

DO NOT
Date the
DRAGON
Next Door

HARMONY
RAINES

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DO NOT Date the Dragon Next Door

The Lonely Tavern Book Two

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DO NOT Date the Dragon Next Door

The Lonely Tavern Book Two

No, seriously DO NOT date the dragon next door.

After a bitter divorce from her mafia ex-husband, she's moved to the small town of Wishing Moon Bay with her children to start a new life - without any brooding men in it.

Unfortunately, the only apartment she can afford is owned by a dragon shifter that everyone tells her is powerful and dangerous. While it sounds all too familiar, she can't deny that he's easy on the eyes. Very easy on the eyes.

Oh, and worst of all, he lives next door.

When they can't stop running into each other, Leah soon gets a glimpse behind his tough exterior, and wonders if he isn't the bad boy everyone makes him out to be. He can be charming, sweet with a vulnerable side he tries desperately to hide.

That is until her ex-husbands 'associates' turn up in town.

She soon sees why everyone has told her to not date the dragon next door.

Chapter One – Ash

The door to The Lonely Tavern creaked open, drawing a few idle glances from the gathering of late afternoon patrons.

Ash strode in. His leather jacket hugged his broad shoulders, and his heavy boots thudded on the worn wooden floorboards, turning the idle glances curious. The door swung shut behind him, shutting out the bright sun, and leaving Ash's sharp, dark features cast in shadow. He paused, his eyes catching the glint of candlelight from beneath his brow as he read the slate sign on the host stand.

'Tonight's Special: Fiery Negotiations, on the Rocks.'

"Hm." Ash's lips quirked up into a smile before he set his eyes on the bar and strode forward.

More eyes followed him now, and he made sure to meet each one, nodding at the faces he recognized, some returning a smile or small wave, others turning away. There was one man with short blond hair nursing a drink in the corner, and Ash's smile faded briefly when he saw him.

Soon, the gazes were behind him as he reached the bar. Morwenna, with her mop of curly gray hair and black dress jingling with charms and trinkets, was intently polishing the inside of a pretty crystal glass.

Ash's eyes, however, fell on the big hunk of a man standing beside her, watching Ash approach with a wary expression. Flint made an odd choice for a bartender, but Ash would guess someone of his size and history would be a fine choice for a right-hand man.

Ash's heavy footfalls reached the bar, and he flicked his eyes away from Flint, back to Morwenna as he rested an arm on the bar.

When she didn't look up from her frenzied polishing, he began to drum his fingers on the rough wood before clearing his throat again, this time much louder.

Morwenna looked up from the glass, her angular features showing mock surprise. “Ash! Oh my, I didn’t see you there.”

Ash allowed a smile to creep over his face. He knew, more than most, of the cunning that hid behind the tavern owner’s zany exterior. More than that, in his short time in Wishing Moon Bay, he had come to admire it.

“Evening, Morwenna. Flint.” He gave a small nod, tasting the tang of a fellow dragon shifter on the air as he briefly met Flint’s eye. “I’ve got a bit of news that might interest some folks here.”

“Oh?” Morwenna arched an eyebrow and leaned forward onto the bar. “We’re all ears, Ash. What’s the word?”

Ash paused, leaning back on the bar as he turned to survey the room. Most had returned to their food and drinks, though he spotted some still giving him the side eye. “I’m sure everyone’s heard about my previous tenant’s *unexpected* departure. Well, I’ve just finished fixing the apartment up.”

“You mean that lovely cliffside property you managed to snap up?”

“Sure. And now I’m looking for a new tenant to enjoy it. Someone who appreciates the...quieter side of Wishing Moon Bay.”

“Quiet, eh?” someone called out from a nearby table. “Didn’t think it was your style, Ash.”

Ash’s lips twitched into a half smile, one that didn’t quite reach his eyes as he watched the speaker’s companions grimace as Ash swept his gaze over them. “People change, I suppose. And we can all use a little more *quiet* in our lives.”

The patron chuckled and raised his tankard in mock salute.

Ash turned back to Morwenna. “It’s a decent place. Good for someone looking for a fresh start, maybe.”

“Someone like you?” Morwenna’s eyes squinted playfully as she snapped her fingers, and Flint handed her a small tumbler of amber liquid, which she placed in front of Ash.

“Maybe.” Ash slid the drink toward him. He closed his eyes, but before he could savor his drink, he winced as he heard the door slam open behind him. He could almost feel *her* glare burning a hole in the back of his head. “*Crap.*”

“*Ashley!*” Sofia’s harsh tone could cut a man in two. “I should have known I’d find you in a bar. I should have come here in the first place to spare myself the two hours I’ve spent waiting at your apartment!”

Ash grimaced into his drink as he heard her heels clacking loudly as she stormed toward him.

“We could probably smuggle you out the back,” Morwenna leaned in and whispered. “Brushworth is getting very good at diversions.”

Ash caught a glimpse of the wonky broom at the corner of the bar and chuckled quietly before nailing his drink. Damn, that was some zesty whisky. “Thanks for the thought.” He turned on his heel, catching Sofia by the square shoulders of her checkered power suit, and spun her back toward the door, falling into step beside her. He tapped his forehead with his fingers as he lowered his voice. “Ah, how could I forget about lunch with my favorite sister?”

Sofia scoffed, mirroring his hushed tone. “Don’t pretend you haven’t been avoiding me. Besides, we all know that *Orla* is your favorite sister.”

“I would never avoid you. I just had some business to take care of that conveniently filled the two hours we had penciled in for lunch.” Ash kept his gaze on the door. He really didn’t want to have this argument so publicly.

Sofia swatted Ash’s hand from her shoulder, her long ponytail flicking him in the face as she stepped away. “Mother and Father might tolerate your arrogance, but I shall not.” She grabbed him by the scruff of his collar and pulled him close, speaking through gritted teeth. “And we both know I am not as lenient, either.”

Ash unpicked himself from her grasp, glancing around at the eyes that were all on them. “*Fine,*” he hissed. “We can talk,

as long as it's in my nice, *private* apartment and not in front of the whole *damn* town."

Sofia smirked. "No, we wouldn't want to create a scene now, would we?" She turned and headed for the door, which swung open for her.

Ash followed, a jeering voice following him out.

"Nice and *quiet*, eh?"

The door swung shut behind him, leaving him alone in the alleyway with Sofia, who eyed the crooked facade of The Lonely Tavern.

"Is this really a regular place for you to drink?" she asked with more than a drop of distaste.

Ash shrugged. "Regular enough. It has a certain charm."

And for some reason, he was drawn there. Although he had not figured out why.

Her lip curled in disdain. She truly looked out of place here in her creaseless suit with immaculate hair and makeup. Whatever place they were supposed to have lunch would likely have cost more than a month's rent from his whole apartment unit.

"Okay. Lead the way, *brother*." Sofia made a dramatic sweeping motion with her hand.

Ash chewed the inside of his cheek as he regarded the fiery expression on Sofia's face.

There really is no way we can avoid the coming confrontation, his dragon said resignedly.

A man can but hope, Ash replied with a sigh.

He stuffed his hands into his jacket pockets and tilted his head. "All right. This way."

Sofia laughed incredulously. "I'm sorry. *What* are you doing?"

Ash turned to face her, walking backward away from her, and shrugged. "It's within walking distance. Stretching your

legs instead of your wings might do you some good.”

Sofia arched an eyebrow.

“And the Dragon Guard isn’t a fan of people, particularly dragons, shifting in town.”

“I see.” Sofia nodded curtly and followed as Ash turned back around. “I never took you for such a *goody two shoes*.”

Ignoring Sofia’s barbed comment, he led her out of the alleyway and onto the main street. It was coming up to Wishing Moon Bay’s busiest time of day as the afternoon slipped by, and the streets were filled with people heading home, or out to shop, or simply strolling around the pretty streets.

All manner of people filled the small town. The scents and sights of folk from human to shifter to faery and orc had been overwhelming to Ash when he had first arrived there. But now, the tapestry of cultures and peoples ensured that he never wished to return to the dour, monotone cities of Cairnnoir, the Dragon Isle that had been his home for all his life. Until now.

As Ash watched his sister, he recognized the same expression he had worn once, though hers came with an unhealthy helping of disdain as she did her best to avoid groups of people, grimacing when anyone came too close.

“I really do not understand what you see in this place,” she said as they turned off the main street and took a steep, sloping road up toward his apartment block.

“Maybe if you spent less time in that office of yours, you might learn to appreciate its colorful flavors.”

Sofia grunted in reply. Leaving him in no doubt there would *never* be enough time for her to learn to appreciate the town.

It wasn’t much longer before they were on the highest roads of Wishing Moon Bay, which ran along a plateau of one of the cliffs that enclosed the bay. The houses here were much sparser, and everyone they passed had the aroma of well-to-do, from rustic cottage-style manors to the occasional more modern glass box.

Sofia studied the houses as they walked, and Ash could almost see the numbers running through her head, estimating how much they might be worth, what rent they would demand, and the average salary of a homeowner up here.

Ash sighed and turned his gaze toward the bay. He had never appreciated views before. Being a dragon, he was more than used to seeing the world spread out far below him. But those views had been fleeting, ever-changing as he soared over miles and miles. Since living in Wishing Moon Bay, he'd realized how much detail he had been missing. The low cloud over the mountaintops blended into snow, then forests. The dots of animals roaming green fields outside of town. The morning mist punctured with boat lights in the bay.

There are certainly worse places to while away in solitude. His inner dragon blinked as he, too, looked down over the sunny bay.

You've been a little quiet, Ash said, only slightly accusatory.

His dragon blew out a thin plume of smoke. *I'm certainly not avoiding having to deal with our charming sister.* He stretched his wide wings out over his body. *It's always so pleasant when she visits.*

Ash chuckled. *We could always swap places. We're about to get more than an earful.*

No, as you said, the Dragon Guard don't much like dragons shifting in town. It unnerves the locals. His dragon settled down for a nap with a smug smirk on his face.

"Here we are." Ash pointed at a small, unassuming building near the edge of the cliff.

"You're joking? That's barely a shed." Sofia shot him a look of disbelief and...disappointment.

"Come on, I'll show you around." Ash fished the keys out of his pocket and unlocked the thick door. "You never know, you might like it."

Accompanied by a derisory snort from Sofia, the door opened onto a wide staircase that led down. The building was

cut into the very cliff. It was framed by a huge, long window where the cliff face would have been that looked down onto the town below, letting in bright beams of sunlight that bounced off the white walls. The space felt so much larger than it really was, and the airy atmosphere almost felt like flying.

Almost. Ash's dragon chuckled.

Sofia gave a begrudging nod of approval as she stepped inside, closing the door quietly behind her.

Ash shook his head with a chuckle as he led her down the short flight of stairs until they came to a landing. The stairs continued farther down, but he took one of the corridors, passing by a door before he reached his apartment.

"Ashley?" Sofia asked as Ash stuck his key in his door. "Are these *apartments*?"

"That's right. Each is rented out, which is tiding me over for now. I can get away with a pretty high rent with the location. Except that one." He pointed at the door someway down the long corridor. "Had some troubles with the last tenant."

"You're living in an *apartment*?" Sofia wrinkled her nose as she sniffed. "And what's that smell?"

"Oh, there's a tea shop downstairs. I managed to make an arrangement where they pay me each month so they can use my staircase as access." Ash pushed open the apartment door.

"I can't believe this." Sofia shook her head as she stepped into Ash's apartment. "You could be living in a manor, a mansion, hell, a castle if you wanted. And you're living in an *apartment building*. With *other* people. And a *tea shop*."

"So? I don't mind other people being around." Ash tossed his keys into the wooden bowl on a shelf below a painting of the bay. "Sue me."

"I should! Though if I didn't know who you were, I wouldn't bother because I'd assume you had barely anything to your name." Sofia's seething gaze took in the Nordic decorations of the interior.

“Seriously? Just because I don’t want to live alone in some ivory tower.” Ash headed into the kitchen.

“Ivory tower?” Sofia exclaimed as she chased after him. “So what? Luxury is beneath you now?”

“Beneath me?” Ash grabbed two cups out of the cupboard. He shut them hard, but the soft close cushioned the impact. “Do you know how much this place is worth?”

“Nothing compared to what you left behind in Cairnnoor.” Sofia looked at him incredulously.

Like the isolation that came with our family’s lifestyle, his dragon growled.

Not to mention the sleepless nights and regret, Ash added sourly.

“So this is what your visit is all about, then? Trying to bring me kicking and screaming back home?” Ash grabbed the kettle. “Tea?”

“I’d love some.” Sofia turned and leaned against the counter. “And of course it is! You’re going to throw everything away because you hurt someone’s *feelings* over a business deal?”

“Hurt someone’s feelings?” Ash stuffed two infusers with loose tea leaves and poured hot water over them. “I’m pretty sure I ruined that man’s life!”

“Oh, boo hoo.” Sofia pouted before her face hardened again. “That’s business, baby.”

“No, that’s called being a villain.” Ash glanced down at his watch. One minute thirty-five was the perfect amount of time for the tea to brew.

“Since when have you been the beacon of morality? You’re the one who’s brokered pretty much each and every one of our acquisitions since you could talk.” Sofia jabbed a finger at him. “You were sweet talking extra candy off teachers from the moment you could say ‘mama.’”

“I’ve had a change of heart.” Ash held up his hands defensively. “I don’t know what else you, or Mom or Dad

want me to say. I just don't want to do it anymore. It's not hurting anyone."

"*Yes, it is,*" Sofia hissed. "We've got that Spire deal coming up imminently, and we are short our golden boy negotiator." Sofia then put on a sweeter tone. "And of course, we miss our baby brother."

Ash waved her off and picked out the tea infusers. "Don't give me that crap."

"I'm gonna give you a faceful of dragon fire if you're not careful."

"And ruin my lovely apartment?" Ash said sarcastically as he handed her the teacup.

"Thanks. And nothing of value would be lost. We give the restaurant servers bigger tips than the deposit you'd have put down on this place." Sofia took a sip from her cup. "Mmm, that's excellent tea."

"It's from downstairs."

Sofia narrowed her eyes. "And you haven't bought the place out."

Ash threw up a hand and rolled his eyes before he jutted his face toward her. "I don't want to take advantage of small businesses for profit anymore. What are you not getting?"

"So that's it? You're going to just waste away here and throw your talent away?"

"No! I'm going to show you, and everyone else, that there's another way. A better way."

Sofia laughed, wiping a tear away from her eye. "You're just the latest naïve entrepreneur in a long, loong line of naïve entrepreneurs to say that. Trust me, baby brother, you're just..."

"*Enough!*" Ash launched his cup at the wall, which shattered into a million pieces, spraying brown-green liquid all over the white tiles. "I am sick of everyone telling me what I *should* be doing and treating me like an *idiot* for daring to think differently! If we're just going to go around in circles,

then you can get the hell out and go back to your manor, or mansion or castle, or wherever it is you hoard your precious property deeds and company shares these days.”

Sofia looked at him levelly for a moment before placing her teacup on the counter. “Fine. I don’t know what you’re looking for out here. Redemption, meaning...love? Whatever it is, I promise you won’t find it.” She turned and her heels clacked loudly on the wooden floor before Ash heard the door open. “And when you don’t, your *family* will be waiting for you!”

With that, the door slammed shut.

Chapter Two – Leah

“Here we are, Wishing Moon Bay.” Leah slipped off her cashmere coat and folded it over her arm. “Isn’t she beautiful?” She leaned on the ship’s railing and sighed. It was just as she had always remembered, from the sparkle of the gently cresting waves to the colorful mix of quaint buildings that lined the coast, all nestled in the embrace of a vast mountain range.

“And *why* are we here again?” Tommy leaned back on the railing, watching the crew of the Wind Raider as they moved to and fro over the deck. With his hair slicked back and his shirt tucked in beneath a dark vest, he looked so much like his father.

Leah smiled sadly. It had started with the change of clothes, then came the change of tone in his voice. It was dismissive, aloof. When her ten-year-old son started to sound like his father as well as look like him, she decided she couldn’t take it anymore.

“Because Wishing Moon Bay is the place where wishes come true,” Leah told Tommy.

“All wishes?” Maria held onto the rail, her face flushed with excitement.

“I don’t know about all wishes.” Leah moved closer to her daughter and slid her arm around the young girl’s shoulders.

“It’s a fairy tale,” Tommy sighed. “It’s made up. Wishes don’t come true. Besides, we had everything we wanted back home.”

“Yes,” Leah replied, brushing over his comment. “They do come true.” How did she know? Because Wishing Moon Bay had already granted her wish—to take her children far away from their father and start a new life. One without the corruption, the greed, and the violence.

Leah leaned farther over the railing and looked back at the unending horizon behind them. Every time she looked back, she could almost picture Vittorio coming for them to *persuade* her to return to his side.

Despite receiving their divorce papers, her ex-husband still saw Leah as *his*. It's why she'd had to get away, put some miles between them.

Put an ocean between them.

"So if I wish for a pony, I'll get one?" Maria asked.

Leah chuckled softly. "Maybe." Although she hoped that particular wish didn't come true right now. Vittorio had made sure Leah never had access to many of their resources, even when things were good. It was one of the many ways he tried to control her.

And now that they had left Leah wasn't sure how they were going to afford a place to live, let alone a place to keep a pony. But she was willing to do whatever it took to get them settled here in Wishing Moon Bay.

Well, almost.

"There's no such thing as wishes," Tommy said. "Besides, if we'd stayed home, Father could have bought you as many ponies as you wanted."

"Tommy," Leah snapped, as Maria's bottom lip trembled. "Since when did you learn to be so mean?"

Tommy avoided her gaze. "I'm not being mean, I'm being truthful. We had everything we wanted, and now we're starting again. And just because you *wish* for something, doesn't make it true." He pushed off from the railing and stalked away.

Leah's heart ached for her son. He had grown up so fast since his father had taken an interest in him, trying to mold Tommy into his image.

"The world is more magical than you could ever imagine," Leah murmured as she watched him go.

“Woah!” Maria squeaked as a dark shadow slipped briefly over the ship.

They turned their heads upward to see the underbelly of a gigantic dragon as it glided overhead, the blue sky filtering through the membrane stretched over its wide wings.

“A dragon!” Maria pointed and shouted as the beast gently flapped its wings before swooping down toward the quay.

“You don’t say!” Tommy teased, though he still watched the dragon with wide eyes.

“What?” Maria asked, not taking her eyes off the winged beast. “You might have seen a dragon before, but I have not.”

“They are magnificent,” Leah agreed. But there was another side to dragons. A darker side. A cruel side.

“Are there lots of dragons in Wishing Moon Bay?” Maria asked.

“I don’t know. The last time I was here was before Tommy was born and the dragons were forbidden to leave the dragon isle of Cairnnor. But things have changed now.” She watched the dragon as it banked to the right and headed toward the main part of town. Just to be on the safe side, she planned to steer well clear of dragons.

There was a call from the sailors, followed by the sound of rope being hauled through pulleys and the flapping of canvas as they began to lower the sails. In response, the Wind Raider slowed as it carved through the surf, weaving nimbly between the fishing boats as they headed toward an empty slip on the harbor.

Leah and her kids clung onto the railing as the boat keeled one way, then another as they turned sharply. Leah shook her hair back from her face and laughed as a wave broke against the ship’s bow, showering her with cool sea spray. She could not recall the last time she felt so alive. So free.

“Hold steady!” Captain Ronan called out as the last of the sails came down, and the ship coasted toward the slip.

Two crew members threw ropes over the side, the ropes seeming to tie themselves onto the metal cleats, and finally, the Wind Raider came to a stop, bobbing gently on the calm water.

It was as if they had ridden the ocean, racing over the waves on a wild stallion that had now been tamed, and the exhilaration Leah felt dissipated as reality set in. This was their new home. Their new beginning.

Leah watched the strange faces of the throngs of people moving about in the harbor. She'd left behind all the resources and connections from her previous life. She knew no one here and had barely any coin.

Panic gripped her as the enormity of her actions crowded in on her.

But she squashed it down. She could succeed. She could carve out a new life for them. A free life.

And freedom, to make their own choices, to pursue their own hopes and dreams, was more important than all the coin in the world.

All she had to do was figure out the next step. And then the next step. And so on and on until she had built a life for them here.

“Ready to disembark?” Captain Ronan approached with a wide grin on his handsome face. She suspected he could charm the fish from the sea if he so desired.

“We are,” Leah said, although a glance at Tommy told her that her son was on the verge of mutiny as he looked from the busy harbor to his mother.

“I’ll have your trunks sent into town,” Captain Ronan said. “If you’ll let me have the address of your accommodation.”

“Oh.” She pressed her lips together as her forehead creased. “I don’t...”

“You don’t have accommodation?” the captain asked with a concerned expression.

“No.” Leah ran her tongue over her lips nervously, her stomach hollow.

What if she couldn’t find anywhere to stay? She had little coin and it would be gone in no time if she couldn’t get a job.

“No problem,” Captain Ronan said with a wave of his hand, though Leah was certain it, in fact, *was* a problem. “There’s a place for lost souls such as yourselves. I’ll send your luggage to The Lonely Tavern. The owner, Morwenna, will hold on to them until you know where you are staying. I’m sure she won’t ask for much in return.”

“Oh, thank you,” Leah said with some relief.

“My pleasure,” Captain Ronan said. He glanced at Leah and then at her two children. “I’m sure you will find what you are looking for in Wishing Moon Bay.”

“Me, too,” Leah said, her tone light, and flashed the captain a practiced smile, hiding the nervousness that swirled inside her.

The clang of the gangplank against the dock reverberated through the air, sending a shiver of excitement down Leah’s spine. Gripping the strap of her purse, she set one foot on the narrow wooden plank and shifted her weight onto it.

The salty breeze whipped at her hair as she glanced around nervously, but when her gaze settled on her children’s expectant faces, courage surged within her.

She’d made the tough decision to leave her husband, their father. She’d chosen to leave their old, comfortable life behind, along with all the luxuries they had enjoyed. So now she had to get a grip, pull herself together, and make this work.

Leah quashed her fears and doubts and walked down the gangplank, head high. She would make a go of it. More than that, she would make a success of their lives. There was no way she was going to prove Vittorio right when he said she would come running back to him and beg his forgiveness.

She stepped down onto the solid stone platform, turning to help her daughter down.

“Mommy, look at all the birds!” Maria exclaimed, her eyes lit with excitement as brightly colored birds swooped down toward the ocean. With a flash of color, they dipped into the water, vanishing beneath its depths for a moment before rising triumphantly with a silver fish in their beaks.

“Beautiful, aren’t they?” Leah said, determined to be one of those triumphant birds.

Once Maria was off the gangplank, she turned to help Tommy, but he was already across, landing next to her.

“Come on, Maria!” Tommy seemed to shed years in a matter of seconds as he ran along the docks, dodging sailors as they unloaded their ship’s cargo. His dark hair flopped wildly as he ducked under someone unloading a crate, wearing a carefree grin.

“Not too far!” Leah called out as she looked around. She hadn’t been to Wishing Moon Bay for so long that nothing looked familiar.

Except their luggage. She spotted their small trunks being hoisted off the Wind Raider and placed on the back of a truck, alongside other cargo. Leah looked back up at Ronan as he moved about the deck, barking orders.

“A place for lost souls, hm?” She looked back as the truck trundled forward, taking their few remaining possessions with it. “Okay, let’s go!” Leah beckoned her children from where they were watching someone fishing and promptly raced back to her.

She had felt a little underdressed at first in flats and palazzo trousers, but as she held onto her children and navigated them through the bustling harbor side, she was certainly glad she had left her usual dress and heels in her trunk.

“I’m hungry,” Tommy said, his eyes fixed on a small bakery on the edge of the harbor.

The smell was incredible, and Leah’s stomach rumbled at the thought of a nice, hot pastry. But she didn’t want to wait out in the open where she might be spotted by one of her ex-

husband's associates. The docks were *the* place to be if you wanted to do *business*.

"Let's get to town first," Leah said. "Maybe we can get something to eat in the tavern." She could see the displeased expression on her son's face, but he kept quiet as they crossed over the coastal road.

"Tavern? What's that?" Maria asked.

"It's an old word for something like a restaurant," Leah said.

"Sounds like it might be fancy," Tommy said absentmindedly as he looked up at the stone buildings around them.

"How far is it, Mommy?" Maria asked. "I'm hungry, too."

"It's, um, a good question." Leah came to a stop. She really did not know where she was. Her last visit had involved a limo up into the mountains, and a stay in a cozy, yet very plush lodge. She looked around for any kind of landmark that she recognized or a sign, but instead, her gaze landed on a middle-aged woman walking toward them with a slightly harassed look about her. Leah let go of her children and stepped forward. "Excuse me. Miss, excuse me."

The woman tried to avoid Leah, but Leah made sure she couldn't get past. "Yes." The woman looked her up and down, her expression darkening.

"I need to get to The Lonely Tavern. Could you give me some directions, please?" Leah asked, before putting a hand over her mouth and whispering loudly. "If we don't get there soon, I'm going to have a little hostile takeover on my hands." She giggled and nodded toward Tommy and Maria.

The woman looked past Leah, and upon seeing the kids, her expression softened. "The Lonely Tavern, eh?" The woman's face cracked into a smile. "I can tell you the way, but I cannot promise it will be there when you arrive."

"I'm sorry?" Leah asked. Was this woman making fun of her?

Or was there a chance that their belongings might disappear from Wishing Moon Bay, leaving them with only the clothes they stood in and the contents of Leah's purse?

"Oh, I'm joking," the woman laughed.

"Ah." But Leah's relief was short-lived.

"Sort of." She glanced along the street. "Even if it does disappear, sooner or later it comes back."

"Okay." Leah nodded. Perhaps she'd chosen the wrong person to ask. "So, if The Lonely Tavern is where it's meant to be, where would I find it?"

"Now..." The woman waved her hand. "I am not saying where it is meant to be...but I can tell you where it *likes* to be."

"And where would that be?" Leah asked, her patience wearing thin as Maria tugged at her arm.

"Carry on along this street, then take the next left. Then the second right. And another left, and you can't miss it." The woman waved her hand in the air. "Got it?"

"Next left. Second right. Next left." Leah nodded. She could always ask someone else for directions if they didn't find it. "Thank you, so much."

"No problem." She turned away and strode down the street, with Leah staring at her back.

"Mom?" Tommy said.

Leah shrugged. "Let's go find The Lonely Tavern."

They walked in silence along the street. Leah was tired both physically and emotionally from the whirlwind divorce with Vittorio, the clandestine getaway, and the journey here, so she could only imagine what her kids were going through. She was sure that some food would lighten the mood, though.

Leah wanted to trust the woman who gave them directions. For some reason, it meant a lot to her, as if it was a test for the people of Wishing Moon Bay as a whole.

So, it was with some relief that, after taking the next left, the second right, and then another left turn, they found themselves down a narrow street looking up at a quaint sign that read ‘The Lonely Tavern.’

“Is it *meant* to be there?” Marie whispered as if she were afraid she might offend the building that looked as though it had been forced into a gap between two other buildings that were altogether too small for it.

“Whether it’s meant to be there or not, it’s there,” Tommy said, although not unkindly. “Besides, it’s boutique.”

Leah laughed and looked down at Tommy. “Boutique?”

Tommy shrugged. “It’s what Father called the little sushi restaurant we went to last week. I bet they’ve got a themed olive cart menu here.”

Leah giggled. “A la carte? What *has* your father been teaching you? Come on, let’s go in.”

“I bet there’re knights and princesses who serve the food.” Maria beamed.

“I bet the food is cooked in dragon’s breath.” Tommy nodded.

Leah smiled to herself. Some of her best experiences had been dining or drinking out at establishments that decided to break the mold. And this place had that feel. It would probably be busy this time of day, though perhaps not if it were more exclusive.

She put out her hand to open the door, but it swung open slowly just before she made contact.

Definitely exclusive.

She flashed a smile at her kids and stepped inside.

Her smile dropped as she took in the scene before her. It wasn’t so much themed, more like it belonged in an era long bygone. The benches, tables, and chairs were roughhewn and undecorated. Most were without any kind of cushioning, and all were vacant of people dining. The room was dim, lit by only a few candles, with shadows and cobwebs clinging to the

corners and ceiling of the room. Shelves lined the beams above their heads but were filled with so much clutter it was hard to make out any single item.

The only other people in the tavern were an older, unkempt woman standing at the bar, flicking through what looked like a shopping catalog, and a man with short cropped, blond hair slouched on a bar stool.

Leah could almost hear the crickets in the desolate room, though instead of a tumbleweed, a lone, unattended broom idly swept the floor.

Leah looked down at her children, who looked at the scene before them, mouths agape, when she spotted the slate sign on the abandoned host stand.

'The home of mossless, rolling stones'

"Mommy." Maria tugged at her sleeve. "That broom is sweeping by itself."

Leah nodded. "I see it, darling."

"Hello!" The woman at the bar looked up from whatever she was reading. "Children are not usually encouraged in the bar area."

"Oh. No. I don't usually bring them to a...tavern," Leah said. "But we've just arrived on the Wind Raider and Captain Ronan sent our luggage here."

"Oh yes. Those lovely vintage trunks that came with my latest shipment of stoneware." The lady picked up a colorful cocktail umbrella from a tankard filled with them and placed it in between the pages she was reading.

"That's great," Leah breathed a sigh of relief and began leading her children toward the bar, their eyes fixated on the broom as it roamed between the tables.

"And I told them to take them right back." The woman slammed the book shut.

"O-oh." Leah's steps faltered.

“I’m tired of that rascal passing off his latest acquisitions on to me while he figures out what to do with them.” The woman rounded the bar. “I’ve had a storm in a bottle, shoes that dance by themselves, two crates full of rubber ducks which then started appearing in *all* sorts of places, that cursed beret that changed everyone’s hairstyles—which actually was quite amusing—and *worst* of all...” The lady took a breath, one finger raised as she stopped just in front of the cowering Leah and children, “That collection of pirate poetry.” The woman threw her hands up in the air and turned away. “I had no idea that Bert was such a rhapsodist, and there’s only so many times you can hear ‘rum’ rhymed with ‘chum,’ or ballads about the one-legged seagull, before you want to walk the plank yourself!”

There was a moment of silence as they all stared at the strange, gray-haired woman.

“So...” Tommy began, “You don’t have our luggage?”

“Morwenna,” the door behind the bar opened, and a huge, broad-shoulder man with dark features and a warm smile stepped out, “you’re not terrorizing the newcomers, are you?”

“Me?” Morwenna gasped. “I would never. I blame Captain Ronan *completely*. And so should *you*.” She pointed at Leah.

Leah shook her head. “He was just trying to do us a good turn. We’re new in town, and don’t even have a place to stay.”

Morwenna pursed her lips. Then she and the man glanced at each other before Morwenna began talking slowly. “Well, in that case, you might just be in luck.”

“Please, if there’s anywhere you know of,” Leah said. “Though ideally not too...rough?”

“I’ll write you down directions.” As the dark-haired guy looked around, a piece of paper fluttered down from the rafters.

“Wow!” Maria breathed. “Is that magic?”

“No.” Morwenna crossed her arms and craned her neck up. “It seems that some imps have made themselves at home in amongst the cobwebs.”

“Are you looking to replace Brushworth?” the man asked as he looked down at the catalog Morwenna had been reading.

“Shhh!” Morwenna scowled at him. “Of course not. I just think he needs a little extra help these days. He’s not as young as he used to be. His bristles have lost their luster. Don’t you think?”

“I’m sure he won’t be pleased about that,” the man said as he scribbled something down. “There, you should be able to find the place fairly easily.”

“Thank you ever so much, Mr...?” Leah stepped forward to take the paper, noting that the catalog was named ‘The Spick and Span Spectacular—the home of cleaning tools and charms.’

“Flint,” the man said as Leah reached for the paper, but he didn’t let it go at first. “It’s a nice spot...but just be aware of the landlord. He’s sort of...infamous around here at the moment.”

“Especially with the ladies.” Morwenna made a swooning motion onto the bar. “He has been *constantly* harassed by women recently.”

“That’s right,” the man who had been sitting staring into his drink spoke for the first time, slurring slightly. “He’s ruined me. Him and that blasted family of his. They’re devils!”

“Right.” Leah took a small sidestep away from the man but noticed that Morwenna and Flint gave him a sympathetic look.

“They’re all rich and powerful and dangerous. But he’s the worst, the most dangerous of the lot!” The man took a swig. “Wanna know why?”

“Why?” Leah asked.

“He’s *charming*.” The man nodded.

“He’s got a bit of a reputation around here.” Flint shrugged. “So check out the apartment, see what you think. Just maybe...*don’t* date the dragon next door?”

Leah laughed and waved her hand as Flint let go of the paper. “Don’t worry, I have no intention of being around men

like that whatsoever.”

“Well, you’ve been warned.” Morwenna wagged a finger at her.

“What about our things?” Maria piped up.

“They’re just in the back,” Flint said. “We can arrange to have them delivered when you find a place.”

Leah frowned. “I thought—”

Morwenna rolled her eyes. “I *told* them to take it back, but Flint here wouldn’t let them. He’s just a big ol’ softy, really.”

Flint shrugged with a smile.

“Well, thank you very much, Flint. I owe you and I won’t forget it.” Leah glanced down at the directions as she guided her children toward the door.

With that, the tavern door opened, and the children giggled as the brush swept at their ankles and propelled them out onto the street.

Chapter Three – Ash

Ash closed his eyes as he heard the door slam. He rested his forehead on a balled-up fist before he let the tension go and shook his head, rushing out of the kitchen. “Sofia!” Even though his family frustrated the hell out of him, he hated the idea of his sister leaving like that.

Go after her, his dragon urged, as he sat up alert.

I’m going! Ash hurried to the door, but as he reached out a hand, he gasped and froze. It felt as if someone had a hold of his heart and was trying to squeeze the life out of him.

Ash leaned on the doorframe as his mind filled with fog, leaving him disorientated. Summoning all his strength, he managed to turn the door handle and stumble out into the hallway.

Sofia spun back around. “And another thing!” Sofia stormed toward him, jabbing her finger at him, but paused when she saw his expression. “Ash?” Sofia ran forward and slipped her arm around his shoulders as he inhaled deeply. “Ashley, what’s wrong?”

Ash straightened up as the intensity of the feeling faded. But the sense that there was something wrong persisted.

Not wrong, his dragon told him. *Right.*

What are you talking about? Ash asked.

She’s here.

Who is?

He could hear footsteps coming down the stairs, echoing through the very stone of the cliff. An inescapable presence that grew more overwhelming with each passing moment.

His mate.

The feeling was at the same time alien, but so, so familiar.

Ash could hear something, and as his focus came back to the empty corridor, he realized that Sofia was calling his name.

Ash sucked in a breath, and pushed away from his sister, forcing himself to stand steady through force of will. As he turned to Sofia, he switched on his best smile. "I'm fine. It must have been the tea."

Sofia snorted. "I told you. Living above a tea shop..."

Ash stuffed his hands into his pockets. "Anyway, thanks for stopping by, Sis."

Sofia eyed him curiously. "What is going on with you?"

"Nothing," Ash insisted, flicking his wrist out to glance at his watch. "It's just that I think I've got someone coming to look at the apartment."

"Oh." Sofia rolled her eyes. "Your apartment."

"Don't start," Ash warned her.

"I'm not *starting*." Sofia huffed, letting her shoulder drop. "Well, it was good to see you." She began to turn away.

"Yeah." Ash blew out his cheeks. "Hey, you know I do love you, Sof."

Sofia looked stunned for a moment before her expression softened and she stepped toward him, arms out. "I know." Ash felt as stunned as Sofia had looked when his sister wrapped her arms around him. "I love you, too. But I'm not done, you know."

Ash let out a small chuckle as he hugged her back.

This is how things could be if they would just listen to us, Ash's dragon grumbled.

I know, but let's just enjoy this moment of peace between us.

Ash closed his eyes. He missed the days when they were all young, without the burdens they carried now.

"Oh! Hello?" a deliciously sweet voice called.

Ash's eyes snapped open. At the end of the corridor, framed in late afternoon light pouring in from the grand staircase

window, was a woman. Even across the distance, he could tell she was gorgeous, dressed well in flowing trousers that only hinted at the curvy figure beneath, her dark raven hair catching the sunlight. Two little figures peeked toward him from behind her.

“What? Oh.” Sofia craned her neck to see who the voice belonged to, shoving Ash away from her upon realizing someone had seen her in a moment of vulnerability.

Sofia ran a hand down her jacket, unruffling it, while Ash ran a hand through his long hair. He hoped he didn’t look as though he’d just had a heated argument.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt.” Ash’s mate walked toward them. A small girl hugged close to her, while a slightly older boy strode to her side.

“Not at all. We were just finishing up here,” Sofia said as she walked away from Ash, heels clacking loudly on the floor.

“We’re here to look at an apartment?” The woman glanced between Ash and Sofia as she approached. “The door was open, so I figured it was an open house.”

Ash watched Leah take a respectful step back, not intimidated as most were by Sofia’s aura, but aware of it.

“Oh, the apartment’s free. And very recently redecorated, I hear.” Sofia smirked as she glanced back at Ash, pausing as she drew level with Ash’s mate and leaning in. “Though I’d watch out for the dragon next door. He seems to *always* get what he wants.”

She really cannot leave well enough alone, can she? Ash’s dragon finally began to relax a little as Sofia walked away from the woman and her children.

At least Sofia doesn’t know that woman’s ours. Ash had to fight to keep himself from staring at her. *I think we played that cool.*

Very cool. His dragon nodded. *Minus the tea stains all over the kitchen.*

We'll get the cleaner in. Or failing that, get the whole thing replaced.

“Call me soon, Ash!” Sofia called over her shoulder as she walked away. “Don’t leave me waiting too long this time,” she added with a wave.

“Is this a bad time?” Ash’s mate asked uneasily. “This is probably a bad time.”

“No!” Ash said all too quickly before dialing his voice back down. “No, not at all. I’m Ash.”

“I’m Leah. And this is Tommy and Maria.” Leah gestured at the two children, who waved shyly. “Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

Ash nodded, for the first time in his life unable to find the right thing to say. All he wanted to do was reach out and touch her, caress her skin. So he kept his hands firmly in his pockets, trying to think while his dragon writhed around within him, barely able to contain its excitement at being so close to their fated partner.

Leah watched him for a moment before looking up and around at the corridor, with its shiny marble-esque walls and art déco paintings. “This really is a lovely building. Do you know if the landlord is in?”

“He is. I am.” Ash grimaced. “I’m the landlord.”

Leah nodded. “I see.”

Ash could feel her eyes moving over him, studying him before she spoke again.

“Like I said, Ash, this really is a lovely building. But we’re working on a tight budget right now. After looking at this building...I don’t think a place like this is for us. Thank you, anyway. And sorry for wasting your time.” She turned to walk away, ushering her confused children back toward the steps.

“Why would you be wasting my time?” Ash strode after them, his expression dark as he rushed after them. “Is there something wrong with the building? You don’t like the art déco? That can go.”

We'd tear this place down and the whole cliffside with it if she so desired. His dragon growled, flames pouring from his jaws.

“No, not really, I just don't see how we would afford this place.”

Ash could see almost shame on her face as she uttered those words, and his heart broke for her. “I don't know about that. You might be surprised.”

“Might I?” Leah tilted her head back, a defiant gleam in her eyes.

“What harm is there in looking?” Ash softened his tone and offered her his most disarming smile.

“What harm, indeed.” She nodded. “All right. Could we see it, please?”

“We?” Ash glanced toward the end of the hall, expecting her husband to walk down the steps and completely ruin his day. Maybe even his life.

Was this fate's way of paying him back for ruining so many other people's lives?

It would be fitting, his dragon huffed.

Sure, but let's just hope that fate doesn't think the same.

“Me and my children.” She gave him a strange look as if asking how he could have missed the two young people who were right behind her.

“Oh. Yeah. I was wondering if there was anyone else...” Ash scratched the back of his neck. “For insurance reasons, you know.”

“No. Just me and the children.” She smiled brightly at him, but the smile felt out of place, as if she were putting on a face. A face she thought he wanted to see.

“It's good to meet you all.” He held his hand out to her, desperate to touch her for the first time, to feel the connection between them. Not that he doubted it. No. This was his mate. He'd never been more certain of anything in his life.

“It’s...good to meet you, too.” Leah laughed lightly as she slipped her hand into his. As their skin touched, Ash had to fight to keep the breath in his lungs, and his knees from buckling as a jolt of energy coursed through him. Her eyes widened and locked with his for just a moment.

“Good to...meet you, Leah.” He gave a short, awkward laugh and resisted the desire to hold on to her hand for longer than appropriate. He coughed as she pulled her hand back. “Shall we go take a look at the apartment?”

“If you wouldn’t mind.” Leah flexed her hand. Did her skin still tingle from his touch?

“Okay.” He nodded, standing there in front of her like a dazed fool. He needed to pull himself together. He ran a hand through his hair, fished his keys from his pocket, and unlocked the door. He stepped to the side. “After you.”

“Thanks.” She glanced up at him, her eyes questioning as she stepped into the apartment. “Very nice.”

“I’ve just finished redecorating.” Ash smiled at Tommy as the boy walked past, but Tommy’s dark eyes were hard, unfriendly.

Protective, Ash’s dragon said.

He sees me as a threat? Ash asked. I can respect that.

He probably just heard our shouting match with Sofia, Ash’s dragon reminded him. And she didn’t exactly do us any favors with the introduction.

Yeah, remind me to thank her for that one day, Ash scoffed. But that day would not be today, or tomorrow, or any time soon. He intended to keep the news that he’d finally found his mate from them for as long as possible. The last thing he needed was them interfering.

He could just imagine them putting more pressure on him to return to the family fold so that he could provide a good life for his mate and her children. They would have leverage over him. But he wanted to do things his way. He needed to prove to his family and himself that he could stand on his own two ‘ethical’ feet.

His dragon snorted. *I can just see their faces now if they hear you talking about ethical feet.*

I don't care about their faces, Ash replied. The only face he cared about was his mate's.

And her face looks pretty darn happy right now, Ash's dragon said.

We did do a pretty neat job here, considering the state before, Ash said as he looked at the sweeping view of the ocean from the floor-to-ceiling window along the length of the living room, which was wearing a color palette to suit—sea blues, rich beiges, and whites. The minimal design had only a few decorations, which Ash had made sure to be felt deliberate.

Though I will say, Ash began as he watched the three of them inspecting the plush furniture. *They're not as amazed by the place as people normally are.*

No, Ash's dragon said studiously, *I don't think they're a stranger to this lifestyle.*

"It's lovely," Leah said, peering through the wide arch into the kitchen, the dining area lying beyond. "And very open plan."

"You can thank the previous tenant for that," Ash chuckled as he stepped past Leah and led her and the children into the kitchen. "I don't think I've ever found myself putting walls back up instead of taking them down when renovating."

"Really?" Leah ran a hand over the wall as if checking it were sound.

"Yeah, you should have seen the faces of the team when they came to quote me on the job." Ash idly ran a hand over the dials on the cooker. "I'm not used to working to a tight budget, so it took some negotiating to get everything just right, but I think it came out pretty well."

"Seems so," Leah said wistfully.

Ash followed her gaze to where Tommy and Maria stood with their faces pressed against the glass, giggling as they

pointed out things happening far below them.

So carefree, his dragon said.

I can't remember the last time we felt carefree, Ash mused. *But I'm glad they like the view as much as we do.*

Ash pulled himself back to the present, tapping his knuckles on the white countertops. "These worktops might just be one of my favorite features. They've been cut from deep mountain rock. It's stylish, almost impossible to damage, and rings pleasantly when knocked." The material chimed softly in response to his ring hitting it. "I had to get in a specialist to fit it. Now that took some string pulling. But it just pulls the whole thing together."

Leah nodded politely. "They sure do."

Ash watched her face for a moment. She was unreadable. "And don't even get me started on the cooker. It turns out a lot of witches don't want just money in exchange for services, and they so often don't just tell you what they want exactly. Anyway, this thing makes it impossible to burn whatever you're cooking."

"Very useful."

"Do you like it?" Ash asked cautiously. "Everything is new, and I know I said something about negotiating with the team, but I promise no corners were cut."

"I think anyone would be happy with an apartment like this..." Leah trailed off.

"I haven't even shown you the balcony." Ash ushered her back into the living room.

"A balcony?" Maria exclaimed. "I've always wanted a balcony!"

"Then this is the apartment for you." Ash winked and led them to the end of the living room window. The sliding door had been fitted in such a seamless way that you wouldn't even know it was there. Ash opened it, and led the family out onto the wide balcony, hemmed in by chest-high glass barriers.

"Wow," Leah breathed as she stepped out. "What a view."

“Look, Tommy, a sail ship!” Maria pointed through the glass.

“Do you think that’s Captain Ronan?” Tommy peered through the barrier.

“Maybe,” Leah said.

“You came across the ocean?” Ash asked, wanting to know everything about his mate and her children.

“Yes, Mom paid Captain Ronan to…” Maria began, but Leah cut her daughter off.

“Thanks for showing us the apartment, but we’ve taken up enough of your time,” Leah said in the tone of a person who was about to turn down his offer as she stepped back inside.

It was a tone Ash was all too familiar with, but he knew just how to handle it. Especially as this deal was one he was not going to let go of.

“It’s no trouble, really. It’s important to take your time finding the perfect new home for you and your kids.” Ash closed the door behind them.

Leah paused, watching Tommy and Maria as they continued to gaze out through the window, mesmerized by the view.

“They seem to like it,” Ash whispered.

He kicked himself silently as Leah’s expression ever so subtly hardened as she turned to him.

“It’ll make a lovely home…but it’s not for us.”

Chapter Four – Leah

Who was she kidding? The apartment was perfect for them. It was big, light, fresh, and new. Just like the future she'd dreamed of.

“Why?” Ash blurted out, obviously bewildered as to why she would not want to rent his beautiful, immaculate apartment.

“Like I said, we are working to a tight budget, and I know a place like this is out of our price range.”

Budgets? Price ranges? It certainly felt strange to be using terms like that. However, Ash had obviously spent a lot of time and money on creating a high-standard apartment. And despite the sales pitch, he was clearly proud of it. Even if he had pulled a few strings and negotiated hard. She pressed her lips together. When Ash was talking about how he created the apartment, he reminded her of Vittorio when he was starting out. Before...

She sighed. Before he'd become a gang boss. Thanks to her.

As much as she blamed Vittorio for making her leave to protect the children, she was well aware of the part she had played.

“We haven't even talked about rent yet,” Ash said, returning to his cool demeanor. “So how do you know you can't afford it?”

“This would obviously demand a high rent not just from the location, but the size, and the amount I imagine you spent on finishings. I just don't see how this would work for us,” Leah said. She hadn't been completely naïve when she decided to move to Wishing Moon Bay. She'd done her research, and planned everything out, making sure she had enough coin to last them for a couple of months if they lived a simple life. In a small apartment in a less affluent part of town.

“All good points. But you haven’t taken all the factors into account,” Ash said, sounding like he belonged more in a boardroom than an apartment building.

“And what factors have I not taken into account?” Leah asked.

Ash had a good poker face, but he couldn’t hide his eyes lighting up when he realized this was his chance. Why exactly was he so set on persuading her to move here?

“First, I’m still getting over the previous tenant—an orc wrecked this place after hosting an all-night party while I was out of town. Putting this place back together cost as much as he had paid me in total, so renting out to the highest bidder didn’t do me any favors anyway.”

Maria giggled. “An orc? Living here?”

“Yeah.” Ash laughed, “And you wouldn’t believe what he was willing to pay me to rent this place. Anyway, since you have young children, I can’t image you’re going to be hosting many parties where you tear out the walls.”

“I’m not young,” Tommy said, straightening his back and making himself look taller.

“You’re younger than the orc,” Ash replied. “And younger than me.”

“But older than me,” Maria said with a giggle.

“Okay, no crazy parties here,” Leah agreed.

“Second, I believe that you have better manners than said orc,” Ash said. “The poor ladies in the tea shop downstairs had more than one run-in with him. Left them traumatized, to say the least. Talk about a bull in a china shop.”

“Manners. Check.” Leah smothered a smile. This guy sure was trying hard to convince her to rent his apartment.

“Third, I think the building needs children.” Ash’s third point caught her off guard.

“You do?” Maria asked.

“Yes,” Ash said. “Children brighten the palace up.”

“Children are not paintings you hang on a wall, or a dash of fresh paint,” Leah said.

“No, they are not,” he agreed. “Children bring laughter. They bring fun. And they bring smiles.”

“And dirty fingermarks on freshly painted walls,” Leah reminded him.

“We’ll wash them. All the time,” Maria promised, her gaze drifting back to the balcony.

“I don’t think you can leave bigger stains on the wall than me.” Ash chuckled, stopping quickly when he met Leah’s questioning glance. “But if you promise to not destroy anything, keep it clean, and don’t harass the neighbors, I’m sure I can offer a lower price.”

“Okay.” Leah held up her hands. “You are very persuasive.”

“Thank you.” Ash bowed his head.

“But you still haven’t given me a number.” Leah crossed her arms. “Which makes deciding more than a little difficult.”

“What can you afford?” Ash asked.

“That is not the way rent usually works,” Leah told him.

“Listen, I want you to have this apartment,” Ash said, and she believed him. She just didn’t know why. What was his ulterior motive? And he had to have one. One that went beyond all the points he’d just made.

Flint’s words, along with that woman’s that Ash had been hugging, popped into her head. ‘Don’t date the dragon next door.’ Was that it? Did he want to date her?

She had no intention of becoming a notch on a dragon shifter’s bedpost. Not even for an apartment like this.

“Here’s the deal,” Ash said after a moment. “You are looking for a home for your family. I’m looking for a long-term tenant who will look after the place. So you pay me what you can afford for now and when you get yourself settled and you get a job, or whatever it is you plan to do, then we discuss a rent increase.”

“Say yes,” Maria whispered loudly.

“I’ll give you guys some time alone to talk it over.” Ash edged toward the door. “Take as much time as you need. Look around the place, imagine yourselves living here, and then give me an answer.”

“Sure.” Leah nodded.

“When you’re ready, just come and knock on my door, just down the hall.”

Leah’s eyes widened slightly. “Oh wow. You really *are* next door.”

Ash frowned. “That’s right. Anyway, no rush.”

Leah nodded and watched Ash as he backed out of the apartment as if he didn’t want to take his eyes off her. She shivered and her palm tingled where she’d shaken his hand earlier. A frisson of energy and excitement had swept over her. She’d explained it away as her first contact with a dragon shifter. Since she was certain that was what he was. Why else would people warn her not to date the *dragon* next door?

Then he reached the door and stepped outside, heading across to the apartment next door.

She stared after him for a moment and then turned her attention to Tommy and Maria. “So, what do you think?”

“We should take it,” Maria stated firmly.

“We should discuss the pros and cons,” Leah suggested.

“The pros are, we need somewhere to live, and this is a great apartment,” Tommy answered.

“And the cons?” Leah asked.

Tommy and Maria stared back at her without a word.

“Okay. Does Ash seem a little off to you?” Leah asked and was greeted by the same blank expressions. “Like he’s willing to let us pay whatever we can afford, without actually knowing how much that is. Like, he seems *really* determined for us to live here.”

“He’s being kind,” Maria said.

“People are not usually that kind to strangers,” Tommy told his sister.

“But this is Wishing Moon Bay,” Maria protested. “Maybe people are nicer here because they think if they are, then their wishes might come true.”

“So, that’s it,” Tommy said with a shrug.

“What is it?” Leah asked.

“You find out what his wish is and help it come true.” Tommy made it sound so simple.

“But if his wish comes true, then he might not be nice to us,” Maria reasoned.

“I don’t think this has anything to do with wishes,” Leah said. And if it was, she hoped his wish wasn’t what she thought it was...

“Haven’t you wished we would find a great apartment that we can afford?” Maria asked her mom.

“Yes,” Leah admitted.

“Then maybe our first wish has come true,” Maria said. “And you should never ignore a wish.”

Tommy held out his hands to his mom. “What is the alternative?”

“Alternative?” Leah asked, feeling like the child here rather than the grown-up.

“Yeah. If we don’t live here, if we don’t accept Ash’s offer, where are we going to sleep tonight?” Tommy asked.

“And Morwenna might send our trunks back to the Wind Raider and Captain Ronan might sail away with them.” Maria’s chin wobbled, but she sucked it up and regained her composure.

But that chin wobble was enough to make Leah see the sense in her children’s words. She didn’t have to completely

trust Ash's motives, but he seemed genuine enough, and Leah was cautious enough to keep herself and her children safe.

And she believed they were safe here. Certainly safer than if they had to spend the night on the streets.

“Okay. I'll go talk to him,” Leah said. As she headed to the door, she pointed at them. “Stay here. Behave. No arguing.”

“Can we go on the balcony?” Maria asked.

“As long as you are sensible.” She gave them *the* look and received a murmur of agreement from both of them.

Okay. Now all she had to do was strike a deal with a dragon and arrange for their luggage to be delivered. And get some food. She placed her hand on her stomach, which had a hollow feeling she wasn't used to.

She needed to get some groceries. Or maybe they could go and explore the town and eat out tonight in celebration of their new apartment and new beginnings? It just wouldn't be anywhere fancy.

It was an extravagance, sure, but it would be worth it after their long journey, and perhaps help her kids settle soon.

As she left her apartment, she smoothed her hair and slipped on her jacket, suddenly nervous at facing Ash alone. Not because she was afraid of him, but because he was one of the sexiest men she'd ever laid eyes on.

There! She'd admitted it!

He was refined yet rugged. Clearly intelligent, and clearly very muscular under that leather jacket, and striking with his long, black hair.

Shaking her shoulders and her arms as she released the tension in her body, she raised her hand and knocked on his door. Then she took a step back.

There was a long pause, but she could swear she could sense him on the other side of the door. Sense him? Pfft. But it was true. From the moment she had met him, she'd felt a strange connection to him.

And from the moment they had touched, she wondered if she knew what that connection was. She'd heard about shifters, fated mates, and the connections they shared.

But she'd gotten it wrong. Unless Ash had a fantastic poker face. All the stories she'd heard about shifters meeting their mates centered on the fact that they could not resist them, unable to keep away.

Besides, fated mates, or just a fling, Leah was not interested in his type at all. She'd had more than enough bad boys and broody businessmen.

Finally, the door opened.

"Hi." Leah crossed her arms in front of her. There was something innately intimidating about this dragon shifter. Everything from his sharp look and his intense gaze, to his rough demeanor put her a little on edge. For a second, she was tempted to tell him that no, she would not take the apartment. But the thought of her children being homeless, even for one night, gave her chills.

She'd fought hard for custody of the children. If word got back to Vittorio that she couldn't provide a roof over their heads, he'd haul her into court and get the custody agreement thrown out.

On the flip side, if she rented an apartment from Ash and he turned out to be into shady deals, then Vittorio would surely hear of it through the grapevine, and the outcome would not be pretty.

"Should we break out the whisky to seal the deal?" Ash leaned against the door frame. He knew he'd made an offer Leah couldn't refuse.

"Wouldn't it be champagne?" Leah asked with a tilt of her head.

"Only if you're into cliches and weak drinks," Ash replied before adding, "Besides, I always get the bubbles up my nose. Whisky's my go-to."

"So did my ex-husband until I introduced him to the delights of a fine wine." Leah smiled as a wave of nostalgia hit

her for the good old days before Vittorio had set his sights on clawing his way up from obscurity to notoriety.

Ash shook his head. “I don’t think you could beat an aged whisky, nice and smoky, over the rocks. Especially with a little sprinkle of cinnamon, or nutmeg. I always find it just takes the edge off a stressful day.”

“Really?” Leah raised her eyebrows in surprise. “Maybe it’s a businessman thing.”

Ash frowned.

Leah waved her hand. “That’s just how my ex-husband had his whisky too.”

“Oh. That is a coincidence.” Ash’s expression darkened at the second mention of her ex-husband. “I’m sure it’s just a common way of serving the drink in expensive bars. A little pinch of spice means they can charge extra. My father had it just the same way.”

“Maybe that’s where he got it from, too.” Leah trailed off. Not that Vittorio’s father would ever have been able to afford expensive bars – Vittorio hadn’t grown up in luxury, and his parents had passed before he and Leah had made a success of themselves in the underground of Thalian.

“Maybe you could teach me a thing or two,” Ash suggested, not wanting the silence to linger.

“I don’t know if you need any lessons on the finer things in life,” Leah said, peering over his shoulder to see the imposing designer couch that dominated the living room behind him.

“I’m sure there’s plenty of things from overseas you can teach me about. Seems we’ll be neighbors. I’m sure we’ll have plenty of time to chat.”

“You’re getting ahead of yourself.” She held up a hand. “I have some questions first.”

“Questions?” Ash chuckled, a low, rumbling sound, and pushed off from the door frame. “I think you might be the hardest person I’ve ever had to sell something to.”

“Perhaps it’s just because I know the tricks of the trade.” Leah let a smile slip through before she put her guard back up. “Tell me a bit about the local area.”

“What is there to say?” Ash said. “You’ve seen the houses around here. It’s an expensive area, which means it’s quiet. There are some good stores on the next street over, maybe a five-minute walk, and there’s a good tea shop below us. There’s a magnificent view. I like it.”

Leah nodded. “How did you come to own this building?”

“I decided to branch out,” Ash responded.

“Branch out from what?”

“My family’s business,” he said evasively.

Leah knew what that likely meant and did not like the sound of it.

“And the other tenants?” she asked. “You mentioned the orc who wrecked the apartment. What are the others like?”

“Good, decent people, as far as I know.” Ash glanced down the hall. “But I believe you never truly know someone. So, unfortunately, I cannot give you cast iron assurances that there won’t be any trouble in the neighborhood. But I *can* assure you that any trouble will be nipped in the bud. Fast. And permanently.”

That answer could have come straight from Vittorio’s mouth.

But, on balance, she appreciated his offer of protection. At least in the short term.

“One last thing,” she said. “If I rent the apartment... I’m not... I don’t do favors...”

“Favors?” He cracked a smile. “So you won’t give me a cup of sugar if I run out?”

“You know what I mean,” she told him firmly.

“I do.” Ash dropped the smile and placed his hand on his heart. “Leah, I promise you I am not expecting anything from you other than the rent you can afford.”

Leah pursed her lips as she watched his face. “I don’t know why you are so eager for us to live here, but only know it’s out of necessity that I’m accepting your offer.”

“You don’t have to be so hostile about it.”

“Just know that I will not tolerate any sort of coercion. I know what your kind is like.” Leah kept her voice conversational.

Ash scoffed. “My kind? You mean dragons?”

“No. *Businessmen*,” Leah said flatly.

Ash cracked a smile. “Well, all right. I suppose I wouldn’t be able to pull the wool over your eyes even if I tried. Not that I would.” He finished quickly.

“In that case.” She thrust out her hand. “We have a deal.”

“We do.” He slipped his hand into hers. “And I’m here whenever you need me.” He handed her a key. As he did, he glanced at his watch. “Can you get yourself settled in? I have an appointment.”

“Sure.” Her hand closed around the key, and she stepped back. “Thank you.”

He nodded.

Leah walked back to what was now her apartment. As she pushed the door open, she glanced back at Ash, catching him quickly looking away and disappearing inside.

“Are we staying?” Maria asked as she ran to meet Leah at the door.

“We are.” Leah nodded and then laughed as Maria and Tommy hugged her, turning around and around until they were all dizzy.

She’d done it. She’d found them a new home.

Now all she had to do was find a job.

Chapter Five – Ash

Well, that went well, Ash's dragon said as they stood behind the closed door, their senses locked on their mate as she walked away.

It did. Ash turned away from the door as Leah entered her apartment. He didn't want to eavesdrop on her life.

He wanted to be part of it.

You could sound happier. His dragon rolled his eyes.

I am happy. Ash opened his closet and took out a pair of pressed black slacks and a crisp white shirt and hung them on the door.

Could have fooled me, his dragon retorted.

I just wish... What did he wish? That he hadn't met her?

No, he would never wish for that. Not ever.

But he did wish their meeting had occurred just a few months later. After he'd made a name for himself in Wishing Moon Bay. After proving himself capable of providing for them without his family's involvement.

Trust in fate, his dragon told him patiently. *Trust that we have met each other at the exact right time.*

Time. Ash glanced at his watch and quickly stripped off his jeans and shirt as he headed for the shower. Although it had felt as though the world had stood still when he was with Leah, time had not waited for him.

After the fastest shower in history, he threw on his usual business attire, black slacks, a white shirt—open at the neck—a splash of expensive cologne, and a pair of perfectly polished boots. He ran some gel into his hair in an attempt to tame it and shrugged on his leather jacket.

As he studied his reflection in the mirror, he flattened his features, removing any trace of emotion. Some might call it his poker face, but this was his business face.

Ash put his success in business down to one thing. Emotion. His ability to hide his completely, coupled with the ability to read other people's entirely.

It was the most useful weapon in his negotiating armory. He could tell when people were desperate, he could sense when he could push for a lower price, and tell when he needed to give up certain concessions.

And that was one of the things he found so intriguing about Leah.

There had been only a handful of moments when she let her emotions through. While Ash could only guess at whatever situation she was in and the utter turmoil that came with it, he would have missed any hint at it if he wasn't so experienced.

If she had been a business rival, she would have been formidable.

But that was the old Ash. He didn't want to be that man anymore.

He forced a smile and grimaced. The new Ash was going to take some work.

He turned away, grabbed his keys and phone, and headed out of the apartment. He only paused briefly as he passed the next door to savor the nearness of his mate. The sound of laughter drifted out of the apartment, and he smiled. A natural, cheerful smile.

I don't know about wishes coming true, his dragon said. But that was a miracle right there.

Funny dragon, Ash said sarcastically as he strode away, taking the steps two at a time.

As he reached the street, he hesitated. The need to turn around and run back to her, to swear his undying love to her was almost too much.

But he was a man in charge of his emotions. His emotions did not rule him.

So why are we in Wishing Moon Bay? his dragon asked.

You know why, Ash ground out as he headed down the street, taking the turn that led downhill toward the docks.

I thought I did, his dragon said. *I thought we were here because you got your feelings hurt.*

You know, I enjoy walking in silence, Ash said.

Did I hit a nerve? His dragon chuckled.

I did not get my feelings hurt, Ash said. *I hurt someone else. Badly. And I want to show the world that you can be successful without doing that.*

His dragon fell silent. Despite the snark, he too knew the intense regret that came after their last business deal, though it was hard to see the scars through his scaly hide and dry demeanor.

The streets were quieter now that the evenings were drawing out, and the sun was well and truly setting. He could understand how the industrial area of Wishing Moon Bay could be seen as intimidating, especially as darkness closed in, with its hulking warehouses, skeletal loading equipment, and clanging ambiance.

But to Ash, it was perfect. It was the furthest thing he could find from the malign boardrooms he was used to.

This place was the working person's turf, where honest work was rewarded instead of cheated.

Being late to a meeting was a strategy that Ash had applied before, to build tension and anxiety in a nervous opposition, but this time Ash found himself hurrying to beat the clock, jogging down the cobbled streets until he reached his rented warehouse.

He had planned to arrive early and set the place up properly, but he'd been a little distracted.

The lights are on inside, his dragon observed as Ash came to a stop and took a moment to tidy his appearance. *That means people showed up, at least.*

That's a promising sign. Ash looked up at the rundown warehouse. Not the ideal place for the inaugural meeting of the

Wishing Moon Bay business forum, but it was cheap, and you had to start somewhere.

And for Ash, this was it.

If anyone actually listened to him. The treacherous thought popped into his head unbidden. And unwelcome. But he would not let thoughts deter him. He had something to prove and now that he had his mate, he needed to prove it faster.

Or return to our old life, his dragon said.

Not an option, Ash replied.

Why? Because it would dent your pride? his dragon asked.

No, because if we want things to change, if we want the family to change, then we have to lead by example, Ash replied.

Do you think they are capable of change? his dragon asked.

That is a discussion for another day, Ash replied as he took a deep breath and pulled open the door.

The aged metal squealed unpleasantly, and about twenty faces turned from where they were huddled talking to face him as he stepped inside.

Are they here because they are interested in the business forum, or because they want to gawp at you? Ash's dragon asked.

Does it matter? Ash asked. *They might have come to look at me like I'm a prize exhibit in the zoo, but as long as they stay to listen to what I have to say, then I'm okay with it.*

"Hello." Ash raised a hand as he pushed the door closed behind him.

"Hello," an inaudible murmur went around the room.

Enthusiastic, his dragon commented.

They will be when they hear what I have to say. Ash readjusted his jacket as he headed for the front of the room. If you could call it a room. The slate stone floor needed relaying, and some of the timber paneling was split and rotted in a

couple of places. But Ash liked the ambiance of the place. It was...boutique.

He could envisage this as a melting pot of business ideas, a place where local people could come for advice on how to strengthen their businesses, ask for partnerships, and connect with investors.

So they can fend off the wolves, his dragon said. Oh, make that dragons.

Ash ignored the barbed comment as he reached the small, raised platform on the other side of the space. The faces all watched him silently, standing next to the chairs Ash had placed earlier.

Ash nodded his head a few times as he psyched himself up.

Just another business meeting.

He then turned and faced them. “Thank you all for coming.” His voice reverberated around the tall, empty room. Ash was met with an assortment of expressions, all of them curious. Some expectant, some skeptical. He could feel their eyes on him, analyzing his every move, searching for any hint of weakness or vulnerability. But Ash stood tall, exuding confidence.

He was determined to make this his stage and charm the audience.

“I understand that this might not be the most conventional place for a meeting like this and that many of you might have been reluctant, or even suspicious of me inviting you here. However, if I’d had a little corporate espionage in mind, I’d have chosen a much more dangerous place, like my accountant’s office.”

Ash kept a straight face as he was met with one or two confused chuckles.

“Regardless, it means a great deal to me that anyone turned up today, and I hope it shows that there could be a foundation of trust that we can build upon. Just like this old warehouse, tonight we might just be able to form the rickety foundations that could be built into something special. And that thing is

something I'd like to build with all of you. I envision this place being a center of commerce, of deal-making, of trading dreams with one another and together making those dreams a reality, just as the ocean is said to do for wishes. I have invited you all here today to discuss the founding of the Wishing Moon Bay Business Forum, a collective vision for empowering our local businesses.”

Not bad. His dragon watched the crowd through slitted eyes as they murmured and whispered between one another.

It certainly got their attention, maybe even their interest. Ash watched a few wide eyes, some concerned expressions, and lots of surreptitious glances toward him. *But is interest enough?*

A small, wiry man with round spectacles stepped out from the crowd.

A willing sacrifice? His dragon curled a lip just enough to show a glimpse of teeth.

Remember, it's us on the chopping block. Ash watched the man expectantly.

He only briefly met Ash's eye, talking more to the group than him. “Hi, all. You'll know me from the cartography store in town. And for your information, *mister*, it might not be the busiest store these days, but it is highly prestigious. It's a part of this town just as much as the sea. Now, I've had my fair share of run-ins with dragons, and I know of other businesses that have had run-ins with this particular family of dragons, so I feel like I speak for everyone when I ask why should we trust you?” There was a slight accusatory tone in his voice. “Your reputation on Cairnnor is...well, less than stellar. I hear you're all known for making offers people like us can't refuse—and not in a nice way.”

The comments were met with a low murmur of agreement.

Ash's smile didn't waver.

Seems they've done some background checks of their own. His dragon watched the mapmaker, who still wouldn't meet Ash's gaze.

Our reputation unfortunately precedes us.

“I understand your concerns. My family’s approach has been...aggressive in the past. But I’m here to chart a new course. One that values collaboration over conquest,” Ash said.

A woman with a big bun pierced with knitting needles and a thick, colorful scarf was the next to speak up. “Your intentions sound noble, and that was quite a nice speech.” There were a few nods and words of agreement. “But talking is easy. How do we know this isn’t just some ploy for you to take advantage of us?”

Nodding respectfully, Ash replied, “I appreciate your skepticism. It’s healthy, and I would expect nothing less. And you’re right, talk is easy. That’s why I am coming to you, alone, in this humble venue, and not asking what you can give me, but what I can offer you. If you’ll give me time.”

“If he asked what we could offer him in a place like this, I’d have been sure we were getting robbed.” A voice spoke from somewhere in the group, followed by some nervous laughter.

“We still might be!” Another chuckled.

“I’m still not sure what it is you’re offering.” A burly man with a worried frown creasing his brow spoke up. “I’m barely keeping my head above water since a firm importing cheap candles moved in across the street. They are severely undercutting my prices. How exactly are you supposed to help someone like me?”

Ash clicked his fingers. “That there is exactly why we need this forum. A coalition, if you will, of business owners and business investors from Wishing Moon Bay who want to help keep this rich culture alive, and out of the hands of people like...like my family.”

At least you’re an honest crook, his dragon rumbled.

Not a crook anymore.

The room buzzed with murmurs, and Ash allowed himself a moment of triumph. He had won them over. Or, at least, made

them take him seriously. But he didn't want to let the moment fade.

“Just think, with a little bit of capital and some coordination, we could pair your candles with some fine whisky, and sell it as a premium item for premium occasions, that no cheap candles could compare to.” He could see the faint smile of a man picturing what Ash could be selling, seeing what his business could be. “Give this a chance. We could build something meaningful here that benefits us all.”

“I'm sure we all know who this is *really* going to benefit,” a voice in the audience muttered.

“Just a few more lumps of gold to add to the treasure hoard,” another said to a ripple of laughter.

“If you have questions, I'm here,” Ash offered, refusing to feed the comments.

The group began to disperse, polite but noncommittal. The map shop owner shrugged nonchalantly. The lady with knitting needles in her hair offered a sympathetic smile, and the candlemaker left with a heavy sigh.

Ash watched them leave, a sense of disappointment threaded through his veins.

They were a tough audience, his dragon said, with surprising compassion. But they need more than words. They need action, proof that you will not use this business forum as a way of finding their weak spots. They probably suspect that we are planning to expand, and Wishing Moon Bay is the next step on our journey to world domination.

World domination? Ash asked. *You have been spending too much time with Ariel.*

Out of all our sisters, she is the most...driven, Ash's dragon said somewhat diplomatically.

She can't hear you, Ash told his dragon.

You can never be sure, his dragon answered.

Ash sighed as he watched the crowd leave through the squeaky door. *World domination doesn't sound too hard*

compared to this, right about now.

“Ash, isn’t it?”

Ash nodded as two women hung back as the warehouse emptied. “It is. How can I help you?”

“I think it’s us who can help you.” She thrust out her hand. “I’m Penny. And this is my sister, Helena.”

“Good to meet you both.” Ash shook their hands each in turn. “And how do you think you can help me?” he asked, trying not to sound condescending.

“You are new in town,” Penny said.

“I am,” Ash answered. “But I’m not new to business.”

“I think we all know that. Your reputation precedes you,” Helena told him.

“Ah, my reputation,” Ash nodded.

“Your family is known for being brutal in business,” Helena said.

“Brutal?” Ash chuckled. “That’s putting it lightly.”

Penny, with a knowing glint in her eyes, leaned in slightly. “That’s exactly why we think we can help you. We were new in town not so long ago. So, we can share our insights as to how we learned to fit in.”

“Fit in.” Ash looked toward the closed door. “I don’t think that’s what this is about.”

“Sure it is.” Helena looked him up and down. “Fitting in is where you need to start.”

Penny continued, “We’ve gotten to know the people here, their concerns, their aspirations. We can help you understand them better.”

Ash’s gaze turned thoughtful. “And what do you get out of it?”

“Get out of it?” Penny asked sharply.

“Not everything is about profit,” Helena said.

“If we help you, we expect you to play fair,” Penny said. “We need your word that this is not a way of hoodwinking the people of this town for your own gains.”

“You have it,” Ash agreed.

“Okay then.” Penny nodded, watching him warily. “Because we’ve all heard of the repercussions of your family’s tactics. If you’re truly different, prove it. Help us protect what we have here. We all know that now that Cairnnoir is free, it’s only a matter of time before your family set their eyes on Wishing Moon Bay.”

“If they haven’t already.” Helena side-eyed him.

Ash took a moment, not wanting to seem too eager before he nodded. “All right. I’m listening.”

Penny and Helena exchanged a look. “First,” Penny began, “you need to sort of...introduce yourself.”

“That’s not what that just was?” Ash raised an eyebrow.

Penny shook her head. “Not really. Now, when someone new moves into a neighborhood, what’s the first thing that happens?”

Ash gave them a blank look. He’d never really *moved in* to a neighborhood.

“People bring them moving in gifts,” Penny explained.

Helena nodded over her shoulder. “Like a pie or something.”

Ash chuckled. “I don’t think I’m going to be getting any gift baskets from anyone after that.”

“No,” Penny said patiently, “but like you said, it’s not about what they can give you. Yes, you’ve moved into Wishing Moon Bay, but you’re trying to introduce them to your world. The world of big business. So, provide something of value. Bake them a pie.”

“Something of value...” Ash rubbed his chin. “How about a free workshop? Or a seminar? Something that will introduce

them to perhaps some more advanced marketing. Or attracting investors.”

“Exactly.” Penny smiled approvingly.

“But not here,” Helena said quickly.

“What’s wrong with this place?” Ash smiled wryly. “You’re right. I have a plan for this warehouse. I have a vision, but it’s hard for people to see past what’s right there in front of them.”

“Exactly,” Helena said. “You need to impress people. Show them you’re legitimate and not doing dodgy deals in back allies.”

“Hm,” Penny agreed. “You’d have probably had more than double the people here if you’d have just rented out a café or a hall somewhere.”

“I’ll start looking for somewhere else,” Ash said, his mind already sifting through the places that might be suitable.

“Listen, I’m sure we can organize the venue,” Penny said.

“You can?” Ash asked warily.

“Yes, I’m sure we can persuade Valerie to let you host the workshop at Wishing Moon Bay Hotel.” Helena smothered a smile. “In exchange, you can use our business as a case study for whatever workshop you want to run.”

“Okay.” Ash clapped his hands together. “Yeah, okay. This could work.”

“Don’t you want to know what our business is first?” Helena asked.

“No.” He waved his hands at them. “I’m confident that whatever your business is, I can help you.”

“Now, there’s confidence for you,” Penny said.

Or arrogance, his dragon added. You know what they say, pride comes before a fall.

I have no intention of falling, he told his dragon.

No. Ash intended to soar higher than the clouds. And take the businesses of Wishing Moon Bay with him.

Chapter Six – Leah

“I love it here,” Maria breathed as they stood together looking out across the ocean from the balcony, the gentle sea breeze ruffling their hair.

“We’ve only been here for half an hour,” Tommy reminded his sister.

“So?” Maria’s brows tugged together, and her bottom lip stuck out, a sure indication an argument was about to ensue.

“Okay, let’s go and arrange for our luggage to be sent over,” Leah said. “And then we can go and find something to eat.”

“I’m starving,” Maria complained, which was probably the reason for her short temper.

They still hadn’t eaten since arriving, and even Leah was feeling famished now.

“I know.” Leah left the balcony and went back into the living area, where she’d dumped her purse on the sofa. “I have a couple of candy bars.”

“I thought you said candy before dinner will ruin our appetites,” Maria said, as the kids followed her in.

“You don’t have to remind her,” Tommy hissed.

“I can hear you,” Leah said as she held out the candy bars. “And I think this once it’s fine.”

“But what if we see something delicious and I can’t eat it because my appetite is ruined?” Maria asked.

“I’ll do you a favor and eat them both,” Tommy offered magnanimously.

“No, you won’t,” Leah said before Maria had a chance. “If your sister doesn’t want this candy bar, I’ll save it for later.” Leah passed a candy bar to Tommy and then held the other one out to Maria. “Your choice.”

Maria eyed the candy bar and then took it with a resigned sigh. "I'll eat it."

"On the way?" Leah asked hopefully as she shouldered her purse and headed toward the door. "The sooner we get to the tavern and organize our luggage, the sooner we can go and sample the delights of Wishing Moon Bay." On a budget.

"On the way." Maria took a bite of her candy bar and skipped to the door as if instantly revived by the sugar rush.

Tommy unwrapped his bar and took a bite. "I still don't think we should have left."

"Duly noted," Leah told him as she shepherded him out of the door.

"If we were home now, I could just ask for a cook to make me whatever I want." Tommy took another bite of his candy bar.

"And maybe that is one reason why I decided we needed a change," Leah told him.

"Could we not have had a change and kept all the staff?" Tommy asked.

"Listen." She wrapped her arm around his shoulder and hugged him closely. "Think of this as an adventure. A chance for you to sample the other side of life."

"And if I don't like it?" Tommy asked.

Leah stopped walking and turned her son to face her. "I would not have brought you here if I didn't truly believe that you would."

"But if I don't?" Tommy asked, looking up at her.

"Will you at least give it a chance?" Leah asked.

Tommy sighed heavily as he shook his head, but then he answered, "Yes. For now."

Leah would have to settle for that and call it progress. Anyway, if things turned out as she hoped...wished...then Tommy would want to stay here. He'd appreciate their new

life, and his freedom to follow his dreams. Whatever they might be.

Luggage. They'd all feel a little happier once they had some familiar things around them. The apartment, although decorated to a very high standard and furnished with quality items, was sparse, and minimalist. Like a show home.

Not a real home. And if this was where they were going to live, at least for the short term, then Leah needed to turn the apartment into their home.

"Wait for me." She pulled the door closed behind her and jogged to catch up with Tommy and Maria as they stepped out into the evening.

"I can't wait to explore the town," Maria said enthusiastically. "I want to learn all about magic."

"You're not a witch," Tommy said sourly.

"She might be," Leah replied.

"I might?" Maria's eyes lit up with excitement.

"I am the descendent of witches who lived here in Wishing Moon Bay. My grandma was a well-respected hedge witch."

"I didn't think any witches were well respected," Tommy retorted, screwing up the wrapper from his candy bar and shoving it into his pocket.

"Not everywhere, but they are here." Leah could still recall the moment she told Vittorio about her ancestry. He'd told her to keep it quiet, as if it was something to be ashamed of. But that didn't stop him from utilizing her talents to advance his career.

"Dad said witches are..." Tommy began, but Leah placed her hand on his shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze.

"Your dad said a lot of things, but most of what he said was his opinion. And although it's good to listen to other people's opinions, it's also good to make your own mind up about things and have your own opinions," she told him.

“Look, Tommy!” Maria pointed to the sky as a flock of the colorful birds flew over.

Tommy cracked a wide smile as his gaze turned toward the sky, following the birds as they swooped and glided, chirping noisily as they headed toward the mountains. “What kind of birds are they?”

“They are Halcyon Skydancers,” Leah said. “When I was a little girl, I remember my grandma could charm them from the sky. They would rest on her finger, and she would feed them nectar from the Tuli Vine.” She smiled at the long-forgotten memory.

“Did she teach you how?” Tommy asked.

“No, but I’m sure we can figure it out together. I remember my grandma telling me the most important thing to remember was to keep your mind clear and thoughts tranquil. Like the surface of the calmest waters, or the stillness of a windless summer day.” Leah had no chance of charming a Halcyon Skydancer right now. Her mind was a maelstrom of thoughts. Each idea vied for dominance, far from the serene state she needed to achieve.

“I’d like that,” Tommy murmured as he watched the Skydancers disappear into the distance. “To see one up close.”

“Me, too,” Maria agreed. “We could practice.”

“We could.” Tommy nodded. “We could sit on the balcony and...” He glanced at his mom and smiled sheepishly. “Meditate.”

“Didn’t your dad always say that meditating was...” Leah broke off as Tommy cracked a wide grin. “I think you are getting the idea.”

“My own thoughts, my own opinions, and my own choices,” Tommy said with a confident nod.

“Within reason.” Leah slid her arms around her children, and they walked together along the street to The Lonely Tavern. “You are still children.”

Tommy leaned his head onto her arm. She'd expected his usual retort that he was not a child, but he seemed content to be one. At least for the evening.

They didn't rush too much to get to the tavern, taking some time to take in some of the sights of Wishing Moon Bay, but also acutely aware of their rumbling stomachs.

"There it is!" Maria pointed at the sign hanging over the strange-looking building that bulged outward in the most peculiar way.

"Let's hope Morwenna hasn't changed her mind and sent our luggage back to the docks." Leah let go of Tommy and Maria as they reached the door.

"Morwenna is funny," Maria said.

"I wouldn't let her hear you say that," Tommy said. "She might turn you into a toad."

"Is she a witch?" Maria breathed,

"Yes," Tommy replied, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. "Didn't you see all those charms on her dress? And the floating broom."

"I wonder if she knows how to charm a Halcyon Skydancer." With that, Maria raised her hand to push the door open and went inside.

Tommy followed behind his sister, and Leah hesitated for a moment before she stepped over the threshold, bracing herself for whatever they might find inside what could only be described as the strangest tavern she'd ever seen. Not that she'd been in many—well, any—taverns before.

'Make sure you take the right fork,' the host stand read as she approached.

Who wrote these things? Leah hitched her purse higher on her shoulder as she approached the bar, hoping Morwenna was not going to charge her an exorbitant price for storing their trunks for a few hours. Perhaps if she were really lucky, Morwenna might not be here at all, and Leah could deal with Flint, who seemed to be a sweetie.

But there was Morwenna standing on the bar, metal-handled broom in hand, swatting at something in the rafters.

Maria and Tommy approached the bar, watching her curiously.

“What are your charms for?” Maria’s voice carried across the tavern.

Morwenna paused, the brush held high. She lowered her eyes, slowly followed by the brush. “They are wards.” Morwenna pointed at a silver charm on her right forearm without looking and said, “This one is for warding off children who ask too many questions. I think I’ll ask for a refund.”

“You’re funny,” Maria said lightly.

“Or maybe I should turn you into a toad,” Morwenna said, maintaining a straight face as she prodded the brush toward the rafters.

“Rebbit,” Tommy croaked.

“Leah!” Flint waved from the other side of the room, where he was seated at a table with three elderly men.

“Ah, so this is the delightful Leah,” one of the men said and stood up, giving a half bow.

“And who might you be, kind sir?” she asked, returning his bow with a light laugh.

“Stan,” he replied with a chuckle, his cheeks turning pink with delight.

“Well, I’m very pleased to meet you, Stan.” Leah returned his smile while keeping eye contact as she approached the table of men.

“And I’m Harry.” Harry stood up and nodded, offering her his hand.

“Good to meet you, Harry.” As she slipped her hand into his, he lowered his head and pressed his lips lightly to the back of her hand.

“The pleasure is all mine,” Harry said smoothly.

“I’m Bert.” A third man waved his hand at her.

“My, I had no idea The Lonely Tavern attracted such a charming clientele,” Leah said, once again maintaining eye contact with Bert.

“Sit.” Bert jumped up and offered her his seat. “I’ll buy you a drink.”

“No, thank you. I can’t stay long,” Leah replied and was met with a collective ‘*aw*’ from the three men, much to Flint’s amusement.

“How did it go with the search for an apartment?” Flint asked as he sipped a strange-smelling beer and winced. “I don’t think I’ll ever get used to this stuff,” he said before taking another sip.

Leah wrinkled her nose, “Good. Thank you so much for giving me the details of the apartment. The landlord and I have come to an arrangement, and we have the keys. I’ve come now to arrange to have our luggage delivered. If it’s still here.”

“Don’t worry, Morwenna didn’t send it back to the docks, it’s out in the back room,” Flint said easily, then his eyes narrowed. “So Ash let the apartment to you.”

“He did,” Leah replied. “At a very reasonable price.”

“Really?” Stan asked. “I always got the feeling that dragon was out for gold. You know how they like to add to their hoard.”

“Oh, don’t I?” Harry replied as he took a sip of his gin. “Remember that dragon shifter who flew in a couple of months ago?”

“Oh, the one with the flashy gold watch.” Bert rolled his eyes.

“You mean the one with the *fake* flashy gold watch?” Harry asked, a mischievous glint in his eye.

Stan leaned in, eager to contribute. “Yes, *that* dragon shifter.”

“What happened?” Leah glanced over her shoulder to check if Maria and Tommy were okay. They still had Morwenna cornered now that she had climbed down to sit on the bar. The floating broom nearby irately swept around the metal brush Morwenna had been holding.

“Well,” Stan looked right and left as if worried someone might overhear before he continued. “He came in here one day and made this big announcement about how he was going to make someone rich beyond their wildest dreams.”

Bert, chuckling, joined in. “He had this wild plan to start a ‘luxury’ treasure hunt, selling maps to tourists down at the docks for a hefty price. Claimed the maps would lead to a cache of ‘dragon gold’ that he’d found clues for, and he’d split the find with whoever found it.”

Harry laughed, shaking his head. “Turns out he even had a buried chest in the old quarry. And told everyone there was a curse on the chest so that no one would open it without him there.”

Leah listened, intrigued. “So, what happened?”

“Well,” Bert said, “this guy thought the quarry was abandoned, which it was, except for a bunch of kids who fancied themselves archaeologists, and just so happened to be ‘surveying’ the old quarry.” Bert chuckled. “Of course, when they found Mr. Treasure Hunter’s chest, not knowing anything about this ‘curse,’ and thought they had struck gold.”

“They were all late home for dinner by all accounts as they spent the entire afternoon trying to get into this chest by smashing it open with rocks dropped from the top of the quarry...” Harry paused for effect. “Only to go home with a box full of fake jewelry!”

“No,” Leah giggled.

“Oh yeah,” Bert nodded. “They came back into town shouting about finding hidden treasure, only for anyone walking around with one of these maps to recognize the ‘ancient and unique carvings’ that held the curse and realize they’d been conned.”

“Of course, everyone wanted a refund,” Stan said.

“The conman put up a fight about it, but Ken, the local jewelry store owner, took one look inside that chest and declared them the worst fakes he’d ever seen,” Bert said.

Harry burst out laughing. “That dragon shifter had to come clean about the whole thing. The parents were amused, but he was red-faced and muttering about lost investments.”

“And the best part?” Stan added with a wide grin. “He ended up donating the fake chest to the local school for their playroom. So, in a way, he did add to his hoard—a hoard of goodwill from the kids. But not so much from the townsfolk!”

Their laughter filled the tavern, and Leah laughed along with them.

“And this is why dragons have such a bad name in town,” Flint grumbled.

“Well, we can’t blame them completely. After all that trouble on Cairnnor, I can see why so many dragons wanted to come and try their luck over here. Just a shame none of them have a clue about how the world works outside of that island,” Harry said as he finished his drink. “Present company excepted, of course.”

“Of course.” Flint seemed a little mollified.

“So, since you gentlemen obviously know a lot about this town, I was wondering if you could possibly help with something?” Leah asked.

“Tell us what you need,” Bert nodded.

“Do you know of anywhere I might be able to find employment?” Leah asked, a little bashfully.

“A job, huh?” Bert rubbed his chin.

“What experience do you have?” Harry asked.

“Well, before I came to Wishing Moon Bay, I used to host parties and events for my husband’s...company. They were always very successful. I suppose I have an eye for detail.” Leah’s eyes unfocused slightly. She could almost see the way

she would arrange even the table they were sitting at for an event. “Things that guests wouldn’t necessarily notice, but would affect how they felt, or acted, without them even realizing.” She brought her focus back to the men and gave them a disarming smile. “And of course, finding the right wine can open doors like nothing else.”

“A hostess, eh?” Stan nodded. “We’ll certainly keep our ears out for something of the sort.”

“Thank you,” Leah said sincerely. “I want this to be a fresh start for me and my children.”

“Flint knows all about fresh starts, don’t you, Flint?” Stan nudged Flint’s elbow.

“I do.” Flint stood up abruptly and stared at Morwenna, who stood scolding the broom, much to the children’s amusement. After a moment, he picked up his tankard and tipped his head back, draining its contents in one go, and placed the tankard back down with a clang, “Come with me.”

“Dutch courage,” Harry whispered under his breath as Flint strode across the bar toward Morwenna.

“Better go with him,” Stan said, ushering Leah away.

But as she followed Flint, the older men stood up from the table and followed her across the room.

“—and if only you could get that blasted feather duster to keep on top of the cobwebs around here—”

“Morwenna,” Flint said assertively.

Morwenna turned from the broom, which perceptively sagged as if hanging its head, and turned to Flint. “Now if you tell me again to take it easy on Brushworth, so help me, I’ll have you dressed in a maid outfit and sweeping this place up by hand.”

“I think you’d struggle to find one to fit me, but that’s not important.” Flint straightened himself. “Leah here is in need of work. And you are in need of a host,” Flint said, his tone a little less assertive as Morwenna turned her full attention to him.

“I need a host, do I?” Morwenna jingled as she looked from Flint to Leah and then zoned in on the older guys standing behind them.

“The Regulars agree,” Flint said, and half turned to look at the older guys.

“We do?” Bert’s voice wavered.

“We do,” Harry said firmly, taking a step forward. “That host sign by the door can be a little...”

“Rude,” Stan butted in.

“Hmm,” Bert and Harry agreed, not looking Morwenna in the eye.

“But Leah...” Harry hooked his arm through Leah’s. “She’s charming.”

“Charming...” Morwenna repeated as if the word was stuck in her throat.

“Exactly,” Stan said with a nod. “And that’s exactly what The Lonely Tavern needs. A little charm.”

“That’s what the swords on the wall are for,” Morwenna stated.

“Morwenna.” Flint arched an eyebrow at his boss.

Morwenna narrowed her eyes at him. “What do you think, children? Is there really such a lack of charm in the tavern?”

“I think Brushworth has more charm than anyone!” Maria declared loudly, and the broom visibly perked up.

“But that doesn’t mean it couldn’t do with a little more.” Tommy met his mother’s eyes, who gave him a wink.

“A trial,” Leah suggested, trying to snatch a victory before it ended in defeat. “Risk-free. Just give me a chance to show you what I can do for your business.”

“What if I like my business just the way it is?” Morwenna asked.

“Do you?” Flint asked.

“I do. Apart from the recent infestation of cobwebs. And the imps in the rafters. Perhaps if we could pull in a few more pennies, I’d be able to afford another brush that actually sweeps itself.” Morwenna nudged a new brush, which tipped over, and clattered onto the floor. Morwenna looked around, her eyes distant. “Well, the tavern did open its door to you.”

“And that’s a sign,” Flint said happily.

“Signs and portents,” Morwenna grumbled.

“So we have a deal?” Leah asked.

“You can work a shift tomorrow afternoon, and we can go from there,” Morwenna said.

“Tomorrow?” Leah asked.

“Not convenient. Oh well, signs and portents,” Morwenna muttered as she slid the cleaning item catalog across the bar toward herself.

Leah sucked in a breath. She could not afford to let this chance slip by. “That works.”

“Oh, and no children allowed,” Morwenna added without looking up from the catalog.

“But...” Leah began.

“We can look after the kids,” Bert offered.

“I don’t want to impose,” Leah said.

“You aren’t,” Stan assured her. “Harry here has three grandchildren. He’s an expert.”

“We can go fishing,” Harry suggested.

“Fishing!” Tommy exclaimed.

“Please, Mommy,” Maria clasped her hands together and gave Leah that look. “I could watch the Skydancers over the sea.”

“Okay.” Leah had taken a chance coming here. Why not take one more?

“Yay!” Maria jumped in the air.

“Now, I think we should go and celebrate,” Leah said to her children.

“Please do. Elsewhere,” Morwenna idly flicked up the catalog to where she had marked a page with the cocktail umbrella.

“There’s a great pizza place down the street,” Flint said as he walked her to the door. “You go and celebrate, and I’ll get your luggage sent over to your new apartment.”

“Thank you,” Leah said to Flint.

“You’re welcome, Leah,” Flint said. “Not so long ago, I came here searching for a new beginning. Sometimes we all need a second chance.”

“We do,” Leah agreed, her eyes resting on the host sign. She smiled, confident she had taken the right fork.

With that, the tavern door swung open, and Leah and her children stepped out onto the street, their new life, and pizza awaited!

Chapter Seven – Ash

Let's hope today goes better than yesterday, Ash's dragon said brightly as Ash locked his apartment door and pocketed the key.

It will. Ash sucked in the sea air, savoring the unique smell of Wishing Moon Bay. Even though it was bordered by the same ocean that surrounded Cairnnor, the smell was different. Even inside, it tasted...nice.

It's the smell of freedom, his dragon said.

You've changed your tune, Ash replied. *The way you were speaking yesterday, I thought you were all for giving the family another chance.*

I gave it some thought and decided to give this new life of ours a chance. His dragon puffed out a lazy plume of smoke that slowly dispersed as it drifted off. *Or at least give this plan of yours a chance. But we need to change hearts and minds. And fast. Yesterday's meeting was a bit of a disaster.*

Not at all, Ash said.

How so? his dragon challenged.

Because we learned something. A few things, actually. Which means that even though the meeting was not a complete success, it was useful. Ash shoved his hands in his pocket and savored the sensation of his mate. She was there, next door. So close and yet so far away.

I need a whisky, Ash said.

Before midday? his dragon asked sourly.

You sound like one of our sisters, Ash replied. *Or all of them.*

I might take that as a compliment since they do only have our best interests in mind, his dragon retorted.

No, they have what they think are our best interests in mind, Ash replied as he strode away from his apartment and toward

the stairs.

The tavern? his dragon asked.

It's as good a place as any, Ash replied, giving a lingering glance at the view out the staircase window. *Plus, I'd like to thank Morwenna for sending Leah our way.*

I don't think you will ever thank her enough. His dragon chuckled deeply.

The impulse to go and knock on her door to orchestrate a meeting and then an invitation to join them was compelling, but he resisted. He did not want to impose or push his company on her.

At least not yet.

If he hadn't made any great steps forward in their relationship in the next few days, then he might resort to imposing on his mate. At least a little.

Like borrowing a cup of sugar? His dragon's chuckle turned into a laugh as they exited the apartment block and headed down the street.

I'm sure I can be more imaginative than that, Ash said.

Will you marry me?

Leah doesn't even like us enough to date us, let alone marry us, Ash told his dragon.

She likes us, his dragon said with a smug smile.

I hope you're right. Ash forced himself to walk away from his building.

He put one foot in front of the other, strolling through the town in a large, circular route that would eventually lead him to the tavern. Bar the destination, this was the route he walked most mornings.

It let him watch the town come to life, and he paid particular attention to the town's stores and stalls as they awoke for the coming day. He watched where and when deliveries were made; he observed which store owners talked to one another along with those they avoided, as well as who

the early customers were. He did also take one or two detours down small alleys to grab a glimpse at what was going on behind closed doors, finding him pleasantly surprised to see a lack of backhand deals and mostly just suspicious glares.

He nodded and said good morning, smiled, waved, and even stopped to talk to a handful of people. Most were, of course, suspicious of him at first, but Ash was no stranger to cold audiences and small-talked his way into little pieces of information to help build up his picture of the commerce that took place in town. Which were the more popular streets? Was it busy for this time of year? Seen anything strange in town recently?

As he neared the tavern, his thoughts returned to his mate. What was she doing? Spending the day sorting out the apartment, making it a home, most likely.

Was she fretting about money? From what he'd gathered, Leah didn't have much in reserve.

Whereas we have plenty, his dragon reminded him.

If we have to help her out, we will, Ash said. *But persuading her to accept our help might not be easy. She wants to succeed on her own.*

Like someone else we both know, his dragon said dryly.

Ash smiled as he brushed off his dragon's comment. Yes. He had his pride. But he'd swallow it if he had to. For his mate.

I just wish we knew what she was running from, Ash wondered aloud.

How can you be so sure she's running?

Ash rolled his eyes. *Come on. We've seen this before. The nice clothes, the attitude Leah and her kids have, coming straight to our cliffside apartment she knows she can't afford. She's used to money. I'd go so far as to say she's even used to power.*

From somewhere overseas. But not Cairnnor, his dragon mused.

Definitely not Cairnnor, otherwise we'd know who she was...maybe I'll put some feelers out.

He turned the corner and there was the tavern. It was a strange building, out of place in its surroundings. Maybe that's why he liked the place so much.

You feel a kinship to a building? his dragon asked.

Why not? You have to admit we don't exactly fit into this place, Ash said.

Well, the tavern seems to have a kinship to you, too, his dragon said when the tavern door swung wide open as if inviting him in.

Ash stepped into the tavern, his gaze resting on the host table. He quite enjoyed the cryptic message that changed each time he walked in there. Sometimes its insights were piercingly obvious. Others took him some time to work out. It was like a fun little horoscope every day.

Today's read, 'If you seek, you may find. But if you pause for a moment, what you seek might find you.'

Looks like we'll be seeking today. We don't have time for pausing.

Ash strode across the dimly lit tavern, his dragon senses tingling with every step. The Lonely Tavern was old, ancient even, and he could feel it in his bones. It gave him a similar feeling to when he was close to his family's treasure hoard.

It whispered of a time long ago.

What I wouldn't give to be able to sit down and talk to the place. Ash glanced around the bar area.

Need I remind you buildings don't talk? His dragon chuckled. *Unless it has the world's most ancient PA system.*

You know as well as I that The Lonely Tavern is more than a building, there is ancient magic at work here.

Ash approached the bar, sat down on a stool, and rested his elbows on the well-worn bar.

“What can I get you?” Flint asked, coming from behind Ash and placing a tray of dirty glasses on the bar.

“The usual,” Ash replied in a hushed tone as if the people from the past who had drunk at this very bar might hear him.

“So, he thinks he’s been coming in here long enough for you to know what his *usual* is, does he?” Morwenna’s voice drifted through from the back room, laced with her usual sarcasm.

“Seems so,” Flint said with a smile, reaching for a glass and filling it with Ash’s preferred single malt whisky. The amber liquid had been perfectly aged in a sherry cask, and its rich, delicious taste helped Ash when he needed to think.

Flint handed Ash the whisky, who took a sip, savoring the deep flavor as it warmed his throat. He carefully set his drink down on the bar. “Thanks for sending Leah and her children my way. The apartment is perfect for them.”

“We didn’t do it for you,” Morwenna called from the back room, her tone sharp.

“That’s why I’m thanking you,” Ash said, both bemused and irritated by Morwenna’s interference in the conversation from afar. “For looking out for them.”

“Why is he being so nice?” Morwenna’s voice came from the back room again with more than a hint of suspicion.

“I’ll ask him,” Flint replied, his eyes meeting Ash’s.

Leaning closer to Flint, Ash asked, “What is with that woman?”

“That woman is doing inventory,” Morwenna answered for herself.

“Leah said you were very generous and lowered the rent so that they could afford it,” Flint said, his eyes narrowing at Ash.

“I did,” Ash responded, taking another sip of his whisky.

“Why?” Flint’s gaze was as steely as it was inquisitive.

“Because they looked as if they needed a break,” Ash replied evenly. He still wasn’t ready to announce to the world that Leah was this mate. Especially in what was known as the hottest gossip spot in town. There was no way Leah could find out they were fated mates yet, and if there was one way to get off to a bad start with your mate, it was them finding out the news secondhand.

“Since when did you care about people needing a break?” Morwenna challenged, her voice heavy with skepticism.

“Could you just come out here and speak to me face to face?” Ash asked loudly, his patience wearing thin.

“I could,” Morwenna called back curtly, but she didn’t appear.

Ash let out an exasperated sigh and glanced at Flint, who shrugged in response. It seemed that Morwenna was determined to rile him. The best thing he could do was take his drink to a table across the room and sit down, alone with his thoughts.

“Another.” He drained his glass and set it down on the bar.

“Sure.” Flint refilled the glass and handed it to Ash as he rose from his chair. “It was a good thing you did for Leah. She truly appreciates it.”

Ash nodded and his eyes locked with Flint’s for a moment. A look of understanding passed between them that left Ash in no doubt that Flint knew. Or at least had a strong suspicion.

But he was going to keep Ash’s secret.

Finally, a dragon who was not out for himself.

“Just...don’t do anything stupid,” Flint said.

Ash smiled with a short laugh and winked at him before he pushed away from the bar and headed to a quiet corner, where he sat down and leaned back in his chair. He needed to think about his next move. Penny and Helena were right. He needed to show the people of Wishing Moon Bay what he had to offer.

But he needed to get it right. This was his one shot at winning them over.

Sipping his drink, he watched as a mop and bucket came around the bar and began cleaning the floor. It was almost sedative to watch them work unaided by human hands. The mop would meticulously wipe down an area of floor, wringing itself out before it moved on with the bucket loudly following in short jerky movements. When they finished, they left the bar as the door opened and a couple of men ordered a beer from Flint.

You're not the only one drinking this early in the morning, his dragon told him.

Nope, I am not. Ash took a gulp of liquor and then nearly choked on it as his mate walked in past the host stand.

How could he not have sensed her approaching? Did the bar have some kind of magical perimeter?

Or was this Morwenna? Had the witch cast a spell that dulled his senses so that his mate would bear witness to his day drinking?

I thought you said there was nothing wrong with it. His dragon puffed out a smoke ring in amusement.

There isn't, Ash said as he raised his glass to his lips in defiance.

"Leah." Flint flashed her a welcoming smile.

Ash didn't want to eavesdrop, but he couldn't say that he wasn't straining his hearing just a little to hear what they were saying.

"Hi, Flint." Leah smoothed her hands over the long black skirt that she wore with knee-length boots and a white blouse that was open at the neck. "I'm a little nervous."

Ash tensed. Why was his mate here at this time of day? And why was she nervous?

Ash half rose from his seat, ready to defend her honor. Or anything else.

"Don't be," Flint reassured her. "You'll do just fine."

“Is there anything you want me to focus on particularly?” Leah said.

“Yes.” Morwenna appeared from the backroom. “Flint.” She snapped her fingers. “Did you prepare the sale figures from yesterday?”

“I did.” Flint handed Morwenna a piece of parchment.

“Ah, just as I thought.” Morwenna scanned the figures. “Leah, I want you to upsell our customers.”

“Upsell?” Leah asked.

“You do know what that means.” Morwenna stared at Leah over the edge of the paper.

“Of course.” Leah smiled. “You tell me what you need, and I will make it happen.”

“Now, that is confidence, right there,” Morwenna said brightly, “but confidence isn’t the same as competence.”

“No, it is not,” Leah agreed. “So, you tell me what you need, and I will do my best.”

“But is your best good enough?” Morwenna asked.

“You can judge me on that later,” Leah leveled. “But I assure you, you will be more than happy with my work.”

“Flint! Get the snacks.” Morwenna nodded and Flint went out into the backroom and returned with a tray of very dark buns.

“Okay.” Leah leaned forward and wrinkled her nose. “What are they?”

“I haven’t thought of a name for them yet,” Morwenna confessed. “I was too busy making them. My word, was I busy making them.”

Flint inhaled deeply and said, “They smell like bread beer.”

“Well done, Flint. Give the dragon a gold star!” Morwenna seemed very impressed, while Flint looked slightly horrified.

“You made bread beer cake?” he asked.

“Yes. Waste not want not.” Morwenna took the tray from Flint and set it down on the counter. “Since your darling wife started selling her artisan spirits here, our sales of kvass—the delicious, malty, *fermenty* tasting bread beer for the uninitiated...” She gave Leah a look. “Have plummeted! And it’s the cheapest thing for me to sell because it literally just appears in the fermenting barrels downstairs. So, I have returned the bread beer to its natural form.” Morwenna gestured grandly at the tray of buns. “Bread beer bread.”

So this was Morwenna’s inventory that she was counting.

“When you say waste not...” Flint began.

“I took the waste product from the bread beer and turned it into these...” Morwenna held out her hands, looking pleased with herself.

“Yeah. That’s what I thought,” Flint said as he looked up at Leah apologetically.

“Look, Flint, the tavern wants to sell bread and beer, and our new employee is going to make that happen.”

Maybe we should just go over there and offer to buy them all. We could hand them out to people in the street, Ash’s dragon suggested.

Or feed them to the birds, Ash said as the sour smell reached him.

But Leah nodded and said, “Okay. I’ll get to work.”

Ash realized this was not his fight. Leah had to do this for herself and to prove herself to Morwenna.

Chapter Eight – Leah

Leah gnawed at the inside of her cheek as she stared down at the dark-colored tray bakes.

She wasn't sure if it was just Morwenna's intense gaze making her nervous, but it felt as though someone was watching her. Though with a glance around the dark corners of the tavern, she couldn't see anyone she recognized in the sparse crowd.

She took in the sharp scent of the dark bakes, turning her attention back to them. The clock was ticking, and lunch hour would be the best time to sell these bakes. No one would be coming in to try some funny-smelling bread buns, but if she marketed them as a luxury food item they were trying out and paired it with a nice drink...something with a very strong flavor, like a port wine or spiced ginger bear. Yeah, that could work.

“Okay, let's taste these bakes,” Leah said.

“You are actually going to eat one?” Flint screwed his face up as if he could think of nothing worse.

“I am.” Leah selected one of the bakes and broke it in half. “And so are you.”

“That will come out of your wages,” Morwenna said.

“You aren't paying me,” Leah reminded the witch.

“Ah,” Morwenna said as Leah handed one half to Flint.

“Why do I have to eat it?” Flint recoiled as Leah arched an eyebrow at him.

“I need you to taste it and help me come up with a name. Then we can pair the bakes with the drinks you sell,” Leah said.

“You think having something strong to wash it down with will help?” Flint squished the bun, frowning at the texture.

“I’m thinking more of a drink that could complement it,” Leah said. “What sort of beverages do you stock?”

“My wife’s gins, whiskies, and rums are always popular, but she could whip up a batch of pretty much anything if you let me know,” Flint said. “Otherwise we do have a limitless supply of bread beer.”

“And that’s why you have to taste this with me. You know the drinks here better than me. And although I am all for taste testing them, I will not be much good to anyone if I am flat on the floor passed out drunk.” Leah sniffed the bake before she raised it to her mouth and took a bite.

After some hesitation, Flint did the same.

Leah braced herself after seeing Flint’s reluctance.

The first bite was a slap in the mouth, the tang of fermented rye making her screw up her face. For a second she considered spitting it out, but after just a moment of chewing, the tang was replaced by a more mellow, savory flavor. There were still highlights of sourness but balanced pretty well with a hint of molasses-like sweetness.

If she were to give it a color, it would probably be the deep rich amber of fall leaves.

“Hmm.” Leah nodded and looked at Flint.

“It’s...not bad,” was Flint’s favorable opinion.

“Not bad!” Morwenna snorted. “Is that all you have to say? I slaved over a hot oven for hours making these.”

“You spent most of the time in there shouting at the pots and pans,” Flint retorted as he swallowed his first bite.

“It’s much better than I expected.” Leah did not have time for Morwenna and Flint to have a spat. “It has a real depth of flavor. This could be a hit...as long as people can get past how they look and smell.”

“As long as we don’t name it ‘leftovers from bread beer’,” Flint said as he ventured a second bite.

“What if we call it ‘Brewer’s Loaf’?” Leah suggested. “It ties back to the piece’s origin, which from what you’ve said seems important to the tavern, and also gives it an...artisanal feel. If we create a story around the idea for the bread and the baking process, I’m sure people will be sold enough to give it a try.”

Flint reached for a second bun. “I think these would go well with Liselle’s beers.”

“I was thinking the same. I think a ginger beer would suit these. A spicy kicker to wash down the tang,” Leah thought for a moment. “Can I see your wine list? I think I might have an idea to sell these as part of a dinner, not just a lunchtime snack.”

“It’s not extensive,” Flint said as he leaned behind the bar and grabbed the list.

“We stock what our customers want to buy,” Morwenna said defensively. “If you want more, I can always put an order in.”

Leah thought for a moment, her mind turning to wines as she skimmed through the short list. “From the wine side, I’m thinking a robust red. Perhaps a Merlot or Shiraz. Their fruity, spicy notes could elevate the bread’s flavor if someone wants a more serious drink than ginger beer.” She had purposely chosen the more expensive wines from the list. “It’s a pity you don’t have a Madeira. It’s from the World Beyond and would complement this nicely. You might even be able to sell it as a little exclusive experience for your customers. I’m sure anyone who frequents here will get a kick out of anything a little outlandish.”

“A Madeira?” Morwenna stepped behind the bar and opened a slim, tall cupboard next to the wine rack. “Hello, hello! You in there! I need a Madeira, no time to spare.”

Leah cast a confused glance to Flint, but she saw the cupboard’s shadowy depths stir in response to Morwenna’s words, and Leah gasped as out stepped a tall, long-limbed man. He was both elegant and spindly, dressed in a crisp white shirt, complete with bowtie and dinner jacket.

With a flourish, he presented a bottle of Madeira, cradled in his arms like a precious newborn babe. “Madam,” he began, his voice rich and deep, with a strange accent, “this Madeira is steeped in the legacy of its very prestigious vineyard, a symphony of rich caramel notes, accented with the subtlest hint of spice. Its aging process under the sun imparts a complexity that...”

“That sounds absolutely perfect,” Morwenna reached out and closed her hand around the bottle.

The wine connoisseur bowed slightly, his mission accomplished. “I am but at your service. Should you need further guidance through the world of wines, you need only ask.”

“Yes, yes,” Morwenna bundled the bottle into her arms. “What’s the damage?”

“For this particular service, two jars of moonlight, and a perfectly ordinary spatula will suffice.”

“An ordinary spatula?” Morwenna exclaimed. “Do you think I have anything *ordinary* in the whole of this tavern?”

“I don’t know that one will be enough,” Leah whispered, not sure exactly what she was witnessing.

Morwenna threw her a glance. “Give me two more, please,” Morwenna ordered.

“Of course.” The man reached into the shadowy depths of the cupboard and then handed two more bottles to Morwenna. “That will be *two* perfectly ordinary spatulas.”

“Fine,” Morwenna grunted. “I’ll have Flint post them after his shift.”

“Always a pleasure.” The tall man bowed before receding back into the shadowy depths of the cupboard.

“That is the strangest thing I have ever seen.” Leah stared at the cupboard even after Morwenna had closed the door.

“I’d like to agree with you,” Flint said, “but the yeti in the fridge is stranger.”

“A yeti? In the fridge?” Leah asked, wondering if the dragon shifter was teasing her.

“I think it’s a yeti, but it doesn’t talk much, and I’ve never dared ask,” Flint replied. “And Morwenna likes her secrets too much to give me any answers.”

“It’s not my secret,” Morwenna insisted. “I keep telling you, it’s the tavern, not me. If it were me, I’d have the whole tavern run by something useful, like Roombas.”

“Of course.” Flint glanced at Morwenna and then switched his attention to the group of men who had just walked through the door. “Okay. What’s our game plan?”

“Game plan?” Morwenna asked. “Don’t look at me. It’s not my job on the line.”

“Let’s offer some small tasters to everyone in here now. We want to create a bit of a buzz in here, get people talking about this controversial new addition to the menu.” Leah nodded to herself. “We want to make sure everyone’s very vocal about what they think, both good and bad, and then we start suggesting drinks. But they won’t be free. And if they want a second serving, they can buy more.”

“You think people will be willing to try that?” Flint nodded toward the dark brown tarry bake.

“Sure they will.” Leah smiled. “It’s all about perceived value. We let customers know that they’re going to be the very first to try what could be the talk of the town and let them try for free. They’ll at least take a bite.”

“You certainly talk the talk,” Morwenna said.

Leah got to work, cutting the “Brewer’s Loaf” into small, bite-sized cubes. She arranged them neatly on a wooden platter, alongside a selection of ginger beers Flint had found, and the pretty bottles of wine and Madeira.

She sucked in a nervous breath as she eyed the people in the tavern and pushed down the feeling that she’d made a mistake. She was used to hosting parties and business meetings. She had never been a salesperson. And she had no idea the clientele she was dealing with.

But here she was, and she was not going to let this opportunity go to waste. Even if she failed, she'd learn from the experience. She'd learn something about herself and something about Morwenna's customers. With that knowledge, she would do better next time.

"Good luck," Flint said as she picked up the platter.

"I think I'll need it," Leah said nervously.

"Why not try that side of the room?" Flint nodded to the left of the bar. "There are only a few people there. Ease into it."

Leah stared into the dimly lit shadows. There was someone seated in a corner. He must have been there all along. Her neck tingled, and she shivered in anticipation. Whoever was there, they were the ones making her feel...odd.

She was struck with the sudden desire to see who it was.

Not only because she was curious but also because it might be one of Vittorio's associates. She had always suspected he might follow her, and if she was going to run into one of his men, she'd rather do it in a public place like this.

Leah gripped the tray tighter and rolled her shoulders, straightening her back. She would not be intimidated.

But as she took a step toward the person in the shadows, she didn't feel intimidated. Quite the opposite, if she were being honest.

She swallowed hard. What if it was a spell? What if someone had cast a spell over her and she was being lured into the shadows?

Flint would let nothing happen to her. All she'd have to do was call out, and he'd come to her aid, no doubt causing a scene that would end her trial at hosting at the tavern.

Or maybe the kerfuffle would be good for business, and they'd draw a crowd of onlookers to whom she could sell the Brewer's Loaf to—the bread that started a brawl.

"Excuse me, sir. Would you like to try a piece of our brand-new Brewer's Loaf?" she asked, her voice warm and inviting

as she drew closer to the person seated at the table. “It pairs wonderfully with our selection of wines or if you want something lighter, a refreshing ginger beer. Might I recommend a red? Its rich notes bring out this unique bread’s hearty flavors.”

“I would.” The voice was instantly familiar, its deep tone edged by a hint of amusement.

“Ash?” Her cheeks flamed red as she realized he must have been seated here in the shadows, watching her all this time.

“The one and only,” he replied as he leaned forward, the light from a wall lamp casting his face in a warm glow.

“Sorry to have bothered you,” Leah said as she took a step away, her head filled with confusion.

Ash was the one she’d sensed. Ash was the one who had sent tingles down her spine.

“No bother,” Ash insisted as he half rose out of his seat. “I would like to try the Brewer’s Loaf. If you don’t mind.”

“Of course.” Leah held out the tray to him. She was well-practiced at keeping her cool in these situations. Many times in the last few months before her divorce, she’d had to play host to worse people than Ash.

Wow, that made her sound ungrateful. He’d been nothing but kind to her, but she sensed an underlying edge to him that reminded her too much of Vittorio.

Ash took a small square of the Brewer’s Loaf and sniffed it warily before placing it in his mouth. She watched as he chewed it thoughtfully, watching his lips, and thinking how much she’d like to kiss them.

No! No, no, no, no, no.

Ash stifled a cough as he fought through the first few bites, but then nodded in cautious agreement with the flavor.

“And what would you suggest I drink to complement the Brewer’s Loaf?” Ash asked, unaware of the turmoil he was causing her.

“You heard us talking at the bar,” she said, a little accusingly.

“I did,” Ash smiled. “So I assume you are going to recommend the Madeira.”

“That would depend,” Leah said.

“On?” Ash met her gaze.

“What is your usual drink?” Leah asked.

“Whisky.” He held up his empty glass. “Never been one for wine.”

Leah paused for a moment. “Then, in that case, I would suggest against the Madeira. I think you’d find it too sweet. An oaked wine, like a Chardonnay, or perhaps a certain Shiraz would be best for you. Unfortunately, we don’t stock those currently, but I could sell you some of our Brewer’s Loaves to go?”

“Impressive. You know what you are talking about.” Ash leaned back with a look of admiration, which coaxed a smile to her lips.

“I know a thing or two,” Leah said coyly.

“Well, please, tell me more.” Ash tilted his head back, slipping once more into the shadows.

Leah watched his face for a moment, but it was hard to see any expression on his chiseled features in the dim light. “Oaked wines are simply wines aged in oak, similar to how whisky is aged in wooden barrels. It lends itself to more premium wines, which might suit your taste.”

Ash chuckled at the comment before a thoughtful expression crossed his face. “When do you finish your shift?”

“Excuse me?” Leah exclaimed, a little taken aback.

“I might have a business proposition for you.”

“A business proposition?” Leah raised an eyebrow, quickly recovering her composure.

“Yes.” Was Ash toying with her?

“I finish when I have sold all these.” She glanced down at the tray in her hand.

“In that case, I’ll take two, and I’ll try a glass of Madeira,” Ash said.

“Thank you.” She backed away and headed to the bar.

“Everything all right, Leah?” Flint asked.

“Yes.” She nodded, aware of her flushed cheeks. “Ash is seated at the table over there. And he’s ordered a glass of Madeira and two pieces of Brewer’s Loaf.”

“Has he now?” Morwenna asked, sharing a glance with Flint.

“Yes.” Leah blew a strand of hair off her face and turned around, heading out into the main bar area. She was determined to shift the bread as soon as she could so she could hear Ash out on whatever proposition he had in mind.

Chapter Nine – Ash

“I’m impressed,” Morwenna told a delighted Leah as she returned to the bar with an empty tray.

“That’s a first,” Flint murmured as he returned to the bar with a tray of empty wine glasses. More than half of which had contained the Madeira wine that had sold out and had to be replaced by an extra two bottles.

All this Ash had seen and heard from his seat. He’d always enjoyed people-watching, sitting outside a coffee shop while watching the world go by. He’d always been interested in how people acted when they thought no one was looking, how their masks slipped when they weren’t paying attention. Such observations had helped greatly in dealing with stubborn competitors.

But watching his mate as she interacted with the customers inside The Lonely Tavern was something else. The way she smiled seemed to cast a charm over people with a simple quirk of her lips, a gentle laugh at their comments on the food as she told them her story of how the strange Brewer’s Loaf came to be.

Leah had a way of making each and every one of the people she spoke to feel special, feel as if they were an intrinsic part of what made The Lonely Tavern so unique that they belonged here. And in the process, only deserved to be one of the first to try Morwenna’s strange new dish.

Only, she is the unique thing here, Ash’s dragon said as he puffed out a plume of smoke that drifted away like a cloud on a summer’s day.

She is unique, Ash said. *And she is just what we need.*

Does she complement us in the same way the wine complemented the Brewer’s Loaf? his dragon asked dreamily.

She complements us in every way and on every level, Ash said, unable to take his eyes off her.

Because, as he'd watched Leah move about the tavern, he'd realized that fate might just have smiled down on him in a way he could never have imagined. When he'd come to Wishing Moon Bay to start again, he'd always seen himself alone.

But he wasn't alone anymore. He could conquer the world with Leah by his side.

Hold on, his dragon said, suddenly alert. Don't get carried away.

I'm not, Ash said. But I'd be a fool not to ask Leah to help me by hosting our mixer at the hotel. Look at her, she's just what I need. And after, she'll have people lining up to have her host events. She'll never find herself trying to sell funny-tasting bread again.

Ah, you are thinking three steps ahead, as usual, his dragon said with approval as they watched their mate at the bar.

"Does this mean I have a job?" Leah asked hopefully.

"Yes," Morwenna agreed. "Let's start with two hours a day, shall we?"

"Two hours a day?" Leah barely concealed her disappointment.

"You do have to get settled in that shiny new apartment of yours," Morwenna said as if she were doing Leah a favor by only giving her a couple of hours of work a day. "And then there's childcare."

"Childcare." Leah glanced at the watch on her wrist. "Speaking of, I should get going."

"Same time tomorrow?" Flint asked as Leah headed for the door.

"Yes," Leah said over her shoulder. "If I can."

As she hurried from the bar, Ash rose abruptly from his seat, knocking the table hard enough to rattle the empty glasses. Immediately, the dustpan and brush were at his feet, sliding back and forth across the floor as if getting ready to catch the glasses should they fall. Ash grabbed hold of the table, steadying it before he hurried after Leah.

The door stood open, letting in much-needed fresh air after the lunchtime rush. Ash had been surprised how busy the tavern was even as lunchtime slipped by.

Morwenna at least does not need our help in business, Ash's dragon said as their eyes adjusted to the bright sunlight.

There she is. Ash was more interested in his mate than the local tavern owner.

"Hi." Ash strode to Leah's side and fell into step with her, trying not to seem as if he were just running to catch up with her.

"Oh, hi." She smiled brightly and then her expression changed as she realized it was Ash. "Sorry, you wanted to talk to me."

"I did," Ash said. "I still do. If you have time."

"I have time if we walk and talk," Leah said. "The Regulars are looking after Tommy and Maria while I worked. I said I wouldn't be more than three hours."

"Sure. I am a master at walking and talking," Ash said.

"A master, huh?" Leah cracked a smile, and his stomach did little flips, which he hoped had nothing to do with the Brewer's Loaf he'd eaten.

More likely the two whiskies and the Madeira, his dragon suggested. *Or, of course, it could simply be the nearness of our mate.*

Huh, Ash said. *Why didn't I think of that?*

Was this what love felt like? Ash had no clue, he'd never experienced love before. Not romantic love. And since his sisters were all single, too, he had no actual experience of what a shifter felt when they met their mate.

"So?" Leah asked.

"So?" Ash repeated back to her.

"You had something you wanted to ask me. A business proposition?" Leah prompted.

“Oh, yes,” Ash confirmed as they took a right turn and headed toward the beach.

“Are you expecting me to guess what it is?” Leah cast a sideways glance at him.

“No.” Ash shook his head.

You’re handling this so well, his dragon said dryly.

“So?” Leah asked.

“Oh. Right.” Ash raked a hand through his hair and grinned sheepishly. “Okay. I have this thing...”

“A thing. Sounds painful,” Leah teased.

“No, not that kind of thing,” Ash assured her.

“Ah, so this is a process of elimination.” Leah came to a stop as they reached the beach front. “So, this is the famous Wishing Moon Bay beach.”

“Yes.” Ash sucked in a deep breath, filling his lungs with the fresh sea air. “It’s so much softer than Cairnnor.”

“Softer.” Leah turned to look at him, her eyes flickering down to his lips before she looked back at the ocean.

“Yes. Cairnnor is more craggy. Inhospitable. But Wishing Moon Bay is so...welcoming.” He gave a nervous laugh and ran his hand through his hair again. Why was he so nervous? He was never nervous. He’d stood and bore the full front of rage from powerful people who knew they were beat. He’d bested some of the most dangerous people in the lands. But since meeting Leah, his control of his emotions seemed to be slipping.

You are becoming softer, his dragon teased.

“Why did you leave Cairnnor?” Leah asked and then shook her head. “Sorry, that’s none of my business.”

She stepped away from him, hurrying toward the beach. Ash followed, ready to pour out his heart and soul to her.

But then his head took over. “I am organizing a workshop for local businesses. A sort of semi-professional mixer where

business owners can mingle, meet, and listen to a talk about seeking investments and growth. It's being held at a local hotel. And I want to invite you to help me host it."

Now you want to talk business, his dragon said. When you could have told her everything, admitted she was our mate and then we could have got on with living happily ever after.

We don't live in a fairy tale, Ash reminded his dragon. And if we did, don't you recall that in the fairy tales they read outside of Cairnnor, the dragon is always the bad guy?

Point taken, his dragon grumbled.

"You want me to help you host an event?" Leah stopped walking and turned to face him.

"Yes. I watched you in the tavern today. You have a skill. There's a certain way you set people at ease, get people comfortable and talking...subtly persuade them to try whatever it is that you are offering. Not to mention your knowledge of wines." He chuckled before turning his tone more serious. "You are just what I need."

In more ways than one, his dragon said.

"I'm flattered," Leah told him.

"Don't be," Ash answered, then winced. "I mean, I'm not inviting you to flatter you. I'm asking you because I believe us working together could benefit us both."

"I'm listening." Leah folded her arms across her body as she waited for him to continue.

"If we get this right, I hope to gain the respect of the businesspeople in town. As you know, I'm sure it's not easy to start over when you are an outsider," Ash said.

"I do." She nodded.

"And you could showcase your hosting skills to some of the more influential people in town. You can create contacts and network with other businesses. Particularly the hotel itself. They might offer you work. You could set up your own business," Ash suggested.

“Wow, you have given this some thought,” she replied, but Ash suspected he hadn’t sold her on the idea.

“I have.” Ash shrugged. “What do you say?”

“I say I will have to give it some thought.” She turned away from him. “But right now, I have to find my children.”

“They’re along the coast, not too far.” Ash pointed to his left.

“How do you know?” Leah asked. “Have you been keeping tabs on them, too?”

“I can sense them,” Ash told her. He didn’t admit why it was so important to know where Tommy and Maria were. He didn’t tell her that since they were part of her, they were part of him. That it was his duty to watch over them and protect them, in the same way he would watch over and protect her.

“Is that the fabled shifter senses at work? Now that is a handy trick.” She dropped her hands to her sides as she turned away from him and strode along the sand. “It sure would make keeping tabs on the children a whole lot easier. Tommy is at that age when he wants to start exploring on his own. I get so worried that he’s going to get lost, especially in a new town.”

“If that ever happens, and I doubt it will, since Tommy seems to be a smart kid, then you know where to find me.” Ash fell into step with her, his boots sinking into the sand as they walked.

“So, this event of yours,” Leah said as they walked. “You need to assure me it’s all above board. And seems that I’ll be pinning my name on it, any food will need to be of quality, and I’ll want to be serving the best wines we can get to go with it. Preferably locally sourced, since I don’t have the luxury of a magic cupboard that provides wine on demand.”

Ash laughed. “How did Morwenna do that?”

“She said it wasn’t her, but the tavern,” Leah said with a smile. “I’m not sure if I believe her... Anyway, I’d like to explore some of the local wineries. I read about them when I was researching Wishing Moon Bay. Apparently, it’s very fashionable here to infuse all sorts of things with magic.” She

looked toward the distant mountains. “I don’t suppose you have a car I could borrow.”

“I have never needed a car,” he said.

“Really?” Then her eyes widened. “You have wings.”

“My dragon has wings,” Ash corrected.

“And you can just fly wherever you want whenever you feel like it.” She shook her head as she blew the air out of her cheeks. “What freedom.”

“Want to try it?” Ash asked.

“What do you mean?” Leah turned around and walked backward as she waited for his reply.

“You want to visit the vineyards, which are on the higher slopes of the mountains.” Excitement threaded through his veins. He was making progress, more progress than he’d expected after their first meeting yesterday. “And I can take you there.”

“Fly? On your back?” she squeaked.

“Why not?” Ash asked as if it were an everyday occurrence, but his dragon had never carried anyone on his back. Ever.

The thought made him a little uneasy. What if he banked too suddenly and she fell?

I’d never let her fall, his dragon insisted.

“I can’t,” Leah said. “The children.”

“You don’t think they would like to go on an adventure on the back of a dragon?” Ash found himself saying.

“You’re serious?” she asked, as if he was crazy.

“I am,” Ash said. “Because I want you to succeed in this new life you have chosen, Leah. Oh, and if you think the wine will improve my chances at this event, then I’m all for it.”

She stared at him for the longest time as if she was trying to read his mind or look for an ulterior motive. As if she didn’t

believe anyone would help her without expecting something in return.

His heart fractured as suspicion crossed her face. But then her expression cleared, and she nodded. “All right then.”

Chapter Ten – Leah

What was she thinking? She'd agreed to ride on the back of Ash's dragon into the mountains. Worse, she'd agreed for her children to ride on his back, too!

However, she could not ignore the thrill of excitement that coursed through her. As for Tommy and Maria, they would be beside themselves. Seeing a dragon was one thing. Riding on the back of one another. She wouldn't have been able to go without them, if they found out they would be beyond livid.

"There they are." Ash pointed to a small group of people about two hundred feet away.

"There they are." Leah grinned, her earlier fears about riding on the back of a dragon momentarily forgotten as the sound of laughter drifted toward her on the breeze.

As they approached the small sandbar where Tommy and Maria were fishing with *The Regulars*, a flock of Halcyon Skydancers swooped low over the ocean waves, their iridescent wings shimmering like jewels in the sunlit sky.

Leah was transported back to their arrival on the Wind Raider and those first few hours in Wishing Moon Bay when they had nothing but each other and a few belongings.

Now, it was starting to feel like home. They'd made friends. She had a potential job at The Lonely Tavern, and even an offer to help Ash with his event at the local hotel.

But it was more than that. They were beginning to make memories. Memories that would last forever. She would certainly never forget her first taste of Brewer's Loaf, or the wine connoisseur who appeared from the cupboard behind the bar at the tavern.

And the first time her son caught a fish.

"Mom!" Tommy shouted excitedly, holding a doubled-over fishing rod in his hands with the help of Stan. "You're just in time!"

“Think we’ve got the biggest catch of the day here!” Harry laughed and stooped down to the water’s edge to net the hefty fish with shiny, rainbow-hued scales.

“Look at you!” Leah called out, her heart swelling with pride as Tommy knelt and ran a hand over the fish’s scales. She fumbled in her pocket for her phone. “Can I get a picture of you?”

“Sure,” Tommy replied, turning his attention back to the fish as Harry showed him how to unhook it without causing harm. “Quick, before we put it back in the ocean.”

“Aren’t you keeping it?” Ash asked in surprise. “I’m sure one of these guys could gut it for you, and you could have it for dinner.”

“No!” Maria declared firmly. “The fish go back into the ocean where they belong.”

Stan chuckled, adding, “It *is* where the fish belong.”

“And the skill is in the catching, not the eating,” Tommy said, echoing Stan’s sentiment.

“Indeed, that is some skill,” Stan agreed. “When’s the last time you caught a fish that big, Harry?”

“1980,” Harry replied dryly, rolling his eyes as Bert and Stan joined in laughter. He lifted the fish into Tommy’s arms, guiding him on how to hold it properly for the photo.

“Smile,” Leah instructed, snapping a picture of her son with his prized catch. Then, stepping back, she motioned for everyone to get closer, so they were all in the frame. “Everyone smile!” She tapped her phone screen several times as she captured the group’s beaming faces, forever preserving this moment of happiness. “Perfect.”

“There, now let’s put it back in the water.” Harry guided Tommy toward the ocean, and they paddled into the waves. “That’s it. Hold him steady for a moment until he gets his bearings and then gently let him go.”

“Look at him,” Tommy breathed in awe as the fish swam away, a glittering shimmer of color beneath the waves.

“Thank you so much,” Leah said as Harry and Tommy waded back to the shore. “It’s so kind of you to look after Tommy and Maria.”

“There’s nothing kind about it,” Stan said as he brushed the sand off his hands. “We have had the best time, haven’t we, lads?”

“We have.” Harry slipped his arm around Tommy’s shoulders and patted his back. “It’s a joy to pass on knowledge.”

“Thank you,” Tommy said, his hair ruffled by the wind. He looked so much younger than the boy who had sailed across the ocean. And yet at the same time, he looked older, wiser, more confident in himself.

“And Bert helped me collect shells.” Maria held out a handful of iridescent shells. “He said he’ll help me make a picture frame and then I can decorate it.”

“And I know what photo should go in it,” Ash said. He’d been standing back as if he didn’t belong there with them. “If you give me your phone, I’ll take a photo of the three of you.”

“Good idea!” Stan said. “A memory of your first proper day in Wishing Moon Bay.”

“Okay.” Leah handed her phone to Ash. “Thank you.”

“You are welcome,” he purred, his voice a low rumble in his chest.

As she turned toward the others, she noted a curious exchange of looks between The Regulars. But then Tommy and Maria were by her side, and she put her arms around them and smiled, while the weaves rushed across the shore and the Halcyon Skydancers chirped as they flew away.

“Here.” Ash handed her phone back to her. “Shall we go?”

“Go where?” Maria’s eyes were bright, and her cheeks glowed. She looked as happy and carefree as her brother.

“Ash is hosting an event at a local hotel, and he wants me to help him host it,” Leah explained. “I’d like to use local

wines, and Ash offered to take us to a vineyard I wanted to visit.”

“Boring,” Tommy said with a sigh. “I’ve seen plenty of vineyards back home. I don’t need to see another one.”

“Tommy,” Leah warned.

“I could stay here and fish,” Tommy suggested.

“Ah, we have to get going.” Harry began to dismantle the rods. “And you should mind your mom. She’s doing her best for you, and you have to support her.”

“Okay,” Tommy sighed, his shoulders slouched as he helped The Regulars pack up their fishing gear.

“Shall we walk back to the town?” Leah asked Ash.

“No.” Ash looked around. “We can take off from here.”

“Take off?” Maria asked.

“Yes.” Leah glanced at Tommy. “Didn’t I mention Ash has offered to fly us to the vineyard?”

“No, you did not!” Tommy’s mood took an instant upturn.

“Ah, your first ride on the back of a dragon,” Stan said. “Now that is something you will never forget.”

“Yeah...” Bert chuckled. “Do you remember that time we rode a dragon to Stesia?”

“How could I forget,” Stan said.

“You rode a dragon?” Tommy asked.

“We did, but that is a story for another day,” Stan replied. “You go on, we can manage here.”

“Are you sure?” Leah asked.

“You heard them,” Ash said. “They can manage, and we should get going.”

“We’ll stand here and watch if that’s okay,” Stan said as the three men paused, packing away the fishing gear, and sat down on their folding chairs as if they were about to watch a show.

“You have an audience,” Leah said lightly.

“So, I see.” Ash eyed the three older men before he stepped away from the group.

“Have you ever seen anyone shift before?” Maria slipped her hand into her mom’s and held her tight.

“Once,” Leah said. “We went to a party held by one of your father’s...friends. And for entertainment, he hired a dancing bear. Only the bear was a shifter. After the show, I saw him shift from a bear to a human. It was one of the most incredible things I’ve ever seen.”

“This is going to be more incredible, isn’t it?” Maria whispered. “Since Ash is a dragon.”

“It is.” Leah glanced down at her daughter. “You won’t be scared?”

“No,” Maria shook her head. “It’s not like Ash is one of those mean dragons from a fairy tale, is it?”

“I hope not,” Leah murmured, recalling Ash’s argument with the woman outside the apartment block yesterday.

Before she could think about it any further, the air around Ash shimmered, almost like the fish’s scales in the blue water. Then it began to pop and crackle, and for an instant Ash disappeared from view. In his place, a looming shadow appeared, shrouded in the energy that filled the air. Leah stood her ground, even as the voice in her head told her to take the children and run.

Then, in the blink of an eye, the dragon’s features grew more distinct, the black shape turned a beautiful shade of emerald green, each scale covering the dragon gleaming in the sun.

“It is magic,” Maria breathed.

“And we’re going to ride on his back?” Tommy came to stand next to his mom, pressing close to her for reassurance. Something that he hadn’t done since he was much younger, during one of the worst thunderstorms they had ever experienced.

“Any tips?” Leah asked The Regulars as the dragon stood before them in all its magnificent glory.

“Well, dragon-riding isn’t like anything you have ever experienced before,” Bert said. “The creature has a mind of its own. But he’ll not let you fall.”

“That’s no help,” Harry said. “The thing about riding a dragon is that those scales along its back are the best thing to hang onto. Grip with your thighs, but not too tight, or the scales might give you sores.”

“But the best tip I can give you,” Stan said, “is to enjoy it. There’s no greater thrill than dragon riding.”

“Come on, Mom,” Tommy pulled Leah forward. “Less talking. More dragon riding!”

Leah’s stomach lurched as they walked closer to the enormous dragon. “Maybe this isn’t such a good idea. I could rent a car...”

The dragon’s head slowly turned and looked down at her. Its large, serpentine eyes—green, cracked with copper—stared at her. Deeply and intensely. They were mesmerizing, but as she stared closer, she could see Ash staring back at her.

They were one and the same. Leah knew shifters were two halves of a whole, but she’d never fully understood it before.

“Can we touch him?” Maria hissed.

“Why don’t we ask him?” Leah replied.

“Can he understand us?” Tommy asked as he stepped closer to the dragon.

Before Leah could answer, the dragon lowered his head, his snout only inches away from Tommy. She held her breath as Tommy tentatively raised his hand and touched the dragon’s snout.

Maria, emboldened by Tommy’s actions, moved to stand by her brother’s side. Tommy glanced down at her and then nodded slightly. Maria pressed her lips together and sucked in a shuddering breath before reaching out and placing her hand on the dragon’s cheek.

Leah swore the dragon's mouth curled up into a smile. Then he sucked in a breath and puffed out a cloud of smoke over the top of their heads, which turned into a ring as it drifted away.

"Come on, Mom." Tommy beckoned to Leah.

"It's cool." Maria grinned as she half turned to look at Leah. "He's so warm!"

Leah stepped forward and held out her hand to the dragon. His eyes blinked slowly as she finally touched him. "You are amazing." She felt a gentle shock through her body as her skin touched the dragon's rough, warm scales.

The dragon's lips pulled back, showing huge teeth in a strange smile, and his body seemed to vibrate. Was he laughing or purring?

"Are you going to get on or stare at him all day?" Stan asked.

"How do we even get on his back?" Tommy moved to the side of the dragon and looked up.

In response, the dragon lowered his left forelimb toward the ground. Then he nudged them gently in encouragement.

"I think you have your answer," Bert said.

"Won't we hurt him?" Maria asked. "If we stand on his leg, won't that hurt?"

"He can take it," Harry laughed. "It'll take more than the three of you to hurt a dragon like Ash."

"If you say so." Leah joined Tommy by the side of the creature, who craned its thick neck to watch them. "Maria, you're the smallest, so I'll lift you onto his leg. Then Tommy can go next. Then I'll follow and we'll all climb up together."

Maria raised her arms and Leah lifted her daughter up. Maria placed her feet on the dragon's forelimb, wobbling a little as she gained her balance. Then Tommy attempted to scramble up. He wriggled and kicked his legs, but couldn't quite make it. Leah gave him a boost, expecting her son to

retort with a ‘I can do it on my own’ but instead, he said, “Thanks, Mom.”

Leah took one last look at The Regulars, who were watching with some amusement. “We’ll be experts at this in no time.”

“I have no doubt,” Bert answered with a chuckle.

Leah placed her hands on the dragon’s forelimb and bounced a couple of times on the balls of her feet before she jumped up. Tommy and Maria slipped their hands under her arms and helped her up.

“Now, that’s what I call teamwork!” Harry called out.

“All we have to do now is get up there.” Leah straightened her clothes and then turned to Maria. “Ready?”

Leah and her children worked together to mount Ash’s dragon. Once again, Maria went first, followed by Tommy. Leah held up her arms to catch anyone as they fell, but they didn’t find it too difficult to clamber up onto the dragon’s back, where they could hold on to his spines. Leah quickly followed behind, seating herself so she could hold on to her children.

It wasn’t particularly elegant, but they got the job done.

“Bon voyage!” Stan stood up and waved as if they were about to embark on a long journey.

“See you soon!” Maria said.

“Thanks for teaching me to fish!” Tommy called out.

Then the dragon crouched down, like a coiled spring, and leaped into the air.

The children squealed while Leah wrapped her arms around them tight and grabbed the horn in front of Maria.

The air filled with the sound of the dragon’s thundering wings as they propelled them skyward.

As the dragon rose higher, he tilted his wings and aimed for the mountains. Fear gripped Leah, fear for her children and herself.

But then a different feeling swept over her. As the dragon flew them toward the mountains and his movement smoothed out, she knew deep in her soul that they were safe, that the dragon would never let anything happen to them.

Relaxing a little, she let go of her fear and embraced the experience of the wind whistling past her face.

Chapter Eleven – Ash

Ash's dragon soared through the sky, his powerful wings beating hard against the air, propelling him forward with a fierce determination to impress Leah and her children. He wanted this to be an experience they would never forget.

The ocean glittered beneath him like a dazzling mosaic of blue and turquoise, mirroring the brilliant tones of the sun as it dipped toward the horizon.

Ahead of them, Ash caught sight of a flock of the Halcyon Skydancers that Maria seemed to have fallen in love with. Their brilliant plumage was dazzling as they flitted through the sky in a flock, looking for schools of fish in the bay to descend upon.

An idea crossed his mind, and with a surge of excitement, the dragon raced toward the flock. The wind whirled over his scales, sending shivers down their spine. As they neared the birds, the Skydancers chirped playfully at them, as if accepting his challenge. The small birds swooped down toward the ocean in a graceful dance that Ash's dragon eagerly followed.

He heard an excited squeal from his passengers as they dipped quickly toward the ocean before he fanned his wings out and caught them, turning sharply to join in with the dance of the birds. It wasn't just their cries of delight; it was as if their feelings were transmitted through his scales, as if they were all connected. As they were. Leah was a part of Ash, and the children were a part of her.

Ash's dragon suddenly broke away from the flock, banking sharply to the left. He surged forward, driven by a sense of wonder that filled him like never before. He had never imagined that having a mate could feel so incredible, so alive. He wanted to fly as fast and as high as he could—he was unstoppable!

Go steady, Ash warned his dragon, sensing the mounting concern of his mate as the dragon flew hard and fast. *You don't*

want this to be the first and last dragon ride they take on your back. You don't want to scare them.

Of course, the dragon replied, as he curbed his speed. *I want this to be their first of many dragon rides.*

With that, Ash's dragon tipped his wings, expertly catching a thermal as he climbed higher into the sky in a much smoother movement. The dragon set its sights toward the mountain, and let the thermals carry them, gliding toward the peaks. As they drew nearer, Ash spotted the vineyard nestled amongst the rolling hills, its rows of vines stretching out like veins across the landscape. It was strange seeing the vines in such an organic arrangement, instead of the neat and organized vineyards he had seen before.

Over there, Ash directed, pointing toward a grassy knoll on the edge of the vineyard, just beyond the stone wall that surrounded it.

His dragon dipped his wings in acknowledgment and began to descend, careful not to cause any damage to the tender plants below.

He wanted everything to go well since this was like a first date. Even if Leah didn't know it yet.

Ash's dragon tucked in his wings and landed on the knoll with practiced precision. Then the dragon bent his forelimb and his passengers scrambled off his back.

As they touched down gently on the soft grass, the children gathered around the dragon and patted him.

"You're a wonderful dragon," Maria said.

"That was awesome," Tommy added.

"Thank you for getting us here safely," Leah said as she stood in front of him and placed her hands on either side of his massive head.

You are welcome, his dragon said, wishing she could hear him.

Don't worry, I'll tell her, Ash said.

I'd rather you told her I love her. His dragon gently and reluctantly pulled his head away from Leah.

I'll save that until Leah knows we are mates, Ash said lightly. *I don't want to scare her off.*

How can love ever be scary? his dragon replied.

You'd be surprised, Ash told him.

Leah placed a kiss on his scales and then backed away, beckoning to the children. "Stand back. Ash needs to shift. I don't think the owners of the vineyard would appreciate a dragon stomping over their precious vines."

"Can't we just stay here with the dragon?" Maria asked hopefully.

"No, we came to the vineyard because I'm helping Ash with an event. An event that means a lot to him."

"Okay," Maria said and hugged the dragon as best she could before joining her mom.

"We're going to fly back to town, aren't we?" Tommy asked as he took a couple of steps back.

"Yes. So, the sooner we visit the vineyard, the sooner you get to ride on the dragon again," Leah said.

The air around the dragon shimmered and Tommy held out his hands, palms facing outward. "It tingles."

"Let me try." Maria left Leah's side and ran to join her brother.

Ash sensed she wanted to warn them to be careful, but she held the words back. Letting go a little, so her children could experience this new world around them. And there was a lot to experience.

The dragon faded away, and for a second there was nothing but empty space where he'd been standing. Then a shadowy figure appeared. The features soon filled in until Ash stood before them in his human form.

"How do you do that?" Tommy asked in awe.

Ash shrugged. "It's just a part of me. As natural as breathing. At least it is after the first time."

"What's it like the first time?" Maria asked as they climbed down from the knoll and headed toward the entrance to the vineyard.

"It's a tradition for all dragons to make their first shift by diving off the Borean Cliffs on Cairnnor," Ash replied.

"Your parents let you dive off a cliff?" Leah asked, horrified at the idea.

"They do." Ash turned to look at her, his eyes darkening. One day, he hoped to take their child to the edge of those cliffs and dive off with them, as was the tradition of his people since time immemorial. But he planned to keep that from his mate for now.

You're keeping a lot from our mate, his dragon told him.

For now, Ash replied.

"What's it like to fly?" Maria asked.

"It's like..." Ash thought for a moment. "It's like flying."

"That's not an answer," Maria retorted with a laugh.

"I can't explain it," Ash shrugged. "It's like being free."

"I'd love to be able to fly..." Maria said dreamily.

"Well, don't go jumping off any cliffs hoping you might shift into a dragon," Leah warned her daughter.

"I'm not stupid," Maria said. "You have to be born a shifter, don't you? That's what Stan told us."

"You do," Ash agreed. "My father was a dragon shifter, and I inherited the shifter gene from him."

"Your mother isn't a dragon shifter?" Leah asked.

"No, she comes from Panjara. She arrived on Cairnnor when she was in her twenties to do business with my father's family." He shrugged again. "And she never left."

"They fell in love?" Maria asked.

“Sort of,” Ash said.

“Sort of?” Maria asked.

“Are those orange grapes?” Ash pointed to the mosaic of bright colors beyond a large metal gate, cutting off the conversation. He led the others toward them, partly because they were so unusual and partly because he wanted to steer the conversation away from dragon shifters and their mates. Because that’s where it was heading.

Ash did not want Maria to ask him if he had found his true mate. Because he wasn’t ready to give a truthful answer.

They reached the gates of the winery, which stood open. Since they were so high in the mountains, it seemed reasonable to assume they would not get too many curious passersby simply popping in for a wander around the grapevines.

Still, Leah didn’t want to impose or interrupt the owners.

“Someone is coming,” Ash said as they paused at the gates.

“Do you think they keep watch?” Leah asked quietly as an older man wearing a beret walked toward them, taking the winding path through the vines. He had a tanned complexion that made his teeth seem ultra-white when he smiled.

“He’s a wolf shifter,” Ash said. “He doesn’t have to keep watch. He probably sensed our arrival before we even landed.”

“Ah, of course,” Leah said as she raised her hand and waved back.

“Or maybe he saw the giant dragon flying overhead,” Tommy said dryly.

“Hello there!” the man called out.

“Hi!” Leah waved as the man came to a stop on the other side of the gate. “We’re hosting a business event at the Wishing Moon Hotel, and we would like to feature some local wines. We’d be interested in learning about yours.”

“You must be interested to come all the way up here,” the man said. “Luckily for you, the Moon Spring Winery makes

the best wine this side of the protection spell.” He chuckled jovially. “Even if I do say so myself.”

“There’s nothing wrong with being proud of your product.” Leah stepped forward and held out her hand to him. “I’m Leah. These are my children, Tommy and Maria. And this is Ash.”

“Good to meet you all. I’m Horatio.” He flashed a wider grin.

“Good to meet you, Horatio,” Leah said. “This is a truly spectacular spot.”

“It’s not a bad spot to while away the years. I inherited the vineyard from my uncle, who taught me everything I know about growing the best grapes and making the finest wine. There is nothing quite like it, especially as these varieties grow in these alpine conditions.” He cracked a grin. “I sound like an advert for my own vineyard.”

“Perhaps we could discuss the details inside? And maybe even try some of your wines,” Leah said hopefully. “Though I’m sure they are just what we are looking for. After all, there is something to be said for tradition, and there’s nothing more traditional than a business that’s been handed down through the family.”

She really knows how to butter people up, Ash’s dragon remarked. Maybe we could even learn a thing or two from her.

I just wish we knew why she was so good at this. Ash tried to not watch Leah too much as she spoke.

“Of course.” Horatio half turned and swept his arm across the vista before them. “And I’d love you to taste some of my new wines. You’re right, there’s something to be said for tradition. But I like to add my own spin. Make my own traditions. You might have spotted my golden grapes. They’re a new variety I’ve been cultivating for a few years. And this year, I finally think I’ve cracked it.”

“Intriguing,” Leah said. “Perhaps this event could benefit us both. We’re more than happy to showcase any new product

you've got." Leah glanced at Ash and raised an eyebrow. "Wouldn't we?"

"Oh. Yes." Ash had slipped into a daze as he watched Leah interact with Horatio. She was a natural, setting people at ease and showing a genuine interest in Horatio and his wines. "You should come along to the event."

"Should I?" Horatio turned an inquiring eye on Ash. "And why is that? I am doing just fine."

"I can see." Ash nodded. "But there's always room to expand."

"Ah, there might be. But just because there is room, doesn't mean you have to fill that room. There's something to be said for keeping things simple."

"True, but many of the business owners and investors from the area will be there. You never know who you might meet." Ash pointed a finger. "It's not all about expansion. There might be someone who can help with efficiency. With the right investment..."

"You're right. But I prefer to invest my time in my vines and follow the seasons." Horatio politely cut him off. "It's one tradition my uncle taught me that I have clung to."

"There is something to be said for a simple life," Leah agreed. "So, this golden wine... It sounds intriguing."

"Oh, I can't wait for you to try it." Horatio walked away into the winding maze of colorful vines, waving for them to follow. "I don't get many visitors, so I would appreciate your opinion. It's one thing having sommeliers sample a wine, but completely another for the average wine drinker..."

Horatio talked all the way as they trailed behind him. Ash could feel himself becoming lost in amongst the head-high, green wall of tangled grapevines, but Horatio walked with a confident step. In fact, he barely watched where he was going as he talked about the differences between white and red.

Ash tuned him out as the small manor house in the center of the vineyard came into view. It wasn't a big building, but it

had clearly been built with a lot of care—both delicate and rugged.

Why is he so hesitant to even talk about the opportunity we're offering? Ash wondered. He's not even had potential customers sample his new product. With a little push, something unique like this could even expand beyond Wishing Moon Bay. Maybe even to Cairnnor and farther.

Dragons are partial to a deep red wine, his dragon agreed.

And Leah has a passion for wine, Ash mused. This is a project we could work on together. It would give us an excuse to keep working with Leah after the hotel event.

“There are other ways for you to improve your business,” Ash began, interrupting whatever Horatio was talking about. “Perhaps diversifying with workshops or tours. We could market not just the wine, but the whole experience. We could export to—”

“Is that why you are really here?” Horatio asked, his expression darkening.

“No,” Leah assured Horatio as she shot a stinging look at Ash. “We have just come to ask about supplying wines for this event. Unfortunately, Ash always has his business mind switched on when he sees a good opportunity, which your wines most definitely are. He cannot help himself.” Her eyes narrowed. “Can you?”

“No,” Ash replied. “I apologize. I just got a little ahead of myself.”

“In that case...” Horatio studied Ash for a long moment, as if trying to assess his sincerity. “Let’s go try some wines.” He smiled at Tommy and Maria, who were marveling at the rows of vines, oblivious to the grown-up conversation. “I have some grape juice for the children, too.”

With that, they headed around the side of the stone house to a group of small buildings, where the magic of turning grapes into wine must happen.

But Ash would rather turn wine into money.

Chapter Twelve – Leah

“Hey, this way!” Leah called out. She could hear the rustling and the giggling as Tommy and Maria chased each other through the rows of vines.

“Coming!” Maria called out as she and Tommy raced toward their mom. It was wonderful to see them in such high spirits. They’d enjoyed the dragon ride here immensely, thrilled at clinging on as Ash’s dragon swooped down toward the ocean and then climbed toward the sky.

They had really settled into their new home of Wishing Moon Bay, especially Tommy, who was no longer the reserved, cool, and distant child he had been so recently.

She had to admit she was thrilled by the dragon, too. But Ash’s human side? Not so much right now.

He’d been overbearing and forceful as he tried to persuade Horatio to expand his business. Not knowing when to stop when it was obvious Horatio was not interested. By his tone of voice, she felt he wouldn’t have let it go if she hadn’t interrupted.

Unfortunately, the whole episode had reminded her of Vittorio.

Just how forceful was Ash willing to be to get what he wanted?

Leah shot Ash a sideways glance from under her lashes as they walked toward the low stone building. He was quiet, deep in thought. Or brooding. Who could say? He was a hard man to read.

Damn it! Why did he confuse her so? And why did she feel this attraction to him? There were times when she was certain he felt it, too. Times when she caught him looking at her and that look was...smoking!

Leah chewed her bottom lip. Or perhaps she had gotten it wrong, and Ash was only interested in her because he wanted

her help with his business event.

Leah wasn't sure which would be worse.

Better to not to know. There was only so much she could deal with right now, and a dragon declaring his undying love for her was not one of them. Particularly when she'd been warned off him.

Maybe tomorrow at her shift in The Lonely Tavern she could tackle Flint about that very same comment he'd made the first time she met him.

"Here." Horatio opened a stout wooden door that led into a cool building filled with large casks lined along the length of one wall. On the other side of the building were various wine-making paraphernalia, and boxes filled with bottles. Some empty, some full.

All proudly displaying the name *Moon Spring Wines*.

"Moon Spring," Leah began. "Is the water used in the wine spring fed from the mountain?"

"Yes." Horatio beamed happily. "We use the same spring to irrigate the plants. We've also got an old water mill that I've had modernized to provide enough power for the whole operation."

"Wow," Tommy said. "Can we see?"

"Later, after we've tasted the wine," Horatio replied. "Here, let's get you young uns some grape juice."

Horatio crossed to a shelf that held stone bottles and took one down. "These bottles keep it cool." He grabbed a couple of glasses and handed one each to the children. "It's nice and refreshing. Not too sweet."

Horatio poured the grape juice into the glasses and nodded, encouraging them to take a sip. Maria raised her glass to her lips and tasted it first, while Tommy gave it a sniff.

"It's good!" Maria said and drank her glass, while her brother sipped it thoughtfully, letting the flavors settle on his tongue.

“Your boy is a natural at tasting,” Horatio said with a laugh. “Look at that ponderous expression.”

“He’s watched me enough times,” Leah laughed lightly. “But this is the first time he’s tried grape juice.”

“I like it,” Tommy said as he took a longer sip. “It’s sweet and tangy. Like...a sherbet.”

“Spoke like a connoisseur. Help yourselves to more if you want it.” Horatio set the bottle down on a nearby table. “I make the grape juice from the grapes that don’t pass my stringent quality tests.” Horatio glanced at Ash. “Now, that is something you could market if you wanted. I could up my production if you found a buyer. There’s always plenty of grapes left over from the winemaking.”

“Sure,” Ash said enthusiastically. “Maybe we could take a couple of bottles with us when we leave.”

“I’ll box some up for you,” Horatio offered, then he clapped his hands together, his eyes alight with excitement as he went to the racks filled with glass bottles and slid one out. With practiced hands, Horatio uncorked the bottle, the gentle pop of the cork followed by a pleasant scent. “This is my take on Merlot,” he began, his voice infused with a reverence. “It’s the heart of my vineyard. Crafted from grapes kissed by the mountain dew and nourished by the purest spring water that’s filtered through the very rock beneath your feet. The grapes aren’t as flashy as the golden ones you were looking at, but it’s a velvety, easy wine to drink.”

He handed Leah and Ash a glass each and then poured the wine with a steady hand, the rich, dark red liquid flowing into their glasses. “Notice the depth of color,” he invited, “a prelude to the complexity of the wine itself.”

Leah held the glass up to the light before she sniffed it, closing her eyes to better focus on the scent that rose from the glass. Notes of dark cherry and plum mingled with a hint of vanilla, a whisper of the oak barrels in which the wine had aged to perfection.

“Now, taste,” Horatio said, a hint of excitement in his voice.

Leah took a sip, the Merlot’s flavors unfolding on her tongue, a harmony of dark fruit, a touch of earthiness, balanced by a silky-smooth finish. The mountain spring water lent the wine a clarity, a purity that was unlike any she had tasted before.

“This is exceptional,” Leah murmured in a reverence matching the wine maker’s. “It’s smooth, deep, yet not so intense you’d struggle to finish it. It...feels like a painting. Of the mountain, I suppose. But it’s not refreshing like I’d imagine the air and water to be. It’s more earthy, like the rocks and the crags.”

Horatio’s eyes twinkled with pride. “That was the aim,” he confessed. “To create not just a wine, but an experience. A wine to transport people to the mountain as I know it.”

“It’s good,” Ash said, earning himself a shocked look from Horatio and a giggle from Leah.

“Good!” Horatio spluttered.

“Ash is a whisky drinker,” Leah explained quickly. “But don’t worry, by the time I have finished with him, he’ll learn to appreciate your wine. And this is an excellent wine.”

“It is,” Ash agreed quickly. “It’s excellent. The flavors burst on your tongue, but then they mellow and linger pleasantly.”

Leah chuckled, and then Horatio joined her until they both laughed so hard that Leah had to wipe the tears from her cheeks.

“That’s a funny one you’ve got there,” Horatio said when he could finally speak.

“I’m glad to be of entertainment,” Ash said dryly, but then he cracked a smile. “Maybe we should move on.”

“How about we try this golden wine?” Leah suggested, trying to hide her impatience. The wine intrigued her. She’s tasted every red and white wine under the sun, and some more unusual liquor, but never ‘golden wine.’

“Of course.” Horatio left them at the table and headed for the far end of the room with barely concealed excitement.

“Thoughts?” Leah asked Ash quietly.

“On the wine?” Ash swirled the last of the red liquid around the bottom of the glass before he finished it. “It’s nice, for a wine. One of the nicer ones I’ve tried. I find that wine can be a bit sharp to drink.”

“Says the whisky drinker.” Leah arched her eyebrow.

They turned to watch as Horatio opened a tall cupboard, a faint glow casting onto his face and carefully pulled out a bottle. The liquid within swirled and shimmered but began to slowly fade as he walked over.

“I have to keep them in the dark, otherwise they lose their shimmer.” Horatio placed the bottle on the table.

Leah and Ash leaned in to watch the rhythmic glow. The children ran to the table and peered over at the bottle.

“It looks like gold dust,” Tommy said.

“No, like fairy dust,” Maria breathed.

Horatio chuckled as he popped off the cork. “Maybe I should let you market this wine. It would appeal to dragons, I’m sure.”

“It would,” Ash said as he accepted a glass and stared into the swirling golden depths.

“Don’t fall in,” Leah said and gave him a gentle nudge.

The smile he turned on her took her breath away. In that moment, his earlier behavior was forgotten, as she basked in the radiance of his smile that was brighter and warmer than this magical, shining wine, leaving her feeling more precious than gold.

“Try it,” Horatio urged, his excitement barely contained.

As heat spread across Leah’s skin, she tore her gaze away from his and took a sip of the liquid. It was beautiful, extraordinary even. It was an elegant infusion of flavors, from

refreshing summer fruits to deep-bodied, dark, and luxurious chocolate, along with something else she couldn't define.

She let the wine sit on her tongue for just a moment, letting it whisper to her of treasures lost and found, of the feeling of flying, of a lazy summer's day.

"Astonishing," Ash whispered.

Horatio watched them, a satisfied nod affirming his success. "Golden grapes," he mused, "they hold the light of the sun and the essence of the earth. This wine is their story, told through each taste."

"If I took this back to Cairnnoir, you could name your price, and they would pay it," Ash said.

"Hmm," Horatio let his gaze fall onto the bottle. "My intention when cultivating the grape was never based on its monetary value. It's...something else. A pride in the craft, I suppose. Though I will say I have taken a bit of a risk turning production away from the established grape varieties to try to perfect these."

Leah swallowed down the lump of emotion that had formed in her throat. She had mastered the craft of influencing people subtly. Putting people at ease, choosing the correct decor for the atmosphere, and the right foods and drinks to suit their tastes. And just a touch of magic to make them feel comfortable and malleable.

When she'd left Vittorio, she had sworn she'd never use her gifts to invoke emotions in people ever again. But tasting Horatio's golden wine, and experiencing the sensation it invoked, gave her pause for thought.

"Could we take a bottle of the golden wine with us, too?" Ash asked.

Horatio shook his head. "I'm afraid not. I only have two bottles left. The rest is still aging. But as soon as it is ready, I'll hand deliver it to you."

"Thank you," Ash said humbly.

“Well, we should try more of the wine that you do have so we can place an order,” Leah suggested. “It’s getting late, and I need to get Tommy and Maria home and make dinner.”

“Of course.” Horatio put a stopper in the golden wine bottle. “Let’s try the Cabernet Sauvignon.”

Half an hour later, Ash and Leah had shaken hands with Horatio on an order for a decent number of assorted wine bottles, paid for on the spot by Ash. Now they were wandering through the neat rows of vines, plucking a grape here and there as they made their way back to the knoll.

“I thought that went well,” Ash said with a longing glance back at the stone outbuilding where they had left Horatio. But Leah sensed it was not Horatio that held Ash’s attention but the golden wine.

“Careful!” Leah caught hold of Ash, but too late. Not watching where he was going, he’d stepped onto a row of new vines, and stepped straight onto a young shoot. Luckily, not one of the golden grapes. Even so, she hated to see the poor thing, so young and fragile, lay flattened against the earth, its leaves crumpled, and its vitality seemingly crushed.

“Oops.” Ash’s face fell as he stepped back, looking down at the damage he had inadvertently caused.

Leah hunkered down beside the damaged vine and closed her eyes. She reached out and touched the vine with her finger, but also on another level. She closed her eyes, feeling herself tapping into the energy or the spirit of the delicate little vine. She had held an empathy for all living things—a gift that was strongest with plants, a legacy from her grandmother, the herbalist. She whispered softly, words of healing and growth, her voice barely audible over the gentle rustle of the vineyard.

As Leah’s gentle magic flowed from her hands, a visible change took over the vine. The crumpled leaves unfurled, reaching back up toward the warmth of the sunlight. The stem, bent and broken, straightened and strengthened before their

very eyes. And then, almost in gratitude, the vine grew, adding a few inches as if to celebrate its revival.

Ash stood in awe. "I had no idea you could do that."

Leah turned to Ash with a surprised smile. "Neither did I. I mean, I've always had an affinity with plants, and I can sometimes sense what people feel, but nothing like this...."

"Is it time to fly?" Tommy asked as he and Maria ran along the straight row of vines to join them.

"It is." Leah touched the leaves of the vine one last time before she glanced at Ash.

A small smile played across his lips. "Last one to the knoll is a smelly sock."

Tommy and Maria screeched as they dodged around him and ran toward the vineyard exit, neither of them wanting to be a smelly sock.

"How old are you?" Leah asked.

"Forty... Oh." He chuckled. "You mean because I was childish."

"I mean, because you are childish," Leah agreed. "But it's good. I love seeing them so happy and carefree."

"They weren't like this before?" Ash asked.

"No, their dad was very serious. Fun was frowned upon." Leah pressed her lips together. She didn't want thoughts of Vittorio to invade her thoughts and spoil the mood.

"He sounds like my father," Ash said. "All he ever thinks about is business."

Leah nodded. "Vittorio is the same."

"Come on!" Tommy called out as he and Maria stood on the knoll, waiting. "Run."

"Run. Run. Run," Maria and Tommy chanted.

"Come on." Ash caught hold of her hand and they ran side by side toward the knoll, leaving the vineyard behind them.

Once they were clear of the gate, Ash let go of her hand and held back, letting her get ahead of him. As she turned to look at him, her face flushed with happiness, Tommy and Maria chanted, “Smelly sock! Smelly sock!”

“You’ve got me.” Ash held up his hands in mock defense.

“You let me win.” Leah prodded him on the shoulder playfully.

“I had something in my shoe,” Ash said lamely.

“Of course you did.” She laughed as she put her arms around her children. “I guess since you lost, you’d better fly us home.”

“My pleasure.” With that, he stepped away and the air around him shimmered before he faded away and the dragon appeared in his place.

Standing on the higher ground made clambering onto his foreleg easier, and the climb onto his back was easier and less nerve-wracking this time around. A couple more attempts and they would be experts at working together to mount Ash’s dragon. This was a family team-building game like no other.

Just as Ash was a man like no other.

The dragon took off, and swooped down, gliding over the lower slopes, heading directly for Wishing Moon Bay. The thrill of riding on his back was just as intense as the first time, but this time Leah was more relaxed. Trusting in Ash. Trusting in his dragon.

They landed on a quiet part of the beachfront, startling a flock of seagulls who were eating a dropped sandwich off the ground. After quickly dismounting, they stood back while Ash shifted.

“I still wish I could do that,” Maria said.

“It would be a great superpower,” Leah admitted.

“It would,” Tommy agreed.

“So what now?” Leah asked Ash as they began walking back toward the apartment along the seafront.

“What now?” Ash asked, sounding flustered, stopping as they stepped onto the paved street.

“Yes. We have the wine. Are we going to go and look at the hotel venue?”

“Oh, the venue.” Ash nodded. “I’ll go over there later today and have a chat with them. See if I can set a date. Then we’ll have to get flyers made.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Leah said.

“I’ve enjoyed today.” Ash stared straight ahead as he spoke.

“Me, too,” Leah said quietly as she watched Tommy and Maria as they held a lamppost and went around and around until they were dizzy. “Thanks for taking us.”

“My pleasure.”

They walked in comfortable silence back up the hill. It wasn’t long before they reached the apartment building, and they were following Ash down the stairs toward the apartments.

Had she only lived here for a day?

It felt like home already.

“Coming through!” Tommy and Maria dodged past, laughing as they ran.

“I wish I had their energy,” Leah said. “I’m about ready to pour myself a nice glass of wine and sit on the balcony and watch the sun go down.”

“Sounds perfect.” Ash stopped outside his door and turned to face her.

Speaking of perfect. She licked her lips as her eyes caressed his face, lingering on his lips.

He drifted back toward her.

“I’ll talk to you soon.” She tilted her chin, and he lowered his head toward hers, their lips no more than an inch apart.

Her breath caught in her throat. She’d never wanted to be kissed so much in her life.

“Mom! Have you got the key?” Maria yelled, shattering the moment.

Ash stepped back nervously and placed his hand on his door, and he grunted in surprise as it swung open. Just inside the door stood a stunning woman with raven black hair, her arms folded across an expensive-looking suit dress, tapping her arm impatiently.

“Hello, Ashley. I was beginning to wonder if you were ever coming home.”

“I should go.” Leah ducked her head and without a backward glance, hurriedly opened the door and stepped inside.

Why hadn't she heeded Flint's warning? There was a reason he'd told her not to date the dragon next door.

Because the dragon already had a girlfriend. Or two. Or maybe more.

Chapter Thirteen – Ash

“You look surprised to see me, brother,” Ariel said as Ash entered his apartment. “Dragon senses failing you?” She arched a questioning eyebrow at him. “Leaving your home and your family has dulled your edge.”

“Have I left?” Ash looked at her. “I see more of my sisters since I left Cairnnor than I did—”

“Okay, don’t get smart with me,” Ariel said tartly.

“No one is as smart as you.” Ash closed the door behind him, his senses still locked on his mate as she entered her apartment. It was a constant distraction, he had to admit, but he was certainly not going to complain.

“That’s true,” Ariel said. “Which is why I’m here.”

“You’re here because you are smart?” Ash stepped past Ariel and headed for the kitchen to put the kettle on to boil and got out the tea infuser. He needed to distract himself from the need to chase after his mate, pull her into his arms and kiss her senseless.

“Yes.” Ariel crossed the apartment to the kitchen and leaned back on the counter as she watched him get two mugs from the cupboard. “I’m here because I’m smart enough to know that we need you. Well, smart enough to admit it, actually. We all have our role to play, and yours is to secure this Spire deal we’re working on.”

“Not anymore.” Ash selected fruit tea from his cupboard. “Tea?”

Ariel eyed the brown stain on the kitchen wall at her eye level. “Sure.”

Ash nodded and filled the loose-leaf infusers. “And if you were that smart, you would know that you’re wasting your time here.”

“It’s never a waste of time spending time with my little brother,” Ariel replied.

Ash grinned at Ariel, reached for a cookie jar from the counter, and offered her one. “Maybe instead of smart, you were always the sweet one?”

Ariel snorted. “You know I am not the sweet one of the family and never will be.” She reached into the cookie jar and took two cookies. “Thanks.”

“You are welcome.” Ash took a cookie and bit into it.

So why is she here? Ash’s dragon asked.

I’m sure she’ll tell us soon. Patience is not one of Ariel’s strong points, Ash answered.

“How goes your grand scheme?” Ariel asked as she nibbled her cookie.

“My grand scheme?” Ash asked, pouring the hot water onto the tea. “I’m not sure it’s that grand and I wouldn’t call it a scheme.”

“You know, to conquer the realm of Wishing Moon Bay,” Ariel matter-of-factly waved her cookie. “We all know that’s what you are here to do.”

“Conquer Wishing Moon Bay?” Ash scoffed.

“Yes, one business at a time,” Ariel replied. “So you can prove yourself to your family and, well, yourself. Step out of the shadows cast by your sisters.”

Ash chuckled. “And there I was thinking you were the smart one of the family.”

“Are you telling me that’s not what this little vacation is all about?” Ariel asked with a frown.

“Vacation?” Ash shook his head as he handed her the tea. “This is not a vacation. This is my new life.”

“Of course, it is,” Ariel drawled as she sipped her tea, while not taking her eyes off her brother.

“It is,” Ash insisted, his temper starting to boil. “Is that what you all think? That this is what? A phase?”

“No.” Her brow wrinkled as she shook her head. “I know you better than that, Ash. Maybe better than you know yourself.”

“So, tell me, oracle, what is this?” He swept his arm around the room.

“This is a pokey apartment,” Ariel wrinkled her nose as she looked around his home.

“Stop playing games.” Ash gripped his coffee cup so tightly that he thought it might explode into a million pieces. If he kept getting sisterly visits like this, he was going to need some more teacups. “I’m a little old to suddenly decide that I need to prove myself by conquering a town.”

“I would call it a midlife crisis,” Ariel went on.

“A midlife crisis?” Ash had heard it all now.

“Yes. A midlife crisis. Coupled with a sudden desire to leave your mark on this world. Why else would you want to *help* business owners?” Ariel asked. “It’s a classic ingratiating situation. Although on a fairly large scale, which I’ll admit is quite impressive. You’re going to charm them and help them, making them even more compliant for when the time comes for a change of leadership.” Ariel looked more than satisfied with herself at figuring him out.

“I want to help them because I don’t like what we do. We take and take and then tear it all down,” Ash retorted as he fought to control his temper. “I tried to explain that I wanted to try another way, but you are all so stuck in the past that you won’t even discuss the idea.”

“It’s the way our family has done business for generations,” Ariel reminded him. “It’s worked so far, and will continue to do so.”

“That doesn’t mean we have to keep doing things the same way,” Ash replied. He drained his cup and set it down in the sink, out of harm’s way. “Anyway, it’s been nice chatting with you, Ariel. But I have things to do and places to be.”

“I’ll tag along.” Ariel pushed herself away from the counter and tipped her half-drunk cup of tea into the sink.

Ash knew better than to argue with his sister. The more he insisted she didn’t come, the more she would insist that she did. More than likely, she’d get a phone call from their father halfway there and she would shift and fly back to Cairnnoir to take care of some important errand.

We can but hope, his dragon said dryly.

“Suit yourself,” Ash answered as he headed for the door.

“I always do,” Ariel answered and received a short laugh from Ash in reply. “Was that funny? What does that mean?”

“It means that you like to *think* that you do what you want, but you are stuck in the old ways, which means they hold you captive.” Ash opened the front door and waited for Ariel to leave his apartment before he closed it securely.

“I am not a captive,” Ariel retorted sharply.

“Really?” Ash arched a questioning eyebrow at his sister.

“Really,” she replied tartly.

“You believe you are capable of change?”

“If I *wanted* to change, I *would* change,” Ariel insisted as they reached the stairs. “But I don’t want to. So don’t try to use some kind of psychological mumbo jumbo on me, because it won’t work. I know all your tricks.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t dare,” Ash replied sarcastically. “You are much too smart for me.”

Ariel blew the air out of her cheeks. “Are you trying to make me storm off and leave you to go to this appointment of yours on your own?”

“Who said it was an appointment?” Ash asked. “For all you know, I might be going for a walk.”

“Great.” Ariel smiled quickly. “There’s nothing like a walk to invigorate the soul.”

Ash chuckled. “I do miss you.”

“Do you?” Ariel stopped walking as they reached the street.

“Of course I do.” Ash gave her a half smile. “I never left because of you or anyone else. I left because of me. This is something that I have to do. And maybe I am trying to prove myself. To me. To you... Who knows? But all I know is that this is important to me, and I’d appreciate your respect. But I am *not* trying to ‘conquer the realm.’”

Good speech, his dragon said lazily.

Ariel tilted her head to one side. “I guess we should leave you to follow your heart. To try to do things your way.”

“Does that mean no more surprise visits?” Ash asked.

“No,” Ariel snorted.

“Good.” Ash stepped closer to her and wrapped his arms around her, hugging her tightly.

“Okay.” Ariel froze and then patted him lightly on the back. “I think we’re done here.”

“Are you sure?” Ash held on even tighter. “Because we could go down to the beach, maybe get ice cream, or a hot chocolate with whipped cream and marshmallows. I could even braid your hair.”

“Nope.” Ariel stuck her arms straight up and ducked, sliding out of his arms. “I should get going.” She straightened her dress.

“Well, it’s been good seeing you,” Ash told her.

“Hmm.” Ariel stared at him for a long moment. “There is something different about you, brother.”

“Maybe I am becoming who I was always meant to be,” Ash replied.

“I believe you have always been who you were meant to be,” Ariel said before stepping back toward the cliff edge and then fell backward. Moments later, a green-hued dragon rose into the sky, the draft from the downbeat of her wings nearly knocking him from his feet.

Ariel always did like to make a dramatic exit, his dragon said.

Or entrance. Ash chuckled as he watched her bank right and head back to Cairnnor. *She knows something's up, though.*

I highly doubt she'll jump to the conclusion of us having found our mate, his dragon rumbled. *Yet.*

Turning away from the sight of the dragon, Ash hurried on. The sooner he got to the hotel and organized an appointment to go and discuss his plans for the workshop event, the sooner he could get back and bask in the nearness of his mate.

As he walked through town, he studied the stores he passed, mentally coming up with ideas for how he would advise them if they were his clients. He found this a great way of brainstorming new ideas. It was as if his subconscious took over and began to connect the dots for him.

But as he neared the hotel, he turned his full focus on how he was going to approach this meeting. It was always good to give a good first impression. However, he was also aware that he shouldn't come over as too pushy. He'd learned that lesson from their trip to the vineyard.

You did see the look Leah gave us, didn't you? his dragon asked.

Yeah, how could I not? Ash berated himself for getting too carried away, but he had to put himself out there. He had to take risks if this was going to work out. He just had to tone it down to fit the small-town feel.

If you are going to prove yourself to your family, his dragon chortled.

Don't you start, Ash replied with a roll of his eyes.

Don't worry, I know exactly why you are doing this, his dragon said. *It's time we built something instead of tearing things apart.*

And if we hadn't made that decision and come to Wishing Moon Bay, we would not have met our mate, Ash said. *So, I have to believe it is the right decision.*

Agreed, his dragon said. Even if our path ends at a different destination.

What does that mean? Ash asked as the hotel came into view.

It means that we should keep an open mind, his dragon replied. *See where the road takes us.*

Well, the road has brought us here. Ash crossed the small parking lot in front of the hotel and headed for the door.

“Hello, welcome to the Wishing Moon Hotel,” a man said from behind the reception desk.

“Hello.” Ash smiled and studied the man for a moment.

He’s not a shifter, Ash’s dragon said.

No, he’s not. So maybe he’s a witch. Ash stepped closer to the desk.

“My name is Jeremy. How can I help you?” Jeremy asked. “I have several rooms free if you have not made a booking.”

“I’m actually here to speak to the owner or the manager,” Ash replied. “I met Penny and Helena at a...”

“Oh, you’re the *dragon* shifter,” Jeremy said in a slightly condescending manner.

“I am *a* dragon shifter,” Ash tried to keep his tone light. “But I’m not sure if you would call me *the* dragon shifter. There are plenty of us.”

“I meant, you are the dragon shifter from Cairnnor who has come to Wishing Moon Bay to steal our business,” Jeremy said in his excessively polite tone.

“That’s not why I am here,” Ash replied in an equally polite tone.

“That’s the rumor I heard,” Jeremy said.

“Well, you should know that not every rumor you hear is true,” Ash replied with an easy smile.

“Well, I can tell you now, this hotel does not need your help,” Jeremy said. “It’s been run by the same family for

years. Valerie Kelts knows the business inside and out and her son, Logan, has taken over most of the day-to-day running...”

Jeremy stopped talking as Ash turned around. He could sense another dragon. And a wolf.

“Hey there.” A man with blonde hair and a friendly smile entered the reception area, followed by a dark-haired man in chef’s whites. “I’m Logan, the manager. Helena told me to expect you.”

“And I am Ivan,” the dark-haired man said.

“Good to meet you both.” As Ash shook hands with Logan and then Ivan, he could taste the faint metallic tang of a dragon shifter.

“Penny and Helena explained you want to hold an event at the hotel. A business mixer type of thing, right?” Logan said.

“I do. Well, it was Penny and Helena’s idea. They seem to think I need to win over the people of Wishing Moon Bay.” He glanced at Jeremy, who was busy looking busy as he listened to the conversation. “And I think they might be right.”

“Dragons do have a bad name in this town,” Ivan said. “But once people see you are genuine, they don’t hold it against you.”

“You work here?” Ash asked.

“I’m Valerie’s son,” Ivan said. “I run the kitchen.”

“Oh, I didn’t know.” Ash looked at Logan. “I thought Logan was Valerie’s son.”

“I am,” Logan cracked a grin. “Valerie has six *adopted* sons.”

“Ah,” Ash nodded as if that explained everything when instead it posed plenty of questions.

“Anyway, I’d love to talk to you about this event of ours. Penny and Helena are excited about the prospect of working with you.”

“I don’t know why, since they are doing so well on their own,” Jeremy muttered.

“I firmly believe there is always something to learn if we have an open mind,” Ash replied.

“I agree,” Ivan said.

“Valerie is also interested in meeting you,” Logan side-eyed his brother. “She has a soft spot for dragons.”

“Well, that is good to hear,” Ash said. “And I would love to meet her. It takes a certain kind of a person to adopt six children.”

“She is an extraordinary woman,” Logan said, his voice thick with emotion. Then he coughed. “She’ll be here tomorrow. Why not come back then and meet her?”

“Ah, the morning,” Ash replied. “I wanted my...partner to come along and she isn’t free until the afternoon. Does that work for you?”

Partner? his dragon scoffed.

Logan raised an eyebrow as he studied Ash, then his expression softened and he said, “I’m sure that will work just fine.” He glanced past Ash. “Jeremy, can you put that in the diary, please?”

“Certainly,” Jeremy said and flipped open an appointment book, and scribbled in it loudly.

“Tomorrow afternoon it is, about 2:30 pm?” Logan asked.

“Great.” Ash edged toward the door. “I look forward to it.”

Ash left the hotel and hurried back home. It had only been a quick outing, but he’d accomplished what he needed, and now he needed to be somewhere else. Except that he didn’t reach his apartment. He found himself at the door next to it. He needed to share the news with his mate.

Raising his hand, he knocked lightly and then stood back as he sensed Leah coming to the door. She hesitated before she opened it, and he wondered if she was afraid of who might be on the other side. He needed to find out more about her past and her ex-husband to make sure that she was safe.

“Ash.” She didn’t exactly look pleased to see him, which burst the bubble of his good mood.

But he refused to be deflated. They’d had a great afternoon at the winery and when he left her, she’d seemed in a good mood. She was probably tired after all she’d been through over the last few days.

Or she’s worried about who is going to look after Tommy and Maria while she’s at work, his dragon reminded him.

“Hi, Leah.” He’d hoped to be invited in so he could prolong his stay, but Leah’s body language told him there was no chance of that. “I’ve been over to the hotel. I made an appointment for us to go and meet with them tomorrow afternoon.”

“Great.” Her mouth turned up at the corners, but it was only a hint of a smile.

“I also wondered if you were in need of childcare tomorrow, while you work your shift at the tavern,” Ash said. “I’ve got a pretty clear schedule.”

“Oh.” Her expression brightened. “Would you? I mean, if it’s not too much trouble. I don’t want to inconvenience you.”

“No inconvenience at all,” Ash insisted. “It’ll be fun.”

Wouldn’t it? He wasn’t great with kids, but how hard could it be?

“You would be a lifesaver,” Leah said before her jaw clenched, and he felt as if she were shutting him out once more.

“I’ll see you in the morning, then,” Ash said.

“Thanks, Ash.” Leah smiled at him and edged the door closed an inch.

“Well. Have a good evening.”

“You, too.” Leah closed the door on him, leaving him in no doubt he would not have a good evening.

How could he when he had no idea why his mate seemed so distant?

This afternoon he'd felt as if they had taken a step forward. But now it was like they had taken two back.

Would he ever be able to convince her to date the dragon next door?

Chapter Fourteen – Leah

“Stop worrying, Mom, we’ll be fine,” Maria assured her mom as Leah clasped her hands together nervously, staring at the door.

Ash would be here any moment, and Leah was having second thoughts. Not that she didn’t trust him with her children. She got the feeling he would lay down his life for them if he had to. She brushed her hand through her hair. Maybe that’s what she found so attractive about Ash. He reminded her of Vittorio in many ways. There was an undercurrent of danger to him, a sense of power held in check, just like her ex-husband.

But with Ash, it was different. Where Vittorio’s aura spoke of a life in the shadows, Ash’s presence was more primal, more elemental. It was as if he was part of something ancient, a force of nature that was both thrilling and terrifying. There was an easiness to him—he didn’t have to try to project power or show it off, it was just natural to him. Leah sensed that this protective instinct was part of his very being, something inherent and unchangeable.

He was possessive, yes, but it was a possessiveness born of a desire to protect, not to control.

And that was down to his shifter nature. It’s what set him apart from Vittorio.

So why was she uneasy about allowing Ash to take care of the children? Because she didn’t want to be in his debt. She didn’t want to *owe* him.

Because if she owed him, their relationship would be out of balance. And it was important to Leah that they were equals.

Leah pressed her lips together. She already did owe him. He’d let them have this apartment for a low rent. She’d suspected his reason was simply because they were mates.

Even though he'd never admitted it. She'd seen the way he looked at her when he thought she wasn't looking, the way her skin tingled when they touched. The way he made her heart race...

When they were at the vineyard, she'd been so certain.

But seeing another woman in his apartment had made it clear. Ash was a womanizer. He used his animal magnetism to attract women and cast a spell over them.

That's why she'd been warned not to date the dragon next door.

The knock on the door made her jump. Ash was here. She needed to go to work. The children would be safe with him.

The rest didn't matter. She'd figure it out somehow.

"Is that Ash?" Tommy appeared in the living room, dressed, hair brushed, and alert. Just about the opposite of how he started most mornings.

"I don't think we're expecting anyone else," Leah said as she headed for the door. But before she reached out and opened it, she hesitated. What if one of Vittorio's associates was on the other side of the door? She was surprised that there had been no reprisals so far.

"Mom?" Maria's hand threaded into hers. "Shall I open it?"

"I've got it." Leah smiled down at her daughter and opened the door. When she saw the tall, dark, and handsome Ash, she let out a long breath of release.

Which did not go unnoticed by the dragon shifter.

"Am I late?" Ash cocked a questioning eyebrow at her.

"No." Leah forced a smile. "You are right on time. Come in." She stepped to the side and held the door open for him.

"Wow, this place looks great." Ash stood in the middle of the room and looked around at the photos of the children at various ages. And the soft furnishings she'd bartered for at the local thrift shop.

“Thanks.” Leah glanced at Ash and then looked away. She had to be strong. She had to make it clear she would not be pulled under his spell.

Leah was a one-man woman, and she expected her man to be a one-woman man.

“We can take it from here, Mom.” Tommy handed Leah her purse. “You don’t want to be late for work.”

“Don’t I even get a hug?” Leah asked. Her cheeks flamed red as her eyes locked with Ash’s for a moment and read the desire there.

“I love you, Mom.” Maria flung her arms around Leah.

“Love you,” Tommy mumbled.

“I love you both.” She reached for Tommy, and he reluctantly gave her a quick hug.

Then she dropped a kiss on each of their heads and let them go. “Thanks, Ash. I do appreciate your help.”

“Any time,” Ash replied, his expression unreadable as she turned and headed for the door.

“Be good,” she said before she left the apartment and took a deep, steadying breath.

What was it about that dragon shifter that intrigued her? No, more than intrigued her. He was a mystery she had to unravel. As if her life depended on it.

No time to think of that now. She needed to get to The Lonely Tavern and start her shift. If yesterday was anything to go by, she was sure Morwenna would have some new trial to test her.

Leah grinned to herself. She liked Morwenna. And Flint. They were a curious combination. But they complemented each other.

Just like she and Ash would complement each other given the chance.

Why did the man constantly keep creeping into her thoughts?

When Leah arrived at The Lonely Tavern, the door swung open, and she stepped inside. Her eyes instantly went to the host table.

‘The answer is in the questioner.’

What the dickens! That didn’t even make sense.

“Leah.” Morwenna seemed to appear from nowhere.

“Good morning, Morwenna.” Leah kept her composure and smiled warmly.

“I like that.” Morwenna pointed at Leah’s face. “Always a smile, no matter what.”

Leah hoped Morwenna wasn’t challenging herself to try to wipe the smile from Leah’s face.

“A smile goes a long way,” Leah said.

“Unfortunately, my patience doesn’t,” Morwenna replied, and her eyes narrowed as she looked up at the rafters. “It turns out that it isn’t just our paying customers who have taken a liking to the Brewer’s Loaf. The imps seem to have taken quite a liking to it as well. Sneaky little upstarts came down last night and ate a whole batch of the stuff.”

“Pity,” Leah glanced upward, blinked as a small trail of crumbs fell from above.

“It is.” Morwenna scowled at the shadows above them. “But not to worry, there’s plenty for you to sell today. In fact, I made triple the amount.”

“Triple?” Leah asked.

“Well, double and a half after the imps helped themselves,” Morwenna said.

“Double and a half.” Leah glanced around the empty tavern.

“Yes. Word would have gotten around after the success of yesterday. So I thought...go *big* or go *home*.” Morwenna leaned forward, her dress jingling as her eyes bored into Leah. “Do you want to go home, Leah?”

“No, Morwenna. Do you?” Leah arched a questioning eyebrow at the gray-haired witch.

Morwenna cackled. “I like you, Leah. You’ve got bite! Just wish I could figure out where those little troublemakers keep coming from.” With one last look at the rafters and a muttered a curse under her breath, Morwenna turned and crossed the tavern to the bar.

Leah was about to follow her when the tavern door opened and a woman with dark brown hair streaked with silver strands walked in. A sinking feeling came over Leah as she spotted the expensive-looking jewelry and designer jacket.

It couldn’t be, surely.

“Hello, welcome to The Lonely Tavern.” Leah greeted her with a smile.

“Oh, hello.” The woman scanned the room as if she was looking for someone.

“Can I help you?” Leah asked.

“I wondered if Ash was here,” the woman asked.

“No, he’s not, I’m afraid.” Leah kept the smile fixed on her face.

“I was told he drinks here. Often.” The woman turned her penetrating gaze on Leah.

“He does,” Leah answered. Maybe this was her chance to learn a little more about her neighbor. “He might come by later.” She winced internally at her white lie. It wasn’t as if Ash wouldn’t come by later for a drink. Leah simply didn’t admit that it might be *much* later. “Why don’t I get you a drink while you are waiting for him?” Leah offered. “Whisky?” She arched a questioning eyebrow. “Or tea?”

“Tea,” she snorted. “Do I look like a tea drinker?”

“Whisky then?” Leah asked. “Or perhaps a glass of Madeira and some Brewer’s Loaf? It’s the new and exclusive house specialty.”

“I thought this house’s specialty was the rustic decor,” she replied as she looked around with some distaste.

“You have a point, but the regulars like it.” She held out her hand. “I’m Leah, by the way.”

“Orla.” Orla briefly shook Leah’s hand with the same look of distaste. Then she leaned forward and sniffed Leah. “You smell of him.”

“I smell of who?” Leah took a step back, resisting the urge to sniff her clothes.

“Ash. You have his scent on you,” Orla replied sharply, a questioning look on her face.

Leah nodded since there was no use denying it. “He’s my neighbor.”

“Is he now?” Orla said and nodded to a table in the corner. The same table Ash had been seated at yesterday. “You know, a glass of this Madeira and some Brewer’s Loaf might be just what I need.”

“I’ll get them for you,” Leah said and dashed to the bar, where Flint was tying fine netting around a curved piece of metal wire. “A Madeira and a couple of slices of Brewer’s Loaf.”

“And a good day to you, too,” Flint said in amusement.

“Sorry. Hello, Flint. How are you?” Leah asked while she turned her head just enough to be able to watch Orla from the corner of her eye. “What are you doing, by the way?”

“The imps are getting a bit out of hand, so I figured I’d try trapping them.” Flint held up his makeshift net proudly. “I’m wondering if Morwenna will notice if we start to use the Brewer’s Loaf as bait. Seems they’re stealing it anyway...” Flint slid out a bottle of Madeira from the shelf over the bar and poured a glass.

“She told me she wants us to sell a double and half batches,” Leah said in a hushed tone. “Which is why I am contemplating offering buy one, get one free.”

“How about three for the price of two?” Flint suggested. “The more you can sell at once, the better, right?”

“Oh, that would work. Oh, by the way, Flint. This event that I’m hosting for Ash in the hotel... would your wife be interested in supplying some drinks? I’m trying to keep everything local, and by all accounts her drinks are very popular.”

Flint beamed at her; the net forgotten. “I’m sure she would be absolutely thrilled. We can sample some of her brews after your shift sometime, and if there’s anything in particular you’d like, she’d be able to whip something up.”

“That’s perfect.” Leah nodded and picked up the tray with the glass of Madeira and a plate containing two slices of Brewer’s Loaf. “Now. Wish me luck.”

“Do you need it?” Flint peered around Leah to Orla, seated in the corner. “Oh. Good luck.”

“She knows Ash,” Leah whispered.

“Does she?” Flint asked with a curious look. “Seems every well-dressed woman in town knows Ash.”

“Seems so.” Leah’s eyes narrowed as she studied Flint for a moment. “Do you know her?”

Flint shook his head. “I’ve never met her before.”

“All right. I’m going to find out who she is and why she is looking for Ash.”

Flint’s wide brows furrowed. “Just be careful.”

Leah flashed him a smile before heading across the quiet bar area to the dark corner where Orla was sitting reading through a small notebook. She looked up as Leah approached.

“Now, I must warn you that the Brewer’s Loaf has a sort of kick to it when you first take a bite.” Leah laid the tray on the table, placing the wineglass down on top of a napkin. “You’ve probably never tasted anything like it, but it’s very popular with the locals.”

“Intriguing.” Orla eyed the bread from beneath dark eyelashes before flicking her gaze up toward Leah. “So, does Ash spend much time in here drinking?”

“I’ve only been here for a couple of days,” Leah said noncommittally.

“Yet you know he likes whisky.” Orla tilted her head to one side. “And tea. I presume that is why you suggested them to me.”

“It is,” Leah confessed, thinking quickly. “Ash was in here drinking whisky yesterday morning. I figured you two would have similar tastes.”

“Morning?” Orla chuckled. “Ash always was a morning person.”

“So he drinks a lot?” Leah asked.

A smile played across Orla’s lips. “He does like his whisky but uses it as more of an excuse to spend time people-watching. He’s always trying to understand what people are thinking. It’s one of his best traits.”

Leah swallowed down the lump of emotion in her throat. “You know him well?”

“More than most,” Orla replied guardedly.

“Why don’t you try the Brewer’s Loaf and tell me what you think,” Leah said, steering the conversation away from Ash. At least for now.

“I suppose,” Orla once again studied the dark brown bread buns. “Although now I’m thinking I should have stuck to whisky, too.”

“Oh, Ash tried the Brewer’s Loaf and the Madeira yesterday,” Leah told her quickly. “He liked it so much he had seconds.”

“Did he now?” Orla asked, then sighed. “I suppose I might as well try something from Ash’s favorite bar. Perhaps it might help me try to understand what he is thinking...and why he came to Wishing Moon Bay.”

Orla picked up the Brewer's Loaf and took a small, tentative bite. As she chewed, she wrinkled up her face, before it turned contemplative. "Interesting flavor."

Leah glanced toward the tavern door, where a group of people were reading the sign on the host table. What was the message it had given her this morning? Something about answers and the questioner. Leah had taken it as a spelling mistake, but now she wasn't so sure.

Orla knew Ash well, it seemed. This might be a good time to get some information on her dragon shifter next-door neighbor.

"Ash is new in town, then?" Leah asked, even though she was missing out on an opportunity to prove her hosting skills on the group of people approaching the bar. She spotted Flint glancing toward her before he greeted the new patrons.

Orla nodded. "He is." Orla picked up her glass of Madeira and raised it to her lips. After a quick sip, she placed the glass on the table and glanced toward the door as if she were about to take her leave. "And you said you were his new neighbor?" she asked in a disinterested tone.

"I am." Leah nodded. So this was the game they were playing. They both wanted information about Ash, but Orla was not giving much away. "Why don't I get you that whisky?"

Before Orla had a chance to answer, Leah hurried to the bar and grabbed a glass. Under Flint's questioning gaze, she glanced up at the array of whisky bottles.

"Isle of Fire Single Malt," Flint murmured.

"Thanks. She flashed him a smile before she whispered, "Isle of Fire Single Malt, please." Leah watched as an embellished bottle on the rack above her tipped over. She held the glass up and the bottle poured the perfect measure before righting itself.

But instead of taking the glass to Orla's table, Leah ducked out into the back room. Surely Morwenna would have herbs and spices out here. She paused as she took in the room. It

looked as though it had once been a small cleaning room fitted with a sink and draining board, but the back wall had been clumsily knocked out with stoves and clay ovens placed haphazardly.

Leah stopped in the middle of the room and turned around slowly, her eyes searching the shelves. “Nutmeg.”

As if in answer, a small jar rattled on the shelf as if announcing its presence.

“I’m not even going to question this place anymore.” Leah shook her head.

Chapter Fifteen – Ash

“So, what do you want to do?” Ash asked as the door closed behind Leah and her footsteps faded.

“We could fly to Cairnnor and you could show us the Borean Cliffs,” Tommy suggested hopefully.

“Not today,” Ash said.

“Why not?” Tommy asked.

“Because it’s a long way,” Ash replied, a little exasperated.

“We don’t mind,” Maria said, staring up at him with big eyes.

“But your mom might,” Ash said. “What if she got back, and we weren’t here?”

“You could ask her...” Tommy replied.

“No,” Ash told them firmly. “We have a meeting at the Wishing Moon Hotel later today. I don’t want to be late.”

Tommy and Maria seemed to accept his decision. But that still left the decision as to what they were going to do while Leah was at work.

The beach, his dragon suggested. Or maybe a short flight into the mountains.

No flying, Ash told his dragon. Not unless we’ve run it by Leah first.

Okay. His dragon did not hide his disappointment. He’d enjoyed yesterday’s dragon ride to the vineyard and would happily have flown the children to Cairnnor, or Panjara, or even Stesia.

You are such a soft touch, Ash told his dragon.

I just want them to be happy. And to like me, his dragon said.

Oh, you don't have to worry there, Ash replied. They have accepted you. How could they not when you are a magnificent dragon? It's me I'm worried about. I have little skill or experience with children.

That's true, his dragon said a little smugly.

Thanks, Ash replied.

“Okay. *Anything* else you would like to do?” Ash asked. This was going to be a long day if he couldn't find some way to amuse them.

“Do you fish?” Tommy asked hopefully.

“No,” Ash said bluntly.

“Have you ever fished?” Tommy asked.

“No.”

“Why not?” Maria asked.

“There was never anyone around to teach me.” Ash slumped down onto the soft couch. “My dad was always too busy and could not see the point of spending hours trying to catch a fish since you could go to the store and buy one.”

“He sounds like my dad,” Tommy grumbled.

“Well, maybe sometime we could go fishing together.” Ash placed his hand on Tommy's shoulder. “But we don't have any fishing rods, and neither of us know how to set them up even if we did.”

“What about me?” Maria asked.

“You didn't want to fish,” Tommy reminded her. “You were afraid the hook would hurt the fish.”

“I could still come along,” she said. “I enjoy being on the beach.”

“You could,” Ash replied.

“So what did you do when you were growing up on Cairnnor?” Tommy asked, sitting on the chair on the other side of the coffee table.

“What did I do?” Ash leaned back and stared out the window. “We’d go exploring. Cairnnor is a wild place, with immense mountains and hidden valleys. Then other times we’d go down to the beach and see what the tide had brought in.”

“Beach combing,” Maria breathed in excitement.

“Exactly,” Ash replied.

“Can we do that?” Maria ran to the balcony and looked out at the ocean. “Mom wouldn’t mind. She always says that we need more fresh air, and it’s not as if we would be far away. We could leave a note for her and if she got back early, she could come and find us.”

How does she speak so fast without having to take a breath? his dragon asked in awe.

Ash smothered a smile. “We could go beach combing. What do you think, Tommy?”

“I guess it might be fun,” Tommy did not sound convinced.

“We could look for wish stones, too,” Maria said. “Have you ever made a wish, Ash?”

“I’m not sure I believe in all that,” Ash replied.

“Then let’s all go down to the beach and find a wish stone. We can throw it into the ocean and make a wish and then see if any of them come true.” Maria turned her back on the ocean view. “Yes?”

“Okay,” Ash agreed.

“I’ll go change into my swimsuit.” Maria darted across the living room and disappeared down the hallway.

“Tommy?” Ash got the feeling it wasn’t what the boy wanted to do. Maybe because there were no fishing rods involved.

“I’m ready.” He held out his arms. Tommy was already dressed in shorts and a T-shirt, perfect for the beach.

“So am I!” Maria rushed back into the living room wearing a long shirt dress over her swimsuit and a floppy hat on her

head, along with a pair of pink sunglasses. “I have a towel in here.” She held up a beach bag. “We should take snacks and some water.”

“You are very organized,” Ash told her.

Maria shrugged. “Mom always says that you should be prepared.”

“She says if you don’t prepare, you prepare to fail,” Tommy said.

“Wise words,” Ash said as he got up and went to the kitchen area, searching through cupboards. “I don’t suppose you know where the snacks are.”

“In here.” Maria dragged out a chair from the kitchen table and stood on it so she could reach a higher cupboard. “Have you ever failed?”

“Me?” Ash was not used to being ambushed by questions. “Everyone fails at something.”

“But have *you* failed?” Maria put a handful of candy bars in her beach bag and climbed down from the chair.

“Yes.” Ash slid the chair back under the table.

“When?” Maria asked. “When was the last time you failed?”

“The last time?” Ash knitted his brows together as they headed for the door. He’d never guessed caring for Leah’s children would be so hard. It was like being interrogated by one of his sisters.

“Yes.” Maria waited for Ash to open the door and then went outside, with Tommy following behind.

As he closed the door, part of Ash wanted to run for the door opposite and hide away from Maria’s questions in his apartment.

Chicken, his dragon snorted.

“The last time I failed,” Ash murmured.

Well, you failed to tell Leah that we are mates, his dragon began. You also failed to persuade Horatio to let you market his wine. You also failed to gain the trust of the locals.

Thank you for the support, Ash replied sharply.

“Can’t you remember?” Maria asked.

Or are there too many to choose from? his dragon added.

Ash stared straight ahead as they walked along the corridor and turned for the stairs. There was nothing like being ganged up on.

“Last night, I failed to wash the dishes,” Ash said.

“That doesn’t count,” Maria said with a roll of her eyes.

Even Tommy giggled as Ash said, “Why doesn’t it count? Washing the dishes is hard, especially at the end of a long day.”

“You’re funny,” Maria said and slipped her hand into his as they stepped out onto the street.

Ash tensed. There was something uniquely trusting in the simple gesture. And as Ash closed his hand gently around hers, he swore he would protect Maria and Tommy from whatever life threw at them.

“What did you used to do back home before you came to Wishing Moon Bay?” Ash asked as they reached the street and headed for the beach.

“I used to play in the courtyard,” Maria said.

“With your friends?” Ash wondered if the children missed their old life and their old friends.

“Not really.” Maria skipped alongside him. “Daddy didn’t like me inviting friends over to the house.”

“Did you ever go to their houses for, I don’t know, like, a play date?” Ash asked.

“I used to...” Her voice trailed off.

“Did something happen?” Ash asked in a conversational tone, keeping his tone light.

“People got scared of our dad,” Tommy answered after a long silence from Maria.

“Scared of him?” Ash asked.

“Daddy got mean.” Maria turned her eyes down.

“Is that why you left?” Ash felt like he was prying into Leah’s past. However, he was doing it for her. For Maria and Tommy. If their father was as bad as they insinuated, Ash might have to protect them. And the more he knew about the man, the better.

“We left because Daddy wanted Tommy to go to work with him and Mommy didn’t like it,” Maria said.

“*Maria*,” Tommy said in warning.

“My dad was the same,” Ash told them, cutting off any argument. “When I was about your age, I was mad about rock climbing. I hadn’t had my first shift yet, so if I wanted to get higher into the mountains and explore farther, I had to climb. And then I set my sights on climbing to the top of the tallest mountain on Cairnnor.”

It seemed as if he had blinked, and they were already at the beachfront. Ash squinted his eyes slightly as he looked out across the sea. He couldn’t see Cairnnor, but he didn’t have to see the dragon isle to know exactly where it was. It was as if the island itself called to him—a part of him.

A part of the past him.

“Did you ever climb to the highest peak?” Maria pulled gently on his hand to get his attention.

“No, my father decided I should climb the corporate ladder instead,” Ash said wistfully. “But one day. One day I’ll do it.”

“Did you come to Wishing Moon Bay to escape your dad, too?” Tommy asked.

“In a way.” Ash nodded. “I came here because I wanted to be my own person. To do things my way. And if that doesn’t work out...” He squeezed Maria’s hand lightly. “And if I *fail*. That’s okay. Sometimes you have to fail to see where your path lies.”

He sucked in the sea air. “And our path lies at the ocean.” He swept Maria into his arms, and she squealed in delight as they raced toward the sand.

“Wait for me!” Tommy ran alongside them and then he raced ahead, laughing as he neared the ocean and kicked off his shoes to splash in the waves.

Ash set Maria down and they both pulled off their shoes. Maria dumped her beach bag alongside the shoes, making sure it was out of reach of the waves that rolled gently across the shore before she ran into the ocean, water splashing up to soak her dress.

Laughing, carefree, they jumped the waves, holding each other’s hands. Water splashed up around them. The sun glistened off the ocean’s surface, like a million shimmering dragon scales.

When they were breathless and soaked to the skin, they walked along the ocean’s edge, looking for treasures carried in by the tide from faraway shores. Maria found a large conch shell hidden in a pile of seaweed, while Tommy unearthed a piece of worn driftwood with a faded word carved into it.

As they searched for wish stones along the shoreline, they took turns guessing what the word on the driftwood Tommy found said, coming to the conclusion that it was the name of some long sunken pirate ship.

Ash took a minute to look up from the golden sands and watch as Tommy and Maria waded through the shallow surf, whispering to one another as they searched. He couldn’t remember a time when he felt so carefree, so fulfilled. He might have missed out on having a childhood like this, but now that Leah and her kids were in his life, he might just have a second shot.

As he took a breath, feeling the warmth on his skin, and listened to the gentle rhythm of the ocean, he realized that it might have just been one of the most perfect moments of his life.

“Is this one?” Tommy called out as he held up a round, perfectly smooth stone that shimmered softly in the sunlight.

“It is,” Ash confirmed, sloshing through the water toward him.

“Let’s find more!” Maria called out as she ran along the tide line.

The search intensified now that they had found one wish stone. And soon they had two more.

“One each,” Ash said.

“What about Mommy?” Maria asked.

“There’s three,” Ash frowned. “One for you, one for Tommy, and one for your mom.”

“But what about you?” Tommy asked, his expression serious.

“I don’t have a wish,” Ash insisted.

“Yes, you do,” Tommy replied.

“Your mountain peak,” Maria reminded him. “Come on, Tommy, we have to find one more!”

Tommy and Maria resumed their search with renewed enthusiasm, leaving Ash frozen to the spot as he watched them. This was what family was truly about. Thinking of others first.

Our sisters have thought of us first before, his dragon reminded him.

Have they? Ash asked.

You know they have, his dragon said. *It’s just that somewhere along the way, we all lost sight of that. We became driven by profits and bank balances.*

I miss those simple days, Ash said.

They’re not gone, his dragon reminded him.

No, they are not.

And though they heckle us, them wanting us to return to Cairnnor is their way of showing that they care, his dragon said.

With that, Ash jogged to catch up with the children, scouring the beach for a wish stone as if it were the most precious piece of treasure in his hoard.

“Here!” Tommy held up a wish stone, his face alight with happiness.

“We have four!” Maria yelled as she ran to join her brother. “Can we come back later with Mommy to make our wishes?” Maria asked hopefully.

“You’ll have to ask her, not me,” Ash said, recalling Leah’s earlier frosty tone. He wasn’t sure what he’d done to upset her, but when he walked into her apartment this morning there differently seemed to be something off.

Maybe she was worried about leaving the children with us, his dragon suggested. *It’s a huge leap of trust to allow someone to look after your children.*

You’re right, Ash agreed. *Especially as it seems like their father was more than a little overbearing. She must want to be careful as to who influences them.*

Don’t we know the feeling? his dragon grumbled.

“Can we eat our snacks now?” Maria asked as they headed back along the beach.

“I have a better idea,” Ash said. “Why don’t we go and get some ice cream? My treat.”

“Yes.” Maria nodded enthusiastically.

“Tommy?” Ash asked.

“Sure.” Tommy took one last look at the ocean, his eyes fixed on the distant horizon before he turned and followed Maria.

“Are you thinking of fish?” Ash asked as he fell into step with Tommy.

“I was thinking about our voyage here on the Wind Raider, and how I might like to have a ship of my own one day.” He glanced up at Ash from under his brow, as if expecting his dream to be dashed on the rocks.

“Maybe we could hire a boat and go out on the ocean,” Ash said. “See how you like it.”

“Then, when I’m older, I could ask Captain Ronan if I could be his apprentice,” Tommy said more confidently.

“You could.” Ash nodded. “But my advice is to also keep an open mind. Try different things. See if you like them. See if they like you.”

“Yeah. I might.” Tommy nodded as they reached the spot where they had cast off their shoes.

Gathering up their belongings, they headed toward the beachfront in search of ice cream.

“Luna’s Licks,” Maria announced as they stood outside an ice cream parlor with a sign declaring it was ‘renowned for its magical and unusual flavors.’

“This looks interesting.” Ash glanced at the children. “Shall we go in?”

“Sure,” Tommy said as he glanced up at the sign.

“Remember, you can choose any flavor you like,” Ash said, ushering Tommy and Maria through the door, where the scent of sweet, mystical concoctions filled his senses. They were indescribable, and he had the urge to try them all.

Magic is afoot. His dragon chuckled.

Maybe a little magic is what we need to convince some of the businesses in Wishing Moon Bay to give us a chance, Ash replied.

As they stepped inside, it was like being transported to a different place entirely. The walls and ceiling were painted midnight blue and silver, mimicking the night sky of Wishing Moon Bay, and there was a soft purple glow in the air. Ash stared up at the ceiling, watching as the murals moved as if galaxies were wheeling past them.

“Ash.” Maria yanked on his sleeve, and he blinked as if woken from a dream. “Ice cream.”

“Ice cream.” Ash stepped closer to the counter with its array of ice creams, each labeled with names as intriguing as their sparkling appearances.

Tommy’s eyes widened at the sight. “Dragon’s Breath? Do you think it really makes you breathe fire?”

The man behind the counter chuckled. “Only a little smoke, buddy. But it’s cool mint and charcoal, quite refreshing.”

Maria, on the other hand, was drawn to a sparkling pink ice cream. “Fairy Floss? Is it made by actual fairies?”

“The very same,” the man assured her with a wink. “There’s nothing quite like it. It’s very light and perfectly sweet.”

Decisions made, Ash ordered for them, adding a scoop of “Midnight Magic” for himself, a flavor that shimmered with a galaxy of colors and promised to taste like the cool night breeze mixed with the thrill of adventure.

As they took their first bites, Tommy’s mouth puffed out a small cloud of smoke, causing Maria to giggle before her own ice cream left a trail of sparkles on her lips.

“It really is fairy magic!” Maria whispered.

“Wow, this is the best ice cream ever!” Tommy exclaimed, trying to blow smoke rings. “Look. I’m Ash’s dragon!”

Ash laughed as he licked his ice cream, and a thrill sent shivers down his spine as if he was caught up in the wonders of the universe itself. “You don’t get ice cream like this in Cairnno.”

“Nor on Thalian,” Tommy exclaimed as he licked his ice cream a couple of times and then puffed out a long plume of smoke.

They walked back to the apartment as they finished their ice cream, followed by a trail of sparkles and smoke from the kids. Ash felt almost reluctant to return to his apartment, not wanting the day to end, but before he knew it they were

walking down the white staircase, looking out through the long window at the beach they had just come from.

“You guys should probably go shower and wash the salt out of your hair. It’ll get all itchy otherwise,” Ash said.

“I suppose.” Maria ran a finger through her tangled hair. “Mommy usually braids it when it’s wet to stop it frizzing, so I might wait for her.”

“I can braid it for you,” Ash said off-handedly.

“Yes, please!” Maria darted inside as Ash unlocked their apartment door.

“You know how to braid hair?” Tommy asked in surprise.

“I do.” Ash went to the kitchen and made a pot of fresh coffee.

“Isn’t that a bit girlie?” Tommy asked as he lingered in the doorway.

Ash chuckled. “Does it matter? I find it therapeutic. If you want, I can teach you.”

“Maybe,” Tommy said with a shrug and headed for the living room.

His father really did do a number on him, didn’t he? Ash’s dragon said.

Yeah. But as you said, it’s never too late to change, Ash replied.

And that’s exactly what he’d done since coming to Wishing Moon Bay.

And meeting our mate, his dragon added.

Ash’s stomach rumbled. The ice cream had been good, but he needed something a bit more sustaining.

Perhaps something else we can introduce Maria and Tommy to? His dragon sighed happily.

Chapter Sixteen – Leah

Leah stood, a pinch of nutmeg between her fingers, her other hand open as stared into the dark amber whisky.

Was she really about to do this? She'd promised herself that she would not use her magic to influence people anymore. But she needed to know more about Ash, and this might be her only chance to speak to someone who knew him well.

It's not as if she were doing any harm. She simply needed to know if she could trust him. After all, he was her landlord, and they were about to work together. If the event at the hotel ended badly, it would tarnish her reputation and make it impossible for her to find work in Wishing Moon Bay. She did not want to uproot Maria and Tommy when they were just getting settled.

Leah took a deep breath and dropped her hand. She didn't need magic. She would do this the old-fashioned way.

She dropped the nutmeg into the drink and grabbed a teaspoon to stir it in. A little personal touch that perhaps reminded Orla of home would be enough to get her to stay and set her at ease. If she was close to Ash, maybe this would remind her of him, and get her to open up about the mysterious dragon shifter.

Besides, this whole thing would be good practice for the hotel event. She felt a little out of practice after everything.

With the glass of spiced whisky firmly in hand, she headed back out into the bar area, skirting around Flint as she took the drink to Orla's table. "Here. Try this. I mixed it myself."

Orla took a sip, and the first hint of a smile appeared on her face since she had entered the tavern. "That's pretty good. Comforting." She swirled the drink around in the glass, watching it with humor in her eyes. "You don't find whisky like this very often."

“I’m glad you like it,” Leah replied. “So, tell me, how do you know Ash? Are you coworkers?”

“I suppose you could call us that. At least you would have been able to.” Orla placed the glass on the table. “But we worked in different...departments. Because of our distinct skill sets.”

“And what is Ash’s skill set?” Leah asked.

“Ash is very good at understanding people. He can empathize with them. Which makes it easier for him to get what he wants,” Orla said, taking another sip of her whisky.

I bet it does, Leah thought, but then dragged her mind out of the gutter. Orla might genuinely be one of Ash’s coworkers and nothing else.

“Like in a business deal?” Leah asked.

“Exactly like that,” Orla confirmed as she picked up her Brewer’s Loaf and took a good bite. “Though I’m sure he doesn’t confine himself as to where he used his talents. The trouble is with him. You might not even know you’re doing his bidding.”

Crumbs spilled to the floor as Orla gestured with a slice of loaf, and Brushworth appeared from behind Leah, followed by the dustpan skidding along the floor. Leah stepped back to allow the cleaning staff to do their job.

Orla watched the animated objects. “Is that a magic broom?” She pointed.

“It is,” Leah said nonchalantly. “Haven’t you ever seen one before?”

“Magic is not so openly in use on Cairnnor,” Orla said as she reached for the broom handle, only to be rewarded by a rap on the knuckles from Brushworth. “Ouch!” Orla snatched her hand back.

“I think there’s a sign somewhere that says don’t touch the magical items,” Leah warned her. “It seems they can be a little temperamental.”

“Hmmm.” Orla picked up her second loaf and bit into it. As she chewed, she narrowed her eyes at Leah. “And how are you settling in here in Wishing Moon Bay?”

“Me?” Leah asked cautiously. She wasn’t sure how much Orla knew about her. She wouldn’t have heard anything from Flint or Morwenna seeing as this was her first time in the tavern. But Leah had no idea how much Ash might have said, or how involved this woman was in his life.

“Yes, you.” Orla fixed her with a steely stare that seemed somehow familiar. “If you’re Ash’s neighbor, then I’ve heard you’re new in town.”

“I’m doing fine.” Leah glanced around the tavern, aware of the fact that she had other duties to attend to.

“You never said where you came from.” Orla picked up her whiskey, not taking her eyes off Leah. “Or why you are here.”

“I traveled here for work,” Leah replied evasively.

“What work?” Orla was so direct it was hard not to feel as if she was an inquisitor.

“Hosting.” Leah smiled brightly. “How about you?”

Orla narrowed her eyes in the most unnerving way. “Mergers and acquisitions.”

“Mergers and acquisitions.” Leah shook her head and said in a breathy tone, “That sounds very complicated.”

“Oh, I think you might be good at it,” Orla said as she drained her glass.

“Oh, I wouldn’t know anything about that sort of thing.” Leah went to turn away, feeling a little defeated that she hadn’t been able to glean anything new from Orla, but then she paused.

Although she had usually been the one in the background, she had witnessed plenty of negotiations, and seen the game of give and take. She just needed to stick to her guns and get what she wanted from Orla without giving too much away.

She turned back and slipped into the seat next to Orla, who raised her eyebrow at her.

“So I’m guessing there’s a lot of money involved in your line of work?” Leah rested her chin on her palms. “Your clothes look very expensive, and Ash must be well off to have that nice apartment building.”

“Sure there is.” Orla narrowed her eyes. “Haven’t you other customers to serve?”

Leah shook her head. “I’m on break. And it’s not every day we get new faces in here.”

Still not technically a lie, she convinced herself.

Orla looked upward at the sound of scurrying above them. “Are there mice in here?”

“No, I think they’re imps. Anyway, you asked me earlier what I did for work. It really is hosting, but I see it as a bit of an art. Finding the right decor, creating the correct atmosphere...mixing the perfect drink. I believe that the success of any event is based on these small details that so many people miss.”

“Perhaps with a new host they might have more luck bringing new faces in here,” Orla said. “Especially if they are reprimanded by the broom.”

Leah laughed lightly. “I bet you guys are under a lot of pressure with merging and acquiring. If there’s a lot of money involved.”

Orla watched her face for a moment, but Leah made sure all she saw was a friendly, slightly curious smile. “It certainly is. Especially at the moment.” She let out a sigh.

“How come?” Leah pushed gently.

“We’ve recently lost our chief negotiator. Right when we are about to go into negotiations with one of our chief competitors.” Orla began to loosen up, and Leah got the feeling that she needed to get some stuff off her chest.

“You’re not the negotiator, then?”

Orla chuckled, running her finger around the rim of her empty glass. “Oh, no. I don’t think I could ever spend too long mediating. I find I lack the patience required for it. When I want something, I’m not such a fan of waiting for it.”

“I get that.” Leah nodded understandingly. “Time’s even more precious than treasure, after all. No use wasting it waiting on others to decide on something.”

Orla gave Leah a mildly surprised look. “Exactly. There’s so much else that needs doing, things the others don’t always even think of. I’d much rather be taking care of those things than waiting for everyone to dance around making a decision.”

Leah let the quiet fill the air for a moment, then spoke as if a thought suddenly came to her. “Feels like Ash would have made an excellent negotiator.”

“Oh, he did.” Orla looked wistful. “Trouble is, that dragon truly does always get what he wants.”

“How come he left?” Leah prompted.

“Because he was too good. That, and he sprouted a conscience from somewhere. He had this notion that he was ‘taking advantage.’ Silly, everyone’s always out for themselves in business. I thought he understood that.” Orla shook her head. “He never was the most logical of us.”

Leah hid a smile by glancing away to see how Flint was getting on.

From what Orla said, Ash was a man who had everything and gave it up to be a better version of himself. She liked the sound of that. “I guess you can’t be totally logical if you need to understand people. You need to be able to feel, right?”

“Exactly. Which is why the rest of us haven’t been able to fill his position.” Orla glowered at her glass.

“And what is it you do, exactly?” Leah asked.

“I mostly find myself researching the fundamentals of potential investments. Whether that be going through documents, talking to people...generally connecting the dots,

and figuring out our profit margins. I come up with the offer price.”

“And that’s where Ash would come in?” Leah asked, catching another suspicious glance from Orla.

“It is. It’s Ash’s job to negotiate the price.”

Leah held her gaze for a moment before shrugging. “I don’t think that I could imagine Ash being in a situation like that. Trying to drive down the price of a business purchase or whatever. He seems a like too sweet a guy.”

“That’s because you haven’t seen the real Ash.” Orla raised her eyebrows.

Leah leaned in slightly. “What is he *really* like?”

Orla gave her a sideways glance. “You’re very interested in Ash.”

“He is my landlord. I suppose it’s in my best interest to know what he’s like. Especially if he’s a ruthless capitalist. Is he sweet? Controlling? Angry?”

Orla smiled slightly. “He is sweet, I suppose. Unless there’s something that he truly cares about, and then he can snap and go completely overboard.” Her eyes grew distant as if she were recalling a memory. “But it’s quite rare.”

“Overboard?” Leah asked. “How overboard are we talking?”

Orla looked thoughtful for a moment. “The thing with Ash is that he’s...sensitive. When it comes to things that are important to him. And that can make him volatile.”

“Volatile enough to move across the sea to Wishing Moon Bay?”

Orla held her gaze for a moment before she stood up abruptly. “You do have a gift, Leah. You’re very easy to talk to. Too easy to talk to.” She reached into her purse, pulled out a roll of paper money neatly folded into a clip, and placed it on the table. “I just have one favor to ask of you.”

“You do?” Leah instantly felt guarded.

“Tread carefully where Ash is concerned. His heart is in the right place. But this small, friendly town—Wishing Moon Bay—is not where he belongs. He’s a dragon of Cairnnor. It’s in his blood, his DNA. And soon he’s going to realize that and fly home.” Orla nodded and then stalked out of the tavern, leaving Leah more confused than ever.

So much for getting answers.

Leah grabbed the cash, the empty tray, and the glass and hurried back over to the bar, where Flint stood proudly over an empty tray of Brewer’s Loaf.

“Are you all right?” Flint asked.

“I’m fine,” Leah said. “And thank you.”

“For what?” Flint asked.

“For covering for her while she was being a chatty Cathy,” Morwenna said as she came out of the back room.

Leah sighed. “I’ll make up for it.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” Morwenna said with a wave of her hand.

“Are you feeling all right?” Flint asked.

“Of course I am,” Morwenna said and locked eyes with Leah. “I’ve had a very *interesting* morning.”

“I should get out there and start serving customers.” Leah avoided her eyes.

“Yes, and tomorrow, I might let you behind the bar to mix some drinks,” Morwenna said. “It seems you do have a gift for this line of work, after all.”

Leah didn’t reply, but she was certain Morwenna had somehow learned her secret.

But if the witch thought she could persuade Leah to use it on the tavern’s customers, she had another thing coming.

“All sold,” Leah announced to Morwenna, as she placed the tray, empty save for a few crumbs, back on the bar.

“Impressive,” Morwenna said from where she had been watching at the bar. “Maybe tomorrow I’ll bake four trays.”

“No,” Leah wiped her brow. “Three trays were plenty.”

“But you sold double and a half,” Morwenna frowned. “If I keep making them, you can keep selling them.”

“Yes, but it’s doubtful we can keep this up. We need to come up with something else. They’re a novelty right now, but that will wear off before long.” Leah glanced at the clock on the wall. “I need to go. I have an appointment in half an hour, and I need to get home and change.”

“An appointment?” Morwenna followed as Leah headed across the tavern.

“I’ll see you tomorrow.” Leah waved as she strode toward the door, hoping that the tavern would not keep her a prisoner here until she’d answered Morwenna’s questions.

But the door swung open, and Leah made a quick exit.

As soon as her feet hit the sidewalk, she hurried toward the apartment. Her conversation with Orla had taken up a chunk of her time, add in the extra Brewer’s Loaf she had to sell, her shift had been an hour longer than yesterday.

Would Ash be okay with that? Had he survived his morning with Maria and Tommy? Had they survived their morning with him?

She kept going over what Orla had cryptically told her. Should she be afraid of the dragon shifter’s moods?

Leah reached the apartment building and took the steps two at a time. By the time she arrived at her front door, she was breathing heavily. Taking a moment to compose herself, she listened for voices from inside. But instead of voices, she heard laughter, followed by singing.

Ash’s deep voice was the clearest through the door, but she could make out Maria’s and Tommy’s, too, as they sang what sounded like a sea shanty. It wasn’t one Leah recognized.

Leah opened the front door quietly, not wanting to disturb them. However, as she stepped inside, Ash was already

looking at her as if he'd sensed her approach.

Of course, he had. He was a dragon shifter, after all.

"Mom's home," Ash said as he broke off the song.

"Mommy!" Maria called out as she jumped to her feet and rushed toward Leah. "Look at my hair."

Leah grinned as Maria spun around, showing off her neatly braided hair. It was quite impressive, woven with red and orange ribbons that resembled fire as Maria swished her head from side to side.

"Wow," Leah exclaimed, her admiration clear. "It's stunning, Maria. It suits you beautifully."

Maria's face glowed with happiness as she tugged at Leah's hand. "Come see Ash's braids!" she urged, pulling her toward Ash.

Leah's attention shifted to Ash, observing the similar tribal braids that adorned his head, although they were not as neat and uniform.

"Did you do that?" Leah asked as she admired the braids. Which, if anything, made him look even more ruggedly handsome, like a warrior of old.

Shaking her head, Maria's eyes sparkled with excitement. "No, Tommy did them," she said, pointing to her brother, who looked slightly bashful under Leah's gaze.

Tommy looked down, a modest smile on his face. "Ash was teaching us about his culture and heritage," he said quietly, trying to deflect the compliment.

Leah's throat constricted as Tommy tried to hide his obvious pride in the braids. "You've done a wonderful job, Tommy. And so have you, Ash," Leah said. "I was worried you might not have coped."

"We had the best time," Maria said. "We went beach combing and played in the ocean. Oh!"

Maria rushed from the room, only to return a couple of minutes later with her hands closed into fists. "And we found

these.” She opened her hands to reveal two perfectly smooth stones in each hand. “They are wish stones. But we didn’t make our wishes because you weren’t there.”

“We want to go down to the beach together and make our wishes,” Tommy mumbled. “The four of us.”

“The four of us, huh?” If Leah had any doubts about Ash before, they were now gone. He had given the kids a wonderful morning filled with new memories...and, apparently, new skills. Tommy would never have dared braid anyone’s hair back home. But Ash had shown him it was okay to try new things.

Leah hid a smile. It was good for Tommy to have a male role model who wasn’t afraid of things like that.

“If that’s okay with you,” Ash said quietly.

Leah couldn’t hide her smile anymore, wishing she hadn’t been so frosty with him this morning. Despite her reservations, Ash had proven he was not the same as Vittorio. Not at all.

“I’d like that,” Leah nodded. “But first we should have lunch and then go to the hotel.”

“We made lunch,” Maria said. “Ash showed us how to make ‘Ember Roasted Root Medley.’” She pronounced the name carefully before listing off the ingredients on her fingers. “It’s made from sweet potatoes, carrots, beets...marry...um, marry-ated smoky sauce. Ash says it’s normally slow-roasted on coals to make it smoky. But we didn’t want to burn the house down, so we had to use the stove.”

“Thank you,” Leah said, fighting back tears as she saw how happy her children were.

“Don’t cry, Mommy, it tastes good. Honest.” Maria’s face was contorted in concern.

“These are happy tears,” Leah assured them. “This is all so unexpected.”

“Come on, sit down, Leah,” Ash said as he got to his feet. “I’ll pour you some coffee while Maria and Tommy serve your food.”

Ash guided her to the dining area and pulled out a chair. As Leah flopped down, it was as if a weight had lifted off her shoulders. Her fears for the future ebbed away as the knowledge that she could build a life here in Wishing Moon Bay cemented itself in her head.

She wasn't alone. She had a job and a home. She was beginning to make friends. The children were not pining for their old life. In fact, this was the happiest she'd seen them for a while. Their cheeks were flushed from the sea air, and they chatted happily about their beach adventure while she ate.

Now, if only she could secure more work and earn enough to pay their bills, including paying Ash the full rent for the apartment, she'd be as happy as a Halcyon Skydancer with a fish in its beak.

"That was so good," Leah said as she finished her food and sipped her second cup of coffee. The children had gone off to work out what they were going to wish for, leaving Leah alone in the kitchen with Ash. Thankfully, the food had provided a distraction from the dragon shifter. If not, she might have been seated here drooling over him instead of his cooking. Those braids in his long, dark hair really did suit him. Even if they were a bit messy.

"It's one of my favorite dishes," Ash said. "But I'm usually too lazy to make it for just me."

"You are a man of many talents, Ash." She drained her coffee cup and set it down on the table. "Is that the time?"

Ash glanced at his watch. "We should get going." He stood up. "I'll go round the kids up."

"Thanks." Leah rose wearily from her seat. After a few hours on her feet and then coming home and eating the delicious food, she was relaxed and ready for an afternoon nap. But this meeting was important. She had to keep moving forward, 'reaching for the stars' her mom used to call it.

Five minutes later, Maria and Tommy were waiting at the front door with Ash, while Leah was in the bedroom getting into a summer dress and dragging a hairbrush through her hair.

“Perhaps you could braid my hair when we get home,” Leah told Tommy as they left the apartment.

“Really?” Tommy asked.

“Yes. Really,” Leah replied.

“I thought you might be mad,” he said, not meeting her eye.

“Why would I be?” Leah slipped her arm around her son’s shoulders while Ash walked on ahead with Maria.

“Dad would never have let me braid his hair,” Tommy replied.

“That’s because he didn’t have as much as Ash.” Leah chuckled. “But in all seriousness, your father was brought up in a certain way, Tommy. But you are not your father. If you want to braid hair, braid hair. If you want to be a hairdresser, be one. Or a baker, or a mapmaker...”

“Or a sailor?” Tommy asked.

“Whatever you want, Tommy. I’ll support you.” She hugged him close, knowing exactly what she would wish for when she threw her wish stone into the ocean.

That her kids would find their own path to the happiness they deserved.

Chapter Seventeen – Ash

“Are you nervous?” Leah asked Ash as they approached the hotel.

“Does it show?” Ash sucked in a steadying breath and let it out slowly.

“Not really. I was just surprised, that’s all. You always seem so confident.” Leah nodded toward the large building. “I heard the family who runs the hotel are good people. And we are bringing them business. So, I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

“Yeah. I just want this to go well.” Ash went to run his hand through his hair, but stopped himself, not wanting to mess up his braids. “And whereas the family who runs the hotel might be good people, that’s not the way people see me.”

“Isn’t that the point of this event, for you to show people who you really are?” Leah looked up at him.

“Maybe that’s the problem.” Ash stopped walking and turned to face Leah. “What if they do see the real me and they don’t like what they see?”

“Well, if my kids are anything to go on, people are going to love the real you.” She locked eyes with him for a long moment and in that moment, it was as if all his fears were stripped away.

“Thank you.” He licked his lips, resisting the urge to lower his head and kiss her.

“For what?” she asked. “You are the one who has shown Tommy that he can be whoever he wants to be. He would never have been brave enough to braid hair or cook or run around in the ocean if he hadn’t seen you do it.” She reached up and ran her fingers over his braids. “They suit you.”

He gave her a half smile, filled with appreciation. “Ready?”

“Ready.” She turned back to face the hotel and called out, “Maria. Tommy.”

“The hotel has a turret!” Maria ran toward them, her braids bouncing around her shoulders.

“Do you think we could go inside and have a look?” Tommy asked as he followed.

“We’ll see. But that isn’t why we are here, remember?” Leah said.

“We know.” Tommy looked up at the turret. “But maybe you could ask.”

“If we get the chance,” Ash replied.

“But first, remember what we talked about?” Leah asked.

“Yes, we should go into the grounds and play quietly, and stay together, while you and Ash talk,” Tommy said, as if reading from a script.

“Yes. Any problems, you come and find me,” Leah said, looking nervous.

“Don’t worry,” Ash reassured her. “I won’t let them out of my...senses.”

“I forgot you don’t have to see people to know where they are.”

Ash’s eyes darkened as he looked at her and said, “No, I don’t.”

He would know where Leah was, no matter where she was in the world. He was certain of it. Even if she sailed across the ocean back to Thalian, he would find her.

In this life and the next, his dragon said.

Let’s just focus on this life, shall we? Ash replied.

Absolutely, his dragon said, his head filled with images of them living with Leah and the children. But not at the apartment. No, he imagined them living in the mountains among newly planted vines, where they would make their own wine, creating an heirloom brand.

But that was for another day. He had to focus on the task ahead first.

“Be good. To each other,” Leah said as Tommy and Maria disappeared around the side of the hotel, heading for the grounds around the back. From the photos they’d seen online, there was a pond and benches, and shrubbery where they could play hide and seek.

“I have them in my senses,” Ash assured her again. “We can always excuse ourselves if ever you want to check on them.”

“Okay. Then let’s focus on securing the hotel as a venue and arranging the date and the catering.” Leah reached into her purse and pulled out a notepad and pen. “Ready, partner?”

“Ready.” He paused, longing to be Leah’s partner, not just in business, but in every facet of their lives.

They entered through the main door into the reception area. Thankfully, Jeremy was not on duty and instead, they were met by Penny’s smiling face. “There you are. We have been waiting for you to arrive.”

“Hello, Penny. This is Leah, my partner,” Ash said.

“Is that what dragons are calling their m...” Penny caught sight of Ash quickly shaking his head and cut herself off as she came around the counter to meet Leah. “Hi, Leah. Good to finally meet you. I’ve heard nothing but good things about you.”

“You have?” Leah glanced at Ash in surprise, who returned a confused expression.

“Yes, Ivan is one of Valerie’s sons. He runs the kitchen here, and he is also a good friend to Flint,” Penny said. “And Flint has been singing your praises since you started at the tavern. Especially when you were able to sell those strange breads.” She wrinkled her nose and lowered her voice as if Morwenna might hear her. “Ivan tried some and said it was very...peculiar. I think that was the word he used.”

“It is an acquired taste,” Leah said with a wide smile. “But Morwenna set me a challenge, and I had to rise to it if I wanted to be given a chance at working at the tavern.”

“Well, after speaking to Flint and hearing about how you managed to make those peculiar breads a hit, Ivan has spoken to Valerie about the possibility of hiring you here at the hotel for a couple of special events we’re hosting later in the month. This event you want to host here will be a great trial run!” Penny said.

“That would be incredible,” Leah shook her head, for a moment lost for words. “Sorry. I can’t believe how good people have been to us since we arrived here. I was so worried I’d made a mistake.”

“I understand.” Penny placed a hand on her arm. “I remember the day I arrived here. If I hadn’t met Logan, I don’t know where we would have ended up. But that’s how fate works, isn’t it?” She glanced at Ash once more, who tried to let his eyes drift toward Leah.

But Ash’s attention suddenly switched as he sensed Ivan and Logan approaching, with an elderly woman who he guessed must be Valerie.

I don’t think you need shifter senses to work that one out, his dragon said dryly.

“Hello,” Valerie said as she and her boys stepped into the reception from a staff-only door. “You must be the hostess queen, Leah. And you must be Ash, the bad boy dragon shifter I have been hearing so much about.”

“I’m not that bad.” Ash pursed his lips.

“That’s not the story that’s going around town,” Ivan said bluntly.

“What is the story?” Ash asked.

“That you use your good looks and charisma to charm people into handing over their family businesses and then you brutally tear them apart and sell off the bits and pieces to make a profit, not caring who gets hurt,” Valerie said. “I am paraphrasing, but that’s the gist of it, isn’t it, Ivan?”

“So I was told by some guy in the tavern last night,” Ivan replied.

“Okay.” Ash held up his hands. “I am not going to lie and tell you that I haven’t been ruthless in the past. And I’m certain I know who is spreading these rumors.”

“Are they true?” Logan asked.

“Without hearing exactly what’s being said about me, it’s hard to confirm or deny anything,” Ash said, keeping his breathing steady as he felt Leah’s questioning gaze on him.

You sound like the man you used to be, his dragon said.

“But I came to Wishing Moon Bay to make a new start and make amends. I’m trying to use the skills I have to help those same businesses grow strong so that they can fend off hostile takeovers,” Ash said, feeling a little like a broken record.

“You have no idea how many times I have heard that story.” Valerie’s gaze was icy.

“It’s true,” Ash said. “I don’t know what else to tell you.”

“And you want to hold an event here to prove yourself?” Valerie asked. “To prove to the businesses you once would have ruined without a second thought that you are here to help them.”

“Yes,” Leah stepped forward.

“And you believe in him?” Valerie asked, her eyes shrewd as she studied Leah.

“I believe in him.” Leah nodded.

“And you promise Leah that you are not here to fool everyone. That once they show their soft underside, you won’t rip them in two.” Valerie’s eyes pierced Ash.

Oh, she’s good, Ash’s dragon said.

She is. They know, or at least have a good idea, that Leah is my mate and they want me to promise her. They don’t need to know if I’m genuine toward them, Ash replied.

“Leah.” Ash reached out and took Leah’s hand. As he locked eyes with her, he said, “I promise you that I am, honestly, trying to help people here.”

“Okay.” Leah glanced at Valerie and then back to Ash as if trying to figure out what she’d missed.

Our mate is perceptive, Ash’s dragon said proudly.

She is, Ash replied.

So, you should make the time to tell her the truth, his dragon said. If she hasn’t worked it out by herself.

Maybe that’s why she was frosty this morning. She might be upset that we haven’t confessed our feelings to her, Ash mused.

If she’s worked it out, she probably is wondering why we haven’t told her. She might think we’re not happy that she’s our mate, his dragon said.

She could not be more wrong, Ash replied, feeling bad that they hadn’t told her even if it was for good reason.

But things had changed, and it was time he was completely honest with her. All he had to do was find the right time.

There’s no time like the present, his dragon said.

We are in a meeting, Ash reminded him.

“Does that mean you would be happy for us to hold our event here?” Leah asked, stepping back from Ash.

“Why don’t we go through and see the dining room?” Logan looked between them before leading them out of the reception, through a short hallway, and into a large dining room.

It was empty for now, save for the two long rows of tables, surrounded by smaller round tables, all draped in perfectly white cloth and surrounded by comfortable-looking chairs. The long wall along one side was almost entirely glass and looked across the neatly trimmed grounds. Leah was drawn toward the window as they walked inside, smiling to herself as she spotted Tommy and Maria running around the pond in the center, along with another boy.

“I see your kids are getting along with Milo,” Penny said as she joined them.

“Is he your son?” Ash asked.

“He is,” Penny said, her voice filled with love as she joined Leah at the window.

“Is this where we would hold the event?” Ash asked while keeping one eye on Leah.

“Yes. We’ll move the main dining tables to the edge of the room and fill the space with the smaller group tables. We can clear an area at the front there by the stage if you want any stands or displays.” Logan moved between the tables, gesturing as he spoke. “We can set up a projector for any slide presentations. Unless you are using some other kind of...” Logan waved his hands in the air. “You know, power supply.”

“He means magic,” Penny said as a stage whisper.

“I mean magic,” Logan said with a chuckle. “We’re happy to cater to whatever you need to make your event a success. That’s what makes this place special.”

“Great.” Ash paced the room as Leah turned away from the window and scanned the dining hall. “I’d like to make use of the bar area so we can serve welcome drinks. Perhaps some nibbles as well.”

“The bar is always fully stocked. Let us know if you have a theme at all and we’ll cater for it.” Valerie crossed the room to the bar and ran her hand over the smooth surface.

“Actually, I’ve got some wines and spirits that I’ve already selected,” Leah said. “Not that I don’t think you’ve got a fine selection of drinks here.”

“Oh?” Valeria raised an eyebrow.

Leah nodded. “I find that it’s best to tailor as much as possible, even the drinks, to each event. Each person if possible. And with the theme of this workshop being on helping the small businesses of Wishing Moon Bay, we’ve found some real gems from local producers.”

“Ah, so that’s your gift.” Valerie wagged her finger at Leah.

“I suppose you could call it that,” Leah admitted. “Some people have empathy toward others. For me, it’s a little

different.”

“What about catering?” Ivan asked.

“I’d like to work with you on a menu,” Leah said. “I’ve got some ideas, but I’ll want your advice.”

“I’d like that,” Ivan replied. “If you have any recipes you would like to share from Thalian, I’d love to try them.”

Back off, dragon shifter, Ash’s dragon grumbled.

Don’t worry, Ash replied. *Leah is ours, and no one is going to change that.*

Unless you never get around to telling her, his dragon replied snarkily.

“Yes, I’ll write out some recipes for you. Although, I have to warn you, cooking and baking were never my passion.” Leah glanced at Ash before she continued, “I was always more interested in drinks and cordials when I was younger, and then later I transferred what I knew to wine and other liquor.”

“We should get together in the next couple of days,” Ivan said, and then glanced at his watch. “I need to get back to the kitchen.”

“Well, I think we are done here for now,” Logan said. “We’re happy to host, and you seem happy with the venue. We just need to get a date in the diary.”

“Let’s do that now,” Ash said and then paused and asked, “If that’s all right with you, Leah.”

“It is,” Leah said, her smile appreciative.

You’re learning, his dragon said.

Slowly but surely, Ash replied hopefully.

They left the dining room and Penny got the diary from behind the reception desk and opened it up. Between Ash and Leah, they settled on a date in two weeks. Ash would have preferred something sooner but when Leah voiced her concerns about getting the wine and food ready so that it was to the highest standard, he agreed.

“We’ll be in touch,” Logan offered Leah his hand. She shook it and then he shook Ash’s hand, sealing the deal.

“We did it.” Leah let out a long breath as they stood outside the hotel.

“We did. I thought it went well.” He glanced sideways at her. “Are you okay?”

“Yes.” She blew the air out of her cheeks. “I’m nervous. Excited. Worried that I’ve made a mistake.”

“With me?” Ash asked.

“No.” She shook her head firmly. “Well, I suppose... In a way.”

“How so?” His mood dampened.

“I don’t want to let you down.” Leah turned to look at him. “You’ve taken a chance on me, and I suppose I’m a little scared, this is my first time hosting an event that wasn’t for Vittorio’s clients. This is totally different, bigger than what I’m used to.”

“If it makes you feel better, then I’ll let you in on a secret,” Ash began, the pit in his stomach disappearing. “This is a first for me, too.”

“It is?” Leah asked in surprise.

“Yes. Before I came to Wishing Moon Bay, I worked in my family’s business. My father is still at the helm, even though he’s too old and too set in his ways. And then there are my sisters, they are all very driven...” He glanced at her. “You met one of them that first day at the apartment. Even though I have told them that I want to do things differently, they want me back.”

“Your sisters?” Leah asked, surprise on her face.

“Yes, I have three older sisters, Sofia, Ariel, and Orla.” Ash shrugged. “I love them, but I need to do this... What?” he asked as Leah chuckled, and then laughed, reaching out to hold on to his arm as her body shook. “What is so funny?”

“I thought... I thought...” Leah stammered in between breaths. “I thought you had a harem,” Leah said in a choked voice as she tried to control herself.

“A harem?” Ash tugged his brows together. “Why would you think that?”

“Because of the different women that visit your house.” Leah coughed, her laughter finally stopping. “And then earlier Orla came to the tavern. She was asking all these questions and although she said you were coworkers, it was obvious you were more to her than that. So I thought...”

“Oh, Leah.” Ash sighed and shook his head. “Don’t you know I am a shifter? And that there is only one woman for me?”

Leah nodded, meeting his eye. “Yes. I think I do.”

On the doorstep of the hotel, Ash cupped his mate’s face in his hand and lowered his head, capturing her mouth in their first, and most definitely not the last, searing kiss.

One that sealed their fates as they acknowledged the unbreakable bond they shared.

Chapter Eighteen – Leah

“Mom.”

Leah turned from Ivan as Maria ran into the dining hall, cutting off her conversation with Ivan about last-minute adjustments to the menu. There were only three days left until the event and her nerves were starting to kick in. But after talking to Ivan, she was confident the food at least would be perfect. And Ash would be arriving any moment with the wine from Horatio’s vineyard and the liquor from Liselle’s warehouse.

Leah simply needed to bring everything together.

And it *was* all coming together.

Leah just had to bring over the herbs and spices she’d been preparing over the last couple of weeks, which she would add to the drinks as a *seasoning* to help enhance the mood of the event.

“Hi, darling.” Leah held out her arms as Maria drew near. “Is everything all right?”

“Milo asked his mom if Tommy and I could sleep over tonight,” Maria said as she hugged her mom. “Can we?”

“If you want, and it’s all right with Penny.” Leah stood back up and looked about. “I’ll go see if she’s around. I think we’ve covered everything?” she asked Ivan.

Ivan nodded, smiling at the two of them. “I think so. I’ll go and double-check if there’s anything else we need to order in.” He turned and left.

“Logan is in the reception area if you want to ask him where Penny is.” Maria took hold of Leah’s hand and pulled her toward the door.

“Hold on a minute,” Leah said and pulled back. “I have to collect my notes together.”

“I’ll help,” Maria said, and together they gathered up the sheets and scraps of paper that were strewn over the table, filled with scribblings of recipes, table layouts, seating plans, and more.

“Milo says there’s a volleyball tournament on the beach on the weekend, and his friends will be there from school. Can we go, too?” Maria asked. “I’d like to know some of the others before we start school.”

“That sounds like a lovely idea,” Leah replied.

“And we should make our wishes soon!”

“We will, Maria. When this event is over we can spend more time at the beach.”

“Here.” Maria handed over the pieces of paper she’d collected. “Now, can we go and ask Logan?”

“Let’s go find him.” Leah smiled as she let Maria lead her back toward reception. She couldn’t be happier with how comfortable Maria and Tommy seemed to be in their new lives. Over the last couple of weeks of being in Wishing Moon Bay, Leah had watched them grow and thrive, whereas before she felt like they were being suffocated by the pressure of their father. Their vision of the world and their place in it had expanded, and they had tried so many different things. Although dragon riding remained firmly their favorite.

Talking of dragons, Ash was due any moment. She swallowed down the wave of desire that coursed through her every time she thought of the dragon shifter. Her mate.

They’d been so busy they had barely had any time together, other than stolen moments between Leah’s shifts at the tavern, her role as a mom, and the organizing of this event. But when it was over, she planned to get to know him much better.

It was time to move on. Despite her fears, Vittorio seemed to have let her go. He hadn’t turned up unannounced to persuade her to go home. He had sent none of his associates to pass on veiled threats.

Perhaps he had just moved on as well. Perhaps he didn’t even know where they were.

She was free.

No, that wasn't quite true. She was bound to a dragon shifter. A fated mate.

The idea sent a thrill through her veins.

"Hey there, you two. Everything all right?" Logan looked up from behind the desk as they entered the reception area.

"Hi, Logan. Maria tells me that Milo has invited them to a sleepover tonight," Leah said, hoping Logan was in the loop.

"Yes. Milo has been asking for days. He wants to show them the haunted hotel," Logan replied, oddly casual.

"Haunted? Is it really?" Leah asked.

"It was," Logan said with a wave. "And Milo still has a fascination with it."

"One of the old owners haunted it," Maria said in a hushed whisper.

"And that doesn't frighten you?" Leah asked, not wanting her daughter to end up with nightmares.

"No." Maria shook her head. "Why would it?"

"In that case, the answer is yes," Leah replied. An evening without her children. The first since she had moved to Wishing Moon Bay. She could soak in a long bath while drinking wine and reading a book. What bliss.

"Thank you!" Maria hugged her briefly and then ran off, calling for Tommy.

"And thank you," Leah said to Logan.

"You're welcome," Logan said. "Milo talks about your children nonstop. He's made friends at school, but I think he likes that Maria and Tommy know what it's like to be new in town."

"It certainly has been a culture shock in many ways," Leah admitted. "I'd forgotten how magic is used so openly here. Like it's part of the everyday."

“It’s what I love about this town.” Logan turned to look at the entrance, his eyes distant for a moment, similar to how Ash’s gaze became unfocused when he sensed someone.

“Is that Ash?” Leah’s heart fluttered at the thought of seeing him. It was like she was a teenager again, and he was her first love. But he was more than her first love. He was her only love. There would never be another man for her again.

Color crept across her cheeks. She knew this deep down in her soul even though they hadn’t known each other for more than a few weeks and had only shared stolen kisses. It felt like she was young again.

“Penny thought you might like some time alone,” Logan said quietly. “She knows what it’s like to be a single parent.”

“Oh.” Leah ducked her head. “I...”

Logan chuckled. “Ash might be a dragon shifter, but he is devoted to you and the children. And although I had some reservations to begin, I will admit, he does seem to have changed. He’s committed to making this whole ‘business forum’ work, and seeing him with you and your kids...”

“You know?” Leah asked quietly.

“We knew the moment we saw the two of you together,” Logan said. “That’s why Valerie asked him to promise you that he’d changed. A shifter would not outright lie to his mate.”

“Really?” Leah asked. It was as if a weight had been lifted, as if the final barrier that had been keeping them apart had tumbled to the ground.

“Really,” Logan nodded.

Leah had to fight not to run to the door as she heard the truck Ash had borrowed from Ivan pull up outside.

“Yeah, believe me...” Logan held up his hand. “Not that I have ever tried. You know, to lie to Penny...”

Leah flashed him a smile. “I believe you.” Then she tucked her paperwork under her arm and headed outside to meet Ash, armed with this new information about her mate. She

smothered a smile as he got out of the van and closed the door, his eyes fixed on her.

She'd never guessed a man could make her feel so desirable with just a look. Her smile faded as she recalled her feelings for Vittorio. She had been so sure she was in love with him, but now, thinking back, it paled into insignificance compared with her feelings for Ash.

"Did you get everything we need?" Leah said, assuming her professional role as Ash's business partner.

"I did." Ash went around to the back of the truck and dropped the tailgate. "And Horatio gave me this." He plucked out a bottle of the golden wine.

"I thought Horatio said he couldn't part with any more bottles."

"What can I say? I can be very persuasive," Ash said.

"You didn't?" Leah covered her mouth with her hands.

"No. I didn't. I think he likes what we're trying to accomplish." Ash passed it to her. "And he knows we are for real..."

"We are." She closed her hands around the bottle and stared into its golden depths.

"I also believe that he was so impressed by *you* that he wanted you to have it," Ash said, his chest rumbling as he spoke in a way that made her insides turn to liquid fire.

"You're flattering me," Leah murmured as her voice caught in her throat.

"Not at all," Ash said. This guy sure was good for her self-confidence. "You have a talent, and Horatio can see that. Perhaps because you are on the same wavelength."

"So, what are we going to do with this?" Leah held up the golden wine.

"I thought we could drink it after the event." He stepped closer to her and she could feel the heat emanating from his body. "I think we deserve a celebration, don't you?"

“You don’t want to take it back to Cairnnor and see if you can get some orders for Horatio’s next batch from your contacts there? I’m sure this would go for quite a bit at an auction,” she asked. “Or maybe you could visit your family and tell them you are a success, and you want them to celebrate with you.”

“I want to share it with *you*,” Ash replied. “This is *our* achievement. *You* and *me*.”

“Yeah.” She reached out a tentative hand and placed it on his chest. “You and me.”

“Forever.” He wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her close before he lowered his head and kissed her lips. Heat spread across her skin as their kiss deepened, and he ran his tongue along her lower lip, sending shivers down her spine. It was as if the world stood still for them.

And she knew then how she wanted to spend her evening. Not alone. But in his arms.

“We should get these bottles unloaded,” she whispered as their kiss broke.

“Or we could stay here like this for a while longer,” he murmured against her ear.

“We could.” She sighed and pulled away. “But until I explain all *this* to the children...”

“I know,” Ash replied. “I can’t imagine it’s easy to tell your kids that you’re seeing someone who isn’t their father. Especially since the divorce wasn’t that long ago.”

“I don’t want to confuse them.” She lay her head on his chest and listened to the steady thud of his heart. “I know I’m being extra cautious because they like you a lot.”

“It’s okay.” He pulled back from her and brushed her hair from her shoulder. “And we have forever.”

“We do.” She sucked in a shuddering breath. “I’m still trying to get my head around that.”

“Take all the time you need.” Although the expression on Ash’s face said differently. His eyes were intense as he looked

at her, like a man possessed.

Damn, she wanted him to possess her.

“We really should...” She pointed at the cases of liquor.

“Right.” He turned around and grabbed one and handed it to her.

“Thanks.” She hesitated before she headed into the hotel. “I wanted to get these inside quickly because I need to get home and grab the kids’ stuff. Milo has invited them over for a sleepover.”

“A sleepover.” Bottles rattled loudly as Ash picked up two cases of wine.

“Yeah. I have an evening to myself,” she said nonchalantly as they walked side by side into the hotel.

“That’s... An evening to yourself,” he paused. “Alone.”

“That is what an evening to yourself usually means,” she said with a flick of her hair as she opened the door and went inside. Ash grabbed the door before it closed, sticking close to her side as they walked past the reception desk.

“Do you want me to take that?” Logan dodged around the reception desk and held out his arms for the case of liquor.

“Thanks, Logan,” she said. “I’ll go get another one.”

“I’ll help Ash unload the truck,” Logan offered. “If you want to go and grab Tommy and Maria’s sleepover things.”

“Are you sure?” Leah asked.

“Absolutely. They’re in the kitchen with Ivan. I think he’s helping them make dinner for this evening,” Logan said. “I heard Tommy saying he plans to try all kinds of things so he can decide what he wants to do as a career.”

Leah smiled to herself. Tommy was coming out of his shell. She’d expected him to struggle with the change of life, but he’d reached out and grabbed the chance with both hands.

And maybe tonight Leah might do the exact same thing.

Only she was going to grab hold of a certain dragon shifter.
He just didn't know it yet.

Chapter Nineteen – Ash

Leah was alone. For the first time since she had moved in next door to him, she was alone in the apartment.

Sat on his sofa staring at the wall between the apartments, the thin brick and mortar the only thing that separated them.

The temptation to cross the hallway and knock on her door was too much. And if she didn't answer he'd be half tempted to kick it in.

But did she want his company? Or did she want to be alone?

It was an impossible conundrum.

Just go over there and knock on the door, his dragon suggested. If she doesn't want you there you'll know. After all, you are the king of empathy.

I don't know, Ash answered. She's not as easy to read as everyone else.

Isn't that why we wound up here? Because you got too sensitive to other people's feelings, his dragon said.

With a low growl, Ash took a sip of his whisky and pushed himself to his feet. The back of his legs rested against his sofa, where he'd been seated, staring at the wall for the last hour or more. It would be so easy to slump back down into the seat. To dream about Leah instead of facing her.

But the urge to see Leah, to hold her in his arms, was too strong.

Ash raised the glass to his lips and drained the last of the amber liquid before he placed it on the floor.

Then he rolled his shoulders and straightened his spine as if he were about to step into the fighting ring.

Why was this so hard?

Because it was new. Sure, he'd dated women before, but he'd always known, as had they, that their relationship was fleeting. It meant there was no real pressure to get it right.

Until now. He needed to get this right because Leah was his mate. This was his one chance at love.

His dragon chuckled to himself. *Just get over there. Isn't Ariel always complaining that you overthink everything?*

She is. Ash strode toward the door. No more overthinking. They were mates, she would be happy to see him. Wouldn't she?

There was only one way to find out and it sure as hell wasn't sitting here drinking whisky.

Ash left his apartment and crossed the hallway to Leah's door. Before he had a chance to lose his nerve, he raised his hand to knock on the freshly painted door. But then he stalled.

He could sense her. Just on the other side of the door.

Was she craving his company in the same way he craved hers?

Before he could step back, the door opened, revealing Leah with a wine bottle and two glasses cradled in her hands.

"Oh," she uttered, surprise registering on her face. She took a step back, nearly losing her balance, but Ash quickly reached out and grabbed her arm, steadying her.

"Hi," he said, giving her a lopsided smile that he hoped came off as charming and not awkward.

"Hi," Leah replied, her face flushing pink as she straightened up.

There was an uncomfortable silence, as if neither knew what to say next as he stood holding her.

"I wanted to come over and...check on you." The words sounded lame even to him, but he pressed on. "I was going to invite you over for a drink."

"I had the same idea." She held up the bottle, adding, "It's not the golden wine, but it's good. I found it at a local shop."

Her eyes misted with tears before she continued. “It’s from a vineyard in Thalian near my old home.”

“I’d love to try it,” Ash agreed, relieved that he’d been spared trying to fathom if Leah wanted to spend her evening with him or not. “My place or yours?”

“Since you’re here, why don’t you come in?” Leah suggested, stepping back to allow him entrance.

“Great.” Ash raked a hand through his hair, suddenly nervous—a feeling he wasn’t accustomed to. He took a deep breath, gathered his courage, and stepped inside her apartment. It was one small step but it was a massive leap forward for their relationship.

Leah led him to the kitchen area, where she set the wine bottle and glasses on the counter, and then retrieved a corkscrew from a drawer. Ash watched, captivated, as she opened the wine and leaned in to sniff it. Her eyes closed as if the scent transported her back to her hometown.

“Do you miss it?” Ash asked, his curiosity piqued.

“The wine?” Leah replied, opening her eyes and carefully pouring two glasses.

“No, your home.” Ash rolled his eyes and grinned as he realized she was teasing him. “But you knew that.”

Leah smiled in return, and Ash’s heart skipped a beat. “I did. But I couldn’t resist teasing you.” She handed him a drink. “Here. See what you think?”

Ash sniffed the deep ruby-red contents of the glass and then took a sip. “Wow. That is…” He didn’t know how to describe it since wine was not really his thing.

“Full-bodied.” Leah sipped her wine and smiled. “It was my mom’s favorite, whenever I visited her I used to pick up a bottle or two to share.”

“So, do you miss it?” Ash asked. “Home?”

“Thalian? I’m not sure I ever thought of it as home.” Leah took a long sip of her wine. “I don’t miss it as much as I thought I would. I think it’s mostly because the children have

settled here so fast. If they were homesick, then I would be questioning if I'd done the right thing."

"Okay." Ash nodded slowly. "But do you *miss* it?"

Leah looked thoughtful for a moment. "No. I don't think I do. There was money, power, excitement. Almost any luxury I wanted. But I now that I'm here, in Wishing Moon Bay...I'd choose this over that any day."

Ash's instincts wanted nothing more than to pry deeper. To learn who Leah used to be, and what her life used to look like. What her ex-husband was like. But she was clearly being evasive, and he didn't want to spoil the moment. "So where is the other home then?"

"Right here." Leah locked eyes with him.

Ash bit his lip and glanced down. "I'm glad you feel that way. And if you don't want to answer my question, that's okay."

Leah smiled and touched his hand. "I did answer. I was born in Wishing Moon Bay."

Ash's eyes widened. "Really?"

"Yeah, really." Leah turned her head to look out the window. "We didn't stay here long after I was born. My parents weren't the small-town kind of people, and so they up and left, headed overseas in search of opportunity and fortune."

"Did they ever find it?"

Leah hesitated before she looked back at him. "Yeah. I think they did."

Ash chuckled softly. "It's ironic, as I had all the opportunity in the world across the sea from here. But the fortune I wanted was here all along."

Leah's eyes twinkled. "Cute."

Ash laughed into his wine glass. "If it's not obvious this isn't my area of expertise."

“No?” Leah topped up their wine glasses. “But then I imagine looking after kids isn’t either, but you did a pretty good job with that.”

“They’re good kids,” Ash said.

“They are. I’ve seen such a change in them already. They’ve grown, expanded their horizons...” She locked eyes with him. “You have helped them so much. Especially Tommy. Despite the fact that you come over as a big gruff dragon, you have a soft side and you are not afraid to get in touch with your feminine side either.”

“That would be down to my sisters,” Ash replied.

“Take the compliment.” Leah took a large gulp of wine and then set her glass down on the counter. With a nervous breath, she closed the space between them. “Here we are all alone and we’re talking about my children and your sisters.”

“What did you want to talk about?” Ash murmured as she took the glass from his hands and placed it down on the counter before coiling her hands around his neck.

“What if I don’t want to talk at all?” Leah asked.

“That would be fine, too,” Ash replied as he lowered his head and captured her lips with his own, soft and hesitant at first, as if testing the boundaries of their newfound intimacy. As Leah pressed farther into him, the kiss deepened, igniting a flame that had been smoldering between them for weeks.

Her fingers threaded through his hair as his tongue explored her mouth, tasting the sweet remnants of wine. His hands found their way to her waist, pulling her closer until there was no space left between their bodies. Leah sighed into him, a sound that only stoked the fire within him.

Her body felt warm against his, her breasts pressed against his chest, stirring a desire within him. Her breath hitched as his hand slipped beneath her blouse, tracing the curve of her waist before skimming upward, his thumb grazing the underside of her breast.

“Leah,” Ash rasped between ragged breaths as their kiss broke.

She looked up at him, her cheeks flushed, and her eyes glazed over with desire. “Yes?” she replied, her voice barely a whisper. Ash could feel the tremor in her fingers as they traced a path down his chest, her touch igniting sparks beneath his skin.

“I want you. Now. More than I have ever wanted anything in my life, but if this is too soon...” Ash held her close, hating the idea of her pushing him away, but that would be better than pushing her too far, too fast.

“We’re mates,” she said in reply. “I feel it in my bones. I feel it in my soul. Sometimes I think I’m going to explode. I want you so badly. Which is crazy...but it’s the truth.”

“Bedroom?” He arched a questioning eyebrow at her.

“I thought you would never ask.” She took hold of his hand and led him out of the room and down the hallway.

As they reached her bedroom, Leah released his hand and turned to face him. Her eyes held a certain fire that Ash couldn’t resist. He nuzzled her against the door, causing her to gasp in surprise. His lips descended on hers once more, the kiss fervent and filled with a raw intensity that was almost intoxicating. He moved his hands along her body, mapping its curves through the fabric of her clothes. His fingertips brushed against the hem of her shirt, teasing the skin underneath. Leah moaned into his mouth, her fingers fumbling with the buttons on his shirt.

Finally managing to undo them, she trailed her fingers over the hardened muscles of his chest, causing him to groan against her lips. Ash quickly shrugged off his shirt, breaking their kiss only long enough for the garment to hit the floor. He then turned his attention back to Leah, his hands making quick work of the buttons on her blouse.

He wanted to tear her clothes from her body, but instead, he took a breath and slowly inched the blouse over her shoulders. Her breasts swelled as her heart drummed against her ribcage. He could hear it, feel the heat of her skin as her eyes locked with his.

Dropping her blouse to the floor, he traced his fingers over the swell of her breasts. Her breath hitched as his fingers gently caressed her nipple through the fabric of her lace bra, his thumb rubbing its hardness in slow circles.

Without a word, Ash reached around her to unclasp her bra and cast it aside.

He groaned, a low guttural sound as he cupped her breasts, his thumbs rolling over the hardened peaks. Leah's eyes fluttered shut, her mouth parting in a soft moan. He brought his mouth down and gently nibbled on one nipple while his hand caressed the other. She gasped, her fingers digging into his bare shoulders.

But he wanted more.

Wrapping one arm around her waist, he guided her toward the bed. As they moved, she tugged at his belt with urgency, their bodies pressed together in a dance of desperate need. The belt came undone, and he bit his lower lip as he fought for control when her fingers brushed his arousal through his clothes.

Desperate to feel her hand around his hardness, he pushed his jeans and boxers down his legs and kicked them aside.

Leah gasped as she felt the hardness of him against her thigh. A low growl slipped from Ash's lips as Leah explored him, her hand wrapping around his shaft and stroking it gently. He let out a moan, his body arching into her touch. But he didn't want to rush this, not when it was their first time together.

Switching positions, he guided Leah to the bed and helped her lie down. His body covered hers, his weight pushing her into the soft comforter. Their eyes locked as he caressed her inner thigh, inching her skirt up higher.

His fingers traced the delicate lace of her panties as she squirmed beneath him, pressing herself against his fingers. The animal instinct within him roared up, ready to claim her, but he tamed it down.

He moved like a predator about to capture his prey, pressing his hands against her inner thighs. She moved them apart, and he slid her skirt up and then hooked his fingers around her panties, pulling them to one side.

Leah arched her back, watching as he lowered his head and flicked his tongue over her most sensitive flesh.

She gasped, her hands tangling in his hair as he hummed against her, sending vibrations across her flesh that drove her wild. His strong fingers gripped her hips still as he moved his mouth over her, each flick of his tongue sending shudders through her body.

As she writhed beneath him, he slipped his hand along her thigh and then dipped his fingers into her wetness. A gasp tore from her lips, her body arching off the bed as he plunged two fingers deep within her. His thumb brushed over her sensitive bud, his tongue mimicking the movement.

“Oh! Oh!” Leah grasped the comforter as the sensations built, spiraling higher and stronger with each stroke of his fingers and brush of his tongue. Her breath came in gasps, her body tightening as she rushed toward the precipice.

“Look at me,” Ash commanded, his voice rough with desire. He raised his head from between her legs, his eyes dark and full of primal desire. Leah met his gaze as her inner muscles pulsed around his fingers.

His fingers continued their tantalizing dance inside her, pressing against that sweet spot as she came.

Then, as the tremors of her climax subsided, he stripped off her skirt and panties and moved between her thighs. She reached between their bodies, her hand curling around his hardness.

As she stroked her hand up and down, applying just the right amount of pressure, she guided him into her slick heat.

Ash inched forward, barely in control as he pushed inside her. Leah moaned, her body arching beneath him with every slow, deliberate inch he claimed. He moved slowly, giving her

time to adjust, his hands bracing on either side of her head as he watched her face for any signs of discomfort.

But all he saw was pleasure; pleasure that mirrored his own as he fully sheathed himself inside her. Once buried deep within her, he stilled, his breathing ragged. Then he began to move, slowly at first, in and out, his rhythm increasing with each thrust. Leah's nails dug into his back, her body writhing beneath him as he moved. A deep growl resonated from his chest, a primal sound as he captured her lips in a heated kiss, his tongue twirling around hers, mimicking the rhythm of their bodies.

He was close. So close to coming, but he wanted her to come, too, to feel her inner muscles tighten around him as he filled her with his seed.

Ash cupped her breast in his hand, and as their kiss broke, he sucked her nipple into his mouth, his teeth grazing her taut nipple.

She tensed and arched her back as he finally lost control. As his orgasm claimed him, she reached a shuddering climax, as he filled her with his seed and the promise of another child.

Chapter Twenty – Leah

Leah reached out to silence her alarm. As she switched it off, a thrill of nervous energy coursed through her.

Nervous energy that had nothing to do with the dragon shifter lying next to her.

No, this nervous energy revolved around the event she and Ash were hosting at the hotel.

Today.

Excitement bubbled up inside of her. All the preparations were in place. Everyone knew their part. Valerie and everyone else at the hotel had been so supportive and encouraging nothing could go wrong.

Penny had even offered for Tommy and Maria to sleep over again so that Leah and Ash could get an early start with no hitches.

She sighed in the silence that followed the alarm. Maybe there was just enough time for her to work off some of this nervous energy.

But as she reached out for Ash, she found her bed empty.

Perhaps he had gone to the hotel early without her. But the smell of fresh coffee told her he was likely still in the apartment.

She smiled to herself. Perhaps he'd made her breakfast.

Leah pulled on her robe and padded out to the kitchen. The sight that greeted her made her heart flutter in her chest. Ash, shirtless, his back muscles rippling under his tanned skin, was flipping pancakes. His long hair was tousled from sleep, and he seemed completely oblivious to her entrance.

His concentration was entirely on what he was doing. Leah crossed the kitchen and wrapped her arms around his waist from behind, pressing her cheek against the warmth of his back. His muscles tensed under her touch and then relaxed.

“Morning,” she whispered.

“Morning.” He flipped the last pancake and turned off the stove.

“You’re up early,” she said as she relinquished her hold on Ash and fetched the plates from the cupboard.

“I couldn’t sleep,” Ash admitted, transferring the pancakes onto the plates Leah held out for him. His words were casual, but there was a hint of something in his voice that troubled Leah.

“Is there something wrong?”

“No.” He shook his head and then motioned to the table where a collection of papers was spread across it. “I was going over my notes.”

“For the event?” Leah asked, her brows furrowing in concern.

“Yes,” he nodded, moving over to the table and picking up a paper. “I just wanted to ensure I have everything covered.”

Leah put the plates down on the table and scanned the notes Ash had made.

“Wow,” she muttered under her breath. “These are what? Profiles of the business owners who are coming?”

“Some of them are,” Ash muttered, placing the paper back onto the table and rubbing his temples.

Leah moved closer, touching his arm gently. His skin was warm under hers, the hard muscle beneath it unyielding.

“This is really important to you, isn’t it?” she asked.

“More than you know,” Ash replied. The look in his eyes was serious, intense.

Leah chewed on her lower lip. “And this is what you were doing when you could have been in bed with me.”

He tore his gaze from the papers and turned to face her. “I also made pancakes.”

“You did,” she acknowledged. “But this...” Leah swept her hand across the table, the scattered papers rustling under the gust of her movement. “Don’t you think this is a bit far? Profiling all of your potential business partners? How did you even get some of this information?”

“It’s important to always know who exactly you’re dealing with,” Ash said darkly.

“I get that,” Leah said. “But these are just words on paper. You need to trust what is in your heart. Empathy is your gift. You don’t need to spend all night poring over research, or people watching. Just be yourself when the time comes.”

Ash caught her hand in his own, pressing a soft kiss on her knuckles. His lips were warm and welcoming, but it was his eyes that held Leah captive. They burned with a fierce determination that scared her. “But what if it’s not enough? I need this to work. We both do.”

There was something in those last words that sent a shiver down her spine. His desperation was raw, palpable—like he was fighting for something far bigger than just the success of an event.

Their future.

“It will be,” Leah tried to reassure him, squeezing his hand. “Now, let’s eat these pancakes before they get cold.”

She sat down at the table and Ash gathered the papers together into a neat pile before he joined her. The pancakes were still warm and golden brown. Leah added fresh berries and a drizzle of honey before she took a bite.

“These are so good,” she complimented. “If this doesn’t work out, you could always make a living selling pancakes.”

She said the words lightly, but Ash’s expression hardened, and not for the first time, he reminded her of Vittorio. Focused and ambitious. Needing to succeed at all costs.

“I’m not going to fail,” he ground out.

“It was a joke,” she said lightly.

“Sorry.” Ash glanced at the pile of papers. “I just need this to work.” There was so much vulnerability in his voice that her heart ached for him. She’d gotten this wrong. His need to succeed was different from Vittorio’s. Her ex-husband had pursued power and wealth, but Ash was chasing something else.

Something more personal. He was trying to steer his life in a new direction. He wanted to build something for them.

As his mate, Leah had to help him in any way she could.

“I’m going to take a shower,” Ash announced as soon as he swallowed the last piece of his pancakes.

“I’m going to have another cup of coffee,” Leah said, watching as Ash stood from the table.

“You don’t want to join me?” he asked, his tone softer now.

“No, as tempting as that sounds,” Leah said.

“Okay,” he left the room looking a little disappointed.

Leah listened until she heard the soft click of the bathroom door closing behind him and the sound of running water. She sighed and her gaze fell on the pile of papers covered in neat writing.

With a guilty glance toward the bathroom, she picked up the first piece of paper and scanned Ash’s handwritten notes.

Each paper was an impressively detailed profile of people who would attend the event later that day. They looked to be the result of careful observation and inference—their business model, whether they had plans to expand, if they were always local. Some of them even included favorite foods and what they did on breaks.

There was the local florist who refused to sell roses because she hated clichés. The heartbroken baker who lovingly baked cinnamon rolls every morning because they were his late wife’s favorite. The mapmaker who never seemed to leave his store, but frequently had parcels from foreign addresses delivered to his door.

Leah blinked rapidly and shook her head. She would never have taken Ash for the kind to survey people like this. He always seemed to be collected and easygoing.

Draining her coffee cup, she placed all the dirty dishes in the sink and headed to the bedroom to get dressed. She didn't have time to have doubts now. Anyway, perhaps Ash had the right idea of getting...acquainted with the people he was trying to impress. Besides, wasn't that what she used to do when trying to host events before?

Not to this extent maybe.

After carefully choosing her outfit from the small selection she'd brought with her to Wishing Moon Bay, she carefully styled her hair into a tight bun, letting just a few strands hang down and frame her face before applying subtle makeup.

"Wow." Ash stood in the doorway, a towel draped around his hips, and water droplets glistening on his chest.

"Back at ya." Leah turned around and licked her lips, wanting to lick the water from his toned skin. "You should go and get dressed."

"Are you trying to get rid of me?" Ash arched a seductive eyebrow at her.

"I am." She ushered him out of the room. "On second thought, maybe you should go with that look." She tilted her head to one side and admired him. "You'd definitely make an impression."

Ash chuckled, the sound rumbling through his chest like a purring dragon. "I don't think that is the impression I am going for."

Leah shrugged, her smile playful. "Suit yourself."

He chuckled as he padded down the hallway and out of the apartment, heading for his own. As the door closed behind him, Leah took one last look in the mirror.

She studied her reflection, noting the slight flush in her cheeks and the sparkle in her eyes. Ash certainly knew how to fluster her, she thought with a chuckle. The neatly tailored

navy-blue dress clung to her in all the right places, accentuating her curves.

The simple silver necklace nestled against her collarbones added a touch of elegance, while her well-loved pair of black heels gave her an air of comfort and familiarity. Her makeup was understated, but she had taken care to add just enough to bring out the brightness of her eyes and the fullness of her lips.

She was ready to face the day. And slay!

Leah smiled to herself as she grabbed her purse and headed for the door. As she closed it behind her, the hairs on the back of her neck stood on end as she sensed Ash coming out of his apartment. She was developing her own shifter senses where her mate was concerned.

“Ready to go?” she asked as she turned around.

“I’m ready for anything with you by my side.” Ash closed the distance between them and inhaled her scent before he kissed her on the cheek.

“You say the nicest things.” She took his arm, and they headed toward the street.

Ash looked every bit the part of a dashing entrepreneur with a hint of a rebellious streak. He was clad in a charcoal gray three-piece suit that fit him like a glove, sculpting his well-built form in an utterly enticing way. His long, shoulder-length hair was neatly pulled back into a man bun, a stark contrast to the smart attire, yet somehow it worked perfectly with his overall rugged charm. The stubble added an edge to his otherwise suave appearance.

When they reached the street, Leah unlocked the car Helena had loaned her for the day. Ash opened the door for Leah, and she climbed into the driver’s seat and inserted the key in the ignition. He circled around to the driver’s side and slid in, his muscular form barely fitting in the vehicle.

Leah glanced at him and smothered a giggle as she buckled her seatbelt.

“This car is not built for a dragon,” Ash said dryly.

“No, it’s not,” Leah agreed, as her giggle erupted into laughter.

Ash chuckled and then laughed along with her. “We’re supposed to be taking this seriously.”

“Maybe that’s the problem,” Leah said. “We’re taking it too seriously. Let’s just try to relax a little and enjoy the day.”

“I’ll try,” Ash replied, but she got the feeling that he wasn’t entirely convinced it was possible.

Maybe he’d relax a little once they got to the hotel, and the guests started to arrive. Leah had often found that her nerves were worse in anticipation than in the actual event. As they drove away from the apartment, she turned to look at Ash. His eyes were distant, a frown creased his handsome face.

He looked like a brooding dragon. He needed to drop that attitude if he wanted to win over the people attending the event.

Chapter Twenty-One – Leah

“It’s nearly time.” Leah placed her hand on Ash’s shoulder. “Are you ready?”

“Yes. It only took all morning to get this place perfect.” He glanced sideways at her. “It looks good, doesn’t it?”

“Exceptional,” Leah replied as she scanned the room.

The tables were set out with each seat having a small pack of information sheets, showing the carefully laid out schedule of talks and mingling time, as well as a brief introduction to the speakers that Ash had invited in—including more than a few names that would be familiar to the locals. Each was crowned in the center with a pretty array of flowers and herbs native to the mountains around the town that Leah had picked out. Chamomile and lavender for their calming and comforting aroma, and some lemon balm for a refreshing tang.

“I just hope I can win them over,” Ash said.

“You will,” Leah assured him. “You just need to be your charming self.”

Ash snorted. “I don’t think they see me as charming.”

“The way Orla described you, charming is your talent. You know how to appear relaxed, genuine, confident, and say just the right thing. Isn’t that how you closed so many deals?” Leah asked.

“It’s how I ruined so many lives,” Ash replied, staring forward.

“And now you have to turn that charm on and use it to help people.” She moved to stand in front of him and cupped his face in her hands. “I believe in you, Ash.”

He smiled down at her and stroked her cheek gently. “I love you, Leah.”

Leah was stunned for a moment before she said, “You do pick your moments, Ash.”

“I wanted to tell you in case this ends with pitchforks and torches,” he replied lightly, but there was an intensity to his gaze.

“In that case, I should admit that I love you, too.” She stood on tiptoes and pressed her lips to his cheek. “Now, go do your thing.”

“I will.” Ash turned toward the door leading to the entrance hall as the first couple of guests arrived, looking around the room.

“And I will go do mine.” Leah hugged him closely and then let him go.

Ash straightened his jacket and headed toward the door to welcome the steady stream of people who were entering the room, while Leah headed for the catering table and bar.

The two long tables had been pushed to the edge of the room just as discussed and were already laid out with some of the cold foods and starters, with the serving staff bringing out the last of the nibbles from the kitchen.

“At least people have turned up,” Logan whispered in her ear as he came from behind the bar and handed her a cup of coffee. “You look as if you need this.”

“Thanks, Logan. And you’ll have to thank Penny again for looking after Maria and Tommy.” She sipped her coffee and took one last look at Ash as he walked a group of people in, before switching her attention to the array of food and drink on display. “Is everything still on track?”

“Yes.” Logan led her to the bar. “The drinks you chose are all out, with plenty in reserve. And Ivan is about to start on the hot foods, so they’ll be ready in about an hour, just after the first talk. He’s been getting us all to taste the recipes you gave him to make sure they’re perfect. I have to say, Thalias have good taste in foods.” Logan nodded. “And of course, plenty of coffee and teas. So many teas.”

Leah giggled. “If there is one business that Ash has already won over, it’s the ladies in the tea shop beneath his apartments. They adore him.”

“Penny and Helena have enjoyed working with him, too. They’ve already implemented some of his suggestions. The pop-up stores he suggested have been especially good.” Logan wiped his hands on his thighs. “They’re giving a presentation today and I think I am more nervous than them.”

“They’ll do fine.” Leah went around the bar and took out a small tumbler. “Why don’t I fix you a drink?”

“I don’t usually drink on duty,” Logan replied.

“Just try this. It’ll make you feel more relaxed.” She opened a bottle of gin that Liselle, Flint’s mate, had supplied and poured a small measure into the glass. After sniffing it, she went to the array of herbs and spices she’d brought along to complement the drinks and added a touch of *Rhodiola* to help relieve stress. “Here. Sip it slowly.”

Logan took the glass from her and sniffed it. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen herbs added to a drink like that.”

“It’s called a botanical infusion. I don’t know why it’s so uncommon, but if you know what you’re doing, you can really bring out the flavor and feel of a drink. Especially when that drink already has as much feeling as Liselle’s brews.”

Logan lifted it to his lips. “Wow.” He smacked his lips together. “It works quickly!”

“Take a couple of sips whenever you feel your stress building. Just...try not to be so stressed that you can’t see straight because of all the drink,” Leah laughed. “And I can’t take all the credit. Liselle has a genuine talent for brewing. I don’t know how she does it, but these do invoke a powerful emotion. But that just means that with the right addition, you can focus on what a person needs.”

“Could you focus in on something for my aching knees?” Valerie asked as she came to join them.

“I’m not sure if that’s within the scope of a few herbs in a drink,” Leah replied.

“I was helping Ivan in the kitchen, and was reminded that I am old,” Valeria said. “Logan, could you go and help your brother?”

“I can.” Logan took another sip from his glass. “Anything else you need, Leah, just holler.”

“I will,” Leah said as Logan kissed his mom on the cheek and then left the room.

“Your dragon is a little on edge, isn’t he?” Valerie nodded toward Ash, who was standing in the middle of the room, surrounded by groups of men and women in formal wear chatting amongst themselves. Leah could see that he was trying to break his way into one of the groups but was being met with animosity.

Perhaps because his reputation of going for a hard sell had preceded him. Or because he looked tense, his brows tugged together as if he was walking under his own personal storm cloud.

“This means so much to him,” Leah told Valerie. “It’s never easy to go it alone.”

“But he’s not alone,” Valerie replied. “He has you.”

“I’m just here for the refreshments,” Leah replied.

“Leah, you are Ash’s mate. Fate brought you together now. At this precise moment. And there’s a reason for that,” Valerie told her.

“And that is?” Leah looked at the older woman.

“You have a gift, from what I have heard. You are the perfect host. So go out there and host.” Valerie arched an eyebrow at Leah. “Was that too harsh?”

“No,” Leah shook her head.

“Can I offer you a piece of advice?” Valerie asked.

“That wasn’t it?” Leah asked.

Valerie shook her head. “I have six grown sons and I watched them as they met their mates and overcame whatever obstacles fate threw at them. And the thing I learned was that you have to embrace who you are. And only you know who that is.”

Leah thought the words over. Was Valerie the author of the snippets of advice the host stand liked to quote in *The Lonely Tavern*?

As Leah watched Ash place himself between the two men, Valerie seemed to melt away. But her advice stayed. Vittorio had made her cautious, even fearful of using her magic, but Leah was no longer under his control, and no longer in Thalian. She was free to use her gift, and her magic, in any way she wanted. It wasn't something to be hidden and ashamed of until it was useful to him. She was the master of herself, and she would use her gifts as she saw fit.

“Okay, Leah. Do your thing.” Leah raised her hand and waved at Ash to catch his attention. It wasn't hard as his eyes wandered around the room as the other two men spoke to one another, excluding him.

Then she beckoned to him and made a small circular motion, hoping she could convey her message to him. He stood up and for a moment, she thought he was going to come alone. But then she nodded at the two other people with him.

Ash tilted his head to one side and then his eyes widened, and he mouthed, “Ah.” Then he spoke to the two men at the table and glanced toward the bar.

“That's it,” Leah slipped behind the drinks stand. “Come get a drink.”

As she watched the three men approached the bar, Leah poured a glass of Fire Isle Single Malt whisky and added a pinch of nutmeg, Ash's comfort drink. As they reached the bar, Leah handed the whisky to Ash, who gratefully accepted it.

Ash gestured to the two men. “This is a local baker here, and this is a local mapmaker. I don't think I've ever met a mapmaker.”

Leah held out her hand to the mapmaker. “Good afternoon. I hope you are enjoying the event so far. Why don't I pour you a drink?”

The mapmaker slipped his small hand into hers and adjusted his thin-framed glasses as he studied the drinks list. “It’s fine, I suppose. I think I’ll have a...”

Leah raised her hand and added a small, mischievous smile. “Ah, why don’t you let me decide.”

“You decide?” The mapmaker did not sound convinced. “But...”

But this was Leah’s gift. This was where she reigned supreme.

“Yes, let me.” Leah cut him off again, fixing him in her gaze. She shook her head softly, letting her hair flow. “You never know, there might be something here you’ll love, but never thought to try.”

“I—er...yes, okay,” the wiry man stammered.

Leah leaned forward slightly. She looked at his aged, but well-maintained suit. His pallid skin. And she had to admit, cast her mind back to the notes in Ash’s room. “You’re the cartographer, aren’t you? A man who sees the world on pieces of parchment, distant lands drawn with ink and pen. But those distant lands come alive to you. You see them in your mind...” Leah let her sentence trail off before reaching for a glass tumbler. She tapped on the tops of the collection of bottles before her fingers landed on a bottle of Liselle’s rum.

She poured a healthy serving, followed by a pinch of the herb *sprill*, then a dash of mint before finishing it off with a sprinkle of *hariam*, all from the small wooden dishes she had laid out earlier.

As she worked, she focused her breath, conjuring up a vision of a wide ocean with white shores just visible over the horizon. She stopped herself from whispering as she gazed intently into the drink, infusing it with a touch of magic along with the herbs.

“Here. Try this.” Leah set the glass down on a coaster in front of the mapmaker. “I call it, Distant Horizons.” The mapmaker looked bemused, and more than a little suspicious, as he raised the glass to his lips and took a sip. “Like it?”

“It’s...not my usual choice of drink,” the mapmaker said before taking a second sip. “But it’ll do.”

Leah smothered a smile as the mapmaker continued to sip his rum, his expression mellowing as if he’d been transported off to another place. He held the drink up to the light before nodding, satisfied, his eyes drifting toward the blue sky visible through the window.

As she switched her attention to the baker, her gaze met Ash’s for a moment. The mapmaker wasn’t the only one who was looking more relaxed. Although Ash’s expression held something much more intense as he watched her.

Leah looked away before she blushed. “And how are you doing there?” Leah held out her hand to the baker.

“Thinking I made a mistake coming here,” he said as he slipped his hand into hers, side-eying Ash. “It’s not really my sort of venue, a place like this.”

“Oh. I see. Well, let’s see if I can help with that.” Leah looked the man up and down. He had clearly dressed his best, but just as he said, he was likely used to much smaller gatherings. Leah thought for a moment and had to stop her lip from trembling as she recalled Ash’s notes on the baker and how he made cinnamon buns each morning because they were his dead wife’s favorite. “I have something special for you.”

When she had been tasting the drinks in preparation, she had come across one particular whisky from Liselle’s catalog that had unique properties.

Leah selected one of Liselle’s whiskies that had transported her back to the moment she knew she had to leave Vittorio and her old life. Its sourness had reminded her of the heartache, the pain, only to wash it away with a sweet glimpse of hope, of all the good things that were to come.

She picked out the bottle, and poured a measure, before adding a healthy helping of cinnamon and a pinch of sugar to take the edge off the sour kick. She mixed it well and handed it to the baker.

He thanked her, took a sip, and just stood still for a moment. “Wow.”

“How is it?” Ash asked.

“I’ve never had anything like it,” the baker said softly.

“I’ve found that as well,” Ash matched his tone. “There’s so much in this town that I’ve never seen anywhere else.”

“Have you traveled much?” the mapmaker asked.

“Not as much as I’d like to.”

“Really? As a...dragon...I’d have thought that you’d be able to go wherever you wanted,” the baker said.

“If only it were that easy.” Ash sighed. “Say, is there anything else special to Wishing Moon Bay you two think I should try? I’m trying to get the full experience seeing as I’m living here.”

“Gentlemen, if you’ll excuse me, I am going to go and see if I can tempt anyone else to try one of my drinks.” Leah gracefully moved to the edge of the bar. As she did, Ash lifted his hand and touched hers for a brief moment, without missing a breath as he talked.

His touch was electrifying, as if no words were needed for how he felt about her. And how she felt about him.

Valerie was right. They had been brought together at this time at this place for a reason. And Leah was determined to throw herself into her role and use her unique kind of magic how she’d always believed it was intended. Not to influence them per se, but to open their minds, give them comfort, and clarity.

An hour later, Leah stood behind the bar as Ash took the stage to give his first presentation. Everyone gathered in the room was sipping a drink as they listened to what he had to say with what she hoped was an open mind. She’d done her part. Now it was Ash’s turn to shine.

“Going well, isn’t it?” A man in a dark striped suit leaned his elbow on the bar as he watched Ash.

“It is,” Leah replied confidently, not taking her eyes off Ash as he picked up the microphone and started the introduction.

“But then you always had a gift for this type of thing, didn’t you?” The man kept his eyes forward, too.

“Excuse me?” Leah looked at the man. He had a thick, well-trimmed beard and a heavy brow. Not a face she recognized. “I’m sorry. Do we know each other?”

“We met once. A couple of months ago.” He turned his gaze on her. “I should be offended that you don’t remember me. But then you were going through some marriage difficulties.”

“Who are you?” Leah asked hoarsely.

But the man simply tapped the bar and said, “I’ll give your love to Vittorio next time I see him.”

Then he walked away from the bar and out of the room.

Chapter Twenty-Two – Ash

“Thanks for coming and we’ll talk soon, Tony.” Ash shook hands with the baker, who was the last of the stragglers who had hung back to talk to Ash.

“Tony, huh?” Leah asked as she crossed the room and handed him a glass of water.

“I’m meeting him tomorrow so we can hammer out the details of our agreement,” Ash said as he slid his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close. “I’m going to invest a lump sum with him so that he can hire an apprentice. He thinks once they’re trained, he’ll have enough time to start experimenting with some new bakes. And it’s all thanks to your hosting skills.”

“No, it’s not,” Leah insisted. “You are the one who got up there and showed them what you had to offer.”

“But your words, and of course drinks, put me, and them, in the right mood,” Ash insisted, not wanting to take credit away from his wonderful mate.

“I might have added a little something special to their drinks to help them loosen up, but all I put in yours was nutmeg,” Leah assured him firmly. “Just how you like it.”

“No magic?” Ash was more than surprised. Shocked would be more of a word he would use. He was certain after the first whisky Leah poured for him that she’d added a spell to make him relax and seem more friendly.

Less hostility, more hospitality, his dragon said lazily.

Exactly, Ash replied.

“Nope, not me,” Leah said, and he believed her. “Maybe it worked that way subconsciously.”

“Well, however, it worked...” He wrapped his arms around her waist and lifted her off her feet as he twirled around and around.

“Ash!” She placed her hands on his shoulders and laughed as she clung to him.

“Ah,” he said as he slowed and let her down gently. “This was a good day. I have more than enough interest in my business forum to get it off the ground. And as it grows, word will spread. It’s like a snowball rolling down a hill.”

“Did someone say snow?” Maria asked as she ran into the room, followed by Tommy and Penny.

“Ash was talking *metaphysically*,” Tommy said in a matter-of-fact tone.

“You might be right, Tommy,” Leah managed to keep a straight face as she hugged Maria.

The perfect end to a perfect day, Ash said to his dragon.

No, it would be more perfect if we flew into the mountains for a picnic and watched the sun go down, his dragon suggested. *We could always crack open that bottle of golden wine, too. After all, this is a day of celebration.*

“I cannot wait to get home, kick off my shoes, and soak in the bath,” Leah said, dashing Ash’s dragon’s plans. “We could get takeout, too. I don’t imagine either of us feels like cooking.”

“Oh, Ivan has some food for you to take home,” Penny said. “He wanted to thank you for sharing those recipes with him. He’s going to add a couple to the menu.”

“He shouldn’t have,” Leah said. “But I’m grateful he did. And thank you, Penny. I don’t know what we would have done without you these last couple of weeks.”

“Oh, I think you would have found a way.” Penny glanced at Ash. “But I’m glad you are not alone.”

“Me, too,” Leah said as she smiled at Ash.

But there was something in that smile that bothered him. The event had gone so well, but a couple of times while he was speaking to the people gathered in the room, he’d caught Leah warily looking around as if she were expecting the boogie man to jump out from the other side of the bar.

“Is there anything else we need to do?” Ash asked. The hotel staff had been clearing the room and reorganizing the tables and chairs, getting ready for the evening diners, as the event had wound up. Soon it would be as if it had never happened.

But it did happen, his dragon said. It happened, and it was a success.

“No, I think the staff has it under control,” Penny said. “Come on, I’ll walk you out.”

“Thanks.” Leah turned and beckoned Maria and Tommy, who were looking out of the large window. “Come on, let’s go.”

“Can we walk back along the beach?” Maria asked as she turned her back on the view of the hotel grounds.

Leah looked done in, but she nodded. “I think fresh sea air and a nice amble home are just what we need.” Then she paused. “How much food is there?”

“I’ll carry the food,” Ash offered with a raised hand.

What are you, in grade school? his dragon asked.

“Right, that’s settled,” Leah said. “If that’s okay with you, Ash.”

Ash froze for a second, then nodded. “That’s fine, whatever you want to do.”

Doesn’t that make you feel as if we are a real part of the family? his dragon asked.

It sure does, Ash answered. Now that this event is done and dusted, maybe Leah will tell the children we’re dating.

As they left the dining room and entered the reception area, Ash felt as if he were walking on air. He’d proved to himself he could succeed on his own. That he had succeeded on his own. Well, not alone, but without his family.

So maybe it’s time we went to visit the family and told them about Leah, his dragon suggested. We cannot hide the fact that

she is our mate for long since almost every other shifter we meet can tell just by looking.

You might be right, Ash said. And I guess it is time to bury the hatchet.

Preferably not in Ariel's back, his dragon joked.

I'm sure there have been plenty of times when she would have gladly buried it in my back. Or my front, Ash replied.

“There you are.” Logan stepped out of the staff door with a wide smile on his face and a bag filled with food containers. Ash could smell the delicious aroma wafting toward him. His stomach rumbled in response, loud enough to make Maria and Tommy giggle.

“Here we are,” Leah said, ignoring Ash’s stomach and the children’s giggles. “I want to thank you for everything you’ve done to make this a success.”

“That is down to you both.” Logan handed over the bag of food. “Here we go. Enjoy.”

“Thanks,” Ash said.

“Leah. I have your number; I’ll be in touch in the next couple of days with a list of dates for events we would like you to host.” Logan went to stand next to Penny and slipped his arm around her shoulders. If anyone was an advertisement for mates working together, it was these two. “Everyone thought today went perfectly, so we’d love to have you back.”

“That would be amazing,” Leah said. “I enjoy working at the tavern and all, but two hours a day is not enough, and it’s just not quite what I want to do.”

“People were saying nothing but good things about you as they left today,” Logan said. “I’m certain there will be plenty more offers of work.”

“I hope so.” Leah sighed happily. “Okay, if you are sure you don’t need us on cleanup duty, we should get going.”

“Have a good evening,” Penny said. “And I’ll call you tomorrow about another sleepover.”

“And Milo must come over and stay with us soon,” Leah said, as Logan opened the door for them. One by one, they said goodbye and filed outside into the late afternoon air.

“I feel better already,” Leah said as she sucked in a breath. “I’ve gotten used to being outside more in the day.”

“Well, there’s plenty of outside for you down at the beach,” Maria said.

“Why the sudden need to visit the beach?” Leah asked as they walked along the street.

“Because of these.” She dug her hand in her pocket and pulled out the four wish stones.

“You said we could make our wishes together,” Tommy said, “but you’ve been so busy we haven’t gotten around to it.”

“I’m sorry,” Leah said.

“It’s okay,” Maria said lightly. “We can do it now.”

“Do you have a wish?” Tommy asked as Maria slid the stones safely back into her pocket.

“I don’t know,” Leah said as she eyed Ash.

Perhaps she’s thinking all her wishes have already come true, Ash’s dragon said.

Or perhaps she’s thinking, why did I end up the mate of a dragon shifter, Ash said dryly.

“What about you, Ash?” Maria asked as she skipped toward him and threaded her hand through his. “Do you still wish you could climb the highest mountain in Cairnnor?”

“Is that your wish?” Leah asked, then jumped a little as a car door slammed shut loudly.

“Once upon a time it was,” Ash confessed as he watched color creep across Leah’s cheeks. “But that was a long time ago and I am not the same person I was back then.”

“So, what is it?” Maria asked.

“Isn’t there some rule that wishes won’t come true unless you keep it a secret?” Tommy asked.

“There is?” Maria asked with concern.

“I don’t think there is any hard and fast rule,” Leah assured her daughter.

“That’s not what Mi...” Tommy was cut off by Ash’s hand on his shoulder.

“Are you going to wish to catch the biggest fish in the bay?” Ash asked lightly.

“No,” Tommy replied. “When I catch a big fish, I want to know it was skill, not a wish.”

“I like that.” Ash looked up as they reached the beachfront. The afternoon sun blazed across the gentle ocean as it lapped at the shore, beckoning them.

“Here.” Maria pulled the wish stones out of her pocket and handed them out. “Let’s go make our wishes.”

“Last one there is a smelly sock!” Tommy called out as he jumped down onto the beach and raced toward the ocean.

“Wait for me!” Maria called as she sprinted after him.

“Shall we be smelly socks together?” Ash offered Leah his hand.

“I can’t think of anyone I would rather be a smelly sock with,” she replied, though she didn’t look at him as she spoke.

“Are you okay?” Ash asked as she slid her hand into his. The feel of her skin against his was electrifying, and he wished they could spend the night together to have their own intimate celebration beneath the sheets.

“I’m tired.” She smiled at him, but he knew her well enough to know there was something she was holding back.

Perhaps one of the guests at the event made her a job offer. Or maybe one of them asked her on a date.

Or maybe she is simply tired, his dragon replied.

You mean I might be overthinking this, Ash replied.

You took the words right out of my mouth, his dragon replied.

Ash squeezed Leah's hand, offering her comfort and his undying love as their eyes met.

Oh, maybe that's it, Ash said. *We told her we loved her. Maybe it was too soon.*

Well, you can't take it back, his dragon said. *And you wouldn't even if you could, since it's the truth. And anyway, she said it back.*

Perhaps she didn't mean it. She simply felt compelled to say it so that she didn't offend us. Ash sighed heavily. Had he messed things up with Leah?

Overthinking, his dragon said as she settled down for a nap.

"Do you have a wish in mind?" Leah asked, and Ash jumped guiltily.

Ash opened his hand and looked down at the smooth stone. "I have." He glanced at her. "And you?"

"Yes." She tugged at his hand. "Come on."

They ran toward the ocean to join Maria and Tommy at the edge of the water. There, the four of them stood in a line, staring out at the horizon. It was a solemn moment as they were each lost in thought.

"After three?" Leah asked.

"Do we say them out loud?" Maria asked.

"Maybe we could say them in our head and then tell each other when they come true," Leah suggested.

"Okay." Maria nodded, looking nervous as she closed her hand tightly around the stone.

"One," Leah began.

"Two," they all joined in. "Three!"

They all threw their stones, watching as they arced through the air, glimmering in the sunlight, before plopping into the ocean and disappearing beneath the surface.

"Now, we wait," Maria said with a firm nod of her head.

“But not here,” Leah said and took Maria’s hand, leading them toward the apartment building in the distance.

A half-hour later, they reached the entrance and filed in, chatting happily about the food Ivan had cooked for them. Maria ran to the landing to stare out of the window.

“Come on, let’s go have some food. I promise we’ll spend the day by the sea soon,” Leah called to her daughter.

Ash chuckled. “She really has fallen in love with the sea, huh?”

“I can’t say I blame her,” Leah said as they turned into the corridor leading to the apartments.

“I guess you didn’t live that close to the ocean before?” Ash turned to Leah, but she stood frozen just behind him. “What is it?” He followed her gaze toward the mat in front of her door.

“It’s flowers!” Maria rushed forward and scooped up the pretty bundle of long-stemmed black roses. “Like the ones Daddy used to give you!”

“They’re not from Daddy,” Leah said firmly as she snatched up the bouquet. She parted the stems, presumably looking for a card.

“Then who are they from?” Maria asked, standing on tiptoe to get a better look.

Leah glanced at Ash, but he shook his head. “Not me,” he said curtly.

But he sure as hell wanted to know who they were from. And why they were sending flowers to *his* mate.

Chapter Twenty-Three – Leah

“Ugh!” Leah turned over in bed and thumped the pillow, partly to make it more comfortable and partly in frustration at how things had ended between her and Ash last night.

Those damn flowers!

If only she knew who had sent them. Ash was convinced they were from a secret admirer. Maria was convinced they were a peace offering from Vittorio, while Leah was convinced they were a veiled threat, possibly from the man who had been at the event yesterday.

As for Tommy, he wasn't bothered about the flowers one bit. He was too preoccupied with thoughts of being a chef. The taste of Ivan's cooking had given Tommy the idea that he might like to open a restaurant in Wishing Moon Bay and fill the menu with traditional Thalian dishes.

Tommy had also made it clear he wanted Leah to be the hostess, the front face of the restaurant, welcoming people and seating them...

Leah thumped the pillow once more. She had to admit she liked the idea. But she had to figure out who the flowers came from first. Because if they were a threat, then they might not be staying in Wishing Moon Bay long enough to eat a meal at a restaurant, let alone open one.

“Ugh!” She rolled out of bed and grabbed her robe, sneaking out of her bedroom on tiptoes so as to not wake the children.

Only the sound of voices from the kitchen told her she was too late; Maria and Tommy were already awake.

“Morning.” Leah rubbed a hand over her tired eyes as she entered the kitchen. “Oh.”

“We were going to make you breakfast in bed,” Tommy announced, a smudge of flour adorning one cheek like war paint. Which seemed appropriate since the kitchen kind of resembled a war zone.

“How about we make breakfast together?” Leah asked, her mood lifting as she crossed the floor and hugged Tommy and then Maria.

“I think we might need to ask Ivan for some cooking lessons,” Maria admitted as she hugged her mom.

“Or maybe being a chef is not for me,” Tommy replied miserably.

“Hey.” She stepped back and placed her hands on his shoulders. “Listen, everyone has to learn. Whether you choose to be a hairdresser, or a sailor, or a chef, you aren’t born with those skills, you have to learn them. Okay?”

“Okay.” Tommy nodded.

“Why don’t we start with pancakes? You can help flip them. And then I thought we could go to the beach as a treat for being so good these last couple of weeks.” Leah fetched a clean bowl from the cupboard and placed it down on the counter. “Okay. Flour, eggs...”

Twenty minutes later, they were seated on the balcony, eating pancakes and drinking orange juice as they enjoyed their view of the ocean. The kitchen was still in disarray, but clean-up duty could wait until they had enjoyed the fruits of their labor.

“Can we build a mermaid sand sculpture?” Maria asked as she ate.

“We can try,” Leah laughed.

“Harry said there are mermaids in the ocean,” Maria said wistfully. “Do you think we might see one?”

“Maybe,” Leah answered as she drank her coffee and leaned back leisurely in her chair.

“Can we ask Ash to come to the beach with us?” Tommy asked.

Ash. She tensed slightly as she recalled the barrage of questions Ash had aimed at her last night over the flowers that had been left on the doorstep. The man was like a dog with a juicy bone. He refused to let it go, no matter how many times Leah told him she did not know.

No matter how much she protested she had no clue, he kept on asking.

Perhaps because he could tell she was not being wholly truthful. Leah had omitted to tell her mate about her encounter with the guy in the suit at the hotel event.

Why? Because she did not want him to get involved. Ash might think he was the only one with a protective streak. She knew what Vittorio's associates were capable of.

"Door!" Maria said as someone rapped their knuckles against the apartment door.

Leah tensed and stood up abruptly. "Stay here and finish your breakfast." She tried to keep her voice calm and neutral, however, as she glanced at Tommy, she saw her fears reflected back at her. "I expect it's just Ash," she said brightly as a way of easing that worry.

"Maybe he heard us talking about going to the beach," Maria said. "He does have super senses, after all, so he probably heard us through the walls."

"If I find out he's been eavesdropping, I'll be inviting the imps from The Lonely Tavern to take up residence in his kitchen appliances," Leah said as she walked to the door.

But then her steps slowed, and she tugged her robe tighter around her. She should go and get dressed before she opened the door just in case...

"Leah?" Ash's voice was muffled through the door.

"Coming." Leah let out a long sigh as she reached for the door and opened it for Ash.

However, when opened the door, she couldn't see Ash's face, and barely his body, around the biggest bouquet of red

roses she had ever seen. They were so wide that she wasn't sure if they would even fit through the doorway.

"These are for you." Ash's face peered around the side of the patterned floral foil.

"Thanks, Ash. These are...so big." Leah shook her head in amazement. He must have bought every red rose in Wishing Moon Bay. "Oh, uh, okay." Ash thrust the flowers forward, squeezing them through the door and into her arms.

They were heavy, much heavier than she was expecting, and her vision became completely filled with vibrant, velvet red. "Thanks." The scent was heavenly as she closed her arms around the flowers. "But you shouldn't have."

"Why?" Ash snapped as he stepped inside the apartment. But before he closed the door, he leaned forward and looked right and then left, as if expecting someone to be there.

"Why?" Leah repeated.

"Yes, can't a dragon shifter buy flowers for his ma—" He stopped dead as she shot him a warning look around the bouquet. "...neighbor."

"That depends on the thought behind the flowers," she told him.

"I *thought* you would like them," Ash replied.

"I do like them." Leah turned and headed to the kitchen, having to walk sideways to see where she was going. "But I don't have a vase big enough."

"I'll go buy one," Ash replied as he followed her. "What happened to the kitchen?"

"Do you want to come to the beach?" Maria asked as she came into the kitchen carrying her empty plate.

"The children wanted to make me breakfast," Leah said as she scanned the messy surfaces. "I'll clean it up now."

"I'll help," Ash offered and reached for the dustpan and brush.

“We should ask Morwenna if we can borrow Brushworth,” Tommy said as he came into the kitchen.

“We can manage, Ash,” Leah said, looking at him from behind the roses.

“It’s no trouble,” Ash replied as he started sweeping the floor. He looked up with that disarming smile of his. “Once we’ve cleaned up, we could make lunch.”

“It’s barely breakfast time,” Leah said, finding a cleanish patch on the counter to dump the flowers.

“And we’re going to the beach,” Maria reminded him.

“Do you want to come?” Tommy repeated his question to Ash.

“I thought we could stay in today since we’ve been out so much lately,” Ash said, not looking up as he swept the flour into the dustpan.

“Why don’t you two go and get ready for the beach?” Leah said. “Make sure you wear sunscreen and bring a hat.”

“Leah,” Ash began as the children ran from the room.

“What is going on?” Leah demanded. “Is this about the flowers?”

“No,” Ash said.

“I am your mate, and you are not meant to lie to me,” Leah whispered so the children couldn’t hear.

“I’m not lying,” Ash insisted.

“So why the sudden change?” Leah asked. “Or is this what you are like normally?”

“I don’t understand,” Ash genuinely looked confused.

“Last night it was a thousand questions about who the flowers were from. Then this morning you turned up on my doorstep with these.” Leah resisted the small voice in her head that told her she was being ungrateful and that Ash was only being nice. The roses were definitely his way of

overcompensating. “And now you want us to stay inside when usually all you want to do is go out and do stuff.”

“I am only thinking of you,” Ash replied.

“Because you don’t think I can think for myself?” Leah scowled.

“Because...” Ash shook his head as he balled his hands into fists. “I want to keep you all safe.”

“Is there any reason you don’t think we are safe?” Leah asked, her eyes narrowing.

“Did something happen yesterday?” Ash put down the brush.

“I thought we had a successful event,” Leah said evasively.

“At the event.” His brow creased. “Or at least after the event, something seemed to be bothering you and then we got home, and you went as white as a sheet when you first saw those flowers.”

“Perhaps because I knew you would overreact,” Leah replied, even though she knew she was being unfair.

“Because that is how Vittorio would have reacted?” Ash asked, his voice low, soothing, as he closed the distance between them.

“I know we are mates, Ash, but I escaped a controlling marriage, and I will not walk into another one,” she leaned back, only slightly.

“Does that mean you want to marry me?” Ash reached out and placed his hand on her upper arm.

Her skin tingled and heat spread through her body. Yes. She wanted to marry him and live happily ever after. But she was beginning to doubt that was a possibility.

She had too much baggage. Ash deserved to be free.

“Ready!” Ash took a step back as Maria came running into the room dressed for the beach.

“Okay, I’ll quickly go get dressed and then we’ll go.” Leah ducked her head as she left the room, not wanting him to see the tears she could barely keep in check. Over these last couple of weeks, she’d gotten a glimpse of what life could be like with Ash.

But the guy at the event and the flowers on the doorstep had reminded her that once a mafia wife, always a mafia wife.

She dressed quickly and composed her emotions while she applied her makeup.

Composed? No, she pushed them down, deep, deep down. It’s how she’d survived the last couple of years of her marriage.

With one last look in the mirror, she left her bedroom and went back to the kitchen. “Wow, you got this place cleaned up fast. Did you smuggle Brushworth in?”

“No, Ash used his super shifter ability,” Tommy said, his eyes bright with wonder.

“Ash can move super-fast,” Maria said in awe.

“Thank you, Ash,” Leah said. “Shall we go to the beach and build that mermaid sand sculpture?”

“Yes!” Maria grabbed her bag and her hat and ran for the door.

“Coming?” Leah asked Ash.

“Yes.” He met her eyes and gave a small apologetic smile, which chipped away at her resolve to keep him at arm’s length.

For his own good.

They left the apartment and headed up the stairs, neither of them speaking as the children ran on ahead. Her heart ached for him. This wasn’t how she wanted things to work out.

Why couldn’t they find a way to make it work? Perhaps if she contacted Vittorio...tried to smooth things over...

“It’s a beautiful day.” She slipped her hand into his as they stepped outside, not wanting the silence to go on too long.

Ash took a deep breath as he stepped out into the sun. “It is. It’s probably a good idea to get out instead of being cooped up...”

She felt him stiffen and followed his gaze to the road, where a black sedan with dark windows drifted to a stop on the side of the road just in front of them.

“Is that car following us?”

Leah’s blood froze in her veins as she turned to look over her shoulder. “Ash, don’t...”

But Ash pulled away from her and thundered toward the car. He grabbed the handle and Leah swore she could hear the hinges squeal as he nearly ripped the door off as he yanked it open. He reached inside and dragged out a man with shades and a white shirt, shoving him so hard he nearly fell over.

“Why are you following us?” Ash demanded.

“What the!” The man regained his balance, only for Ash to grab him again by the scruff. “I’m not! I’m not following you!”

“Then why are you here?” Ash ground out, lifting him a foot from the ground.

“Ash!” Leah rushed forward and placed her hand on his arm. “That’s Doral. He’s the son of...”

“*Me.*” There stood the tea shop owner where she had rushed out of the apartment building, her arms folded across her chest, ready to do battle with a dragon shifter to save her son.

“Ah,” Ash reached up a hand and slid the sunglasses off the guy, revealing his frightened expression. “Sorry, I didn’t recognize you under there.” He put his glasses back on and placed him back on the ground, dusting him off. “Sorry about that, Doral.”

“That’s Mrs. Percel to you,” Eileen snapped as she removed Ash’s hands from her son and cast him a look that said he could buy his tea elsewhere from now on.

Chapter Twenty-Four – Ash

Maybe a slight overreaction, Ash's dragon said sheepishly.

I don't think that's how everyone else sees it, Ash replied as he noted the shocked expressions of the people who had witnessed his slight overreaction.

You were defending our mate, his dragon said in sympathy.

Only she didn't need defending, did she? Ash replied.

But he might. By the look on her face, she was just about ready to grab those flowers he gave her and beat him over the head.

"I'm sorry," Ash said to no one in particular.

"Maria. Tommy." Leah beckoned to her children, who were standing with their eyes wide and their mouths open.

That was the worst of it. He'd never want Maria and Tommy to see that side of him by choice.

But they had seen it and now he had to deal with the aftermath.

"Come on, Doral, let's go get you a nice cup of chamomile tea to help soothe your nerves." Mrs. Percel slid her arm around her son and guided him toward the stair entrance.

Ash had to force himself to meet Leah's eyes.

"I'm sorry," Ash said, and he would keep on saying it until she forgave him, no matter how long that took.

"What were you thinking?" Leah hissed.

"I thought there was someone following you," Ash admitted.

"Is there someone following us?" Maria nestled closer to her mom as she looked up and down the street.

"No." Leah tightened her arm around her daughter. "Ash overreacted, that's all."

“I really am sorry,” Ash said again.

“So you keep saying.” Leah’s jaw tensed, but then she breathed out a long slow breath and said, “But I know you thought you were doing the right thing.”

There’s a but coming, isn’t there? his dragon said.

I believe so, Ash replied.

“But you were wrong.” Leah sighed heavily. “Come on, let’s go to the beach. I want to enjoy our treat before I have to be back for my shift at the tavern.”

“I’m going to...” Ash pointed toward the apartment building. “I think I need a timeout.”

“You aren’t coming with us?” Tommy asked.

“No. I don’t think that would be a good idea.” And when Leah did not ask him to change his mind, he *knew* it wasn’t a good idea.

It was as if his heart had shattered into a million pieces. The pain was unbearable, and he turned around, turned his back on his mate, and stalked back to his apartment.

No! His dragon fought to be free, to stay with their mate.

Leah needs time, Ash grunted, forcing his dragon down.
And so do we.

He reached the apartment and headed straight to the balcony, drawing in the sea air as he fought to control his emotions. What had come over him? He’d never been a violent person, yet he’d totally overreacted.

“Arhhh!” he cried out to the ocean.

As he sucked in a deep breath and stared out at the horizon, it was as if he could hear home calling him. Cairnnor.

Without a second thought, he sprang up onto the balcony rail and leaped off, shifting, his wings beating hard as he left the beach behind, left his mate behind, and flew out across the ocean toward the dragon isle.

Running away. Again.

No, he wasn't running away. He was trying to solve the problem. The huge problem of keeping his mate safe.

And for Ash, the safest place for Leah and her children would be on Cairnnor.

It would take someone with big brass balls to go up against his family on their home turf.

Did Vittorio have big brass balls? He didn't know because he knew nothing about him. But his family might. They knew everything about everyone that was worth knowing anything about.

Ash's dragon skimmed the water as he flew hard and fast toward the family home he'd left for a new life in Wishing Moon Bay.

At least they will be happy, Ash said miserably at the thought of his sisters crowing over his return.

Ash's dragon didn't answer. His focus was on getting to their family estate as fast as possible so they could return to Wishing Moon Bay with equal haste. Because if someone was threatening Leah, then he had abandoned her when he'd promised to protect her.

Forever.

The word rang in his head. After this morning, he didn't know if Leah wanted today with him, let alone forever.

But he'd convince her to give him another chance.

The shores of Cairnnor came into view, and his heart swelled. Home. No matter where he went or where he chose to live, Cairnnor would always be his home. There would always be a part of him here in its harsh mountains and unwavering shoreline.

He flew over the rocky shore, swooping into a valley and heading for the great tower that rose up toward the sky. The colossal building, the historical center of power on the island, was just as imposing as those that sat inside. But as the tower came into view, he tipped his wings and headed west.

Unsure of the reception he would receive from his family, he pushed out his senses, trying to locate his sisters. If Orla was on Cairnnor, he would check in with her first. She had always been supportive...

Until you chose to leave her behind, his dragon reminded him.

She must think we deserted her, Ash said. *I just have to convince her that was never the case.*

And it wasn't. He loved his family. He loved his sisters and was proud of them.

He hadn't left because he didn't want to be around them. He'd left because he saw that they all needed to alter course to survive. Their father was set in the old ways and since the old regime had fallen, things had changed, and they needed to change with them if they were going to survive.

And he was determined they would survive and thrive.

Orla is at home, his dragon said. *And so is everyone else.*

Ash sighed. *Then I guess we are going to have to face them all at once.*

We can handle it, his dragon said as he zoned in on the large estate set in a wooded valley that had been in his family for generations.

As long as Ash had known, as long as his father had known, and his father before him, the family had been wealthy and powerful. However, much of the stability they had enjoyed was through their ability to line the old regime's coffers.

Ash would hazard a guess that was why his father was so against change. The old way had kept them safe when other families had been brutalized, stripped of everything they owned, and cast into prison.

Ash's dragon landed on the large, well-trimmed grass surrounded by dense forest. He cast his eyes up at the large mansion. Built from huge gray stone, complete with turrets and spires, it was built to withstand a siege. Although Ash

wondered if anything could have stood against an attack by the dragon guard.

As Ash's dragon tucked in his wings, the large ebony doors were flung open. Sofia rushed onto the wide steps, heading down from the entrance, followed by the rest of the family. They must have sensed him approaching. His mother and father stood side by side, showing their normal unified front, while Ariel and Sofia walked to the edge of the stone steps.

But Orla left them behind and ran to meet him.

Ash's dragon bowed his head before he shimmered, replaced by Ash in his human form, just in time to be nearly bowled over by an excited Orla.

"I knew you would come back sooner or later." She hugged him close and added, "But I thought it would be later."

"So did I," Ash said as he stepped back from her.

"Did something happen?" Orla's face was unmasked concern.

"I met my mate."

"I knew it!" Orla thumped him in the arm. Hard. "It's that tavern wench, isn't it? What's her name, Louise? I knew there was a reason she was so interested in you."

"Leah," he corrected. "And she isn't a tavern wench."

Orla smothered a smile. "I was only teasing you, little brother." She tilted her head to one side. "But if she is there in Wishing Moon Bay, why are you here on Cairnnor?"

"Because I have messed up." He smiled wryly.

"Ash," Orla said gently. "Believe me when I tell you there is nothing you could do that would be so bad that you would not be forgiven."

"I'm not sure Mother and Father would agree." Ash looked past his sister to where the rest of the family was waiting for him.

"You might be surprised," Orla whispered in his ear. "We were all supposed to show a unified front in our endeavor to

persuade you to return, but we are divided.” She pulled back and gave him a sneaky smile. “I think with the right persuasion you might get them to come around to your way of thinking.”

“Seriously?” Ash hissed.

“Well, at least think about coming around to your way of thinking.” Orla slipped her arm through his. “Come on, little brother. You’ve made quite an impression in your absence.”

“That’s not why I am here,” Ash said as they walked toward the house.

“Isn’t it?” Orla asked.

“No, I’m here because of Leah. I need to protect her.” Ash pushed out his senses, but there was too much distance between here and Wishing Moon Bay. He could not sense her.

The desire to shift and fly back to her side, to reconnect with her, was almost too much.

“So, the prodigal son returns,” his father called out, only to be rewarded by a dig in the ribs from his wife. “Ouch.” He rubbed his sore ribs.

“Well, behave,” Ash’s mom retorted.

“Hello, Ashley,” Sofia said smugly. “Couldn’t keep away?”

“Sofia has missed you so much. She goes to bed each night and cries into her pillow,” Orla said with a sharp glance at her sister.

“I do not,” Sofia snapped.

“I heard you, too,” Ariel added. “But I wasn’t sure if it was because you missed Ash or because you were responsible for the debacle that was the last round of talks on the Spire deal.”

“Neither,” Sofia retorted, but the color rose in her cheeks.

“Let’s have a drink and settle this once and for all,” their mom said and turned her back on them to head inside.

“Best do as she says,” Ariel said and followed.

“Dad.” Ash stood in front of his father while Sofia and Orla went inside.

“Son.” His dad worked his angular jaw as if he had something to say, but didn’t know how to say it.

“It’s good to see you,” Ash said.

“It’s good to see you,” he replied quickly.

Well, isn’t this a riveting conversation? Ash’s dragon snorted.

It’s about what I expected, Ash said and nodded at his father before stepping inside the house.

“I heard your business forum is about to take off in a big way,” his father murmured.

“You heard?” Ash asked.

“Yes. A little dragon told me that your way might not be as crazy as it sounds.” His father sighed and stepped inside the house.

Ash took a moment to take in the family home. It felt like it had been a lifetime since he’d seen the vaulted entry hall, lined with bronze busts of ancestors who watched as you walked past. Tapestry lined the dark walls, lit from below, and lavish chandeliers hung from the high ceiling.

As much as he had got used to his little apartment with an ocean view, there was something to be said about his ancestral home.

As they walked side by side across the hall, Ash allowed himself a small smile of satisfaction. “I actually have some contracts being drawn up as we speak.”

Unless his little...big...outburst this morning had scared people off.

“So, you are serious about this new direction,” his father kept his eyes forward.

“Did you think I wasn’t?” Ash asked.

His father shook his head. “I thought it was a tantrum, your way of getting my attention.”

“That never worked when I was four. It’s certainly not going to work now. I’m forty,” Ash replied.

“That is my problem,” his father said unusually candidly. “I still see you as my children when you are all grown up. Worse,” he began, “I failed to remember how my father treated me the same and how I railed against him. It’s funny how soon we forget how the past treated us.”

“You did?” Ash asked.

“I did.” His father’s expression darkened. “But we were in the middle of a brutal regime, and he was doing his best for us.”

“But that regime is gone,” Ash said. “And you are not your father.”

He placed his hand on Ash’s shoulders. “And you are not your father.”

“But I have learned a lot from him.” Ash looked his father in the eye.

“I hope if you have learned anything, it’s that you should spend time with your mate.” His father quirked a smile. “A little dragon told me that, too. Don’t worry, your mother and I didn’t mention it to your sisters. We assumed you would want to decide when they should know.”

“And does this little dragon have a name?” Ash asked.

“Might have,” his father replied, then he stopped walking and faced Ash. “I have dug around in Leah’s background.”

“Father...”

“I still have a duty to protect my family and their inheritance,” his father held up a hand.

“What did you find?” Ash asked after a moment.

“You know her husband is involved with the mafia over on Thalian?” his father asked.

“Yes. I also know that Leah left him for the sake of the children. Vittorio wanted to mold Tommy into his heir, and she wanted to give him freedom and choices.”

“Something your father never gave you,” his father said with a sad smile. “But I digress. Vittorio is on his way to Wishing Moon Bay as we speak. It’s why we are all gathered together today.”

“On his way?” Ash took a step toward the door. He needed to go.

“Wait,” his father said sharply. “Leah is family. Her problems are our problems.”

“Then *we* should go,” Ash said.

“Not without a plan,” his father said.

If you fail to plan, you plan to fail, his dragon said, repeating the wisdom Leah had taught her children.

Chapter Twenty-Five – Leah

“I still can’t see Ash.” Maria stood on the edge of the shore, shielding her eyes against the sun as she stared in the direction Ash’s dragon had taken flight after the earlier incident.

Incident. Who was she kidding? Ash looked like he was about to throw someone off the cliff if she hadn’t intervened.

And then, to make matters worse, he’d flown off in an apparent huff, leaving her to fend off questions from Tommy and Maria about where he was and when he was coming back.

The answer to the first question was presumably Cairnnor. As for the second, she had no clue.

Maybe today. Maybe never.

“I’m sure he’ll come back when he’s good and ready.” Leah stood up and shook the sand from her skirt. “Come on, I have to get to The Lonely Tavern. My shift starts in half an hour.”

“What about us?” Tommy asked as he curved his hand, drawing it across the sand to smooth out the mermaid’s tail of their rather magnificent sand sculpture.

When Ash left, Leah had been determined not to let his disappearance ruin this special treat. And if she hadn’t had so much on her mind, and wasn’t constantly checking over her shoulder, it would have been a treat. It was a perfect day, and they’d had fun working together to build an almost life-sized sand sculpture that almost looked like a real mermaid.

“You’ll have to come to work with me,” Leah said. Great, as if the day could get any better. She was going to have to persuade Morwenna to let the children hang out in the back of the bar while she worked her shift.

“At the tavern?” Maria finally turned away from the horizon and gathered up her beach towel, sunglasses, and a handful of shells she had found along the shoreline and put them in her beach bag. “I thought Morwenna said no kids in the bar area?”

“I don’t see what else we can do,” Leah said. She’d hoped Ash would keep an eye on them for a couple of hours, but he’d left before she could ask him.

But that was on her. Not him. She’d have to figure out a more permanent childcare arrangement. She’d held off as the children would be starting school in the next couple of weeks, and she’d hoped to manage until then with the help of Ash and The Regulars.

What would Vittorio say if he knew his children were spending hours in a tavern?

She glanced nervously toward the beachfront behind them. She had the sneaking feeling that someone was watching them. Perhaps it was Ash. He might have circled around and landed in town before shifting into his human form and walking to the beach. Or maybe it was just that Ash had set her on edge with his paranoia.

Leah had to admit she found some comfort in the idea that he was still in town. Still watching over her.

If she was totally honest, she’d also found some comfort in the way he’d dragged Doral out of the car when he thought the guy was a threat. Perhaps that was why she’d reacted so strongly.

Did she bring out the aggressive side of a man? Was that why Vittorio had become the man he was today?

No. She was not to blame. That was a false lie Vittorio had fed her time and time again.

“Mom.” Marie slid her hand into Leah’s and looked up at her. “He will come back.”

“Who?” Leah asked.

“Ash,” Tommy said as he brushed the sand from his palms and then held her other hand.

“We know you like him,” Maria said.

“You do?” Leah’s voice caught in her throat as tears misted her eyes.

“And he likes you,” Tommy said as he stared out across the ocean.

“We think you are ‘fated mates,’” Maria said as they walked away from the ocean and their mermaid sand sculpture.

“And who told you about fated mates?” Leah asked with some relief. The children might only suspect that she and Ash were mates, but they weren’t objecting to the notion.

“Milo. He told us about his mom and Logan and how they were fated mates. Then Logan’s brothers all met their mates. And he said that he heard his mom and dad talking about you and Ash...” Maria’s voice trailed off. “Are you?”

“I believe we are,” Leah said. “But just because we are fated mates doesn’t mean it’s going to work out between us. I have you both to think about.”

“Penny had Milo to think about.” Maria tugged at Leah’s hand. “Is that The Regulars?” She waved her hand enthusiastically. “Harry! Stan! Bert!”

“Ah, there you are,” Stan said as the three men came toward them from down the street. “We were hoping we would bump into you.”

“You were?” Leah asked.

“We’re going down to visit a friend of ours who has some old fishing rods he no longer uses. He said Tommy could have them if he wants.” Harry shrugged. “Want to come look at them while your mom works her shift at the tavern?”

“We’ve just come from there,” Stan said, looking frazzled.

“Morwenna is going to war with those imps,” Bert added as a way of explanation.

“What happened?” Leah asked.

“Are the imps all right?” Maria looked as if she were going to go into battle for the little creatures who lived in the rafters.

“Well, Morwenna’s got to catch um first,” Bert replied.

“She’s ordered a net to do the job,” Harry said. “Apparently it’ll be able to get into all the crooks and crannies...”

“Nooks,” Stan corrected.

“Nooks to you, too,” Harry said.

“No, you mean nooks and crannies,” Stan said. “Not crooks and crannies.”

“Oh, yeah!” Harry chuckled to himself.

“Mom,” Maria took hold of Leah’s hands, her eyes bright with tears. “You have to go and save them.”

“If anyone can do it, it’s you,” Stan agreed.

“I don’t know.” Leah was in no mood to be caught in Morwenna’s sights. “But I’ll see what I can do.”

“I know you can do it.” Maria flung her arms around Leah’s neck and hugged her tightly. “If the imps need somewhere to stay, they could always come and live with us.”

Leah could imagine nothing worse. Not that Ash would allow it, anyway. But then the dragon shifter was not here to say otherwise. And if the brooding man did not come home, perhaps she would set them loose in his apartment!

Rolling her shoulders, Leah left the children to go with The Regulars and hurried to the tavern. When she reached the alleyway, the door swung open, and she went inside, expecting to see all hell breaking loose.

But it was utterly calm.

The bar stood unattended, the tables were empty, and the air was still. Leah looked around, confused.

“Hello?” she called out as she walked toward the bar. There was a single slice of the dark brown Brewer’s Loaf placed on a plate, with one of Flint’s nets poised over it, a rope under tension keeping it open. “What on earth?”

She stopped at the bar and looked at the makeshift trap, following the thin rope that led behind the bar and into a closet, where there was a soft creeping sound. Leah gasped as

the closet door crept open, and Morwenna's angular features peered out.

"Leah?" Morwenna hissed. "*You were supposed to start your shift twenty minutes ago.*"

"I know, sorry..."

"*Shh!*" Morwenna held out her hand. "*Go and join Flint under the tables.*"

Leah shook her head. "What is happening?"

"Under here, Leah."

Leah turned to see the huge dragon shifter hunched under one of the tables, beckoning for her to join.

"Flint?" She stepped away from the bar and stooped next to him. "Why are you under the table? And why is Morwenna in the closet?"

"It's the imps—ow," Flint bumped his head on the table as he craned his neck to look up. "She's trying to lure them out with the Brewer's Loaf. They can't resist the stuff."

"You're kidding me." Leah turned her eyes up to where Flint was looking, and sure enough when she squinted, she could see a group of small creatures with red fur, dragonfly wings, and tiny yellow eyes standing atop the shelves that lined the rafters. They were all hungrily watching the loaf of dark bread, and in the quiet Leah could swear she heard them whispering hurriedly in strange, raspy voices.

Then, as if they had counted down together, the whole group dove down in a flurry of tiny wings, bee-lining for the loaf. Instead of landing, they all latched onto the bread with tiny hands, hitting it with enough force to yank the bait from the plate, which clattered to the floor. The rope went taut, and the net fell, just a second too late to trap any of the imps as they descended onto the Brewer's Loaf, now on the floor.

"Blast!" Morwenna yelled, burst from her hiding place, and grabbed the metal brush that had been leaning against the cupboard. "Looks like I'll have to sweep up this mess the old-fashioned way!"

She vaulted over the bar, and the imps looked up in shock as she landed, brush held like a golf club, and swung. The imps squeaked, scattering into the air. One was just slightly too slow and was launched across the tavern.

Leah scurried out of the way as Flint stood up, flipping the table he was under, and threw himself upward, hands outstretched, but he just couldn't quite reach any of the little creatures as they retreated into the rafters.

"I don't think this is going to work." Leah got to her feet, steering clear of Flint as he landed heavily.

There was a rattling from above, and they all turned their eyes upward, trying to see the imps scurrying around, but then things fell quiet.

"See? I don't think they're trying to be a nuisance..." Leah ducked as a bright yellow rubber duck flew past her head, bouncing off the floor with a squeak.

It was quickly followed by another, then another. Before she knew it, it was raining rubber ducks on their heads.

"Duck and cover!" Flint yelled, diving under a table.

Leah ducked under a tall bar stool to avoid the onslaught. "I'm sure there's a perfectly reasonable way to make peace here."

"So, that's how those got everywhere, eh?" Morwenna spun the brush around to hold it like a shotgun. "Not quite how I imagined duck hunting, but close enough!" She aimed the handle up at the rafters.

"Surely you can just talk this out?" Leah yelled.

"Not if I can avoid it!" The tip of Morwenna's brush flashed for a second before a bolt of light fired up into the rafters, exploding in a flash of color like a small firework. As the rafter lit up, Leah could see the imps disperse in a panic as shreds of ribbon, glass shards, and bits of dried plants fell from the shelves, along with the colored trails from the bright burst of fire.

“Brushwoorth!” Morwenna yelled, lining up another shot. “I want that feather duster up there to flush them out!”

“Parley!” Leah darted out from beneath the bar stool, hands held out in front of Morwenna. “Parley!”

“Parley?” Morwenna asked incredulously. “Just as I’ve got the upper hand?”

“Upper hand?” Leah gestured at the mess of debris and rubber ducks on the floor and the scorch marks on the ceiling. “You can’t serve customers with the tavern like this.”

“If it’ll rid me of those pests, I wouldn’t mind if I have to rebuild this whole tavern.” Morwenna rattled the brush in the direction the imps had gone.

“I don’t know,” Flint said as he got to his feet. “There’s got to be a way we can resolve this without burning the place down.”

“You’re siding with the enemy now?” Morwenna arched an eyebrow before lowering her weapon. “All right, I might have been exaggerating when I said about rebuilding the tavern. That would be an awful hassle. What do you suggest?”

“A negotiation.”

Half an hour later, after much coercion and a bit of miscommunication from each side, Leah, Morwenna, Flint, and four imps sat around a table in the middle of the tavern, each with a drink in front of them—a tankard of bread beer for the humans and filled thimbles for the imps.

Leah took a sip, screwing up her face at the sour flavor as she watched a moody Brushworth trying to corral the rubber ducks into a pile. She looked down into her tankard, and then across at the single slice of Brewer’s Loaf set in the middle of the table. Had the strange-tasting bread really caused all this conflict?

The imps readily sipped at their thimbles of bread beer, one already holding out an empty, gesturing for it to be refilled. Leah could see Morwenna scowling out of the corner of her

eye, but obliged, topping up the small vessel from the jug of beer on the table.

“Now. That’s much better.” Leah sighed. “Isn’t it?”

Morwenna grumbled, taking a long drink from her beer, and Flint gave her a bemused look.

“I think it’s better. Though this is definitely a first for me.”

One of the imps spoke, its words a garbled mess of sounds like sandpaper on stone, grating metal, and crackling fire.

“Yeah, well, I don’t like your face either,” Morwenna said over her tankard.

“Hey, let’s keep this civil,” Leah scolded them. “Now, Morwenna, you can start. What do you want from this exchange?”

“I want my imp-free tavern back, thank you very much,” Morwenna said.

This was followed by an angry-sounding retort from the imps.

“It sounds like that will not be possible,” Leah said calmly. “After all, this tavern is as much their home as it is yours. If this is your home?”

“So we should all find a way to coexist, is what Leah is saying,” Flint said.

“That’s exactly what I’m saying, Flint.”

“Well, perhaps they should stop stealing from me.” Morwenna pointed a finger. “First the rubber ducks, and now the Brewer’s Loaf.”

Leah nodded. “That’s a good point. Why have you started stealing?”

The imps looked at each other sheepishly before one started speaking in its grating voice, making grand gestures with its little arms, before giving its best attempt at a disarming smile, showing plenty of teeth.

Flint and Leah glanced at each other before looking at Morwenna, who sighed.

“They’re saying that the Brewer’s Loaf is a lot nicer for them to eat instead of the spiders, which they’ve been living off until now and they didn’t think I’d mind since we have so much bread beer to make it from.” Morwenna placed her chin in her hand. “Oh, and they liked the ducks because they like the squeaking noise they make. To be fair, I don’t mind too much about the ducks. It did solve the problem of what to do with two crates of them.”

“All right, we’re getting somewhere.” Leah clasped her hands together. “So it seems that the imps aren’t going anywhere, and they don’t want to give up the Brewer’s Loaf... is there anything they can do in return?”

“They could do something about the cobwebs,” Flint said, warily watching Morwenna’s expression. “It seems they kept the spiders under control, but stopped when they started eating the bread. If they got back on top of them, you could stop losing your mind about it, and we can get rid of all those broom catalogs.”

“Yes, I’m sure Brushworth would be *thrilled* about that,” Morwenna said.

“I get the feeling he has felt threatened by your obsession with new brooms,” Flint replied.

They all turned to look at Brushworth, who had stopped sweeping, seeming to have been listening in on the conversation, but jumped and promptly got back to work under their gaze.

“How does that sound?” Leah turned back to the imps. “You can help with keeping the rafters clean, specifically the cobwebs, and in return you can eat the Brewer’s Loaf, and not get exploded by Morwenna.”

The imps eyed her for a moment before one of them waved his arms, calling for a group huddle. They spent a few moments whispering to one another before they all turned back and nodded.

“Great! Then I think that concludes the negotiations,” Leah said. “Just look how easy it was to settle your differences and stop any animosity by just...sitting down and...talking about it...” she trailed off as an idea came to her. “Excuse me.” She got up quickly, grabbed her coat, and headed for the door.

She paused just long enough to read the host sign:

Hostile negotiations ahead.

Leah smiled to herself and shook her head. She wouldn't exactly call the negotiations hostile, they'd ended up pretty amicable in the end.

She looked up as the door swung open and went to walk forward when Tommy and Maria stepped inside.

“Mommy!” Maria ran over to her and hugged her.

“Kids? What are you doing here? I thought you were looking at fishing rods.” Leah looked between them, confused. Maria was beaming up at her, but Tommy's expression was troubled as he kept his gaze on the ground.

“We were! And then we went to the sweet shop to see Penny and Helena, but then!” Maria pointed to the door, and Leah's heart stopped as a familiar figure appeared at the door. “We found Daddy!”

Vittorio took off his sunglasses, his sharp features turning up into a smug smile as two burly men stepped in behind him. “Hello, darling.”

Chapter Twenty-Six – Ash

“We’ve come all the way to Wishing Moon Bay again, just to end up back in this damned tavern?” Sofia said.

“We’re not here for a drink. This is where Leah is because she works here,” Ash explained, only a little exasperated.

“That’s convenient for you, isn’t it?” Ariel looked up at the wonky exterior. “I thought she was supposed to be a good host. Why is she working in *this* place?”

“It’s just a for-now thing. She’s got other gigs lined up at the hotel, but these things take time.” Ash could feel his frustration growing.

“I think it’s got a certain charm to it,” Orla said. “And even in this place, Leah made a delightful host. I’d love to see her work in a fancier place.”

“Thanks, Orla. Now come on,” Ash took a deep breath as he stepped toward the door, which slowly swung open, “We’ve got to warn Leah that her ex-husband is on...his way.”

He stopped in the doorway as all eyes turned to him. Two men in dark suits stood by the bar on either side of a man with slicked-back hair and a silky black shirt.

Vittorio.

Leah stood to one side, looking angry and flustered, while the kids stood with Flint and Morwenna behind the bar. He could see the tension in Flint’s body, while Morwenna was, as always, unreadable as she watched the events unfold.

We never should have left, his dragon roared. Look what happens as soon as we walk away.

Well, we’re here now.

“What’s happening, Ash?” Sofia asked.

Ash didn’t answer. Instead, he stormed forward, feeling his blood boil as he headed for the bar. Vittorio turned to face him. He opened his mouth to say something, but Ash didn’t give

him a chance. He lashed out his arm, grabbing the man by the scruff of his expensive shirt, and forcing him back onto the bar. The other two men were quick to grab Ash, trying to wrestle him off.

Ash grunted. It didn't matter how many men Vittorio brought to this bar fight; nothing would stop him!

Suddenly, Ash's grip on Vittorio slipped, along with the hands grabbing at him, and his feet slid across the floor as some force pushed them apart.

"Hey! Hey! No! No! No!" Morwenna stood atop the bar, hands outstretched, before she sighed, exasperated. "How many times do I have to repeat myself? No fighting in the tavern!"

Ash met Vittorio's eyes, and they both looked up at the scorch marks burned into the damaged shelves and rafters, then down to the debris littering the floor around their feet.

"Right." Ash stepped back, now flanked by his sisters.

"So, this is the man you chose over the father of your own children, huh?" Vittorio shook his head at Leah. "Unbelievable."

"Yeah, unbelievable," one of the suits said.

"Yeah, I don't believe it." The other also shook his head.

"A moody dragon shifter and his angels." Vittorio sneered at them.

"Heh, he's going to need a guardian angel to save him from us." The left suited man cracked his knuckles.

"Oh wow," Sofia's lip turned up. "I think that caused me physical pain."

Ariel shrugged. "If they want to dance, we can take this outside and dance."

"Or leave another scorch mark in here." Orla looked at Ash. "What do you say, brother?"

Ash glanced at Leah, who *almost* looked relieved to see him. "What do you want to do, Leah?"

Leah straightened up, her face serene as she put her mask on. “We’re going to do what people do when they want different things. We’re going to *negotiate*.”

Vittorio chuckled as he looked at each of their faces. “Fine. If you want to play the game, we’ll play the game.” He pulled out a chair and sat down, placing himself at the head of one of the larger tables, his two goons sticking to either side of him, staying on their feet.

Ash met Flint’s eyes. He could see the dragon shifter wanted to act, but then he saw Morwenna whisper something and he reluctantly stayed still.

What is her deal? His dragon seethed. We could annihilate these idiots in seconds.

Ash shook his head. *I don’t know what agenda the witch has, but she’s not to be crossed. This is what Leah wants, so it’s what we want.*

Ash looked at his sisters. Ariel reached for a chair and gestured for Ash to take a seat. “Shall we?”

Ash nodded, catching Leah’s eye, and beckoning her over. She hesitated for a moment, before saying a quiet word to the children to stay with Flint by the bar, and came to sit beside him, backed by Ash’s sisters.

“I feel like we can skip the introductions,” Ash began. “What do you want, Vittorio?”

“Oh, not much.” Vittorio looked at his fingernails. “Just my wife and children back.”

“*Ex-wife*, need we remind you,” Sofia cut in. “Divorced through the proper channels, I understand.”

“Perhaps I’d hoped she wouldn’t be my *ex-wife* indefinitely.” Vittorio smiled at Leah, making Ash’s skin crawl.

“People make mistakes.” The man to Vittorio’s left adjusted his red tie. “Or can change their mind. With a little persuasion.”

“I think this whole incident only shows that our client was of sound mind when she decided to leave,” Ariel said. “And I don’t believe that not wanting to be married to someone is negotiable. Isn’t that right, Leah?”

“That’s right.” Leah nodded, keeping her gaze level with Vittorio.

“Even if leaving was against her best interest?” the man on Vittorio’s right, with a blue tie, asked. “She had everything she wanted while she was in Thalian.”

“That’s right.” Vittorio nodded. “That is right. She and the children never wanted for anything. If ever they asked, I would provide. Now they find themselves in this strange town with nothing to their name. She didn’t even stay around long enough to receive a severance package.”

“A severance package?” Ash asked incredulously. “We’re...”

“It’s all right, Ash, let me handle this.” Orla placed a hand on Ash’s shoulder before she slammed it onto the table, causing it to tip sideways for a moment. “We’re talking about a marriage here! Not a job! No wonder she left if you were treating her like an employee! I imagine it was likely the same for the children.”

No wonder they want us back to negotiate deals, Ash’s dragon said.

Yeah, this is getting heated, Ash agreed.

Because they are letting their emotions get in the way, his dragon replied.

“Now, hold on a moment,” Vittorio raised his voice. “I will not have people like you talk to me about my children like that!”

“Well, we won’t be discussing Leah’s return to Thalian anymore. She is a free agent, and no amount of talks is going to change that,” Sofia said.

“Yes. That’s totally non-negotiable. I’m not coming back to Thalian,” Leah said. “We’re settled here. We’re happy here.”

“You really think so?” Vittorio asked. “Well, why don’t we ask them? Maria, Tommy, my wonderful children. Could you come here a moment?”

Ash and Flint shared a glance, but Ash nodded.

Flint grimaced before he lowered himself. “Go on, you two. You two should get a say in this as well.”

Maria nodded and ran around the bar to the table, while Tommy hung back a little way.

“Daddy! We don’t want to go back to Thalian. We like it here. There’s the sea, and wishing stones, and sky dancing birds and dragons and magic...” For the first time since Ash had known her, Maria took a breath as she spoke. “You can come and visit, but we want to stay here.”

Vittorio smiled at her. “Oh, my little Maria. I know it has all these pretty things, but they’re not going to provide for you. What work is there here for your mother? Hosting at a hotel? That’s not going to give you the life you want. And what are you and Tommy going to do when you grow up?”

“Tommy’s going to be a chef, or a sailor, or a hairdresser,” Maria said in her matter-of-fact tone.

“Is that so?” Vittorio took a measured breath as his expression darkened. “Tommy? Is this true?”

Tommy looked down with a nod.

“You really want to be a *hairdresser*?”

Tommy shrugged. “Maybe. I haven’t decided yet.”

“Okay,” Vittorio said quietly. “You two can go back to the bar now.”

Ash watched his expression. He knew what was coming. He glanced at Morwenna and quickly gestured to his ears. Morwenna nodded and flicked her finger at the kids as they headed back to the bar.

“Some things should not be seen or heard. Look up, look up, and watch the birds.”

The air seemed to shimmer around them, and then a flock of Halcyon Skydancers flew around their heads. Ash saw Maria's lips move as she spoke to Tommy, her eyes wide with wonder as she held out her hand and one bird landed on it, but no sound escaped the bubble surrounding them.

That's better. They do not need to hear what's coming.

Vittorio took another, deeper breath, and got to his feet. "What the hell are you doing to this family?!" he yelled. "A *hairstylist*? A *chef*? These two could be so much more! You could have been so much more! You could all be powerful, and wealthy. And you've thrown it all away? What are you thinking?"

Ash got to his feet, fixing the other man in his gaze. "I can give them all that, and more."

"You do not know who you're talking to," Vittorio growled.

"We know *exactly* who we're talking to," Ariel said. "We know about the secret *spice* shipments out of Thalian. We know about your contacts here in town. We know all about how you've climbed the ladder by getting chummy with powerful people, only to undercut them and force them out."

"All thanks to her!" Vittorio jabbed a finger at Leah. "*That's* who she is. She's one of us, not some small-town hostess."

Ash was ready to throw himself across the table at Vittorio. Not even Morwenna's magic would stop him.

"Don't you dare—" Ash stopped as he felt a hand on his arm. He looked down to see Leah shaking her head.

"It's not worth it," she mumbled.

Ash clenched his jaw. "I need a drink." He stepped away from the table and headed for the bar.

"Look at that mighty dragon shifter, running with his tail between his legs," Vittorio snarled. "Or maybe he's not a dragon. Maybe he's a big fat chicken!"

Ash took Leah's words to heart and calmed himself, ignoring the comment.

“Really? Resorting to name-calling?” Orla scoffed. “Sit back down and let’s actually discuss custody rights. That’s why you’re here, after all...”

Ash got to the bar and turned to watch the scene, seeing that Leah had followed him. She put her elbows on the wooden top and buried her face in her hands.

“He’s a real piece of work, huh?” Ash said, just loud enough to be heard over the raised voices still talking at the table.

“There is a reason we left,” Leah sighed. “I just don’t know how we’re going to resolve this. I was hoping if we could sit down and talk, we’d come to some sort of agreement, but he’s on a warpath.”

“I know. He’s insufferable. But, hey, it’ll be all right.” Ash rubbed her back, keeping his voice calm.

If that’s what he wants, we’ll show him the true meaning of war, Ash growled.

We’ll burn his empire to the ground...

Ash stepped away from Leah and reached for a glass. “Do you mind, Flint?”

“Not at all.” Flint reached for a whisky bottle and poured them both a drink.

Chapter Twenty-Seven – Leah

“Psst.”

Leah glanced to her left, but everyone seemed to be focused on the heated argument between Ash’s family and Vittorio’s men.

“Over here, madame.”

Leah slowly turned to her right. “Hello?” Was there someone hiding behind the counter?

“Not over there. Over here.” There was a tap at the tall cupboard behind the bar.

Leah slid around the counter and opened the cupboard, peering into the dark. But then she stepped back sharply as the wine connoisseur himself stepped out into the bar, his velvet red vest catching the light. “Oh! Hello.”

“Good afternoon, madame.” The man bowed slightly and then cleared his throat as he held up a bottle of tawny liquor. “While my specialty is seated in the fine liquors derived from the humble grape, I seem to have stumbled upon this single malt. Distilled in the Mullion region of Thalian. A very rare spirit by all accounts, as the distillery was shut down by...”

“That’s all very interesting,” Leah said politely. “But we’re kind of in the middle of something here.”

“Yes, of course, madame. However, I believe you might find this particular bottle of interest. It was said to be the favorite of one Ronaldini Marran.”

“Ronaldini?” Leah said, her interest piqued. “Vittorio’s father.”

“The very same.”

“Go on,” Leah urged.

The connoisseur looked down at the bottle with its aged, barely legible label cradled in his arms. “Ronaldini was a man who aspired to greatness. But alas, he never found the... reputation he thought he deserved. He lived in the shadow of others. Every evening, after a hard day of labor, he would pour himself a glass of this whisky—quite a luxury I might say—and sit in his chair dreaming of greatness.”

“And you are telling me this because...” Leah arched an eyebrow, wishing the wine connoisseur would cut to the chase before Vittorio’s men decided to do some cutting of their own.

“Because as Ronaldini sipped his drink, his son would climb onto his lap. A son who dreamed of being a haberdasher. He had such a fondness for ribbons and buttons...” The wine connoisseur’s voice drifted off.

“Vittorio wanted to sell buttons?” Leah asked. “How exactly do you know this? He’s always been incredibly secretive about his past. Who exactly are you?”

“He did. But his father decided that if he could not achieve his desires, his son would. He ensured his son was brought up to be a hard man who would be relentless in his pursuit of power, taking the Marran name with him.” The wine connoisseur handed the bottle to Leah, ignoring her questions. “But that same child who wanted to sell ribbons and buttons is still there, I assure you.”

“I see.”

“Perhaps if Vittorio were to be reminded of that small boy...”

“I understand.” Leah nodded.

“Then I shall take my leave. Good day, madame.” The wine connoisseur bowed his head and cast a derisory glance at the commotion in bar area, before reaching for the edge of the cupboard door and closing it behind him.

Leaving Leah alone with the bottle of whisky.

“Right.” Leah gnawed on her bottom lip before flashing a smile at her kids, grabbing a glass, and darting out into the

back room where Morwenna's herbs and spices were neatly stored. But what was she supposed to add to the liquor?

It was as if her head had emptied of all the knowledge she'd accumulated on herbs and spices and tinctures. All she could hear were the raised voices from the bar, while fear for the future took a grip on her heart.

"Leah." Ash appeared behind her. "Are you all right?"

"Yes." She nodded. "I just need to get this right."

"What?" Ash closed the space between them. "I've never been back here. It's...interesting."

"I can't explain..." Leah pressed her fingers to her temples. "And I can't think..."

"I'm sorry." He took hold of her hand and held it in his. "For everything."

Calm seeped into her bones as she turned to face him. "This is not your fault. And it's not my fault. If anyone is to blame, it's fate. Our worlds have collided. Literally."

"You think fate made a mistake?" Ash asked.

"Don't you?" Leah asked.

"No."

She let out a long sigh of relief. "I thought you did."

"You were wrong." He cupped her face in his hand and lowered his head, capturing her lips with his. She melted into him, knowing with all her heart this was where she was meant to be.

"Nutmeg." She pulled away from him as the jar rattled on the shelf, announcing its presence.

"You're making me a drink?" Ash asked, bemused, as he reached the jar down and handed it to her.

"No, I'm making Vittorio a drink." She added a sprinkle of nutmeg and then held her hand over the drink.

She imagined her ex-husband—the imposing figure who had dominated so much of her life with his scheming, his

relentlessness, and his ambition, as a small boy. Perhaps around Tommy's age. He likely looked just like him.

He'd look up to his father, picturing himself as being like that man someday. Thinking that if he could just grow up a bit faster, just try a bit harder, he'd make that man proud. She pictured that small boy climbing on his father's lap, a man she had met, who was in countless family photos, a man who passed away just before seeing his son's ambitions coming to fruition.

He'd be able to smell the acrid drink, flavored with botanicals, just as they served it in fancy bars. He'd sit and listen as his father told him all the plans he had, all the things he wanted for his son, all the things he wanted his son, Vittorio, to be and achieve.

"Does he deserve a drink?" Ash asked as he slotted the jar of nutmeg back in its place.

"Perhaps what he truly deserves is a little kindness and understanding." Leah arched her eyebrow at her mate. "As we all do from time to time."

"Did I mention I was sorry for the incident with the flowers? And with Doral. And for flying off like that..." Ash flashed her his most seductively charming smile.

"Exactly. Sometimes we get swept along in the moment..." She pointed at the glass and watched the amber liquor swirl around and around, glowing faintly with her magic. "It's time."

Leah headed back to the bar area with Ash behind her. Vittorio was once again seated, watching as his two associates talked with Ash's sisters. Their voices weren't as raised but were no less intense as they talked.

"...and they are to be enrolled in whatever course of study Mr. Marran sees fit."

"No. It will, of course, be a joint decision."

"Well, in that case, their time should be evenly split between here and their home in Thalian."

“That won’t work...”

Leah headed straight for Vittorio, ignoring the discussions, as other people tried to decide what was best for her and her children.

“Here, why don’t you have a drink?” Leah set the glass down on a napkin on the table in front of him.

Vittorio smiled wryly as he regarded the drink. “Are you trying to end this with poison?” Vittorio asked.

“Whatever our disagreements, you are the father of my children,” Leah said. “You know I would never hurt you.”

“Oh, so now we are family!” Vittorio gestured with his hands.

“Just drink the drink,” Leah said. “It might help you see things more clearly.”

He snorted. “So, you’ve added a little of your magic to this? Trying to make me see things your way?”

“No, Vittorio. I am trying to help you see things *your* way.”

“Now that’s something I’d like to...” His voice trailed off and his eyes softened as she inched the drink closer to him across the table. Without a word, he closed his hand around it, their fingers touching briefly before she let go. Raising the glass to his nose, he sniffed it, and his throat worked as if he were swallowing his emotions. A thing he had been doing for a long time if the wine connoisseur spoke the truth.

“I haven’t...Mullion Single Malt. Laced with...nutmeg. My father’s drink.” Vittorio looked up at his ex-wife. “How did you know?” He looked back down into the glass. “How did you even get this? Then distillery hasn’t been operational for decades.”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” she replied. “Will you take a sip? I think it’s important that you do.”

Vittorio tilted the glass and took a sip.

The lights in the tavern flickered and flared for a moment, bright enough that they obscured the walls and the rafters

before they dimmed again. But the tavern didn't return. There were no imps, no floating brooms, or strange-smelling bread.

Where the grand hearth had been was a small, humble wood burner. Instead of the bar was an old armchair, in which sat a middle-aged man with graying stubble, and a child on his lap.

“Will I get to drink that when I'm older?” the boy asked.

The man chuckled. “You'll be able to drink whatever you want when you're older. You'll be able to travel across the ocean to fetch a bottle of beer if you so choose. When you grow up, son, I'll make sure that you'll be able to have whatever you want.”

“I think I'd like to learn to sew,” the boy said ponderously.

The man laughed again. “No, you don't, son. You were made for something greater than that.”

And then it was gone, just like shadows burned away as the candles relit, revealing the tavern once more.

“What did you put in this drink?” Vittorio asked roughly.

As the tavern returned to its normal cluttered chaos, Leah realized that the raised voices had stilled.

“What just happened?” Ariel asked. “We were somewhere else just then.”

“Oh, that,” Morwenna waved her hand in the air. “Sometimes the tavern likes to have a brief trip down Memory Lane.”

“Memory Lane?” one henchman asked. “And whose memory was that?”

“I don't know.” Vittorio drained the rest of the liquor and then stood up. “Thank you for the drink, Leah. It was good to catch up.”

“We're going?” one of the guys asked. “We were just about to get into recreational choices.”

“I don't care,” Vittorio said. His expression turned confused before a ghost of a smile appeared. “I don't care!” he said to

his man before turning to Leah.

Ash stepped close, but she held up her hand.

“Leah. We had some good times, didn’t we?”

Leah smiled. “We sure did.”

“And some not-so-good times.”

“Yeah.”

“I understand why you left with the kids. I think I always did. Perhaps...perhaps I just needed some time to understand.” Vittorio opened his mouth as if to say more, but he stopped himself. He nodded toward Ash before giving a sharp whistle and heading for the door, followed by two confused men in suits.

“Wait, Daddy!” Maria ran out of the bubble and toward the door. “You’re leaving already?”

Vittorio smiled and crouched down. “Not for long, I just need to...take care of some business. Perhaps in a couple of days, I could take you and your brother out for, I don’t know, ice cream or something?”

“Yes!” Maria jumped up and down.

Vittorio looked over her shoulder at Tommy and straightened up. “And perhaps you could tell me about all these new things you’ve experienced.”

Tommy smiled. “Sure.”

Vittorio gave one last look around the room before he stepped out of the open door and into the streets.

“That’s it?” Sofia asked. “I was just getting into the zone there.”

“I think we make a good team.” Orla placed her hands on her sister’s shoulders. “And Ash barely said anything that whole time.”

Ash chuckled. “Maybe you don’t need me for negotiations after all.”

“We’ll always need you, Ashley,” Sofia said.

“But we know this is where you belong,” Ariel added.

“And we are here to support you.” Orla hugged Ash. “But you have someone else to care for you and support you.” She smiled as she glanced at Leah. “And we could not be happier.”

“Don’t be a stranger, Leah,” Sofia called out as Ash’s sisters left the tavern.

“Well, hasn’t this been an interesting afternoon,” Morwenna said as Brushworth entered the fray and began sweeping up the debris strewn across the tavern floor.

“It certainly has,” Leah agreed.

“But we’re all right now, aren’t we?” Ash asked hopefully.

“I believe this has been a learning experience,” Leah replied as she placed her hand on his arm. “Don’t you?”

“I do.” Ash nodded and slipped his arm around her waist. “I learned that we need to be true to ourselves and what we feel in our hearts. And I feel love, so much love for you. You bring out the best in me, Leah.”

“I do?” she asked. “I thought I brought out the worst in you. And in Vittorio.”

“No.” Ash shook his head. “Look what you have accomplished here. You have changed people’s lives. For the better.”

“And it all started here,” Leah said, glancing around The Lonely Tavern.

“Don’t think you are special!” Morwenna called out from behind the bar. “The tavern is a skilled matchmaker. You aren’t the first and you won’t be the last couple it brings together.”

Ash smothered a smile and leaned forward, whispering in Leah’s ear, “She’s wrong. We are special.”

“We are,” Leah agreed.

Epilogue – Leah

“Is this your wish?” Leah asked as she trailed her fingers across Ash’s chest, following the contours of his toned abs. It was early morning, and they were staying with his family at their country estate on Cairnnor.

“Lying in bed with my mate?” Ash rolled onto his side and swept his hand across her cheek. “No, I always knew this would happen. After all, I am irresistible.”

Leah chuckled and dug him in the ribs. “That’s what you think.”

He took hold of her hand and rolled her onto her back. “It’s what I know.”

He lowered his head and kissed her neck, sending shivers through her body. Who was she kidding? He was irresistible. To her, at least.

And her kids. They loved him, and despite a couple of rocky moments, Ash had turned out to be the perfect role model for Tommy. He was also a good example to Maria of how a man should treat a woman.

Once he’d dialed back his protective instincts.

As for his other instincts...

Leah gasped and arched her back as he cupped her breast in his hand and licked the flat of his tongue over her taut nipple.

Yeah. Some of those instincts were incredible. It was as if he was so attuned to her body that he knew exactly what she wanted and needed.

And right now, she needed him.

Leah inched her thighs apart and Ash moved to nestle between her legs, resting his weight on one elbow while he continued to torture her breasts with his mouth.

And what exquisite torture it was. His teeth grazed her nipple, sending shockwaves through her body and then he

sucked it into his mouth, swirling his tongue around the taut bud to soothe away the pain.

Trying to focus on her mate's pleasure, which was next to impossible when his touch robbed her of coherent thoughts, she reached down between their bodies and curled her hand around his hard shaft. He groaned against her breast as she applied just the right amount of pressure.

So, maybe he wasn't the only one who was attuned to his mate. She gave a small, satisfied sigh as she stroked him up and down, feeling him harden further.

Ash moved his hips in rhythm with her hand, letting out a low growl that vibrated against her skin. His free hand slid down her abdomen to where she needed him the most. She gasped as his fingers dipped into her wetness, teasing her with a slow, sensual rhythm that had her hips arching up to meet him.

Her grip tightened around him, and he took it as a sign to intensify his movements, stroking her depths with a skill that only heightened her arousal. He was so good at this, knowing exactly where and how to touch her. Leah let out a shuddering sigh as he probed deeper, hitting all the right spots with a precision that elicited a sharp gasp from her lips.

She was close to coming, and as Ash tensed, she knew he was close, too.

But then he slipped his fingers out of her and closed his hand around hers, guiding him into her. Inch by inch, he filled her, leaving Leah breathless with a pleasure so intense it bordered on pain. She wrapped her legs around his waist, pulling him closer.

Ash's movements started slow and controlled, a torturous display of restraint that made Leah ache for more. But Leah knew how to make her dragon lose control.

Curving her hand around his chest, she brushed her thumb across his nipple. He moaned and thrust harder, deeper as she pinched the taut bud between her finger and thumb.

Ash captured her lips with his mouth, his tongue exploring her mouth as his rhythm intensified.

He was everywhere; in her, around her, overwhelming her in the best possible way, as he claimed her.

She was his. No one else's. Ever.

And she never wanted to be anywhere other than in his arms, in his bed, in his life. A life that they were building together. Step by step. Brick by brick.

Leah arched her back, offering herself to him as he drove into her again and again, each thrust more powerful than the last. She clung to him as if her life depended on it, her nails digging into his broad back. Her body was a live wire of sensation, every nerve ending sparking with pleasure under Ash's expert touch.

A ripple of energy surged through Ash's body, his dragon-shifter nature responding to the intense connection between them. His eyes glowed like embers in the dim light as he met Leah's gaze.

As they moved together in perfect harmony, her muscles tightened around him, drawing him even deeper into her. Her breath grew ragged, her pulse quickened as he continued his sweet assault.

The tension that had been building in the pit of her stomach finally tipped over the edge. Ripples of pleasure coursed through her as she rode the wave, digging her fingers into Ash's back. She let out a low scream as her climax roared through her.

Ash stiffened above her. His breath was hot against her neck, his heart pounding against her chest before a ragged growl tore from his lips as he found his own release. His thrusts became erratic, his body shuddering as he emptied his seed into her.

In the aftermath, they lay together in each other's arms. Ash nuzzled into the crook of her neck, his breath tickling her skin as he pressed lazy kisses along her collarbone.

"I love you," he whispered.

“I love you, too.” She tangled her fingers in his hair and turned his head to face her. “I always will.”

“I know everyone told you not to date the dragon next door...”

“They did,” she agreed with a laugh.

“But I don’t think anyone ever told you not to *marry* the dragon next door.” He gave a small smile as he reached for the nightstand.

“Are you proposing to me?” Leah said, sitting up in the huge bed with the sheets gathered around her.

“I am.” He slid out of the bed and went down on one knee. “And it’s not because we just made love.”

“I should hope not. A mate is for life, not for a quickie in the morning,” Leah replied with a laugh.

“Was it that quick?” Ash arched a questioning eyebrow at her.

“It’s quality, not quantity, that counts,” Leah assured him.

“So, will you?” Ash asked, taking her hand. “Will you do me the honor of being my wife, Leah?”

“I will.” Her breath shuddered through her body as she cupped his face in her hands and showered him with kisses.

“Damn, I love you so much.” He wrapped his arms around her tightly and held her close. “Oh, the ring.”

She let out a nervous laugh as Ash opened his hand to reveal a gorgeous emerald ring set in a circle of flawless diamonds. “It’s beautiful.”

“It’s from the family treasure,” he said. “As you can imagine, I had plenty of input from my sisters as to which ring I should choose.” He ran his thumb across the emerald jewel. “But this one spoke to me.”

“I love it.” She held him close, his body warm against hers, but then he stiffened. “What’s wrong?”

“The children are awake.” As if he had forgotten the last few moments of intimacy, he stood up and went to the closet.

“You look like a kid at Christmas.” She rolled over to watch him as he pulled a pair of clean jeans from their hanger and then chose a pale blue button-up shirt.

“You do remember what we’re doing today?” He threw on his clothes and headed for the door before he rushed back to the bed and kissed her on the lips.

“How could I forget?” She waved him away as she got out of bed. “Go on, I’ll be down in a few minutes.”

“Orla is making pancakes,” Ash whispered in her ear before he headed for the door once more.

It seemed as if everyone was up early this morning, but then this was a big day. They had been staying with Ash’s family for a couple of days before the children started school. But today they were going home.

But that was not why everyone was up early. Or why they were so excited.

As Leah dressed, the sound of running feet passed her door and went down the stairs. Tommy and Maria had spent a couple of days with their father before they’d arrived on Cairnnoir. Leah had to admit that Vittorio was making an effort. He hadn’t exactly morphed into a man who wanted to own a haberdashery store, but he was talking about changing his business model.

Something Ash had offered to help him with.

Leah sat down heavily on the bed. Life sure was full of surprises.

She placed her hand on her stomach. Not least of all the little one that was growing inside her.

Tommy and Maria could not wait to have a baby brother or sister. As for Ash, he was over the moon.

So was his family at the prospect of a new addition to the family. An heir to their empire.

But Leah was going to make absolutely certain her child made their own choices in life and followed their own path.

Dressed in green palazzo pants and a floral blouse, Leah left the bedroom and went downstairs to the smaller of the two dining rooms where she found her children, her mate, and his sisters all seated around the large table, eating pancakes drizzled with maple syrup with a large helping of fruit on the side.

“Mom!” Maria turned her sticky face to greet her mother. “These are the best pancakes!”

“They smell wonderful.” Leah kissed her daughter on the top of the head and then hugged Tommy. “Morning.”

“Morning,” Tommy said after he swallowed his mouthful of pancakes.

“Sit.” Ash jumped up out of his seat and pulled out a chair.

“Thanks.” She reached for a glass of orange juice.

“Oh, he did it!” Orla cried out as she saw her hand.

“Did what?” Ash asked.

“Proposed,” Sofia said dryly.

“Oh.” Leah glanced at the children.

“Oh, they already knew Ash was going to propose. They came with us to choose the ring,” Ariel said.

“They did?” Leah asked in surprise.

“You should see the treasure!” Tommy held out his hands. “It’s massive.”

“And you’re okay about me and Ash getting married?” Leah asked.

“As long as I can be a bridesmaid,” Maria said.

“And as long as I don’t.” Tommy’s face brightened. “But I could do your hair.”

“Or you could design my dress. Or arrange the flowers...” Leah smiled at her children. “You can be or do whatever you want to do.”

“Just don’t date the dragon next door!” Ash’s sisters chorused and then collapsed into laughter as he threw berries at them.

“Food fight!”

Maria and Tommy joined in as shrieks of laughter filled the kitchen, flinging handfuls of berries across the table. They might not share the same blood, but Leah’s children were part of this family and were loved and cherished, maybe as much as the mountain of treasure.

Epilogue – Ash

Ash's dragon soared above Cairnnor with his precious cargo on his back and his sisters by his side. As they caught a thermal, he stretched out his wings and circled the highest peak on the island, the one he'd always dreamed of climbing.

Perhaps that is our next adventure, his dragon told Ash as he dipped his wings and aimed for their destination.

The Borean Cliffs.

Flanked by his sisters' dragons, they swooped down toward the flat grassy clifftop. With expert precision, Ash's dragon landed and then bent his forelimb so that his passengers could scramble to the ground, while the other three dragons landed gently around him, shifting into their human forms.

There was a steady breeze coming in from the endless sea that stretched out far below the tall cliffside.

"Wow!" Tommy took a couple of steps toward the cliffs. "It's so high."

"It has to be," Orla said, joining Tommy. "Our first shift can be dramatic. You leap off, holding onto the faith in your other side. Because if you fail..."

"I don't think I'd ever let my child jump off this cliff," Leah replied as she eyed it warily.

"Don't worry." Ash placed his arm around her shoulders. "When our child leaps off these cliffs. I will be by their side. Ready to catch them if they fall..." Ash locked eyes with Sofia, who rolled her eyes at him. "But they won't fall because I'll know they're ready. I'll sense it."

"Still..." Leah said.

"Are we going to jump?" Maria asked. "Or stand around all day talking about it?"

"We're going to jump!" Tommy stated firmly.

"I don't know," Leah said.

“Trust me.” Ash looked into her eyes. “I will never let you, Tommy, or Maria fall.”

“Come on, Mom. I want to know what it feels like to jump, like a dragon.” Tommy took hold of her hand and pulled her away from Ash.

“Don’t worry,” Orla said. “We’ll be right there with you.”

“What’s better than one dragon shifter...” Leah began.

“Four,” Ariel answered.

Leah held out her hand to Maria. “Okay, let’s do it.”

Maria clasped her hand as Ash and his sisters shifted once again. He loved being here with them and sharing in this moment. When he dipped his foreleg, Leah and the children climbed onto his back and held on tightly.

I will not let them fall, his dragon promised.

I know. Ash trusted in his dragon. He would let nothing happen to their mate or her children.

The dragons exchanged glances, just as they had when they stood here together in their younger days. It had been years, many years, since they had gathered here like this as a family. Work had always seemed to get in the way.

But today they had put all work aside.

As if an invisible signal passed between them, the four dragons stepped toward the edge of the cliff and then stepped off, diving down toward the ocean in freefall. Ash’s passengers clung to him, crying out in a mixture of excitement and fear as they plunged toward the gray ocean below.

And then a moment before it was too late, he spread his wings and skimmed the surface of the ocean. The cries on his back turned to whoops of joy as he flapped his wings and climbed higher and higher.

His sisters were there with him circling, spinning, thrilling in their shared experience.

Then, as one, they turned toward Wishing Moon Bay, flying straight and true toward Ash’s new home. With his new

family.

If there was any proof needed that old and new could exist alongside each other, this was it.

It felt too soon when they reached the shores of Wishing Moon Bay. Ash landed on the beach, while his sisters flew around them in a circle and then headed back toward Cairnnor.

“Bye!” Maria and Tommy called out as they frantically waved at the retreating dragons.

“Come on,” Leah said. “I need to get to the tavern.”

She climbed down off the dragon’s back, and Maria and Tommy followed. As soon as their feet were on the sand, the dragon disappeared from the world to be replaced by Ash in his human form.

“Aren’t you glad you trusted me?” Ash said as he threaded his arm around her waist and pulled her close.

“Maybe,” she said and kissed his cheek.

“It was amazing,” Tommy said.

“Can we do it again?” Maria asked.

“Another day,” Ash replied. “But right now, we have places to be.”

“Bye, Mom.” Maria hugged Leah and then skipped off along the beach.

“Bye, Mom.” Tommy waved as he turned and ran after his sister.

“Bye, wife-to-be.” Ash kissed her lips briefly, wishing he could stay by her side. “I thought tonight we could open the bottle of golden wine and celebrate our engagement.”

“I like the sound of that,” Leah told him.

But for now, we have places to be, his dragon said. And amends to make.

We do, Ash said as he stepped away from his mate. Today, they were going to help rebuild the business they had torn apart.

And find the finest tea set to apologize to Mrs. Percel.

In that moment, Ash finally felt free. Even though he was bound to a woman, a family, by a bond that could never be broken.

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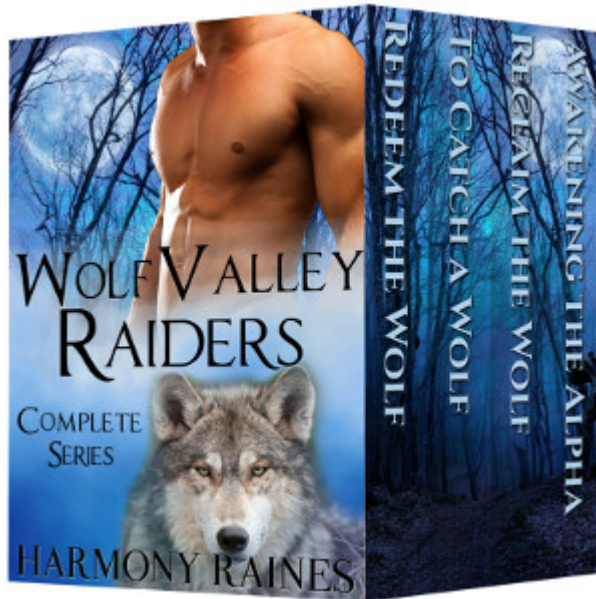
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