



# DRAGON'S SECOND CHANCE

ELITE SHIFTERS OF COLORADO

ALICIA BANKS

# DRAGON'S SECOND CHANCE

## ELITE SHIFTERS OF COLORADO

(Book 2)

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DRAGON'S SECOND CHANCE (ELITE SHIFTERS OF  
COLORADO BOOK 2)

# DRAGON'S SECOND CHANCE (ELITE SHIFTERS OF COLORADO BOOK 2)

Blurb:

**#Betrayal, Bitter Memories, and a Broken Dragon.**

**He was the son of the Elite Dragon King and the strongest and fiercest among all the shifter clans.**

He was the only heir but he didn't want his throne back.

He had been betrayed by his own blood.

He had his one true mate and there was no replacement for her.

But life had different plans...

Going back to Colorado was the last thing he wanted until he saw her.

He had peered into the depths of her striking and beautiful eyes.

There was something vibrant about that woman, who seemed to deliberately slam herself into him.

He knew he was betraying his mate, but he had no control.

And the cat shifter, she was with made his blood boil every time.

He was a danger and he needed to protect her.

He tried to douse the flames of anger, jealousy, and desire.

She was a human and he didn't intend to stake a claim on her.

***So why did his traitorous heart beat faster and ache when she was around?***



# Chapter 1

“Hey Silvia, I’m heading for the meeting. If the meeting goes long, I may just go directly back home. Please take care of yourself and have a great night!” Mickey said, walking out of her office as she hung her bag on her shoulder and began adjusting her dress.

Silvia was the secretary at Petals to the Metal, and Mickey felt she had a great connection with her since they’d been working together for such a long time. Every time Mickey had to go out of the office for any sort of meeting, Silvia handled everything in her absence with both care and finesse. Two things that made the woman worth her weight in gold, as far as Mickey was concerned.

Mickey strode out of the building and quickly jumped into her car. She threw it in reverse and began driving to the next meeting. It was about an hour’s drive from her office, and she knew it would take no time to get there, but still, Mickey’s professionalism demanded her punctuality. It was just who she was.

*Ring. Ring. Ring!*

Mickey glanced down at her phone as it rang and hit the talk button the moment her eyes flickered over the caller ID. It was Sarai, one person she just couldn’t ignore, her best freaking friend.

“Hey girl! What’s going on?”

“Oh, Jeez! I just had to give you a call to let you know that I major appreciate you, lady! I’m serious. I just don’t know what I’d do without you and bouncing these babies on my hips!”

“That’s what best friends are for, Sarai.”

“Yeah, but as the owner of Petals to the Metal, I feel like I’ve kind of let my clients down with all this,” Sarai said.

Mickey scoffed with a light chuckle. “Honey, you’re my best friend, and to be frank, your company is doing fantastically. I mean, think about it.

You've got a huge contract for decorating a giant celebrity wedding and your brand just keeps blowing up all the time!"

Sarai exhaled softly and giggled a bit. "Yeah, you're right about that. But you've contributed to that just as much as I have. I just can't believe how well things have gone. Are you almost to the office yet?"

"No, I'm en route, but I should be there soon. You know me, I'm *never* late."

"Right, of course. Okay, well let me know how things go. I'm anxious and eager, as you know."

"You got it, hun. Talk to you soon." She quickly ended the call and pressed the stereo button on her steering wheel. The radio began blasting Alana Grace's *Black Roses Red*, one of Mickey's favorite songs. She smiled as she began to sing it. Her thoughts shifted to how grateful she was to be working at the job she had. She thoroughly enjoyed it, and it was her passion, which made it a breeze to both do *and* enjoy!

Within the hour, she would be arriving at the meeting place, and she needed to be in that positive, happy space in order to deliver on a deal she knew both she and her best friend could handsomely profit from.

An hour later, Mickey pulled into the parking lot of the celebrity office space. She slammed her car door and skipped across the lot to enter the office in haste.

*Oomph!*

Stunned, Mickey blinked as her body ran smack into a tall and devilishly handsome man who was, sad to say, entirely focused on his phone.

*Wow, self-absorbed much?* Mickey thought, as her eyes met with his. She was at a loss for words, but from the expression on his gorgeous face, he seemed equally speechless, as he didn't so much as even offer an apology. Feeling suddenly uncomfortable, Mickey glanced away as she stepped back.

"What?" she finally asked. The man continued to stare at her, and she felt his eyes boring into her as if he was trying to peer right *through* her! She sighed and shook her head as she began striding toward the elevators. She didn't have the time for gawking jerks, that was for sure. Besides, she knew that David, one of Sarai's top managers and employees, was already waiting for her, and she hated leaving anyone hanging on a thread.

Mr. Tall-and-Sexy would just have to continue to watch her as she disappeared from his sight. Since she and David had met at Sarai and Alistair's wedding, and they had become very close friends, despite the fact that he was a cat shifter. Mickey had already accepted the shifters' world since the day Alistair had shifted into a humongous dragon in front of Mickey and Sarai. And now her best friend Sarai, who was deeply and madly in love with Alistair, was married to that gorgeous dragon shifter. Alistair was a great husband who loved Sarai so much and he had even fought with his own father for Sarai. Since that day, Mickey wished she could also get lucky enough to have a gorgeous dragon by her side.

Mickey pushed the elevator button and waited for the doors to open. She knew David well enough to expect this meeting to end rather promptly. After all, he had earned his position because of his cutting-edge eye for detail and precision. David had an incredible eye for décor, which was precisely why Mickey needed him to brief her over his designs as manager first. Mickey and Sarai had learned many of their tricks from the internet and the events the two had gone to, but David actually had an interior design degree, and he was a guru at certain things.

Finally, the elevator opened, and Mickey sauntered in, her eyes flashing back to the man she'd run into. The man who she observed had long and incredibly kinky curls as his taut and thick physique strode out the doors. There was something strangely magnetic about him, but Mickey glanced up as the elevator doors closed and shook it off. It wasn't like she would ever see him again, anyway.

After the meeting, as Mickey and David headed out of the office, her thoughts shifted back to the long-haired man. Who was he and what had he been doing there? Did he work here? Her curiosity was highly piqued and for some reason, she felt a little disappointed that she didn't see him again as David held the door open for her.

*God, Mickey, what kind of an idiot are you?* she thought.

What kind of stupid fool was she to be searching for someone she knew had already left? Furthermore, why the hell would he even stick around to talk to her after she'd regarded him so hastily and rudely?





Stephan was in Colorado to attend a meeting. It was the office of a big Hollywood celebrity, who was Stephan's friend. He was seated on the third floor at his friend's office.

As he talked to his friend about the details, a smell entered his nostrils. *A shifter's near. A cat*, he sensed.

"Please excuse me, I need to make an urgent call," he lied. He needed to check if there was danger around.

"Sure, I hope everything is fine, Stephan," his friend replied.

"Yes, everything is good. I just forgot some office work, so I need call Thomas." His friend nodded and Stephan walked down to the main hall.

*Actually, it would be a good idea to call Thomas first, before taking any action*, Stephan thought.

He stared down at his phone as he moved towards the entrance. His eyes flickered from side to side as he slid his tongue across his lower lip. There was something vibrant about that girl, the one who had slammed herself into him. He knew it was somewhat his own fault, but seeing her had been so incredibly unexpected.

He had been stunned what just had happened. Never in his life had he imagined that a glimpse of any living woman would bear so uncanny a resemblance as the one that woman seemed to bear. Because the woman she resembled, Aiyana, had long been gone from his life, and it was almost impossible to imagine the brief meeting he'd had with her could even have occurred.

Her image fluttered through his mind, so real, so concrete that he knew he would never forget it. And because he hadn't uttered a single word to her, and stood there like a fool, he'd missed out on the chance for a proper introduction.

He regained his conscious as she moved towards the elevator, and he quickly went out to call Thomas.

"Hello, Stephan," Thomas answered.

Thomas was his personal assistant, and Stephan viewed him much more as a father figure than the man even recognized. When Stephan's uncles, George and Dale, killed his parents and brother Vincent, Thomas was the one who saved Stephan and settled in Australia with him. Thomas had worked for King James, Stephan's father, and James had deemed him the most trustworthy person.

“Thomas, there is a cat around. It could be dangerous. I need your thoughts on that, what do you think I should do?”

“Oh, did it hurt someone?”

“No, I mean, I don’t know yet.”

“Son, I would suggest you don’t do anything until you witness something. The cat might work there at the office; as you know, they lead their lives like normal humans. Just like we dragons try to do.”

Stephan took a deep breath and said, “I think you’re right, Thomas, it’s just that I have been constantly thinking about the past.”

Colorado was the last place in the world Stephan wanted to be at. It was suffocating as the bitter memories and ugly truth from the past flashed back in his mind since he had landed here. If it was not for his friend, he would have already rejected to contribute the wedding event, no matter how much money he may have lost.

“I’m coming back to Australia; my work here has finished here,” Thomas said.

“Wow, really? When do you leave?”

“Thursday morning at nine o’clock. The flight is supposed to arrive at four o’clock in the afternoon. Will you be able to pick me up?”

“I don’t see why not,” Stephan replied. “Give me a call when you depart. I’m also heading back tomorrow morning, as my meeting has finished.”

“Of course, looking forward to seeing you. And don’t stay there too long. I don’t want you to get into any fights. They could have grown more dangerous. It is not the right time, and we need to work on proper plans and preparations,” Thomas warned.

“Yes, Thomas, please don’t worry. I will be back soon.”

Stephan ended the call and let out a loud sigh. He thought about his parents and brother; they’d all been so happy here in Colorado. He shrugged off the thoughts and headed back to the third floor and sat on the chair near the big glass window. Still, his mind kept coming back around to settle on her once again. He had peered into the depths of her striking and beautiful eyes, and what he’d seen there was magnetic without a doubt.

Every detail about her was so perfectly etched into his mind’s eye, perfectly managed long waves of her hair, luscious lips and oceanic eyes made his heart sink in his chest. Indeed, everything about her was like a

breath of fresh air, like hope had once again been breathed deep into his lungs.

Stephan had never experienced love, or even feelings of attraction towards any other person since he had lost his mate, Aiyana. He was a quiet and distrusting person, and it wasn't something he was at all used to.

## Chapter 2

Stephan stared out the big window glass from his friend's office as he blew a light breath out over his steaming coffee. His eyes widened as his eyes once again spotted the enticing female who he'd bumped into earlier. But she was walking through the parking lot with another man. Stephan watched with a curious smirk as she slid into a car and the man hopped in alongside her. The car pulled off and he watched it until it disappeared down the long drive and out over the horizon.

The woman and her male accomplice were long gone, but he couldn't help but wonder about her. Who was she? What did she do? And why did she have to so strangely resemble Aiyana? Suddenly, Stephan wished he could stay for just one more day. Maybe then he could get another chance to see her. To actually meet her properly. For the first time, Stephan actually wanted to stay in Colorado, even though he hated it, but he knew it just wasn't possible. Especially not with Thomas coming back home so soon. With a sigh, he resolved it was best to go back to his hotel room and catch up on some much-needed rest.

Soon, he would be heading back to Australia, but the thoughts of that luscious woman and her divine scent, a fragrance he couldn't decipher... Like a bouquet of fragrant wildflowers. The thought of it alone made him break out into a smile, happy and content in ways he hadn't been in ages... hell, years.



"I think you're really going to like it here; this is one of my favorite restaurants," David said as he held the door open for Mickey. Something about the place already screamed expensive and fancy, she could tell that right off the bat. Thankfully, she had worn a nice dress that could pass off as semiformal, as it was evident to her this was a classy place, and

underdressed was the last thing she wanted to be. Another plus was that David had brought them just in time for the crunch between lunch and dinner, which made getting a table a breeze. Within moments, the two of them were seated and smiling at one another from across the table.

“Have I told you how incredible you look?” David asked, smiling widely as he winked at her. Mickey hated it when he did this, and frowned slightly.

“David, we agreed, just friends. Remember?” she asked in a low tone.

“Yes, we did, but even a friend can pay a friend a compliment. Right?”

“Can I get you two started with something to drink?” A young waiter approached, smiling widely as he glanced at the two of them.

“Yes, actually. Can you get me a bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon? I think a nice red would be great for a starter. Then, I think we both need to browse the menu for just a few moments. Isn’t that so, Mickey?” he asked.

“Yes, please.” The waiter disappeared and David piped up instantly.

“The shrimp scampi is excellent, if you like seafood. Their steaks, however, are the best in town, and I *highly* recommend them, if that’s your sort of thing.”

“Well, I do love me a good steak.” She smiled, closing her menu. “I think that will be perfect, actually.”

“So, are the meetings always that easy?” David asked.

“Sarai’s work speaks for itself. Clients tend to be agreeable with proven formulas and performance. It’s simple, really.”

“Yeah, but this isn’t going to be Sarai’s work, this will be yours,” he said.

“Yes, but they are Sarai’s designs. I’m just executing them,” she stated matter-of-factly.

“You don’t give yourself nearly enough credit,” he said with a frown. Mickey frowned back, unsure of what to think of that statement. Then there was the matter of his tone, which she didn’t like at all.

“Are you and Alistair having a poker night?” Mickey asked, realizing it was time for a change in the subject matter – real quick like.

“Alistair is a father now; he doesn’t have time for poker. In fact, I haven’t seen him around the gym much at all. He still owns the place, but I

think he stopped training all together. It's why I needed to find a new job, and franchising Sarai's flower shop was just the project I needed."

"We're both very grateful to you," Mickey reassured him.

"I'm the one who is grateful. I get to work with two beautiful women, and you two make my job easy. Like you said, the product sells itself, so marketing is a breeze." David laughed. Mickey blushed and shook her head. The compliments always bordered on flirting, and sometimes she didn't know what to think of it. But she still loved spending time with David and valued his creative abilities.

After they finished, they headed back to their car. David now drove with Mickey in the passenger seat. Remembering that she had promised to call Sarai, she pulled her cellphone out and hit her speed dial number. Sarai's voice filled her ears instantly,

"So, the meeting went well, right? Let's hear all the great details?" she asked. On the opposite end of the line, Mickey could hear her little one fussing a bit.

"Are you putting them down now? Sounds like someone doesn't want a nap."

"Yeah, I know, but we've got work to discuss," Sarai replied. Mickey chuckled.

"Okay, so this is the deal - we have six months to complete this project. It's in the Maldives. All exotic island style. We are the only ones who are supposed to know anything about it; you, me, and David. It's totally top secret. Major hush-hush," she explained.

"Wow, really? Okay, so no pressure. I know you can totally handle this, Mickey. You've been my right hand for years now, and it's finally your turn. To tell you the truth, I'm so proud of you!" Sarai gushed.

"Thanks," Mickey said. "I promise you I will do my very best."

"I have zero doubts. You've got my full faith, honey. Absolutely, full faith." Mickey smiled. Just hearing those words from her best friend made it *all* worthwhile.

## Chapter 3

*Six months later...*

Mickey sipped her coffee while working on her laptop. She was going over the workflow one final time as they were leaving for the wedding event next day.

*Perfect. Everything is just perfect,* Mickey thought to herself.

Mickey and Sarai were very excited about this event, as it would be one of the biggest projects for their company, which would result in great success in future.

*Ring. Ring. Ring.*

Mickey's eyes flickered down to her phone and she pursed her lips as she noticed Sarai's name on the screen.

"Hey, girl. What's going on?"

"I...it's...they're..." Sarai's words were broken up between sobs and Mickey instantly felt a pang of worry as it struck the center of her chest.

"Whoa, hey now. Take a breath. I can't understand anything you're saying, hun. What's going on? Slow down and tell me what's going on." Sarai sucked in a deep breath and Mickey could hear her struggling to make out her sentence.

"W.. we...we were attacked, Mickey!" she exclaimed. Mickey's eyes widened as she pushed the phone closer to her ear.

"What? I don't understand. Attacked? What do you mean?" she asked, confused as ever.

"Balthazar..." she stuttered, "He attacked us because he wants to be the only heir of the dragon shifter clans."

"What the hell? Oh my God, are you okay? Are the kids all right?" she asked, trying her best to remain calm and hide the terror she

immediately began feeling. Trembling and uncertain, she bit into her lip as she listened closely.

“It all happened so fast. I mean, I had to save the kids... I guess, somehow in the midst of it all I broke my leg. But...” Sarai trailed her words, “Something strangely incredible happened. I mean, I’m still not entirely sure what to think of it, but...”

“But, what, Sarai?” Mickey pressed.

“Well, you know Alistair is a dragon shifter. It might surprise you, but I also...have magical powers. I mean, how can a normal human fight alone with the fiercest dragon?”

“Whoa! Wow! What happened? Is everyone else okay? What about Alistair?” Mickey asked, stunned by this new information.

“I hope so, I mean he wasn’t home, luckily. To be honest, I fear if he had been here, Balthazar would have killed him for sure. The children are fine, just shaken up. Anyway, with my damaged leg, I may not be able to go to this wedding event, as you can imagine.

“David has already agreed to go with you and assist. You’ll also have a team of workers with you, and the hotel has amped up extra staff, so you’ll have plenty of help. I am confident that you can do this, Mick. And, that’s not all, I want you to take credit for this one. You’ve earned it, and you deserve to have some fun and not worry about me. I have the most loving and caring husband.”

“How am I supposed to do that? Are you sure you’ll be safe?”

“Honey, I’ve got this. Trust me, anyone comes in here after my babies, I’ll be sporting some bright orange and happily carry my ass to prison. You don’t mess with a mama bear.”

“Not mama bear; I always said you were a pixie.” Sarai laughed, but in the back of her mind wondered if Mickey was right.

“Well you let me know if you need anything. Promise?”

“Promise. Now, have fun. Love you.” Mickey was a little nervous now, as she had to handle everything alone.

*You can do it, Mickey.* She shrugged.

She had just completed the final preparations and it was going sorely late. As luck would have it, she had a long ass flight the next morning, too, and she needed to get home to start packing. If she was lucky, she might get just a few hours of sleep before she had to crack her eyes open and drag her tired ass to the airport. When she finally made it to her



bed, she was out in minutes, exhausted and anxious and ready to carpe diem the hell outta this new opportunity.



Almost two days later, they all landed at the Male airport. “You ready for this to be over?” David asked her as they all boarded the ferry.

“I don’t know. I mean, it’s pretty heavenly here. Look at the freaking view.” The water was so blue, Mickey swore it looked just like pure sapphire or topaz. It was enchanting and downright breathtaking. The perfect romantic place for a wedding.

“What do you want to do when we arrive?” David asked as they reached the resorts.

Mickey’s eyes widened as she took it all in. “I don’t know, but wow! This place is even more lavish than I first imagined it. I might just spend all day resting in comfort.”

“What about going for a swim later?”

Mickey shrugged. “I don’t know, maybe. We’ll see. I’m feeling a little jet lagged, to be honest. We humans usually get tired after spending almost thirty hours in flight.” She teased David in a low voice so that nobody can hear, and David laughed at it.

Truth was, all Mickey wanted to do was crawl into her massive hotel bed and pass right the fuck out. In fact, she could almost hear the pillow calling to her as they strode into the building. Later, there would always be later, right?

“Let’s get inside to get some rest, everyone must be tired. Tomorrow onward, we may not even get time to rest,” Mickey said as they reached, looking at the team members.

“Yes, Mickey,” everyone replied.

They got their keys and went to their respective rooms. It was the most beautiful resort. And every team member looked happy and excited to be here.

*What the fuck?* Mickey’s eyes widened when she entered her room. It was a spacious room with a peaceful color tone, and the lights were soothingly dim. It had everything that any other luxurious hotel room had, but the best part was the beautiful blue water view. She decided to sleep for some time before enjoying the resort.

When she woke up, she stepped out on the balcony. She had a killer view. As far as the eye could see was pure paradise. She'd slept a good couple of hours already, but the idea of taking a dip started to gnaw at her. With a shrug, she slipped back through the sliding glass doors and began sorting through her suitcase in search of her swimsuit.

After a minute, she found it and shimmied out of her pajamas. Her hair was already pulled back from her nap, and she didn't see the point in fixing. A simple bun always seemed to be just right for swimming, anyway. She grabbed a robe after slipping into the bathing suit and wrapped it tightly around her, easing into the hall as she sauntered quietly toward the elevator.

Honestly, she wanted to enjoy the dip without David's companionship and then find herself right back in her room resting. There was plenty of time and work to address with David, and she was beginning to feel like he hadn't entirely given up on the idea of the two of them becoming more than friends. No, going out on her own was necessary for boundaries and personal refreshment alike. The elevator dinged and she walked out, turning toward the pool as she made her way down the corridor.

Quietly, Mickey walked forward, her eyes taking in the interior décor with appreciation. There was no doubt this was going to be a great backdrop for the location wedding she was assisting with. She stepped through the glass doors of the interior pool and tilted her head curiously as her eyes slid past a man seated on the upper balcony, a floor above her.

The glass panes between the two of them made an odd focal point on his face as the sun glinted off it, and Mickey noticed that he was sipping a tea cup and dressed in a fine pinstripe suit, if ever she had seen one. He looked just as refined and polished as the very day she had run into him six months earlier and, oddly, seemed to be smirking down at her as his eyes slid over her standing at the pool's edge. Shrugging it off, Mickey determined to ignore it, but the original tugging he had struck in her seemed to pop up harder than it first had, and the irresistible urge to glance up at him tore at her, eyes betraying her mind as they lifted to watch him for a moment.

*What is with this guy?* she wondered. *Worse yet, what was with her?*



If there was one thing about Stephan, it was that he was an incredibly hard worker and very dedicated to his work. He wasn't the sort

of person who liked procrastination, and had no patience for it in any of his employees. Some people thought that made him an asshole at times, but under the surface, everything about Stephan was based on how very important the hotel chain was to him. It had been named The Aiyana Group of Hotels in honor of the woman he had loved, his mate, who had been murdered right before his very eyes.

Since the loss of Aiyana, Stephan had never allowed anyone to get close to him; he had very few friends and even fewer confidantes. He was a resilient man, the strong, silent type, which had served him well as a boss and businessman. With such a huge hole left in his heart, Stephan preferred to stay aloof from the world. It was easier.

It was later in the day now, and he found himself walking around outside of the hotel, something he did to ensure the grounds stayed in perfect condition, when he sensed the presence of a cat shifter.

He searched around and his eyes found her again, the woman who had stolen his attention back in Colorado nearly half a year ago. He wondered what her name was, but noticing that she was with a group of people, it occurred to him that she might be employed for the wedding. He had to admit, he couldn't keep his eyes off her in the stunning flared sundress she arrived in, complete with matching sunglasses and sunhat. She looked adorable, and he almost forgot that he was searching for something. His eyes followed her until she entered the resort.

The sight alone had fixed a contagious smile on his face that had lasted all day. Undeniably, he was beyond happy when he saw her, it was like his heart had been jolted back into feeling. The woman had kept him restless for last six months, the only person who seemed to renew any hope of vitality rather than miserable existence within his soul. Even when he walked into the staff meeting, he was smiling from ear to ear. It was so noticeable that hotel manager even smiled back at him as he approached.

"Liam, tell me what's going on with the party arrangements. This is a big celebrity wedding. I *have* to know everything is going as planned." The welcome distraction of knowing everything was lined up and in order was one that Stephan pursued strategically. Otherwise, his mind might continue to wander to the woman he could see so perfectly etched into his memory.

"It is, Stephan; you have nothing to worry about," Liam reassured him.

Stephan sighed. “Good. I have a dinner with Thomas. Keep me informed.” He nodded and strode back out the door, overhearing Liam’s voice as he disappeared.

“Of course.” The door shut and Stephan headed off to the onsite restaurant to meet with his uncle. Because of the wedding, Stephan had chosen the restaurant as yet another means to ensure things were in perfect order. He walked toward the heavy wooden doors, polished so well one could see the light glint off them they approached. He pushed the door open and the host immediately lifted his head.

“Good evening, sir. Right this way. Your uncle has already arrived,” he said as Stephan smiled with a nod.

“Thank you, kindly, Francoise.”

“Of course, sir,” the man said as they wound through the entryway foyer toward the tables secluded in the back. Stephan’s eyes found Thomas quickly as they walked through the labyrinth of tables. Thomas smiled back at him from a corner booth, the one they had both used as their private perch for years. He stepped up on the podium and approached the booth, sliding into it with a nod.

“Hello, Thomas. I see you’ve already taken the liberty of ordering drinks,” Stephan acknowledged as his eyes ran over the shot glass sitting atop the table.

“Ah, you know I enjoy an evening anxiety reliever before dinner. Why, do you need one as well?” he asked with a chuckle.

“Indeed. Thomas, there is a cat here in the hotel, but I haven’t identified it yet.”

“Yes, I sensed the same. Not to worry, if it’s anything dangerous, we both can handle it.”

“I wonder if it’s Dale and George’s shitty plan? Maybe he discovered I am still alive.”

“It’s possible,” Thomas said, nodding his head as he looked at Stephan. “You know that we’ve grown strong enough to handle it in the past few years. That day back in Colorado, I stopped you because you were alone. I knew you were strong enough to handle anything, but I didn’t want you to take the risk when it was not required. Let’s not focus on that; you have so many other things to focus on.”

Stephan just nodded and he could feel that Thomas loved him so much. “So, what shall we discuss this evening, Uncle Thomas?”

Thomas leaned up and tilted his head. "Well, I know you will not like hearing this, but..." He pursed his lips and let out a long sigh before he once again spoke up. "Stephan, I think it is time you took a new mate. It had been years since Aiyana." Stephan blinked once and glanced down at the table. This was not a conversation he wanted to have, but Uncle Thomas continued. "You work too hard for your business, but your personal life is important too. And you should focus on keeping the elite shifter race going."

Stephan glanced up and groaned. "I don't have time to play. I'm the owner of a huge hotel chain." He waved his hand around. "Haven't you noticed?"

"Yes, the *owner*, which means you can delegate."

"I don't like to delegate. I enjoy the work," he protested, and his eyes darted across the restaurant as he noticed a group of people walking toward a booth not too far from his and his uncle's.

"I know you like your human form more than your dragon. Your mother was a human, but the reality is that you are a dragon shifter, and that cannot be changed."

Immediately, his eyes found the magnetic woman he'd been worried about since the moment he'd first saw her. This time, her lovely hair was pinned up, and she was immaculately dressed like the perfect professional woman. Distracted by her, his uncle's voice seemed to muffle, and he no longer heard a word he said as his focus entirely was on her now.

She was dressed in a fine blue dress the color of pure sky, but the most enchanting thing about her was the delightful laugh he heard bubbling from her as she spoke to one of the men in her party. She walked out in front of him as they were led to their table, but Stephan's gaze did not go unnoticed as the woman lifted her eyes to meet with his and smiled briefly. That was it. Instantly, he felt his heart flutter and he was smitten. Suddenly, he knew his uncle was right. Aiyana was long gone and never coming back; it was time for him to find a new mate, and as fate had it, he might have just found *her*.

"Instead of staring at the girl, go say hello. You haven't been with a girl since your mate died," Thomas suggested as he watched his nephew's reaction. They both spotted the cat shifter. *What he was doing with a woman who was human?*

“Wait, maybe she is the cat, because I smelled a cat only after she entered in,” Thomas said, hiding his smile as he wanted to tease Stephan.

“A cat?” Stephan asked, perking a brow curiously, “What do you mean?”

“You know, *a cat*,” Thomas stated with emphasis.

“No, she’s a human,” Stephan pressed.

“How can you possibly know that, Stephan?”

“I know you what you’re trying to do, but for your kind information, I have seen her closely,” Stephan said without thinking too much, as his entire focus was on her.

“*Closely?* How close have you two have been?” Thomas grinned at Stephan.

“Nothing like that. A few minutes before I had called you, we bumped into each other back in Colorado. Literally. And you should stop teasing me.”

They both laughed.

“I must say, she resembles Aiyana so much,” Thomas said as the woman slid into the booth beside the cat shifter.

Stephan just nodded his head as memories of Aiyana flashed back.

“Well, they can only be friends,” Thomas said as he witnessed the sadness in Stephan’s eyes. He genuinely wanted Stephan to be with someone.

“I don’t know, Uncle, they look pretty cozy,” Stephan stated as he watched the cat shifter inching closer to the woman and showing her something on his phone.

The two of them were both merrily laughing at whatever it was. The sight of it made his blood start to boil slightly. He didn’t like the thought of her with another man, but he didn’t even so much as know her name. He had to stay calm, but seeing her with him as she was, it ripped his smile away and left him in a foul mood instantly. Stephan only hoped it wouldn’t last the rest of the evening. It was just like having his balloon popped the moment after he’d gotten it.

Stephan was restless and anger was taking over him every time he saw the couple laughing together. As soon as he finished his dinner, he told his uncle that he had to check some emails, and he would see him next day. Then he left to return to his room.

The next morning, it was time for him to go meet with the Petals to the Metal team. He now stood in the conference room waiting for them to arrive and raised his eyebrow when the cat shifter from the restaurant came in with his team members.

He approached Stephan and tilted his head. "Hi, I'm David."

"Hi, David. I'm Stephan. Nice to meet you."

"Pleasure is all mine," David smiled as they shook hands. "I apologize, but our team leader, Mickey, she isn't feeling well and thinks she may have caught a cold. So, she is going to try to recuperate this morning and will be joining us later for the evening meeting. She extends her apologies."

So, the attractive woman now had a name. Mickey, it seemed. Amazing, he thought as the song slithered through his head. Curiously, Stephan blurted, "So, you are the owner of Petals to the Metal?"

David laughed and shook his head, "No, I'm actually the marketing guy. Our owner, Sarai, broke her leg, and Mickey needed an extra pair of hands. And I joined her." Stephan could sense David's heartbeat increase while he talked about Mickey, which meant he feels something for her.

"Oh, I see. Well, that's too bad," he said, suddenly concerned for the woman's welfare. He pursed his lips and sat down as David commenced the conference, mind wandering off to worry about whether Mickey would be alright or not.

## Chapter 4

Mickey shifted on the hotel mattress and let out a long sigh. She was supposed to be in the meeting, not laid up in a bed feeling like utter and royal crap. Earlier, she had texted Sarai to see how she was doing, but hadn't gotten so much as a single emoji out of it.

*Ring. Ring. Ring.*

Mickey glanced down at her phone and immediately hit the talk button. "Hey, Sarai."

"How are you feeling? What's got you under the weather?" Sarai inquired with a concerned tone.

"Ugh! I know you were counting on me, hun, but I am not at all well. I woke up throwing up, and I'm just hoping I can pull it together for the rest of the trip."

"Girl, you can't be held to blame for getting sick. Nobody has any control over that, and it's not your fault. You just need to get plenty of rest; I think maybe you've been working too much. After you get back, we should go have a girls' day out or something. Maybe do a little TLC and spend the day at a spa after a nice shopping spree. What do you think?"

"That sounds great actually, but how are *you* doing?"

"I'll survive," Sarai replied. Mickey pursed her lips as she didn't at all like that sound of that.

"I'm worried about you."

"Don't be. I have a dragon protecting me. I'm fine," Sarai stated matter-of-factly.

"I'm so mad at myself for getting sick. I shouldn't have gone swimming. I should have known better. I mean, I was already not feeling well," Mickey blurted.

"No, you just stop that," Sarai said.

"No, seriously. I should have stayed in bed and waited till today. Now I'm going to look like a failure. I'm so nervous that everything is



going to fall apart now, especially since you're not here to save my ass," Mickey said in one single breath.

"That's not true. That's why you have David, and all the planning has been handled already. The team knows how to set everything up. They've practiced putting it all together for months. You've got this. Don't worry. Trust yourself."

"Yeah, I'm grateful David agreed to come. He's been a real rock to lean on," Mickey said.

"Well yeah, of course. He has a *crush* on you." Sarai chuckled.

"Yeah, I know, but I just want to be friends with him. He's nice, but there's just nothing there romantically."

As they talked, there was a knock on the door. "Hang on Sarai," Mickey mumbled as she got up from bed. "Someone's at the door." She dropped the phone on the mattress and stepped toward the door, lifting the chain lock to slide across before she opened the door.

"Good day, miss," the bellhop said. Mickey shook her head as she glanced down at the room service tray service in his hands.

"Oh, no. You have the wrong room, I didn't order any room service," she said. The bellhop smiled slightly and shook his head.

"Miss, this was sent with compliments by the owner of The Aiyana Group of Hotels."

"What?" She blinked. "Oh, wow. Um, okay," she said, pulling the door open so he could wheel the table in. He lifted the tray cover and smiled at her as steam arose from what appeared to be a hearty soup. She nodded. "Just put it over there, thanks."

"Of course." The bellhop put the brakes on the tray wheels and strode out the door. Mickey sighed and walked back over to the bed, lifting her phone from the mattress.

"Wow!" she muttered into the phone.

"Who was at the door?"

"Room service," Mickey said with a sigh. "Apparently, the owner of the hotel sent over soup. I don't know how he knew I wasn't feeling well, but..."

"Oh my gosh, the owner of The Aiyana Group of Hotels sent you soup? So, how does he look? Is he handsome? When and how did this come about and how come you haven't shared *all* the details?"

“Hold on, hold on, Sarai! I haven’t met him yet, so how would I know?” Mickey scoffed as she rolled her eyes.

“Oh, bummer. Well, enjoy the complimentary soup and feel better soon.”

“Yeah, I will, and, you too.” Mickey hung up and walked over to the hot soup tray. It looked like a great soup and smelled divine. She pulled the tray up to a chair and sat down, lifting the spoon and devouring the soup quickly. Indeed, it was a savory, hearty soup, and she ate every bite. Exhaustion hit her instantly, and the comfort food sent her right back to bed. Within moments, Mickey was dozing away just like Sarai had told her to.

After three hours, Mickey lifted her head lazily from her pillow. She’d heard someone knocking, but the last thing she wanted to do was get up. Choosing to ignore it, she pulled the pillow over her head and tightly closed her eyes.

“*Who is it?*” She pulled the pillow from her head and squinted slightly.

“I’m a doctor. I was sent to check up on you,” a voice called to her.

“A doctor?” she asked hesitantly and got up to open the door. “Who sent you? David?”

“The owner of the hotel sent me. He said you needed to be well for the wedding they’re having here soon,” he insisted. Mickey didn’t know what to think as she rubbed her eyes.

“Why does he care so much?” she unintentionally blurted.

“I didn’t ask. I’m just here to take a look at you. Will you allow it? I can have you feeling better in no time,” the doctor said.

“I don’t think I need anything but more sleep.”

“Okay, well, let me have a look at you, and then I can give you something for just that. Will that suffice?”

“I suppose.”

The doctor approached her and flicked on the lights. Mickey squinted as he began his exam; the sooner she could go back to sleep, the better things would all be, but that still didn’t explain why the boss of the hotel seemed to be so concerned with her health and welfare. She was curious, and she decided she would search around on the internet once her headache went away. She took the medicine offered by the doctor and slept for few hours.

When she woke up, her headache was gone, so she made herself a cup of coffee and sat on the chair to check the first day's progress report. After a couple of hours' work, she had dinner. Already exhausted again, she slipped back into bed.

The next morning, Mickey was feeling better the moment she opened her eyes. The next thing she needed was a long hot shower. And she immediately moved to do just that. Feeling revived and refreshed, she walked across the hotel room with her robe wrapped tightly around her.

*Ring. Ring. Ring.*

The hotel phone was ringing, and she raised a brow as she approached it.

"Yes? Hello?"

"Ma'am, your breakfast is ready, should we send it up to you?"

"I think there has been some misunderstanding here; I haven't ordered anything."

"No, the owner of the hotel ordered for you."

"The boss again? Um, okay. Yeah, send it up." There was a broad smile on her face. Everyone enjoyed being taken care of by someone. She was an orphan, and there hadn't been anyone to take care of her in a long time.

She was quite impressed. Curiosity about this owner was now gnawing at her, and she determined that after she finished her breakfast, she would definitely go today and do some research on the mysterious boss.

*How did he even know I was here? Maybe he found out at a meeting. What if he's an older man?* she thought.

While eating, Mickey switched on the TV and flicked it to a movie. There was something about the background noise of a movie that helped her fall back to sleep, and when she finally cracked her eyes back open, it was well past noon. The bonus, though, was that she was already feeling better, so she thought she'd go check on the progress her team was making. She'd been absent long enough. Now, she came to stand before the conference room and peeked her head inside.

"Hey."

"Mickey!" David exclaimed happily.

"Hey David," she said as she stepped inside and shut the door. He walked toward her and smiled gently.

"You feeling better?"

“Yeah, I’m feeling much better. How are things coming along?”

“Well, I’m glad you’re feeling better, and things are going well. The hotel owner and staff have been really nice to all of us and very accommodating for our needs,” he said.

“Wow, that’s great.” Mickey nodded thinking about *the boss*.

“Yeah, so, look, I was about to go get some lunch. Do you want to join me?”

“Yeah, sure. I think I can handle some real food now.” She took a deep breath.

“Great,” David said as he began to walk closer to the door. Mickey turned around, and there, standing over her, was the same man she’d first bumped into all those months back. Once again, with a phone glued to his hand.

“I hope it’s not your hobby to run people over.”

He glanced down at her and shook his head. “Ah, my apologies,” he said, taking her hand as he lowered his lips to meet with her delicate fingers. “You must be Mickey. My pleasure to finally make your acquaintance.” His voice was deliciously husky.

She raised a brow and tilted her head curiously. “And, who are you, exactly?”

“Stephan. I...”

“Ah, I see. Well, at least you know how to speak, Stephan.” Before Stephan could finish his introduction, he laughed lightly at her comment.

“Well, I must apologize, but admittedly, you took my breath away that day.” Mickey pursed her lips trying to cover her smile.

“Are you a friend of the bride or groom?”

“Yeah. I am the groom’s friend, as well.” Mickey glanced him up and down. Everything about the man screamed wealth and prestige. From his Italian leather loafers to his silk suit, *everything*.

“Oh, it’s just... I saw you at the building.”

“Yes, I was there for a meeting,” Stephan said.

“Oh, well, I was there for a meeting as well.”

“Fantastic. I was just about to go grab something to eat; would you care to join me?”

“Um, actually, my friend David and I were just about to grab lunch together,” she said, glancing back at David with a nod.

“Ah, well that is perfectly alright. How about dinner then?” he asked.

“Uh, well, I’m not sure. I should really get to work. My team and I have a lot to do.” She glanced around the room. Her mind instantly fluttered to what Sarai would say:

*What is wrong with you? He is handsome and rich and he wants to take you to dinner! How often does a guy like that offer to take you to dinner?*

“Well, I’ll give your room a call later. Or, if you like, you are welcome to come to the restaurant here at six o’clock. Tell them your name and they will know where to direct you.”

Mickey nodded, at a loss for words as Stephan turned around and began walking away. One thing was for sure, that handsome man seemed interested in her, and she couldn’t stop thinking about him as she and David went out to get lunch. He was absolutely stunning, and he wanted to take her out on an official date.

\*

In the evening, Stephan now sat at the bar with a cigar in one hand and a drink in the other. He turned just in time to see Mickey walking in through the door, and with the cat. He snarled slightly and turned back toward the bar, shaking his head. He knew better than to react outwardly, but it was taking every inch of his self-control not to go over and accost them. The two of them moved to the dance floor and he watched as they laughed and began moving to the music.

*Does she even know David is a cat shifter?*

Mickey’s body moved so perfectly, with a grace that he couldn’t deny. She was utterly stunning, and any man who got to be as close as David was to her, well, they should consider themselves blessed. He pushed his drink to the side and snubbed his cigar out in an ashtray. It was time for him to be a man and to make the move he knew would make all the difference.

As she strode off the dance floor, he quickly approached. “So, how about dinner tomorrow night?”

“You don’t give up, do you?” The corners of her lips lifted in a curious grin.

“No.” He smiled. “Not when I want something as badly as I want you,” he admitted as Mickey’s jaw dropped a bit in shock.

“You don’t even know me!” She laughed, coughing a bit in the process. He could sense that she was having difficulty resisting his offer, and now that he had asked a second time, he could see she wasn’t sure what he would make of her rejecting him for a second time.

Locking her eyes with his, she finally said, “You know, I’m sorry, but I don’t go to dinner with strangers.” As much as she didn’t want to say it, this was what he was to her. They didn’t know each other from Adam.

“No worries, we can accompany each other here, at least. I insist.”

“Well, I suppose you’re right. Yes, we can.” She finally gave in, and Stephan grinned.

“I look forward to it, Mickey.” He smiled.

“How do you know my name? Don’t tell me you came here following me all the way from Colorado.”

Stephan immediately laughed, “Yes, you got that right.”

“Hi, Stephan!” David said as he came moving toward the two of them, “I see you finally got to meet Mickey.”

“Hello, David. And, yes, I did,” Stephan said.

“You two know each other?” Mickey asked, curiosity knitting her brows.

“You would too, if you had attended the staff meeting the other day.” David chuckled. “This is Stephan, the owner of The Aiyana group of Hotels,” he explained.

Mickey’s eyes widened. She was obviously embarrassed, and ran out of words for few seconds. “Oh, you’re the owner of the hotel. Oh! Well. Hello, Stephan. I must apologize. I didn’t know, and also thank you for your kindness with the soup and the breakfast. They were both very good, and the doctor, a godsend. All of it was so unnecessary, but I cannot thank you enough for your enormous consideration.” She was rambling a bit. Adorably.

“Oh, it was my pleasure, Mickey. Now, you can thank me with a dance.” He winked at her.

*How could she not say yes now?* Mickey blushed and nodded. Stephan smiled and held out his hand with a wave toward the dance floor. She slid her palm into his as he led her back to the dance floor, one hand expertly on the small of her back. He led her across the floor. A tingle of electricity jolted through their fingertips. They danced for a few moments, and as the song came to an end, Stephan smiled at her.

“Would you join me for dinner now that you know who I am, Mickey?” he asked her softly. Mickey smiled and gave a light nod.

Mickey glanced up at Stephan anxiously. God, but he was tall, and made her feel small and fragile just standing beside her. “Thank you for the dance. And for walking me to my room.”

He swept a hand in dismissal. “My resort is safe. That doesn’t mean a beautiful woman should walk back to her hotel room alone.” She blushed as he gave her one of those cocky smirks he was so good at. “So, do you have plans again for dinner tomorrow night?”

Mickey hesitated and bit her lip, not sure what to say. “You know as well as I do there’s a lot of work to do for this wedding.”

He raised a brow at her, a knowing look in his eye. It was strange, no one ever looked at her like that. It was as if he could see right through her, straight to the heart of the matter. The truth was, she was terrified. She was busy, making a success out of a business and advancing her career. Men didn’t often like career women, and she couldn’t even guarantee she had enough time to bother with dating, much less a relationship.

But he shook his head. “I’ve seen your work. I’ve been around, watching the preparations. Everything is on schedule. Besides, you have my entire staff at your disposal. Delegate anything you need done immediately. It would be a shame to if you worked yourself into an early grave. You’re much too beautiful for that.”

Mickey’s cheeks heated to scorching. She couldn’t believe she was having this conversation at all, but he was such a gentleman that she didn’t know if she could turn him down. He’d proven himself kind and considerate, and really, she was in this beautiful place for such a short time.

*Did she really want to work every waking minute? Wouldn’t it be fun to throw caution to the wind for one night?*

“Alright, dinner sounds nice,” she finally managed.

He beamed at her, a smile that nearly had her melting into a puddle on the floor. He had too many good qualities at his disposal. “Wonderful. There’s a great place about an hour from here. This restaurant might be the only place around with a better view than ours. Be ready at six so we can be there for a reservation at seven.”

She nodded. “Okay.”

“Goodnight, Mickey. Sleep well.” He left her as she slid into her room and closed the door, leaning back against it as she sighed.

She couldn't think of another time she'd come this close to swooning over a man. Maybe it was just that she hadn't been at full capacity, still ailing a little from her illness. But he inspired stars in her eyes and her heart to skip a beat, just with one glance in her direction.

It was late, and if she was going to get her work done and be able to get ready and go out, she needed her rest. But as she washed her face and changed into her pajamas, she couldn't get Stephan out of her head. His touch on her waist as they danced had made her insides boil and her stomach turn over, imagining what it would be like if she was truly wrapped in his arms. And his smile was to die for.

She brushed her hair and teeth and laid down on the plush bed, luxuriating in the fine linens of the hotel and wondering if Stephan had picked out the fineries himself or if he had a team of people who did that sort of thing for him. She always enjoyed making the décor decisions herself, but she could see where having an entire chain of luxury hotels would prohibit the ability to take the time to be personally involved.

Still, she had a feeling that his taste came into play with all the décor, and she reveled in the fact that he had good taste, the golds and muted earth tones creating a peaceful atmosphere while remaining elegant. It helped her calm and fall into a deep, restful, dreamless sleep.



## Chapter 5

The day had been hectic, with some of the arrangements for the tables showing up wrong. The colors were off, and they weren't arranged neatly enough for Mickey's liking. And now that she'd expended all that energy straightening everything out and assuring new arrangements with the right colors would arrive the next day, she'd had to rush to her room to get ready for dinner.

Mickey strode across the hotel room, her feet seemingly sinking into the plush carpet as she began looking over her clothes. She was so nervous she didn't know what to think, let alone do. Sure, she had a few nice things she had brought with her, but nothing elegant or formal really, and biting into her lip, she was at a loss for what she would wear.

She glanced at the clock as she hopped out of the shower and toweled off her hair. She was running late, and she only had forty-five minutes to get ready. She didn't even know what she was going to wear. Stephan hadn't told her what sort of restaurant they were going to. Did she need to dress casual or wear her evening best?

Flipping through the closet full of stuff she'd brought with her, she decided on a happy medium: a shimmering dress that wasn't pretentious or exaggerated in elegance. She paired it with a comfortable set of pumps, blew her hair dry and pinned it back, and applied her makeup. She was just packing up her purse when there was a knock at the door. She inhaled sharply, ducking into the bathroom to take one last look at herself in the mirror. She didn't want to disappoint, but she also didn't want to look like she'd worked too hard to impress the man who would be standing beyond the threshold.

She opened the door, relieved to see that he was dressed casually in chinos and a button-down shirt that fit tight over his chest and shoulders, showing off the breadth of him. She nearly lost her breath as his eyes

seemed to heat, brushing over her from head to toe. He gave a slight nod, whether in approval or greeting she had no idea. And did it really matter?

The dress was one she knew would make her shine, but what came from Stephan's lips as she made her way toward him made her cheeks singe so red she could scarcely contain her embarrassment.

"Wow!" Stephan murmured. "That dress makes you look like a million bucks!"

"Thank you." Mickey blushed as he looked into her eyes and took her hand once again and delicately pressed his lips to it.

"Come, our ride is waiting," he told her, offering his elbow to her. It was a gentlemanly, debonair move that she had never been privileged to before, and she took it, wrapping her hand through it as she closed the door and walked with him down the hall. They made their way down to the hotel lobby, Mickey feeling just like a spoiled rotten princess.

"Thank you," she told him, wondering where he had learned his manners as he escorted her to the car and opened the door for her. She hadn't expected a driver, but the man tipped his hat to her as Stephan slid in beside her.

The car pulled away from the hotel, and nerves had Mickey wringing her hands in her lap, biting her lip. It was too quiet, and she needed to fill the space. She had a feeling Stephan was a man of few words, but also that when he spoke, he'd ask a lot of questions. She didn't want to talk about herself, so she thought she'd turn the tables on him first.

"So, tell me about yourself, Stephan." She leaned back into the seat to make herself more comfortable as she focused her sights on him.

He shrugged. "Well, I live in Australia with my uncle, and I run Aiyana all over the globe." Mickey nodded; she was well aware of his influence in the Aiyana Hotel Chain.

"Well, what about any other family? Your parents? Any siblings?" she asked curiously.

"I don't much like to discuss that," Stephan began with a frown. "Sadly, I lost both of my parents and my brother in a terrible accident. I've never been quite the same ever since," Stephan admitted.

"Oh..." Mickey felt ashamed now, color flooding her face. "I'm so sorry." As Stephan lifted his gaze to meet with hers, she could see the sadness reflecting in his eyes and an instant pang of guilt hit her like a ton of bricks.

“It’s alright. It was a long time ago now. I just have to keep my focus on good things,” he said to brighten up her mood. Mickey nodded, taking a deep breath. She smiled slightly as the intoxicating scent of his cologne hit her nostrils. She caught the appealing aroma, and something about it sent a shiver straight down her spine. Spending this evening with Stephan would be intriguing, of that, Mickey was confident.

Mickey’s mouth worked, but nothing came out. Of course her question would have dredged up a nightmare. He was obviously very practiced at hiding his pain. “I moved to Australia with my uncle after that, and we had no idea what to do with the fortune until I met my manager, Liam. We were fast friends, and he had experience in concierge services and the business end of hospitality. It seemed like a good investment, and it just grew.”

He was proud of his accomplishments, she noted, but he was also still sad. She couldn’t imagine having lost her whole family in a single accident, and she understood. No matter how long it had been since they were gone, she’d still feel lost when talking about them. That was what she imagined she saw under the surface on Stephan’s face; the sadness of a lost child.

“I’m so sorry you lost your family,” she said quietly, wanting to reach out and comfort him but feeling oddly awkward about it. This large, muscular man probably wouldn’t take well to being mothered. He was a self-made man, and he was strong and sleek and imposing. So, she clasped her hands tighter in her lap and added, “You made a great decision. Your hotels are extremely successful. And I’m guessing you have tons of events like this wedding.”

He chuckled, his eyes crinkling in true happiness. “Yes, they do. But I’ve never met anyone as beautiful as you while hosting these events.”

Mickey blushed fiercely and had to turn away. How could he say that? He was surrounded by beautiful and rich women all the time. Celebrities basked in the sun at his hotels. And here he was, telling her she was prettier than any of them. It had to be a line. But if it was, he was a good actor. It sounded sincere.

To clear the air, she considered broaching the subject of the wedding, but she had a feeling that discussing work when this was obviously meant to be pleasure wouldn’t go over well. In fact, he was likely to tell her to drop it right away.

It was Stephan who broke the silence. “You’re a beautiful woman, Mickey. Someone should have told you this by now. Several people, in fact. Get used to hearing it. Regardless of how well we know each other, or don’t, I’m an honest man, and I’m going to say what’s on my mind. Even if it makes you turn twenty shades of red.”

She had to laugh softly, even though she was still embarrassed. But from that point forward, conversation flowed easily. They talked about favorite destinations and travel, music, and other random topics.

The hour drive to the restaurant seemed to fly by, and Stephan took her hand to help her out of the car, tucking her fingers into the crook of his elbow again as they walked inside.

Stephan now escorted Mickey though the restaurant, directing her toward their table as he held her arm gently. The closeness of him sent a tremble through her body, and the electric energy it brought her was undeniably appealing and provided her a great deal more pleasure than ever she could have anticipated it would.

Stephan pulled her chair out for her, and Mickey took her seat with a smile. Only after Stephan was confident that she was comfortable did he pull out his chair and take his own seat. The table was nice but small and intimately set, enhancing the closeness the two of them shared, their legs nearly brushing against each other beneath the table. Indeed, it seemed like a magnetic pull existed and the air had been made electric between the two of them, something Mickey had never experienced before. The waiter approached and smiled.

“Can I get the two of you started with a drink?”

“Yes, please. I would like a nice rosé.” The waiter gave a light nod. As he disappeared, Stephan looked back at Mickey, “I hope you don’t mind, but I already took the liberty of placing our orders, so we won’t be getting any menus tonight.”

“Oh! Um, sure.”

Stephan smirked, snapping his fingers instantly. Their table was in a sheltered but breezy spot at the edge of the patio, overlooking the ocean, and she couldn’t imagine anything better.

Suddenly, a waiter appeared with a tray for the first course. Upon it there were oysters on the half shell, crab legs, and shrimp cocktail for two. She arched a brow as the waiter placed it down in front of them.

After Mickey finished relishing every bite, she peeked up to notice that Stephan had been watching her while she ate. "Is there a problem?"

"No, not at all. I just rather enjoy watching you and the unrelenting joy that is flashing across your face as you eat. It is clear you quite enjoy the dishes."

Mickey chuckled, blushing slightly. "Um, okay."

"I don't think I have ever seen someone enjoy eating like you do," he stated matter-of-factly.

"Well, I do *love* seafood. It's something that gives me great pleasure," she admitted.

"Well, then it appears I chose well for our dinner."

She smiled and nodded as he cracked a crab leg. He lifted his eyes to meet with hers and then reached across the small table to feed it to her. She opened her mouth as he placed it on her tongue and moaned lightly. Stephan chuckled and Mickey felt herself flush bright red. Stephan leaned forward and took yet another crab leg,

"I wouldn't think someone from Colorado would love seafood. I can't imagine it's fresh there," he said.

"It isn't, but my friend Sarai married a dra...a...a devilishly handsome rich man. He often has crab legs, lobster, and oysters flown in from Maine. So, I am quite lucky quite often." Sarai let out a big sigh of relief as she realized that she had almost just blurted that Sarai's husband was a dragon shifter. She thanked God as she managed to change her words. That was something she could never tell anyone in her life, no matter how much important that person was.

Maybe, just maybe, this Stephan guy might prove to be more than she had first bargained for, and as he smiled at her across the table, all Mickey could do was hope. Hope that, maybe, something magical might come from their paths crossing. And yet, something seemed just a little odd about him. Something just a little off. Shaking her head, she decided to blow it off, intent on actually enjoying herself. Something she knew she was long overdue for.

Stephan raised his brows as if he knew Mickey just attempted to hide something. But he decided not make her feel awkward, so he asked, "Well, then it seems to me you do enjoy a bit of the splendor in the world already. Tell me, what does your friend, Sarai, do?"

“She owns Petals to the Metal, but since she got married and had children, she’s been very busy and unable to be around much. That’s why you wound up with yours truly,” she explained.

“Ah, well at least she is doing something as lovely as being there with her children. If possible, it is best for a mother to be with her offspring. I hope, if ever I should have any, my wife would be able to do just the same,” he said.

“Is that so?” she frowned.

“Indeed, it is. I mean, I wouldn’t oppose if my spouse wished to work outside of the home, either. And I am by no means the sort of man who would prevent my loved one from pursuing their heart’s desires. But while children are young, it is always nice for their parents to be more involved. After all, they grow so swiftly,” Stephan said.

“Wow, you might make quite the family man someday, Stephan.” Mickey smiled, her heart warming up from the tenderness of his kind words. Mickey had never imagined that she, herself, would be the sort to want to have kids but, then again, she had never encountered anyone who had the strange ability to make her feel like Stephan seemed to. Stephan chuckled lightly and snapped his fingers once again. This time, the waiter appeared with a main dish of what appeared to be succulent salmon.

Wow, Mickey thought, *this guy really does go all out!*

His gaze washed over her in silence several times, heating her to the core. When their fingers brushed against each other on several occasions, her body flushed, goosebumps raised over her arms and the back of her neck. It made her stomach churn and heat, and she wondered what he expected at the end of the night.

He was such a gentleman, but he flirted with her in very subtle ways. When dessert came, he forked off a carefully small piece, feeding it to her gingerly and seeming to devour her with his gaze as she took it with her teeth and nearly melted at the delicious sweetness.

After Mickey and Stephan shared the most incredible dinner, she smiled up at him – feeling completely blown away by the amount of pampering he had done. It had certainly been breathtaking and magical.

“Are you about ready to head back to the hotel?” he asked her curiously. Mickey tilted her head.

“As much fun as I’ve had tonight, it is a little sad to see it ending already, but I am quite exhausted, to be honest,” she replied. Stephan leaned

forward, smiling softly as he slid his finger up through Mickey's hair. He pushed a tendril of her locks back behind her ear, and Mickey felt her skin instantly tremble in response. Something about even the most subtle of touches was enough to make her skin feel aflame, but she dare not let Stephan know it. Not on the first date, anyway!

"I am delighted to hear that you enjoyed the night. I must admit, I have too. I really hope I get to see you again before you leave," he said.

Mickey smiled. "That would be lovely. We shall see," she said with a smile.

"Of course, come!" Stephan said, reaching out toward her with a grin as he stood up. Mickey slid her palm into his and rose, her cheeks flaming slightly. How was it that he constantly made her feel so shy? It was a feeling she wasn't at all familiar with. Usually, she was extroverted, a woman in full control of her own self. Just the way she liked it.

When they finally finished and left, her nerves got the best of her, and she locked up, silent and staring out the window. "Mickey?" She turned to glance at him as he called her name with a low, deep tone. He reached toward her, pinching the tress of hair that had fallen on her cheek between his finger and thumb. He rubbed it gently for a moment and then, with a sigh, tucked it behind her ear. The sensation of his touch was overwhelming, and her breath caught in her chest as she met his eyes briefly.

She didn't know what it was she saw there, but it made something in her chest ache, and when they got back to the hotel, that ache had spread through her entire body. With a small, secretive smile, Stephan told her, "I had an incredible evening. Thank you for humoring me and gracing me with your attention for a night."

It was an odd thing to say, she thought, but she nodded. "Thank you for dinner and conversation. I really enjoyed it." It made her heart flutter lightly in her chest. Never in her life had Mickey felt the way that being with Stephan made her feel. And, she had to admit, she kind of liked it. Being pampered, for the first time ever, she wondered what made him so interested in her and how had she, a simple decorator, aroused the attraction of someone so clearly handsome, capable, and utterly rich.

"Goodnight, Mickey. Sleep well." He bowed over her hand, touching it to his lips but not kissing it, and then he walked away. She stared after him briefly, wondering if she should have said something more,

done something more. But her heart fluttered, and she dove into her room, giddy and tired and curious about this very large but seemingly sensitive man.



## Chapter 6

“You’ve been strangely present the last few days.” Liam’s observations came with a teasing lilt to his tone, and Stephan clenched his jaw. “In fact, you haven’t left the hotel in three days. Not since you went to dinner.”

Stephan shook his head, continuing to walk toward the board room where they would be meeting with Mickey and her team once again to iron out some additional details of this massive event. “And what does it matter to you? I’m taking some responsibility off your shoulders. You should think of it as a mini vacation.”

Liam chuckled. “That might be true, if you were getting anything done. Instead, I’m having to follow behind you and make sure I’s are dotted and T’s are crossed in every document. It would be easier to do it myself.”

“Then I’ll let you,” Stephan snapped.

Liam was silent for a moment. When he spoke again, his tone was very somber. “You like this woman. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“I hope not, as I like a great number of people, and you don’t seem to care about that.” It bothered him how he felt so drawn to Mickey. What did that say about his altruism? He had a mate. He’d lost her, and he suffered every day for it. But months ago, he’d seen Mickey and had failed to forget her. And a few days ago, fate had seen fit to drop her in his backyard, so to speak, and he couldn’t get her off his mind. Worse, she was pushing Aiyana from his thoughts, the pain fading in lieu of this new attraction he felt for another woman.

Curse the body, he thought. The soul knew there was only one mate for his kind. Or did it? After all, this new sensation was deep within him, and it was more than a physical draw. However, he had no intention of admitting that to Liam. “She is a beautiful woman. I apparently need a distraction for a while.”

“She seems to be a very special sort of distraction. That’s all I’m saying,” Liam muttered.

“It’s nothing,” Stephan argued, his hand on the doorknob. “You should keep your opinions to yourself until you have solid backing for them.” He didn’t feel good about biting Liam’s head off, but he needed to stop this train of thought.

Of course, it did little good. As he opened the door, and Mickey looked up where she stood at the other end of the room, beaming at him. He was going to have to find a way to throw a wall between them. But not today. Not yet. He smiled back, walking toward her. “Good morning. I see we’ve received the silver threads to tie off the gift bags.”

She nodded. “Good morning, Stephan. Yes. They’re thinner than I expected, but they are delicate and beautiful. I think they’ll be perfect threaded through the red velvet.” She pointed to some photos she had laid out. “I think I want to move the chocolate fountain to this corner. It seems out of place over here, too close to the dance floor.”

He leaned over to look, his body an inch from hers as he gazed over her shoulder, smelling her soap and shampoo, and reveling in that scent. He knew the moment his breath tickled her neck, her body twitching ever so slightly, her breath hitching, and her heart thrumming. “I think you know well what you’re doing. You’re the expert, and I digress to you.”

Mickey turned her head to look at him, and her lips were mere inches from his. It proved difficult to concentrate, his eyes falling on them and unable to break away as she told him in a husky voice, “I feel like this corner is a little dimmer, shrouded by some shadows. More romantic.”

*Seductive.* That was the word that came to mind. Stephan stood there, holding his breath for a moment, and then he stepped away, trying to center himself. “Yes, I think you’re right. What else is on the agenda for today?”

Mickey opened her mouth to talk, but the door opened again, and David walked in. Stephan squeezed his hands into fists at his side, then flexed his fingers. David was an issue. He was always there, always around, and always capturing Mickey’s attention. And something about him breathed danger.

Still, he forced a smile. “Good morning, David. We were just getting started.”

David gave him a short nod, then turned a winning smile to Mickey, who graced him with one of her best smiles. The interaction was more than Stephan could stand. It was early, but he needed a drink.

Clearing her throat, Mickey ran down a quick list of things to accomplish, and she made some requests of Stephan he didn't hear and blindly granted, knowing that Liam would take care of the details. He couldn't focus, his attention on the man who continued to get in his way. He wanted to find a way to separate the two of them, to send David away for one reason or another, so that he didn't have to watch the man flirt with and entertain Mickey through the day, as he seemed to do.

But he had no claim on her. He didn't intend to stake a claim on her. Mickey was human, and on top of that she was not Aiyana, and she was no replacement for his fated mate. No one would ever take that place by his side or in his heart.

*So why did his traitorous heart beat faster and ache when Mickey was near?*

He couldn't remember ever feeling jealous before, and it didn't sit well with him as he walked out of the conference room and headed at a swift pace toward the bar by the pool. With a motion of one finger, his best bartender had a Crown and Coke in front of him, and he drained it quickly, trying to douse the flames of anger, jealousy, and desire. Desire for Mickey. Jealousy of her relationship with David. And anger at himself, for feeling anything at all.

The day wore on, long and hot, and Stephan lost track of time, and of how many drinks he'd consumed. His head swam a little, and he turned away from the blurry image of Liam coming toward him, probably to give him a report of the day's activities and a verbal lashing for how he was acting. There had been few times in his life that he'd acted in such a way that it was unbecoming of his position. Stephan could hold his liquor, but he couldn't fault any condescension from Liam, since there was no telling how many people had witnessed him draining one glass after another.

To his relief, Liam said nothing about his drinking. At least, until Stephan practically growled at the sight of Mickey walking toward the pool, her hips swaying in the bikini and sarong she wore, laughing at whatever David was saying to her, walking beside her with a golden tan.

Liam's gaze followed his, and he sighed. "I understand the alcohol dulls emotions, but it might behoove you to explore those emotions rather than bury them."

"The only emotion I have is pure, unadulterated hatred for that man," Stephan replied through clenched teeth.

“Is the offense you take to him only because he is so close to the woman who has you on edge? Or is there something else?”

Blinding jealousy coursed through Stephan’s veins as Mickey threw her head back and laughed loud enough for him to hear her from the distance, and she shoved playfully at David’s shoulders. “He’s a danger. I can’t explain it, but it’s not only the way they are together.” Too late he realized the mistake he’d made, practically admitting that was jealous. He’d been so careful not to let that out, and he’d just failed in his endeavor.

“She’s quite a woman.” Liam stood there, and Stephan could feel his manager’s eyes boring holes in him. Still he didn’t respond, and Liam finally said, “Stephan, you’ve lost your entire family. No one expects you to remain alone for the rest of your life.”

That caught Stephan’s attention, and he turned blazing eyes on Liam. “I will not dishonor the memory of my mate. Aiyana was my one true mate. And I may lust after a woman or two. I might even take care of my physical needs on occasion. But I will never connect with anyone as I did with her, and anything less would be a disgrace to her memory.”

“Stephan, your family...”

“Would agree with me,” he interrupted before Liam could say anymore. However that sentence was going to end, it would have caused Stephan more turmoil. Instead, he patted Liam’s on the shoulder, seething as he glanced at David again, pulling at Mickey’s wrist, trying to coerce her into the pool. “I appreciate your concern, Liam, and I also appreciate you taking care of things today.”

He walked off, ignoring the quiet protests his manager made as he headed toward Mickey and her unwelcome friend. She saw him coming and waved, and a quick look at David’s face told him there was no love lost between them. Stephan gritted his teeth and smiled, hoping it didn’t come off as a grimace. “Good evening, Mickey,” he said, trying not to let his inebriated state affect his movements or speech pattern.

“Stephan! Listen, I owe you a great deal of gratitude. Having your resources at my disposal means that I can actually take the night off and relax. Everything is done for the day, and I get to actually enjoy your beautiful resort tonight.”

“I’m glad to be of service. You have anything you want or need at your disposal. Anything you ask of me is yours.” He was aware of the *entendre* behind the words, and he victoriously watched David shift

uncomfortably while Mickey flushed all over, her pulse throbbing wildly in her neck.

“I just might use that calling card,” she told him, her eyes filled with mischief. It was the first time she’d shown any sort of open interest, and Stephan was fully aware she didn’t even know it was seeping out.

But David obviously didn’t miss it, chiming in, “I think we’ve got everything handled, Stephan. But we appreciate the offer. We should be fine for the evening.”

And with those words confirming that they would be spending the evening together, sparking the flames with the liquor still in his system to fuel them, Stephan nearly lost it. He had to get away, or he would do something he regretted. So, instead of bursting out and starting a fight with the regretfully present David, he merely smiled and nodded. “Please, enjoy. Mickey, allow me to gift you. All meals and drinks and entertainment are on me tonight. If David chooses to join you, I’ll extend the offer to him at your discretion. Have a good evening.”

That had been a bit of a nasty thing to say, but he couldn’t help himself. Mickey wasn’t meant to be his. Stephan had had his woman. But she certainly shouldn’t be with this man, who leered and had no backbone. He stank of something Stephan couldn’t place, something that reminded him of cruelty and deceit, malice and danger. Mickey smelled of innocence and light. The contrast was clear.

Tonight, while the two of them reveled together, Stephan would hide out in his suite, where it was safe and he would do no harm.

## Chapter 7

Mickey's nerves were taut as she checked every detail one last time. Speaking into her headset, she asked, "Are all cameras in place? The bride's party enters in less than ten minutes."

She listened carefully as twenty cameramen confirmed their position and readiness, trained on the event in the grand garden from every possible angle. David was in charge of assuring that air traffic was controlled, disallowing any errant cameras from picking up on the event from overhead. But her entire team was alive with whisperings, having caught glimpses of the bride and groom finally and awestruck by their stardom.

This was going to be the event of the year, and Mickey had thrown everything at it from every angle. If this went over successfully, her portfolio would be such that the business would flourish, and they would be in such high demand they would have to start scheduling out years in advance and turning people down. Of course, if there were any hitches, she'd be the embarrassment of the industry.

So far, all was well, and she took a moment to breathe deeply, calming her racing heart. But every time she closed her eyes, she pictured Stephan, glancing at her with heat in his eyes or feeling his breath as he stood too close. Seeing him stride through the hotel, giving quiet commands that were followed without questions. He had a raw power to him that was even more intriguing than his appearance, and that was saying something.

"We have liftoff," came the voice of her team member who stood by the door to the dressing lounge where the bride and her maids had prepared. From her post on the balcony, Mickey watched the procession, followed by the ceremony, whispering orders when necessary and smiling broadly as everything went as planned. Better, even, if she was honest. She always expected a small error, but perfection ruled this day.

Things grew a bit chaotic as the ceremony ended and the room began to empty. She rushed along to the ballroom, where the reception had

been set up, checking with the catering team from the hotel and all the other aspects of the arrangements. The flowers were beautiful, the lighting was ideal, and the cakes were delightful and smelled of sugar. The champagne was icing, and the bartender was set up in the back, the dance floor in the front, with the chocolate fountain in the back corner, enticing and bubbly.

It took only about an hour for all of the guests to make their way into the ballroom and chatter before being seated, and many of them had drinks in hand. The food would be served shortly, once the newlyweds made their big entrance. Yes, her team had created a tight run ship that was faring quite well. She was relieved and excited, and she wished only that she had someone to share it with.

After the toast, followed by the couple's first dance, Mickey relaxed. All that was left was to cut the cake, and that was a simple enough thing she really had no control over. She could pat herself on the back for a job well done. She headed into the kitchen, thanking the caterers for the plate they'd set aside for her. She hadn't eaten since breakfast, too anxious, and now she hadn't realized how hungry she was until the smell of everyone's dinner washed over her. She managed a few bites, washing them down with a glass of cold water.

"You've done incredibly well." The smooth voice was unmistakable, and it crawled up her spine with a tingle and a shiver. She turned, her appetite for food forgotten as she witnessed the allure of Stephan's presence, decked out in a three-piece suit with a bowtie. He was insanely appealing on any normal day, but now, he was the epitome of a dream come true.

And he was staring at her like she was a meal to devour. "Thank you. We couldn't have pulled it off without you and your staff." Her throat was dry, her voice hoarse and raspy.

"You look divine," Stephan told her, stepping closer. "I take it you've got time for a walk?"

This was likely a very bad idea. But how could she resist? Stephan had always been a gentleman, even when there were moments she wished he would cross the line into devious and depraved. Admittedly, she'd grown overly fond of him, and her desire swirled through her anytime he was near. And still, he hadn't pushed any boundaries, and for that she was grateful and determined to show him courtesy.

“I do.” He gestured for her to leave the kitchen and pressed a hand to the center of her back to guide her. It seared her skin through the thin material of her silk dress, and she shuddered slightly, hoping he didn’t notice. He led her through the wandering crowd in the ballroom, and Mickey was curious of their destination. He didn’t say anything, and that made it all the more mysterious.

And then she saw it. The chocolate fountain.

All her memories of telling him this would be the dark corner where romance and secrets happened flooded her, and her stomach churned with dozens of butterflies and a sinking feeling that made things lower in her body tingle. He stopped just short of the corner, his gaze searching the many people partaking of the chocolate, the quiet flirting and giggling that exuded from each one of them. “This was probably your best contribution. I’ve seen a lot of people over here, sharing secret glances and exchanging numbers.”

Mickey gulped, wondering what would happen next. “I see. It seems to have been a great inclusion. Anything that makes the guests happy.”

“Yes, this is true. But I discovered by watching the shenanigans over here that it’s not as secretive as some may prefer. I’ve found a spot far more secluded for little private interludes.”

Mickey whirled to gaze up at him, seeing the amusement and seduction in his eyes. “Is that so?”

He nodded, pointing to the now open French doors leading out to the private gardens off the back of the ballroom. “I’ve noticed several clandestine meetings out there, people walking out separately and coming back in together. And I went out to find out where they were secretly meeting.”

“And what did you find?” she asked, intrigued.

“Come with me. I’ll show you.” He winked conspiratorially, and he took her by the elbow, gently, guiding her outside and down a barely lit path toward a small pond. There was a large statue beside it, two giggling companions slinking out from behind it as they approached.

Before she knew what was happening, Stephan whisked her behind the statue, pressing her back up to the cold marble. She gasped and stared up at him, waiting with bated breath. His eyes were black orbs in the darkness, and he told her, “I’ve waited a long time for this.”



Before she could question it, he dove in, kissing her with demand, his lips moving over hers and then his tongue pressing against her lips to part them. She opened to him, both stunned and ignited by a spark like some thin, dry bark. He tasted of whiskey and honey, of something very masculine, and she let her tongue dance with his, exploring as he did. He cupped the back of her neck, tilting her head back so he could deepen the kiss, and she sighed into his mouth as her whole body took in the passion he exuded.

He was tender and rough at the same time, gentle and kind but harsh and needy. She couldn't get enough, wanting to climb his body and find her way inside him, to feel what he felt and hear what he thought. But she could do neither, too caught up in her own reveling at the intensity of her arousal.

It was over as quickly as it began, and disappointment flooded her. Still, as he touched her waist ever so slightly, taking her back toward the event, she sizzled and heated. That one small touch ran through her, and she could feel it everywhere. He smiled and winked at her as he guided her back to the kitchen and her food. "Thank you, Mickey. I needed that."

And then he was gone, blending back into the crowd and mingling easily while she stood there, off kilter and wondering if that was just a one-time encounter or if it just might be the beginning of something much bigger.

She couldn't stop thinking about the kiss, but more importantly, the feel of his hands on her. His touch had been almost innocent, but it still sparked things in her that were far from innocent. She tried to watch him, but only caught a rare glimpse throughout the rest of the revelry. And when things wound down, she had to start the coordination of cleanup, losing track of Stephan entirely.

She didn't know why it was important. In two days' time, she would be on a flight back to Colorado, back to the daily grind and working on her next event while getting this one ready to launch in her portfolio. Stephan would be here, or at one of his other hotels, doing his thing. She'd gotten the best she could hope for, an incredibly hot kiss and the attention of a man that made her blood boil. He had his own life, his own business, and she had hers just as well. Especially after this wedding, she was going to be too busy to worry about a man in her life, even one as seductive and scintillating as Stephan.

*Maybe in another life*, she thought as she helped direct the traffic of empty plates, trash, and linens that needed to be cleaned. But for now, she had to hold onto the very physical memory of the time she'd spent with Stephan and put it up to a beautiful experience to look back on in the future.

## Chapter 8

Stephan now stood watching out the balcony window with a frown on his face.

“What’s got you so solemn?” Thomas’s voice rang in his ears and he spun around to look at him with a somber sigh.

“I don’t really want to talk about it, if you don’t mind,” he snipped.

“Heh, I do mind. And your drinking seems to be getting a little out of hand. It’s that woman, isn’t it? You’ve been pining over her ever since the night you took her out to dinner. Why don’t you go talk to her again?” his uncle asked. Stephan rolled his eyes – this was not a conversation he wanted to have with his uncle, at all.

“She’s going to be leaving soon enough. I might not even ever see her again,” he said as his eyes fixed on the horizon.

“Nonsense. That’s a poor excuse and you know it. Go talk to her. And you’re rich as ever, even when she does leave, if you really want to pursue this girl you can do so across the globe,” he scoffed.

Stephan sighed. “You really think she’ll like me? And even if she does, what happens when she finds out I’m a dragon shifter, and had a mate?” Stephan asked.

“You are forgetting something: your own mother was a human. *Remember?*” Thomas pressed.

“Yes, I do. But...”

“No if and buts, just go and talk to her. You cannot decide that she will reject you without even asking her. Make the connection stick, Stephan. It’s not rocket science.”

“You’re not going to let up on this, are you?” Thomas shook his head, crossing his arms over his chest with a lift of a brow. “I know, that look says everything. Fine, I’ll go see about her,” he said, stepping past Thomas and straight out the door. Thomas was right, if he wanted the woman, he needed to show it and stop cowering like a scared little kid. Oddly enough, the

thought of her refusing him made him feel exactly like that, but he couldn't let fear keep him from trying. It just wasn't in his blood.

He couldn't sleep. He'd spent the last two days thinking about that kiss. Something had sparked in him, something he hadn't felt in ages. In a way it terrified him, but the more he thought about Mickey, the more he realized what he had to do.

He glanced at the clock. It was early, barely dawn, but she had a flight back today and would be leaving for the airport with her crew in less than an hour. And he desperately needed to see her before that, before she embarked on her journey home with David sitting next to her and treating her like his princess. He'd nearly ruined his chance here, he thought. He should never have walked away from her after that kiss. Or he should have at least acknowledged her over the last two days.

*Should I tell her about my reality? No, it would be too early to reveal those secrets. I could wait until I get a little closer, as Mickey could be taking everything casually.*

He'd had to do something to cope with his feelings. And being around her clouded his judgment. Now, though, he couldn't focus on anything else, and he hurried out of his suite and through the hotel, bound for Mickey's room like a man on a mission that no one could stop. He didn't even care if Liam tried to stop him to discuss business matters. He'd shove the man aside and tell him to wait. He only had so much time.

He rapped on Mickey's door rapidly, insistently, and she opened in moments, staring up at him with wide eyes. She looked like quite the snack in her red tank top and tight jeans, and it made his blood boil, his body reacting in ways he would rather she not notice. "Stephan."

He moved into the room, forcing her out of the door, and as it shut, he grabbed her, kissing her again and feeling that shift in his soul. Whether he wanted to admit it or not, there was something special about this woman. She tasted of sugar, coffee, and a feminine perfume that was unique to her being. It was delicious, intoxicating, and he had trouble ignoring the way she reacted to him.

Her breasts pressed against his chest, heavy and thick, her nipples hard, and she moaned into his mouth, arching against him and making him want so much more. He wanted to feel her moving beneath him, learn every nuance of her body, explore and memorize every curve. And he couldn't, not now. She was leaving, and he wouldn't stop her.

And there was no way he was going to do this quickly enough to get her to the airport on time. He wanted to take his time and bask in her. He'd already blown his gentleman act here. He needed to slow down before he got lost in the moment and did something that would push her away for good.

Easing off the kiss, he made his ministrations tender, not wanting Mickey to think he was pulling away for lack of desire. Slowly, he backed off, and he stared at her, gasping for breath as her chest heaved, their faces inches apart. "I should have done that sooner," he told her with a lopsided grin.

Her eyes searched his face, for what he had no idea. "Why?" she asked, still breathless and seeming a bit tipsy. He doubted she'd been drinking at this hour, and it gave him a heady pleasure to think that he'd done that to her.

"Because I don't want you to leave," he told her simply. Stepping back so she didn't feel trapped by those words, he tried to explain, "I don't know what it is about you, but I'm very drawn to you. And the idea of you flying out of here and out of my life for good makes me ache, Mickey."

"You can always look me up when you're in town," she hedged, sounding hesitant and as if she was looking for the right answer.

"Or, we could exchange numbers, and we could keep in touch. I don't want to look you up. I want to be sure you know I'm determined to be there, with you, soon. I want to stay in touch, get to know each other better."

She smiled at him. "I'd like that."

Relief flooded him, and his shoulders eased, the tension falling away. He kissed her again, feeling as though he'd taken the first step in recovery. Maybe he could love someone else, even if it wasn't his precious Aiyana. He only had to remember they were two different people. He felt like he'd been hiding behind his mate's memory since he lost his family, and now, he wanted to move past it. He could honor her in other ways, but the way Mickey made him feel warned him not to walk away.

He kissed her again, long and slow, and he had to stop as his arousal became too potent. "You have to go."

"I know," she told him with a sigh. "But at least I'm not going home disappointed."

## Chapter 9

Mickey pulled her car into the office parking lot and rolled it into park. She slid the key from the ignition and stepped out the door, making a beeline for the entrance. As she approached, she could already see Sarai standing at the door, waiting for her. She hurried to the entrance and Sarai swung it open with a smile.

“It’s good to have you back,” Mickey greeted Sarai as they embraced. Mickey had returned home three days ago, but Sarai had still been out ill, and this was the first day she’d been back in the office. Mickey hadn’t realized how much she missed her friend until now, seeing her again and wanting desperately to share the success of the trip. Both professionally and personally.

“I missed being here,” Sarai said, propping a hip on the table in the break room as Mickey went about making her coffee. “So, tell me all about it. Was it beautiful? I haven’t heard anything on the tabloid shows, so I’m hungry to hear about it.”

Mickey beamed. “There were absolutely no media leaks. We were locked down, and everything went perfectly. I already have some of the raw footage to look at, so you can see. It was gorgeous, and they couldn’t have picked a better setting. Stephan has really created the perfect luxury getaway.”

Sarai raised a brow at her. “Stephan? Who is Stephan? There’s a certain quality to your voice when you say his name.”

Mickey blushed deeply. “He’s the owner of the Aiyana Hotels. He was there to personally oversee his own staff and offer as much assistance as possible. This is great publicity for his hotels, too, when it comes out. The fact that there were no leaks makes it a prominent destination for anyone who wants discretion.”

Sarai smirked. “I don’t think that’s the only thing he gave his personal attention to. So, what was with the *owner* of the Aiyana Hotels

dotting on you like he did? Was it just the soup?" she asked. Mickey chuckled, glancing away as she felt her cheeks burn slightly.

"Oh, hush! Just stop. I'm sure it was... you know, just him trying to be nice," she said.

"Oh, bull crap, Mickey! I wasn't born yesterday, hun."

"The event was a major success, and I'm thankful that he helped as much as he did," Mickey said, trying to avoid the conversation Sarai was steering toward. Again, Mickey's flush deepened, burning her cheeks. But she couldn't hold back her smile. "We danced. Then he took me to dinner. We kissed, and we exchanged numbers."

"Ah, yes. See? I could tell you were glowing with a different light. Tell me, what does Stephan look like?"

Just the sound of his name made her giddy, and she bit her lip, trying to figure out how to describe him to Sarai. "Broad and tall, long dark hair. Eyes you can get lost in. And he's such a gentleman, like Alistair." She shook her head. "I wasn't looking for anything, and really, it's just casual. He lives in Australia, and I'm here, for goodness sake. But there's something there. I just don't know what it is."

"I think you have the hots for Stephan." Turning beet red, Mickey opened her mouth to protest, but Sarai held up a hand to stop her. "I can't fault you for that. If he's that good looking, charming, and richer than a chocolate mousse with caramel topping, I probably would be, too, especially if he wanted to wine and dine me but was a perfect gentleman about it. But the way you talk about it, I think there might be more."

Rolling her eyes, Mickey shook her head. "The logistics of it is just wrong. I can't bank on anything. And now that we have this wedding behind us, the work is going to flood in. I don't have time to develop a relationship with feelings and commitment."

"Mickey. We have an entire team. We're not going to become workaholics. And there is an Aiyana Hotel about five miles from here, in case you forgot. He can here as often as you want, on business, I'm sure. And if things go really well, you could probably convince him to move here."

"Not what I'm looking for," Mickey protested.

*Why would he come all the way to Colorado just for you, Mickey? There must be so many women he would have met at different places, and*

*you're just one of them. It was just a kiss... nothing more nothing less,* Mickey thought, and she was missing the taste of his mouth already.

"Are we ever looking for it when it happens?" Sarai asked drolly.

"No. But this is still just casual," she insisted. "So, you can tease and play, but I'm just going to thwart your efforts. Now, come on, let's look at the footage from the wedding of the century."



Stephan was back in Australia, along with Liam and Thomas. He lived in a big house in Caringal, which was surrounded by big forest area. It was the best place for him and Thomas. And it was the place where they had been constantly trying to make their dragon forms stronger so that one day, they could take revenge on Dale and George for killing Stephan's family.

Since the day he'd returned, he had been constantly thinking about Mickey. There was not a single second he had not missed her. The dragon in him was selfish and wanted to taste her once again.

Stephan's eyes focused in on the television screen in front of him. This was the idle prattle he rarely paid attention to, rather preferring to zone out in his own head. But the welcome distraction was meant to soothe his mind. He couldn't help but keep thinking that he was somehow betraying Aiyana, that his thoughts shifting continually toward Mickey was an ultimate betrayal of some sort. He knew it was stupid, foolish even. Aiyana had long been dead, and the sacrifice she had made had entirely been for him.

The more he thought on it, the more he realized that had to be why he felt the pang of shame that kept hitting him directly in the chest. But still, Stephan wasn't sure as he wrestled with lingering self-doubt. Somehow or another, he needed to come to terms with it. It wasn't like Aiyana was ever coming back, and if the tables had been turned, the last thing Stephan would have wanted was for Aiyana to keep herself from being happy. *Didn't he deserve the same thing?*

Stephan glanced up as he heard a rapping at the door.

"Yeah?" he called out, expecting it to be Liam or Thomas. Sure enough, around the corner popped up the face of his uncle. "What do you need now?"



“You’re doing it again.”

“Doing what?” Stephan asked, turning his attention back toward the TV.

“Locking yourself up as some sort of penance for your guilt and fears. I just don’t get why,” he said.

“You’re going to give yourself a stroke worrying about me this much. I’m fine. I promise,” Stephan insisted.

“Bullshit. You have been moping around ever since we are back from Maldives. Are you going to deny it? Because I have never seen you as happy as you were while she was there with you and now... well, you seem entirely distracted. Like your mind is off in the clouds somewhere.”

“Damn it, Thomas. I love you dearly, but I really don’t need you meddling in my affairs,” Stephan said, whirling around to look back at him defiantly.

“You know, Stephan, I fear that you really fail to see that you, too, deserve to be happy. I haven’t seen you glow as much as you did since... well, since you lost your family, and then Aiyana.”

Stephan sighed and leaned into the couch, lifting his head to the ceiling as he closed his eyes. “Just go. I *really* need some personal space. Some time to think,” Stephan whispered.

“Alright, but just remember, there’s no reason to feel guilty for those who have already passed on,” Thomas said before he walked out of the room.



Stephan stared at his phone, Mickey’s picture at the top as he thought of what to text her. He still felt he was betraying Aiyana, but he couldn’t get Mickey out of his mind, no matter how hard he tried. He wanted to feel her in his arms, beneath him in the bed, her lips pressed to his. He couldn’t stop imagining what they would do together.

The napkin Mickey had scrawled her number across sat right beside it. For the last couple of hours, he had struggled with whether or not he should call her or let her be. Thomas had once again been right, but he still wasn’t sure what to think about how Mickey sometimes behaved. It was almost like she wasn’t sure of what she wanted. Like she was apprehensive about engaging fully in anything romantic.

He also had to agree with his uncle about his ability to pursue her, however, and it did seem that she always reacted to that. Whether she was fully vested in trying a relationship out or not didn't really matter when her body spoke about her most intimate desires. He leaned forward and reached for both the phone and the napkin, drawing them closer as he began to punch in the numbers to text Mickey. It always seemed less invasive to him, somehow. Problem was, he still didn't exactly know what to say.

*Hi Mickey,*

*It's Stephan. I just wanted to check in on you and see how things are going. Did you make it back safely? How was your flight? Really looking forward to speaking with you again. Take care. Until later – Stephan.*

Then he clicked his screen off, sighing as he reached for his cup of coffee, nodding at Liam, who was just approaching. His manager was later than usual, a clear sign he wasn't sleeping well, and Stephan looked at him expectantly as he slid into the booth across from Stephan.

"I don't want to hear it. I'm fine," Liam answered without the question actually being asked. "But I'm seeing you happy but hesitant, and it worries me."

Stephan scowled. "Why is that?"

"Because you should enjoy the happiness, Stephan. This misguided loyalty to someone who isn't here anymore is going to put you into the grave. You'll never feel whole. And the way you are with this Mickey is so close to what you had. I can feel your happiness radiating off you every time you talk to her or mention her."

"And you feel it's alright to forget Aiyana?" Stephan challenged, reminding him that he was one of the fiercest dragon shifters among all dragon shifter clans, and also a son of an Elite King.

"No," Liam said, "but there's no danger of you ever forgetting her. You're simply moving on and continuing to live, and I think she would want that for you." Liam sighed. "To be honest, I think she's good for you. I haven't seen you this happy since before Aiyana died." His expression grew grim. *Damn Liam and his idiocy.*

Stephan didn't want to talk about it. "I'm trying to embrace this opportunity, Liam, really I am. It's just difficult sometimes to set aside that memory."

"I understand. But keep trying, and I think you'll find a pleasant life ahead."

## Chapter 10

Stephan tried to burden himself with the work to keep Mickey from his thoughts. But he failed because the dragon in him never grew tired. He shifted so many times that week with the hope maybe he could take her off his mind, but he failed. Every time he shifted, the desire in him grew more.

Liam was right. He could mourn and be alone for the rest of his life, or he could seize an opportunity that presented itself and take his life to the next level. Stephan wasn't the sort to sit around and daydream about something he wanted. If he wanted it, he went after it. His past had taught him that life could end without warning, and he didn't have all the time in the world.

Grabbing his phone, he skipped past messaging and dialed, international call rates be damned. He had more than enough money. What he wanted was the girl across the water.

"Stephan?" She answered with his name on her lips on the third ring, and it brought a smile to his face.

Then he realized he'd forgotten to check the time difference and winced. Hopefully, he hadn't woken her up in the middle of the night. He looked at the clock on his phone quickly and did the math. Thankfully, she should just be getting off work. "I wanted to hear your voice," he said in return, forgoing the traditional greeting.

He could almost hear her blush through the phone, from thousands of miles away. "That's sweet. Listen, I'm about to get in the car and drive home."

"This won't take long," he assured her. "I just wanted to call and tell you that you've been on my mind since you left. That you're always on my mind, and I don't know how long I can stay away from you."

She hesitated, and Stephan held his breath. Had he said the wrong thing? He couldn't tell, not without her here, where he could hear her

heartbeat. And he had so little experience with emotions and women. “Well, why don’t we plan to see each other?”

“I want more,” he blurted out, hearing the responsive sharp intake of breath. But he had to push forward, or he wouldn’t get the words out. He didn’t want the guilt to flood back in and keep him silent. “I want to be with you. I want to feel your body up against mine. I want to taste you, to touch you. I want to hold you while you sleep, to wake you up with a kiss that turns into something passionate in the morning.”

*Dead air.* Stephan held his breath, trying to listen for any reaction, but it was as if Mickey had completely disappeared. Then came the soft whisper, “I can only imagine what that would be like.”

“It doesn’t have to be imaginary, Mickey. I haven’t wanted this with anyone, ever.” He winced. He had once, but trying to explain a dragon mate would probably go over as well as explaining the truth of his family’s death as opposed to calling it an accident.

“Stephan, I have a career that’s taking off, and I’ve got to focus on that. It’s extremely important to me, not just for myself, but also for my partner here. I have to take into account her needs, too. So, I’m not saying no. In fact, I’m saying yes. But only if this can remain casual, with no expectations. I don’t want to strap you down with the idea of a full-blown relationship just to disappoint you when I can’t give you what you need.”

Stephan thought about that and appreciated her honesty. He let it roll around in his head and sink in for a few minutes, and then he cleared his throat. “Okay, I understand. It doesn’t make me want this any less.” And it was true. He would rather have what little she could offer than nothing at all, and that spoke volumes about his feelings for her. “I just need to be with you. I can’t define what I’m feeling right now, but I feel like, since you left, there’s been an emptiness I didn’t feel before.”

Stephan knew that Mickey only wanted to keep their contact casual, but that was better than not having her in his life at all, and when she hinted that she was excited about the possibility of him coming to visit her, he hopped at the chance. He hung up, feeling anxious and enthusiastic. He could picture her, see the glow in her face and the shine in her eyes when they were filled with mirth. And he could smell that special aroma she put off when she was excited, when he kissed her or touched her. Now, he just needed to be patient.



Mickey glanced down at her cellphone and smiled impishly. She and Stephan had been texting back and forth for a couple of days now and the conversations had really started to turn steamier and steamier with every passing day. She couldn't deny that the more she wrote to him, the more he was starting to infect her thoughts. He was really starting to get under her skin, but she still wasn't sure that this was anything more than a fun time for him, and it made her slightly apprehensive.

There was still so much she didn't know about him, and it sort of bothered her to know he didn't have much of a family history to go back on. She honestly really wondered what had happened to his parents and brother, but the way his eyes had looked when she first scratched the surface of that were so sad, she knew better than to dare asking again. Causing anyone any sort of pain wasn't something that Mickey enjoyed doing, but it did make her curious, and she wanted to learn more about him. She skimmed over his newest message and found her cheeks instantly burning brightly as she giggled lightly.

*Mickey,*

*I can just imagine how luscious your sweet curves look right now. I can't help but keep recalling how gorgeous that fine green gown looked on you on our first date. I can't get it out of my mind. And then, the sweet taste of your lips, it's been on my mind all day.*

*S.*

This one was actually much milder than some of the others Stephan had sent her, and she worried about what Sarai or anyone else might have thought if they came by and read it over her shoulder. Thankfully, she had been so busy with new wedding decorating ventures, and that had kept both Sarai and David absent as of late. She pursed her lips and began typing out her own message, biting into her lower lip as she read back over it,

*Stephan,*

*I too cannot keep my mind from wandering back to you and the way you kissed me that last time we saw one another. It just seems like we never really got a proper chance to see where things might go, but having you to talk to is a welcome consolation prize. You're making me bright crimson right now with such endless compliments! You sure do know how to make a woman feel wanted.*

*Mickey.*

She had to admit that she did like getting his messages; they brightened her day and made her feel instantly happy any time one of them popped up on her screen. It was the first time in her life she'd felt like this. But she wanted to take things slowly with getting to know Stephan, and though she did really like him, it seemed wisest to keep her heart guarded. She was no young woman, she was a woman in her third decade, and she needed to make sure she wasn't burned beyond recognition. Especially with where she was in her career placement. It was everything to her to keep herself on track and without knowing Stephan well enough at this stage, she sure as hell wasn't about to dive into something foolishly and screw up her whole life plan. No man was worth doing all that for, not by a long shot! But, that didn't mean she couldn't enjoy the feeling that his attentions were bringing her. Every woman deserved a good self-esteem pick up, and that was exactly what Stephan was bringing her. And, if Mickey was wholly honest with herself, she *really* liked it.

*Hello again, Mickey,*

*I was actually thinking of coming very soon. I'll be sure to let you know when I've got an idea on the itinerary. Have a good night, I know it's getting late there.*

She smiled down at the message, this was why it had been so hard to tell Stephan no. He was just so incredibly sweet about everything he did, so considerate!

# Chapter 11

*(A week later...)*

The doorbell rang, and Mickey scowled. It was early, barely past sunrise, and the neighbor's dog was barking wildly. She had no idea who it could be. She had her event today, but her alarm had just gone off about five minutes ago, and she grumbled as she pulled her robe tighter around her body to go see who was at the door at this hour.

When she opened it, she gasped. "Stephan!" He had told her he would come to see her soon, but she didn't expect him so early. Yet here he was, looking tousled from travel and delicious, right there on her stoop.

The neighbor's dog still barked, and Stephan turned and whistled at it, instantly shutting him up. Mickey was impressed, but she was in no shape for him to see her. She had been just about to step in the shower, her hair barely brushed. And yet he looked at her like he wanted to consume her right then and there.

His grin stretched from ear to ear as he leaned casually in the doorframe. "Good morning."

Gulping at the thick rasp of his tone, Mickey shook her head slightly. "What are you doing here? You're not supposed to be here. I..." Mickey trailed her words as Stephan stepped closer, reaching for her hand. Slowly, he pulled her hand up toward his lips and pressed featherlight kisses against her fingertips – his eyes continuing to bore into hers as he peered up at her.

"I came for you, Mickey... I had to see you... I needed to see you." He released her hand with a tender brush of his thumb against her palm before she pulled it back to her side.

"What is it that makes me so appealing to you, Stephan? I'm just a regular woman. An interior decorator," she said. Stephan shook his head.

“Ah, no - you are so, so much more.” He lifted his hand, tenderly tracing the edge of her cheek as he pushed a stray tendril of her from her face. Mickey sucked in a breath, the touch sending a light shiver through her body as she retracted his hand from her face. “Does it bother you that I came so far just to see you?” he asked. Mickey bit into her lip, though it was odd she felt a sudden peace slip into her as she shook her head lightly.

“No. I... I’m just surprised,” she admitted, casting her eyes to the ground as she felt the heat of her blushing once again capturing her cheeks.

“Do you want me to go?” he asked in soft tone nearly a whisper. Her eyes lifted to instantly meet with his and she shook her head slowly.

“No... please, don’t,” she said.

“Are you upset? I hope you aren’t. I traveled all night. Or day. Well, depends on where I was in the hemispheres. Doesn’t matter. I flew nonstop to Miami and switched planes with no downtime and got here. I grabbed a car and got here as fast as I could to surprise you before work.”

After all he had done, she knew what a fool she would be to reject him now, and the way her heart was beating against her chest – she knew that having him in such close proximity was certainly having a tremendous effect on her. She could feel herself growing wet between her thighs, the wetness induced by the mere scent of him. But when his lips had brushed her flesh once more, she knew more than anything that all she wanted was to have them pressed to hers, exploring every inch of her mouth with his tongue.

Stephan grinned and stepped forward, his hands sliding down to wrap around Mickey’s waist as he pulled her in closer to him. She stepped up on her tiptoes and pressed her lips instantly to his. He parted his mouth to meet with her kiss and slid her tongue across his. Her eyes closed as he slid one hand through her hair, turning with her as he pressed her into the wall directly behind her. Mickey lifted her leg and rested it on his hip as he leaned in closer and deepened the kiss. His hands instantly slid up beneath her ass as he lifted her from the ground. Mickey broke free of the kiss and looked up at him as she bit into her lower lip.

“Are you sure?” he asked, holding her as he looked directly back into her eyes. She released her lip with a nod as she sighed breathlessly,

“Yes...” she mumbled. Mickey’s heart melted. She wanted this to be casual, with no expectations. But every time she set her mind to it, Stephan did something that blew her mind. Something generous, kind, or all around



gentlemanly. And his sincerity behind those actions really made her heart skip a beat.

God, but he looked delicious with his hair slightly out of place and his shirt a bit wrinkled. He was always so put together, and at this moment, he looked more human than god. Maybe even beastly. It was enticing.

Stephan carried Mickey into her room and toward her bed. He didn't care about anything but the way she had infected his every thought, and all he wanted to do was be one with her – he could no longer hold himself back from it. As soon as he laid her down upon the mattress, he moved to pin her down, his lips instantly finding hers as he pressed his body harder into hers. Mickey arched her back and lifted her spine from the mattress as she parted her lips to accept his kiss. He growled into her mouth as his hands sprawled out across her body. He slid his palm flat up the plane of her stomach, pushing her shirt out of the way as his hands met with her soft, supple skin. He deepened the kiss and slid his hand up her chest until his fingers brushed against the soft bud of her nipple – erect and ready for his touch. Stephan grinned, pulling away from the kiss as he lowered his mouth to claim the pert tip and suckled upon it gently. Mickey's mouth flew open and she gasped lightly as he nibbled against it.

“Oh!” she called out. Stephan released her nipple and moved to the opposite one, lowering his mouth to flick his tongue out over the tip. The sensation caused an instant giggle to flee from Mickey's lips and she grinned fiendishly at the way he was already tormenting her body. And she kinda liked it. He pulled the rest of her nipple into his lips and Mickey gasped yet again. “Please...”

“Are you ready?” he asked her curiously. Mickey groaned.

“I can't stand it anymore...” she whimpered. Stephan growled lightly once more and moved his mouth down toward her navel, pressing his lips to her skin as he drew his mouth further down toward the apex of her thighs. He shifted his opposite hand down to her pajama pants and slipped his fingers slowly down the front of them. Mickey lifted her hips from the mattress and Stephan gripped the edge of the fabric, quickly tugging the pants down to her knees. As the air hit Mickey's body, an array of goosebumps instantly arose across her flesh and Stephan grinned before lowering his tongue to draw down between her slickening slit, parting the lips of her pussy to himself. She lifted her eyes to meet with his as he drew her clit in between his lips and began suckling.

“Oh, fuck...” Mickey groaned, allowing her legs to fall apart as he continued to taunt and tease her clitoris. Suddenly, he withdrew from her body and tugged the pants completely off her, baring her legs to him. He glanced down and lifted her legs, drawing her knees up over his shoulders as he lowered his mouth to claim her pussy once again. Mickey leaned her head back against the mattress, her eyes rolling closed as she reached for the sheets, fingernails digging into the them to anchor herself in place. She could feel her body already starting to draw closer to the first waves of pleasure, nobody had touched her like this...

She gasped as she threw her head back up to peer down at Stephan, who had his head deeply buried between her thighs. Groaning, she lifted one hand from the bed and slid it into his hair, lifting his head to force his eyes to meet with hers. All she wanted was to see his intense eyes while his tongue busily worked her clit over. Obediently and, somewhat shockingly, Stephan did exactly what she wanted as if he could read her thoughts. Then again, Mickey knew how well actions spoke louder than words, and clearly, Stephan knew how to read her body. Again, things that were blowing her mind as the muscles of her pussy began to tightly clench, she moaned lowly as Stephan released her clit for a moment and drew his tongue out to dart across the swollen nub. He quickly lowered his mouth and drew it between his lips once more. Mickey could feel her lips swelling as Stephan continued to eagerly suckle – tenderly, then with more force, drawing her orgasm from deep within her. She groaned as her muscles began to contract and release, and throwing her head back one last time, Mickey parted her mouth to moan loudly, “Oh, fuck – yes!”

Stephan chuckled as he pulled his face up from between her thighs.

“Did you enjoy that, beautiful?” he asked with a husky voice. Mickey’s eyes flickered as she lifted her head lazily and nodded.

“Oh, God...I’ve never...” She trailed her words breathlessly and rested her head against the bed yet again. Stephan smiled and Mickey heard the familiar rustle of a belt buckle. She looked down to see Stephan’s magnetic gaze boring into her own.

“Do you want more? Shall it be...” he chuckled lightly.

“Permitted?” Mickey gulped, nodding lightly as she drew her tongue out across her lips.

“Yes...” she whispered lowly. Stephan grinned and continued to remove his belt, pulling it through the loops – it made a strange zipping

sound and then he dropped it to the floor.

*Clank!*

As it hit the ground, Stephan began working on the top button of his trousers, drawing them apart before he slowly, achingly, teasingly drew the zipper down and shimmied them off his body. Mickey's eyes widened as she looked down to see the tent he had already sprung in his boxers, and could hardly believe her eyes. If well-endowed were ever described in such delicate terms – he would have exceeded them by leaps and bounds. He was equally yoked, as well – in that he had *both* length and girth on his side. “Is everything alright?” Stephan asked as he watched her eyes widening from the sheer size of his cock.

“I, um...yes, yeah,” she said, stunned, and yet still full of lust. Lust that only Stephan could put at ease – without a doubt. Stephan leaned forward and pulled his boxers from his body with one arm. Mickey watched as his dick instantly perked right up the moment he erected his posture again. He grinned as he looked back at her and Mickey spread her thighs further apart as he lowered himself to the mattress and began to crawl atop her. He lowered his lips to capture hers and slid his tongue into the cavern of her mouth – deepening the kiss as he explored the depths of her mouth. In tune with her body, he moved stealthily, his fingers tracing over the sides of her ribs as he lowered his palm to grasp her hip tightly. He pulled away, breaking the kiss as he lowered his hand to angle the tip of his shaft at her entrance and lifted his eyes to meet with hers.

“I’ve wanted nothing more than this moment with you since I first laid eyes on your beautiful face, Mickey. And I want you to know, before I do this, that you are far more than just a beautiful woman – you are an incredible jewel. Even if you will not have me as your boyfriend, just being with you – having you in my life suffices. But, I’d be lying if I didn’t admit that I’d love nothing more than to be the one who holds you every night, pampers you as you deserve, and loves you just as I am about to, forever,” he confessed. Mickey smiled, lifting her hand to trace the edge of his cheek as she peered back at him.

“You are the most gifted man – with such heart melting words. How easily could a woman fall in love with you?” she asked. Stephan grinned and winked down at her before shifting his hips. Mickey readied herself for the initial penetration and gasped lowly as Stephan’s cock slipped into her body, stretching the taut muscles of her pussy to fit around him like a hand

in a velveteen glove – damn near perfectly. He groaned as his cock entered her and the tightness of her muscles clenched around him. It was like heaven, and Stephan looked down at her one more time, lowering his lips to claim hers as he thrust forward – their bodies now one for the first time ever, just as he had imagined it. Mickey broke free of the kiss and looked up at him, watching as he closed his eyes briefly. A look of joy had spread out across his face and it filled her heart with a twang of emotion. He was such a gorgeous man, and it was clear he had a deep soul – two things that made him almost too good to be true. And yet, he had come all this way just to see her. As he thrust harder and deeper into her, Mickey’s pussy began to clench tighter around his cock, and she could feel her second orgasm quickly on its way.

“Do you like it?” he asked, lowering his mouth to whisper gently against her ear. His breath was warm and caused a tingling effect against her skin as he leaned in. She nodded as she lifted her legs to pull him in closer to her.

“Yes,” she whispered. Stephan lifted his face and looked down at her one more time, lowering his lips to press into hers and slipping his tongue in between her lips as he once again thrust into her body. If heaven was in a moment, Mickey knew that she and Stephan had just met it, and as her body began to convulse around his massive cock, she moaned into his lips – relenting to the waves of swelling emotion and release. The willing victim of the tempest of passion that he had released her to.

This morning, though, was going just as well. They’d woken up early, and now, they were in the kitchen, working together to prepare breakfast. Stephan squeezed fresh orange juice, made coffee, and scrambled eggs, while she set about frying the bacon and putting biscuits in the oven.

As they sat down to eat, there was companionable silence. Not her forte, and yet, it just felt right. She was comfortable and confident with him in a way she didn’t feel with anyone else, and as they cleared the table and put the dishes in the dishwasher, the domestic feel of it all warmed her heart.

Stephan’s body against hers, his cock pressed to her backside as she bent to close the machine, warmed other parts of her entirely, and she straightened instantly, only to have him nibble at the back of her neck, pushing her hair aside. She turned in his arms, and his hand moved between

her legs, brushing over the thin satin of her panties and making her soak them instantly.

She'd never been this ready and willing, not for anyone. But there was something about Stephan that got her blood hot and flowing.

She kissed him deeply, toying with him as she bit his bottom lip and tugged. He responded with a smack on her ass and then hoisting her up on the recently cleared table. Giggling and excited, Mickey reached into his soft flannel pajama pants, pulling his hard cock out and stroking it with demand.

He threw his head back with a sigh and pushed harder against her palm for a moment before drawing back and yanking her panties down her legs. Hauling her to the very edge of the table, he shoved into her with one long thrust, deep and commanding, bringing her to a peak instantly. She cried out and bucked against him, riding the waves of pleasure as he started to move his hips.

He felt like he was ready to explode, his cock pulsing and thickening with each long thrust, and it gave Mickey a heady ego trip to think she could do that to this carefully controlled man. With sheer delight, she rocked with him, letting him plunge in, and when she could tell he was close, she wrapped her arms around his neck for balance and groaned, "Faster."

It was his undoing, and Stephan went into an uncontrolled, frantic rhythm that had his head pushing against the end of her. Mickey exploded with fireworks in her eyes, and Stephan followed her over the cliff, shoving wildly into her and grunting with his release.

He kissed her forehead, the end of her nose, and then her lips, chastely but with insistence, and then he smiled at her.

"Mickey, I know it may not matter to you and you want to keep everything casual. But I want to say something, and there are secrets I need to be revealed." Stephan said as his smile vanished.

"Secrets? What secrets Stephan?" she said, as the word "secrets" made her little nervous.

*Mickey, maybe he wants to ask you to be his fake fiancée or wife? Or maybe he is a shifter like Alistair?*

"I was married to Aiyana." Stephan struggled to find the right words and express his feelings. "I loved her so much."

Mickey scowled, and there was some sort of anger in her eyes. “Are you trying to say you are cheating on your wife?” Now she could tell why his hotels named as Aiyana Group of hotels.

“No. I mean yes; it is kind of like cheating. She brought life back to me, she made me smile again. But... she died years ago, making me all alone again.”

“I am so sorry, Stephan.” Mickey’s heart ached when he saw the pain in his innocent eyes as a tear rolled down her eyes. *How much pain this man has been hiding all the time?*

## Chapter 12

“Since the day first time I saw you, I felt happy and alive again. You somewhat resemble Aiyana. That doesn’t mean... I didn’t approach you just because of that reason. I was naturally drawn to you Mickey. It felt like time stood still. My life has never been an easy one, with too many losses to count.” He swallowed hard and thought about his parents and brother, Vincent.

Mickey took his hand in hers as she can see him struggling. “You don’t need to explain anything, Stephan.” Mickey didn’t want to him to go through all the pain again; he had already suffered a lot. She didn’t know why seeing him like that was making her heart cry and giving her unbearable pain.

“No, Mickey, I have to explain. I’m not sure which direction our relationship will move, and I know you want it casual. But...” Stephan said as he bore his eyes in hers.

“No, I am not going to listen anything. I trust you, Stephan... I can look into your eyes and tell you are a good man with a pure heart. You could have easily kept the secret about Aiyana. I lived here in Colorado, and your life is in Australia. It would have been almost impossible for me to find out about your wife.” To change his mood she asked, “How long are you going to stay? I’m being a little selfish; I hope you don’t have any pressing plans. At the risk of making some presumptions, I want you to stay with me.”

*How do I tell her there is a much bigger secret than this that she should know, something she cannot even imagine?*

“Maybe four days, but...” Stephan once again tried.

“No but... okay? I am going to take a shower as I have office work to finish.” Mickey kissed his forehead and left.

He just shook his head. He’d tried many times, but she was not going to listen. So, finally he gave in, thinking he would try again soon.

His phone chimed, and he looked at his screen. It was Thomas, and he could be very persistent. It seemed prudent to answer instead of ignoring him.

“I’m sorry to disturb you, but I wanted to reiterate a few facts. I am so happy to know that you are at least trying to move on. You deserve to be happy, son. But being out in the open without me to there with you to protect you can be dangerous. Be careful; you can’t fight on your own. You have already learned to hide your smell from other shifters. But we don’t know if they have grown stronger and more powerful than before. Be wary of those smells that become too familiar to you. Avoid making eye contact.”

“Everything is fine here, Thomas. You don’t need to worry about me. I will be safe.” Stephan hung up, still replaying the conversation in his mind. He had learned from the best to defend himself. Thomas had been the father figure after everything he had been through. And Thomas was all he had for now.

He wished Mickey could see things differently, and she could possibly accept the reality of the situation. It hurt him deeply to feel this way about her, knowing that there may be nothing to come from it other than physical pleasure. He wanted her by his side.

“Hey, I got us coffee,” Mickey said with a broad smile as she entered the room with two cups of coffee in her hands. She looked beautiful with her wet hair.

Stephan smiled at her. “Thanks. I wish I could share coffee moments with you daily.”

Mickey just smiled as she didn’t know what should she say. *Was that even possible?*

Mickey’s phone chimed, and Stephan grimaced as David’s name popped across the caller ID. “Hi David, I’m sorry. I am just sending you the details. Can I call you later? Right now, I am little pre-occupied with something.”

Stephan watched her walking around the room while she talked on the phone. Her eyes were most beautiful eyes he had even seen. As her luscious lips moved, the beast inside him started poking him to devour her once again, but somehow he controlled his animal. She didn’t only have a beautiful body, but she had a beautiful heart as well. The tears in her eyes while he talked about Aiyana was the proof that she was a warm and loving human who could not bear to see anyone in pain.



But he needed to warn her about David. As Mickey finished the call, Stephan took her hand and asked her to seat next to him on his bed, "Mickey, there is something I want to tell you. Please don't stop me; this has nothing to do with my past, but it is related to you. Can I say something which I may not be allowed to?"

Mickey looked at him with a curious look with a little nervous, "Yes sure, Stephan. You don't need to ask me first."

"I don't know what is between you and David. But I have to warn you to stay away from him. Please don't ask me any questions. You have no idea what kind of person he could be underneath it all. Something ugly lies beneath his surface, which I cannot explain to you right now," Stephan warned her.

"Someone looks jealous," Mickey smirked at him. "Don't worry, he's just a friend, nothing more than that. But maybe you felt something odd because he's had a crush on me for a long time?"

"No, believe me it's not like that, Mickey. There something I can't explain." Stephan just smiled as there was no point in arguing with her.

"You're not the first person to say something. I guess he does have a tendency to rub people the wrong way. You don't know him the way I do. He's been there for me through everything, good and bad."

He just nodded as he kissed her forehead. "I have four days, and I want to make the best of them. Nobody will call me unless it's an emergency, and I plan to exercise my right to screen my calls. I don't normally go unplugged, but you are a special exception." He thought about christening every room in her house.

Being with her meant there was more than a physical need. Every night they did sleep together, cuddled underneath the sheets warm against each other's skin. Her touch was an aphrodisiac, and holding her body was giving him more than he was willing to admit.

It wasn't long before the four days had gone by. Those four days had been most incredible days of their life. Soon they were at the airport exchanging thoughtful glances of infatuation.

"I will miss you, Stephan," Mickey said as her eyes looked into his deep eyes.

"See you soon; take care, Mickey." Stephan hugged her tightly and kissed her forehead before leaving. Mickey watched him until he disappeared.

## Chapter 13

It had been almost a month since Stephan had returned to Australia. She missed him every second after being separated by thousand miles. It was the happiest time of her life when Stephan was there, always around her, pampering her, making love to her.

But only a few days later, she started coming into the office early before anybody else came and leaving later for home, as every corner of her home reminded her of Stephan. Everything in her home smelled like him.

She was seating quietly in her office, sipping her coffee as her phone chimed in the morning. Mickey glanced down at the screen and quickly brought it to her ear.

“Yeah, hello?” she asked. She already knew who was on the other end.

“Hey, are you going to be at the office today?” Sarai’s voice broke through.

“I’m already here. Why do you ask?”

“Oh, well, could you please come by for a few minutes?” Sarai asked.

“Why, what’s going on?”

“I’m back in action and ready to work. So, if you come by, then I’ll give you like...hm, two days off with pay for what you just pulled off. How does that sound?” Sarai asked.

“Um, well I guess I can do that. But, hey what about that girls’ day you were telling me all about. And also, how are the kids?”

“We can talk about all of that when you get here. So, hurry up and swing by. Also, I hope you’re hungry. I’ve got fresh sushi coming in as we speak. Bon Appetit!” she said.

“You’re too good at this, lady. I’ll be right there. Traffic’s probably going to be a nightmare, though. Expect a slight delay,” Mickey explained.

Mickey knew it was just an excuse; she and Sarai hadn't spent good time with each other in a long time. That's Sarai asked Mickey to pick her up.

"Yeah, yeah, I know. See you soon!" she blurted.

Mickey drove to Sarai's home. As slid the key from the ignition and stepped out the door and approached Sarai's main door, she could already see Sarai standing at the door, waiting for her. She hurried to the entrance and Sarai swung it open with a smile and hugged her. "Let's get the sushi in our stomachs, then we'll head to the office." Sarai asked Mickey to come in.

Mickey was little off and faked laughing a few times, even she was not paying much attention what Sarai was saying a few times.

"Are you all right, girl? You look little off today. Would you like to share something?" Sarai kept her hand on Mickey's shoulder.

"I'm perfectly fine, maybe a little tired," Mickey said as Sarai frowned at her and shook her head. Sarai knew Mickey was upset, and the obvious explanation was Stephan. Mickey had never been so quiet. She was bubbly girl with lots of life in her.

"Hey... What happened to my *wild cat*? Why are you so upset, darling? Did he say something to you?"

"Actually, I don't know. I'm not liking anything these days. Since the day Stephan left, I'm feeling so lonely. Don't take me wrong, Sarai, I know you're always here for me. It's just... I don't have any control over this."

"Aww... You're missing Stephan. You love him, right?" Mickey just nodded as tears filled her eyes.

"I am sorry." Mickey looked up as at Sarai and forced a smile on her face. "He has been keeping me at a distance the past few days. Maybe he doesn't have any feelings for me. Or maybe he has found someone..." Mickey's heart ached at her own statement. *What if it was true?*

"If that was the case, he wouldn't have come all the way from Australia just to see you, Mickey. He must be busy somewhere, maybe some office work or some family matters."

"Yeah, you're right." *Maybe Sarai is right. Stephan is a very busy man, and he had been trying to tell you about something... You just don't know his side of this,* Mickey thought.

"We'll continue while driving. Let's go to the office," Sarai said and they left for the office. Mickey felt lighter after discussing things with Sarai.

“I’m sorry, I forgot to ask, how are the kids? They weren’t home,” Mickey asked as she drove her car.

“They’re at their grandparents’ place. Since the day we were attacked by Balthazar, Alistair’s dad has become very protective and anxious, and he wants them to be with him most of the time.”

“Oh! But this is not the way, Sarai. I don’t know much about how things work for dragon shifters, but you guys should find a proper solution for this.”

“You’re right, Mickey. This asshole Balthazar has become more dangerous.”

“What does he want from you guys?” Mickey asked, trying to understand the situation.

“He wants to take his revenge. His father was killed by Alistair’s dad while he was saving his nephew. But on top of that, he wants to be the only heir. As per Alistair, Balthazar is now secretly creating an army to attack all the other Elites.”

“That’s so serious, girl. I’m worried now.”

“You don’t worry, I have a great warrior on my side. He will do anything to keep us safe,” Sarai said as she laughed out loud, and Mickey joined her as well.

“You little pixie, you are too much.” Mickey slapped Sarai’s hand lightly.

Later in the evening while Mickey was working on a presentation, her phone chimed and her eyes twinkled and there was a broad smile on face when she looked at the name on the screen, Stephan.

She immediately grabbed her phone, “Hey Stephan.”

“Hi, Mickey. I am so sorry. I was not able to call you for some odd reason.”

“I hope everything is good?” Mickey asked with concern.

“Yes, don’t worry, everything is fine. I will explain everything to you later, the next time we see each other. I told you that day that there are some secrets in my life... it was just a complication because of that. Mickey, I want you know each and every detail about me.”

“I missed you, Stephan.” Mickey said as her voice lowered.

“I missed you too, and don’t be sad. We will meet soon. And I promise, you will never feel sad,” Stephan said, and Mickey suddenly felt happy and lively.

“All right, Stephan, I need to go to home now. I will give you a call once I get home.” They hung up, and Mickey took Sarai home.

He’d sent her little gifts, including a pristine white orchid, which were his way of keeping his memory alive in her. The snow globe with a foreboding castle and one lone man standing outside the gate had become a guilty obsession.

It was affecting her work, but she soldiered through wondering when she was going to see him again.

“Don’t kill the messenger. This came for you when you were out getting coffee. I’m sure he means well, but maybe you should remind him this is still new for you. I want you to consider following in my footsteps. Love doesn’t have to be hidden from. It should be embraced until it flourishes into something amazing. The only thing I want for you is your happiness.” Sarai was busy making arrangements, with her business on everybody’s lips.

Mickey looked down at the calligraphy. It was beautifully written and invited her to his place in Australia. The pictures that accompanied the invitation made it impossible for her to decline. He was quite adept at making his mind up. Going there and experiencing what she saw in those photographs was foremost on her mind.

*“I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you. There have been times where I don’t know where I’m at because you are always there. There is a cold spot in my bed begging for you. I don’t mean to pressure you. I would say you are my life but that would be creepy. Suffice it to say, missing you has been a terrible imposition that reminds me of what kind of hold you have on me. There’s a car outside waiting for you. I encourage you to take a break from reality and find yourself in the arms of your fantasy.”* She stared at the words and read them over again a few times until they sank into her skull.

Mickey turned and found Sarai with her finger to her lips. “Don’t say a word, because I already know what you’re going to say. This is your story to tell. Go and make those memories before I change my mind.” Sarai ushered her out of the door to the chauffeured limousine idling at the curb.

Mickey giggled and hugged Sarai, “Thank you.”



She was standing in front of his door with no luggage, and only the smile on her face was going to greet him when he opened it. Ringing the bell and waiting impatiently while chewing on the bottom of her lip, she had this unusual anxious energy surrounding her. She still couldn't believe she had flown thousand miles to see him in his element where he had home field advantage.

The house was amazing, and she had to pinch herself to understand how she could be standing in front of something so magnificent. Her bubble gum tongue licked her lips as her fingers trembled at her sides.

The landscape was beautifully manicured with topiary designs of wild animals. They came alive, and she was frozen in place by the intricacies. Somebody had taken great pride in their work to bring a stable of animals to life through inanimate objects.

The double doors had this extravagant feel of royalty. It was a lavish display of wealth and sophistication in pristine white with huge Roman columns to accentuate the property. A circular driveway with several different cars in a multitude of colors and horsepower had become art pieces to be appreciated from afar without touching the unspoiled exterior.

"I have to say that you are a sight for sore eyes. What do you want to do first?" he asked, and knew the answer by the way that she was undressing him with her eyes.

"I think it would be a good idea for you to show me where the magic happens." She narrowed her gaze to the spiral staircase leading to the haven of the bedroom and the sheets beyond.

He grabbed her hand and they raced up the stairs, shedding clothing along the way until they were naked as the day they were born when they went into the bedroom. He stripped back the sheets and pulled her to him until she was on top in control of the action.

"You're so hard for me. I like having this effect on you." She rubbed back and forth along his shaft, feeling the bulging evidence of his arousal throbbing underneath her.

"I have a lot of you running around in my head. That's my story and I'm sticking to it. Just thinking about you makes me crave something unattainable. You are that forbidden fruit." Stephan was enamored with her body and the way that she was looking at him with hungry infatuation.

He tried to sit up but felt her hands on his chest pushing him back down. The heat of her embrace drew him in with a long drawn out breath

coming from the both of them in unison.

She slid down until not one single inch was spared. Sitting there and adjusting to his size, stretching her out in a way that seemed impossible, was making her stare at him with fire in her eyes. Moving in a circle on top of him with her fingers scratching his chest started a chain reaction.

She blinked and noticed for a fleeting second his eyes changing color. Her knees were firmly planted on the black silk sheets.

“This is where you should be all the time. The phantom presence of our last time together sustains me. It’s not enough to satisfy, but it does take the edge off.” She traced her fingers down all over his muscular physique and began to ride him slowly, with his every inch within her.

The faded memory of their time together came back in full force.

“I can’t get enough of you, Mickey. My body, my mind, my soul cries out for you across great distances. I want to kiss as lovers do.” He proved his statement by grabbing the back of her head. He was soon curling his fingers around her locks to bring her down to his lips parting for the chance to take her tongue into his mouth.

The pace quickened, with the bed shaking, smacking heavily against the wall. A painting came loose and crashed to the floor. Rocking back and forth in a rhythmic motion had them hitting the apex of their pleasure within minutes of coming together.



He felt that rush of adrenaline and wallowed in the overwhelming sensation coming over him. Coming down meant that they were sticking together, holding each other’s gaze until the moment passed.

He caressed her to release all the stress from her body until she fell asleep on his shoulder. He was happy, the pain from his past dulling. But deep down he also knew it could end the very next second, once she discovered who actually he was. She had come all the way to Australia just to see him. Mickey had wanted to keep this casual, but it was now evident to Stephan that Mickey was in love with him as well. And as she was falling for Stephan, he decided to tell her the truth no matter what happens...

*What if she leaves? No... no... I have already lost everyone I had loved. Not Mickey now, I will not tell her truth. I want to be selfish...*

Stephan felt helpless at the moment. He wished that Mickey was a dragon too. It would have been easier for him. As his train of thought went on and on, he didn't even realize when he fell asleep.

When he woke up the next morning, his heart raced to see Mickey in his arms. He slowly got up and prepared coffee for both of them. As he returned to the bedroom, Mickey was already awake, checking her phone.

"Hey, I got us coffee."

Mickey smiled and said, "I missed having coffee with you. I wish I could have it with you every day."

Stephan smiled and kept the coffee tray on her right and leaned into kiss her lips. "So what would you like to do today? How about having a nice lunch?"

"Yes, sure." Mickey smiled.

"Wow, you have a Lamborghini? I always wanted to drive a Lamborghini." Mickey's eyes widened when she saw it parked outside his big house.

"Here it is." Stephan said, handing her the key.

"Are you sure, Stephan?" Mickey's eyes twinkled and Stephan laughed at her excitement.

She couldn't believe the way the engine came to life when she put the key in the ignition. Giving her the freedom to jump into the driver seat while he was in the passenger side was giving her license for that need for speed. The windows were down on the canary yellow Lamborghini.

"I would like to get there in one piece instead of becoming a hood ornament. You are full of surprises. I guess I should be careful about giving you free rein. I know what it feels like to be in that kind of control. It can be addictive," he informed with his hand on her bare knee, squeezing and rubbing at the same time to get her undivided attention.

She looked over, her eyes lit up like the Fourth of July. "I didn't know it could be like this. I don't know what has come over me. I have to call Sarai and tell her about this. I'm betting this thing has Bluetooth capability." It wasn't long before she found what she was looking for with the screen lighting up in this blue incandescent color. "Sarai, you will never guess where I'm calling you from. I'm driving a Lamborghini down dangerous roads. I feel alive and I wonder if this is what it is like in some small part for dragons. This freedom is hard to describe. I'm reluctant to let



go of the wheel.” Her slip of the tongue was a mistake, but she didn’t even know what she had done until Stephan decided to say something.

“You must be crazy. This is no time to talk to me. Just come back in one piece. Please focus on driving.” Sarai laughed and she just disconnected the call.

“Did I hear you mention something about dragons?”

“I... I... I was talking about this gym her husband owns in Colorado,” she stammered with her eyes on the road to prevent him from seeing the bald-faced lie in her eyes. As Mickey stammered, he could tell that she was hiding something, but he wasn’t sure if she had said something about dragons. “We are coming to our final destination indicated by the GPS.” He said as Mickey nodded and she stopped with pinpoint accuracy in front of the resort.

“I’m going to make sure our table is ready.” He lifted the door and stepped out on shaky legs. “I’ll be right back, okay?”

“Okay, Stephan. I’ll be waiting here.” She looked around; it was such a beautiful resort.

Stephan came back and asked her to come in with him. He held her hand led her towards the restaurant. They ordered for couple of drinks and danced intimately.

Later when they were eating Mickey’s phone began ringing from inside her purse next to her. It wasn’t a phone call but a text message from Sarai. As she read the message, the happy glow vanished from her face.

“Everything all right?” Stephan asked as he placed his hand on hers. “You suddenly look sad.”

“I need to go back home as there is some last-minute important meeting. My trip is going to be cut short. I will need to take the next flight available,” Mickey said, and she was about to cry. She had just gotten there, and now she had to go back.

“No, you can’t go like this Mickey.” Stephan was understandably upset but he tried to calm himself down.

“You know how it is, I will have to leave as early as possible.” He understood this was about business.

Mickey quickly booked her flight for the next day. They had very little time to be together.

Both were sad, neither wanted to leave the other. There was such a huge distance between them, and it was not at all easy for either of them to

move here and there.

They headed back from the resort; Stephan played nice music as they both sang together. When they reached his home, Stephan took her in his arms and lead her inside the bedroom. “I just want to have a nice night sleeping in your arms, Mickey.”

Mickey offered her arms to him and he kissed her forehead. They slept peacefully together.

When Sarai woke up in the morning, she poured thousands of kisses on Stephan before going for a bath. After she took her bath, she got coffee for both of them. *I don't know when I'll be able to have morning coffee again with him*, she thought.

They both were silent while they sipped their coffee.

After having coffee, he took her back to the airport and escorted her onto the plane before giving her a kiss.

## Chapter 14

“I’m sorry honey. I know you must be very upset. But I needed you here. David went to Italy for an event, and you know I couldn’t make it without you,” Sarai said as they both were seated in the conference room for discussion.

“No worries. I understand, Sarai. This event must be much bigger?”

“Yes, it is. It is party event for foreign delegations of different countries coming here for a meet. We have the meeting in the afternoon today.”

“All right, I’ll be ready.” Mickey smiled.

“I know, I’ve ruined your vacation. I apologize for that, Mickey,” Sarai said as she looked down at the table.

“You should absolutely apologize to me.” Sarai looked at Mickey as Mickey burst into laughter.

“What?” Sarai asked raising her brows.

“First thing, this office is my first love, and my utmost priority. And second, when I got home last night, I received a message from Stephan that he is coming in three days just to see me.”

“Oh... Wow, Mickey! I’m so relieved now, and I don’t have any little doubt that he loves you so much.”

“Yes. I can read his eyes, and the way he looks at me full of love and compassion, it makes my heart melt. But...” Mickey paused for some time. “But he says he has some secrets, which he needs to tell me. I saw him struggling every time he tried. I’m a little scared now; what if there’s something I cannot accept?”

“Aww... Mickey, as much as I have understood him through the talks we’ve had, he’s really a nice guy who wants to tell you the truths of his life. You’ll have to face it girl.” Mickey nodded. “Maybe he also is half human and half dragon.” Sarai laughed and Mickey shrugged lightly slapping Sarai’s arm.

Sarai stood and started working on flower arrangements. “So, if he’s coming into town, I want you to do me the courtesy of both of you having dinner with me. I’d love to meet Stephan, and I know Alistair will also be thrilled by the distraction. He’s been working nonstop for his father for the past few weeks and needs to take a step back. I want him to meet Stephan, a man that has captured your heart and fascination.” Sarai said while putting the finishing touches on quite an exceptional and beautiful bouquet, with a price tag to make any discerning flower lover happy.

“That sounds perfect. I’ll ask him,” Mickey said as she checked the presentation Sarai had prepared for the meeting that day.



“Sarai, I’m going to the airport to pick up Stephan. He’ll be here in a few hours. I’ve checked all the designs and handed them to Silvia, so you can check when you have a minute.” Mickey said as she walked into Sarai’s office.

“Don’t forget to ask him about the dinner, okay?” Sarai said.

“I’m way ahead of you. I invited him to have dinner with the three of us last night and he accepted. He’s a little nervous and tried to decline at first, but I somehow convinced him. I hope Alistair can be on his best behavior tonight instead of brooding as usual.” She didn’t know where they were going to have dinner, but Sarai had already made the necessary arrangements.

“My place is the best venue. Not to brag, but I have the best wine in the cellar money can buy. I wasn’t much into the wine experience until I met Alistair. We go to vineyards all the time to sample a wide array of bouquets.” She was going to close down the business early so that they could get ready to leave a lasting impression on their paramours.

“I will admit to being a little bit intimidated by the property.”

“There’s no reason to be, but I understand the sentiment. I was the same way, and it does take some getting used to. We’ll have the house all to ourselves with no servants. The kids are staying with their grandparents, and there’s still a lot to do. I don’t want to leave it to the last minute.” Sarai showed her a mockup of the menu she was thinking about and made the necessary adjustments according to her wishes.

“I can’t remember the last time I cooked something. I will happily become your willing assistant to give these guys something to stick to their

ribs. You know what they say. The way to a man's heart is through his stomach."

Mickey headed to airport listening to her favorite songs. She had come back from Australia half-heartedly that day. Now as he was coming to meet her, she was very excited. Before she reached the airport, she grabbed some chocolates, a chicken sandwich, and a water bottle for him. This time she wanted to gift him something because every time it was Stephan who always sent her gifts. She had already bought a nice shirt for him.

She waited for Stephan, and when he appeared at a distance coming towards her there was a broad smile on her face. He looked extremely hot in his casual clothes.

*Mickey you are so lucky, you have this gorgeous prince deeply in love with you.*

"Stephan, how are you? Did you miss me?" She gave a small peck on his cheeks and Stephan smiled at her.

As they slipped in the car, Mickey handed him the sandwich. "Wow, how did you know I was hungry?"

"I didn't. I just felt like buying one for you." Stephan smiled as he took a big bite. Mickey loved watching him while he ate; he was a raw and down to earth person, even though he was so rich. "So, ready for the dinner tonight?"

"Yes," Stephan answered.

"Let me take you home; you can have a shower and change, and then we'll leave for Sarai's home. Okay?" Mickey again confirmed, trying to read his mind.

"All right, Mickey." He forced a smile onto his face.

"Do you want to share something? Are you uncomfortable going for this dinner?"

*Silence...*

Stephan didn't answer her question and now Mickey was worried. "Stephan, are you okay?" she asked again, placing her hand on his shoulder as she lowered the speed of car.

"It's not like that I don't want to meet your friends. But... I don't know how to explain it to you."

"It has something to do with your secrets you were talking about?" Stephan nodded his head in affirmation. "So, you want to share?" Mickey

asked as she parked her car in front of her house. Before he could answer, Sarai called.

“Hey Mickey, dinner is almost ready. Please come as soon as possible.” Mickey could hear the noise of utensils behind Sarai. Before answering, Mickey looked at Stephan, and Stephan motioned for her to say yes.

“Stephan, are you sure that you want to go to this dinner? It’s okay if you don’t.”

“Yes, Mickey, don’t think too much,” Stephan said as got his towel and clothes out of his suitcase and then headed to the bathroom.

“All right. We’ll continue where we left off while driving back,” Mickey said, looking into his eyes.

Stephan was ready, and they jumped back into her car. “So, now you can continue, Stephan,” Mickey said, placing her hand on his.

“First, I want to tell you that I love you so much. You may not even want to see my face after this. My truth can traumatize you for life, and I can lose you forever.” Stephan sighed heavily.

“Now you’re scaring me, Stephan, but trust me. I’m strong enough to handle anything in this world, unless until you’ve hurt someone. And if there is something that you couldn’t control, you can tell me without any fears or doubts.”

Stephan nodded as he knew it was not going to be as easy as Mickey thought.

“Mickey, I was born in here in Colorado, and I know this place very well.” Mickey suddenly looked at Stephan as her mouth fell open. “Yes, Mickey, and don’t be surprised. I lied about my parents, too. My parents and brother didn’t die in an accident; they were murdered by my uncles.” He paused as the ugliest and scariest memories from his childhood flashed back in his mind. His breath grew heavy and quick as his eyes glowed for a fraction of second. He looked out the window so Mickey was not able to even notice.

“They were trying to kill me, too.” Mickey looked at him with shock but couldn’t say anything. “Thomas worked here for my dad, and he was my dad’s most trustworthy employee. He somehow saved me, and managed to escape to Australia.”

“I am so sorry, Stephan. Deep down in my heart, I always knew there is a lot of pain inside your heart and it reflects in your eyes. I can see

that, and I know you are a very good person.” Mickey squeezed Stephan’s hand and offered him the bottle of water she had bought for him before going to airport. Mickey’s words gave him more strength and confidence. “Are they still alive? I mean your uncles...”

“Maybe, I don’t know. We never came back to Colorado; the day we bumped into each other was the first time I came back here after the incident.”

“You didn’t try to get justice for your family?”

“We always wanted to; we still want to take revenge. I was so young, and they were very strong, Mickey, big in numbers, while there are only two of us. Thomas preferred saving my life in place of fighting back. And Thomas and I have been working on a plan for a long time, and we are almost ready for it now,” Stephan said as Mickey parked outside of Sarai’s home.

“*Revenge*? What do you mean? Aren’t you going to the cops for help?” Now it was the time to reveal the biggest truth, the one he was afraid of telling her. He kept silent for a minute to gather right words to explain to her. He didn’t want to feel the pain of losing someone he loved again, as he already had lost so much. He had been lonely for a long time after Aiyana, almost seventy years.

Before he could say anything, Sarai shouted from the main door, “Hey guys, come on in.”

Mickey sighed, “I am sorry Stephan. But we need to get inside. Let us get in and enjoy the dinner first. Okay?” Stephan just nodded and he knew it would not be easy for him to gather the courage to start again from the beginning.

They stepped out of the car as Sarai came to receive them. “Hi, Stephan. I am Sarai, Mickey’s best friend,” Sarai said before Mickey could even introduce them to each other.

“Hey Sarai. It’s nice to meet you.”

“So fast,” Mickey murmured.

“You said something?” Sarai asked.

“No, I was just saying that I am so hungry.”

“Oh. Dinner is ready. Come inside.” They all strode into the house and settled around the dinner table.

“Oh my gosh, Mickey! He is so gorgeous and sexy. I must say, I’m jealous,” Sarai whispered in Mickey’s ear.

“Shut up, Sarai.” Mickey narrowed her eyes.

They were sitting at the table with their plates empty and the food simmering on the stove behind them. Sarai had been indulging in wine a little bit too much in a desperate attempt to drown the anger boiling up inside of her as Alistair was not there yet.

“I’m sorry Stephan; Alistair is little late today. I don’t know why he does this, I guess something important came up at the last minute, but he promised to be here. In the meantime, I don’t see any reason why we can’t continue over a couple of glasses of wine.” She was about to pour a liberal amount into her glass when her best friend took exception and gave her a glaring expression of disapproval.

Mickey placed her hand over Sarai’s glass. “We have all evening. He will be here, and you know how important you are to him. Just because he doesn’t know how to express it verbally doesn’t mean that he doesn’t do it in other ways.” She grabbed the bottle from her hands and placed it in the center of the table.

As Stephan looked at his phone, he could smell someone of the same creed around. *It could be danger*, Stephan thought, but he decided to keep silent as he didn’t want to scare either of the girls unless it was required. The smell grew stronger, and Stephan was more alert.

There was a commotion; dogs were barking as Alistair walked in. He dropped the umbrella by the door and stepped into the dining room, nervous about his company feeling annoyed with his lateness. He was relieved to be greeted with smiles from all three of them instead of outright disgust.

“I apologize for keeping you waiting. It appears my wife has been keeping you entertained. Let me do the honors of serving. It seems only fair since you have gone to all of this trouble to make this meal. We haven’t been formally introduced. I’m Alistair,” he offered his hand to the stranger and they stared at one another, instantly coming to the same conclusion.

Stephan was understandably shaken by the revelation he was in the presence of someone of like mind and body. And not just shifters, but Elite dragon shifters. They took the time to assess one another, to get a better understanding of what they were dealing with. They both sniffed the air, marking their territory with a very powerful scent.

Mickey jumped up to help with the food, brushing past Alistair on her way into the kitchen. She carefully ladled each portion with fresh



vegetables and a lobster tail smothered in garlic butter. The plates were adorned tastefully with colorful edible flowers they had picked especially for dinner. She turned and almost bumped into Alistair.

They exchanged glances and smiled at each other before they joined their party at the table. Stephan and Sarai were talking, and Sarai was trying to make Stephan laugh by cracking jokes. They sat down and the conversation came to an abrupt halt. Nobody could say anything when they were immersed in the meal. They savored every bite and didn't come up for air until their plates were empty. It was a testament to both women and their ability to make something to whet their appetite.

When they finished, Alistair said, "I would say for a first meeting this has gone extremely well." Everyone smiled.

"Can you show me the house, Alistair? It looks unique and traditional. It reminds me of something," Stephan requested.

"Sure Stephan, come with me." Both girls followed them. "What you see around you is the product of many years of hard work of my father, George. He has been instrumental in giving me the tools to take the family business in a new direction," Alistair was about to continue when he saw a change in his guest's demeanor.

Stephan hated that name, George, and now he wanted to know who Alistair was referring to. "I apologize for interrupting you, Alistair. I know it's in bad taste, but I need something clarified." Stephan asked trying to control the waves of anger formulating in him.

"Yes, sure Stephan. What is it?"

"This George, you're talking about makes me curious. Do you know Dale and King James?"

Alistair's eyes widened with shock when Stephan mentioned Dale and James. *He recognizes their names.* Mickey and Sarai looked at each other trying to understand.

"How do you know these names?" Alistair queried but was conscious to keep his voice low and unthreatening.

"They were your father's brothers, right?" Stephan's temper was flaring and he got up to pace the floor, wondering if it was possible.

"What's happening, Stephan? Are you all right? Do you know Alistair's father?" Mickey asked as she saw him fuming with anger in very unnatural way. He had always been a cool and calm gentleman. But Stephan wasn't listening to what Mickey said.

“Yes.” Stephan went into a rage feeling this build up in his stomach until he was letting his emotions take over. Alistair was the bastard son of his father’s brother George. They were responsible for killing his parents and brother. Now he was not going to wait for anything. His clothes ripped right off of his body as he morphed and showed his true nature. His dragon had fire in his eyes for revenge against those that had harmed his family. His wings spanned the room and swept the dishes off the table, sending them crashing unceremoniously to the floor, bits of food and glass flying everywhere.

Mickey’s jaw dropped in shock when she witnessed all this. She didn’t know what she should do.

Alistair jumped back, feeling that familiar twitch of transformation underneath the skin. “I don’t know why you’re getting bent out of shape. We don’t have to be at odds. Let’s take this outside where we can settle this like male dragons, if that’s what you want. I don’t think it’s necessary to destroy everything I’ve built for my family. Some of these things are treasured family heirlooms, priceless in my eyes.” He motioned for him to leave through the balcony doors and joined him until they were in flight, spewing fire at one another.

A battle ensued with each one injured, but nothing fatal. First blood was from the razor tips of Alistair’s wings. He was smug but it was short-lived. Stephan turned the tables in his favor. He feigned right when he turned left to catch Alistair by surprise, bringing him down to the ground with a resounding thud. The earth shook and they continued to fight unaware of the two girls rushing out in a mad panic to stop them.

“Stop! Stephan, please stop!” Mickey shouted.

They transformed back into their human forms, Stephan’s hands wrapped around Alistair’s throat. “I will make sure that your family pays for what they did to my family. I will gladly sever your head from your shoulders and make you realize your mistake. This has been a long time coming.”

He was prepared to finally get his revenge but then somebody screaming stopped him cold. “That’s enough of this nonsense, Stephan. I know you’re angry, and you have every right to be. But Alistair did nothing, he is innocent. It is not his fault that George is his father. Can’t you see he’s only defending himself? If he wanted, he could have hurt you as well!” Mickey placed her hand on both of them to separate them from one another.

Stephan didn't know what he was doing, all he could see were his parents being murdered in front of his eyes. Mickey was able to calm him down a little.

Sarai just hugged Alistair and she was about to cry. Mickey felt so ashamed about what Stephan had done. He'd almost killed Alistair. Mickey got inside and got two water bottles. "I am so sorry, guys. Alistair, are you okay?" Mickey asked, offering water to him.

Alistair just nodded. "Don't feel sorry, honey. It's all right," Sarai said, and she helped her husband into the house.

Stephan stood near a bench, still fuming with anger. "Stephan?" Mickey asked softly. Stephan looked away, not willing to look into her eyes. He knew what he did was so wrong and he already regretted that. "Stephan, I know you're feeling bad because of what you just did. It's okay, it was the anger and pain you had building inside of you all those years, it just came out today," Mickey said, and offered him the other water bottle.

Stephan looked at Mickey, and all his anger vanished as she spoke to him. "I am sorry Mickey; I lost all control today. I promise, this was my first, and hopefully last, time."

"I understand, Stephan, but I can tell Alistair is a real gem." Mickey looked at him and smiled. "Let's apologize to both of them." Mickey understood what was driving Stephan. All the pieces fell into place, including the crippling loss of his brother, and she felt so happy for Stephan. At least he has someone to call his family.

Alistair was seated on the couch, looking better than earlier. "Alistair, I'm sorry. I lost all control when I heard the name of your father, George."

"It's all right, but I just want to know, why were you this angry at my father? I know he can be rude at times." Stephan told him everything that happened back then, and he was the son of the Elite King James.

Alistair took a few moments to absorb this new information. "You know only half of the truth," Alistair said as Sarai came and sat next to Mickey.

"Half-truth? What do you mean by that?"

"That night was the worst nightmare for Dad. He loved his brothers so much, especially James. But he didn't know that Dale was so selfish. Dale had conspired to kill your whole family that night so that he could be the Elite Shifter King. Dad even tried to save James's life, but it was too

late for that. You couldn't have seen Dad killing your parents with your own eyes. There must have been some confusion."

"Yes, I just saw Dale killing my mother and my brother Vincent in front of me. I somehow managed to escape."

"It's true, and I don't know how to make you believe it. But Balthazar's father Dale wasn't happy with how the palace was being run, with the shifters free to do whatever they want. My dad was attacked, and he left the palace forever with my mother and your brother. I was barely a glimmer in my mother's eyes." His fists were clenched and he tried to curb his dragon bloodlust.

"My brother? You mean Vincent?"

"Yes Stephan. You heard that right; your brother Vincent is alive. Dale almost killed him that day, but somehow Dad was able to save him."

Stephan's mouth dropped open in surprise to hear this unexpected news. He'd never known his brother was still alive, and he was overcome with emotions until he was hugging Mickey, afraid to let her go. There was a moment of silence until the relief of knowing they didn't have to be enemies washed over them in waves.

It wasn't long before they were talking openly and honestly about everything. It was still tense, but they managed to move past it until they were laughing at the absurdity of a family feud. Alistair also told him that his father had left the palace the same day those incidents happened. He'd loved James so much, and Dale was killed in the fight, while George tried to save James. George had searched for Stephan for so many years, but he'd failed to find him, finally giving up hope.

Stephan once again apologized to both Sarai and Alistair, and they headed back to Mickey's house.

The drive back to Mickey's home was a silent one. Stephan didn't know what he should say to Mickey. If he'd known that Mickey already knew about the shifter world, and that her own best friend was married to a dragon, he would have revealed everything much earlier.

## Chapter 15

Sitting down in the living room, Stephan held her hand and said, “I am so sorry, Mickey. I wanted to tell you everything before, but I was always afraid of losing you. And every time I scraped together enough courage to tell you, something would come up. It’s not an easy thing for a human to believe.” Mickey silently listened to what he was saying. “I know I don’t deserve you, but the animal in me was selfish, and wanted you at any cost.”

“I almost didn’t believe it even when Alistair shifted in front of my own two eyes.” Mickey said as Stephan smiled at her comment. “I hope there aren’t any more secrets. I want to know everything about your life.” Mickey grabbed his hand and took him to the bedroom so that they could talk until morning lying on her bed.

“My dad was the Elite Dragon King, eldest among these three brothers, and my mom was human. We all lived in a huge underground palace. The dragons were free to shift and fly. It was big and exotic and safe. But one day, my parents decided to move to Australia because they sensed something was wrong. They were peace-loving dragons without a deceitful bone in their bodies. My dad decided to leave the palace so that Balthazar’s father, Dale, could be the king. Before they could leave, they were attacked. One of the dragons, Thomas, somehow saved me from a fate worse than death. Thomas was a trusted soldier of my father. He took me to Australia to start a new life, where my father had already made arrangements for us. There I met Aiyana and fell in love. She was killed saving me from a cat shifter in Australia.” He breathed deeply and took a strong drink of the wine sitting in front of him.

“That’s why you kept warning me about David, right?” Mickey asked.

Stephan nodded his head. “Yes. I didn’t know that you already knew that he was a cat. And I had sensed he had feelings for you. After Aiyana, I never trusted cat shifters.”

“What about Alistair?”

“I thought his parents were also involved in the murder of my family. I realized that was not true when Alistair told me the story after I almost killed him. I’m grateful to him for telling me about how Vincent survived. All this time, I thought he was dead,” Stephan said as Mickey leaned into kiss him.

“You are a good dragon, Stephan, same as Alistair.” This time she smiled and gently kissed his lips. As she deepened the kiss, Stephan took the lead and they slept in each other’s arms after having a round of sweet sex full of love.

Two days later, Stephan received an invitation from Alistair to go to the palace where his father and Vincent would be waiting for them. They would be returning to the palace after almost a century.

*Meeting Vincent for the first time in years is going to be bittersweet.*

They stood in front of one another, wondering who was going to make the first move. Brothers reunited after so many years was a moment neither one could ever imagine. Stephan hugged his brother and Uncle George. “I don’t have words to express how thankful I am to you for saving Vincent.” George hugged Stephan tightly once again and he missed his brother James.

Stephan turned to Vincent. “I want to say there would’ve been nothing to stop me from tracking you down if I had known you survived. Mourning you was the worst thing to happen to me. It ripped out my heart, and I have never been the same. I attribute my beating heart coming alive once again to one person. She has opened up my eyes, and I have welcomed her into my arms. I would like to do the same thing for you,” he addressed his brother with a lump in his throat, having no clue how he was going to respond to his overture.

Vincent stood his ground with a nod of his head. “I’ve had a lot of time to think about this on the way here from London. I was angry, and quite despondent. I thought you died, and I became bitter and disillusioned. I’m not proud of some of the things I’ve done. I wish I could take them back.” Vincent took a couple of tentative steps, and they were soon embracing. Mickey felt like a third wheel, but was enjoying this telling moment in her lover’s history.

Vincent and Stephan were there for almost a week, and they worked on renovating the palace, as nobody had lived there almost for a century.

Then Stephan returned to Australia after a week. Mickey missed him terribly, but they talked every night on the phone for hours until they couldn't keep their eyes open any longer.

Stephan was so grateful for having Mickey by his side. He didn't even think it was going to be this easy. He had always held himself back as he was afraid to tell Mickey that he was a dragon shifter. But she just accepted him without even asking a single question. He felt so lucky about that.

Now the only thing Stephan wanted was to be with Mickey. So, he planned, and his enterprise took him overseas to the United States, leaving Thomas to take over the business in Australia.

# Epilogue

Today was going to be a momentous occasion, and she was standing vigil at the front door waiting for him to make his presence known.

He came through the door soaking wet from head to toe. Forgetting his umbrella in the car had him making a mad dash through the downpour to the front door. Dropping it was necessary when he saw her in the black negligee transparent and sending signals to a certain part of his anatomy.

He kicked the door closed and reached out to tear the fabric from her milky flesh. Her tremble of excitement made him drop to his knees with his arms wrapped around her waist. It had been too long, and three months without her in his arms had him climbing the walls. Touching her and moving the material up along her legs until her sex was bared to him had him hungry to consume her. A flicker of his tongue made her legs shake.

“I will always be yours, and nothing can separate us, my love,” Mickey said as she shuddered. His tongue moved along her wet slit before circling her clit and drawing it into his mouth for a moment of unrestrained passion.

She rode his face and held the back of his head, her fingers digging into his scalp. It felt too good to put into words how he was able to play her body like a musical instrument. It was only the beginning, and then he slid the full length of his tongue inside of her. She wondered if she was going to be able to stand it any longer.

“I want to shout to the heavens how you make me feel.” She touched his lips.

“This is a dream come true for me. I was riddled with anxiety about my family history, but things changed dramatically. I can’t thank you in words. You are only reason I got everything back in my life.” He stood up and kissed her.

“I’m going crazy, and I don’t want anything to save me,” she said.



“My heart was broken. It’s amazing how you found your way into my life. I love you.” He kissed her lips and his tongue entered her mouth.

“Are you ready?” Stephan whispered and lightly nibbled her ear.

“Please, Stephan,” she begged.

Stephan smiled and thrust into her. She could feel the passion and the pleasure in her bones, and the heat generated brought forth an animalistic cry of release. The whole world was singing her name and she could hear their voices applauding her. The orgasm was one for the record books and she went completely ballistic with her entire body collapsing with him on top of her. He finally released inside her and lay down on top of her with his hand outstretched, holding a gift from the heart.

The top of the box came open with a flick of his finger to reveal the diamond engagement ring inside, nestled nice and neat against the backdrop of purple velvet. The diamond was an example of perfection. He let the moment sink in before popping the all-important question.

“Will you marry me?” He didn’t have to wait long for an answer when she turned to face him with a huge smile on her face.

“Yes!” She uttered that one word more powerful than anything she could say. Stephan had gotten more than he bargained for with his brother and the love of his life, making him complete.

“Thanks for your unconditional love. I love you, Mickey,” he said and kissed her forehead. She admired the peaceful smile on his face. She hugged him and let her head rest on his chest.

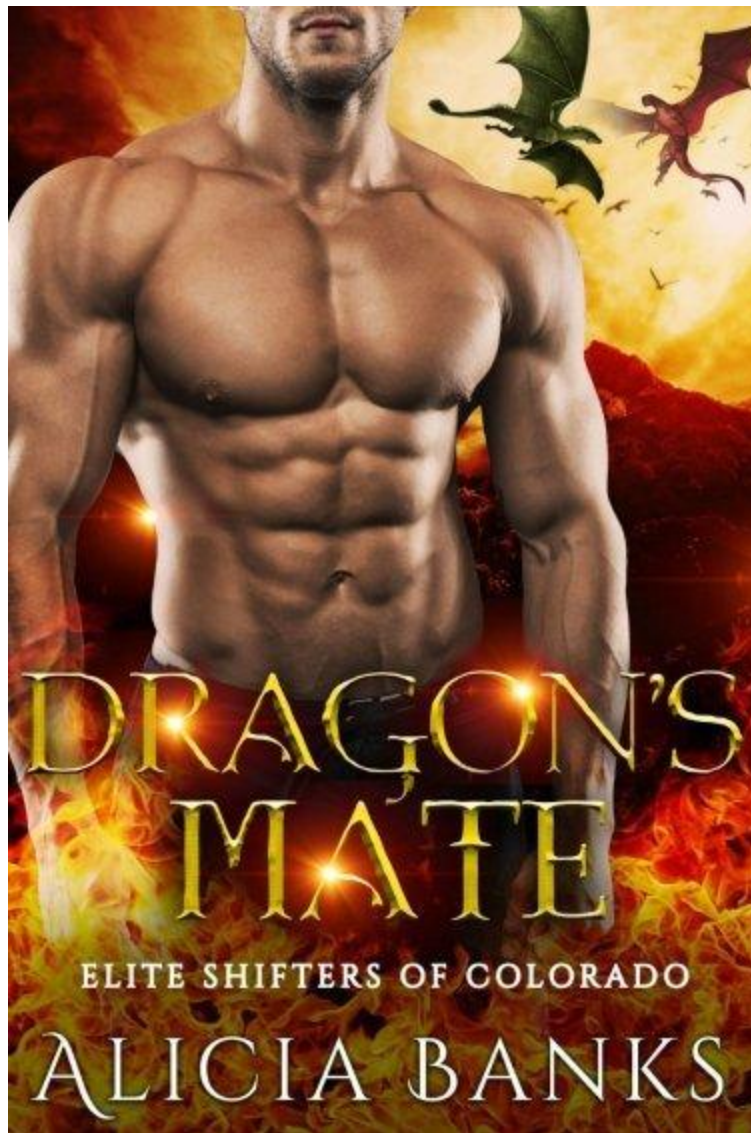
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**~THE END~**

Thank you much for buying this book. This is my third Paranormal Romance Story, which is the second book in the Elite Shifters of Colorado Series. I hope you liked it. Attaching sample of my First Book in the Series in the next page. Please have a look.

Thanks!

**Sample: Dragon's Mate (Elite Shifters of Colorado Book 1)**



BLURB:

**#Elite Dragon Shifter: Strongest and fiercest of the shifter clans.**

**#He is a rebel, stubborn, powerful and son of a King, bound to keep his bloodline pure.**

My mate comes from an ancient and powerful line of dragon shifters.  
I should feel honored and privileged, but I want that human florist.  
She is beautiful as those flower arrangements she makes.  
I couldn't resist warmth of her touch and heat of her body when she asks for help in the gym.  
My mate deserves love, but my heart pulls me in another direction.  
When her intoxicating smell enters my nostrils, I am out of control...  
And now she carries my baby.  
I will turn the world upside down to protect her, save her.  
I am ready to fight; I am ready to kill, even if it is my own Dad.  
It is time to break the boundaries and the years old hollow traditions.  
But... she just got to know I am engaged, and she is not even ready see my face.

**She just knows the half of it, what will happen if she gets to know I am a dragon shifter?**



# Chapter 1

## *Sarai*

A phone released its shrill ring as Sarai walked across the floor to answer it. She picked up the receiver. “Petals to the Metal, this is Sarai, how can I help you?”

Sarai emerged from the vast array of white tubs. They were full of various brightly colored blooms. They filled the air with their sweet perfume. The top of her head was the color of cotton candy, with twists of midnight blue ringlets that cascaded down her shoulders to fall just above her wide hips. She was dressed in her favorite rock tee and neon green leggings. She wore a white apron over it with Petals to the Metal in neon green. Her mom had embroidered her name on it with neon pink thread. In her hand she clutched a bundle of orchids.

“Ok, so that’s two white orchids on a pearl bracelet with a pink ribbon. That will run you \$25. I can do an orchid on the pink ribbon for \$10.” The counter was covered in corsages. She picked up a pair of shears and began cutting stems off as she cradled the phone between her shoulder and her ear. Sarai was an excellent multitasker.

“Coming through!” Mickey said, carrying one of the large white tubs full of pink and white tulips. Unlike Sarai, Mickey was more normal looking with black dyed hair and a diamond stud nose ring. She was dressed in low rise jeans and a white floral top under her apron. Mickey stopped to lift the cord of the phone above her head as she slipped around the counter and behind Sarai.

“Tell you what. I can do a shiny pink ribbon for her wrist and then a sheer ribbon tied around the stem of the orchid. Will that do?”

Business was booming. And the next few days were going to be hectic. It was homecoming weekend in the valley at three different high schools, so

they had hundreds of corsages to make. And there was a wedding that weekend. Bridal bouquets, boutonnieres, and floral arrangements had to be made. On top of that were birthday bouquets, get well bouquets, I'm sorry bouquets, first date bouquets, anniversary bouquets, and just because bouquet orders coming in daily. They were swamped. She only had a very small staff: her, her best friend Mickey, their delivery boy, and one other employee who kept the tubs filled with fresh water.

The bell above the door jingled and Mickey looked up at the sound. A tall, dark, and handsome man strolled in through the door. He was dressed in tight jeans and a black muscle shirt that accentuated the tanned and muscular body underneath. It was alluring, and Mickey couldn't help but watch him with hungry eyes.

He had long black hair that hung around his shoulders and he removed a pair of sunglasses that revealed honey brown eyes. There was an air of arrogance about him, in the way he held his head up, and the way he walked with purpose.

"Yeah, I can do that for ten. Not a problem. You can pick it up between three and six day of. Have fun at homecoming." Sarai had her back to the door, so she didn't see the man who walked in.

Mickey poked Sarai as she hung up the phone and wrote down an order. "Well, hello there," Mickey said under her breath. She clicked her tongue and looked him up and down. She nudged Sarai, who rolled her eyes and smacked her before going to the counter.

The man smiled at Mickey's comment and stopped at the counter. A Rolex, on his wrist, flashed its diamonds as he moved his locks of raven hair out of his face.

"Welcome to Petals to the Metal. Can I help you, sir?"

"Yes," he purred, and Mickey sighed beside her.

"I apologize for my drooling employee." Sarai grinned as Mickey waved slyly and winked.

"It's no trouble." He laughed arrogantly, as if he was used to girls fawning over him.

"I'm sure it isn't." She blushed, embarrassed at her own stupid comment. "Anyway, how can I help you?"

"I need some flowers. An arrangement of red roses should do." He flashed her a smile that showed off his pearly white teeth.

“What’s it for?” Sarai asked as she grabbed the order pad and pen. She tore off the previous order and then wrote down the new one.

“A dinner party, if you must know,” he stated with no hint of emotion.

“You just want a bouquet of red roses?” Sarai asked. “How many roses in it?”

“I believe I said an arrangement,” he snapped and then flashed his perfect teeth again.

“Right, an arrangement. How big of an arrangement are you thinking?” Sarai nibbled on the tip of her pen.

“Just make me an arrangement with red roses.” He was either annoyed or nervous; she couldn’t quite read him.

“Look, red roses are beautiful, but can I suggest something better?” She picked an orchid up off the counter that hadn’t yet been tied with a ribbon. “Orchids are a much more extravagant choice, and we happen to have plenty left over from our homecoming order. We always order extra. And, for contrast, orchids go great with lilies. I can make you a gorgeous arrangement with brightly colored orchids and white lilies. It will be so much prettier than plain old red, boring roses. I know because they happen to be my favorite flowers, so I always make myself an arrangement of them for my birthday.”

“This flower you hold in your hand, this is an orchid?”

“Yes.”

He rubbed his chin thoughtfully as he studied the flower. “Do you have an example of an arrangement so I can have a better idea?” he asked after an awkward moment.

“As a matter of fact, I do.” She opened a book on the counter and flipped it to her favorite arrangement. “I made this one for my birthday last year. I just happen to have these colors in stock.”

“This is gorgeous. As gorgeous as the woman who made it.” He winked, making her blush.

It caught Sarai off guard, and she melted a bit. “Oh, that’s sweet of you to say.”

“Alright, Sarai.” He attempted to read her name off her chest.

She smiled and blushed again.

“Alright, I’ll take this one.” He tapped the page. Then he reached into his pocket for his overstuffed wallet and plucked the bills from it. He put

the now empty wallet on the counter and started counting his fistful of cash.

“Awesome!” She looked around at all the work she still had to do before the weekend. “So, do you need it immediately?”

“No. I don’t need it till Sunday. There’s a family dinner, and she will be there.”

“Oh, they’re for a special lady?” She asked as she rung it up. “If it’s a romantic bouquet--”

“I never said it was a romantic bouquet. I believe my exact word for it was arrangement.” He suddenly turned off the charm and his eyes seemed to darken.

“Right.” She rung him up. “I’ll have the flowers delivered.” He handed her the bills she asked for and waited impatiently for her to count out the change. As she was counting out the last few bills, a shrill sound emanated from her wrist.

“What is that annoying sound coming from your wristwatch?”

“Ah! It’s protein shake time.” He cocked his head at her with curiosity. “I’ve been exercising at home and using the keto diet.” He raised a brow at her. “I’m trying to tone up for a charity race in a few months for muscular dystrophy. One of my moms has it.”

“You have two moms?” he asked with surprise in his voice.

“Yeah. I was adopted at a young age by them,” Sarai explained as she got her shake from the mini fridge under the counter.

“Two moms. How intriguing. Do you have two dads, too?” His question was one she’d heard time and time again.

“No. Just two moms.” She took a drink of her shake as he made a face.

“I am curious, why don’t you work out at a gym? Unless you have your own gym equipment and a personal trainer at home with you, a home workout will hardly equal the proper workout you would get at a gym.”

“Gyms make me feel nervous. People at gyms can be so judgmental. I mean look at me, do I look like the kind of girl who belongs in a gym?”

“Well, maybe you’ve just been to the wrong one.” He pulled out his wallet again and pulled a card from it. “I happen to own a gym. I’m a personal trainer, in fact.”

“Really? I would have never guessed,” she said as she looked him over. This was the first time their eyes locked for few seconds, and his intense eyes made her heart shrink.

“I would be happy to help. Two weeks of training on me. I mean, after all, you’re running for a great cause.” He handed her his card.

“Thanks!” She watched him walk out. Mickey slid over.

“Oh my gosh, what a dream!” Mickey said, still too much hunger in her eyes.

“He owns a gym.”

“Yeah, I was eavesdropping. You should go.” Mickey finished wrapping the bouquet she was working on with the floral tape and picked up the next one. Sarai returned to cutting orchid stems.

“To his gym? I don’t know. I found him a bit rough and arrogant.”

“Why not? One on one time with that hot stud? Imagine him without his shirt. I’m sure a guy like that doesn’t exercise in a shirt.”

Sarai blushed. She looked down at the card in her hand. Alastair Quentin. *Oh gosh, even his name sounded arrogant.*

She couldn’t stop herself from imagining him without a shirt. He was tanned and muscular, and she imagined he had a six pack and rock-hard abs.

“You’re picturing it.” Mickey teased her.

“Am not!” she protested. “I need more lilies.” She held the tub out to Mickey. “Go! Get me more lilies,” she demanded.

“Yes, boss.” Mickey teased as she took the tub and went to get more blooms.

The phone began to ring. “Petals to the Metal, this is Sarai. Hello again, Mrs. Forester. Yes, we have your order. You want to change it to pink Gerber daisies and white peonies? No, that shouldn’t be a problem.” She rolled her eyes. This was the third time the wedding flowers had been changed.

“Yes, the price would go up for labor. Because we already started the bouquets and it would take extra time now to undo what we’ve already done and start on the new ones. We have the bride’s bouquet done and two of the four bridesmaids done... Six bridesmaids?” Sarai searched her desk for the order. “I have the order right here; it was for four. Ok, that’s not a problem. I can make two more, but it will cost more. Let me figure that out, and I’ll have my assistant call you back. Thank you, Mrs. Forester.”

Mickey came back with the tub of lilies. “Who was that?”

“Mrs. Forester.”

“Not again!”



“I need to crunch new numbers for her, and I need you to get me pink Gerber daisies and white peonies. Then go to the craft shop and get me more floral tape and more yellow ribbon, oh- and two more bouquet holders. She added two bridesmaids.”

“I’m on it. All this stress... you should go to work out at the gym.” Mickey winked.

“Go get me my supplies. Do I look like I have time for the gym?”

“Here are the orchids and the lilies for Mr. Dreamy’s arrangement.” Mickey had that teasing smile on her face.

“Take them back, the wedding bouquets have priority,” Sarai said, trying to pretend that Alistair had not made any impact on her.

Sarai flipped a dial on her radio and rock music blasted through the store. She rocked out as she began stripping the previously made bouquets so they could start over.

# Chapter 2

## *Alistair*

It had been a few days since he had gone to the flower shop and met Sarai, and he couldn't get her out of his head. The young woman had to be around 23. She was stunningly beautiful and once his eyes had landed on her, he felt breathless. And her twinkling blue eyes bothered him most.

Alistair finished getting dressed for the dinner. A dinner he was suddenly dreading. He came down and noticed the orchid and lily arrangement was already there on the table. It was even more magnificent than it had looked in the book. It made him moody seeing it there, since it meant that Sarai had already dropped it off. He had missed his chance to see her again, since she had yet to take him up on his offer for the gym.

She was eccentric, hot, and interesting- unlike most of the girls he usually saw. He had spent extra hours at the gym, hoping that she would walk in while he was doing paperwork or working out, but she hadn't showed. He continued thinking about Sarai, picturing her as she had leaned against the counter, her shirt sagging a bit, hinting at cleavage.

*No. How I can even think like that. It's wrong.*

He shook the thought of it off as his arranged mate, Phoebe, came in. Phoebe was nothing like Sarai. She was tall, slender, with golden colored hair that nearly swept the floor. Phoebe was dressed in an elegant lace gown, in a delicate shade of blue. Her face was perfectly painted with no adornments. Her neck and ears dripped with large jewels. Alistair thought back to Sarai's face. He had noticed the diamonds at the corners of her mouth. He had never seen anything like it before, and it made him wonder what it would be like to kiss a mouth so adorned like that. Phoebe coughed gently, bringing him back to the moment.

“Phoebe, you look lovely, darling.” He politely and ceremoniously kissed her cheek.

“Hello, Alistair. Oh, what a pretty flower arrangement,” she said, eyeing the beautiful blooms on the table.

“I’m glad you like it. The florist suggested it. I was going to go with something simpler, more elegant, like red roses.”

“I like this.” Phoebe gently touched an orchid. “Such vibrant colors. It brightens this dull room.”

“Yes. Indeed, it does.” He smiled to himself. “Are you ready for...”

“The show? As ready as I’ll ever be. You?”

He gave her a smirk. The doors opened wide from the other side. Four older adults, dressed in ancient finery, entered the room. The women wore gowns and jewels adorned their head, ears, neck, and waist. Unlike Phoebe's jewels that were elegant but understated, their mothers’ jewels were gaudy and ancient. Their fathers were dressed in ceremonial silk robes. Alistair had forgone his robe for a nice suit. His father’s eyes flashed with rage for his son’s disdain for their customs and traditions.

“Phoebe, don’t you look divine,” his father greeted her.

“Thank you, Lord Quentin.” She took his hand and curtsied. Then she and Alistair's mother curtsied to each other. Alistair bowed to her parents.

“I see your son has no respect.”

“I bowed, didn’t I?” Alistair grumbled.

“You’ll have to forgive Alistair; he prefers the human world and modern living. Shall we?” His father indicated the huge dining room table that held a feast fit for a king, displayed on shiny gold platters. The gold goblets were decked with jewels. Even the utensils had jewels on them. A massive chandelier hung above their heads, the light from it catching the jewels and making everything sparkle.

Everyone took their seats. His father remained standing. “A toast to the bride and groom, may you honor and carry on the traditions of the dragon shifter. As you both know, the dragon shifter dates to ancient times. We are the last of our kind, the nine clans. It is our responsibility to ensure that dragons live on. So, we bind these two young dragons in marriage so that they will continue to carry on the traditions and customs and keep the dragon shifter alive.”

Alistair glanced at his fidgety bride, who looked as if she was a human maiden about to be sacrificed to a dragon. She was a waif of a girl, barely

his age, but she came from an ancient and powerful line of shifters. He should feel honored and privileged that her father had chosen him as her mate, but the sparkling jewels reminded him of the tiny diamonds in Sarai's face, and that made him think about the curve of Sarai's lips. For the first time in his long life, he began to question his parents and their way of life.

"It is our duty as the nobles of the dragon shifters to ensure that there will always be dragon shifters. We do this by keeping the bloodlines pure. We are the strongest and fiercest of the shifter clans, and we must always rule over them all."

"We don't rule them anymore, this isn't the old days, Father." Alistair couldn't help himself.

"Alistair, hold your tongue when your elder is speaking," His father snapped at him. His eyes flashed with anger. Alistair stared him down, his own eyes flashing. A hand touched his, and his eyes softened. He turned to see Phoebe looking at him, her hand still resting on his clenched fist. He pulled his hand away, still seething, but he remained sitting even as he fought every urge to flee to the solitary sanctuary of his gym. His father continued his speech.

"Many clans have fallen due to breeding with humans. Though we must be forced to live amongst them, we do not need to breed with them. We must continue to breed with one another, and so, as tradition states, the clan of Quentin and the clan of McCallister, this green and this blue, are a good match. Today, we honor our ancestors by raising our glass in celebration of combining these two houses, in the promise for a union."

Alistair stared at the table where the flower arrangement was center stage. The beauty of the blooms calmed him some. The arrangement reminded him of its maker, and that brought a smile to his face. He couldn't get her off his mind, no matter how much he tried not to think of her.

"Alistair, your glass, raise it; your father has given a toast. Where is your head?" His mother's voice cut into his thoughts.

He hadn't realized his father had finished the toast. He quickly lifted it, gave a halfhearted smile at Phoebe and obediently took a sip of the wine in his goblet. His father began the ceremonious carving of the peacock that still had its head attached, the feathers tucked beneath it and plumed for an elegant display. It had been stuffed with a savory bread pudding and was surrounded by baked apples and blood sausage. Once he had made the first cut and had taken the ceremonious bite, the knife and fork were passed to

Phoebe's father who made his ceremonious cut and took his bite. Then the peacock was whisked away so that the servants could carve the rest of it to serve after the soup and salad courses.

No one spoke as they shoveled the food into their mouths. Alistair was grateful for that. He liked to enjoy his food, and lobster bisque happened to be one of his favorite dishes. He glanced at Phoebe who seemed to be mindlessly stirring hers. "Not to your liking?"

She leaned over and whispered, "How can you eat? My stomach is in knots."

"Try to eat something, they're staring."

She obediently began to eat, and the elders returned to their own eating. The empty soup bowls and salad plates were removed and heaping plates of peacock, blood sausage, and baked apples came out and were placed in front of each person. Phoebe ate her baked apples but didn't touch the blood sausage or the peacock, so Alistair waited till the elders were busy eating and snatched her blood sausage from her plate. She gave him a grateful smile.

"What? I happen to like it. Try the peacock, it's not much different from turkey." She took a bite and found he was right; it wasn't much different from turkey. At last, their plates were emptied and whisked away, just in time for dessert. A massive flaming pile of meringues was wheeled out on a cart. The servants put out the flames and cut into the meringues. Under the meringues were layers of fabulous fruits, candied nuts, smooth cold custard, and creamy chocolate mousse. Alistair savored every bite.

"Shall we adjourn for coffee and let the love birds have some time alone together?" his mother suggested.

"A wonderful idea," her mother said. They all walked out, leaving Alistair and Phoebe sitting at the table.

Phoebe sighed heavily. Knowing he wasn't the only one not thrilled by the match brought a smile to Alistair's face.

"What do you say we get out of here?" He stood and offered her his hand.

"What do you have in mind?" she asked as she took it and allowed him to pull her from her chair.

"Fresh air?"

"Yes, that would be wonderful." They walked through the doors of the dining hall and passed the parlor where they could hear the parents talking,

then passed through a gilded archway. Alistair stopped to open a pair of French glass doors, and they stepped out onto the terrace that looked over the vast sparkling pool. The moon was bright, and the stars were already out.

Phoebe spoke softly. "Our yard is full of ancient statues of, well, what else, dragons. They represent the dragons that came before us. Father is very big on ancestry and tradition. He's furious that he never had a son. He's never forgiven my mother for that."

"Tradition." Alistair scoffed. "If tradition stated that the father of the groom must throw himself into a volcano on the night his son and heir was to be wed, my father would do it. He would find a live volcano, climb to the top of it and throw himself in. He follows tradition blindly and never dares to question it. I think some of our traditions are wrong, or at the very least old and outdated. They don't work in this time, this century, but does he care? No. Tradition is tradition and it must be followed no matter what. Tell me, Phoebe, is this really the life you want? Do you really want to be bound to me for life?"

"Why wouldn't I? Doesn't every girl wish to be sold and bound to their master, I mean husband? Used for breeding and then ignored and cast aside, as if she isn't even a living breathing thing? And curse her soul if she dares not give him an heir." She flashed him a smirk. "Isn't it the life you want?"

"I'm a male dragon, of course it's the life I want. I want to live my life stooped in ridiculous traditions and customs that are so convoluted it's not always easy to understand them. Curse my soul if I mess it up," he grunted. She giggled.

She walked ahead of him to the water's edge where the terrace met the pool. She kneeled, careful to keep her skirt out of the water, and ran her hand through the cool liquid.

"Right, that's why you have the human-accepting gym."

"The humans give me money to amass my great fortune."

"Admit it, you like humans. There's nothing to be ashamed of. What the traditionalists seem to forget is we were humans once, too." He laughed.

Her father appeared at the door. "There you are, Phoebe. We're leaving. Say goodnight."

"Goodnight, Alistair."

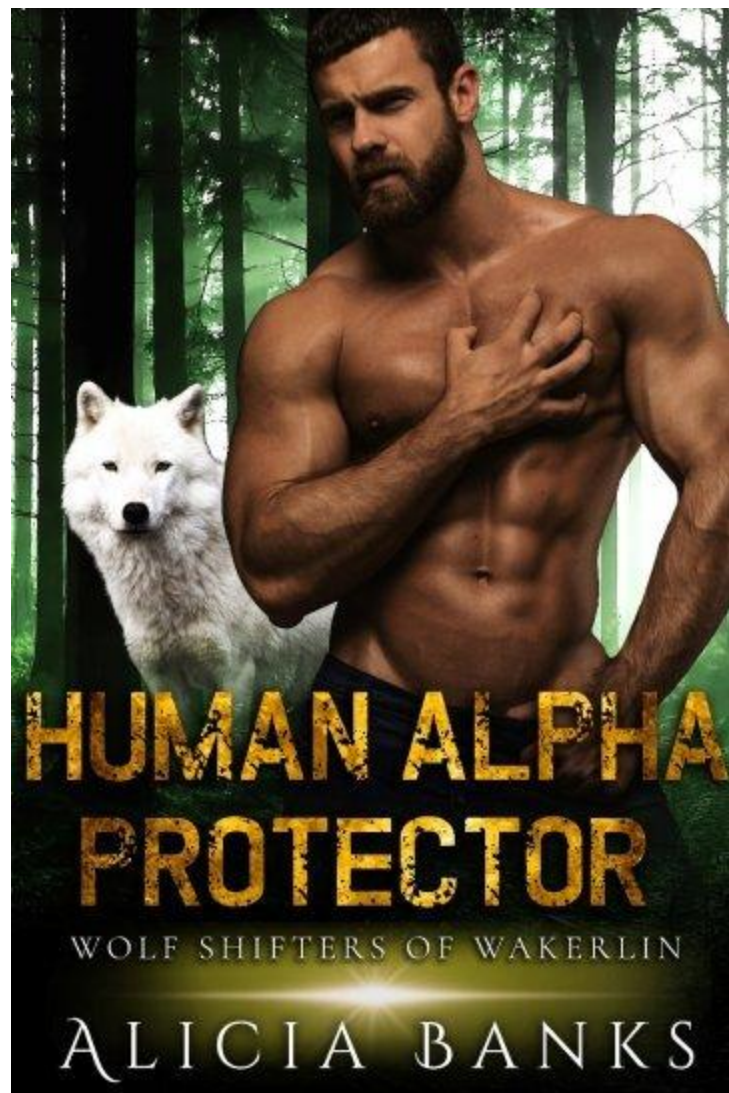
"Goodnight, Phoebe." He sighed with relief that the night was over. He stripped out of his suit and dove into the pool of cool water. His thoughts

once again returned to the flower shop and its sexy owner.

(End of Sample)

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Email:

[aliciabanksbooks@gmail.com](mailto:aliciabanksbooks@gmail.com)

or

[contact@aliciabanksbooks.com](mailto:contact@aliciabanksbooks.com)

Facebook:

[Author Alicia Banks](#)

Facebook Page:

[Alicia Banks](#)

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**Alicia Banks**