



DRAGONS
DON'T DO
HAPPY HOLIDAYS



HARMONY
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Dragons Don't Do Happy Holidays

Christmas at The Lonely Tavern Book One

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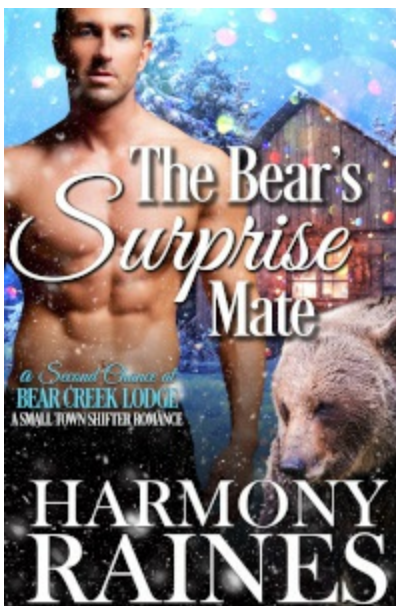
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Dragons Don't Do Happy Holidays

Christmas at The Lonely Tavern Book One

Brooding dragon shifter Flint wants a new start. So, when he arrives in Wishing Moon Bay the plan is simple. Get in. Get out. And avoid the merriness as much as possible.

However, with a dark past, and nothing to his name, getting any supplies for his journey is all but impossible-so much for the season of giving.

But, as they say, when one door closes, another opens. He just didn't expect them to open by themselves. And before he knows it, Flint finds himself tending tables in the strangest tavern in town – The Lonely Tavern.

This isn't the future he envisioned...even when she walks in.

Liselle wants a new start. So, when she arrives in her hometown of Wishing Moon Bay the plan is simple. Forget about her cheating ex-husband. Build a new life for her children. And make as much merriness as possible.

With nothing to her name, except for the support of her family and friends, Liselle knows that almost anything is possible.

Because, as they say, when one door closes, another opens. And this door leads to the strangest tavern in town-The Lonely Tavern. Luckily, potions aren't the only thing this witch can brew.

This isn't the future she envisioned, but she knows she'll do whatever she must for her family...even when he walks in.

But can opposites truly attract? As Flint wrestles with the demons of his past, and Liselle questions if she can ever trust a man again, they might just discover that sometimes, dragons and witches make the most magical of pairs.

'A Christmas at the Lonely Tavern' Series features festive, standalone, small-town, cozy fantasy romances where the stories revolve around a new, quirky

and magical addition to Wishing Moon Bay – A strange tavern run by a witch, who just seems to know when someone needs a little nudge towards finding their Happy Ever After.

Chapter One – Liselle

Liselle Partridge was not the seventh daughter of a seventh daughter. If she were, she might have seen it coming.

It being her no-good cheating husband...ex-husband. The man who had emptied their bank accounts and bankrupt their brewing business before running off with his PA.

But she did not have the gift of second sight.

Or even first sight.

How else could she explain not seeing *it* coming?

The signs were there. Now that she looked back, she could see the distancing, the stonewalling, the excuses and time spent away. The cracks had just kept getting wider and wider, and while she thought they had just been in a rough patch, the whole thing had collapsed beneath her instead.

She strangled the steering wheel, grinding her teeth as she thought about all she had lost, and the untold hexes and curses she might unleash upon him...

“Are we nearly there yet?”

“What was that, darling?” Liselle glanced up into the rearview mirror at her children, her clenched jaw now a not-quite-forced smile.

“Are we nearly there yet?” Casper stretched his small arms above his head and huffed loudly.

Liselle blinked as her focus returned to the landscape scrolling past them. “Just another ten minutes.”

She flicked her eyes back to the mirror. Her two children were gazing out the window with bored, glazed expressions. They’d been ever so good. And not just with the long car journey.

She puffed her cheeks out and blew out a breath, trying to cool the vengeful fires within her.

How could Murray do this to them? To his children?

Sure, he might have fallen out of love with Liselle, but how could he rob

his kids of their friends, their home, everything they knew?

Because that's exactly what he'd done.

By emptying their bank accounts and killing their source of income, Murray had left them destitute. Liselle could barely put food on the table, let alone pay the mortgage and utility bills.

And he just so happened to choose *Christmas* as the time to make his exit.

So here she was, just weeks before the holidays, going home.

Home being Wishing Moon Bay, the town she left ten years ago.

Liselle had always figured she would move back here one day. But on her own terms.

Instead, she was running home with her tail between her legs after being taken for a fool.

She curled her hands around the steering wheel, fighting against the urge to shoot a fireball or a lightning bolt or something violent out of the window.

Maybe that was the problem. She'd been so busy hiding the person she was, *she* had been blind to who her *husband* truly was.

"I'm hungry," Casper announced and tapped his foot against the back of the passenger seat.

"You're always hungry," his sister reminded him.

"Am not." Casper sounded offended at the suggestion, even if they all knew it was true. That boy could eat. And then eat some more.

"Just hang on a little longer. Grandma will have something hot and nutritious for us to eat," Liselle said. Hopefully.

Knowing Katerina Norwood, she'd have a bubbling cauldron ready for them when they arrived. And while it was surely filled with strange ingredients Liselle had never heard of, it would surely be delicious.

Liselle was certain that some of the ingredients were probably left over from her mother's potion making, though she trusted her mom to know what was tasty, but safe.

After all, Liselle had to get her talent at brewing from somewhere.

"Do we have snacks?" Casper asked, as he began rifling through the bags in the middle seat.

"You know you've eaten them all," Hazel told him in her exasperated, motherly way. "Since you already asked if there were any more snacks five

times already.”

Liselle smothered a smile and said, “Let’s look for the sign.”

“What sign?” Casper sat up straighter in his seat and peered out of the car window.

“The sign to Wishing Moon Bay,” Hazel said in *that* tone again.

“I thought you said it was *invisible*?” Casper asked as he lingered on the word.

“Mommy said if the sign wanted to be seen, you would see it.” Hazel angled her head to get the best view of the road ahead.

“So if you don’t see the sign, you won’t be allowed in?” Casper asked.

“You’ll be allowed in,” Liselle assured him as she tried to circumvent a bickering match between her children.

“Is that it?” Casper pointed to a road sign.

“No, that says Littleborne,” Hazel replied.

“Is that it?” Casper asked.

“No, that says Ketterbridge.” Hazel sighed and said, “It doesn’t count if you point at every sign.”

“I see it,” Liselle said. Not that she needed to see the inconspicuous sign, half hidden amongst the bushes and ivy along the side of the road. She knew exactly where to turn off the main road.

“Where?” Casper strained to look out of the window as they passed the sign. “I see it!”

“I see it, too,” Hazel said with a tinge of relief.

“Okay, so we’re going to go through a tunnel in a minute. You remember I told you about the tunnel?” Liselle asked her children as she slowed the car and took the turn, heading off the smooth main road and onto the bumpy side road.

“It’s long, and dark, and scary!” Casper made his hands into claws and growled at his sister.

Hazel simply rolled her eyes at him and shook her head.

The road ahead twisted and turned, and the main road very quickly disappeared from the rearview mirror. The car gave an unexpected rattle, and despite his bravado, Casper whimpered quietly as the tunnel came into view.

“*It’s okay*,” Hazel whispered.

Liselle smiled at her kids as she flicked on her headlights and steered the car cautiously toward the gaping maw of the tunnel cut into the high hills. The tunnel which would lead them to Wishing Moon Bay.

The complete and utter darkness swallowed them whole, as if they were diving into a black abyss. The car's headlights barely pierced the dark emptiness, casting eerie shadows on the damp walls.

Liselle tried not to hold her breath as the light behind them faded, leaving them in almost complete darkness. No matter how many times she traveled through the tunnel, she always found it intimidating. It was, after all, designed to ward off any unwanted visitors who might stray off the main road by accident.

Although, according to Katerina Norwood, no one entered the tunnel by accident.

Even so, Liselle couldn't help but wish that it wasn't so imposing.

"Mommy, it's so dark," Casper whispered from the backseat, his voice a mix of awe and fear.

"Almost there," Liselle reassured him, her own voice wavering slightly. "Just a little bit longer."

At last, a pinprick of light appeared ahead, growing larger as they neared the end of the tunnel. They emerged into the light, blinking against the sudden brightness and Liselle exhaled a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding.

They were here at last. Wishing Moon Bay.

The clouds hung heavy overhead, a gray forewarning of promised snow. A delicate sprinkling already coated the ground, shimmering crystalline dust in the winter sun.

A shiver of excitement and anticipation ran down Liselle's spine. She was home.

As they drove, Casper pressed his nose against the window, his eyes wide with wonder. "I can see the ocean!" he exclaimed, his earlier trepidation forgotten.

"Me, too!" chimed Hazel, her voice filled with awe.

A small smile tugged at the corners of Liselle's lips. She could feel her fears dissolving, replaced by a deep-rooted conviction that they belonged here.

The countryside surrounding the little town was dormant, everything had hunkered down for the winter. But the not-so-distant buildings and streets looked warm and alive.

The quaint town of Wishing Moon Bay greeted them with its familiar charm. Liselle navigated through streets that she hadn't seen in years but seemed unchanged by time. Modern life never seemed to touch this town and she felt a wash of nostalgia at seeing familiar sights.

It wasn't long before they were back on the outskirts of town, and just on the next rise, she could see her mom's house. The Norwood residence.

And it looked exactly as it had ten years ago when she had left. The old building stood away from the rest of the sparse neighborhood. It always looked more crooked the closer you got to it, as if it warped and twisted in the discomfort that came with scrutiny.

Although she'd visited since she'd moved away, it felt different this time.

With the gauge on the fuel tank slowly sliding toward empty, the car rumbled up the last twisty lane before they were pulling onto the gravel of the driveway.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the reflection of her children sitting up as they gazed out the window.

The drive was hemmed in by patches of wildflowers, their petals bright despite the dusting of snow on the surrounding ground. To the left was an extensive herb garden, well, more of a thicket, and Liselle was sure she could see something rustling within.

To the right was the old apple tree, fruitless and leafless for the winter, yet the red ring of mushrooms around its roots remained.

Liselle brought the car to a stop a few yards away from the porch, looking up through the windshield at the wonky facade of the house. If she didn't know any better, she'd have thought that the thick, twisting vine that sprawled across the side of the building was the only thing that kept it standing.

Her eyes rested on the stained-glass window cut into the attic wall. It was oval shaped, almost like an eye, and Liselle couldn't help but feel safe under its watchful gaze.

She relaxed a little, feeling the last ten years, and the woman she had been for that time, begin to wash away.

If she was going to make a life here for her children, she would have to embrace her true self—a Norwood witch.

“Well.” Liselle twisted in her seat to look at her children and smiled at them, “Here we are.”

The two were still staring out of the window.

The words caught in her throat, but after a moment, she found the courage to continue. “Shall we go and find Grandma?”

“Yes,” Hazel said with a nod as she unclipped her seatbelt and got out of the car. At eight years of age, Hazel was confident and knew her own mind.

At least, that’s the face she showed the world, but her father left, and during the upheaval of the move Hazel had retreated into herself. Her usual cheerful outlook on life dimmed. But Hazel hid it well, Liselle suspected, for her mother’s benefit.

Liselle opened the driver’s door and stepped out into the chilly air. “Come on, Casper.” Liselle opened the rear passenger side door and unclipped Casper’s seatbelt. At five and a half, Casper was a ball of energy.

Sitting still in the car for the two-hour drive had been a mammoth task of self-discipline for Casper.

Before his feet had touched the ground, his little legs were moving, as if he were running through the air.

Liselle chuckled and said, “Don’t go too far.”

“Are those hens?” Casper gasped and ran over at full tilt toward the unsuspecting birds, which had just emerged from the herb garden.

“You’re here!” Katerina Norwood appeared at the door, wiping her hands on a tea towel as she stepped onto the wooden porch.

“We are.” Liselle took a deep, steadying breath as the finality of those words settled on her shoulders.

This was where she was going to raise her children. It sure was going to be a culture shock for them.

Thankfully, she had the holidays to introduce Hazel and Casper to the wonders of Wishing Moon Bay and its inhabitants. Many of whom Hazel and Casper believed only existed in story books.

Katerina hopped down the steps, her white hair bobbing as she walked over to her daughter. “How are you doing, honey?” Katerina whispered in

Liselle's ear as she wrapped her arms around her daughter and held her close.

Liselle sank into her mom's embrace, fighting back tears as she murmured, "We're doing okay."

Katerina held her for the longest moment and Liselle let her mom's love wash over her. It was as if she were ten again, with a wounded pride at losing a schoolyard game.

But she wasn't ten. She was a forty-year-old mother of two children who needed her to keep her act together.

"Thanks for letting us come to stay," Liselle said. "As soon as I can afford..."

"Shh!" Katerina put her finger to her lips. "You are welcome to stay here for as long as you need." She tilted her head to one side, her wizened eyes tinged with sadness, and said, "And longer, if that's what you want."

Liselle nodded and said, "Thanks, Mom."

Katerina nodded and winked at her daughter before she turned her attention to Hazel and said, "Look at you, how you have grown."

Hazel smiled shyly and swished her winter coat back and forth as she grinned happily. Katerina stepped forward, kneeled, and held out her arms to her granddaughter.

"Can I have a hug?" she asked in a soft, warm tone.

Hazel's face lit up as she rushed into her grandmother's open arms, embracing her tightly.

Liselle spun around as she heard a shrill scream from Casper.

"Casper?" Liselle's voice cracked as she saw him flinch away from the gaggle of red chickens.

"Look!" Casper pointed at the hens. "It changed color."

"It did not!" Hazel said matter-of-factly as she let go of her grandma and went to her brother.

"Did so!" Casper replied adamantly.

"Mom?" Liselle glared at her mom.

Katerina raised her hands in defense, her shawl slipping down her arms. "I didn't do it," she said with a chuckle. "Maybe it's just the light playing tricks on us."

Liselle glanced from her mom back to Casper and let out a snort. The

group of hens eyeing Casper up suspiciously were now a bright shade of vibrant green, almost as if they had been dipped in a bucket of paint.

“Mom?” Liselle said again, this time with a raised eyebrow, suspecting this was the start of her children’s magical education.

Katerina paused, her eyes sparkling with humor and a thin smile on her lips as she glanced over their expectant faces. “Wilhelmina did it.” She held up her hands at Liselle’s glare. “She said the house didn’t seem festive enough with the flowers and the scarecrow. *I* said I thought they looked plenty festive, but then what do you know? She even suggested we bring a tree in the house!” Katerina shook her head. “Anyway, a sprinkle of Anise, a pinch Henbane later and—” She gestured at the birds, who had lost interest and had resumed scraping in the dirt. “Christmas chickens”

“Who is *Wilha meany*?” Casper asked, his expression bewildered.

“She’s a good friend of Grandma’s,” Liselle explained.

“But what did she *do*?” Hazel asked as she and Casper inched closer to the hens.

Before their eyes, the bright green shimmered and faded, replaced with a bright red.

“Now they’re red!” Casper yelled.

“You know your colors, well done,” Katerina said, as if that was going to distract them from the color-changing hens.

“Mom, you need to explain this properly,” Liselle implored her mother.

Katerina chuckled as she beckoned her grandchildren over and placed a hand on each of their shoulders. “Wilhelmina is a *witch*, children. She thought it would be neat if the hens changed colors like the lights on a Christmas tree,” she explained, smiling at their confused expressions.

“A witch?” Hazel whispered in awe.

Casper’s eyes grew wide. “Like in the storybook?” he asked, looking at his mother.

Katerina nodded. “Exactly like in the storybook,” she replied. “And she’s a good witch, don’t worry. She only uses her powers for good things. Like festive chicken lights to decorate the yard.”

“Does she have a wart on her nose?” Casper asked, as if this was everyday news to him.

“No, she does not,” Liselle replied.

“A witch...so *that’s* what Daddy called you!” Casper beamed at Liselle.

“You—” Liselle cut herself short before she leaned down to her son. “I don’t want you listening to anything your father has to say about me.”

“And I imagine young ears shouldn’t be listening to what you have to say about him.” Katerina gave Liselle a stern look. “Now, shall we go and find something to eat?”

“Okay.” Casper turned away from the hens, who were now blue, and took his mom’s hand.

“Witches are not real,” Hazel said, her feet planted firmly on the ground. “My friend Lisa said magic was just hand tricks and wires.”

“Aren’t real!” Katerina laughed as if this was the funniest joke she had ever heard. But then she met her daughter’s eyes and added, “You really never told them anything about their heritage?”

Liselle shook her head. “No.” She turned to Hazel. “I should have told you, but I wanted us to have a normal life.”

“So witches *are* real?” Hazel’s eyes shimmered with excitement.

“Yes,” Katerina answered. “I am one. Your mother is one, and you and your brother are one, too.”

“I’m a witch?” Casper pointed at his chest.

“You are,” Katerina said proudly.

“But witches are *girls*,” Casper stated.

“Not all witches,” Liselle assured him.

“So I can cast spells?” Casper waved his hands around like a TV illusionist.

“One day,” Liselle chuckled.

Casper jumped up and down on the spot then skipped around chanting, “I’m a witch, I’m a witch, I’m a witch.”

After circling around them twice, he stopped in his tracks and said, “I’m hungry.”

“Then it’s a good thing I have been baking!” Katerina beckoned them to follow her toward the front door.

“There’s cake?” Casper scurried after his grandma.

“Am I really a witch?” Hazel whispered.

Liselle kneeled and took hold of her daughter's hands. "Yes, you are. I'll explain everything, I promise."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Hazel accused.

"Because it's a secret," Liselle said.

"Like Wishing Moon Bay is a secret?" Hazel asked.

Liselle nodded.

"So it was real?" Hazel asked.

"Is what real?" Liselle held her daughter's small hands tightly.

"The sign, and the spell, and everything," Hazel waved her arm about.

"Yes," Liselle nodded. "It's all real."

"But how is Daddy going to find us if he can't see the sign?" Hazel asked, eyes wide.

Liselle clenched her jaw, biting back the words.

I don't think he cares where we are.

Instead, she answered, "When he needs to find us, I'm sure he'll see the sign."

"But what if he doesn't?" Hazel asked.

"That's what smart phones are for." Liselle took her phone from her pocket and held it up.

"The spell doesn't stop them from working?" Hazel asked.

"No." Liselle shook her head. "How do you think Grandma knew we were coming?"

Hazel studied her mom for a moment, as if seeking a lie. Then she nodded and said, "Can we go see what Grandma baked?"

"Sure." Liselle's smiled, but her heart was aching for her daughter as she led her by the hand toward the porch.

Chapter Two – Flint

Flint stared down at the gravestone that declared that Willa Granston lay here. Beloved wife of Lorn Granston.

She was dead. His mother was dead and with her passing, his last tie to the land where he was born was severed.

Cairnnor would always be a part of him. His mother would always be a part of him.

As will our father, his dragon reminded him.

Flint tensed his jaw. He didn't need reminding, and if he could, he would forget. Flint dropped to one knee and laid the flowers he'd picked for his mother on her grave. They were already wilting, and their stems had been crushed by his large hand when his gaze had alighted on his father's grave.

He'd rather his beloved mom was buried far away from his father, but this had been her wish.

Willa had loved Lorn despite his many failings.

They were mates. His dragon sighed as he silently wished that one day, they, too, would know what it was to love unconditionally.

But Flint did not share that wish. Lorn's blood flowed through his veins and who could tell if that blood carried the same cruelty?

We are our mother's son, his dragon told him with his full force.

But for Flint, that remained to be seen.

Flint closed his eyes and rested his hand on the cold earth, saying his last goodbye to his mother. As he opened them, he watched a single flake of snow settle on the back of his hand.

Flint stood up and pulled his collar tighter around his neck as a stiff breeze swept in off the ocean. Winter had set in across the land. The cold settled across his body, matching the frigidness he felt in his chest.

It was time to leave. It was time to slip off his past and head for new, warmer lands where no one knew his name. *The Summer Isle*. That had been his mother's wish. And Flint's promise.

For now, his first stop was Wishing Moon Bay where he would buy

supplies for his journey.

Wherever that may lead.

Now he was free. He aimed to fly where the wind took him, explore distant lands that had been forbidden to dragons for so long until, one day, he found his way to the Summer Isle.

With one last look at his mother's grave, he closed his eyes and let himself slip from the world. For a moment, Flint Granston was gone, lost in a cloud of popping static and energy. But then, mere seconds later, a large, powerful, sapphire blue dragon stood in the empty graveyard where Flint had been.

The dragon shook his slim head and stretched his wings, the pale light of the sun shimmering over blue-hued scales. Sharp teeth snapped at the falling flakes of snow as bright, serpentine eyes took in the surroundings.

But then he stilled, somber as he kneeled and paid his respects to the woman who had given birth to them, the woman who had shielded him from his father's wrath even when Flint had grown big enough and strong enough to knock his father onto his ass.

Not that he ever had.

For that would have truly broken his mother's heart.

Time to go, Flint told his dragon.

The dragon dipped his wings and lowered himself to a crouching position before he leaped into the air. Snow flurried around them as his wings unfurled. With a few powerful beats, they climbed up into the sky and were soon soaring high above the vast island of Cairnnor.

Once they were just below the clouds, Flint's dragon snapped his wings straight, aiming toward the distant coastline of Wishing Moon Bay. His powerful wings sliced through the stinging cold of the wind as he swooped over Cairnnor's towering mountaintops. The picturesque valleys stretched out below them, a canvas of pale greens and dark browns cut through by rippling streams that seemed to call to Flint's restless heart. As they approached the coast, the vast expanse of the ocean unfolded before them, its waves gently lapping at the shoreline.

The town of Wishing Moon Bay soon came into view, nestled along the coastline like a precious gem.

Warmth flickered in his chest. He had heard plenty about Wishing Moon Bay, especially in recent times, about how welcoming people were, how all

sorts of people lived together, and how the water in the bay was said to make wishes come true.

Flint promptly snuffed the thought out; he had no intention of staying in the town for any longer than necessary. He needed only to gather provisions for his upcoming journey across the ocean. Besides, he was sure that the town had no place for yet another dragon shifter leaving their prison of an island.

Yet as Flint's dragon flew closer to Wishing Moon Bay, something tugged at the periphery of his mind, an inexplicable force that seemed to guide him, to call to him. He gritted his teeth, trying to push the thought away. It was ridiculous. The idea that *she* might be here, his fated mate.

He didn't want it; he didn't need it. There was no place for softness in a heart that had been turned to stone by the life he'd had to live. He didn't want to burden her with his presence, his secrets. She didn't need him in her life. Even if she were here, it would be better for both of them if they never met, if she never knew he existed.

He angled his wings and flew closer to the shimmering surface of the ocean. Then he tucked in his wings and spun around, corkscrewing toward the shimmering depths before stretching out his wings and catching himself mere feet from the spray of the waves. His wing tips dipped beneath the icy surface and water sprayed up around him, a brief, refreshing shock that helped clear his thoughts. He needed to concentrate on being a dragon, a powerful beast with strength and grace, not some lovesick fool pining for a mate he never intended on meeting.

Flint laughed at himself, mocking his own self-importance. *A powerful beast with strength and grace! You think a lot of yourself, don't you?*

Someone has to, Flint's dragon replied, his voice rumbling like distant thunder. *Now that our mother isn't here to do it for us.*

The truth of those words stung. As the truth often did.

And both sides of Flint fell silent as they reached the shoreline.

A few boats were out in the sheltered bay, and the dragon's keen eyes could see gazes cast toward him as they approached. They tilted left and skirted around them, heading for a quiet edge of the quayside.

They glided in, slowing down, before flapping to a stop as the dragon's long talons touched down on the concrete of the long quay.

The quay was quiet, likely too cold for anyone to be out on a stroll as

evening began to creep in. They looked toward the town—a collection of buildings huddled together under the watchful gaze of the distant mountains. It seemed warm, inviting.

Flint growled to himself as he shifted from dragon to man.

They would get what they needed and then leave before nightfall. Never to return.

But deep inside, a small, stubborn part of him couldn't help but wonder if maybe, just maybe, fate had something else in store for him.

And that instead of never returning, he would never leave.

Flint was soon on a small street that led him past the first buildings of the town.

This place was the gateway to *the world beyond*. A world that was, on the whole, oblivious to the magical creatures that inhabited Wishing Moon Bay and other distant isles.

Long ago, a coven of powerful witches had cast a protection spell over Wishing Moon Bay to save them and other magical beings from persecution. The spell remained and despite Flint's desire to explore the world around him, he had no intention of ever crossing the threshold of that particular spell.

He began passing a few people, wrapped up in winter clothes, as he made his way farther into the town. Despite his height, at nearly six foot five, no one gave him much notice as he left the quay behind.

Fine by him.

What's first? his dragon asked.

We'll need food, at least enough to get us to Panjara. Flint turned his lip up as he passed a storefront strewn with sparkling string lights. *And a map out of this place.*

It had been forbidden to leave Cairnnor for so long that, beyond rumor and legend, most inhabitants had little knowledge of the outside world. The one good thing his father's position had afforded him was hearing more about the different parts of the world, but not enough to navigate to anywhere farther than the sprawling landmass of Panjara. It would be much easier to buy a map of more distant lands here in Wishing Moon Bay, where trade was brisk.

Looking to tick the first item off of his short to-do list, Flint followed his nose, letting the potent smell of cooking food lead him, which brought him to what seemed to be a high street.

He grimaced at the scene before him. Despite the late hour, the street was bustling with people moving between wooden stalls, which were draped in garlands and twinkling fairy lights.

Let's make this quick, his dragon huffed.

Agreed.

Flint strode purposefully forward, wanting to spend as little time in the busy street as possible, but the thick crowd and festive cheer seemed intent on delaying him and a low growl of annoyance rumbled in his chest as he maneuvered around families and couples who seemed all too happy to be out in the biting cold.

People tending the various stalls called out to him, trying to entice him to look at their gaudy offerings, serving only to heap fuel onto his shortening temper.

He hadn't realized how hungry he was as he approached a large food stall and nudged his way to the front, looking down at the rows of various sweets, fudges, and chocolates. He could see a few hotdogs being grilled at the back of the stall, but he could feel his appetite waning as his senses were overwhelmed by the all too familiar, overpowering scent of Christmas spices—cloves, cinnamon and nutmeg.

How does everyone not get sick of this stuff? Flint grumbled.

Let's just get out of here, his dragon replied with a flick of his talons, tired of the merriment and baubles.

Flint pushed back out of the crowd and headed for a side street. He sidestepped as someone lunged at him, jingling a bucket labeled 'donations.' He didn't have anything to give, even if he had wanted to.

That looks more promising. His dragon perked up as he spotted a sign hanging from a dingy building with a gentle light glowing in the window.

'Cartographers.'

Perhaps fate does have our best interest at heart after all, Flint mused as he pushed the small door open and ducked inside.

The air was immediately dusty and dry. Stacks of paper filled almost the entire floor, leaving a small path from the door to the little counter at the back, where a small wiry man with round spectacles glanced up in utter shock.

"Oh!" He paused, before adjusting his glasses to peer over them, "You

startled me. I can't say I was expecting anyone this time of year...or night."

Flint could feel the suspicion in the man's voice as he folded away the paper he had been looking at.

Can you blame him? his dragon asked. *We don't exactly look cuddly.*

"And I wasn't expecting a mapmaker to be open this time of year, or night," Flint replied, rolling his eyes as he spotted a small lit up Christmas tree placed on top of a stack of thick binders on the counter.

Is nowhere safe? Flint lamented.

"Well, we also sell festive post cards, novelty wrapping paper and the such..." He coughed as he peered at Flint's stony exterior. "Uh...is there anything I can find for *her*? That special someone in your life."

Ignoring the question, Flint ran a finger over the top of a parcel, looking at the streak in the dust it left. "I'm looking to travel. Somewhere far. Somewhere warm, or hot even."

"Ahhh." The shopkeeper raised his head. "Somewhere for people of *scaly* disposition to bask in the sun all year round."

Flint pursed his lips. "Something like that. Somewhere like the Summer Isles."

The man scratched his chin. "I think I've got a map lying around that could get you as far as the Summer Isles. It's a little out of season, I'll be honest, but I think I have one left."

Flint's eyes lit up. "Yes. The Summer Isles. I'll take it."

His inner dragon bared his fangs, attempting a grin at the thought of spending all year, every year, lounging in the scorching heat of the sun. This had, after all, been his mother's dying wish.

"Now, it is quite a journey, so I suggest you prepare well. Let me see, it's here somewhere...ah!" The man finished rummaging through draws, producing a small leather-wrapped scroll, and placing it on the table. "However, this will show you the way. Included on this are travel lines, places to avoid, prevailing winds..."

"*Perfect!*" Flint reached for the map, but the shop owner quickly pulled it back, his earlier nervousness forgotten.

"Now, it's not a cheap piece. This would usually set you back five hundred dollars but seems it's off-peak season. I could lower it to four."

Crap.

He took a second before choosing his words carefully. “Look, I’ve been in a pretty tough spot for...well, my whole life, and I don’t have any money. I don’t actually have anything. So maybe we could work something out.”

The man raised an eyebrow. “I’m in a tough spot, too. Few people buy maps on the best of days anymore, and there isn’t a lot of traveling or vacationing this time of year. I’ve got bills to pay and my terrapin to feed.”

“You’re...” Flint shook his head, feeling his irritation growing again, “It’s just a one-time thing, then I’ll be out of your hair. Think about how good it will look when everyone else finds out you helped a poor drifter on his way.”

“Oh, I’m sure I’ll pay the rent with all that goodwill,” he replied snarkily.

Who does this little man think he is? his dragon snarled.

“My mother just died, and I don’t have a home. I’m just trying to find a place to live,” Flint’s voice began to rise.

The man stood up and waved a finger at him. “Well, I was an orphan since birth!”

Let’s slow roast him like a chestnut! his dragon roared.

Flint ground his teeth as he thought of what was the one possible thing he could say to make the man change his mind. “Well...where’s your *Christmas spirit!*” he bellowed.

“So much for the season of giving,” Flint yelled as he stormed toward the door. “Yeah? Merry Christmas to you, too!” He slammed the door shut behind him and stomped away from the storefront farther down the alley.

We should have just taken the map by force. His dragon seethed.

Oh, I’m sure we’d have made it out of here without the Dragon Guard on our tail, Flint replied. *Besides, we don’t do that. Not anymore.*

His dragon huffed, but he knew Flint was right.

He pinched the bridge of his nose. It had been a long day. And he could do with a drink.

He looked up, and at the next corner in the alley, there was a soft glow spilling onto the cobbled stones that he was certain hadn’t been there before.

Suddenly more alert, he continued down the alley and peered around the corner of the building.

The street in front of him was basked in a warm, orange light. As he stepped out, he saw that the building from which the light spilled was odd. It looked old, as though the whitewashed walls and wooden cross beams belonged to a time of knights and nobles. And he couldn't help but note its strange, twisty shape, as if the building had been shoehorned and wedged into the space in between the other buildings where it didn't quite fit.

His eyes flicked up to the sign, creaking softly as it swung in the icy breeze.

'The Lonely Tavern,' Flint read.

Now that's fate for you. His dragon chuckled wryly.

Flint sighed, *I suppose.*

Chapter Three – Liselle

Liselle stepped inside her mom’s house, the familiar scent of lavender and sage filling her nostrils. Crossing the threshold felt like coming home and, in a way, it was. A wave of mixed emotions washed over her. She had given up her old life with nothing to show for it and was about to begin anew. She felt like a failure, after living in the world beyond Wishing Moon Bay for so long, only to end up where she started—living in her mom’s house.

But, as she looked over the soft, muted colors of the aged wallpaper, the quizzical hanging artwork and tapestries, and the crooked shelves overflowing with pretty mason jars, dried herbs, trinkets and trailing vines, she realized it wasn’t such a bad place to end up in.

She slipped her coat off and turned at the familiar movement to her left as the metal coat stand bowed down, making it easier for her to hang her coat. It was one of the many spells that made this house feel like a true home. It was also one of the many things she hadn’t realized she had missed in the world beyond.

As Casper and Hazel ran ahead of her through the hallway toward the kitchen, the sound of Katerina’s voice filled with love and happiness reminded Liselle that this was where *they* belonged.

As if to cement this feeling in her heart, a shadow caught her eyes, and the sleek black cat that owned it sidled up to her. Liselle hunkered down and scratched the feline behind his ears. The cat put his front paws on her knees and gazed into her eyes with deep green orbs, seeming to understand her unspoken emotions. She smiled, a stray tear trickling down her cheek. “It’s good to be home, Bella,” she whispered.

Belladonna had been a member of the household for as long as Liselle could remember. The cat never seemed to age, as if its life force was connected to Katerina’s. Belladonna looked at her with an unwavering gaze, and Liselle leaned down to press her lips to the top of his head. Bella rubbed himself against Liselle’s thigh and flopped down on the floor next to her. Liselle tickled his tummy, and the cat purred, a soft, comforting sound she had been without for so long.

Liselle straightened up as Casper’s high voice summoned her to the

kitchen, “Mom! Look what Grandma made!”

“Coming!” Liselle called out, wiping away her tears and taking a deep breath. She walked toward the kitchen, soaking up the scent of freshly baked cookies that wafted through the air, making her mouth water in anticipation.

“Grandma made us cookies,” Casper announced.

“Dare I ask what kind?” Liselle ducked under bundles of hanging herbs and sacks of fruits as she crossed the kitchen to the large, scrubbed table that had hosted many family dinners.

“You may not,” Katerina told her lightly. Then she put her hand to her side of her mouth and hissed at the children, “Don’t tell your mom, but these cookies have a special ingredient.”

“What is it?” Casper hissed in reply.

“It’s a family secret,” Katerina said smugly.

“We are family,” Hazel said solemnly.

“So you are,” Katerina acknowledged.

“So, are you going to tell us?” Hazel asked as she eyed the cookie in her hand with interest.

“Why don’t you tell me?” Katerina challenged as she offered Liselle a cookie.

Liselle rolled her eyes as she took a cookie. This was one of Katerina’s favorite past times. She loved creating interesting dishes and then getting her guests to guess what was in them.

Liselle examined the delicate, golden-brown cookie. It had a light glaze over it, making it glisten in the light coming in through the large paned window that framed the long table. She held it close and gave it a sniff. It was zesty, with a subtle earthy aroma. “Rosemary... Thyme... Lemon—moonlit lemon, of course.”

“Of course.” Katerina tilted her head to one side and stared at her daughter expectantly.

Liselle met her mother’s gaze and took a bite of the cookie. She savored the citrusy brightness, followed by a deep, savory mellowness. As she chewed, a sense of calm infused her. “Witch’s Whisper Milk.”

A smile spread across Katerina’s face, and she nodded as she nibbled the edge of a cookie. “I thought you might need a little help sleeping tonight.”

“Thanks, Mom.” Liselle slipped her arm around her mom’s shoulders and hugged her.

“What’s Witch’s Whisper Milk?” Casper looked at his cookie with distaste.

“Well, it’s a special concoction made from equal parts dew collected at midnight and nectar from the elusive Starpetal flower,” Katerina replied theatrically.

“What’s eloo seive?” Casper frowned.

“Well, let me tell you,” Katerina whispered as if she were about to share the best kept secret in the world.

Liselle’s heart lightened as she watched her children gather closer around their grandma. They were going to be okay.

Sure, it might take time to adjust and there would be some bumps along the road, but they would get through it.

“The Starpetal flower is a deep-blue blossom that blooms only on the eve of the winter solstice,” Katerina began, moving her palm across their gaze as if to mimic the movement of the moon rising.

“What is the winter solstice?” Hazel asked, glancing at her mom.

“It’s the shortest day of the year,” Liselle replied with a smile. It was good that her kids were so curious about this other side of her life.

“We witches also call it Yule,” Katerina added.

“So, does that mean witches can time travel?” Casper scrunched up his face as he waited for an answer.

“Time travel?” Katerina seemed perplexed by her grandson’s question.

“Yes.” Casper waited for an answer. He looked so serious that Liselle wanted to hug him.

Katerina opened her mouth to reply, but for once seemed lost for words.

“You said the flower only blooms on the eve of the winter *solstick*. But you already added it to the cookies,” Casper explained in a matter-of-fact way.

“Oh,” Katerina’s expression cleared as she nodded slowly. “The Starpetal in these cookies were the last of the ones I collected last year.”

“So, what’s so special about them?” Casper asked as he took a second cookie from the plate Katerina offered him.

“The Starpetal is known for its ability to enhance dream clarity and make spells last longer,” Katerina replied as she offered another cookie to Hazel.

“So I just ate a spell?” Casper eyed his cookie with suspicion.

“Sort of,” Katerina admitted. “These cookies enhance one’s dreams and help you sleep peacefully. The addition of the moonlit lemon zest ensures that even the darkest nights have a touch of brightness. The Witch’s Whisper Milk lends magical longevity to the cookie’s effects. The herbs add a soothing touch, ensuring that all who consume the cookies are lulled into the sweetest of slumbers.”

“I ate a sleep spell?” Casper eyed the sky through the window. “But it’s not bedtime.”

Liselle went to her son and placed her hands on his shoulders. “I think you would have to eat the whole plateful for them to put you to sleep.”

“Maybe I’ll just have one more.” Casper reached for a third cookie and curled his small fingers around it.

“Well, don’t let them spoil your appetite,” Katerina wagged a finger at him. “I have made a nice stew for us. I’ll warm it through once you are settled.”

“Thanks, Mom.” Liselle shot her mom a thankful smile and then clapped her hands together. “Let’s unpack the car. Then it will be official. We’ll be residents of Wishing Moon Bay.”

“I’ll put some coffee on,” Katerina said as her house guests headed back out of the kitchen. “And there’s some Moondrop juice for you in the fridge.”

“Moondrop juice?” Casper poked his head back around the door.

“Yes, it’s made from...” Katerina was cut off by her grandson.

“Don’t tell me,” he said as Katerina opened the fridge, which was nestled between deep wooden shelves filled with jars of spices, and took out two bottles of a light blue colored drink.

“Enjoy,” Katerina handed Casper the drinks.

“I like Grandma Katerina,” Hazel announced as she dutifully followed her mom out of the house.

“I’m glad.” Liselle stroked her daughter’s hair. “I know she loves you very much. And she’s going to make sure we get settled here.”

“And then what?” Casper took a sip of his Moondrop juice as he caught up

with them.

“And then we start a new life,” Liselle said with a determined look on her face. “We leave the past behind and look forward to the future. We have each other, and that’s all that matters.”

Well, nearly all. Liselle needed a source of income.

As she opened the trunk, her eyes rested on the bottle of Moondrop juice in Casper’s hand. Could she start up a brewery here in Wishing Moon Bay? She’d made a success of her craft brews in the world beyond, but there was no guarantee they would be as well received here.

The world beyond and Wishing Moon Bay were completely different, and what was exotic out there might be all too common here.

“Mom.” Hazel touched Liselle’s hand, and she blinked before glancing down at her daughter. “Have the cookie’s put you to sleep standing up?”

Liselle cracked a smile and popped the trunk. “No, I was just thinking how lucky we are.”

“Liselle!” A familiar voice called out her name, and she spun around to see her aunt and cousin hurrying up the driveway toward them.

“Elsbeth. Marilla.” Liselle took a couple of steps forward as her cousin, Marilla, shot forward to meet her, arms outstretched.

“I can’t believe you are actually here,” Marilla whispered into her ear.

“It’s not as if I had anywhere else to go,” Liselle murmured in reply.

“Oh, honey, I’m so sorry this happened to you.” Marilla tightened her hold on her cousin and then pulled away. “And who are these two young people? They can’t be Hazel and Casper. They’re too tall!”

“I’m Casper!” Casper jumped into the air and somehow managed not to spill his Moondrop juice.

“No!” Marilla covered her mouth with her hands in mock shock.

“Yes.” Casper puffed out his chest.

“And that means you must be the enchanting Hazel.” Marilla smiled softly at Hazel, who seemed suddenly shy. “Can I get a hug from my favorite niece and nephew?”

Casper ran forward with no hesitation, while Hazel hung back for a moment. Then she sighed and went to her aunt. As Marilla hugged the two children, she cast a questioning look in Liselle’s direction.

Liselle shrugged. She had no explanation for Hazel's hesitation other than it had been a long and emotional journey to get here.

"Hello, Aunt Elsbeth." Liselle pushed her worries for Hazel aside and hugged her aunt tightly, who returned the embrace with one hand, her other holding a wicker basket.

"Anything you need, we're all here for you," Elsbeth's voice was choked with emotion as she held Liselle close.

"I will." Liselle buried her face in her aunt's shoulder and inhaled the familiar scent of Elsbeth: a mix of moss that spoke of her many forest forays, sweet honey, and that distinct aroma of Stormrose—a rare herb found only in the hidden crevices of Mount Vellia on Cairnnor—added a refreshing, slightly metallic undertone, like the air just before a rainstorm.

Elsbeth had always been the most druidic of the family.

As she pulled back, she gazed at her aunt, noting the flecks of green in her concerned eyes. "It's good to be home." Liselle smiled.

Elsbeth chuckled softly, her laughter harmonizing with the distant bird songs. "I hope you feel the same after a week of living with your mother. You know she'll overcompensate for everything you are going through. But don't worry, you can escape to Fair Fields whenever you feel the need."

Liselle smiled, taking a deep breath of the cool, fresh air. "I might take you up on that offer. Although, I don't think I'm going to have a minute to spare. Between getting ready for the holidays and finding work, I don't think I'll have time for much else."

Elsbeth, while reaching into the woven basket, which Liselle saw was filled with carefully wrapped jars of various concoctions, replied, "I heard through the grapevine..."

"My mother," Liselle interjected.

"Your mother," Elsbeth said with a knowing smile, "that you were considering setting up your own craft brewery here. Is that true?"

Liselle shrugged as a mix of excitement and apprehension threaded through her veins. "I love brewing, I love concocting special blends..."

"So why do I feel there is a but coming?" Elsbeth asked as the others began to unpack the trunk.

"But," Liselle began, "I just don't know if it will work here."

"Liselle." Elsbeth sighed, setting down her basket of jars with a thud that

resonated like a call to arms. “May I remind you we live in Wishing Moon Bay? A town where the unusual is practically expected? Honey, if a witch can’t start a brewery here, where else would she? Besides, even if it’s not potions, it’s in your blood to brew.” Elsbeth playfully tapped her on the arm.

Marilla snorted as she joined them, holding a box from the back of the car. “Mom has a point. We’ve got a fae-run flower shop that sells ‘mood bouquets,’ for heaven’s sake.”

“There’s nothing wrong with mood bouquets.” Katerina waved a finger high in the air as she stomped over to join them. “And Elsbeth is right...”

“Whoever thought those words would come out of my sister’s mouth...” Elsbeth received a withering look from Katerina.

“And I doubt they ever will again,” Katerina retorted. “But in this instance, she is right, you should start your brewery. We can all pitch in.”

Liselle chuckled. The tension in her chest eased a bit, like the lid of a pressure cooker finally giving way. “All right, all right, you have a point. But it’s just...what if it doesn’t work? What if people don’t like what I brew?”

Katerina’s face softened as she moved closer, her voice dropping to a gentle whisper. “You’re a gifted Norwood witch with a deep well of creativity. You owe it to yourself to tap into that magic and share it with the world—or at least with this quirky little town.”

The words flowed over Liselle, sinking into her soul like rain into parched earth. Still, doubt niggled at her. “What about the children? A new business means less time for them, and they’ve already been through so much.”

Elsbeth picked up a jar from her basket and held it up to the light, watching the liquid inside shimmer in shades of gold and amber. “Life’s a potion, my dear. The balance might be delicate, but you’ll never know the blend until you try.”

Liselle took a deep breath, her decision crystallizing like a spell taking form. “All right. I’ll do it. I’ll start the brewery.”

Elsbeth clapped her hands together, her rings clinking in melodious approval. “Splendid! May Wishing Moon Bay never thirst.”

Katrina gave an approving nod before taking Elsbeth by the arm. “Now, sister, at some point, I need you to see if my hens are cursed to always be festive. I wouldn’t mind so but there is something distinctly off-putting about bright green eggs at the breakfast table.”

Elsbeth gave Katerina a questioning look as Liselle headed to the open trunk of the car.

Liselle grinned as Casper and Hazel held out their arms and she passed them boxes of their toys from the trunk. She owed it to them to make a go of her brewery.

Elsbeth was right. With her knowledge of craft beers and spirits she'd learned from the world beyond, combined with her magic, which she had never dared to use before, the town would know drinks like never before.

“And if you ever need a taste-tester, you know where to find me,” Marilla said with a grin as she returned from the house for another box.

“I would love your opinion,” Liselle told her cousin. “But first I'll have to go to town and source the equipment I need, and then I need to figure out how to sell the liquor.”

“I have some ideas about that,” Elsbeth announced.

“But first, let's finish unpacking and then eat.” Katerina clapped her hands to hurry them along.

“Sounds like a plan,” Liselle said as she allowed hope into her heart.

Chapter Four – Flint

With the rumbling of hunger returning, and his throat dry from standing in the dusty map shop, his feet didn't need any further encouragement as they walked him to the heavy wooden door of the tavern.

He put his hand out to open it, but it swung open before he touched it.

Unusual.

He squinted his eyes against the light as he stepped inside.

The air was warm, and smelled pleasantly sweet, not cloying like the food stall had been, but a pleasant background aroma.

After taking in a lung full, Flint's eyes narrowed as he looked across the room. Thick beams of weathered timber crisscrossed the space above, many lined with short shelves filled with jumbles of items from books to jars to dried mushrooms and flowers, just out of arm's reach. Above them, the vaulted ceiling continued up to where it collected shadows. Lanterns made from iron and glass hung from the beams, and candles were dotted around the room, creating the warm light that Flint had seen from outside, though they glowed and flickered erratically.

The room itself was filled with heavy wooden tables, benches, stools and chairs, though many were laying on their side as if knocked over, any napkins or tablecloths being thrown into disarray.

His eyes came to rest on a slate sign mounted on the front of the small host stand by the door that read: 'Try smiling more. Your ale might taste better.'

Flint wrinkled his nose at the sign before movement caught his eye. "What the..." He watched as a lone broom, unguided by any hand, moved by him, sweeping halfheartedly at the floor as if it had all but given up trying to restore some order to the tavern.

Witchcraft.

Although intrigued, Flint knew better, and took a step back to leave, but bumped into the now closed door.

This is very—what was that? His dragon changed instantly from curious to alert.

Flint's eyes snapped to the long bar that stretched across most of the back

wall where a loud clattering had come from.

Metal and wooden tankards littered the worn wooden bar, along with pots, pans and a couple of large ladles.

Flint took a cautious step forward as a frustrated voice called out, “Where *are you!*” Followed by more clattering, and a jar was tossed up onto the bar.

Is she talking to us? Flint’s dragon raised a scaly eyebrow.

“Come on! Out with you! There’s no point in hiding—” The voice became more muffled, “I will find you. There you are!”

Flint watched with wide eyes as a small, glowing red light burst up from behind the bar with the droning sound of tiny wings beating furiously.

Following close behind, a woman with long messy curls of gray hair leaped over the bar. Tankards flew everywhere as her skirt billowed and jingled from the collection of charms and trinkets adorning her clothes.

“You pest!”

The woman pointed a finger toward the lanterns and candles around the room. Their flames surged in response, burning away almost all the shadows in the room, leaving Flint blinking against the sudden brightness.

In the brighter light, Flint could now see that the little glowing ball was actually a tiny, impish creature, its fur tinged with a reddish hue. It clutched something small and shiny to its chest—and it was heading right for him.

With a flourish of her hands, the woman now gestured to the top shelves, and with each wave of her hand, bunches of items launched toward the creature, which darted nimbly out of the way.

Pressing himself against the door, Flint sucked in a breath as the imp zipped past him before flying higher with a defiant cackle.

Flint craned his neck to watch as its laughter faded, and it slowed as it neared a large mirror hanging on the wall a few feet above Flint’s head.

The creature’s reflection multiplied, showing a dozen imps grinning out and cackling themselves.

With its momentary pause, the woman said a few words and waved her hands, causing the upturned furniture in her path to right itself. She dashed forward, her feet finding purchase on the benches, then the tables, and with a graceful leap she reached for the imp, but it had noticed her and dashed away once again, heading toward the large stone fireplace on the far wall.

Flint was sure it would disappear up the chimney, but as it neared, the fire flared into life, startling the creature, which moved back toward the center of the room. As it did, Flint's eyes drifted to the swords and shield displayed just above the fireplace, and silently hoped they would remain static decorations.

The imp was racing back toward him, and Flint crouched, ready to leap out of the way, but from behind one shelf a feather duster appeared, trying to block its escape, but the creature rolled out of the way, and the duster missed, turning its soft bristles onto the next thing in its path—Flint.

Flint blew out air and grabbed at the duster floating around his head until he managed to get hold of it, throwing it to one side.

That's enough, I think, he swore.

He spotted the broom, still attempting to coral the growing chaos. He grabbed it, holding the handle in two hands as the imp headed toward the door, and swung, swatting the imp back in the direction of the bar with a satisfying *thwack*.

The creature's flight was interrupted as a tankard teetered and toppled over, capturing the imp.

Without missing a beat, the strange woman was there, flipping the tankard upside down, the imp firmly inside.

"You really are a pain in my side," the woman said as she rattled the tankard, eliciting small squeaks from the creature trapped inside.

Flint stepped around the duster as it picked itself up off the floor, warily approaching the woman as she lectured the upturned tankard.

"... and all that aside, you also really need to work on those manners!" Her eyes flicked up to Flint, "Oh! Speaking of, where are mine... What can I get you? We've got some, well, actually we're quite low on variety, but we've got as much kvass as you can stomach."

Flint looked at her skeptically. This witch was clearly powerful, and he knew better than to get too involved with someone like that. "After that whole situation, I think the only thing I want from this place is to leave it."

The woman put one hand on her hip, the other remaining on the tankard. "Well, if you're going to be like that, the door's over there."

"That's the thing. It seems to have locked behind me." Flint's eyes glanced toward the decorative weapons hung on the wall—still there. "I can't

help but shake the feeling that this place has swallowed me whole, and I'd like out before it starts chewing."

Careful, his dragon hissed, don't antagonize the witch, or we'll be the one trapped in a mug.

The woman raised an eyebrow. "The door shut you in, hm?"

Flint nodded.

"I suppose it let you in, too."

Flint nodded.

Her expression warmed slightly, losing its edge. "Well, in that case, I'm Morwenna, the keeper of this tavern."

Flint took a slight step back as she held her hand out.

Morwenna watched him with an amused smile. "I'm not going to be casting any spells on you tonight, don't worry. And you can put Brushworth down, thank you very much."

"Brush-what?" Flint looked down at the broom he was still holding as if it were a sword. "Oh. Sorry."

He let go of the broom, which floated just above the floor, righting itself before drifting off toward the nearest pile of mess.

She's still waiting for us, his dragon remarked. Let's just play nice and get out while we can.

Flint agreed, though he wasn't exactly sure where else he'd go this time of night.

"Flint," he said levelly as he shook her hand.

"Charmed, our paths have crossed," she said in a singsong voice.

We're sure that's not a spell? His dragon narrowed his eyes.

I don't think so, Flint replied as their hands parted.

"Now, can I get you anything, Flint?" Morwenna asked as she moved round to the behind the bar.

Flint narrowed his eyes at her, weighing up the situation, his empty stomach desperately trying to sway his decision. "Some food and a stiff drink, I guess." Flint leaned on the bar and pointed at the upside-down tankard. "Don't you want to put something heavy on that to keep that thing in?"

Morwenna waved him off. "It's all right, the mugs here don't spill as a

rule.” She poked it hard for emphasis. “I’ll let him brew in there for a while and make getting my *Sassidrassi* back a bit easier.”

Flint glanced up at her. “I’m not even going to ask.”

“I find it’s certainly easier that way,” Morwenna winked at him. “Now for food, well, we’re a little low on that, too. You see, the cook’s taken a sabbatical for about two centuries. So, while it’s not a *stiff* drink, the kvass will certainly whet your appetite, but if you’re desperate, we’ve got a few jars of those.” She pointed to the jar on the bar.

Flint slid the dark jar over and read the handwritten label.

‘Emergency Pickles’

His dragon turned his lip up.

“It’s better than mince pies, at least.” Flint turned the lid, which popped off loudly.

“And something to...wash it down with.” There was a humor in Morwenna’s voice as she placed a metal tankard down in front of him.

Flint peered at the opaque, dark brown liquid hidden beneath a thin layer of froth. Occasionally, soft bubbles rose up to join the foam. He leaned in for a sniff, wrinkling his nose at the sharp, yeasty, malty smell. There was a touch of sweetness to the otherwise bitter aroma that it gave off.

“And this isn’t poison, or witches’ brew, or anything else strange?” Flint dubiously picked it up.

Morwenna laughed, a strange, melodious sound. “This is certainly more mundane than that.”

Flint’s eyes narrowed as he lifted the drink to his lips and took a small, cautious sip. His taste buds were immediately bombarded by the yeasty kick of the liquid and were quickly followed by a sourness that puckered his lips.

He shook his head quickly. “Ugh, it tastes like someone’s fermenting bread in my mouth.”

Morwenna nodded sagely as she poured another drink of the stuff and placed it on the bar for herself. “You’d be surprised how accurate that is. It is called ‘bread beer’ for a reason. I hear it’s quite popular in Europe.”

“Then why have you got it here?” Flint looked at the drink with disdain before bringing it to his lips for another sip. Yep, still as punchy as the first time. “Don’t you have a whiskey, or just regular beer?”

Morwenna shook her head as she took a big swig of her bread beer, making Flint wince. “We’ve been traveling quite a bit recently, and I haven’t had a chance to stock up. For some reason, back maybe thirty years ago, the tavern decided it was quite partial to this stuff, so it’s the only thing that it keeps topped up.” Morwenna swirled the thick drink around in her cup. “Maybe it’s because it’s just easy to brew, but I’ve always thought that it’s because bread is a symbol of home, and the tavern thinks of itself as a home for those who need it.”

Flint raised an eyebrow at Morwenna, taking another sip as she spoke. It was still a little unpleasant, but the sharpness had faded. “What are you talking about? What kind of bar even is this?” Flint asked.

“You saw on the sign on the door.” Morwenna gestured grandly. “This is The Lonely Tavern. It’s one of a kind.”

Flint glanced at the empty tables and upturned chairs, though many seemed to have righted themselves since he hadn’t been looking. “That explains why I’m the only one here.” He sighed. “I guess that is fate for you,” he said in a quieter tone.

“What was that?” Morwenna leaned forward.

“Nothing.” Flint swigged the bread beer, not having meant to say that out loud.

Morwenna smiled wryly at him. “It’s not always like this. In fact, this can be quite a popular place. We’re just new to town. Say, you’re from around here, right?”

Flint shook his head. “Nope.”

“Well, you must visit here at least.” Morwenna shimmied her shoulders. “Know a few of the locals.”

His dragon rolled his eyes.

“First time here, so I don’t know any tradespeople.” Flint watched her frustrated expression. He knew where this was going. “And I’m not in the business of favors...but I am looking for work. If you want me to fix up the place, I’ve done plenty of handiwork when needed.”

“Hm.” Morwenna tapped on her drink, her long nails making the metal ring. “The tavern generally looks after itself, but there are a few jobs that need doing...”

It’s been a while since we’ve been involved with a business, Flint’s dragon

mused.

And there's a reason for that, Flint growled. The last time was when we had to run Scrunthor out of town so he didn't come looking for Father and find Mother instead.

His dragon exhaled a long stream of hot smoke at the memory. As long as we're willing to disregard the witchcraft, this should be a short, simple job. Without violence. And then we can get out of here.

We should at least shop around. There's got to be a place we can make some money without dealing with stray imps and being assaulted by the flying cleaning supplies.

Where's going to take a stranger in for a month of work over Christmas? Flint's dragon retorted.

Fine. Flint reluctantly agreed.

"As long as I get paid, and you don't mind temp staff, I'll take the job," Flint said.

Morwenna flashed him a smile. "Great! You can start tonight by unraveling this chaos." She waved her hands at the room in general. "Just make sure you do it properly because you'll be the one serving them tomorrow."

Flint shook his head and held out a hand. "Hold on, I'm not waiting tables."

"Well, neither am I, and I own the place, so I decide who gets paid to do what. And you need to get paid, right?" She pointed at his chest.

I'm not doing that, Flint snapped.

We've done worse for less, his dragon rumbled, *and besides, it's warm in here, and this is the one place untouched by that appalling 'Christmas spirit.'*

He watched Morwenna's expectant look for a few moments as he thought it over. His dragon was right. Of all the ways he'd scraped a living, this certainly wasn't going to be the worst. And besides, what were the chances anyone he knew would turn up at this strange little tavern?

"Fine. I'll do it."

"Splendid." Morwenna held out her hand, and Flint once again shook it. "You can start by helping Brushworth out with flipping the tables." Morwenna pointed vaguely in the direction of the broom, where it was halfway through rolling the scattered tankards into a pile. "And once that's

done, all these tankards and ladles are going to have to go back to where they belong—someone’s made an awful wreck of this place.”

Flint let out a long, controlled breath. “Fine.”

“Welcome to The Lonely Tavern, Flint.” Morwenna stepped out from behind the bar and brushed past him, heading for the stairs to the side of the bar that led up to a second floor. She paused before disappearing upstairs. “Oh, and there’s some money behind the bar tomorrow before you come in. Be a dear and pick up some Christmas decorations? This place is looking a little drab for the season.” With that, she disappeared upstairs.

Flint glowered at her as she went.

Truly, nowhere was safe...

Chapter Five – Liselle

Liselle herded her children back out of her mom's house and closed the heavy wooden door behind them. As Hazel and Casper leaped down the porch steps and headed toward the car, Liselle traced the wreath hanging on the door. Interwoven branches of oak, ash, and yew formed its base, with sprigs of evergreen peeking out, symbolizing life's eternal cycle. Bright holly berries gleamed like drops of sun, and dried orange slices, with deep amber hues, were interspersed between cinnamon sticks and star anise. A central pentacle, a symbol of protection, gleamed in the dim winter light, and as the wind stirred, tiny silver bells chimed softly, projecting a protective feeling. The wreath was not just decoration—it was a spell of protection, love, and rebirth.

She turned from the wreath and stepped out from the covered porch, running her hand over the worn handrail as she took the steps down and joined her children.

“Why do we have to get in the car again?” Casper grumbled as he tilted his head back and stuck out his tongue to catch a stray snowflake that fell from the ominous gray clouds gathering above.

Hazel fixed him with a stern look that, now that Liselle thought about it, was eerily reminiscent of their grandmother's. “Casper, we have to get in the car if we want to help Mommy,” she chided. “It's way too far to walk, especially if Mommy finds what she needs and it's too heavy to carry home.”

“Couldn't we take a sled instead?” Casper waved his hand around in the air. “Grandma could cast a spell on it and it could take us there all by itself.”

“Come on, it's only a short drive to town.” Liselle couldn't help but smile, a soft chuckle escaping her lips as she opened the door and helped Casper climb in the car.

“Why can't we take a sled?” Casper asked in his high voice as she checked his seatbelt was buckled securely.

“There's not enough snow on the ground,” Hazel answered matter-of-factly as she got in the back seat next to her brother.

“But a magic sled wouldn't need snow, it could fly through the air like a magic carpet,” Casper insisted as Liselle closed his door and opened the

driver's door and slid into the seat.

For a brief moment, she leaned back, closed her eyes, and let the weight of the world lift from her shoulders. She could do this. Each step she took was a step forward. No matter what happened, going forward was the only choice she had.

She opened her eyes, seeing her kids in the backseat through the mirror.

“Are we ready to go?” Liselle asked, her tone filled with playful anticipation. Casper and Hazel were about to experience a holiday season unlike anything they had ever seen before.

From the back seat came two jubilant calls of “Yes!” Their enthusiasm was infectious.

With one last look at Katerina's quirky cottage—the mismatch pattern of tiles on the roof, the clumps of moss clinging to the walls and the chimneys sticking out at odd angles—she pressed on the gas and pulled the car out of the driveway.

“Why doesn't Grandma have a Christmas tree?” Casper asked.

“Because she usually celebrates Yule with her coven, she doesn't need to have a tree at home,” Liselle explained.

“Are we going to get a tree?” Hazel asked.

“I'm not sure, honey. I don't think it would fit in the car, so I don't know how we'd get it back here.” Liselle could see the disappointment on her children's faces. She'd love to have a tree to complete the Christmas experience for them in their new home, but she really wasn't sure how they would get one home.

Luckily, the drive to town was short, but more than enough time for Casper to forget about the drudgery of a car ride and for his excitement to build up until it was ready to burst. Liselle even caught Hazel smiling to herself as they passed house after house covered with festive lights and decorations.

The entire town appeared to be basking in the Yuletide spirit, which filled Liselle's heart with warmth. For years, she had felt as though she were pushing the joy of the holidays on herself for her children, battling against her ex-husband's sour disposition. Now, to see Christmas embraced with such genuine enthusiasm was a delightful change.

The tapestry of red, green and gold twinkling lights became only denser as

they approached the town square. Almost every slice of space was filled with decorations of one kind or another—decked trees, hanging garlands, reindeer statues—wait, did that one just move?

“*Mom!*” Casper yelled. “It’s a reindeer! A real reindeer!”

“Where?” Hazel quickly leaned over Casper, peering out of his window.

Liselle slowed the car so that they could gawk at the sturdy-looking animal as it pranced up and down the sidewalk on broad cloven feet. It had a small crowd laughing and smiling at the animal as it reared up and shook its head, the lights and bells adorning its crown of antlers sparkling.

“How is there a reindeer here?” Hazel asked as she gazed out the window.

Liselle shook her head and chuckled. “This is Wishing Moon Bay. Reindeer are probably going to be the least strange thing we see.” Liselle gave one last look at the dancing animal before she turned her attention back to the road and began driving again. “I wonder if that was a shifter,” she said absentmindedly.

“What’s that?” Hazel asked.

“Shifters are people who can turn into animals,” Liselle explained.

“Like a werewolf?” Casper asked.

Liselle chuckled. “No, not quite like that. They have two different sides to them. Their human side and their animal side. I’ve heard they can even talk to each other.”

“That’s so cool,” Casper said.

Approaching the town center, Liselle looked for a place to park, trying not to be too distracted by the beautiful decorations, though everywhere she looked there was festive art that just begged to be admired: baskets of painted pine cones, tall wooden nutcrackers standing guard in doorways, and as they passed a frosted over fountain Liselle could have sworn she saw a crowd watching a group of fairies dancing over the ice, but they drove past before she got a good look.

Every so often there would be an excited gasp or squeak from the children as they pointed out things that caught their eye, and by the time Liselle parked the car, the magic of Yule had wrapped itself around them all.

“Wow,” Casper breathed as Liselle turned the ignition off, her car giving a satisfied purr as it came to rest.

“Ready to go explore?” Liselle asked, even though she already knew the

answer as she got out of the car. Small snowflakes danced in the air as she went to the rear passenger door.

“Can we have some gingerbread cookies?” Casper asked as he slid out of his seat and stood next to her.

“Of course we can,” Liselle replied as Hazel joined them on the sidewalk, her eyes wide with wonder.

It was good to see them like this. Happy, filled with excitement. The last few months had been hard on them all, and although they never complained, Liselle would always remember the sadness in their eyes when she’d told them their dad had left, and they would have to sell the house.

The little town square of Wishing Moon Bay unfolded in front of them, draped in lights and garlands, and filled with people wrapped in coats and knitted jumpers. A massive Christmas tree stood at the epicenter, adorned with sparkling ornaments that looked suspiciously enchanted.

“Mom, look!” Hazel tugged at her coat, pointing at a snowman that winked at them as they walked by. “It winked! It really winked!”

Casper looked around with wide-eyed wonder. “Do you think Santa’s a *wizard* here? Is that how he delivers gifts to everyone in one night?”

Liselle chuckled at their innocence and imagination. “Whatever he is, he sure has a touch of magic.”

Liselle allowed herself to smile behind her scarf as the three of them meandered through the town square, pausing at various stalls to look over shiny jewelry and baubles, funny Christmas sweaters as well as some more magic orientated items such as candles, dried petals and festive dream catchers. She really should start practicing again soon.

The entire scene was at once both familiar and new. As Casper and Hazel danced around chasing frosty bubbles from a performer, Liselle decided it was something else altogether—it was perfect.

“Mom!”

Liselle turned to Casper as he peered in through the shop window and pointed. “Gingerbread!”

“You did say we could,” Hazel said as she joined her brother. “The frosting is moving! Did you see that, Casper?”

Liselle beamed at her kids. “I did. You two stay there. I’ll run in and get us something tasty.”

She slipped inside the store, keeping one eye on her children as she bought a half dozen cookies, making sure to select cookies with enchanted frosting that showed scenes of snowy forests and flying reindeer, as well as a classic gingerbread man. That was the one thing she did miss about having a partner—having someone else to share responsibility with. Not that they were any trouble, especially now in Wishing Moon Bay. A simple location spell would soon reveal their whereabouts, after all.

She paid and thanked the store owner before stepping back into the nipping cold. As the door swung shut behind her, she felt the hairs prickle on the back of her neck. It wasn't goosebumps from the cold, it was something else, as if she were being watched.

She scanned over the crowd, and as her gaze passed over a food stall, her eyes met with a man staring back at her.

He was tall and broad with dark hair and dark eyes, and he strangely wasn't wearing a coat, making his muscular physique all too clear.

She had never seen him before in her life, and yet there was something... familiar about him.

Her cheeks flushed pink as their eyes locked in an unbreakable stare.

But then Casper grabbed a hold of her sleeve and pointed across the street. "Mom, can we go to the Enchanted Toy Shop? Please?" Casper's voice was a mix of hope and sugar-induced excitement.

"How can I say no?" Liselle looked back toward the familiar stranger.

He'd gone.

"Come on, Mommy." Casper tugged at her hand, and she shook her head to rid herself of the image of the stranger. But it refused to go.

Strange, she'd never really felt like that before. Even when she had met her ex-husband, it had been an attraction that had built up over shared experiences. Never had her heart skipped a beat when seeing someone simply standing across the street from her.

Her mind was probably simply playing tricks on her as she continued to wrestle with the emotional fallout from her husband's betrayal. The man she trusted most in the world had hurt her so deeply that she doubted the scar would ever heal.

"Okay, let's go." Liselle blinked back sudden tears as she held her children's hands and crossed the street.

Liselle couldn't believe that she had forgotten about the Enchanted Toy Shop. It was a Wishing Moon Bay institution, run by a gnome named Gilbert who had a particular talent for crafting toys that were one part whimsy, one part wizardry. As they stepped inside, a rush of warm air greeted them, scented with cinnamon and wood shavings.

Liselle took a moment to breathe in the smell. It hadn't changed since she and Marilla had visited the store as children. She let out a long sigh; she had such happy memories of the store, and she wanted to make new memories with Casper and Hazel.

"Hi, Gilbert," Liselle called out to the small gnome who was working on something at a workbench on one side of the store.

Gilbert looked up from his workbench, his eyes widening in delight. "Ah, the Norwood clan! Katerina told me you might pass by this way. I've got something special for you."

"You have?" Casper asked excitedly.

"I sure do." He hopped off his stool and waddled over to a shelf lined with all manner of toys—dolls made in the likeness of an array of mythical creatures, puzzles where the pieces fit impossibly together to form strange shapes, and pretty music boxes among other things. He leaned forward onto a shelf, disappearing down to his waist as he rummaged for a few moments before reappearing. "Ah, here we are."

With great ceremony, he handed Hazel and Casper small, beautifully wrapped packages.

"Thank you," Hazel said, holding her gift tightly in two hands.

"Thank you," Casper replied as he crinkled the paper, trying to figure out what was inside.

"Go on, open them," Gilbert encouraged.

"Really?" Casper asked.

Gilbert's small face wrinkled up as he chuckled. "These aren't *Christmas presents*. They're *welcome home presents*, so you don't have to wait."

Hazel undid the ribbon and peeled back the paper, revealing a small wand. With a flick, a spray of shiny glitter showered around her. "It's magic!"

"Course it is." Gilbert grinned. "I heard there might be a new witch in town, so I figured I'd give myself the honor of making her first wand."

Casper tore into his package, which contained a little wooden dragon. The

scales delicately carved into it were painted with shimmering sapphire blue paint, and it stood in a regal pose, its wings outstretched. As Casper shook it, it breathed cool, harmless sparks from its open mouth. "That's the coolest thing ever!"

"Thank you, Gilbert," Liselle said, her voice choked with emotion.

"You are very welcome, dear." Gilbert touched her arm lightly. "I have a little something for you, too."

"You do?" Liselle croaked before she cleared her throat with a small cough.

"I do." Gilbert went back to his workbench and leaned down. When he straightened up, he held a small box wrapped in elegant paper and tied with a red ribbon.

"Are you going to open yours now?" Hazel asked with a wave of her wand, sending a puff of sparkles in her direction.

"No." Gilbert closed his hand over Liselle's. "This one is for opening on Christmas Eve."

"It is?" Liselle raised a questioning eyebrow at the bright-eyed gnome.

"It is," Gilbert said firmly.

"Okay. I promise not to open it before." Liselle tucked the gift box into her purse and then said, "Thank you, Gilbert."

"Oh, and one more thing." Gilbert walked them to the door and opened it up for them. "Katerina told me you were opening a brewery."

"My mother sure likes to talk," Liselle said.

"Well," Gilbert leaned closer and Liselle ducked her head so she could hear what he had to say. "I hear that there is an empty warehouse off Raglan Way that might be just what you are looking for."

"Raglan Way." Liselle nodded. It was down near the docks. No doubt the warehouse had been used by smugglers at some time in the past.

"Thanks, Gilbert. I'll go check it out. Although, that might be putting the cart before the horse since I have no equipment."

"You go check it out," Gilbert wagged his finger at her and then winked before chuckling to himself as he closed the door behind them.

"This is so cool!" Casper said as he held his dragon in the palm of his hand.

“Shall we drive down to the docks and check out this warehouse?” Liselle asked.

“Not yet,” Hazel said as she tugged at Liselle’s sleeve. “Not until we have bought some Christmas decorations. You said we could since we left all ours behind.”

“I did say that, didn’t I?” Liselle turned to look in the direction of the docks, intrigued by Gilbert’s suggestion that she should go down and check out the warehouse.

But she had promised her children they could pick out some special Christmas decorations.

And unlike their father, she did not intend to break her promises.

Chapter Six – Flint

Flint's eyes narrowed as he wandered the streets of Wishing Moon Bay, a distasteful curl to his lip as he took in the cheerful holiday mood around him. People bustled about, their faces alight with joy and excitement, their laughter echoing through the crisp air.

It's just all so forced, he said as they headed toward the town square. *Just a facade for the season.*

It's sickly sweet, his dragon agreed.

And artificial. Flint followed impatiently behind a group of people gawking at a shop window. *People shouldn't need a holiday to tell them when they can be happy.*

Flint shuddered as a young woman with bright eyes and a sultry smile on her lips headed toward him with a sprig of mistletoe in her hand.

He was in no mood for kissing.

His dragon chuckled. *You are a strange one. Most men would be flattered that a young maiden wanted to kiss them.*

Flint ground his teeth together. *Hasn't our life gotten complicated enough over the last few hours without adding more to the mix.*

True, his dragon agreed. *But a man is not an island.*

Since when have you gotten so philosophical? Flint asked as he pushed his way through a group of people huddled together, talking in whispers.

Town gossips, he presumed.

As he headed down the street, he took more notice of the people around him. People he would normally ignore. But he had to admit, Wishing Moon Bay intrigued him. The town was a melting pot of races—fae with their superior expressions, mingled with humans and shifters, their scents a rich mix of bears, wolves, lions, and even a horse.

Flint could understand why many of his kin had been drawn to this place. If they were going to be accepted anywhere outside of Cairnnor, this was it.

Look sharp, his dragon warned.

Where? Flint paused, his eyes roaming over the heads of the crowd.

Up ahead. See him? His dragon stretched out his wings as if preparing for flight.

Relax, Flint replied, continuing to walk. We are doing nothing wrong. But if you suddenly appear, there would be panic on the streets and that would draw unwanted attention.

The person Flint's dragon was wary of was dressed in uniform, a Dragon Guard uniform. Even from this distance, Flint could taste the familiar metallic tang of a dragon shifter on the air.

This was one of the dragons who had joined an elite force in Wishing Moon Bay to protect the town from Flint's kind.

A remnant of the old regime.

Not wanting a confrontation or to answer any questions as to why he was here, Flint quickly ducked down an alleyway, emerging onto a street filled with even more people, though across it he could see a more open space dominated by a large tree coated in glitzy, sparkly things.

What the hell are we even looking for? Flint asked.

Why are you asking me? His dragon huffed. *Just grab a fistful of shiny things.*

That's what dragons do, after all. Flint chuckled bitterly. *Collect shiny things.*

I might be blue, but I'm not a blue jay, his dragon replied.

His eyes landed on a food stall farther into the Town Square. And his keen eyes could see that it was actual food, with only a mild festive spin on it instead of the stuff he'd found last night.

Flint sighed. He had hoped to grab something to eat, but now all he wanted to do was get the stupid decorations for Morwenna and return to The Lonely Tavern, away from the crowds, though his stomach told him otherwise and he began to move toward the stall.

The Lonely Tavern, his dragon snorted. *The place seems to be named for us.*

Don't get used to it, Flint warned his dragon. *Once we have what we need, we're leaving.*

As Flint threaded his fingers through his hair, he pondered the strange tavern where he had become the latest and seemingly only employee. How had that even happened? He frowned, and his dragon chuckled to himself.

Care to share what you find so amusing? Flint asked his dragon.

Morwenna is a clever witch, his dragon replied. *She has an ulterior motive.*

An ulterior motive? Flint echoed, feeling a surge of curiosity.

Indeed, the dragon said. *I haven't figured it out yet, but these things always reveal themselves, eventually.*

As Flint considered this, he came to a stop in front of the stall. Flint opened his mouth to say something but stopped. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. There was something out there, something he had never experienced before.

Is that the Christmas spirit you're feeling? his dragon joked.

No. Flint shook his head, certain it was something else. For the first time in a long time, he felt vulnerable and exposed.

The Dragon Guard surely hadn't seen him.

He turned to look over the crowd.

Then he saw *her*.

Just on the other side of the row of stalls, a woman wrapped in a thick coat, her woolly scarf draped around her shoulders and a paper bag in her hand stepped out of a store to where two children were waiting.

The moment he laid eyes on her, he knew she was the source of his unease.

She's a witch, his inner dragon confirmed.

She was. He could feel it faintly, but there was a faint aura of magic around her. But that wasn't all. She was more than that.

She was his mate.

As the realization struck him, Flint's heart raced while his dragon roared within him. He had never expected to find his mate here, in this small town, the first place he had been since leaving Cairnnor. And yet, here she was.

Her mere presence made him feel a way he'd never felt before. It made him feel excited, and at peace at the same time. His heart pounded, his throat constricted.

She could feel it, too. She was looking around, searching for something.

Searching for *him*.

He willed himself to move, to duck, to do anything but let her see him, but

he simply could not convince his body to move.

Her eyes brushed over the faceless crowds and landed on him.

Flint felt a jolt in his body as their eyes locked.

All he wanted now was to learn everything about her, to know her deepest dreams and desires, her fears, her needs, to protect her from any harm that might come her way.

One of the children tugged at her sleeve, and she glanced away.

The spell was broken, and he turned away, losing himself in the crowd.

We're going the wrong way! his dragon growled.

No, we're going to the right way, Flint replied, his eyes darting around. *See, there's the store that sells what we need.*

No! What we need is back there. His dragon fought to be free, to stretch his wings and fly back to their mate. But Flint gritted his teeth and denied his dragon his freedom.

For their own good.

And for the good of their mate.

Seriously? his dragon asked.

Seriously, Flint shot back as he dodged a person carrying an armful of perfectly wrapped gift boxes. *I thought we were in agreement; we do not need a mate. Or more specifically, she does not need us.*

That's until we met her, his dragon retorted. *You saw the way she looked at us.*

We haven't met her, Flint replied. *And it's better for her if we don't meet. Ever.*

His dragon gnashed his teeth as the pull of their mate intensified. But Flint was determined to resist. What could he offer her that she needed?

Nothing.

Maybe one day, but not now.

His dragon blew smoke through bared fangs.

It's better this way. Although Flint wasn't sure if he was trying to convince himself as much as his dragon.

Flint pushed the stream of *if-only* images out of his head as he walked on down the street, his eyes fixed on the store up ahead, its window filled with colorful Christmas decorations and large print price tags. He just needed to

get the decorations for Morwenna. Not that he really knew what she wanted. But at least it was a distraction from the alluring call of his mate.

At last, Flint reached the store and, with a deep steadying breath, pushed the door open and prepared himself for the onslaught of canned festive cheer that awaited him inside.

“Happy holidays!” A man dressed as Santa’s elf met him at the door with a wide smile on his face.

Flint gritted his teeth and managed what he thought was a smile, but by the look on the elf’s face, it might have been more of a growling grimace. The elf leaned back away from him, giving the wand he was holding a hesitant flick, showering Flint with star-like confetti.

With a shudder, Flint hardened his resolve and stepped past the man. He would not to be beaten by the holiday season and headed down the nearest aisle.

With little thought for color schemes, he grabbed a handful of various strands of tinsel and then stood dumbfounded in front of row after row of snow globes. But not just any snow globes. These were obviously imbued with magic. They depicted lifelike scenes that swirled and flickered in dazzling ways.

These would surely do. Morwenna would probably appreciate more magical clutter to add to the tavern. He reached out to touch a shimmering ornament showing a gentle snowfall, and as his fingers brushed against it, a blast of icy cold shot up his fingers.

“What the hell?” he muttered under his breath, pulling his hand away.

“Cool, aren’t they?” a small voice asked next to him.

Flint glanced down at the small boy by his side and his eyes widened.

It seems fate is going out of its way to make sure we do meet our mate, his dragon said rather smugly.

Well, fate can shove it.

Flint reached out and grabbed an armful of the magical decorations. He didn’t care what they were, he just needed to get out of there.

But as his hand closed around the snow globes, he was overwhelmed by sensation. He felt the icy blast of a blizzard, the cozy warmth of a roaring fire, the calmness of a pine forest, the tingling touch of snow melting on his skin. The blend of feeling was so strong it felt like it was lifting him up off

his feet.

Flint stumbled backward, tripping over a display of Christmas ornaments, tumbling over and sending colorful baubles scattering over the floor. The small boy reached out to steady him, but Flint was already past saving and found himself staring at the fake icicles hanging from the ceiling.

“Are you okay?” the boy asked, leaning over him.

Flint nodded and was about to right himself when a wave of emotion swept through him, leaving him weak at the knees.

“Casper!”

He had never heard the voice before, but he knew who it belonged to, and his vision seemed to blur as stars swirled around him.

Romantic, his dragon drawled.

But there was nothing romantic about the stars. They were coming from the elf’s wand as he raced forward to see what was happening.

“Mom, I think we need a cookie here,” the small boy called, as if he were a doctor diagnosing an illness.

“Oh.” His mate put her hand inside a paper bag and pulled out a gingerbread man. As Casper moved out of the way, she hunkered down next to him and offered the cookie. “Here. This should make you feel better. At least cookies work for the kids. The holiday season can be overwhelming.”

Flint raised his hand and took the gingerbread man. As he did, his fingers brushed against hers and a jolt of electricity passed between them. Her eyes widened, and her cheeks flushed pink, but she didn’t comment. Instead, she leaned back and watched and waited for him to take a bite of the cookie.

Flint eyed the cookie suspiciously as it winked at him. How was he supposed to eat this thing?

“It’s okay, it’s not alive or anything,” a young girl told him, half hidden behind her mom.

Flint glanced around at the faces staring down at him, all filled with concern, before he obediently bit the head off the gingerbread man.

At least that will stop it from winking at you. His dragon chortled, happy their mate was here.

Flint chewed the cookie under the watchful gaze of his mate and her children. At least he presumed they were her children. There was certainly a

strong family resemblance.

And that brought another burning question into the front of his mind. If his mate had children, did that mean she also had a husband?

Had fate played one last painful trick on them? Was this his reward for his past deeds?

“Shall we help you up off the floor?” his mate asked, her tone gentle as she moved closer.

“I can manage,” Flint replied before stuffing the rest of the gingerbread man into his mouth and pushing himself up from the floor.

“You are very tall,” the young boy said as he craned his neck to look up at Flint.

“It’s in my genes,” Flint replied gruffly.

“You aren’t wearing jeans,” the young boy answered. “Jeans are blue.”

“Casper,” Flint’s mate said with an arched eyebrow. “Let’s give...” She lowered her head and met Flint’s eyes as she waited for him to fill in the blank.

“Flint,” Flint replied. “Flint Granston,” he added as if that might mean something to her. It didn’t.

“Let’s give Flint a moment. I’m Liselle Partridge,” she held out her hand to him and he eyed it warily. Was this a test? Did she want to know if the shock that passed between them before was one of recognition or a residue of electrical charge from manhandling the magic decorations?

“And I’m Casper Partridge,” the young boy piped up.

“And I’m Hazel Partridge,” the young girl announced, her eyes fixed on his face. “You seem awfully big to fall over.”

“I tripped,” Flint replied as he eyed Liselle, who still held her hand out to him. “These snow globes are dangerous.”

With a sigh, he wiped his hand on his leather pants and slipped it into hers.

Instantly, warmth spread out from where their palms touched, traveling up his arm, and then throughout his body. He lowered his gaze, not wanting to see the questions in her eyes. Questions he did not want to answer.

But perhaps he did not need to answer them. If Liselle came from Wishing Moon Bay, she likely already knew about shifters and true mates.

Liselle squeezed his hand, and he brushed his thumb across the back of her

hand in an involuntary movement. Then she loosened her grip, and he slid his hand out of hers, reluctantly. Now they had touched, now the connection was made. It was almost impossible to even think of letting her go.

But let her go, he must.

“Okay, shall we help pick up the decorations from the floor?” Liselle encouraged her children to scoop up the decorations.

“They tickle,” Hazel said as she picked up a star and put it back on the shelf.

“This one is freezing!” Casper said as he picked up the snow globe Flint had first grabbed. Then he turned to Liselle and asked, “Can we get some?”

“I’m sure your grandma can cast a spell or two if we need them, so why don’t we just buy some normal Christmas decorations?” Liselle told her children.

She was met by two mutinous faces as they put the rest of the decorations back on the shelves.

“Thank you,” Flint growled, when he finally found his voice.

“You’re welcome,” Liselle said with a curious smile. “Are you feeling better now?”

Yes, because you are here, his dragon gushed happily.

“I am, thank you,” Flint replied. “I’m not sure what happened.”

“That is the tagline for my life right now,” Liselle said with a half-hearted chuckle.

She needs us, his dragon said.

“Is...there anything I can do to help?” The words left Flint’s mouth before he could stop them.

Liselle gave him a curious sideways glance, and Flint winced inwardly. What an odd thing of a stranger to ask.

“No, I don’t think so. Not unless you happen to own a bar that’s looking to buy my craft beers,” she said.

“You make beer?” Flint tried to stop gazing into her eyes.

“I used to. And do plan to...” Liselle paused, and Flint noticed that she looked a little flustered, too. “I’ve only just moved back to Wishing Moon Bay. I had a business in the world beyond brewing beers and spirits, but... I’m having to start again.” She gave a sad smile. “It’s just such an enormous

investment to start without even knowing anyone who might be interested in buying anything I make.”

Flint gave a wry smile and nodded. “New starts can be intimidating. And sorry, I don’t own a bar.”

Wait.

Tell her! Tell her! his dragon roared in his mind.

The voice in his head was screaming, don’t get involved, but he just couldn’t seem to stop himself from saying, “I just might know someone who would be interested.”

“You do?” Liselle asked in surprise, and the hope in her eyes infused warm, fuzzy feelings in his veins.

“I do,” Flint said and this time when he smiled, it did not feel like a grimace. It also did not feel natural.

It’s going to take some work, his dragon said. But you’ll get there.

Chapter Seven – Liselle

Liselle couldn't believe her luck when they had stumbled over Flint, quite literally, in the aisle of *the tinsel store*, as Casper liked to call it. The handsome, broad-shouldered man had caught her off guard and left her breathless as their eyes locked for a moment.

Was he the answer to her problems? What were the chances he'd know where she might be able to sell her brews?

Please, Hecate, she silently prayed, let this man not be as much of a letdown as my no-good cheating husband.

He certainly didn't resemble Murray physically, that was for sure. Her cheeks turned pink as she tried to push down her attraction to Flint. After all, she was still nursing a broken heart, and a broken bank account, from Murray's betrayal. She didn't need a man.

But that didn't mean she didn't want a man.

No, no, no. She had to focus on her children and their new life here in Wishing Moon Bay.

But, as he strode ahead of them, quiet and mysterious...

For a second, when their hands had brushed against each other's, Liselle was sure there was a connection between them—perhaps even a fated bond. She was certain that Flint was a shifter of some kind. If she had to guess, she'd say he was a dragon shifter; his brooding looks would fit right in among the stories she'd heard about the Dragon Isle. But the way he acted around her told a different story. She'd always heard that when shifters met their fated mates, they could barely bring themselves to be apart, even for a short while. However, if anything, Flint seemed to be trying to avoid getting too close to her.

Or was he just preoccupied with her children who were bombarding him with questions about the tavern he was taking them to? She frowned, wracking her brain for memories but coming up blank. She couldn't recall a tavern called The Lonely Tavern, but then again, things had changed in town since she lived here.

Just as she had also changed. She wasn't the young, optimistic woman

who had left Wishing Moon Bay all those years ago.

As they followed Flint down the street, all carrying the mismatch of Christmas decorations Flint had bought, Liselle found herself imagining them as a family. She shook her head, desperate to rid herself of such thoughts.

She certainly didn't want Murray back.

But deep down, she longed to be part of a family again. Not that she didn't see herself, Casper, and Hazel as a family already, but the kids would love to have a father figure in their lives once more.

Could Flint be the one?

She silently scolded herself. Why was she thinking like this? She'd only just met him. She knew nothing about him.

Yet, Liselle could feel a connection with him.

Perhaps the children could sense it, too. Drawn in by some animal magnetism Flint seemed to possess.

Whether Flint appreciated the attention from Casper and Hazel, Liselle could not tell. The look on Flint's face was unreadable and she would sure love to get a glimpse inside his mind and know what he was thinking.

Flint led them down a narrower street, and Liselle spotted the hanging sign—The Lonely Tavern. Its old wooden board with letters carved into it in an old script looked out of place. In fact, Liselle got the odd sense that the entire building was out of place, as if it didn't quite fit into its surroundings.

Liselle could almost see the magical aura surrounding the tavern, shimmering and undulating like a living thing. She held out her hands, feeling the energy tingle against her skin. Just as she was about to grasp the essence of it, the door loudly unlatched itself and swung open, and she felt an inexplicable urge to go inside.

Liselle hesitated, uncertain if this was the kind of establishment Casper and Hazel should enter. "Casper, Hazel, wait," she said cautiously.

Casper looked up at his mother with wide eyes. "Wait for what?" he asked, curiosity dancing in his gaze.

Her brow furrowed, Liselle considered suggesting that maybe she should come back later, alone. But before she could voice her thoughts, Hazel chimed in, "We have the Christmas decorations Flint bought. We should take them inside."

Casper nodded in agreement, and Liselle found herself taking one step,

then two steps forward, drawn into the mysterious tavern.

Upon entering The Lonely Tavern, Liselle was surprised at how welcoming it felt. A roaring fire crackled in the hearth, and the scent of pine filled the air, mingling with fragrant herbs. In fact, the tavern smelled remarkably like Katerina's workshop, where she mixed her spells and potions. A cauldron bubbled away over the fire and shelves overhead held a treasury of interesting items that caught her eye. She narrowed her eyes as she saw a slate sign on the host's desk in front of her. It read "Cheers to fresh starts."

Something was definitely amiss.

"Where shall we put these?" Casper asked Flint.

As she glanced at Flint, she caught him gazing at her. Heat spread across her skin, and though she would have loved to blame it on the warmth from the fire, she knew it was a reaction to Flint's gaze. Tearing his eyes away from her, Flint directed them toward the bar.

"Stay close," Liselle warned her children, her attention caught by something fluttering around in the beams above them. If she had to guess, Flint wasn't the only one who was not as he seemed.

Not that her children were the least bit concerned as they ignored her warning and followed Flint around the side of the bar. They were much too trusting, and she needed to remind them of stranger-danger.

Icy dread crept into her veins.

Stranger danger? Liselle had followed a complete stranger into a strange bar simply because he'd said what she needed to hear. His promise that he knew someone who might be interested in selling her craft beers and spirits might be completely bogus.

Had Flint lured them here for some nefarious reason?

"You've returned," a singsong voice said.

A woman with voluminous, curly gray hair and a billowing skirt covered in charms and trinkets appeared as if from nowhere at the bottom of the stairs to the side of the bar. Liselle hadn't heard anyone come down the bare wood steps.

"I have," Flint replied gruffly as he set the box he'd been carrying down on the floor behind the counter. "You sound surprised."

"I wasn't sure if the task I set you was too hard," the woman said with a

twinkle of mischief in her eyes as she strode toward them.

“You asked me to get Christmas decorations, not wrestle an ogre.” Flint straightened up and rolled his shoulders.

The woman closed one eye as she looked at Flint. “I’m not sure which would have been more difficult for you. And you found friends along the way!” The woman gestured at the three of them. Casper and Hazel stood a little closer to their mom. “Are you going to introduce me to your helpers?”

“Sure,” Flint replied. “Morwenna, this is Liselle. Liselle, this is Morwenna. She’s my...employer.” Morwenna’s self-satisfied smile grew as she extended a hand to Liselle, who hesitated for a moment before shaking it. Something about the woman’s aura was both intriguing and unnerving. “And these are her children, Casper and Hazel.”

“Charmed, our paths have crossed,” Morwenna said smoothly, her eyes flicking to the children’s curious stares. Casper and Hazel seemed equally intrigued by the witch.

And a witch she was. There was no mistaking her airy poise—the woman was a powerful witch.

Flint must have noticed Liselle’s visible wariness as he subtly stepped between them. “Morwenna is the owner of this place and desperately needs some new drinks.”

Morwenna raised her eyebrows and turned to Flint. “Oh? I hadn’t realized.”

“You can’t seriously want to only ever have that bread beer for people to drink,” Flint said.

Morwenna shrugged. “I’m telling you, you get used to it. And more than that, it really grows on you, especially after a few decades.”

“I think the place will be out of business by the time people acquire the same taste you have.” Flint took a breath. “Luckily, Liselle brews craft beers and spirits, and is looking for a buyer.”

Liselle forced herself to relax a little. She didn’t sense any danger in either Flint or Morwenna. Besides, she really needed to make this work. If she could secure one outlet for her goods, then she would have taken the first step to success. However, Morwenna appeared unsure, studying Liselle intently. “Have you tried any of her drinks?”

“Yeah, sure. They were delicious,” Flint said flatly.

Liselle tried not to look too surprised at Flint's lie.

"Good, I wouldn't want you proposing something so bold as to have an alternative to the tavern's lovely bread beer without having even tried it." Morwenna slid her gaze lazily back to Flint. "What was it like?"

"The beer?"

Morwenna nodded. "Of course. What were the flavors, the bold ones, the subtle ones? It must have been quite something for you to be so sure they'd fit in here."

Liselle had to admire how Flint kept his poker face.

"It was...hoppy. With a touch of fruit."

Morwenna nodded, gesturing for him to continue.

"The fruit was mostly...sweet."

Morwenna looked down at her nails. "Was it an interesting choice of fruit?"

"I couldn't really tell, because the flavors were so complex."

Liselle spotted an almost imperceptible glance in her direction from Flint while Morwenna was looking down. That was her cue. "You tried what was my signature beer. It was a fusion between an amber ale and a farmhouse saison. The fruit you could taste would have been the apricots, but you probably struggled to tell because of the sweet caramel flavor that made it so popular in the world beyond." She flashed Morwenna a smile. "It's hard to pick these things out if you don't know what you're tasting for."

Liselle was sure she could see the ghost of a smile on Morwenna's face before she spoke. "Spoken like someone who knows more about beer than Flint."

Liselle stifled a laugh.

"Go on. Give her a chance," Flint insisted, brushing off the comment. "You'll be sold out by the end of the week, I'm sure of it."

Liselle felt a blush creeping up her cheeks at Flint's salesmanship, especially since he hadn't even tried her brews himself. She hoped he wasn't overselling her abilities.

Morwenna turned her full attention to Liselle. "I haven't seen you in the bar before."

"I don't think you see anyone in this bar," Flint murmured.

“I just moved back to town with my children,” Liselle replied, trying to keep her voice steady.

“That’s quite a big move to go through with two little ones. We’re not running from anything, are we?” Morwenna asked, her expression unreadable.

Flint emitted a low grumble at the question, while Liselle was caught a little off guard.

Was she running from something? Her old life? The mistakes she had made?

No. Murray didn’t have that kind of power over her to make her flee. She had moved here of her own will to build something new.

“No, I’m not,” Liselle said firmly. “My circumstances changed, and it was best for us to move here.” She had a few bottles of her beers in the car; they were the last of the ones she’d brewed in the world beyond, but after that... well, she would have to find a way to get brewing and fast.

Morwenna remained silent for a moment, clearly weighing up her options. In the pause, Liselle’s eyes flicked upward. There was definitely something moving about up in the rafters.

Flint broke the silence, his voice forceful. “If you let this opportunity slip by, you’ll regret it. Another tavern in town is sure to purchase Liselle’s drinks if you don’t.”

“I underestimated you, Flint. I had no idea you knew so much about the tavern trade, considering you’ve only been working here for a couple of hours,” Morwenna retorted, only a hint of sarcasm in her tone.

Liselle’s heart sank. She’d put her trust in a man only for him to let her down once more.

“It’s instinct,” Flint replied, obviously not ready to give up fighting in Liselle’s corner.

“Instinct, hm?” Morwenna narrowed her eyes at Flint and then, with a flourish of her hand, she produced a piece of parchment and an ink pen out of thin air.

“Yes, instinct,” Flint replied as he craned forward in an attempt to read what was written on the parchment.

“Then it’s a good thing I have this order made out for ten bottles of spirits and fifty bottles of beer.” Morwenna handed the pen to Liselle. “If I could

have your signature on both pieces of parchment, one copy is yours and the other is mine.”

“Does Mommy have to sign it in blood?” Casper asked.

“*Casper.*” Liselle tugged her brows together as she looked at her son.

“That’s what they do in movies,” Casper insisted.

“What movies?” Liselle asked before she berated herself for getting sidetracked from signing a deal that would help secure their future here in Wishing Moon Bay.

“Ink is good enough for me,” Morwenna said with an amused tone. “I find blood a little messy.”

“I don’t know what to say,” Liselle breathed as she took the pen from Morwenna. As her hand hovered over the parchment, she skimmed through the contract she was about to sign. Morwenna might not be asking her to sign in blood, but that didn’t make the contract any less binding if there was magic involved. And there had to be magic involved, or else how had Morwenna produced this written order out of thin air?

The contract itself was little more than a simple receipt of purchase for the drinks. The only peculiar thing was that the form was quite specific about what drinks Morwenna wanted, and that almost all of them were spirits and beers that she had sold in the world beyond. How could Morwenna have known about them?

“I’ve always been a believer in the laws of attraction, and that Flint’s brought you here a mere half hour after Elsbeth...” Morwenna trailed off.

“Elsbeth?” Liselle repeated, looking up from the parchment.

“Yes. She was asking if I might have any brewing equipment hanging around, and when I asked her what for, she said about your...predicament...” Morwenna’s eyes twinkled with mischief.

“You already knew?” Flint ground out. “You had already decided to place an order with Liselle?”

“Yes,” Morwenna asked as a smile played across her lips, and she switched her attention to Flint.

“So, what? This was a game?” Flint asked, his voice cold.

“Don’t be so sour.” Morwenna pressed her lips together. “Besides, it was more like a test.”

“A test?” Liselle wasn’t sure if she was missing something.

“Yes, it was a test of character,” Morwenna began. “You see, Flint likes to think he’s a big grumpy dragon, but really...”

“A dragon?” Casper squeaked in awe.

“Yes,” Flint sighed heavily, as if his deepest, darkest secret had been revealed.

“You don’t look like a dragon.” Casper leaned forward and peered at him.

“That’s because he’s a shifter. Like Mommy told us earlier.” Hazel eyed him up.

“Awesome!” Casper gazed at Flint with open adoration. “Can you fly?”

“Of course he can fly,” Hazel said. “He’s a dragon.”

“Can you show me?” Casper asked. “Can I go for a ride on your back? Can we fly into the mountains? Or can we fly over the ocean?”

“Take a breath, Casper,” Liselle told her son, trying to keep her voice level as she let the news sink in that the man before them was indeed a shifter.

She had suspected as much. From her short time with Flint, she also suspected that there was also some other hidden part of him. He seemed gruff and aloof, yet there was a certain gentleness to Flint. At least she sensed there was. A vulnerable side. One he kept hidden.

Liselle tore her gaze from Flint, realizing she had been staring. With her mouth open. Instead, she finished reading through the parchment. It all looked simple enough. The order was for ten bottles of spirits and fifty bottles of beer, just as Morwenna had said. While some of the flavors were specified, they weren’t all. That was good, as Liselle liked to brew with the season.

“Shy of commitment?” Morwenna asked lightly.

“No.” Liselle’s cheeks flushed pink, and she signed the two copies of the order as if to prove her point. Although, she suspected Morwenna was not talking about the orders.

“Excellent.” Morwenna scooped up the two pieces of parchment and then thrust out her hand. “I look forward to doing business with you, Liselle Norwood.”

As Liselle slipped her hand into Morwenna’s, she was struck by the notion that this shake of hands was more binding than any signed contract.

Chapter Eight – Flint

Flint was filled with a mixture of relief and gratitude as he watched Liselle sign to accept Morwenna's order and hand the forms back. Her fledgling business was off the ground. But beneath the satisfaction, irritation bubbled up within him. He'd been played by Morwenna, who'd made him plead Liselle's case when she'd already decided to give her a chance.

Let it go, his inner dragon advised, the beast's voice echoing in his mind. Morwenna did help us, after all. If she hadn't given us this job, we would never have met our mate. And however things went down, what is most important is that Liselle has her first order. If we blow this out of proportion, we might ruin everything. For us and Liselle.

Flint gritted his teeth, knowing the dragon was right, but still feeling the sting of Morwenna's manipulation.

Besides, there's some good news, his dragon said soothingly. You heard her say that she moved here because her situation changed. That's got to mean that if she had a partner before, he's not in their lives anymore.

Casper's innocent voice broke through his thoughts. "Shall we help you with the decorations?" The boy's eyes shone with anticipation, eager to contribute. "I'm sure if I sit on your shoulders, I can reach the rafters."

Flint glanced down at the box filled with brightly colored ornaments and tinsel, unsure of how to respond. Buying the decorations was one thing. But putting them up? Surely Morwenna knew she could only push him so far.

Say yes, urged his dragon. It'll give us more time with our mate and her children. We need to get to know them better.

We don't need to get to know them better, Flint argued. Nothing has changed. We're not staying in this damn town!

Look what would have happened if we hadn't met, the dragon countered. We brought her to Morwenna, and now her business is finally starting.

Liselle would have gotten the order, anyway. Morwenna had the contract ready before Liselle stepped foot in the tavern, Flint grumbled, unwilling to admit that fate may have had a hand in their meeting.

"Have we lost you, Flint?" Morwenna's sarcastic voice yanked Flint out of

his reverie.

He blinked, realizing he'd zoned out while conversing with his dragon. He wasn't used to considering the people around him, so accustomed to being alone with his thoughts and the beast inside.

Things will change now that we've found our mate, his dragon assured him.

We're not staying, he stated firmly.

The dragon gave no reply. He simply snorted out a puff of smoke and turned his back on Flint, clearly unhappy with the decision.

"Thank you for your help," Liselle said, seemingly oblivious to Flint's internal struggle. "But we really do need to go."

Casper pouted at her words, obviously disappointed. "But I wanted to help with the decorations," he whined.

Liselle extended her hand to her son, who eyed it suspiciously before she continued. "We have to go and check out the warehouse, remember?"

"Is it spooky?" Casper's eyes lit up with excitement, already forgetting about the decorations.

"It's Christmas *not* Halloween, Casper," Hazel chided.

"Maybe it's *always* Halloween in Wishing Moon Bay," Casper mused, his voice filled with wonder. "With all the witches, wizards, and dragons!"

"Maybe," Liselle chuckled lightly, "but the strange and wonderful people in Wishing Moon Bay aren't scary. They're just like us." Morwenna snorted slightly at Liselle's words, but she wasn't going to comment. "Thank you, Morwenna," Liselle said, her tone firm yet polite. "I appreciate the order, and I'll get it to you as soon as possible."

"Looking forward to it," replied Morwenna, her eyes glinting with a hint of mischief. "Elsbeth had such good things to say about your brews. So as soon as you can bring those samples, I'd love to try them."

Liselle chewed on her bottom lip for a moment, looking anxious. Flint could almost sense her pain and insecurity, longing to know how she ended up so desperate.

If we made a date with our mate, we could ask her all these questions, his dragon suggested.

However, Flint chose to ignore his dragon, who responded by puffing up

another cloud of smoke.

But was he honestly going to let her walk out of his life?

As Liselle headed for the door, Flint stood stoically while his dragon grumbled. *How can you let her go without a word?*

Confusion left Flint tongue-tied. He'd always told himself that no woman deserved to be stuck with him. But after meeting Liselle, his resolve was wavering.

Shifters believed in fate. They believed that when the time was right, they would meet their mate.

Was Flint challenging that belief? Was he challenging fate itself?

He should act. He should give them a chance.

But Flint kept his mouth shut as Liselle turned away from the bar.

However, then she paused, looked directly at Flint, and said, "Thank you."

"For what?" Flint asked. "I didn't do anything. Elsbeth is the one responsible for Morwenna making an order."

Liselle nodded and said, "Yes, but it's the thought that counts. And I'm thankful to you."

Color infused Flint's cheeks, and he was grateful for the dim lighting of the tavern as he shrank further into the shadows. "It was the least I could do," he replied gruffly.

The very least, his inner dragon mocked.

Morwenna eyed Flint with amusement, clearly aware of the tension between him and Liselle. Could the witch tell that he and Liselle were mates? And more importantly, did Liselle know?

"Well, thank you anyway." The corners of Liselle's mouth turned down ever so slightly, as if she were waiting for him to say more. Was she disappointed in him?

I'm disappointed in you, his dragon chastised tartly, echoing Flint's thoughts.

"Goodbye." Liselle's expression softened, and she gave him a small, sad smile before turning away with Casper and Hazel in tow.

"Bye!" Casper waved enthusiastically.

"Good luck with the decorations," Hazel added.

Flint raised his hand and watched them leave. Feeling as if a part of him

was missing. As the door closed behind them, Flint couldn't shake the feeling that he had just let something precious slip through his fingers.

His dragon remained silent, as if he had nothing left to say as the weight of disappointment hung heavy in the air, an unspoken reminder of the consequences of his reticence.

Flint watched in stunned silence as Liselle, Casper, and Hazel left The Lonely Tavern, feeling an inexplicable sense of loss. The door closed behind them with a soft thud, echoing in his chest.

"That's it?" Morwenna asked in disbelief, her eyes wide and incredulous.

"What is?" Flint shot back, defensive and irritated by her tone.

"You're just letting them walk out of your life?" Morwenna persisted, her gaze unwavering.

"Why wouldn't I?" Flint replied, trying to sound nonchalant. "I only just met them at the store, it's not as if..." He trailed off, searching for the right words.

"You are mates," Morwenna finished for him, her voice low and certain.

The words stung somewhere deep in Flint's chest, but he just shook his head at her. He leaned down and picked up the box containing the decorations, looking for something else to focus on. "Where do you want me to put these?" he asked, his voice tight.

Morwenna snorted and shook her head, gesturing vaguely toward a corner. "Leave them there. I'll deal with them later."

"You don't want me to hang them?" Flint asked, his hands gripping the edges of the box, knuckles white. Not only did he feel like his heart was being torn in two, Morwenna's harsh tone wasn't doing any favors for his mood.

Morwenna glanced around the tavern, taking in the dark wood and dim lighting. "I'm not sure the decorations fit in with the ambiance." She shrugged, a hard glint in her eye.

Flint rolled his eyes. "Why send me out to buy them then?"

Morwenna stared at him directly, arching an enigmatic eyebrow before turning and heading out of the bar.

Flint felt as though he'd been punched in the gut. Had Morwenna known he would meet Liselle and the children at the store? Was that why she'd sent him out? His world seemed to tip on its axis, but before he could process the

revelation, he sensed a presence in the tavern.

Another dragon.

Flint turned around, hackles raised, expecting to see the Dragon Guard he'd seen earlier. However, the dragon who approached the bar was not in uniform. He had a woman with him—his mate. Flint could tell by the way they touched hands and smiled at each other, their actions mirrored as if they were totally in tune with one another.

An overwhelming sense of disappointment and regret swept over Flint, his chest aching as if it were being crushed. Inside his head, his dragon keened like a creature pining for a loss that could never be replaced.

It was just one unfortunate event after another.

“Hey there,” the dragon shifter said as he approached the bar. It was obvious by his curious expression and the way he looked him up and down that he could sense Flint was a dragon shifter.

“Hey,” Flint said and moved behind the bar as Morwenna headed toward the upstairs muttering to herself. “What can I get you?”

A mate, his dragon said unhelpfully.

“I’ll take a honey beer,” the dragon shifter said.

“And I’ll have an Orchard Old Fashioned,” the other dragons’ mate answered, and was met with a bemused smile from the man. “What? I know it’s not Halloween, but I like the apple taste.”

Flint waited for them to stop laughing. “Sorry, we’re all out of everything until next week, I think. Unless you want bread beer, which you probably don’t.”

The woman cocked her head. “Really? We were just in here yesterday and Morwenna seemed pretty stocked up.”

“Really,” Flint replied.

“Yeah.” The man peered over the bar. “She even said she’d put a couple of beers away for me.”

“You’re new here, aren’t you?” the woman asked with a smile.

“Yeah. I am.” Flint figured they weren’t just talking about being new to the tavern.

“In that case, I’m Ivan,” the guy said, his grin widening. “And this is my beautiful wife, Larisa.”

“Great to meet you,” Flint ground out.

“The beer is in the refrigerator,” Ivan said helpfully.

“And where is that?” Flint asked, wishing Morwenna hadn’t gone off in a huff without explaining where everything was.

“I’ll show you.” Larisa slipped her hand out of Ivan’s and came around the bar with an encouraging smile. Flint wasn’t sure customers were supposed to be behind the bar, but he wasn’t going to deny Larisa’s help. After all, didn’t Morwenna know an employee needed some basic training before being left alone?

“Here.” Larisa leaned down and opened a small hatch beneath the bar.

Flint leaned forward, trying to peek inside what must have been the smallest refrigerator in the world. An icy blast of wind to the face warned him that all was not as it seemed.

Which seemed to be the mantra of his life since landing in Wishing Moon Bay.

All right, Flint said, resigned, when in Rome...or whatever strange place this is.

He leaned forward to peer inside, but he couldn’t see any shelves filled with beer. In fact, he couldn’t see anything. It was as if a thick blizzard was raging within, obscuring anything from view.

“Woah, not like that.” Larisa placed her hand on Flint’s shoulder to stop him leaning forward any farther. “Just call in and ask for what you want. If it’s got it in there, it’ll hand it to you.”

Ivan chuckled. “Watch him, darling. I don’t want to have to dive in after him.”

Flint knit his brows together, glancing at Larisa, unsure if she was making fun of him. But she seemed earnest, so he kneeled down and began to call, “Honey...”

Ivan interrupted, “Can you make sure it’s Bear Creek Honey Beer? That other fae stuff they serve here is just not as good.”

“*Bear Creek Honey Beer...please,*” Flint said, not wanting to offend the refrigerator.

His dragon snickered, certain Ivan and Larisa were making fun of him. But then Flint flinched back as a large, furry hand punched a bottle forward out of the refrigerator.

“What the hell?” Flint muttered, cautiously accepting the bottle from the creature, his mind racing with questions. Questions he might *not* want to know the answers to.

The beer was *ice* cold, and once he had hold of it, the large hand grabbed the door to the refrigerator and swung it shut as it disappeared back inside.

“The Lonely Tavern is the talk of the town,” Ivan told Flint as he handed over the bottle. “The main topic of the conversation centers around where exactly that refrigerator leads.”

“And where does it lead?” Flint asked, making sure not to stand directly in front of the small door.

“Maybe you can tell us,” Ivan replied. “Since you work here, you might be able to learn all the secrets of The Lonely Tavern.” He slid his beer over some runes carved into the bar and the top of the bottle popped off with a satisfying sound.

“Like where it goes when it disappears.” Larisa grinned as Flint’s eyes widened.

“Disappears?” Flint asked, glancing toward the door, the feeling of being chewed alive by the tavern returning.

“Yes. Sometimes it’s just gone.” Ivan clicked his fingers. “Poof.”

“But don’t worry, it always comes back,” Larisa said with a laugh as she returned to the other side of the bar.

“Although no one knows where it came from in the first place.” Ivan sipped his beer and then grinned as he slipped an arm around his mate. “But at least you won’t get stranded. Not when you have wings to fly home.”

“Why don’t we make my cocktail?” Larisa asked as Flint grimaced.

It wasn’t that he might end up goodness knows where if The Lonely Tavern disappeared and didn’t come back. No, what troubled him most was that he might get lost and never see his mate again.

A mate you said you didn’t want, his dragon replied.

It’s not that I don’t want her, Flint said as he tried to make sense of his muddled feelings. It was never about not wanting her. It was more that he didn’t think he deserved her, and she didn’t deserve him.

But maybe that will change, his dragon said. *Maybe we will change. And then we might deserve her. And she might deserve us.*

We have changed, and it's not enough, Flint snapped as he watched his first two customers steal a glance into each other's eyes.

Isn't it? His dragon narrowed his eyes. *Here's a dragon shifter in front of us, who would have come from the same island, possibly suffered similarly to us. He's probably got demons, regrets, flaws. And yet...*

"So, how do I make a cocktail in this place?" Flint asked, interrupting both his dragon and the couple's moment.

"It's easy," Larisa said and pointed at a silver tumbler. "First you just grab the cocktail mixer and focus on what you want."

"Of course," Flint replied sarcastically. "What did you want again?"

"An Orchard Old Fashioned, please," Larissa said formally.

Flint picked up the shaker, covered in intricate engravings, and kept the name of the drink in his mind. "Now what."

"Now look up."

Flint turned his eyes up. Above the bar were several racks of glasses and tankards, just above them were several bottles, which would have been hidden from the other side of the bar. It was immediately obvious to Flint which liquids he needed as they seemed to have uncorked themselves, and yet nothing was spilling.

He held up the shaker under each one and they each poured a measure of liquid into the shaker.

"Don't forget the ice from the refrigerator," Ivan said. "I know how you feel about warm cocktails." He poked at Larissa.

She brushed him off playfully. "I wouldn't complain. It's his first time."

Flint swallowed the nauseous feeling that came over him upon seeing these two act so carefree together, and cracked open the small door and called for ice. The hand appeared with a single chunk of ice that it ground into a fine powder as Flint held the shaker beneath it. He certainly didn't want to let that thing get a hold of him.

Knowing what the next step was at least, he gave the shaker a quick rattle, only to find that it kept shaking in his hands when he tried to stop, until it had been perfectly mixed.

Flint placed it back on the bar as two small metal bowls slid from one end of the bar and stopped in front of him. One held a dark red-brown spice he could immediately tell was cinnamon, while the other held fresh lime.

He took a pinch of the cinnamon and added it to the mix before reaching up and picking out a glass at random to pour the drink into, before grabbing a lime slice and jamming it onto the rim.

“There, one Orchard Old Fashioned. I think,” Flint declared, handing the glass to Larisa.

Larisa held the glass up to her nose and gave it a sniff. “Mmm, smells perfect. Thank you...”

“Flint.” He nodded his head at the couple.

As he did, he pictured himself seated at a bar with his mate by his side. For the first time, he let himself see what he was missing. Hadn't he struggled and suffered enough?

In the dim light of The Lonely Tavern, hope bloomed in his heart.

Chapter Nine – Liselle

As Liselle, Casper, and Hazel left The Lonely Tavern, the crowded streets of Wishing Moon Bay enveloped them in a complex mix of sensations. It was getting dark, and Liselle kept a watchful eye on her children. She didn't feel unsafe, however, the streets were well lit by streetlights and filled with friendly faces.

The clear night sky was alight with not just with the bright moon and carpet of stars that peeked out from the curtain of the late evening sun, but with shimmering lights of magic cast by performers and practitioners, shining in every color imaginable and lighting up the crowds as they flared in and out of existence.

It had been so long since Liselle had seen a Christmas like this, and she was as captivated as her children as they gazed around, unable to keep their eyes on one thing for too long.

“Mom, look!” Casper exclaimed, tugging on Liselle's hand as he pointed toward a nearby food stall. The smell of exotic spices wafted through the air, mingling with the scent of baking pastry. “Can we try some Pixie Pockets, please?”

“I guess we could do with something to eat before we go and check out the warehouse,” Liselle agreed, hoping a filling snack might make her son less likely to complain about getting into the car again. She glanced at the sign for the prices and pulled out the correct cash from her purse. “May we have three Pixie Pockets, please?” Liselle handed over a few coins to the vendor.

“Coming right up.” The vendor placed three large, yet delicate looking pastries into individual paper bags.

Liselle's mouth watered at the aroma of the delicate shells filled with a shimmering mix of enchanted mushrooms and tarragon-soaked spinach, seasoned with thyme from the Summer Isle. They looked almost too beautiful to eat.

“Ooh, I want to try those Banshee Bites!” Casper announced excitedly, pointing at a tray of red-speckled breadcrumb-covered balls on the next stall.

“Those are very spicy,” Liselle warned, chuckling as she remembered her

own experience with the fiery snack. “They’re called Banshee Bites because they make you scream like a banshee when you bite into them.”

“I would love to scream like a banshee!” Casper insisted, his eyes wide with curiosity.

Liselle hesitated before shaking her head. “Not this time.” She didn’t want to deal with an upset stomach on top of everything else.

“What about these?” Hazel suggested, pointing at a tray of Squash and Sage Wraps.

“They look yummy,” Liselle agreed. “Can I have three, please?”

After the vendor handed over the wraps and Liselle paid for them, they walked back to the car, munching on their treats. While around them, the world was alive with the sights and scents of the town and its unique inhabitants. Liselle marveled at how quickly the magical world of Wishing Moon Bay was beginning to feel normal.

When it was anything but.

They quickly reached the car and got in with no complaints. Possibly because Casper looked sleepy. It had been a long day and after eating his Pixie Pocket and wrap, Casper was ready for a nap.

Perhaps he’d fall asleep on the car ride to the warehouse. It would be a shame for him to miss out on the warehouse, and she didn’t know how she felt about leaving him alone in the car.

And that was if she could locate the warehouse off Raglan Way in the first place. Liselle hadn’t visited the warehouses by the docks much even during her youth, and she had no idea how to get to Raglan Way. If she got lost and couldn’t find it, she’d have to return tomorrow with her mom.

Which might not be a bad idea, since it was getting dark. The docks had always had a reputation as being a rougher part of town. As a girl, Katerina had always warned her about going near them. And the reasons would change every time. One day, it would be the strange folk who had come across the water and gathered here. Another it would be the power and trickery of the sea who wanted nothing more than to suck her away from dry land.

The warnings from her mother had cast an air of mystic across the industrial buildings of the dock that had only grown with time, and now there was something almost enigmatic about the dark, tall buildings.

As they drove past skeletons of machinery and imposing facades, she

could only wonder what Gilbert had wanted her to see. Whatever it was, she hoped it was worth it. There was only so much running around chasing mysteries that she was willing to do.

Her priority now had to be providing Hazel and Casper with a stable home life.

Did that include a certain dragon shifter?

Liselle shook her head as the thought crept into her head from nowhere. She had no room in her life for a casual fling and since Flint had made no mention of them being mates, that was all he could offer her.

Once he found his true mate, he would dump her in a flash.

Yet her skin tingled where they had touched, and she could not deny the intense connection she felt to him. Was *he* denying it?

“Look at the ocean!” Casper gasped and pressed his face to the car window.

“It’s like it’s on fire.” Hazel leaned across the car to stare at the ocean, which shimmered red and gold as the last rays of the setting sun reflected off it.

“It’s like Flint has breathed fire on it.” Casper sighed and then said, “I wish I was a dragon.”

“Me, too,” Hazel said dreamily. “We could fly wherever we want.”

“Does Flint have treasure?” Casper asked. “Dragons always have treasures in stories.”

“I don’t know.” Liselle had forgotten how beautiful it was here. Perhaps tomorrow she could bring the children down to the beach and they could play on the sand and dodge the waves, while looking for wish stones.

“Next time I see him, I’m going to ask him,” Casper announced.

“Oops!” Liselle nearly missed the sign for Raglan Way, and the children squealed in delight as she made a sharp turn, plunging them into the maze of red brick warehouses.

The whole complex was all but deserted, likely shut down for the holiday period. Liselle eased her foot off the gas as she drove between the looming buildings. She wasn’t sure where she was heading, and the harsh glow of industrial lights made her feel a long way away from the pretty lampposts and festive lights on the main streets.

Despite that, she felt oddly at ease.

Relaxing her grip on the steering wheel, Liselle let her thoughts drift. It was as though she had tapped into the innate magic that flowed within her—a guiding force directing her through the labyrinth of buildings. Trusting it, she allowed herself to be led.

When Liselle pulled up outside a large warehouse which stood away from the others, she knew this was their destination. Excitedly, she got out of the car and held out her hands. Magic pulsed through her veins like electricity, and with a whispered incantation, she created a glowing orb in the palm of her hand. Another followed suit, and Casper and Hazel exited the car to join her, their eyes wide with wonder.

“Mom, you did that?” Hazel asked, her voice filled with amazement.

Liselle smiled, her heart swelling with pride. It had been so long since she had cast even a minor spell, but it came back to her as if it had never left. “Yes, I did. Shall we follow them?”

“Yes,” Hazel said and skipped after the lights, with Casper close behind.

The three of them followed the orbs of light that bobbed and weaved, leading them toward a warehouse that seemed to thrum with a magical heartbeat all its own. As they walked, the sound of waves lapping at the quayside was a comforting lullaby mingled with the distant calls of men loading ships before night fell. The aroma of saltwater mixed with the scent of freshly caught fish and spices from far-off lands drifted toward them on the breeze, leaving Liselle with a sense of nostalgia.

Despite Katerina’s warnings of the docks, Liselle had often made her way down here. She’d sit on the thick stone walls surrounding the docks and watch the comings and goings of sailors, always wondering if one of them was her father. A man she had never met, a man who Katerina never spoke of.

A man who might not be aware that he had a child.

She’d so wanted her children to know their father, to grow up with him in their lives and feel his love.

Perhaps that’s why she’d chosen Murray. Not because she loved him with any great passion. Though love him, she had. But because he’d seemed so down to earth and dependable.

How wrong could she be?

“Mom,” Hazel hissed with a mixture of apprehension and excitement as they neared the dilapidated warehouse. “It’s like the air is prickly.”

Casper and Hazel held out their hands and giggled as they wriggled their fingers.

Liselle joined them, as the very air seemed to crackle with energy, sending shivers down her spine.

“Magic,” Liselle whispered reverently, her voice barely above a murmur. “It’s woven into the very fabric of this place.”

“Why?” Hazel’s voice quivered with the thrill of the unknown.

“Let’s see, shall we?” Liselle ran past her children. When she reached the warehouse, she grasped the cool metal of the door. With a heave, she slid it open. Rhythmic chanting flowed out from within, and the charged feeling of magic intensified.

“Wow!” Hazel gasped as she joined her mom and peered inside. The interior of the warehouse seemed as though it had come alive with an otherworldly glow as thirteen witches stood in a circle around a large, copper still which reflected the magical glow, the twists and turns of its copper piping sparkling in the light. Around them was a storm of movement as barrels, vats, benches and shelves continuously shuffled around in time with the chanting.

“Grandma!” Casper’s voice rose above the incantations, a note of joy unmistakable in his call as he spotted Katerina among the witches, cloaked in robes that shimmered with an ethereal light. Their voices rose and fell in a melodic chant, weaving threads of magic that hung in the air like gossamer.

At the sound of Casper’s voice, Katerina ceased her rhythmic swaying and twirled gracefully toward them, her gown billowing out like the petals of a blooming flower caught in a gentle breeze.

A radiant smile illuminated her face, spreading warmth that rivaled the magic itself. “Welcome, my dears! I wondered whether you would find us before we finished.” Katerina’s voice was rich with love and excitement. “Come, join us.”

“Join you in what?” Liselle asked as she reached for Hazel and Casper’s hands, afraid they might be swept away to distant lands by the powerful magic cast by her mother’s coven.

“Can’t you tell?” Katerina asked as she caught hold of Casper and Hazel’s

free hands and the four of them twirled around and around. “This is all for you.”

“For us?” Liselle asked as a line of oak casks paraded past, hovering a full two feet off the concrete.

“Your brewery.” Katerina laughed as she let go of them and picked up one of the threads of the spell as the others continued chanting.

“My...brewery.” Excitement filled her as she realized what was happening. Then she remembered her other good news. It was all coming together in just the perfect way. “Mom! I’ve found my first customer. They want some samples, but they’ve already put in an order.”

Katerina cast a beaming look over her shoulder. “That’s wonderful, dear! Who is it?”

“It’s for a place called The Lonely Tavern. The owner’s name is Morwenna.”

Katerina paused, her hands frozen in the air, still holding the thread of magic. “The Lonely Tavern? How did you end up there?”

Liselle noted her mom’s surprised expression. “You know it? It’s new, right?”

“We gave a dragon a cookie when he fell over!” Casper piped up excitedly.

“A dragon?” Katerina’s eyebrows only got higher.

“A dragon shifter,” Liselle corrected him.

“He fell over in the tinsel store, and we gave him a cookie, then he took us to The Lonely Tavern, and then a witch bought a load of Mommy’s drinks.” Casper sucked in a gasp of air after he was done talking.

“I see.” Katerina turned to continue her work, but quickly turned back to her daughter. “Be very careful with The Lonely Tavern. You’re right, it is new, and we don’t know much about it. It’s very mysterious, and we think very powerful.” She repeated the movement, beginning her chant before taking Liselle’s gaze again. “More importantly, be *very* careful around that dragon shifter.”

“Why? He seemed nice. A bit broody, but he did get me my first customer,” Liselle said, trying to focus on her mother’s words and not the evolving ritual blooming behind her.

“It’s the fact that he’s nice that concerns me.” Katerina waved a finger in

the air.

Liselle searched her face for a moment before cracking a smile. “You’re not saying that I’m a fated mate to a dragon shifter, are you?”

Katerina pursed her lips. “It would be strange if he didn’t already say if you were...all I’m saying is that the last thing you need right now is a relationship as fierce as that. They can be a funny lot those dragon shifters, especially when you’re just finding your feet again.”

Liselle waved her off. “I’m sure it’s just a Christmas coincidence.”

“Katerina,” Elsbeth called. “You’re slacking there, sister.”

Katerina rolled her eyes dramatically before giving her daughter a wink and began chanting once again.

As the chanting voices rose, she could see the old casks filled with aging spirits, the shelves billowing with the aromas of a myriad of ingredients from all around the world, all infused with magic and power. She could already taste the rich, frothy flavor of the beer that would be produced in this warehouse once its transformation was complete.

As Katerina and the other witches continued their spell casting, Liselle closed her eyes and let herself be caught up in the magic of the moment. She could feel the energy vibrating around her, pulsing through her veins like the heart thrumming rush of seeing an old friend. It was as if the universe had opened up to her, offering her the chance to be a part of something greater than herself, something that would bring joy to so many people.

Chapter Ten – Flint

Flint's muscles tensed as he carried a tray of empty glasses back to the bar.

It wasn't from the weight of the tray, but from the weight of the laughter and cheer that filled The Lonely Tavern. He weaved between tables of people clinking their drinks together in celebration of yet another holiday that he had no interest in. A group of men erupted in bubbling laughter as he passed, their merriment grated on him like nails on a chalkboard. He gritted his teeth, determined to get through his shift.

Make it stop, his dragon muttered, puffing out a cloud of smoke that only Flint could see. The dragon laid its head down and covered it with massive wings, trying to block out the cacophony surrounding them.

I wish I could, Flint murmured under his breath, setting the empty glasses down on the bar. *It's such a waste, celebrating some intangible thing that comes around the same time each year. Do they know that there are actual things in this world that are worth their time?*

Is this our life now? Surrounded by this unbearable babbling? his dragon pined.

Only until we have enough money to leave, Flint replied hopefully, grabbing a towel to wipe down the bar before going out into the back room with the dirty glasses. The one good thing about the magical tavern was that he didn't have to wash glasses. That was taken care of by the self-filling sink.

That can't come soon enough. The dragon groaned, unconvinced. *All I know is dragons don't—and shouldn't—do happy holidays*.

Flint grimaced at that; he knew exactly what his dragon meant. But then, an image of Liselle and her two children flashed through his mind, filling him with an unexpected warmth. If he had a family, if he had children... No. That wasn't going to happen. He would earn the money he needed and leave as planned.

As Flint took a tray of clean glasses through to the bar, Morwenna appeared behind him. "How was your shift?" she asked, her cool gaze sweeping over him.

"How was my shift?" Flint echoed, setting the glass down with more force

than necessary.

“Yes.” Her voice was firm, almost challenging.

“Fine,” Flint answered curtly, tugging at his brow, unsure if Morwenna was trying to trick him again.

“Fine? I figured you must really be enjoying yourself since you’re working overtime.” Morwenna’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t remember mentioning paying for overtime.”

Flint’s own eyes narrowed in response, but before he could retort, a drunken customer stumbled against the bar, slurring, “Happy holidays!” It was the same thing he’d said every time he came up to the bar. “Another beer, please!”

“I think you’ve had enough,” Flint wearily, irritated that he even had to engage with the drunk.

“Do ya now?” the drunk challenged, swaying on his feet.

“I do,” Flint said firmly, holding the man’s gaze.

“It’s all right, Flint,” Morwenna interjected smoothly, pulling a filled glass from somewhere under the bar. “Here.”

Flint shook his head as the drunk handed her a couple of coins and smirked at Flint before taking a long sip from the drink. He placed it back down on the bar with a satisfied breath before he gasped sharply.

“I haven’t turned my Christmas lights on!” He turned and sprinted for the door, nearly knocking another patron over in his rush.

“Do I even want to ask?” Flint said.

“What? It’s just a simple little trick.” Morwenna took the half-drunk drink and tipped it down the drain behind the bar. “He’ll realize once he gets back that what he forgot wasn’t that big of a deal, and all will be well. He’ll deem it too much effort to return.”

“Well, seems you’ve got everything covered, and I don’t even know if I’m getting paid for overtime, so I think I’m going to call it a night.” Flint dropped his towel onto the bar.

Morwenna nodded, before her face turned a little more serious. “Do you have a place to stay? I’m sure we can hunt down a room upstairs for you if you’d like.”

Flint shook his head. “After hearing stories about the tavern disappearing

on a whim, I don't think I'd like to sleep here. Besides, I have a place."

Liar, his dragon accused.

If I spend another minute here, I might find a new use for those decorations we bought for Morwenna, Flint ground out.

"All right then. See you tomorrow, bright-eyed and scaly-tailed," Morwenna called after him over the rowdy voices that filled the tavern.

"I'll be here," Flint replied as he headed for the door.

How did she even find out about us being a dragon shifter? Flint's dragon asked.

Oh, I think Morwenna knows everything about everything and everyone, Flint said.

A few of the customers he'd served gave him a wave as he walked. Having stood in the empty tavern before, he had never pictured it filled with this many people. Soft music played from somewhere upstairs, and a few people were slow dancing by the fire.

Flint replied to the waves with a quick nod as he headed for the door, which swung open for him.

That wasn't the worst work we've done. His dragon sighed in relief as they stepped out into the cool air.

It certainly wasn't our easiest, though, Flint stretched, his back a little sore from standing all day.

There were still plenty of people walking the streets, but they were more subdued, going about their business and keeping to themselves, except for a few revelers.

Flint took a deep breath of the crisp night, savoring the absence of the overwhelming scents of alcohol and perfume that had permeated the tavern.

He was free. At least until his morning shift.

He was sure that the morning shift would be much quieter. Morwenna had mentioned something along the lines of the tavern acting as more of a cafe earlier in the day, but Flint was hopeful that cafe goers wouldn't be as rowdy.

He took off away from the sound and lights of the larger streets until the only sound he could hear were his footsteps echoing against the cobblestones. Flint felt a pang of loneliness.

He shook his head, trying to shake off the feeling. But it only intensified

as his shifter senses locked onto Liselle. She wasn't far away, somewhere down by the docks. If he shifted, he could be there in no time...

Go, his dragon urged him.

No, Flint replied firmly. *She's with other people. She doesn't need me.*

So you keep insisting, his dragon reminded him. *But I believe in fate. And fate brought us together for a reason.*

I doubt that reason will benefit Liselle and her family, Flint replied. *More likely only to punish us.* He cut that thought as he sensed someone up ahead.

He kept walking at a steady pace as he scanned the area. There. In a small alcove in the alley was a shadow that moved as he approached, and a metallic taste hung in the air.

A dragon shifter.

Flint's own dragon flexed his wings, ready to take flight if they needed to shift and get away from there fast.

Maybe it's one of the Dragon Guard out on patrol, his dragon said.

Maybe, but that doesn't mean we are not in danger, Flint replied.

You think the Dragon Guard might see us as a threat? his dragon asked.

If they know who we are. And who our father was, then yes, Flint answered.

His dragon shot out a burst of dragon fire, his anger at being tainted by their father taking a hold of him.

He's coming. Flint kept his eyes fixed on the street ahead, but his senses fixed on the dragon shifter as he stepped out into the middle of the alley.

If he wants a fight, we'll give him one, Flint's dragon growled.

No, if we fight a Dragon Guard, then we'll have to leave town. And their mate. Flint's brow wrinkled as that thought struck him.

So, you do care, his dragon said lightly.

Too much, Flint answered before he forced himself to focus on the figure approaching.

Flint angled his body and subtly changed direction so that he moved out of the path of the dragon shifter coming toward him. However, the other dragon shifter mirrored his movements, intent on intercepting Flint.

Fight or flight? his dragon asked.

Neither, Flint replied. *For now.*

Flint rolled his shoulders and clenched his fists as the dragon shifter approached him. Determined to avoid a confrontation, Flint stepped to the side once more, but the stranger mirrored his movements again. With a forceful thud, the two dragon shifters collided. Flint held his ground, not giving up an inch.

His dragon roared in fury, ready to strike, but Flint held him back.

Easy, Flint said to his dragon, keeping his eyes on the other shifter. *We don't want trouble.*

We don't, but he obviously does, his dragon roared.

"Sorry, I didn't see you there," the stranger said nonchalantly.

"Yes, you did," Flint growled, his eyes narrowing. "A dragon has keen eyesight, even in the dark."

The stranger chuckled and said, "You're right. I did. But I wanted to make sure I had your attention."

"Why?" Flint asked, his muscles tense and ready for action.

"Because I have a proposition for you, Granston."

Flint couldn't help but flinch at the sound of the name, hoping that the shadows masked the fury that burned within him at the mention of his family's title.

"You know my name. Is that supposed to impress me?" Flint asked, his voice dripping with disdain.

"No," the stranger said smugly. "I suppose it isn't."

What does he want? Flint's dragon asked.

I don't know, Flint replied, *and I am not hanging around to find out.*

Flint pushed past the stranger and strode down the street. However, the stranger turned on his heel and walked beside Flint, matching him stride for stride. Anger continued to bubble up inside Flint, but he kept his cool, maintained an even pace, and held his temper in check.

"Aren't you at least curious?" the stranger asked, a hint of amusement in his voice. "From what I've heard, skulking around in dark alleys and taking questionable jobs was exactly what you did."

"Nope," Flint replied curtly.

"You really don't want to know what I want?" the guy asked, feigning surprise.

“Nope,” Flint snapped.

“Even though I could make it worth your while?” the stranger said, raising an eyebrow suggestively.

“If you are offering me money, then I most definitely don’t want to know what you want,” Flint replied, his voice hard and unwavering. He might not have much, but he had his pride. And this dragon shifter would not be bought. He was not his father.

“So, you would rather work for that witch in a seedy tavern than talk to a fellow dragon from Cairnnor? And there was I thinking you were a man who got how things worked,” the stranger said, his tone mocking.

“And how *do* things work?” Flint stopped abruptly, unable to keep the edge of bitterness out of his voice as he turned to face the man.

The stranger’s angular features were only made more obvious in the gray tones of the night, and there was a steely look in his eyes.

“The strongest survive. The richest prosper,” the guy replied nonchalantly.

“And the weak are trampled underfoot,” Flint said bitterly, recalling the dark past he had left behind.

The man nodded with a flash of teeth. “Exactly. And I know that you, along with many others, lost their treasure when Argothorn fell. Luckily for you, I have managed to prosper in these times of change.” The stranger paused, weighing up Flint’s attitude before waving a hand. “But the past is the past, my friend, and surely you know more than any, it is time to look for new opportunities.”

“You are *not* my friend,” Flint replied coldly.

“No, but I could be a benefactor. All I want is information. Then you can take the considerable amount of treasure I have at my disposal and leave this town. The Summer Isle, isn’t it?” the guy asked, trying to pique Flint’s interest.

Flint was more interested in where this guy had gotten his information from than what he wanted from Flint or could offer him.

“Isn’t it what?” Flint’s voice was low and guttural as he took a menacing step toward the man.

While the other shifter was clearly cocky, he wasn’t entirely blind to danger as he took a step back and brought his hands up. “Isn’t that where you want to escape to?” he blurted. “I can understand it. You want to fly away

and leave your past behind. And I can make that happen for you.”

Flint clenched his jaw, feeling his inner dragon stir. This stranger might know a lot of things about him, but he at least didn't know Flint had met his mate. If he did, he would surely use that as leverage.

We need to know who he is and what he wants, Flint's inner dragon said.

We do, Flint agreed.

“Who exactly are you?” Flint demanded.

“Someone who can help you,” the stranger replied cryptically.

Flint shook his head and took another step forward, the man taking another back. “Don't play games with me. If you know who I am, then you know that I'm not one for chasing answers.”

“I do. But I also know there's people who might be chasing you.” The man gathered his confidence and straightened. “You may have disappeared, you may have tried to leave your past behind, but Wishing Moon Bay is not more than a stone's throw from Cairnnor. A word in the right ear and you might not have any choice in whether you stay in Wishing Moon Bay or flee.”

Flint hesitated, his mind racing.

Who was this strange shifter that knew so much? And if he had found Flint, there surely would be others. And those others might want to take their pound of flesh for his father's mistakes rather than offering him money.

Maybe this was the way he protected Liselle. If he helped this guy and got paid for it, then he could leave Wishing Moon Bay and leave Liselle behind. Leave her safe.

No, his dragon said hotly.

Think about it, Flint reasoned. *We could give Liselle some of the treasure this guy is offering. She could make a new life for herself and her kids without having to struggle.*

But what if we are her new life? his dragon asked. *What if we are everything she needs, and more?*

We don't know that, Flint snapped. *But all we know is that we are going to be nothing but danger for her.*

We don't know that, his dragon echoed.

“What do you want?” Flint finally asked, his voice barely above a

whisper.

“Nothing much. Simply information,” the stranger replied, a smug smile playing on his lips.

“Information?” Flint echoed, shuddering as he remembered the dark days on Cairnnor where information was more valuable than any treasure.

“Yes,” the guy held up his hand. “Don’t worry, this will not result in anyone being thrown into the tower or anything.”

Flint’s blood ran cold.

This guy knows exactly what buttons to press, he told his dragon.

Then we need to figure out how to press his right back, Flint’s dragon said.

“Then what information do you want?” Flint asked, trying to keep his voice steady.

“The Lonely Tavern. It’s quite the enigma, isn’t it?” the stranger mused.

“Is it?” Flint countered, feigning ignorance. “It seems like most other taverns to me, full of idle gossip and drunks.”

The stranger laughed, the sound echoing through the chilly night air. “You haven’t been in town long, but you’ll soon learn that tavern and the witch who employs you are not what they seem. I want you to find out about her, and about it. How does it work, where does it go, how does it...*know*.”

Flint raised an eyebrow. There was something that he wasn’t getting about his whole situation, but there would be time to find it out later. “And how am I supposed to know its secrets?” Flint challenged, feeling his dragon’s anger simmering beneath the surface.

“You never had trouble getting information out of people before, did you?” The stranger’s eyes darkened. Then he grinned and said, “I’ll be in touch.” With that, he turned on his heel and strode away.

The surrounding air shimmered and crackled with static electricity, and the man disappeared, replaced by a wiry red dragon. Its slim form fit into the alley where Flint’s would struggle, and nimbly clambered up the stone walls onto the ledge of the roofs. With a downward beat of its wings, the dragon leaped into the air and was soon lost in the dark sky.

Flint stood there as he watched the dragon disappear. *We need to make sure he doesn’t find out about Liselle.*

Are you using him as an excuse not to claim her as our mate? his dragon

asked.

No. Flint didn't need an excuse. He already knew it was the right thing to do. This just confirmed it.

His dragon still did not agree, but with this newfound mystery looming over them, they would need to be careful. At least until he figured out who this guy was and what exactly he wanted with Morwenna and The Lonely Tavern.

When he could no longer sense the dragon, he continued down the street, deep in thought. The offer was almost too good to be true, which meant it probably was.

But if it was true, would he betray Morwenna if it meant helping his mate?

As he pondered this conundrum, he strode to a small square and disappeared, to be replaced by his dragon.

With a swoop of his wings, the dragon took flight, circling the town, his attention fixed on a warehouse near the docks where Liselle and the children were surrounded by what must have been a coven of witches, their magic sweeping over him in waves. He could see strange lights pouring out of the grimy windows.

With the knowledge that she was safe, Flint circled around one more time, his senses on high alert for the dragon who had tried to tempt him. But he was gone.

Banking to the right, Flint took off toward the mountains, needing some time alone. Time away from happy people. People who seemed to have no cares in the world.

But Flint was not naïve. He knew that deep down, most people had problems. Some big, some small, some impossible to solve.

And some easy to solve, his dragon added as he flew toward the distant mountains.

Flint knew his dragon was referring to their mate. But Liselle was not an easy problem to solve.

I don't believe she is a problem at all, his dragon replied.

No, she is not, Flint agreed. *We are.*

Chapter Eleven – Liselle

Witchcraft had been a part of Liselle her whole life. Before she left Wishing Moon Bay, she'd been part of a coven of young witches. They had celebrated the Sabbats and cast spells and worked magic. But that magic paled in comparison to that wove by Katerina and her more experienced coven.

A tingling warmth caressed her skin, and the air rippled with energy. It was as if the magic in the room was a real tangible thing, something she could reach out and touch. She could almost make out shapes and shadows dancing around her as the spell intensified.

As she clung to Hazel and Casper's hands, she felt like a small child herself, dwarfed in the presence of her mother's coven.

How had she walked away from her birthright? How had she left Wishing Moon Bay and lived her life without such powerful magic? Magic that thrummed through her veins in time with the chanting voices that swirled around her.

It was as though she had turned her back on a part of herself. As if she had betrayed her true self.

But you are here now, a voice that might have been her own echoed in her head.

The cadence of the chant reached a crescendo, echoing against the stone walls of the old warehouse as its transformation continued. Oak casks, rich with history and the aroma of sherry and rum, now stood proudly in line against one wall, awaiting their sacred duty. As the coven worked, carved symbols appeared, each one a promise of abundance.

Then the chanting began anew, and the voices of Katerina and the coven wove a mosaic of sound and power through the air. The energy in the room thickened, visible to the eye as a shimmering mist that danced between the witches, connecting them in a circle of enchantment. The very air seemed to pulse with potential.

Liselle, with Casper clinging to one hand and Hazel to the other, watched as grimy stainless-steel vats were ordained with runes for purity and transformation. One by one, the accumulated dirt and dust covering the vats dissipated, leaving the stainless-steel gleaming like new.

With a wave of their hands, the coven raised the vats a foot off the stone floor, where they hovered for a moment before settling gently beside the oak casks.

The coven paused for a moment, as if taking a breath, then they whispered softly, weaving a spell that brought pipes of burnished copper slithering across the ground like large serpents. The whispering intensified, each witch working her own spell as they connected vat to cask with a precision that no mortal hand could achieve.

Taps, crafted from hammered silver and handles of porcelain, affixed themselves to the ends of pipes, their intricate designs gleaming in the ambient light of the spell.

“Watch out!” Liselle warned and ducked as a coil of copper zipped over their heads.

Casper and Hazel gasped in wonder as the copper coil wound around and around, shooting sparks into the air. Liselle was certain this was more for theatrics than for any practical reason. Neave, a member of the coven, always liked to add a little showmanship from what Liselle could remember.

As the last of the equipment settled into place, sacks filled with ingredients opened themselves, their contents being whipped up into the air by an unfelt wind and being blown toward the shelves, where they inexplicably arranged themselves in a tidy order.

With a final, harmonious note that vibrated through the bones of all present, the transformation completed. The warehouse, once bare and echoing, now brimmed with the promise of a new future. Of her family’s future.

Liselle inhaled deeply, filled with a sense of satisfaction even though she had done nothing to help the transformation except bear witness to the power of magic. The sound of the chant and the cacophony of movement faded from her ears, replaced with a growing peace, while the room began to fill with sweet earthy tones from the barrels.

But this was only the beginning. Liselle might not have had a hand in setting up the equipment, but it was her knowledge and expertise that would create a different kind of magic. Alchemy, of a sort, as raw ingredients were lovingly crafted into delicious refreshments. Each one special, each one unique. Each one made to be enjoyed. To bring pleasure to the taste buds and a tingling sense of ease to the mind.

Liselle swallowed down the lump of emotion that formed in her throat as she met the gaze of each of the coven members one by one and nodded her thanks. The faces that looked back at her were aglow, not just from the exertion of their craft, but from the joy of creation and the bonds of their shared success.

No, not just success. Triumph.

Then Katerina stepped forward, her eyes bright with tears of hope for her daughter and her grandchildren. “Together, we have worked our magic,” she said, her voice a melodic echo in the now still air. “We have created a place for Liselle to start anew. To forge a new path. Her own path. But she will not be alone. We stand by her side, sister to sister.”

Liselle felt a surge of gratitude for her mother’s fellow witches. They had accomplished in a few hours what would have taken her weeks, if not months. “This is more than I could ever have hoped for.”

“And this is our gift to you.” The witches formed a circle around Liselle and her children.

“Thank you,” Liselle managed to say as she fought back tears.

“It’s our pleasure, daughter,” Katerina said softly.

“But there’s one more part to the spell,” Wilhelmina said as the witches lowered their hoods. “And we all have a part to play.”

“We do?” Hazel asked warily.

“It’s like setting a match to kindling,” Marilla said as she stepped forward and hunkered down next to Hazel and Casper. “We each gathered here have to make an offering.”

“An offering,” Hazel seemed to shrink before her aunt.

“Here.” Marilla held out her hands with her fists clenched. Then she opened them to reveal a sprig of juniper berries and a handful of hops. “When it’s your turn, you throw it into the copper kettle.”

“Copper kettle?” Hazel asked.

“Here.” Neave raised her hands and a large copper kettle descended from above.

As it drew closer to the floor, a small fire sparked to life beneath it.

Yes, Neave still had a flair for the theatrics.

“We can do that, can’t we?” With a gentle nod, Liselle offered Hazel a

silent reassurance that she would be there by her side through what came next. She could imagine that seeing all of this for the first time would be quite intimidating.

Then she extended her hand, her fingers curling into a tight fist as if to capture the essence of her thoughts. In her mind's eye, she envisioned barley—not merely the stalks and kernels, but the very spirit of the grain: whisper-thin and gilded by the sun, the ears swaying in an unseen breeze, an unassuming crop that could become a whole number of things.

As she slowly unfurled her fingers, the imagined took form.

From her open palm, golden ears of barley materialized, more vivid than any conjured image. They shimmered with a delicate iridescence, each strand a filament of captured sunlight, the kernels plump and ripe, an embodiment of the harvest's bounty. The grains seemed to hold within them the laughter of the wind and the warmth of the earth, a reflection of the magic that coursed through her veins.

“You haven't completely forgotten what I taught you,” Katerina said.

“It's all coming back to me,” Liselle assured her mother.

“Then let's begin,” Katerina said.

Liselle, Casper, Hazel, and the thirteen witches circled around the kettle, each bearing an ingredient for the spell. Then they began their chant. Liselle felt the words coming from her mouth without even needing to think of them.

“From the earth, the barley's gold,
For richness deep and flavors bold.
With hops from vine, we start our wort,
Which soon will be delicious draught.

Cascades of water, pure and clear,
Flow through our brew, bring life here.
A spark of fire, a heat's caress.
Awaken flavors, we do bless.

From the air, and yeast's own might,
Transform our work in day and night.

Sweet nectar's hint, a honeyed kiss,
In this concoction, we find our bliss.

By elderflower, by juniper's gin,
We call on laughter, we call on kin.
By all our hearts, and all our wills,
Bind this spell to these stills.

Brew of old and brew of new,
Brew the bond that holds us true.
By the power of love, begin anew,
All elements, we call to you!"

With each verse, an ingredient was added, each witch stepping forward to contribute their part. When it was Hazel's turn, she stepped forward, her chin tilted upward as she summoned her courage and played her part. Then Casper stepped forward. As he approached the kettle, he leaned forward to peek inside the copper kettle before he threw the hops in.

Liselle could not be more proud of her children as they each rejoined the circle. As the chant was repeated over and over, Hazel and Casper picked up the words and joined in. The stone floor seemed to vibrate beneath their feet as the flames licked the bottom of the copper kettle. As they chanted, the kettle glowed, pulsing in time with their words.

With the last verse, they cast their hands forth, releasing the magic, and the kettle took on a life of its own, its contents bubbling and hissing.

Then, as if on cue, as their voices faded, the kettle whistled its merry tune.

"Liselle," Katerina nodded at her daughter and everyone gathered, watching as Liselle stepped forward to pour the first brew.

"What is it? Beer?" Casper hissed as he stepped closer to his mom.

Liselle lifted the lid and sniffed the contents. But instead of some heady concoction of strange and wonderful herbs and spices, the kettle had produced just what they needed.

With a flourish of her hands, Liselle muttered a spell, her magic flowing through her like an old friend. A tray filled with cups and saucers, a sugar

bowl and a jug of milk landed in her hands, called from one of the shelves. “Tea, anyone?”

The gathered witches collapsed into a fit of giggles, and the tension that had built in the warehouse dissipated.

“Just what we need,” Wilhelmina said.

“Especially since we spent all afternoon baking cakes,” Zoe added.

“A picnic! And I know just the place!” Elsbeth wound her hands around and around as she muttered a spell. The warehouse faded along with the brewing equipment, to be replaced by trees that whispered in the breeze. A stream bubbled happily as it sparkled and danced over rocks and stones next to a woodland glade.

“Wow!” Hazel’s eyes widened. “Butterflies!”

Casper joined his sister as she scampered off after a colorful group of butterflies. Their laughter filled the glade as the witches sat down on a large blanket, sipping tea and eating cake.

Liselle put her arm round her mother’s shoulder. “I don’t know what to say.”

“I simple ‘thank you’ will more than suffice.” Katerina beamed at her daughter.

Liselle shook her head. “I think the least I could do is offer everyone free drinks for life.” She looked around at the pretty landscape, picturing the aged red bricks that had surrounded them moments before. “I’m surprised you chose the docks for the place to set the brewery up. You always said it was a dangerous place.”

Katerina placed her teacup down and turned to her daughter. “I suppose I thought it was. After all, I thought it was the place that I’d lost your father.”

Liselle kept a brave face at the mention of the man she’d never met.

“But I’ve come to realize that it wasn’t the docks. It wasn’t the quayside or these high brick warehouses. It was the ocean. Whether I understand it, or agree with it, the sea called to him, and he could not ignore it. It wouldn’t have mattered where we were, how happy we were. There was some other mistress who had his heart, and he could not let it go.” She looked wistful, her eyes gazing into space. “So I suppose I had thought the docks dangerous. I wanted to keep you away from the tall ships that bobbed on the ocean in case you might one day stow away on one of those ships and leave Wishing

Moon Bay, just as your father had. But it wouldn't have mattered. If your path led you out to the horizon, nothing I could have done would have stopped you."

Liselle could feel tears brimming in her eyes as she pulled her mom close. "I suppose I did leave. It's just I left for the world beyond instead of sailing away."

Katerina shook her head and took her daughter's face in her hands. "Yet your heart always remained here. And despite the distance, I knew I could always reach you, unlike the men in our lives who took off without looking back."

Liselle placed her hand over her mother's. "And I knew you were always there when I needed you. But this time I have no intention of leaving. This is my home. And it's Casper's and Hazel's, too."

Katerina nodded. "Good. Now will you pass me one of those fairy cakes?"

Liselle laughed as she reached over, before taking in the women around her. Witches who she hadn't seen in years who had all banded together to help her in her time of need.

It was the most surreal moment. A most magical moment.

As Liselle glanced around at her friends, while her children laughed and played, she finally felt as if she were home. As if this was where she was meant to be.

As if the winding path her life had taken was always going to lead her to this very spot.

Chapter Twelve – Flint

The weak morning sun crept into the cave, its pale rays shimmering across Flint's dragon as he stirred from a restful night's sleep. His massive wings unfurled, stretching out and casting shadows onto the cave walls. With a mighty yawn, the dragon exhaled a plume of fire that momentarily illuminated the remaining darkness around him.

On muscular legs, the dragon moved to the mouth of the cave, ready to face the day. And what a day it was. The sight below was breathtaking, with distant snow-capped peaks rising up tall and proud, standing like giants at the top of the world. The snow sparkled like scattered diamonds as the morning light reflected off of every ridge line and rocky outcropping.

Farther down the mountains stood vast pine forests, their branches laden with a heavy blanket of fresh snow. He inhaled deeply; the air was crisp, and the smell of pine filled his nostrils as he took in the beauty of it all.

And there in the distance lay Wishing Moon Bay, nestled between the sea and mountains. Smoke rose lazily from chimneys as the townsfolk woke up to this spectacular winter morning.

Liselle, his dragon murmured as his senses locked onto their mate down by the docks.

Has she been there all night? Flint asked his dragon.

The dragon pondered this for a moment, shaking his head to clear the fuzziness clouding his thoughts. *I don't know*, he admitted, sitting back on his haunches. *I thought she left, but it's all a bit fuzzy.*

We were exhausted. Flint sighed, not blaming his dragon for losing track of their mate in the night.

The thrill of discovering his fated mate had mingled with the sorrow of saying goodbye to his beloved mother, leaving him emotionally drained. Not to mention the whirlwind that the past day had been with the tavern, and the mysterious stranger he had met. When they found the cavern last night, they had checked it out for signs of use and found none. Then the dragon lay down, tucked his head under his wing, and slumbered deeply.

Do you think everything is all right? Flint's dragon asked.

Maybe she's decided to start the brewery down there. She's probably started early. Liselle needs to provide for her family, Flint said.

Her children, her family...they mean the world to her, just as Mother did to us, the dragon whispered, staring pensively at the snow-covered ridges surrounding them and the tall pine forests farther down the mountain. The landscape was softer here than in Cairnnor, less stark and harsh.

I wish there was more we could have done for her, Flint said after a moment's silence.

As do I. But she found her peace, she told us as much, his dragon said in a soothing tone. *There is still time to right our past failings.*

Could a life in Wishing Moon Bay help to soften the rough edges of his own heart?

There was only one way to find out.

The dragon leaned forward, letting gravity pull him off the ledge they stood on. He unfurled his wings, gliding just above the ground as they gained speed before angling upward and beating his wings. Snow whipped up around them as they gained altitude, skimming the tops of the tall pines before gliding gracefully down the foot of the mountain. They flew low in the hope of remaining hidden from prying eyes, though no shifter would be fooled by their stealth.

But was there any need to hide? Wishing Moon Bay offered them a fresh start—a chance at a clean slate.

We are not staying. You heard what that guy said last night. This isn't the new beginning you think it is, Flint informed his dragon, but the beast had other plans.

I aim to change your mind, he replied, and tilted his wings to angle them straight toward the warehouse where Liselle awaited.

The dragon anticipated an argument from Flint's human side, but none came. Instead, he fell silent, allowing the dragon to take control for now.

Why? the dragon asked, curious about this sudden change of heart.

Because we cannot fight over this, Flint answered honestly, feeling the tension between them begin to dissipate. *One of us must give in.*

Ah, the dragon mused, *and you hope I can persuade you to change your mind?*

Flint hesitated, then replied, *I did not say that. But you can say your piece,*

then I will say mine.

They swept over the rooftop of a cottage on the outskirts of Wishing Moon Bay, once again skirting the boundary of the town toward the ocean and following the shoreline until they reached the docks. Before Flint knew it, they were landing on a wide street in amongst a maze of industrial buildings, though they knew which brick wall was in between them and their mate.

The dragon smirked, knowing full well that Flint's defenses were weakening.

The pull of fate was too strong to ignore, even for his stubborn human side.

As Flint's dragon tucked in his wings and prepared to shift, the warehouse door slid open to reveal Liselle, her eyes wide with wonder as she looked up at the dragon.

"Flint?" Liselle stepped forward, her voice laced with awe. "Is it really you?"

Flint's dragon stood staring at her for a long moment. Should he shift and let their human side speak to their mate?

No, Flint said. She needs to meet you. She needs to understand fully what we are, who we are, if we are going to make this work.

So now it's if we're going to make it work, his dragon said with a self-satisfied puff of smoke.

Yes. If. Not when, Flint said caustically.

It's a step in the right direction, the dragon said happily, but then he switched his focus to their mate, who stood warily in the doorway, her hands clasped to her chest.

"Flint?" she said again.

The dragon bowed his head and stepped closer. His talons clattered on the asphalt, and his eyes fixed on Liselle as she left the sanctuary of the warehouse, her hand outstretched. He stood still, as still as a statue as she approached him, her hand coming to rest on the smooth scales of his snout.

It is me, Liselle, he said, wishing she could hear him.

She knows, Flint assured him.

As her fingers grazed his scales, the dragon gave a low rumble that

vibrated through her hand. “You are incredible,” she whispered.

And so are you, the dragon said. Then he added, *Make sure you tell her that.*

I will, Flint promised.

“I’ve always known dragons existed, but I never saw one,” Liselle said as she stroked the length of his serpentine neck.

He leaned gently into her touch, which was warm on his cold scales. The dragon shivered in ecstasy at her touch. He’d never experienced anything like it. *So this is what it feels like to be touched by fate.*

Very poetic, Flint told him. *She likes you.*

And I am in love, the dragon said as he puffed out a plume of smoke shaped like a heart.

You didn’t, Flint shook his head.

Liselle laughed slightly in disbelief at the smoke-heart.

How else am I going to make her see that we are mates? the dragon said smugly.

We hadn’t decided... Flint insisted.

No, you hadn’t decided, the dragon said as Liselle reached for the heart-shaped smoke ring as it drifted higher into the air.

“Are we mates?” Liselle whispered as if afraid she might sound stupid, asking the question out loud. She turned back to look into the dragon’s bright blue eyes, who regarded her intensely.

After a moment, the dragon nodded, holding her gaze for a long moment as she reached out and stroked his smooth scales once more.

“Is that why I get this tingling feeling when we touch?” she murmured.

The dragon nodded again, a low rumble emanating from deep within him.

She lifted her hand and took a step back. “Why didn’t you tell me before?” Liselle accused.

That is a question for you to answer, the dragon said and took a step back, breaking the connection with their mate. He stared at her for a moment, drinking in the form of her body beneath her thick winter dress before closing his eyes and letting himself slip out of the world.

The air around the dragon popped and fizzed, but Liselle stood her ground, not unused to the crackle of magic.

She must have seen this before. Not a dragon shifting, but a bear or a wolf, or one of the other kinds of shifter.

Flint stood before Liselle, feeling both vulnerable and exposed, yet at the same time, invincible—as if he could conquer the world. All because of her, his fated mate.

Ah! Flint's dragon chuckled to himself. You're finally waking up to the fact that we've found our mate. A mate we are meant to be with.

Flint smothered a small, self-deprecating smile. *Maybe.*

“So,” Liselle began, folding her arms across her body, “were you ever going to get around to telling me?” The hurt in her voice stung him more than he expected.

Flint sighed heavily, hating the thought of upsetting her. “I wasn’t sure how.”

“Words are a good start,” she replied tartly, raising an eyebrow.

“They are,” Flint agreed, rubbing the back of his neck. “However, I think my dragon did a good job without them.”

“He did,” she conceded, her lips curving into the ghost of a smile. “I would never have guessed that the huge dragon that has swords for talons and can breathe fire would be your softer side.”

With a resigned sigh, Flint took her soft laugh as a good omen.

Liselle backed away from Flint. “You look as if you need some coffee,” she said, glancing at the dark circles under his stormy eyes as she stepped back toward the warehouse.

“I thought this was a brewery,” Flint replied, looking past her where steel vats and oak casks loomed large.

“You want something stronger than coffee at this time of the morning?” Liselle arched a questioning eyebrow at him as they stepped into the warehouse. Her playful tone was a welcome distraction from the intensity of their earlier exchange.

“No,” Flint assured her. “I’m not much of a drinker.”

“Wow,” Liselle said, her tone stilted as she slid the door closed behind them. “I’m not sure we’re compatible as mates, since brewing is my thing.”

“I’ll have one occasionally, and I’m sure yours will be the only drink I’ll find myself enjoying,” he assured her, unsure whether or not she was teasing

him.

But, as he caught her gaze, he could see the laughter dancing in her eyes. A smile spread across his lips, and she smiled, too, with a soft, seductive curve of her lips and he felt silly for over explaining himself.

And that was the moment he knew he was lost.

No, you are found, his dragon told him.

And he was right. It was as if a part of him had been missing his whole life that he hadn't even realized was absent, and now he was complete.

"Do you always look so serious?" Liselle asked as she made her way across the warehouse to a small kitchen area in one corner.

"I don't know. I have never considered it." Flint glanced at his reflection as they passed by a steel vat, its surface was so polished it was like looking in a huge mirror.

You do look kind of grave, his dragon said.

Grave? Flint forced his lips to curl upward into a smile.

Now you look as if you are about to put someone in their grave. His dragon chuckled, enjoying himself immensely. As he always did when he was teasing his human side.

Flint often pondered how his dragon had kept his sense of fun after all they had been through.

"So, was that yes to coffee?" Liselle picked up a coffeepot and waved it in his direction.

"Yes, please," Flint replied as he looked around at the rest of the interior. The vats were certainly imposing. Liselle must have been planning on producing enough beer to supply the whole of Wishing Moon Bay. There was such a mixture of smells in the air coming from various bowls, shelves and barrels, but the thing that caught his eye was the large still with winding copper wires in the center of the warehouse.

Flint narrowed his eyes as he noticed the symbols and runes that had been carved into much of the equipment.

"This place is pretty big. Was it already fitted when you took it over?" Flint asked.

Liselle smiled as she looked over the brewery. "No, I had some—well, quite a lot of help putting everything together."

“Your coven?” Flint asked.

“Not mine, my mother’s.” Liselle took two spoonfuls of coffee beans and poured them into a grinder. With a flick of her finger, the grinder turned, churning up the tough beans.

Flint smiled sadly. “Sounds like you’re close with your family.”

“I am, now more than ever.” She clicked her fingers to ignite a burner, placing the filled kettle onto the heat.

We could finally be a part of a family, Flint’s dragon said. An actual family that bonds together when someone is in need.

“You’ve all done a good job. This place looks like you should be charging Morwenna double for her first order,” Flint chuckled.

Liselle smiled. “I don’t know about that. It’s all well and good having a big brewery, but if no one will take a chance on me, it doesn’t mean much.”

“Don’t say that. I find myself thirsty every time I think about you describing those beers last night.” Flint watched her face.

Liselle’s gaze lingered on his mouth, and she bit her bottom lip before she filled two cups with coffee from the pot. The aroma was amazing, the rich scent of coffee mixing with the underlying scent of hops and barley from the brewery. Flint took a sip and savored the flavor. It was strong and bitter, just the way he liked it.

“So, tell me about yourself,” Liselle said, leaning against the kitchen counter and crossing her arms over her chest.

Flint nearly choked as he took another sip of his coffee. If there was one thing he hated more than the holidays, it was talking about himself. “I...”

Liselle’s eyes twinkled as she said, “Why don’t we start with why you are here in Wishing Moon Bay?”

“I came to get supplies,” Flint answered.

“Supplies,” Liselle nodded and then looked down at the floor. “Supplies as in starting a brewery or supplies for a journey?”

Flint paused as she lifted her eyes back to his. “A journey.”

“A long journey?”

Flint nodded.

You’re digging yourself a hole, his dragon warned. One you might not get out of.

“I’m guessing you’re not planning on staying in Wishing Moon Bay, then.”

“When I left Cairnnor...” Flint swallowed down the lump of emotion that formed in his throat as the image of his mother’s grave filled his head.

“Why did you leave?” Liselle came closer and placed her hand over his as she looked into his eyes. The pain in her heart was reflected in her eyes, as if she had touched his soul.

“My mother died.” He nodded and clenched his jaw. “And there was nothing left for me on the Dragon Isle—Cairnnor.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” Liselle paused and then said, “You loved her very much.”

“Yes,” he rasped. “Growing up, she was everything to me.”

Liselle reached out and touched his cheek, her thumb brushing away a stray tear before it trickled down his cheek. “I’ve only heard little bits about what happened on Cairnnor, about the old dragon lord, and how hard it was there.”

“You don’t know the half of it, and you wouldn’t want to.” He jerked his head back and nearly spilled his coffee. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Liselle told him. “You might be a dragon, but that doesn’t mean you have to have a hard exterior. Or interior.” She shrugged. “It’s good to let your emotions out. They shouldn’t be bottled up inside.”

“And you?” Flint asked quickly. “Why are you in Wishing Moon Bay? I mean, I gathered you are new in town.”

“I grew up here,” Liselle said. “But then I left. I got married, bought a house, started a family...”

“And now?” Flint was unsure if his mate was still married or not. The last thing he wanted to do was break up her relationship and bring her pain.

Especially when there were children involved.

Some marriages are best ended, his dragon ground out. Especially when there are children involved.

“And now I’m back.” Liselle half turned and looked across the warehouse at the brewing equipment. “And this time, I am not going to leave.”

Flint tensed as he sensed a car approaching. “There’s someone coming.”

“Oh.” Liselle checked the time and drained her coffee cup. “My mom is

here with Casper and Hazel.” She placed her cup in the sink and then turned to him. “So what’s it to be?”

“I don’t understand,” Flint answered.

“You say we’re mates. As much as I like you, I barely know you. But the one thing you’ve made quite clear is that you don’t plan on staying here.” Liselle leveled her gaze at him. “I’ve been there already, and I won’t let history repeat itself—for my sake, and for my children’s sake.”

Whatever she asks, say yes, his dragon hissed.

I don’t know! he ground out.

“I’m not going to force you to stay, and I’m not chasing you either. My children and I are a package deal, and we just want a settled Christmas this year at least.” Liselle’s jaw tensed. “If that’s not what you want, I’m asking you to leave now.”

Chapter Thirteen – Liselle

Liselle watched as her children, Casper and Hazel, climbed out of the car. Hazel gave her a wave, but Casper was fiddling with his toy dragon. Katerina flashed Liselle a smile as she looked up at the looming warehouse.

Casper's voice broke through her thoughts as he announced, "I thought Grandma would fly us here on her broomstick."

Hazel rolled her eyes at her brother. "Witches use cars just like everyone else. Not everything has to be magic."

Liselle smiled at her daughter's wisdom but couldn't help but feel a pang of guilt for keeping their heritage a secret for so long. Maybe everything could have been magic for them their whole lives.

"Hey, you two." Liselle stooped and embraced her kids in a hug before standing and kissing her mom on the cheek. "Thanks for bringing them."

Katerina inhaled sharply and pulled away from her daughter. "You smell of dragons. Again."

She really couldn't keep anything from her mother.

"Flint is here," Liselle whispered, her heart racing.

At least she thought he was still here. He might have escaped out the back door of the warehouse rather than facing her family and the commitment she had asked of him. She may have been too intense with him, but then wasn't the whole point of being a fated mate the intensity of it? Besides, she was a no-nonsense woman when it came to her romantic relationships now.

Not that she had been planning on having any more of those anytime soon.

She puffed air out of her cheeks. It was just typical that fate seemed to have paired her with the most reluctant shifter ever.

"Okay. Are you going to tell me *why* you smell like dragon?" Katerina asked, her disapproval evident in her tone.

"Dragon!" Casper exclaimed excitedly, Katerina not having spoken softly enough. "Is Flint here?"

"I thought we'd talked about this?" Katerina raised an eyebrow. "You really need to be careful and *intentional* with how you go forward. Don't let yourself be whisked from your feet."

Liselle hugged herself, wishing she could stop time for a moment to consider what she should do.

Before she could answer, Flint appeared in the doorway, looking ruggedly handsome in black jeans and a leather jacket. He seemed like a hero straight out of a romance novel—surely out of her league in any other scenario. But this wasn't the world beyond; this was Wishing Moon Bay, where anything was possible.

“Flint!” Casper ran to the dragon shifter, but stopped a few feet away, looking up at him in awe.

“Hey, Casper. Hazel.” Flint nodded at Liselle's daughter, who remained cautious and hesitant by Liselle's side.

“Why are you here?” Hazel asked, her eyes narrowing.

“I was just wondering the same thing,” Katerina interjected, her voice icy.

“I came to see if Liselle needed a hand with the brewery,” Flint replied smoothly, though color rose in his cheeks. “But it seems that there's no need.”

“Yes, we have everything under control,” Katerina answered, leaving no doubt she disapproved of the dragon shifter.

“Anyway, thanks for dropping the children off,” Liselle said to her mom, trying to defuse the tension.

“I can stay if you do need a hand,” Katerina said in a lower voice. “Magic is far more useful than brute strength.”

Liselle turned her back on Flint and the children, looking her mom in the face, and smiled, trying to look more confident than she sounded. “It's okay. I can handle this. I'm sure Flint's just doing the job that Morwenna asked of him. I'm sure she's as eager as we are to get the brewery operational.”

“That doesn't put me at ease.” Katerina looked over Liselle's shoulder for a moment. “Call me if you need me.”

“I will.” Liselle walked her mom around to the driver's side of the car and said, “Thank you.”

Katerina reached up and cupped her daughter's face in her hands. “I don't want to see you hurt again, Liselle.”

“I love you, Mom.” Liselle wrapped her arms around Katerina and squeezed her tight. “I'll see you at home later.”

Katerina patted Liselle's back and sniffed loudly before she pulled away. "I'm making seaweed soup and mushroom mashup for dinner. Don't be late!"

"Mushroom mashup?" Casper wrinkled his nose.

"I think she's joking," Hazel said, but didn't sound convinced. Perhaps she was already learning that Katerina could be unpredictable, especially where her culinary skills were involved.

"Do you cook?" Casper asked Flint hopefully.

"My dragon can breathe fire if that counts," Flint said.

"Really?" Casper gasped. "Like this?" He held up his toy dragon, cool sparks pouring from its mouth.

Flint snorted and raised an eyebrow, glancing at Liselle. "Not quite."

"Maybe Flint can barbecue us something tonight." Liselle laughed as she headed for the door.

Hazel's eyes lit up. "Can we have that for dinner instead?"

"I don't think Grandma is going to like the idea of having a dragon breathing fire in her kitchen," Liselle replied.

"Maybe Flint can barbecue us something normally then," Hazel said.

"I don't think Grandma is ready to hand her kitchen over to a stranger," Liselle replied.

"Flint isn't a stranger," Casper said as he looked up at the tall shifter. "He's Flint."

"Your mom is right to be cautious." Flint cast a look at Liselle that she could not interpret.

"Okay." Liselle steered the conversation away from Flint and Katerina's cooking. Her mom already clearly disapproved of the dragon shifter, and any criticism of her home-cooked meals would only make the situation worse. "Shall we go into town and find some ingredients for our first batch of beer?"

"I have a better idea!" Casper pointed his finger in the air. "Why don't we fly into the mountains and gather ingredients?"

"Yes!" Hazel said, for once in agreement with her brother.

"I don't think..." Liselle began before Casper cut her off.

"When we were eating breakfast, you were saying that you needed the freshest ingredients, and that you wished you had time to hike up into the

mountains and gather them yourself.”

“You did,” Hazel said in a tone so reminiscent of her grandma it was uncanny.

“And while we are there, we could get a tree!” Casper jumped up and down.

“A tree?” Flint asked.

“Yes, a Christmas tree.” Casper shook his head in disapproval as he added, “Grandma doesn’t have one.”

“Flint is not a pack horse.” Liselle needed to rein in this conversation before it got out of control. “We can get a tree tonight, by car.”

“Is a tree that important for Christmas?” Flint asked.

“Of course it is!” Casper yelled.

Hazel nodded sagely. “You can’t have Christmas without a tree. Where would we put the presents?”

“A tree is very important,” Liselle conceded. “But I’m sure Flint should be at work rather than flying us about.”

All eyes turned to Flint, whose expression remained unchanged a long moment before he spoke. “If you need to get ingredients for your beer, I’m sure Morwenna will see this as work. And I guess while we’re up there, we might as well pick out the best Christmas tree there is.”

“Yes!”

“Yay!”

Liselle was sure that she saw the faintest smile in Flint’s eyes as the children leaped up in the air together in excitement.

“As long as you’re sure. But I... How would we even...” Liselle began.

Flint closed the distance between them and held out his hand to her. Liselle’s brows tugged together as she placed her hand in his. Instantly, the connection between them sent a jolt of electricity up her arm and warmth filled her body. “You’re a witch, aren’t you?”

“You want a spell?” Liselle’s curiosity was piqued.

“A spell.” Flint smiled, a smile that reached his eyes for the first time, which burned with longing. “I’m sure there’s a way that you can all comfortably fly on my dragon.”

“Okay,” Liselle squeaked as he brushed his thumb across her palm. “Can

someone find a blanket from inside?”

“I’ll get one,” Casper said and ran into the warehouse to retrieve the blanket they had used for the picnic last night.

“Thank you,” Liselle said as Casper returned. “Now, the magic happens. Ready?”

Flint stepped back and gestured to go ahead.

Liselle said hoped her magic would not fail her now. Flint made her body react in strange ways, and this might affect her powers, which were still a little rusty.

She pulled her kids in close and whispered instructions to them. When they both nodded eagerly, they spread the blanket out between them and began chanting.

“Flame’s breath and twilight’s fold,
Shape this blanket into hold.
Strong and sure for dragon’s ride.
By this spell, a saddle’s pride.”

“Wait, saddle?” Flint asked as they repeated the spell again.

Liselle could feel her magic awaken and surge through her veins. She closed her eyes and repeated the spell. As she chanted, she reached out with her hands, envisioning the blanket being transformed into a sturdy saddle. She felt the power of the spell flow from her fingertips, weaving an intricate pattern as she wove the spell.

The air around them was charged with electricity and the smell of ozone filled their noses as Liselle felt every atom in the blanket move to form a new shape. The fabric seemed to be alive under her control, shifting and reforming until finally it settled into its new form—a beautiful saddle fit for a dragon ride for three.

Dazed from the intensity of the spell, Liselle looked down at the saddle in awe. She had done it!

She met her kids’ wide eyes, and they all laughed as they turned to face Flint, who was giving them a skeptical look.

“I don’t know about that,” Flint said.

“It’s the only thing I could think of.” Liselle grinned as she beckoned Flint over.

He ran his hand over the velvety leather. It was a little rough around the edges, and the texture was still very carpet-like, but it looked comfortable, and as though it would fit on the dragon she had seen earlier.

“I think I was thinking more like, I don’t know, seatbelts, or something.” Flint frowned.

“This will work fine,” Liselle said. “The magic in the saddle will be just as good as seatbelts, and I’m sure you’ll be careful with us.”

“It’s not the safety so much that’s the problem...” Flint trailed off.

Liselle tried to keep most of the humor out of her voice. “Is it that embarrassing to wear a saddle?”

“Well...”

“Come on, Flint, just turn into a dragon so we can go get our tree.” Casper watched him expectantly.

“Fine.” Flint stepped back into the empty street.

“Let’s go!” Casper threw his hands into the air.

“Ready?” Flint said, taking a breath.

“Ready when you are!” Liselle stared down at the saddle and said, “Wait. How do I put this on you...your...”

“Magic, probably,” Flint replied, and then took a dozen running steps away from them.

The air around him fizzed and popped as he faded from the world.

“Where’s he gone?” Hazel asked as she grabbed Liselle’s hand.

“Watch.” Liselle hunkered down with her arms around her children as a huge form appeared, casting a shadow over them.

The air quickly cleared, leaving the blue-hued dragon that Liselle had seen before, its scales glistening in the sunlight, standing bright against the dull red of the brick walls around them.

Casper squealed, partly in delight, partly in alarm, while Hazel gripped her mother tight. The dragon turned to face them, somehow a gentleness in its movements as it lowered its horned head, tucking its clawed feet under its body.

“Can I touch him?” Hazel asked.

“Me, too?” Casper looked up at Liselle, his eyes filled with wonder. It was as if the last few months had never happened, as if this dragon standing

before them had chased the haunted look from her children's eyes as their world had turned upside down.

"Yes, you can touch him." Liselle let go of her children as they pulled away from her and approached the dragon side by side.

Who'd have guessed that meeting a dragon would prove such a positive bonding experience for her children? Actually, who'd have guessed that they would be meeting a dragon at all?

Liselle watched Casper and Hazel giggle with delight, reaching out to stroke the dragon who puffed out little smoke love hearts at them. The children chased the floating hearts, their laughter music to her ears. Yet doubt lingered in the back of her mind. Was she setting herself and her children up for more heartache?

It all just seemed so whirlwind.

Only time would tell. For now, she had to figure out a spell to get this saddle on the dragon's back. With a deep breath, Liselle focused her energy.

"Hmm." Liselle chewed on her bottom lip for a moment and then summoned her magic.

"Leather grip and buckles tight,
Cling to scales with all your might.
Upon the dragon, take your place,
Hold firm and true in strong embrace."

The saddle levitated and hovered for a moment before moving toward the dragon. Casper and Hazel stopped chasing the smoke hearts and hurried to Liselle's side, watching excitedly as the saddle settled on the back of the enormous dragon. A leather strap snaked around the dragon's belly and securely attached itself to the saddle.

"It worked," Liselle said as she approached the dragon and rested her hand on his shoulder. "Are you comfortable with this?" she asked softly, stroking his shimmering scales.

The dragon leaned his head against her shoulder, nuzzling her affectionately with his large head. She took that as a yes.

"Okay. Let's climb on." Liselle put her hand on her hips as she tried to figure out how they were going to get up onto Flint's back.

"Another spell?" Casper asked excitedly.

In response, the dragon lowered his left leg toward the ground and nudged Liselle in encouragement. “What a gentleman.”

The dragon snorted loudly, and Liselle ushered the children toward the lowered limb. Then she helped them to scramble onto his forelimb before following behind them.

It wasn’t exactly graceful, but as she stood up, she had a thrilling rush. They were going to fly on the back of a dragon! But they weren’t there yet. Ignoring the odd sensation of standing on a dragon’s limb as he breathed, she hoisted Casper onto the saddle first, followed by Hazel, and finally climbed on herself. As the dragon moved beneath them. Anticipation coursed through her veins. They were *really* going to fly on the back of a dragon.

It was as if they had been transported into one of the children’s fairy tale books!

But this was not a fairy tale. If they fell, they might die.

“Sit still and hold on tight,” Liselle instructed, her voice firm yet gentle. Casper and Hazel gripped the saddle horn in front of them, and Liselle wrapped her arms around them both, holding onto the horn as well.

As if sensing they were ready, the dragon crouched down.

Liselle felt her stomach churn slightly and struggled to keep her breath while her children held as tight as they could to the saddle and each other.

They all involuntarily shrieked as the dragon leaped from the ground and the air whipped their hair back. There was a booming sound as his powerful wings stretched out and began beating, carrying them upward.

Liselle thought for a moment that she might be sick as they rose above the rooftops, but strangely, as they flew farther from the ground, her nerves settled, and were replaced with euphoria.

It wasn’t just the fact that she was flying, that she could see the whole town spread out beneath her, it was the fact that the one responsible for it, this powerful, majestic beast, was hers.

That was a strange feeling.

Casper and Hazel whooped and shouted over the wind as they pointed out things below them and squealed in delight, but doubt crept into Liselle’s heart. As the ground turned into a blur beneath them, she realized how easy it would be for Flint to leave. He could go wherever he wanted to with barely a moment’s notice.

She was determined to stay in Wishing Moon Bay, but there was an obvious wanderlust in Flint.

Memories of the conversation with her mother surfaced, making her wonder if she, like her mother, was fated to have a mate drawn away by distant adventures.

She had given Flint an ultimatum at the warehouse—if he could not fully commit to them, he should leave. Had he taken it as such? She should have been more forceful, more demanding.

The wind caressed her face as they soared through the sky, Liselle's heart pounding in rhythm with the dragon's wings. The sensation of flight, combined with the closeness of her mate, stirred a deep longing within her. She yearned to be one with him, to share their lives and love completely.

But could she trust him to stay? To choose them over his own yearnings? As they glided over the town, Liselle tried to banish her doubts and fears, focusing on the present moment and the magic of flying with her children and dragon mate.

“Mommy, this is amazing!” Hazel exclaimed.

“I could do this every day,” Casper added, his eyes wide.

So could she. But she couldn't allow herself to believe in Flint. Not yet.

But deep in her soul, she wanted to believe. She wanted to trust again.

She wanted to love again.

Chapter Fourteen – Flint

With his mate and her children clinging to him, Flint's dragon soared over the town of Wishing Moon Bay with his sights set on the distant mountains.

This was so different from when he had flown up here last night. Alone. He had forgotten the thrill of flight, of freedom, but the excited shouts from his back brought it all flooding back.

This feels so right, Flint's dragon told his other side. *Doesn't it?*

It was hard not to be swept along by his dragon's enthusiasm. And yes, this did *feel* right. But that didn't mean it *was* right.

His dragon chuckled. He would let nothing dampen his good spirits. *You'll come around once you've shown off your manly muscles and chopped down a tree and hauled it into their living room.*

And what am I supposed to use to chop down a tree? Flint asked.

We did not think that through, did we? his dragon replied with a chuckle.

No, we did not. Flint hated the idea of causing Casper and Hazel disappointment.

Or our mate, his dragon said.

Or our mate, Flint agreed.

No, he would never want her to be disappointed in him. He had lived most of his life with his father's disappointment following him like a shadow. Only after his death did Flint feel as if he'd stepped out from beneath it. But even now, it was still there if he looked for it.

Then don't look, his dragon said as he angled his wings and swooped down toward the pine forests below.

The trees rushed toward them, their branches reaching out like eager hands, ready to catch them if they fell.

But no one was falling today. He would keep Liselle and the children safe. Always.

The dragon slowed his descent, his wings brushing against the soft branches, sending a shower of snowflakes cascading down upon them. Casper and Hazel squealed in delight as the icy flakes dusted their faces.

As the ground rushed closer, the dragon bent his limbs, absorbing the impact of their landing, which sent swirls of snow into the air. As he straightened his legs, he let out a plume of smoke as relief washed over him. He'd landed safely, with his precious cargo intact.

Not half bad, Flint admitted, knowing how nerve-wracking this must have been for his dragon. The only other person they had carried on their back was their mother, and that had been years ago.

I am out of practice, his dragon said. *But hopefully that will soon change.*

The dragon lowered his left leg. Liselle swung her leg behind her and slithered down the dragon's shoulder to land on the dragon's forelimb. After adjusting her footing, she raised her arms and helped Hazel down, then repeated the action with Casper.

"Okay, ready to jump?" Liselle asked, holding out her hands to her children.

Casper and Hazel took her hands and together they counted, "One, two, three," then jumped, landing next to the dragon with the soft crumpling sound of the deep snow, windswept but safe.

"Wow, that was amazing!" Casper exclaimed, his face beaming with excitement.

"Thank you, Flint." Hazel threw her arms around the dragon's neck and hugged him tightly.

They love you already, Flint said, recalling Liselle's words back at the warehouse.

By staying, we made a commitment, his dragon reminded him.

Yes, we did, Flint replied. And he intended to honor that commitment. And not because of the mating bond, but because the more time he spent with Liselle and her children, the more he glimpsed a future where they were happy together.

A happy family, his dragon said.

"Isn't it beautiful up here?" Liselle asked as she spun around, taking in the pristine snow and the delicate icicles that hung on bare tree limbs.

"So cool!" Casper jumped in the air and then picked up a handful of snow, which he hastily made into a snowball before launching it at his sister.

"Casper!" Hazel let go of the dragon and leaned down, scooping up the snow before throwing it at her brother.

“Missed me!” Casper said as he jumped to the side and then hid behind a tree.

Your turn to make them fall in love with you, Flint’s dragon said as they shifted.

Liselle turned to watch as the air surrounding them crackled and popped. “I’ll never tire of seeing that,” she told him when he stood before her in his human form.

“Watch out!” Flint dashed forward and threaded his arms around her waist, pulling her close as he shielded her from an avalanche of snow that fell from the trees above.

“Oh!” She gasped and clung to him, their bodies close together, their lips inches apart.

“Sorry.” Flint shook his head to shed the snow and loosened his grip on her, but she didn’t step away.

“I’m not,” she murmured as her eyes lingered on his lips.

“Ugh!” Flint shuddered as a snowball hit him on the back of the neck and melted down his back.

“Charming.” Liselle raised an eyebrow at him.

“Oh, I didn’t mean you,” he said, but she grinned, and he let out a short laugh.

“Got you!” Casper chimed in, giggling as he and Hazel emerged from their hiding places. Flint looked at the two siblings, his eyes twinkling with amusement.

“It’s not very honorable to ambush someone like that...” Before he could finish, another snowball came hurtling toward him, but this time he ducked to the side.

“All right, you two,” Flint said, a smile playing on his lips. “You’ve asked for it!” He gathered snow into his hands. Casper and Hazel squealed with delight and scrambled to create their own ammunition.

Flint watched as the kids took cover behind the trees and leaned out to launch snowballs at him. Then he saw a snowdrift, he could have ducked around to get behind them. He reined in his competitive spirit, as well as his strength, and allowed himself to be pelted by the icy projectiles. He even found himself laughing as he did so.

It was a strange sensation for him, this laughter and lightheartedness. He

had never experienced such joy as a child, and he realized how much he had missed out on. He raised his arm, then launched a snowball at Casper as he frantically scooped up snow but stopped.

We could do this forever, if you let us, his dragon whispered.

I... He was cut off as something cold hit him in the face, and he turned to see Liselle grinning mischievously, looking around as if to see where the snowball had fallen from.

He chuckled and shook his head. It was on now.

Breathless and grinning, the group collapsed onto the snowy ground, lying side by side as they stared up at the gray sky through the branches.

“Let’s make snow angels!” Hazel said as she began moving her limbs to hollow out the snow around her.

“I want to make a snow dragon!” Casper responded, flapping his arms like wings and flinging snow everywhere.

Liselle sat up and brushed snow from her hair. “I need to look for those ingredients.”

Casper perked up, curious. “How are you going to find ingredients in the snow?”

“Remember, Casper,” Hazel chimed in, “Mom is magic.”

Flint, still lying in the snow, nodded. “She’s right. Liselle, you’re magic.”

Liselle blushed at the compliment. “Thank you, Flint.”

She stood up, brushed the snow off her and began to weave a spell, her hands moving gracefully in the air. There was a slight shift in the air, and Flint noticed that there were small patches of snow that had a soft, red glow to them.

“What is it?” Hazel asked as she crouched down next to one of the glowing patches.

“We’re looking for Cheribubs. They’re a small bulb that grows under the snow,” Liselle explained as she started scraping back the snow. “They’re very difficult to find without a spell, but they make for a really nice fiery beer.”

“We better get digging then,” Flint told the children, and all four of them began rooting around in the snow.

To speed things up, and to stop their hands from getting too cold, Liselle cast a second spell, melting the snow where she held out her palms.

By the time the helpful glow of the spell faded, they had almost filled the hessian sack Liselle had brought along.

“Next, we’re going to look for Winter Spice,” Liselle informed the group as she led them farther into the woods. “It’s a small nut that grows on bushes beneath the canopy. Mom and I used to pick these when I was a little girl, and they’re just so tasty.”

“What do they look like?” Hazel asked, ducking under snow-covered branches.

“Tiny and perfectly round, with a hard, yellow shell,” Liselle explained as she held up a low branch for her daughter to pass under.

Liselle didn’t need a spell this time as she led them toward a snow-covered glade. Flint remained at their side, protective and watchful over Liselle and her kids, but also over the forest around them. However, he had to give the others credit that he rarely had to lend much of a hand as they trudged through the snow. Liselle was confident in her direction, and despite the cold and long walk, Casper and Hazel’s spirits were as high as ever.

As they approached a large fallen log blocking their path, Flint wordlessly extended a hand to help Casper and Hazel clamber over it. The children accepted his aid gratefully, their breath fogging in front of their faces from the effort.

Flint then turned his attention to Liselle. She hesitated for a moment before attempting to climb the log herself. As she lost her footing, Flint’s lightning-fast reflexes kicked in, and he caught her hand just in time to prevent her fall.

“Thank you,” Liselle whispered breathlessly, her cheeks tinged pink from both the cold and her near tumble. Flint couldn’t help but notice how small and delicate her hand felt within his own, a stark contrast to his roughened grip.

“Anytime,” Flint replied, but as he went to release her hand, she tightened her grip on his, her eyes locked onto his, and her smile was like a ray of warm sunshine burning away the biting cold, with an intensity that stirred something deep within him.

In that instant, he realized that leaving would mean betraying not just their

fated bond, but Liselle herself. She had already been hurt once—that much he had gathered—and Flint refused to inflict that pain upon her again.

As they stood atop the fallen tree, Hazel pointed to the other side of the clearing in front of them. “There! Are those Winter Spice?” she asked.

Liselle followed her daughter’s gaze and smiled. “Yes, they are. Good spot!” She gave her daughter’s shoulders a squeeze.

With one last glance at Flint, she let go of his hand. Together, the four of them scrambled down from the log and set off toward the yellow orbs hanging from the low tree across the clearing.

Snowflakes danced through the air as Flint, Liselle, Casper, and Hazel traipsed through the snow. Casper raised his arms toward Flint, who watched him out of the corner of his eye.

“I’m not flying us just over to the other side of the clearing,” Flint said.

“You don’t have to be a *dragon* to carry me,” Casper told him. “My legs are tired, though.”

Flint glanced at Liselle, who ran a hand over her son’s hair. “He does only have small legs.”

Flint shrugged and effortlessly scooped him up and hoisted him onto his shoulders. With a delighted grin, Casper reached for the snow-laden branches above them and knocked loose a cascade of powdery white flakes. The snow shower covered them all, eliciting giggles from the children and soft laughter from Liselle.

“Okay, let’s pick these, and then we can get a tree and go back home for hot chocolate with marshmallows,” Liselle said, her breath crystallizing in the cold air.

Casper squealed in delight and clung tightly to Flint’s head, while Hazel took her mother’s hand and hugged her tightly.

Isn’t this perfect? Flint’s inner dragon mused happily, and Flint couldn’t help but agree.

The gold-brown nuts of the Winter Spice hung like baubles on the low branches. Casper held up a hand and pulled one of the branches down to within Flint’s reach. He reached up and picked one.

He rolled the pearl of auburn in his hands.

We know what these are, Flint remarked. They’re Hawmars. I didn’t know they grew outside of Cairnnor.

I guess they can grow on any mountain side, his dragon replied. *There's still so much to learn about the world outside of the dragon isle.*

“Let’s get picking!” Liselle announced, plucking one of the nuts and handing it to Hazel.

“They’re so pretty.” Hazel gazed into her palm.

“I’ll pull the branches down and you can pick them,” Casper told Flint, reaching up for another branch.

Perhaps they have as much to teach us as we have to teach them, his dragon mused as Flint pulled down handfuls of the Hawmars.

I don’t know if there’s much from our past that we should share with them.

How to survive. How to weather the storms that rage across the world in whatever form they come, his dragon replied. *We will teach them to overcome anything.*

Flint watched Hazel and Liselle laughing as snow flicked off a branch and into their hair, Casper giggling from above as he watched.

I don’t think I want that, Flint said slowly. *I think I want them to teach us how they see the world.*

His dragon was pleased at the thought, and a warmth spread through him despite the chill air.

“Are you okay?” Liselle’s voice broke through his reverie, her hand gently touching Flint’s arm. He flinched, feeling the sudden contact like a brand across his skin. Liselle hesitated for a moment before giving him a reassuring smile and holding up a Hawmar, which she had split in two, revealing the rich, dark inside.

Flint gently put Casper down, then leaned forward and sniffed the Hawmar.

As the aroma reached Flint’s nostrils, a torrent of emotions swirled inside of him, and his eyes misted with tears. “It reminds me of my mom,” he murmured, his voice barely more than a whisper. “She used to grind it up and sprinkle it on hot chocolate at this time of year.”

The memories of stolen celebrations were bittersweet. It hurt that it hurt him to remember the love that had sustained him through the darkest days of his past.

The holidays had been some of his happiest memories—and some of his most horrid nightmares.

“Maybe you could show us when we get home,” Liselle said softly.

Home, his dragon murmured as he felt the pit in his chest from memories of his mother. He missed her more than ever as he watched the children gathering the Hawmar. She would have loved this. Loved the sound of laughter.

“I’d like that.” Flint brushed his hand across his eyes as a flurry of snowflakes fell from the clouds above.

“Okay, I think it’s time we got our tree before it snows too heavy.” Liselle stepped away from him.

“I love the snow!” Casper held out his arms and spun around with his face turned toward the sky and stuck out his tongue.

“I know you do,” Liselle said. “But we’re high up, so you’re going to be very, very cold when the weather turns.”

“We have a mighty dragon to keep us warm,” Hazel reminded them.

“True.” Liselle looked at Flint. “But...we didn’t bring any snacks with us.”

“No snacks!” Casper gasped.

“None. So, let’s choose a tree.” Liselle turned and looked around the forest.

“What about that one?” Casper asked, pointing to the tallest tree he could see.

“It won’t fit in Grandma’s house,” Hazel told him.

“It would if Mom used her magic to make Grandma’s house bigger.” Casper stretched his arms out wide.

“How about this one?” Liselle headed for a young spruce sapling, no taller than five feet.

We still don’t have an axe, Flint’s dragon reminded him as they followed Liselle to the tree.

Then we’ll just have to snap it in half with our bare hands, Flint replied.

“I like this one.” Casper reached out and touched its spiky pine needles. “And one day it will grow as big as that tree.” He pointed to the tall tree once more.

“No, it won’t,” Hazel rolled her eyes at her brother. “Once we cut it down, it will die.”

“I don’t want it to die!” Casper stroked the tree as if it were a pet dog.

We could pull it out of her ground, roots and all, Flint suggested.

That is not a bad idea, the dragon said.

“What if we uproot it and plant it in a big pot?” Flint suggested.

“Could we do that?” Casper asked Liselle hopefully.

“We could.” Liselle nodded and then glanced sideways at Flint. “But how do we get it out of the ground? It’s frozen.”

“Your magic spell.” Hazel obviously had every confidence in her mom. “The one you used for the Cheribubs.”

“I don’t know if it’s strong enough to pull a tree from the ground.” Liselle stepped closer to the tree, wrapped her hand around the trunk, and gave it a tug.

“Why don’t you and Flint try together?” Casper asked. “You could cast the spell and Flint can pull on the tree.” Casper’s eyes widened. “Or the dragon could pull on the tree. He’s super strong.”

I am, Flint’s dragon agreed.

And you’re also likely to knock down a half a dozen other trees in the process, Flint told him.

You just want to show off, don’t you? his dragon replied.

“Want to give it a try?” Liselle arched a questioning eyebrow at him.

“If you do,” Flint agreed.

His skin tingled as Liselle thrust her hands forward, her expression turning to one of concentration.

Flint grasped the slender tree trunk and pulled, feeling warmth emanating from the ground as the snow began to melt into slush. Instantly, two more pairs of hands wrapped around the trunk as Casper and Hazel joined him.

Together, they pulled firmly on the tree. For a few moments, nothing happened. Then, slowly, the earth around the tree’s roots loosened.

“We’re doing it!” Casper shouted as the tree roots emerged from the snow-covered ground.

Flint grunted as with one last exertion that tree pulled loose from the ground, and he caught himself from stumbling backwards, holding the tree in both arms.

“Nicely done!” Liselle said. “We make a great team.”

“Does this mean we can go home?” Casper asked excitedly.

“Are you tired of the mountain already?” Liselle asked.

“No, I just want to fly on Flint’s back again. It was awesome,” Casper replied.

“Then let’s get this tree loaded, it’s time to fly,” Flint said, feeling a flicker of excitement when he thought about decorating the tree with Liselle and her kids.

Being around Liselle and the children might just change his mind about the holidays.

Now, that would be a Christmas miracle. His dragon chuckled.

Chapter Fifteen – Liselle

As they soared through the sky on the back of Flint’s dragon, Liselle clung to her children, their small bodies huddled against her. The wind whipped around them as the dragon swooped down from the mountain, skimming snow-covered slopes and fields.

It was both exhilarating and terrifying, all rolled into one. Her children were her world, and she had put her ultimate trust in Flint when she’d agreed to let Casper and Hazel ride on his back. So far, she had no regrets.

The sight of her children’s joy, their faces filled with laughter as they played in the snow and pulled their Christmas tree from the ground, outweighed the fear in her heart. Although the swooping and diving filled her more with excitement. It was the thought of letting another man into their lives that worried her.

“They must think we’re birds!” Casper’s voice, brimming with awe, cut through the wind as they flew over a herd of cattle. The animals below, casting curious glances upward, lowed mournfully at the dragon’s vast shadow.

Approaching the edge of town, the dragon glided toward Katerina’s house—unmistakable from where it stood crooked on its rise. The dragon’s wings banked sharply left, then right as it zeroed in on its target. With each maneuver, Liselle’s stomach performed acrobatic flips, a sensation that reminded her of her first roller coaster ride.

But this was no mechanical ride; this was the raw, powerful flight of an actual flesh and blood dragon—her mate.

If not for her tight hold on the children, Liselle might have pinched herself to check she wasn’t dreaming. But the icy kiss of the wind on her face and the rhythmic pulse of Flint’s wing beats rooted her firmly in this incredible reality.

Flint’s dragon dipped his wings gracefully and there in front of them was the familiar sight of her mom’s house. A coil of unease tightened in Liselle’s chest. Liselle planned to ask Flint to stay for lunch. It was the least she could do since he’d been so generous with his time.

How would Katerina react to an unannounced dragon guest at lunch?

Perhaps a prior warning would have been prudent. Yet, calling ahead would have allowed Katerina the opportunity to decline. After their conversation earlier, Liselle didn't need shifter senses to know her mom did not approve of Flint.

And she understood her mom's concerns completely. Katerina didn't want to see Liselle hurt again. Katerina was being protective of her daughter in the same way Liselle would protect her daughter, and her son, with her life, if necessary.

Although Katerina would probably deal with Flint using magic, perhaps banishing him to another realm. Or casting a protection spell around Liselle, in the same way the founding witches had cast a spell around Wishing Moon Bay.

Liselle smiled to herself at the idea. One she would not put past her mother.

However, Liselle hoped Katerina would give Flint a chance since he had been kind enough to carry their Christmas tree down from the mountains—even though he clearly didn't care much for the holiday season.

Well, she was about to find out. Flint's dragon, with a gentleness that belied his immense size, slowed to hover above Katerina's house before landing smoothly so as not to frighten or harm his passengers. Despite his rough and rugged exterior, the man was a softy on the inside. At least, where Liselle and her children were concerned.

As they landed, a surge of emotion swelled within Liselle, bordering on love. Yet, how could she love a man—or a dragon—she had only recently met? It all seemed so unreal, so surreal. But she and Flint were mates. So they *should* love each other. Or *would*, with time. Wouldn't they?

“Okay, wait for me to get down, then I'll help you,” Liselle instructed, before swinging her leg over the dragon's back, sliding down his muscular shoulder to land deftly on his forelimb. She reached up to assist Hazel, who dismounted with an assuredness that mirrored her mother's. Casper followed, looking so small beside the dragon's majestic form.

“We're getting better at this,” Casper beamed. “But we need plenty of practice. We should fly again tomorrow!”

Liselle chuckled, shaking her head as she helped them to the ground. “We'll see. Remember, Flint has a life and a job.”

“Thank you for the ride,” Hazel said, her voice tinged with shyness, as she approached the dragon’s snout with a gentle pat.

Flint’s dragon responded with a gentle nuzzle against her shoulder and puffed out a small plume of smoke.

For a big, scary dragon, he was kind of cute. Love for the magical creature bloomed in her chest. She sure was falling for both sides of Flint. Human and dragon.

She never expected to love again after Murray, at least not until she’d had time for her heart to heal.

But maybe it had healed in this brief span of time.

When she was with Flint in the mountains, she had felt whole for the first time in a long, long time.

The gnawing question, however, lingered in her mind—could she trust him? Murray’s betrayal had left deep scars. Had shaken her to the core—was it possible to put that behind her and move on so soon? Especially when Flint was already erring on the side of distant.

Liselle, Casper, and Hazel worked together to untie the leather strap from around the dragon, their fingers nimbly loosening the knots while the dragon dropped the tree from his massive claws with a thud.

“I’m glad we didn’t cut down a tree,” Hazel said as they took a moment to admire their Christmas tree.

“Me, too,” Liselle said as she slid her arms around her children and admired the tree.

The roots, still encased in a clump of earth, were a promise of growth and permanence. A living Christmas tree, a symbol of new beginnings and enduring traditions, symbolized their new life here in Wishing Moon Bay.

“Come on, we need to get the tree planted.” Liselle quickly unbuckled the saddle and used a quick sprinkle of magic to remove it from Flint’s back.

As her hands brushed against his scales, the same jolt of electricity, coupled with a sense of deep connection, threaded along her fingers and up her arm. There was no doubt in her mind that man and dragon were one and the same.

Liselle dropped the saddle next to the tree and then the three of them stood back in awe as the air crackled and popped with electricity as Flint’s dragon disappeared from the world.

Flint himself appeared before her. A smile graced his lips, one she couldn't help but return. He took her breath away, his dark eyes filled with warmth and something else she couldn't quite place.

Perhaps love. Perhaps an unspoken promise never to hurt her. If only she could read his mind.

"Thank you," Liselle whispered, her voice barely quiet.

"Don't mention it," Flint replied, his gaze locked onto hers.

Together, Liselle, Casper, Hazel, and Flint carried the tree toward the house, though Flint did most of the heavy lifting. Although whoever was steering nearly landed them in Katerina's rose bushes. As they straightened their course, their laughter mingled with the crisp winter air as they approached the front door.

Before they reached the door, it swung open, and Katerina stood there with an arched an eyebrow and curiosity lacing her voice. "What is *that*?"

Liselle ran her fingers through the pine leaves, their sharp scent filling her senses. "It's a Christmas tree."

"It's *our* Christmas tree," Hazel said proudly, her face pink from excitement from the dragon ride over the mountains and exertion from carrying the tree.

"All right, I can *see* what it *is*," Katerina answered, her tone teasing, "But Christmas trees don't usually have roots."

"We're going to plant it in a pot and let it grow really big." Casper flung his arms open wide, excitement dancing in his eyes.

"Are you now?" Katerina folded her arms across her body, her expression stern yet softened by the hint of a smile playing across her lips as she descended from the porch. "And I'm assuming you'll want to keep it under my roof?"

Casper's eyes sparkled with excitement as he clasped his hands together, pleading with Katerina. "Please, Grandma, can we keep the tree?"

Katerina raised an eyebrow at the two children standing in front of her. "It's not a pet," she asserted, her voice firm yet tinged with amusement.

"But it *could* be," Hazel chimed in.

"Are you two ganging up on me?" Katerina asked sternly, though her lips twitched with the effort of suppressing a smile. Then, as if someone had flipped a switch, her entire demeanor changed. She leaned down and

playfully tickled her grandchildren, who squealed with laughter. “How can I say no to my two favorite grandchildren?”

“We’re your *only* grandchildren!” Hazel exclaimed, wriggling out of her grandmother’s reach.

“So you are.” Katerina straightened up and glanced at Liselle, then at Flint, who was trying his best to blend into the background. “There are some pots and compost in the shed around the back. At least if it’s alive, it won’t shed pine needles all over the floor.”

“Thanks, Mom,” Liselle said, kissing her mother on the cheek.

“Thank you, Grandma!” Casper and Hazel chorused.

“All right,” Katerina said, “Just hurry up about it. Lunch is ready, and I don’t want it to spoil.”

As they prepared to relocate the tree, Casper turned to his grandmother with a hopeful expression. “Can Flint stay for lunch?” he asked innocently.

Katerina pressed her lips together, glancing at Liselle before responding. “I suppose I can make it stretch to one more.”

“Thanks, but no thanks,” Flint said. Although, he looked as if he instantly regretted his harsh tone. “But...thanks.”

Liselle shot him a curious look, her eyes narrowing as she tried to decipher his decline.

Katerina’s eyebrows arched in surprise. “My cooking isn’t *that* bad,” she teased.

“I’m sure it’s not,” Flint shook his head. “I have to work. My shift starts in half an hour. I have enough time to help with the tree, and then I need to get to the tavern.”

“I see,” Katerina said, dropping her arms to her sides. If she was relieved, she hid it well. “Well, don’t let me keep you. I’d hate for you to be late for work.”

“Another time?” Flint asked after an awkward pause.

“Another time,” Katerina repeated, with a nod of her head.

“Okay, we should pot this tree and carry it into the house before Flint has to leave for work,” Liselle announced, turning her attention to the task at hand.

“Do you enjoy working in The Lonely Tavern?” Casper asked as they

lifted the tree and headed around the side of the house.

“It’s a job,” Flint replied, his voice gruff.

“Does that mean yes or no?” Casper persisted, refusing to let the topic drop.

“Casper, why don’t you run ahead and find a pot large enough for this tree?” Liselle suggested, attempting to redirect her son’s attention.

“Are you sure you can carry it without me?” Casper asked, his concern for helping his family evident.

“We’ll try,” Liselle replied with a small smile. As Hazel opened her mouth to speak, Liselle shot her daughter a warning look not to tease her brother.

With an energetic skip, Casper dashed ahead toward the shed in the backyard. He battled with the stubborn door, tugging at it with two hands until, finally, it creaked open enough for him to squeeze inside.

As they reached the shed with the tree, the sounds of Casper rummaging through its contents filled the air. “Got it!” he called out triumphantly, emerging with a large pot in his arms. “It doesn’t look very Christmassy, though.”

“You and Hazel could decorate it,” Liselle suggested, trying to keep her children focused on the festive task at hand.

“Or you could use magic,” Hazel chimed in.

“We don’t use magic for everything,” Liselle told her daughter gently.

“Will it run out?” Casper asked, his brow furrowed with concern.

“No, it won’t run out,” Liselle assured him, offering a comforting smile. “But we shouldn’t take it for granted either.”

“I’ll grab the compost,” Flint said, his voice deep yet gentle.

“Thanks, Flint.” Liselle’s gaze lingered on him as Flint grabbed the large sack of dirt. As if it weighed nothing, he dumped a load into the pot, his muscular arms flexing under the weight.

Hazel and Casper hollowed out some room in the compost for the roots, while Flint once more did the heavy lifting and Liselle guided it in. Together, they patted down the compost to secure it in place. As Flint lifted the heavy pot, Casper and Hazel exchanged wide-eyed glances.

“Wow, Flint is so strong!” Casper flexed his thin arms. “Will I be that strong one day?”

Liselle hid a smile as she admired her shifter mate. “Maybe, if you make sure to eat your grandmother’s cooking.”

As they approached the front door, Liselle opened it for Flint, who carried the tree into the living room and placed it down.

Katerina entered the room and shook her head. “Flint, would you move it to the corner? There’s more space there.”

“Sure,” Flint shifted the tree to its designated spot, the muscles in his back rippling beneath his shirt. When it was in position, Flint stood back to admire the tree.

“Are you sure you can’t stay and help decorate the tree?” Casper asked, hope etched on his face.

“No,” Flint replied, glancing sideways at the clock on the mantelpiece. “I think Morwenna might set her feather duster on me if I’m late.”

“Perhaps you can come over and see the tree when it’s decorated,” Katerina suggested, her tone softening as she witnessed Casper’s obvious disappointment.

“Sure.” Flint’s eyes rested on the tree as he took a reluctant step backward toward the door, as if his heart was torn between duty and desire. “I need to go. I’ve...had a great time.”

“Great, that means we can do it again,” Casper declared.

Flint gave a small, bittersweet smile. “I’d like that,” he murmured before turning and walking out of the house, closing the door quietly behind him.

Liselle’s chest tightened with longing as she watched him leave.

“Can we decorate the tree now?” Hazel slipped her hand into Liselle’s as if sensing her mom needed comfort.

“After lunch,” Liselle said as she squeezed her daughter’s hand. “It was cold on the mountain, and you should eat something hot and get warmed up before we decorate the tree.”

“Yes, go clean yourselves and I’ll dish up,” Katerina said with a wave of her hands.

Casper eyed her warily as if he wasn’t sure if she’d just cast a spell over him. His look was met with a tilt of the head and an arched eyebrow from Katerina. Her mother had lost none of her ability to unsettle people with her presence whenever the opportunity arose.

“Come on, Casper.” Hazel let go of Liselle’s hand and reached for her brother, tugging at his sleeve as they left the room together.

“You know I hate what you went through,” Katerina said as she headed back to the kitchen. “But I am not sorry you are here. I love you and those kids.”

“I know you do and despite it all, I’m glad we’re here.” Liselle went to the sink and washed her hands before drying them and going to the cupboard to fetch bowls for the fragrant stew Katerina was stirring in a big cast-iron pot.

“Is he your mate?” Katerina asked without looking up.

“He is.” Liselle set the bowls out on the counter.

“Did he tell you as much?” Katerina asked. “Or did you have to ask him?”

“Does it matter?” Liselle crossed the kitchen and opened the drawer, taking out four spoons.

“You tell me.” Katerina wiped her hands on a cloth as she faced her daughter. “Is he hiding something? You know what dragons are like.”

“No, I don’t,” Liselle replied. “The only dragon I’ve ever gotten to know is Ivan, and he is loyal and loving and dependable.”

“Ivan was raised here in Wishing Moon Bay by Valerie Kelts. So, he doesn’t count,” Katerina retorted.

“Mom.” Liselle placed the spoons on the table and then went to her mom and enveloped her in a hug. “I never expected this. And I don’t think Flint did either. But I don’t think either of us can deny what is between us.”

Katerina rested her head on Liselle’s shoulder. “I don’t want you to make the same mistake I did and give your heart to a man with wanderlust. Or what you did before and gave your heart to a man with...lust.”

“I know, Mom. I have the same fears. But when I met Murray, the one thing that attracted me to him was the way he seemed so steadfast and true. A little boring, that was my first impression of him. But boring appealed to me.”

“And look where that got you,” Katerina murmured.

Liselle sighed. “Back here with you. So, maybe someone that’s a bit more exciting is good for me.

“Someone like that hulking dragon shifter who decided to leave Cairnnoir and come here just as you arrived,” Katerina added slyly.

Liselle paused. "His mom died."

"Oh!" Katerina reeled as if she'd been punched in the gut. "I could sense a sadness surrounding him. That perhaps explains things a little more."

"Does that mean you'll give him a chance?" Liselle asked.

"I invited him back to look at that tree you've hauled in here, haven't I?" Katerina asked, but her brusque tone covered her emotions.

"You have," Liselle replied, and that was a step in the right direction.

Chapter Sixteen – Flint

The tavern was alive with laughter and conversation as Flint endured his second shift at The Lonely Tavern.

Maybe it was always like this. But tonight Flint had tapped into it, and the hours that went by weren't so unbearable.

I wonder why? his dragon asked. *Could it be because you have finally opened yourself up to the possibility of love, and even happiness?*

Maybe, Flint mused as he moved among the tables, collecting empty glasses.

“Evening, Flint!” called out the eldest of a trio of elderly men who he'd learned were *regulars*.

Morwenna's tone as she said the word had left Flint in no doubt that he should not upset them.

Regulars pay the bills, and our wages, his dragon said.

From what I've seen so far, Morwenna has plenty of regulars. Flint wouldn't put it past Morwenna to add something to the beer to make the people of Wishing Moon Bay *regulars*.

“Evening,” Flint mustered a light, friendly tone as he approached the corner table where the three men sat, their faces etched with the lines of many years and much life experience.

“There's something different about you this evening,” the man said, his white hair a stark contrast to his ruddy, weathered face. “Don't you think, Harold?”

Flint set down his tray and gathered up their empty glasses. These regulars could talk for hours, and he had no intention of getting caught up in a conversation with them.

Harold, the man to his right, with a beard as thick and gray as a wolf's pelt, leaned forward. “You're right, Stan. There is something different. Did you find a hoard of treasure, or has love finally caught up with our stoic dragon?”

The table erupted in laughter. Flint's smile faltered. He wasn't really interested in everyone knowing his business.

“I think he’s blushing.” The third man, lean and sharp-eyed, raised his glass. “Don’t worry, your secret is safe with us!”

“Have a good evening,” Flint said as he grabbed the last empty glass and made ready his escape.

Harold leaned back, his eyes twinkling with mirth. “She must be one special lady to thaw the ice around our dragon’s heart.”

Flint’s eyes softened at the mention of Liselle. “She is,” he said before he could stop himself.

Bert, the third man, nodded sagely. “We’re only teasing you, Flint. There’s nothing better than a mate.”

The men shared knowing looks, their laughter subsiding into a comfortable silence.

They know what it is to have a mate, his dragon said.

They do. Firmly gripping the tray, Flint made his way back to the bar, angling his body to protect the stack of glasses from being tipped over when he spotted the mop roaming the tavern. He’d come to learn it could be strangely bad-tempered when it had to mop up spilled drinks. Luckily, the tankards were un-spillable, but the other glassware was not so dependable.

As Flint approached, he noticed Morwenna watching him from behind the bar. Her eyes, sharp as a hawk’s, missed nothing, so if the old guys had noticed something different about him, then so had she.

Morwenna raised an eyebrow. “So, a mate?”

Flint headed into the back room where large bubbles floated in the air amongst the smell of soap. He placed the tray of dirty glasses on the metal table and went to pick up the clean one beside it. Somehow, the tableware left in this room was cleaned, but only when no one was in the room for a few minutes.

He glanced over to see that Morwenna had followed him in and sighed. “Yes,” he admitted, since there was no point in lying to the witch.

“Does this mean you plan on settling down?” Morwenna leaned forward, her curiosity piqued.

“It’s early days,” Flint replied. This was one more conversation he did not want to get into. “And I would prefer not to talk about my personal life.”

“Would you?” Morwenna chuckled, her eyes crinkling with amusement. “Well, you might want to wipe the smile off your face if you don’t want

anyone asking.”

“What smile?” Flint grabbed his chin with his fingers.

“The one that slips onto your face when you don’t think anyone is looking,” Morwenna told him.

“Does it?” Flint furrowed his brows.

“It does. It’s the talk of the tavern—the grumpy bartender suddenly started smiling.” Morwenna smirked. “Careful, Flint, you might just catch the holiday spirit.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Flint replied, but the image of the tree in Katerina’s living room decorated with Christmas ornaments and sparkling with fairy lights popped into his head. He couldn’t wait to go on over there and see what the children had done with it.

“Why don’t you go and see this special lady of yours?” Morwenna suggested.

“I haven’t finished my shift yet,” Flint replied as a burst of laughter rippled around the tavern.

Flint also suspected Morwenna put laughing powder in the beer.

Is that even a thing? his dragon asked.

Morwenna shook her head slowly and rolled her eyes. “A piece of advice, Flint. When your boss says you can leave early to visit the love of your life, you leave right away. No questions asked.”

Flint nodded. “Goodnight, then.” He stepped out of the room, grabbed his small pack from where he tucked it safely out of sight behind the bar, and headed through the merry patrons toward the door.

It opened for him, and he stepped out into the cool night air, certain the sound of Morwenna chuckling to herself followed him.

Ignoring her mocking tone, Flint strode down the cobblestone street, his steps confident and brisk in the chill of the December night. The town was quieter than when he’d arrived at The Lonely Tavern for his shift. But there was still a steady flow of people back and forth along the street.

Don’t they have homes to go to? Flint grumbled as he pulled his collar up around him.

Maybe they live in cheerless caves, too, his dragon replied.

Is he here? Flint shivered and looked around.

No, his dragon replied. *There's no sign of him.*

Him, of course, was the dragon shifter who had approached Flint last night. An encounter that left him wary. Not for himself, but for Liselle and the children.

Flint knew firsthand exactly what dragons were capable of.

Thankfully, tonight, there was no trace, no hint, of that unwanted presence.

As he walked, Flint felt a different, far more welcome sensation.

His mate.

Liselle's presence was like a beacon, drawing him irresistibly to her. He could sense her at the warehouse near the docks, perhaps she was brewing her first batch of beer with the ingredients they had foraged this morning.

With a quick glance around, Flint ducked into a shadowed alleyway. When he was out of sight of any passerby, he shifted seamlessly into his dragon.

With a powerful leap, he took to the skies, his wings cutting through the cold air. While below him, the town lay like a jeweled tapestry, houses adorned with twinkling Christmas lights that shimmered in the darkness. Reds, greens, and golds flickered softly, painting a picture of festive warmth and cheer.

The flight over the town stirred something in Flint. The Christmas lights, each a tiny speckle of joy, began to thaw the chill in his heart. For the first time in a long while, he felt a tingle of the holiday spirit, a sense of wonder that he thought he had lost forever.

As he neared the warehouse, the sights and sounds of the town faded. Replaced by the salty tang of the sea, the creaking of moored boats, and the distant call of night birds. But among all these, one presence dominated his focus—his mate.

Landing near the warehouse, Flint shifted back into his human form. He stood for a moment, taking in the bustling activity of the docks at night. But all these faded into the background as his thoughts centered on one thing, one person—Liselle.

Anxious to see her again, Flint approached the warehouse, a mix of anticipation and nerves swirling within him. Despite their growing connection, he couldn't shake the feeling of uncertainty.

What if Liselle didn't want to be disturbed? She might have come here tonight for peace and solitude.

If she wants us to leave, we'll leave, his dragon assured him.

You're right. Yet still, his steps slowed as he neared the entrance, his hand hesitating at the door.

But before he could knock, the door slid open. There stood Liselle, dressed casually in an open-neck shirt, jeans, and an apron. Her cheeks were flushed from exertion, and her eyes sparkled with excitement. "Just in time," she greeted him with a smile that lit up her face.

"For what?" Flint asked, stepping inside as she beckoned him.

"To help me celebrate my first brew," Liselle answered, her voice bubbling with enthusiasm. As she closed the door behind them, Liselle's expression shifted to one of nervous anticipation.

"Already?" Flint's eyebrows rose in surprise as he followed her past the large vats to a corner of the warehouse where ten bottles of amber liquid stood in a neat row on an old wooden table.

"I used a bit of my magic," Liselle admitted with a slight shrug. "Well, *a lot* of magic. I wanted to get the first samples to Morwenna tomorrow. Luckily my mother and her coven had the foresight to engrave runes, everything to help speed up the maturation of the drinks."

"I'm sure she'll like them," Flint assured her even though he had no idea of the witch's tastes. Morwenna was an enigma, a closed book.

Takes one to know one, his dragon teased.

"I hope so. But first, I'd like your opinion," Liselle said, her voice tinged with a hint of vulnerability. "Your *unbiased* opinion."

Flint nodded solemnly. "I will always tell you the truth," he promised, his tone sincere.

I know, it's a shifter thing, Liselle said goofily, and he grinned, her humor contagious. "I might not know much about dragon shifters, but I have had shifter friends."

Yes, it's a shifter thing, Flint confirmed, mirroring her goofiness.

Truthfully, he was thankful his mate had some knowledge of shifters. He'd always dreaded the idea of explaining what he was and who he was to someone who had no idea shifters existed. Let alone a dragon shifter. It was like a double whammy. Two mythical beasts rolled into one.

“Okay, honest opinion.” Liselle opened two bottles of beer and handed one to Flint.

He took the bottle, giving it a careful sniff. He could immediately smell the savory nuttiness. “Winter Spice,” he noted, recognizing the familiar aroma.

“That’s a good start,” she said as she held up her bottle to his. “Cheers.”

“Cheers,” he said, clinking his bottle against hers.

They both took a sip, the rich flavors of the brew blossoming on their tongues. Flint savored the warm, nutty taste, chased by the faintest sweetness of caramel. The texture was velvety, and as he closed his eyes, he could almost taste her magic. It was like a tantalizing tang to the otherwise smooth beer that he could not describe.

“Well?” Liselle asked after a moment, her eyes searching his face for a reaction.

Flint took another sip, letting the flavors settle on his tongue. “It’s good. Really good,” he said honestly, seeing the relief and pride flash across her face.

“I was hoping you’d say that, but I was nervous. I’ve never used magic in creating my brews before.” Liselle’s smile returned, wider this time, a smile that made his stomach flip.

Desire filled him. Not just physical desire, although that was undeniable. But the desire to make her smile every day, to ease the worries that made her brow crease and her mouth droop. Desire to wake up with her each morning and for her to be the first thing he saw, the first thing he touched.

Flint coughed and cleared his throat as he swallowed down his desire along with the beer. But when he spoke, there was still a hint of wistfulness in his voice. “I’m sure Morwenna’s customers will love these. They sure do like to drink. And they drink *plenty* of beer.”

Liselle, catching his gaze with an inquisitive look, tilted her head. “You sound almost...disapproving. Is there a story there?” she asked gently.

Flint pressed his lips together, his fingers twisting the bottle in his hand.

Liselle, sensing his discomfort, quickly added, “I’m sorry, it’s none of my business.”

Flint sighed, weight lifting as he decided to share a fragment of his past. “My father,” he began, his voice low. “One of his many flaws was his

inability to hold his liquor. And he was not a happy drunk. He could be cruel. It was not pleasant.”

Not pleasant is an understatement, Flint’s dragon remarked, as the memories of those times surfaced, dark and unwelcome.

For a moment, Flint was pulled back into those memories, but then Liselle’s hand touched his, and the warmth of her skin chased the shadows away.

“I never knew my father,” Liselle confessed, her voice filled strangely with curiosity rather than sorrow. “I often wonder what he’s like. How different my life would have been if he were a part of it.”

Flint looked at her, feeling a connection in their shared sense of loss. “I’m sorry,” he said, his voice soft.

“It’s okay.” Liselle shrugged slightly. “My mother has always been wonderful, so I don’t feel as though I’m worse off for his absence.”

“What happened to him?” Flint asked.

“He was a sailor, and he went to sea,” Liselle replied lightly, and took another swig of beer. “As sailors do, I imagine.” Then she looked up, locking eyes with him, and asked, “Why don’t you like the holidays?”

Flint leaned back and let out a deep breath. “My father didn’t see the point. He wasn’t a *happy holidays* kind of person, or a happy anytime kind of person.”

“Oh,” Liselle said softly, her voice filled with understanding.

Tell her everything, Flint’s dragon urged.

“One year, I was about Hazel’s age, I guess. He was going away on... business. My mom surprised me; she’d gotten hold of some decorations without my dad knowing. So when he’d gone, she got them out, and we decorated the house,” Flint said, his hand sweeping in an arc above his head. “All these gaudy colors, reds and golds, blue, silver...”

He fell silent, intensely aware of Liselle next to him.

“Oh, Flint,” Liselle whispered.

“We cooked a feast, just the two of us,” he continued, his voice catching. “And then my father came home. He’d forgotten something, or so he said... He tore it all down. I just remember how *angry* he was. And I’d seen him angry before, but never like that.”

Flint turned away from Liselle, his emotions raw and exposed. He didn't want her to see the pain and anger in his eyes. Anger at himself for not being strong enough to protect his mother from the cruelty of his father.

Liselle reached out, her hand gently resting on his arm. "Flint, that must have been so hard for you and your mother," she said softly, her voice laced with compassion.

Flint nodded, his throat tight. "It was," he whispered. "After that, the holidays...they became a time I associated with pain and disappointment, not celebration."

Liselle squeezed his arm, offering silent support. "I can understand that," she said, her eyes reflecting her own experiences of loss and longing. "It's tough when the joy of such times is overshadowed by darkness."

Flint turned to face her, his eyes meeting hers. "You've had your share of darkness, too," he observed, recognizing the veiled pain in her eyes.

Liselle nodded, a melancholic smile touching her lips. "We all have our scars, don't we? Sometimes, it's the shadows in our past that shape us the most." She paused, taking a deep breath. "But you know, Flint, I like to believe we have the power to redefine those memories. To create new ones that are filled with light and love. That's what I want for Hazel and Casper."

Flint considered her words, feeling a spark of something stir within him—hope, perhaps, or the beginning of healing. "Maybe you're right," he said, the corner of his mouth lifting in a tentative smile. "Maybe it's time to start new traditions. To make the holidays something to look forward to again."

Liselle's face brightened at his words, her smile genuine and encouraging. "Exactly! And what better way to start than with a new brew and new company?"

Flint chuckled, the sound surprising even him. It was light, unburdened. "I think I'd like that. Starting anew...with you."

Chapter Seventeen – Liselle

Liselle's heart raced as she moved closer to Flint, her eyes locked on his. In the dimly lit warehouse, their connection felt both intimate and urgent. She placed her beer down and reached up to cup his face in her hands, her fingers brushing against the rough stubble on his cheeks.

"You know I'm a package deal," Liselle reminded him softly. "I might be your fated mate, but my kids are my world."

Flint's eyes softened as he looked into hers. "I know," he said gruffly, wrapping an arm around her waist and pulling her close. The heat radiating from his body was both reassuring and enticing. "I am in love with you, Liselle. And it's not just the mating bond talking."

Liselle sucked in a breath, not expecting this admission from him. Flint had been so emotionally closed off that hearing those words was huge, as if he'd let her in, let his barriers down. Could she do the same?

"I'm not expecting you to say them back to me," he blurted. "I just needed you to know."

"Flint." Liselle stood on tiptoes as she pressed her lips to his. She might not be ready to say the words, but she needed to show him that she cared for him, that she wanted to trust in him, trust in their bond. That she wanted to love him.

That she *did* love him.

The realization hit her hard. She'd been afraid that the mating bond had too much of a hold on her. That it had influenced the way she felt about Flint. But mating bond or not, she did love him.

"I love you, too," she whispered against his mouth.

Flint groaned and scooped her up in his arms, holding her against his chest. "Over there," Liselle told him and pointed to a corner of the warehouse where hessian sacks were stacked in a neat pile. As Flint carried her to the corner, she whispered a spell.

"Hessian sacks, rough and wide,
By magic's touch, now abide.

Threads unwind, weave anew,
Form a bed, from old to new.”

“I love it when you talk magic,” Flint murmured as he placed soft butterfly kisses down her neck.

As his breath caressed her skin, she buried her face in his chest and inhaled his scent. It was as unique as the man himself, a complex mix of the wild essence of nature. It was predominantly musky, with a rich and earthy aroma that spoke of ancient forests and untamed lands. This primal fragrance was intriguingly laced with a faint metallic tang, reminiscent of the molten heart of mountains, hinting at his fiery, otherworldly origins.

Flint leaned down and lowered her to the bed as if she were more precious than any gem. As he straightened up, their eyes locked, and Liselle had never felt more desirable.

Flint’s eyes darkened as he shrugged off his jacket and unbuttoned his shirt before pulling it over his head to reveal his toned chest and tossing it carelessly onto the floor.

Liselle’s breath hitched at the sight of Flint’s chiseled physique. The way his muscles rippled as he moved was mesmerizing. She wanted to run her hands all over him and explore every inch of his body. She couldn’t believe that this magnificent creature was hers, all hers. She felt a surge of possessiveness and desire, and she knew she wanted him, needed him.

Flint crawled onto the makeshift bed, hovering over her, his eyes bright with desire. He leaned down and captured her lips in a deep, passionate kiss, his tongue exploring her mouth with a hunger that left her dizzy with need.

Liselle moaned into the kiss, her hands wandering over his chest, tracing the lines of his muscles. She could feel the heat emanating from his body, searing her skin, each touch igniting sparks of pleasure that coursed through her veins.

They broke the kiss, gasping for air, and Liselle pulled him down for another. As they kissed, Flint’s hands roamed over her body, exploring every curve and dip. He pulled away from her lips, his gaze intense as he looked down at her. “I need you, Liselle,” he said huskily.

Liselle nodded, knowing that she needed him just as much. Her body was on fire, and she needed him to quench the inferno. “Yes, Flint.”

Flint kissed her hard on the mouth again, and she felt his fingers tugging at the ties of her apron. She arched her back, helping him as he slid the straps over her head and threw it to the floor. Seconds later, the rest of her clothes lay scattered next to it.

Flint gazed down at her, his expression appreciative as he drank her in. His gaze was like a caress, and Liselle felt her cheeks flush. She wasn't young, and she didn't have a perfect figure. She was a mother, with curves that were soft and rounded. But Flint didn't seem to care. In fact, he seemed to revel in them.

"You're so beautiful," he whispered, and Liselle's eyes misted with tears.

Flint lowered his head to her breasts, kissing and nipping at the sensitive skin. Liselle moaned, her fingers tangling in his hair as she arched into his touch. She could feel his arousal pressing against her thigh, and she wanted him inside her, filling her completely.

"Please, Flint," she begged, and he lifted his head to look at her, his eyes smoldering with desire.

He kissed his way down her body and Liselle gasped as he found a particularly sensitive spot, and she arched her back even more, pressing her body closer to his. Flint took his time as if it no longer had meaning. As if they were the only two people in the world.

Pressing his hand against her inner thigh, he gently urged her to spread her legs wider for him. She obeyed, wanting him, wanting all of him.

Without a word, he positioned himself between her legs, and she gasped as he lowered his head and licked her. Liselle moaned, her back arching as she threaded her fingers through his hair, her hips bucking against his mouth.

His breath was warm across her sensitive skin as he stroked her inner thigh with his left hand, before sliding two fingers inside her.

Liselle cried out as he rubbed against her inner walls, his fingers moving in time with his tongue. The tension in her body grew as he took her closer and closer to the edge. He lapped at her hungrily, each flick of his tongue taking her higher and higher, until she could bear it no longer.

Liselle cried out as the orgasm hit her, her muscles spasming as she pressed her hand against his head. Flint growled against her skin, his fingers pleasuring her until he felt her body relax. He pulled away from her, smiling in triumph at her flushed face.

Liselle smiled back at him, before slipping her hand around his neck and pulling him down next to her. He tenderly stroked her damp hair back from her face and leaned forward, kissing her deeply. She kissed him back, their tongues entwined as desire coiled in her belly once more.

His arousal pressed against her thigh, and she reached down, her fingers wrapping around him firmly and stroking him once. Flint groaned against her mouth, his hips bucking against her hand. She moved her head down to kiss his chest before taking his nipple into her mouth and gently nipping the hard bud.

Liselle heard his breathing quicken as she placed gentle kisses on his chest and down his ribcage. She felt him tremble under her touch as she licked his skin, before moving her lips down to his hipbone. He raised his hips to her, his breathing ragged.

Liselle leaned down and pressed her lips against the head of his manhood, her tongue flicking across the tip. He moaned, the sound reverberating through her as she wrapped her lips around him and slowly moved them down the shaft, taking him deeper into her mouth.

He groaned as she moved her head up and down his length, his hands tangling in her hair. Liselle moved her head faster, enjoying the sound of him moaning above her.

She moved her hand down to cup his balls, gently squeezing them as she took him even deeper into her mouth. She felt his muscles quiver under her touch.

“Enough,” he ground out, and she lifted her head to meet his eyes. “I want to come inside you. To feel you around me.”

He eased her back onto the bed, his body hovering above hers as he guided himself into her.

She arched her hips against his, gasping as he filled her.

He pulled his hips back before thrusting into her, burying himself to the hilt. Liselle teased his hard nipples with her finger and thumb before capturing it with her lips. Flint gasped and tensed, his hips thrusting forward as he threaded his hand beneath her and held her close to him as he moved in and out, the sensations building in her body until all she could feel was him.

Liselle lay beneath Flint, her heart pounding in sync with his as they moved together, the air thick with their mingled scents of desire. She stroked

her fingertips down his muscular back, urging him on, marveling at the contrast between the rugged strength she felt beneath her touch and the tender way he worshipped her body. As he raised his head, their gazes locked, and Liselle was struck by the intensity of emotion that swirled within his dark eyes.

“Flint,” she whispered, her voice barely audible even to herself.

He responded by slowing his movements, capturing her lips with his in a slow, passionate kiss that left her feeling breathless and dizzy. The connection between them deepened, transcending physical pleasure and reaching into the very depths of her soul. It was unlike anything she had ever experienced before, rendering her love for Murray a pale shadow in comparison. This was something that went beyond mere attraction or affection—it was a bond that seemed eternal and unbreakable.

As Flint began to move inside her again, his thrusts started gentle but gradually increased in tempo. His eyes grew wild, the pupils dilating until the irises appeared golden, hinting at the beast that lived within him. But instead of fear, Liselle felt an almost primal sense of safety and protection, as if this man—this dragon shifter—was the only thing that could shield her from the darkness of the world.

Her desire for Flint consumed her, burning through her veins like dragon fire, potent and irresistible. The sensation built steadily, their bodies entwined and slick with sweat, until finally it reached a crescendo. Flint tensed above her. A guttural growl escaped his throat as he jerked into her with abandon, filling her with his essence.

Liselle’s climax washed over her, her muscles clenching around him as she arched her back and wrapped her legs around his waist. In that moment, it was as if they soared together above the peaks of the mountains surrounding Wishing Moon Bay, weightless and free.

Exhausted and sated, they collapsed into each other’s arms, their breaths slowing and mingling as one. Liselle traced patterns in the sparse hairs on Flint’s chest, her thoughts a whirlwind of emotion and revelation.

“What are you thinking?” she whispered, her heart still racing from the intensity of their lovemaking.

Flint chuckled softly, his eyes distant as he recalled a memory. “About the taste of the Limuli fruit. My mom gave me one once. They’re hard to get hold of normally, but when Cairnnor was so isolated... They only grow on the

Summer Isle. When she died, I made a promise that I would go there and pick one from the tree.”

His voice was nostalgic. She could only imagine what Flint had been through as a child and a young man. But then a sinking feeling settled over her when she realized that sounded as though he still intended to leave Wishing Moon Bay. The thought of losing him filled her with an inexplicable sense of loss, especially when she had only just found him.

“I should get home.” Liselle pulled away from him, instantly missing the warmth of his body as she reached for her clothes and began to dress.

“Of course.” Flint watched her for a moment, and she could feel his confusion.

Well, he wasn’t the only one who was confused.

Flint’s admission that they were mates had filled her with a sense of permanence, of a future together. Yet, he still planned to travel to the Summer Isle. History seemed poised to repeat itself, echoing the loneliness that had haunted her mother’s life, and Liselle’s past few months. Was she destined for the same fate?

As she sat down on the bed and pulled on her jeans, she swallowed down her emotions. She needed to keep a level head. There was too much at stake for her to fall apart.

And over a man she barely knew!

“Here.” Flint’s voice cut through her thoughts, his hand extended to help her up. Liselle hesitated, torn between the instinct to retreat and the desire to hold on to the connection they’d forged. The thought of him being a part of her and her children’s lives had given her hope, a hope that felt fragile now.

Was she overreacting? Maybe. She was tired, and in no state of mind to make a lasting decision about her relationship with Flint.

Liselle slipped her hand in his, feeling that spark of recognition as she let him pull her to her feet. “Thanks,” she murmured, feeling the turmoil within her intensify.

Flint’s eyes narrowed with concern. “Are you okay?” he asked, studying her closely.

“I’m fine, just tired,” Liselle replied, her voice betraying the lie.

“Do you want me to come by tomorrow morning and help you take the beer to Morwenna?” Flint’s offer was earnest, but Liselle couldn’t mask her

coolness.

“No, I can manage,” she said, her tone more distant than she intended.

Flint seemed confused by her change in mood, his brows furrowing as he tried to understand. Liselle recalled Katerina’s words about dragons and their supposed emotional detachment. She had believed Flint was different, but doubt crept in, mocking her for thinking she could be the exception.

“I’ll see you out,” she said, her voice clipped as she led the way to the door. The realization that being mates didn’t guarantee a perfect relationship was a bitter pill to swallow. Flint’s parents must have been mates, and that hadn’t brought them happiness. Flint had his own life, his dreams, and perhaps, in his eyes, she was just an unplanned detour.

At the door, Liselle pulled it open, her arms crossed defensively over her chest. Flint followed closely, his confusion evident. “Liselle, what happened?”

She stood there, the cool night air mingling with the scents of the docks—the salty tang of the sea, the subtle fishiness, blended with the earthiness of wet wood and distant seaweed. The sounds of the harbor filled her ears—the rhythmic rocking of ships on the ocean swell, the haunting creak of rigging. Memories of waiting for a father who never returned, of watching the horizon for a ship that never appeared, came rushing back.

“Liselle,” Flint whispered, his hand tenderly cupping her face, the warmth of his palm a stark contrast to the chill in her heart. “Don’t shut me out.”

“I have to,” she responded, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Why?” The pain in his eyes was palpable, striking directly at her heart.

“Because you are going to leave. And take a part of me with you,” she choked out, her hand flying to her mouth to stifle a sob.

“No,” he assured her firmly. “I am not going anywhere.”

“But you said you were going to the Summer Isle,” Liselle’s voice wavered, a mix of hope and confusion in her eyes.

Flint cracked a grin, his eyes softening. “I am. With you. And Casper and Hazel.” He paused, adding, “I’d even take Katerina if it would make her like me.”

“She’s always wanted to travel,” Liselle replied meekly, realizing she had jumped to conclusions. She felt a twinge of embarrassment for her reaction in front of Flint.

Flint stepped closer, his presence reassuring. "I'm not going anywhere without you." He lowered his head, his lips gently brushing against hers in a tender, affirming kiss.

"I'm sorry," Liselle murmured, clinging to him, her face buried in his shoulder. The comfort of his embrace enveloped her, offering a sense of security.

"It's okay," Flint whispered, his hand stroking her back soothingly. "We both have baggage. It's going to take time for us to get to know each other, for us to trust in this bond we share."

Liselle let out a shaky breath. "I hate that I feel this way," she confessed. "It's like I'm just waiting for you to leave. You don't deserve that."

Flint chuckled softly. "Do you know why I never told you we were mates when we first met?"

"Because you didn't bank on your mate having two kids and a mother like Katerina?" Liselle managed a small, strangled sob.

"I like that Katerina is so protective of you," Flint said, his voice warm. "She reminds me of my mom. A mother's love is strong, protective, selfless."

"And so is the love shared by mates," Liselle added, looking up at him with renewed hope.

"Which is why I thought you were better off without me, that you didn't deserve me as a mate, that you deserved better," Flint confessed.

Liselle cupped his face in her hands. "I think you are exactly what I deserve."

Flint wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close. "I've...not had an easy life, and the thought of finding happiness so easily with you just seemed impossible. I want to be the man you deserve, and I intend to spend the rest of my life proving that to you."

"I'd like that," Liselle said, a smile breaking through her earlier apprehension.

"Then you'll let me help you tomorrow?" Flint asked hopefully.

"Yes, please," she agreed, her voice softening.

"It's a date," Flint said with a light-hearted grin.

"Our first date. How romantic," she teased, a playful glint in her eyes.

"What can I say?" Flint shrugged playfully. "I have never really dated

anyone, so I need some guidance.”

“Then I suggest you also come for dinner tomorrow at my mom’s house,” Liselle suggested. “The kids can’t wait for you to see the tree. Not that there is much tree to see beneath all the decorations.”

“Dinner,” he agreed warmly. “Then maybe we could fly somewhere together, just the two of us.”

Liselle tapped her finger playfully on his chest. “Somewhere romantic.”

“Challenge accepted.” He kissed her again, melting away her fears. “That’s if we can sneak out without Casper finding out.”

Liselle giggled. “I should get going. Can I give you a ride? Where are you staying, the tavern?” Liselle asked, pulling back slightly.

“No,” Flint snorted with a hint of amusement. “I have a nice remote cave up in the mountains.”

“You’re living in a cave?” Liselle’s eyes widened in surprise, a mix of curiosity and amusement dancing in her gaze.

Flint’s expression turned to one of mild amusement at her reaction. “Yes, a cave,” he confirmed, his eyes twinkling with a hint of mischief. “It’s not as primitive as it sounds. I’ve made it quite comfortable. Besides, it’s a dragon’s natural habitat.”

“A cave, really?” Liselle couldn’t help but laugh, the tension from earlier easing away. “I have to see this.”

“It’s my little sanctuary,” Flint said, a note of pride in his voice. “Away from the world, a place where I can be myself, in both forms.”

Liselle nodded, her curiosity piqued. “I guess everyone needs a place like that. Somewhere they can retreat to.”

Flint leaned closer, his gaze intent. “But it’s not a home. Not like what I feel when I’m with you and the kids. That’s different. That’s where I belong.”

Her heart fluttered at his words, a warmth spreading through her. “You’re welcome in our home, Flint. Anytime.”

He smiled a genuine, heartfelt smile that reached his eyes. “Thank you, Liselle. That means more to me than you know.”

They stood in silence for a moment, just enjoying the connection between them. The salty night air wrapped around them like a comforting blanket.

Finally, Flint stepped back, though his hand lingered on her arm. “I should let you get some rest. Big day tomorrow.”

Liselle nodded. “Yes, it is. And thank you. For everything.”

He leaned in and kissed her forehead gently. “It’s my pleasure. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

With one last lingering look, Flint turned and walked away. His silhouette distorted in the shadows as he shifted, and the shape of the dragon looked back at her, its bright eyes shining through the dark before it took to the skies.

Liselle stood in the doorway and watched him until his figure faded into the night.

Liselle closed the door softly behind her, the last glimpse of Flint’s departure still vivid in her mind. The conversation with him had lifted a weight from her heart, replacing the earlier confusion and fear with a thrill of anticipation. Instead of succumbing to tiredness and heading home, she felt energized, a newfound determination coursing through her.

Turning back to the interior of the warehouse, Liselle’s gaze fell upon the remaining ingredients they had foraged earlier from the snow-covered mountain. Among them were the Cheribub bulbs, their subtle glow in the dim light of the warehouse hinting at the magic within. Tonight, she decided she would use these to brew a batch of gin, something special and infused with enchantment.

Liselle moved with a fluid grace, her hands skillfully selecting the largest bulbs, her fingers gently caressing their smooth surface. She began the meticulous process of preparing them, slicing them with precision to release their potent essence. Each slice was an act of care, an acknowledgment of the magic that nature had bestowed upon these simple bulbs that she had the privilege of using in her brews.

The air in the warehouse filled with the fresh, earthy aroma of the Cheribub, a scent that reminded Liselle of the mountain’s serenity. She set up her distillation apparatus, a beautiful assembly of glass and copper that glittered under the warehouse lights. With each step, Liselle’s excitement grew.

As the gin began to take shape, she infused it with her magic. Whispering incantations, Liselle’s hands moved in elegant, deliberate gestures, weaving the energy around and into the brew. The air shimmered with the power of her spell, the gin glowing softly as it absorbed the enchantment. She hoped to

instill not just a flavor, but a feeling into the crystal-clear liquid. She hoped that anyone who sipped it would feel just as she did at that moment.

Liselle watched with satisfaction as the magic settled into the liquid. This batch of gin was more than just a drink; it was a memoir of how there could be a sweet finish to even the most bitter of experiences.

Hours passed, and as she finally sealed the last bottle, Liselle felt a deep sense of accomplishment. There was something special about the fusion of her practical skills from the world beyond and the magical ability that had been passed down through generations. A quick spell here kept the temperature perfect during the distillation, but careful handling when preparing the ingredients brought her two worlds together.

Exhausted but fulfilled, Liselle turned off the lights, leaving the warehouse with the bottles of softly glowing gin safely stored. As she stepped out into the cool night, her mind was filled with thoughts of Flint, their upcoming dinner, and the future that lay ahead. A future that, for the first time in a long while, seemed bright and full of possibilities.

Chapter Eighteen – Flint

Today is going to be a good day! Flint's dragon swooped down from the mountain and let out a plume of dragon fire that melted the snow from the ground below before he beat his wings harder and rose above the tops of the trees as they headed toward Wishing Moon Bay.

Last night was amazing. More than amazing.

The best night of his life. Lying in his mate's arms. And then after... It was as if by opening himself up to Liselle, he'd allowed light into his life. And now he was ready to bask in that light, in the love of his mate for the rest of his life.

So, yeah. Today was going to be a good day.

They swooped down over the town and flew fast and true toward the warehouse. He could sense Liselle. She was alone. Waiting for him. Perhaps they might make love once more before they headed to The Lonely Tavern.

Now that would be a good start to the day.

However, after he landed outside the warehouse and shifted into his human form, he entered the warehouse to find Liselle looking frazzled. If he had to guess, he'd say she hadn't gotten much sleep last night.

Flint would like to think that he was the cause of her restless slumber. That she'd spent the night thinking about him. But her tired eyes betrayed a nervous energy. She was worried about how Morwenna would react to her brews.

Concern immediately washed over him. "Hey, you, okay?" he asked, stepping closer to her.

Liselle forced a smile, her fatigue evident. "I stayed up a few more hours after you left," she confessed. "I made some gin to go along with the beer."

Flint raised his eyebrows in admiration. "You have been busy."

"I just hope Morwenna likes it," Liselle said, biting her lip. "I really need this to work out."

Flint wrapped his arm around her, drawing her close. He could feel the tension in her body, the weight of her hopes and worries. "She will love it," he assured her confidently. "You proved your brewing skills in the world

beyond. People loved your brews. Now you've added a touch of magic. It's bound to be a hit."

"Keep talking." Liselle leaned into him, her arms slipping around his neck as she rested her head against his chest. Flint could feel her slowly relaxing in his embrace, her breaths synchronizing with his. He kissed the top of her head, offering comfort and reassurance.

"You've put so much into this, Liselle. Your passion, your talent, your heart. Morwenna will see that. And even if it doesn't go as planned, we'll figure out another way to make this work," Flint said, his voice a soothing murmur.

Liselle looked up at him, her eyes reflecting a mixture of gratitude and affection. "Thank you, Flint. For believing in me, for being here."

"Always," he replied, his gaze locked with hers.

Flint's muscular arms flexed as he carefully lifted the bottles of beer, their amber liquid catching the morning light streaming through the warehouse windows. Liselle worked alongside him, her brow furrowed in concentration as she wrapped the bottles in protective cloth before placing them into boxes.

"I'll need to come up with a name for the drinks, for the brewery, and not to mention labels," Liselle sighed, tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear. "But right now, I can't think of anything."

"You will," Flint assured her, his deep voice resonating through the room. "You just need to give yourself time to think. And breathe. You have been going flat out since you arrived here."

"There's so much pressure," Liselle admitted, biting her lip. "And I don't just mean because we need the money. I know my mom will take care of us. But it's more than that. I need to prove that I can stand on my own two feet."

Flint clenched his jaw, swallowing down his anger toward himself. He was Liselle's mate; he should be the one providing for her. After all, he was a dragon shifter, and dragons were supposed to have treasure. Lots of treasure! But no matter how wealthy his father had become in his unscrupulous line of work, he had made sure Flint didn't see even a copper piece of it.

His dragon huffed as their good mood slipped away.

Now who's beating themselves up? his dragon chided.

Point taken, Flint replied. He couldn't dwell in the past if he wanted to make a fresh start here with Liselle. They might be starting with nothing, but

if they worked together, they would succeed. They would make a good life for themselves and Casper and Hazel.

With the last box packed, they carefully loaded them into the trunk of the car. Liselle locked up the warehouse before they got into the vehicle and drove away, passing the tall ships harbored in the docks. The salty scent of the sea filled the air, mixing with the faint aroma of the brews they carried with them. Liselle glanced at the ships before looking out toward the horizon, her eyes reflecting the vast expanse of the sea.

But then she turned and smiled at him, her eyes lighting up with warmth. “All I need is here.”

Flint’s heart swelled, and he reached out, covering her hand with his. “All I need is here,” he repeated, feeling the truth of the words resonate deep within him.

As they left the docks behind, they headed into town. The streets were quiet since it was still early morning, but soon they would be bustling.

If Morwenna doesn’t like Liselle’s brews, we could always sell them on the street, his dragon suggested, trying to lighten the mood.

Flint chuckled, imagining the scene. *Especially if you are sitting by the stand. Like a mascot.*

The dragon huffed in amusement. *We could call them Dragon Fire Brews. And if people don’t buy, I will breathe dragon fire over them.*

That is certainly a unique selling point! Flint said, smirking at the idea.

As they neared The Lonely Tavern, Flint could sense a mix of excitement and anxiety churning within Liselle. He understood her feelings; this was a crucial moment for her, and her brews could make or break their future. They pulled up outside the magical tavern, its cozy exterior beckoning them in.

“Come on,” Flint said softly, resting his hand on her shoulder and squeezing it gently.

“I just need a moment,” Liselle replied, staring ahead, and taking a deep breath. “Right now, this is still a wonderful possibility. But once we go inside, if Morwenna doesn’t like the beer...”

“Then we’ll just sit,” Flint said, staring ahead as well, mirroring Liselle. The tension between them was palpable, a silent understanding of the stakes at hand.

“Okay, so now this just feels weird,” Liselle said, breaking the silence

with a nervous laugh.

“I don’t feel weird,” Flint replied. “We’re just sitting here staring at a strange, magical tavern.”

Liselle nudged him in the ribs playfully before opening the car door and stepping out. “Come on, I’m going to trust in fate. And trust that you were telling me the truth about the beer, even though you don’t drink enough to be an expert.”

“It was good,” Flint insisted, following her out of the car. “Honestly.”

“I suppose if it was good enough to loosen even you up, then everyone else will think it’s amazing.”

“That’s more like it!” Flint grinned as they made their way to the back of the car. Liselle popped the trunk, and they each grabbed a box filled with her carefully brewed concoctions. As they straightened up, Flint tensed, catching a familiar scent on the breeze.

“Flint?” Liselle asked, noting his sudden change. “Is something wrong?”

“No.” He shook his head, trying to reassure her. “Katerina is here with Casper and Hazel.”

Carrying the boxes, Flint and Liselle rounded the corner of the tavern to find Katerina standing there, hands on her hips, watching as Casper and Hazel ran circles around her. “You’ll make me dizzy,” she warned playfully, holding the box of bottles high.

“Mommy!” Hazel sprinted toward Liselle, her eyes wide with excitement. “Is that it?”

“It is,” Liselle confirmed, her grip tightening on the box she held.

“Flint should have flown you here,” Casper chimed in, spreading his arms out like wings as he ran.

“If you had your way, Flint would fly here, there, and everywhere,” Katerina said bluntly, giving Flint a knowing look.

“If I was a dragon, I’d fly there, here, and everywhere,” Casper declared, his youthful enthusiasm infectious.

Katerina chuckled, approaching Liselle and Flint. Her gaze flicked from Flint to the boxes. “So this is what you were working on all last night,” she said, her voice laced with insinuation.

Liselle blushed but ignored her mother’s teasing. “This is it,” she

confirmed, steeling herself for the moment of truth.

I'm not sure if she means us or the gin, Flint's dragon said.

Well, she's right. Either way, Flint chuckled.

"Right, we should go inside." Yet Liselle stood rooted to the spot as she looked at the tavern without moving.

"Want me to go first?" Flint asked.

"No, I've got this," Liselle said and then added, "but thanks for the offer."

"It's good to know you have her back," Katerina whispered to Flint as Liselle marched up to the door.

"I only want what is best for Liselle," Flint said with sincerity.

"Even if that's not you?" Katerina gave him a sideways glance.

"Even if that is not me," Flint answered, his voice so low that only Katerina heard.

Let's hope we never have to make that choice, Flint's dragon said.

"Shall I open the door, Mommy?" Casper asked and ran toward the tavern door, but as if by magic, which it certainly was, the door swung open all on its own. "Cool!"

As Flint and Liselle entered The Lonely Tavern, the absence of festive cheer was immediately noticeable.

Liselle's eyebrows rose in surprise. "Ooh, what happened to the Christmas decorations you bought?" she asked, scanning the undecorated interior.

Casper walked in front of them, studying the bare wood as if surveying a building site, "Aren't you decorating for Christmas?" There was a hint of disappointment in his tone.

Hazel, not to be left out, added her own touch of innocence. "I expected it to be pretty in here. I wanted to see the cool snowflakes. And the stars. They twinkled and everything."

"I see, plastering my house with decorations isn't enough, hm?" Katerina teased.

Morwenna emerged from behind the bar as if by magic, placing the box of decorations that Flint had all but forgotten about on the hardwood. "Flint, it appears you have a job to do while I sample Liselle's hopefully delicious brews."

They're ganging up on us, Flint communicated silently to his dragon,

amused by the turn of events.

This place would look better with a few holiday decorations, his dragon agreed, surprisingly supportive of the festive endeavor.

“Sure,” Flint said, placing the box of bottles on the counter. He was met with enthusiastic responses from Casper and Hazel, both eager to contribute.

“I’ll help,” Casper said.

“Me, too,” Hazel skipped toward Flint, her face alight with excitement.

“Let’s see what we’re working with.” Despite his best efforts, he couldn’t stop himself from glancing up at Morwenna as he picked up the box, whose bright blue eyes gleamed in the firelight.

Her usual intimidating presence was replaced with an uplifting aura, and Flint gave her a nod as he set the box on the floor and opened it, Casper and Hazel gathering around.

Liselle began to carefully unpack the bottles as the two witches delved into a discussion about flavors and textures. The children’s giggles filled the tavern as they eagerly dove into the box of decorations. Casper and Hazel’s excitement was infectious, their laughter echoing through the space.

“I think we should put the most colorful, sparkliest tinsel up first!” Casper announced as he pulled out a long rope of glittering tinsel.

“I think we should put snow globes on each of the tables first, then we know what colors to put where,” Hazel said as she picked up one of the snow globes. “Woah, it’s so cold.”

“Let’s just start with something simple first.” Flint grabbed a bundle of bunting from the box. It was colorful, but more pastel, less gaudy, and with no sparkles or glitter. It was the safest option.

He reached up to hang the end of the bunting onto the bottom of one shelf on the crossbeams overhead. He couldn’t quite reach high enough, reaching up onto his tiptoes when the end of the bunting slipped from his fingers, magically attaching itself to the rafter. Flint looked down in surprise to see Morwenna winking at him, a mischievous smile on her face before she turned back to continue her conversation with Liselle, with Katerina hovering nearby, watching the whole scene.

The tavern itself seemed to be helping with the decorating; Brushworth would sweep fake snow about to coral it off the walkways, the flying feather duster, under Flint’s watchful eye, powdered garlands with glitter, and the

shelves reshuffled themselves when no one was looking, replacing the magical clutter with pretty ornaments.

Casper and Hazel directed the operation with complete seriousness, pointing out where each star and snowflake should go. The transformation of the tavern was a sight to behold. The decorations seemed to come alive under Morwenna's magical touch; stars twinkled with a gentle light, snowflakes cascaded in a never-ending swirl, and the bunting sprang to life as if the reindeer depicted on it were real. Wherever there were string lights, the candles extinguished themselves, letting their warm glow be replaced with the twinkle of blues, reds, greens, and golds.

The tavern, once plain and unadorned, now sparkled with the magic of the season. It was a transformation that brought a sense of warmth and cheer, perfectly capturing the spirit of Christmas.

Flint stood back, watching the joy on the children's faces.

There. I think you've finally found your holiday spirit, his dragon said.

Flint couldn't help but grin as he took the last, and largest snowflake, and under the stern guidance of the children hung it right above the bar, eliciting laughter from Morwenna and Liselle as he shifted it back and forth until Casper and Hazel were satisfied.

Casper, his face filled with pride, turned to Flint. "They look good, don't they?" he asked, his childish voice filled with a sense of accomplishment.

Flint nodded, his gaze sweeping over the magically adorned tavern. "Yes, they do," he agreed, a smile tugging at his lips. The decorations, with their magical twinkle and lifelike animation, had indeed transformed the place, and perhaps he had been transformed in the process.

As Flint turned and took in the scene, his eyes landed on the door as it swung open, and the shape of a slender man blocked out the sunlight, followed by a familiar voice.

"I hope I'm not interrupting," the man said, his tone unsettlingly casual.

"You sort of definitely are," Morwenna said from behind the bar.

The man—the dragon shifter from the night before—ignored her and stepped inside. Flint could tell by his fine clothes and aloof expression that he used to be someone important back in Cairnnoor.

"I've been looking for you, Granston. I suppose meeting here is as good as anywhere."

Flint stepped into his path. “Sorry, the tavern’s closed.”

The man feigned disappointment. “I didn’t realize that there was an... investors’ meeting.” He peered over Flint’s shoulder at the others, understanding dawned on his face. “Oh, I see. I see.” He turned to Flint with cold eyes. “You’ve made it clear to me that you’re not interested in money, but if I said I had another form of leverage now—”

Flint didn’t hear him finish his sentence. He didn’t need to. Flint knew what he meant, Flint knew how the old regime of Cairnnor—how his father—got what they wanted. Who they hurt. He could still see the thin mouth of the other man moving, but all he could hear was his pulse beating in his ears as he felt anger rush up through him. No, not anger. Something more powerful, more primal. White hot, protective rage.

The world came crashing back to him as he lunged forward, his mind clear except for one thought—*protect Liselle*.

Before the other man could react, Flint’s fist connected with his face, sending the intruder stumbling backward. Although he was caught off guard, he quickly regained his foot, ducking under Flint’s next strike, and planting his own fist into Flint’s side.

He barely felt it, grabbing the man around his waist and launching him into the air, where he crashed into tables and chairs and hanging icicles.

The two clashed in the middle of the tavern, a whirlwind of aggression and power. Stools were knocked aside as they grappled, the sound of wood splintering under the force of their blows. Glasses shattered, their fragments scattering across the floor like icy diamonds. The fight was brutal and unyielding, each combatant driven by their own deep-seated fury.

Flint’s mind was singularly focused on protecting his family, every punch thrown intending to neutralize the threat. The dragon shifter was equally determined, his movements fueled by some other purpose, yet just as unrelenting as Flint’s.

Around them, the tavern descended into chaos. Morwenna shouted for them to stop, her voice barely audible over the din of the fight. The feather duster fluttered back and forth as it tried to avoid getting caught in the conflict while trying to contain the spread of glitter and fake snow.

The stranger was fast, but Flint was faster, his strength and speed forged from years spent fighting for survival, and when he saw the other man hesitate, just for a moment, he seized his chance. With one strong hand, he

grabbed a bar stool to his side and swiped it at the other shifter, one leg snapping cleanly off as the other dragon shifter buckled to the floor, breathing raggedly.

Flint tossed the stool to one side, his chest heaving as he stood tall over his opponent.

The room was silent, save for the heavy breaths of the combatants and the soft whimpers of fear from the onlookers.

“You’re more like your father than I thought possible,” the dragon shifter spat. There was a hatred in his eyes that mirrored Flint’s own.

The man started to pull himself to his feet.

“*Out!*” Morwenna commanded, and the tavern door flew open, and as if driven out by a gust of wind, the dragon shifter rolled over and was blown out the door, which slammed behind him.

Flint dragged his hand through his hair, steadying his breathing as he turned to see the shocked faces of those he held most dear.

“Flint?” Liselle asked, clasping her children to her.

“We should continue our discussion later,” Morwenna met his eye.

“No...” Flint began.

But Katerina huddled her daughter and grandchildren together and herded them out of the tavern without a word, leaving Flint stricken with self-loathing.

Just like your father.

The words rang in his ears, and his lip curled up at the sound. He reached up and grabbed the bunting and tore it down with a yell. He swatted at the delicate snowflakes and ripped up the tinsel.

All the while, he could hear his father’s voice just as loud and as harsh as it had been all those years ago.

‘DRAGONS DON’T *DO* HAPPY HOLIDAYS!’

Chapter Nineteen – Liselle

What just happened? The question echoed through her mind like a broken record. Everything had been going so well. Morwenna seemed excited about Liselle's brews, impressed with the flavors, and the kids had been so happy as they decorated the tavern with Flint. Then bam! A fight! And not just a scuffle. She'd worried that Flint was about to kill someone.

"Liselle," Katerina said as she placed a hand on her daughter's arm. "Breathe."

Liselle sucked in a deep breath as she suddenly became aware of the worried faces of her children looking up at her. She forced a smile onto her quivering lips. "I'm okay," she reassured them even though she felt anything but.

"Did you see Flint?" Casper asked, wide-eyed. "He punched the other guy's lights out. Wham! Bham!"

"No, he did not," Hazel corrected, her small brow furrowed in confusion. "His lights were still on."

"Well, he knocked him to the floor, and he broke a chair." Casper sounded impressed. Which was the opposite of how Liselle was feeling. She shuddered at the memory of Flint's fury, hot and violent, clashing against the festive atmosphere like a storm.

"I'm sure Morwenna can repair the chair with magic," Hazel said, trying to be optimistic.

"Okay, let's get home. I'll drive," Katerina held out her hand to Liselle. "Keys."

Liselle dug her hand into her pocket and handed over the keys. "Can you take the children home?" she asked her mom. "I'll walk. I need some air."

"We'll walk with you," Hazel offered and slipped her hand into her mom's.

"I think Mommy needs some time on her own," Katerina said gently, giving Liselle a knowing look. "Some time to clear her head." Then she lowered her voice and said to Liselle, "And I think that dragon shifter of yours needs a time out."

“Mom,” Liselle said with a warning in her voice.

“What?” Katerina asked, her eyes narrowing. “He just attacked a guy. In front of the children.” Katerina’s tone left Liselle in no doubt that she saw that as a cardinal sin. And maybe she was right.

But before Liselle wrote Flint off, she wanted to know what happened. Who was that strange man, and what was it about him that sent Flint into such a fit of rage? She turned and looked back at the tavern, the warm glow from the windows beckoning like a dying ember.

“I’ll see you at home,” Liselle whispered, her gaze lingering on The Lonely Tavern for a moment longer.

Katerina pressed her lips together before she gave a nod. Her eyes filled with worry for her daughter as she held out her hands to the children. “Come on, let’s go make some Chocolate Flipples.”

“What are Chocolate Flipples?” Hazel asked, her curiosity momentarily distracting her from the tense atmosphere.

“You’ll see,” Katerina said as they went around the corner of the tavern, leaving Liselle alone.

As Liselle began her solitary walk through the quiet streets of Wishing Moon Bay, she couldn’t help but replay recent events over and over in her mind. What had he meant by leverage? Had he meant her? Was the stranger someone from Flint’s past? He had been awfully cagey about who he used to be. She’d initially put it aside as something he was embarrassed about, but was something dark lurking beneath the surface? And if so, could she ever truly trust him again?

Those questions haunted her every step, their weight growing heavier with each passing moment. And as the chill of the winter night settled into her bones, Liselle knew that the road ahead would be long and uncertain, but she was determined to seek the answers her heart so desperately craved. If she could not reconcile with who Flint was, she at least wanted to know *who* he was.

Liselle, her resolve firm, turned back toward The Lonely Tavern, her feet carrying her with a sense of urgency. She needed to talk to Flint, to understand why things had spiraled out of control so quickly. The fight, the anger, the violence—it was all so unlike the man she had started to know. He was grumpy on the outside, sure, but there had been a softness to him. A softness that had been burned away by whatever anger the other man sparked

in him.

She was almost running when she arrived at the tavern door. She reached out, her hand grasping the cold metal handle. She pulled, but to her surprise, the door didn't budge. It felt as though it was locked, firmly shut against her, as if it were a physical manifestation of Flint's emotional barriers.

She yanked at the door, but it would not budge.

A pang of doubt crept into her heart. Had Flint locked her out, not just from the tavern, but from his life as well? Liselle sighed, feeling the weight of rejection settle heavily upon her.

Turning away from the tavern, she wove through the crowds of happy people out doing their holiday shopping. Laughter and the scent of cinnamon filled the air, but to Liselle, it felt hollow and distant. Somehow, she would have to find a way to muster holiday cheer for Casper and Hazel, but the joy of the season felt tainted now.

As she walked, Liselle couldn't help but dwell on the man who had fought with Flint in the tavern. What did he mean about Flint being more like his father than he could have imagined? She wanted answers, but it seemed Flint wasn't willing to give them to her.

Heading down a narrow alleyway, Liselle noticed the crowds thinning around her. It should have been a relief to be away from the festivities, but instead, an uneasy sensation crept up her spine. Was someone following her?

A surreptitious glance over her shoulder confirmed her suspicions—the man following her was none other than the one who had fought Flint earlier.

She felt a surge of panic but took a deep breath and forced it down. She was a Norwood witch, and if one beating wasn't enough for this guy, she would oblige with giving him a second.

Her mind raced as to why he was so interested in Flint, and now her. She really knew little about the dragon shifter she had come to care so much for.

Liselle's thoughts turned to Flint, to the safety he had provided. Now, with the threat looming behind her, she felt a deep longing for his protection, for his presence. But she was alone, and she knew she had to face this danger by herself.

As the footsteps behind her grew closer, Liselle braced herself, turning to confront her pursuer. Her voice was steady, but her hands raised reflexively. "What do you want from me?" she asked, her eyes locked on the man's lean

figure.

“Flint is a dangerous man,” the man called out, stopping a few feet away from her. “Violent, cruel, unpredictable. Just as his father was.”

The man’s face was bruised and bloodied, and he held his side. Flint really had done a number on him.

“Who are you?” Liselle demanded, trying to ignore the sting of his words. She refused to believe that Flint was a bad person.

But maybe she was wrong. If it weren’t for the mating bond, would she have put her trust in Flint?

“Does it matter?” The man shrugged. “You’re better off without him, Liselle. Trust me.”

She tightened her jaw. “I don’t need your advice.” She turned on her heel and walked away, her steps quickening as she put distance between herself and the stranger.

“You’d let a man like Flint be a part of your children’s lives?” the man asked as if he knew exactly which buttons to press.

And press them he had.

Liselle stopped and turned back to him. There wasn’t the contempt in his voice that she had heard in the tavern. He seemed...sad.

She realized that this might be the only opportunity she’d have to speak to this man, and to perhaps learn a little about Flint’s past. The festive lights and magical holiday decorations floating in the air above them created a stark contrast to the tension that crackled between them.

She sighed, aware of a faint metallic taste on her tongue. “You’re a dragon shifter, too?”

“Guilty as charged,” the man replied with a slight nod.

“Do you come from Cairnnor?” Liselle asked, curiosity getting the better of her.

“I used to,” he answered.

“And do you have a name?” she pressed on.

“Varn,” he finally said, a hint of reluctance in his voice. They were both wary of each other, but Liselle wanted to find out what this man wanted. Why was he so interested in Flint, and more importantly, what did he hold against Flint personally, or was he just against Flint’s father?

“So, tell me, Varn, what exactly do you want?” she asked, determined to get to the bottom of it.

“I want to save you from making the biggest mistake of your life,” Varn said.

“And what is that? In your opinion?” Liselle asked, her mind racing through scenarios. None of them were good.

Varn shifted uncomfortably. “Flint.”

“You need to be more specific,” Liselle said, trying to keep her voice steady.

“You’re his mate,” Varn stated, though it sounded like he was still piecing it together himself.

“And what if I am?” Liselle asked defiantly, her hands balled into fists at her sides.

“Look, here’s what I am offering,” Varn said, a hint of desperation creeping into his voice. “I will pay you to walk away.”

“You’ll pay me to walk away from what? Flint?” Liselle asked, her voice incredulous. She couldn’t believe what she was hearing.

“It’s the treasure I agreed to pay Flint. But I want to give it to you. I asked around. I know you need the cash.” Varn watched her expression.

Liselle’s anger flared as she stared down Varn. “My circumstances are none of your business, and I’m not in the habit of taking money from strangers.”

Varn persisted, “I’m trying to do you a good turn here. Flint was going to sell the secrets of the witch who runs the tavern. He was going to find out the mysteries of how that place works and give it away for money.”

Liselle felt a jolt of shock at his words, her face betraying her surprise. “I don’t believe you.”

“Look what kind of a man he is,” Varn said as he offered up his bruised face and bloodied hands as evidence. “Flint’s father was a bad man. He would do whatever he needed to get what he wanted, and he hurt people. Flint is no different. He just wants to leave this place, and he would do whatever it takes to earn enough money to do so.”

Liselle almost couldn’t believe what she was hearing, but there was a softness to this man that made him feel genuine. Who was Flint, really? The one thing that she knew was that he seemed reluctant to stay. But selling out

Morwenna and The Lonely Tavern? She didn't believe it. Or was it just that she didn't *want* to believe it?

Chapter Twenty – Flint

Flint stood in the middle of The Lonely Tavern, surrounded by the festive carnage he had wrought. Shreds of tinsel and bunting still hung from the rafters, and broken baubles littered the floor. As he glowered in the remnants of his rage, his breathing still heavy, a stray piece of ribbon lazily swung through the air, coming to rest on his head.

He closed his eyes.

“Tantrum over?” There was clearly a smirk in Morwenna’s voice, and Flint bristled at the tone.

You do look like a kid who threw his toys out of the pram, his inner dragon observed, not without a large dose of embarrassment for his human side.

Thank you for the support, Flint said caustically, rolling his eyes at his own thoughts.

You’re welcome, his dragon replied bluntly.

He opened his eyes to see the feather duster floating toward him to sweep away the ribbon, but it stopped dead when caught in his glare, before slowly deciding to start cleaning off the glitter that now covered almost every surface.

Brushworth gave him a wide berth as the broom began sweeping up the broken decorations.

“I don’t think those poor decorations deserved that.” Morwenna’s voice cut through him again.

Flint clenched his jaw, struggling to maintain his composure.

But then, a glimmer of hope.

She’s coming back. Flint’s heart skipped a beat as he felt Liselle’s presence approaching the door. He could fix this. He could make it right. His pulse quickened with anticipation as he took a step toward the door. As his foot lifted, it snagged on something, and his hasty momentum carried him forward and down, sending him crashing to the floor. He looked around to see his feet wrapped up in knots of tinsel.

He fought to free himself as Liselle reached the door and rattled the handle in confusion. It held fast, refusing to release its hold. The tavern had locked

his mate out.

As Flint's anger bubbled up inside of him again, he wrestled with the unyielding decorations. They seemed to tighten around him as he struggled, even as he clawed his way across the floor toward the door. Toward the woman he loved. The woman he wanted to spend the rest of his life with.

But it was too late; Liselle had turned around and walked away. Flint threw his head back and howled with rage, the sound echoing through the tavern. But that rage quickly turned to sorrow and regret.

"Drink?" Morwenna asked from the bar, her voice softer than before.

"No," Flint grumbled as he turned himself over into a sitting position.

Unperturbed, Morwenna, from her perch on the bar, reached for two glasses and set them down on the bar. "Beer or gin?" She nodded toward Liselle's brews.

"I said I don't want a drink," Flint told her as he pushed himself to his feet, his anger simmering just beneath the surface.

How could he stand here and drink Liselle's brews when he might have lost her forever?

"Are you sure? Her gin is quite good. She is a very talented brewer." Morwenna chirped on, as if nothing at happened.

There's only one thing that we want, Flint's dragon said morosely as the sense of their mate faded, along with their anger.

Flint's jaw clenched, his chest tightening as the sinking feeling of regret settled in his gut.

"What the?" He tugged his brows together and shot an accusing glance at Morwenna as the tinsel entwined around his angles loosened and dropped to the floor. Instantly, the broom swept them away like fallen leaves.

"Not me!" She held up her hands in protest before she added, "Gin, I think." With a flick of her wrist, she popped the cork on a bottle of gin, and the scent of Cheribubs wafted toward him. Images of Liselle and her children flitted through his mind, their laughter echoing in the mountains. The memory stung like a fresh wound, gnawing at his battered heart.

Head hung in defeat, Flint made his way to the bar, each step heavy with the weight of the situation. Morwenna filled the glasses with a generous amount of gin, followed by a dash of tonic. As he reached for the glass, her eyes flicked past him, staring at the door, or perhaps beyond it.

A smile twitched on her lips as she reached for three more glasses and uncorked a bottle of beer. “We have company.”

A glimmer of hope ignited within Flint, even though he hadn’t sensed Liselle’s return. Maybe it was Katerina. He’d willingly take a tongue lashing from her if it meant getting Liselle back. But his hope was snuffed out like a fragile flame when the tavern door swung open, and *the regulars* walked in.

Harry was first, pausing just inside the door as he surveyed the chaos Flint had wrought. Stan and Burt crowded around him in a stunned silence.

Then Stan gave a low whistle. “What happened here?” Harry asked, sidestepping around the brush and dustpan, sweeping up the remnants of the decorations. “Was there a boxing match between the Krampus and Santa?”

“Flint happened,” Morwenna said, her voice a mixture of amusement and reproach.

“Hey now,” Burt chimed in as the three men reached the bar. “If you needed a hand hanging the decorations, you only needed to ask.”

Flint eyed the ruined decorations, memories of Liselle’s laughter fading into the silence that filled the tavern. “They were up. I took them down again.”

“Took them down?” Stan leaned on the bar with his elbows as he surveyed the scene. “You could say that again.”

“Oh!” Harry’s eyes narrowed as he looked at Flint. “Women trouble?”

“Dragon trouble,” Flint muttered, gripping the glass of gin Morwenna had poured. Maybe he needed that drink after all.

“Trouble or not, wallowing in it won’t help,” Harry advised, clapping him on the shoulder with a knowing grin. “Nor will drowning your sorrows.”

“This wasn’t my idea.” Flint held up the filled glass, but then his gaze dropped to the floor. What was the point of arguing?

What was the point of anything without his mate?

“You need to do what’s best for your mate,” Burt told Flint as Morwenna handed the three regulars a glass of beer each. “You’re in this together.”

“Maybe,” Flint whispered, his grip tightening around the glass. “But sometimes it’s better to let things go.”

“What’s up with you?” Harry asked as he took a swig of beer. “Oh, now, that’s good. Very good. Much better than that bread beer you’ve been serving

us lately, Morwenna.”

“There’s nothing wrong with bread beer,” Morwenna said definitively. Then she sipped her Cheribub gin and her eyes widened. “This is fantastic, Flint. Liselle is a brewer of fine spirits.”

“Liselle? Is that Katerina’s girl?” Stan asked as he took a gulp of his beer and grunted in surprise. “I heard she was back in town.”

“Her no-good husband ran off with another woman and took everything with him, so Elsbeth told me.” Harry shook his head in the most disapproving manner. “I’d like to get my hands on a man who does that to his family.”

“Violence rarely solved anything,” Stan told his friend.

“Hear that, Flint?” Morwenna asked as she sipped her gin.

“You do look as if you have gone three rounds with an orc.” Harry narrowed his eyes and inspected Flint more closely. “Maybe even five rounds.”

“You had an orc in here?” Burt had been too busy sipping his beer to listen to the conversation so far.

“No, a dragon shifter,” Flint ground out.

“You fought one of your own?” Stan asked in surprise.

“Haven’t you heard? We’re good at that,” Flint replied bitterly.

“But something must have started it,” Harry pressed for details.

“Oh, Flint started it,” Morwenna said. “At least, that’s what it looked like from where I was standing. At the bar. With Liselle.”

“*Liselle* is your mate?” Harry’s expression lit up brighter than Christmas lights on a tree as he realized. “Well, I never.”

“I wished I never.” Flint hunched his shoulders as he stared into his untouched gin.

“You should never wish that.” Stan placed his hand on Flint’s back and patted it lightly. “Fate has chosen the two of you to be together. And I have never known fate to make a mistake.”

“There’s always one exception to the rule,” Flint grumbled.

“Oh, you are not that special, Flint,” Morwenna said bluntly. “Get over yourself.”

“And go get your girl,” Burt said.

“It’s too late.” Flint shook his head. “I’ve shown her and her mother and

her children what kind of man I am. A monster.”

Burt chuckled. “A monster? For a little bar scuffle between shifters?”

Morwenna grimaced. “I wouldn’t call it a little scuffle. Flint nearly killed the guy.”

Burt’s chuckle became a little more nervous. “Yeesh. What happened? You’re normally so cool headed.”

Flint swilled the clear gin around. “He tried to buy me out last night. He knew my father, and in turn, that I was good at gathering information. He wanted me to find out the secrets of The Lonely Tavern for him.”

Morwenna snorted before leaning in closer. “Do go on.”

Flint shrugged. “I don’t know what or why he wanted to know, but he was pretty serious. I guess when he couldn’t find me, he figured I wasn’t interested, so he came here himself. And then when he saw...”

“When he saw Liselle and the kids, he knew he’d found a way to get you to cooperate,” Stan finished for him before shaking his head and tutting. “What a slimeball.”

Flint shrugged again. “Desperate people do bad things. And most of the shifters leaving Cairnvor are desperate at the moment.”

There was a pause as all the men looked into their drinks before Harry spoke. “What would he want to know about this place, anyway? Where the bread beer comes from?”

Morwenna tilted her head and raised her shoulder. “Who knows?”

“It doesn’t matter.” Flint let out a long breath. “I should have controlled myself.”

“Maybe,” Burt replied. “But I’m sure if you explained what happened to Liselle, she’d understand. You were just trying to protect them. You may have gone just a little too far, but your heart was in the right place.”

“Sure!” Harry agreed. “I might have used a stern voice *before* breaking a barstool over his head, but the point stands—you protect the ones you love.”

Flint shook his head. “It’s too late now. I don’t think she’d even want to see me now.”

“It’s never too late,” Morwenna said kindly as she reached across the bar and covered his hand with hers. “Don’t let love slip away, Flint.”

“What do you know about love?” Flint shot back, his tone unnecessarily

cruel.

Morwenna's mouth turned up at the corners. "Not as much as I hoped and dreamed. But enough."

"I'm sorry," Flint replied humbly. "I don't know what's come over me."

"Love," Harry said dreamily.

But sometimes, if you loved someone, you had to set them free. Those words rang out in Flint's head. They were the same words he'd often repeated when he found his mom crying after an argument with his dad.

Mates or not. Some people were not meant to be together. Or perhaps they were cursed not to be with the ones they loved.

"Don't be like that." Stan slapped him playfully on the arm. "Who'd have thought you'd be tending a small-town bar, eh? This is Wishing Moon Bay after all! If you fight for her as hard as you fought that shifter, nothing will stand in your way."

Burt leaned forward and pointed at him. "You're only gonna get one shot at this, Flint. We've seen how happy you've been in the short time you've been seeing Liselle. Don't you want that?"

We do, his dragon affirmed.

Flint took a sip of the gin.

It was crisp and clean, as if the mountain air itself had been distilled into a glass. It was subtly sweet, like fresh spring water melted from glacial ice with just a hint of sourness from the Cheribub bulbs. In amongst all the flavors, though, he could taste the familiar tang of Liselle's magic, though there was something different to it this time.

Joy. Happiness. Belonging. Contentedness.

Flint couldn't explain it, but it was as though he could taste the emotions as the alcohol burned comfortably in the back of his throat.

He had felt those emotions only a short time ago. And he was not ready to let them go.

"I should go." Flint downed the rest of his Cheribub gin and placed the glass down on the bar before stalking toward the door.

"Go get her!" Stan called out.

"Open your heart to love!" Harry added.

"She's worth fighting for!" Burt yelled.

But Morwenna remained silent as the tavern door swung open for him and he stepped out into the winter chill.

Flint paused for a moment as he tried to locate his mate. Where had she gone after the tavern locked her out? Home?

No, he could sense Liselle at the warehouse.

Ducking down the nearest alleyway, he shifted into his dragon and leaped into the air. With swift downbeats of his wings, he flew above the town, skimming chimney pots as he headed for the dock. Minutes later, he landed at the warehouse door, his head filled with memories of the night before.

Everything had been so right when he'd left Liselle. But how quickly they had fallen apart.

Flint stood outside, hoping for Liselle to open the door to him and fall into his arms. But the door remained resolutely closed. She was here, though. He could sense her inside.

"Liselle." He tapped lightly on the wooden door and waited for an answer. None came.

Flint stood back, staring at the door. Should he go in? What if she didn't want to talk to him?

Fight for her, his dragon said.

But that was not why Flint was here.

Flint's heart hammered in his chest as he opened the warehouse door, stepping inside and immediately finding himself surrounded by the scent of hops, Cheribubs, and Winter Spice. A pang of longing surged through him; he wished Liselle was there to share in this moment with him.

"Liselle," he called out softly, his voice echoing in the cavernous space.

"I thought you might have flown away to the Summer Isle." As if summoned by his words, Liselle appeared from behind one of the steel vats, her eyes puffy and red-rimmed. Flint's chest tightened at the sight of her distress.

"I never bought the map to get there," he admitted.

"But you could have," Liselle responded, her voice barely above a whisper. "All you have to do is find out the information Varn wants."

Flint sucked in a sharp breath, feeling like he'd been slapped. "How do you know?" he questioned, his voice rough with emotion.

“That’s what your fight was about, wasn’t it?” Liselle asked, her gaze never leaving his.

Flint hesitated, then nodded. “He threatened me...us.” His voice faltered. “So I hit him.”

Liselle simply nodded, understanding dawning in her eyes.

“I never meant to hurt you,” Flint confessed, his voice cracking. “But I realize now my past is my constant companion.”

“Isn’t that the fate of everyone who ever lived?” Liselle replied, her voice hitching in her throat.

“But most other people don’t have the past I have. A past that might cause those they love to get hurt.” Flint wanted to say more, to tell her how much he loved her and how he wanted to be with her forever, to raise Casper and Hazel together. To teach them about his ancestry, how not all dragons were bad, that there was goodness and light...but all he could see was darkness and pain.

“He offered me money,” Liselle said flatly, breaking the silence.

Flint’s anger surged within him. “For what?”

“To walk away. From you,” she replied, her voice barely audible.

It felt as if he’d been punched in the gut. For a moment, Flint couldn’t breathe. Then everything seemed so much clearer, and he made a decision that broke his heart. “You should take it.”

With that, he turned his back on his mate, yanking the door open. He stepped outside, the nearby ocean calling to him, whispering of adventure. Numb, Flint took two steps forward, shifted into his dragon form, and flew away, leaving behind the woman he loved and the life he wanted, but believed he could never have.

Chapter Twenty-One – Liselle

Liselle stood in the warehouse, surrounded by her brewing equipment, feeling as if an icy wind had just blown through her soul. Flint's suggestion that she take Varn's offer and walk away from him echoed in her ears. Didn't he want her? Her heart felt like it was being squeezed by an invisible hand, pain radiating from the center of her chest.

The memory of Murray telling her he was leaving her for someone else flooded back, unbidden. That moment had felt as if someone had torn her life into pieces, scattering them to the winds. Then the realization that he'd left her with nothing but broken dreams and two children to raise alone had compounded that hurt a hundred times. At that moment, she had sworn to herself that she would make a new life for herself and her children, one that wasn't dependent on any man.

Yet here she was, her heart in tatters once more because of a man. Because of Flint.

Liselle couldn't untangle the mess of emotions that swirled within her—hurt, anger, confusion. She clenched her fists at her sides, trying to hold on to something solid, anything to keep her from breaking apart.

It felt as though so little time had passed from the moment they had locked eyes in the Christmas market to the moment he had just walked out of her life.

Static electricity shimmered across the back of her hands as her magic built with her emotions, eager to be unleashed. She wanted to shoot fireballs at the dragon shifter. She wanted to shout and to scream at him, to make him see sense.

If he had only opened up to her, perhaps if she had known just a little more about his circumstances and who he used to be, this could have all been avoided. Was his past really that dark? Would it catching up with him be *that* dangerous for her in her very hometown?

But fireballs and lightning bolts would be a waste of her magic and a waste of time. Instead, she should channel all her anger and hurt into a brew. That was who she was. And that was how she was going to make her mark on Wishing Moon Bay. Each batch wouldn't simply be seasonal, and in tune

with the Earth, it would reflect the seasons of her own life. Just as she had with the gin, each drink would be infused with some deep-seated emotion, an experience not just for the palette, but for the soul.

She took a deep breath, steadying herself, and forced her hands to relax. The static dissipated, but the energy inside her remained, waiting for an outlet. Liselle turned to her large copper still. This time she would make a whiskey. A spirit that was known for its long maturation process where each step altered and developed the flavor. It was complex, nuanced, where the final drink was complete and whole, yet one could taste each step of its transformation.

She would pour all of herself into this brew—her pain and her heartache, her stubborn determination, her joy. It would be powerful, transformative, and it would not depend on anyone else.

Under the dim glow of the warehouse lights, Liselle stood, her eyes pools of unshed tears. She moved with a silent grace, gathering her herbs—Star Anise for its protective qualities, Starflower with its celestial blue petals that brought courage and comfort to the heart and Moonwort for its ability to unlock hidden truths and enhance intuition, among others. Each spice was carefully selected, not just for its flavor, but for the emotional essence it carried.

As she ground the ingredients, their fragrant aromas mingled, woven with memories and dreams, pain and longing.

With a flick of her fingers, she lit the still and poured in the mash that had been fermenting in one of the vats. She whispered a quiet message to each ingredient as she added it to the pooling distilled alcohol. Each was a recollection of the hardships she had overcome, and the way she had changed; the independence she had learned, letting herself be helped by those who cared for her, and...opening herself up to the possibility of love once again.

Then she began to mold her magic, pouring her emotions out and letting them become a tangible thing around her. She closed her eyes as she picked out and unwound each emotion from the tangle inside her and let it flow out. Heartache and despair gave way to healing and catharsis. Fear and doubts became hope for the future, and the hurt of rejection became nostalgia for happy times, to be treasured forever.

Once the distillation was complete, she called over one of the barrels and

decanted the liquid from the still into the aged cask, before having it roll itself into the middle of the room.

Then she sat with it. The powerful runes carved into the wood by her mother's coven sped up the maturation process, from years to a matter of hours, and the whole time Liselle meditated. Just as the whiskey would take time to mature, so would she. A process that perhaps would never truly finish, but she took these quiet moments to reflect on what she wanted, who she wanted to be, and came to realize that no matter what, she wanted to be a beacon of joy for those around her. She simply enjoyed being happy, and that was enough.

When she deemed the whiskey ready for a taste, she took a small shot glass and filled it with her new brew.

"This brew," she whispered, "is for healing. For mending not just broken hearts, but soothing all wounds of the spirit." Her voice was a soft caress, imbued with conviction and hope.

Liselle took a tentative sip of the tan liquid. Initially, it tasted sharp, a poignant reminder of her loss, intensifying with the sourness of heartache. But as she swallowed, a remarkable transformation occurred. The whiskey seemed to bloom within her, spreading a warmth that was akin to a gentle embrace with an almost sweet after taste. It filled her with a sense of hope, a promise that pain was not the end, but a passage to new beginnings.

She closed her eyes, letting the magic of the brew wash over her. In that moment, Liselle understood that every tear, every moment of sadness, was a step toward healing, toward a future where hope blossomed even in the most unlikely places.

"Liselle?"

Liselle nearly dropped her shot glass at the unexpected voice behind her. "Marilla?"

"The one and only." Marilla did a small curtsy and smiled, but then her smile faltered. "I heard what happened."

"News travels fast in a small town." Liselle got up and placed the shot glass down on the worktop.

"Actually, Katerina called and asked if I could come check up on you. She thought you'd have been home by now." Marilla came closer and sighed. "You know we all want to help. We love you."

Liselle's face crumpled, and Marilla dashed forward and embraced her cousin, holding her tight. "It's such a mess. So much more of a mess than when we arrived in Wishing Moon Bay."

"What can I do?" Marilla asked.

"Nothing," Liselle said miserably. "Flint has made his thoughts on the subject quite clear."

"You spoke to him?" Marilla asked as she rubbed Liselle's back, infusing her cousin with calm and love.

"He came here." Liselle inched away from Marilla and wiped her eyes on the back of her hand. "He told me to take the money..."

"Go on," Marilla urged, with a confused look on her face.

"We need to rewind a little further," Liselle said with a flick of her wrist.

"Let's have some tea, and you can tell me all about it," Marilla suggested and headed for the small kitchen area.

Marilla placed the copper kettle on the burner and lit it. She then extended her arms, and the cupboard opened, followed by the teacups obediently floating down and settling gently on the countertop.

As the water in the kettle began to sing, Marilla reached for a jar of loose-leaf tea. Her fingers danced over the lid, and as she whispered another spell, the leaves inside stirred to life, releasing their fragrant aroma into the air. Her movements when casting were much slower and more deliberate than Liselle's slightly erratic spell casting. She spooned the tea into a strainer, letting the leaves swirl and steep in the hot water, infusing it with both warmth and magic.

"I thought it best to bring these, as well." Marilla pulled a neatly wrapped bundle from her bag and placed it on a tray. With a brush of her fingers, the cloth came undone to reveal scones. They were golden and flaky, still warm, emitting a tempting, buttery scent. Next to them was a pot of cream alongside a jar of homemade strawberry jam, its rich, ruby-red color glistening invitingly.

Marilla finished her preparations by pouring the tea into the cups, the liquid a deep, comforting amber. She placed the tray with the scones, cream, and jam on the table, arranging everything with a meticulous eye for detail.

"There we are," Marilla said with a comforting smile. "Tea is the answer to most problems. That and the ear of a trusted sister."

“Thank you, Marilla.” Liselle smiled gratefully.

“Now, a summer meadow is all we need.” Marilla swirled her hands around and around until the warehouse faded away.

“Bounds of brick and beams, now fade,
Bring forth grass and sunlit glade.
Bloom with flowers, under sky so wide,
In this space, let summer abide.”

As they sat on the grass surrounded by wildflowers and the hum of bees, Liselle turned her face to the sun, the warmth of its rays chasing away her sadness and replacing it with hope.

“Now,” Marilla said as she handed Liselle a scone and a cup of tea. “Spill.”

Liselle’s heart raced as she recounted the morning’s events to Marilla, who sat across from her on a checkered picnic blanket. The warm scent of cinnamon and nutmeg wafted through the air, creating a comforting atmosphere that was at odds with the tension Liselle felt in her body. “Before Flint came to see me, I saw the guy he fought with in The Lonely Tavern.”

“He came here!” Marilla nearly choked on her scone, eyes wide with surprise.

“No, he caught up to me when I went for a walk to clear my head,” Liselle said, trying to keep her tone even. “Are you all right?”

“Of course,” Marilla coughed, taking a sip of her tea to clear her throat. The steaming liquid was a rich amber hue, steeped with fragrant herbs that danced on their taste buds like fairy lights.

“He didn’t want to hurt me,” Liselle assured her cousin.

“Then what did he want?” Marilla asked, curiosity piqued.

“To warn me about Flint.” Liselle took a bite of her scone, the buttery pastry melding with the sweet jam and smooth cream as she chewed thoughtfully.

“Warn you about Flint?” Marilla leaned in, concern etched on her face. “What about Flint?”

Liselle hesitated for a moment, her gaze dropping to the delicate teacup in

her hands. “He wasn’t too specific,” she admitted. “But apparently Flint has a dark past. He’s said so himself, but I thought it was just the usual stuff, you know, financial troubles or a tough upbringing. Which it sounds like it *kind of* is, but this guy said that Flint’s really dangerous. And after seeing him fight, I don’t find it that hard to believe. He also said that he had already offered Flint money to provide information on Morwenna and The Lonely Tavern.”

“Information?” Marilla whispered conspiratorially, glancing around as if someone might be listening. “I mean, I know the place appeared from nowhere, and it’s more than a little odd. But I have sensed nothing bad about it. And Morwenna has only ever given off good vibes. You know as well as I do that our mothers have a nose for these things and they both like her.”

“I don’t know,” Liselle sighed, frustration simmering beneath her now calm façade. “The guy said that Flint was willing to do it, but obviously Flint must not have accepted the money since the dragon shifter offered me the money instead.”

“Wait!” Marilla’s teacup clattered on its saucer, her eyes wide with shock. “This guy is a dragon shifter, and he offered you money for what?”

“To walk away from Flint and the bond we share,” Liselle confessed, swallowing hard as the scone suddenly felt like lead in her throat.

Marilla shook her head, disbelief etched on her features. “You’ve had a busy morning, haven’t you?” The tension in the room broke as Liselle giggled at her cousin’s remark, the sound rising and growing deeper until she laughed so hard, she nearly spilled her tea.

“I have,” Liselle gasped between fits of laughter, tears pricking the corners of her eyes.

“Oh, honey, what are we going to do?” Marilla asked, her expression softening with empathy.

Liselle shook her head, the laughter fading as reality settled back in. “I don’t know.” She wiped her eyes, trying to regain some semblance of control over her emotions.

“And this leads us to the part where Flint told you to take the money?” Marilla pressed gently, her voice laced with concern.

“Yes,” Liselle confirmed, her chest tightening with an unspoken mix of pain and longing.

“Does Flint know that the offer of money was for you to walk away from

him and the mating bond?" Marilla asked, suddenly deadly serious.

Liselle hesitated before finally nodding. "Yes," she whispered, a knot of uncertainty twisting in her gut.

"You love him?" Marilla asked.

"I do." Liselle stared up at the summer sky. It was all an illusion, but it helped her feel at ease. "But if you love someone, sometimes the only thing you can do to prove that love is to set them free."

Marilla nodded sagely. "And that's what Flint has done."

The breath left her lungs as Marilla's words hit her like a punch to the stomach. Flint had never meant to hurt her. He was being cruel to be kind.

And maybe she owed him the same kindness.

Chapter Twenty-Two – Flint

Flint's dragon soared over Wishing Moon Bay, the colored lights of the town now faded in daylight. The excited sounds of people talking and laughing floated up to him, mingling with the aroma of gingerbread that tickled his nostrils. Everyone was so wrapped up in their last-minute Christmas shopping that barely anyone noticed the dragon as it ducked into a side street, and Flint appeared in his place.

He walked out onto the edge of the crowd, watching the people move about with a somber expression.

We were beginning to like the holidays, his dragon mused, its voice a soft rumble in Flint's mind. We were beginning to see ourselves as part of this town, part of something bigger than us.

Flint sighed heavily, his breath visible in the crisp winter air. *I was beginning to see myself as part of a family. Of Liselle's family. But I was wrong, we were wrong, we are better off alone. Varn is right. We are our father's son. We have his anger inside of us, and now we know we cannot contain it forever.*

His dragon snorted and shook its head. *You are wrong. We are not our father's son. We were protecting Liselle and her family. Varn has a chip on his shoulder a mile wide and he's taking out whatever happened to him on us.*

Maybe that's what we deserve, Flint muttered as he stalked down the street, hands shoved deep into his pockets.

And maybe Liselle and her family are what we deserve. We have never gone out of our way to hurt anyone. All we've wanted is to keep ourselves to ourselves, his dragon retorted stubbornly.

They continued their internal debate until Flint noticed a store selling traveling supplies. His dragon quieted as he peered into the small, unassuming place. Wooden shelves were stocked neatly with various supplies, from backpacks to camping gear, to rations. He ducked inside, grateful for the quiet as it contrasted with the festive bustle outside. At this time of year, people were thinking of indulging in rich foods, full of flavor. Not dried trail rations. This certainly worked in Flint's favor, as practically everything was on sale.

Under the watchful eye of the store owner, Flint browsed the selection. He gathered up various packs of dried foods, some jerky, fruit leathers, a water bottle, and a thick woolen blanket. Setting them down on the counter, he added a robust waterproof pack to hold everything, replacing the small pack he'd picked up just after he'd arrived.

"Going somewhere?" the store owner asked, raising an eyebrow.

Isn't it obvious? Flint thought but answered the owner with a more diplomatic response. "I'm planning a trip overseas."

"Ah, I get a lot of your kind in here lately," the store owner said, packing Flint's items into the waterproof bag.

"My kind?" Flint asked, his voice guarded.

"Dragons from Cairnnor. It's like you are all trying to get as far away from that place as possible," the store owner elaborated as he placed the rations and blanket inside the pack. "I'm never sure if you're running toward something or running away from something."

Flint clenched his jaw, resisting the urge to snap at the man. Instead, he said, "Some of us want to see the world."

"Well, safe travels," the store owner replied, his tone neutral as Flint handed over payment, which was pretty much everything he'd earned from working for Morwenna, and took the packed bag. He was grateful that everyone had tipped him so well.

"Thank you," Flint replied as he left the store.

What now? Flint's dragon asked.

Flint watched a sparkle of stars erupt from a Christmas store and fall on the people below, who laughed and tried to catch them before they melted like snowflakes. *Now we go and see Morwenna. We'll let her know we're leaving and ask her to keep an eye on Liselle.*

Flint strode down the street toward The Lonely Tavern.

However, something prickled at his senses. Flint rubbed the back of his neck.

Are we being watched? his dragon asked.

No, Flint answered, looking around.

Varn, his dragon ground out.

Was the dragon shifter spoiling for a rematch? Or was it simply another

twist of *fate* that he'd have one last run-in with the stuck-up dragon shifter before he left?

Flint clenched his fists. If that's what Varn wanted, that's what he'd get.

How dare the dragon shifter threaten Flint's mate?

And then track her down and offer her money to reject us, his dragon reminded him as he shot a plume of dragon fire from his mouth.

But then Flint let go of his anger. He didn't want to be angry anymore. Even at Varn. Besides, Varn's offer might be the best thing for Liselle. The best thing for all of them.

"Woah! Steady there!" A shout rang out as a group of pedestrians seemed to rush away from something up ahead.

Varn, Flint and his dragon said as one.

What's he doing? Flint asked as they ran toward the commotion.

Woah! His dragon was shocked to see the slender red dragon emerging from an alley up ahead and into the main street.

Whatever he's doing, it's not good, Flint replied. *This is no place for a dragon.*

Is he drunk? Flint's dragon asked as the red dragon seemed to wobble and then flop heavily down to the cobblestones, the crowd forming around him stepping back.

We need to do something, Flint said, all thoughts of fighting Varn gone.

As the people scurried away, Flint approached the red dragon, who turned to face him. The dragon's dark ember eyes narrowed, and he sucked in a deep breath.

He's going to burn us to a crisp, Flint's dragon warned.

"Let's just calm down." Flint held out his hands to the red dragon as it snaked his head from side to side. It wasn't clear if the beast was sizing Flint up, or if he simply couldn't keep balanced.

The air around Flint crackled with energy as Flint prepared to shift the instant Varn's dragon breathed fire.

You won't make it in time, Flint's dragon told him.

I will, Flint replied.

The red dragon swayed as he reared his head. His aim was off. If he did breathe fire, there was every chance he would burn down a building rather

than injure Flint.

“Varn, let’s talk about this.” Flint put his arms down.

The dragon curled his lip at Flint.

“I know we have our differences, but this isn’t what you want. Innocent people will get hurt.” Flint sucked in a breath. “If you want me to kick your ass again, we can fight as men. Or as dragons. But let’s go somewhere else, back to Cairnvor, where no one else will get hurt.”

Other dragons are coming, Flint’s dragon said. There are a few of them. It’s got to be the Dragon Guard.

“Come on, Varn. This isn’t going to end well.” Flint stepped closer and reached out to touch the red dragon. “I feel your pain. I don’t know what my father did to you, but he’s hurt me plenty. I’m not him, and he’s not around to do any more harm.”

The red dragon looked into Flint’s eyes. If he breathed fire now, Flint’s human form did not stand a chance.

A surge of static electricity crackled in the air, sending shivers up Flint’s arms and prickling his fingers. The hairs on the back of his neck bristled as Varn’s dragon form vanished from sight. Flint instinctively took a step back, tensing for whatever came next.

Varn materialized in his human form, looking like death warmed over. His cheeks were hollow, skin pallid and sweat-drenched. He swayed unsteadily and then crumpled to his knees with a groan, even more intoxicated than his dragon counterpart.

“Come on, up you get,” Flint said gruffly, looping an arm around Varn’s waist and hauling him upright.

“Are you here to finish me off?” Varn slurred, eyes bleary but defiant.

“Nope,” Flint replied, scanning their surroundings, seeking a solution.

The Lonely Tavern, his dragon whispered inside his head.

They could go there and wait for Varn to sober up.

Good idea. Flint nodded.

“Come on.” Flint braced himself, supporting Varn as they took a step forward. “We need to leave before the Dragon Guard arrives.”

But as the words left his mouth, he looked up to the sound of wingbeats overhead as two dragons landed gently on the roof above them. They glanced

at each other before nimbly climbing down onto the cobbles and shifting. Two uniformed men appeared in their place, their eyes narrowing with suspicion. “Everything all right?” one asked, more concerned than aggressive.

“Marek?” Flint recognized him, his brows arching in surprise.

“Flint! Well, I never.” Marek’s face broke into a wide grin, but quickly faded as he approached.

“You’re part of the Dragon Guard here in Wishing Moon Bay?”

“Sure am. I tell you, you can never expect where you’ll end up in this town.”

Flint smirked. “Yeah, I’m beginning to see that.”

“You two know each other?” The other dragon shifter glanced between the two of them.

Marek gave Flint a slight side eye. Flint was all too familiar with that look — ‘just go with it.’

“Sure, we know each other from the coffee shop,” Marek said.

The other shifter snorted. “You worked in a coffee shop?”

Marek ran his hand through his hair and laughed. “You wouldn’t know it now, would you? And Flint here was our top barista.”

The other shifter cast an amused glance at Flint. “Really?”

Flint nodded. “It’s funny because I’m working as a bartender now, in The Lonely Tavern.”

“You were always a pro at customer service. How is it there? It’s the talk of the town, and even the authority don’t know what to make of it. I haven’t had a chance to swing by yet.”

Flint shifted his grip on Varn, who was sliding off him. “I don’t really know what to make of it, either. It’s...unusual. But they have just started serving a new line of gins and beers.”

“Is that what’s up with him?” The other shifter pointed at Varn.

Flint laughed, almost half convincingly. “Yeah, didn’t realize he’d had so much until now, so we’re going to head back there and see if my boss can find something to help sober him up.”

“You do that.” Marek nodded. “Just, look, he can’t be shifting on the streets. It’s dangerous.”

“Don’t worry, it won’t happen again,” Flint assured him.

“I trust it won’t.” Marek stepped forward and clapped Flint on the shoulder. “If it doesn’t work out at the tavern, we could do with a good man like you. I know how good your people skills are.”

Does he mean people skills or people skills, his dragon asked.

I think you know, Flint replied. One thing Varn hadn’t been wrong about was his ability to find information.

“Haha, yeah.” Flint turned and steered them toward The Lonely Tavern.

“I’ll come by for a drink sometime. It would be good to catch up.”

“It would. Thanks, Marek.”

Marek smiled. “Take care of yourself, Flint.”

“You, too. See you.”

It might be a good thing we can’t hear what he’s saying, Flint’s dragon said as they dragged Varn down the alley.

True, I doubt it’s anything good. Sweat broke out on his brow as they turned a corner.

“You...you worked in a coffee shop?” Varn’s head was unsteady as he turned to look at Flint.

“No, of course, I didn’t work in a coffee shop. But Marek wasn’t about to tell his Dragon Guard friend he used to pay me to find help with smuggling exotic goods into Cairnnor.”

“Huh...”

It was a relief when the sign for The Lonely Tavern came into view.

As they approached, the door swung open for them. Flint had half expected the tavern not to let him in after the damage he’d done earlier. But as Flint entered the dimly lit tavern, it was as if nothing had ever happened. The decorations were back in place and there was the faint sound of Christmas songs coming from somewhere. Flint was too emotionally exhausted to try to figure out where.

“You’ve returned!” Morwenna came around the bar to meet them.

“Are you talking to me or him?” Flint said as he angled his head toward Varn.

“Both.” Morwenna tilted her head to one side and studied Varn. “He needs to sober up.”

“No kidding,” Flint said as he glanced around and headed for a bar stool, where he could dump Varn. However, the bar stool had other ideas and skipped out of the way before Flint could lower his companion onto it. “What the?” Flint asked.

“What did you expect?” Morwenna asked. “It’s only just been put back together after the pair of you broke it. And yes, I hold you equally to blame.”

Flint glanced down at the battered stool, with one leg mismatched from the others. “Fine,” Flint muttered, his annoyance barely contained. He shifted Varn into a nearby booth, making sure he didn’t accidentally jostle the recovering stool.

“Can you cast a sobriety spell on him or something?” Flint put his hands on his hips as he watched Varn slowly tip over until he was lying on the bench.

“Nothing that will eliminate the hangover he’s in for.” The witch gave them both a stern look, but her gaze softened as she took in Flint’s weary expression. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thanks, Morwenna,” Flint mumbled, sinking down onto another bar stool and rubbing his temples.

Morwenna wriggled her nose, then held up her hands dramatically. “Whoops! Too many sips! Clear this head and skip the tip.”

“That didn’t sound like a spell—”

“Ugh!” Varn sat bolt upright as if someone had thrown a bucket of cold water over him. Then he sagged forward, holding his head in his hands as he rested his elbows on the table.

“I’ll make some strong coffee.” With a rustle of robes, Morwenna headed for the bar to make coffee.

Or to give us time alone with Varn, Flint’s dragon said.

My thoughts exactly, Flint said, all his hatred toward Varn evaporated. The guy was in a pitiful state. Like a dog who had been beaten by his owner.

“Varn,” Flint began, unsure of where the conversation would lead.

“Flint,” Varn rasped.

“You went to see Liselle,” Flint said.

“I did.” Varn nodded and then groaned.

“You offered her money.”

“I did.”

“I thought you wanted information on the tavern and Morwenna.” Flint kept his voice low, but that didn’t mean Morwenna, or the tavern itself, wouldn’t hear.

“I did. I thought this place was the only way...” Varn rasped. “But then I saw you with Liselle and I thought...”

“What?” Flint asked. “What did you think?”

Varn lifted his head, his eyes blazing amber as he said, “I thought, why should Flint Granston have a mate when mine had been so cruelly torn from my side!”

“I’m sorry,” Flint whispered, unable to bear the thought of losing Liselle.

Says the man who was about to walk away from her, his dragon snapped.

It’s different.

Varn snorted. “You’re sorry. Well, sorry doesn’t bring her back, does it?”

“So because you lost your mate, you don’t want anyone else to have one?” Flint was trying to get his head around Varn’s motives.

“Not anyone. *You*. Flint.” Varn’s eyes swam with tears. “Why should the son of the man who ripped her from me get to live a happy ever after while I die a little bit more each day?”

“My father?” Flint’s face paled.

“He arrested me. Imprisoned me for nothing...” His eyes went out of focus as if he were recalling a memory. “And as I sat in my cell, I sensed her. Fleeting. Then she was gone. She was there, Flint! Only a few feet from me, then gone forever before I could even see her.”

“I’m sorry,” Flint told Varn as he scratched his chin. “There’s got to be more to it than that, surely.”

Varn crossed his arms. “Your father was a cruel man. Maybe it was because my betters thought a mate would distract me from my work, or perhaps your father simply hadn’t inflicted enough suffering that day.”

Flint smiled wryly. “I wish there was something I could do.”

“You could,” Varn hissed. “She’s out there somewhere.”

“You want me to help you find her?” Flint asked.

“No. You’ll never find her. I haven’t been able to. Where she was stowed away, it’s not an easy find.” He shook his head and then put his fingertips to

his temples. “I want to know the secret of this tavern. Because it might hold the key to me finding her.”

“Varn, I don’t think the tavern can do that,” Flint replied.

Varn shook his head. “How can you say that? You arrive here practically the same day as your mate, and you just so happen to have a reason to see her so you can sell her drinks to this place. It’s my only hope.”

“It’s just chance...fate, even. I’ll help you search for her,” Flint promised, wishing he could undo what his father had done.

“No,” Varn sighed, deflating into his seat as he did. “You belong here, with Liselle. It was cruel of me to try to drive a wedge between you. You belong together. No one deserves my fate.”

“Coffee.” Morwenna appeared by Flint’s elbow and set a tray of coffee down with a clatter. “Unless you have somewhere else you need to be?”

Flint stood up and backed away from the table. “There is something I need to do.”

With that, Flint turned around and headed for the tavern door, which stood open as if it always knew he was going to leave.

Chapter Twenty-Three – Liselle

Liselle glanced around the circle. There were four Norwood witches, each standing in their designated spot as they cast the spell.

A spell to make a map that would take her mate far away, to the land of endless summer. As one, they began to chant...

“In Wishing Moon Bay, where our journey begins,
We seek the path where the summer never ends.
With ink of the stars and parchment of dawn,
Reveal the route that must be drawn.

Through the mist and over the deep blue sea,
Guide us to Panjara, where the winds sing free.
From there to the Summer Isle, our destination bright,
Illuminate the way with celestial light.

Let the oceans part and the landmarks arise,
On this enchanted map, under the open skies.
From Wishing Moon Bay to the Isle’s golden sand,
Show us the way, with map in hand.

With this spell, the map now unfurls,
Guiding through waters, where mystery swirls.
To the Summer Isle, where dreams take flight,
May this map lead us, by day and by night.”

“Liselle.” Katerina squeezed her daughter’s hand. “It’s done.”

Liselle stared at the piece of parchment on the small altar in the center of their circle. As she watched, fine lines appeared as the route to the Summer Isle was revealed.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Marilla asked as they continued to hold hands. The circle could not be broken until the map was complete.

“I am.” Liselle nodded resolutely.

Elsbeth and Katerina exchanged a glance, something unsaid passing between them.

“What is it?” Liselle did not want there to be secrets between them.

“Your aunt and I stood here once, long ago, with Wilhelmina and Lois.”

“You were looking for my father?” Liselle guessed.

“I was,” Katerina replied and smiled wistfully.

“Did you find him?” Liselle asked.

“I broke the circle before the spell was complete,” Katerina confessed.

“Why?” Liselle asked.

“I realized that if he wanted to be here, he would be.” She smiled sadly. “He didn’t know about you before he left. But if he cared for me, the way I cared for him, he would have returned to these shores.”

“You didn’t want him here for the wrong reasons,” Liselle said.

“Exactly,” Katerina replied.

“It’s done,” Elsbeth announced.

The four Norwood witches stood in reverence for a moment and then dropped hands. Liselle could not take her eyes off the map as she stepped forward and reached for it.

The parchment was thick and covered with a film of wax to protect it from the weather. As she unfurled it completely, she ran her finger along the route from Wishing Moon Bay to the Summer Isle.

“So far away,” she whispered.

But what did distance matter? Flint was here in Wishing Moon Bay, but he might as well be a thousand miles away.

“Are you sure about this?” Marilla came to stand next to her cousin and looked over Liselle’s shoulder at the map.

“I have never been more sure,” Liselle said. “If I give Flint this map, then he is free to make his choice.”

Liselle took the parchment and rolled it up before tying it with a blue ribbon that matched the color of Flint’s dragon. Then she headed for the front door. As she approached, the coat stand leaned down, and she plucked her

coat off a hook.

“Thank you,” she said to the coat stand, before turning to the three Norwood witches. “And thank you.”

“We’re here for you,” Elsbeth assured her.

Liselle buttoned her coat, feeling the chill of the evening air seeping through the cracks in the door. Or maybe it was the chill in her heart that made her feel cold. “Mom, can you watch the kids until I come back?” she asked, her voice wavering slightly.

“Of course,” Katerina replied warmly, her eyes filled with understanding.

Casper and Hazel were upstairs playing games on their tablets. Liselle hadn’t wanted them to bear witness to the Norwood witches conjuring a map that would guide Flint away from their shores, away from them.

“Take your time,” Katerina told her, placing a reassuring hand on her daughter’s shoulder.

“You have what you need for a location spell if you can’t find him?” Marilla asked, concern etched into her features.

“I do,” Liselle confirmed, hoping her dragon shifter hadn’t flown to his cave in the mountains to lick his wounds and nurse his ego. She didn’t want to borrow a broomstick to ride up there. She’d freeze in these temperatures.

“We love you,” Katerina called out as Liselle opened the door, releasing a gust of icy wind into the room.

“I love you, too!” Liselle glanced back over her shoulder as she stepped outside. This was it; she would need to be strong. No tears.

As she walked away from the house, the parchment containing the map felt heavy in her hand, its weight an oppressive reminder of what she was about to do. But then, just as she reached the end of the drive, she saw Flint coming toward her, his tall figure silhouetted against the twilight.

“What are you doing here?” Liselle blurted out, her hand tightening on the map. She could feel the butterflies erupting in her stomach, their wings fluttering against her insides.

Flint smiled at her, a tentative, uncertain smile that made her heart skip a beat. “You invited me to dinner.”

“Dinner?” Liselle tugged her brows together and put her fingers to her temple. Was she going crazy? The last time they spoke, he’d told her to take Varn’s money and walk away from Flint and the bond they shared. Now he

was here as if none of that had ever happened.

Had it happened? Or had someone played a magical joke on her?

“I thought you said I was better off without you,” Liselle said, her voice barely above a whisper.

“I did,” Flint nodded, taking a nervous step toward her. “But I’m a fool.”

“You are,” she snapped as anger and pain washed over her.

“And I hurt you,” Flint continued, his voice thick with emotion.

“You did.” Liselle covered her mouth as she stifled a sob, feeling the sting of tears behind her eyes. So much for no tears.

“And I wish I could take it back,” Flint said softly, his gaze filled with regret.

“This is for you.” Stepping forward, Liselle thrust her hand out toward him, offering the map to him.

“What is it?” Flint asked, his eyes locked onto hers.

“A map. To the Summer Isle.” Liselle held it out to him, but he simply stared at it, his expression unreadable. “Please, take it.”

Flint reached out and curled his fingers around the rolled parchment, his hands trembling as he unrolled it. Liselle knew she had done the right thing. This was what he wanted. She needed to set him free.

“And I have something for you,” Flint said gruffly as he looked up from the map, his eyes dark and vulnerable.

“You do?” she whispered.

“I do.” He came closer, and she wanted to melt into his arms, to lose herself in him.

“What is it?” Liselle asked, her breath catching in her throat.

“Me,” he said with a shrug, his voice barely a whisper. “If you’ll have me.”

If she’d have him? Liselle couldn’t picture her life without him.

“This has to be forever,” Liselle said firmly.

“Forever. I promise,” Flint replied as his shoulders sagged in relief.

“And a shifter never breaks their promise to their mate,” Liselle said. “At least that’s what I heard.”

“You heard right,” Flint said as he closed the distance between them. “I

am yours, if you'll have me." He still looked uncertain as he waited for her to answer.

"Well, I did invite you to dinner—apparently," Liselle laughed softly. "And the kids have been dying for you to see the tree."

"That's not what I'm asking," Flint said gruffly.

"I know." Liselle pressed her lips together as she tried to keep a hold of her emotions as they threatened to overwhelm her.

"I'm sorry," Flint said simply.

"Flint." She went to him and wrapped her arms around him as she buried her face in his shoulder, inhaling his scent.

Flint took a shuddering breath as he held her close as if he never wanted to let her go.

All her doubts disappeared. This was where she belonged, in his arms.

Liselle tilted her head back and looked into his eyes, which glowed a deep amber as if his dragon were shimmering beneath the surface. Then she licked her lips, and he cupped her face in his hand, stroking her cheek. In that moment, it was as if they were making a silent promise.

An unbreakable promise.

Then he lowered his head and kissed her.

It was a tender kiss at first, filled with the promise of forever. But as their lips moved together, the kiss deepened, filled with fire and passion. As if they were trying to convey all their emotions through this one act.

When they parted, breathless from the kiss, they held each other as the sun's light faded from the mountains, and stars came out one by one above them. It was a magical moment borne from the connection they shared.

One that fate had woven into their souls.

"You know we're being watched," Flint murmured against her ear.

"Varn?" She stiffened in his arms, afraid the dragon shifter had come here to Katerina's house to tear them apart once and for all.

"No," Flint chuckled. "That's all in the past. We're friends now."

"Friends?" Liselle looked up at him.

"Well, not enemies," Flint said lightly.

"So who?" Liselle turned around and the drapes covering the window overlooking the front yard slid closed. "Come on." She took his hand,

comforted by the warmth of his skin and the strength of their connection. “Let’s go tell them. Even though they’ve probably already guessed.”

“Your mom isn’t going to turn me into a toad, is she?” Flint asked.

“Not as long as you promise to fly us all to the Summer Isle sometime soon.” Liselle shivered and tugged her collar up around her neck. “I think we could all do with a vacation somewhere warm and sunny.”

“I’ll have to ask Santa if I can borrow his sled,” Flint replied.

“Are you making holiday jokes?” Liselle asked as they walked hand in hand to the front door.

“I’m working on it,” Flint replied.

As Liselle reached for the door handle, a snowflake drifted down and landed on her cheek. Followed by another, and another. “It’s snowing.”

She took a moment to look out across the town as the snow came down harder. Wishing Moon Bay sure was a magical place. It had given her a future. A new beginning filled with love.

And hope.

And family.

“Ready to see the tree?” Liselle asked.

“I’m ready for anything,” Flint said. “But one thing first.”

“Are you stalling?” Liselle asked.

“No, I just wanted to say I love you.”

“I love you, too, Flint,” Liselle answered.

“And one more thing.” He reached behind her and opened the door. Katerina, Elsbeth, and Marilla nearly fell over each other as they tried to look as if they weren’t eavesdropping, while Casper and Hazel were perched on the stairs looking at the door with eyes filled with hope.

“You had something to say?” Liselle asked.

“Happy holidays!” Flint’s voice rang out across the town so everyone would know this dragon *did* do happy holidays.

Epilogue

Liselle awoke with a start and stretched out her hand in the darkness of the bedroom, only to collide with something warm and hard. Flint. A smile spread across her lips as her mind drifted back over the last few days.

When she emerged from the long, dark tunnel into Wishing Moon Bay, it was as if her life began anew. Before the tunnel, she thought she'd lost everything. But now, it was as though she had found everything.

Everything she ever needed and more. So much more.

"Morning," Flint mumbled without stirring.

"This isn't just any morning," Liselle answered, her words a mere whisper in the stillness of the room. "This is Christmas morning." She slipped her arm around him and held him close, feeling the steady rhythm of his heartbeat. "The best Christmas ever."

Flint turned to face her, a smile ghosting over his lips as he leaned forward and pressed his lips to hers. The warmth of their connection seemed to seep into her very bones. "I was just checking you were real," he murmured against her lips.

"I am," she whispered, and their kiss deepened. "I'm real. You are real. We are real."

As Liselle ran her fingers down Flint's chest, she teased his nipple into a taut bud. He groaned and slid his arm around her, holding her close. She could feel his hardness pressing against her thigh, sending tingles of anticipation to her very core.

It's early, the sun isn't up yet, so Hazel and Casper should be asleep for a little while longer, she mused.

And Flint was one Christmas gift she would love to unwrap.

Her hand slid down between their bodies and stroked his hardened length. Flint gasped as she applied just the right amount of pressure. They might not have been together long, but she had learned so much about her dragon shifter and how he liked to be touched and teased. She bit her lip, savoring the exquisite sensation of their intimate connection.

"Oh," she gasped as Flint slid his hand between her thighs and stroked her

mound. He knew exactly what she liked and was more than willing to give it to her. The pleasure he elicited from her sent shivers dancing up her spine.

“How long do we have?” Flint murmured as he kissed her jawline and then moved lower to take a nipple into his mouth.

“Hmmm,” she murmured, arching her back as his lips closed around her nipple. “Just long enough. I hope.”

“That’s all I need,” he replied. “All I’ll ever need.”

“I am relying on your shifter senses,” she told him as she stroked his shaft.

“Don’t worry, I can tell by their breathing that they are still asleep.” Flint rolled his tongue around and around her nipple as he slid his finger inside her.

“I’d never have guessed you weren’t giving me your undivided attention,” Liselle said as he rolled her onto her back and positioned himself between her thighs.

Moving as one, Liselle guided Flint into her, sheathing him in her slick heat. She gasped as he filled her completely in one swift thrust and then began to move in a gentle rhythm. Flint’s breath on her neck sent tingles down her spine and she wrapped her legs around his hips, pulling him closer as she met him thrust for thrust.

“I love you,” Liselle whispered as she kissed his cheek, following his chiseled jawline before she nipped the sensitive skin on his neck.

“I love you, Liselle, more than I thought it was possible to love anyone.” He lowered his head and sucked her nipple into his mouth, swirling his tongue around it, teasing and taunting, and then suckling it into his mouth.

She threaded her fingers through his hair and whimpered softly as Flint deepened his thrusts, circling his hips as he stretched her inner walls. With each thrust, her arousal grew, her orgasm tantalizingly close as he grazed her nipple with his teeth.

Liselle arched her back, her fingers digging into his flesh as she urged him on. Flint increased the tempo of his thrusts, brushing the hair from her face as he raised his head to look into her eyes. She met his steady gaze, reading the signals his body gave her, telling her he was close to coming.

Liselle tightened her inner muscles around him, the friction between their bodies incredible as he thrust deep inside her. Then his body tensed, and he came, his seed spilling into her as her orgasm washed over her, leaving her body tingling with pleasure.

Flint flexed his hips, small movements that prolonged her orgasm, as her inner muscles pulsed around him. She wanted to cry out, but she buried her face in his shoulder as ecstasy swept over her.

At last, they lay there in each other's arms, completely sated.

Liselle stroked his back, reveling in the current of electricity that still passed between them whenever they touched. It was tangible proof that the mating bond existed. Not that she needed one. Her heart belonged to Flint, as did her body.

Flint's lips brushed across her forehead. "Have I told you today how much I love you?" he asked, a smile in his voice.

"Not for at least a minute," she said and giggled as he lifted her head to look at her.

"Are you trying to injure my male pride?" he asked in a mock-serious voice.

"You're right, you probably lasted three minutes," Liselle assured him.

"Maybe we should make love again..." But then Flint's eyes grew distant.

"They're awake?" Liselle whispered.

"They are." Flint rolled out of bed and dressed inhumanly fast—he wasn't human, after all. Then he leaned down and kissed her cheek. "I'll be waiting for you under the Christmas tree."

"I hope you plan on wearing a bow," Liselle said as she slid her legs out of bed.

As Flint left her bedroom and went downstairs, she dressed in her favorite Christmas pajamas and pulled on a warm robe. Then she sat on the edge of the bed, waiting for Casper and Hazel.

She didn't have to wait long for the sound of excited whispers, followed by hurried footsteps running toward her room.

"Did Santa come?" Casper asked as he burst through the door.

"Why don't we go downstairs and see?" Liselle stood up and held out her hands to her children, their faces alight with joy.

"What about Grandma?" Hazel whispered loudly as they tiptoed past her bedroom door.

"Grandma is already awake," Katerina's voice came from behind her door, which swung open. "Although why we have to get up so early is beyond me."

Her expression, however, betrayed her excitement.

“To open presents,” Casper said with wide-eyed innocence.

“Then we’d better get to it,” Katerina said. “I’ll put the coffee on.” With a wave of her hands, she mumbled a few words, and the aroma of fresh coffee wafted up from downstairs.

Together, they went down to the living room where their tree stood, adorned with decorations and guarding the brightly wrapped gifts.

“Wow,” Casper whispered.

“What shall we open first?” Liselle said as she let go of her children’s hands, and they ran to the tree.

“Coffee?” Flint emerged from the kitchen with a tray of coffee and Christmas cookies.

“We’re going to need it,” Katerina said as she sat on the sofa.

“This one first,” Hazel said, thrusting a small box into Liselle’s hands.

“Oh.” Liselle looked down at the gift.

“It’s the one from Gilbert,” Hazel reminded her.

“We want to know what’s in it,” Casper added.

“Then you’d better open it, Mommy,” Katerina said, lifting her coffee cup for a sip.

“Do you know what’s in it?” Liselle asked.

“Now, that would be telling,” Katerina replied innocently.

Liselle glanced up at Flint, who shrugged. “Okay.” Her fingers trembled as she carefully loosened the delicate silver ribbon and unfolded the deep forest green wrapping paper with whimsical snowflakes.

“Must be something special,” Flint murmured, watching her.

Inside, a smaller box nestled within revealed a piece of parchment bearing the words, *To Flint, Happy Holidays*, in elegant script. Liselle’s eyes widened. “This gift isn’t for me. It’s for Flint.” She handed him the box, puzzlement etched on his face.

“Me?” Flint gently took the box, lifting the parchment to reveal another box—a jewelry box, more precisely, a ring box. He swallowed hard, opening it to reveal an antique diamond ring that glinted with inner fire.

“Dragon gold,” he murmured, confused.

“I think you know what you have to do now,” Katerina softly told him, her

voice heavy with emotion.

Understanding dawned on Flint as he stepped closer to Liselle and dropped to one knee.

“Oh!” Liselle covered her mouth, tears brimming in her eyes. “Is that what I think it is?”

“My mother’s ring,” Katerina confirmed, her voice choked. “I never had a use for it, so I thought it was time it was yours, Liselle.”

“It’s like a fairy tale ending,” Hazel whispered, gazing at the ring. All thoughts of other gifts were forgotten as she hugged Casper.

“Liselle Partridge,” Flint began, glancing at the children, “and the Partridge children, will you marry me?”

“Yes!” Liselle exclaimed, holding out her hand for Flint to slip the ring on.

“We’re getting married!” Hazel clapped excitedly.

“Yay!” Casper shouted, jumping.

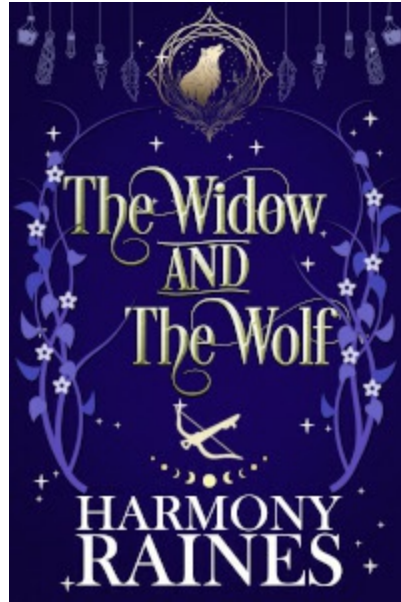
“We are,” Liselle affirmed, throwing her arms around Flint. They embraced, then beckoned Casper and Hazel to join in.

“Room for one more?” Katerina asked, tears in her eyes.

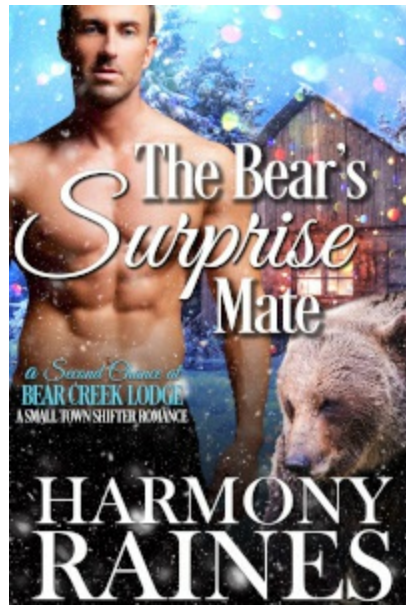
“Always,” Flint replied softly, his eyes misty. “Thank you.”

“Well, you aren’t so bad,” Katerina said, inclining her head. “For a dragon shifter.”

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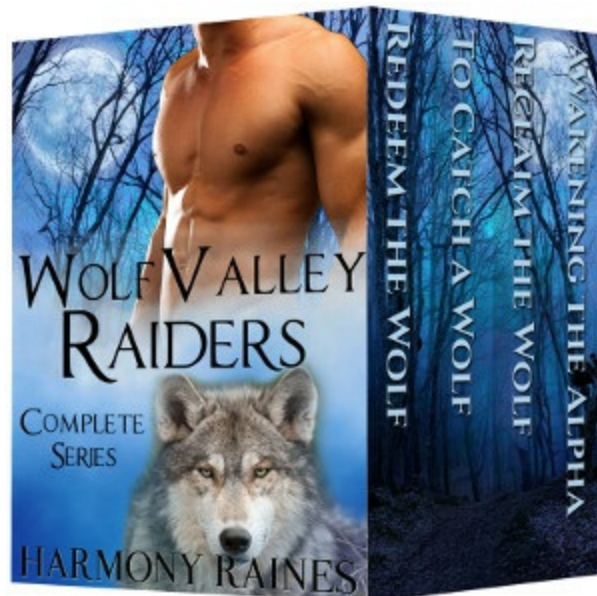
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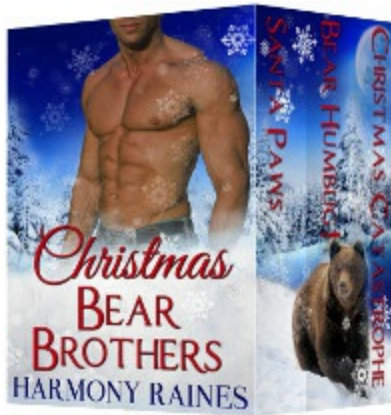
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