall out of the sockets at the sight of Mack in his raw form.

Surprisingly enough, her watching his ass doesn't even make me a little jealous. Huh. It must be the whole pack thing. That doesn't mean I am ready to miss the perfect opportunity to poke a little fun.

"Enjoying the show, Em dearest?"

Her face whips in my direction, and she lowers her hands. Her eyes aren't quite as wide as before, but she is still ogling all the goods she can. When she moves her head slightly to stare at James' dick, mine automatically goes with her, and now I am gaping like a creeper at someone else's dick.

"Holy shit, dude!" To his credit, James doesn't even flinch when he realizes that Em and I are both staring at his junk. In size, it's about as long as mine but slightly skinnier. However, he makes up for that with one of the lengthiest Jacob's Ladders I have ever seen. Not that I've seen a bunch, but I mean, the one guy at the gym in town has one that he is damn proud of and likes to show everyone. He's not a small dude, and he has seven of the

piercings. I would say James has about thirteen of them without getting close enough to count.

Before I can say anything more, I get smacked in the face with a rogue pair of sweats. When I pull them down, I see James standing and putting a pair on for himself, and I quickly do the same. Em averts her gaze when I wink at her and see the light blush bloom across her cheeks.

“Thank you.” James nods at Mack, who apparently only had two pairs of pants and is now rocking a pair of boxer briefs.

“Mack is always prepared.” I finish tying off the pants to keep them up and then wrap one free arm around my best friend’s shoulders. “Aren’t you bud?”

He just grunts, and the moment is interrupted by the sound of low growls. What in the...

“Sorry. I think I might be getting a bit hungry.” Em is biting her bottom lip, and fuck if I don’t want to do the same.

“Oh, here. Let me get everything out.” James reaches into the basket and starts pulling out little takeout food containers and laying them on the blanket. I let Mack go, and we sit back down to enjoy the meal.

The containers have little divided sections that keep the fruit salad and the gnocchi separate. He hands us chunks of bread, little cups of oil dip, and stemless wine glasses. The intention of alcohol makes me a little nervous. Not that I am opposed to the stuff. Honestly, shifters burn through it too quickly to get the effects. But when you are first getting to know someone, tossing alcohol in the mix is not always a good thing.

“I hope it’s ok that I decided against the wine this time. I brought an experimental fizzy juice I have been working on.” Nice bro!

James pops the lid, and the smell of cranberries and mandarin oranges fills the air momentarily. It smells amazing. Once we have everything set and

glasses filled, we all start to dig in. That's when I notice Mack fidgeting uncontrollably. What the heck could have the big guy on edge? When I shove another strawberry into my mouth, the answer smacks me in the face.

While I enjoy the vegetarian meal, Mack's bear needs meat. Damn. I wonder if he has any jerky or something in the truck?

"Oh, one last thing." James reaches back into the basket and pulls out a small box. "There isn't much here, but I grabbed the last of Kat's meatballs since I didn't know if either of you needed...you know..." Mack practically jumps over me and snatches the box from James like a greedy toddler.

"Manners there, big guy."

"Thank you." He grunts out before taking a big whiff of the meatballs.

Yeah. Sure. Say thanks to James, and who cares if Syd gets squashed in the mix?

"Oh, Goddess. Are those her garlic meatballs and mushroom sauce?" Em asks as I continue to stuff fruit in my mouth. Damn, this is good food.

James, also caught with a mouthful, nods.

Em lifts her fork toward the box. "Do you mind?"

And for the second time tonight, I'm left speechless as the big grump who would take off your hand for stealing his leftovers not only shares a meatball with our mate but, as gently as possible, *feeds her* the bit of food.

I catch myself staring as her lips wrap around his fork. She closes her eyes and lets out an appreciative moan, making me so fucking thankful for the sweatpants.

That may or may not be slightly damp now with pre-cum.

Fucking hell, this woman makes me feel like a damn teenager again.

# Chapter 17

James

**E**very time my heart beats in my chest, it hurts. Getting used to it has been challenging, but I've finally gotten to where I can control my reactions. This is a new, foreign feeling, but I hope I'll either get used to it, or it will get better over time. Regardless, it's worth the kick in the chest because it means that somehow, I'm alive again by some miracle. Or, at the very least, more alive than I was before I met Em.

Or maybe I will wake up tomorrow and be dead again. Who knows at this point? I sure as hell don't.

Being naked in front of Emerson—by her own doing, no less—is so freeing. The only thing that would make the experience better is if she had magicked her clothes away, too. Well, and less distance between our bodies, of course.

Ok, maybe a few factors could have made the whole experience better, but I am exceptionally proud of my body and have no problem with Emerson looking at her fill. The lust that blows her pupils wide tells me she is enjoying the show. Her rapid breathing only increases my own need for our sexy

witch. Oddly enough, the sight of her getting just as excited by the eye-feast of her two other prospective mates doesn't bother me.

And if my cock twitches a bit when the goth rockstar shifter licks his lips at the sight of my piercings, well, can you blame me?

Maybe if things all pan out correctly, I can come out of this whole experience with a mate *and* a sexy lover.

Once the entire group has their food in front of them, the small appreciative noises around their bites fill me with pride. I love my work. I love food. And watching others enjoy the time and effort I've put into it was the closest thing I've had to being alive in a very long time. Until recently, that is.

It is a thing of nourishment, but it also offers so much more. It can bring you comfort or send you into a fit of desire. Food is everything to me. And for reasons I do not yet understand, having the approval from all three of them feels incredibly important tonight.

When I hand Macklin the meatballs, his eyes light up. Sydney doesn't seem overly interested in them, which makes me think that Macklin's penchant for meats must come from his shifter beast. Whatever that may be.

None of us seem to be in a hurry to confess our supe biology yet, which is fine. Revealing that kind of information was deeper than exposing our naked bodies. And I'm not quite ready to take that step yet.

I worry my lip a little as I think about her reaction to learning more about me. If I can be sure of a way to have a healthy relationship with Emerson and *never* let her find out about my—er... affliction—I would be more than happy with that. But that would mean breaking her trust and risking her health and safety, and that's not a risk I can live with. So I know I will have to tell her eventually. Maybe once I figure it out for myself.

The sound of Emerson moaning has my attention snapping in her direction.

She sits there with her eyes closed and her lips wrapped around the fork Macklin offered her. When she slowly backs away and begins chewing, she opens her eyes to find us all watching her and chokes.

Macklin gently smacks her back, and it seems to do the trick. Once her breath returns, I pass her a water bottle, and she takes a healthy sip.

“Was I making loud yum-yum noises again? Nugget says I do that a lot.” She smiles, and a light blush covers her cheeks. “Sorry. I’ll try to keep it quieter.”

“No!” Ok, I hadn’t meant to blurt it out and shock everyone. “What I mean is, those ‘yum-yum noises,’ as you call them, are some of the best compliments you can get as a chef.”

“Oh! Kat always tells me she hates hearing my food orgasm sounds when she is trying to eat.”

To my credit, I keep a straight face. Sydney coughs on his piece of pineapple, and if I don’t know any better, I would say that Macklin is blushing. After over fifty years on this planet, I have learned to take an opening when I see one.

“I happen to enjoy the sounds of you very much orgasming over a meal, especially one I made for you,” I add a wink and am instantly rewarded with an honestly delightful giggle.

She fans herself a little, but based on the smile, I know it’s all for show. “My, my. I didn’t realize a first date with all three of you would lead to getting naked and moaning all in less than an hour.”

Our laughter rings throughout the clearing, scaring away a small flock of birds.

Who knew dating Emerson would be such an adventure from the very start?

As if to punctuate my thoughts, there is a slight shift in the breeze before

the blanket under us expands. *Exponentially.*

We all look down at the blanket, now large enough for at least twenty more people. Emerson groans out an apology, but Mack—the blanket owner—simply shrugs and goes back to eating. Sydney takes a moment and rolls around a bit, somehow avoiding making a mess of the remaining food. And I...just smile at her. This woman is a wonder, and I have never had a better first date in all my life.

I watch Emerson, watching Sydney roll around like a loon. Yes, I know I am being a bit of a creeper with all the staring. What can I say? I enjoy observing people and learning what makes them tick.

“So...we could go back to playing the truth or dare game?” Emerson’s suggestion is met with nervous smiles. While I don’t mind ending up naked again, I don’t think there will be any more spare clothes to save us from the inappropriate travel to our respective houses.

“It was my turn to spin after all.” She picks up the bottle and glances around at us all. I quickly remove the empty food containers and make space in the center of our little circle. When no one outright objects to the continuation of the game, Emerson plops the bottle down and gives it a good twirl. It makes a few spins before stopping and pointing directly at Macklin.

“Alright, Mack. What will it be? Truth or dare?” She has an aggressive glint in her eye that begs him to give in to some fun, and he doesn’t disappoint. It’s always good to know that even the grumpy ones can be won over by a pretty smile and mismatched eyes.

Macklin leans close to her, his face less than a foot from hers, and growls. “Dare”

Her voice is breathy and barely above a whisper as she leans closer to him. “Kiss me.”

I was sorely mistaken if I had expected Macklin to be just as fierce with his affections as he was with most everything else so far. In one smooth motion, he pulls Emerson into his lap and gently leans her back, caressing her cheek with his free hand and cradling her with the other. He leans forward and presses his lips against hers.

The moment they touch, she melts into a puddle, and her apparent ease with the shifter has a bell ringing in my head. She's his mate. And since he and Sydney are a pack, that means she is also his mate.

How the hell did some random app from a coffee shop advertisement help a witch find not just a date for the holidays but all three of her fated mates?



# Chapter 18

## Emerson

**W**ho knew that a big, growly bear of a man would be so gentle and romantic?

He kisses my brains out. Plain and simple. And not in the fast, make-you-want-to-rip-your-clothes-off kind of way either.

No, he takes his time. Small, slow sips, savoring my taste, making me fall hard and fast off the most delirious edge imaginable.

Once my body relaxes into his embrace, I know I don't just want to be with this man. I *know* I never want to be without him again.

*Mine.*

My heart sings it out so loudly that the beats ring in my ears as he slowly releases me to his side.

I barely avoid relinquishing the whimper that lodges in my throat at the sudden lack of connection. Can't he see what he's doing to me? How weak and vulnerable I am right now? Is he so oblivious to the puddle of goo he's just turned me into? After kissing my fucking brains right out of my head, he

picks up the container of meatballs, all calm-like, and continues to chomp away at them like nothing just happened.

I'm being cast aside for meatballs. He kisses me stupid and then goes back to meatballs?!

That has to be some record. I don't think I have ever gone from being nearly in love with someone to so fucking pissed in such a short amount of time. Before I can even consider dialing it back, my magick tingles down my arm, and the meatball inches from Mack's face pops like a balloon, sending much more sauce than was present, flying in every direction.

Standing up, I pick a random direction and begin to walk. I have no clue where I am going, but I need a moment after all... *that*. I hear the commotion behind me and hushed words, but I keep walking. How fucking big did I end up making this damn blanket?

"Mind if I join you?" James's voice is smooth and calming. I don't say a word, but I don't pull away when he gently takes my hand. After a moment or two, he chuckles softly, and I can't help but glance over at him.

"Did you think this is how your first date would go when you signed up for that app?"

Returning the smile, I shake my head a little. "Definitely not. And the weird part of it all is when the four of us were just sharing food together, it all felt so... right. I felt calm and centered. Grounded. That's baffling, right? I mean, we're all relatively strangers."

James doesn't answer me, but I see him bite his lip from the corner of my eye. Clearly, my thoughts are giving him pause. We continue to walk and the fresh air settles me. Just as I am about to suggest going back to the picnic and finishing this date off for the night, James comes to a stop.

"Do you mind if we try an experiment?" I tilt my head to the side a little as

I consider him. He's incredibly handsome in the classical sense, which makes those delightful piercings even more decadent and naughty.

"What kind of experiment did you have in mind?" He guides my hand in a way that has me turning to face him.

"Kiss me." He says the words so softly I almost miss them entirely, but my heart races. Did he just ask me to kiss him? After the display, Mack and I had just put on?

"What?" My voice sounds as shocked as I feel.

"Kiss me, and then you will know if it was just Macklin that made you feel that way, and through the pack, Sydney as well. Or...if it really was all four of us together." His reasoning is sound. I mean, there is no harm in a kiss, right? *Right?*

I lick my lips, and James takes the gesture as my agreement.

Where Mack's kiss was soft and sweet, James is steel and fire. He pulls me to him, gripping my hip with one hand to close the distance between our bodies, and uses his other hand to cradle my head before smashing our lips together. Lips and tongues battle fervently for control. I can hear the words echoing in his mind just as if they are my own.

More. More. More.

*Mine. Mine. Mine.*

The chant rings loudly in my ears, and when James nips at my bottom lip while getting a handful of my ass, I moan into the wind. My hands explore his exposed flesh as if tracing every ripple and dip. They run softly down his Adonis Belt, stopping just above the hem of his sweatpants and drawing a deep moan from my chef before he trails nips and kisses across my chin and neck.

It's not enough. And yet... and yet it's too much.

My eyes snap open as my brain catches up to what is going on. James's hand is working its way up my abdomen, getting closer and closer to my right breast. All of my confidence and bravado washes away with the speeding thumps of my heart and the sudden rush of fear enough to freeze me in my tracks.

Fear of disappointment. Fear of pity. Fear of rejection.

"Wait!" I yell far too loudly, making James jump back from me as if my words had slapped him.

Panic floods me as I dart my eyes around and try to find an exit. That's what I do best, after all. Run from my fears. I ran from my parents so many times as a kid. Hell, I started marathon running when I was first diagnosed with cancer. My subconscious was no doubt trying to outrun the disease.

And now?

Now, I want to run away from my erratic and irrational heart.

I can't fall for the first three guys I meet. It's just that's not how it works. And they all probably agree I am a nut job by now. If that was what they wanted, I might have been down for a bit of fun before we all went our separate ways. But now? Yeah, that wasn't going to happen. My stupid fucking heart leaped out of my chest and has now plopped at the feet of three gorgeous men and asked them to hold it.

They don't want me, though, even if they could handle my crazy magick, even if they found my mismatched eyes enchanting. This... my broken body. It was too big of an ask.

My vision starts getting wobbly, and the panic takes over. My labored breathing makes it harder to get a handle on the panic attack that's firmly got me in its clutches. This is not a good sign. Whenever I get this freaked out, my magick...

Oh.

And there it goes. The telltale sign of me losing complete control of my magick races through my body, and I clench my eyes shut as the pained scream tears out of my throat.

The sounds of the meadow dissipate in a loud pop. When I open my eyes again, I'm surrounded by darkness. I flail my arms around until I find a door and shove it open.

I probably use too much force on the door because it flies open, and I land face-first on my clothes-covered bed.

Wonky is one thing, but now my chaos magick is reaching new levels.

My body feels impossibly heavy, and I know I should probably let the guys know I'm okay but I just don't have it in me at the moment. My eyes drift shut, and I lose the battle, giving in to the sleep. Sleep I now dearly need.

I ran so hard from that date that I teleported.

# Chapter 19

## Emerson

**Y**ou know when you wake up after crashing hard? When everything seems a little brighter, louder, and just overall... more?

Yeah. That's not me.

The morning after my first date with the guys, I wake up with a raging headache, and my thirty-three-year-old body is kicking my ass for the excessive magick I made it do yesterday.

Not that I *made* it do anything. My damn magick has a mind of its own. I haven't had complete control over it a day in my life. Sometimes, I get a taste of control when I channel it into my art. Other times?

Yeah, other times, I manage to fucking teleport away from the sexy guy with his tongue down my throat.

A groan slips past my lips as I roll out of bed and shuffle my way to the kitchen in search of coffee. Caffeine is probably not the best idea when I have a magick hangover to deal with, but I'm pretty sure I have an emergency stash of Kat's cookies in the back of a cupboard somewhere.

Squinting through the slits, I now call my eyes. A shocked gasp escapes my lips when I notice the time.

Damn. It's been a while since I've slept past eleven am. I probably need to check in and let everyone know I'm alive. I hope they aren't too worried about my disappearing act.

With a fresh cup of coffee and a few delicious, life-saving cookies—seriously, I'm pretty sure Kat's food *has* saved lives—I curl up on my comfy, ratty couch with the most enormous, fluffiest blanket I have.

My phone slowly powers up—I need to replace it—and when I finally make it past the lock screen, a million notifications start flying in.

Oh shit. Ok, deep breaths. Tackle priorities first, Em. That means Kat before the rest.

*Kat: And? Was it as amazing as I told you it would be?*

*Kat: Em. Let me know when you get home. The only reason I'm not blowing up your phone is that I'm worried you might be having some naked fun.*

*Kat: Emerson Petunia Whitlock. I'm coming over if you don't check in by midday today. If you have naked men in bed with you, it's your fault for not letting me know that you're ALIVE.*

Oh damn. She full named me. I wasn't up to facing Kat yet. She could take one look at me and see the entire ocean of emotion running through me right then, and I just... couldn't deal with it yet.

*Em: Sorry, babe, I'm fine. I had an eventful night. My magick had a blast. I'll come on by tomorrow and tell you all about it. Love you. xx*

I close out of my message thread with Kat and brave the rest of them. There are a couple of frantic messages from James, Syd, and Mack. But at some point, they'd created a group chat.

*James: Sweetness, we're incredibly sorry for pushing you too hard.*

*Macklin: We're ready to take things as slow or fast as you want. No expectations other than spending time with you.*

*Syd: And Mack has something to tell you... Don't you, Mack???*

*Macklin: Fuck off Sydney. Don't put your crooked nose where it ain't wanted.*

*Syd: My crooked nose is sexy AF, and I know at least one person who wants it.*

*James: Make that two.*

*Syd: \*smirk\* Now come on, big guy—time to open up.*

What follows is a litany of gifs, each getting worse than the previous one. Syd pulls out all the stops to get his friend to open up, and I quickly scroll down to get to the good part. From the messages that they're sending, it's obvious they're still interested in me, even if I bailed on them in the middle of our first date. Strangely enough, that takes such a massive weight off my shoulders. If I am being totally honest, I was a teensy bit terrified they would want to run in the other direction.

That doesn't mean I still have to deal with my feelings around the damn missing breast. I have to take some time to come to terms with men showing attraction and how I will go about sharing that scary part of myself with them.

I finally get to the next message from Mack.

*Macklin: Honey, I'm sorry about the meatballs. Firstly, my beast was starving for the food and for you, and because I didn't want to risk jumping you on our first date, I opted for the food instead.*

*Syd: Good boy.*

*James: Now, sweetness, if you can, please let us know you're okay. We'll leave you be until you let us know you're ready for more.*



*Macklin: Agreed*

*Syd: Motion carried.*

There is a bit of a delay after that. The guys are obviously *trying* to give me some space, but the concerned messages have been pouring in since eight this morning. All of them basically ask me to check in, even if I am still pissed at them. I didn't mean to make everyone so worried, but that still doesn't mean I know what the hell to say to them.

Ugh...

My first cup of coffee is long gone, and my stomach is crying for something more than some cookies, so I grab my keys travel mug, and tuck my phone in my back pocket. Time to hit up *Serendripity* for some of the good stuff, and I'll grab some funky cupcakes from the *sweet* bakery across the road.

Maybe, after a second coffee and an influx of sugar, I'll be able to figure out a reply to the guys.



Eventually—after another cup or three—I find the words and shoot them a quick text to let them know I’m safe, thinking of them and taking some time to deal with the stuff for the gallery showing.

It’s not a total lie.

I *do* need to focus on getting the best possible stuff together for the showing.

So that’s exactly what I do. With all of these crazy emotions running through me, along with my magick doing its own thing for the last week, there’s finally enough of the damn shit to get some real work done.

One painting after another, followed by sculptures and statues. No medium and method is left untouched. At some point, Kat shows up, but I’m so neck

deep in paint, canvas, and brushes that she leaves me some meals, kisses me on my head, and shows her right back out the door.

Once again, I'm beyond thankful my sister knows me as well as she does. She can always tell when I need a break and when to leave me be.

Not surprisingly, I lose track of the days, one quickly flowing into the next. All I know is by the time I surface, I have everything I can need for the showing. Looking at the pieces, I refuse to acknowledge the subject matter. Doing so will come too close to admitting what's going on inside my head and heart.

The men have been quiet, only sending me simple updates and greetings, and now that I'm done working through all the emotions in me and finally have a better handle on my magick, I think it might be time to reach out to them.

Especially since they've been so cool about me giving them the cold shoulder.

*Oh shit.*

A quick look at my phone and the date at the top right-hand corner clues me into the fact that I've been holed up in my tiny little apartment, ignoring the outside world for... *five fucking days.*

Oh fuck, fuckity, fucking fuck!

Nugget is going to kill me.

I missed our weekly aunt and niece date.

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I *totally* missed our weekly aunt and niece date.

# Chapter 20

## Macklin

“S he sent us a message!” Syd’s excited voice calls from the front of the shop. There’s no need to ask who the ‘she’ is that he’s referring to. We’ve been anxiously awaiting a message from the damn witch for almost a week. The only reason my bear hasn’t shifted ran over there, and claimed her was because he felt guilty for hurting our mate’s feelings with the meatball incident.

My clumsy hands grab the phone, but it isn’t on the desk where I’d left it. Shuffling through all the paperwork, I dig around until I unearth the damn thing.

*Emerson: Thank you for being patient. I’ve been working all week, but I’d love to get together tomorrow night if you are still open to it.*

I want to shout with joy at her reaching out and, at the same time, throw my phone against the wall because there is no way my bear—or me, for that matter—will be happy with waiting until tomorrow. Before I can say something I’ll regret, I notice the three little jumping dots appear next to

Syd's name. Luckily, the wait isn't long before the idiot's message pops up on my screen.

*Syd: Any chance of moving that up a smidge... to say... tonight?*

Even though I had that same thought not two minutes ago, the urge to roll my eyes at him is strong. Of course, I want to see her tonight. Without a doubt, my bear would kill to get his eyes on her as soon as possible. But after the way she'd run from us, we must be extra careful.

An eternity passes as we wait for her response.

*Emerson: Sorry, boys, but I have an important date tonight.*

*Emerson: With my niece.*

*Emerson: Talk soon! Have a kickass day!*

The level of emotions that run through me through three little messages is terrifying. When my eyes landed on the 'I have a date' one, my bear pushed through my control. Now I'm stuck with a pair of broken shoes and a torn-at-the-seams outfit because I couldn't quite get a handle on my bear in time. Only when I focus on the following message and the word 'niece' do I realize I was being as much of an idiot as Syd tends to be.

We all send her various versions of our own send-off before Syd pops his head into the office.

"Busy?" He's got that look about him. I've known him almost my entire life, and I *know* when he has something significant to share.

Instead of answering, I lift my chin, inviting him to come inside.

Syd steps into the small office, closing the door behind him. His excitement and nerves are palpable, and I can't help but be curious about what he's got brewing inside of that crazy head of his. I lean back in my creaky chair, focusing on my best friend.

"So... I might have a confession to make."

“What the fuck did you do now?” I ask, trying to keep my tone from going completely incredulous but unable to stop myself from nearly flinging right out of the chair.

“You know that sexy, mysterious supe we went on a date with the other day?”

“You mean the one we were just texting with?”

Syd chuckles, his laughter filling the small room, but he fidgets a little. “No. The other one. The vegetarian with a flair for the dramatics and class? The man that practically screams *DOM* in all the best ways?”

Well, fuck. It almost sounds like Syd is into our third pack, mate? I don’t even know what we’d call James. As far as I can tell, he isn’t a shifter, but sometimes he smells *odd*.

“What about him? What did you do, Syd?” I love my brother, but I swear if he did anything to jeopardize things with Em, I am going to kill him.

Syd shifts nervously in his seat, a sheepish grin on his face. “Well, you know how I am charming and an excellent friend, right?”

“Syd,” I ground out, keeping a tight rein on my control. “What. Did. You. Do?” I can’t believe he’s willing to mess with our happily ever after.

And for what?

We have our perfect girl right within our grasp. And because he’s got a hard-on for a piece of ass, he’s willing to mess with it?

“Well... we haven’t heard from Em in quite some time. But I was hopeful that we would. So I invited him over for a game of poker tonight.”

My bear’s roar rumbles in my chest, and it takes all of my willpower to hold a firm hold of him. “Why in the fucking world would you do that without checking with me first? And just why would you do it at all?”

Syd’s face falls, and he looks genuinely contrite. “Well fuck, Mack. I



figured it would be good to get to know him. We're going to be stuck with him for what will hopefully amount to being the rest of our lives."

I don't fall for it, though. I saw the way his eyes sparkled when he brought up James earlier.

"That's not the only reason you did it, though, is it?" I challenge him, knowing he won't outright lie to me.

The unicorn shifter lets out a huge, beleaguered sigh. "So maybe I think he's hot. And maybe I want to see if he thinks I'm hot, too. What's so bad about that? It's not like I'd ever do anything without talking with Emerson about it first. If this is going to work, we all need to be open and honest with each other. But at the end of the day, I'd rather *not* bring up my attraction to James in front of Em if it isn't even returned."

My anger defuses instantly, when I realize Syd's intentions are good, even if his execution is a little questionable. "Well, you've already made the plans with him. So we might as well see it through. And at least I'll be here to keep an eye on you. You might not move on him without talking to Em first," I say, knowing the statement to be true. "But that doesn't mean you won't go out of your way to make James uncomfortable."

"You know," Syd responds. "You're no fun when you're being a grump."

Rolling my eyes, I throw the pen I'd been doodling with at his head. The cheeky asshole ducks and the pen flies past him, hitting the door behind him. "According to you, I'm always a grump."

"Exactly."

At his rebuke, we both burst out into laughter. When it finally dies down, he nods once. "We'll talk to James together. And then, hopefully, after we've sorted it out amongst the three of us, we can talk to Em tomorrow and put all our cards on the table."

“Sounds like the perfect plan.”

And at my final words, my best friend gets up from the chair and struts from the office with an extra hop to his step.

Fuck. I hope tonight *and* tomorrow night goes better than our first date.

Maybe this time we can all manage to keep our clothes on.

Images swirl in my mind and I backpedal so fast that I would have toppled over if I were on an actual bike.

Yeah, I have no problem with Em getting us naked again.

As long as we can get *her* naked, too.

# Chapter 21

## James

What does one take to an impromptu get-together with the two men you hope to share a mate with?

Obviously, I'm bringing the food. And I've got a vast fucking variety too. After the way Mack had devoured the meatballs on our first date, I would not make the same mistake again. Syd might not be a huge meat eater—please goddess, I hope that's not *too* true—but Mack is definitely the meat and potatoes kind of guy.

But when I asked Syd what he had planned for the evening, he responded with numerous non-answers and return questions.

The taxi drops me off at the address Syd had forwarded to me, but there's a loud shout before I can take it all in.

"You're here!" And there he is. The sexy man that nearly draws as much of my attention as Emerson does.

"Of course I am." It's my only response because I can't stop staring at him. Syd definitely has that sexy rocker vibe down pat. Skin-tight leather pants hug every delicious inch of his thighs. Pants that sat so low, it would take

minimal effort to have them tugged *off* his well-rounded ass. His dark Guns-n-Roses tee is well-washed and looks soft enough to sleep in.

I've been dreaming of running my fingers through Emerson's crazy curly hair, but I'd be lying if I didn't admit to a fantasy or two about Syd's long purple-tipped strands as well.

"Come on in, handsome. Mack is inside, grumbling to himself as always. It's nothing impressive, but it is home."

Syd shrugs as we enter the front door of a well-lit, if small, entrance. He doesn't give me much chance to explore and look my fill as he's storming down the short hallway straight into the most atrocious kitchen I've ever seen. However, before I can even think to complain—does this man ever slow down—we head straight through the back door into an enclosed porch.

Mack reclines on a large sofa with a beer cradled against his chest. He doesn't move from his position, with his feet propped against the porch railing. "Yo."

"Evening," I respond, finally getting a chance to take in my surroundings. It doesn't look like he's overly pleased to have me here, but Syd's enthusiasm certainly makes up for it. "Thanks for having me. I have to say, I was a little surprised to get the call." I turn to Syd and hold out the bags I'd brought. "Dinner. Where should I set it up?"

At the mention of food, Mack sits up, eyes eagerly trained on the food and nose enthusiastically in the air. Ah hah! The answer to the puzzle is Macklin. Feed the beast.

"What did you bring? Any... meatballs?"

Syd and I burst out in laughter at his eager question and the hunger in his gaze.

"No," I start, and at the dejected look on his face, my laughter rolls from me

again. “I have some deboned pork ribs, garlic and butter potatoes, and flame-grilled veggies. I also have cake.” I shrug at the last item on the list. I had a full day on the lunch shift and only got out of work a short while ago, so I grabbed the cake on the way out. “I didn’t bake the cake, but it’s still good.”

“Oh. That sounds delicious,” Syd responds, taking the bags from me without asking. “I’ll go dish up. Why don’t you get comfortable.” He indicates the other empty loveseat on the porch before turning to the back door. “Want something to drink, James?”

With a quick glance at the label on Mack’s bottle, I nod towards the big guy. “I’ll have whatever he’s having.”

“Perfect,” Syd purred before rushing into the house.

The awkward silence that ensues is bad enough that even my undead—mostly—heart skips a beat.

“He’s going to come on to you.”

My shocked gaze turns to Mack at his words. “What?”

“He’s going to come on to you. Tell you he likes the way you look. Express his interest.”

I blink. Take an unnecessary breath. And then try again. “Excuse me?”

“I’m warning you now so that you can school your reaction. If you’re interested, great. We can deal with it and figure out how to share that with Em. If you’re not... well, now you have time to devise a decent enough way to let him down without hurting him.” The last part comes out in a growl.

Well, fuck. Who knew the giant had such a small, soft heart?

“Are you two a... thing?” I ask, weary of stepping on any toes, especially as it’s already a dangerous road with all of us sharing Emerson.

Mack snorts before shaking his head. “Nah, man. He’s like my brother. We grew up together. But I know the hurt and rejection he’s faced. So I’m asking

you nicely—and only once—if you’re not into him too, let him down easy.”

My heart gives another one of those fucking beats that shoots a jolt of pain straight through me. Suppressing the grunt that wants to escape, I clear my throat to cover it. Mack sends a questioning glance my way, but thankfully, my response cuts off any question he may have been about to ask.

“It’s a good thing I’m interested too, isn’t it?”

Mack sighs, relieved, before leaning back in his sofa cushions again.

“Well!” A cheerful voice calls from the door. “I have food and beer. But I only have two hands, so someone needs to open the door and grab the extra stuff on the counter.”

Mack slowly gets up without a word and opens the door for his friend before letting him slip past.

It doesn’t take long for all three of us to dig into the delicious—if I do say so myself—meal. As we eat, Syd peppers me with questions. About my childhood, why I enjoy my job, and where I live.

The conversation is easy, especially as things are staying pretty surface level, but I can’t relax knowing the invite’s real purpose. Mack’s words weigh heavily on me. I am interested in Syd and what he has to offer. It’s been way too fucking long since I had a taste of anything, but even before I was turned, I’ve never had a gender preference. But I am worried about the rejection Mack had mentioned and how Emerson would take it if two of her mates got together, too.

Mack places his empty plate on the table beside his seat and nudges his friend with his knee. It’s adorable. They are like brothers, and I enjoy watching their dynamics. Seeing them carry on like this, I know that our life with Emerson will be filled with many exciting moments. The prospect of that future brings a smile to my face.

“So...” Syd starts but pauses to clear his throat. “The best way to do this... Uh... ok, so I think you’re sexy. I’m pretty sure the feeling is mutual. And if Emerson and you are open to it, I’d like us to explore the extra dynamic in the group relationship. I thought it might be best to be open about that right out the gate.”

Well. Fuck.

He just came right out and said it. It was a stumble and some fast words. But there it was. His intentions were laid out right at my feet. Waiting for me to pick them up or cast them aside.

Unable to find the right words, I just sit there and stare at him. I know what I *want*. But I’m worried—about so many things.

“Holy shit.” Syd’s face falls at my exclamation. “No!” I rush to add. “Not that I’m not interested. It’s just,” I huff out a breath and push forward. “There is something I need to tell you guys about first, and I need everyone to stay calm until I finish. Ok?”

My stupid heart does its one bump thing again, and this time, I can’t control the grunt of pain. One bump becomes two and then three, and before I know it, my hand clutches my chest.

It’s been happening more and more over the past few days, but it’s so much worse when it catches me off guard like this.

“Fuck! Dude, are you okay?” Syd bends over forward and places a warm hand on my knee.

“Yes,” I groan, taking a deep, steadying breath. “Sorry. It’s part of the thing I need to tell you.” I take another deep breath in, and I try again. “It’s my species. Before we do *anything*, I need to tell you what I am.”

“Yeah?” Syd asks.

Just say it, James. Don’t be a fucking coward. Rip off the bandaid and just

lay it out there.

“Well... I used to be a pixie until a wendigo bit me, and now I am a zombie. Er... zombie-ish.” My words come out much faster than intended, but based on the shocked faces of my two new friends, I’d say there was no better way to drop that information bomb.

Hopefully, what comes next isn’t panic.



# Chapter 22

## Emerson

I am in a full-blown panic.

She agreed to the date night. She claimed she wasn't mad. But now?

My little Nugget has locked herself in my apartment bathroom and will not come out.

To be honest...I think my messy bed is to blame.

Ok, so *obviously*, I had to clean up my art—this gallery set is not safe for seven-year-old critics, if you know what I mean—before she came over. No big deal. I do that every time, which she is used to.

But while I was picking the movie, Sabrina ran to the bathroom, and then... the yelling and accusations started.

I know I hurt her by missing our night. Keeping things constant for her has been a big security blanket since her daddy died. Then, when I got sick? Let's just say her therapist told Kat that date nights with her favorite auntie were healthy for both Sabrina and Kat.

And like a giant boob, I missed it.

Now, don't get me wrong. It's not the first one I've ever missed. She's not unreasonable because her mama isn't raising a spoiled brat.

Like I said, Nugget was fine. Until she ran for the toilet in my bedroom. The first thing she saw was the massive mess of brand-new clothes on my bed, and she assumed I blew her off last night to go on a shopping spree. She came stomping out with her two tiny fists full of clothes and hurt shining so clearly in those little green eyes. She threw them at me and called me a liar before she ran to the bathroom and shut herself inside.

I *have* to start listening to Kat more. I should have taken care of the clothes already. Fucking hell, I am glad Kat can't hear my thoughts right now because I do not need to feed her massive ego about her streak of being right.

Taking a breath, I gently tap my knuckles on the wood door that separates us. I hear her sniffles, and the sound nearly brings me to tears.

"Nugget? Sabrina, honey. Please open up. I can explain."

The silence stretches, and I finally give in to talking to her through the door.

"I know you're hurting. I missed our date night. I won't try to talk myself around that. But I want you to know—and I am fully prepared to submit to a pinky promise here, Nugget—I got lost in work." I pause, waiting to see if she responds, but when she doesn't, I push through. "You know me, honey. I love you more than anything in the world. I would never, not in my life, put shopping ahead of time with my favorite girl. The clothes were my magick on the fritz again. I love you, Nugget. More than anything."

I wait patiently, with my head resting against the bathroom door. Thankfully, I hear some sniffles and shuffling before the door slowly opens, and the most beautiful seven-year-old wraps me in a chokehold of love.

"Your magick is ridiculous. Why would you need so many clothes?"

I can't help it. I break out in a full belly laughter that echoes through my

bedroom. Sabrina joins me soon after and plops a big, wet, smacking kiss right on my cheek.

“Are we good, Nugget?”

“Yeah, I guess.” She shrugs, sending a tentative smile my way. “But what are you going to do with them all? There have to be hundreds of outfits here.”

The glimmer in her eyes sparks an idea, and I just can’t pass it up.

“Well, I was thinking we could do a runway show. I’ll set up the camera to snap pictures. Then you can help me pick the best ones, and when we’re done, we can box up the rest. I’ll take them to the shelter tomorrow.” Her face lights up at this, and I can’t help but add a little extra to smooth out the last of the hurt feelings. “Oh! And I almost forgot. I ordered pizza! We can pig out and watch that movie about the evil fashion designer you love so much.”

Pure glee. That is the only way to describe the maniacal squeals and flurry of movement that follows my favorite girl as she dives right into the clothes and begins making a ‘no’ pile for me.

My heart is filled with joy and a warmth I only ever get from spending time with my sister and niece. This is precisely what I needed to help me find my center again. Stuff with the guys is weighing on me even more than I realized. But I get tonight to be with Nugget, so I focus back on the beautiful girl flying through the outfits in my room. We model no less than ten outfits each. Sabrina talks me into keeping a few dresses I wouldn’t usually like but might make good date night pieces. We fill five boxes full of almost brand-new clothes for the shelter, which makes my heart even happier.

My stomach, on the other hand, rebels after the third slice of pizza. You have to understand that even though Georgino’s is the *best* pie in town, there’s only so much I can fit in. But watching a seven-year-old stuffing

down six pieces without blinking has me feeling a bit queasy. Also, she has had two glasses of soda, almost an entire bowl of popcorn, and two brownies. I don't understand where she puts it all, which makes me mildly jealous.

Most kids would be wired. At least, that's what I have come to understand about caffeine and sugar consumption, but since I only have Sabrina to gauge as a reference, I can't say.

I can say that we have just hit the movie's climax—when you learn who the lousy lady truly is to the morally gray fashion designer—and I hear Sabrina's soft snores. When I look at her, the sight makes me laugh a little.

She has chocolate smeared on her cheek, and her mouth hangs wide open. The primarily empty popcorn bowl sits in her lap, where her one hand rests inside, and there is a tiny trail of popcorn bits all over her torso. Add in the makeup in far too large a quantity that she still has on from our little runway show, and it becomes increasingly difficult not to dissolve into a full fit of giggles.

Naturally, I do the only thing any caring and loving aunt would do.

I snap a fucking picture and blast that bitch to her momma and toss it up on my very sad socials. Of course, Kat responds immediately with that bit of horrified face emoji. When I see her bubbles, I am prepared for a text yelling at me for the sweets or something. Instead, she manages to throw me into a complete fit of laughter.

*Kat: I can't believe you, Em!*

*Kat: You know that purple lipstick does not go well with green blush.*

*Kat: Please ensure she gets a bath before she settles in for the night, or that will all be a nightmare to get off in the morning.*

Damn. That means I have to wake her up.

Another text pops up, confirming my suspicions.

*Kat: Yes. You have to get her up and in the bath. I'll know if you don't.*

It's a good thing I snagged some of her favorite bath bubbles in case of such an emergency.



Waking up a sleeping dragon is no easy feat.

When the dragon is also very much regretting gorging on the ridiculous amount of food she ate, things get a little hairy.

“Ugh! I never want pizza ever again!”

I pat Sabrina's back while she sips tea, feeling guilty. I didn't stop her from going so crazy, especially when her bubble bath turned into a scene from that demon possession movie and led to draining and cleaning the tub quickly so she could take a shower to clean off all the ick.

That is a vision I wish I could never see again.

“I’m sorry, Nugget. Drink your tea, though. Your Momma made me this blend, which should make your tummy feel better.”

She perks up a little and sips more enthusiastically. Thankfully, the cinnamon tea Sis makes me for hangovers is just cinnamon, ginger, and motherwort. Her magick makes it settle the stomach more than just the herbs themselves.

Sabrina finishes the drink with a smack of her lips and a tiny cringe at probably having gotten a bit of the leaves in her mouth, quickly followed by a gigantic yawn. I scoop her and head to bed, grateful we took the time to go through all those clothes earlier. Chores are always much more fun when you can make a game of them.

“Did you find your soul mates, Auntie Em?”

I’m super thankful that we are already snuggling in under the covers because if I was still carrying my niece, I think I would have dropped her.

“Uhm... I don’t know yet. Maybe?”

“Mommy said that two of them are shifters. Shifters have mates. I hope you and Mommy find your mates like I did.” Her big yawn distracts my brain for a millisecond before it registers what just came out of her mouth.

“Found your mate? What are you talking about, Sabrina?”

“Tommy is my mate. But don’t worry. I told him we have to grow up before we can do any of the kissy face stuff that means he’s stuck with me forever.”

“Kissy face? Wait just one second.” I am getting riled up. I know it. My sister’s amazing tea is useless now, but Sabrina is falling fast. “Sabrina, you are too young to find your mate. Shifters don’t even have their first shift until they are teenagers.”

“Well, yeah, but gorgons don’t shift.”

“Who is a gorgon?” I don’t mean to screech it at her, but I am in a full-fledged panic attack here, and this kid is just dropping bombs before going to sleep like it is nothing.

“Tommy is a gorgon.” She sounds equally exasperated at me for not following along and tired enough not to have the energy to deal with me right then.

“But your mommy said his parents are human honey, that means Tommy is human too.” The reminder that my sister already did a thorough sweep of the boy has me settling a bit. Too bad the comfort doesn’t last.

“But Tommy is adopted.”

Oh fuck.

Fuckity fuck, fuck.

# Chapter 23

## Emerson

I am trying so fucking hard to get a handle on my magick, but it does not play well with panic.

I've already cycled through four new fabric designs on my couch—which I actually had no idea I could do—and now have eleven identical clones of the mostly dead ficus my sister gave me as a gag gift a year ago. And don't even get me started on the headache-inducing disco ball that has replaced my kitchen lights or the fact that it is raining glitter.

*Everywhere.*

And I can't figure out how to shut the shit off.

I'm going to have sparkly coffee for months.

Oh, man.

I'm going to have sparkly poo for months too. That's terrifying.

My sister reaches a new octave in my ear and brings my mind whirling back to the problem at hand.

“Why are you yelling at *me*, Kat?! I didn't do anything!” I'm sitting forward in my seat with my head resting in one hand my elbow perched on



my knee.

“I’m not yelling *at* you, Emerson! I am yelling in general!”

“Ok, ok. So what the hell do we do, Kat?”

There is a pause on the line before I hear Kat blow out a deep breath. She’s obviously just as thrown by this as I am. My niece—her daughter—just told us she’s already found her mate, and he’s a gorgon... with parents that probably don’t know about the supernatural world.

“Alright, nothing to be done tonight. I will contact a friend of mine in the police department. We need to find out if the boy’s parents are actually human because that is the biggest problem first. It’s dangerous for him and them if his snakes show up unexpectedly.”

She’s right. I know she’s right. But when I stop in the doorway to my bedroom and see Sabrina all curled up and sleeping, my mind begins to swirl again. And now the fucking walls are all different splotches of colors. Ugh. My fucking magick.

I grab my head and walk away from the bedroom, hoping to keep the crazy at least contained in the living room and kitchen. However, Sabrina would probably think this was all fun.

“Kat?” I’m not sure how to voice the question. Thankfully, my sister knows me well enough that I don’t actually have to say the words.

“It’s ok, Em. Even if they wanted to secure their bond, they’re entirely too young to know how. After all, since he isn’t a shifter and doesn’t have his parents to guide him, Tommy would not understand how to go about it.”

I nod but then remember she can’t see me. “You’re right. And Nugget said she wouldn’t play kissy-face with him, so there’s that at least.”

Kat lets out a groan. “Oh Goddess, I am not going to get any sleep tonight.”

“I’m sorry, Kat.”

“Don’t you dare apologize, Em. This is serious. I’m just grateful that Nugget said something before anything really bad could happen.” She sighs deeply, and it takes a second to realize we made the noise together. Our anguish over the whole ordeal is shared by our love for that little girl.

“Alright, Kat. I’m going to do the bossy thing. You should drink some tea and get some rest. I will run Sabrina to school in the morning, so you have that extra time to get a head start on all...this stuff.” I can’t help but offer assistance, because I *need* to be there for both my sister and Sabrina.

“Thanks, Em,” she says, sounding as tired as I feel.

“Go to sleep, Kat. I love you.”

“I love you too.” She doesn’t hesitate, as the beeping of the disconnected call punctuates her statement.

I pocket the phone and look around my apartment in horror.

Colors and patterns that should never mesh create a dizzying effect across the walls and couch. I worry the rugs may also be affected, but it’s impossible to tell with the nearly 3 inches of glitter covering...*everything*.

Of all the things I could have had happen, why did it have to be a downpour of craft herpes? How the fuck am I going to clean this up?

I like sparkly things as much as the next girl, but I prefer glitter in a non-flaky form. Like seriously. I could use a damn snow shovel here.

So much for crashing early with my favorite girl.



“Hurry up, Auntie Em! I’m going to be late!”

“Nugget, I can only move so fast. The roads are getting a little slippery, so I have to be careful.” She only answers me with an exaggerated huff.

I don’t even mention the fact that I have only gotten about four hours of sleep and couldn’t make any coffee. So I am also running a smidge slow this morning. But at least I got rid of all the fucking glitter and fucking awful colors all over the walls. At least, I think I did. I wasn’t brave enough to try the coffee maker or toaster and opted for the fruit salad Kat sent for breakfast instead. Nugget didn’t mention glitter, so I am going to pat myself on the back and say job well done. But she did side-eye the new look of my couch.

The car slides a little to the left. Not enough to jar us or for my precious cargo in the back to even take notice, but it’s enough to have me on edge. My

knuckles turn white on the steering wheel as we pull up to the school drop-off zone. Based on the evidence of other cars sliding around in the slush, I think today would have been a good day for a delay at least. However, if the forecast on my app is right, it won't be slowing down soon.

I barely throw the car in park when I hear the click of Sabrina's buckle.

"Thanks Auntie Em!"

"You're welcome, Nugget. I love you, have a—and she's already gone." I try not to be hurt at getting shrugged off, and when I see two other girls screaming and rushing to meet her before they all go into the building with joined hands, I can't help but smile.

I never really had many friends as a kid. I was always too weird. Kat, of course, was loved by all. I was just the quiet B student, who spent way too much time in the art studio or library. Actively avoiding others.

It's not that I don't like people. I just tire of the face they make when they find out I'm a chaos witch. We aren't exactly the popular subtype of witch. I mean, who do you think is responsible for the way that famous tower leans? Yep. You guessed it. A chaos witch.

Piece of advice. If you are an architect and you decide to break up with a chaos witch, maybe don't do it so close to your life's work. Although, that all kinda worked out in the end.

I slowly pull out of the school lot as the snow falls in the big fat flakes that I adore. If I weren't driving.

I hope they let out a little early today because the thought of Kat and Sabrina being out in this mess later on after it has accumulated makes me incredibly fucking nervous.

Oh fuck.

My date is tonight.

There is no way in hell I can safely make it out to the address Mack texted me last night.

Well, there goes another date night bust.

I really hope that fate isn't working against us here.

# Chapter 24

Sydney

**N**ope. There is no fucking way I am giving up that easily. Em just texted to reschedule our date because of the snow, but honestly? It gives Mack and me the best idea for slightly changing our original plans.

*Syd: Dress warm and be ready for Mack to pick you up at 4 pm.*

*Em: Are you sure? I don't even think his big truck will be safe.*

*James: Checking out the size of his truck, were you?*

*Em: OMG NO!!!!*

*Em: I mean, yes? His TRUCK, not his... Just shut up!*

*Mack: Be ready at 4 pm. Trust me. Trust us.*

*Mack: James, Syd is picking you up at the same time.*

Bubbles pop up to indicate someone is typing, but I'm too nervous to stand still, so I slide it into my back pocket and return to my task. Mack and I put the final touches on the dinner prep, so we are preparing things for the activities.

I hear the engine from one of the snowmobiles revving up. Mack gave them a clean and full check while I snagged the trunk from the attic. I spot a few boxes of holiday decorations and decide to bring them down with me. Maybe if I have enough time, I can get some decorating done and set a better scene.

Mack and I have never been great about decorating. We take time to do the tree every year, a tradition Mack's mom instilled in us. But we just can't get in the mood enough to do much past that.

I get four boxes of decorations set in the living room and the trunk full of snow gear, all prepped in the mudroom before things take a bit of a turn.

The back door swings open to an angry Mack.

"We have a problem."

"Ok. What's up?"

He thrusts his hands forward and gives me two giant pieces of plastic.

"Uh, gee. You shouldn't have?" I say, taking the chunks from his hands.

"Fucking sled broke. Can't find the others in the barn."

"How did you manage to break it?"

Mack glares at me and walks toward the bathroom right off the mudroom. Based on the slush covering his entire backside, I'm gonna guess his ass broke the sled. I manage not to laugh until I hear the shower turn on. With my grumpy packmate safely enclosed in the bathroom, I let it out.

"Did the widdle teddy hurt his bum?" I know I shouldn't egg him on, but I can't help myself, especially when I am getting as nervous as I am.

"Fuck you, Sydney!" he shouts at me but stays under the hot spray.

Mack's growl just makes me laugh harder. I quickly slip into my snowsuit and grab two helmets from the stash before heading to the door.

"I'll take care of the sleds and pick up James. I'll meet you at Em's house."

Mack grumbles but throws out a quick 'fine' before I am out the door.

Thankfully, the hardware store in town just got a bunch of new sleds in. I only know because the store is right across the street from *The Horny Bear*, and I watched them unload some yesterday when I went to grab lunch. Unfortunately, the school had an early release today because of the snow, and I already decided to cancel tomorrow, giving the kids an extended weekend. This all means they probably had a rush of sled purchases today.

It kind of makes me wonder if one of the supes working there has some sort of precog abilities.

I throw my leg over the snowmobile and latch the extra helmet to the back when my mind tumbles back to Mack. He, too, has some precog abilities. However, he works hard now to keep them dampened as much as possible.

I can't really blame him. No one wants to predict their own mother's death in vivid, gory detail only a handful of days before it happens.





"Come on, Bob. You have to have something. I just need one more."

I try my best puppy eyes on the fifty-year-old shopkeeper, but ever since his daughter and I had a bit of a go-around, the man doesn't like me much. Figures.

"I only had one of the extra large sleds left. You got that one. But the long ones have been selling like crazy today." Bob shrugs and points to the fast dwindling pile of sleds. "I have the purple and green ones."

"You *have* to have a different color. Anything, Bob." To be fair, we don't really need a bunch of different colors to make this work, but I am an attention-to-details kind of guy.

Bob lets out a big sigh.

“I have one more. It’s one of the round ones. I put it back for a little girl a few weeks ago, but her mom kept saying no, so I don’t think they will be back for it.”

Bob takes just a second before he emerges from the stockroom with a large tie-dyed disc. The swirls and designs have no pattern and just seem to be tossed around, but it somehow works. Just like Em and her magick.

“It’s perfect!”

I load the sleds into the big burlap sack I also purchased and secure everything to the back of the snowmobile. I’m getting tight on time, but I have to run the sleds back to the house real quick, so there is room for James. Also, because I really want it to be a surprise for Em.

Forgoing the main roads, I opt to cut through our neighbor’s field. With the snow covering the ground in a thick blanket, the ground is thoroughly protected from any damage my ski’s or track could cause.

I make it back to the house in record time and take just a moment to set the sleds up nicely with Mack’s help before we are both setting off.

I don’t know what I expected to see for Jame’s house. I mean, during our game last night, we did a lot of talking. I know he is good with money and has over fifty years on his belt that he has been saving and investing it properly. The idea that he is so much older than me is still a bit mind-boggling, but if I am being totally honest here, it also kinda turns me on even more. No wonder he gave off the big Dom vibes.

As I pull out front of the address he had given, though, I am left speechless. It’s sleek and modern and so showy. It looks like a rockstar dream pad. The lot is huge and open, but backs up to a large hill that is mostly rocky terrain. The matching shades of the natural rocks accented the dark grey of the stone

on his house surrounding it. But the front is nothing but glass. Huge windows cover the whole front, giving you a decent view of the inside.

How the hell could he handle sleeping, all exposed like that? It makes me wonder at some possible voyeuristic kinks he might have. Before I have time to really snoop more through the windows, James trots his way over to me.

“Hey there, handsome,” I say with a wink. Then I internally facepalm when I remember I have a helmet and goggles on, so he can’t exactly see me.

“Hey, yourself.” His smile is genuine, and damn it makes me melt a little.

Without wasting any more time, he puts on the spare helmet and slides on behind me. His hands move dangerously close to me as he wraps his arms around my middle. *Just* above the goods.

My skin comes alive, and I suddenly feel like I have far too many layers on. My thoughts swirl, and I gulp audibly.

This ride is about to be incredibly...stimulating.

# Chapter 25

## Macklin

The weather has my bear pushing hard to get out. Obviously, we love the snow, and when it comes down as much as it has in the last two days, we spend more time outside than inside. And less time on two legs.

But with Em coming over and preparations for our date, I haven't had the time to go out running to let him loose. I'm probably tempting fate by getting onto a fucking snowmobile to fetch our little mate.

My bear's growl rushes through me at *just* the thought of having her arms wrapped tightly around my middle.

The drive is easy; before I know it, I pull up in front of her building, where I find her waiting outside, wrapped up in the most ridiculous coat, scarf, and hat.

"What the heck are you wearing?" I ask around, a reluctant chuckle. It's probably not a good idea to question a woman's clothing choices, but Em's dressed as one of Santa's little helpers. Even her ear muffs look like elf ears.

Her beautiful face grows even redder at my question before she smiles.

“Big guy, it’s safe to assume that whenever something around me sounds weird, looks weird, or acts weird... it’s probably my magic.” She gestures to a group of teens huddled in an alley not too far away. “They were teasing a kid for believing in Santa. I might have gotten a little upset at the bullying. My magic took over. It happens.” Her nonchalant shrug speaks volumes. “Anyway, I stepped in and explained to the little boy that Santa sent me to remind him to send off his letter while he still had time. The assholes laughed, but I made the kid’s day. So I call it a win.”

A wave of rage flows over me, and my bear lets out a rumbling roar that has Em’s eyes widening in surprise. We are both pleased to note that there is no fear in her gaze. Before I know what’s happening, I’m looming over the group of teens. They look harmless enough, but no asshole that laughs at my mate will get away with it.

“You think it’s cool to bully a little kid?” My voice booms out of me, and the little shits all stand up straight, two of them actually taking a step back. None of them answer me. “I asked you all a question!”

“No, sir!” the one closest to me whimpers, looking down at my shoes. “Sorry, sir. We won’t do it again.”

A low rumble builds from my chest, a warning to them, and they’re quick to heed it, all four of them scurrying away like the rats they are.

When I return to Em, she’s trying hard to suppress a grin but failing miserably.

“You defended my honor.”

“I stood up for the kid,” I retort. Fuck knows why.

“Nuh-uh. You defended my honor. That means you like me.” She’s got a shit-eating grin plastered over her face, which only enhances her beauty.

“Are we going to get going, or what?” I ask, refusing to give in to her

teasing.

She smiles at me, then nods before motioning to the snowmobile. “Lead the way, big guy.”

When we climb on, she wraps her arms tight around my middle and snuggles her head into my back. Her scent wraps around me, and my cock grows painfully hard. Using every ounce of willpower at my disposal, I start up the machine and head home.

The ride is over way too quickly, but by the time we get home, I have full control over my bear again. After giving him a pep-talk and reminding him we don’t want to scare Em away, he quiets down. We will obviously have to tell her about our animals at some point, but Syd’s species is so rare that we’re giving it a little time.

Syd and I both know he won’t be in danger from her finding out, but people always react badly when they find out... his pheromones aren’t always a good catch.

“Oh, my gosh!” Em breathes out as she climbs off the machine. My body already misses having her wrapped around it, so I quickly follow behind her. “It’s so fucking cute!”

“It’s not cute!” I bite out, disgruntled at her description of our pack house.

“It is! It’s like something from a Christmas movie. The perfect little farmhouse.” Her warm laughter fills the surrounding air.

“It is not cute. It’s just a house.”

“Dude!” she lets out a bark of laughter. “It’s got white shutters with flower boxes!”

Thank fuck, at that point, we’re interrupted by the roar of another engine coming our way.

As the noise grows louder, I turn to see Syd and James ride up on their

snowmobile, pulling up beside us. The idiot is decked out in a festive red and green scarf, looking like a giant Christmas tree ready for a winter adventure. He matches Em perfectly.

“Hey, lovebirds. Ready for some sledding?” Syd grins, his stupid face reflecting genuine excitement.

“Absolutely!” Em replies, clapping her hands, her eyes sparkling with enthusiasm. “Your place is adorable, by the way.”

Syd chuckles, James, joining him in laughter. “Thank you! Mack’s mama worked hard on making it the picture-perfect place, and I’ve been breaking my back to keep up with it, not that the big goof appreciates it.”

Em turns to look at me, and I kid you not... sticks her tongue out at me. I have absolutely no control over what happens next.

Her full-bellied laughter—fuck, I really like the sound of it—rings out again as I chase her around the front yard. The thick snow drifts slow her down, but it’s nothing against my shifter nature. Before she makes it far, I grab her around the middle and throw her over my shoulder.

Her delicious body wiggles against my shoulder, and I deliver a warning smack on her ass. “Quit it, or I’ll drop you,” I warn.

“Pfft. As if you would ever.”

My chest puffs up in pride at her confidence in my abilities, but I’m not allowed the moment to bask in it.

“Are we going sledding, or what?” Syd calls out as he and James walk up behind us.

“Wait...” Em calls out, her voice sounding soft and sweet. “Are you two holding hands?”

We whip around quickly, my eyes drawing to the two men behind me. Em lets out a startled cry, but my arm is tightly wrapped around her. She’s not

going anywhere.

“We were going to talk to her first!” I barked out in accusation.

Em’s wiggles renew in fervency, and she smacks me. “Let me down, big guy.”

Her body slides down mine, and the smallest groan slips past her lips as she slides past my still, very hard erection. She turns around in my grip, and I can’t make myself let go of her, so I don’t. My arm wraps around her neck, and I keep her plastered to my side.

“What were you going to talk to me about?” she asks, trying to look up at me before directing her eyes to the two idiots across from us.

Syd clears his throat. “Uhm, well, we wanted to find out if you’d be open to the possibility of James and I exploring a relationship *inside* our group dynamics.”

“You mean, you two wanna get it on too?” The little minx sounds ready to jump them both at the thought. “Why on earth would I *not* be okay with that?”

Her body turns into mine, and I can feel her looking up at me. My eyebrow raises at the question in her gaze.

“And you? Are you going to get you some of that action over there?”

Syd’s cackling laughter breaks the spell her eyes have over me. “No, Em. I don’t mind, but I don’t swing that way.”

As if it didn’t bother her either way, she shrugs under my embrace and smiles. “Cool. More for me.”

The cold bite of the air against my face, the sparkle in her eyes, and the feel of her warm, soft body against mine are responsible for my actions.

My arm slips down from her neck and pulls her up against my body. Her upturned face meets mine, and her soft gasp of pleasure sends a chill down



my spine when my mouth descends on hers.

# Chapter 26

James

**W**ell fuck.

It is not the first time I've watched the two of them make out, but the way Emerson lights up is one of the hottest things I've ever seen in my entire life. My heart gives a painful beat before my stupid fucking dick comes to life. Again.

The hand, still firmly clasped in Syd's, squeezes before he turns to me.

"I know," he whispers, the words reverent. "I don't know how we managed it, but we're the luckiest fuckers in the world."

"Truth." It's the only word I can get out around the knot in my throat. My gaze travels to Syd's tongue as it flicks out to lick his lips. My free hand moves to adjust my junk and causes Syd's eyes to snap down at my erection.

"Looking at it isn't going to help me get a handle on it," I warn.

"Maybe *I* want to get a handle on it," he quips, a cheeky grin lighting up his face.

"Syd," I groan out before tugging him closer. I can't help it. With Em and Mack standing there pawing at each other and him... right there... looking

irresistible, I pull him into my embrace. We're a perfect fit—in the same way I'd imagine Em, and I will be—and I send a silent prayer of thanks to the Goddess for bestowing me with these amazing gifts.

Our lips meet in a soft, tender kiss, but the way Syd nips at my lip shows me he has some bite to him. I look forward to making him bend to my will.

“Behave,” I warn before grabbing hold of a very impressive bulge in his pants. Apparently, the old adage about being hung like a horse counts true for unicorns, too.

After I'd shared my secret, Mack and Syd shared their species with me, too. Syd explained about his pheromones, the worry clear in his posture. But I wasn't worried. Everything that has happened with us the last ten days makes it perfectly clear that we—all four of us—are meant to be. So what if his magickal essence enhanced the experience?

“You're going to be a good boy for me now, aren't you?” I ask, eliciting a groan from the unicorn. “You're going to behave and stop tempting me so we can have fun with our girl. And if you're really good, I'll even give you a reward later.”

Syd humps against my hand, and I squeeze around his cock, tightening my grip on what I know will be just beyond the edge of pain. The bratty man only hums in pleasure, and I'm even more excited to explore with him.

“Do you understand, Syd?” I ask, my tone careful.

He quickly nods before taking a deep breath and stepping away. My fingers reluctantly let go of my new favorite toy, but I give him the space he needs to get control of himself.

Mostly because I need to do it too.

“Okay,” I say, clearing my throat. “Let's get this party started.”

My order finally draws Em and Mack from their lust-infused embrace. Em

blinks at me, clearing the fog before smiling at me.

We grab the sleds at the bottom of the hill and slowly make our way up. The air is crisp, and the anticipation in the group is palpable. Em, always the adventurer, is practically bouncing with excitement.

“Race you to the bottom!” she calls out, already pushing off.

We all follow suit, and the sleds zoom down the hill, laughter and cheers filling the air. Em’s joy is infectious, and I find myself caught up in the moment. The day’s worries melt away with the exhilarating slide down the slope.

After a few rounds of spirited racing, we take a break by a bonfire as Mack gets the blaze burning brightly. We all huddle close together, sharing stories, bits about our past, and laughter as the flames dance in the cold air.

Dusk falls, and even though I know we should probably be going inside and out of the cold, I can’t make myself issue the order.

Under the starlit sky, with the scent of pine and snow around us, I catch Mack stealing glances at Em and Syd’s gaze straying from our beautiful witch to me. His eyes are filled with a happiness that matches my own. It’s a strange dynamic, but it seems like we’ve found something special—a connection that goes beyond the ordinary. And I’m very excited to see where it will go.

Mack’s stomach rumbles audibly, and Em’s delighted giggle fills the air. “Hungry much, big guy?” He reaches over to tickle her, and she quickly scuttles over to me and plants herself in my lap. With her arms wrapped around my neck, she sticks her tongue out at Mack.

“Think it’s time we head inside and feed the beast.” Syd stands up and holds his hand out to Em, who quickly grabs it, allowing him to pull her up.

As we gather our sleds to head back to the farmhouse, the cold air nipping

at our cheeks, I can't help but feel a warmth in my chest. Maybe, just maybe, this oddball group of supernatural beings has found something truly extraordinary in each other.

We settle in at Mack and Syd's pack house, sharing hot cocoa and cozy blankets as the food they'd prepared for us cools just a bit in the crock pots. Other than the fully decorated—if eclectic — tree in the corner, the rest of the house begs for some attention, but I can't make myself say anything about it. Too immersed in the magickal atmosphere of our pack-in-waiting.

“You know,” Emerson says, looking around, her eyes lingering on each of us. “this is the best date I've ever been on. Thank you, guys.”

Syd grins, giving her a playful nudge. “Anytime, babe. We're always up for an adventure.”

“Adventure is all fun and well... but do you think we could tackle the very sparsely decorated house instead of embarking on another one?”

Em's question has a surprising reaction from Syd, who quickly jumps up and runs to the corner. Dragging over boxes with him into the warm, fire-lit lounge we've settled into.

His handsome face peeks around the massive pile of stuff he's got. “I was kind of hoping you'd say something about it.”

He carefully places everything on the ground in front of the tree before turning back to the group.

“Feel like helping us decorate the house?”

“Fuck yes!” Em shouts before crawling over to the pile of decorations, treating us to a delicious view of her ass.

As the night unfolds, filled with laughter, shared glances, and the warmth of newfound connections, I can't help but grow ever more hopeful.

And if my heartbeat picks up to a speed, it hasn't reached before? Who am I

to question it?

# Chapter 27

## Emerson

The lounge is lit up with a wide variety of Christmas lights, and the tree is so overladen with decorations I'm afraid it might topple over at any moment.

But as Syd had gone overboard with the collection of decorations, I couldn't stop myself from putting on 'just one more.' The three men, true to their natures I am quickly becoming attached to, indulged me, and Mack even went so far as to lift me to the top of the tree so I could fill the unreachable branches with even more ornaments.

During our decoration bonanza, the snow started coming down in earnest. Mack made it clear to us that we weren't going anywhere, and after eating our fill of the most delicious soups, we all sprawled out on the floor in the lounge in a giant nest of blankets and pillows.

The warmth of the blankets and the glow of the Christmas lights create an atmosphere of comfort, yet I can feel a nervous flutter in my stomach. As I look around at the faces of the three men around me, I know it's time to share a part of me that goes beyond the magick I wield.

“Hey,” I begin, my voice soft, slightly unsteady, betraying my nerves. “There’s something I need to tell you.” I swallow down my fears and look at each of them in turn. All I see is patient acceptance. And maybe a bit of concern.

“A while ago,” I start after taking a deep, steadying breath. “I battled breast cancer.” My gaze shifts to the flickering flames in the fireplace. “The doctors caught it early and promised me with the right treatment, I could beat it.”

A heavy silence settles over the room, broken only by the crackling of the fire. I can’t take my eyes off the flickering flames, keeping my focus there so I don’t have to look at their faces and see the pity I know will shine in them.

“This happened just after Kat’s husband passed away. Kat and Sabrina were reeling from the loss, and I just couldn’t take the chance that I would be another loss they would have to overcome. I opted for a unilateral mastectomy so they could make sure to remove it all.”

“I wanted to tell you... because... well, it’s not like I can keep it a secret indefinitely. Not if we want this to move further than some heavy necking. After my operation, I never thought I would be in a situation where I’d have to open myself to the possibility of more. But now I’m here, and I want it. More than I can describe.” I take another deep breath. “I value what we’re building, and I don’t want my past to be a barrier,” I continue, my fingers nervously playing with the edge of the blanket.

Mack reaches over, gently placing a massive hand on mine. “Em, babe.” His voice is soft, filled with understanding. “Look at me,” he asks, and when I continue to stare at the fireplace, he whispers. “Please.”

My eyes slowly move up, and I’m met with his warm gaze. His warm, empathy-filled gaze.

“Baby, I *know* I’m not speaking for just myself when I say I couldn’t care



less if you had one breast, two or three. Even none. Sweet girl, you're beauty personified, not because of your looks, but because of who you are."

My heartbeat speeds up at his words, the tears that have been threatening to fall since the start of my confession finally running over the walls of the dam I'd built to hide my vulnerability.

"The journey was tough, but it taught me a lot about strength. Not just my own either. My sister and niece were there with me every step of the way. But more than that, it taught me the importance of embracing every moment."

"That's such a good way to look at it, darling," James says, reaching for my other hand. "And you're so fucking brave for sharing this with us."

I meet his smile with a soft one of my own before continuing. "People have asked me why I don't get reconstructive surgery, and I suppose it's an option... but the surgery, my new body, it's a reminder of what I've overcome. And even though I'm sure about my choice, I worry about what my potential mates would think about my body as it is now."

Syd offers a warm smile, his aura shining brightly. "Em, honey, we care about you. Not your body. Even though I think it's one fine as fuck body. One I'd like to fuck very much."

Syd's head bounces forward as Mack smacks him, and we all laugh at the absurdity of it all. Syd's laughter dies down, and his face grows serious as he looks me in the eyes. "Seriously, honey. You're beautiful. Inside and out. I wouldn't change a thing about you. And when the time comes that you're ready to share your body with us, I will worship it like the divine temple it truly is."

James tugs on my hand, pulling me closer before wrapping his arms around me. "We all have our battles, darling. How we make it through to the other side defines us. And in my not-so-humble opinion, I think you're a badass."

The silent tears running down my cheeks go unchecked as I look from Mack to Syd before turning to look up at James. “You all mean it, don’t you?”

Mack leans in, hovering his mouth just over mine. “You’re now part of our pack, Em. And I dare you to try to get away from us.”

In that moment, surrounded by these incredible beings, I feel a weight lifted from my shoulders. They see me for who I am, beyond my physical differences and crazy magickal abilities. The vulnerability I’ve shared with them only solidifies our growing bond.

As this realization strikes, another follows soon on its heels.

My magick hasn’t gone on the fritz since Mack picked me up at my place. For once, my soul is completely at peace.

The night grows late, and instead of moving into different bedrooms, we all opt to make camp right where we are. As we drift off to sleep, I can’t help but feel a profound sense of gratitude for the unique group I’ve found and the—dare I say it—family we’re starting to form.

I guess that app wasn’t such a bust after all.

# Chapter 28

## Emerson

**F**ingers slowly thread through my hair.  
Lips press softly against my neck and shoulder.

Hands gently knead the tense muscles of my feet.

All in all, I would have to say that is the best way to wake up. Too bad it's just a dream. My lashes flutter open, and the gentle lights from the tree and various decorations encompassing the living room help my vision adjust without the headache-inducing light of morning I usually face.

Or afternoon, as my sleep schedule tends to be as erratic as everything else in my life.

Only when my brain adjusts to being awake do I discover that the tiny touches and caresses were not in my dream at all?

Mack continues to toy with my hair and massage my scalp while Syd peppers my subtly exposed skin with kisses, and James—with his magick fingers—does wonders for my tired arches.

Before I can formulate a response, the myriad of tenderness pulls a deep, throaty moan from my lips. The sound is echoed by three deep growls from

each of my men, sending anticipation shivers down my spine.

And works as a “go” signal, because the gentle touches become even more tender and far more intimate. The guys each take turns removing bits of clothing from themselves. James’ hands trail up my legs over the sweatpants I borrowed from Syd. When he reaches the waistband, his eyes meet mine in a questioning glance.

A simple nod of my head has him hooking his fingers inside and sliding them down my body, leaving me much more exposed in the simple black tank top—again borrowed from Syd—and my simple tie-dyed cotton panties. Eerily enough, I realize the design of my panties echoes the disc sled the guys got for me.

Mack’s fingers move down to my neck and shoulders as he adjusts my head in his lap, Syd moves down and lifts the tank to pepper kisses on my abdomen, and James kneads his way up my bare legs, caressing my inner thighs and getting oh so close to where I truly want his fingers.

My idle hands can’t take the torture anymore and reach around aimlessly. Thankfully, I manage to get a firm grip on Syd’s rigid cock, still covered by the thin fabric of his boxers. His deep moan fills the air at my touch, and I suddenly burst to life with need.

More.

More touch.

More skin.

More of them.

Just more...

Syd pulls his mouth away from my body and quickly sheds the last bit of his clothing, offering his dick to my needy hand again. With my other, I reach behind my head and grope Mack’s enormous dick. At the contact, he brings

his face down to mine and kisses me. The angle is a little awkward, but he cradles my head to take the pressure away. My hand pumps both dicks with equal enthusiasm, and the men all moan together.

James starts at my knee and kisses my thigh while Syd leaves little bites across my abdomen. All of them show such care and somehow coordinate everything without words.

James' mouth clamps down on my panty-covered pussy, and I—  
“Yes! Oh fuck.”

“That's the plan, little witch.” Mack's words vibrate through me, and I want to tell him to just get on with it. But James moves the thin fabric to the side and impales me on his tongue, and I just can't think straight anymore.

Lost in the bliss, I don't even register when Mack shuffles my head to a more elevated pillow. When my eyes flutter open, it's just in time to see Mack's massive cock head right before he rubs it across my lips. I open my mouth like the good girl I am, and he slowly inches inside. When he gets as far in as physically possible—which for a dick his size isn't too terribly far—I cup his balls and hollow my cheeks as he gently fucks my face.

James fills me with a single digit, and his mouth is doing nasty, delicious things to my clit. And Syd... at some point, that sneaky turd got my shirt lifted all the way up. Exposing my left breast and... my scar. Thankfully, the work James and Mack are doing has me unable to curl into my fears right now, but I'm not so lost to my pleasure that I miss Syd's softly spoken words.

“So fucking beautiful.” His voice is reverent as he whispers across my skin before his lips descend on my scar for a sweet, soft kiss. The tenderness of it all has tears pricking my eyes, but with Mack thrusting harder and harder into my mouth, it's easy to brush off the reaction to that.

The attention on my pussy ebbs for a mere second before I feel James'

uniquely decorated cock rubbing through my folds. Coating himself in my juices. Syd moves his attention to my breast, and his tongue languidly circles my nipple.

“Darling,” James whispers, drawing my gaze up to his. “I’ve not been with a woman in longer than I care to admit. And it’s not like I can get any human viruses. But I can stop now and get protection if you need me to, but dear goddess, I hope you don’t.”

*Longer than I care to admit.* Those six words speak to my soul. I look from him, where he’s patiently waiting for the other two, and they both assure me they’re clean, too. I could go into detail about not being able to have kids, but we’ve had enough heavy for one night. At my simple nod, James’ blinding grin lights up his face.

As he slowly, torturously presses his way into me, Syd’s mouth clamps down on my nipple, causing my grip on James’ cock to tighten and my moaning to vibrate around Mack’s dick. We soon fill the room with sounds of pure pleasure as these men—*my* men—show me what it is like to be worshiped.

James lifts one of my legs flush against his torso as he continues thrusting into me. My channel squeezes around him as his piercings nudge against my core. It’s almost too much to handle. Driving my pleasure to heights that leave me teetering precariously on the edge of insanity. James moans as he thrusts a few more times with nearly erratic movements, stroking my clit in rhythm with his thrusts.

And just like that.

I fall over the edge.

My body quakes, and my toes feel like electricity shoots out of them. Mack pulls out of my mouth as nonsensical words tumble out. I shiver and moan

through the pleasure as it pulses throughout every nerve ending, and I milk James' cock for every last drop he can give me.

Once spent, he collapses on the floor in a puddle of pleasure. Syd stops to give James a heart-stopping kiss that lasts seconds and hours. After seducing me by making out with another man, he wastes no time taking James' place. He also leaves me no further time for recovery or adjusting to his impressive length as he shoves into me until he bottoms out. I cry out, and my sounds are quickly drowned out by Mack's massive cock. The flavor of him explodes on my tongue.

He's so fucking delicious.

Syd sets a rapid pace. Both with the movement of his glorious cock in and out of my channel and with the two fingers he dances around my clit. In mere seconds, I find myself approaching that ledge again. Syd's movements become volatile as he chases his release, and just when I think we will soar over that peak together, a loud slap rings across the room, causing us all to freeze. When I look at Syd's face, his cheeks are bright red. James' hand wraps around Syd's throat as he nibbles on his ear, but I hear the older man's commands.

"You better make our girl come at least once before you do." He licks up Syd's lobe, and we both shudder in response.

I reach for Mack's cock and run my hand up and down the length of him. Enjoying the feel of his silky smooth shaft. As much as I love his flavor, I need to watch Syd and James. Their chemistry is erotic in ways I could never have expected. James smacks his hand across Syd's ass again, causing him to bite his lip.

"I said, make our girl come."

Syd's eyes light with something almost feral. He lifts both of my legs,

resting my feet on his shoulders as he deepens our angle. He holds his fingers up, and James licks them like a fucking Popsicle before Syd rubs them in circles around and over my clit, giving it a little pinch and rocking as slow as possible in and out of my pussy.

The sudden change from fast to slow has me borderline delirious.

I always thought my magick would drive me insane.

Now I am damn near convinced it will be these three mouth-watering men.

And I can't say I would mind it one bit.



# Chapter 29

Sydney

**M**y balls are so tight they feel like balloons on the verge of popping. While I had hoped James would make some moves on me after I teased him with that first kiss, the spanking and choking caught me off guard and nearly had me coming earlier than I intended to. My unicorn wants to bite her. And him. I keep fighting against it, and the tiny nibbles on her perfect breast are almost too much. My control is so frayed, and my hold on it is tenuous at best.

Part of me wonders if James could sense my beast trying to break free. I have to say, though, his choice of action is the best I could have hoped for. He keeps a steady but loose grip on my throat. He lets me breathe easily but shows me who is in control right now. His other hand has a bruising grip on my hip and is guiding my cock at a painfully slow speed, in and out of Em's sweet pussy.

Her channel flutters around me, and I know she's closing in on her climax again.

Speaking of close... pre-cum leaks from the tip of James' cock where it rests just between my cheeks.

Em gasps, and Mack latches onto her nipple while I give her clit a tiny pinch. The trick works perfectly, and Em goes careening off the cliff with her next orgasm. I pick up the pace just a touch, which also has James' cock head sliding against my tight hole. When he releases my hip to cup my balls, that's all the encouragement I need.

"Oh, Emerson!" Her name is a plea, a praise, a promise on my lips. It's the only coherent word I seem to be able to paste together now.

Her beautiful body quivers as I gently set her legs down and collapse backward on top of James. His arms wrap around my waist as he holds me tight against him.

Mack takes his turn in a truly Mack fashion. My best friend, ever the gentle giant. Obviously, he wouldn't change that for something as important as this.

He scoops her into his arms before taking her spot on the blankets and pillows. I watch as he cradles and kisses her. Mack cherishes her in the way she truly deserves, and a brief flair of jealousy courses through me before I tamp it down. Deep down, I know it's not something I could ever give her. I suppose that's why she has the three of us. We each bring something different to the table.

Em is our table.

No, wait... she is our feast.

I watch, enraptured by the sight of Mack lifting a loose-limbed Em to straddle his body. My heart fills with warmth as I watch my friend take in our girl as he lets her kiss across the scars covering his chest before she grips his dick tightly and slowly sinks into it. When he's fully sheathed, the sound of all our moans in a chorus echoes through the living room.

I think this is now my new favorite room in the house.

I don't spend much time in the house, as opposed to my apartment above the garage. I mean, I love the house, but it's filled with ghosts. It needs new memories. Maybe those memories were meant to include the four of us. Together.

James leans up against my back and whispers in my ear.

"Watching them is almost too much. Do you see how he worships our girl and that tenderness? Isn't it extraordinary? It will be up to us to bring the debauchery, little pony." When he nips at my ear to punctuate his statement, my dick twitches to life again.

Giving into the urge, I turn my head, and he meets me in a searing kiss. From the start, he has complete control of the kiss, like a true Dom, and I have never wanted to be such a good little sub in all my life. Or maybe... a mostly good sub? A good sub who likes to be naughty. Well, I suppose the best term would be a brat... and I'm not sold on that.

To prove the point to myself, I nip at his lip and suck on his tongue. His growl sends shivers across my body and fills me with excitement. He breaks the kiss as he reaches one hand in front of my body, gripping my cock tightly and rubbing his thumb across the seam of my head, spreading pre-cum around the tip.

I melt into his touch, and he whispers in my ear again.

"If you don't behave, I will be forced to fuck that pretty little mouth of yours."

My dick jerks in his hand as my mind wanders. When I lick my lips, James chuckles softly.

"Another time, little pony. Right now, it is all about *her*."

My eyes snap back to Em as she rides Mack. Her tit bounces as she rises

and falls on his cock. The sight is mesmerizing. She's forgotten her reluctance and shyness regarding what she considers a deformity. Something I think only increases her beauty. And from my angle, I can clearly see his glistening shaft appearing before Em's pussy swallows it down again.

James pumps my cock, while I continue to watch Em fuck like the Goddess she is. Mack circles her clit as she reaches up and pinches her nipple. James grinds against my ass, letting his dick slide through my cheeks and rub against my hole.

"You like that, don't you, little pony? You wish I were fucking your tight little ass."

I bite my lip. Unable to form words, I manage to jerk my head in a slight nod. Mack roars before bringing Em's lips down to his while he continues to thrust inside her. His cum flows out as he fills her with more.

James begins to jerk and twist at my cock until soon I'm spraying my seed across my chest. He continues to rub his cock through my cheeks before he shoves the head of his dick nearly under me and explodes all over my balls.

Seeing his cum mixed with mine, coating my shaft is fucking hot as hell. And when I look up and see Em's cum filled pussy leaking all over Mack's cock while they tangle in tongues, it nearly has me coming again.

I have no idea where this stamina is coming from, but I do know that maybe a little bit of our added enthusiasm may be the fact that I can't keep hold of my pheromones as well as I'm supposed to.

I refuse to give in to the fear that brings out.

We want this. We all do. So, there is no way my pheromones influenced anything.

Right?

# Chapter 30

## Macklin

**A**fter a marathon session of incredibly athletic sex and numerous orgasms from all of us, we all passed out at some point. My gut tells me that Syd probably had something to do with the vigorous nature of our actions, but I *also* know, without a single doubt, that we all wanted everything that happened in the far too early hours of the morning.

But right now, with a delicious Em curled up against me, her face nuzzling into my chest in the most adorable way, my bear is pushing up against my iron control.

My little witch is still lost to her dreams, and with Syd wrapped tightly around her back, I'm confident I can slip out the back and let my beast shift and play around in the snow for a bit. He wants to meet Em, but I'm hoping some time in his natural environment might please him.

With careful movements, I begin carefully extracting myself from her hold, but before I make it from our nest of pillows and blankets, Em gives the most delightful little snore. On her exhale, a burst of glitter falls down on us, and it

takes everything I have to control the laughter that wants to rumble from my chest.

After the close call with the glitter snore, she turns her back on me and snuggles into the damn unicorn. I catch his slowly blinking gaze while mouthing the word 'shift' to him.

My understanding... asshole friend lifts his chin in acknowledgment before drawing our mate closer to his chest.

"Fucking jackass, sad excuse for a pony," I mumble under my breath as I quietly make my way to the kitchen, where I walk right into our resident zombie.

"Morning," I mumble before sidestepping to allow him back into the lounge.

He, in turn, does the same thing, indicating I should step into the kitchen with him. Curious about what he might want to tell me, I follow him inside.

"Morning. I'm making breakfast." He starts telling me something quite obvious as I take in the food all over the counters.

"Looks more like a feast than breakfast," I quip, drawing a reluctant chuckle from James.

"Well..." James starts, his voice sounding slightly hesitant, which I find odd for the confident zombie. "I figured, since we had all those revelations last night, it's probably time I reveal my truth to Emerson."

Ah. That would explain the nerves.

I think he's being stupid. My little witch is one of the most understanding creatures I've ever encountered. Coincidentally, I feel the same about Syd and his fear of his pheromones.

"I'm going for a run," I grunt instead of responding to his concerns. He'll reveal himself, or he won't. That's a choice he'll have to make himself. What

I know, though, is if he doesn't pull his finger from his ass and do it soon and ends up hurting Em with his secrecy, we might have a problem.

I shove through the back door, the brisk bite of the cold winter air soothing my bear in a way nothing else except Em has ever done. I hardly make it five steps before my beast takes control, and my shift overruns me.

We run through the snowdrifts, rolling and playing with the snowflakes. Although if anyone ever accuses me of playing with snowflakes, I'll run them through with my claws.

The crisp, white snow drifting down distracts us so thoroughly we never hear the back door opening again. But we both instantly turn our heads toward the house at Em's delighted laughter.

"You're a polar bear?!" Her messy, beautiful curls fly behind her as she runs to me at full speed in her ridiculous red elf suit. "This is fucking awesome, Mack!"

Her laughter fills the air. My beast and I preen for our mate, prowling around her, drawing another giggle from her.

"Can I cuddle you, big guy?" she whispers, her voice reverent.

In response to her careful question, we move closer and nudge her hand with our snout. Her bright grin only serves to increase the dumb bear's pride. And when her hands dig into our fur and grab hold to hug us, he lets out a rumbling groan of pleasure that can't be mistaken for anything else.

"Like that, do you?" she whispers before nuzzling into our neck with her face. "Oh my gosh. You're so fucking soft. I want to ride you. Can I?"

Visions of our naked witch on my back burn itself into my brain. Even though I'd never take her in my animal form, I can see myself taking her for a ride, shifting back, and then taking her for a completely different ride.

"No fair!" Syd's voice calls from the house. We look at the house, and my

bear rumbles out a laugh. He's already shucking his clothes. No worries about the cold weather as he prepares to shift. "You can't show me up with your lame as fuck white bear!"

His words are barely out of his mouth before his body moves into the shift, and Syd's human form is replaced with that of his large—I'll never admit to thinking this—majestic unicorn form.

Our little witch squeals out in delighted pleasure... and damn, she *does* sound more excited for him than she was for me. No, I will not pout. Pouting is beneath a bear.

Syd prances over to us, his head bobbing up and down as if he's some kind of parade horse on show for his mate... which I suppose he is.

"Oh my gosh, you poor baby. Your horn is broken." Em coos at him when he nudges her with his snout. Her sweet face leans closer to his before she places a soft kiss against his nose. "Don't worry, baby. You're still the sexiest unicorn I've ever seen... and that explains the crazy monkey sex we were having just a few hours ago, doesn't it? Unicorns have like... what are they called? Pheromones, right?"

She doesn't sound bothered by it in the least, and if I weren't in my bear form, I'd have told Syd I told him so. Making a mental note to rub it in later, we move closer to Em and nudge her with our snout, pushing her to the back door.

She might be dressed in her snowsuit, but it's much colder today, and with the snow coming down again, she needs to be inside where it's warm and safe.

"Ah! Come on, Mack. I want to play first!"

Choosing to ignore her protests, we continue to herd her until she's forced to step into the house or decide to become a squished pancake against the



side of the house.

Wisely, she opts for the open back door instead.

The last thing I heard before the door snapped closed behind her was.

“So... James... what does that make you? A sexy, ageless fae?”

Well, James, the ball is in your court now, buddy.

# Chapter 31

James

**O**bviously, this is not how I envisioned the day going.  
Emerson's innocent question asks me what kind of supe I am.

Harmless right?

So fucking wrong.

In retrospect, she took my species like everything else. With a finesse unlike anything I'd ever seen. Meaning she looked at me with her eyes bugging out of her head, and suddenly, all the appliances in the kitchen turned on at once.

After the initial shock wore off, she had a lot of questions, and I did my best to answer them all as honestly and carefully as possible.

*Yes, I crave brains, but I control it with a careful diet, and surprisingly, since taking in Kat's carefully concocted ingredients, even that slight craving has gone away.*

*Yes, zombie bodies still decompose. I have been controlling this, too, with my diet and exercise plan.*

*Apparently, meeting my mate means that certain body parts start working again.*

And that... That is where the proverbial shit hit the fan so hard that I'm pretty sure Mack and Syd won't ever get the kitchen cleaned up again.

Thinking back on it now, I feel like such a fucking idiot.

All three of us are the biggest dumb fucks on this side of the hemisphere.

We were so fucking worried about sharing our species with her; not a single one of us thought about sharing that she is our fated mate.

I can't speak for Mack and Syd, but *I* know witches don't *know* when they meet their matches.

And it isn't like we didn't have ample opportunity to share it with her. Yesterday was a magickal day, and in the evening, when we cuddled up on the floor and shared about our lives, we shared our hardships... we should have opened up the same way she had.

Now all three of us are left here, in Mack and Syd's house... without our witch.

After completely blowing up at us and blowing up a few pillows and couch cushions in the process, Em *poofed* again as she did on our first date.

"Another beer?" Syd slurred before stumbling up from his spot in the ruins of their living room furniture. I'm rather impressed that he's managed to get sloshed. Last time I checked, it takes a shit ton of booze to get a shifter drunk.

"I'm fine," I respond, watching him walk away with a worried gaze. I'm unsure which of us Em's departure hurt and shocked the most, but Syd doesn't look like he's handling it very well.

Mack grunts a negative response, and the unicorn shrugs before heading for the kitchen. After a minute, a loud crash fills the air.

“I’m okay! The beer’s okay! It’s just the crock pot!”

The big bear shifter grunts again before laying his head against the couch behind him.

“He’s a lucky son of a bitch. His pheromones make it so he can get drunk. The goddess’ way of balancing the universe, I suppose,” Mack answers my unspoken question. His eyes are still closed, and if he hadn’t just spoken to me, I’d have thought he was asleep.

“Is he going to be okay?” My worried tone has the shifter lifting his head enough to look at me through his one good eye.

“What do you think? Our fated mate just ran away from us, and the last thing she told us was that she couldn’t stand to look at us.”

She did say that—those exact words. With eyes so filled with tears, I’m sure she couldn’t even see through them.

“What are we going to do, Mack?”

I’m not used to being unsure. My life is orderly, perfect, and after being turned, I’ve worked fucking hard to ensure everything runs exactly as it is supposed to.

“We’re going to give her today to calm down. Then tomorrow, we will woo her.”

“Just like that?” I ask.

The asshole shrugs and drops his head back again.

“There’s fuck all else for us to do, James. I’m thankful I don’t have to face her sister at work tomorrow. If you even still have a job.”

“Fuck.”

At my one-word response, the bear shifter roared in laughter. “At least there’s one thing going for us.”

“Oh, yeah, asshole? What’s that?”

“She didn’t reject us outright.”

Thinking about that small gift of mercy, I remain quiet. My thoughts are introspective. Until I realize it is too quiet in the kitchen, and has been for way too long.

“We should probably check on Syd,” I say as I push up from my position on the only piece of furniture that hasn’t been blown to bits, and this is only because I dragged it in from another room.

“Knock yourself out, lover boy.”

I push open the swinging door that separates the living room from the kitchen, expecting to find Syd at least attempting to clean up the mess he’d made of the crock pot. What I don’t expect is to find him sprawled on the floor, surrounded by broken glass and a toppled chair. The idiot is cuddling a beer bottle like one would cuddle a beloved child or lover.

“Syd!” I move closer, crouching down beside him. He’s out cold, and his breathing is steady but heavy with the stale smell of beer. The smell reminds me exactly why I never liked getting drunk on the brew. Shaking my head in disbelief, I tuck a loose strand of hair behind his ear.

I know Mack had said his body doesn’t metabolize booze as fast as shifters usually do, but with the amount of beer he’s had, he should not be *this* drunk. How the hell had he managed to get this drunk this quickly?

“That’s what he gets for trying to make it all numb by getting shitfaced,” Mack mumbles from the doorway. He looks more amused than concerned, and I shoot him a disapproving glance.

“Help me get him up,” I grumble, grabbing one of Syd’s arms. Mack reluctantly takes the other, and together, we manage to hoist him onto his feet. It’s a struggle to keep him upright, and I wonder if his inebriated state is more because of the emotional turmoil than the alcohol itself.

“He’ll sleep it off and then not even have a hangover to deal with tomorrow,” Mack says, trying to reassure me.

“Yeah, well, help me get him to bed at least,” I reply, glancing around at the wreckage of the kitchen. We’ll deal with that later. Right now, Syd needs to sleep off whatever demons are haunting him.

Between the two of us, we half-carry, half-drag the lush up the stairs and into a bedroom Mack points out. Based on the decor and the slightly stale smell, I would guess this isn’t Syd’s room. Most likely a guest bedroom. Dropping him on the bed, we exchange glances, both of us realizing how much of a mess he’s in.

As I turn to leave, a muffled sound catches my attention. I look back to see Syd’s eyes half-open, mumbling something incoherent. I move closer to make out his words.

“She’ll come back to us,” he whispers, his words slurring together. “We just need to show her how perfect we are together. Win her back.”

Mack and I exchange a glance, a strange mix of determination and resignation. Syd might be drunk as a skunk right now, but his words strike a cord deep within my heart.

“Yeah, we will,” I assure him, tucking the blanket around his shoulders. “Get some rest, naughty boy. Tomorrow’s a new day. And you’re going to need to be your best for the punishment. I’m going to rain down on your ass.”

As we leave the room and close the door behind us, Mack turns to me with a grin. “Seems like Syd is on the same page. We’ll get her back.”

His confidence buoys my own turbulent emotions. I nod, feeling a newfound sense of determination wash over me. “Yeah, Mack. We’re not

losing her without a fight. Tomorrow, we win the heart of Emerson Whitlock.”

# Chapter 32

## Emerson

*T*welve days later.

The air in the room is thick with tension, and the sound of my frustration echoes in my ears as I move around the gallery, adjusting paintings and sculptures for the hundredth time.

Almost two whole weeks have passed since the disastrous revelation, and despite Mack, Syd, and James pouring their hearts out to my front door, on voicemails, or in potted plants and chocolate deliveries, I still can't forgive them.

Did I suspect we were mates?

Maybe.

Everything about them was just too perfect from the start.

But they *knew*.

And told me nothing.

On top of all the phone calls and unwanted visits, gifts had started showing up every single day. And the perfect fucking gifts too.



My favorite types of paint. Coffee brands that are no longer available in the US. Baked goods that are so fucking delicious that I can't ignore them, no matter how much I want to.

And honest-to-goddess love notes. Pages and pages of the sweetest words.

At this point, I know I'm just being a stubborn bitch. But it took a lot for me to open up about my cancer journey and share myself with them. It's the first time I've done that since having the surgery.

So, instead, I threw myself into preparation for Christmas and the gallery show. The showing is just around the corner, and my stress levels are through the roof. To add to the fun and mayhem, my fucking magick has been acting up again.

At some point, Sabrina's Christmas presents had shown up at home, but the second I took them from the delivery guy, they vanished into thin air.

I'm still looking for the damn boxes.

And then there's the art.

This showing is supposed to be a celebration of my art, a culmination of all my hard work and dedication. Instead, it's a collection of pornographic material. Sabrina will never be able to see any of the work on show.

It starts off calm and chaste. These are the first paintings and sculptures my magick created right after meeting the three men.

After the first date, the subject matter grows a bit more risqué. Large sculptures embraced and in the middle of passionate kisses—portraits of bodies entwined and lost in each other.

Then, lastly, I have the stuff I've—or should I say my magick—been creating in the last few days.

Almost every painting is an abstract image of our bodies coupled together in the throes of some pretty heavy scenes. The sculptures are large clay pieces

of porn.

And no matter how I try to arrange it, it looks exactly like it is—the build-up of a relationship. And not one of the setups satisfies me. Something is still missing.

I know what it is.

The ending.

But I'm not ready to jump into that yet. Not even close. It's far too soon.

Right?

The door of the gallery creaks open, and I turn to see my sister Kat striding in. All tall, confident perfection. Her dark curls bounce with each step, and she's dressed casually for her, but she still leaves quite the impression.

The serious look in her eyes has me straightening up.

"Emerson," she greets me, embracing me in a tight hug. Her greeting slightly fills the empty pit in my stomach, but I know it won't last. "You've got to stop torturing yourself, honey, and everyone around you."

Pulling away, I cross my arms defensively. I'm not in the mood for one of Kat's pep talks. All I want from her is a cuddle, a kiss, and maybe a double chocolate brownie.

"It's easy for you to say, You don't have three supernatural assholes who broke your heart by breaking your trust."

Kat sighs, giving me a pointed look. "You're right. I don't. What I have is a broken heart because the love of my life died well before I was ready to call it quits. He left me with a broken-hearted daughter who forgets more and more about him every day."

"Oh, Kat! I didn't mean-" I start, but she interrupts me with a hand held high.

"No. I'm not mad. I know you didn't mean anything by it. But honey, you

have to know how much it hurts me to see you fighting with fate. Life is too bloody short. Why would you want to waste it by pushing away the three men the goddess made specifically with you in mind?”

I open my mouth again to say anything to soothe the utter devastation and grief on my sister’s face, but before I can get any words past the massive lump in my throat, the gallery door opens again.

“Aunty Em?” Sabrina’s soft voice calls out. The little brat has her hands held out in front of her eyes so she can’t look at the paintings. “I’m sorry. I was going to wait in the car because Mama said I can’t see your new stuff, but my insides told me you needed me, so I had to come.”

When she reaches our little huddle, she wraps her arms tightly around my body, shoving her head against my stomach.

“You’re sad. I can tell. Why are you sad, Aunty Em?”

Her face pulls away from my tummy and her beautiful eyes look up at me with a question in them. Tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, I stroke the side of her cheek before whispering. “It’s just... grownup stuff, sweetheart.”

Kat kneels beside Sabrina, looking at me with a mix of sympathy and frustration. “Em, as much as you want to shut us and them out, you can’t keep going like this. We love you. And I’m pretty sure they do, too. *Plus*, I’ve seen how miserable you are without them.”

My chest rises with a huge sigh, the weight of everything crashing down on me. “I just need time to process all of this, Kat. It’s difficult.”

“But Aunty Em, when I’m sad, you always tell me it’s best to face what’s causing it head-on so I can deal with it and move on.”

The words of my seven-year-old niece hit me like a ton of bricks. Maybe it is time to listen to the wisdom of a child. My own method clearly isn’t

working for me. Taking a deep breath, I nod, looking at Kat with newfound determination.

“Okay, maybe it’s time for me to talk to them.”



So I’m a teensy bit of a coward.

I promised Kat and Sabrina I would talk to the guys. But I never promised when.

And even though I understand the need to have a little urgency, I slept on it for another night before sending them all a text in our group chat.

*Emerson: Can I meet you guys at Mack and Syd’s house?*

The response is almost instantaneous.

*Mack: Yes little witch.*

*Syd: When baby?*

*James: Of course, darling.*

A reluctant smile stretches across my face before I agree to meet them there for dinner.

# Chapter 33

## Emerson

**W**hy the fuck did I say dinner?  
Dinner is too much pressure.

Dinner is an entire meal, and fuck knows what else after.

The sound of my knuckles on their door beats in time with my heart, and I take a steadying breath just before the door opens to show a cautiously smiling Syd.

“Hi, baby. Thank you so much for coming.”

He takes a step back and does this super awkward shuffle that shows he’s unsure if he should hug, kiss, or just let me come in. Taking the decision into my own hands I step up to him and give him a soft kiss on the cheek.

It’s the safest option. Not the cold shoulder of an informal greeting, but no promise of more with a kiss on the lips. He shows me into the living room we had spent all our time in last time, and a surprised giggle escapes me when I spy the new furniture around the room.

“Gone shopping?” I ask, indicating the brightly colored sofas. And when I say brightly, I mean they’re all a mess of psychedelic tie-dye rainbows.

Mack clears his throat from his position on one of the love seats. When I look at him, he stands up. “Actually, they just kind of appeared a week ago.”

His words are like the flame attracting the moth, and I’m helpless to follow his unspoken request. As with Syd, I step closer. Mack bends over so I can reach his cheek, where I plant a soft kiss. He has dark circles telling me he’s probably not slept much more than I have in the last two weeks.

“Oh,” I respond with a scrunch of my eyebrows. “Sorry. That was probably me.” Stupid, wonky magick doing its own thing again. Clearly.

“We don’t mind,” Syd rushed to assure me. “Honestly, I love it. On the other hand, Mack has grumbled a bit about the headache-inducing colors, but he’s not said anything about it in the last two days, so I think he’s grown used to it.

I nod and glance around a little. Looking for the fourth member of our merry gang.

“Where’s James?”

“Right here, darling,” he calls me from the kitchen door. And, of course, he’ll be in the kitchen. It’s probably one of the few places he feels safe.

“Shall we?” James asks before taking a seat.

The atmosphere grows tense, the air heavy with unspoken words as I sit across from Mack, Syd, and James. They each wear a mix of nervousness and hope in their expressions. I take a steadying breath, the scent of the Christmas tree doing wonders to help ground me.

“Alright, let’s talk,” I say, my voice more committed than I feel. “I’ve had ample time to think, and I understand that you guys were scared to be upfront about... everything. I might not fully understand why you didn’t tell me, but I’m willing to try.”

Mack scoots closer to the edge of the chair, his eyes filled with sincerity.

“Em, we messed up, little witch. We should have been honest with you from the beginning. Or at the very least, when you shared all of yourself with us.”

Syd nods in agreement. “Yeah, we are. We’ve also had much time to think, and we realize how bad it must have looked. We understand you needed time. We just want a chance to make things right.”

I meet their eyes, sensing the authenticity in their words. A sense of hope begins to stir within me. “I appreciate your apologies, and I need you to know I’m sorry, too. Sorry for shutting you out and not giving you a chance to explain. It’s just... It was a lot to process.”

James, usually the composed one, looks at me with a vulnerability in his eyes that speaks to my soul. “We understand Em. Thank you again for coming over. You can take all the time you need, and we’ll be here when you’re ready to explore more with us.”

Encouraged by their understanding, I decide to share another part of my life with them. “In the spirit of honesty, there’s something else you guys should know about me to understand why I blew up the way I did. My family... It’s complicated. My parents never really cared about Kat and me. They’re a...” I stop and clear my throat, “Fated match. And they are so wrapped up in each other that Kat and I were always second best. Always overlooked and forgotten. It messed with my head, made me wary of relationships, especially the fated mate variety.”

Syd’s expression softens, and he gently touches my arm. “Em, we’re not your parents. *You* are not your parents. We care about you. And you’re important to us. And we would never do that to any kids we might have.”

At his words, tears run down my cheeks.

“But you know I can’t have kids.” The words are a broken mess pulled from my chest.



“Are you telling me that we can’t find a lost soul out there to love, cuddle and raise to be an absolute little shit?” Mack asks me.

“Yeah... er–no?” My query draws a soft smile from my gentle giant.

“Yeah, little witch. We care about you. You’re important to us, and if you want, we can talk about that.”

“I’d like that,” I whisper in response.

Mack smiles. It’s a genuine, reassuring smile, and I can’t fight the reflex of my lips curling up in response.

“We’re not going to rush you. First and foremost,” James orders, his voice firm yet filled with love, “you need to learn that we’re here for you, no matter what.”

With that, the tension in the room seems to dissipate. We migrate to an oversized, comfortable couch, and I feel a sense of belonging for the first time in weeks.

For the second time in our short relationship, we spend a long, cold winter evening curled up in the warm, cozy living room and share more about our lives. Our dreams, our wants, and our needs.

Between bites of orgasmic food, of course.

It’s a cathartic experience, and as we sit together, limbs tangled, eating and laughing, I realize that maybe—just *maybe*—opening up isn’t quite as terrifying as I thought.

Maybe there is something to be said for this whole fated mate thing after all.

# Chapter 34

## James

I'm not sure how Mack and Syd's house has turned into the unofficial pack house, but I can't claim to be mad about it. It's nowhere near as modern and convenient as my sprawling place, but it's way more comfortable.

It feels like home.

And the little witch curled up with her head resting on my lap is why it does.

Sometime during our heart-to-heart and after we had our fill of the food, she'd fallen asleep. The guys and I relaxed into the silence, taking comfort in the sounds of her soft snores and the calm that seemed to fill the space. The dark smudges under her eyes are unmistakable, and I know we all want her to get some rest.

Until the minx nuzzles into my cock, inhaling deeply before letting out a soft moan. The damn appendage instantly hardens at the feel of our mate rubbing against it.

“Hmmm, can I have a taste... sir?” she asks me, and the damn heart that hasn’t been beating the entire time I’ve been away from Em kicks back into gear again. It puts a whole new meaning to the term ‘my heart skipped a beat,’ and as painful as it is, I love that this woman gives this to me.

“You better, darling,” I say my order in a low voice, and Em eagerly turns her body the rest of the way and pushes up to give herself a better angle. Her stunning mess of curls falls around her face as she quickly pushes her hand into my pants to gain access to the ever-hardening cock.

A low growl slips past my lips when her fingers wrap around me. With her hair falling over her head, I don’t have a view of what she’s doing... but for now, I’ll allow it, too lost in the sensation of her delicate fingers tightly gripping my erection.

But when the warm heat of her mouth wraps around the head of my cock I *need* to see it. I have to watch her take me, inch by torturous inch. My fingers dig into her hair, running through it until I get a grip on most of it, pulling it away from her face.

The forceful tug has Em looking up at me, the hunger in her eyes so stark it takes my breath away.

“Do you enjoy tasting me, my little sex kitten?”

And she *mewls*.

Fucking *mewls*.

The sound of it travels straight through me, and my cock jerks in her hand, already threatening to release.

Mack and Syd will be very sad they’d stepped out to grab some more firewood because I feel our fiery witch is about to put on quite the show. They can always just fall in when they get back.

“Answer me, Em,” I order, and she lets my cock drop from her mouth.

“Yes, sir.”

And fuck me. *Fuck me.* The look on her face is one of the most beautiful things I’ve ever seen. Her eyes are filled with a mix of lust, need, and, most importantly... trust.

Our witch. Our mate... trusts me to play with her.

And I won’t let her down.

“Now take it like the good girl you are.”

I don’t need to say anything else to have her hungrily take me in and suck me down as far as she can take me. The feel of her tongue running over my piercings nearly pushes me over the edge, but I cannot lose control so early in the game.

This is important.

“Fuck, yes, Em.” Throwing my head back, I lose myself to the pleasure for a short moment, allowing myself to just enjoy her wet heat before pushing the impending orgasm back down. With my fingers still holding on to her hair, I guide her back to my erection, using the grip I have on her to fuck her face.

Each time I hit the back of her throat, my sexy mate gags but then goes right back to it, hungry for more.

“Holy shit, Em. You look like a Goddess taking James’s cock.” Syd’s hungry voice draws my attention to him standing in the doorway. His eyes are glued to the juncture of my thighs, where Em is doing her best to swallow me whole.

“She does, doesn’t she?” I push the words out past my tightly clenched teeth. “Where’s Mack?”

“Right fucking here,” he responds with a growl as he pushes past Syd. He drops a huge stack of logs onto the floor before storming over to us, quickly

shucking his clothes.

Syd remains where he is, staring at us, his eyes moving from Em's mouth moving on my cock to me. His face pleading with me.

Fuck my life.

How did I get so lucky?

He's waiting for permission.

“Get over here, naughty pony. You need to eat out our girl to prepare her for that monster of a bear.”

Syd jumps at my order, rushing to Em, where he falls to his knees behind her sexy pert ass. Strong, confident hands slip up her hips, pulling her dress with them. When Syd's hands reach soft skin, I watch as he pulls down Em's tights.

The sexy shifter wastes no time once our witch's sex is exposed. I know precisely when his tongue meets her folds because Em moans around my cock, the vibrations sending a shiver down my spine.

“Slow down, darling. If you make me come before Mack fills you, I'll have to pull you over my lap and teach you a thing or two.”

Again, she mewls, and it takes all of my willpower not to lose my load down her throat. But the good girl she is, she listens to my order and slows her efforts.

“That's it, little witch. Let Syd get you all worked up for me.” Mack moves in closer, his hand wrapped around his impressive-sized erection. He slowly strokes himself as Syd works on Em's sopping pussy.

Syd's still dressed, but I can see his hand rubbing against the bulge in his pants, and I make a mental note to have a *chat* with him later about touching what's mine... and Em's.

For now, all I can focus on is her luscious lips, tantalizing tongue, and

succulent sucking.

Her fingers dig into my thighs, signaling how close she is to falling over the precipice.

“That’s it, darling. Come for me. Come for us.”

And she does.

Her head is thrown back, my cock forgotten as she loses herself to the beautiful pleasure Syd’s given her. The unicorn continues to lap at her lips, drinking her in as she rides her waves.

Before the tremors can subside, Mack moves into Syd’s spot, quickly filling her in one swift motion.

Before he can ride her, though, she needs to get back to work because my balls are about to burst, and I need her mouth on me.

“Darling,” I call to her, and her slowly blinking gaze turns to me in question. “You forgot something?”

Her sweet smile spreads across her face before she shakes her head, turning her attention back to me.

With Mack’s slow thrusts and her eager mouth, she quickly works me back up to the state I was in before Syd rocked her world.

The more eager Mack thrusts into Emerson’s welcoming folds, the harder and deeper she takes me.

The large bear has his hand wrapped around her middle, and I can only guess, but I’m assuming he’s working her clit, pushing her to join us.

Thinking of *us*, I search the room, looking for Syd, and find him leaning against a couch, his pants pushed down his thighs, his own erection gripped in his hand so tightly I’d be worried he’d do permanent damage if it weren’t for the look on his face.

Satisfied that he will be joining us, even though I’ll be teaching him a

lesson later, I grab Em's hair again and thrust up into her mouth as Mack fucks her.

It only takes a few thrusts of pumping into her mouth before I let my pleasure free. Finally.

Not long after, Em, Mack, and, lastly, Syd join us.

# Prologue

Emerson

**M**y show was a roaring success. Even for it being on Christmas Eve.  
The gallery was packed.

My men were with me the entire time. Always touching, always showing me exactly how infatuated they are with me.

Obviously, having three sexy men as mates does wonders for the self-confidence. But it's a work in progress.

But the successful, completely sold-out showing?

Holy fucking shit. That is like a dream come true.

When the gallery owner approached me and informed me that the last piece available for sale had been sold, I nearly passed out.

He promised to give my details to any further potential buyers, and I have a feeling after tonight that I will be one busy witch.

So what does a chaos witch do after finding her three fated mates, becoming a super-successful artist, and finding a love for herself she was sorely lacking before?



Hauls her ass to her sister's house for Christmas Eve celebrations and gift exchanges with her fantastic niece.

I find it endearingly adorable how nervous the guys are to 'officially' meet Kat and Sabrina. Never mind that James works for my sister, and both Mack and Syd dealt with her over the phone.

"Fuck, Em. We don't have any gifts," Mack moans for the tenth time. Okay, probably not tenth, but he's hung up on the fact that he's meeting Sabrina without a present.

After I'd shared with them that I can't have kids, all three of them assured me they were okay with that. We had more than enough love between the four of us, and if the time came later in our lives when we felt we had *more* to give, we could look at adopting.

It was one of the most amazing, heartwarming, yet saddest conversations ever.

But it only cemented the knowledge that they are the perfect men for me.

"I have gifts for her," I respond. Again.

"But they're not from *us*," Syd answers, his worry lacing his tone.

"You two heard her. She knows Sabrina better than anyone other than her mother. I've met her. She's a sweetheart. Willful and knows her mind, but at her core, she's just good," James scolds the other two and I turn and wrap my arms around his neck before planting a soft kiss on his mouth.

"You're my favorite," I tease before kissing the tip of his nose. "Zombie." I finish before bursting out in laughter at the groans from the three of them.

"Now, let us get this show on the road. Sabrina might be sweet but won't be pleased if we're late."

We make it to Kat's front door and I use my key to open the door before calling out. "We're here!"

I'm assailed by a blonde flash who crashes into my legs.

"Aunty Em!" Sabrina cries out before holding her arms up to me. Unable to deny her request, I grab her and give her a quick cuddle.

"Hello there, Nugget. Miss me?"

Her adorable frown tells me precisely what she thinks of my stupid question before her face splits into a grin.

"You're here! So I get to open my presents!"

That's when she steps back and looks at the three men behind me.

"Holy heck, Aunty Em! I never thought you'd manage to find all three toys on my wishlist!" Nugget shouts out before jumping up into Mack's arms.

Thankfully, he's quick on the uptake and wraps his arms around her tiny body.

"You're my one-eyed polar bear!" She pops a kiss on his cheek before demanding to be let down. Holding her arms to Syd, he quickly succumbs to her charms and picks her up. "You're my unicorn with a broken horn!"

Then she looks at James, the smile on her face so huge it's blinding. "And you're my vegetarian zombie!"

At the beginning of her little show, I admit to being confused.

But then, when she accurately guesses all three of my mates' species, my mind jumps back to December first.

Sabrina's wishlist.

I was so fucking proud of finding all three impossible items.

How did I not make the connection?

I guess that was one killer dating app.

I wonder if I can get Kat to sign up for it.

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There. That's enough mushy shit for one book

# About the Author

G.R. Loreweaver brings to life worlds filled with PNR menage and lots of delicious twists.

When she isn't creating characters that we love--only to be mean to them-- she likes to spend her time watching movies or playing video games. She adores all things purple and can usually be found spending time with her amazing husband and crazy kids, most likely with her toes in the grass.

If you would like to check out more works by G.R. or send her some tacos, you can find her in all the places here: <https://linktr.ee/grloreweaver>



Leslie Ayla is a new author living on the sunny coast of KZN South Africa, with her two daughters, doggies, and a loving, incredibly patient husband. Books have always been her escape from her day job but she also loves baking and TV shows like Castle and Bones. Newsletter sign-up: <https://www.subscribepage.com/leslieayla>

She loves interacting with other authors and readers, so feel free to reach out on any of her social platforms the following platforms:

Facebook Reader Group: [Leslie's Little Lounge](http://www.facebook.com/groups/leslieslittlelounge) (<http://www.facebook.com/groups/leslieslittlelounge> )

Instagram [@LeslieAyla](https://www.instagram.com/leslieayalaauthor/) (<https://www.instagram.com/leslieayalaauthor/> )

Facebook page: [Leslie Ayla Author](https://www.facebook.com/LeslieAylaAuthor) (<https://www.facebook.com/LeslieAylaAuthor> )

# Also By Leslie Ayla (K.L. Ayla)

## Standalone:

Their Precious Princess

## Indulgence Series:

Indulging Their Little

Finding His Daddy

## The Kink List:

DILF

## Rawhide Ranch Series (Shared World):

Matching Little Megan

## Twisted Little Tales:

Pretty Little Omega

Bratty Little Beta Part 1

Captivating Little Omega (Coming January 2024)

Written under K.L. Ayla (PNR WhyChoose)

## The Hunter Chronicles

Genesis

The 12 Dates of Christmas – Shared World

The Wonky Wish List



# Also By G.R. Loreweaver

*The Noctifer With Series*

(complete)

Noctifer Magick- Book One

Noctifer Soul- Book Two

Noctifer Heart- Book Three

Noctifer Legacy- Book Four

Cursed Fate

*StandAlone in the Noctifer Witch Universe*

(coming early 2024)

*A Myth of Dire Consequences Duology Novellas*

(complete)

A Story of Lust & Deceit

A Tale of Love & Torment