



SANTA  
© LAWS

SARAH SPADE



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CLAWS  
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Cover by Sanja Gombar

# CONTENTS

[Foreword](#)

1. [Santa Claws](#)
2. [Snow](#)
3. [Shannon's Gift](#)
4. [Thundersnow](#)
5. [Surprise](#)
6. [Mal's Gift](#)

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[Also by Sarah Spade](#)

# FOREWORD

Thank you for checking out [\*Santa Claws\*](#)!

It's a holiday tradition of mine to write a holiday-themed companion every December. This year, I decided it would be perfect to check in with Mal and Shannon. Considering their story takes place in May, by the time the holidays roll around, they would've been mated for ~seven months. With how quick their romance wrapped up, this story is a bit of an extended epilogue for those two :)

It also features the pregnancy trope. I want to note that up front in case that's not your thing, but since [\*Stolen by the Shadows\*](#) confirms that mating on the night of the gold moon guarantees that a Sombra demon's mate will get pregnant, and Shannon and Mal's first time together was on the night of the gold moon, I always knew that had to have happened. You'll learn more about that in Kennedy's book — [\*Bonded to the Beast\*](#) — but with this story, you'll see how Shannon figures out she's expecting... and how she tells Mal.

Plus, you get a sneak peek into Mal's first Christmas, and since this entire book is told in Shannon's POV, some of the humorous misunderstandings that can happen when a demon from a hellish realm celebrates the holidays!

To you and yours: Merry Christmas, happy holidays, and a very happy new year!

xoxo,  
Sarah

# CHAPTER 1

# SANTA CLAWS



I'm a humbug.

There. I admit it.

Me. Shannon Crewes, who normally has a smile and a quip for any situation... when it comes to the holidays, I'm basically a younger, blonder Scrooge, only instead of being stingy and mean, I just grit my teeth and grin and bear it all through December.

There's no reason why, either. As a kid, I fucking *loved* Christmas. Trimming the tree, baking cookies, buying presents... getting presents. It was my favorite time of the year. Then I got older. I moved out, into my own apartment, and despite a few scattered relationships that never lasted, the holidays reminded me how lonely I could be. Then my parents headed south, and it wasn't the same visiting them in their sunny Florida condo for Christmas so I just... didn't.

These last few years, I sent them a Christmas card with a couple of hundred bucks, got my younger cousins gifts from their online wishlists, and made sure to do my part when it came to the office secret Santa. That was it. The sooner we hit January, the better, and I didn't see that changing anytime soon.

Of course, I never expected that, this year, I'd have a mate...

Since Mal came into my life back in May, my life has been turned upside down—and I mean that in a good way, obviously. I went from being a flighty twenty-nine-year-old chick who hadn't been laid in longer than I want to admit to happily settled down with my immortal shadow monster partner. He's like my demon husband, without a real wedding or any chance of a divorce. 'Til death do you part' has nothing on a Sombra demon since it's

nearly impossible for him to die, and that means I'm looking at forever as Mal's mate.

Literally.

But though I'm going to spend the next couple of thousand years—and isn't that a heady thought?—with Mal, it's only been seven months. The best seven months, yeah, but it's not really a lot of time when you think about it. And while we're learning more and more about each other every day, there's so much left we don't know.

And one of those things? It happens to be my aversion to celebrating Christmas.

It's not that I hate it or anything. It's just... I never quite saw the point of going through the hassle of putting up decorations, getting a tree, decorating it, only to have nothing underneath it on Christmas except for the handful of presents my parents ship me from Florida. I did it my first year living on my own and it was so depressing, I never bothered again.

When I had a boyfriend or I was living with a roommate, that was one thing. Since I was perennially single and living by myself, I celebrated outside of the house, but kept Christmas far from my space. It worked for me—until Mal came home from his evening exploration tonight with a question.

“Shannon, my mate. What is this ‘Christ-mus’ I keep hearing about?”

*Christ-mus?*

Ah, crap. He has to mean Christmas, right?

After all, it's two weeks into December, anywhere you go you see candy canes, bows on light posts, Christmas music blaring in every freaking shop, and a holiday coffee menu down at the Beanery that I couldn't help but try out even when it was still November. I had to be a major dingus to think that Mal wouldn't eventually realize that something was different in Jericho.

There's no reason not to tell him. He got a kick out of Thanksgiving, especially when he turned to mist and tagged along with my carry-on when I flew down to see my parents for the holiday, and though I didn't plan to visit them again for December, I should've realized Mal would be curious about Christmas.

We were just finishing up dinner when he asked. Because he's easier to hide in his shadow form when it's dark out, he explores the human world some nights while I either do some errands, cook dinner for us, or veg out in front of the TV. Him asking me questions isn't anything new, though I kind of wish he hadn't asked about Christmas.



But he's my mate, and he chose to stay with me in my world until I felt comfortable enough to join him in his, so if he wants to know about Christmas, I'll tell him.

I'm not all that religious. I was raised Catholic, so I know a lot about the holy side of Christmas, but I decide not to bore Mal with those details, especially since I haven't set foot in a church in years; I didn't even go when I thought holy water might banish Mal, so that tells you something, doesn't it?

Instead, I tell him about the more whimsical side of Christmas—including Santa Claus.

And, yeah... that might've been a mistake.

Mal's expression is horrified. "An immortal male watches you when you sleep? He knows when you're awake? He sneaks into your home?"

I have to swallow my giggle. I don't know what's funnier: his expression, how nefarious he makes Santa sound, or that *Mal* is an immortal male who watches me when I sleep and who knows when I'm awake. And, sure, I summoned him, but he snuck right into my bedroom that fateful night, didn't he?

Instead of pointing that out, I just say, "To leave presents. That's the important bit, Mal. He leaves gifts, so no one cares how creepy it is."

"But this Santa Claws... he's immortal like we are?"

There's also no reason to let him know that the *idea* of Santa is immortal, not the fat man himself. "You could say that."

"So he's a demon."

"Not really. He's actually a saint."

That doesn't assuage my mate's worries. Lifting his hand, he flexes his claws. "Let him try to come to our home. He can bring you presents because you deserve them, but if he tries to take my Shannon from me... I dare him to try. I bet my claws are far bigger than your Santa Claws."

Oh, boy. I just know that he's got the wrong idea of Santa... and I think that's fucking adorable. Not only that, but the way his expression has gone so fierce, as if he'd gut freaking Santa Claus if he tried anything unforward with me has me forgetting all about my Scroogey side. Instead, I'm all about showing Mal how he's the only male for me.

Including the mythical man with a sack full of toys. Mal's got the only thing I want right now, and it's my favorite thing to play with.

In a husky voice, I say, "I bet that's not all that's bigger."

He sucks in a breath. I grin.

Got him.

Now, Mal's getting better at initiating mating with me. It took me a couple of weeks of assuring him that, as his mate, he doesn't have to ask permission to make a move. If he's down for mating, I'm usually ready and waiting. He may be a thousand years old, but I'm freaking twenty-nine and I was celibate for the least three years. He wants sex? Unless I'm already busy doing something else, I'll never turn down Mal.

Same thing with casual embraces, kissing, and touching. I'm a touchy-feely kind of chick, and I show my affection physically. Mal loves it when I latch onto him, and it's only been recently that he's gotten it through his thick skull that, hey, he can go on and touch me, too.

Maybe it's because he's so consumed with the idea of a jolly fat man breaking into the apartment to leave gifts. Maybe it's his curiosity with one of my traditions that I completely forgot to tell him about. Either way, it doesn't seem like mating is on his mind... until I reach past the shadowy layer of his woven pants and find his cock.

Mal has gotten so much better at communicating his needs—but sometimes a girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do. And right now? I wanna do my mate.

His cock immediately starts to harden beneath my questing fingers. I give him a crooked smile, an almost dare as I raise my eyebrows. Without words, I let him know that we can discuss Christmas and Santa Claus—sorry, *Santa Claws*—a little longer... or we could turn in early tonight.

From the way he shudders beneath my touch before disappearing his shadow coverings, I think I know exactly what Mal would rather do.

Good. I'm glad we're on the same page.

“Dishes?” he asks in his deep, throaty voice.

“Leave ‘em for tomorrow.” My breath hitches a little. He's already naked, almost completely erect, and I can't get the image of Mal looming over Santa out of my head. Call me a perve, tell me I have my issues when it comes to the holiday... yeah, that's pretty much true. Don't care. I want my mate—and I want him now. “Come on.”

We learned the hard way that mating in the living room only works if he's sitting on the couch and I'm bouncing on top of him. That close to the door to my apartment, we have to be quiet so that none of my neighbors—okay, Mrs. Winslow—don't hear us going at it and wonder who I'm keeping

hidden in my home. I mean, she wouldn't be *wrong*, really, but if we have to do more of our fucking in the bedroom, that's fine with me.

There's enough soundproofing in there that I can scream and groan as loud as I like and no one knows except the male who drives me wild.

Mal's size used to worry me. These days, I love it. He makes me feel so dainty and small—not so hard since he's more than seven feet tall—and he revs my need up to eleven when he scoops me up in his arms and carries me to the bed.

Once he lays me out, I quickly undress, then lay out on the bed. He joins me, prowling toward me like a stalking predator. The fact that he can do that while also making me feel absolutely safe makes me even more desperate for him. So instead of starting with foreplay like we usually do, I let my legs fall open while crooking my finger at him, knowing that Mal will immediately climb on top of me.

There's no doubt in my mind that we don't fit perfectly anymore. Sometimes he doesn't even bother going shadow. If I'm aroused enough, I can take him as he is, though the heightened pleasure it gives both of us when he's fucking me as part-shadow means that he usually does. I don't care, so long as he shoves that thick cock inside of me.

Which he does, and, *yes*, it feels as amazing as always.

I immediately run my hands over his chest as he begins to leisurely rock into me, making sure that I'm taking him easily. The moment I do, he picks up his pace, knowing exactly how much I need him to take me a little harder from the way stroke his skin.

His mark.

On his chest, Mal has seven characters carved into his deep red skin, glimmering with the silver ink that set the demon tattoo. Something about how primal it looks always gets me going, and tonight is no different.

I love body art. Always have. I've got plenty of tattoos myself, including the sunflower on my arm. But Mal's is even more impressive. As a sign that I'm his bonded mate—that he wears my name on his heart—he etched 'Shannon' in the Sombra written language on his chest.

It's a mating mark, he explained after he did it. A symbol to every soul in Sombra that he was a bonded male, and that he was taken. In his society, it was something the males did to prove that a female owned them. It was a heady sensation, knowing that he was proud to mark his body with my name, and I asked if it was something I was supposed to do, too.

Turns out, in Sombra, only the males wore the mark. He tried to explain it as how females were revered, and too precious to be branded in such a way. Screw that. I might not have needed to use silver-laced ink to keep Mal's name on me, but my local tattoo artist had no problem swirling the name Mal in script over my left boob.

It's small and discreet so that no one but my mate knows it's there, but all he has to do is run a claw over the three letters and he's hard as a rock in an instant. Not saying that Mal isn't *usually* hard around me, but knowing that I chose to put his name on my body as him primed to mate in a heartbeat.

Fair enough. Just running my palms over the seven characters that spell my name has me ready to cream myself. Curving my fingers, scratching him lightly with my nails? That about guarantees that Mal will explode inside of me almost immediately.

Only... something's different. Something's not right.

He's thrusting, murmuring my name, murmuring "fiore mi"—*my flower* in Sombran—all while he works toward finding a rhythm that'll get us both off. His arms are braced by my head, face dipped down to nuzzle the top of my head, the strands of my wavy white-blonde hair mingling with his stick-straight black hair as the bed squeaks away.

His panted breath warms me as he keeps most of his big body off of me. My palms are braced against his muscular chest, but my fingernails aren't scratching at him. My fingers aren't even *touching* him.

I had thrown my head back, eyes closed, moaning as I invited Mal to take me a little harder. As soon as I realize that my hands... that they don't feel *right*... my eyes snap open. I'm shifting on the sheet, the force of his thrusts scooting me back and forth as he swivels his hips, his cock pulls out then, then eagerly finds its way back inside of me. I'm not holding onto his horns like I usually do when we're both racing to find pleasure with each other. Holding onto his chest should be enough—

—only I'm barely holding onto him.

Why? Because each one of my fingers has turned inky black, as if they were part shadow just like Mal.

*What the...*

"Shannon," he grunts, oblivious to the way I'm staring in horror at my hands. From the way his voice is gone guttural, I know that Mal is close. His eyes are closed, lips curving around his fangs as he moved a little more frantically. "My Shannon."

He's close. I am, too. And while part of me is inwardly freaking out that something weird just happened to my hands, I'm lost in the throes of passion with my mate. I can worry about that later. For now, I'll take pleasure and satisfying Mal over trying to figure out what the fuck just happened to my fingers.

"Take me, Mal, baby," I purr, lifting my hips to give him a different angle. It allows him to go a little deeper, filling me up just a little bit more, while also hitting the spot inside of me guaranteed to help me come. I shove my hands into his hair, hiding my shadow fingers so that they don't distract me from this moment in time with Mal. "Show me I'm yours."

"You are."

Holding himself up with one arm, he lifts the other, squeezing my tit, pulling another moan from me. Using the side of his claw, he swipes along my tattoo of his name, then turns it to shadow. For a moment, his thick, red fingers look just like mine did, then he tweaks my nipple exactly the way I like it, and as pleasure starts to heat me up from the inside out, I completely forget about anything except how Mal is making me feel. I start keening out my release right as he bucks inside of me, filling me up with his jizz.

I tug on his hair, bringing his mouth toward mine as he shoots another load inside of me. Once again, I can't help but think that shadow dick is a million times more amazing than regular dick, though that's probably because of the male that monstrously delicious cock belongs to.

Then I kiss Mal, letting him swallow my panting cries as I come down from my orgasm. He's still easing his semi-hard dick in and out of me as he sucks on my tongue, kissing me expertly while careful not to cut me with his fangs. No matter how hot and horny—heh, *horny*—Mal gets, he never for a moment forgets that he's so much bigger, so much stronger, so much more dangerous than I am.

And, God, I love him for it.

Once he breaks our kiss, I notice that the bumps over his nose draw close together as he gives me a concerned look. Pulling out completely, he rolls to his side, leaving me splayed out on my back like a well-pleasured starfish.

His sweat-slicked hair falls over his shoulder as he looks at me. "What bothers you, my mate?"

"What? Me? Nothing."

"Are you sure?" He taps his chest with a claw. "During mating, it seemed as if I frightened you for a moment. But then it was gone and you cleaved to

me instead of pushing me off, so I... I wasn't sure if I did something wrong."

Ah, Mal. My sweet, sweet demon. Right when he finally gets comfortable enough with mating that he actually initiates it instead of waiting for me to just grab his dick and tell him to get naked, I have to freak out mid-sex.

Granted, I still don't know what the hell happened with my fingers there for a second. Glancing down, I see that they're completely back to normal. Who knows? Maybe I just imagined it, or it has something to do with being a Sombra demon's fated mate. Whatever it was, it definitely isn't worth upsetting Mal over.

I should've known better. Thanks to our bond, I can't hide anything from him. It's like he's tapped into my emotions at all times, so of course he felt my flash of fear and thought he caused it.

Reaching up, I stroke the edge of his hard jaw. "You didn't. You can't, babe. Nothing about you scares me, okay? Promise."

So maybe the size of his dick gave me a little reservation at the beginning. And, okay, the horns, the claws, and the fangs had me running for the door when I first cast the true love spell and, instead of getting up the nerve to ask out Derek from the Beanery, I discovered I was Mal's fated mate. Since then, though, Mal's just Mal, and if either one of us is the scary one of the bunch, it's Shannon when she hasn't had her coffee.

In case he doesn't believe me, I send a pulse of love and affection down our bond while hoping like hell I managed to shake off any of my nerves from before. Even if I did go transparent a little bit for a second there, I never want Mal to think that his shadow form was something he couldn't be proud of.

When he leans down, nuzzling the top of my head with his cheek, I'm pretty sure I pulled it off.

Score one for Shannon!

I wait a moment to see if he's going to say anything else about it. When he doesn't, I sit up, then press a quick kiss to the corner of his lush mouth. It's late enough that we can take the dozy post-sex feeling and fall asleep, but I should probably freshen up first. And, okay, maybe I'm looking for an excuse to take a few minutes to myself before Mal starts second-guessing what he sensed through our bond earlier.

As I start to scoot to the other side of the bed, Mal climbs up. "Allow me."

My heart flutters. Handsome, artistic, thoughtful, and he's willing to get

the washcloth? How did I ever get so fucking lucky?

Still, I don't want to take advantage of Mal. "Don't worry about it, Mal. I got it."

He's already standing. "I insist, my Shannon."

Well. If he insists—

*Ding.*

## CHAPTER 2



# SNOW



As Mal starts to head toward the bathroom, I'm curious enough about the notification sound on my phone to go rooting for it. Just as I finally find it, Mal's back with a freshly damp washcloth and curious expression as I'm excitedly showing him my phone screen.

One of the apps I have on my phone is for the weather. Whenever it's raining or there's a thunderstorm alert, it pops up to let me know. Only it's the middle of December and with the recent cold snap, the only weather even it might be forecasting is...

"Look, baby. It's snowing!" I squeal.

I'm almost thirty. I've lived in New York my whole life. Some seasons are worse than others, but I can't remember a single year where we didn't have at least one good snowstorm. Depending on the temperature, we can have our first snow as early as the end of October, though it usually doesn't start until December. Considering it's been unseasonably warm lately, there hasn't been a single flurry—though, according to my notification, it looks like we had a sudden squall no one's been expecting.

I've been dying to show Mal snow. In Sombra, he lives in a red-tinged, shadowy part of the demon realm where the ground is scorched, it rains ash, and there are freaking *skulls* as part of the decor. He tells me that Marvo, Sombra's capitol, is a beautiful oasis, but Nuit... not so much.

He marveled at New York in the fall, with the changing colors on the autumnal trees. How will he react when he sees frozen flakes falling from the sky? I told him all about that—while still conveniently forgetting to mention Christmas—but this is the first time we've had a snow alert since he's lived with me.

I can't wait to show him!

After taking the washcloth from him and tossing both it and my phone onto the bed behind me, I grab Mal by his pointer claw and drag him over to the window.

My bedroom overlooks the backside of the apartment building's parking lot. That's where the dumpster is, and the cozy, warm cat shelters we set up for the local strays at Mal's behest. And, thanks to the quick storm, everything is overlaid with about an inch or so of freshly fallen powder.

It twinkles beneath the lamplight out back, sparkling brightly as the window blows the flakes around. It whisks me right back to the magic of childhood, and I'm so glad I got to share this with my shadow monster.

"Look at the snow," I whisper. "It's so beautiful, isn't it?"

"Yes," rumbles Mal. The heat of his naked body sears my back as he moves into me. His big hands land gently on my shoulders while his cock nudges me insistently. He's hard again, I notice, until he distracts me by adding, "You are magnificent, my mate."

I glance behind me. He's not even looking at the snow. Instead, he's watching me with such adoration that my breath catches in my throat. Seven months in and he can still catch me off-guard with such an earnest compliment and a look just like that one.

Know what? This is the first snow, but it won't be the only snow. And though this isn't our first night together, every moment with Mal is just as magical. We can gaze at the snow tomorrow morning if it's still there. Tonight?

This is all about me and Mal.

Letting go of the window curtain, I turn into my mate, looping my hands around his neck. I don't even bother checking my fingers again. Instead, I tilt my head back and meet the adoration in his glowing golden gaze.

I hop up, knowing instinctively that my mate will catch me. Wrapping my bare legs around his thick waist, I grin as he grabs me by my ass, hoisting me so that my pussy is spreading his jizz and my wetness all over his hairless groin.

His nose is amazing. The way his nostrils flair, Mal groaning as he takes in my scent, it doesn't take my heat against his warm body to know that I'm ready for another round. My body does that for him, just like I know from the way he's back at full staff that he's more than willing to find his way back inside of me.

I grin wickedly. Consider me fully distracted now because all I'm thinking about is getting back in bed. Kicking him firmly in his taut ass cheek, I tell him, "Just for that, I'm going to be on top this time. Show you just how much your beautiful mate fucking adores her male."

And adores fucking him, too.

My formerly innocent, virginal mate matches my grin. Already lifting me higher, angling me so that he can wedge the head of his cock into me, he says, "As you wish, my mate."

And just for that? After I'm done with him, I'll lay back down and let him do whatever the hell he wants to me.

He's my mate. My lover.

And there isn't anything I won't give him.

THE NEXT MORNING, I WAKE UP TO FIND MAL SITTING CROSS-LEGGED AT THE end of the bed. He has one hand on my lower leg, absently stroking my exposed calf. In his other hand, he's holding an oversized tablet.

I'm not so surprised by either of those things. My mate will take any excuse to touch me in even the most gentle of caresses, and I must've kicked the heavy blanket off of me while I was sleeping. I have a tendency to toss and turn, especially when I have something on my mind, and though I sleep better when Mal is holding me close, I don't blame him for shifting his spot when I flip like a freaking top all night long. Especially since he maybe gets three or four hours at most, and usually spends the time when I'm sleeping just watching over me.

Hey. It makes him happy. So maybe it was a little weird when we first met, but if Mal wants to stare at me while I'm passed out and snoring and still somehow thinks I'm amazing, I'm not going to stop him.

Even though I kinda stop the stroking when I stretch out my leg, then flop from my belly to my back so I can sit up.

My phone is buzzing nearby. I have it on the charger, tucked under my pillow somewhere. I habitually set my alarm an hour before I have to leave the apartment every morning I have work. That gives me time to shower, have breakfast, maybe a quickie with Mal, then head on out.

Today, I find the charging cord, tug the phone out from beneath, then turn

off the alarm. Only then do I use my big toe to tap Mal's rock-hard thigh. "Morning, babe."

The first time I used the term of endearment with Mal, his brow furrowed as a look of confusion passed across his strong features. It was another one of those *off* translations between English and Sombra. When I said 'babe' or 'baby', he gets the image of a demon kid in his head. Spawn, as he called it. I had to explain that it was similar to the way he referred to me as 'my mate' or 'my Shannon'.

He didn't understand why I referred to him as offspring, but me being possessive of him? Now, *that* Mal understood.

"Good morning." He trails a claw on the instep of my foot. I have to fight back a squeal at how tickling that is. "Sleep well?"

When I wasn't worrying about why my fingers were disappearing on me, sure. I slept just peachy.

Should I tell Mal? Last night, my first instinct was to bury my hands in his hair, hiding my fingers at the same time as I grounded myself by clinging to my mate. By the time we were standing by the windowpane, watching the snow fall, my hands were back to normal. So long as they stay that way, I see no reason to freak him out.

Who knows? Maybe I'm just becoming more like Mal. I mean, we swapped essence—and over the last seven months, we swapped a lot more than that between us with all the mating we've done—so that makes sense to me. He's already given me a super extended lifespan. With our bond, why wouldn't I get some awesome shadow powers?

And if I'm reaching, that's fine.

I'm not freaking out.

Nope.

Uh-uh.

"Why wouldn't I?" I ask. Before he can answer me, I jerk my chin at the iPad in his hand. "What about you? Learn anything interesting this morning?"

One thing I learned about having a partner from a whole other plane? Our essence swap gave us insight into each other, our lives and our pasts, as well as sharing our unique languages, but there's only so much it could do. Between my use of slang and my outlook on life, Mal needed a little more help when it came to understanding life in the human world.

Enter the internet.

Those early days when we were first getting to know each other, we had plenty of misunderstandings. Me trying to banish him with powdered sage and table salt while Mal thought it was my strange mating ritual was one, and how he convinced me to let him give me his essence without mentioning that the consequences included mate sickness was another. And then there was my phone...

They didn't have tech like us humans do in Sombra. In his demon world, they rely more on magic, I guess, because in some ways his people are leaps and bounds ahead of us despite Mal's clan being more of a hunter-gatherer-bartering society. Of course, they don't call it *magic*. To the Sombrans, they explain everything away as "the will of the shadows", whatever that means. Luckily for me, I'll find out sooner or later since me and Mal have plans to visit Sombra in the new year. For now, I just think of it as magic.

But phones, though? Television? Cars, online shopping, and fast food? Things I take for granted every day are unheard of in Sombra.

To Mal, my phone is a small, rectangular glass box that I tap and it gives me answers. And while he's not wrong at all, I've given up trying to explain that it's so much more than that.

Instead, I got him his own. Well, not a *phone* phone. With his ginormous hands and long claws, my phone looks ridiculously tiny. But a tablet? When Mal holds one of those, it seems like the same size as my phone. With a little wi-fi and a crash course in how to use Google, Mal can ask the internet any of his questions and soak up the answers whenever he wants. I also put a couple of different streaming apps on it for him, too, since he gets a kick out of watching some of my favorite shows while I'm at work.

He still loves Bob's Burgers, and he's amazed by the portrayal of demons in Supernatural, but he's recently found an affinity for Doctor Who.

Go figure.

Since I don't hear the sound of the Tardis or any British accents coming from his tablet, I figure he was doing some more of his own research this morning. That's pretty common. As much as I don't mind teaching Mal all about the human world, he often has more questions than I have answers. Unleashing him on Wikipedia was one of the best things I've done to integrate him into my kind.

But not Reddit, though. Or Facebook. Twitter, too. I made sure to warn him away from those sites just because I know firsthand exactly how shitty humans can be on social media.

Mal lays the tablet next to him as he nods solemnly. “Yes. And I must apologize.”

My gut tightens. Forcing myself to ignore the unease, I tap Mal with my toe again. “Apologize, big guy? For what?”

“I misunderstood about your Santa Claus. He has no claws, and he’s no demon. My screen says he’s a toymaker. A craftsman who brings gifts to spawn.”

Oh. Is that all? “Don’t feel sorry, Mal. I like your interpretation a lot better.” I show him my nails. Long as they are, they’re stubby compared to Mal’s claws. “Santa Claws is coming to town, but he better watch out. Mal’s got my back.”

“Always. But this Christ-mus... *Christmas*... it’s also a time for family.”

“That’s right.”

“Like the turkey holiday. With the feast and your kin.”

I couldn’t actually introduce Mal to my parents, but I also couldn’t leave him alone. Mom and Dad know my feelings about Christmas, so they usually book a cruise for themselves for December, so they weren’t expecting me, but all hell would set loose if I missed Thanksgiving. I find it absolutely charming that the only thing Mal remembers about the holiday is the turkey I kept sneaking under the table to him while he was wearing his shadow form.

Of course, then I defiled my parents’ guest room after they went to sleep, but hey. It wasn’t the first time I fucked a guy under my parents’ roof. At least this time I was in a committed relationship, and even if they’ll never meet Mal, what they don’t know won’t hurt them.

Is he wondering if we’re supposed to be taking another plane ride? The novelty wore off for Mal on the trip back, so I can see how he’d be worried that that was coming up for us.

“Usually,” I tell him, “but I’m not really so big on the Christmas thing. I’ll buy a couple of gifts, make merry at the office Christmas party if Chris”—my closest colleague, and my best friend’s husband—“makes me, but that’s about it.”

“Ah. If that’s so.”

Wait a minute—

“Mal?”

“Yes, my flower?”

“Did you... did you want to do something for Christmas?”

“It seems to be a tradition that so many in your world follow. And it’s a

family celebration, and since you've taken me as your mate..."

He doesn't even have to say it. I know exactly where his thoughts have gone. "You're my family now, Mal. You and me... we're together forever. You know that."

His eyes brighten. "Of that, I have no doubts."

I believe him. Still, I know exactly what he's thinking. And what the hell is wrong with me? This is Mal's first Christmas in my world. Just because I haven't really celebrated over the last few years doesn't mean that he shouldn't experience it for himself.

Good going, Ebenezer Shannon. So careful to ignore the signs of the holidays approaching, you completely disregarded how Mal might be curious—or might want to find some joy in a strange new world where the only family he has is you.

"You're right, babe. Christmas is a time for family. About good cheer and showing how much we care about each other."

"That is what my glass screen said."

One day, I'll have to point out that he can't believe everything he reads on the internet. Then again, since most of his ideas about Christmas seem spot on, I figure that's not today.

There's not much time until the twenty-fifth. If we're going to do this, we might as well get started.

I grin. "I have a couple of boxes of decorations in my closet I can get down after work." It's not much. A few stuffed animals I thought were cute, some ornaments for the sorry, Charlie Brown-looking Christmas tree I bought my first year in Jericho, and maybe some tinsel. "You want a family Christmas for us, Mal, you're going to get one."

He pulls me into his embrace. "I want whatever will make you happy, my mate."

You know what? Showing Mal the magic of Christmas? Sharing my childhood traditions with him, making some of our own... I actually think that will make me kinda happy.

"Sounds like a plan."

# CHAPTER 3



## SHANNON'S GIFT



It's pretty much impossible to get any alone time when your mate is basically your second shadow. And since Mal is a Sombra demon, when I say *shadow*, I mean it.

I normally don't mind. How can I? I love Mal, and I'm at my happiest when he's around. Courtesy of the way he can turn to mist when we're in public, it isn't often that I have to be separated from him. He even comes with me to work sometimes, even though we no longer have to worry about him bursting into flames if he's too far from me. Like me, Mal tags along because he prefers to be with me.

Of course, when I need my space, he gives it to me. If I'm busy at work or he'd rather stay in the apartment and work on an art project, there's no reason why we can't split up. Despite our mate bond, we're not *that* codependent. We've spent the last seven months coming to a happy medium where we each have our own life while sharing the one we have together.

Only one problem, though. If I feel itchy and need some time to myself, all I have to do is ask. That's a little hard when I'm working on a surprise for Mal.

Just because I didn't plan on going all out for the holidays before Mal started asking me about it, that didn't mean that I wasn't going to celebrate at all. I always planned on giving my mate a heartfelt gift, and it seemed perfect that I have it ready for Christmas.

To me, the most impressive present is one that's thoughtful. It doesn't have to cost a lot. It could cost *nothing* and, if there's thought behind it, it could be the most precious thing in the world to me. For Mal, I decided that I wanted to give him something that shows him how head-over-heels in love

with him I am. Since he's an artist, the best way I thought to do that was by creating something for him.

Now, I know it's nothing compared to the masterpieces he creates. Before I took on this project, the extent of my art skills were stick figures and a drawing of the sun wearing shades. That's about all. For Mal, though, I watched tutorials on my lunch breaks when he was at the apartment. I bought my own canvases and paints so he didn't notice any of his were missing. I snapped a picture of him while he was sleeping—one of the rare times I worked his body to exhaustion before falling right behind him—so that I had an image to work from.

Now, with a week until Christmas, I have a nearly finished portrait of my gentle yet proud, kind yet protective, absolutely stunning hunk of my mate. I painted him in his solid form, finding the right shade of red for his skin, even managing to make his golden eyes pop. His shiny black horns arc off the canvas.

And, sure, the proportions are a little wonky. His nose is kinda weird, and his hair... it's a bit of a black blob instead of the thick, straight strands, but this is the third portrait I attempted to paint and it's the best one I've done so far.

There are only a few more details I have left. Especially now that Christmas has blown up a little, and Mal's actually looking forward to celebrating it with me, I want this to be the best gift he's ever been given. Of course, I ordered a bunch of painting supplies to add to his collection, and some other things I thought Mal would like—including a t-shirt with a sunflower on it that I bought in the largest size I could find online—but this is my big gift for him.

And I rarely had time to work on it.

How could I? I didn't want Mal to see it, and if I brought it to work, my nosy cubicle mates would have questions I wouldn't know how to answer.

*What are you drawing the devil, Shannon?*

*Are you into painting fanart or something?*

*There something we need to go to HR for...*

Yeah. No, thanks.

Instead, I have to take the time as I found it. Luckily, in the week since me and Mal decided to actually do Christmas together, my mate has been turning to shadow more and more before slipping out of the apartment.

He has to. Now that we're mated, Mal is allowed to stay in the human

world with me, but if any other human discovers he's here—that the Sombra demons exist—then Duke Haures, the ruler of Sombra, will have his guards snatch him and drag him back to Sombra sooner than I can blink.

They tried. On the night of the gold moon, Mal's deadline to bond me to him, three other demons crossed into the human world to threaten my mate with a pair of enchanted chains. Of course, I wasn't about to let that happen. In what was probably the most impulsive decision of my whole life, I fucked Mal and took him as my forever mate after knowing him for, like, a week, maybe?

Oh, well. I don't regret it one bit. Given the chance, I'd do it all over again, too.

Even so, now that we know what's at stake, we're very careful to keep Mal hidden. I know that, one day, I'll have to leave my life as I know it behind—I'll kinda have to, considering I'm forever twenty-nine and, eventually, someone will notice that I've stopped aging—but, for the moment, I'm happy here. *We're* happy here.

And ever since I agreed to celebrate an honest-to-God Christmas with him, we're fucking downright jolly.

That first night, after I returned home from the office, I got the decorations down from the top of my closet. Over pizza—onion for me and meat-lovers for Mal—we set out the few stuffed animals of Frosty and Rudolph that I had, hung the four of five dollar store pictures I had crumpled up at the bottom, and decked out the television area with sparkling garland. It was a start, and I promised to get more the next day.

My mate beat me to it.

I should've known better than to rely on crappy dollar store postings. At least, not when I have the most talented artist as my mate. Using nothing but some card stock and colored pencils, crayons, and paints, he drew all kinds of stereotypical Christmas scenes as decorations that he posted throughout the living room. I get the idea he gingerly used a claw to type "Christmas" in the the Google search bar, selected image, and copied what he saw, but I didn't care. Because Mal took each one a step further and added the two of us to each scene.

There was a drawing of Sam the Snowman, Rudolph, and Clarice, with Mal holding hands with me beside a decked-out Christmas trees. Another had Mal on an oversized sleigh, wearing Santa's trademark hat around his horns, with me on his lap. He drew me in a more risqué version of Mrs. Claus—

including holding a candy cane in a very provocative pose—thought I’ll say one thing. If my white-blond hair was curled and under a cap, I’d make an awesome, younger version of Santa’s wife.

My favorite—if only because it was so blasphemous, it made my lapsed Catholic side burst out in laughter—is a sketch of the nativity scene with me as Mary, Mal as Joseph, and an empty manger tucked between us. Considering I purposely kept religion out of Christmas since my mate is, well, a *demon*, I find it hysterical that he painted this scene without having any idea what it meant beyond it had some tie to Christmas.

I did, however, get some more baubles, some odds and ends that really made our apartment scream “Christmas”. A stocking for me, one for Mal, and enough candy canes that the living room stinks like peppermint was first. Then I went down to the grocery store and stocked up on everything we’d need to make my mom’s infamous chocolate chip cookies.

I... might’ve got more dough on Mal than wrapped up to chill to bake later. I couldn’t help it, though. When the best part of making cookie dough is eating it, and eating it off my brawny mate... yeah. A few mishaps in the kitchen were bound to happen.

Not that Mal complained. Considering how that night ended, I think baking cookies together might become one of the traditions Mal insists on as we celebrate the holidays together.

There are a few that we don’t mention. Gifts are one. I know I’ll have something for Mal, but I don’t want to make a big deal of it. To me, the most important part of the holidays has always been being with family, not so much the gift exchange. Besides, I don’t want him to feel like he has to do something for me when: a) this Christmas is all about Mal, and b) he does everything for me every damn day that we’re together.

The other tradition I attempted to avoid? Getting a Christmas tree.

To me, it just made sense. Without a tree, there’s no pressure to put gifts under it. Plus, we live in an apartment on the fourth floor. I’d really rather not have to go out, pay close to a hundred bucks for a tree that’s gonna die in a couple of weeks, then lug it home, drag it up to my apartment, then get it standing. Not to mention decorating the freaking thing, ooh-ing and ahh-ing over it for a couple of days, then bitching when I have to take the lights and the ornaments back off. Sure, I could go out and get a fake tree, but there are only a handful of days until Christmas. I just didn’t see the point.

Only one problem: I forgot to tell Mal that we were going no tree this

year.

Whoops.

IT'S ABOUT NINE O'CLOCK AT NIGHT WHEN MAL IN HIS BARELY-THERE MIST form comes floating back through the front door to the apartment. I'd been waiting up for him, watching a random Christmas episode from Bob's Burgers to keep me in the holiday mood, since Mal announced he was going out for a stroll around the neighborhood.

One thing I learned since we became mates? Before me, Mal was lonely. He had no family left in his clan—though, in Sombra, the clan you're currently a part of *is* your family—and the clan artist was nowhere near as respected as the clan leader or the hunters. He has clansmen, but no friends, and spent centuries upon centuries alone, perfecting his art while waiting for the one female would be his.

That's part of the reason he used to spend so much time glued to me like he really is my shadow. It's almost like he's afraid that, should he look away from me for more than a second, I'd change my mind about being his mate and bolt or something. Not that I can. Even if I wanted to, bonding yourself to a Sombra demon is a lifetime arrangement—and it took Mal a while to realize that I'm not going anywhere.

Eventually he figured it out. That's when he stopped joining me at work everyday, choosing to stay at the apartment where he could work on his art or play with his tablet, though sometimes he's as possessive and protective as he was those early days together.

That's also about the same time when he started his explorations...

I know Mal misses Sombra. Why wouldn't he? He spent over a thousand years in his realm. It was the only life he ever knew, and even if I didn't feel his homesickness like an ache in my gut thanks to our bond, I've gotten to know Mal very well since we bonded. He wants to go home, he wants to show me off to his clan, and he wants us to raise a family there together.

Now, I'm not saying I don't want those things. I do. When I agreed to be Mal's mate, I did it knowing that it wasn't just about saving him from Hures's goons. This was a forever thing, and while mating is about sex, it's also about procreating. He has his mate, and Mal is longing for offspring.

His own family.

If it happens, it happens. That's my outlook on it. Do I want it to happen *now*? I... I don't know. When it comes to leaving the life I know in the human world for Sombra, I'm a little more keen. I've always wanted to travel. It can't get any better than going to a whole new plane, right?

We're going to do that soon. I have vacation time I plan on using in the new year, and I promised Mal I'd go home with him to see what his world is like. Mal, on the other hand, has spent the last few months learning all about my neighborhood.

It all began with the stray mama cat and the little black kitten that Mal recovered from under the dumpster. I barely knew my mate then, but anyone who is kind and caring when it comes to something—or someone—weaker than them has me paying attention. In the months after that, he's proven that his soft touch is just part of who he is.

And that includes nightly rounds to make sure that his kitty friends are warm and safe, well-fed, and protected from any threats. With his help, we've already trapped six of them, doing trap-neuter-release for the more feral strays, while finding homes for three that were too friendly to go back outside.

I thought that that was where he went after dinner. Sometimes he likes to just watch people from the shadows, almost as though he's part of the human world even though no one else can see him; he says it's not that different from when he was in Sombra which breaks my damn heart, and makes me so glad that we found each other.

I thought that that was where he went... and I was wrong.

# CHAPTER 4

# THUNDERSNOW



**A**s soon as he's safely inside, Mal shifts shapes, turning into the solid, demonic male I adore. His eyes are glowing brighter than usual, a deep blush high on his red-skinned cheeks turning the heights almost a rich burgundy color.

“Are you free?”

I've got my hair thrown into a bun on the top of my head, my feed buried in cozy slippers, and a pair of comfy pjs on. I'm sucking on the long end of a candy cane, the remote dangling from my hand as I get ready to put another episode on. I don't think I can look any freer.

Removing the candy cane from my mouth, I wrap the plastic wrapper around the pointed edge. “What's up?” My own gaze goes heavy-lidded when I notice that Mal is bare-chested, his pecs glistening in the lamplight. His temperature runs so much hotter than mine—even though our essence makes it so I can't sting him with my chill and he can't burn me—but Mal doesn't sweat on his body, only near his hairline. His skin only gets slick like that in the shower, or if he gets caught in the rain when he's not completely mist.

Or, I think, remembering tonight's forecast, the snow.

We've had another couple of snowfalls since the one two weeks ago. It still brings childlike wonder to me while I finally got Mal to admit that it amazes him how frozen water falls from the sky yet doesn't melt when it hits the ground. It did, however, melt the second it hit his skin, sizzling at the same time.

So when Mal asks me to pull on my boots and my jacket, forever looking out for me, I figure he just wants to show me the recent snow. He gets



enjoyment out of watching me play in it, even encouraging me to throw snowballs at the wide target of his shadowy chest. In the dark, I look like a crazy chick flinging snow around all by herself, but I couldn't care less. Hidden in the shadows, Mal can spend the time with me outside of our apartment and no one is any the wiser.

I guess that's one perk to Daylight Saving's. The earlier sunset gives me more time with my mate, and I'll take it gladly.

Just like how, when Mal wants me to go outside with him, I don't even hesitate.

I thought he wanted to show me the snow piling up at the backside of the apartment building.

That would be a nope, though I do notice that something is out there that wasn't there when I parked after work...

It's a tree.

A huge ass tree. Pine, maybe, like the wild trees that aren't too far from the edge of the parking lot, but it's a tree no matter what kind.

And there's no doubt in my mind that Mal propped it up and left it by the dumpster for me.

I don't ask him. I can't. Because, standing right next to the tree, watching it with a scowl on her face, is Mrs. Winslow. My neighbor from only a couple of doors down, she's the building gossip, and the last person on Earth I want to figure out that my mate is a shadow demon from another realm.

Is that what he went off to do? Find us a tree? In the darkness, he might have been able to manage it—especially if he took one of the wild trees nearby—but it would've been nearly impossible for him to march it through the apartment building to bring it upstairs.

Or maybe Mal didn't think that far ahead. If Google said we needed a Christmas tree to celebrate the holiday, he might've decided to get one for me and only realized the logistics of getting inside one he brought it back.

I don't know. Can't wait to find out, but not until I get rid of Mrs. Winslow...

“Evening, Mrs. Winslow.”

Her head whips around when she hears my false pleasantries. “Well, hello, Shannon. It's awful late to run into you here down here.”

Tell me about it. Most of my neighbors are locked up tight by nine o'clock. In our little hamlet, we might not have a curfew, but you'd never know from how quiet it gets at night, and how most stores on our Main Street

are closed as soon as the sun goes down.

“I guess it is.”

“What are you doing outside in the snow?”

I could ask her the same thing. Too bad I know that Mrs. Winslow won't even deign to answer until I come up with a response for her.

“I—” *Crap.* My first instinct is to tell her that I came down here to throw out trash but, yeah... my hands are empty. That won't fly. I glance over at the tree again, then blurt out, “I thought I heard something.”

“Same for me. I heard a... *thump*, I think it was. I came down here to investigate.”

Honestly? I call bullshit. Unless she had her long neck stuck out of her window, there's no way she could've heard anything out back. I know I didn't, and that worries me. I get the idea that she was snooping instead and might've seen something that piqued her interest.

I just hope it wasn't a shadowy figure moving a tree over to the dumpster...

“It's a tree,” I tell her. “Probably one that a neighbor of ours threw out and couldn't get it inside the dumpster.”

“Christmas isn't for another couple days, my dear. I doubt anyone threw out their tree so soon.”

Yeah. I know. But I'm grasping for an excuse that isn't Malphas from Sombra brought me home a frigging tree.

“Thundersnow maybe?” I say weakly. “From the earlier storm?”

Mrs. Winslow arches her eyebrows. “Really, Shannon?”

As lame an excuse as it is, I run with it.

“What else could've happened? Someone strong enough to rip it from the ground dragged it here, but they didn't leave any drag marks behind? And what about footprints? There aren't any except for ours.”

*Don't notice that the snow could've filled the other prints—or that the prints Mal would've left would be fitting for Bigfoot and not a regular human...*

Mrs. Winslow frowns. Ha. Gotcha there!

She obviously can tell that something weird is going on. It'll probably bother her to no end that she can't figure it out, or that what she's seeing doesn't make any sense. How can it? She doesn't know that she's sharing an apartment complex with a Sombra demon who can carry a massive tree without dragging it anywhere.

She opens her mouth, but before she can say anything else, I cut in with a quick, “I’ll call someone to see if we get it removed.”

My neighbor sniffs, tugging her jacket tightly around her. “As long as it’s not blocking the path to the dumpster or filling it up unnecessarily, I guess that’s the best we can do.” She shivers, glancing up to give the sky a quelling look. “Darn snow. It makes everything messy.”

I’ve always loved the snow. Right now, I’ve never been more grateful for it. It gives me an excuse to cover up the mystery of the tree next to the dumpster *and* keeps Mrs. Winslow from hovering around outside as if by sheer will alone she could demand the tree to start talking and explain how it ended up behind our building.

After nodding her goodbye at them, then checking to make sure her car didn’t get struck by a tree falling from thirty or so feet away, Mrs. Winslow disappears back into the building.

I make sure no one else is around, then gesture at the tree.

Mal is in his shadow form. He’d melted into the darkness behind the dumpster, leaving only the narrow slits of his golden eyes for me to see him watching me curiously. He knows better than to let anyone see him, especially Mrs. Winslow, but now that we’re alone, he speaks up.

“Your celebration calls for a tree, does it not?”

“Christmas trees are a thing, yeah, but—”

He frowns. “Is it the wrong sort of tree? I tried to find one that matches the images on my screen. I can get us another.”

And have Mrs. Winslow wondering what the hell was going on? No chance she believed my weak excuse just now, and if it wasn’t for a stroke of shitty luck, she never would’ve noticed the tree Mal brought back for me.

The last thing I need is for her to start peering at me suspiciously again. After Mal first moved in with me, I got the feeling she was waiting to catch me doing something weird. And while I’d love to tell her where to stick her big nose, Mal staying in the human world relies on us keeping him a secret. It would be satisfying as all hell to show Mrs. Winslow my demon mate, but I’d never do anything to put him at risk.

Did he do it himself? I have no idea where this tree came from or how he got it—considering it still has a root or two attached, I’m thinking my strong mate actually pulled it from the ground—but what if someone saw him? I know Mal can carry small things with him while he’s in shadow form, like my purse or his tablet, but a pine tree? No matter how late it was, someone in

Jericho could've seen him.

“No, no. This is fine. It's great actually. Perfect for a human Christmas celebration,” I tell him hurriedly. Upsetting Mal for trying his best is like kicking a puppy who just wants affection. You don't do that unless you're heartless and cruel—and I'm not either. “We're gonna have to work out the mechanics of getting it inside, but we can do that. Maybe when the rest of the apartment is asleep and you can help me sneak it in.”

Mal rubs his right horn. “I wanted the best tree for you, my mate. I thought the bigger one would be better even if it is a little scrawny.”

Scrawny for a seven-foot-demon is massive for me. Still, I appreciate the gesture—even if I should've thought about getting a small tabletop tree to stop this from happening.

He tried. To me, that's all that matters. Mal tried, and if I have to hire a pair of damn movers to get that tree inside myself, I will. That way, Mrs. Winslow is happy the tree is gone, I get to give Mal a traditional Christmas, and my mate is satisfied he can provide for his mate.

I gesture for him to bend low. It's hard for me to find him in the shadows when it's all but pitch-dark outside, but I can... I don't know... almost *sense* Mal. Closing my eyes, I part my lips, sighing when I find his.

His hands go to the small of my back. I feel his heat through my thick coat. Between his kind gesture and how turned on I already was when I saw the water dripping slightly down his bare chest, I decide to worry about the tree later.

Right now? I need my mate.

You'd think that this insatiable need to jump his gorgeous body would lessen in time. Yeah, right. I'd never been such a lusty woman before—I proved that when I went three years between lovers—but something about Mal... I'm addicted to him. His touch. His taste. His heat... any moment we're not mating seems like a moment wasted.

Luckily for me, Mal seems to be making up for a millennia of celibacy. All it takes is me getting ready for him and he's more than willing to give me what I need.

Pulling back from our kiss, he says, “Now, my mate?”

I don't even pretend not to know what he means. “If you don't mind.”

“Everything I am is yours. Everything I'll ever be belongs to you.” Still holding tightly to me, he uses his other hand to tap my name on his chest. “Whenever you want your male, just tell me. I'll always be at your beck and

call. You know that.”

I do. So, in that case...

I grin up at my shadowy mate. “Race you upstairs.”

Mal chuckles, a low rumble that goes straight to my pussy. “Lead the way. You know I much prefer the sight when I’m behind.”

Right. Because he’s looking at *my* behind.

Something about the snow, the tree mix-up, the magic of Christmas only a couple of days away... that just adds to the love I have for my demon. I can see us making ridiculous screw-ups we can laugh about later while teasingly talking about sex for the next couple of hundred years... and I can’t fucking wait.

This is only the beginning of Shannon and Mal, and my heartrate kicks up as I have that thought. Shannon and Mal... it just has such an awesome ring to it, doesn’t it?

He might have been Malphas once. The moment I called him ‘Mal’, I made him mine. I only cemented that fact when I took him inside of me, finalizing a bond that will never break. Me inking his name on my skin was just the proof I need to give my sweet, sweet mate.

I’m his. He’s mine.

Nothing will change that—though I look forward to showing him just how perfect he is for me.

Leading the way like he requested, I move quickly through the growing pile of snow, absolutely sure that, if I slip, Mal will be there to catch me.

Once I hit the back door, I reach for the knob, doing a double-take when it passes right through my hand.

*What the—*

No. Not again. It’s a trick of the nighttime, or maybe my hands are too cold to feel the metal, and...

I grab the knob a second time. Just like before, it doesn’t take.

I look down. Don’t want to, but I have to, and holy shit.

Holy *shit*.

It’s not just my fingers that have gone completely shadow now. Jerking back the sleeve of my coat, I see that it’s not just my hand, either. It’s half down my forearm.

“Shannon, my flower? Is everything alright?”

I shake my sleeve down past my hand, hiding it from him. “Yeah,” I lie. “I’m fine.”

Maybe.

I have to tell Mal. I know that. If I don't, he's going to keep on wondering what's wrong with me. And maybe he knows exactly what's going on... but, on the off chance that he doesn't, I don't want to freak him out.

Okay. My rationalization is shaky at best. I hate the idea of hiding anything from Mal, but I'd rather get a second opinion on what the hell is going on before I have him worrying over me. Going to a human doctor is obviously out, of course, but if mating a Sombra demon means that I'm turning a bit shadow myself, there's someone I know who might be able to confirm it.

After all, Amy Benoit has had Nox as her bonded mate for more than fifteen years.

# CHAPTER 5

# SURPRISE



**T**he office I work at is always closed for Christmas. Christmas Eve, too, and if we're all caught up on our orders, the day after Christmas is a freebie. The time between Christmas and New Year's is when we're like a ghost town. Only a handful of us come in, running on a skeleton crew. Anyone hoarding PTO can cash it in, and if you'd rather it roll over into the new year, our employer actually offers half days at overtime pay to entice workers to come in.

I've always taken whatever shifts were available. Doesn't hurt to get a bigger check at the end of the year, and I usually take my time when I visit my parents in Florida for Thanksgiving. Mal knows I plan on doing the same this year—but when I put in for a sick day on the 23rd, Lisa doesn't even hesitate to approve it.

My poor boss. Ever since I took the week off when I first met Mal and the mate sickness got its claws in me so bad that I actually let him stick his claws in me as he fingered me in the office bathroom, Lisa's been checking on me, making sure that I haven't had another bout of "flu". If I looked as flushed and hot as shaky as I felt before me and Mal worked out a cure for the mate sickness, it's no wonder she still worries for me. That was fucking awful, and despite how shaky I am when I think of how half my arm went shadow, at least it's not *that* bad.

Before I contacted Lisa, I shot Amy an email. For some reason, she prefers to communicate that way. Every now and then I'll send her a text, but when I finally caught on to the fact that she checks her email far more frequently than her phone, I gave up and used the older tech. I have to remember that, despite looking like she's younger than me, she stopped aging



fifteen years ago. Maybe her phone isn't as glued to her hand as mine is.

I didn't really go into details. I guess... I don't know... putting it into words made the whole situation real somehow. Almost like I pretend there wasn't something wrong with me if I didn't actually tell Amy what was on my mind. I just asked if she had some time to sit down and talk to me—mainly because I wanted to actually show her my hand if it went shadow again—and, thankfully, she said I was more than welcome to stop by on the 23rd.

She knows I'm not bringing Mal. I couldn't bring myself to tell her why for the same reason what I led my mate to believe that I was going into work today. Actually putting words to my secret suspicions—that there's a reason humans and Sombra demons rarely get paired together—is much harder than flippantly pretending that everything is a-okay.

The drive to Connecticut is about three hours from where I live on Long Island. I thought the snow might make it worse, and I'm glad that it doesn't. I left around the same time I would for work so it's just about noon when I pull up in front of Amy's house.

I have to do a double-take when I see just how decked out it is from Christmas.

Shit. If I'm Ebenezer Shannon, her home looks like it belongs in a Hallmark movie. She has twinkling lights expertly strung everywhere, giant-sized candy canes made of tinsel lining her walkway, and garland wrapped around the posts in front of her house. Even her front door is covered in festive wrapping paper.

She's even dressed for the season when she opens the door.

Forty-one-year-old Amy Benoit wearing a twenty-six-year-old's face, a kind, welcoming smile, and one hell of an ugly Christmas sweater.

Like, seriously ugly. It's got the grinch in the middle with big, creepy yellow eyes, fuzzy green fur sticking out all over her chest, and a crazy red, green, and white pattern that had me almost crossing my eyes.

She even has a Christmas bell hanging off of a silver necklace that jingle jangles as she waves at me. "Shannon, hello. It's so good to see you again. Come on in."

I do, not even a little surprised when I step into her front room and it looks like a display right out of freaking Macy's or something.

I'm too busy gawking at her over the top decorations to notice her mate at first. Only when the tall, scowly male appears from behind the door can I rip

my stare away from her home in time to see him winking into sight.

Unlike Mal, he's got a faulty switcher. Seriously. Amy says it has something to do with the chains the Sombra duke's guards threatened Mal with. Poor Nox got stuck wearing them for years, and ever since he's found it difficult to control his forms. He can go from mist to shadow to a dark red-skinned demon in a heartbeat, all without choosing to do so.

The moment he goes solid, his nostrils flare. "Ah," he says in that rasping, deep voice of his. "You must give Malphas my congratulations on your spawn."

Excuse me.

Spawn?

What?

AN HOUR LATER—AND AFTER AMY RUSHED ME TO THE DEN, THEN GRABBED me a cup of water to help settle my shocked nerves—they've already explained it to me three times. Amy twice, in a kinder, gentler manner, and then there was Nox's brash announcement that, surprise: I'm pregnant.

I'm going to have a baby. A half-human, half-demon kid. A little bit me, a little bit Mal. That's why part of me goes shadow at inconvenient moments, and why my sex drive has been out of control. I just thought it had something to do with Mal and, guess what, I was right.

Know why? Because surprise number two: I've been pregnant since first night we fucked.

Yeah. Go figure. Turns out that it was unavoidable.

I have to wonder if Mal knows. The only thing he ever told me was that, if we didn't finalize our mate bond by the first gold moon after we exchanged our essence and made the mate's promise, we'd lose it forever. Worse, he'd end up being dragged back to Sombra in chains since the duke's first law is that no one in the human realm is allowed to know that Sombra demons exist. Our mating ended up waiting until the last minute so it definitely was the night of the gold moon that we consummated our mating. If that's so, I got knocked up that right night.

Amy's the one who explains that part to me. She can't tell me for sure that every Sombra male knows about how the night of the gold moon

guarantees a bonded pair creating offspring. Giving Mal the benefit of the doubt, she suggests that he never would've thought the gold moon would affect us here in the human world. It was Sombra's moon, and a deadline the guards enforced by crossing planes. Did it turn Mal's little swimmers into super swimmers or something while he was in my world? No way to know for sure, but there's no doubt about it: I'm freaking pregnant.

Nox knew from first sniff. Since Mal hasn't mentioned my scent changing, I have to assume that he's so used to me that the subtle change between my scent before we mated and after didn't stick out to him. I only met Nox once before—though me and Amy keep trying to make plans to get together that always seem to fizzle out—and that was pre-bonding. His nose is strong enough to scent the difference, and even if it wasn't, the moment I tell them about my weirdo symptoms, he confirms it.

"In Sombra," grates Nox, "our demonesses are already made of shadows so it doesn't affect them. But the demonesses from Soleil who are mates to my clansmen... it happens to them. It's the spawn being created from two different peoples. Malphas's shadows combining with your human nature to make something new."

Okay. That explains why my hands keep turning to shadows. A problem I'm going to deal with since the last thing I need is a human noticing that there's something different about me... but, first, I have to ask.

"What about you two?" They seem to know a lot about this topic. "Do you have a little half-Amy, half-Nox kid somewhere." I point at Amy, ignoring the way Nox growls under his breath in warning. Please. He's taller than Nox, and I'm a freaking weakling. I'm frustrated, but no threat to Amy. "Tell me. Did you hide your shadow baby from me and Mal?"

Amy shakes her head. "Me and Nox decided to wait a few more decades before we have kids."

"But you said that, if you screw on the gold moon, you you end up with a baby whether you want to or not."

"That's true. But I first mated Nox when it wasn't the gold moon," Amy explains. "Then I learned the truth about what it means. I wasn't sure then that it would affect us while we were in the human world, but we decided not to take any chances."

Lucky for her. "How do you do that?"

Amy glances up at her scowling mate. She has on a sappy, lovesick look that I'm sure I wear whenever I look at Mal. "Lots and lots of cuddling when

it's the gold moon."

You know, thinking back on it, there are some nights when Mal suggests that the two of us just cuddle, snuggling close while he holds me tight. I respect him and his needs so I never pushed him on those nights, and, yup, I think that, once or twice, he might've mentioned it was the night of the gold moon.

So maybe he didn't know...

"Okay. Can't change the past," I say, trying to sound like I'm not freaking the hell out on the inside. "So... what now? Because I'm not saying you're wrong"—especially since, deep down, I kinda expected something like this since the first time my hands went shadowy during sex—"but if I'm really seven months pregnant, shouldn't I be showing by now or something?"

I still get my period. My belly is as flat as it used to be. Despite my high sex drive and the weird shadow hands, I'm the exact same Shannon I was before I met Mal. I don't get it.

Nox clears his throat. "In Sombra, a demoness carries her spawn for twelve turns of the gold moon."

"Twelve moons... so, a year?" That makes sense. Maybe you don't start showing until you're eight months or more... and I hold onto that hope until Amy winces.

Uh-oh.

This much stress can't be good on my poor baby, but I take a deep breath and turn to my fellow human. "Okay. Spill. What else do you know that I don't."

Her expression turns apologetic as she admits, "Time works differently in Sombra. I don't know if you noticed it yet, but there's not a gold moon every month. It, uh... it only rises every *three* months of human time."

I'm not a math whiz. Never have been. Still, even I can't fuck that one up.

"Three years?" I screech. "I'm going to be pregnant for *three years*."

"The baby is half human," offers Amy. "Maybe you split the difference and it's only a year and a half. We... we're not sure."

No shit. And that's probably another reason why Amy and Nox have held off on having kids of their own. Who in their right mind wants to be pregnant for eighteen months? It hasn't been so bad so far, and three years would suck, but once I'm actually visibly pregnant? What then?

And how the hell do I tell Mal?

Amy's already soft voice gentles. "I've talked about it with my aunt a

couple of times, too. She's holding off on having kids of her own, but she agrees that, if we ever do, it probably won't be as long as if we're demoneses because we share our mate's lifeforce instead of being immortal on our own."

I'm barely listening to the second half of what she said. I can't help it. I'm kind stunned by the first part.

"Your aunt? You mean Susannah? The chick who owned the spell book before I had it?"

And lost it... something I've pointedly refused to mention to Amy. Oops. I was supposed to bring it to her last summer, only then it disappeared—or, better yet, was *stolen* by Kennedy, the former owner of Turn the Page, who also disappeared.

I don't know if she's feeling bad for having to be the one to drop the P-bomb on me, but she lets that slip by without a comment. Instead, she nods. "Right. My aunt Su. She, um... she's also mated to a Sombra demon."

You know what? I'm not really surprised to hear that. She was the one who translated the "Verus Amor" spell, then vanished thirty years ago. It made sense that she had a mate of her own, and since there's been no hide nor hair of her since, I totally got the idea she might be in Sombra.

"Who's her mate?"

Again, Amy and Nox exchange a look. "I'd rather not say."

Oh, no. "Ew. It's not Glaine, is it?"

I fucking hate Glaine, and from the way Amy's pretty features screw up into a look of pure loathing, I'm thinking she's no fan of him, either.

She shakes her head again. "No. Definitely not. But she's in Sombra, and one of three of us who found our mates in a Sombra demon—"

"Four," cuts in Nox.

"That's just a rumor, babe. We don't know for sure that there's another human female in Sombra."

He shrugs. "But there could be."

"Yeah. I guess so."

Rumors...

Huh. In our email exchanges, when I first told Amy that I was planning to take a trip to Sombra with Mal, she mentioned that she visits frequently with Nox. They plan on moving their for good as soon as her mother—her only living family—passes, but now I understand why the travel back and forth as often as they do: her aunt is there.

And, it seems, another human.

Kennedy, perhaps?

Huh. Maybe there's something about *Grimoire du Sombra* itself that's magic. It found Susannah Benoit, then Amy, and me. Now it's in Kennedy's hands... if she was meant for a Sombra male of her own, maybe she was meant to take it from me.

Or maybe I'm trying to justify losing Amy's book...

"Three or four, that doesn't really matter. What you're telling me is this: I'm the first one who's going to have a hybrid baby, right? I'm the freaking experiment?"

Amy gives me a crooked grin. "Merry Christmas, Shannon."

# CHAPTER 6

## MAL'S GIFT



**M**al can tell that something's up as soon as I arrive home later that night. I brush it off as a long day, careful not to say anything that is a lie. I don't want to lie to him—I never meant to, not on purpose at least—and while I can't deny I've been doing a lot of “lying by omission” lately, I justified it by thinking I was making shit up. That I was imagining things.

Welp, I'm not.

Tomorrow is Christmas Eve. In two days, Mal's first Christmas will be over. I want him to have a holiday to remember—and I decide in an instant that there's no better way to do that than confess my pregnancy to him after we open presents on Christmas morning.

Until then, I do everything I can to keep the news to myself. Despite my innate humbug-iness, I stick to my plan to make this the perfect first Christmas for Mal. Me, too. Somehow, over the last two weeks, some of the shine of the holiday has come back for me. Maybe it's the ol' bun in the oven or the fact that I'm distracting myself to keep from having to tell Mal he's knocked me up until the actual holiday day, but I throw myself into celebrating Christmas the way I did when I was a kid for Christmas Eve.

Though he somehow managed to get it inside the apartment while I was gone—and, honestly, I don't even ask how because I'm afraid to find out—Mal waited for me to decorate the tree. Together, we hang all the sorry ornaments I had from my first—and only—Christmas on my own.

We watched whatever Christmas movies were on the television, then baked too many cookies. After gorging ourselves sick with them, I came up with the brilliant idea to bring some to my neighbors.



Hey. It never hurts to stay on Mrs. Winslow's good side. Considering she has a glimmer of tears in her eyes as she accepted the cookies and wished me a "Merry Christmas", I think I accomplished that... for now, at least.

Because I've never been the most patient chick, I insist on giving Mal his painting before we turn in. Mrs. Winslow isn't the only one who has a sheen covering her eyes when Mal gingerly unwraps my present and sees the painting I made of him over the last few weeks.

After deliberating exactly where he wanted to hang my "masterpiece"—honestly, that's what my kind mate called my gift for him, and he wholeheartedly meant it—he disappeared into the bedroom, returning with a small box about the size of a deck of cards, absolutely covered in bows.

"My turn."

I don't know why I'm so surprised that Mal has something for me. He's the one who spent weeks throwing himself into every tradition of Christmas he could find. Why wouldn't he sneak some of my tape, wrapping paper, and bows and put something like this together for me?

I take one of the—I do a quick count... *seven*—seven bows and stick it to the base of Mal's horns. Then, because he looks almost bewildered that I'm decorating him the same way we did the tree, I do the same to his other horn.

He might not have any idea why I find it so charming to cover his horns in bows, but I can feel the pleasure pulsing down our bond as he realizes that I regard him as my greatest gift.

His gold eyes gleam brightly as he uses his claw to pluck one from the small package. After swooping down, he presses a quick kiss to the top of my head then presses the sticky side of the bow to my boob.

"Really, Mal?" I swallow my chuckle.

"Of course, my mate. You've made me your present. I've done the same."

Then, to prove his point, he covers my other boob with another bow.

Two can play this game. Snatching another one, I decide to stick it to, well, my snatch.

Unfortunately, it doesn't stick to my jeans so well, but that's easily remedied. The silky—and, yes, damp—panties I'm wearing holds the bow a lot better.

Only for a moment, though, before Mal bats the bow away.

"I want my present now."

With a grin on my face, I quickly shimmy off my panties. Once I'm bare

for the waist down, Mal scoops me up, tossing me over his shoulder, before bringing me to the bedroom.

Hey. I'm not going to stop him. In fact, I'm giggling the entire time—until he has me spread out in front of him, my legs thrown over his shoulders now, his face buried in my pussy.

I lose track of how long he spends going down on me. If I left it up to Mal, it could be hours—and it might've been. I know I orgasm at least twice, muffling my shouts with my wrist so that I don't disturb my neighbors with my cries.

When he finally shows me mercy, he lovingly cleans me up, then joins me in the bed.

"Rest, my mate," rumbles Nox. "I shall keep you safe from Santa Claws."

I don't even bother to tell him anything different. Drowsy from my orgasm, and content in my mate's arms, I cuddle against his big body and let sleep claim me, knowing that Mal will protect me from anyone and anything—including the legend of ol' Saint Nick.

BECAUSE MY WORK DAYS START SUPER EARLY, THE ONLY TIME I GET TO SLEEP in is on the weekends. That's one thing Mal learned about me almost from the beginning, and quick learner that my monster is, he knows I'm not a morning person. I'm more prone to snarl on my way to the bathroom, and if I don't get my caffeine fix ASAP, I'm way more dangerous than my sweet mate looks.

For the holidays, I tried to swap it out for hot chocolate. That lasted... one day? Maybe two. Mal, on the other hand, has a bit of a sweet fang. While I guzzled my coffee, he sipped hot chocolate with me every morning this last week.

Today is not different. I wake up slowly to the delicious scent of freshly brewed coffee tinged with the sweetness of Mal's favored drink. Blinking my eyes open, I see him crouched down by the bed, a mug cradled in each of his massive palms.

"Morning, my Shannon."

"Morning," I murmur back, gratefully accepting the mug he's offering me as soon as I sit up. It hits me after my first marvelous sip what day it is. I

grin. “Merry Christmas, Mal.”

His expression lights up brighter than any Christmas tree. “Merry Christmas. I did my duty and protected my mate. Santa Claws did not come for you this year,” he says, a hint of a tease in his voice as he winks at me, “though there are some presents under the tree.”

God, I love a playful Mal. He had me fooled for a bit there, when I couldn’t quite tell if he believed that he needed to protect me from Santa Claus or not. Knowing him, I wouldn’t put it past Mal to stay up just in case. As for the presents... of course they’re there. I gave him his painting last night, but that’s not all I got him.

And considering we got... distracted last night, I still have one very special gift of my own to open. Not to mention one to share with Mal...

Once I finish my coffee, I hand Mal my empty mug. While he brings his and mine back to the kitchen, I quickly freshen up in the bathroom. I’m too excited to share Christmas—and my news—with Mal to hop in the shower. After brushing my teeth, washing my face, and throwing on my fuzzy robe, I join him in the living room by our crooked, haphazardly decorated Christmas tree.

I fucking love the damn thing. It’ll be a pain in the ass to get rid of it, and I’ll have to plan better for next Christmas—especially if I’m going to be a mama by then—but for our first together? For Shannon and Mal? I couldn’t have asked for anything better.

Beneath the tree, I see the wrapped presents piled on one side. They’re the ones I got for Mal. On the other side, there’s the small gift with the two remaining bows still stuck to it, and...

I squat down next to the floor, getting a better look.

There’s a small puddle, a handful of acorns, a tattered leaf that’s half orange, half red, and a few fallen pine needles artfully arranged in the shape of the heart.

“What’s this?”

“For Christmas, you’re supposed to give gifts with meaning. At least, that’s what I read.”

I nod. “Yeah. That’s what I made you your painting.”

He points at the wrapped present with his claw. “That one has meaning, but so do these.” His claw finds water. “Some snow from the other night. I wanted to share it with you, and I gathered some, keeping it in the freezer. I didn’t expect it to melt so quickly once I removed it.”

“Ah, baby.” Reaching up, I pat the nearest part of Mal I can reach. It’s his forearm, and a chill skitters down my spine when I feel his heat. It’s *amazing*. “Still a sweet thought.”

“You love the snow. And the trees that are on the streets outside are home,” he adds, pointing at the acorns, the leave, and the pine needles. “This all... it reminds me of you. The life it holds. It’s beauty. When I see objects like these, I think of my fiore. My flower. I think of my love...”

A lump lodges in my throat. “Me.”

He moves into me. I’m on my knees on the floor, Mal crouching down beside me, his big size calming me in a way I haven’t been since the holiday season began. “You,” he rumbles, running his claw gently along my jaw.

I lean into him. “I love them. All of them... the gifts, and their meaning. Thank you,” I say, before impishly adding, “Santa Claws.”

His laugh is a rumble deep in his chest. “You still haven’t opened your wrapped gift, my mate.”

He’s right. I haven’t. After squeezing his forearm again, I reach down, scooping up the small box. I still have no idea what it could be, especially after the other gifts he laid out for me. What’s so meaningful that he wrapped it and put seven bows on it?

I eagerly unwrap it. Thankfully, my head is ducked enough to hide my bewildered expression when I see that Mal has given me a box of—

“Chalk?”

He nods earnestly. “It’s a replacement for yours that I used up.”

I still don’t get why he bought me a box of chalk. I mean, I don’t want to offend him, either, but despite the misunderstanding when it came to the tree, he’s done an amazing job celebrating an honest-to-God human Christmas with me. His decorations, the cookies we baked, the movies we watched... it’s not like I expected jewelry or anything like that, but chalk? He got me chalk?

Come to think of it, *how* did he even get this?

He’s right about it being a replacement. It’s a brand new box, even though it’s the same exact dollar-store box of colored chalk I bought months ago. The old spell book I bought from Kennedy’s defunct shop, Turn the Page, had a handwritten note that, before anyone attempted to read the “Verus Amor”—*true love*—spell, they needed to use yellow chalk to draw a protective circle. It took me three stores to find some, and after I accidentally summoned Mal, he used the rest of the colors in the box to draw my portrait

in chalk.

Looking back, the moment I saw my face on my bedroom floor, etched with Mal's artistic hand... when I saw just how he saw *me*... I was a goner. And, sure, I put up a good fight. I pretended like I was going to maybe not accept the gorgeous, hunky, devoted male who wanted nothing more than to give me pleasure, pamper me, and treat me like a queen for the rest of our long, long life together.

So the chalk has meaning, I guess. Still...

"Where did you get this from?"

His chest puffs up a little in obvious pride. "I traded it for coin."

Okaaaay. So I'm pretty sure that's Mal-speak for 'bought it', but... "Um. How?"

From what he's told me about Sombra, they don't do stores. Money? Nope. They're all about a barter system where their clans trade goods and services back and forth.

"Since I've learned of your Christmas, I wanted to get you a real gift."

"You didn't have to do that," I argue. "Just celebrating it with you... that was enough. And then the snow... the acorns... it was perfect."

That's an understatement. These last few weeks with Mal have reminded me how much I loved the holiday season. We created our own traditions this year, and I'm actually looking forward to doing it again next year—once we welcome the new addition to our family, that's it.

"You deserve more," he insists. "So much more. Every night I went out and searched the ground for coin. If a human lost it, and I found it, it was only fair... yes?"

Amused, I nod. "Sure."

"That's what I thought. When I reached the amount for the *giz*... the chalk... I trade the coin for it. And I wrapped it for you as your gift because you're going to need it, and I wanted to be the one to give it to you. For Christmas."

This is it. Confused as I still kinda am, this is the opportune moment for me to tell Mal about my Christmas surprise—

—and, before I get the chance, he does something that stuns me speechless.

He lays his big hand over my belly, and I know in an instant that—just like Nox—he was already aware that I was pregnant.

"I— *what?* Did you... you knew already?"

“My Shannon... I’m attuned to every part of you. Did you think that I wouldn’t notice? That I couldn’t see you glowing from within, or watch as the shadows growing inside of you greeted their father?”

*Father.*

Whoa.

I’m going to be a mother. Mal’s going to be a father.

I don’t know how to react. He didn’t tell me he’s happy about this, just that he was aware. Almost hesitantly, I lay my hand over his. When he keeps his in place, I let out a sigh.

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

A hunk of Mal’s long, straight black hair falls forward, hiding his face from me as he dips his chin into his brawny chest.

Uh-uh.

“Malphas? Look at me, baby.”

He shifts his gaze just enough that he’s staring right into my eyes. My breath catches in my throat when I see the worry mingled with hope luring in his. “Mal...”

He exhales softly. “I didn’t want you to run from me.”

“What? Why would I?”

“Because you have before, my mate.”

“No, I haven’t.”

Hang on. Yes I have.

Of course, I had my reasons. I was a human woman who had no idea that magic worked, or that Sombra demons existed. You can’t really blame me for bolting right for the door when a portal opened in my bedroom, spitting out a naked shadow monster who immediately started to harden beneath my shocked stare. I found out much later that he was only naked because, with my luck, I managed to summon him right from his bath, but still. I didn’t know that then, did I?

I came back eventually, though that’s not really anything to brag about, either, since my whole purpose doing so was grabbing my phone so I could google a way to get rid of him. Luckily for us both, the dried sage and salt didn’t work, neither did banging a pot with a wooden spoon, and I ended up stuck with a demon I couldn’t communicate with until I accidentally gave him my essence.

I huff, not really meaning it. “I’m never gonna live that down, am I?”

“See? You’re upset.”

I'm really not. I'm feeling a hundred different emotions right now—thank you so much hormones—but being upset with Mal? Never.

I'm happy. A little bit scared because I've never been a mom and I don't know what to expect; though maybe I will by the time I'm ready to have this sucker. Annoyed at myself for keeping the secret so long when one adult conversation with my mate would've erased my last few weeks of freaking out. In love with Mal, naturally, and because being super lusty is another side effect of carrying a demon baby—according to Nox who'd heard more clansmen screwing their pregnant mates than he probably ever wanted to admit to anyone—I'm wondering if it might be a little weird to fuck him underneath the Christmas tree...

Hey. It's the holidays, right? I said I wanted to make this one a Christmas to remember, and what better way than to go out with a, ahem, bang?

Soon, I promise my cranked-up libido. But first—

“You didn't say anything because you were afraid of how I'd react. Confession time, baby: I did the same thing. I guess... I don't know... I thought something was wrong and, maybe I was being ridiculous, but I wasn't sure how it would make you feel if there *was*”—and I'm babbling. I'm totally babbling. Can't help it though— “and maybe you're not ready to be a dad and—”

“Shannon.”

“I think I'm ready to be a mom. THis... us... we're fated, right? We're meant to be. Maybe this,” I say, tapping his hand with mine, “is, too—”

“Shannon, my mate.”

“—and I thought, hey, Christmas, yeah? I'll tell you on Christmas—”

Mal ducks his head, cutting off my rambling with a claiming kiss that leaves no doubt in my mind that he's pleased with the revelation that we're going to be parents. Just in case, once he breaks the kiss, I grab his fingers, squeezing as many of them in my grip as I can.

“You're glad? Really glad?”

“It's all I've wanted my whole long life. The most amazing mate to spend forever at my side, and a family to treasure and protect.” With the hand I'm not clutching like a lifeline, he tilt my chin back, forcing me to see the honesty splayed across his face. “That's why I had to get the *giz*. When the spawn is born, we'll need to draw plenty of protective circles to keep him or her safe. Until then, a small marking on my mate will contain the shadows. Trust your male, Shannon. You've given me the most precious gift of all the

night you accepted me as yours: a fulfilled life. A future to look forward to. I will never be able to repay you, but I will always protect you.”

I... I don't know what to say, except, “I couldn't ask for more than that, Mal.”

He nuzzles the top of his head with my chin. “You have to ask for nothing, my mate, but I will give it to you all anyway.”

Because the chalk isn't just chalk, is it? Just like Christmas wasn't just Christmas to Mal. It was a time for family—and that's exactly what we are, isn't it?

Me, Mal, and the baby we made together...

The chalk might've been technically stolen from a dollar store. I could give a shit. It's the most precious thing I've ever been given.

I loop my arm around Mal, kissing him this time. Against his mouth, with the lingering taste of coffee, toothpaste, and my mate's sweet hot chocolate on my lips, I grin. “Merry Christmas, Mal.”

“Merry Christmas, my Shannon.”



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## STOLEN BY THE SHADOWS



### What if your imaginary friend was real?

Then again, Nox was never as imaginary as he was supposed to be, and while I thought of him as my friend, he watched over me because he knew we were meant to be more than that.

He knew that we were *fated*.

Me? I had no freaking clue, but that made sense. The last time I saw him I was twelve. He was the shadow monster that kept me safe. But, like all imaginary friends, he was just gone one day. And, as I grew up, I forgot all about Nox.

He never forgot about me.

Fourteen years later and he's still as much a protector as he always was. When I'm stalked by an ex who just

can't accept that we're over, Connor isn't the only one who likes to hide in the shadows. Too bad for him that Nox *is* the shadows.

He's changed, though. My old imaginary friend is wrapped in golden chains, his shape unlike any he ever showed me before. He's big, and he's fierce, and he saves me from Connor only to take me for himself.

And I... I'm kind of okay with that.

\* *Stolen by the Shadows* is the second book in the **Sombra Demons** series. It tells the story of Amy and Nox, the bonded couple introduced in *Mated to the Monster*.

[Get it now!](#)

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## BONDED TO THE BEAST



**I didn't mean to steal the book—but I did... and now I'm in big, big trouble.**

The moment I convinced one of my loyal customers to buy the leather-bound spellbook, I regretted it. At first I thought it was because I could've gotten more than fifty dollars for it—money that would've come in handy while I was on vacay—but while I was on the beach, all I kept thinking about was the book.

It called to me for some weird reason, and when I got Shannon's message that she had a question about it, I hoped that meant she would let me buy it back. Nope. She wanted to know where I got it from.

Too bad I had no idea. Almost as if by fate, it popped up in one of my boxes of stock, but I couldn't trace it. Believe me, I *tried*.

So when Shannon offered to drop it off so that I could get a closer look at it, I jumped at the chance. And that's how I found the “true love” spell in the middle of the book.

I don't know what made decide it was a good idea to read it out loud, or what came over me when the beastly shadow monster appeared in my bedroom and crooked his claw at me...

One thing led to another and, suddenly, I'm the bonded mate to a horned demon who doesn't speak English, who stole me away to terrifying world of shadows and skulls, and who I can't stop touching even so.

When I finally understand him, there's only one thing my ew mate wants to make sure is clear: I'm his. He has no intention of letting me go, either in Sombra or my world.

And it isn't long before I start to wonder if it would really be so bad to be forever bonded to the beast...

\* *Bonded to the Beast* is the third book in the **Sombra Demons** series. It tells the story of Kennedy and Loki, the bookseller and her beast.

[Releasing March 28, 2023!](#)

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