



Asher's
CACHE

PINE HAVEN SHIFTERS
SARAH DINAN

Asher's Cache

Pine Haven Shifters Book 2

Sarah Dinan

ALSO BY SARAH DINAN



PINE HAVEN SHIFTERS SERIES

Lucy's Lawman

Asher's Cache

Tane's Temptation

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Contents

[1. Chapter One](#)

[2. Chapter Two](#)

[3. Chapter Three](#)

[4. Chapter Four](#)

[5. Chapter Five](#)

[6. Chapter Six](#)

[7. Chapter Seven](#)

[8. Chapter Eight](#)

[9. Chapter Nine](#)

[10. Chapter Ten](#)

[11. Chapter Eleven](#)

[12. Chapter Twelve](#)

[13. Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Bonus Epilogue](#)

[A Note from Sarah](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[About Sarah](#)

[Join Sarah's Insider's Community.](#)



Asher leaned back in his chair, taking in the packed bar with a satisfied smirk. While it had been a pain in the ass getting some of the townsfolk to sign off on this one, he had to admit, getting Pine Haven Falls as a stop on the Four Corners Poker Run was one of his finer ideas.

“I’ve gotta give it to you, Ash,” Maddox smiled across the table. “This is a fantastic turnout.”

“Well,” Asher shrugged. “You know how I fly.”

“That I do.” Maddox chuckled, motioning for another round. “And you’re damn good at it.”

Asher grinned at his Alpha, bowing his head in acknowledgement of the praise. Maddox wasn’t one for blowing smoke. He wasn’t one for doling out the compliments either.

“Just doing my job, boss.”

And his work was paying off big time. The town was bursting at the seams with bikers and while some were just

passing through on a day trip to get their poker card at High Country Bar & Grille, several made a stay of things before heading back to the rally in Durango. Whether it was overnight or just for a meal and some shopping, all that traffic was good for business.

“If only everyone did their jobs as well as you do.” Maddox glanced at a group of bikers vacating their table. “Would make my life a hell of a lot easier.”

“I don’t envy you.” Asher chuckled. “Mayor’s a tough gig.”

And Maddox was no ordinary mayor. But then, Pine Haven Falls wasn’t an ordinary town either.

“God, I’ve never seen this place so busy.” Their waitress huffed, setting a fresh round of beers on the table. “Good thing it’s only for this weekend.”

Asher gave Tamara an appraising glance, noting the fatigue in her features as she tightened her ponytail. Damn, she was too young to look that tired.

“Folks giving you a hard time?” He asked.

“No, sir.” She gave him a little smile. “It’s just a lot of people. The kitchen can barely keep up and no one’s getting their breaks.”

“Shit, Tamara, I’m sorry. I didn’t think of that.”

He’d checked in with all the local business owners over the past few weeks, encouraging them to order well ahead of the weekend so they could keep their visitors in a steady supply of

food, drink, and merchandise, but it hadn't occurred to him to mention extra staffing needs.

"No, it's okay." Tamara said hastily. "We're glad you got us on the map. We just didn't expect so many people. I mean, who knew bikers would have so much disposable income?"

Maddox chuckled at that. "Trust me, Ash was counting on it."

"Have you seen those bikes?" She smiled. "Some of them are to die for."

"Don't be getting any ideas, sis." Trent chuckled, reaching out to shake hands with Maddox and Asher before refocusing on her. "And how about you take thirty, get off your feet?"

"Really?" Tamara beamed up at her brother. "You're gonna cover for me?"

"Yeah." He smiled warmly. "I got you."

The familial affection was hard to miss as Trent watched his little sister make her way to the back of the bar. That type of bond fascinated Asher. As an only child, the closest thing he had to a sibling was his best friend, Cade. And if the two of them hadn't grown up together like they had, Asher doubted he'd be suited for his current role in the pack. Dragons tended to be solitary creatures, after all.

Hell, sometimes he wondered why Maddox had picked him as his Beta. But Asher's penchant for accumulating and managing wealth was a thing of legend, if he did say so himself, as evidenced this weekend.

“You know, Asher,” Trent grinned. “I knew we’d be busy, but I didn’t quite see this coming.” He gestured around at the full bar. “It’s been non-stop flow. Not that I’m complaining.”

“They seem like good patrons at least.” Asher noted a heavily tatted man in a leather vest stacking his comrades’ dishes like a professional table busser.

“Yeah.” Trent nodded. “Thank fuck they’re not as rowdy as they look.”

Asher nodded, taking a pull from his pilsner. Sure, these folks looked tough, but most of the motorcycle clubs that came through these parts were full of do-gooders who liked to ride. Former felons who’d turned over a new leaf and all that. Good thing too.

No one wanted trouble here.

“Listen,” Trent said hesitantly, glancing between Maddox and Asher, “I hate to ask, but I could really use some help. We’re balls-to-the-wall here. My servers are getting run ragged and I’m busting my ass to get them breaks, but it’s not enough.”

Asher glanced across the bar. Just like the rest of the packed room, the line at the card-draw table hadn’t dwindled, it had simply changed inhabitants.

“I’ll take over with the cards and send whoever’s on deck to you.”

“Thanks.” Trent clapped Asher on the shoulder. “I really appreciate it.”

“No problem.”

“And I’ll see if Lenora has anyone she can spare.” Maddox pulled out his phone.

“You two are a godsend.” Trent grinned.

“Don’t count your hens.” Maddox murmured as he texted.

Asher left the two of them discussing who else they could hit up for some short-term help and made his way through the throng of bikers, thankful for their presence.

While some citizens would rather live a hermetic life, quaintly tucked away in the massive, old-growth pine forests surrounding the town, that wasn’t an option if Pine Haven hoped to flourish.

To stay with the times and have the capacity to support the diverse needs within their growing community, regular financial infusions were absolutely necessary. Transient traffic was the number one contributor to the town’s wealth, the easiest way to get cash injections with minimal disruption to the populace. And Asher knew how to orchestrate those opportunities flawlessly. Major influxes of tourists like this only happened a few times a year, but they were vital to the health of the community.

They’d already turned quite a profit this weekend in their cut of rally merchandise sales alone, not to mention all the local food, drink, and shopping. Asher spotted another group of bikers parking and got busy reorganizing the table, refilling

the pen cup and making sure the rally's branded merch display was solid.

As jobs went, pulling playing cards and helping the riders log their draw was an easy gig. Getting the bar selected as a venue for the poker run had been a much bigger challenge, but that was behind him now. And with how successful the weekend had been so far, this was sure to become an annual thing.

Not that he minded. It was fun seeing all these people, hearing some of their stories, and flirting or shooting the shit with them. While they weren't shifters, many of these bikers had formed their own packs, and there was something endearing about that. A palpable camaraderie they freely extended to him, especially when he pulled them a good card, setting someone up for a great poker hand.

As the day wore on, the staff and various patrons kept him in a steady supply of beer and though he'd originally had other plans, Asher had to admit that this wasn't a bad way to spend a Saturday. He did a once over on the table again as yet another wave of bikers flooded in. The ladies flirting with him already, leaning across his table and showing him their cleavage while he worked.

Another free beer landed at his elbow, and Asher had to grin. This was turning out to be a fantastic weekend.



Clea leaned back in her chair, smiling at the group of tattooed bikers she'd been riding with. As relocation plans went, this one was one of her more brilliant, if she did say so herself.

“You up for another round, Duchess?”

“Definitely, thanks.” Clea grinned at Mav, appreciating the way he'd taken to looking after her since she'd joined the ride with his crew a few days ago.

“Dirty?”

“You know it.”

That earned her a wink and a smile.

As Mav ordered for the table, she had to give it to him, he made a good MC president. He'd been calling the shots all weekend, but none of his decisions were arbitrary. Mav seemed to consider his club member's skills and moods, leading them deftly while coming across as both sympathetic and bad-ass. He was handsome too, in a gruff and tumble sort

of way. But then, she'd always had a thing for tats and muscles. Quite the opposite of the asshole she'd been living with for the last two months.

Damn, it felt good to be free.

And she couldn't wait to offload the rest of the lot she'd stolen from that no-good tech billionaire. She just had to lie low a bit longer.

"Here you go, Duchess." Mav smiled, handing her a fresh martini as a server doled out the food.

"Who had the Reuben?"

"Over here." She smiled, lifting her glass to make space for the plate as she observed their new server.

He wasn't the same one who'd taken their orders or delivered the appetizers. She'd been cute, but damn, this one was something else. Tall, dark and handsome with the most gorgeous yellow eyes, like yellow sapphires or canary tourmalines. And those muscles...

"Looks like a lull at the card table." Mav announced.

"You want me to see if I can draw for the club?" Blaze asked, following Mav's gaze.

"Nah." Mav shook his head. "I'll see if they can do a table visit though, since there's no line." He glanced at Clea. "You eat up, okay?"

She nodded, giving him another smile as she picked up her sandwich. She found Mav's protective streak endearing and if

she hadn't just come off that job, Clea might have even let herself settle into his brand of caretaking for a bit, enjoyed it more, maybe even upped the ante in the physical department. Though he'd definitely been protective of her on this trip, aside from some light flirting, Mav hadn't been romantic or sexual to Clea in any way.

Unfortunately.

It had been ages since she'd had a good lay. And, given the way he moved, she imagined he'd be more than satisfactory.

Still, it was probably for the best, especially since she was probably going to ditch Mav and his MC soon. Considering the heist she'd just pulled, he'd be better off if she parted ways with him.

They all would.

She'd certainly enjoyed her time with the Chaos Riders, though. Despite their rough exteriors, the motorcycle club was full of gentlemen. Some of them were even complete simps, which was a wickedly delicious juxtaposition to their looks Clea found completely endearing. A few of the guys were doing the poker run with their girlfriends and it had been adorable watching those tough bikers go all caretaker on their old ladies as they made the trek to each card draw venue. Kind of made a girl wistful with all that romantic posturing going on. Not that she'd know what to do with actual romance. Sex, sure. Relationships that weren't a means to an end? Not so much.

Even this thing with Mav, they could probably become more with time, but mostly she'd just liked the idea of rolling with his group, hiding out in the pack as she scouted her next place to lie low. The poker run had been fun so far, and Mav and his Chaos Riders had been excellent traveling companions.

And those bikes, gorgeous.

Hers wasn't bad either, not that she'd had much say in the make or model. She'd just been happy to get some untraceable wheels and offload the Banksy she'd taken from that asshole mark. Her fence had made a steal with that one - the art she'd offloaded was worth more than double the price of the motorcycle he'd procured for her. Still, it was good to be free and clear with that one, and at least her contact had hooked her up with a comfortable ride.

Which was a good thing, considering how many miles she'd logged in the saddle already.

The poker run was a nice way to explore the Four Corners area, though. With the wind in your face, raw power between your legs and kind companions as an escort. Honestly, if not for the dust, it would be perfect. Too bad it was coming to an end soon. They'd been to venues in Utah and Arizona already and after this stop in Northern New Mexico, they'd hit one more in Wolf Creek then head back to Durango for the last draw and final tally.

While she wanted to complete the poker run with Mav and his Chaos Riders, Clea wasn't sure that was a good idea. As much as she'd appreciated riding with them and the way Mav

had taken her under his protection, she didn't want them taking any heat for her actions. And the closer they got back to civilization, the greater the chances of that happening became.

“Okay people,” Mav had returned with the guy from the cards table, “This is Mr. Ford. He's agreed to help us out by...”

Clea didn't catch whatever else Mav was saying. She was too busy staring at the newcomer. He was built like a surfer, or maybe a quarterback. And with his blonde hair and striking green eyes, there was something about tall, blonde, and handsome that had her struggling to look away.

There had to be something in the water in this town. Every single local she'd encountered was hot as hell, and some of them had oddly colored eyes. Maybe it was a fad, colored contacts or something.

But damn, those eyes.

She'd seen green eyes before, but nothing like this man's. His were a brilliant green, like flawless emeralds or raw moldavite crystals. And as he caught her gaze and cracked a grin that made her core quiver, Clea wondered if the guy was even real.

Truly, in his well-fitting jeans and black Motorcycle Rally t-shirt, with his artfully disheveled beach-blond hair, he looked simultaneously at home and like he didn't belong at all.

And damn what his gaze did to her.

Like a massage across her body, making her woozy.

“Duchess?” The concern in Mav’s voice had Clea shifting her eyes.

“I’m good, Mav.” She reached for her water in case the martini was contributing to the warm haze washing her body right now.

“You look a little dazed.” He frowned. “You get enough to eat?”

Clea couldn’t help but smile. Though she and Mav weren’t involved, he considered her one of his this weekend. She liked the way he looked out for his crew and had included her in that number. But she didn’t want him to worry over her.

“Yes.” She nodded, glancing at her plate. “That Reuben was delicious.”

“You haven’t finished it.”

“I don’t like the crusts.”

A ripple of chuckles went around the table at Clea’s admission.

“Leave it to Duchess to treat a Reuben like a tea sandwich.” Razor laughed. “And damn, we love you for it, girlie. You’re something else, you know?”

“You want another one?” Mav asked as others laughed at Razor’s comment. “You’ll need the energy for the road.”

“You guys heading out after this, Mav?”

Holy shit, Blondie’s voice was incredible. Smooth and resonant, soothing. Like the sound of a gentle wind on a field

of flowers. And those lips of his...

Clea watched his mouth move as he replied to something Mav had just said, wondering what those lips would feel like against her skin.

And what the hell was she even thinking right now?

She shook her head, trying to clear it, and downed half of her water. She didn't have the luxury of swooning over some stranger, no matter how sexy he was. No, she needed to keep her wits about her, even in this little town. Though it was tucked away in the middle of a vast pine forest and the chances of anyone finding her here were slim, there was no telling who all was passing through this weekend.

"Absolutely." Mav extended his hand to Blondie. "Thanks again, Ford."

"Call me Asher." He smiled, clasping palms with Mav. "And it's the least I can do. We want everyone to be safe and healthy here."

Mav nodded. "We appreciate it."

Clea's eyes tracked tall, blonde, and handsome as he made his way back to the card draw table. There was something incredible about the way he moved, a kind of predatory grace that invited all kinds of speculation. And with those broad shoulders and lean muscles... maybe he was a martial artist or something. She wondered if he had any tats under that black shirt of his.

"Enjoying the view?" Mav chuckled.

Shit, busted.

Clea grinned. “Just admiring nature’s beauty.” And she had to admit, it was an excellent view.

Asher Ford had a very fine ass.

Mav smirked as he shook his head. “You’re something else, Duchess.”

“Thanks for taking me on, Mav.” Clea raised her glass to him. “I’m having the best time on the road with you and your crew.”

“Same.” Mav clinked his glass to hers. “And here’s to more fun times ahead.”

“What time are we hitting the road tomorrow, boss?” Blaze asked.

“Tomorrow?” Clea frowned. “I thought we were doing Wolf Creek Pass tonight and then staying in Pagosa.” She’d been looking forward to that ride.

“Change of plans.” Mav set his untouched water in front of her with a knowing look. “The ladies need a little rest, so we’re going to stay in Pine Haven tonight and do the joyride tomorrow. Just worked it all out with Asher.”

“The ladies.” Clea smirked, knowing full well Mav hadn’t surveyed the whole MC in the few minutes he’d been talking with the guy.

“We’ll have an easier day tomorrow if we’re all rested.” He nodded. “Better this way.” Mav glanced at Butch and Harlow,

who looked a little worse for wear. “For all of us.”

“You’re a good leader, Mav.” Clea smiled, appreciating how dialed in he was to his crew. She hadn’t even noticed that some of the others were flagging.

“Damn right he is.” Blaze piped up, lifting his beer. “To our fearless prez.”

Everyone joined in the toast, clinking glasses and taking a long drink, and Clea appreciated feeling like one of the gang. Not that they were a gang. But one of the pack, the group. The camaraderie was nice, a welcome change to her typically solitary life. It’s not like thieves had a lot of friends.

The cute waitress was back, taking refill orders as the handsome server with the yellow eyes cleared empty dishes, swapping Clea’s plate with a fresh one.

“Oh,” She stopped the server. “I didn’t order this. I think it’s meant for someone else?”

“It’s on the house. Compliments of Mr. Ford.”

Clea glanced across the room, where Blondie grinned at her, raising his pint glass in salute.

Mav leaned into her ear, “Looks like you’re not the only one admiring the scenery.”

“Indeed.” Clea lifted her own glass, giving Blondie what she hoped was a winning smile.

Something about him was incredibly compelling, but she couldn’t put her finger on exactly what or why. Still,

handsome was handsome, and free food was free food.

She glanced down at her plate. “They cut the crusts off.” Clea glanced at Mav. “Did you order it that way for me? You’re so sweet.”

Talk about detail oriented. No wonder the guy was the president of the club.

“Not me.” He motioned with his chin. “Asher. He seems to have taken a liking to you, Duchess. It’s working out in our favor,” Mav focused on her again. “But you’ll let me know if that’s a problem.”

Not a question. But that’s how Mav rolled, and Clea had come to enjoy it over the past few days. He didn’t just do that with her, he did it with everyone. Commands, not questions, but always from a place of care and concern. Man, if she wasn’t on the run, she would totally go back to Colorado with them and become a patch in his club. They were good people.

“Sure thing, Mav.” She nodded. “I absolutely will.”

As they settled back into their food and drink, Clea let her eyes wander back toward the door, back to Asher Ford. He was shuffling the cards, talking and laughing with another group of bikers who’d just come in. As though he could sense her gaze, he shifted his focus, those gorgeous green eyes locking onto hers as he gave her a winsome smile.

And damn, what it did to her.

Clea broke the gaze first, reaching for her water and taking a long drink. There was something about that guy. Something

she couldn't name, but very much liked.

Something thrilling.

She glanced at Asher again. Maybe staying in town tonight wasn't such a bad idea after all.



Duchess.
Asher chuckled to himself as she broke their eye contact. The name certainly suited her. Lean and refined, with a slight accent that made him think of the old country. There was something patrician about her. Even in her jeans and form-fitting t-shirt, surrounded by a group of burly bikers, it was clear she was some kind of royalty. If her gorgeous features hadn't given that away, the bling she sported certainly did.

While it wasn't uncommon for women to wear diamond stud earrings, Duchess's were nearly three carats. And damn, the way they caught the light against the backdrop of her fair skin and dark hair was mesmerizing.

Not as mesmerizing as those blue eyes of hers, though. That hue with their mischievous sparkle rivaled every sapphire he'd ever seen. And he'd seen his fair share over the years.

She wore a variety of rings ranging from some kind of gold signet pinky ring to the stunning white gold and diamond two finger ring with a Fancy Yellow Radiant Diamond where the two bands united. And that was only on her left hand. Her right showcased a confection of crossing bands with shards of tourmaline and brown diamonds on her thumb, a brilliant orange cushion cut diamond ring on her forefinger, and some kind of coiling titanium serpent with diamond scales, sapphire eyes, and a freshwater pearl on her pinky.

And though the gold, titanium, and all those gems lit him up, it was the woman who wore them Asher couldn't seem to get enough of. Even now, he was glancing across the room at her while he collected the cards and prepped for the next group of patrons.

Damn, she was something else.

"How you holding up, Ash?"

Asher shook himself, glancing around the room as he replied to his best friend through the pack link.

"Good. It's steady here, but not unbearable. How about you?"

"Just peachy." Cade chuckled. "Got a couple of guys in lock-up for brawling at the Hummingbird of all places."

"Seriously?"

So far, the worst Asher had seen here at the bar was a loud disagreement, which had been quickly solved with another round.

“Yeah, they got twisted over some woman.”

“*Huh.*” Asher grunted, checking on Duchess while Cade laid out what had happened at the coffee shop.

She was laughing at something the bald, bearded biker was saying.

And what was up with that, anyway? Bald with beards. Did women really dig that look? He guessed so. Duchess was certainly smiling widely at the guy, tucking her dark hair behind her ear with those blinged-out fingers. And the little blonde at the guy’s side was looking at him like he was a god.

“*Hey, you okay?*” The concern in Cade’s voice brought Asher back to himself.

“*Yeah. What time’s your shift done? I’m at High Country manning the cards.*” And he could use a distraction to keep himself from ogling that gorgeous brunette.

Damn, there was something about her...

“*Just wrapped. You gonna be there long? I could use a beer after that. And you need to tell me what’s up.*”

“*Nothing’s up.*”

“*Riiight.*” Cade chuckled.

Asher glanced at the door, picking up the cards again as a group of leather-clad women made their way inside.

“*I’ve got more customers.*”

“*Nonstop action over there, huh?*” Asher could hear Cade’s smile.

“You know it.” He grinned, getting busy with the shuffling. *“Somebody’s gotta work. Now getcha ass over here and keep me company.”*

“Let me call Lucy first, let her know. I’ll see you in a bit.”

As he closed the telepathic link, Asher thought about how good Cade had it. While he didn’t envy the raging territoriality Cade lived with now where Lucy was concerned, there was something in his best friend’s affect that was altogether more solid since having met her. Lucy had been a surprise and the change in Cade since they’d mated was palpable. He was more settled somehow, more grounded and self-assured. Not that he’d ever lacked confidence. The guy was a wolf, for fucks’s sake.

But there was something about Cade that had seemed to have changed on a cellular level since he’d bonded with Lucy. It was like his raw iron had been tempered into carbide steel. Or something like that. Hell, even though Asher didn’t know shit about romantic relationships, he knew his friend was better for having Lucy in his life, that was for damn sure.

“Hey handsome.” A woman with a fake rack and an equally fake red dye job smiled up at him. “Well, aren’t you a tall drink of water?”

Asher gave her a smile he didn’t feel as he shuffled the cards.

“And where do you all hail from?”

“We’re from Utah, honey.” Her friend replied. At least she was the real deal with her naturally full breasts and the soft sprinkling of gray highlighting her brown hair. “I’m Banshee. That’s Ruby,” She nodded to the redhead. “and this here’s Vice. And this is...” She motioned to the rest of the women who mostly smiled and nodded at him as Banshee made the intros.

Turns out, the Desert Cougars MC were a nice group of women, friendly and jovial. He drew them some good cards, and they rewarded him with smiles, compliments, a pint, and a few propositions.

He accepted the pint, but left the propositions. There was only one woman he wanted to be with tonight and she was busy slipping her arms into her leather jacket as her MC prez held it out for her. Damn him.

Asher shook his head.

Mav seemed like a good guy, solid. The kind of leader who’d do whatever it took to keep his people safe. The way he’d arranged lodging for his club tonight reminded Asher a lot of Maddox, actually. So, no wonder Mav was taking such care of Duchess, getting her into her jacket and handing her her scarf. Good leaders took care of their people. And good males took care of their women.

Asher fought back a twinge of regret as Duchess smiled at Mav. He wanted to be the one who’d wrapped her in comfort and made her smile like that, not the human.

And that was messed up, wasn’t it?

It was obvious the two of them were comfortable with each other and who was he to get in the middle of that? He barely knew the woman after all. Hell, he hadn't even spoken to her directly. But as other members of the Chaos Riders MC glanced at his table, he hoped to change that.

He lost his breath momentarily as he and Duchess made eye contact across the room again, those arresting blues of hers searing right into his being. His heart pounded in his chest as she made her way over to him with the others, that gorgeous gaze not leaving him even as she walked through the crowded pub.

She moved with such grace, such poise, shining like royalty among peasants, and Asher found himself longing to be in her thrall. He'd happily bow before her and—

“Hey, Ash.”

He started as a hand clasped his shoulder.

Cade's voice was low, calm. “It's just me. You okay?”

Asher turned to his friend, staunchly ignoring the look of concern Cade was rocking.

“I'm fine.” He bit back his annoyance, fighting the urge to seek Duchess out in the crowd again. “Just scoping the scene.”

Cade chuckled. “Picking your playmate for the night? You've certainly got a range to choose from. Though, I'd be careful. Tough to tell who's with who in this lot.”

Yeah, like he needed to be reminded of that. He'd witnessed it firsthand, fuck-him-very-much.

“Um, Mr. Ford?”

Asher turned to his new patron. It was the little blonde with that bald and bearded biker. Baldie had her tucked up under his arm like he didn't want her walking by herself, and Asher had to admit there was something adorable about the way they fit together.

“How can I help you?” He smiled, picking up a deck of cards.

“I just wanted to say thank you for setting us up at the Osprey Inn tonight. We were supposed to go to Wolf Creek after dinner, but I'm really glad we get to stay here.”

“Happy to be of service, miss.” Asher gave her a winning smile, which earned him a scowl from her escort.

“Relax,” Asher chuckled at Baldie. “She's perfectly safe here. Look,” he motioned to Cade, who was still in uniform. “I can even have Deputy Hansen escort her to the inn if it makes you feel better.”

Baldie just grunted, but some of the others with him laughed as Cade chuckled and Asher got busy shuffling and dealing the cards.

He pulled good ones for this crew too, appreciating the way their president had handled things with him, telling it straight, looking out for the women. Apparently, they'd had a long drive from the venue in Arizona today, and Mav had been concerned about a few of his newer riders and fairer members.

Making arrangements for them to stay in town tonight hadn't just come from a place of goodwill for Asher. It was good for Pine Haven's coffers, and it was his job to keep them filled. Instead of just whatever they'd spent at the bar on dinner and drinks tonight, the Chaos Riders MC would help another family-owned business by staying in their inn. And then they'd need breakfast in the morning, probably hit up the coffee shop before heading out, maybe even visit a few shops on their way. All in all, it was good for the town.

And it also meant a certain brunette would be staying tonight rather than simply passing through.

Asher wondered again for the millionth time if she and Mav were romantically involved. While she'd laughed and talked with Mav and the others in the motorcycle club, Asher hadn't seen much in the way of PDA from her. Mav worrying over her eating and helping Duchess into her jacket was the closest thing, but that didn't necessarily mean the two of them were together...

"You know," A frisson of sensual awareness shot through Asher at those words and he glanced up from his cards to see Duchess smiling at him. Damn, she was beautiful. "I'd be happy to take Deputy Handsome up on the escort."

God, that voice, silky and warm with a slight accent. Soothing and sensual, like a Mediterranean sunset. As her words sank in, though, Asher frowned.

"It's Hansen. And he's taken."

And what the fuck?

She came all the way over to flirt with his best friend?

Asher drew her a card, trying to get a handle on his ire.

“Oooh, Queen of Diamonds.” She leaned in, lowering her voice as she logged the card on her tally sheet. “My favorite.”

That shouldn’t turn him on, it really shouldn’t. But damn, there was something about the way she spoke, the subtext in even the simplest of comments spoke directly to his cock. Oh, he had to have this woman. He couldn’t explain why exactly, but she was compelling as fuck and he needed to claim her.

“Diamonds suit you.” He smiled, pushing his fantasies of adorning her with them aside. “I like that one in particular.” He motioned to her pumpkin diamond ring.

“Oh, this?” She wiggled her fingers, letting the gemstones catch the light. “I do love this one. Orange and gold are my favorite colors, like the sun, only wearable.”

Well, that explained the yellow diamond on her other hand.

“I have to say, though, I’m becoming quite a fan of green.” She smiled, giving him a wink. “You know, if Deputy Handsome is off the table, I’m wondering if you’re available?”

“Oh, I’m the second choice, huh?”

“No, darling.” She laughed throatily. “You’re the only choice. What time do you get off?”

“Whenever you want.”

And wasn’t that the fucking truth?

As Cade choked on his beer, Asher tried for a little cleanup. He wasn't sure he and Duchess were having the same conversation since he was the one writing all the subtext. But he was loving the hell out of the way her eyes lit up at his comment, and the curve of her lips as she gave him that sensual smile.

“Everything good here?” Mav frowned.

“Solidly so.” Duchess beamed up at him. “Blondie here is going to escort me to the hotel and help me get settled.”

“Is he?” Mav looked back and forth between him and Duchess.

Asher collected the cards and reshuffled the deck, trying to look professional. Though he had to admit, his thoughts of helping Duchess get settled in were far from professional, unless your profession was porn. But damn, there was something about that woman that called to everything masculine in him. Something about her that had him wanting to preen and posture and get to know her better in every carnal sense of the words.

And that made him a complete asshole, didn't it?

But whatever. This was his MO. Women flocked to him and he took his pick. He'd show them a good time, and then they'd move on, better for their fling, while he'd go back to business as usual, better for having blown off a little steam. It was the cycle of his life, one he was quite used to, and quite good at.

“Absolutely.” Asher smiled. “It would be my pleasure.”

“It’s settled then.” Duchess beamed. “I’ll just wait for you outside then while you wrap up here.”

“I won’t be long,” he assured her.

She gave him another smile before sauntering out of the bar with her friends. And damn, her back view was gorgeous too.

“Well,” Cade chuckled as they left. “I didn’t see that one coming. Congratulations, Ash.” He rested a palm on Asher’s shoulder. “And welcome to the club.”

“What?” Asher shrugged him off. “What club?”

“Seriously? Have you seen yourself today?” Cade shook his head with a wry smile. “She’s already got you wrapped, but don’t worry. It’s a good thing.”

“What the fuck are you talking about, Cade? How many beers have you had?”

Not that beer had much of an effect on most shifters. Hell, if it had, he’d be drunk off his ass with the amount he’d consumed today.

“That woman you’re about to escort.” Cade held Asher’s biceps, turning him so they were face to face. “You treat her well, do you hear me?”

Asher frowned.

“I always do. And I don’t get why the fuck you’re acting so weird. You know I treat all of them with respect, give them what they want. It’s always mutually beneficial. You know I don’t do non-consent, and the fact that you’re implying—”

“I’m not saying anything about that.” Cade shook his head. “Listen, Ash, I’ve never seen you look at a woman the way you were checking out that Duchess chick.”

“She’s not a chick.”

Cade released him, holding up his hands in a placating way.

“See? This is what I’m talking about. Just be careful, okay? Be kind. To both of you.”

“I’m always careful.” He had to be.

“You know what I mean.”

“Sure, sure.” Asher nodded, even though he wasn’t quite so sure. In fact, he had no fucking clue what Cade was on about. Hell, there was a time when they’d both go in together for the fun, but that had long passed.

“If you need anything, let me know, okay?”

Asher laughed at that one.

“Isn’t that my line?” As the pack’s Beta, he was always saying that to someone. “But yeah.” He smiled. “Will do.” Asher held out the deck of cards to Cade. “Can you handle the table for a bit? Maybe line up some help? This place has been a non-stop party.”

“Yeah, I’ve got it.” Cade smiled. “Go on, get out of here.”

As Asher made his way to the door, Cade called out to him through the pack link.

“Enjoy yourself, Ash. You deserve it. And no matter what happens, have fun.”

“*Will do.*” He replied, thanking Cade again before closing the telepathic link.

Asher took in the fresh night air as he stepped outside, appreciating the cooling sensation as it filled his lungs while he scanned the environment, looking for Duchess.

There, by a beautiful silver BMW cruiser, chatting with Mav and the guy called Blaze, the club’s VP if memory served.

“Evening.” Asher smiled at them. “Everything okay, gentlemen?”

“We gonna have a problem with you?” Blaze replied, looking stern.

“Not that I can think of.” Asher grinned. While it was good that those guys were looking out for Duchess, Asher didn’t want them worrying for her on his account.

“Come now, boys.” Duchess purred. “While I do love a protective male, I’m a big girl and I’ve chosen this one.” She glanced at Mav and Blaze. “Let me have my fun in peace. I’ll see you two in the morning at the rendezvous point. I’ll call Mav if anything changes. Okay?”

After a long minute, Mav nodded.

“You let me know if there’s a problem.”

“Absolutely.” Duchess saluted him. “Have fun tonight, you two.”

“And you.” Mav glanced at him and Asher gave what he hoped was a winning smile, not a shit-eating grin.

For whatever reason, he felt like he'd just won the fucking jackpot.

And as Duchess leaned against her motorcycle and started discussing possibilities with him, Asher knew he was in for an incredible night.

He absolutely planned to have fun.

And then some.



“**Y**ou sure you’re good with me driving?”

Clea grinned at Blondie’s question, not even trying to take it at face value.

“Oh, I’m positive.” She moved aside so he could take the lead. “In fact, I’m looking forward to it.”

With that sexy gait of his and the sense of power he effortlessly exuded, she absolutely wanted him to drive.

And not just her motorcycle.

Blondie cleared his throat, breaking their gaze and mounting her bike. And damn, he looked good on a motorcycle.

Clea climbed on behind him, but rather than leaning back and using the arm and backrests of the cushy passenger seat, she scooted forward, considering wrapping her arms around Blondie’s waist.

“You know,” she said into his ear. “It’s completely fine with me if you want to take the scenic route to the hotel.”

“Any sights in particular you have in mind?”

Clea threw her head back, laughing at his cheekiness. Oh, this man was right up her alley.

“Why, all of them, Blondie.” She grinned. “I’m up for the private tour, if you are.”

He turned, looking over his shoulder at her, those green eyes of his positively smoldering.

“I’m definitely up for that, Duchess.” He revved the engine. “You hold on.”

There was something about the way he said that last that lit her up inside. Not a question, an order, but one she was more than happy to comply with. Clea leaned into him, wrapping her arms around his waist.

“This good for you?”

“No.” He took her hands, giving a little tug as he ordered her closer.

When Clea had moved her hips up and nestled against Blondie’s back, he brought her left hand to his lips and kissed her thumb.

“That’s better.” He lifted her right hand, turning it so he could kiss the backs of her unadorned fingers. “And my name is Asher.”

“Asher.” She smiled, enjoying the heat coiling in her core as he flattened her hands against his belly. She could feel his

muscles through the soft cotton of his t-shirt and damn, what that did to a woman.

Clea had to work to focus as Asher pulled out of the parking lot. With the tingling where he'd kissed her skin, the power between her legs and the wind in her hair, she was already in near Zen territory. Add to that the sexy man in her arms leading them to some sort of adventure, she was near orgasmic and he'd barely touched her.

Oh, tonight was going to be fun.

As he drove, Asher lifted one of her hands to his mouth for a kiss before smoothing it against his abdomen again and returning his hand to the handlebars. It was a small thing, but the gesture went a long way with Clea. His attentiveness to her let her know they were going to have a good time together.

And she was absolutely up for that.

Though they'd just met, there was something about him that called to her and drew her in. And it wasn't just his good looks, though damn. Even with his clothes on, he was a fine specimen of a man. She couldn't wait to see him unveiled.

She'd bet money he was a showstopper.

The bike slowed and Clea leaned with Asher as he made the turns, appreciating the way his muscles shifted beneath her hands.

In no time at all, they were pulling into another parking lot. Clea frowned as she took in the building.

The Osprey Inn was a sprawling white manse that simultaneously fit in and stood out in the small mountain town. The Inn's mix of Tudor and neoclassical architecture somehow worked to create a welcoming and homey vibe. For some reason though, Clea didn't want to go there, not right now.

"I thought we were checking out the sights."

"I thought I was escorting you to the hotel and getting you settled in."

Clea leaned back, shaking her head. "It's still early. Why don't you take me somewhere else, somewhere more exciting?"

"Exciting, huh?" Asher chuckled. "What do you have in mind?"

"What about the falls? Pine Haven Falls has to have a waterfall, yes?"

"That's best seen in the day. It's not safe at night."

"Why not?"

"No lights, the terrain is steep, the water's swift." Asher shook his head. "It's not a nighttime venue."

"It's not quite dark yet, and I have headlamps in my saddlebags."

Asher turned toward her more. "It's a bad idea, Duchess. I won't fuck around with your safety. We're not doing anything dangerous on my watch."

Clea sighed, trying not to swoon with his glower. There was something she found incredibly sexy about a protective male. Something endearing in the way Asher laid down the law about danger.

It was probably a good thing he didn't know what she did for a living.

If his current expression was any indication, he'd probably lose his mind if he had any idea what kind of dangers she faced and overcame on the regular.

"Fine." she soothed, running a hand along his upper arm. "Nothing dangerous. How about that private tour then? I'd love to see your place."

"You would?" His eyes positively glowed at her suggestion, and Clea felt liquid heat in her core at the sultry sound of his words.

"Well, only if you're there, of course." She smiled, trying to keep it light though every part of her wanted to feel every part of him. God, it had been a long time since she'd felt like that for anyone.

"If we go to my place, you won't be coming back to the hotel tonight."

Now that was an invitation if she'd ever heard one.

"I'm completely fine with that." Clea grinned, wondering what kind of house Asher lived in.

"What about your friends?"

“I know where to meet them in the morning.”

“Listen,” Asher’s voice was low, serious. “Consent is important to me and I want to be upfront with you. I’m not dating material, Duchess.” He shook his head. “We can have fun, but that’s it. I don’t do long-term. We have fun in your room here, or I take you to my place. It doesn’t mean we’re anything but lovers for the night.”

“Oh, you’re my kind of man.” She grinned. “I don’t do long-term either. I tried once, but my heart wasn’t in it. And the sex was mediocre.”

And why was she telling him this? She wanted to get *into* his pants, not have him shun her. A night with him? Sign her up.

“I can assure you, sex with me is far from mediocre.” He chuckled.

“Promises, promises,” she teased.

“Careful, Duchess.”

There was something in the way he looked at her, something feral and wild that called to everything feminine in Clea and had her wanting Asher to take her right there on the bike. They sat for a moment, just holding each other’s gaze, the heat between them building.

“Damn, I want to kiss you,” she breathed.

“Yeah.” He nodded. “I want that too, but not here.” He turned back to the steering console. “Hold on to me.” He ordered as he revved the engine.

She didn't need told twice.

Clea slid as close to Asher as she could, wrapping her arms around his waist again and pressing herself against his back. She enjoyed taking in the scent of him and appreciating the heft of his body as the wind whipped through her hair. That delicious heat they'd shared earlier enough to keep her warm, even as the night air licked at her exposed skin while Asher drove them toward his place.

Despite having just met, Clea felt completely comfortable with Asher. Probably because she was completely comfortable with herself. She knew she had her own back, and she was the kind of woman who knew what she wanted and usually got it. Asher was what she wanted right now and the fact that he'd made it clear upfront that there'd be no lingering threads after their hookup was an incredible relief. She wasn't great with entanglements.

While some women might have considered Asher's honest brutal and off-putting, the way he'd laid out terms from the beginning was an incredible turn on to Clea. She liked knowing what she was dealing with.

Asher brought one of her hands to his mouth for another kiss and Clea pressed her torso closer to him as he rested her palm along his belly again and went back to steering with two hands. She smiled, reveling in the sensations in her body, the desire unspooling in her belly at his touch.

If this was the response he called from her fully clothed, she couldn't wait to get naked with him. Couldn't wait to feel

those soft lips across more of her skin. Couldn't wait to find out what kind of lover he was, though she didn't have a doubt in her mind about that.

Damn, she couldn't wait.

Tonight was absolutely going to be a good one.



Asher couldn't stop grinning as he drove Duchess's bike. Not only was the BMW a comfortable ride and smooth as silk on the road, he was thoroughly enjoying the way Duchess pressed up close to him as he drove them through the town and out into the woodland. Though they'd just met, there was something about having her nestled in and wrapped around him like that that felt right.

He liked the idea of protecting her from the wind with his body and couldn't keep himself from lifting her hand to his face to take in her delicious scent. There was something intoxicating about her particular blend of fruity and floral, something ephemeral too, like an oceanic breeze he couldn't get enough of.

He wanted to linger as he lowered her hand again. Her skin was so soft, and those rings adorned her perfectly. But, lingering would be detrimental to the driving. No way in hell was he about to crash her bike. She was trusting him to drive them safely and he wasn't about to let her down.

As he flattened her hand against him again, Asher relished the feel of Duchess's palms along his abdomen and wondered what those delicate hands of hers would feel like on the rest of him.

Damn, he couldn't wait to be with her skin to skin.

He downshifted, loving the way Duchess tightened her hold and leaned with him into the turns. He enjoyed the feel of her and didn't have a doubt in his mind that they'd have an excellent time together. The fact that she'd been on board with his decree that they were one night and done was a major bene, too.

So many women wanted more from him, and he simply didn't want to give it. He couldn't. As much as he enjoyed the sex, he didn't do attachments. That just wasn't his way. That didn't mean he wouldn't give his all in the moment to pleasure his partner though, and he had big plans for Duchess tonight.

As they came to a stop, Duchess leaned back a little, keeping her hold on his waist.

"So, this is your place, huh?"

He heard the amusement in her voice and bit back a string of curses as he realized where he'd taken them.

"Yup."

God, could he be any lamer?

And what the hell had he been thinking driving Duchess here? He'd never had a female in his private homestead before. Well, aside from the occasional help, but that didn't

count. Shit. He'd meant to take her to his place in town, but he'd just auto-piloted them here.

“Well, that’s some cabin.” She slid her hands along his sides as she got off the bike, and Asher missed her touch immediately. “You live here alone?”

“I do.” Asher bit back another curse as he got off the bike, trying to get his head back in the game. Sure, he didn’t bring women to this property, but they were here now, and it’s not like he’d see her again after tomorrow, anyway. “This is where I like to come to unwind.”

“Mmm.” Duchess smiled knowingly. “Always good to have a place like that.” She glanced at the trees surrounding the circular drive before opening her tail box. “I have one in the Smokies.”

“Really? You don’t strike me as the outdoorsy type.”

“Don’t I?” Duchess’s low, throaty laugh did something to Asher and he couldn’t help grinning even as he discreetly rearranged himself while she reached into her luggage. “I’d say I rough it about as much as you do.”

“Then you need your hot water and Wi-Fi, huh?” He joked.

“Absolutely, Darling.” She slid a backpack on one shoulder as she closed the tail box. “And I’m hoping your cabin has a bathtub. I’ve been on the road for days and could use a good soak.”

“Oh, I see.” He chuckled, offering his arm as she settled her backpack onto both shoulders. “You’re here for the amenities.”

“I am absolutely here for the amenities.” Duchess gazed up at him with a sultry smile that spoke directly to his cock. “I thought we’d agreed on that, Asher. Fun for the night and nothing more. Amenities, amenities. And I do believe you owe me a kiss.”

“Do I?” He grinned, loving her playful tone and the way her hand rested in the crook of his arm as he escorted her to the porch.

“Indeed.”

“As I recall, you wanted to kiss me.”

Duchess shifted, releasing his arm and coming to stand in front of him.

“And as I recall, you wanted that too, but didn’t feel the parking lot was the appropriate place.”

Asher smiled at Duchess, fighting the urge to throw her over his shoulder and carry her inside. God, she was sexy as hell looking up at him like that with her windblown hair and the spark of desire in her eyes. Before he could talk himself out of it, his lips were on hers and damn him, but that kiss stole his breath, wiping every thought from his brain.

He canted her head to deepen the kiss and Duchess went with it, yielding to him even as she slid her palms up his torso and twined her arms around his neck, pressing them closer together.

Fuck, he couldn’t wait to get her inside.

In a smooth movement, he cupped her ass and lifted her, splitting her jeans-clad thighs as he moved. Asher was vaguely aware of her sliding her fingers through his hair and wrapping her legs around him as he carried her into the house, but he mostly focused on her delectable mouth. Damn, the flavor of her was exquisite, and the way she tugged at his hair as they kissed ratcheted his need for her higher.

Drunk on their kisses, he moved like a blind man, his hands roaming Duchess's body, peeling off her scarf and jacket as he walked.

She helped him out, shifting her hips and reaching between them, taking care of the fastenings on their jeans. And fuck if that didn't amp him more. The fact that she wanted him as much as he wanted her was an aphrodisiac of epic proportions and, as she slid her hand lower, Asher gave over to his primal instincts.

He wrenched his lips from hers, appreciating the whimper that called from her as he kissed down the column of her neck and lowered Duchess long enough to get those jeans down her hips. Asher appreciated the way Duchess clawed at his shirt, bunching it between her fingers and yanking it over his head while he unzipped one of her boots.

And then they were kissing again.

Asher loved the delighted moans Duchess gave him as he explored her mouth. Loved her incredible flavor. Loved the way she pressed into him, sliding her hands along his back and chest, leaving electric ripples in their wake. He broke the kiss.

“You’re so fucking hot, Duchess.” he breathed, peppering her smooth neck with kisses.

“Asher.” She groaned with carnal need, spearing her fingers into his hair as he made his way lower.

He had her bra off in no time and availed himself of her perfect tits, loving the way her nipples were already at attention for him.

Duchess moaned with pleasure as he acquainted himself with her breasts, kissing and sucking and touching every inch of them. She called his name as he nipped at her tender flesh and Asher made his way back to her lips, enjoying the way she surrendered to his kiss as he backed her against the wall.

He palmed her bare ass, lifting her again and loving the way she shifted against him as he reached between them. Damn, the feel of her skin on his was exquisite. He loved the way she cried his name as he sank himself deep into the very core of her, and the way she moved with him as he worked her hot sheath.

There was something incredible about this woman.

Something simultaneously familiar and exotic that lit him up from the inside and had him craving more. Asher drove into her deeper, loving the guttural way she called his name as he nipped her neck and shoulder.

Duchess undulated in time with his thrusts, her inner walls massaging his cock with every stroke, and Asher growled with the effort of staving off his climax. It was a wasted effort,

though. Everything about her called to him. And here, locked in this moment, buried to the hilt in her wet heat, with her succulent body wrapped around him, urging him on, Asher could think of nothing else. Duchess broke their kiss, calling his name with a throaty cry as she went over her edge, taking him with her.

Sure as if he was flying, pleasure flooded Asher's system as his orgasm took him into another realm. He lost all track of time as waves of ecstasy washed his body, making his limbs languid and light, transforming him from the inside until he was floating on a sea of tranquility.

He could live here, wrapped in this oceanic breeze.

He really could.



Clea's body hummed with pleasure, aftershocks coursing through her even as she came down from her climax.

Holy shit, that had been incredible.

She'd assumed Asher would be a good lay based on the way he moved and his sheer air of masculinity. But damn, he'd been even better than she'd imagined, and she had a hell of an imagination. She wasn't sure if that orgasm had rocked her so hard because it had been a while since something without batteries had taken her there, or if it was all just Asher.

Probably Asher.

There was something about that man that called to her in a way no one else ever had. Something alluring and magnetic she hadn't experienced with another person before.

And damn, that had been a fantastic fuck.

Too bad he wasn't a repeat player. They'd fit together perfectly and she could definitely get used to that kind of pleasure on the regular.

At least they still had the rest of the night to play.

Asher shifted, stroking her hair back from her face, and Clea realized they were on the floor. Well, Asher was on the floor. She was sitting in his lap, still impaled on his impressive length. Damn, she liked the way he filled her.

“You okay?” he rasped, tucking her hair back behind her ear.

The tenderness in his voice and concern in his eyes nearly undid her. No one had ever asked her how she’d felt after sex before.

“Yes,” she admitted. “That was fantastic.”

Asher caressed her cheek, then slid his hand around her neck, bringing her disheveled braid forward.

“May I?” His fingers trailed her braid. “I’ve wanted to see your hair down since we met.”

“By all means.” Clea smiled.

She watched as Asher pulled off the hair tie and slowly unraveled her locks. There was something intimate about the way his fingers wove in and out of her dark hair as he undid the braid. Something sexy in the slightly feral smile creeping across his face, the possessive gleam in his eyes.

Watching a man take her hair down shouldn’t be such a turn on, but it was. Her core reacted to the intensity of Asher’s gaze, the deft way his fingers moved. And though she’d just had a mind-blowing orgasm, Clea felt herself gearing up for another.

He was too from the feel of things, which was fine by her. Hell, she'd be happy to spend the entire night on the receiving end of his glorious—

“Shit.” Clea shook her head as realization crept in.

“What is it?” Asher dropped her hair, cupping her face in his hands. “What’s wrong?”

“We just had unprotected sex.”

Incredible, but unprotected.

Asher let out a string of curses as his hands went to her hips, lifting her off his lap. Clea missed his presence immediately.

“I’m so sorry.” He shook his head, getting up and offering her a hand. “I got swept up in the moment. I didn’t even... Shit.”

“Probably not the end of the world. I have an IUD and I’m clean, but—”

“I’m clean too.” Asher interjected. “And I’ve never had unprotected sex in my life.” He started pacing, running a hand through his hair. “Fuck.” He shook his head. “I swear I’m responsible, Duchess. You’re just so damn sexy, I didn’t even think, I just— Shit. Fucking... shit.”

As he scrubbed a hand down his face and launched into another litany of curses, Clea grinned.

“You think I’m sexy.”

That stopped him in his tracks.

“Absolutely.” He dropped his hands and Clea couldn’t help raking her eyes over his naked body.

He really was an Adonis.

“I think you are too.” She smiled. “And as much as I enjoyed you barebacking me, I’m not sure it’s wise to continue the way we began.”

That had felt too damn good.

“Continue?” Oh, the confusion on that chiseled face was adorable. “You want to keep going after that?”

Clea lifted her chin, arching her back slightly to remind him she was naked, not that he needed the reminder. His gaze kept flicking over her body, making her want him more.

“I thought we’d agreed to a night of pleasure.” She took a step forward. “The sun’s barely gone down. Surely one and done isn’t the plan.” It wasn’t hers anyway, especially not with a body and talents like his. She rested a hand where his abdomen veed, brushing her fingertips along his hot skin. “Do you have any condoms?”

If not, she had some on her bike.

Asher nodded. “I do.”

“Good.” Clea purred, letting her hand drop lower. “Damn, Asher.” She smiled up at him, pleased that he was already ready for her again. “You really are magnificent.”

He put a hand on top of hers, stilling her.

“Why don’t we get you that bath?”

“Are you putting me off?”

Perhaps going home with him had been a mistake on her part, not that she regretted the sex they’d just had.

Asher frowned. “Not at all. I have every intention of taking you again. I just want you to be comfortable here, and I’m remembering you said you’d like a good soak. Why don’t we start there?”

“Mmm.” Clea slid her hands up his well-defined torso, wrapping her arms around his neck. “I like the sound of that.”

She raised up on her toes, pressing her lips to his. And there it was again, that incendiary heat from earlier. That electric buzz coursing through her body from wherever Asher touched her. Though she was the one to initiate, he took control quickly and Clea melted into him, yielding to his passion as he kissed her senseless.

When they came up for air, Clea chased Asher’s lips, feeling dazed in the best possible way. Lightheaded with pleasure and lust. She could kiss him like that for the rest of her life and be just fine. She really could.

Asher’s low chuckle did something to her, sending a shot of warmth straight to her core.

“Come on, precious.” He kissed her forehead before scooping her into his arms.

Clea nestled against Asher’s bare chest, appreciating his masculine scent and the way he cradled her close as he carried her through his house.

And what a house it was.

Open, spacious, tastefully decorated with a blend of antique and modern furniture that somehow worked. The interior was a far cry from what she'd expected when they'd arrived.

While the exterior was made of timber beams, and there was a huge wood-burning fireplace in the living room, calling this place a cabin had definitely been an understatement. It was clear from the furnishings alone that Asher had an affinity for the finer things. And didn't that just make her like him even more?

"I like your decorating style." Clea smiled, appreciating the King Rococo mantel in the bedroom. "Is that breccia on the fireplace?"

"You know your stones." He kissed her forehead again as he took her into the bathroom.

"Oh, my heavens." Clea exclaimed, unable to contain her delight at the space. "This is incredible, Asher."

While it was minimally decorated, the bathroom exuded luxury with its earthy and eclectic blend of marble, glass, and wood. It even had a chandelier made of tree branches and cut crystals.

"I'm glad you like it." He smiled, setting her on her feet and holding her close. "Now," He gazed down into her face, and Clea fought the urge to kiss him again. "Would you like bubbles or bath salts?"

“Mmm,” she groaned, already imagining sinking into that enormous tub. “I like both. Why don’t you surprise me?”

“Alright then.” He grinned. “You have a seat while I draw you a bath.”

Clea settled into the armchair he’d indicated, wondering if he’d watch her bathe. It would be better if he joined her.

There was something lovely about the way he glanced at her while checking the water, as though he wanted to please her. Or eat her. And she was fine with that, too. Clea shifted in the chair, angling her hips and widening her legs, appreciating the way Asher’s gaze followed her movement, the desire in his eyes.

“Careful, Duchess.” His voice was low, husky. “When I get started again, I won’t want to stop.”

“That’s fine by me.” Damn, her voice was lower, too. There was something about him that lit her up in the best way.

Something about him that made her want.

Asher shook his head as though trying to clear it before coming over and scooping her into his arms again. Clea arched against him, relishing the feel of his skin on hers as he carried her.

And then he was setting her into the tub even though it was only half full.

While the hot water felt incredible, Clea found herself pouting as Asher withdrew.

“You’re not joining me?”

“Soon.” The promise in his voice spoke right to her core and Clea shivered with anticipation. “You relax, precious. I’ll be back soon.”

“Wait, you’re leaving?” She frowned, wondering where he’d go. It’s not like there were any shops around, they were in the middle of the woods.

“I’m just going to get us something to drink.” He reached out, gathering her hair and gently twisting it into a knot near the top of her head. “How’s that?” he asked. “Is it too tight? I don’t know where your hair tie went.”

“It’s fine.” She smiled, appreciating the way he’d tended to her. “And I have more in my bag.”

“I’ll get it for you.” He smiled. “You just relax.”

Clea grabbed his arm as he started to stand.

“Kiss me before you go?”

“My pleasure.” He grinned.

Asher closed the space between them, cupping her cheek with one hand as he kissed her tenderly. In no time, the heat took over again and Clea found herself clawing along his shoulders, trying to bring them closer together, moaning as his free hand caressed her breasts.

He pulled back when his hand got wet.

“Shit, the water.” Asher moved away from her to turn off the tap before the water spilled over the sides of the tub.

Once again, they'd lost track of time with the kissing.

Not that she minded.

He regarded her from the side of the tub, his emerald gaze positively smoldering at her while he removed his watch. Clea was about to invite him to join her when he stood in an elegant rush of limbs. Her breath caught at the sight of him. She'd forgotten he was naked, and damn, he had a fine form.

"Enjoy your bath," he husked.

"Oh," Clea smiled seductively. "I will."

As he stared at her with abject lust, Clea imagined Asher was warring with himself about staying or going. She knew what she wanted, and it involved him getting into the tub with her. Before she could tell him that, though, he turned on his heel and left.

Even though she knew he was just heading into another of the rooms to get them a drink and gather her things, Clea was sad to see him go. And that was a first. There was just something about him that had her in a way. Something that called to her, that made her ache for more.

She leaned back in the bath, appreciating the spacious tub and the gorgeous decor with a satisfied sigh. That asshole she'd left back in Seattle had a big marble number like this, but his space had been as cold and as he was. And the hotel bathrooms she'd used since she'd escaped, while getting the job done, weren't anything remotely luxurious.

Asher's place was warm and inviting. She liked the natural elements, the way the wood and stone played together, the way the bronze and gold fixtures gave the space an old world feel.

And that chandelier was gorgeous.

The way the light refracted from the gem cut crystals, she knew they were Swarovski, which meant Asher owned a unique piece of history in more ways than one. She wondered idly where he'd get the kind of money needed to own a one-of-a-kind work of art like that. Like any of the fine things in his house, for that matter. He looked like a surfer. Snowboarder was probably more like it, considering the closest ocean was hundreds of miles away.

"I wasn't sure what you'd like to drink, so I brought a few options." Asher's voice pulled Clea from her musing. He'd put pants on, but damn, he still looked edible.

She sat up, grinning at what he'd brought her as Asher set a tray on the stand by the side of the tub.

"Looks like you brought the whole bar."

"I wasn't sure what you'd like, so I stuck to the W's."

"This is perfect." She smiled, selecting the rocks glass. "I love options. *Yiama*!" She lifted the glass in a toast, taking a sip of the fine whiskey and loving the trail of fire it left down her throat.

"Greek, huh?" Asher smiled, crouching down and reaching out for her cup.

She handed it to him with a nod.

“My father was Greek.”

“Was.” Asher took a sip before handing the glass back to her. “He still around?”

“No.” Clea shook her head. “He’s long gone.”

And good riddance. He may have been an excellent thief, but he’d been a shit father.

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

Clea glanced up at Asher, her breath hitching at the compassion in his eyes. She handed him the whiskey glass.

“What about your folks?” Though she already knew the answer.

“Gone.” He shifted his gaze, staring at something over her shoulder. “I never really knew my father. Mum died when I was young, shortly after we came to Pine Haven.” He shook his head. “That trip took everything out of her.”

An ache bloomed in Clea’s chest at the thought of a young Asher losing his mother, and she rubbed a palm over her heart space.

“My mom died when I was young, too.” Her soft admission drew his eyes and Clea met his emerald gaze head on. “I’m sorry for your loss, Asher.”

And damn her, but she meant it. The thought of him alone and hurting made her chest ache more.

“Look at us,” she chuckled, breaking the gaze and reaching out for the rocks glass. “A couple of orphans.” She downed the

rest of the whiskey, relishing the burn as she handed Asher the empty cup. “Thanks for the drink.”

“Would you like another?” He gestured to the tray. “We still have water and wine.”

“I’ll pass on the wine for now.” She smiled. “But I won’t say no to the water, or another whiskey.” She’d enjoyed sharing it with him and the burn dampened that strange ache in her chest.

“I’ll get the bottle then.” He cupped her face with his palm, trailing his thumb lightly along her cheekbone as he leaned in for a kiss.

He pulled away far too soon and Clea found herself chasing his lips again. She wasn’t sure what it was about him that made her want more, but as Asher encouraged her to relax and promised to be back soon with her stuff, she wanted him to stay.

There was just something about that man.

She stared after Asher in a daze for several minutes before getting with the program, downing some water and reaching for a washcloth. As she ran the soap over the cloth, Clea marveled at how much she and Asher seemed to have in common. Okay, dead parents and a healthy appreciation for fine things weren’t really all that much in common, but it was a start.

Just look at that chandelier, like jewelry for the home.

And then there was the sex.

Mind blowing didn't even begin to cover it, and they'd only just scratched the surface. Damn, what Asher could do to her body.

At that thought, Clea got busy with the cleanup.

Though the water felt incredible on her road weary muscles and she would have loved soaking for hours, she didn't want to spend all her time in the tub unless he was in it with her. If she only had one night with Asher, she was going to make the most of it.

All of it.



Asher took some deep, steady breaths trying to get his head around things as he surveyed his space looking for Duchess's backpack.

Holy shit, that woman was something else.

He'd thought she was something the moment he'd laid eyes on her with her patrician good looks, sexy air of confidence, and all that bling, but the reality of her was more than he'd been prepared for. They'd just met and already he'd experienced two firsts in his life, having a woman in his lair, and taking her bare.

Fuck.

What the hell was wrong with him? He never had sex ungloved, but from the moment he'd first kissed her, he'd lost his damn mind with need.

For her.

There'd been no thinking, only primal passion and damn him, but he'd been rough with her. Not that she'd seemed to

mind. And how fucking sexy was that?

Asher scrubbed his hand down his face on a curse. He really was an asshole sometimes, wasn't he?

He refocused on collecting their things, hoping Duchess was enjoying her soak while he tidied up their clothes. He had to do something to keep himself from going back in there and taking her again.

Shit, it had been hell fighting his primal urges when he'd dropped her drinks off earlier. Not only had she been sexy as hell with her silky neck exposed and the water lapping at her tits like that, the way she'd memory-laned it with him tugged at his protective instincts.

He'd never told a woman about his mum before.

And that made three firsts tonight, didn't it?

The only people who knew about his mum outside the town leadership were Cade's family and some of the older locals. The fact that he'd shared that part of his past with a human gave him pause.

There was something different about Duchess, though, something he couldn't name. Something that had him wanting to share all his secrets, to open his vault and adorn her in his jewels.

To add her to his hoard.

And how fucking messed up was that? He'd never had that inclination before. Sure, he'd adorned a few of his bed partners before - an anklet here, a bracelet or hip chain there.

Seeing his treasures on a feminine form was sexy as fuck. But he didn't just want to put a bracelet on Duchess, he wanted to see her covered in his treasures, dripping with his jewels.

Fucking hell. The thought of her trussed up in his precious metals and gems had him hard as a rock.

“Now, isn't that a sight to behold?”

Damn, her voice was smooth as silk.

Asher glanced up from the shirt he'd just folded, his heart rate kicking up a few notches as he took in Duchess's beauty.

She stood without a stitch of clothing on, her creamy skin boasting a healthy pink glow from the warmth of the bath. And the sensual smile playing on those delectable lips spoke directly to his cock.

“One could say the same for you.” He set the shirt on top of the pile he'd been folding for her. “You look edible Duchess.”

“Mmm. I like the sound of that.”

Asher could only watch as she approached, enamored by the way her hips shifted as she walked, her bare feet padding across the wood floor, the way her breasts lifted as she reached her jeweled hands up and untied the knot he'd made of her hair. The way her dark tresses cascaded over her shoulders as she came up against him. He tucked her hair behind her ears, loving how those diamonds on her lovely earlobes glittered against the backdrop of her silken locks.

“You're so fucking beautiful.” He murmured, dropping his lips to hers.

She opened to him, that oceanic scent of hers deepening as he explored her mouth. His hands traveled on their own, caressing the curve of her waist, her hips. She yielded to his touch, letting him lift her, wrapping those long legs around him as he moved.

It was with reluctance on both sides that he broke their kiss, her whimper beckoning him back for more. And fuck him, but he couldn't resist.

Damn, he loved the way she kissed.

It was a wonder they made it to his room at all. But they did, landing in a tangle of limbs on his bed.

“Duchess,” he rasped breathlessly when they came up for air. “I want to make you feel good.”

“You already do.” She shifted her hips against him and he rolled them on the next kiss, loving the way she went with it and the feel of her atop his body. “It's my turn now.” She grinned down at him.

Shit, she was incredible straddling his hips while stretching to the bedside table to grab one of the condoms he'd left out. Asher reached for the foil packet and Duchess pulled it away with a sexy smirk.

“I've got it this time.”

“Wait.” She cocked her head to the side, dropping her hands as he gripped her hips and sat up. “I want you to wear something of mine, Duchess. Will you do that for me?”

“Depends on what it is.” She smiled, but there was a wariness in her eyes and Asher cursed himself for breaking her mood. But he had to see this through.

“It’s in a box inside that drawer.”

He’d pulled it from his vault after he’d settled her into the bath earlier and couldn’t wait to see her face when she saw it. Hell, he couldn’t wait to see it on her, glittering against her skin.

Duchess eyed him circumspectly for a moment.

God, he felt nervous now. What the hell was wrong with him? What had he been thinking hand selecting for her like that?

“Okay, Darling.” She raised a dark brow. “Now you’ve got me intrigued.” She lifted off him, up onto her knees, as she leaned over to the table. “Ooh, I like the sight of this.” She cooed, pulling out the jeweler’s box. “I’ll have to be honest, though. I don’t care how gorgeous they are, if these are nipple clamps, they’re going right back in the box.”

“Not a fan of nipple clamps, huh?” He chuckled, suddenly imaging those luscious breasts of hers sporting gems and delicate chains.

“No,” she said primly. “And by the way, you didn’t ask my safe word. It’s plums.”

“Plums?” Asher laughed at that one, earning him a saucy smile which let him know she wasn’t talking about the fruit. And somehow that juiced him more.

God, he couldn't wait for her to open the box.

"What's yours?" She settled into his lap again with the box.

"My safe word?" He shook his head as she nodded. "I don't have one."

"Well, that's an unfortunate oversight on your part, then." She chuckled. "Anyone could take advantage of you, you know."

"Are you planning to take advantage of me, precious?" He joked, brushing a kiss across her temple.

"Well," She gave him a playful smile as she rolled her hips, grinding against him. "You do have some incredible amenities."

"Fuck, Duchess." He breathed, trying to keep it cool. The feel of her was exquisite, and he hadn't put that condom on yet.

"I believe that's next on the agenda." She chuckled. "Can I open this now?"

"Allow me."

He took the box from her, opening it and pulling out the necklace. While the diamonds glinted in the lamplight, their brilliance was nothing to the look on Duchess's face as he held it up for her.

"Holy shit." She breathed. "Is that... is that the Vivid Yellow Diamond?"

“The pendant, yes.” He smiled, pleased at her appreciation. “The string is just regular diamonds, but I remember you said you liked gold and thought you’d look incredible in this.”

“And you just happen to have the world’s largest Asscher-cut diamond in your bedside cabinet.”

“Don’t look so surprised, precious.” He grinned, loving the fact that she knew her jewels. “Lift your hair for me.”

She did as he requested, bunching her dark locks into a high ponytail as he fastened the string of diamonds around her neck.

“It’s gorgeous.”

Asher smiled at the awe in her voice, loving the way she looked down at her own chest, the brilliant yellow gem resting perfectly at the top of the cleft in her breasts.

“Just like you.” He lifted her chin, brushing his thumb along her lower lip. “Now *you* are the sun, precious.”

And he was definitely in her orbit.

“Asher, I…” She shook her head gently, and he felt a strange pinging sensation in his chest as he got lost in her gaze.

And then they were kissing again, her breasts tight against his chest as he laid back with her in his arms. Damn, he loved having her up close like this. He slid his palms over the smooth skin of her back, slipping into her silky hair as he kissed her deep.

“Duchess,” he panted when they came up for air. “I want inside you again.”

Fuck, he needed inside her again.

“Yes,” she purred. “Let me just get the—”

She shifted up to get another condom. He wasn’t watching her hands, though. Asher’s eyes were drawn to her throat, that string of white diamonds framing it elegantly. He trailed his fingertips along Duchess’s exposed skin, all the way down to the yellow gem hanging at the top of her breasts.

Those lovely breasts.

He traced the lines of her pink areolas, loving the juxtaposition between her smooth, creamy skin and her pearled nipples. Loving the way her breasts lifted as she reached over to the table.

“Here we go.” Duchess smiled triumphantly, holding up a new packet.

“I can do that.”

“I’ve got it.”

Fuck, the feel of her hands on him as she put the thing on nearly threw him over the edge. He kept it together though, and thank fuck for that. In no time, his cock was deep in the promised land again, happily encased in her slick heat.

Asher threw his head back on a grunt as she palmed his chest and they found their stride, loving the feel of her as she rode

him. He gripped her hips, urging her on as that string of diamonds became a pendulum with their thrusts.

She chuckled as he clutched her, leaning in for a kiss while keeping up her undulations. The sight of her adorned in his jewels stoked his fire even more.

He tried to stick with her rhythm, he really did. But she was going so goddamn slow and he was about to blow over here.

“Go faster, precious,” he ordered.

She leaned back, rocking those luscious hips, those diamonds glittering alluringly down her décolletage.

“I thought you liked this pace,” she said throatily. “I know I do.”

“Fucking hell,” he gritted as she kept up with that steady glide, “You’re going to be the death of me.”

Death by slow sex.

Maybe that wasn’t a bad way to go, but he wasn’t going to last long enough to find out.

“Duchess,” he growled.

“Oh, Darling,” she drawled, “you’re so cute when you’re needy.”

“Cute, huh? I’ll give you cute.” He smacked her ass, drawing a delighted squeal and giggle from her before he rolled their bodies so he was on top again.

Duchess inhaled sharply, desire etched across her features as she wrapped her legs around him and slid a hand along his

shoulder while he took over the rhythm, driving into her deep.

“I take it back.” She panted, her head rocking back on the pillow with each thrust. “I like fierce better than cute, Asher.”

Now fierce he could do.

He kissed her hard. Taking her mouth the same way he took her sex, fully, completely. And she was fucking perfect, right there with him the whole time, moaning and mewling her pleasure for him. Clawing at his back and calling out his name as he drove her to her edge.

Ecstasy infused them both as they climbed together, cresting the waves of desire and getting caught in their undertow again and again like some kind of euphoric tide. He'd never come so hard or so long in his life and just when he thought he was done, another orgasm tackled him from behind, and then another, taking her right off the cliff with him again.

Holy shit, she really was going to kill him.

And he'd never been happier.



Clea winced as she clambered over another log, wishing she was soaking in Asher’s fantastic tub instead of tromping back down a game trail from a fruitless search.

Treasure Falls indeed.

“Why would they name it Treasure Falls if there’s no treasure?” She asked again.

“It’s the beauty of the place that’s the treasure, Duchess.” Blaze chuckled.

“Well,” she huffed, stepping around a boulder, “I think it’s a misnomer that vastly misrepresents the location.”

“You really thought we’d find treasure up there?”

Clea shot Blaze a dark look. Like she’d be out here kitted out for climbing otherwise?

A big fat no on that one.

The allure of treasure was the only thing compelling enough to get this dirty, especially with the way her body ached right

now.

While she'd thoroughly enjoyed her time with Asher last night, he'd worked her over big time. She'd actually lost count of how many orgasms he'd given her, but damn, could that man move.

And kiss.

And the way he'd gone down on her had rendered her speechless for at least an hour.

And the taste of him was electric, like deep throating a lightning bolt.

Damnit, the morning had come too soon.

She'd hated leaving him. Hated leaving his necklace too, but she couldn't take that from the guy. Not when he'd been so good to her. No one had ever made her feel so beautiful, so desired, before. She had to admit, it was a nice change of pace.

Too bad he'd only wanted one night.

She'd only wanted that too when they'd started their fun. But now that she'd been thoroughly fucked and pampered by him, she rather fancied the idea of more with Asher Ford. At the very least, they could have spent the rest of the weekend together, and she could have relaxed in that glorious tub of his again, letting the water soothe her well-used body. But then, she'd have missed this non-adventure at Treasure Falls.

“Honestly,” she grumbled. “It’s not even that beautiful.”

She'd bet the falls in Pine Haven were better than this wall of rock. They'd named the town after them, after all.

Pine Haven Falls.

Damn, she wanted to go back there.

Well, not to the town itself, but to that 'cabin' in the woods. To Asher and his treasure trove. Honestly, the way the man had kept pulling out jewelry for her was orgasmic in and of itself. She'd hated removing it all this morning.

Well, most of it anyway. She'd kept one of the tennis bracelets.

As accessories went, the bracelet was rather understated, but it was elegant in its simplicity. A string of black diamonds set in black gold that complimented her look nicely and served as a lovely reminder of the best sex of her life. Just looking at it gave her a fluttery feeling, probably because it reminded her of Asher.

Damn, that man had been something else.

It really was too bad they'd only agreed to one night, but that was the way of it. Good things and all that.

"I don't know, Duchess," Blaze said from up ahead. "I think there's a certain beauty here."

"Maybe," she agreed. "But I'd hoped for something more spectacular." It was hard to keep the disappointment from her voice. This outing hadn't been at all what she'd expected.

Treasure Falls was just your average cliff dumping water. A tourist stop and chain-up station on the way to Wolf Creek with a couple of man-made trails and viewing points and a whole lot of no treasure. There weren't even any caves or outcroppings on the cliff face.

What a letdown.

"I'd say somebody didn't get enough coffee this morning." Blaze chuckled, holding a branch back for her so she could pass.

"And I'd say somebody is having a little too much fun on this hike."

Though she had to cede that indeed, she hadn't had enough coffee at the rendezvous point this morning. No amount of coffee could make up for the fact she'd stayed up all night. Not that she minded the way she'd passed the time. No, she'd thoroughly enjoyed herself with Asher.

Clea glanced at her wrists with a pang of guilt. She hoped Asher wouldn't miss his tennis bracelet.

Or his watch.

She'd seen that one in the bathroom when she'd been getting dressed and hadn't been able to resist. The white gold and black chronometer face dwarfed her wrist, but she didn't care. She liked the heft of it, and knowing that Asher had worn it.

As an added bonus, the black leather band went well with her current look and complimented the tennis bracelet. Besides, his watch was clearly made for looking elegantly

badass, and she needed that right now. No one needed to see how vulnerable all that intimacy last night had left her.

She was traveling with a group of tough bikers, after all.

Blaze held his hand out for her, helping her down another steep patch of the non-trail they'd been exploring, and she had to give it to the guy, he made a great VP. Just like Mav, Blaze looked after the MC crew and he'd volunteered to go with her on her little trek, not knowing she'd planned to scale a cliff in search of treasure that apparently didn't exist.

"Thanks, Blaze." She smiled as she stepped down beside him, grateful for his company.

While the MC members had wanted to drive Wolf Creek Pass, she hadn't had the urge to do the curving, seven percent grade roads today, even though they were fun. She'd originally planned to hit Treasure Falls alone while the others did the poker run, but Mav and Blaze had vetoed that plan. They weren't keen on her soloing it anywhere on their watch and had decided to divide and conquer for this outing. Though it had seemed a little overprotective to her, Clea had to admit, their decision made her feel like part of the family.

"You know, Blaze, you're good people."

"Well, I try." He winked at her. "And you're not so bad yourself."

"I appreciate you hanging with me."

Even though the treasure hunt had been a bust, Blaze had been a good escort, holding back branches, pointing out loose

rocks. Giving her space and time with her thoughts.

“It’s my pleasure, Duchess.” He beamed.

She smiled as he held back another branch for her. “You might look gruff, but beneath all those tats and leather, you’re a solid gentleman, Blaze. A real cinnamon roll.”

“Now, don’t go around saying things like that,” he grumbled. “I’ve got a reputation to uphold.”

“Well, far be it from me to tarnish your rep.” She chuckled. “Your secret is safe with me.”

He winked at her again before retaking the lead.

They fell into a companionable silence as they made their way back to one of the public trails and Clea found herself wondering what Asher was up to again. He’d been sound asleep when she’d left this morning, looking positively edible sprawled across the elevated mattress in sated repose. While she’d briefly considered climbing back into bed with him, she’d honored their agreement instead, and taken off.

Besides, if she hadn’t showed at the morning rendezvous, Mav would have turned the town out looking for her. He was good like that. She was lucky he and Blaze had let her ride with them all this way. Despite whatever reputations, they really were good people. It was going to suck to leave them too, but what could she do? Sticking around wasn’t a good idea, no matter how much she might want to.

As she and Blaze got to the parking lot, someone drawled her name.

“Clea Aëtos, it’s been a while, Cookie.”

She knew that nasal tone well, and unease skittered into her belly as she spotted the asshole. Jeff Kluge looked just like he always did, smarm in a suit.

Oh, and look, he’d brought his friend.

His hulk of a bodyguard loomed behind him like a boulder in a suit, and Clea fought back memories of being trailed by that monster.

Great, just what she needed. More shit for her already crappy day.

“Figures I’d find you here. Treasure hunting, are we?” Kluge sneered, taking in her attire. God, why didn’t he wear a hat? Like seriously, the bald thing didn’t work for him at all.

Clea staunchly ignored him and all his Lex Luthor as she made her way to the bikes. So she’d carried some rope and a few cams up the trail. Big freaking deal.

“You have something of mine,” he called after her.

Several things, actually, but she wasn’t about to tell him that.

Besides, she’d already offloaded most of them.

“You know these guys?” Blaze growled in her ear.

“Asshole ex,” she said loud enough so Kluge and his goon could hear.

Blaze eyed them while she took off her climbing gear, packing it into her saddlebags and doing her best to appear

calm.

How the fuck had Kluge found her?

“Come on, Cookie, don’t be like that.” Kluge held his hands to his sides. “So we didn’t work out, that’s no reason to—”

“You tried to imprison me.”

Blaze went for his gun at that comment, but Clea staid his hand.

“Well, what did you expect?” Kluge smirked. “You didn’t really think you could leave me, did you? You’re an incredible asset in the social circuit, not to mention the bedroom.”

Clea threw her head back and laughed. This guy was too much.

“So, you lost all your party invites, then?” Served him right, it’s not like he gave a shit about any of those causes or people anyway. “And by the way, we never had sex, Kluge.”

Like she’d let him anywhere near her naked. She’d dosed him whenever he’d wanted to get busy and a little porn went a long way with him in that state. She’d just played along after the fact, letting him believe he’d rocked her world.

The idiot.

“It’s Kluge,” he snapped, pronouncing it ‘clue-guh’ instead of ‘clooge,’ “And we absolutely had sex. As I recall, you couldn’t get enough of me.”

“You keep telling yourself that.” She closed one of her saddlebags, giving Blaze a nod. “Well, I’d say it was good to

see you again, Kluge, but I'd be lying." And she couldn't wait to put as much distance as possible between them. The guy was a lout.

"Kluge," he gritted, correcting her pronunciation again.

Man, she never got tired of that one.

"And you're not going anywhere until you give me back my diamonds."

As Blaze's gaze shot to her, Clea pasted a smile on her face, pretending all was well. There was no way she was giving that asshole back anything she'd taken from him. And how the hell had he spotted the fake she'd left in his showroom, anyway? That moron didn't know cubic zirconia from moissanite and his goons were even less educated.

"I don't have your diamonds."

"You're fucking wearing them right now."

Clea took stock of the gems she was sporting and realized what he was talking about.

"These?" She motioned to her ears, grateful he hadn't noticed the fact she'd taken his Archduke Joseph, yet. That gem was the whole reason she'd initiated contact with him at all. "As I recall, they were a gift. You renege on more of your contributions these days? My, how your stakeholders must love that."

He grimaced at her low blow, but she didn't give a shit. He may be a tech billionaire, but the guy was a worm.

“Now, now.” He regained his composure, taking a step toward her with one of his fake-ass smiles. “Let’s not overreact here, Cookie.” God, she hated that stupid name. “I loaned you those while you were with me. I’d like them back now.”

“I think not.” She matched his saccharine tone. “As I recall, they were a gift, not a loan. And after everything I’ve endured with you, I think I’ll keep them. Let’s call them my asshole tax.”

“Why you little—”

Blaze intercepted with his sidearm drawn. “I believe the lady said no.”

“Oh ho.” Kluge chuckled, sneering at her on a back step. “Got yourself a new boyfriend, have you?” He focused on Blaze as his goon closed ranks. “Watch yourself. This one will screw you over the minute you turn your back.”

Blaze didn’t budge. He just held that sidearm locked and loaded, his jaw set, sternly ignoring Kluge’s bodyguard and focusing on the spot he intended to blow a hole through if Kluge moved any closer.

Sometimes it paid to be in with ex-cons.

“Come now.” Kluge turned the smarm back on, lowering his arms, clearly recognizing the stalemate. “Let’s be reasonable here. We’re all adults.” He looked over Blaze’s shoulder at Clea. “I know you drugged me, Cookie. That’s domestic abuse. I could have you arrested.”

“Hmm, then the world would find out you can’t get it up without medical intervention,” she countered.

“Fuck you, Aëtos. Seriously.”

Ah, there he was, the self-righteous prick with a temper problem who’d made her life a living hell.

“Just give me the damn earrings.”

“You’re a billionaire, you can get more.”

Seriously, the man could buy anything he wanted. And he did if memory served.

“I don’t want more. I need those. Now, just fucking hand them over and no one has to get hurt.”

“Interesting.” Clea mused aloud, wondering what he’d need with her earrings specifically. “Now you threaten bodily harm. You know,” She pulled a forty from the saddlebag, slipping the safety off. “I think my friend has the right idea.”

She lifted her firearm, aiming at Kluge’s bodyguard and shaking her head as Kluge lost his shit and stumbled backward.

“Don’t even think about Muscles.” she warned, knowing the goon was about to pull another weapon. “We’re all just going to go our separate ways and pretend like this never happened, aren’t we, Jeff?”

“You fucking bitch.” He smoothed his suit coat. “Why can’t you just give me the damn earrings?”

“Because they’re mine. I’ve grown rather partial to them. After all, it was their brilliant gleam that got me through that horrible ordeal in Seattle. You remember that one, don’t you? The time I told you we were done, and you locked me up and refused to let me leave?” Fucking bastard and his biometric locks. “Talk about domestic abuse. I could have *you* arrested.”

At least he had the grace to pale at her comment, but the terror in his eyes probably had more to do with Blaze’s low growl than anything else.

“Lower your weapon.” Blaze ordered Muscles, keeping his piece trained on Kluge. “Sounds like the lady has a claim, and I’ll back her. At your detriment if need be, but it doesn’t have to go like that.”

Kluge’s eyes darted between her and Blaze, and Clea could just see him mentally struggling over what to do.

“Fine,” he huffed, straightening his tie and calling off his goon. “But this isn’t over, Aëtos. You owe me—”

“I owe you nothing. Especially not after all the shit you put me through.”

“Best you be heading out.” Blaze gruffed, motioning with his gun.

She and Blaze covered the assholes as they loaded into their ride. And they kept their forties high as Muscles pulled the SUV alongside them with the window down.

“I’ll be seeing you.” Kluge hissed at her as they rolled by.

Great, more threats.

Clea didn't give him the satisfaction of a response. She just lifted her chin and lowered her weapon, knowing Blaze had her covered. She didn't know what Kluge wanted with her earrings, but she sure as hell wasn't going to just hand them over.

"Have a nice day, Kluge." She called after the SUV as it turned onto the highway.

"It's Kluge." He shouted back, making Clea chuckle.

God, that never got old.



Well, this sucked.

Asher stared at the bedroom bench, marveling at the care Duchess had taken with his treasures. Every single piece he'd adorned her with was laid out beautifully, as though on display.

Well, almost every one.

His black gold and black diamond bracelet was missing. She'd left her hair tie in its place.

And fuck him, but he didn't even mind. He'd loved the way the dark gems had glittered against her fair skin last night and the thought of her wearing something of his out in the world lit him up inside in a curious way.

And how messed up was that?

She'd stolen from him and here he was getting all sappy about it.

Daydreaming about the way his gems and gold had caressed her perfect skin as she'd cried out his name in pleasure. About how fucking incredible she'd looked adorned in his jewels. His heart actually physically ached at the loss of her, the longing to hold her again nearly overwhelming.

He was losing it, he really was.

But she *had* been incredible, a feast for the eyes and the senses. She was funny too. And damn, the way she'd rocked his world. A male could get used to that. But they'd had an agreement, hadn't they?

And she'd honored it.

Asher ran a hand through his hair, cursing the fact that he'd been out cold whenever she'd left. He couldn't think of the last time he'd slept like that. Man, he was just racking up the firsts, wasn't he? And damn him, but he wanted more.

"Hey Ash, what's your ETA?"

Asher rubbed his temples as Cade's voice came through their telepathic link. He couldn't get a fucking break, could he?

"Change of plans." He replied, picking up Duchess's hair tie. *"Give my regards to Lucy."*

"What? Your regards? You're not coming over?"

"Not today, man." God, he was tired. And with how raw he was feeling right now, the last thing he needed was to be around a group of people at some brunch, even if it was at his best friend's house.

“What the fu— Ah, I get it.” As Cade changed his tone, Asher bit back a curse.

“It’s not what you think.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Cade chuckled. *“No problem. You have fun with your piece and we’ll catch you later.”*

“She’s not a piece.” Asher growled through the link. *“And she’s not here.”*

“Uh, okay.” The confusion in Cade’s voice cut through Asher’s ire.

Shit, he needed to get it together.

“Listen, I’ve got a situation,” he admitted. *“It’s complicated.”*

And he had no fucking clue how to explain it.

“I’ll come to you.”

“I’m out at the manor.”

“Shit, you took her there? She must be important then. I knew it.”

Asher just let that one hang. He’d never met anyone like Duchess, true. And he’d hated waking up alone and finding her gone, but that had been their agreement, hadn’t it? No strings attached.

“We agreed to one night.”

“And you want it to be more.” Cade said knowingly.

Asher scrubbed a hand down his face, shaking his head.

“I’m so fucked, Cade.”

“I’m on my way, Ash. You just hold on.”

“Okay.”

Yeah, he’d get right on that.



Thank fuck for his best friend.

Cade hadn’t come alone. He’d brought Maddox with him and their presence was enough to help Asher calm the fuck down. At least a little bit. By the time he’d laid everything out for them, though, Asher was back to clutching his heart and pacing the living room, trying not to burst out of his skin.

He needed to fly.

“Seriously,” He ran his hands through his hair again. “This sense of urgency is freaking me out. I have to find her.”

“Okay,” Maddox nodded. “We’ll find her. What’s her last name? I’ll get Tane searching the DMV and—”

Asher let out a string of curses as realization set in. Despite the intense connection he felt with Duchess, he didn’t know much about her at all, did he?

“Duchess probably isn’t even her real name.” He scrubbed a hand down his face. “Fuck.”

How the hell were they going to find her? And why the hell hadn't he gotten her phone number? Oh yeah, because he'd been too busy adorning and worshiping her. He was such a fuckup.

"Hey," Cade clapped his palm on the back of Asher's neck, giving him a little squeeze. "Calm down, brother, we'll figure it out."

"How?" Asher broke away and started the pacing again. "How the fuck are we going to find her when we don't even know who the hell she is?"

"Why don't you tap your bond?"

Maddox's words drew him up short, his heart rate kicking up a few notches.

"What bond?"

Maddox laughed, soft and low.

"You're joking, right?" He shook his head. "Honestly, have you seen yourself? You're acting like a bonded male if ever I've seen one. I think you're even worse than this guy was." He jerked his head at Cade.

"Wait a minute," Asher rubbed his sternum. "You're saying she's my *anam cara*? That's why I'm over here losing my shit?"

Holy fuck, when had he bonded with her? He was pretty sure he'd remember that.

“There was something between you two from the outset,” Cade said sagely. “I’ve never seen you look at a woman the way you were eyeing Duchess last night.”

“Did you claim her?” Maddox asked.

Asher combed through his memories, willing his cock to stand the fuck down as images of Duchess in the throes of passion filled his mind.

“No,” he admitted. “Not fully.”

He’d nipped her sure, and they’d had unprotected sex that one time, but it wasn’t enough.

“Then no wonder you’re out of your mind right now.” Maddox rose, taking out his phone. “She was with one of the motorcycle clubs, right?”

“Yes.” Asher nodded. “She and her crew were doing the poker run. I pulled cards for them... She got the queen of diamonds...”

Images of Duchess, naked on his bed wearing his jewels, filled his mind and Asher didn’t even try to stop them. Queen of diamonds indeed. God, it had been extraordinary the way they’d fit together, the way they’d complimented one another. The way they’d driven each other over the edge again and again. And damn, the way she’d worked his—

“*Seriously, Ash,*” Maddox growled through the pack link, “*get out of your head.*”

“Fuck, I’m sorry.”

Shit. The last thing he wanted to do was broadcast his sexcapades to his Alpha. Or anyone else, for that matter.

“Did she say what stops they’d already hit?” Maddox asked, as though nothing had happened.

Asher shook his head. “Mav, their president, said they were headed for Wolf Creek, but I don’t know about the others. The rally’s in Durango and we’re the eastern-most venue on the poker run.”

“Then you go to Durango.”

“Yeah.” Asher met his Alpha’s eyes, hope blooming in his chest. “The final card draw station is at the rally. She’ll end up there eventually, no matter what order they visit the venues. Why the fuck didn’t I think of that?”

“Because your brain is sideways right now.” Cade grinned. “Don’t worry, Ash, things’ll settle once you complete your bond. You’ll see.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

Asher knew several bonded and mated couples in town, but aside from Cade and Lucy, he hadn’t been privy to much of the process. All he knew was that when Cade had met Lucy, things had happened fast. He’d never suspected something like that might happen for him, but here he was, itching to get out of his skin and take to the sky in search of his mate. He needed her with an urgency he couldn’t explain.

Maddox gestured toward the window. “Get out there, Ash. Go find your woman. Let us know if you need backup and

we'll be there."

"Backup?"

"You know," Maddox waved his hand. "Wingmen and shit."

"You want us to drive you?" Cade asked.

Asher shook his head. "I'm good. Flying's faster."

He'd figure out the return trip later. With any luck, he and Duchess would return on that sweet bike of hers.

After he packed a bag, they left his house together, Cade and Maddox wishing him well and reminding him to check in if he needed anything.

As Asher shifted into his dragon form and took to the sky, he'd never been more grateful for his pack mates. If not for his best friend and his Alpha, he really would have lost his mind today.

Now, while he still had that strange ache in his sternum, at least he had clarity around the relentless desire for deeper connection with Duchess. The sense of urgency he hadn't been able to shake since waking up alone. He'd been running on instinct without understanding, but he knew the truth now, Duchess was his *anam cara*. His mate.

And damn, he couldn't wait to see her again.



By the time she and Blaze had rejoined the rest of the club at Chimney Rock, Clea was ready for a shower and a nap. But the crew's enthusiasm for the historical site was contagious, and she found herself going with the flow, taking the hike up to the top with the others.

And holy hell, what a view.

Fantastic didn't even begin to describe it. She literally had a three-hundred-sixty-degree view of the San Juan Mountains. It was easy to imagine a simpler time, a simpler life, from that vantage point overlooking all that nature, and there was something soothing in that.

Bringing Blaze and Mav up to speed hadn't been a picnic, but after that encounter with Kluge, she hadn't had a choice. They'd taken things in stride. Mav already knew most of it anyway, and he didn't care that she was a thief. But that trip down memory lane hadn't been a pleasant one and now, anxiety churned in her gut despite the warm breeze on her face and the spectacular view.

As she gazed out at the landscape, Clea replayed the interaction at Treasure Falls. If Blaze hadn't been there, that whole thing could have gone very differently. As it was, she'd just managed to piss Kluge off, which, while hilarious to her, probably wasn't a good thing. She'd seen that man throw more than one temper tantrum before, and they weren't pretty.

"You okay, Duchess?" Mav's voice startled her out of her thoughts.

"You know it." She tried for a grin, but it was half-hearted. In truth, she felt like crap, exhausted, anxious. God, what she'd give for a little respite.

Thoughts of Asher flooded her mind. Asher with his powerful body and gorgeous voice. His handsome smile and easy way. His belly laughs and tender touches. His emerald eyes and drugging kisses. He'd made her feel safe, welcome, beautiful. What would he think of this situation? she wondered.

Probably for the best they'd only had the one night together. Though the ache in her chest suggested otherwise.

"We're heading back to Durango."

"Already?" She frowned.

"Razor and Duke are doing the flat track tonight, and you've had a helluva day, Duchess." Mav rested a hand on her shoulder. "The sooner we get back to the rally, the better."

Clea nodded. He had a point. And there was safety in numbers. Jeff Kluge may be a total douchebag, but he wasn't

fool enough to go head to head with a bunch of bikers.

“I’m sorry Mav.”

“Nothing to be sorry about.” He pulled her into a one-armed hug. “Let’s get you back to the hotel.”

“Good call.” She nodded. “I’m already dreaming of getting clean and putting this day behind me.”

“I’ll bet you are,” Mav chuckled as they headed for the path. “Nothing a hot bath and some rest can’t cure, right?”

“You know it.” She grinned.

As they made their way down to the bikes, Clea’s mind went back to Asher. She hadn’t even told him her real name. The omission hadn’t been because she was trying to play him, either. She hadn’t even known about his jewelry collection until he’d started draping her in the stuff.

Now that was a kink she could totally get behind.

And even with all that bling available, the man was what she wanted.

Asher.

There was something about that man.

Though they were a one-time thing, she couldn’t help wondering what would have happened if she’d stayed. Sure, they’d just met, but it felt like she’d known him much longer. Like he was a part of her somehow. And yes, technically she’d stolen from him, but she’d only taken his bracelet and watch

as mementos of their time together and she had zero plans of offloading either one. Ever.

As she started her bike, Clea glanced at Asher's watch, loving the way it glinted in the sunlight. Time was a funny thing, wasn't it? A continuum that everyone experienced differently. Some moments seemed to drag, others to zip by in a blink. Some days felt like forever and others happened in fits and spurts, and all the while, time simply was.

She hadn't had enough of it with Asher.

Clea fell in with the pack, grateful Mav had put Duke and Rex on tail gunner. Even though she knew she was safe with the club, she couldn't shake the sense that they were being followed.

Man, she was tired. From the bust of a treasure hunt earlier to that run in with Kluge, today had not gone to plan. And what had begun as the delicious aches from a night of passion had turned into a kind of bone-deep weariness in her body, making her want to curl up and let the world pass her by for a little while.

As they drove on, Clea fought the urge to break away from the pack and turn around. She glanced at Asher's watch again, that strange sense of urgency riding her hard the closer they got to Durango. She couldn't say exactly why she felt that way, but she knew it had something to do with Asher. Which was ridiculous. They'd had one night together.

And yet, she felt drawn to him in a way she couldn't explain, as though they were connected somehow. And the further she

got from Pine Haven, the more tenuous that connection seemed to become, like a rubber band stretched too tight, about to break.

Clea sighed heavily, giving her head a little shake. She needed to get her shit together. Pining after Asher was infinitely foolish, he'd made himself abundantly clear from the outset. She wasn't going to see him again.

And yet, as she cruised along with the MC, she couldn't shake the feelings, the knowing in her core.

She was going the wrong way.



Asher cloaked himself as he flew lower, scanning the roads for any sign of Duchess as he hit Durango. Damn, there were a lot of bikers. He knew the rally was a big deal, but shit. This was needle and haystack territory if he'd ever seen it.

Taking a deep breath, he surveyed the area, identifying a suitable spot to touch down. Not only did he need space in his dragon form, he needed shelter nearby to get dressed. At home, it didn't matter if he was buck-ass naked when he changed forms. Shifters didn't really get worked up about that kind of thing.

Not that people actually walked around town naked or anything.

Pine Haven had laws just like any other place, and public indecency wasn't something he was keen to have on his record. Asher made quick work of things, donning jeans and a rally tee and slinging his bag over his shoulder before heading

around the building and joining the throng of bikers and enthusiasts.

God, how was he ever going to find her in this?

Cursing himself for not having exchanged contact information with Duchess, he snagged an event map and made his way to the poker run booth. She had to hit it at some point this weekend.

He hoped he hadn't already missed her.

Asher checked out the scene, impressed with the event. The lineup looked awesome, the vendors seemed cool, and everywhere he looked, someone was smiling. He wondered idly if he could pull something like this off back home. The town itself wasn't the right venue, but the fairgrounds in Pineberry Springs might work nicely, leaving Pine Haven available for lodging. The idea had merit, but he'd have to be careful with the execution if it were to happen.

While the cash from seasonal traffic was good, no one wanted Pine Haven to make a name for itself in the mainstream. Which was why half the town had been against participating in the poker run. He'd won them over though, and the local commerce had benefitted big time. Every restaurant, bar, and B&B had been nonstop action, from what he could tell.

The thought of lodging made him wonder what hotel Duchess was staying in. Knowing her, it'd probably be the resort and casino one town over, but he doubted the rest of her

club would go for that. Too far away from the rally, although none of them seemed to mind riding.

Frustration plagued him as he waited for Duchess. What if she wasn't going to show? What if they were heading to Utah today or something? What if she'd already come for her last card and played her hand? Or what if she'd decided not to complete the poker run?

Shit. He was so screwed.

"Hey man, you alright?" The guys running the booth seemed nice enough, but it was clear from the look on this one's face, lingering was going to be a problem.

"I was supposed to meet my girl here." He explained, checking his wrist. Shit, where was his watch? Oh, right, he'd taken it off when he'd gotten it wet last night.

"What's she look like?"

Fighting back images of Duchess in the bath, Asher gave her description with little hope. There were many brunettes with blue eyes in the world. "She's with the Chaos Riders."

"Ah," The guy smiled. "Mav's crew. They haven't been through for finals yet, but I'll tell your old lady you stopped by if I see her."

Right, they definitely didn't want him sticking around.

"You checked the hotel?" His friend asked.

"Next on my list." Asher smiled, not wanting to let on he didn't know where the fuck to go now that his plan of waiting

at the cards booth was busted.

“I gotta hand it to Mav,” the other guy chuckled. “He was smart booking for the whole weekend even though he was road tripping. The Marriott’s completely sold out now. Hell, all the close hotels are. I had to get a campsite.” He shook his head. “My old lady wasn’t thrilled with that at first, but she’s having fun now.”

“That’s good to hear.” Asher nodded. “Can I leave my number in case my woman stops by before I see her?”

“Nah, man.” He shook his head. “We have enough to keep up with.”

As if on cue, a group of bikers came up for their cards. Asher thanked the guys, bidding them farewell, hope swelling in his chest again as he pulled out his phone. A Marriott close by. He could work with that.

Unfortunately, there were several Marriott hotels nearby, each with a cutesy name ending with Inn. Asher took a seat at a picnic table, taking some deep breaths while trying to marshal his thoughts. He couldn’t afford to spin out again right now. He needed to think clearly. She was out there somewhere. She had to be.



Clea stretched luxuriously, grateful for the bed. Mav had been right, nothing a hot bath and a little rest couldn't cure. Well, almost nothing, but she'd focus on what she could control.

Too bad her dreams weren't one of them.

As though trying to forget Asher wasn't hard enough.

Her subconscious mind had been serving the blonde Adonis to her while she'd rested, and she'd woken up aroused with no one but herself to do anything about it, which sucked. But, she reminded herself on another stretch, she'd dealt with worse.

Far worse, actually.

Waking up needy wasn't necessarily a bad thing, it was the fact she was all alone that had her frustrated. Which was silly. She'd been alone for a majority of her life. Same stuff, new location, wherever you were, there you were and all that. Blah, blah, blah.

Clea took a deep inhale as she stretched again, glancing at the clock on her bedside table. She still had a few hours before the flat track races and the stunt show. As she contemplated the merits of staying in bed versus roaming the rally grounds, her thoughts drifted back to Asher again, wondering what he was up to, remembering what they'd done...

The knocking on the door had her pulling both hands above the sheet on a curse. She kept up with the cursing as she scrambled out of bed and into a robe. Whoever that was better

have a damn good reason for trying to beat down her door. They'd interrupted some quality solo time.

Throwing the door open, she recoiled at the visitor. He took full advantage of her surprise, pushing her back into the room with his bodyguard in tow.

“What do you want, Kluge?” She demanded, ripping herself from his grasp and putting as much space between them as possible.

Shit, how had he found her?

“It's Kluge,” he corrected.

While she normally got a kick out of that one, Clea didn't have the mental bandwidth to spare for chuckles right now. The sight of Muscles barring the door brought back memories of being locked in that fucking penthouse.

“You know, stalking is illegal.” At least her voice came out steady. “I'm pretty sure you can get a few years in prison for this.”

“Like that restraining order you filed holds any weight,” he snarked. “When are you going to get it through that pretty little head of yours that the law can't touch me? You, on the other hand,” His gaze turned dark. “You stole from me, Cookie.”

“No.” She smiled, trying to keep him talking as she urged her brain to think of a way out of there. “I loaned a few of your things to interested parties. There's a difference.”

Sure, he'd have to buy back his own collection, but he was a billionaire, he could afford it.

“My Banksy is in Qatar.” He grumbled.

“My, it's quite the world traveler.” She'd fenced it in Everett before getting the hell out of Washington.

“Quit fucking around.” Kluge took a step forward, rage emanating from him ominously.

Clea glanced around, taking stock of the situation, looking for anything that could help. She was barefoot, naked beneath her robe, blocked into her own hotel room by two assholes, and her phone was on the other side of the bed. While she knew she could take Kluge when it came to fisticuffs, if she made a move on him, his goon would take over. The last thing she wanted was that wall of muscle anywhere near her. Muscles could restrain her in a heartbeat and with the rage and desperation Kluge was rocking, fun and games would not ensue.

“Fine.” She held her hands up. “Just calm down. I'm sure we can handle whatever's bothering you, like adults.”

“Whatever's bothering—” He pointed a shaking finger at her, “I want my diamonds back, you bitch.”

“I don't have your diamonds.”

“You still wearing them!”

“Seriously?” She sighed, crossing her arms over her chest, trying to appear unruffled though her heart rate was through

the roof. “This again? Just have that jeweler in Bellingham make you some new ones. We both know you can afford it.”

Kluge made a strangled sound, running his hands along his bald pate as though he still had hair. Clea moved closer to the little table. One of those chairs would make a good weapon.

For about a minute, anyway.

Still, it was worth a try.

“Come on, Cookie.” Kluge was going for calm, but his voice cracked. “Just hand them over.”

The strain on his face surprised her, but she didn’t let it show. Clea focused on her breathing, trying to get her heart rate to calm down as she inched closer to her goal. If she could just get to the chair, one hit would knock Kluge out and then—she glanced at the door where Muscles stood with his arms crossed over his massive chest.

Shit.

There was no way she was getting out of this one.

Not this time.



The spikes of fear were new.

Asher bit back a growl of frustration at his current lot, a sense of impotence dogging him as he tried to focus. He normally had all the cunning of, well, of a dragon. But damnit if this mate bond shit wasn't messing with his head.

The urgency he'd felt this morning had only ratcheted higher as the day had worn on, and now, bouts of actual terror were making themselves known in his system. He was no closer to finding Duchess than he'd been earlier, though.

Well, maybe a little closer. He was in the right town, at least.

Fuck, he was so screwed.

He took a deep breath, and then another, trying to clear his head so he could think beyond his primal need and calm those goddamn spikes of fear. His *anam cara* was nearby. She had to be. And he was going to find her.

As Asher shut out the world and focused on his breathing, he noticed the hum. Deep in his chest, a thrumming sensation he

knew well. Treasure.

Part of his hoard.

Cursing himself for not having thought of that earlier, he reached out with his senses in search of what was his. Dragons were intimately connected to their hoard. The treasures, once claimed, an extension of their very life force. That connection was why anyone who ever tried stealing from them usually ended up dead. A dragon could track their treasure across the world, and Asher knew that his was close by.

Though he should have been elated that he'd found her location, doubt crept in as Asher closed the distance. What if Duchess didn't want him? They'd only agreed to one night after all, and she'd seemed delighted when he'd laid out the terms. He'd never expected to find the type of connection they'd shared, though. And that connection changed everything for him.

Shit, if she didn't want to be his, he was beyond screwed.

Now he understood why some of his ancestors had abducted maidens and knights. The bond was no joke. He felt like he was going to die without Duchess in his life. As much as he wanted her, though, he wasn't about to coerce her into anything. That wasn't love.

And fuck him, but he loved her.

Asher rubbed his sternum again with a new understanding of the ache there. Damn, he was so alone in this, this awakening, this dawning of knowledge, and it was his own fucking fault.

His heart ached anew for the loss of his mum, and he vowed to hit up the fire station and talk to Finn and Idris when he got a chance. He'd avoided the older dragons for far too long, telling himself since they weren't the same breed, they couldn't help him. But that had been a crock of shit, hadn't it? He'd felt the guilt of his mother's sacrifice and been ashamed to ask for help or to receive any that had been offered. Maybe if he'd let Finn mentor him, he'd have known from the beginning what the fuck was up with this connection, this bond.

His *anam cara*.

Why the fuck had it taken a bear and a wolf to help him recognize the truth?

Well, he thought as he stepped into the lobby, thank God they had. If not for Maddox and Cade, he's still be impotently pacing his house, wanting to bust out of his skin. Now, he felt the thrumming in his chest, in his bones. His treasure calling to him, like unto like. He followed the call, his blood heating as he made his way through the hotel. His life force strengthening as he closed in on his goal.

Approaching Duchess's door, Asher's nerves cut through the humming excitement at reconnecting. What if she didn't want him?

Only one way to find out.

He knocked with his heart in his throat, smoothing his hair and clothes as he waited. God, he wished he'd worn something

nicer, maybe brushed his hair with something besides his fingers today.

Asher frowned as the silence stretched. He knew his treasure was in that room. He felt it. And yet, no one answered the door. He tried again.

And again.

And one more time for good measure. And—

What the fuck?

The guy who answered the door didn't belong there. Thickly muscled and wearing a suit, he had bodyguard written all over him. His face had a whole lot of fuck-off going on, but Asher wasn't having anything to do with that.

What the hell? She'd already found another lover?

Oh fuck no.

Asher coldcocked the guy as he pressed his way into the room, fury infusing his veins at the sight of Duchess in nothing but a robe, looking up at another suit. He didn't know which was worse, the fact that the guy practically had her pinned, or the at the fact she'd already moved on. But fuck, that's what they'd agreed to, hadn't they? Still,

“You'd think after what we shared, you'd have the decency to give it a few days,” he snarled.

“Asher—”

“Don't give me some fucking platitudes.” God, this was a nightmare come true. She didn't want him and what the fuck

was he going to do?

The other guy started laughing, just clapping his hands and cracking up. The bastard.

“Oh,” The guy wiped his eyes. “Oh, this is too good to be true. Let me guess, you had the best sex of your entire life and she robs you blind, huh?” The suit focused on Duchess. “Your days are numbered, Cookie.”

Cookie? What the fuck?

Before Asher could speak his mind, the suit turned to him fully, extending his hand.

“Jeff Kluge. And I’d say this makes us allies.”

“Hardly.” Asher cast a glance at Duchess, leaving the suit’s hand hanging. With the full frontal, he recognized the guy. Big wig tech billionaire who’d been trying to buy up every private security firm west of the Continental Divide. “What the hell are you doing with him?”

“Asher,” Duchess held up her hands. “it’s not what you think. I—”

“That’s my watch.” He frowned, though the sight of it on her slender wrist did things to him he didn’t want to acknowledge right now. “And my bracelet.”

Damn, that black gold caressed her skin perfectly, those black diamonds glinting in the light as her hand went to her throat.

Asher tried to get his head back with the fucking program, but the column of her neck was just begging for his attention. Her creamy skin crying out to be—

“Hold on there.” Kluge stepped in front of him, disrupting his line of sight. “I was here first. You wait your turn.”

“Wait my turn?” Asher snarled.

Who the fuck did this guy think he was?

At least Kluge had the grace to back step a little, holding his hands up all let’s-play-nice and dropping his voice.

“Look, I just want her earrings. Then you can do whatever the hell you want with her.”

Asher focused on the diamonds in Duchess’s earlobes, trying not to think of the way they’d sparkled while she’d thrown her head back in ecstasy last night. The gems were dazzlers, sure, but he didn’t see what the big deal was. Duchess was far more valuable.

“Fine.” He shrugged, taking a step back. “I’ll wait then.”

The look Kluge shot him held both malice and glee and it took everything in Asher to back off. But what else could he do? He’d already assaulted a member of one of the most powerful tech tycoon’s staff. So the guy wanted Duchess’s earrings, big deal. He could wait for the exchange and send Kluge on his way before having a heart to heart with Duchess. God knows, he didn’t need any witnesses for his heartache.

And it would definitely come to that.

The defiance on Duchess's face was clear as day.

Shit, he was so fucked.



Even though his gaze suggested she was probably in mortal danger, the fact that Asher had found her buoyed Clea somehow. Damn, even pissed off, he was handsome as hell.

“Right then.” Kluge clapped his hands together, drawing her gaze. Shit, how could she have forgotten about him? “As I was saying before we were so rudely interrupted, I’d like my earrings back.”

Clea shook her head, holding her ground. Sure, she could just hand them over, but with the way Asher was glowering at her, she wanted him to know the truth. She may have stolen a few things, but those earrings were hers legitimately.

“I believe you mean *my* earrings,” she drawled with more confidence than she felt. Damn, what Asher must think of her. “These were a gift. And after all the shit you put me through, I’m not giving them back.” She tapped a finger on one of them. “Asshole tax, remember?”

“Come on, Cookie—”

“I’m not your Cookie, Kluge, I never have been. And you’re not getting these back. We’re done, remember?”

Kluge gritted his teeth and Clea fought back a satisfied smirk. No need to let him see how much fun she was having taunting him with his own name.

“Look,” He took a deep breath, holding his hands out to the sides as he went for calm, “I can have new ones made for you.”

“Why would you do that when these are perfectly fine?”

Clea cast a glance at Asher, who was glaring daggers at Kluge, wondering if he thought this situation as sketchy as she did. The guy had tracked her down over earrings? She’d been wearing them for months. Why now?

“Because I need those back.” He spoke slowly, clearly fighting back irritation as he explained to her like she was a kindergartener. “I know you like those, so I’ll have new ones made, exactly like them. I’ll even call the jeweler right now and place the order.”

“What’s the big deal, Kluge?” She dropped her arms, resting her hands on the back of the chair she planned to hit him with if necessary. Somehow, with Asher in the room, she didn’t feel as trapped. But she wasn’t about to take any chances. “I get you want them, but why these in particular? We both know you can afford whatever the hell you want.”

He dropped his arms on a sigh, his shoulders curving in.

“They’re not mine.”

“You gave me stolen goods?” Clea laughed at that one, hard. Talk about the whole pot and kettle thing. “Who’d you get

them from? The Bratva? 'Ndrangheta?"

"Worse."

Clea froze at that comment, racking her brain for pertinent intel. Whoever was worse than the Russians and Italians was still probably going through Botswana for traffic. Maybe she could reach out to her contacts and—

"Just give me the earrings, Aētos." The steel in Kluge's voice sent a chill down her spine. Whoever had his balls in a vice was obviously not someone to mess with.

"Who?" she pressed.

She'd been wearing the things after all and if whoever they belonged to was pushing Kluge so hard he'd tracked her to Colorado, they couldn't be far behind.

"Jyost." He actually shuddered when he said the name.

Clea shook her head, trying to recall where she'd heard it before. It sounded Dutch, maybe German.

"You said they weren't 'Ndrangheta."

"He's not." Kluge shook his head, lowering his voice even more. "He's worse. You don't know how fucked I am if you don't return those earrings."

"Now that's intriguing." She shot a glance at Asher, who'd seemed to calm down a bit. He sat on the edge of the bed, his elbows resting on his thighs, observing the conversation with a clenched jaw. "You're telling me your life is in escrow right

now because of these?” She gestured to her ears. “How inconvenient.”

“Damnit, Aëtos.” He rushed her, grabbing Clea’s shoulders and shaking her. “Quit fucking around!”

The low growl had both of them looking at Asher, who’d closed the distance from the bed, crowding them both.

“Let go. Now.”

A shiver of fear flittered through Clea’s body, immediately replaced by heat. There was something utterly primal in Asher’s stance. His powerful body poised for a fight, his emerald eyes locked on Kluge, daring him to move. And that low growl in his voice... Damn, he was sexy as hell right now.

Kluge complied immediately, tripping over himself to get to the wall as Asher cupped Clea’s cheek.

“You okay?”

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak. His eyes were... glowing? Clea held her breath, not daring to move as those luminous greens raked over her body. Her brain told her it was a trick of the light, but she knew it wasn’t.

Those eyes were illuminated from within.

Before she found her voice again, Asher refocused on Kluge.

“You’re going to stay the fuck away from her.”

Kluge cowered against the wall, the look of abject terror letting her know she hadn’t imagined it. Asher’s eyes were definitely glowing.

Holy shit. What was he?



“Don’t touch her again.” Asher stared down at Kluge, waiting for confirmation that he understood.

“I just want the earrings, I swear.”

Kluge’s cowering shouldn’t have pleased him so much, but it did. That asshole had touched his woman. Asher should be tearing him limb from limb. While he didn’t give a shit about Kluge’s fear, the scent of Duchess’s kept him in check. Damn it, the last thing he’d wanted to do was scare her, but he was doing a helluva good job of it, wasn’t he?

He cast a glance at her. Duchess’s gaze was locked on him, her hands gripping the back of that chair so hard her knuckles were white.

“It’s okay, precious,” he said softly. “I won’t hurt you.”

The fear in those beautiful eyes cut right through him.

She inhaled audibly, opening her mouth to speak and then just nodding her head.

“Please, Aëtos,” Kluge whined from the floor, “For the love of God, just give me the earrings. I swear I’ll leave you be. You have no idea what Jyost is capable of. He was ways of tracking—”

“Wait a minute.” She frowned, loosening her grip on the chair. “Jyost. Braden Jyost? The guy whose tech you were trying to rip off?”

“I bought his company. That was a fair exchange.”

“You buried his company.” She scowled. “There’s a difference. And isn’t he in prison right now?”

“What does this have to do with her earrings?” Asher asked, wondering how a guy in prison could hold such sway in the tech tycoon’s life.

Kluge sighed heavily as he stood up. “Those are the archetype. Jyost wants them back.”

“The archetype?”

“His proprietary tech.” Kluge shook his head. “I don’t know how he did it. He must have destroyed the documentation on his prototypes.” He glanced at Duchess. “Those earrings are the key to the Fidelity line.”

“You mean that abominable violation of privacy you tried to tout as engagement rings?” Duchess frowned. “You’ve been tracking me through the earrings?” She pulled them off on a curse.

“Jyost has. And I have no fucking clue how. It’s not like the guy has internet in solitary.”

“Let me see those.” Asher held out his hand.

The moment the diamonds connected with his palm, he let out a laugh.

Kluge narrowed his eyes. “What’s so funny?”

“You think this Jyost is bad now,” he chuckled, “you haven’t seen anything yet. I’d suggest you release him sooner rather than later.”

While dragons liked their solitude, being separated from their hoard was untenable. It’d be only a matter of time before the guy went mental.

Asher turned to Duchess, “We can’t keep these.”

“Yeah, no joke.” She crossed her arms with a frown. “Like I want embedded trackers in my life. You owe me new earrings, Kluge.”

“It’s Kluge” He said it like ‘clue-guh’ and Duchess’s smirk let Asher know she’d been purposely mispronouncing the name all this time. He chuckled at that. She really was something else. “And I’ve already agreed to get you new ones.”

“That won’t be necessary.” Asher informed him, pocketing the earrings. “Don’t worry, Duchess.” He took her hand, pulling her closer, grateful she didn’t pull away. “We’ll get you new ones.”

The smile she gave him lit him up inside. Maybe there was hope for them yet.

“Wait a minute.” Kluge frowned. “You just put them in your pocket. Those are mine.”

“No, those are Jyost’s.” Asher glared at Kluge, appreciating the way the man paled and backed into the wall. “You release him and tell him to come find me. I’ll keep these safe until his arrival.”

“You fucking asshole.” Kluge drew himself up to his full height, which was still several inches shorter than Asher. “You think you can—”

“I know I can,” Asher replied confidently. “And believe me when I tell you that if you come against either one of us,” He motioned between himself and Duchess, “You will regret it. You think you have things bad now...”

Kluge looked back and forth between them, opening and closing his mouth like a newly caught fish for a moment, before he finally frowned.

“You can’t be serious.”

“We are,” Asher said with finality. “Now, let’s call you a luggage cart so you and your friend can leave. We’re done here. I’ll know when you’ve released Jyost, and until he comes to pick up his earrings personally, you’re going to be on my shit list.”

Probably much longer, if he was honest.

By the time Kluge agreed to his terms and cleared the room, Asher was ready to climb out of his skin again. Sure, he was

alone with Duchess like he'd wanted to be, but the silence between them felt like a death knell.

Asher rubbed his aching sternum, trying to think of the right words to say and coming up blank. He had so much to tell her, and yet, outsiders weren't supposed to know most of it.

God, he didn't want her to be an outsider.

They'd been so close, so connected before. But now, sitting here like this in her hotel room with him in one of the chairs and her on the foot of the bed, the distance between them felt vast and insurmountable.

A soft rustling broke the deep silence and Asher glanced over to see Duchess standing up, taking off his watch.

"Here." she said softly, crossing the room to him with her hand out.

Asher reached for her and she dropped his watch and bracelet into his open palm.

"Let me guess." She smiled sadly. "They're micro-chipped, like a little pet. That's how you found me, isn't it?"

"No."

"Then how?"

Asher shook his head. He wanted to tell her he really did. But if she wasn't going to stay with him, he had to protect his people, no matter how much it killed him to withhold from her.

“I hate this distance between us, Duchess,” he admitted. “I know when we met, we agreed to one night only but,” He gazed up into those sapphire eyes, putting the whole of his heart on the line. “I don’t want us to end there. I want you in my life, precious, full time.”

“Full time,” she repeated slowly. “As in, not a weekend fling.”

“God, you’re so much more to me than a fling. Surely you’ve felt that.”

She nodded.

“It doesn’t make sense, though. We just met. The intensity of our con—”

“So, you’ve felt it too?” He smiled, hope blooming in his chest again. “The connection, the pull.”

“Yes,” she whispered. “Since I first saw you.”

“Same.” He grinned, standing and pulling her closer. “Among my people, when we connect with another like that, it’s because they’re our *anam cara*, our true mate.”

“Mate...” Duchess stepped back at that word. “Listen, Asher, I need to tell you something before we go any further.”

Dread crept into his belly at the unease on her beautiful face, but he encouraged her to go on. He had to hear it, whatever she had to say.

“My name isn’t Duchess. That’s just my club name. My given name is Clea, Cleone Aëtos.”

“The eagle.” He smiled, translating her surname.

She shook her head. “He was my father, and he’s dead. The apple didn’t fall far from the tree, though.” She raised her chin, looking him in the eyes. “I’m a thief, Asher, just like he was. But I didn’t steal from you on purpose.” She dropped her gaze. “Well, I did. But not to be vindictive. I just wanted a memento of the best sex of my life. I never planned to offload your things, I just... wanted something to remember you by.”

Her words worked their way through the anxiety he’d been rocking all day, soothing him in an unexpected way.

“Best sex of your life, huh?” Asher chuckled. “Oh, precious, we were just getting started.”

She glanced at the bed, then back at him and damn, the desire in her eyes spoke straight to his cock. But he didn’t want to take her here. Still, he found himself ducking his head and kissing those soft lips of hers, relishing the way she opened for him as though no time had passed since they’d last been together.

When they came up for air, they were on the bed and Clea’s robe was wide open, his palm cupping one of her perfect breasts.

“Shit, Clea.” He pulled back. “I’m sorry, I just—”

“Don’t worry about it.” She smiled lazily. “I’m on board, you know.”

Asher’s heart stopped momentarily at her words, then beat erratically.

“What do you mean?”

“Really?” she drawled with a saucy smirk. “You need me to spell it out for you?” She arched into his hand, and Asher fought back a curse. She was just so damn fucking perfect.

But he had to be sure.

“I can tell you want to have sex, precious.” Make that two of them. “I want to know if it’s just that or if you want more.”

She pulled away, sitting up and rearranging her robe. Asher had to focus on his breathing to remain calm.

“I want more, Asher,” she said softly. “I want everything. But I’m not clear on what that is exactly, what that means. It’s just this sense, this...” She shook her head with a frown. “You sure you don’t care that I’m a thief?”

“I love everything about you, Clea.” And that was the damn truth. “We’ll have to work on the PR around that job title, though.”

She laughed at that, and Asher felt his own spirits lift even more. After a moment, a comfortable silence fell between them again and Clea reached out, taking his hand.

“Okay, I’ve told you mine.” She smiled knowingly. “It’s your turn.”

Asher could only stare at her, marveling at her strength, appreciating her willingness to communicate openly. He knew she could do it in the bedroom, but this - wanting to know his truth. It felt more intimate than anything they’d already shared.

After a long moment, she squeezed his hand.

“Did you know your eyes were glowing earlier?” she asked slowly. “Like, Christmas lights glowing. You want to tell me what that’s all about?”

Asher steeled himself for her to run, but he had to tell the truth. He couldn’t keep this from her. If she really was his *anam cara*, she’d understand. Just as he understood that she went by many names and worked as a thief. In truth, they were more alike than she knew.

“I’m Dragon.”

It felt good to say that aloud, good to tell her the truth. And yet, Asher didn’t feel any relief as the frown flitted across Clea’s face.

“What club are you with? I was thinking of officially patching with Mav’s crew. I don’t want to be rivals.”

Asher struggled for a moment with her words, but the meaning finally set in.

She thought Dragon was his club name.

“No, not a club. I’m not with a motorcycle club. I *am* a dragon. A shifter. I can take human or dragon form.”

“A dragon.” Her brows being up like that couldn’t be good. “As in an actual dragon? Like a fire breathing, scaled, winged, loves treasure dragon.”

“Yes.”

She just stared at him for a moment and Asher wracked his brain for a better way to explain things, but there wasn't one. This was his truth. He was Dragon, and he lived with one foot in humanity and the other in the land of beasts.

God, if she left now after being given this knowledge, he'd have to—

“Oh, my gosh!” She tackled him with a hug, knocking him back against the mattress. “That’s so fucking cool! No wonder you love shiny things so much! Can I see your hoard? Wait,” She sat up. “Do dragons really have hoards?”

“We do.” He nodded on a laugh, pulling her into his arms and kissing the top of her head. “It’s how I found you, actually.” He leaned back so he could see her face. “I tracked my treasure.”

“Like Jyost’s earrings.”

“Exactly. He’s Dragon too, though I’m not sure what type.”

“There’s more than one type?”

“Yes, but we tend to keep to ourselves for the most part. There are actually a few others in town.”

As Asher explained about Pine Haven Falls being a sanctuary for shifters and the role he played in the community, Clea hung on his every word. Her unbridled enthusiasm as she asked questions and assimilated information filled him with pride and love.

The fact that she fully embraced his truth blew him away.

“This has to remain between us though, Clea,” he cautioned. “It’s not public knowledge outside the town, and even in town, most shifters keep that part of their identity on the DL because we live alongside humans.”

“You mean there are people in Pine Haven who have no clue their neighbor is actually a dragon or a wolf or whatever?”

“Yes.”

Before she could reply, he pressed in for a kiss. It was obvious Clea had a million questions, and Asher vowed silently to answer all of them later. Right now, though, he needed to connect with her in the most primal of ways.

And she was right there with him, just like before.

In a dance of limbs, clothes were lost, and pleasure found. Asher relished relearning every curve of Clea’s body, reacquainting himself with every inch of her from her dark, silken locks to her delicate toes. The feel of her on his skin, the sounds of her pleasure and ecstatic way she called his name spurring him on from ledge to ledge to ledge.

As he released into her luscious core, he felt himself floating on that sea of bliss, caught in the euphoric tide, Clea’s oceanic scent washing over him as her inner walls milked his cock, calling forth another release. Time did not exist for them, not right now. There was no past, and no future, only this moment. This perfect union.

Asher repositioned, kissing down the column of Clea’s neck before coming back to her lips. “Will you wear my mark,

Clea?” He asked with reverence.

“Your mark, like a tattoo?”

“Yes,” he murmured against her skin, “I want to give you everything, precious. All of me. I love you and I want you to be the crown jewel in my life.”

“Will it hurt? I’ve never had ink before.”

“Only in the best way.”

She shifted her hips against him at that and damn, but he loved the sensation. Still buried deep in her wet heat, he was ready to go again.

“Clea, precious.” He kissed her deep, finding a rhythm and then stopping himself.

“Don’t stop, Asher,” she moaned. “I need you.”

“And I you.” He cupped her cheek, gazing down into those gorgeous eyes. “God, I love you Clea.”

“Me too,” she grinned. “So much, it’s scary. You realize how crazy that sounds, right? I mean, we just met, and I feel like you’re... home or something.”

He kissed her again, reveling in the truth of her words, the joy in his heart. He’d found his *anam cara*, and she’d found hers.

When they came up for air, she chased his lips in that way of hers and Asher gave her a sweet, chaste kiss before pulling back again.

“Clea Aëtos, my Duchess, my precious, will you wear my mark?”

“Mmm.” She rolled her hips again. “Of course I will, Darling.”

As they started moving again, Asher made a trail of kisses along Clea’s jaw and down her throat, loving her mewls of pleasure as he nestled in at her neck. Damn, she was so fucking perfect.

And she was his.

He kissed along her shoulder, nipping her hot skin on his way back to her throat as he kept up with the driving rhythm down below. Clea met him thrust for thrust, calling his name in that throaty way she got when she was close to her climax. Asher bit down on the tender juncture at Clea’s neck and shoulder, sending them both flying off that cliff, coming again and again.

He had no concept at all of time, or space, or reality. All he knew was Clea. Entire universes collided and reformed as he marked her in the way of his people, pleasure coalescing into light and infusing every pore, every cell until they were both reborn.

As they came back to themselves, Asher marveled at the beauty of the bonding. Through their link of light, he could feel Clea’s joy, her love.

“You came for *me*,” she whispered with awe. “I didn’t know.” Clea shifted up, resting a hand on his chest. “I thought

you just wanted your stuff back.”

“I wanted you, Clea.” Asher smiled, cupping her cheek.
“You’re the only treasure I care about.”

The radiant smile she gave him took his breath away.

“I’ve never been anyone’s treasure before.”

“Well, get used to it, precious.” He grinned. “Because you’re mine now.”

“And you’re mine.” She turned her head to kiss his palm. Through their link, he could feel her delight, and that lit him up even more.

Though he wanted to get her home and adorn her with jewels, he couldn’t get enough of her right here, right now. Hell, he probably couldn’t get enough of her ever. And that was the beauty of his treasure. It was precious, no matter the setting. To have, and to hold, and to behold.

Perfect in every season.





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Thanks so much for reading! I hope you enjoyed Asher and Clea's story as much as I enjoyed writing it. I'm looking forward to sharing [more adventures featuring the sexy shifters of Pine Haven Falls](#) with you soon.

In the meantime, I'd love to invite you to [my FREE Insider's Community](#) where you'll get the inside scoop on creative updates including sneak peeks, deleted and behind-the-scenes, giveaways, exclusive offers and special events.

Also, it would mean SO much to me if you would take a brief moment to [leave a rating and/or review on this book](#). It helps other readers find me. Thank you for your support!

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ABOUT SARAH

Sarah Dinan writes spicy paranormal romance and urban fantasy stories featuring alpha-protectors and the people who bring them to their knees. She's been a teacher, actress, martial artist, radio DJ, Turkish cuisine connoisseur, hair model, belly dancer, ropes course facilitator, and is a critically acclaimed Celtic singer. When she's not penning tales about the art of surrender and the ownership of desire, Sarah can be found enjoying nature, encouraging creatives, making music, playing video games, and advocating for clean water. Sarah lives in Austin, Texas with her husband, son, and battle cello, Tilda. Visit her at SarahDinan.com or connect on socials @thesarahdinan.



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