



Surrounded by Scales

Book 8 of The New Hemlock Wolf Pack Saga

MAGGIE HEMLOCK

Surrounded By
Scales

New Hemlock Wolf Pack Saga Book
8

Maggie Hemlock

For everyone who's stuck with
me this long. We're onto the
second generation, my dears.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and events are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR: This is not the beginning of a series, nor is it meant to be read on its own as a standalone. The complete reading order for this series and the Hemlock Mpreg Universe books can be found at the end of this book.

P.S. This book contains polyamory and spanking.

P.S.S. I've included the Healer's Oath/Charge of the Healer in this book as well, because I know not all my readers started with The Hemlock Wolf Pack and may not be familiar with it.

The Charge of the Healer

Today I take up the charge of the healer. I make an oath to follow keep my vows to the best of my ability. I promise to go above and beyond what is expected to protect life, society, and the world as we know it from harm and disease. I pledge my humble hands, higher learning, and wholesome heart to my mission. Today and every day, I mindfully choose compassion over cruelty, giving over taking, and healing over harm. I accept this mission and way of life according to my own freewill.

I will respect and honor the hard work of my predecessors and teachers and ensure they gift of knowledge and understanding they granted me will be put to use in healing the sick and protecting the healthy. I will do my utmost best to ensure that their knowledge is passed down to the next generation of humble hearts and willing hands. If a willing student seeks my knowledge, I will honor those who walked this path before me and impart our combined wisdom to inquisitive mind of future healers.

I will utilize the knowledge of the healing sages to the best of my ability to treat to heal the sick and injured, comfort the dying, and to usher new life into the world. I will uphold my promises while remembering my patients are more than their ailments or conditions. I won't forget the most important lesson of medicine: kindness, a smile, and warmth will do more than any drug, surgery, or therapy. For if the spirit is nurtured, the body is stronger and more receptive of medical care.

I will be indiscriminate in my care and healing. All deserve the chance of life. It is not my place to play the law of the land, god, or fate. I will provide the greatest care to any and every patient regardless of their station in life, heritage, lifestyle, and other factors. My mission doesn't allow for withholding care from those who are different. For on the

inside we are the same. My mission is compassion not judgement.

While patients are under my care, they may speak freely to me and I will uphold their privacy. For they do not confide in me for the sake of telling the world their secrets, but for the sake of their health and their healing.

I pledge to not allow pride or boastfulness from keeping me from seeking answers to questions I am yet to know. I will not hesitate to ask my fellow healers for their advice, expertise, or helping hands.

When possible, I will prevent disease and pain. Just as a peace treaty before a battle is more successful than afterwards, so is prevention to curing.

At all times, I will keep in mind, that I am part of society and not above it. As an inhabitant of earth and other realms, I understand I more than most have a responsibility to society as a whole, be they healthy or in need of my aid.

If my path falters, I pray to the ancestors, a fellow healer is there to right my steps and heal the path before me. May I always keep the path pure, respectable, and compassionate so that I may experience the humble joy of aiding those in need.

Chapter One

Dara

“Remind me again why we didn’t take Cade’s offer of escorting us through the Other World gateways?” Sam asked, staring out the plane window.

We were somewhere over the states now and his inner beast grew restless. Though, restless had been a good word to describe Sam for as long as I knew him. I met him as Detective Samuel Grint. Most detectives I met working as a Doctor at the London Moonscale Hospital were restless. Like doctors they saw enough to keep them up at night. I thought after he retired, he’d be less restless, but his wasn’t a retirement brought on by old age. Like my own retirement, it was our way of saying to Clarence we couldn’t in good faith and by oath support any full fledged war in London. If I had gone to medical school to be a surgeon, I would’ve stayed behind. I couldn’t support the war, but battle medics were always needed. I was a family doctor more familiar with childhood pox and delivering babies than I was with sewing a leg back onto a man who might not make it anyway.

“Dara, love,” Sam said, pulling me back to the current moment. “Are you with me?”

“I am. We took the plane because Cade is banished, remember?” I whispered to my chosen mate and new husband.

His fingers looped through mine, and he squeezed my hand.

“I’m starting to think we could’ve flown this ourselves.”

“Perhaps,” I nodded. “We could’ve, but we would arrive dead tired. I’m not retired. I have a job to do. War or not, the next Moonscale Heir has probably been conceived by now. Whether we’re in London or in the woods, someone has to ensure the survival of that baby.”

“Oh, love,” Sam smiled at me, and I went warm and fuzzy all over just as I had since the first time he smiled at me.

No one had ever done that to me before. I never expected it would be a restless detective that burnt me up inside in all the right ways.

“At least in the woods no one will ask stupid questions,” Sam said, leaning back in his seat and stretching out his legs.

“It’s as I said before, I think their noses are broken or they don’t trust them,” I said.

“No, love. They’re jackasses,” he said and made a braying sound.

I laughed, but an older dragon shifter two seats in front of us turned to shoot us a dirty look.

“Sorry, chap,” Sam said. “Newlyweds and all.”

“Well, if you make that sound in bed, I hope he has earplugs,” he said and turned around to resume his doorstopper of a novel.

Not everyone in London understood why two Alphas would decide to tie their lives together as we had. It wasn’t unheard of, but it was uncommon. Sam was a widower. I met him shortly after his true-mate died. For years we were friends and then one day everything clicked. I hadn’t met my true-mate, but some dragons never did. Sometimes Sam was still torn about that, but we had our contingency plans in place. I hoped if I ever crossed paths with my other half they’d love Sam as much as I did. If that was the case, together we could give him the world. He’d never want for anything ever again. He’d never be in danger.

“What are you thinking about?” Sam asked me.

“Our new life. The lack of jackasses. Cade Moonscale in the middle of nowhere instead of in meeting halls,” I chuckled.

“You’re not much older than him,” Sam reminded me.

“Oh, yes, Sam. I’m so young,” I teased.

“You are.”

“What does that have to do with being in the middle of nowhere?” I asked him.

“Everything,” he laughed. “Nothing actually. I just can’t imagine you and Cade in high school together.”

“Well, it happened,” I shrugged. “A good thing for us too or we’d be stuck on Hemlock Mountain or in Spain or something.”

“And you’re all about the small town charm, now, eh?” Sam laughed and squeezed my hand.

“I am all about the small-town charm where the first mate will eat people for being rude. It has a certain appeal, doesn’t it?”

“Well, if Liam eats a jackass, you’re the one who will have to cure his stomachache,” Sam laughed again.

“Better than worrying about Clarence Moonscale’s ulcers,” I frowned.

“Oh, that man’s his own worst enemy,” Sam frowned back at me, his brows furrowing together. “Speaking of Moonscales, is Cade there yet?”

“We’re still an hour out,” I said, glancing at my watch. “Are you expecting him to run late?”

“I’m expecting that he’s so wrapped up with his mate in the covers that he’s not thinking about us at five o’clock in the morning.”

“I hope so. If you have to be banished from London you should at least have a good time,” I laughed, and Sam leaned over to steal a kiss.

The reader huffed again.

Chapter Two

Cade

I rubbed small circles on Eston's back while my dragon did a happy dance inside me. If I was a bit further into my morning coffee, I would've told him to sit down and shut up. There was enough jubilation going on in the corridor outside our bedroom. Eston didn't need a party while he worshiped the porcelain throne.

"We're having a hatchling! We're having a hatchling! We're having a hatchling!" My dragon sang out.

"Don't make me laugh, Alpha," Eston said between rounds of being sick. "It hurts."

"Mate," I said to him, still rubbing circles on his back.

"You have to go pick everyone up."

"We have to go pick everyone up," I said, not liking the idea of leaving him here with morning sickness alone.

"I don't think the RV and me will get along today," Eston said, pushing back onto his heels and flushing the toilet. "I've never been fond of anything motorized anyway, but today," he patted his stomach.

"I'll make Liam go," I said, grabbing a washcloth from the cabinet and running it under the hot tap.

"Can Liam even drive the RV?" Eston asked, leaning his head back as I ran the warm cloth over his face.

"I don't know. I can't be the only one who knows how to drive one," I said and tossed the cloth into the hamper. "It's not right for me to leave you alone like this."

"I'll miss you, but we both know I won't be alone."

“My dragon is sort of digging in his claws about it,” I admitted, holding out my hand to help him up from the floor.

“Not yet. I’m not sure my stomach is ready for that lurch,” Eston shook his head.

“I can’t go when you can’t even get off the floor.”

“I’ll be fine. I used to sleep on the floor all the time.”

I bit my tongue. Eston’s past is full of shit that should’ve never have happened. Instead of diving into that, I joined him on the floor.

“What about your friends? What about Douglas’s friend?” Eston asked.

“They’ll wait or someone else can get them.”

“You’re acting like your father,” Eston whispered.

“Ha!” I threw back my head. “No, I’m not. He’d done be off while you were yucking it up. I’m staying with my mate and unborn hatchling.”

“Going to get your friends doesn’t make you a bad sire,” Eston said and took my hand in his.

Our fingers entwined and for a second, I wasn’t sure if my dragon would ever let me budge up. Hell, I wasn’t sure if I bloody wanted to budge up.

“We could wait until you feel better. Morning sickness usually doesn’t last all day. I don’t want to drag you along if you don’t want to go, though.”

“Cade,” Eston cooed my name. “I just want to go back to bed. I’ll crawl into bed with one of my brothers if that makes you feel better.”

It didn’t. I thought about everyone in Heartville and I wasn’t sure I trusted any of them to protect my pregnant mate. That was ridiculous of course, because they’d all protected him before.

“Cade? Eston?” A voice called from the corridor.

It was vaguely familiar, but the owner didn't live here.

“Hey, Philip. Sorry they woke you up. It's just maybe morning sickness,” Eston called out.

“I've been woken up for less,” the old bear laughed. “Are you going to let me in or has Cade barricaded the bathroom?”

“I've not barricaded any bloody thing, thank you very much,” I said, waving away a ring of smoke as it danced out of my nose.

“Good, you're listening up,” Philip said, and I rolled my eyes. “Here's what I figure. If I can survive a war in the Wildlands, I can protect one pregnant wolf. So, we'll do the urine test, and you can be on your way to the airport. I'll stick around until you're back.”

“He is a double threat, Alpha,” Eston said, squeezing my hand.

He looked so tired with big heavy bags under his eyes.

“He's a warrior and a midwife and my brothers are here. I'll go sleep at Liam and Bobby's if that makes you feel better.”

My dragon shifted my eyes to his and glanced around the room. Philip McCoy had given him the idea of barricading the bathroom. I shook my head trying to dislodge the thought. I couldn't leave Eston now. It didn't matter who was here. Was this the same intensity that drove my father to war?

I reached out to pull him into my lap but stopped short because I didn't want to jostle his stomach.

“Alpha,” Eston said.

“Yes, mate?”

“We need to do the test, either way, right? You want to know for sure, right?”

“More than anything,” I nodded, “but I think we already know.”

“Well, let’s start there. Let’s make it official. I’ll do the test and we’ll go from there.”

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Eston made it sound so simple, but I had to get up and open the door without frying the bear alive. No wonder my parents waited so long to have their second child if I made them feel like this while my carrier was pregnant.

I managed to open the door, grab the test from Philip, and shut it again without harming anyone.

“You knock it off in there. We can’t be frying midwife war heroes alive!” I bitched at my dragon.

Five minutes later, Eston sobbed in my arms, his fingers clutched around the test with the pixelated baby wrapped up in its yellow blanket.

“Alpha,” he said between happy sobs.

“Yeah?” My voice cracked when I spoke.

“Can you go get the doctor from the airport? Philip wants to be back with his family at some point and we’re going to need a doctor,” Eston said, poking at all my soft places.

Whether I wanted to leave him for a few hours or not, he was right. I had to get the damn doctor. I kissed his forehead and pretended for a few minutes that I didn’t have to go anywhere.

Chapter Three

Abel

“Thanks for letting me know he’s running late,” I said into the phone. “I think I’m going to grab a bite to eat while I wait. Do you know who else he’s supposed to pick up?”

“He hasn’t told me,” Douglas said from the other end of the line. “All I know is they should be landing soon. I should’ve gotten Manny to drive one of the work trucks up, so you had less of a wait.”

“I’ve been reading,” I shrugged. “I’m okay. If not for your invitation I’d be stuck at my grandparents’ house playing bridge in Spain until Clarence got this out of his system. Being stuck in an airport full of cuddly rodent shifters for a few hours is nothing compared to that.”

“The Moonscale Heir has been conceived,” Douglas said all serious like an old timey oracle and then laughed.

“Well, good for them,” I said and tried not to roll my eyes.

“Still sore?” He asked.

“It’s been too long to be sore, I know. Too many months have passed since Sam broke up with me. It’s all bullshit. I’m bullshit with nail polish on.”

“Oh, Abel. Wait until you’re here to beat yourself up. I can’t hug you through the phone,” Douglas said.

“Just make me cupcakes,” I said, managing a chuckle.

“Already made and cooling. I love you.”

“I love you too, Douglas,” I said, ending the call.

The line for food was ginormous. Rodents loved to eat as much as the rest of us. Still, with my luggage in one hand and a book in the other I got in line. I hadn’t read much before

Sam tore out my heart because he was afraid he'd rob me of meeting my true-mate one day.

"Fuck Sam Grint with a cactus," my wolf said into my thoughts as I opened my book.

I lost myself to the battle unfolding on the worn thin pages. I didn't even hear the next plane land or the passengers pouring into the building. Nothing caught my attention until a tall man got in line behind me and blocked the light that shined on my book. I turned to ask him to move two steps to the left and the air caught in my lungs.

"Abel!" Sam said, looking as if I caught him with his dick in his hand. "What are you doing here?"

"Same as you, probably," I managed to spit out the words despite the ache in my heart. "My parents insisted on me leaving London."

"Where are you headed?" He asked.

"Oh, the mighty detective didn't do his research?" I said, my words coming out like venom.

Love and hate were the front and back covers of the same book page. I hated him for making me love him. I hated him for breaking my heart so I could meet some magical mystical true-mate who I wasn't even sure existed.

"I retired actually," Sam said, stuffing his hands into his pockets.

"For what it's worth I'm glad you won't die in the war," I said and turned back around without answering his question.

"I'm headed to Heartville," he volunteered his destination. "That's where your friend moved, right?"

My heart plummeted even further into the pit of my stomach, and I closed my book. My wolf growled but I swallowed down the sound. Part of me wanted to get back on a

plane to Spain and say fuck it. I could play bridge until the war was over.

I took a deep breath to steady myself. I needed food and couldn't call Douglas to panic talk while Sam was right behind me. I let it out and drew in another. That's when it hit me.

"Not in front of Sam! Don't prove him right!" I whispered to my wolf.

The fingers of fate had no mercy for me that day as they dug into my soul. My body heated up and my wolf trembled as he rose to his legs to sniff the air. It wasn't Sam. He couldn't be my true-mate. His had died before we met, and I'd been too up close and personal with him. I'd have known if the strings of fate had tied us together. I stood ramrod straight refusing to look around. My wolf dug into my ribs like he could dig right out of my flesh. I braced myself for an impact. Some Alphas were known to pounce their mates upon meeting and this smell was all dragon.

"Dara! There you are!" Sam said behind me as my head spun. "There's someone I want you to meet, love."

"Sam?" His new boyfriend answered.

"Yes, love?" Sam said.

"Code two."

"Really?" Sam asked and I turned to see what had perplexed the ex-detective.

"No," I shook my head as I met the other man's eyes.

His fingers were entwined with Sam's. They had wedding rings. No! No! No! Dara? Was that his name? No. It was Sam's boyfriend. Sam's boyfriend looked at me, his mouth slightly open as he drew in a breath.

"NO!" I shouted and sprinted away.

My wolf dug his claws into me again and again, but I ran. I ran using his own speed against him. Sam didn't get to dump

me and date my true-mate! He didn't get to barrel over my life twice!

“Are you okay?” A rat shifter with a grey streak in his hair grabbed for my arm, but I dodge his outstretched fingers and sprinted anyway without looking back.

Soon, he and others ran on my heels as if we were all just ship rats fleeing before the ship sank. I hit the doors, opening them into the airport's parking lot. I stopped. Where the fuck could I go? That's when Mr. Grey Streak hugged me, and the others gathered round. I was warned at the Moonscale airport that rodents loved to touch each other. They touched each other even if they hadn't met before. Sometimes this poured out onto others. They just wanted to be safe. They just wanted to keep me safe, but no one could save me from the fuck up of Samuel Grint.

I sank into Mr. Grey Streak's arms and let the tears fall. I couldn't hold them anymore. Life was just too bloody cruel.

“Shhh.... We won't let them hurt you,” he cooed to me.

It was too late for that. It wasn't bad enough Sam had to go and break my heart. He also found and married my true-mate.

Chapter Four

Sam

“I’ve fucked up, love,” I said to Dara as our fingers entwined.

A group of Alpha rodent shifters closed in around us. None of them made to fight, but it was clear they intended to block our path if we pursued Abel.

“Do you know him?” Dara asked, standing on his tiptoes to look over the heads of the rodents.

“That’s Abel,” I said.

“Your ex?” He blinked, still not looking at me.

“Apparently, I have a thing — I just fucked up,” I shook my head.

“The one you broke up with so he could find his true-mate?” Dara smirked.

“Yes, and now he hates me,” I said, and my heart dropped into my stomach.

It was never about not loving Abel. I loved him too much. Just weeks into our relationship I lay awake at night imagining ripping his true-mate to shreds because I didn’t think I could let him go when the time came. So, I made a clean break of things. I left him before I could ever do that sort of damage. I gripped Dara’s hand not to keep him from charging into the line of rodents but because it wouldn’t be the hand of my husband for much longer. Abel couldn’t even stand to look at me. I’d board the next plane headed toward Europe and visit my cousins in Paris until Clarence Moonscale worked his shit out.

“Heartbreak and hate aren’t the same thing,” Dara shook his head.

An omega pushed his way through the group of Alphas and whispered to one of them.

“Oh,” the Alpha laughed. “Let them through! One of them is the wolf’s true-mate.”

The crowd dispersed with a few congratulations and hugs thrown our way. When they were gone it was time for me to let go of Dara’s hand and let him chase his destiny down. Maybe in another lifetime I could’ve loved them both forever.

“You go on, love,” I said, swallowing down fire from my dragon to keep my voice level. “I’ll wait right here.”

“For a cop, you’re a bad liar,” Dara turned to face me and took my other hand in his. “If I go without you, you’re going to get back on a plane.”

“We always knew, love,” I said and squeezed his hands.

“Knew what?” Dara asked, stepping closer.

“That it could end this way.”

“No,” Dara shook his head. “Don’t you see the joke fate has played on you?”

“It is the most cruel joke of all,” I nodded.

“Come on,” Dara said and tugged my hands.

“Dara, love,” I said, gently as I could. “Abel hates me. I—”

“He wouldn’t have run away if he hated you,” Dara shook his head. “Don’t you think he’d have rubbed it in, if he hated you? He’s confused and hurt and maybe a little frightened.”

“This is your moment,” I said, trying to pull my hands away but Dara tightened his grip on me.

“Samuel Bastion Grint,” he said my full name and I cringed. “I could forgive you if you broke my heart today or any day. I won’t be able to forgive you if you don’t try and you leave my true-mate – a man you once loved too – out in the

parking lot heartbroken. That's not the man I married. He had a heart. So if you're casting yours aside, I won't forgive you."

I took a deep breath and started to explain how complicated it all was.

"I know. You told me about Abel. You told me how it ended, why it ended. Don't you see? I think you were meant to be with us? You dated us one after the other and then we got married."

"I don't know if Abel will ever forgive me," I whispered.

"There's only one way to find out."

"How are you still standing here?" I asked him.

"It's not easy, but I'm a doctor. I know life's not easy, and I love your stubborn ass, Samuel Grint. I think that's one thing my true-mate and I have in common."

"That doesn't bother you?" I asked him.

"Oh, Sam. Come on," he said and tugged me again. "I don't have time for dumb questions."

That time I let him drag me along with him to my doom.

Chapter Five

Abel

Thomas, the rat shifter with a grey streak in his hair, rubbed small circles on my back. My sobs had died down into hiccups as I told him the shortened version of the whole story. He was headed out shortly on a flight up to the cold lands that used to be called Canada for the birth of his great-great-grandchildren. He said he was happy to stick around for as long as I needed him, though. The worker at the airport in London was right. Rodent shifters were too nice for their own good.

“See, there they come,” he whispered as the airport doors opened. “Both of your Alphas. You’ll see you can work this out. The three of you will figure it all out. The dirty heartbreaker fell in love with both of you. Surely, this romance has been written in the stars.”

I wasn’t sure about anything being written anywhere. I wasn’t sure of anything as Dara’s scent wrapped around me again. He was a head taller than Sam and just as broad. Even in the early morning sunlight his green eyes shined as bright as I knew mine probably did. He had dark hair that hung to his shoulders and despite the shitshow that was currently our lives he wore a grin and a death grip on Sam’s hand.

“I’m sorry,” Sam mouthed to me silently.

He should be sorry. It was so ridiculous I almost laughed. He dumped me so I could find my true-mate and then the bloody asshole went and married him!

“I’ll be alright,” I whispered to Thomas. “You should catch your plane. You don’t want to miss the birth of the babies.”

“Are you sure, Abel?” Thomas asked gently.

“I am,” I nodded. “My ride will be here soon.”

“Okay, if you’re sure,” Thomas said and gave me a gentle hug.

When the embrace broke, he reached into the pocket of his sweater and gave me a business card.

“You call me, if you need anything. Life is too hard as it is. I couldn’t imagine having to cross an ocean to flee a war,” Thomas flashed me a sad smile.

“Thank you. Congratulations on the new great great grandbabies. I bet they’re beautiful.”

“All babies are,” he smiled and gave the dragons a wide berth as he left.

Once Thomas was back inside the airport, Dara tried to tug Sam forward, but he refused to budge up. Dara shot him a frown and crossed the short distance to where I sat on the bench. I couldn’t look up at him. I couldn’t look into those green eyes and know that one of us were probably going to have our heart ripped out.

“Hi,” Dara said, dropping to his knees in front of me.

He was tall enough that if I glanced up our eyes would’ve met, but his scent made it hard enough to think without adding that into the equation.

“I’m Dara O’Scott.”

“Abel Hollinger,” I said.

“It’s very nice to meet you. It seems we already have someone in common,” he said.

“Fucking Sam.”

“Yeah, him,” Dara said, letting out a little chuckle that wrapped around me like a warm blanket.

“Your husband,” I reminded him.

“Yours too if you’ll have him,” Dara said, gently.

I laughed. There was nothing else I could do.

“He’s trying to give you away on a silver platter, Sam,” I said, still not daring to look at Dara.

“I am his to give,” Sam said, his voice softer than I remembered it.

“So what? You think it’s that easy? We all just live happily ever after? Like nothing happened?” I asked.

My wolf started clawing at my insides again. Wincing, I took Dara’s hands in my own. I’d probably regret it later, but my ribs ached from my inner beast’s insistence.

“I don’t know if it’ll be easy, at least, at first,” Dara said, speaking slowly as if deliberately choosing each word he said. “It’ll take work. It’ll take time. I know he broke your heart.”

“Yeah, and then he married my true-mate. He worried about me missing out on you but not vice versa.”

“It’s different with Alphas, mate,” he said, and I huffed.

“Not many men would be willing to share their omega, but sometimes—”

“Ha! Plenty of omegas have two Alphas,” I rolled my eyes.

“Polyamory is certainly making a comeback in shifter society,” he nodded. “Sam loved you too much to give you away to someone. His dragon—” Dara stopped and looked back at his husband.

Sam sighed but nodded.

“He was afraid he’d try to fight your true-mate if you ever met them. He was afraid he’d hurt somebody because he loved you too much and—”

I dropped Dara’s hands and rubbed mine over my face. It was hard to think while I touched him, but I found it equally hard to think while I didn’t touch him.

“Mate,” Dara continued when I didn’t say anything. “I think– Just hear me out. Maybe I’m a tad off in fairyland, but he loved you and let you go and then we found each other.”

I opened my mouth to say I wasn’t going to get my heart broke again, but the words caught in my throat. Sam knew he broke my heart but admitting it aloud while they both were within earshot was too much.

“I offered to go back to Europe if that helps at all, Abel,” Sam said.

“He didn’t offer,” Dara shook his head. “He wanted to sneak off while I came to talk to you.”

“Look,” I said, finally raising my head, “I’m not looking to break you two up. I wish you all the best. I really, do, but – I can’t.”

“Can’t what, mate?” Dara asked.

The word mate cut through me. That’s who this dragon shifter of a man was. He was my true-mate who was also married to the man who broke my heart in two.

I leaned my forehead against Dara’s, my eyes glistening with tears I refused to cry anymore of.

“I can’t get my heart broken again,” I whispered to him. “If Sam gets another bee in his bonnet and leaves – I won’t be okay.”

“He’s not going to get another bee in his bonnet,” Dara said.

“You can’t promise that. No one can.”

“I can promise that. I know Sam better than anyone. We’re married. We’re chosen mates. We were friends before that, and I know how much it hurt him to let you go. He shouldn’t have. He really shouldn’t have. Maybe he wouldn’t have if he knew it was me, he was imagining beating up. I know I’m asking a lot.”

“We’re all going to Heartville,” I said because I couldn’t think of anything else to say since I couldn’t make a promise one way or another.

“We are,” Dara grinned and took my hands in his again. “So, we have time to figure it out.”

“I’m still staying with Douglas for now,” I said, sitting up a little straighter.

“That’s your friend from the hospital, right?” Dara asked.

“My best friend,” I nodded.

“I’ll miss you, but I understand,” he said and kissed my forehead.

I allowed myself to lean into his warm lips for a fraction of a second.

Chapter Six

Dara

I had my work cut out for me. Stubbornness was a quality that made a good detective and Sam was full of it. He was a damn good detective before he retired. Abel on the other hand was heartbroken and, on a mission, to escape how Sam made him feel. The ancestors were laughing at me right now. I didn't need someone who spoke to the ancestors to tell me that. My grandfather in particular was probably having a real good laugh at us.

"I missed something," Cade's booming voice made Abel startle away from me.

"Frost's Pit froze over," Sam said.

"Huh!" Abel huffed and squeezed by me to stand up. "Because I met my true-mate? That's what you wanted, Sam Grint."

I rose to my feet as Cade looked to me for answers. I gave him the short version of the story and he grinned.

"Well, Sam. Both of them, huh?" He laughed. "I hate to be the one that rushes true-mates, but Eston tested positive for a passenger this morning and you have a job to do, Dara."

"And you're itchy to get back to him," I nodded.

"They're loading things up now. Bring the luggage and load up yourself," Cade said.

I glanced at Sam who still smelled like he might dart away.

"Where else is there to go, Sam?" I asked, walking over to him as Abel followed Cade.

"Spain? France? Antarctica?" Sam said and pressed his lips together. "Dara, I don't think I'm going to be good for

your relationship with him and I broke it off with him so he could find you and—”

“Nope,” I took his hand. “I’m not giving up this easily. Everyone’s tired and jetlagged. Everyone’s on edge because Clarence Moonscale wants to smash up his own Frost-damned city. You’re not getting off this easily. We said we’d try things out if I met my true-mate and I’m holding you to that promise.”

“You guys coming or not?” Cade bellowed over his shoulder and Abel cringed at the sound.

“Give us a minute!” I bellowed back and then whispered to Sam. “You’ve got to come because if he makes Abel cringe like that again I’m going to descale the Moonscale heir myself if you’re sexy ass isn’t there to sit on me.”

“I think Cade could hold his own,” Sam chuckled.

“Not right now. He’s distracted by Eston’s passenger.”

“Maybe more so right now,” Sam said.

“Come on, Sam. It’s time to go home,” I took his hand in mine and entwined our fingers.

Fortunately, Sam didn’t make me drag him across the parking lot like a toddler tossing a tantrum. Even if Cade’s huge RV hadn’t been in sight it would’ve been impossible to miss the sweet scent Abel left behind as he followed Cade. It wrapped around me like a blanket and made my dragon alert for danger. The rodents were inconsequential, but Cade’s irritation had him worried.

Abel was all the way in the back of the RV curled up in the far corner of the bed when we climbed the steps to board it. His face was hidden in the crook of one arm, but his phone chimed with incoming texts.

“All of Heartville is going to know what I did,” Sam whispered.

“And you’re a big brave detective. You can handle it,” I hissed back. “We’re married. We’re a package deal.”

“Douglas is going to punch me in the nose,” Sam said.

“No, he’s not. He has kids to worry about.”

“It’ll be about twenty minutes before they’re finished loading up. Slow as fucking Father Yule pulling his own sleigh,” Cade cursed the last part under his breath.

“Cade,” I said, dropping Sam’s hand. “It’s normal to feel like this while your mate is pregnant, but he’s in a village of people who adore him. Shifters love to eat and he’s about to be the guy who makes it happen. They won’t let anyone hurt him.”

“I know,” Cade said, running a hand over his face. “I—”

“Want to be there,” I finished his sentence for him. “I want to be there, too. He’s a patient. Still, I’m grateful you didn’t stand up at the airport. I don’t know how long the rodents would’ve let us linger with all the problems we were causing.”

“Congratulations by the way,” Cade grinned and plopped himself down sideways in the driver’s seat.

“Maybe,” I nodded and glanced at Abel, his face still hidden.

“Congratulations,” Cade said again. “I don’t mean to sound like an arse—”

“But you’re going to,” Sam cut in.

“Bloody right I am,” Cade laughed. “After everything Eston and I went through in the few days after we met, I think you three can manage to work things out.”

“You can go talk to him if you want to. I’ll sit up and chew on Cade’s ear,” Sam said.

“He looks busy,” I said, wanting to rush to Abel but his posture was so damned closed off.

“Go on,” Cade clapped me on the back. “Give it another try. It’s going to be a long drive back if you’re all sitting around stiff and silent as boards.”

If Abel heard us talking about him, he didn’t lift his head. He didn’t budge up at all.

“Don’t let him run off on me, Cade,” I sighed.

“He’s good at that,” Abel’s voice danced up to the front of the RV, muffled.

Sam shot me a told you so look that I ignored. I didn’t make my way to the back until he sat down and looked comfy. Was I a selfish dragon? Maybe. I wanted them both. I couldn’t imagine my life without Sam and Abel was my true-mate. I was a doctor, but even the best healers didn’t have a magic potion for a broken heart.

I sat down on the edge of the bed the furthest away from Abel to give him space. The mattress was surprisingly thick and comfy.

“I’ll just sit here,” I said, announcing myself because remaining silent felt like an intrusion.

“You married a giant scaly ass,” Abel said. “Quit making excuses for him.”

“Okay,” I nodded. “Sam can speak up for himself when you guys are ready to talk. You do know that he had no way of knowing the connection between us, right? He had no way of knowing —” I stopped at a loss for words. “We didn’t even know of the connection ourselves. How could we expect him to know?”

“I didn’t and I don’t,” Abel huffed.

“Are you angry at him or the universe?” I asked.

“Everyone in existence over the age of twenty,” Abel said.

“Well, at least you get properly angry. My dragon can appreciate that,” I chuckled. “Is there anything I can do?”

Anything you want to know? To tell me?"

Abel took a long deep breath and let it out slowly. His phone chimed again.

"Douglas is an ass too," he grumbled a second later as he sat up.

"What's he got to say about it?" I asked.

"He told me that I pretty much got what I wanted and more," Abel rolled his eyes.

"But you don't feel that way, do you?" I asked him.

"I don't want my heart broken again and I hate to--"

"Hate that you now have to face the fact in a semi-public way that it was broken?"

"Exactly," Abel said and leaned back against the RV's wall.

I picked up one of the pillows from my side of the bed and offered it to him for his back. Flashing me a sad smile he took the pillow and squished it behind him. For a moment neither of us said anything. I was just grateful he was upright and not hiding his face anymore.

"How do you drink your coffee?" He asked and I grinned before I could stop myself.

"I find a little cream makes the fuel go down better."

"Good. Douglas and I used to play this game about how we'd meet our true-mates. We'd make up stories for each other. Sometimes they were nice and sometimes they were a bit arsey. He used to tease me that I'd meet you at his bakery, but you'd like your coffee black."

"I can drink it black in a pinch," I shrugged.

"I'll have to introduce you to the world of gourmet coffee."

"If that means you're sticking around, I'd like that."

“It’s not like I can go home. War and all. Plus, I’d miss the grand opening of Bad Wolf Cakes 2.0. Then there’s the nail salon that Douglas has gotten everything ready for. Well, not everything. Mostly, he’s gotten permission to have it built next door to his bakery. He has the idea that we’re going to turn into a little strip mall or something.”

“Even tiny villages need businesses,” I said. “Nails, huh?”

“Go ahead. Rag on it.”

“I think hygiene is rather important,” I said. “Clean and well-kept nails are part of my business model as a doctor. If anyone gives you grief let me know. I know a couple ways to take a person apart. You learn that when you learn how to put them back together.”

“You two are so in love. It would’ve been better if –”

“Don’t,” I shook my head. “That’s not true and I think part of you knows it. I didn’t marry Sam because I gave up on meeting you. I married Sam because I fell in love. I don’t think it would’ve been better if our paths didn’t cross. Not for me. Not for you and not for Sam either.”

“I’ve always been a monogamous wolf,” he said.

“Well, you don’t have to date Sam if you don’t want to,” I said.

“But I have to put up with him.”

“For now, at least. If polyamory is really a deal breaker –”

“I didn’t say that,” he said and my heart skipped a beat.

“You two good back there?” Cade asked. “We’re loaded up and ready to go if you are.”

“Take me to meet my patients!” I called back after glancing at Abel.

Neither of us said anything as the RV roared to life like a giant beast rising from its slumber. Once Cade navigated out

of the parking lot without running over any of the rodents I looked back to Abel.

“I’ve never understood why anyone would. Relationships are complicated and messy and adding more people into the mix—”

“Not all relationships are messy,” I said, fighting the urge to reach out and take his hand in mine. “I’m not saying the right relationships are perfect. Everyone disagrees about things and every couple has their arguments and obstacles to overcome.”

“All mine have been messy. Fuckbois, I guess.”

“I’m guessing you’re including Sam in that,” I chuckled.

“Not really. I—”

“You won’t hurt my feelings. We need to be honest about where we are.”

“I don’t know how much Sam told you,” Abel sighed. “I’m not sure how much he could tell you. I was just at a point in my life where I was ready to settle down. I was the favorite chair at the salon and business was booming. Hell, that hasn’t changed. Well, now it has, but you know what I mean. Everything else in my life was right and I wanted a family. I wanted to finally date someone stable as I was, and I thought Sam was the guy. I mean, we had our baggage, and I was going through a lot because Douglas nearly died, but I was ready. Sam was like a rock. I imagined this whole life for us and then he just said no to it all.”

“The line between selfless and selfish is a sheet of paper,” I said. “I’d like to say platitudes such as it went the way it did so we’re all together now, but I don’t think you’re big on platitudes.”

“If what you’re saying is true, the universe conspired to break my heart,” he chuckled.

“The universe is an asshole and fate takes the path of least resistance because it’s a lazy fuck,” I said.

“Were you poly ever before?” Abel asked me.

“No. Not because I was morally against it. I was too busy to do much dating at all, honestly. I was married to my job.”

“You still are. You’ll have less patients, but I think without much to do in a small town you’ll be up to your ears in pregnant people.”

“Well, I don’t usually stack my patients up on top of each other. Not good for the babies,” I tried to make him laugh.

It worked a little. He gave out a half-hearted chuckle.

“But I know what you mean. Work-life-Sam-you balance is my problem.”

“If you get burnt out it’ll be everyone’s problem.”

Unable to fight the urge any longer, I reached out for Abel’s hand. He let me take it and I scooted back on the bed closer to him.

“Can I offer you some life advice that a professor told me in medical school?” I asked him.

“Go on,” he huffed.

“If you don’t take paths because of what could go wrong, you’ll stand still your whole life. I don’t mean, take unnecessary risks, but every path you take has its pits and yeah, we’ll fall into some of them, probably more than once. Happily ever after isn’t about perfection. It’s about being together and helping each other climb out of those pits and stay on the road.”

“Maybe I just don’t want you worn thin,” Abel said. “Life is hard. I didn’t realize how hard until the night Bad Wolf Cakes burnt down, but it’s hard.”

“Not always. The war and that fire are the same hard. It was a million little things leading up to this and sometimes I

wonder if I'm even doing the right thing.”

“But we met. So, you must be, right? According to your own theories.”

“Apparently,” I chuckled.

Chapter Seven

Abel

Heartville's parking lot was full of people waiting to meet us. I spotted Douglas in the crowd holding a squirming Juliard and my heart leapt in my chest.

My best friend and my godson!

It'd been too long since we were all together.

Eben was there with them, holding their youngest. Even from here I could see how cute the pup still was.

"Go on," Dara said and gave my hand a squeeze. "We have time. Go reunite with your friend. I'll be off to the clinic to check on Cade's mate, most likely."

"Take care of him. He saved Juliard," I whispered to Dara.

"I like to think he's in capable hands with me," Dara chuckled.

"Don't get eaten by Cade!" I teased him, not wanting to let go of his 'capable' hand.

"I'll do my best and who says he'd win, anyway?" Dara winked at me.

If my shoulders were a little less broad I would've shimmied out of one of the RV's many windows instead of walking past Sam Grint to leave. I held my head high like I was on the most important mission on Earthside as I walked past him. How was I supposed to look him in the eye now? I missed him so much but part of that pain had sunk its roots into anger. There would be time later to talk to him – maybe to yell at him too.

To Sam's credit he didn't try to stop me to talk. I exited the RV and was swept into Douglas's arms. I would've wept into his neck if he wasn't holding the baby. Instead, my wolf

held his head high and I followed his lead. Douglas had enough problems of his own without me rehashing everything I already texted him about.

“It’s going to be okay,” he whispered in my ear.

“He doesn’t like his coffee black, you jerk,” I managed a laugh for him.

“We’re going to have to come up with a new game to entertain ourselves now that we’ve both met our true-mates,” Douglas laughed and hugged me tighter. “It’s all going to be okay. We’ll make it work. We really will. I’ll put on my carrier voice and make them all behave.”

“He’s gotten so big!” I said and then glanced at Eben holding Baby Jace. “They both have! Oh my Juda! Why did you let them grow so much while I wasn’t here?” I laughed and kissed Baby Juliard all over his laughing face.

“Lunch is waiting back at the house,” Douglas said. “Cupcakes too. After we eat, Eben’s going to take the children out to play. So, we can talk about your scaley situation.”

Douglas’s house was nicer than I thought it would be for a small town. It even had a big porch with rocking chairs. Though, every house we passed by seemed to have rocking chairs on the porch as if they handed them out when folks moved to Heartville. It was quaint. It was cozy. I would’ve probably enjoyed the view all that much more if my mind wasn’t elsewhere.

It sucked. I already missed Dara and I didn’t even know him. He was off to the clinic to take a look at Eston. It was his job. Even if we met under the best of circumstances, it wasn’t like I could’ve sat in on Eston’s exam just to be close to him.

My wolf whined inside of me, but he shut up for a minute when the smell of cupcakes filled the air. I made a b-line for the pink-frosted gooey goodness, but Douglas stopped me.

“Gotta have lunch first,” he laughed. “Setting a good example for this one and all that.” He nodded to Baby Juliard.

The table was already set up for a Sunday roast. It wasn't Sunday but the food tasted just as good on a Wednesday. Douglas excelled in baking but could turn almost any food into something delicious. I, on the other hand, survived through takeout. That was going to have to change here, but that was a problem for another day. Well, maybe it was a problem for another day. No one said I had to move in with Dara and Sam. I couldn't imagine lying in a room listening to their grunts of passion at night just so I could be close enough to Dara not to ache inside.

I shook my head to rid myself of the thought and managed to make small talk with Douglas and Eben throughout lunch and dessert. My wolf howled in delighted victory when I bit into the gooey chocolate center of one of Douglas's cupcakes for the first time in way too long.

“This was worth all the trouble,” I groaned. “All the trouble in the universe. I was born to eat these cupcakes.”

“Let's hope the rest of Heartville feels that way,” Douglas chuckled.

After lunch, Eben made good on taking the babies, so Douglas and I had time to chat. I helped him clean up, following the same ritual from back when we had meals at his London flat above Bad Wolf Cakes.

“You can vent if you need to,” Douglas said, as he turned on the water, and I grabbed a clean hand towel from his cupboard to wipe down the table and Juliard's high chair.

“I don't know what to say, Dougie. I miss Dara already. I'm so mad at Sam, I could kick him, but then he goes and wears this bloody forlorn face like he's the one who had his heart trampled on.”

“Do you want my real thoughts, or do you need me to be on team ‘Sam Sucks?’” Douglas asked, glancing at me over

his shoulder.

“I want you to be on team ‘Sam Sucks,’” I chuckled. “Except,” I paused a moment, “this is real life. So, tell me what you actually think.”

“I don’t think Sam is putting on a forlorn act. I think it was difficult for him to break things off with you. Yes, it hurt you too. But I don’t think it’s just about that. He broke your heart and now he knows deep down that if it turns out you can’t forgive him or at least tolerate him he’s going to lose Dara and you. He broke your heart, but at the end of the day you and Dara are true-mates. That’s going to win out in the end, and he knows it. He knew it when he broke up with you. You have the upper hand here. I’m not telling you what to do, but I don’t think this is the time to be petty about it, Ab. I really don’t. Whatever happens next is going to lay the foundation for a lot of things. If you really aren’t able to forgive him. If it really hurts too much, I’ll do whatever I can to help. But this is when you have to stop and think about all three of you. This is when you have to answer the question of if you still love Sam or has that ship sailed and sank to the bottom of Heartbreak Bay already.”

Tears stung my eyes as I dried off the table and turned my attention to Juliard’s highchair.

“You don’t have to tell me what the answer is. I’m not Dara or Sam,” Douglas said. “I just want you to really think about it, Ab, because if you send Sam away, I don’t think he’ll come back.”

“What if I don’t send him away and he leaves anyway?” I asked. “What if he breaks my heart again and he breaks Dara’s heart?”

“That’s part of the package. He gets to choose some things too,” Douglas frowned at me over his shoulder.

“Would it be shady if I wanted to talk to him alone?” I asked.

“No. It wouldn’t be. I don’t pretend to know anything about polyamory of any sort, but I imagine if you guys are a thurple it’s multiple relationships within that. Your relationship with Sam, your relationship with Dara, their relationship, and then all three of you. All of those are going to have to work out if this is what you all want.”

“When did you turn into a therapist?”

“Bakers are like bartenders. We hear the world’s problems,” Douglas chuckled. “Make sure to get the seat too. He likes to hide food he doesn’t like under his bum.”

“Got it,” I nodded.

Chapter Eight

Dara

When I took the Healer's Oath, I understood that it meant at times I would set aside my personal life for the good of my patients. Only back then, I never imagined my personal life would be so complicated. I left Sam in the clinic's cozy waiting room while Philip McCoy filled me in on Eston's chart. The guy had a list of traumas as long as my tail, but seemed to be coping well enough.

"You'll still want to watch him for that, though," Philip said. "Trauma likes to rear its head at the worst of times. Hormones and flashbacks don't play nice together. Besides that, he's healthy. He eats mostly from his garden and hunted meat from the woods. He's a bit heavy on the coffee, but already agreed to try to back down to a cup a day. He has his brother-in-law to watch out for, but Cade can help with that. His brothers will too. I'm not sure on their birthing plan and I'm not sure whether to expect a life birth or an egg. He underwent his well omega exam but declined an ultrasound until a time where Cade could be there. I don't blame him and I'm sure Cade will appreciate that. Now, unless you have any other questions, I'm headed home to my own brood." He put on his black cowboy hat as he stood up to shake my hand.

"Sounds good to me. Gotta number for me to call if something isn't in the notes?"

"Charlene should be able to help you, but I'll give you my number anyway," Philip said.

"Hey, you're the one—"

"Yes, in the War of the Wildlands," he nodded.

"Oh, not that," I shook my head.

"It's always that," Philip shrugged. "Usually, anyway."

“Philip McCoy, rodeo star, midwife, and the bear with two mates.”

“Oh,” Philip said and sighed. He took his hat off and sat back down. “I was hoping you didn’t realize that until I was gone.”

“You can still go if you need to. My problems aren’t yours,” I laughed.

“Only they are, because some of the so-called adults here are like my grandkids. They’ll be your patients and what affects you will affect them too. So, sit down and start asking your questions. The longer you beat around the bush the longer I’m here and the longer Eston is waiting for his ultrasound,” Philip said. “So, we might as well get this over with.”

“How?” I asked.

“That’s a loaded question,” Philip chuckled. “It’s one folks ask the most, though. The answer is we just do. It took time and circumstance. Falling in love isn’t easy and staying in love is even harder. That sounds like a load of crap, but outside of true-mates, that’s how it works. I’d die for Cypress and Ruben and our kids, but relationships take work. I resent having to be away so much. I’m glad they’re not alone, but I feel like I’m missing out on a lot. Doesn’t answer as to the how, does it?” Philip chuckled again.

“Not really. I feel more confused than ever,” I sighed.

“Well, look, what worked for us probably won’t work for you,” he said. “You do have advantages over us, though. Sam and Abel had a relationship that ended because Sam wanted to be a noble Moonscale knight and let him wait for his true-mate. Maybe he should’ve pulled his head out of his ass back then, but I don’t have much room to speak. I left the apartment when those two first responded. I was sure Cypress would move on. Sam probably feels the same about you and Abel. Hell, he might be in a worse spot than me.”

“How do you know so much?” I blinked at him.

“Well, patients talk. You know that. Eston filled me in a lot. He knew Abel’s side through Douglas and once Cade told him about y’all he knew there was going to be trouble.”

“I feel like I’m going to be torn in two.”

“Probably not. From what I’ve heard of Sam, he has good intentions. Worst case scenario he leaves and you gotta deal with that.”

“That’s not what I want.”

“Have you told him that?” Philip asked.

“Yes, I have!”

“Well, then, he knows and he’s still here. So, there’s probably some hope there. Give them time and just face the fact of what Sam and I already know: Until you and Abel have the claiming vows and your inner beasts and the magic calms down everything’s going to feel up in the air.”

“I can’t just jump him,” I laughed.

“No, you can’t. We’re civilized shifters even if Clarence Moonscale might’ve lost his mind for good this time. He’s calling it a war, but I’m pretty sure it’ll turn into an ‘anti-witch’ hunt and it’s gonna be a fuckin’ mess over there. That’s not helpful for your situation, though. Give it time. You feel like you’re stuck in the middle, but I don’t think you are. Well, not only you. I think all three of you feel that way to a point. I’d guess.”

“Why can’t they just see the universe wants us to be happy?” I asked, swallowing down a roar from my dragon.

“I ask myself that question all the time, but speaking of time, that’s what it’s going to take, and I’m sorry, but I gotta get home for lunch,” he said. “Call me if you have questions about the notes.”

“Thanks, Philip,” I said and stood to shake his hand.

Chapter Nine

Eston

After I said goodbye to Philip for now, Cade practically carried me into the examination room. He paced the floor back and forth as I took my shirt off and stretched out on the table.

“I’m the one who should be nervous,” I teased him and tried to snatch his hand, but he didn’t notice as he paced by me.

“Why’s that, mate? I’ll keep you safe.”

“Because I don’t know Dara and you do. You went to college with him,” I said.

“I know Dara. I even like him as a person, but — you.”

“What about me, Alpha?” I said and snatched at his hand again.

This time I caught it and tugged until he turned to face me and came to the table.

“He’s going to touch you.”

“Well, he’s going to do an ultrasound,” I said. “From what I’ve seen with my brothers, it’s gooey and loud and not that sensual at all. So, no worries there.”

Cade put his hand over my belly and a chill shimmied up my spine. He was warm to the touch and his hand was like a stone shield over the baby.

“Cade, you asked Dara to come be the doctor here before I was pregnant. You wanted someone here full time at the clinic, and you decided then before this happened you trusted him. I think you just need to remember that, Alpha. He’s not here to hurt the baby. I’m sure he’s a very careful doctor or Philip wouldn’t have left.”

“I know that, mate,” Cade sighed, but his hand was still on my stomach. “I– I’d burn down empires to protect our baby.”

“I know,” I squeezed his hand. “Only an empire isn’t threatening our baby right now. We’re in Heartville where we all would burn down anyone who tried. I love you and I love how you want to take care of our baby. Right now, we take care of them by letting Dara into the room and having an ultrasound. So, will you unlock the door, now?”

“You noticed that, huh?” He gave a little chuckle.

“I’m always watching you. It’s hard to take my eyes off you when we’re together.”

Cade leaned down, his warm strong hand still on my belly, and kissed my forehead.

“I love you, mate,” he whispered.

“I love you too. Now let the doctor in and let’s find out if we’re expecting eggs or wolves.”

“In the plural, huh?” Cade grinned.

“I’m a triplet. It runs in my blood,” I shrugged a shoulder.

“Cade,” Dara called from the other side of the door. “I’ll be eternally grateful for you arranging this job for me, but, friend, I have issues to deal with. So, if we’re done playing hide the pregnant omega, I’m ready to do the ultrasound.”

Sighing, Cade let go of me and went to unlock the door. Dara was a tall man. He wasn’t as tall as Cade, but he was taller than most of the wolves here in Heartville. He wore a friendly smile that looked a bit forced, but given the circumstances, I forgave him for being a bit distracted.

“How are you feeling, Eston?” He asked, picking up the clipboard with all my information on it that Philip had left behind.

“Ready to be informed,” I said. “I’ll have to buy a few books on nest building if we’re expecting eggs.”

“I’m sure that can be arranged, and Cade here probably could build a monarch sized nest in his sleep,” Dara clapped Cade on the back. “Looks like Philip has covered everything except the ultrasound.”

Dara glanced around the room and quickly located the machine next to the table. With Cade’s insistence the poor guy hadn’t even had time to settle into his new clinic or meet Nurse Charlene before he had to get to work. If Dara minded, he didn’t show it. Maybe working in family medicine in London meant he dealt with a lot of impatient first-time parents.

Cade put his hand back on my stomach and I took slow deep breaths. The calmer I got my wolf, the calmer Cade would be. At least, that was my working theory.

“Where’s Sunny?” Dara asked, filling the silence as he arranged everything and booted up the machine.

“With my brothers. They’re great built-in babysitters. I’m sure they said that about me all the time before. It feels good to say it about them too,” I said and flashed the new doctor a reassuring smile.

“Okay, Cade. Here’s how we’re going to do this, please and thank you,” Dara grinned. “You’re going to drag that chair over next to him and sit down. You’re going to hold his hand and keep your hand off his stomach once I put the gel onto it. You can roar and grumble and make all the threats you want, but we’re getting through this ultrasound. Once we get past the first one, the following ones will be much less stressful for you. I have some whiskey out in my bag if that will calm your dragon down.”

“He doesn’t need to drink,” I said and put my hand over Cade’s on my belly. “He’s going to be okay, aren’t you, Alpha?”

Cade didn't say anything as he slid his hand out from under mine and grabbed the chair. When he was settled, we entwined our fingers, and Dara picked up the tube of jelly. He rubbed it between his big draconic palms before twisting off the top. Thankfully, the jelly was luke warm and didn't make me squirm from the cold. I took a deep breath as he spread it out with his ultrasound wand. A moment later, the whoosh whoosh of the ultrasound machine filled the room.

My heart skipped a beat as I finally took my eyes off Cade and turned my attention to the monitor. I squeezed his hand as the wand glided over my flesh.

"Right there," Dara said, a moment later. "One, two— Wait. No, three."

"Told you," I said, squinting to make out the shapes on the screen.

Still pressing the wand against my skin, Dara leaned over and did something that made the image on the screen zoom in. One, two, three, little dragon eggs sat nestled together inside of me as if even through their tiny shells they wanted to be as close together as possible.

Cade sniffled next to me, and I glanced at him. Tears ran down his cheeks and it took all my power not to twist to my side with the wand still pressed against my belly.

"They all look to be in excellent condition," Dara said. "We'll watch you closely as they grow. Dragon eggs don't grow to their full-size during pregnancy. They absorb the nutrients they need and then they make their way into the world and finish growing in their nest. So, we won't have a timeline, but three eggs isn't a common occurrence. We'll want to run blood panels to ensure you're getting enough protein and all the other good stuff."

"Should we worry?" Cade asked.

"Not at all," Dara shook his head. "It's not common, but it's not unheard of either. I'm going to head out front to print

out the sonograms and you two can take as much time as you need.”

“Thanks, Dara,” Cade said.

As soon as he was gone, I sat up. With Cade’s silent tears we’d all forgotten about the gel on my belly. I hugged Cade and cringed realizing the gel would probably stain his shirt.

“We’re making a family,” Cade said.

“We made a family, Alpha. I’m just growing it now,” I chuckled as we embraced. “It’s going to be alright. My carrier didn’t have a single problem with me or my brothers during pregnancy. Not a single one and I don’t even have to grow these to full size.”

“I know,” Cade whispered. “If someone ever told me I could be this worried and this happy at the same time I’d have called them a Frost-damned liar.”

“Emotions are complicated, and they don’t like to take turns,” I sniffled. “Come on. We should probably get home and see if Nicky can spell that gel off your shirt. Also, before they think we’re taking too long and storm the clinic to save me.”

“I love you,” Cade said, pressing his forehead to mine.

“I love you, too, with everything I am, Alpha.”

Chapter Ten

Sam

The Heartville Clinic had a perfectly good waiting room, but I'd always been bad at waiting inside. Back in my early days on the force, I even hated stakeouts. I'd never been good at inaction. Sitting on the plane left my dragon feeling crunchy. I paced the porch of the clinic grateful that while it was close to residences no one was outside to witness my irritation.

My mentor on the force once accused me of wanting a time machine.

“Sam, you just want to jump to the end of the case and find out if it all worked out. You can't do that. Don't wish your time away.”

He was right then, and he was right now. Dragons were built for survival which meant we were always searching for certainties. Only in the modern world, things grew less certain every year.

“Oh, mate, give me strength. Actually, I have enough of that. Give me patience,” I whispered to someone who had been dead quite a few years. Personally, I hoped he wasn't lingering in the Other World. If he was he'd probably be bored out of his mind. Still, when common sense scattered to the four winds, he was the one I spoke to. The act of speaking the words aloud was more important than whether or not someone was listening on the other end.

The breeze carried Abel's scent to me before he came into view. I stopped my pacing and sat down in one of the clinic's rocking chairs. As I waited for him to gather up enough nerve to come into view, I imagined how many babies might've been rocked here already and how many more would be rocked in

the months and years to come. Would Abel and Dara's babies be rocked here?

"You're putting all the horses before the carts," my dragon mumbled into my thoughts.

"It's not as simple as you think," I told him, silently.

"Hi," Abel said, catching me off guard.

"Hello, Abel," I said and flashed as much of a smile as I could manage.

"You look grim," he said and scrunched up his nose.

"Looking for Dara? I'm afraid he's just in with Eston and Cade. Last I heard, Cade locked him out of the examination room. Quite the level head our heir has, huh?"

"Actually, Sam," Abel said, stepping closer to the porch and swallowing hard enough to bob his Adams apple. "I've come to talk to you."

I opened my mouth and shut it again. I wasn't certain I wanted to hear what Abel had to say, but after everything I put him through, I owed him.

"Come on then," I said and nodded to the chair next to me.

He took the steps slowly as if he might turn and run before, he ever reached the chair. I almost told him I didn't bite. That would've led to a dirty joke back in the day. So, I said nothing and let him take his time. Hell, maybe he wasn't even afraid of me. The true-mate response scattered the brains of all involved.

"Are you going to run away again?" Abel asked.

I took a deep breath and told him, "I didn't run away last time."

"Well, you can't send me away this time," he said and added a second later, "It felt like you ran away, Sam."

“I’m not going to apologize for doing what I thought was best.”

“Dara said it was more complicated than you told me.”

“Dara has a great big maw of a mouth,” I said and gripped the arms of the chair.

“And yet you married him.”

“That I did,” I said and let out a deep breath.

“I’m not here to assassinate you, Sam. So, you can relax.”

I closed my eyes. I had to ask him the question and I had to ask it while Dara wasn’t around to influence his answer.

“Abel, do you want me to leave?” I opened my eyes and asked him.

“If you’re going to leave at some point, I’d rather you do it now. Sam, you built me up only to topple me over. I can’t go through that again.”

“I’m sorry about that. It was selfish.”

“I’m glad you can admit it at least,” Abel said, leaning back in the chair.

“Abel, can I say something that may be vastly inappropriate given the circumstances?” I asked, struggling to keep my voice level.

“I think this is the time to say all the inappropriate things. Dara isn’t here to get his feelings hurt.”

“After my mate died, I never thought I’d love anyone again and then you came along playing nursemaid to your friend and all fiery about getting justice for him. I was so afraid of losing you – to someone younger or to some dingbat asshole setting fires or your true-mate. I’d already lost the person I loved the most in the universe. Why would creation allow me to keep someone else?”

“You do realize the universe didn’t take me away, right?” Abel huffed.

“No, I was a dumbass,” I nodded.

“What do you think of Dara’s talk of the universe conspiring to bring us all together?” He asked me.

“I wish I could look out at the world through Dara’s eyes. I think I’d be a lot happier if I did.”

“After everything that happened with Douglas and Eben and how they met I should believe the universe will take any chance it gets to get its own way. I want to believe that. Only, I don’t want to topple over again.”

“If we try this, Abs, and someone needs to go because we can’t make it work, I’ll go. Dara might protest but I’ve lost my true-mate. I know how much that hurts. It’s pain neither of you can fathom and I want to keep it that way.”

Abel reached over and put his hand in mine. It fit the same as it had always as our fingers entwined. He leaned over and kissed my cheek before resting his head against my shoulder. I wanted to say something to make everything alright again. I wanted to untwine time and do it all over. I wanted to tell him he was right that we could’ve worked out even if he met his true-mate. Only as I couldn’t fast forward time, I couldn’t rewind it either. So, I didn’t say anything as we waited for Dara to come out.

Chapter Eleven

Abel

Flying always left me exhausted and I drifted off to sleep while we waited for Dara to finish working. Sam smelled good. He always smelled good. Only now he smelled a bit like Dara too. My brain latched onto the faint scent of my true-mate as I drifted off to sleep.

“He said he was still going to stay with Douglas. So, I say we take him there,” Dara said, breaking through the oblivion of my nap.

“I think we should save him the walk and the trouble of finding you when he wakes up,” Sam said. “And save you the trouble of missing him by taking him to the house.”

“Sam, we haven’t even been inside the house yet. We don’t even know if there’s a bed to put him in,” Dara sighed.

“Love, Cade said everything we needed was there. I’m sure they even set up the guestroom. They needed a physician and you’re their saving grace. Surely, they didn’t let us come all this way not to have set up the house.”

“I’m awake,” I said, before the argument could get heated. “Don’t argue like that. No bickering about me or whatever you want to call it. I’m not a kid that needs to be tucked into bed.”

“We wanted you to get some rest,” Dara said, smiling down at me.

I melted a little but stood my ground by sitting upright and blinking the fog of sleep from my eyes.

“How long did I sleep?” I asked.

“Not long,” Sam said. “Maybe twenty minutes.”

No one knew what to say next.

“You guys should go check out the new house. Before you know it, you’ll be inundated with patients,” I said before the silence grew totally unbearable.

“You’re right,” Dara nodded. “We should probably help Cade get our stuff to the house too. You can –”

“Not yet,” I shook my head. “I think I’m going to head back to Douglas’s to take a nap. I need – Well, first I need a nap.” I stood up and stretched my arms above my head, careful not to breathe in too deeply.

“At least let me give you my phone number,” Dara said, as if I were about to fly back to London without him.

“Don’t smell so panicked. I’m not making a run for it,” I said. “I tried that at the airport, and it didn’t– Never mind.”

“I have Abel’s number, love,” Sam said. “Unless you’ve changed it that is,” he glanced at me.

“No, I haven’t,” I shook my head and bit my lip.

“Don’t go. Let’s stay. Take a nap right here again,” my wolf chimed off in my thoughts.

I froze at the top of the stairs and my wolf wagged his tail in hope.

“Let’s meet up for dinner or something,” I said without looking at either of the other men.

Dara smelled defeated but I needed time to wrap my head around everything unfolding. Maybe the three of us could work out but I wasn’t ready to be alone with both of them at the same time.

“I could go check on our stuff and Cade and you and Dara could go look at the house,” Sam said as if somehow, he read my thoughts.

“Okay,” I nodded.

It was as close to halfway as we could meet each other.

Chapter Twelve

Dara

Before he headed off to the only parking lot in Heartville, I kissed Sam. I'd see him again soon. I had to trust that he wouldn't run off. Even if he did, I had no right to stop him.

"I doubt Cade is out there working. He's probably at home in bed celebrating with his mate by now," I whispered to him. "He seemed pretty determined to get Eston alone away from everyone who annoys him. Right now that is everyone."

"Then I will start moving our stuff myself," Sam said. "I may not be a spring chicken but I'm not quite to the age of a relic yet, love."

I smiled despite all the uncertainty coursing through my veins.

"That's better," Sam said. "You should be happy right now. You should be over the moon."

"I'm a doctor. We can't afford to have our heads in the clouds."

"Well, sometimes the clouds come down to you," Sam said.

Abel and I didn't say anything until Sam was out of sight. Then Abel bit his lip and let out a long slow breath.

"I think Sam and I agreed to try," he said before I had the chance to say anything. "I think so at least."

I nodded, unsure of what to say and afraid of saying the wrong thing. Sure, there weren't any rodents to block my path if he ran off again, but chasing my omega through the streets of Heartville wouldn't have been a good look for the village's new doctor.

"Do you know where the house is?" Abel asked.

“Right there,” I pointed to a house not far from the clinic.

It was honeysuckle yellow with white trim and a door as green as the forest when spring breathes life back into the world.

“At least we don’t have a long walk,” Abel grinned.

“Let’s get on with the job at hand,” I said and reached out for his hand.

He let me take it in mine and entwine our fingers. I was careful not to grip onto his for dear life. Abel was a wolf, not a dragon and furry shifters were sometimes like glass in our grips. His hand was warm and for a second fur bristled against me as if his inner beast leaned into his palm to say hello to my dragon. I smiled despite it all. Whatever Abel and Sam believed, I was determined to remain convinced that the universe conspired in our favor.

Inside the house was as spacious as any back in London. The rooms boasted high ceilings and the kitchen had a big picture window overlooking the clinic. I could sit and have my breakfast and watch for patients if need be. Sam was right. The bedroom, guest room, and nursery were all fully equipped. I had a nursery in my London house too. I’d never had a kid, but had taken newborns home with me from the hospital if they needed special attention and their parents were unable to provide it for any reason. The hospital frowned upon the act, claiming it would make them dependent on the hospital, but I carried on giving my patients what they needed. Sometimes that was a break or someone with medical knowledge to watch over a hatchling all night.

“If you want, I’ll help you unpack,” Abel said.

His voice brought me back to the present. Soon, our own baby – pup or hatchling – would more likely than not sleep in the nursery here, safe and sound.

“What about your stuff?” I asked him. “I should offer to help you first.”

“Eben – he’s Douglas’s mate, and his friends already took it over to their house.”

“Bears are nothing if not industrious and hardworking,” I nodded.

“I understand if you’d rather not have me pilfering through your belongings. We don’t really know each other,” Abel said.

“I don’t believe I have much to pilfer through. Nothing to hide anyway,” Dara grinned. “I would welcome the help. Besides, if you’re going to live here too, eventually,” I paused to give him time and space to object, “you should have some say in how the kitchen and the like are set up.”

“I’m a shit cook,” I said. “So, if you expect me to—”

“You will be running a salon. No one expects you to morph into a house omega. Honestly, while I understand the appeal from both sides for the folks it works for, I’d worry about you being home all day bored or working too hard on the house. Maybe that still makes me a cave dragon, but it is what it is.”

Abel surprised me by slipping between me and the crib I stood over. He looked up through his long lashes at me with parted lips. I lowered my hands to the crib on either side of him to stop myself from pulling him into my arms.

“Is this okay?” He asked me.

“Perfect for me,” I nodded and met his gaze.

I stood immobile as he raised a hand and rested it against my cheek. I leaned into his warmth reveling in each new touch from my newly met mate. I nuzzled into his hand, scent marking him, like the cave dragon he was turning me into.

Abel rose on his tiptoes and his soft kissable lips hovered inches from mine. The front door swung open and we startled apart like teenagers caught necking at a drive-thru.

“It’s just me. I brought the china first. You were so worried about it that I thought we might as well get it inside and see how it fared. I don’t hear any tinkering,” Sam’s voice called out.

“Kitchen comes first,” Abel grinned.

“I guess so,” I said as we started out of the nursery. “Hey, are you okay to skip the nap you wanted?”

“I don’t think I could fall back asleep right now anyway. Jetlag is so fucking weird,” Abel said.

“We’ll all take a few days to adjust to our new surroundings,” I said as we headed into the kitchen.

Thankfully, Sam’s guess that the china arrived without a scar was correct. The dishes in the set had been passed down through my family for generations. Someday, biology willing I’d pass them on to my own children.

“Let’s go get the china cabinet, sweetheart,” I glanced at Sam. “Can’t unpack any of it until we have that.”

Chapter Thirteen

Abel

Working alone in someone else's kitchen was strange, but the act of unpacking left me little time to dwell on the ache I'd carried with me for too long now. Which was a good thing, because if I was really going to give us all a chance of being together, I had to forgive Sam sooner or later. Maybe everyone was already talking about how much of an idiot I was for giving him another chance to break my heart. Maybe they'd always whisper about it.

By dinner time, Sam and Dara were mostly unpacked. There were still boxes of medical books and journals that needed to be shifted over to the clinic's library, but those could wait until morning. We all stood in the kitchen when the work was finished unsure of what to say to each other.

Back in London, one of us would've recommended ordering out and we'd have collapsed around the table or maybe on the sofa in front of the television to watch a movie. Only here, there wasn't anywhere to order out from.

"You two go rest," Sam said. "I will put together something for dinner. The fridge looked decently stocked when I peeked in on it earlier."

"Are you sure, Sam?" Dara asked. "You might've done most of the heavy lifting today."

"Nonsense," Sam waved us off with a wave of his hand. "Go rest."

"If you're sure."

"I am sure, love," Sam leaned over and kissed him on the cheek.

I wondered if they were keeping themselves chaste in front of me or if that's how they always were. Dara took my

hand and led me into the living room. The black leather couch looked comfier than any sofa I'd ever seen before. Dara sat down on the far end leaving it to me to choose how close I wanted to be to him. I flopped down on the sofa with my head in his lap not asking if it was okay to be close to him this time.

“You should've taken that nap,” Dara said, his fingers playing through the ends of my hair. “I'm sorry –”

“You didn't make me help. I wanted – I want to be close to you. It's all just so damn confusing right now. I knew that meeting your true-mate made it hard to think, but no one warns you about this situation. Though, polyamory is becoming so common, maybe they'll start to.”

“Eh, they should. Maybe we'll write a book on it- the three of us,” Dara chuckled, and the sound wrapped around me like a warm blanket.

“We'll have to figure it out first,” I laughed.

“I think we have, or we've started to at least. If we weren't a good team this house wouldn't be put together already. I expected it to take days if not a whole week because of work.”

“Why do you think so many people are--”

“Poly now?” Dara finished my sentence as I swallowed down a yawn.

“Yeah, that,” I nodded.

“Well, because the human governments fell of course. It'll be centuries before we unpack and process all the trauma they left behind, but I think when governments stop regulating stuff like – you can only marry one person – people see there are more possibilities out there. Not that one person isn't enough, but that love can grow and spread through more than two people. I had quite a few poly families as patients back home. At the time I figured jealousy was probably ripe, but they all seemed happy. Now I get it, because if I'm honest I can't

imagine my life without you or Sam. The fate of London itself is up in the air, but losing one of you frightens me more than any war ever could.”

We dozed off chatting about the clinic and the salon that would soon be built. A little over an hour later, Sam woke us up gently by kissing Dara on top of his head. He had managed a perfectly tasty dinner of baked chicken breast, potatoes, and garden-fresh green beans. I was too exhausted to properly enjoy the meal, but I ate anyway. We’d all worked too hard on the house and jumped too many time zones to skip dinner.

As dinner wore on, I realized I wasn’t going back to Douglas’s that night. I could’ve managed the walk, but the thought of taking so many steps away from Dara left me aching inside. There was a guest room and a comfy sofa. Both were great options a lot closer to Dara than my best friend’s house.

“I’ll sleep in the guest room tonight,” Sam announced as he pushed his chair back and started to clear the table.

“Here let me help you with those,” Dara stood up.

“I’m not chasing you out of your own bed, Sam,” I said.

“Don’t be—” Sam started but Dara shook his head.

“The way I see it and either of you can correct me if I’m wrong. We’re all too tired for sex. No sex is happening tonight. I’m exhausted. So, I’m not having sex anyway,” he cut to the point. “We’re shifters. We’re naturally touchy feely. That bed is big enough for all three of us and probably another three men. So, if everyone can stop being butthurt for just a bit, we can all crawl into bed and sleep like normal people. Yes, you can sleep by the door, Sam, like always, and I will sleep in the middle and play referee if needed.”

Both Sam and I were too tired to argue. I opened my mouth to say I hadn’t brought any pajamas, but Dara had already disappeared down the corridor. I helped Sam finish clearing the table while we waited for him to come back.

“Is he always that bossy?” I yawned.

Sam flashed me a sleepy smile that made my cold heart melt a bit for him and nodded.

“I think it’s from being a doctor. He’s used to people following his orders,” Sam nodded. “I’ll still sleep in the—”

“No, Sam. If you’re not comfortable sleeping in the same bed with me, I’ll sleep on the sofa or something, okay?”

“I’m more worried about your comfort. I could sleep next to Clarence Moonscale right now and not care. I’m tired.”

“Me too,” I nodded. “Well, not the Clarence thing, but the tired one.”

Not long after we finished washing up the dishes, the three of us fell into bed with Dara in the middle. I wore one of his t-shirts that hung low around my knees. I was a frumpy mess, but under the blankets it didn’t matter. I worried I’d have trouble falling asleep with all the magic and thoughts buzzing in my brain, but as soon as I buried my face in Dara’s chest I was out like a light.

Chapter Fourteen

Sam

I woke up too early the next morning and found myself unable to fall back asleep. Dara was spooned behind Abel, and they looked too peaceful to wake up. So, instead, I did what I did most days. I got up, shaved, showered, and got to work. The boxes of medical books and journals weren't going to grow feet and walk themselves to the clinic. Besides, the more work I got done while they slept the more time they'd have to spend together today. It wasn't like the village's only doctor could go on a mating moon leave. Well, he could, but Dara wouldn't hear of it. I didn't even need to ask him to know that.

"At least you two are sleeping well," I whispered as I peeked in on the duo one more time before setting off with the first load of boxes.

My dragon slept just as unbothered as my husband and his true-mate. It was only me up carrying boxes of books between the house and the clinic before the sun even thought of gracing Heartville with its early morning warmth. By the time it did, Dara's books were tucked away in the clinic's little library and Nurse Charlene was coming into work.

Unsure of what to do with myself, I walked the edge of the village as if I had rounds to make. The few actual guards I passed merely nodded and stepped off the trail making way for me.

"It's so quiet here," I said aloud to hear something that wasn't just a tweeting bird or little animal scurrying off in the forest. "London had so much life. So much hustle and bustle. Never thought I'd miss the noise, first thing."

I glanced up at the sky. If I woke the big scaly guy up, we could go for a fly around the village and perhaps further out. Only he didn't budge. When leaving London, I imagined my

retirement would be spent mostly doting on Dara. I'd have time to read all the books I never got around to and to take up fishing again. I'd tinker with things at the clinic when they broke and haul out overanxious sires looking for a fight if they got a bit too rowdy or overprotective.

Footfalls sounded off behind me and I turned expecting to see another of the guards, but Abel and Dara's worried scents hit me before they came into view.

"SAM!" Dara shouted.

"Dara?" I said, sprinting toward them. "What is it? What happened?"

"You're here," he panted.

"Where else would I be? I went for a walk after setting up your library," I said.

"I thought you— We thought you —" Dara tried.

"Are you okay?" I asked, stepping closer to him.

"He's having a panic attack, Sam. We woke up and you were gone, and Nurse Charlene said you didn't even say good morning," Abel chimed in, shooting me a dirty look.

"I didn't want to interrupt her morning routine," I said, feeling like a giant scaly ass. "I just thought — I thought I'd give you two some time alone. Dara, I would never leave without telling you." I took his hands in mine. "We are married. I'm not going to disappear into the night without a trace and you should know better than to think that I would."

"I—," Dara said and I felt like an ass again.

"I'm here and unless one of you two tells me to leave I'm not going anywhere. Except, perhaps on a walk to feel useful. I'm sorry my absence scared you. You were both so soundly asleep, love. I didn't have the heart to wake you up."

Keeping hold of his hands, I stepped closer to him and gave him a soft chaste kiss. I would've leaned into it and

showed him just how much I wanted to hang out with him for the rest of my life, but I feared even the single kiss was too much while Abel was around. I didn't want to be the one who made him feel left out.

"I'm sorry I overreacted, Sam. I just –"

"Okay, let's do this. If we're all in agreement we'll make a promise none of us can leave Heartville for good or a while even without telling each other first," I said, reaching a hand out to Abel.

He didn't take my hand but stepped up behind Dara and hugged him. That was even better. Neither of them would think clearly until they exchanged the claiming vows.

"I promise," Dara was the first to say.

"Me too," Abel echoed his sentiment.

"Me as well," I nodded. "Good. Now that we've settled that. What shall we do today?"

"I have to head into the clinic. I need to have a good look at the patient files and find out how Charlene and the temps have been handling things. I figure that will give you two some time to work things out," Dara said.

"Oye!" Abel swore. "Seriously? I'm being shuffled back and forth like neither of you know what to do with me."

"That's not what I meant at all," Dara twisted out of my arms to face his true-mate. "I just thought while I was at work you two could keep each other company. Unless you had other plans, of course."

"I was going to drop by Douglas's and see how the construction was going," Abel said, squaring his shoulders.

"Good. Sam can go with you and lend a hand with the heavy lifting since he likes it so much," Dara grinned.

Abel opened his mouth and then shut it again. He repeated this several times and if he hadn't been wrapped up in Dara's

arms, I would've told him to spit it out already.

“I'll give you two a moment,” I said and continued on my walk.

Chapter Fifteen

Dara

Holding Abel so close was one of the best things I ever felt in my life. He leaned his warm lean muscular body in against me and I wanted to melt into him, but first I needed to know what he was reluctant to say in front of Sam.

“I thought you two had called a truce,” I said when Abel couldn’t find his words.

“I’ll miss you,” he finally said. “I wish you didn’t have to work today. Then you could come with us.”

“I know. I wish I could,” I said and meant it. “Things have been so up in the air here for carriers and the babies. They had a lot of good temps, but the temps never settled in, and a stable doctor is a must for any community to thrive. I want nothing more than to whisk you into the copse of trees and have my way with you.” Everything inside me burnt hotter with each word I spoke. “But I took the Healer’s Oath.”

Abel trembled in my arms and the sweet smell of his slick arousal filled my nostrils. I was hard – hard as a rock. The world went out of focus and there was only Abel. I pulled him closer until not a drop of air could’ve squeezed between our bodies. My dragon purred, shaking me with his mechanical sounds. I was trained to ignore distracting scents and always act professionally. I couldn’t ignore Abel’s scent as his soft kissable lips parted and his hands came to rest on my shoulders.

We kissed, chaste and slow at first, reveling in the first real taste of each other. His mouth opened against mine and my tongue didn’t need a second invitation. He tasted like coffee and sugar as my hands drifted from his waist down to his ass.

“Doctor? Doctor?” An unfamiliar voice called out in the woods.

“I am a doctor!” I called back cursing myself for not hiding the copse of trees when I could’ve.

A guard jogged into view and Sam sprinted back our way too.

“Sorry, to interrupt, Doctor,” a tall man with sparkling dragon fly fay wings said. “Bobby asked me to look for you. Cade said Eston’s having horrendous morning sickness. Nurse Charlene offered to go over, but he’s insisting that the doctor come.”

I wanted to swear under my breath and tell Cade Moonscale where to put his elitism. There probably wasn’t anything I’d do that Nurse Charlene wouldn’t know to do also, but duty called. I took a deep breath and thanked the guard for finding me.

“Will you run ahead and tell his heir majesty that I am on my way but must swing by the house and pick up my bag.”

“Of course,” the guard nodded and was off again.

“Will shall live in interesting times until he lays his eggs,” I said, taking one of Abel’s hands in mine and then one of Sam’s in my other. “Now, you two get along today and if you *really* get along, I’m okay with that. Now, I have to go tend to Cade’s anxiety.”

“Don’t let him push you around, love,” Sam kissed my cheek.

“I have a feeling his anxiety is rooted in the chaos his sire is unleashing in London. We’ll just have to be patient with him until his brain catches to what’s really bothering him,” I said and squeezed both of their hands.

Abel opened his mouth and shut it again.

“I’m sorry,” I frowned at him. “I wish I could say things would settle down soon, but no one can promise that.”

I kissed Abel’s forehead and my dragon cussed out Cade silently inside my thoughts. Thankfully, he didn’t let his barrage of curses fly over the Moonscale Flight link.

Chapter Sixteen

Abel

“I’m sorry about this morning,” Sam said, as we watched Dara sprint off.

It was hard not to look at Dara. His strong legs pumping him forward and his round ass working in tandem with his arms.

“Me too,” I said. “Shit,” I shook my head. “You meant your grand disappearing act,” I laughed.

“I should’ve left a note.”

“Yeah, you should’ve,” I said and glanced at Sam.

He was watching Dara too.

“Can you arrest Cade?” I asked.

“For interrupting your make out session? Even if I still had my badge, I don’t think calling for the doctor when there is no real concern is a crime,” Sam chuckled and offered me his arm.

I stared at it for a moment, remembering the first time he offered it to me while Douglas was in the hospital recovering from the fire that burnt down his home and business. I slipped my hand into the crook of his arm, and we started back toward the village.

“We’re not going to *really* get along,” I told him.

“I have no expectation of romping, Abel. The true-mate response is like a pair of blinders. You and Dara are focused on each other and that’s the way it should be.”

“You two are married,” I said.

“Yes, and we’ll still be married once the magic settles down,” Sam nodded.

I opened my mouth to ask a really inappropriate question and then clamped it shut. A hot blush crept up my cheeks onto my ears and my wolf head butted my ribs. He wanted to know the answer, but I wasn't a nosy git.

"Are you alright?" Sam asked.

"My wolf is-- ummmmmm, thinking like a fuckboi," I said.

"About Dara?" He asked.

"Partially."

"Oh, about me too?" He said, the slightest air of cockiness showing through his reserved expression.

"You and Dara. Make of that what you will."

"The three of us or ???" Sam blinked but didn't miss a step.

"Not quite," I said, blushing harder.

"Oh, that question."

"What question?" I glanced up at him.

"The one everyone asks and says they're just curious."

"See," I nodded. "It's like I said. Fuckboi."

"I think more than anyone you have the right to be curious," Sam said. "I think perhaps we should wait for Dara to be here for this conversation, but unless we knock out Cade Moonscale or lock you two in a room together for your claiming vows, I might be the only one to help bridge the gap. I think we do what any couple does and that's whatever we want."

"That's not vague at all," I laughed.

Sam stopped and looked at me. His gaze raked up and down my body.

"You are certainly in the middle of a true-mate response," he smirked at me. "I'd offer you a piggyback ride to hide the

evidence, but I don't think that would help your issue. I'd offer to *really* get along with you, but that's not happening until Dara claims you. That's a boundary. Oh, you should know, Dara likes to talk about boundaries. Mostly why his patients are so bad at setting them, but he talks about them a lot. So, that's a boundary. He said he was okay with it, but the magic might disagree if something happens. So, we can head back to the house, and I'll cook something up while you... er.... Shower. We can even take Dara something to eat afterward. He should be done with Cade's panic attack by then."

"Juda above me! I want to go punch Cade Moonscale in the nose!" I growled.

"Well, don't do that, love," Sam said, a smile twitching at the corners of his lips. "I'm sure he deserves it, but you'd only break your hand and upset Eston."

"Do you still have your steel toed boots?" I asked.

"You can't fit them and you're not giving Cade a back-alley vasectomy with them either. I have to say I don't quite remember you this violent."

"I miss him, Sam. It's stupid. It's so stupid. I just saw him. I don't know him. Pregnant people deserve good health care, but none of that seems to matter because I fucking miss him!"

"Oh, Abel," Sam pulled me into a hug. "This is normal. It's not stupid. You're not stupid. This is the magic of it all. Let's get you back to the house for a cool shower. That'll help you for a bit."

"I'm not in heat!" I snapped.

"I know," he said as I pulled away. "Cool showers help most situations."

"If you say so," I rolled my eyes.

"Come on," he wrapped an arm around my shoulder. "You can walk back to the house with me, or I'll throw you over my

shoulder like a fireman and give all these nosy shifters something to talk about.”

“I’m almost willing to cause that scene,” I said, “but I think Dara would be mortified.”

“I think Dara would be tickled. He’d take it as me carrying you off to bed like a cave dragon.”

“I’m about to drag him to bed and I don’t know whether I’d— What I’d do. I’m somewhere between claim me now and tell me everything and anything about yourself.”

“Oh, come on. You’ve got to eat at the very least,” Sam said and hefted me over his shoulder.

I shrugged it off and enjoyed the free ride back to the house.

Chapter Seventeen

Dara

By the time I reached Cade's house, Eston was no longer sick. His morning sickness had come and went as morning sickness had done for many turns of the moon. He was stretched out on the sofa with a cool cloth on his head. One of his brothers – I couldn't tell the triplets apart yet – sat on the floor next to his head and Cade paced behind the sofa as if someone had knocked Eston out cold.

Nem, a bear shifter and retired wrestler, I had met a time or two, flashed me an apologetic smile as he opened the door to let me in.

“THERE YOU ARE!” Cade bellowed and Eston flinched.

“Let's use our baby on board voices, Cade,” I said and nodded at Eston.

“That's easy for you to say,” he hissed under his breath. “You didn't watch your mate throw up for the better part of half an hour.”

“Well, let's not make natural matters worse by yelling. Whatever stress he experiences your hatchlings will experience too. It's easier said than done, but you need to be the calm figure right now, Cade.”

“Where were you?” He asked.

“Cade Moonscale, I am the doctor for Heartville. The clinic hours are on the door. I will be there during those hours, and I will happily make house calls for emergencies outside of them. What I won't do, is answer to you like Clarence croaked and made you king.”

“Dragons don't have kings.”

“You're the one who said it,” I nodded. “Now, if you'll excuse me, we'll discuss treatment for your anxiety after I see

to the pregnant patient.”

“I’m okay,” Eston said from the sofa, the cloth still over his eyes. “It was the bacon. I smelled it and well, you know.”

“I do know. Bacon is a very common trigger for morning sickness, but it can be many foods and many things. The important thing is to keep you hydrated while you’re experiencing it. If you ever feel too bad afterwards and can’t drink water have someone call for me. We can keep you hydrated in other ways.”

“Can’t you do anything for him now?” Cade asked, leaning on his elbows on the back of the sofa.

“Alpha,” Eston cooed.

“I’m not being unreasonable, mate,” Cade said.

“Actually, he’s not. I do have some orange gummies here that should finish settling your stomach down and I’ll even leave you with the bottle. Thankfully, even if Cade loads you up on them, you can’t overdose them,” I said and shot Cade a dirty look. “Now, if you’re okay, I’d like to talk to your mate outside.”

“Be nice, Cade!” Eston warned from the sofa. “Don’t make me get up and have belly flipflops again.”

“I’ll be perfectly civil,” Cade said, sounding more like Clarence Moonscale every day.

The morning sunshine danced brightly down as if summer was having its last hurrah before autumn undid all its hard work. I sat down and Cade at least cooperated enough to sit down in the other rocking chair.

“So, how long have you had panic attacks?” I asked him.

“I don’t have panic attacks,” he said.

“So, first one?” I asked.

“That wasn’t a panic attack. Those come on uncalled for. Eston was sick. If you were there, you’d know what I mean.”

“I have seen many a cases of morning sickness. It’s not pleasant, but in most cases, it’s not deadly either, Cade,” I said.

“It’s your job to attend to people,” Cade said, as if I were the one with the problem.

“And I do and did. I came away from Abel to ensure he was okay and now I’m making sure you’re okay. You can give me that attitude all you like, but Cade this isn’t a question of where I was or if I did my job. This is a question of how I and the medical team, however small we are, can support you and Eston. You in particular, because Eston doesn’t need an enraged dragon stomping around Heartville. He needs a mate who will hold his hair back, rub his back, and remind him that morning sickness isn’t forever.”

“I did those things,” Cade said through gritted teeth.

“Cade, you were pacing when I arrived.”

“Because you took too long.”

“Cade, I have yet to conquer the art of teleportation. If you know a good teacher, recommend them.”

“Smart ass,” Cade said, but a ghost of a smile played on his lips.

“Well, better that, than a dumbass as the village’s doctor, huh?”

“I couldn’t do anything to make it stop,” he said.

“That is the case with most vomiting. Even more so with morning sickness. It’s normal to be upset and feel helpless and make demands at first. I only ask that you remember how sensitive Eston will be to your reactions right now. If you freak out and pace, he’s going to feel more anxious. It just perpetuates the cycle. I know a good therapist I could refer you to.”

“I don’t need a therapist. Besides, I’m banned from London. I’m pretty sure that means, I’m banned from using

the health services there too.”

“Well, tele appointments do exist and I’m sure your sire wouldn’t rob you of mental health care.”

“Well, he’s done a good job of stressing me out so far,” Cade said and rubbed his hand over his face.

“Is this more about that?” I asked.

He shot me a dirty look.

“Cade, I’m not talking to you as a friend or a dragon in your flight. This is a medical appointment. What you tell me isn’t going anywhere. I’m not some nosy git trying to get the scoop. I’m trying to do the job Bobby hired me to do and that’s take care of the good folks here in Heartville.”

Another dirty look came my way.

“If not me or a therapist, is there someone else you can talk to? Dorian or one of them? Bobby? He knows how it is to have asshole parents occasionally.”

“Maybe,” Cade grunted.

“Cade, if you need to talk and none of them work, I’m here. Hell, I’ll find you a therapist on Hemlock Mountain or somewhere if you don’t want one from London because you think they can’t see you as anyone besides Clarence Moonscale’s heir and for what it’s worth, I’ll always remember you as a theater nerd more than an heir.”

Cade chuckled, but it didn’t reach his eyes.

“How’s Sunny doing?” I asked, trying a different angle.

“He’s getting huge,” Cade smiled, for real this time. “Is he adjusting well?”

“As well as a newborn can,” Cade nodded.

“Good. He’s someone else who will be reactive to your state of irritability.”

“You keep saying that, but don’t tell me how to change it,” he shrugged.

“I did. Therapy. Talking it out,” I shrugged back. “If that fails, maybe working out at the gym hard early in the morning.”

“See, that’s an answer.”

“Oh, Cade,” I sighed. “It’s not like we have a magical pill to make it all better. I get where you’re coming from. I feel pretty fucking helpless about London too right now.”

“How are Abel and Sam getting along?” Cade asked, trying to change the subject and I let him.

“Well enough. It’s touch and go, but I don’t know how much of that is them and how much of it is my and Abel’s true-mate response.”

“I’m sorry if I interrupted—”

“No, Cade. Don’t be sorry. It’s not only my job. It’s my calling. I signed up for it. If calling me keeps you from enraging like your sire has on occasion, then by all means call me. Even if my phone’s off Cade, you can still use the group link, right?”

“Yeah, but I don’t care to.”

“Well, if you think it’s an emergency, use it.”

“Everything a bit bloody off with Eston feels like an emergency,” he said.

“I’m glad you two are so in love,” I said.

“I’m feeling better enough to go inside now,” Cade said. “You should get back to your guys before they start without you.”

“That would actually be a relief. If they fall back into bed together, this will probably work out.”

“Good luck, Dara, and thanks for coming out.”

Chapter Eighteen

Sam

Abel looked and smelled a lot calmer after a shower and some breakfast. He still was all moony-eyed and it didn't take much guessing to know he missed Dara. Hell, watching him moon over Dara, made me miss him.

After the kitchen was returned to its pristine condition we headed over to where Douglas and the others were working inside of Bad Wolf Cakes 2.0. Despite the furnishings still being hauled in my dragon was a little disappointed the whole place didn't smell like bread or cakes.

Douglas was in the bakery's kitchen programming all his fancy cooking equipment. I grabbed the edge of a long table and helped Manny haul it in while Abel slipped away. I figured some time with his best friend might be the cure to his temporary blues.

"Thanks. I forgot how helpful dragons are," Manny grinned.

"Guy nearly died. Gotta be helpful," I winked at him.

"Don't flirt with my mate," Eston's brother, Nicky, called out from across the room where he and the last triplet, Cedar, were painting a mural of some sort of forest. "Don't you think two men are enough? Are you trying to start a harem?"

"He's joking," Manny said.

"I hope so," I chuckled.

"I was only joking about the last part," Nicky called back.

"Well, I'm sorry to inform you, I wasn't flirting with Manny," I said.

"Don't argue with Nicky," Abel called from the kitchen. "From what I hear from Douglas there is no winning."

“There isn’t,” Douglas called back, and we all laughed.

The bell above the door chimed and we all turned to see who joined us. Dara stood with his medical bag in hand having sniffed us out. My heart leapt into my chest like it did sometimes when I saw him when I wasn’t expecting it.

“Dara!” Abel jumped through the window, meant to set out orders.

“Don’t do that, Abs! Food goes up there!” Douglas scolded, but even though I couldn’t see him, there was a smile to his words.

Abel scrambled over the stooless counter and crashed into Dara’s arms. The medical bag hit the floor and Dara pulled him close. They whispered with their foreheads pressed together and Nicky let out a wolf whistle.

“Behave!” Cedar said, and playfully slapped his brother’s arm.

“Compersion,” another voice, vaguely familiar called from the kitchen.

A second later, I saw the cowboy hat before I saw the man.

“I didn’t expect to see you back here so soon, Philip,” I said, still not taking my eyes off them.

“I didn’t either, but someone had to help bring the appliances on the last leg of their journey,” he said. “Compersion. That’s what you’re feeling right now. Look it up later. For now, you can come help Douglas and me break down these ungodly sized boxes.”

“Is that okay?” I aimed the question at Dara and Abel.

“Only if you want to,” Dara said.

“You two – go– Just go spend time together,” I said.

“*You almost told them to go romp,*” my dragon chuckled into my thoughts, and he wasn’t lying.

Chapter Nineteen

Abel

“Are you okay with leaving Sam back there?” I asked, when we were out of earshot of the others.

“He needs to make friends here. I’m the doctor. Everyone must like me or at least put up with me. He doesn’t know most of the folks here beyond Cade’s immediate in-laws and Douglas. Besides, it feels like a fair trade. I’m stealing your capable hands from Douglas’s bakery and letting them have Sam’s. You two are so much alike. You and Sam that is. Both of you are worrying about harming my relationship with the other.”

“I never wanted Sam to be miserable even when he broke my heart,” I said, tightening my grip on his hand.

My wolf nuzzled against my ribs reaching out for his dragon.

“I know that. He knows that too,” Dara frowned.

“I hope so.”

“Maybe it’s everything that happened this morning but you two make my ass ache,” Dara laughed. “I love you both to death, but it’s obvious you care about each other. I’m not saying Sam deserves a free pass, but I hate to tell you, you’re not making each other miserable. The only ones you’re making miserable are yourselves.”

“Is that your doctor voice?” I asked him.

“Yeah.”

“Is Eston okay? I know doctors can’t talk about patients, but—”

“He’s fine. He’s having a normal pregnancy. That much I will say. I don’t want you worrying about Juliard’s hero.”

“Thank you,” I said and rose up on tiptoes to kiss his cheek.

“If this square wasn’t so crowded,” he said and bit his lip.

“What would you do?” I teased. “Because my ass or knees are going nowhere near that pavement. You might have scales, but I don’t.”

“We could use the bench,” Dara shrugged.

“We might break that bench,” I smirked.

“Bobby could dock it from my pay.”

The house felt a lot smaller without Sam there. There was technically slightly more space without a third person, but Dara and I were alone for real without him there. My mind raced in circles around everything I wanted to ask him and everything I wanted to do to him and have him do to me.

“Let’s sit, shall we? Unless you want to head straight for the bedroom,” Dara said.

“We should probably talk first. That’s what intelligent men would do, right?” I teased. “Someone’s gotta tell me because I think I lose IQ points when you’re around.”

“Sitting it is,” Dara nodded and tugged my hand so that I followed him to the sofa.

For a moment neither of us said anything, but I couldn’t stop looking at his lips. They were soft and full and belonged pressed against mine. I almost climbed into his lap until he said something my distracted brain didn’t fully hear.

“Huh?” I said, snapping back to the fact we were supposed to be talking.

“I think we should discuss that first, because of what the true-mate response magic is known for,” Dara chuckled.

“Huh?” I was still. “Sorry, I didn’t hear what you said before that. I was too distracted looking at you.”

Dara grinned and took both of my hands in his. We twisted on the sofa until we sat facing each other.

“Where do you stand on family planning?” He asked me again.

I dropped one of his hands long enough to dig my phone out of my pocket and check some dates.

“I seem to have missed my last birth control shot in all the chaos of Clarence threatening to burn down London just to smoke out the hate group,” I said.

“I would guess that a lot of people did,” Dara nodded, using his doctor voice again. “The next question would be do you want to resume birth control.”

“That would mean you’d need super sperm for us to make a baby. They’d need helmets to crash through whatever the birth control does.”

“That’s not how birth control works, but okay,” Dara laughed. “I think that may only work with barrier protection like condoms and the condom manufacturers would have one hell of a time if sperm evolved to come out with helmets.”

“Do you want helmets for your sperm?” I asked.

“I think we’re getting off track.”

“I think we can blame the magic,” I said. “What I’m trying to ask, is do you want children?”

Dara’s expression turned soft, and he smiled at me. I melted into a pile of goo right on the sofa.

“I’ve always wanted a family. Sam and I even discussed adopting once we settled in here,” he said.

“We still could if that’s the route you want to take,” I said.

“We’re well off enough that we could take both routes if we wanted to,” Dara said. “I guess it all comes down to if you want to have a baby.”

I blushed. It was a simple question and only required me to force one syllable off my tongue, but that one-word answer had a larger meaning. Saying I wanted a baby meant I wanted Dara to put a baby inside me. My wolf wagged his tail, and I nodded afraid the words would come out exactly how I didn’t want them to.

“I need to hear you say it, sweetheart.”

“I want you to put a baby inside me,” I said before I chickened out.

“That was—” Dara laughed, losing his train of thought and leaning in to kiss me.

I scooted forward on the sofa, until I had to rise to my knees to straddle over him. He scooted back until he rested against the sofa’s plush arm and I was in his lap, our torsos pressed tightly together. I ran my fingers through his hair and his hands found the full round globes of my ass.

“I’ll remember he likes dirty talk,” my wolf whispered into my thoughts.

“Right now?” Dara asked, in between kisses.

“Right now, what?” I asked and sucked his bottom lip into my mouth.

“Put a baby in you right now?” He asked when I gave him his lip back.

“We can try and see if you can,” I smirked.

“Are you questioning the ability of my sperm?” Dara asked, a mock-serious expression dancing across his face.

“Maybe,” I said. “Whatcha gonna do about it?”

“What? You want a spanking?” Dara teased.

“I’m going to call your bluff. I’ve never said no to spanking,” I said and leaned back enough to cross my arms over my chest. “I’m hard and slick and just defiant enough.”

“I see you have a very exciting story to tell me one day,” Dara said.

“About getting spanked?” I arched a brow.

“About all these men offering to spank you.”

“They didn’t always offer. Sometimes I asked.”

“Sam can keep secrets better than I thought,” Dara chuckled before leaning in to kiss my neck.”

“I never asked Sam. I always figured spanking and other kinks were what you gave up when you settled down.”

“Huh? We’ll see about that,” he said.

Dara fingered the hem of my shirt for only a second before pulling it off over my head. My lips crashed into his as his nimble fingers worked to undo my fly. His tongue darted into my mouth as he cupped my dick through my underwear. Then the world turned upside down. For a muscle-bound dragon, Dara moved with speed I didn’t think he was capable of. He had me off his lap and then over it before my brain fully registered what was going on. Anticipation zipped through me. He was strong and over his lap I felt just how hard he was. Reaching under me, he adjusted himself before speaking.

“This is a view a man could get used to,” he said, and I shook my underwear clad ass at him.

“You gotta claim it before you can look at it every day,” I teased him.

“I plan to,” he said, running his hand over my ass cheeks one at a time.

I bit my lip. Usually, I usually had more sass and tolerance than this, but I was already so slick from just kissing him. I was about to open my mouth and beg him just to take

me there on the sofa or the floor, to fill me up and try to put a baby inside me. Then his big hand came down against my ass and I eeked at the unexpected thump. The force hit in all the right places to send a spiral of pleasure over my dick. I wiggled my ass at him, craving another. His hand came down again, but I was ready this time as the sweet sting spread across my flesh.

“It’s only now occurred to me your hand is almost as big as my ass,” I laughed.

“Do you want me to stop?” Dara asked.

“I didn’t say that,” I shook my head.

A second later, Dara tucked his thumb into the waistband of my boxershorts and tugged them down around my knees.

“Such a lovely view,” he said and traced what I figured must be his handprint across my ass.

I let out a low hiss as his fingers teased the already stinging skin. Still, I arched up against his hand needing more. A second later, he gave me what I needed: Several hard swats alternating between cheeks. I ground against his lap, rubbing both of our dicks, as my brain did its usual struggle dance as pain morphed into something that felt delicious against my skin.

“You’re so slick,” Dara said, his voice growing deep and husky as he spoke. “Already so slick.”

He ran his hand over my ass and down to my balls. He cupped them. He was right. I was slick and in this position my slickness dribbled down onto my balls. I bit my lip as a new wave of pleasure washed over me. Dara had one hand tight around me so I couldn’t shift positions and offer more of myself up to him. A second later, he let go of them, and another short burst of spanks found my ass. The sting was building and my cock dribbled precum onto his pants as I rubbed against him.

Dara rubbed my stinging ass again. He wasn't sure of his own strength or my tolerance. We hadn't talked about a safe word, but I felt safe with him. He was my true-mate after all.

This time Dara's fingers didn't head for my balls. They slid between my cheeks and glided over my slickness to tease my hungry omegahole.

"Alpha," the word crept out of my throat and into the living room as a moan.

I rubbed against his fingers inviting him inside, but Dara wasn't done teasing me yet. Another round of hard slaps came, and the air caught in my throat for a second. I rocked hard over his lap, moving against the force of his arm holding me in place. He throbbed under me until he reached down to readjust himself again.

"That would be easier if you weren't wearing pants," I said, looking back at him over my shoulder.

"Cheeky!" He said and slapped my ass again, hard across the center.

I pressed my palms against the sofa, desperate to get him out of his clothes and inside of me. Only I stopped short of pressing myself upright when his fingers slid between my cheeks again. Pleasure and need spiraled over me in a quick storm as his fingers prodded against my hungry hole. I pressed back against them and this time he gave me what I needed. His fingers slid inside me as if they'd done it every day. I rocked on his digits reveling in the fullness they brought to the table. I pushed up onto my knees for a better angle and he slapped my ass again.

"Does that mean down or ????" I asked, confused.

"That means you have a slappable ass," Dara growled, and I rocked hard over his digits as they probed into me.

Bracing my weight on one hand, I moved the other over his dick until I found the button of his slacks. Then I undid it

and the zipper followed in suit as if by magic. It was an awkward angle, but I wanted to touch him. So, after contorting my arm a bit, I wrapped my fingers around his long thick throbbing dick and stroked as much as the angle allowed me to.

Dara growled again and his warm breath danced over my back. I backed up more across the sofa and his probing, needy fingers followed me.

“You’re gonna run out of room, sweetheart,” Dara said.

“I have just enough,” I smirked, but the words turned to a moan as his fingers picked up speed, vibrating my still stinging ass cheeks.

Wiggling around, I freed Dara’s cock from its fabric prison and stroked him skin-to-skin. His flesh was soft over his hard shaft and thick in my hand. I stroked him slowly at first, reveling in the slight curve of his cock and how it throbbed to be inside of me.

I leaned my head down, but Dara’s fingers entwined in my hair and stopped me.

“If you put your mouth on me right now, I’m going to explode, mate,” he said, through gritted teeth.

I opened my mouth to ask him if that wasn’t the point of all of this, but his fingers disappeared leaving my hungry omegahole abandoned and wanting more. He lifted me up again and sat me down on his lap this time.

His lips crashed into mine and his arms pulled me into him. I found the hem of his shirt and with some wiggling tore it off over his shoulders. It landed with a soft thud behind the sofa. Everything else faded away. Everything that mattered so much on the walk home just wasn’t there. There was Dara and me and our inner beasts and the rest of the world would have to wait its fucking turn because I finally found my true-mate.

I watched friend after friend meet their true-mate and fall in love. I thought I'd never find him. I thought I'd be alone forever. Now he was here and nothing was standing in our way.

“Ready?” We both asked at the same time when the kiss broke.

There wasn't a need to say anything else. I reached between our bodies and stroked Dara's hard cock for a few promising seconds before shifting my weight and leading him to my slick hungry omegahole. He growled as I sank onto him, consuming him inch by inch, and letting him fill me up. He thrust up and my fingers dug into his shoulders at the sudden jolt of pleasure.

I kissed him hard, and his hands found my still stinging ass. He kneaded my flesh as our bodies found the rhythm between us. Our tongues danced between our mouths as Dara guided me over his dick again and again.

When his hungry mouth disappeared from mine I put a hand on either side of his face to keep kissing him, desperate for every last taste of him I could get as the friction built hot up and fast inside me.

“I'm going to claim you, mate,” he growled against my lips and a chill shimmied down my spine.

That time I let him pull away. He kissed up and down my neck leaving behind a warm trail that made me want more. Then his attention turned to my shoulder. My gland was swollen up with the clear magical fluid that would bond us together as true-mates for this lifetime. Dara bit me hard, clamping down his mouth on the gland. It stung – in a fucking glorious way. His tongue didn't give the fluid much time to escape onto my skin. He sucked at my gland, guiding the fluid straight into his mouth as I rode his cock, harder and faster. I didn't know what the magic of the claiming vows would show him, but that was something to talk about later.

He'd barely finished lapping up the last of the clear magical fluid from my claiming gland when my wolf growled for me to claim him. I didn't need to be told twice. I wanted forever with Dara as much as my wolf did. Borrowing my wolf's sharp canine tooth, I bit into him. He growled and slapped my ass with both hands as the clear magical fluid holding his most important memories oozed out. I lapped up the sweet liquid as his strong hands continued to guide me up and down his cock.

Dara came from a big family of dragons and knew from an early age he wanted to be a doctor like his grandfather. He was loyal to his flight, but his patients came first. So many faces danced through my head I felt as if I were being introduced to everyone he ever met. That wasn't the overwhelming part. No, that was how much love poured out in his memories. He loved everyone and it was overwhelming. Tears formed in my eyes as I watched him leave his job and his beloved London under threat of war.

"Shush, mate. Don't cry for me," he whispered. "Home is where we nest."

Leaning back, I kissed him hard again. I was close, but with our mating link wide open now I didn't need to say anything. His pleasure poured down over me letting me know just how much he liked being buried up inside me. Dara was close too. So, fucking close that I wanted to roar. No, wait. That was Dara. Dara was going to roar –

A howl broke free from my wolf and danced straight out of me as everything I was drew up into a tight ball before exploded in pleasure all over Dara's naked torso. His fingers dug into my ass as he thrust up harder and faster, seeking his own relief, and then came the roar I swear was heard around the world as his warm sticky seed exploded inside me.

I kissed him hard, and our bodies kept up their dance until every last drop of pleasure was spilt from both of us. I clung to him even after he was flaccid. I cried into his shoulder. Not

over London or the war, but out of sheer relief and mirth that I finally found him. Now that I was in his arms nothing would ever tear me away from my mate. Even if that meant I had to work out my baggage with Sam Grint.

Chapter Twenty

Sam

When lunchtime rolled around, and Dara hadn't texted or called to make plans I took it as a good sign. The two of them needed some time alone to nourish their new but growing bond. I tried not to think too hard about what they might be doing, because thinking about them with their hands and mouths all over each other left me hotter under the collar than I cared to admit.

I lunched with the others helping with the interior of the new bakery. Things were coming along and once the stools for the counter arrived the next day the work was complete. Once Douglas's ingredients arrived, he'd be up and running.

As we ate the conversation turned to Abel and his salon which was next on Manny's list. Some folks thought other businesses should come first, but no one was ready to undertake the job of running and overseeing them.

Back home in London, Abel had a very in demand chair at a shifter salon. I figured he'd be just as in demand here. The first love of his life was nail art, but he could do the whole kitten kaboodle. Hell, when we dated, he cut my hair.

"Others will come," Manny said, cutting into the conversation. "They will. We'll build them as they go. I think soon it'll be Eston's greenhouse that's coming up to be talked about."

"Right now, I think my poor brother would turn the blueprints into a vomit lake," Nicky said.

"No vomit talk while we're eating," Philip shook his head. "I'm sittin' with a bunch of Neanderthals."

"Sorry, Philip. Thought you of all people would have a stronger stomach," Nicky smirked.

“Not for that while we’re eating. You’re all grownups. Act like it.”

“You alright, Philip?” I asked.

“Yeah. Folks are just overlooking a few big things. What smaller places need are community gathering spots – the gym works. The salon will be that too and the bakery. A bunch of shifters are hunting and gardening and droning in food. You gotta doctor now. Things will grow, but if you don’t keep community focused there ain’t a damn point to none of it. So, let them have their businesses.”

“Hear, hear!” Manny cheered.

Retirement still had me restless. I announced I was going for a walk and politely asked if anyone wanted to come with me. I didn’t expect any takers, but Philip adjusted his black cowboy hat and stood up.

My feet dragged me back to the edge of the village and Philip followed my lead. Neither of us said much until the buildings gave way to trees and the village square disappeared behind them. The first chill of autumn was starting to dance in the breeze, ruffling the green leaves soon to put on their colorful dresses for the last hurrah before their withering.

“How are you three doing?” Philip broke the silence.

“I’m hoping since they’re home alone that they’ll get around to their mating vows. They’re both on the same group link as me. So, I don’t think they’ll be a big jolt like there is sometimes. What’s really put the beehive under that hat of yours?”

“Clarence Moonscale,” Philip huffed. “Thinks I’m going to go win his war for him. I get that he was attacked. I do, but I didn’t see him coming over here and helping. He even did recon on parts of the Wildlands to see if he wanted to make a base there. He didn’t do shit. I know it’s his dragons suffering now, but unless war comes to our doorsteps, I’m done with it.

We got four kids at home now and while I don't mind visiting here – that's where I need to be.”

“Block his number,” I said.

“I have, but he has others. He's trying Canton too. Now that one is so fucking bleedin' hearted that I don't know what he's going to do.”

“Sorry, our flight is causing you such a headache.”

“Clarence Moonscale has always been a headache.”

“Do you think you'd end it as quick as he seems to think?” I asked Philip.

“Naw,” he shook his head. “He can't make a real war out of it. These people hide in plain sight. He has an established law enforcement system that I don't think he's making use of to the best of their ability, but you'd know more about that than I would.”

“He jumped straight to war, really.”

“Now he has to figure out how to do that in London,” Philip shrugged.

“Has Liam seen something that has you worried?” I asked.

“Naw,” Philip shook his head. “Not that he's told me anyway. Those kids have grown up so fast.”

“That's what they do.”

“You have kids before?” Philip asked.

“Wasn't in the cards. We had a lot to do, and we thought we had time.”

“I get it,” Philip nodded. “What's your plans for here? You got one running around being a doctor, one who'll be running a salon, and you? Retirement will kick you in the balls if you don't do something and I'd know. I retired to an ugly bathrobe and a television set for a long damn time. Don't do

that. You have them. So maybe you won't. But don't." He shook his head. "Find something to do."

"Well, I hope it's something new I find," I chuckled. "Because usually I investigated major crimes. There've been a few here but let's hope those were flukes and not the norm."

"You can say that shit again," Philip nodded.

The village square came back into view and Philip, and I said goodbye. We shook hands and he headed back through the woods to where the Other World gateway was. That was his shortcut home to his mates and children.

"Gotta go make sure our guys are eating," my dragon chimed into my thoughts. *"All romping and no chomping isn't healthy for anyone."*

Chapter Twenty-One

Dara

Sometime after we exchanged the claiming vows we dozed off on the sofa. I woke when the doorknob jiggled. Abel was more or less on top of me. All I could do was pull down the knitted throw over him to offer a bit of privacy. Sure, Sam had seen it all before, but until I knew where Abel stood on nudity with him, I figured it was better safe than sorry.

Sam slipped through the door, opening it as little as possible.

“Hey, sweetheart,” I whispered, not wanting to wake up Abel.

His body was warm and soft against mine. He didn’t stir in his sleep as Sam kicked off his shoes and shut and locked the door behind him.

“Hey, love,” Sam said. “I should’ve stopped by Douglas’s or asked them to gather up some of his clothes.”

“I think he’s under the impression that he’s still staying in their guestroom,” I grinned and kissed the top of Abel’s head. “Not that we’d stop him if he wanted to.”

“From the smell of the claiming vows, I doubt he thinks that anymore,” Sam grinned. “Did you two eat lunch?”

“No,” I shook my head. “I know, I know. Usually I lecture you about skipping meals. It’s a pity that there’s not take out here. I could go for some fish and chips straight off the truck right now.”

“I’ll see what I can do in the kitchen and then I’ll pop over to see about getting some of his clothes.”

I almost told Sam he wasn’t our errand boy but stopped short. I was always telling patients that sometimes they had to

let their partners put in extra work and it would level out later. It was time for me to take my own advice.

“Thank you.”

“Hi, Sam,” Abel yawned.

“Hey,” Sam said. “I’m going to make lunch. Any requests?”

“Your homemade pizza? Too big of a request?” Abel grinned, nuzzling his cheek against my chest.

“Not at all. While the crust rises it’ll leave me time to get you something to wear from Douglas’s.”

“How’s the bakery going?” Abel yawned again.

“Good. Just waiting on the stools and his cooking supplies. Should I put on a pot of coffee while I’m at it?” Sam asked.

“Please. I’d rather have a frappuccino but I don’t think Douglas will make me one right now,” Abel chuckled.

“Maybe that’s the hobby I’ll take up in retirement. Artisanal coffees,” Sam chuckled as he disappeared into the kitchen.

“How are you feeling?” I whispered into Abel’s ear once we were alone.

“Comfy,” he grinned. “I might never let you up again. Then we won’t need clothes.”

“I might be convinced that’s a good idea,” I said and wrapped my arms around him tighter.

“It’s the best idea,” he said and nuzzled against my chest again.

Our scents had already morphed. When the claiming vows were exchanged between true-mates their scents changed to slightly smell more like the other. Besides the bite mark left on our shoulders that was the best proof that we in fact belonged

to each other. It was something other shifters would pick up with their noses too.

We fell into a cozy silence and the world had never been clearer for me. This was life – this was how it was supposed to be. Sam was here and Abel was here. We were all safe from the fiery ball that London was morphing into. Things were looking up for us. Though, work was going to be a bitch tomorrow. I didn't want to leave Abel's side for a single second.

That night we all slept in the same bed again. Not all of Abel's stuff was at the house, but most of it was still packed away in traveling crates. Sam would remedy that tomorrow if Abel wanted him to. I was snug between both of them as my dragon and Abel's wolf chatted themselves to sleep. Mostly they talked of nests and live births, of babies and cribs. They talked about long runs and flying above the crowds. When they fell silent, I fell asleep to the soft breathing of the two men who meant more to me than anything or anyone else in the world.

The next morning, I woke before Sam or Abel. Sam was usually an early riser, but I figured he worked himself exhausted yesterday at the bakery. He was used to being active in his field and I knew he wouldn't be happy sitting on his haunches for long.

It took some acrobatics, but I managed to wiggle out from in between them without waking either of them up. I grinned to myself, when Abel scooted right into Sam's arms in his sleep. Sam wrapped himself around Abel and pulled him into his chest. Some habits never die. If not for the oath I took upon finishing medical school, I would've crawled right back into bed with them, but Heartville needed its doctor to be on his toes.

My first stop was to check on Cade and Eston. Cade hadn't called or texted, but I figured the first time sire would be put at ease if I dropped in now and then. It was a quick trip since Nem answered the door to say they were both still out cold with no signs of morning sickness.

"If you're up to the task, invite Cade to workout with you guys. He needs to, but he might need an excuse to go," I said.

"Meddlin' doctors. You're as bad as Philip," Nem chuckled.

"I'll take that as a compliment," I said, waving goodbye.

My next stop was the clinic to do what I had meant to do the day before. Plus, I figured I needed to make a few house calls to pregnant patients to introduce myself and let them know Cade Moonscale wasn't the only one I'd come to the aid of.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Abel

I woke up to a hard dick pressed against my stomach. It wasn't Dara's. I'd only been with him once, but the shape of his body was forever imprinted on my brain. Though, it was familiar in an aching way.

"Sam," my wolf whispered into my thoughts. *"It's Sam."*

I froze, tensing, before the last few days rolled back into my mind. I forced my muscles to relax and not jerk away from him. Instead, I relaxed into his arms and reveled in his warm muscular body pressed against mine. My mind wanted to say we'd woken up like this a thousand times before, but we hadn't. Sam and I were only together a handful of months and we hadn't spent every night together. Only, I still felt safe and warm in his arms when I let my guard down.

Dara loved him. No, he loved and adored him. That much was clear from the memories that poured from his claiming gland during our vows. Part of me still loved Sam too. It was an aching part, scared to death of Sam changing his mind again, but it was there, nonetheless.

Sam's hand slipped over my hip to grope my ass. He blinked his eyes and opened them a second later. He froze like a deer in the headlights. I wasn't the man he expected to wake up to either. I chuckled and he jerked his hand away.

"Sorry. I –"

"It's okay," I said. "Mornings are rough."

Neither of us said anything for a minute. Dara had made it clear that he was fine with however much intimacy Sam and I wanted to share, but we weren't there yet. After a few seconds of awkward silence, I scooted away and sat up leaving Sam

plenty of room to sit up and pretend he wasn't dealing with rock hard morning wood.

“Good morning,” I said, trying to pretend the last few minutes hadn't happened.

“Morning. I take it our man has headed off to care for the pregnant and panicked of Heartville?” Sam chuckled, rolling over onto his back and putting his pillow over his crotch.

“That would be my best guess,” I nodded.

“It's not that it wasn't nice to wake up curled up with you --” Sam started but I shook my head.

“We're not there yet, Sam. Maybe I should say we're not back there yet. That's okay. I know Dara wishes it was instant, but life doesn't work that way.”

“Do you wish it did?” Sam asked, stifling a yawn and looking up at me.

“Sometimes,” I nodded.

“Me too,” he said, reaching out for my hand.

I let him take it and entwine our fingers together.

“I really fucked up, didn't I?” He asked.

“I don't know anymore, Sam,” I sighed. “Either I'm like a bad penny who keeps coming back or it was always meant to be this way.”

“You're not a bad penny, Abs,” Sam said. “Maybe I'm the bad penny. I'm genetically closer to copper than you are.”

“You're not a bad penny either. Hell, maybe Dara needed you more than I did.”

“I don't know if it's about need,” Sam shrugged.

“I don't know either,” I agreed. “Hey, I'll make breakfast this time. You can deal with that before it cuts through the pillow.”

Sam's cheeks turned the lightest shade of pink and I bit my lip to hide a smug smile. It was nice to know I could still get to him. Hell, it had to be that way if this was going to work out, right? For a moment, I imagined myself between Sam's legs – being the one to make him bite his lip for a change. I shook the thought away but not before it slipped over my shared mating link with Dara.

"That's hot, sweetheart. He'd probably go for it," Dara said, turning me into a walking tomato.

I slid out of bed and left the bedroom before Sam could ask what it was all about.

If Dara had been there, I'd have thrown myself onto him right in the kitchen not caring if Sam came out to watch or not. Wanting Dara made sense. Still wanting Sam left my brain more scrambled than the eggs I scrambled around the pan as I made breakfast. Eggs, beans, and toast was on the menu. A little piece of London we could keep with us and one of the few things I knew I could manage without burning down the house. I never bothered to learn elaborate meals. Why would I? Douglas was way better at cooking than I'd ever be.

"Got a minute, mate?" Dara's voice chimed into my head over our mating link again.

"Always," I said.

"I just wanted to make sure you knew that I understand that if we all work out there is a good chance you and Sam will be intimate again. I'm okay with that. I don't think I'd say that about anyone else, but you and Sam sorta belonged to each other before he and I even became an item. I'm not saying to do it. I wanted to ensure you didn't hold back because you thought I'd be uncomfortable."

"I want to. I'm just not there yet," I said after thinking about it for a few minutes.

"I understand. If it gets too overwhelming today, you two can swing by the clinic and I'll play buffer."

“Thanks, mate.”

“Thank you for understanding what Sam and I share. Now, I have to get back to work. You have a good morning and make sure Sam eats breakfast. He likes to skip it.”

“I’ll tell him you’ll spank him if he doesn’t.”

Our mating link fell silent as I set the table. I loved hearing Dara’s voice inside my thoughts, but it made me miss him that much more. I was momentarily distracted when I sat down. I hadn’t forgotten about the foreplay from yesterday, but I forgot how much sting could be left behind after being spanked by a dragon. I grinned to myself as Sam walked into the kitchen fully dressed for the day.

“So worth it,” I said to my wolf, because there was no one else to talk to about it.

“Good news?” Sam asked, crossing the kitchen to pour himself a mug of coffee.

“Huh?” I blinked.

“You’re grinning like the cat that ate all the canaries,” he winked at me, and I melted a little.

“Love wounds,” I said and took a bite of my buttered toast.

“Now it’s my turn to say huh,” he said and arched a brow over his mug as he took a long drink of coffee.

“Little injuries from sex,” I filled him in on the lingo.

“Interesting,” Sam said.

His eyes sparkled as if it was on the tip of his tongue to ask where exactly his husband had left his mark on me.

“I know,” I grinned. “You’re too much of a gentleman to ask and I’m not sure how to explain it.”

“That sounds – kinky?” he laughed.

“It was,” I nodded with a smirk.

“Interesting,” Sam said again as he picked up his fork.

“We’ve established that,” I nodded.

Part of me wanted to blurt it out just to see Sam turn into a tomato. The other part of me wasn’t even sure how to explain any of it to him. Dara was the first one who more or less took me at my word and didn’t ask why spanking wound me up so much.

“I’d guess that spanking could leave behind – what did you call them? Love wounds?”

“Huh?” I nearly choked on my coffee.

“Sorry, love. The knitted blanket didn’t leave much to the imagination yesterday. It’s none of my business, but I’m pretty sure I saw a few of Dara’s handprints left behind.”

“I wanted him to!” I said, a sudden need to defend Dara’s honor bubbling up to the surface.

“Oh, I know,” he nodded. “I trust Dara and also know he doesn’t run around spanking his lovers without their permission. I think I’ve been with him enough that if that was the case, I’d be the one sitting gingerly in my chair this morning.”

I didn’t know how to respond. I bought time by digging into my beans.

“Spanking is one of the most common kinks in London,” Sam said.

“Yep.”

“I’ve made you uncomfortable.”

“I don’t know what to say, Sam.”

“You don’t have to say anything. We can drop it and talk about something else.”

“I never told you, because I really liked you and didn’t want to risk you thinking I was out of my mind.”

“You’re overthinking things now and you did back then too. You’re a grown ass man, Abs. You know what you like and that’s that. I probably would’ve had a list of questions because I would’ve been afraid of hurting you, but believe it or not, I do know the world isn’t vanilla.”

“I didn’t mean—” I stopped and swore under my breath. “I wasn’t trying to say our love life was too vanilla or anything. We had a —” I bit my lip.

“We had chemistry,” Sam nodded. “A lot of chemistry. I think we still do and that’s part of our problem.”

“Are you saying you believe makeup sex would fix us?” I laughed.

“Not fix us, but it would definitely ease up some of the tension,” Sam said, meeting my gaze. “I’m not rushing you. I’m not going to bring it up again. Just my thoughts.”

“Would you be mad if I said maybe, but I’d want Dara there. I know he says he’s okay with it, but—”

“You’re worried too,” Sam nodded.

“Of course, I am. I don’t want to hurt him.”

“Then I think he needs to be there the first time. That way we know for sure what he thinks. I believe him. Mostly, because Dara is the most self-aware person I know.”

“So, now we need to ask your husband and my true-mate for a threesome?” I teased.

Sam’s cheeks went pink again. Under the table I was hard and slick, but neither of us mentioned that.

“It would seem so,” Sam nodded.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Dara

When I unlocked the front door that evening after a day of introducing myself to my new patients the house was quiet. Eerily quiet almost. Sam sat on the sofa reading the Moonscale Times on his phone. I didn't need to see the screen to know what he was reading. His brows furrowed together and he shook his head every few seconds like a disappointed father.

"Hey, love," he said, when he noticed me standing in the doorway. "How was your day?"

"Busy," I smiled. "Busy is good for the soul, though." I sat my bag down by the door and kicked off my shoes.

I always kept my medical bag by the door no matter where I lived. Keeping it there cut down on my response time and where babies were concerned that was always a good thing.

"How was your day?" I asked, undoing my tie and hanging it up on the coat rack so it didn't get lost.

"Interesting. Not as busy as yours. We got all of Abel's stuff over and he's unpacking in the guestroom. As far as clothes and personal belongings go, I think if we don't count your library, he spectacularly out does us both. Though, to be fair, I'm not sure we should count his salon supplies."

"You started with interest and then changed the subject," I said, stretching my arms above my head causing my back to pop in a cascade of little sounds.

"I'm not sure if I should be the one to bring it up," Sam said. "I was hoping it floated magically to you over your link with Abel."

"Did something happen? Bad, that is?" I asked, everything inside me tightening up.

“No, love,” Sam shook his head.

“What is it then?” I asked, wanting to call out to Abel.

“I think my own codes of honor and ideals about how the world works have tied my tongue in a knot. He’s your true-mate and—”

“Did you guys have sex?” I sighed inwardly in relief, and sat down next to him on the sofa.

“No, we did not,” Sam said firmly.

“Are you trying to ask my permission?” I asked, leaning back and arching a brow.

“Not exactly.”

“You have it. You don’t have to ask. The way I see it, sweetheart, is I’m with both of you. We’ve more or less decided that we’re trying this out. You guys have history. I’d be a hypocrite if I was upset about it and honestly,” I paused because sometimes Sam was more reserved about romping, sex, and intimacy than I was. “It’s sort of a turn on to think about.” I finally decided on the wording.

“That’s a good thing,” Abel said, from the end of the wall.

He leaned against the wall, wearing skinny jeans and no shirt.

“Otherwise, I’d start to think I was the pervert,” he said, and Sam blushed.

I took Sam’s hand in mine and entwined my fingers through his.

“Because more than once over the last few days I’ve thought about you two in bed with each other,” Abel continued.

“Philip says it’s compersion,” Sam blurted out.

“It’s normal,” I nodded. “Well, I think it’s normal in our situation.”

“We want you to be there,” Abel said.

“Where is there?” I asked and felt like an idiot a few seconds later after his words sank in.

“In the bed with us,” Abel said before I could speak again. “Sure, we’ve been together before, but that was before you for both of us and that way no one’s worried if we’re going to upset you. I’m sure it won’t have to be every time. I’m sure that if we did the math there would be a lot of combinations of us, but the first time— well, our second first time I guess it would be.”

“We can do that,” I nodded. “Maybe not tonight. You’re both nervous as birds before a storm.”

I rubbed my arms as if I could rub off their nervous scents.

“Only about upsetting you, love,” Sam said.

“I’m excited at the thought,” I said, taking his hand back in mine. “We’ll talk ourselves through it. If you two are only nervous about upsetting me, don’t be. I know what I said, and I meant what I said.”

“I don’t know if I’d be so calm about it if it were the other way around,” Sam said.

“That’s my cue to return to unpacking,” Abel said.

“You can stay,” Sam said. “Maybe it’s best we’re all here for the conversation.”

Abel nodded before crossing the room and sitting down in the armchair. I almost told him to join us on the sofa, but he pulled his feet up in the chair and curled on himself protectively.

“This would be a good time to have a clone,” my dragon chimed into my thoughts and Abel laughed when his words leaked over our mating link. Not wanting him to feel left out, I filled Sam in on the one liner. He grinned and nodded.

“I think that’s okay, Sam,” I said. “Not only for the practical reasons, but because we’re different people. We’ve responded to the true-mate magic differently. If it was someone else – Alpha, beta, omega – whatever, I wouldn’t be okay with it. You and Abel I’m okay with. That goes for both of you too. Not just Abel.”

Sam smiled and glanced down at his lap.

“Closed polyamory then,” Abel said from his perch on the chair.

“Yes,” I nodded.

“Are you okay with polyamory?” I asked Sam.

“We talked about this before we knew everything,” Sam nodded. “I never thought it would be Abel, but –”

“Are you glad it’s me?” Abel asked.

I hated how small his voice sounded as if he expected Sam to cut him with a barbed tongue.

“At first, I thought it was my punishment for breaking your heart,” Sam admitted. “I’m glad we have a second chance now that I know you’re not going to tar and feather me and send me on my way.”

“Okay, sweetheart,” I grinned at Sam. “You’re going to have to explain the hang up to me. I’m wading in the deep end, but I’m lost.”

“On some level it feels wrong to -- invade? Trespass? I don’t know the word – cross over maybe? It feels wrong to do that to your mating link when I would have never been okay with it if it was the other way around. I loved him so--”

“There are different sorts of love,” Abel said. “I’m not downplaying your grief or any relationships you had in the past, but how’s this analogy? So, I’ve revealed to both of you that I like to be spanked. What would you have said if Dara

told me he wouldn't spank me because he wouldn't let me spank him?"

Sam blinked and I bit back a chuckle and tried not to think about Abel sprawled out over my lap bare assed.

No one said anything for a long moment. I almost spoke, but Sam's brows were furrowed in concentration again.

"That actually makes sense," he said.

"Would your true-mate have wanted polyamory?" Abel asked and I cringed, afraid he'd poked a sore spot of Sam's.

"No," he shook his head. "Very old fashioned."

"See, then it makes sense for you to feel that way. You wanted him to have what he wanted," Abel said. "You're still a good true-mate to him."

Sam's eyes glistened and Abel unfolded himself and stood up. He joined us on the sofa, on Sam's other side and kissed his cheek. My heart melted a bit watching him come to comfort Sam. Abel wrapped both of his arms around one of Sam's and leaned his head on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry I wasn't a better boyfriend to you," Sam said.

"You were a good boyfriend until you weren't my boyfriend anymore," Abel chuckled.

"I'd like to be your boyfriend again, if you'd have me," Sam said.

I bit my lip as a million expressions and thoughts danced through Abel's eyes.

"Are you going to stay with us, Sam? For good? At least for the foreseeable future? I know shit happens, but I can't stand another breakup because of something hypothetical. London is at war. I might have a baby this year. I'm starting my own business. I love you too much to get cut like that again."

"I'm here, for good," Sam nodded.

“Then I’ll let you be my boyfriend again,” Abel smirked.

“Thank you,” Sam said.

“We’re gonna be okay, Sam. All of us.”

“Hear, hear,” I nodded.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Sam

That night I slept like a rock. I wasn't sure whether it was Dara's reassurance or Abel's forgiveness that lightened the weight on my shoulders. Maybe it was their combined efforts to reassure me they both wanted me here. I wasn't a trespasser in someone else's love story.

In the morning, I woke up alone in the bed. I stretched out like a starfish and yawned. Inside his inner sanctum, my dragon yawned too. I blinked against the bright sunlight leaking in through the slats in the blinds.

"Slept in," I said to the empty room. "Haven't done that in a while."

In the kitchen, there were two sticky notes on the coffee maker. One from Dara, he was at work. The other let me know Abel headed over to check on Douglas's progress with Bad Wolf Cakes 2.0. After a quick shower, I made my usual unofficial rounds of Heartville before coming home for a quick breakfast of an egg sandwich.

Philip was right. I had to find something to do. I was already checking the perimeter unasked a couple times a day. I enjoyed the walk, and it was wise to know the faces and scents of the guards charged with keeping the village safe.

I straightened up the house and washed up the breakfast dishes. Then, not wanting to interrupt Dara at work I headed over to Bad Wolf Cakes 2.0. Abel was in the kitchen with Douglas.

"Hair net if you're coming back here!" Douglas announced through the food service window. "This is officially a commercial kitchen. Hair nets are required, Detective Grint."

“Just, Sam now,” I chuckled, heading past the counter with its new pink stools and into the kitchen.

I grabbed a hair net and pulled it down just above my ears. It wasn't too different from the surgical caps we wore during homicide investigations to protect the evidence.

“Whatcha cookin'?” I asked, reaching out for Abel's hand.

Our fingers entwined and he squeezed my hand.

“I don't cook anything. I'm banned from cooking in any kitchen that belongs to Douglas,” he chuckled.

“I'm mostly putting things away and sorting them into easy-to-use containers,” Douglas said. “I think I might be able to open next week or the week after. It depends on how fast I adjust to the new appliances and how much time the kids will let me be away. Juliard keeps shifting. I can't put a hair net over his whole body.”

“That one is more wolf than boy,” Abel teased.

“I believe it,” Douglas said, but grinned like the proud papa he was.

“How's the other little one?” I asked.

“Jace? He's with his Daddy right now. They're on a video call with Eben's parents. I believe Juliard is currently at war with Manny over the blueprints for Abel's salon. He only wants to help or maybe play. Actually, what he really wants is Uncle Eston to come out and play in the garden, but Cade.....”

“Is Cade being mean to that baby?” I asked, feeling grumbly at him already for his constant need of Dara.

“Not exactly,” Douglas said. “Juliard is three handfuls and Cade is worried that he'll overexert Eston.”

“Eston is going to eat his mate before he lays those eggs,” Abel said.

“Sooner or later, he’ll put his paws down about it,” Douglas said. “Probably after the morning sickness phase is done. I got lucky and neither of mine were that way. You,” he glanced at Abel, “were worse than Manny with Baby Juliard.”

“He’s my godbaby!” Abel smirked.

“Do you need any help?” I offered Douglas.

“He won’t take help,” Abel said.

“You want to open crates of canisters? The crowbar is over there.”

“You got it.”

We passed the late morning hours chatting and washing canisters out in the big commercial sink. I washed them and Abel dried them inside and out before passing them off for Douglas to use. He wouldn’t let me put them away for him, because he was positive, I’d flub up his system.

After we were finished, Douglas headed off to find his kids and Abel and I headed over to the clinic to see if Dara was coming home for lunch that day. We made the short trek hand-in-hand and in some ways it was like we never parted. In other ways, everything was new.

“You’re not doing your job!” Cade said through gritted teeth as we opened the door to the clinic.

“I am, though, Cade,” Dara said, smelling almost as irritated as the Moonscale heir. “He should have exercise, and do you know how much of an ass you’re being by keeping the kids away from him? This is bordering on isolation and abuse, Cade! Don’t think I won’t knock your block off or let one of your brother-in-laws do it! Those kids aren’t a threat to him! That bloody garden isn’t a threat to him! I’m telling you as his doctor, you are stressing that wolf out. You let him do what he does. If you’re worried, follow him around and don’t bitch about it.”

“I– I am not abusing my mate!”

“Not yet,” Dara said. “Isolation is a form of abuse, Cade. He comes from a decently big family. He has a huge support system. You can’t cut him off from that.”

“I’m not saying he can’t see other adults—”

“Not yet, Cade, but it’s a slippery slope. This is about your anxiety, not his.”

“I—” Cade stopped, short realizing we had joined them in the clinic’s waiting room.

“You gentlemen can wait in my office, please,” Dara said, his voice just as crunchy with us as Cade.

Cade dug his hands into his pockets and neither of them said another word until we were tucked away inside Dara’s office. Not that our relocation hid their conversation. It only gave them the illusion of privacy.

“Cade Moonscale, I’m telling you. You’ve got to stop this. Let him see the kids. That’s an order. I’m not going to foster your sire’s attitude and bad habits in you. His body was designed to grow and protect children. It’ll do its job and you can do yours.”

Cade didn’t say anything for a long moment.

“How does anyone do this?” He finally asked.

“Do what, Cade?” Dara asked, his voice a bit less crunchy now.

“Not lose their bloody minds trying to keep people safe.”

“Cade,” Dara said, softly. “He is safe. You don’t have to isolate him. No one here wants to hurt him. The kids don’t want to hurt him. Are you keeping Sunny away from him too?”

“Sunny’s too little to hurt him,” Cade said. “He and Sunny and the babies – Dara — they’re all I have!”

“Bullshit! What are the rest of us? Chopped liver? Cade, if you just stop for a minute and think about what you said.

I'm not offended. We were acquaintances at the best of times in uni, but Dorian would slap the dog shit out of you for saying that. Eston's brothers and their mates probably wouldn't be too happy either. Neither would Bobby. You have family here. Family who hasn't banished you or dragged you into a war or—"

They both went quiet. For a moment, I thought they realized we could hear them. When the silence stretched out for a second too long the detective in me couldn't resist peeking out the door and down the corridor. Dara was embracing Cade.

"Should I get Eston?" Abel whispered, peeking around me.

"No," I shook my head and motioned for him to go back into the office. "Eston would probably be glad to comfort his mate, but Cade's not ready for that or he wouldn't be here demanding Dara put him on bed rest with no visitors. I always thought Clarence could've benefited from an anxiety med. Now, I know he could."

"I wish we could do something to help them," Abel frowned.

"Unless you can make a whole hate group disappear to end a war, love, I don't think there is anything we can do."

"That sucks," Abel frowned and I pulled him into a tight hug. "Something I learned from the job – you can't save everyone."

"You're not him," Dara's whisper carried down the hall. "You are not your sire. You are not destined to have his issues."

"What do I do?" Cade asked.

"Go home to your mate. Plan a garden playdate for those kids before it gets too cold. Be gentle when you explain to the kids about Eston being pregnant. Emphasis the babies and how

we all take care of them and mostly remember, you're not destined to become Clarence Moonscale. You're you and you're better than how you've been reacting to this situation recently. I promise you that or I wouldn't have moved here to take this job."

Chapter Twenty-Five

Dara

That evening I found myself stretched out on a blanket on the living room floor. I wasn't any more stressed out than I had been in London, but I wasn't about to refuse a four handed massage from my guys. It was the first time I was naked with both of them and I almost demanded someone else should undress too before taking my pants off.

That would've been childish. I was the mediator and the buffer until our love lives smoothed out. It wasn't like I had anything to hide from them anyway. They'd seen it all.

Sam perched on my ass working my shoulders and murmuring how we'd probably need to go for a fly soon. He was right. My wings felt cramped. Their tightness spread into my shoulder blades and the back of my neck. His warm fingers worked out the familiar-to-him knots.

Abel worked his thumbs into the arch of one of my feet. His fingers were soft, almost delicate, as they worked into my flesh. It was hard to think in a straight line with their hands on me. The whole thing started out as 'just a massage.' They both believed Cade was causing me undue stress, but that came with the job. I wasn't here just to deliver babies. I wasn't a therapist, but I knew enough mental health medicine to know Cade needed help to process being banished by his parents.

"Heartville needs an in-person therapist," I said, my voice gooier than usual.

"No work talk," Sam said, and playfully swatted me.

"Ouch! That is not part of a massage!"

"Ow!" Sam swore.

"What?" I asked, turning to look back at them.

"Abel pinched my ass!" Sam laughed.

“That’s what you get for swatting him!” Abel said.

“Thanks, mate, I think,” I laughed.

“We’ll just have Abel follow Cade around and pinch him when he gets too worked up,” Sam laughed. “How ‘bout you come work on his shoulders, and I’ll move to his lower back.”

“You just don’t want me to have access to your ass anymore,” Abel teased as they shifted around me.

“Maybe not. That hurt!” He laughed.

“Sam, are you okay?” I asked, unsure if they were joking or what exactly had transpired.

“I am. It was just unexpected.”

“I’m a wolf. I nip.”

“Well, next time just bite my ass,” Sam said.

“I just might,” Abel said.

Sam’s weight shifted and his hard cock pressed against my back for a second. The pinching had definitely done something for him and from the smell of his thick arousal, all of it had done something for Abel. I was hard too but tried to focus on their nimble fingers instead of my cock pressing against the soft fleece of the blanket.

“Tell me what you want, Alpha,” Abel cooed over our mating link.

I bit my lip.

“A massage is never just a massage,” my dragon said, trying to stretch his wings inside his inner sanctum.

I knew this was coming. I wanted this. Only how did I—Do any of it? It was my turn to feel like a fish stuck in a tree.

“Let us help you feel better,” Abel said over our mating link.

Sam adjusted his weight again. His hard cock pressed against my bare ass through his pants. I wanted him inside of me and Abel's mouth pressed on mine until Cade Moonscale and his banishment were the last things on my mind.

"We can do that," Abel said aloud, picking up my thoughts over our mating link.

I grinned. Sam was right. The mating link made life a lot easier.

Abel shifted and leaned over to whisper in Sam's ear before he grew too confused. His weight disappeared from me and a second later his footfalls disappeared down the hallway.

"Turn over so I can kiss you, Alpha," Abel said, his voice deep with need.

I rolled over onto my back and he straddled my belly. Raising up on my elbows, our lips met in a hard clash. His were soft and supple, a sharp contrast to his quick tongue snaking into my mouth to conquer my own. He tugged at my hands until I was flat on my back again and then put them on his ass as our tongues danced between our mouths.

A moment later, Sam stood over us naked with the lube in hand. I swallowed hard, hungry for both of my guys. Abel kissed me again before rolling off me and Sam dropped to his knees on the blanket. I spread my legs making room for his broad hips and muscular thighs. He was fucking as gorgeous as ever naked and muscular, hard and hungry for me. No, for us. His eyes lingered over Abel's clothes just as mine had done moments before.

Abel pulled his shirt off over his head and stripped down to his black boxer briefs, but that was as naked as he got for the moment. He stretched out next to me and kissed my neck. Sam's big warm hands caressed my thighs as he lifted them up. My heart skipped a beat and Abel froze next to me.

"Alpha?"

“I’m good,” I chuckled.

“Are you sure?” Sam asked.

“I don’t think I’ve ever had this much attention on me. It’s a bit overwhelming.”

“Want me to stop?” Abel said.

“No,” I shook my head and added, “you neither,” in Sam’s direction.

“So, you like being overwhelmed,” Abel teased as his soft fingers played over one of my nipples.

“I’m still figuring that out,” I said, watching him draw circles over my chest. “We’ll see how it goes when all the attention is on one of you guys.”

That shut them up for a minute.

Sam stretched out on the floor between my legs and placed a promising kiss on the hard head of my cock. My breath caught in my throat and Abel pinched my nipple. My cock twitched under Sam’s soft lips as pleasure spiraled up and down it.

Sam’s mouth slid over me slowly as one of his lubed digits prodded at my ass. I wrapped an arm around Abel and pulled him in for a kiss, not wanting him to feel left out. His hard dick pressed against my side as our tongues danced together. Sam worked my body slowly, opening me up bit by bit. Unlike Abel, neither Sam nor I were self-lubricating.

As I kissed my omega, Sam worked me into a slow frenzy with his fingers buried inside me and his tongue pressed hard against my shaft teasing it. I squeezed him with my thighs letting him know I was ready for him. We were very versatile dragons and we’d come up with our own ways to communicate our needs to each other in cases of busy mouths.

Abel turned his head to watch as Sam pushed himself back up onto his knees. My dick stood erect, the air cooling

my flesh from the saliva Sam left behind marking his territory and driving me crazy. Abel's fingers returned to my nipples as Sam stroked himself. My heart pounded against my ribs – I was so ready for him. I wanted him and Abel and – The breath caught in my throat as the big thick head of Sam's cock pressed against my hungry body. I bit my lip, head tilting back, as he opened me up.

Abel ran the fingers of his free hand through my hair, making my scalp tingle as Sam inched his way into my tight passage. He held onto my thighs as he opened me up and we found our rhythm. Friction and fullness fought it out in my brain as pleasure wrapped itself around me like a warm blanket. A second later, Abel's lips crashed into mine as his soft nimble fingers wrapped around my dick.

My breaths came in heavy pants as the contrasting stimulations fought it out in my belly. I gripped Abel, my fingers digging into his side as Sam's thrusting picked up speed. Abel squeezed my dick, our lips pressed together, but motionless. He squeezed hard before sliding back up and spinning a circle over my cock. A drop of precum came away on his palm and spread itself over my shaft between our flesh.

"It's so sexy to watch you writhe like this, Alpha," Abel whispered against my lips before turning to watch his hand work over my cock and Sam's dick moving into me again.

I blushed hot and red, but it didn't matter. I wanted him to watch. I wanted Sam to watch us too. I wanted to see them together. Even as they teased and pleased me I wanted more of them. I wanted all of them and I wanted them for the rest of our lives.

The fire inside my belly built up hot and high as the friction rose inside of me. Sam growled, his fingers digging into my thighs as he held them high. He pushed them back, nearly up to my chest. His thrust came faster and deeper and Abel's hand moving over my dick followed his pacing. I panted, fingers, still digging into Abel as my balls drew up

tight to my body and a roar gathered itself up inside my throat. A ring of smoke shot out of my nose and Sam waved it away with one hand before gripping my thigh again. We were close and Abel was grinding his cock against my side as if he rode out the wave with us over our shared mating link.

Sam grunted as he thrust hard into me, and I exploded as he brushed against the perfect spot inside of me. My body tightened and spasmed around him as orgasm shook my brain up and left my limbs trembling. He came seconds later with a roar that shook the house as his nails dug into my outer thighs. His warm sticky cum poured into me and I pulled Abel into a hard celebratory kiss, between pants.

Sam leaned against my legs panting, our passion spent. He lowered my legs to the floor and leaned in for a hard kiss before turning his attention to Abel. My omega swallowed hard as Sam moved between his legs and tucked his thumbs into the waistband of his underwear. Sam paused for a second and Abel nodded for him to continue. His heart pounded against his ribs, and I watched as he pulled Sam in for a long hard kiss. Turning to my side, still a bit breathless from Sam pounding into me, and ran my hand over Abel's lean muscular chest. I pinched his nipple, and he bit his lip for a second as Sam stripped him naked. His cock stood erect and waiting. I stroked him softly as Sam finished pulling his underwear down his legs and over his feet.

Then Sam was belly down between Abel's soft thighs with his tongue teasing his balls. Abel's breath caught and he moaned a second later. He turned his face to me with parted lips and I kissed him softly as I stroked him. His hips grated and his heels dug into the floor as Sam worked him into a frenzy. His pleasure rained down on me over our mating link sending a cascade of tingles up and down my spine.

I squeezed him, working the pleasure out of him, until his dick twitched in my hand. Then Sam's mouth was on him, up and down. I swallowed hard. It was almost enough to make me

hard as a rock again watching Sam drink down Abel's pleasure as he writhed under our touch. Sam sucked him until there was no pleasure left in his balls to suck out.

We lay in a heap on the floor panting and grinning. After tonight, I was almost positive we were really going to make it all work out.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Abel

Things got easier after that night. Sam was right. We needed makeup sex, but we had to do it in our own way. Sex wasn't the end all be all of relationships, but for most people it was an important part of it.

Sex.

Romping.

Mating.

It all made idiots out of us at some time or another.

Then again - it was one of the few ways to fully connect with another human being. Mind. Body. Soul. Something that fulfilled that longing to know someone really wanted you. They wanted you around and they wanted to share the good things in life with you.

That night we stayed up late despite Dara having to work the next morning. By the time our heads hit the pillows around 2 AM we'd decided until I conceived, Sam and I would keep his dick out of my omegahole. It wasn't Dara's idea. It was mine. I wanted to be with Sam and Dara, but I needed to know who sired my child. I wasn't against kids with Sam, but a deep part of me wanted my first baby to be with Dara. His eyes had lit up when we talked about children of our own and I wanted to give that to him – to us.

“There's plenty of other fun stuff to do,” Sam had chuckled as we all curled up in bed after a group shower that was more of a hand job party to begin with.

With the awkward part of being a thuple out of the way life fell into an easy rhythm. Most days Dara went to work at the clinic and Cade stayed his most needy patient. I'd go off to talk to Douglas and hang out at the bakery or to see Manny

about the planning of the salon. By the middle of our second week in Heartville Manny was about ready to break ground. I opted out of a groundbreaking ceremony. Dara had enough on his plate without feeling obliged to attend such a gathering. We already had the grand opening of Bad Wolf Cakes 2.0 to attend. The town buzzed with excitement and drool whenever someone brought it up.

Most days Sam tagged along with me wherever I ended up. I didn't mind and welcomed his company. We'd drop in on Dara several times a day and sometimes I wondered if we made his job more complicated. Still, we had to feed our guy. He was caring for the whole town and if we didn't bring him lunch and sometimes dinner, he'd skip those meals altogether and Sam nor I were going to let that happen.

I woke up the Saturday morning of Douglas's grand opening with a sore ass and a flipflopping belly. The two were mostly unrelated.

Well, sorta unrelated. I was pretty sure sex played a part in both predicaments.

I swallowed hard, willing my stomach to lay still as memories of the night before flooded into my brain. This time it was Sam who had spanked me. Somehow our sex the previous night evolved into Sam bossing both Dara and I around. We alternated between Dara sliding in and out of my hungry omegahole and Sam stopping him long enough to spank me for a few minutes before instructing him to resume. This continued until I called uncle on the spanking and begged Dara to fuck me until I came. After that, Sam slipped himself right inside of Dara and everyone got their brains fucked out.

The titillating memories weren't enough to keep my stomach at bay. I clambered over Sam, nearly stepping on him because he was on the side of the bed closest to the door. In the bathroom, I threw up, barely making it in time.

A second later, the shadows of my guys loomed over me. I didn't dare speak for fear of upsetting my stomach and I didn't dare hope this meant Dara and I had conceived sometime in the last two weeks.

"I'll get some water," Sam said and disappeared from the doorway with a yawn.

I wasn't finished being sick and I was glad for a smaller audience as my stomach continued its gymnastics routine. Dara rubbed small circles on my back as my stomach played through another game of ejection. My carrier had locked my dad out of the bathroom every time he had morning sickness with me. It was a funny story our family told now. I couldn't imagine trying to lock anyone out of the bathroom with how sick I felt. Besides, sure, this wasn't sexy, but Dara was a doctor. He'd seen way worse than this, right?

"You know what this probably means, right?" I asked, as Dara washed my face with a cloth that seemed to appear from thin air.

"One certainly does hope so," Dara said gently.

"Me too. Otherwise, I'm sick and shouldn't go to Douglas's party and I don't want to miss that."

Dara touched my forehead and then my neck and shoulders.

"You don't seem to have a fever. We'll check officially in a bit when you're feeling a bit better. Sam's grabbing the morning sickness gummies from my bag. We'll do a test too, but only when you feel up to it."

"I might never get off the floor," I said.

"Then I might as well join you."

Fortunately, whoever designed the houses in Heartville didn't skip on bathroom space. I was almost positive the draconic influence in the village was the only reason there was enough room for Dara to sink down and join me. Neither of us

said anything as we waited to ensure my stomach was really finished with his debut act.

Sam appeared in the doorway not with the gummies, but with Dara's whole medical bag.

"Didn't feel right going through your bag," Sam said, passing it off to him.

"It's not a purse," Dara chuckled.

I did too.

Wrong move.

That was the wrong move.

Such a wrong move!

I was sick again.

"No more laughing!" My wolf whined inside my thoughts.

His belly had joined the flip-flop Olympics too.

"Should I take my leave and keep it until you guys come out?" Sam asked.

"No," Dara said, rubbing those small comfy circles on my back again. "You're about to learn the same lessons as Cade. Sometimes there is nothing we can do but stand vigil or sit with him. Somethings have to pass in their own time. Unfortunately, morning sickness is one of those things."

"So there's nothing I can do to help?" Sam asked.

"You can open the bag and get the gummies out," Dara said, a trace of laughter tickling his words. "It's not a purse. There's nothing personal in there. There's nothing dangerous or addictive in there either. That's all locked up at the clinic. See if I have a test in there too. The box will have a baby in a yellow blanket on it."

I sank back down on my heels and twisted to lean my back against the side of the tub. My eyes drifted closed as

Dara flushed the toilet and Sam rummaged through the medical bag.

A second later, Dara took my hand in his and turned it palm up. I smiled at his soft touch as he held it steady and placed a few gummies there.

“Easy does it. They work, but go slow, mate,” Dara whispered to me.

I sucked on one of them for a few seconds before I was brave enough to chew them.

“How long do they take to work?” Sam asked.

“Not long,” Dara said, his voice still gentle.

“Sam?” I said his name.

“Yes, love?”

“I don’t remember where I put Douglas’s gift. I got him a little mold to make his own howling wolf cupcake toppers. It’s in a purple gift bag. Will you look for it? That way we know where it is when it’s time to go.”

“Of course,” Sam said.

His eyes lit up once he had something useful to do.

“I wasn’t trying to get rid of him,” I said to Dara over our mating link. “I know vaguely where I left it, but he looked so anxious to be helpful.”

“Love does that to people,” Dara nodded. “How’s your stomach faring?”

“Better. Not quite ready to test it yet. I feel a bit hungry, oddly enough.”

“That’s normal with morning sickness,” Dara said. “In some carriers it comes and goes like it never happened.”

“I might just have toast. Just toast.”

“That’s a good place to start. We’ll have Sam make it,” he said and winked at me.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Sam

After the longest three minutes of my life, we didn't stare down at a pixelated baby in a yellow blanket. That was the positive result according to Dara and Abel. Instead, we stared down at a big red X.

"How's this possible?" I asked.

"Sam," Dara cooed at me. "Sometimes tests give false negatives. It's true that false positives are more likely, but we don't have a reason to worry."

"I've been told that before," I said and shook the memory of too many hospital trips with my dead true-mate.

"Well, not by me. We'll try another and then we'll do an ultrasound if it's negative too. I have to run to the clinic to grab it. You can stay with Abel, okay?"

I took a deep breath and wanted to tell him to stop using that voice on me. Only Abel reached out from my hand, and I joined him on the sofa. I couldn't watch someone else I loved fade away. I couldn't do it. I wouldn't survive it.

"I'm alright, Sam," Abel said. "Maybe the test was old. Maybe – my stomach is ahead of my bladder in knowing? I haven't felt sick before now and all arrows point to a baby. I mean, we all have a lot of sex. It's become one of our most time-consuming hobbies."

I laughed despite the dread churning inside of me. Abel moved my hand from his to rest on his stomach. He was right. It was hard not to imagine a life growing there after how much sex and romping went on in our house. Beneath my palm and his flesh a little life probably bloomed setting off his hormones to cause all sorts of crazy and yet somehow still incredible changes in his body.

“I brought two more,” Dara said, walking back inside.

“Are we going to do both at once?” Abel asked.

“No,” Dara shook his head. “That might be a waste of a test.”

“How are you not nervous?” I asked him.

“Because I’ve been through this with so many patients. I think we’ll get a positive sometime in the next few days, though. Leaving the house was difficult for me. Logically, our house is very safe. You were here with Abel. I felt very rushed, and my dragon has grown crunchy with everyone else. All those signs point to something inside me knowing something. I’ve seen it in other sires.”

“Yet, you’re not descaling me,” I said and nodded to my hand on Abel’s belly.

“I trust you and not much can get through a dragon’s hand,” Dara grinned.

“How are you so calm, though?” I asked again.

“Self-awareness. We don’t have to act on every urge we feel.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Dara

Inside me a hurricane battered my dragon. All I could think about was the little baby who might be growing inside of Abel. It took all my control to pass the box off to him and not follow him into the washroom. He was more than capable of providing a urine sample without my guarding him. My dragon roared but I swallowed the sound down. Whatever the test said, my dragon's attitude was all the proof I needed.

I joined Sam on the sofa and held his hand while we waited for Abel to reappear.

"Magi, set a three-minute timer," Abel told his phone before the water in the bathroom turned on.

A moment later, the door opened. Abel didn't rejoin us on the sofa. Instead, he leaned against the doorway shirtless. His expression was a mix of tiredness and excitement.

"If I am, we don't tell anyone until after Douglas's party. It's more about food than drinking. So, unless I throw up again there, I shouldn't have to steal his spotlight and I don't want to."

"We'll do our best to keep it under wraps," I nodded.

"How did we go from wait and see to talking about keeping it under wraps?" Sam asked.

"I trust Dara's intuition," Abel grinned. "I also trust my wolf. Also, I've mentally ruled out food poisoning since neither of you are sick."

"The last one, isn't the best evidence," Dara shook his head. "It's almost impossible to give a dragon food poisoning, but I still stand by my dragon's erratic reaction as proof."

Windchimes blew through the house.

“The timer!” Abel said, silencing his phone and turning to look at the test.

His heart skipped a beat, and a grin broke out across his face. Sam and I raced to join him in the bathroom. There on the sink, in the test’s little window, was the pixelated yellow blanket-wrapped baby.

I wrapped my arms around Abel and spun him around laughing. Our lips crashed together as I sat him down on his own two feet again. Our family was growing!

I dropped to my knees and kissed his bare belly. Sam turned to leave. He always wanted to give us privacy, but Abel caught his hand and tugged him over. Sam stood behind Abel, and he leaned against him, all hugged and supported. We stayed like that for a long time. There was still an ultrasound to do and blood work to take. Not to mention the million things we’d need to do to get ready for our baby’s grand entrance into the world, but for that moment in time – everything was exactly how it should be.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Abel

Despite our eventful morning we arrived early at Bad Wolf Cakes 2.0 just as promised. No sooner had I walked through the door and met Douglas's gaze before he grabbed my arm and dragged me into the kitchen.

"Have you taken the test?" He asked, once we were out of earshot of the others who came to set up early.

"Yes," I said, not wanting to lie to my best friend.

I was the one there when he tested positive for both of his kids. He grinned and pulled me into a tight hug. I hugged him back thankful my stomach hadn't performed a second act.

"When?" Douglas asked, still holding onto me.

"Just this morning! I woke up and it was like my stomach -- Like when I drank too many dragon bombs with tequila," I laughed. "It took two tests," I said and filled him in on the whole story.

"Oh, my Juda!" Douglas cheered and hugged me again. "I'm going to be an uncle! How's Sam and Dara taking it?" Then he paused and leaned in to whisper, "Do you know who sired the baby?"

"Dara," I nodded. "No questions to be asked, if you know what I mean," I looked over my shoulder at the order up window hoping no one was straining their ears to overhear us. I loved our sex life but didn't want the whole village talking about it.

"Congratulations!" Douglas squealed and hugged me again. "They're taking it well, then, right?"

"Over the moon!" I squeezed him tight. "Let's not tell the rest of them yet, though. This is your big day!"

“I don’t mind sharing,” he grinned. “This is a good thing! I was worried about you – you were heartbroken and then confused and – I’m so happy for you and happy that I don’t have to beat up either dragon!”

Slowly, others poured into help and the preparations morphed into a celebration. Cupcakes and other sweets covered almost every surface in the dining area. I nibbled on things here and there, testing my stomach, and wondering if I needed to really clean up my diet now that I was pregnant. I wasn’t fat, but then again it was almost impossible for a wolf shifter to get fat. Our inner beasts just burnt too much fuel for that. I’d miss coffee. I missed it even as I refrained from drinking one of Douglas’s fancy frappuccino drinks.

Slowly the word circulated about our news and folks stopped by the table to congratulate us. Manny even stopped by to ensure the salon still had the green light.

“I won’t be able to be around the chemicals for a while – until the baby comes, but I’m not going to be pregnant forever. Besides, I’m not the one building it,” I chuckled.

“The list keeps growing. So, I wanted to make sure nothing changed,” Manny said.

“With how much this one works,” I jerked my thumb in Dara’s direction, “I’m still going to need something to keep me occupied. I may teach Sam to do nails too, just to keep him busy.”

Sam squeezed my knee under the table.

“I better go get Juliard before Cade blows a gasket,” Manny said.

“Wait a minute,” Dara said and looked around the bakery.

Eston and Cade were at a table with his brothers and their mates. Juliard sat on the edge of the table in wolf form as Eston fed him a squash.

“I think they’re okay,” Dara said. “I talked to Cade. He can’t isolate Eston. Even if he has good intentions. I’m glad he took my advice to heart.”

“Me too,” Manny sighed. “Juliard loves Eston. He loves everybody, but Uncle Eston might be one of his favorite people in the world.”

The party went on late into the night, but around dinner time I hugged Douglas goodbye, and we headed home. I was exhausted from the morning and all the excitement. Life was headed in the right direction, but I had a feeling I was headed to bed right after dinner.

Chapter Thirty

Dara

The next morning, we were all up bright and early. I sent Sam to unlock the clinic and turn things on while I patted Abel's back during his morning sickness. I was able to get a gummy into him much sooner this time and his stomach settled down after just one performance.

Then after a quick bite of toast we were off to the clinic. Nurse Charlene offered to perform the ultrasound so that I could participate as a spectator like most sires, but the thought of her too close to Abel's naked stomach made my dragon roar. So, I was the only one left to perform it.

"DARA!" Cade's voice broke through the clinic walls, and I was pretty sure there was about to be a Cade-shaped hole somewhere in the clinic.

"I'll be right back, sweetheart!" I said and gave Abel a quick kiss on the forehead.

"THE EGGS ARE COMING!" Cade bellowed and both of my guys followed on my heels.

A lot of egg-laying carriers had no issues delivering the eggs all on their own. I knew a lot of dragon omegas who snuck off and no one knew the eggs were there until afterward. The marvelous thing about dragon eggs was that they gathered up all the fuel they needed from the womb and then exited stage left. Their growth really happened inside the nest.

"Do you have a nest?" I asked, meeting Cade at the front door.

"Yes! It's been ready for over a week!" Cade nodded, as I grabbed his forearms to keep him from motioning wildly with his hands.

“Is he alone?” I asked, walking him backward onto the porch and holding tight as I led him down the steps.

“No! His brothers are with him! They told me to get you and --”

“So, you have. Come on,” I said, dropping one of his arms but keeping a firm grip on the one closest to me. “Did he want you to get anyone else?”

“He didn’t say,” Cade said, looking around in all directions as if he forgot to pick up someone else.

“Calm down. If he wants someone else, we’ll get them. Just— breathe, Cade. Fainting will not help your mate.”

“He’s a wolf! Can he even lay eggs?” Cade said, his voice turning gravelly from his dragon.

I stopped dead in my tracks and stood in front of him.

“Cade Moonscale,” I said.

His full name got his attention.

“You know better than this. You know wolves and bears and big cats and even rabbits have laid dragon eggs before. You know this. Don’t do this. Don’t throw all your logic out the window when it’s time to use it. Eston could give birth safely to a live newborn. A dragon egg is maybe two chicken eggs big – that’s the biggest I’ve seen unless someone laid them in dragon form. So, stop this incompetent act and get it together.”

“Dara, I --”

“Yes, you do. You freaked out, but you’re better now, eh?”

“Yeah,” Cade nodded. “Sorr--”

“No apologies. You’re not the first sire to lose his wits. Are you ready to go check on Eston, now?” I asked him.

“Yeah,” he nodded.

Only then, once his scent was calm, did I let go of his arm. We sprinted through the village to their house and as soon as he opened the door, I knew the eggs had come already. The fresh metallic scent of dragon eggs was a smell like no other. It screamed life to me, and I wondered which way our baby would make their way into the world.

I still followed Cade into the house and through to a room that smelled freshly built. In the far corner, was a big nest, made of blankets and other fabrics woven tightly together. I would expect no less from our Moonscale heir, but it was still an impressive sight. The three brothers sat around the three eggs and there was still room for Cade to climb gently into the nest.

“The eggs are identical, Alpha,” Eston announced before Cade had a chance to sit down. “Just like me and my brothers.”

“Permission to come closer, Eston?” I called out.

He wasn’t a dragon, but one did not approach another’s nest full of eggs without permission.

“Come on, then,” Eston waved me over. “I need to make sure they’re hard enough for guests before the kids come to see them.”

Cade stiffened at his mate’s comment but didn’t say anything.

“We might wait until tomorrow morning before we invite them in,” I said. “Just to be on the safe side.”

Waiting that long was overly cautious. Those blue eggs were already strong enough to withstand most forces, but I’d give Cade that long to grow accustomed to the idea of kids in the nest with his eggs. I had to meet the more neurotic sire halfway on some things.

“They’re perfect,” I said, leaning on the edge of the nest.

And they were. Their shapes were what we expected – almost like overgrown chicken eggs. They were shiny and reflected the light. Their color was good and solid with no translucent bits.

“After they’ve had some time to settle in, I’ll come by and give them a listen with my stethoscope. We may be able to figure out how far along and how close to hatching they are. Are you feeling alright, Eston?”

“A bit tired,” he yawned.

“You get some rest,” I grinned at him. “Egg laying is hard work.”

Chapter Thirty-One

Sam

I wanted to follow on Dara's heels, but Abel grabbed my hand and stopped me.

"Let him do his job," Abel whispered.

"He was until—"

"My ultrasound can wait, Sam," he grinned up at me. "My baby isn't coming right now and Eston's sort of are. Maybe he'll need help."

Abel was right, of course. I wasn't fond of the idea of Dara going anywhere with Cade. His mood shifted too quickly for my liking. Would Dara grow that irrational as Abel's pregnancy progressed? Would I?

The thought of a tiny wolf pup making its way around our new house made me smile despite myself. A little Dara and Abel running around and climbing up on our lap for love. A tiny baby held in the crook of Dara's big arm looking impossibly small. A little person they made – despite everything that could've kept them from meeting. The baby was no more than a bundle of cells right now, but I loved them as much as I loved the men who made them.

With our fingers entwined together, Abel led me back inside the clinic. He hopped back up on the examination table and beckoned me closer with a single finger. He was still shirtless, not having bothered getting dressed during Cade's episode.

He tucked that beckoning finger under my chin and pulled me down for a long slow kiss. His lips parted softly under mine inviting my tongue into his mouth. I rested my hands on his sides, reveling in how warm and comfy it was to touch him.

We both knew we weren't going to violate the sanctity of Dara's clinic by romping around, but a kiss didn't hurt anyone. In fact, it touched me right where I needed to calm down.

"He's okay," Abel whispered when our long kiss broke. "He can handle Cade. He's not Clarence. Cade's just afraid."

"I know," I chuckled. "I shouldn't laugh. I'm nervous too. Not to his point of bellowing but nervous enough. If I get overprotective, I give you full permission to clock me."

"Maybe I'll like it. You can protect me from-- Hmmm..... I don't know what I need protected from," Abel laughed.

"Everything," I said.

"Hmmm.... Maybe. Probably from caffeine withdrawal and morning sickness, mostly."

"I'll kick that coffee pot's ass for tempting you," I said and let out a teasing growl.

"My hero," Abel smirked and kissed me again.

"There is one thing I think I need to say, and I think Dara would agree with me."

"What's that?" Abel asked arching a brow.

"You're not getting any more spankings until after the baby comes. I can't -- I don't think. No, I know I couldn't bring myself to hit you -- even there -- even if you wanted it knowing you're pregnant. I'm not trying to be a cave--"

"It's okay. I know that. Putting that extra sting on me is one thing, but I'm not going to put extra stress -- even fun stress -- on my body while I'm growing a life. Maybe we don't have to give up kink forever, but for now I think that has to go on the back burner. Wolves are pregnant for between two and three months. It's not that long. Dragon eggs may take longer, but we don't know what we're getting into yet."

"Let's find out," Dara said, appearing in the doorway of the examination room.

“How’s Eston?” Abel asked before I could.

“Three healthy identical blue eggs. We may be dealing with another set of identical triplets if their eggs are any indication of who’s inside,” Dara said, rounding the examination table and leaning past me to steal a quick kiss from Abel before turning his attention to the ultrasound machine.

I moved back so that Abel could swing his legs up and stretch out. I circled the table to the side without the machine and took his hand in mine. While the machine booted up, Dara undid the button of Abel’s jeans and scooted the denim low enough that we found the end of his happy trail. I opened my mouth to say something dirty, but shut it. Dara had his serious doctor face on.

“The gel shouldn’t be too cold, mate,” Dara cooed the words as he smoothed the gel over Abel’s stomach with his hands before washing them and coming back to pick up the wand.

“Ready?” Dara asked him.

“More than I can even explain,” Abel grinned from ear-to-ear.

There was a slight tremble in Dara’s hand until the wand pressed gently against Abel’s gel covered belly. All eyes turned to the monitor. It didn’t take long for a little jellybean to show itself on the screen.

“Is that our baby?” Abel asked.

“Yes,” Dara said, turning misty eyed as he spoke.

“A wolf, right?” Abel asked, squeezing my hand.

“Unless you have other shifter genes prominent in your family, that would be correct,” Dara nodded, still not looking away from the screen.

“I have a few cousins who are foxes. My uncle married a fox from Spain,” Abel said.

I opened my mouth to say that wasn't how bloodlines worked, but Dara turned his head just enough to shoot me a warning look. So, I kept my mouth closed.

“I think the odds are still in favor of our wee one being a wolf,” Dara grinned at him.

“Good because I think I'd be crap at sitting in a nest all day. Might still find out one day but --”

“You wouldn't have to nest alone,” Dara said, still holding the wand to Abel's belly.

He leaned in for a long slow kiss before finishing the ultrasound. My thoughts turned to the nursery back at the house. All the houses built in Heartville came with them, but it still seemed like a tiny miracle that they knew we'd use it so soon.

“See. Retirement has its perks. No perps, just perks,” my dragon chimed off in my thoughts as Dara turned off his machine and cleaned up Abel's gel-covered belly. *“We get to help raise a baby. They have businesses or both will soon. I don't think we're going to have much time to be bored with a wolf cub around.”*

Chapter Thirty-Two

Abel

With the confirmation of my pregnancy, Dara gripped the reins of our lives and pulled us all closer together than ever. The coffee pot was banished from the kitchen into the spare room's closet until further notice. I could safely have one cup a day, but Dara said it wasn't fair to have it there always tempting my coffee-reliance. We'd get our morning cup from Bad Wolf Cakes 2.0 or he'd made it over at the clinic. Sam wasn't thrilled about the banishment of the magical beans, but he relented because sires had been known to do weirder things with their first baby.

He and Sam also started getting up an hour earlier than usual to go work out at the gym. Dara stopped every morning to drag Cade with him. That change Sam was pleased with. I guessed he must've worked out a lot as a detective to stay in shape.

By the time they returned home from the gym, I was usually awake. If my stomach was having a good day, I made up breakfast. I stuck with simple foods that had less chance of turning my belly and/or being burnt to a crisp. If I had a morning sickness day, I'd usually lay back down, pop a few gummies, and wait for them to bring the coffee. Those days became few and far between as the first month of my pregnancy passed.

Dara worked at the clinic in the mornings and made home visits to patients in the afternoon. He got on well with Nurse Charlene. The water dragon was glad to have another medical person around. She even took her daughter off to watery destinations every other weekend with Dara around to free up some of her time.

I took to shopping online for stuff for the baby during the day. There were so many things out there. I knew some of

them would be helpful and some were crap from when Baby Juliard was much smaller. I was positive I bought too many outfits, but figured we'd have another, or someone else would have a need for them and I could pass on the clothes that we never got the chance to use. I bought swings and bouncers, a changing table, and a highchair. Car seats and two strollers. The first stroller was more of a pram meant for tiny babies and the second was a two-seater in case I had Jace or Juliard with me and the baby.

If Sam minded being the one to bring in all our drone deliveries he never complained. We made a game of him guessing what was arriving in each box and crate. He got pretty good at guessing after a while.

Halfway through my first month of being pregnant, Manny and his crew broke ground for the salon. There wasn't a big party or anything and I didn't want one. I wasn't even sure what I'd call it when it was finished. I never had a whole salon to myself before. I had a business degree to go along with everything else I needed, but I was used to having a chair, not a whole salon. So, just like my incoming baby, my salon needed a name.

Sometimes in the afternoon, after romping around with Sam, he'd take a nap and I'd lay awake staring at the ceiling spinning names in my head and poking Dara over our mating link for his opinion if he was in route to a patient's house and not actively doctoring. At the end of the first month, no name was set in stone.

Dara was in favor of me naming the company after myself. At one time, I'd probably have jumped at the idea. Eventually, I planned to hire others too and I knew how it was to feel small where you worked. I didn't want my name hanging over all my nail, hair, and spa artists. When that time came, I wanted them to feel at home at work. Creatives always did their best when we felt we had a place to call home for our art.

As my belly grew, so did my restlessness. Sometimes I missed the nightlife of London. Not that I could have right now even if I were there. London was a chaotic ball of arrests and skirmishes between Clarence's dragons and those who wanted to wipe magic off the face of Earthside. The latter was ridiculous, of course, but when did that ever stop a hateful person?

I took to giving myself and my guys manicures a lot. I painted Douglas's nails with safe polish that didn't have the fumes some of the other stuff I worked with did. Hell, I'd have painted Sam's nails if he let me. Dara did give in on more than one occasion and returned to work the next day with flowers or geometrics on his fingernails. He got a lot of compliments, and I teased him that he was my marketing team.

By the time I hit the six-week mark of my pregnancy I felt the baby's weight pulling my center of gravity low to the ground. The skin of my belly started to stretch taut, and Dara's favorite pastime became rubbing my belly and talking to the baby. It took three tries to find out we were expecting a tiny baby boy. Our baby was seemingly shy or a trickster who just wanted to keep us in the lurch of not knowing who we should expect.

Two days after our baby finally let us win that round, my salon was finished. I'd spent a lot of time working with Manny in the planning phase, so when he announced it complete, it really was. The chairs were in place and the stations set up. Inside and outside, the business was ready to run. The only thing missing was the name.

A few days after the original tour of Manny's excellent work, I waddled back over to the salon while Sam ran Dara's lunch over to him. It wasn't a long walk. I walked to Douglas's bakery at least every other day, but with gravity pulling on my belly it was longer than ever. Inside, I climbed up into the first chair and closed my eyes. This one would be my chair when it came time to cut hair. The first nail station

would be mine too, because I wanted to see the front door. I opted for big windows upfront that showed the street and the people passing by. Anyone could look inside and see how much fun we all were having.

With the sunlight dancing on my face through the window, I knew exactly what I had to call the salon. Claw Spa. Sure, we'd do other beauty related things here, but nails were my specialty and my favorite. I shot Manny a text. Cedar would design my logo the same as he designed the new logo for Douglas.

“Well, baby, that’s out of the way,” I said. “We have named the salon. Claw Spa. Don’t worry. I’ll do my best to make sure your name doesn’t rhyme like that. It works for businesses but not babies.”

My wolf wagged his tail inside of me and I was overcome with the zoomies. I managed to wiggle out of the chair, go outside, and lock up before I shifted down to my furry form. Even in wolf form I had a belly, and it was obvious that I was pregnant, but pregnant wolves ran a lot. They still hunted until it was time to den down. I zoomed around the village square careful not to knock anyone over. Then I headed down the path to the woods. Maybe I'd catch a rabbit and eat it whole. My tail wagged as the trees closed in around me. I passed two of the dragonfly fay guards on my way in. They waved and smiled, as friendly as ever. I ran until my wolf stopped to pant and we both lost track of the trail and the time.

A heartbeat sounded in my ears that wasn't my own. For a second, I thought I heard my pup's heartbeat now that I was away from the noise of the village. Only it was too loud to be my pup and it wasn't coming from inside of me. I held my breath and heard yet another.

Shit!

This wasn't good.

I sniffed around but smelled nothing.

Someone lurking around in the woods wearing pheromone blocker spray was never a good thing. The lack of scent also ruled out forest animals. Wild bears didn't hide their scents.

"It's not working, Ang!" A man grumbled and I tiptoed into a copse of trees to hide.

"Shut up and get it done! That damn bear will be here any minute!" A woman snapped back at him.

I couldn't smell them, but she just sounded like a crunchy dragon.

"Dara, I may be in trouble out here," I said, pulling on my mating link with him.

"Sweetheart?" Dara reached back out to me.

I told him everything, mostly using images since our mating link translated so much.

"Stay where you are. I'm getting Sam and Bobby."

I hunkered down in the bushes and did my best not to pant despite the heat creeping over my body. The gym was the closest building to the woods, but after my zoom-a-thon I wasn't sure which direction its safe harbor lay in.

"Here! Fuck! You're useless!" The woman snapped at her companion. "I'll do it! It's a fucking simple net! How fucking stupid can you be?"

"It's not gonna work, Ang!" The man snapped back at her.

"It is too! That damn bear is ours!"

Were they hunting? There weren't any bears out here that I knew of. At least, none this close to the village. Their London accents gave them away too. Seriously, why would a Londoner live in the woods here? Much less two of them. They could've fled the war, but why not just come live in the village? Others had since we arrived.

"ANG!"

“Shut up! Someone’s going to hear your big mouth!” Ang snapped at him.

Ang? What was that short for? She certainly wasn’t an angel.

I steadied my breathing once again and let out a long slow breath. I tuned into the group link which was full of chattering and planning. Dara was coming. Sam was coming.

The brim of a cowboy hat appeared through the trees beyond the voices, then disappeared. A shadow loomed in the sky. What the fuck had I zoomed my way into and how in the name of all Juda’s little babies was I getting out of it?

Chapter Thirty-Three

Eston

My eggs grew a bit each day until they came up to my hip when I stood up in the nest. I sat in front of them with my back rigid. Something was going on in the village that Cade and my brothers didn't want me to know about. Cade and the other Alphas had taken off in a flash and Nicky and Cedar came into the nesting room and locked the door behind them. They refused to answer any questions about why everything was going on lockdown. My heart pounded in my ears thinking of all the possibilities. I didn't want Cade out there with the emergency. I wanted him here with me and the eggs that housed our helpless little babies. The last time Dara was here he listened and heard three strong heartbeats. They were close to hatching. It was almost time and of course, all hell would break loose now.

I opened my mouth to question them again but a thud behind me made all three of us jump. There wasn't a window in the nesting room. I twisted around to see one tiny toe poking out of the center egg.

"Nicky, I need you to do a spell," I said, starting the speech I had rehearsed in my head since I found out my babies would hatch.

"I think that one's hatching, Est. It's okay," Nicky stepped closer to me.

"No, I need you to bind the three of us to never speak of what we see in here," I shook my head and rubbed the tiny toe of my firstborn. By scent he was a boy. He would've been the one to carry Cade and Clarence's curse of solo leadership if I didn't have my plan. He didn't need to worry, though. I did have a plan and whatever hell was unleashed in Heartville made it easier to enact.

“Nicky, I need you to bind the three of us to never speak of what we see in here,” I said again.

“What’s wrong?” Nicky asked, stepping into the nest next to me.

“Nothing if you help me,” I said through gritted teeth. “They’ll never know who the firstborn was. We’ll save my babies so many problems. Clarence and Cade will either have to accept they’re all heir or have no heir.”

I thought of the other kids all safe and sound in the cellar with Douglas, Dorian, and the other omegas. I was the one who couldn’t leave the nest. We couldn’t move the eggs. If we all survived whatever fresh hell was unfolding, this would secure the future for my children.

“I can do that,” Nicky said.

He pricked each of our fingers and made us swear upon the moon and our parents that we’d never speak of what happened in this room. The magic wrapped around our pressed together fingers and a bright translucent cord bound us all together. A second later a foot of the peekaboo toe crashed through the shell. He was safe. He came first, but he’d never carry the weight that his sire and his grandsire did. I sobbed in relief and Nicky and Cedar both rubbed slow gentle circles on my back.

“Thank you,” I managed to croak out as the baby freed his left arm from the shell too.

“We’re family. That’s what we do,” Nicky said.

“I’ll grab a blanket from the closet,” Cedar said, as another arm broke free of the first shell.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Abel

“Ang! Someone is here!” The man whisper-shouted, but the woman called Ang ignored him.

“We’re here for the damn bear! So, I hope someone’s here! If the net doesn’t get him burn down the whole fucking forest if you have to! We can’t let him run to Clarence’s aid!” Ang hissed at him.

Help Clarence? Come over? Cowboy hat! Shit! They were aiming for Philip!

Philip Mcoy!

Dr. Philip!

Maybe I should’ve worked out at the gym with my guys. The man was right whether or not Ang believed him. Their bear was here. I squeezed my eyes closed as my nose twitched. This was no time to sneeze! I was hiding out. I squeezed my eyes as hard as I could. My belly ached from laying on the rough ground.

No! No! No!

I sneezed and then I froze. The heartbeats of the others sped up and I heard the crack of a bullet just as a heavy weight plopped down over me. The smell of scales surrounded me as my draconic savior grunted. It had to be Sam or Dara. No! No! Who else would take a bullet for me and the baby? Who else

--

“*Cade?*” I poked at him over the Moonscale Flight link.

“*Shush for a minute,*” he said, sounding pained even over the flight link.

The gun cocked again, and magic rippled over me. He was bringing out his wings. The second bullet was deflected,

but he was bleeding onto my fur from the first bullet. Had my zoomies just brought about the downfall of the Moonscale heir? Had I just widowed Eston by going for a run in the forest? Had I just left three unborn hatchlings orphans?

“We’re going up,” Cade hissed over the flight link. *“Don’t panic. I got you. We’ll get out of this.”*

“I trust you,” I said because what else could I say to the man who just took a bullet for me?

We went up as the gun cocked again. Cade avoided the bullet and turned his back to the shooter. I waited for him to grunt when the next shot came, but instead the ground below us was illuminated as one of the intruders exploded into a mass of bone and blood and whatever else makes people tick.

“Take that, Ang!” My wolf growled.

In the shadow of the explosion, I saw the brim of a black cowboy hat. Their bear hunt had failed.

I panted from the heat and the anxiety beating inside of me. Cade cradled me to his chest, my belly protected by one of his arms. He hissed and groaned as he flew. The bullet had hit his shoulder and was pouring blood still even as the wound worked on closing itself with the help of his Alpha genetics.

We nearly fell to the ground in front of the clinic. Nurse Charlene waited outside for us. Where were my guys? Were Sam and Dara out there in the woods caught in the middle of the shootout? I whined.

“Is he hit?” Nurse Charlene asked.

“I don’t think so,” Cade said, his arms trembling around me. “But check him first anyway! The baby—”

He swayed on his feet and Charlene took me from his arms. A moment later, Dara’s scent rushed into my nose and then Sam’s. Charlene handed me off to Dara and everyone rushed into the clinic. Dara looked me over despite me saying I was fine. It was Cade who needed all his attention. He didn’t

stop his fussing until I managed to shift back. Cade's blood was sticky and cold on my back, neck, and in my hair.

"Help him!" I cried out.

Sam wrapped his arms around me from behind and I leaned into him as Dara and Charlene helped Cade lay down.

"It's a flesh wound, Doctor," Nurse Charlene said. "It's already healing."

"My pinky's broken," Cade grunted, holding up his hand as if that were his biggest problem in the world.

"Let's get the bullet out first," Dara said, opening his bag.

"Turn around here," Sam said and twisted me around in his arms.

I buried my face into his chest as much as my belly would allow.

"What the hell did you do out there, Cade?" Dara asked, his voice amazingly calm for a man who had his fingers buried in a fleshy hole.

"Free fell during a shift. I hit where I was aiming. What the bloody hell else was I supposed to do? Abel's part of the flight. Even over here he's one of mine and he's pregnant and you're more helpful to Eston if you're not mourning the loss of—" Cade's words died and resurrected as a grunt.

"The bullet's out," Dara said. "We'll wash it out and then tend to your pinky. I would lecture you and say you're lucky that's all that you broke, but under the circumstances I think I'll spare you. Nurse?"

"Yes, Doctor?" Charlene replied.

"Can you do me a favor? I think Philip and the others have put an end to the danger. Eston's probably freaking out a bit at the moment. Could you sprint over there and let him know his mate should be home within the hour?"

"Of course," Charlene said and sprinted toward the door.

“Is he going to be okay, Dara?” I croaked out between sobs.

“He’s fine, sweetheart. He just needs to rest and eat. Now, I want to get you onto the ultrasound table and check on our baby.”

Sam lifted me up before I could answer and carried me down the hall to the room I spent the most time in at the clinic. Cade pushed himself to his feet and followed us. Over Sam’s shoulder, I watched him roll his shoulders and pull his wings back in.

“I’m okay,” he said, as if I were an annoying parent fussing over a skinned knee.

“Water in the mini-fridge in my office, Cade. Drink or I’m giving you an IV,” Dara warned right before we turned into the room.

“Yeah, yeah,” Cade nodded and disappeared into Dara’s office.

This time I couldn’t look at the monitor as Dara performed the ultrasound and Sam held my hand. I didn’t want to see if something was wrong with the baby. He was big now and looked like a baby at our last ultrasound. I didn’t want to see him hurt. I couldn’t bear him hurt over me just wanting to run around the woods like an idiot.

“You are not an idiot, Abel,” Dara said. “You should be able to run in the woods without being shot at.”

“How is he?” I whispered and squeezed Sam’s hand for dear life.

“Perfectly fine. Your body is a wonderful perfect shield for him,” Dara said. “I just-- Better to check just in case.”

I sobbed again as new information flooded over the group links.

Ang and her mate were in the woods to lay a trap for Philip McCoy. He was due to visit Liam and his other friends for dinner. No one was sure how they gained the information they used to lay their trap and we'd never know. Philip said he'd have tried for a live capture if not for the proximity of a pregnant omega. Then again, Philip has always been the shoot first sort if all the stories from the War of the Wildlands were to be believed.

The working theory of Bobby, Clarence, and the Hemlock Wolf Pack leaders was that someone from the Wildlands – someone probably bad – had fled for London at some point and joined up with Mundanes Before Magic. They warned of Philip and Canton's prowess at war and spread the fear that they'd come to Clarence's aid.

Clarence wasn't too sad about the loss of information because he had reason to believe Ang was part of trying to blow up his mate and newborn. I had a sinking feeling that Mundanes Before Magic had just pulled Philip into the war.

I trembled on the table as the information poured in. I didn't want the war to come here. We'd fled from it and somehow, I still ended up being shot at by a member of the hate group.

"I'm sorry," Cade's voice sounded out from the doorway.

"Don't," Dara shook his head. "They did this. Their fear of losing the war did this. They came here for Philip, not for you. You just got caught in their crosshairs. I don't know what would've happened if you weren't here, Cade, and I don't want to imagine it. Thank you for being there right where and when Abel needed you."

"Sam, I'll get Abel home, if you can walk with Cade? We can do it the other way around if you want--" Dara said, but Sam shook his head.

"I'll go out. You go straight to the house with Abel," Sam said, and he and Cade exchanged a look.

“It’s the rules of combat,” Cade shrugged. “You keep the healers alive.”

I hugged Cade before he left and was unable to find the words to thank him again. Who the hell shifts in the sky as he falls to the ground to protect someone? Apparently, Cade Moonscale.

“You can’t say he’s like Clarence anymore,” I whispered to Dara as we walked out of the clinic. “I don’t think Clarence would be that brave for anyone except his own mate.”

Chapter Thirty-Five

Cade

My shoulder still stung when I reached home.

Home.

It really was home now.

Heartville.

The crowded house Eston and I shared with his brothers.

Our nest.

Our cozy bed.

The kitchen where Nicky and Nem argued over who was going to do the dishes or fold the most laundry.

It was all home.

Maybe more than London ever was.

I rolled my shoulders willing the sting away as my dragon yawned. Thankfully, the bullet didn't get him, only me. In a real battle, he'd be more helpful than me anyway. If someone else came back any time soon, it would be his turn to fight and save everyone.

"Come on, Cade," Nem said, opening the door before I put my key in. "Manny's gone to get the kids and you need a shower before you go in there. I don't think Eston even knows you're hurt. They locked us all out of the nesting room. Still won't let us in."

Shit!

"Eston's had his part of the mating link shut down for a while. I did too," I said and rubbed a hand over my face.

"Don't do that," Nem shook his head. "You're bloody and just spread blood and muck around. You need a shower before you see him."

“I need to let him--” I started but Nem shook his head.

“Stop that! This isn’t the time to be bloody annoying, Nem.”

“Cade, you are covered in blood. Your blood. Eston doesn’t know you’re hurt. He will find out, but you look like you’ve bled out. Take a shower. I’ll grab you something to wear. If what I think happened in there did, believe me, you’ll want to be clean.”

“Shit!” I swore and tried to scoot past him.

“Shut up for a minute!”

“This has probably bloody killed Eston’s anxiety and --”

“Do I have to throw you over my shoulder like one of the kids and carry you off to the bath? I’d like to see my mate in the flesh sometime before the sun burns out,” Nem said, narrowing his eyes on me in a perfect impression of Adrian. “I get it! You got shot – things are happening fast, but do you really want to go into your nest like this.”

I walked past him down the hall and stopped just outside of the door of the nesting room. I didn’t try the handle. If Eston had a panic attack Nicky would’ve locked it down with magic. Since I wasn’t willing to tear the door off the hinges I knocked.

“Alpha, we need a few minutes, please!” Eston called back. “Just a few minutes! Are you alright? Did they find them?”

“That can wait!” Nicky called out. “The last part anyway! Are you okay?”

“I’m okay,” I nodded, blinking. “I’m going to clean up. I feel like I’ve rolled around in the mud.”

On the way to the bedroom, Nem shot me a told you so look, and I shot him a bird back.

“Fly away with that, bear man!” My dragon swore under his breath.

I wasn't in the mood for guessing games or riddles and neither was my inner beast. I wasn't in the mood for anything except to climb back into the nest with my eggs and mate. Dad's bloody war poured over here following poor Philip just trying to have a meal with his friends.

Angela and Rob were somewhat familiar to me. They were Moonscale dragons alright.

“Not anymore. Now they're Moonscale goo,” my dragon chimed into my thoughts impressed with Philip's use of exploding bullets.

They were impressive. What wasn't impressive was Angela and Rob bringing their bullshit over here and it was all bullshit.

“They didn't want Philip over there. So, they tried to kill him,” my dragon mused inside my thoughts. *“Yeah. So smart. Top of their class. Let's pick a fight with a bear who isn't bothering us. Let's make him mad! Poke the bear! Poke the bear! POKE THE BEAR!”*

Ignoring him, I stripped off what was left of my clothes. My shirt had gone the way of the human governments once Dara got ahold of me. Not that it would've been wearable with a bullet hole anyway. I stood under the hot water a long time as the blood stuck to my skin turned the water pink.

“Cade,” a little whisper came from the other side of the bathroom door.

I expected Nem or Eston, maybe Dorian, but it was Sergei's voice that came around the cracks in the door.

“It's not locked!” I called out and bit my cheek, so I didn't laugh.

Sergei had first met Dorian as a disembodied spirit while the latter was in the shower. Any other day, I'd have made a

joke about him crashing showers, but today wasn't the day.

"Everything okay?" I asked as he slipped into the bathroom and shut the door behind him.

"That's what I came to ask you. Dorian's getting the baby now that everything's been given the all-clear, but we smelled your blood on the way over there."

"I got shot playing the hero," I chuckled. "That's what they'll say anyway."

"What really happened," Sergei asked, ruffling through the linen cabinet.

A second later, the door opened and stepped inside shirtless.

"I'm going to wash your back. I'll be careful of your shoulder. Better to not be bloody when you see Eston next," he said.

"Probably," I nodded.

"So, what happened?" He asked.

"With Angela and--"

"No, with you," he said. "They're dead. They were dumbasses and assholes. Let their ancestors deal with them. We're worried about you."

"She was going to shoot Abel. I didn't let her," I told him the shortened version of it. "It's not a big deal."

"I think it is," Sergei said, washing circles on my back. "I bet a lot of people will. Saving two lives is a big deal."

"It was the least I could do since--"

"Nope. You don't get to blame yourself. You can blame your dad the tiniest bit, but maybe you should blame Philip for being so badass? It would make as much sense as blaming yourself."

I laughed and shook my head.

“You gotta let them celebrate you a little bit. Not for being heir. Maybe that’s why you did it but—”

“No. I mean, maybe. Abel is a fight member. He’s also my friend’s true-mate and —”

“A person. See. That’s why when Dara wants to throw you a feast, you’re gonna have to let him. You’re not like a lot of them. It took me a while to see that.”

“Thanks, Sergei,” I said and stretched. “How’s it looking?”

“Just about closed up. Shouldn’t cause a problem.”

“Have you heard from your sire?” I asked.

“He’s in Spain at the moment. I think he’s doing everything he can to avoid going home. I think he wants to, and I almost want to tell him to, but it’s not my place.”

“What happened between your parents isn’t your fault.”

“I know, but I’d rather him have to ignore me than be so miserable.”

“Life is a bundle of miseries,” I sighed. “We just choose which ones are worth suffering for.”

“Oh! You’re sounding like Xenos.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” I chuckled. “Now, will you please get me a towel?”

“Alpha?” Eston’s voice came through the door. “Are you okay?”

I told Eston the truth – the whole jumping out of the sky truth – as soon as he was in the bathroom. I didn’t want to be my sire covering up things that really happened. It wasn’t just my future I put at risk when I saved Abel.

Sergei slipped out of the bathroom and Eston wrapped his arms around me. I held him close, breathing in his scent and silently thanking my parents for banishing me. This was where

I wanted to be – right here with him. This was where I was meant to be.

“Don’t be mad at me,” Eston said, looking up at me.

“What happened? Are you okay?” My heart skipped a beat as I searched his eyes trying to discern what transpired while I was out skydiving in the woods.

“I’m fine. Everyone’s okay,” he squeezed me tight. “The babies – Come see.”

“Mate?”

“They’re okay. They’re perfect,” Eston said. “Maybe put on pants first.”

“Probably a good idea.”

A few minutes later, I stood in the doorway of the nesting room watching Nem, Cedar, and Nicky hold our triplets. They were big babies like Sunny was. Small and tiny in comparison to who they’d grow to be. I froze for a moment. Three tiny lives depended on me. Four. Four tiny lives when you counted Sunny and Sunny counted.

“Sunny’s with Manny and the other kids,” Eston said, as my thoughts oozed over our mating link.

Every atom inside of me wanted to rush into the nest like a bull trapped in a china shop. Instead, I took each step deliberately and climbed inside. I didn’t know who to reach for first and wished I had a third arm. They were all beautiful and while Dara would probably say it was too soon to say they were identical, they were, just like Eston and his brothers.

I ended up stretched out on my back with all three of our perfect little boys on my chest and Eston curled up on his side pressed against me. Nicky lay on the other side as if to prevent a roll away baby.

“They’re so perfect. I’m sorry I wasn’t here when everything happened. I know you hadn’t hatched eggs before

and --”

“They did the hard work,” Eston grinned and leaned up to kiss my chin. “We only had to wait and clean them up.”

“You guys did so well. All six of you,” I smiled.

I couldn’t stop smiling. This was the life – keeping everyone safe and coming home to my family and three beautiful baby boys. Who could want more?

“But there is something else you should know,” Eston said, and my muscles tensed.

I looked from baby to baby checking for any little problems. All of them had ten fingers and ten toes, heads full of hair.

“I asked Nicky to do a secret binding spell,” Eston said.

“For what?” I blinked.

“So, none of us could say who came out first,” Eston said, not looking at me.

“Oh, that,” I chuckled. “You scared me. I thought something was wrong and --”

“No, Alpha,” Eston squeezed my arm. “At least, I hope you understand why I did what I did. If the time ever comes that they have to lead the flight, either they take all of them, or none of them. No one will ever know who was born first. I didn’t -- you carry too much on your shoulders. None of them will ever have to bear that load alone.” He sniffled.

“Ah, I’m alright. I’m not carrying it all anymore. Not here in Heartville, anyway. If my parents’ war ever ends, we’ll probably have some arguments, but they’ll get over it. They’ll have to. You did what you thought was best as their carrier. That’s what dads have been doing since the dawn of time. Good ones, anyway,” I grinned at him. “I’m not too worried about who came out of his egg first. Mate, I’m just happy they all came out safe, sound, and healthy. That’s the important

thing. That's what we've-- That's why we do all of it. So our kids are safe and healthy and can have better than we did."

"You're not mad then?" Eston asked, his voice perking up hopefully.

"No," I shook my head fast. "It was smart thinking. Now we just have to name them."

"I have ideas about that," Eston grinned and pushed himself up onto his elbow.

"Throw them at me, mate," I said, and leaned up just enough to steal a kiss.

"Indigo, Cobalt, and Teal," he said, pointing at each baby as he said his name.

"I think you've already decided beyond the idea phase."

"I'm sorry. I had to call them something," he laughed.

"I love it. It goes basic to how dragons used to name their kids," I said and stole another kiss. "Welcome to the world, Indigo, Cobalt, and Teal."

Chapter Thirty-Six

Dara

I let Cade by without hosting a feast in his honor since he didn't look comfortable with the idea. Maybe it was for the best at the end of the day. With Angela and Rob exploded and the ordeal done and dusted, maybe it was best for everyone in Heartville to move on as quickly as possible. Still, Cade had shaped the town's destiny with his quick thinking, and it wasn't something I'd soon forget.

I lay awake some nights watching Abel sleep with Sam spooned behind him. Now that he was pregnant, we always boxed him in on the bed as if the whole world outside the bedroom was a threat to him and the pup. Maybe it was after what happened in the forest. I watched him sleep in gratitude. If not for Cade's quick thinking our bed might be down a person and a pup. I couldn't imagine my life without Abel. It ached to even consider that possibility.

It was something that stayed in the back of my mind as the last few weeks of Abel's pregnancy came to pass. I took those weeks off, because Philip McCoy wouldn't stop dropping into Heartville after the ambush attack. Some folks expected him to race off to London to prove a point, but that wasn't the old cowboy turned midwife's style. There were rumors that he put Clarence in touch with the member of the Guardians of Glitter Bomb who made the exploding bullets and that he talked tactics with him too. I didn't ask. I didn't want to think about people exploding all over London or anywhere else for that matter.

Instead, I kept my mind on my family and friends here in Heartville. During my days off, the only house calls I made were for Cade and Eston. I checked in on their babies often and took calls late at night to ease Cade's anxieties whenever something new happened. Baby Teal took to sucking on his

toes whenever his parents left the nest. Some times he tried it on his brothers too. Baby feet were clean enough and built in binkies. Though, I did suggest binkies as a substitute for toes. Either way, he wasn't hurting anyone and was healthy as any baby I'd ever seen. They all were.

I was usually up when he called on one of my gratitude vigils, as I came to call watching Abel sleep until I was too exhausted to hold my eyes open anymore. It was on one such vigil that Abel's water broke. He was close and had been extra crunchy that day when a newcomer stopped by to ask for a manicure. It wasn't an unusual occurrence, and he did lots of basic manicures right in our kitchen. He refused and said everyone was to leave him alone. Then he shifted and dragged all the pillows and cushions in the house under the bed. He stayed there for hours.

It took some coaxing to convince him to shift back and have dinner with us. Sam and I didn't say it aloud, but we both knew the signs. He slept uneasily in between us that night, arching up as if his back occasionally twinged. Abel was smart. He didn't need us to tell him he was close. I let him sleep for as long as his body allowed. There wasn't much else to do in the early stages of labor. Rest was for the best. He was a first-time carrier and probably in for a long labor anyway.

My eyes had just drifted shut as sleep pulled at the edges of my mind when the gush spread across the bed. Sam's heart pounded in his chest, and I shook my head at his panic as I reached behind me to turn on the lamp that lived on the nightstand.

"Sam, will you please go fetch Douglas," I said, keeping my voice level as I ran through all the tiny details of Abel's birthing plan.

"Of course," Sam nodded and slid out of the bed.

I kissed Abel's sleepy forehead and prodded Nurse Charlene gently over the group link. I could've delivered a

baby in my sleep, but thought it was best to remain professional and have another pair of trained eyes on hand. Sometimes even the best doctors overlooked signs of danger within their own loved ones. My pride wasn't nearly as important as the safety of Abel and our pup.

I brought Abel a warm cup of sugary tea. He'd need the energy if the night dragged on into morning. While he drank, I prepared the bath. We'd purposefully not used the second bath to save it for the birth of the pup. I'd delivered babies in clinical and home settings. Abel's family and medical history didn't tick any of the boxes to send him for a clinical birth. Still, we had the OR prepped and Philip standing by if a c-section was needed.

"Don't think like that," my dragon chimed into my thoughts.

He was right, but he was also wrong. You couldn't be overprepared for the birth of a baby.

By the time Sam, Douglas, and Charlene arrived, I already had Abel in the tub. He leaned back with his eyes closed and kept a death grip on my hand. I cooed to him how much I loved him and how all of us would stay here for as long as it took. He didn't have to rush or worry. All we had to do now was let nature take its course.

Charlene took to prepping things we might need, and Douglas changed into his swimming trunks before climbing into the tub with his friend. He kissed his forehead as I had done before moving him into the tub.

"Baby's in the right position," I told Douglas.

He wasn't in the medical field but after having two babies I was sure it would be his next question.

"Good. He's a good boy and he wants to see the world," Douglas grinned.

“Sam, sit,” I said, as he started pacing the length of the bathroom.

He plopped down on the toilet seat.

“Sam, I’m supposed to be the one who might want to pace. Don’t take part of my job unless you want to do it all,” Abel teased, still keeping his eyes shut.

We all chuckled, and Abel screwed up his face in another contraction. I took a quick look to see how things were progressing.

“Almost time to push. Almost. Just a little bit longer, sweetheart. Just a little bit.”

Abel nodded and squeezed my hand.

“You’re allowed to make noise,” Douglas said, stroking his friend’s cheek.

“I know and I probably will,” he nodded. “I just don’t want to scream myself hoarse yet.”

After the next contraction I had Douglas switch me places since I was the one who would deliver the baby.

“Sam, come be helpful,” I said, once Abel’s breathing returned to normal.

“Huh? I’ve never—”

“Shush. Come on. Get behind Abel and support him. I can’t be in both places at once.”

Nurse Charlene leaned against the doorway watching. The bags under her eyes proved she was as tired as I was after my gratitude vigil.

I ran my palms down Abel’s full moon belly again and again encouraging, the baby to move downward as his body dilated in preparation for the birth.

“Little breaths,” I coached him. “Tiny little breaths like we practiced.”

He kept his eyes closed, but smiled at me as we both fell into the breathing patterns we practiced.

“What’s the first thing you want after your baby is born?” Douglas asked.

“A coffee – from you, of course, and the other thing I’m not saying. It’s dirty,” Abel laughed.

“Well, don’t get too dirty or you’ll have another baby right away,” Douglas teased.

Abel’s face contorted and I held my breath as his body arched in another contraction, the strongest yet.

“Breathe, Doctor. If you pass out, you’ll miss the birth of your firstborn,” Nurse Charlene said from the doorway.

I took a deep breath and forced in another and another until his contraction passed. Douglas was a bit pale from how hard his hand was squeezed, but he didn’t let go of Abel. None of us did

“With your next contraction, we’re going to start pushing,” I told him.

Abel nodded fast and hard, finally opening his eyes and meeting my gaze.

“You got this,” I smiled at him. “The hard part was growing him. This will be over before you know it and he’ll be here with us.”

“We should call him Kaden, but with a K,” he said. “I mean, we haven’t decided, and Cade saved me and—”

“I love it, sweetheart,” I nodded and ran my hand down his belly again. “It’s perfect.”

It showed first in his eyes – that first twinge of the next contraction. Then he growled, bracing his weight against Sam as he pushed. The baby moved along perfectly. Things moved quicker than even I expected. The early stages of his labor had

lasted nearly a day, but it seemed our boy was tired of waiting to see the world.

“I see the head, sweetheart,” I grinned two pushes later and reminded myself this wasn’t the time to get misty eyed.

I had to keep my head in the game until our boy was safely ushered into the world.

“Tea, Doctor,” Charlene held out a cup for me to drink from.

“Thank you,” I nodded when I had down the cup.

“You’re being a very good patient,” she teased me.

“I’m trying.”

With the next push everything moved at the speed of light. Our baby’s head came into the world and a few more pushes brought him into our universe screaming bloody murder and showing off his well-developed lungs. I counted fingers and toes and checked his mouth and nose to clear it while Charlene clamped off his cord.

My hands trembled as she passed me the surgical scissors. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. My fingers stopped their dramatics and I cut the cord with the baby resting on my legs. He was perfect. He was so bloody perfect and I was a good judge of babies. I’d delivered plenty, but he was the best baby in any world.

“Welcome to the world, Kaden,” I whispered, as I washed him, and the others looked on.

I placed him on Abel’s chest and kissed my mate’s forehead. Then I kissed Sam’s too for good measure.

Once on Abel’s chest Baby Kaden fell silent and rubbed his face against his carrier’s skin. He was right where he wanted to be now – back with the only person he knew existed up until a few moments ago. Now I was misty-eyed. Sam leaned forward and wiped a tear from my cheek.

“You did well,” he mouthed to me silently.

“We make a good delivery team,” I grinned, glancing around the room.

“He’s tiny and pretty,” Abel sniffled.

“You grew him. Of course, he’s beautiful,” I whispered.

“Congratulations,” Nurse Charlene said. “I’ll change the bed out so it’s ready.”

“Thank you!” I called as she disappeared from the room.

“We did it! We really did it!” Abel sniffled with tears running down his cheeks.

“You were incredible, mate,” I said and stole a quick kiss. “Let’s get you cleaned up and out of this tub and back into the nice warm bed.”

“I love you – all of you,” he said, tears still falling.

“And we love you too,” I said, stroking his cheek. “To the moon and back. We love you.”

Epilogue

From the Journal of Liam Moonscale-Hemlock

Haven't written in a while. In a rush to get to bed. So many calls from Clarence and Star. Ugh! So many people demanding I have visions. You'd think by now they'd all know that's not how it works. Bobby is threatening to hide my phone. I might let him tomorrow. I want one night of sleep where no one calls me to ask if I've had a fucking vision. There's not enough cold brew in the world to put up with the demands that I can do nothing about.

Quick updates – stuff to maybe write more about later.

- Many newcomers to the village fleeing the war in London.
- So many babies being born! All perfect. All beautiful. All healthy.
- Saw Daniel kiss a vampire while I was in the shower. I think the other guy was a vampire anyway. I like to imagine the vision came from his carrier who died shortly after his birth. Either Daniel is getting a boyfriend or finally meeting his true-mate soon. No vampires incoming that I know of, but I'm sure London has their fair share of those living the fanged-life.
- Starting to suspect Stariel might have a sibling soon. Bobby's definitely going to eat Clarence or Star for bugging me if I'm right.

Gotta sleep now. Gotta be better about keeping up with this journal too.

Read on to discover how much of Liam's vision of Daniel and this mystery vampire (?) comes true!

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Hey lovelies!

I wanted to drop a note here, first, to thank you all for reading this book and the previous ones in the series. I love writing in The Hemlock Mpreg Universe and sharing this universe with you all. When I started Wrynn and Darian's book back in December of 2017 I never thought it would go this far. I never expected it to go anywhere – but this is an amazing journey and one I'm happy to be on.

I've been getting some questions from you all and I thought this might be the best place to answer them. That way if you're too shy to post to my FB but have been wondering too – you can see it here!

<3

- 1) Sergei's parents will have a resolution at some point. This is planned. I don't know what they're going to do yet, but yep. They will have some resolution and I'll update you guys (via stories of course) as soon as they let me know what's going on.**

- 2) Starry — yes! He is going to have a book and if everything works out how I'm currently envisioning it, he'll be the omega MC in the holiday book this year! It's about time for the winter holidays to come to Heartville and I can't wait to see what they come up with!**

- 3) This one was new to me, but a few readers have asked questions that I'd love to answer in slice of life stories. For those of you who don't follow my FB right now my life is noisy. I'm not making the noise. No one in my house is making the noise. It's just noisy on my street at the moment. It shouldn't**

be this way forever. If/when it ends slice of life stories that never quite fit into the books might be a possibility. I have one in mind where Wrynn and Darian go on an anniversary trip. It only seems fair to start with them, since they started the whole universe of books.

- 4) I've been asked about a family tree/trees and at this moment I don't have one made up. It's something I've thought about putting together, but it's a massive undertaking. Had I known that Darian and Wrynn's book would lead to all of this – I would've started it then, but I had no idea! Again, the noise and just life stuff, have prevented me from taking on this task. If I have to choose between writing and extras, I'll always choose writing the stories.**

I think that's it for housekeeping for the Hemlock Mpreg Universe! Thanks again

for coming along on the journey with me and my imaginary friends! If you have the time, dropping a quick review on Amazon, Goodreads, BookBub, or your favorite place to review books would be my favorite gift in the world. It's reviews and readers who continue to support the books that make expansion of the Hemlock Mpreg Universe possible.

Happy Reading!

XOXO

~Maggie

Reading Order for Maggie's Books

This has been much asked for, and despite posting it on the blog and FB I always get folks asking. So, if I remember, it'll be tucked in here at the end of every book. It's also always posted in my FB group (Hemlock Wolf Pack.)

[The First Omega](#)

[Omega Studies](#)

[Omega Sight](#)
[Omega Magic](#)
[Healer's Oath](#)
[Omega's Homecoming & Ardan's Oath](#)
[Claiming the Shaman](#)
[The Sleeping Omega Prince](#)
[Omega Rebellion](#)
[Skystead Wolves](#)
[Mated for the Holidays.](#)
[Saving Cinder](#)
[Freeing Fenrir](#)
[Crow King's Heir](#)
[Alpha in Distress](#)
[Sky's Homecoming](#)
[All the Pieces of Us](#)
[As Long as You Need Me](#)
[Omega Midwife](#)
[Pheromone Swap](#)
[Making Room for Love](#)
[Behind Dragon Wings](#)
[Interview with a Captive Dragon](#)

[The Other Mr. Claus](#)

[Yuletide Bites](#)

[Stay with Us](#)

[Guardians of Glitter Bomb](#)

[To Save a Sidhe](#)

[Dead Mates Society](#)

[The Love We Choose](#)

[The Love Right in Front of Us](#)

[Alphas of Lore](#)

[The Vampire and the Beast](#)

[Catnip & Mistletoe](#)

[The Practice Alpha](#)

[Alpha Unleashed](#)

[Alpha Misunderstood](#)

[The Pride of Glitter Bomb](#)

[The Age of Lions](#)

[A Worthy Bear](#)

[Stuck Between Two Bears](#)

[Omega in the Stars](#)

[Just a Wolf](#)

[Canton: A Memoir](#)

[Wildlands Omega](#)
[A Wilder Alpha](#)
[Omega's Fall](#)
[Alpha's Curse](#)
[Alpha of My Heart](#)
[A Wildlands Yuletide](#)
[Omega's Second Chance](#)
[Alpha's Sacrifice](#)
[Omega's Return](#)
[The Little Hemlock King](#)
[The Kissing Wars](#)
[Haunted Mates](#)
[Keeper of My Secrets](#)
[Invisible Alpha](#)
[Banished Alpha](#)
[Kiss Me Better](#)

Surrounded by Scales (You are here!)

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About the Author

Maggie Avery Hemlock (they/them) calls the Appalachian foothills home along with their cats Fenrir and Achilles. In their free time, Maggie and their furbabies, enjoy reading, nature, and chasing the red light of doom. (One day, Fenrir will finally capture it, but only if Achilles doesn't beat her to it!)

Their career started in freelance journalism and expanded into fiction as the years passed. While reality may be stranger than fiction, storytelling is their first true love. Their tall tales caused her trouble during their early years of childhood, but soon with chubby-pencil to paper, they began story writing.

Decades later, this love matured into a passion, and they've written across many genres. Their current love is MPREG, both for the genre's shifters and gender-bending nature. It's so much better to read and write about people falling in love, making babies, and raising happy families than it is to read about them killing one another off.

With a strong belief in live and let live and all love is love, Maggie Avery Hemlock is both a member of and an advocate for the LGBT community.

