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KINDRED OF  
ARKADIA 7

**Gifts  
of Fate**

Alanea Alder



## Kindred of Arkadia 7

# Gifts of Fate

It's Christmas in Arkadia. Which could only mean one thing. Chaos! The babies are due any minute and Rian is on a rampage trying to get the Pride House ready to be featured in the Council newsletter.

Even though it's supposed to be the "Most Wonderful Time of the Year" the newly mated couples are finding it hard to get into the spirit. Tempers are running high and nerves are frayed. Fear and doubt linger throughout the town like an oppressive, dark cloud. Will the mated couples be saying Merry Christmas or good-bye to the ones they love? Can the town avoid death and tragedy?

Will Fate bless these couples twice in one year? Who will receive *Gifts of Fate*?

NOTE! *Gifts of Fate* is a holiday reunion book in the Kindred of Arcadia series and includes mixed romantic pairings. It is not stand-alone. We recommend reading this book after books 1-6.

**Genre:** Alternative (M/M or F/F), Contemporary, Paranormal, Shape-shifter, Vampires/Werewolves

**Length:** 21,734 words

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# **GIFTS OF FATE**

*Kindred of Arkadia 7*

**Alanea Alder**

**EROTIC ROMANCE**



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GIFTS OF FATE

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## DEDICATION

I hope that you are curled up somewhere nice and toasty with a mug of your favorite cuppa.

It's not a very long book, but I hope it brings Arkadia to your home for the evening and helps you deal with your own personal chaos that is the holiday season.

From my home to yours, Happy Holidays!

Much love,

Alanea

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# **GIFTS OF FATE**

*Kindred of Arkadia 7*

**ALANEA ALDER**

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## Prologue

“Prince Gabriel, I have contacted all of the regional coven leaders, they have already sent us whatever blood they had stored. We’re running out of options.” Roman removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes. Gabriel sat at his desk in his office at the coven house, elbows on the desktop with his crossed fingers covering his lips.

“We’re out of time. Baron gave us a month before he came for Rhys, it’s already been that long. He’s probably giving us some leeway due to Christmas being right around the corner, but I fear he will be coming soon. He will come and there won’t be anything I can do to stop him.”

“It won’t be the same without hearing Rhys at Christmas,” Roman said in a pained voice.

“It was the reason why I turned him.” Gabriel sighed and stared down at the council paperwork that had been sent back to him, a faint smile on his lips.

“You still haven’t told Ashby, have you?”

Gabriel shook his head.

“It all happened so fast. With everything going on with Rhys and the Inner Court about to give birth, I haven’t really had the chance. The timing couldn’t be worse.”

“What are we going to do?”

Gabriel looked up and Roman was shocked at the depth of sadness and hopelessness that he saw.

“I don’t know.”

# Chapter 1

*Rebecca*

*Dec 20<sup>th</sup> - Afternoon*

“Oh the weather outside is frightful, but the fire is so delightful.” Rebecca sang cheerfully as she hung fresh garland and wreaths up in the diner. She loved Christmas. The snow outside reminded her of the magical day when she first came to Arkadia. So much had happened in the past year, it felt like she had lived here all her life.

The diner smelled like Ma’s beef stew, homemade bread and cinnamon from the desserts baking in the oven. She was about to get on the stepladder when she heard a low growl from her mate. She looked behind her to see Liam already standing from where he sat with his mates to come over and assist. He winked at her and took the garland from her hands. She turned to Aleks.

“You don’t have to be so growly.”

“You should know better than to be climbing around on a step ladder. You’re due any day now. You’re so big you’d probably topple off to one side.”

Rebecca gasped and looked down at her stomach. She secretly complained to Ashby and Sebastian about how big she was because she didn’t want to worry Aleks, but damn the man for calling her out on it in the diner.

“I’m not that big. I’m perfectly healthy.” She sniffed.

Liam leaned down and whispered, “You know he’s just worried. We all are. You’re just so tiny and let’s face it, your tummy is not.” He kissed the top of her head, arranged the last section of garland, and stepped down.

“I’m fine. We both are. Drill sergeant over there has been keeping track of how many steps I take from the den to the bathroom, how many ounces of water I drink and all my pre-natal vitamins.” She smiled sweetly at Aleks before sticking her tongue out at him and rubbing her tummy.

“Have you picked out a name yet?” Ashby asked, grinning. Rebecca could kiss the man. He always seemed to know exactly what she was

feeling and what to do to make her feel better. Bringing up choosing a baby name would be a fun way to bring her overbearing bear down a notch or two. He had been dogging her every step for the past month and restricted her visits to the diner. Torturing him was her only form of entertainment.

“I think I have.”

“It has to be an ‘A’ name,” Aleks jumped in. She had been teasing him about naming the baby Gabriel for weeks.

“I found the perfect name. Aloisius. It’s Liam’s middle name and I think it will suit my baby right down to his little purr,” Rebecca said, taking a seat across from Ashby who had his back to Aleks. He caught her eye and winked.

“That’s a fine name,” Liam exclaimed, jumping on the bandwagon.

“Like hell! We are not naming my son Aloisius! And he does not purr, he growls!” Aleks rumbled.

“Hmmm I don’t know, it feels like a purr to me,” Rebecca said innocently.

“It’s a growl.”

“A purr could sound like a growl,” Kaden added.

“Especially from her tummy like that,” Rex chimed in with a straight face.

Rebecca looked around and realized most of the pride was in the diner.

“It’s a growl, dammit!”

“It’s okay, Aloisius, daddy loves you no matter what, even if you purr.” Rebecca made kissy noises to her stomach.

“He is not going to be Aloisius!” Aleks roared.

“You said I got to pick the first name since you picked the middle name,” Rebecca reminded him.

“That was because of a family tradition,” Aleks protested.

“Not my problem. Oh!” Rebecca rubbed her stomach and looked over to Sebastian who had also grabbed his midsection.

Liam, Kent, and Aleks both jumped up and went to their mates.

“What is it?” Aleks ran a gentle hand over Rebecca’s stomach.

“Are you okay, kitten?” Liam asked.

“That felt funny,” Sebastian said, frowning.

“I feel fine now,” Rebecca said, tilting her head back for a kiss. No matter what was going on Aleks had a way of making time stop every time

their lips touched. He didn't disappoint. He delved into her mouth and nibbled on her lips. When they broke apart she sighed happily. Aleks didn't return to the barstool, he grabbed a chair and sat close to her, taking her hand in his.

Liam and Kent sat back down on either side of Sebastian, looking worried.

"You both let us know if you feel it again, we'll run get Doc," Liam said. Kent nodded.

"Hey Liam, why is most of the pride here, except for Rian and Damian? Are y'all fumigating or something?" Rebecca asked. Liam winced and the pride members all looked away. Her eyes narrowed.

"What?" she demanded.

"Rian is going on somewhat of a rampage," Kent started.

"The pride house was chosen to be featured in the Council's holiday newsletter that will come out in January. Rian wants everything to be perfect for the photo shoot," Sebastian continued.

"Christmas has always been a tough time for Rian." Liam sighed and leaned back in his chair. Sebastian wrapped an arm around him, showing his support. Liam smiled down at his lover.

"The first Christmas after the pride left was a lonely one for us. We didn't have many new pride members at that point. Rian called his parents and asked if they would come home to visit. They led him on, letting him think that they were coming, and then cancelled on Christmas Eve. Rian had gone out of his way to dig out old decorations and make the place homey. The following year he invited them again. He really missed his little sister. Again, they made it sound like they were coming back and cancelled last minute. Rian has been waiting every year for the past fifteen years for his family to come back, and they never do. He wants this photo shoot to be perfect, because in his mind, if his family sees how amazing the pride house looks now they will want to come visit."

"They will never go against my father though." Liam shook his head.

"So, we'll sleep on the front lawn if we have to, so the house will be exactly as he wants it for the newsletter," Rex added.

"With the bulbs exactly six inches apart on the tree," Kaden said, smiling.

“And the candles burned down exactly one inch which shows they have been used but not too much.” Talon grinned.

“I think that you all are amazing men. Rian is very lucky to have you.” Rebecca wanted to kiss all of them but knew Aleks would get mad.

“We’ll just spend more time at the diner.” Kent laughed. Sebastian scowled. Rebecca looked at her friend.

“What’s the matter, don’t you like it here?” she asked.

He looked up, surprised.

“You mean you haven’t met Jacinda yet?”

Rebecca shook her head. “Who is that? I thought I knew everyone in town already.”

“She moved in a few weeks ago. Flamingo shifter. And a hussy!” Sebastian spat.

“Sebastian. Language.” Ma called from behind the counter. Sebastian turned to face Ma.

“But, Ma, that is me watching my language, I really wanted to call her a cum-guzzling, mate-stealing whore,” Sebastian hissed.

Rebecca felt her eyes widen.

“It’s true,” Ashby said quietly. Rebecca turned to her normally sweet best friend, who hated to say a harsh word about anyone.

“Normally I’d just say we were, you know, being a little bitchy. But this woman is nasty. She only goes after mated men or gay men. Mated gay men are like a special challenge to her. She said that gay men are only gay because they haven’t fucked the right woman yet.” Ashby’s blue eyes took on a decidedly cold look.

“She has flat-out asked Liam and Kent for a threesome. She said she wanted to be in the middle of a lion sandwich, right in front of me, pregnant belly showing and everything. I wanted to claw that bitch’s eyes out.” Sebastian growled.

“I think Gabriel frightens her, but she has made no qualms about coming on to me. Baptista had to physically step between the two of us at Sweet Nothings the other day. She was trying to fish her hand down my pants!” Ashby turned a brilliant shade of scarlet. Rebecca turned in her chair to face her mate.

“Fair warning. You flirt with this woman and I will shoot you. If I think you may be flirting I will shoot you. If I think she may be thinking about

flirting with you, I will shoot you. If I think you think she may be flirting with you, I'll shoot you." Rebecca stared up into her mate's eyes.

"Wait. What! Why do I get shot?" Aleks demanded.

"Because I technically can't shoot her without provocation, but I can shoot you all day long. I know, because I checked with the council about that," Rebecca said smugly. Aleks nodded and then stopped.

"Why would you ask the council about that?" he asked, his eyes taking on a dangerous glint.

"Just sayin'." Rebecca shrugged.

"No, seriously, Becca. Why did you ask about shooting me?" Aleks asked. Rebecca ignored him and turned to the table.

"So we're all in agreement. Jacinda is bad news and we're on mate watch. If you see her sidling up to one of our mates, we cock block that bitch!" Rebecca shouted, throwing her small fist in the air.

"Can we get in on that protection?" Kaden asked.

"Yeah, I don't want that woman coming anywhere near me." Talon shuddered.

"Absolutely! Gotta protect my peeps!" Rebecca nodded.

"Did you guys get a tree yet?" Sebastian asked, changing the subject. Rebecca shook her head then brightened.

"No, but I think I'll surprise Aleks tomorrow and go out and cut one down. He can drag it in later. I've been dying to use my new chainsaw." She bounced happily in her chair. Aleks wasn't the only one who turned a shade paler.

"No," Aleks said simply.

"But."

"No."

"But I wanna."

Aleks took her chin between his thumb and forefinger and rubbed his nose against hers.

"No, Becca. Tomorrow we'll go out together and you can pick any tree you want and I'll chop it down," he said firmly. She sighed.

"Okay, but I wanna use my chainsaw soon." She turned to Ma.

"Ma, does Arkadia do a town tree? Like in the square?" she asked. Ma stopped what she was doing and looked over thoughtfully.

“A long time ago we did. But not since before the boys were born,” she admitted. Rebecca smiled, an idea forming in her mind.

“Uh oh,” Sebastian said.

“Oh dear,” Ashby sighed.

“What?” Liam and Aleks demanded at the same time.

“She has an idea.” Sebastian grinned.

“She’s smirking, which means it’s probably a good idea,” Ashby added.

“You know me so well, my fellow cohorts. I’ll text you details later. But I think you manly men should get a tree for the square for our town Christmas party on Christmas Eve. Maybe we can get Peyton to leave the bar for the party.” She hummed along to Elvis’s “Blue Christmas.”

“We can do that. I bet a tree would be an incentive to leave the bar. I know Mojo has been working with him a lot lately. Poor kid is still terrified to leave the bar. Liam, Kent, are you guys available later to help with the town tree?” Aleks asked. Both men nodded. Aleks leaned in close to his mate.

“You know I don’t like that texting,” Aleks grumbled in her ear.

“That’s because your nosy self is used to being able to eavesdrop on all my conversations. Not anymore. *Muwahahahaha*.” Rebecca held her phone as if she were holding a light saber. “The force is with me.” She grinned.

“Better watch it or...” Sebastian gasped and his hands went to his belly. Rebecca dropped her phone on the table and clutched her stomach.

“Okay, I didn’t like that.” She frowned.

“When was the last one?” Aleks demanded.

“Three minutes and forty-one seconds ago,” Kent said, looking at his watch.

“I feel funny.” Sebastian rubbed his lower back.

“I’m calling Doc,” Liam said. He was reaching for his phone when Rebecca’s phone started to go off. Rebecca answered it.

“Hey, Kate. Did you feel that?” she asked. Kate laughed.

“More than you did. I’m in labor,” she said, sounding calm.

“Kate, did you want to wear your gown?” Caleb asked in the background.

“Yes, dear,” was Kate’s response.

“Forget the gown, where in the fuck is Doc! We called him like an hour ago. Riley! Riley, go see if Doc is outside.” They heard Bran’s voice in the



background grow louder then get softer as if he were pacing close to the phone and then away.

“Bran, calm down. We called him about fifteen minutes ago. He should be getting here any minute.” Kate chuckled and then gasped.

“Just breathe.” They heard Nic say.

Rebecca felt the same fluttering around her midsection. She turned to Sebastian, who nodded.

“So we’ve been picking up on you. Aleks and Liam were about to call Doc thinking we were the ones in labor. Oh my gosh, I can’t believe it’s time. How are you doing?” Rebecca asked.

“I’m fine. It’s been kinda off and on all day. It’s just getting stronger now. Nic has been an angel. Our bond seems to be as strong as the ones you share with Sebastian and Ashby. He came over this morning when I first started to get the small cramps. This is second time around for Caleb so he seems to be doing okay. He’s not freaking out like Bran, but he has been staring at the dresser for the past couple minutes trying to remember which drawer I keep my nightgowns in.” Rebecca could hear the smile in her voice.

“Hey.” Bran and Caleb protested at the same time.

“Did you pick out names yet? I know you were on the fence about one of them,” Rebecca asked.

“I think I’ll know for sure when I see them. I can’t wait to hold them.” Kate stopped and took a deep breath. Rebecca looked over to Kent who met her eyes. He looked down at his watch.

“She’s under two minutes apart.”

“Fuck! Fuck! Where is Doc?” Bran yelled.

“I think I hear his car,” Caleb said.

“I better let you go. They really aren’t handling this well,” Kate said.

“Did you want us to come over?” Rebecca asked.

“No, it’s okay. I have my mates and Nic and the pack. Besides, there’s no telling how long this will actually take. We’ll swing by the diner in a couple days to show them off. Oh! Okay that one hurt. Better run!”

“We love you, Katie Bell,” Ashby yelled.

“Bye guys!” Kate ended the call.

“Wow, I can’t believe it’s time already.” Rebecca shook her head.

“You know what Doc said. That one of you could set off the other two with false labor pains,” Liam said, eyeing his mate.

“I feel fine. I’m just picking up on Kate, that’s all.” Sebastian kissed Liam’s hand.

“Becca? How do you feel?” Aleks asked.

“I feel like I have butterflies flying around my abdomen. But that’s it. Will it be okay for Kate to bring the babies out in a few days?” She rubbed her belly.

“Shifter babies are a lot stronger than human newborns. In fact the fresh air will help them, their animals will get the scent of home. It’s very common for shifter newborns to be out and about the next day,” Ma explained.

“Does that mean I won’t be stuck in the house after the baby is born?” she asked excitedly. Everyone looked at Aleks. Ma shook her head.

“Maybe not you.” She smiled. Rebecca sighed.

“Come on, baby, let’s head home,” Aleks said, standing.

“Us too, kitten. I want to get you to bed,” Liam said, taking Sebastian’s hand.

“Good luck, guys,” Rex called out.

“Goodnight,” Rebecca said as Aleks helped her put her coat on.

Walking hand in hand, they left the diner and stepped out into the snow. They waved as Liam, Kent and Sebastian walked in the opposite direction toward their car. Rebecca turned her face up and opened her mouth. She loved to catch snowflakes. She looked over to see that Aleks was watching her with a look of love in his eyes that seemed to touch her soul.

“I love you,” she said simply, and watched his eyes darken.

“I love you too. You are my entire world, Becca.” He took her in his arms and rubbed his cheek on her head.

“Aloisius loves you too.” Aleks stepped back and eyed her suspiciously.

“You’re really not going to name him Aloisius are you?”

“*Hi-mi-tsu*,” she said, drawing out each syllable.

“I told you that you could watch anime as long as you didn’t speak Japanese to me. What did that mean?” Aleks grumbled.

“Secret.”

“Why can’t you tell me?” he asked.

“No. It means, secret.”

She smiled and took his hand, heading toward their truck.

“Becca. Baby? Aloisius? Really?” Aleks asked.

Smiling, she kept walking, enjoying the sound her boots made in the snow.

Christmas really was her favorite time of the year.

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## Chapter 2

*Kate*

*Dec 20<sup>th</sup> into Dec 21<sup>st</sup>*

Kate cuddled Landon and Lucas close and breathed through another contraction.

“That one was the worst one yet,” Nic panted. Through their bond he was getting echoes of her contractions.

“I’m so sorry about this, Nic,” Kate said, feeling horrible. She never dreamed that he would be experiencing contractions alongside her. Morning sickness and cravings were one thing, but this was real pain and she wouldn’t wish this on one of her best friends.

“It’s okay. This is probably the closest I’ll ever come to having kids. Besides, I wouldn’t trade our bond for anything. It’s worth some crazy-ass contractions,” Nic said.

“You’ll find someone, Nic. Fate seems to be busy in Arkadia matching everyone up. I doubt she’d forget you.” Kate took a deep breath and exhaled.

“How are things?” Doc asked, walking in with Felix.

“What took you so long, Doc? I heard your car get here like ten minutes ago,” Kate asked. Doc raised an eyebrow and looked over to where Riley and some of the other wolves stood looking embarrassed.

“Sorry, Kate, our wolves kinda freaked out. He’s a tiger and you’re our Alpha about to whelp. They didn’t want to let him in,” Riley explained, his cheeks burning.

“Oh. Thanks, guys. I think. How’d you get in?” Kate asked.

“I shifted my animal to wolf and brought him to the surface. Since he’s my mate, it helped,” Felix said, going to the long folding table they had set up in the room.

“Felix, you are, as usual, fabulous.” Kate smiled as Beverly and Gina walked in. Kate kissed the wiggling twins and handed them off.

“Good-night, boys. When you wake up in the morning hopefully you will have new siblings to play with.” Kate watched as Lucas waved a

chunky hand.

“*Nigh* Mama.” They called out.

“Call me if you need me, Kate,” Beverly offered, and left with Gina.

“Okay, people, let’s clear the room, non-essentials out,” Felix said. Nic stood as if to leave and Kate panicked.

“Nic, you can’t leave! I need you. You’re my breathing partner.” Kate grabbed his hand.

“I didn’t know, I mean Felix said non-essentials,” he said, looking down to where their hands were clasped.

“You are essential, Nic! I don’t know what kind of screwed-up job Rebecca, Ashby, Sebastian and I have been doing lately, that you don’t know that. But you are. You’re one of my closest friends and I need you for this.” Kate refused to let go of his hand.

Nic’s face transformed. His eyes brightened and he looked at Kate with a new sense of confidence.

“Okay, let’s do this thing,” he said, taking his seat.

“So, what do we do?” Caleb asked.

“Caleb, you keep scraping Bran off the ceiling and help Doc.” Kate grinned before she felt a sharp pain rip across her stomach.

“Deep breath in, short breaths out,” Nic said, his voice like a deep well of calm.

Kate did as instructed and soon the pain subsided.

She felt Doc lift her gown and spread her legs. Bran growled. Caleb smacked his shoulder.

“Thanks, man.” Bran shook his head as if clearing it.

“Trust me, Bran, even if I were straight, sights like this would have me looking at men,” Doc said, starting her pelvic exam.

“Hey!” she yelled.

He looked up at her and winked.

“Oh. My. God!” Kate yelled. The pain radiated from her stomach to her back.

“Focus on me, Kate. Breathe,” Nic said, smiling down at her.

Kate looked up into his chocolate-brown eyes and did as he instructed. He didn’t know it, but she was using his eyes to focus and breathe. Over the past year she had noticed that her quiet friend felt things so deeply, but he never wanted to burden anyone with his problems. His eyes were always

kind, always gentle. It was his eyes that made her feel like everything would be okay.

She loved both her mates with every cell in her body, but they couldn't do this for her. Both were too worried and anxious. Their feelings always showed in their eyes. She needed Nic's calm presence and unwavering, patient gaze.

"You're doing wonderfully, Kate. I expect the first one to be coming any time now. How are you with the pain?" Doc asked.

"Hurts like hell, but what are my options. Epidurals don't exactly work on shifters." Kate breathed through her next contraction, keeping her eyes locked with Nic's.

"Which is why your breathing partner is so important. Nic, I have to say you're doing a wonderful job," Felix complimented.

"I was jealous, but not anymore. I can see why she needs him. Hell, he's calming me down from across the room," Bran admitted.

"Well this party is just starting. Take a seat, gentlemen, it may be a while," Doc said.

Kate looked over to her mates.

"I love you both." She put her heart behind her words.

"We love you too, Katie Bell," Caleb said, taking her hand. She took a deep breath and braced for the next contraction.

\* \* \* \*

"Okay, one more push, Kate." Doc ordered. Caleb stood on one side holding one leg, while Bran stood on the other holding the other.

"I can see the head, Kate!" Bran exclaimed.

"You can do it," Nic whispered.

"This is what you've been dreaming of for so long. One more push, Kate." Nic squeezed her hand. Crying out and bearing down with every ounce of strength, Kate pushed. She felt a second of intense pressure and then relief. And then there was the sound she had been waiting her whole life to hear. Her baby's cry.

"It's a boy, Katie, we have another boy!" Caleb shouted, tears streaming down his face.

Felix took the baby to the side table and began to clean him up.

“We’re not quite done, Katie, you got one more. How are you holding up?” he asked.

“I’m tired. But I can’t wait to hold them,” she whispered through dry lips. Nic reached over and brushed her lips with a moist cloth. She smiled her thanks. Another contraction started.

“Okay Kate, one huge push,” Doc yelled. Gritting her teeth she looked up at Nic, scared. She didn’t know if she had one more push left. His warm eyes filled with tears and he leaned in.

“Hurry, Kate, this baby wants to meet its Momma,” he said. His words were exactly what she needed to hear. Taking a deep breath she pushed and pushed.

“Another boy! Oh God, Kate, he’s perfect,” Bran cried. Nic collapsed in the chair next to the bed.

Doc carried the baby over to the table for Felix to clean and collect information before turning back to Kate. He carefully massaged her lower stomach.

“One more push, Kate, and then you’re done.” Kate nodded as she began to push to deliver the afterbirth. Heaving a sigh of relief as it left her body, she collapsed back onto the bed.

Felix turned and handed a tiny wrapped bundle to Kate. With trembling hands she brought the baby to her chest. She looked down and couldn’t help the tears that streamed down her cheeks.

“Hello, Merrick Bran McGregor,” she whispered, and kissed the baby softly on his head.

Nic moved so that Caleb and Bran could lean in from either side of the bed. Felix, smiling, handed her the second baby.

“Hello, Matthew Caleb McGregor.” She stared at the tiny souls in her arms. When she looked up she saw Nic watching them, tears dripping off his chin. He was feeling her bond with her sons. She looked down.

“Welcome to the world, my boys. You have a large family that loves you very much. Including an Uncle Nic.” She smiled up at Nic.

“Get over here, Nic, and meet our sons,” Bran said, wiping his eyes. Nic stumbled forward as if in a daze.

“They are so small,” he whispered, his eyes wide.

“They didn’t feel small,” Kate grunted.

“Look, he has fingernails. Kinda,” Nic said, entranced.

“Baby fingernails are the sharpest things on the planet.” Caleb laughed and ran his large hand over the babies’ heads.

“You all did very well. I’m proud of you,” Felix said, packing up the small medical case.

“Textbook perfect, Kate. Congratulations on the birth of your sons.” Doc offered his hand to Bran and then Caleb for a handshake.

“Can we tell the pack now? I can hear them in the hallway. I bet they are dying to hear the official news.” Felix grinned.

“Good idea. These little guys have an entire pack to meet.” Bran grinned. He walked over to the door and flung it wide.

Riley, Gina, Beverly, and to Kate’s surprise, Baptista, waited in the hallway.

“We have two more boys!” Bran yelled excitedly.

“Hot damn! That is wonderful news, Alpha!” Riley grabbed Bran for a hug.

Gina and Beverly walked in and went right to the bed to stand next to Nic. They leaned forward.

“Oh, Alpha, they are perfect,” Beverly gushed. Kate felt a wave of pride wash through her.

“How are Landon and Lucas?” She could see that the sun was starting to come up. Her other boys would be up soon.

“Still sleeping soundly when last we checked,” Gina said.

“Baptista, come meet your godsons,” Caleb called.

“I wasn’t sure,” the large man said, stepping into the room hesitantly.

“Well I am. If it weren’t for you, they wouldn’t be here today. Neither would I,” Kate said, tears filling her eyes at the thought of losing the two precious bundles in her arms.

“I um, brought them toys,” Baptista said, holding up two small, old-fashioned teddy bears. Each was wearing sewn knightly armor which bore a regal crest.

“Knights?” Kate asked. Baptista nodded.

“I never had any children, but back before I was turned, before Prince Gabriel saved me, I was a knight. During those times, we would foster children and raise them to follow in our footsteps as knights of the land. This is the closest I think I’ll come to fostering.” Baptista set the bears down on the dresser.



“My sons will be truly blessed to have a godfather like you, Baptista.” Kate smiled.

“We’ll just keep them away from David and Daniel.” Baptista grinned.

“Where’s the fun in that?” Kate asked.

“What are their names?”

“Merrick and Matthew.”

“They are strong names.”

Caleb nodded to Bran and they walked over to the bed. They took the boys and passed Matthew to Nic, who instantly brought the baby to his chest. Caleb handed Merrick to Baptista, who looked like he was about to faint at any moment.

“Kate, we were going to wait, but I think this is the perfect time to give you your Christmas gift, since you just gave us two more precious sons,” Caleb said, sitting on one side of the bed. Bran joined them on the other side of the bed.

Bran handed Kate a small box. She looked from Caleb’s face to Bran’s before she opened it. When she saw what lay nestled inside she couldn’t hold back the sob that seemed to explode from her heart.

Cushioned on white satin were two more gem charms for her necklace, each in the December birthstone. The bluish-green charms wavered as her eyes filled with tears.

“I love you both so much, I don’t deserve you.” She pulled both men’s faces to hers for a three-way kiss. She pulled back to kiss first Bran and then Caleb soundly. They heard a sniffle and to everyone’s surprise, Baptista was the one wiping his eyes. Felix patted the large warrior on the back. Doc smiled at the trio of mates.

“You have a beautiful family.” Baptista leaned in and gently passed Merrick back to Caleb. Nic returned Matthew to Bran.

“Here’s your mommy and daddies,” Beverly said as she and Gina came in toting Landon and Lucas.

“Mamamama Dadadadadada!” the boys babbled.

Gina and Beverly placed them on the bed and let them crawl up to snuggle in close to Kate.

“Landon, Lucas, these are your brothers. Merrick and Matthew.” Kate introduced the boys. Bran and Caleb knelt down so that the newborns were eye level with their older brothers. Lucas leaned in and placed a gentle

but sloppy kiss on Merrick's head. Not to be outdone, Landon did the same for Matthew.

"I think this will be the best Christmas ever," Kate whispered.

"We all got our gifts early this year." Bran stared down as he watched his sons meet each other for the first time.

"I wouldn't have it any other way," Caleb agreed.

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## Chapter 3

*Felix*

*Dec 21<sup>st</sup>*

“Was that made-for-TV perfect or what! I felt like I was watching a Hallmark Christmas special.” Felix couldn’t seem to stop smiling. Claybourne was driving them back to their home after dropping off the unneeded medical supplies at the clinic. It had been a long time since he was able to celebrate Christmas. This year seemed to be kicking off wonderfully.

“You are a goof. The mother and both babies are healthy, that’s all that matters.” Claybourne yawned. The delivery had taken them into the next morning.

“Why do you think we were ambushed by Rebecca at the clinic? She wasn’t happy until she took our pictures,” Felix said, turning on the radio to a Christmas station. Seconds later in the middle of *White Christmas*, Claybourne turned the radio off. Felix sighed. His mate had been a huge Ebenezer Scrooge ever since Thanksgiving. If he didn’t know better he would say the man hated Christmas.

“No telling with her. I know that she was relieved to hear that everyone was okay,” Claybourne said, pulling into their driveway.

From the outside you couldn’t tell it was four days until Christmas. There were no lights, no garland. No dancing snowmen or flashing candy canes. Felix had mentioned once and only once that maybe they should get some decorations for the house and that idea had been shot down.

*We’ll just have to take it down again in a few weeks, it’s a waste of effort.*

Maybe his mate did hate Christmas.

“All I want is to lie down for fourteen hours.” Claybourne parked the car and got out, slamming the car door shut. Frowning, Felix watched as his mate, seemingly forgetting he existed, unlocked the front door, opened it, walked in and closed it behind him.

He crossed his arms and waited, tapping his foot. After ten minutes he came to the realization his mate had truly forgotten him and was probably asleep in bed. He got out of the car and walked to the front door. He turned the knob to discover it had been locked. Staring at the knob in shock he reached for his wallet and pulled out a single key. He unlocked the front door and marched right into the master bedroom. Sure enough, there was his mate in his lounge pants, face down, out like a light.

*Motherfucker!*

He debated waking his mate up but rejected the idea. His mate had worked hard last night bringing two new souls into the world, and he deserved a rest before he got his ass chewed out, and not in the good way either. Suddenly feeling like a stranger in his own bedroom Felix grabbed the pajamas he had left draped over the chair and walked out.

He headed to the den and sat down on the sofa. He couldn't get the soul-searing love he had seen between Kate and her mates out of his mind. Had his own mating fizzled already? Would having a child bring back that fire? That need to be with your mate more than you needed your next breath?

He sat cross-legged on their sofa and hugged the pillow to his chest. What could he do to bring back their passion? Maybe Claybourne was simply tolerating him. He couldn't lose his mate. Not now. He looked around the house and realized that there was nothing of him in any of the rooms. If he packed up all his clothes and left, no one would ever know he had lived here. Disgusted, he threw his pajamas on the sofa beside him and stood up.

Claybourne was his mate and this was his home, dammit! If he wanted to celebrate Christmas, hang mistletoe and dance naked to "Good King Wenceslas" then he was going to. Grabbing the car keys, he headed out the door.

\* \* \* \*

"Thanks for the help, Rian, Sebastian," Felix said, putting the last box of decorations in the car.

"Thanks for taking this stuff off my hands, it doesn't really go with the feel I'm trying to portray." Rian waved his hand at the princely way the

pride house was decorated. It looked like something out of *Better Homes and Gardens*.

“I can’t believe you guys didn’t have any decorations.” Sebastian frowned.

“Hey guys, I gotta go check on my baked gingerbread ornaments. If you need any advice just text me a picture,” Rian offered, and ducked back inside.

“That man is a genius when it comes to decorating. Hey, quick question, did Rebecca make you pose for pictures?” Felix asked. Good thing Rian had over-ordered, as that meant more free, high-quality decorations for him. Lucky!

“Yeah, she got most of the pride in the diner this morning, she has been all over town like a tiny camera Nazi,” Sebastian shook, eyeing Felix.

“Is everything okay?” Sebastian asked. Felix looked at his extremely pregnant best friend and decided now would not be the best time to share that he thought his mating was going down the toilet.

“Yup, I’m going to surprise Claybourne with a festive house when he wakes up. Maybe even bake some pie or something,” Felix said. Sebastian’s frown deepened.

“You? You want to bake? Okay, what is going on?” Sebastian demanded, crossing his arms.

“Nothing, just getting into the Christmas spirit,” Felix said cheerfully.

Sebastian smiled, nodded, then jumped up and put Felix in a headlock, raking his knuckles over his friend’s scalp. Not wanting to hurt the baby, Felix didn’t fight back.

“Ow fucker! No fair, you’re totally playing the pregnant card to avoid getting your scrawny ass kicked,” Felix yelled.

“Damn right, bitch. Now spill!” Sebastian said, tightening his grip.

“Fine! I think Claybourne is sick of me and doesn’t care if I’m there or not,” Felix yelled.

Sebastian released Felix and stepped back. “That’s not true. That man loves you to pieces,” Sebastian protested.

“He forgot me. Today he forgot I was even in the car with him. He went into the house, locked the door, changed into his pajamas and went to sleep,” Felix mumbled.

“I am so going to kick his ass,” Sebastian growled.

“Kitten, are you okay?” Liam asked, opening the front door concernedly.

“I’m fine, hun. Be right in.” Sebastian smiled up at his mate. Liam looked at Sebastian a second longer and then dubiously shut the door.

“Seriously though, do I need to beat some sense into him?” Sebastian asked. Felix wiped at his eyes. He should have known his best friend would be on his side.

“No, I need to do this for myself. Thanks for the offer though, Shamu,” Felix joked.

“Har har. Just wait until it’s your turn. This shit is not fun. I don’t know how normal human women do this. Rebecca is a damn goddess in my opinion.” Sebastian grunted.

“Let’s get my mate remembering I exist before we plan babies, okay?” Felix rubbed Sebastian’s belly.

“I am not a Buddha statue, stop it.” Sebastian batted Felix’s hand away.

“Okay hun, I gotta go blow his mind with Christmas decorations, then blow him, before I allow him to blow me.” Felix wagged his eyebrows.

“Onward, horny soldier!” Sebastian gave a salute.

“Love ya.” Felix called, getting into the car.

“Love ya back. Oh and Felix,” Sebastian yelled. Felix stood back up next to the car.

“Yeah?”

“Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas to you too.” Felix got in the car and waved as he drove off.

\* \* \* \*

Felix was just putting the finishing touches on the tree when he heard his mate behind him.

“What in the hell is all of this?” Claybourne demanded.

“It’s Christmas decorations. I couldn’t sleep and realized we didn’t even have a tree, so I went out to get one. Of course the stores are picked clean, it’s a good thing that Rian had too much in his effort to overthrow Martha Stewart.” Felix put the empty ornament box on the coffee table.

He had put up a pre-lit Christmas tree, a garland on the fireplace, and all kinds of Christmas knick-knacks around the room. He had even found two stockings at the grocery store that were perfect for them. One had a stethoscope around it, the other a thermometer.

He decided that pie was beyond him, but he got a tube of Pillsbury cinnamon rolls and they made the house smell heavenly. There was even eggnog waiting for him later in the fridge.

“Take it down. Take it all down.” Claybourne’s fists shook beside his body.

“What?” Felix whispered.

“Take it down! It’s gaudy and tacky and, and messy!” Claybourne exploded.

“No! Do you know how hard I have worked to make this special for us? It’s our first Christmas together, we should celebrate,” Felix protested, feeling a ball of ice form in his stomach.

“Did you ever stop to think about what I would want? The tree and the garland are littering needles all over the place. The little snowman is just clutter that I’ll have to move to clean since you don’t feel like you have to. You just created more work for me!” Claybourne ground out from between his clenched teeth.

“What? What!” Felix couldn’t believe what he was hearing. He couldn’t stop the wave of nausea that crept up the back of his throat. Pushing past his mate, he ran to the guest bathroom and locked the door. He had just enough time to raise the lid and his stomach emptied all of the candy he had been snacking on all morning in fits of nervousness.

“Felix! Felix open the door! Are you all right? Let me in!” Felix could hear Claybourne’s frantic yells.

“You forgot me,” he whispered. The pounding on the door stopped.

“What?” Claybourne asked.

“This morning you forgot me. You locked the door behind you and went to bed. When I came in I looked around and realized that there was nothing of me in the house. That if you got rid of my clothes I would disappear from your life.” Felix panted and fought back another wave of nausea.

“That’s not true,” Claybourne whispered.

“It’s my first Christmas out of that cage. For years I didn’t get to have Christmas. I wanted this to be special. I wanted to be special to you. I can’t do this anymore.” Felix wept and threw up again.

“Felix, just open the door, baby, let me check on you please.” Claybourne pounded on the door. Exhausted, Felix realized he was losing track of time, he was only catching bits and pieces of what Claybourne was saying.

When the pounding on the door turned into a full-out attack Felix shifted into a two-thousand-pound walrus and lay against the door.

*Bah fucking humbug!*

\* \* \* \*

“Felix, come on buddy, shift back and open the door.” Felix opened his eyes and looked down. He remembered what had led to him shifting and he felt his heart break.

“Felix, you’re scaring me to death. Open the door.” Felix realized that it was Sebastian calling out to him, not Claybourne. Shifting back, he struggled to get up. He grabbed a towel from under the cabinet and knotted it around his waist. His clothes lay in tatters around him. He opened the door and peeked out. Sebastian pushed the door open, cracking him in the forehead and squeezing inside before closing the door again.

“What happened? Claybourne called me losing his damn mind. He said that you were sick and wouldn’t open the bathroom door. I’ve never seen that man lose his composure the way he did when he couldn’t get to you, not even when y’all were racing to find a cure to the virus. He is absolutely frantic. Kent and Liam had to get him to shift and go for a run.” Sebastian sat down on the toilet seat.

“He’s probably just concerned because he’s a doctor and it would look bad if I died in his bathroom or something,” Felix said, hopping up on the counter.

“Die! Who said anything about dying? What in the hell is going on?” Sebastian said, panic edging into his voice.

“Calm down, Papa Smurf, I’m fine. He got me so upset I tossed my candy-laden cookies into the toilet. I probably passed out due to stress and



due to the fact that I'd been up for over twenty-four hours when he decided to get all pissy." Felix relaxed against the mirror.

"You're fine though, right? You're not pregnant?" Sebastian asked. Felix shook his head.

"Things have been so rocky lately I haven't even brought it up."

"What do you mean he got pissy? Because according to him, he was a complete and utter insensitive ass and you were leaving him."

"Leaving him?" Felix sat straight up, struggling to remember what he had said.

*I can't do this anymore.*

"Oh fuck, I may have said something like that. But I didn't mean it that way. All I wanted was to enjoy Christmas with my mate. How did things go so wrong?"

"How was he an insensitive ass?"

"He told me to take down all of the Christmas decorations, that they were gaudy and tacky." Felix wiped away his tears.

"Tacky! There's no way Rian would buy anything that was tacky!"

"I know right!"

"What else?"

"That was pretty much it. Oh, and I created more work for him since I don't clean around here and all the Christmas stuff would make it harder for him to keep the house picked up."

"He's right."

"What?"

"He was an insensitive ass."

"I just wish he would have just talked to me about it, like an adult. He just ordered me around and belittled me like a child," Felix complained.

"No, like my father," Claybourne said slowly, opening the door.

"Come on, Sebastian, let's give them some space," Liam said from the hallway where he waited with Kent.

"Let's get one thing straight, Doc. I love you, because to me Felix is my brother and you are his mate. But if you hurt my brother again I will bring down a world of hurt on you. I've kept my mouth shut up until this point hoping you'd pull your head out of your ass and see how shitty you've been treating him. This is your first and last warning. You better start treating my brother right or you will see what kind of scary shit I can shift into, because

I have tricks that even Felix doesn't know about." Sebastian stood up and stretched, rubbing his back.

"Now make up and give me a niece or nephew to spoil." He grinned evilly at Claybourne, who swallowed hard.

"Oh and Doc, I'll see you tomorrow for my appointment at nine a.m." Sebastian waddled past Felix and Claybourne to Liam.

"Good luck, Doc," Liam said, and all three walked down the hallway.

"Felix I'm..." Claybourne started.

"I'm stealing your cinnamon rolls!" Felix heard Sebastian yell from the kitchen.

Smiling, he yelled back, "Go ahead, what's another ten pounds!"

"Fuck you! And for that I'm taking all of them." Felix smiled until he heard the front door close and his friend was gone.

"You were right!" Claybourne blurted out.

"Huh? About what?" Felix asked, wanting clarification.

"All of it. You're right, we should be enjoying our first Christmas together. You're right, you don't have a presence in our home, that's my fault. Every time you bought something, it would seem out of place, you were considerate of my feelings and got rid of it. I had no idea that's what I was doing. It wasn't because you aren't special to me." Claybourne dropped to his knees, crying.

"I never even realized that it was your first Christmas being free, of course you'd want to celebrate. But once again it was all about me. I freaked out that things were different. There were needles on the floor. The lights weren't symmetrical on the tree. The snowman on the left side of the fireplace has a button missing. I turned into the one person I hate most in the world." Claybourne pounded his fists into his thighs. Felix jumped off of the counter and dropped onto the floor beside his mate, grabbing both hands.

"I should have thought about what these changes would do. I just thought that it would be okay since it was Christmas and who doesn't like Christmas?"

"Stop it! Stop making excuses for me. You are always compromising, always being selfless and putting what you want aside for my own asinine ways."

“You’re my mate, of course I’ll compromise. It just hurt the way you came at me like that,” Felix admitted softly.

“We never celebrated Christmas when I was a child. Christmas meant mother would be busy with dinner parties and father would open a new bottle of whiskey. The house was never decorated. The one time I tried to put up a tree like my friends had, that is what my father yelled, ‘Take it down, it’s tacky and gaudy!’ After I left home, I didn’t know how to celebrate. It was just me, so I never started.” Claybourne looked up and Felix could see the stark terror in his eyes at the thought of becoming like his father.

“Come with me.” Felix stood and pulled his mate up. He walked him back into the family room.

He sat Claybourne on the sofa. He ran to the kitchen and grabbed the dustpan and foxtail. He quickly swept up the loose plastic needles and threw them away. Next he grabbed a black Sharpie from the utility drawer and drew a button on the snow man. He stood in front of his mate.

“Okay, what needs to be changed with the lights?” he asked. Claybourne looked at him for a second like he had lost his mind. Felix rolled his hand in front of him.

“Come on.”

“The branch on the right, there is a light strand that dips down lower than on the left.”

Felix turned and eyed the tree before he saw what his mate was talking about. He adjusted the light strand and stood back.

“What else?”

“I hate purple bulbs. Purple is just not a Christmas color.”

Felix easily plucked off the handful of purple bulbs.

“Now, tell me what you like.”

“I like that the tree’s lights are white. It seems to make it glow. The color ones are never organized evenly. I like the smell of cinnamon. I love our stockings. I saw them when I came back out here for the phone to call Sebastian. You really scared the hell out of me.” Claybourne looked up at him. This time the fear he saw there reached all the way to his mate’s soul.

“I’m sorry about blocking the door. It was childish of me,” Felix said, walking over to stand in front of his mate. Claybourne pulled him close by the hips and buried his face in his stomach.

“I thought that you were pregnant, that you had been too afraid to tell me. When you didn’t answer I thought you were losing the baby, possibly dying, and it was all my fault. That I had killed the only person I have ever loved.” Claybourne’s fingers dug into his back.

“You love me?” Felix couldn’t stop the question from flying out. Claybourne looked up at him, shocked.

“What have I done? Oh God, what have I done that you don’t even think I love you anymore?” Claybourne released Felix and buried his face in his hands.

“It wasn’t all you. I was so afraid that I wasn’t good enough for you, that I haven’t been speaking up when something bothered me and it all turned to self-doubt, and then I doubted you.” Felix dropped to his knees and pulled his mate’s hands away from his face, taking them into his own. Claybourne looked at Felix and pulled both of his hands free to cup his face. The raw emotion he saw in his mate’s eyes made him ashamed for ever doubting that the man before him felt anything but love for him.

“I love you so much that it hurts. I look at you and I physically ache. I never dreamed I could love someone so much. Sometimes I wake up early so that I can watch you sleep. I’m tormented by the desire to wake you up and make love to you, but find it hard to wake you since you look so peaceful and perfect in your sleep. Every day you make me laugh and smile. I’m scared some days that I will lose you because I have nothing to offer you. How can someone like me bring you the same happiness and joy that you bring to me?” His mate’s words were his undoing.

Sobbing uncontrollably, Felix did the only thing he could think of in that moment. He leaned forward and took possession of his mate’s lips. Claybourne’s responding passion set his skin on fire. He felt as if his mate wasn’t inside him soon his prick would explode. Claybourne flipped the solid wood coffee table out of the way with one hand and lay Felix down on the rug gently. His desperation fueled a level of urgency that neither one of them could deny. Felix felt his dick harden to the point of pain at his mate’s aggression.

His hips were jerked up when Claybourne roughly pulled the towel from his body. Claybourne stared down at his leaking cock and his eyes shifted to his tiger’s sky-blue color.

“Lube?” Claybourne asked, his voice deeper than he had ever heard it. Felix could see his mate’s cock bulging from behind his slacks.

“Under the sofa.”

Claybourne’s hand disappeared under the sofa for a second and returned with a small tube of lube. He doused two fingers and gently eased them into Felix’s puckered opening. Felix hissed in pleasure.

“God, please fuck me,” Felix begged. Claybourne shook his head.

“I want to make love to you.” Felix grinned up at his mate.

“Let’s compromise, make fuck to me.” Claybourne laughed, and Felix felt his heart soar.

“Anything you want, my mate.”

Soon Claybourne was plunging three fingers in and out of his opening.

“Please.”

Claybourne leaned forward and made sure Felix was looking up at him before he gently kissed his lips. Seconds later he thrust his hips forward, driving his thick cock deep inside his mate and hitting Felix’s sweet spot. With gentle lips Claybourne teased and made love to Felix’s lips and neck, while his hips and cock dominated him from the waist down.

“You are a damn genius and I love you.” Felix tightened his grip in Claybourne’s hair, pulling the man down for a searing kiss. When Claybourne savagely pounded into him again he pulled back to scream his satisfaction.

“I will always try to give you what you need. Sometimes you just have to tell me what it is,” Claybourne said, his eyes full of love.

Claybourne alternated between driving his cock as deep as he could and pounding into his mate in short bursts. Felix could feel his own dick slap against his stomach, leaving streaks of pre-cum smeared across his body.

“I can do that.” Felix gasped as Claybourne reached between them to fist his cock.

“Close,” Felix whispered, and Claybourne began to thrust over and over again, pushing Felix’s body across the carpet. His mate’s dick was relentless as it stretched his body over and over again with its demanding pace. When his gentle kiss became a claiming bite, Felix cried out his release. Claybourne lifted his head from Felix’s shoulder and roared, filling his mate with his cum.

Refusing to let his lover go Felix wrapped his arms and legs around Claybourne until he was forced to lie on his side so that they could stay connected.

As their breathing returned to normal, Felix pulled back and looked at his lover as Claybourne eased from his body.

“You thought I was pregnant?” he asked. Claybourne flushed and nodded.

“You want a baby?”

“Someday. I wouldn’t mind a small version of you racing around.” Claybourne smiled.

“We better have a small version of you, I don’t think you could handle two of me.” Felix laughed.

“I don’t even deserve you, much less two of you.” Claybourne kissed down Felix’s neck.

“For that awesome statement, I won’t return your Christmas present,” Felix teased. Claybourne propped himself up on one elbow, his hand against his head. His entire face was transformed into an eager, boy-like expression. Felix felt his heart melting.

“What did you get me?” he asked. Felix blushed.

“You’ll laugh.”

“I won’t, tell me. Please.”

“I got you a new Dyson that picks up animal hair, since I’ve been shifting more in the house.” Felix watched his mate’s face for disappointment. Claybourne sat up excitedly.

“The Dyson DC39? The one with the HEPA bagless system?”

“Yup.” Felix grinned. It looked like he knew his mate better than he realized.

“That’s way better than what I got you.” Claybourne frowned. Felix sat up, curious.

“What did you get me?”

“Oh. A car.” Claybourne’s eyebrows furrowed together. “But don’t worry, we’ll go out shopping to get you something fun. How about we get some things for the house that you pick out?”

“You got me a car?”

“I know, boring. You can’t play around with it, I’m sorry.” Felix wrapped his arms around his mate’s neck.

“You got me a freaking car!” Felix demanded.

Claybourne nodded.

“Thank you. Thank you. Thank you! Where is it? What is it? When can I drive it?” he asked, practically vibrating.

“I parked it in the garage out back. I got you the GL Class Mercedes SUV. I wanted you to be safe.”

Felix squealed and launched himself toward the back door. Claybourne caught him around the waist, laughing.

“You’re naked and it’s snowing.”

“I wanna play with my car!” Felix whined.

“Later, Trouble. How about I make us some homemade apple pie? We can listen to Christmas carols.” Claybourne pressed their bodies together.

“Can I dance naked to ‘Good King Wenceslas’?” Felix demanded, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

“Whatever makes you happy, baby.” Claybourne swayed them from side to side.

“Best. Christmas. Ever!” Felix said, snuggling close to his mate.

Felix knew that they would have ups and downs, but he also knew he would never again doubt the love of the man in his arms. He would never doubt this gift ever again.

## Chapter 4

*Damian*

*Dec 22<sup>nd</sup> Morning*

“Everyone is at the diner avoiding you,” Damian said crossly as he watched his best friend pick at imaginary lint.

“That’s a mean thing to say,” Rian argued.

“It’s true! You’re driving everyone out of the house, including Sebastian who could give birth any day now.”

“I need everything to be perfect.”

Damian’s eyes went to the stockings hanging on the fireplace mantel. The names written in childish handwriting seemed out of place with the elaborate decorations.

“Rian, no matter what, our families aren’t coming back. When are you going to accept that?”

“Never!” Rian turned his back to his friend.

“I’m heading to the diner to be with my friends and grab lunch. I hope you take this time alone, in your perfect world, to think about what matters most.” Damian slammed the door behind him when he walked out.

\* \* \* \*

Rian collapsed to the floor and stared at the room before him. It was perfect. From the drapes to the table runner. If it was so perfect why did it feel so wrong? It was quiet. It had been a long time since the house was this quiet. Back when Liam’s father ran the pride it was a common occurrence, but not recently. Not his with his misfits living here. He didn’t like it growing up and he didn’t like it now.

He got up and looked around the room. He couldn’t put his finger on what was missing. He had made sure that the napkin rings matched the candelabra. The punch bowl sparkled. The lights in the chandelier dimmed. The tree was a work of art, each bulb perfectly spaced apart.



Throwing up his arms in frustration he went to sit down on the sofa and remembered last minute he had just vacuumed it. In his effort to preserve his slip cover he missed the sofa and hit the floor. He looked up and grinned only to realize he was alone. There was no one there to razz him. He finally figured out what was missing. His friends.

He jumped to his feet and grabbed his coat. You could have the most beautifully decorated house in the world, but that is all it would remain. A house. What made it a home was friends and family and that's what he wanted most. A home. He hoped that his friends would forgive him for the way he had been acting lately. Smiling, he headed out to the diner to eat lunch with his family.

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## Chapter 5

*Sebastian*

*Dec 22<sup>nd</sup> Day*

“Hey, Doc, how are the newest citizens of Arkadia?” Sebastian asked when he saw Doc and Felix walk in the door the next morning. From Felix’s glow he figured that the two of them had worked things out. He felt relieved. He had hated seeing his best friend so hurt.

“The boys are doing well. Both mother and babies are just fine,” Doc assured everyone.

“I can’t wait to see them!” Rebecca said enthusiastically before turning to Madison.

“Say cheese!” Rebecca grinned and snapped a picture before turning to Connor.

“Your turn.” Connor grinned at his sister and Sebastian heard the click of the camera.

“Rebecca, what in the hell is up with all the pictures?” Felix asked. Sebastian listened in, because he was curious too.

“Not tellin’.” Rebecca turned to Rex and Talon. Both men hammed it up for the camera. Rebecca giggled and asked them to flex. Laughing, the men complied. Aleks growled from the counter.

Sebastian laughed and then groaned as the pain in his back tightened.

“It’s not any better is it?” Liam asked.

“No, I think this kid is wrapped around my spine.” Sebastian tried to smile at his mate to reassure him but he was too tired. Liam reached over and began to rub small circles on his lower back.

“You’re in pain? Sebastian, why didn’t you say anything yesterday?” Doc demanded, getting up from their table. He knelt beside Sebastian and took his wrist.

“Felix, my stethoscope.” Felix, looking concerned, reached into Doc’s bag and handed him the instrument.

“Ow, ow, ow. Motherfucker ow!” Sebastian complained as Doc listened in. Rebecca winced and rubbed her back.

Doc sat back on his heels, staring up at Sebastian in shock.

“You’re in active labor, Sebastian, those are contractions! You’re less than a minute apart. We need to get you to the clinic!” Doc stood.

“What!” Liam and Kent yelled.

“I’m fine, I don’t think I’m in labor, my back just hurts. There’s no pain across my abdomen.” Sebastian reassured both of his wide-eyed mates.

Doc pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Sebastian, you’re experiencing back labor! How long has your back been bothering you?” He asked. Sebastian felt a sliver of panic.

“Since Kate went into labor.”

“So you’ve been in labor for approximately thirty-six hours. We need to get you to the clinic.”

“I gotta go pee first,” Sebastian said, struggling to his feet. Liam pulled at his hair frantically as Kent helped him to stand.

As soon as he got to his feet he felt a gush of warm liquid run down his legs. Mortified that he had just wet himself he stared at Kent with tears in his eyes. Seconds later a debilitating pain gripped his abdomen, driving him to his knees.

“His water just broke. Get his pants off.” Doc ordered.

“Like hell! I’m in the middle of the damn diner,” Sebastian yelled.

“I need to check you, Sebastian,” Doc said calmly, looking Sebastian in the eye.

Embarrassed beyond belief, Kent raised his hips as Liam pulled his pants off. Ma came over with some towels and pushed the hair out of his face.

“I’m so sorry, Ma,” he began. She smiled down at him and took his hand.

“Don’t you worry a bit about it, you just concentrate on your little one.”

Sebastian nodded. Doc pushed his legs apart and he felt cool air hit his nether regions.

“Kill me now,” he muttered.

“Sebastian, did you realize that you had already shifted to female parts?” Doc asked, looking impressed.

“No, I didn’t feel it shift. It wasn’t like that this morning.”

“Well you are completely dilated and your baby is crowning. You’re having this little one right here.” Doc turned and grabbed a pair of gloves

out of his bag.

“What! No, Doc, we have to get him to the clinic! Where there are machines and medicines and needles and sterile tables,” Liam yelled, every ounce of blood draining from his face.

“I don’t think the baby is going to wait, Liam,” Sebastian ground out between his teeth.

“Breathe, kitten, you’re doing great,” Kent said, sitting close to his mate holding his hand.

Liam scrambled to the other side.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“Yes I’m goddamn sure!” Sebastian bellowed.

“Okay, kitten, let’s uh, do this.” Liam swayed slightly beside him. Sebastian looked up to see where Rebecca was.

“I’m here.” With Rex’s assistance Rebecca sat down on the floor behind Sebastian, helping to prop him up. Aleks sat behind Liam, placing a steadying hand on his shoulder.

“This really fucking hurts,” he whimpered. She grimaced.

“I know.” She took a deep breath. Doc looked up.

“Becca, how are you doing?” he asked, concerned.

“I’m evidently fine and never having this baby! I think he’s hibernating for the damn winter,” she said, exasperated.

“It will be your turn before you know it,” Sebastian said before yelling out.

“Okay, Sebastian, you can push whenever you feel like you have to,” Doc said.

Sebastian nodded and grabbed both of his knees and bore down. He wanted to push more than he wanted his next breath.

“Great job! One more,” Doc yelled.

“Kitten, you’re doing it! You’re really doing it!” Liam said excitedly.

“Keep doing it.” Kent held on to Sebastian’s leg, his hand over where Sebastian gripped his own knee.

“Doc. Something’s wrong!” Sebastian panted. He could feel it in his heart.

“Okay, I need you to give me a really hard push, Sebastian.”

Sebastian felt Liam grab his other hand and he could feel their strength and love through their mating bond. He pushed.

“I see the problem. The cord is around the baby’s neck. Push and don’t stop pushing, Sebastian,” Doc ordered.

Sebastian turned to Liam, terrified.

“Push, kitten,” Liam said, tears in his eyes.

“We have you,” Kent assured him.

Sebastian pushed and pushed until he couldn’t feel his lower half. He pushed and suddenly he felt something slide from his body. He stopped pushing and tried to look down.

“Where’s my baby?” he demanded.

Liam and Kent held on to his hands, tears streaming down their faces.

“Why isn’t my baby crying?” he demanded, his voice going shrill.

He could see Doc moving and doing things but he couldn’t see his baby.

“I want my baby!” he yelled.

Rebecca wrapped her arms around him from behind, her tears falling on the back of his neck.

“It’s a boy,” Liam said brokenly. But still there was silence.

“Please, please, let him breathe!” Sebastian sobbed. Kent and Liam wrapped their arms around Rebecca and Sebastian.

Sebastian looked up to see Rex and Talon weeping. Ma held a sobbing Rian and Damian.

Minutes went by and Doc never stopped working on the tiny body. Sebastian buried his face in Liam’s neck and died inside.

“Please, Fate. Not on Christmas.” He heard Rebecca whisper. From a distance he could feel Kate sharing in his frantic terror. Ashby and Nic, kneeling on either side of Rebecca, reached in to lay a hand on either one of his shoulders. His pain radiated through the entire Inner Court.

“Please,” he begged between sobs.

“Please,” was the whispered echo along their shared bond, and for a single moment the night held its breath.

“There he is!” Doc yelled, and seconds later wails filled the diner. Pulling his face from Liam’s chest, he looked down at Doc who also had tears on his cheeks.

“I think someone really wants to meet you,” he said, passing up his baby, wrapped in one of Ma’s clean dishtowels. His little man’s mouth was open and he was screaming for all he was worth.

“Thank you, oh, thank you,” he chanted. Liam and Kent leaned in from either side to each lay a hand on their baby. Sebastian looked behind him to see Nic and Ashby holding Rebecca. Aleks was patting Liam on the back, laughing his relief. When he looked around the diner, there wasn’t a dry eye as his friends shared his absolute joy.

Doc collapsed against Felix, who wept as he held his mate. Sebastian could hear his best friend thanking his mate for saving their nephew. He looked down and smiled at his son, who was now beet-red and squalling.

“He is the most perfect thing I have ever seen,” he whispered.

Rebecca, Ashby and Nic leaned in to get a better look.

“Oh, Sebastian, he is gorgeous. He…” Rebecca trailed off and tilted her head to one side.

“He looks like Kent *and* Liam. How did you *do* that?” she asked. Sebastian shrugged. He didn’t care who his son looked like, as long as he was healthy and alive.

Liam looked down, blinking past his tears.

“You know, you’re right. He has Kent’s dark, black hair, but that is definitely a Lewenhart nose,” Liam said, sounding amazed.

“He’s adorable!” Rian sobbed, still completely emotionally wrecked.

“Rian, what are you doing here? I thought that the photographer for the Council newsletter was at the pride house this morning?” Sebastian asked, cuddling his son who had quieted and was now sucking on his own fist.

Rian looked up. He and Damian shared a smile.

“They can take pictures without me. This was more important. I wouldn’t have missed this for anything, you are my family. Of course I had to be here to welcome my nephew!” Rian blew his nose on the napkin Ma handed him.

“Nothing is more important than family,” Damian agreed, holding on to Rian.

“Come on little papa. Let’s get you and junior to the clinic. I want to observe you for a little while,” Doc said, pulling Felix to his feet. Liam got up and Kent passed their mate and son to him.

“Sebastian! Did you decide on a name?” Rebecca asked from Aleks’s arms.

Sebastian looked at Liam and then Kent. They both nodded.

“We chose Lucian Alexander Lewenhardt. Lucian means *light*. I think it’s fitting, especially now.” Sebastian smiled down at his son. Aleks’s mouth worked like a fish.

“Don’t get all worked up over it. I like the name and we’re spelling it with an ‘x.’ He has my initials,” Liam teased.

“Now we really have to name our baby Aloisius!” Rebecca clapped her hands together.

Aleks looked down at his mate, panicked.

“No, Becca we don’t. Right, Liam?” Aleks begged.

“He should share something in common with his brother,” Liam joked, and Aleks buried his face in Rebecca’s shoulder.

Sebastian swatted Liam’s chest.

“Come on, I’m all sticky and I want a bath.” Instantly Liam’s attention was on his mate.

“Here, wrap them in this,” Rex said, wrapping Sebastian and the baby in his long winter coat.

“Thank you, Rex.” Sebastian smiled warmly at his friend, who blushed.

“Come on, you four,” Doc said and headed out the door. Kent nearly tripped.

“We are four now aren’t we?” He beamed at Sebastian.

“Yes we are,” Sebastian agreed.

“Yes we are.”

\* \* \* \*

Hours later, Sebastian lay nestled between his two mates with their infant son in his arms. Doc had arranged for them to rest on one of the bear-sized cots and he was grateful. He had had a hard time passing his son to Felix to be cleaned and weighed. Felix had understood and made sure that baby Lucian had stayed in view.

Sighing, he ran his finger over his son’s bowed lips. He was going to be such a heartbreaker.

“Nothing can ever happen to him,” Liam whispered softly. Sebastian looked up and saw fear in his mate’s eyes.

“Nothing will. He has three pretty badass fathers, Felix, who can literally eat anyone who messes with him, a whole pride and pack full of

uncles, at least one grumpy-ass bear as a godfather, a pair of scrappy foxes ready to throw down and one tiny, overprotective, human, gun-toting godmother watching over him,” Sebastian reminded him gently.

“My whole world crashed when he...” Kent swallowed hard and fresh tears coursed down his cheeks. Sebastian knew this was hitting his gentle giant hardest. He rubbed Kent’s forearm.

“He’s fine now. He is definitely a fighter,” Sebastian said, enthralled at the sight of his tiny son yawning. Kent’s smile took over his face as he reached in his hand to stroke the baby’s soft cheek.

“What do you think Rebecca was doing with the camera?” Sebastian asked, cooing at Lucian.

“Adding us to the FBI’s Most Wanted List? You never know with her,” Liam said, shrugging.

Doc walked into the room with Felix.

“Okay, you gentlemen are cleared to head home and introduce this little guy to his pride. They have been calling up here non-stop since this afternoon,” Doc said, grinning at the trio.

Liam and Kent got out of bed and helped Sebastian to his feet. Surprisingly, he felt little pain after having given birth. If he moved slowly he was fine. Kent left the clinic to pull the car to the front.

“Doc, I can’t thank you enough for what you did for Lucian,” Sebastian said, stepping up to kiss the stoic man on the cheek. He blushed furiously.

“He’s my nephew too. Does this mean I’m forgiven for yesterday?” Doc asked, his eyes showing a rare hint of vulnerability.

“It was never my place to forgive you, but to answer your question, after what you did today there is no way I could be mad at you. You’re family after all.” Sebastian sighed happily, holding his son close.

“My man is amazing.” Felix held up their joined hands and kissed their intertwined fingers.

“Only because of you.” Doc grinned.

“Come on, kitten, let’s get our boy home,” Liam said, bursting with pride.

“He needs to meet Al.” Sebastian grinned.

“Who is Al?” Liam asked.

“The stuffed alligator I bought him.”



Behind them Sebastian heard Felix burst out laughing. Liam's face looked worried.

"When do baby hybrids start shifting?" he asked nervously. Sebastian turned in his mate's arms and waved at Sebastian.

"Sebastian."

"Bye Felix, come by soon."

"Sebastian?"

Sebastian kissed the top of his son's head and thanked Fate for his son.

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## Chapter 6

*Ashby*

*Dec 22<sup>nd</sup> Evening*

“*And then we didn’t know if the baby was going to make it. But I swear Fate herself helped baby Lucian. Nic, Rebecca and I talked about it after Sebastian went to the clinic, we think she responded to our prayer.*” Ashby bubbled over with excitement.

“Every baby born is a miracle, but it sounds as though you experienced something truly beautiful, *mon ange.*” Gabriel held Ashby in his lap in his office at the coven house. Though his words matched the conversation, Ashby could tell his mind was somewhere else.

“You still haven’t been able to find a supplier, have you?” Ashby whispered.

Gabriel’s arms tightened. “No, not yet.”

“Gabriel, we live in a shifter town,” was as far as Ashby got before Gabriel started to shake his head.

“I never want to give our neighbors the idea that we look at them as though they were food. It could set back our relations with them in irreparable proportions. I’ll find a way, angel.” Gabriel sighed.

“What else?”

“Rhys is no closer to regaining his humanity than the day we brought him home. I fear he is lost to us.” Gabriel whispered and buried his face in Ashby’s blond curls.

“We’ll get through to him, you’ll see. I went down there yesterday...”

“Alone?” Gabriel demanded. Ashby sighed at his overprotective mate.

“Of course not, Baptista was with me after he got back from visiting Kate’s babies. Rhys recognized me, I know he did.”

“He needs to do more than recognize you to stay alive. If his eyes haven’t shifted back by the time Baron comes back to Arkadia, he will be put down like a rabid dog.”

“It’s not fair! He didn’t ask for this. It was forced on him.” Ashby turned his face into Gabriel’s chest.

“It is our law.”

“It’s a dumb law!”

“The council has been very lenient with us, *mon ange*, they have helped us enormously.”

“How has the council helped us?” Ashby was confused. The shifter council rarely interacted with the vampires.

When Gabriel didn’t respond right away, Ashby looked up. Gabriel’s eyes were weary, and he gazed down at him nervously.

“Gabriel?”

Gabriel stood and set Ashby in his chair and began to pace in front of the desk.

“Gabriel you’re scaring me.”

“I meant to discuss this with you beforehand, but my request was processed so quickly and it just so happened that they had a need.” Gabriel stopped pacing, his back to his mate.

“What request?”

“I asked them to look into possible children that needed adopting,” Gabriel said, turning around.

Ashby felt as if all the air in the room were sucked out of the window. He gasped and grabbed his chest. Gabriel was instantly before him.

“I knew it. I knew you wouldn’t want me because I couldn’t have babies.” Ashby closed his eyes in pain.

“No! No, *mon ange*. I saw how much pain you were in and how hard you tried to hide it from your closest friends. I could feel it in your heart, the desire for a child of your own. How could I not move Heaven and Earth to make that happen for you? You are my very reason for existing.” Gabriel peppered Ashby’s face with kisses.

“What did they say?” Ashby asked, feeling like his entire world was spinning out of control. In the background he heard the doorbell ring.

“They found us a child, my angel. They are making arrangements to send the little one to us, possibly after the New Year.” Gabriel smiled and seemed to hold his breath.

“We’re going to have a child! We’re going to be parents!” Ashby yelled. The doorbell chimed again. Ashby jumped up and started to pace the room, mimicking Gabriel’s earlier movements. Gabriel tried to walk

alongside but Ashby seemed to start, stop and turn as new concerns or ideas popped into his head.

“How old? Is it a boy or a girl? Do you have any idea how much stuff we have to get!” Ashby ranted, waving his arms. He tried to get his breathing under control. The doorbell chimed again, and again and again.

“Someone get the damn door!” he screeched. Gabriel winced. Beyond the office door they heard people stampede for the front door at Ashby’s uncharacteristic display of temper. Ashby took a deep steadying breath.

“They wouldn’t tell me anything except that the child’s parents had been murdered by Drainers and that they had no one in the world to take care of them. As for supplies, we have plenty. The things in the spare room that you think are for Rebecca are actually early Christmas gifts for you.” Gabriel pulled Ashby into his arms.

“Hey! Did anyone order a baby?” Daniel’s voice rang through the house.

Ashby froze and looked up at his mate. Gabriel looked as close to panic and shock as he had ever seen him. Ashby dashed for the door and ran downstairs to the foyer. Gabriel, with his vampiric speed, made it there seconds before him.

Ashby stopped a few feet from a small woman holding a tiny bundle wrapped in a blue blanket. She wore a tidy, tweed suit and sensible shoes. She looked like the quintessential British nanny.

“I am Prince Gabriel, who might you be?” Gabriel asked.

“I’m so terribly sorry, I assumed the council let you know I was coming. Oh dear. I have brought the child they told you about. There was a mistake on the paperwork for the adoption date, his foster family is going out of the country for the holiday and of course couldn’t take him with them. Will that be a problem?”

“No!” Ashby and Gabriel practically yelled, and the woman jumped and gave a nervous titter.

“I’m afraid he doesn’t come with much,” she said and eased the baby into Ashby’s shaking arms.

“Is that ours?” Daniel asked excitedly. Gabriel nodded with tears in his eyes.

“David! David, hurry, we’re having a baby!” Daniel screeched, and coven members began to pour into the foyer.

“When?” David yelled.

“Now!” Daniel jumped around from foot to foot, trying to catch a glimpse of the infant.

“What!” was the bellowed reply from the landing before David tumbled down the stairs in his effort to get to the foyer to see the baby. Daniel ran over to help his twin.

Ashby felt Gabriel standing close behind him, peering over his shoulder. With trembling hands Ashby pushed aside the blanket so they could see their son for the first time. When he saw his son’s face he couldn’t stop crying. He looked up at his mate to see that the Prince of all vampires had pink-tinged tears streaking lines down his alabaster cheeks.

“How?” Gabriel croaked and cleared his voice and spoke again. “How can he look just like you?” His voice broke. Ashby rubbed his cheek along the baby’s soft head.

“What is he?” Ashby asked in awe.

“We thought you knew, he’s a fennec fox. It was one of the things that weighed the decision in your favor since you are the same animal. Well then, my cab is waiting. Merry Christmas and congratulations to you both.” She nodded and let herself out the door.

Ashby felt his knees give out and his mate was right there to catch him. Gabriel eased them both down and sat Ashby between his legs on the foyer floor. He wrapped his arms around his mate to touch their son.

“I should be furious with you for making this kind of decision without me, I just can’t find it in me. Not while holding our son. You made this happen for us.” Ashby’s heart felt like it was about to burst he was so happy.

“A fennec fox with blonde curls, *mon petite ange*. My little angel,” Gabriel whispered.

“What will we name him?” Ashby asked, pulling the blanket back to inspect every finger and toe.

“How about David?”

“Or Daniel.” The twins glared at each other.

“It should be a regal name,” Roman commented.

“Powerful,” Baptista added, cooing at the baby.

“How about Arthur?” Ashby asked. Gabriel nodded.

“He was a fine man.”

Ashby's head turned up to his mate his mouth open.

"You knew King Arthur?" Gabriel just smiled.

"I think that is a perfect name." Kurt, like most of the coven, was already smitten with their infant prince.

"Did you hear that? You are now Arthur Mikhail Fairfax." Ashby held the baby close. He heard Gabriel's breath catch.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

Ashby nodded.

"That's regal and powerful all right," David snorted.

"You nailed it." Daniel laughed.

"Welcome to our coven, my son," Gabriel said, his voice thick with emotion.

"Welcome home, Prince Arthur!" The coven celebrated around them. Ashby turned an impish face to his mate.

"That will never, ever get old."

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## Chapter 7

*Connor*

*Dec 23<sup>rd</sup> Morning*

“Giddey where in the hell are you?” Connor heard his mate yell into her cell phone.

“Oh Madison, you know I couldn’t miss the Fireman’s Ball. They expect me every year,” Giddey drawled.

“I need you here, like yesterday. I have casework piling up all over the place. Do you have any idea how many outdated laws I’m tackling?” Madison demanded. Connor heard a loud sigh.

“Madison...”

“Don’t Madison me, mister. When is your flight?”

“Hmm my flight.”

“You haven’t booked it yet, have you?” Madison’s voice got cold.

“I was going to that day you called but then I had to list the apartment and then box up my things. Did they show up?” Giddey asked. Connor snorted.

“Yes all fifty-two of them, all of them say either clothes or shoes. You’ll need an entire room just for your clothes!”

“Duuuh. Why do you think I insisted on a two-bedroom apartment, even though the rent in New York is criminal?”

“Flight information. You better be booking as we speak on your iPad!” Madison yelled.

“Touchy, touchy. What’s the matter, hun, your bear not giving up the loving?”

Connor choked as his coffee went down the wrong way.

“For your information my bear is hung like a horse lord and can fuck like a porn star,” Madison quipped. Connor stared at his mate in shock.

“Get it, girl! I can’t wait to meet those hot lions you told me about.”

“Then hurry up and get here already.”

“Fine! I’ve booked my flight for after New Year’s, no way am I missing that. There, I’ve emailed you my info. Happy now?”

“Yes. Miss you drama queen.”

“Miss you too, ballbuster. Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas.” Madison ended the call and flopped back next to Connor on their sofa.

“Hung like a horse lord and can fuck like a porn star?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

“It’s true.” She grinned at her mate. Connor was leaning in for a kiss when his cell phone started ringing. Sighing, he answered.

“Hello.”

“Hey Professor.” Connor sat up. It was Baron, which could only mean one thing.

“What’s happened?”

“An oily, sniveling excuse for a lawyer, on behalf of some wolf Alpha, petitioned the council that your man Rhys’s time was up two weeks ago. I’m under Council orders to head to Arkadia to execute Rhys, I’ll be there by this evening.”

Madison’s eyes widened and filled with tears.

“What the fuck, man! Tomorrow is Christmas Eve,” Connor protested.

“Believe me, Griffin and I argued to postpone until after the holidays. But the lawyer said that Rhys is a threat that must be dealt with right away. The reason I’m calling is, I was that this might be easier coming from you.” Connor fell back against the sofa and closed his eyes.

“I’ll call Gabriel as soon as I get off the phone with you.”

“He has to be brought to the town square. That whining little shit said that he didn’t feel safe going to a house full of vampires.” Connor could hear the contempt in Baron’s voice.

“Fuck! We’ll have little kids out caroling.”

“Connor, you know if it were up to me,” Baron said, using Connor’s real name.

“I know. I’ll call Gabriel now, what time?”

“Around six.”

“See you then.”

“Bye, Professor, and for what it’s worth, I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, man.” Connor ended the call and looked at Madison. He could see sadness and anger in her eyes. He knew this brought up recent



memories of being taken and abused. She and Rhys had bonded in that tiny cell.

“Madison.” She shook her head.

“There was nothing I could do. I tried. But that law is ironclad and for good reason. No vampire has ever come back, not after thirty days. It’s been nearly forty for Rhys.”

Shaking his head, Connor dialed Gabriel.

“Gabriel speaking.”

“Prince Gabriel, it’s Connor Arkadion.”

“Connor, perfect timing. I wanted to make sure you’re at the diner later. Ashby and I have a surprise for everyone.” Gabriel sounded jubilant. Connor hated that he had to be the one to tell him that one of his children was about to die.

“Baron called,” was all he was able to get out.

“Hold,” was the crisp ordered response. In the background Connor heard.

“Angel, I’m heading to my office for this phone call. You should take Arthur upstairs and pick out an outfit for this afternoon.”

“Okay. I love you,” he heard Ashby say.

“I love you too, *mon ange*.” There was the sound of walking and a door shutting.

“Who is Arthur?” Connor asked. He heard a sigh.

“Arthur is our adopted infant son. He was placed into our care last night. Today is supposed to be a happy one for my family. What did Baron have to say?”

“Damn it!” Connor yelled in helpless frustration.

“He’s coming isn’t he?” Gabriel asked.

“That conniving boot-licker Salsiby went before the council and insisted that Rhys was a threat and pushed to have his execution immediately. They’ll be here this evening, Gabriel. You have to bring Rhys to the town square by six for execution.”

There was silence from the other end of the line, he couldn’t even hear Gabriel breathing.

“Then I better make sure that Ashby enjoys this afternoon,” was the emotionless reply.

“If there is anything I can do,” Connor offered.

“I’m afraid there isn’t anything anyone can do. Thank you for being the one to call me, I know that it could not have been easy for you. But it made a difference hearing this from a friend.”

“We’ll stand by you tonight,” Connor promised.

“That would be most welcome. Until this afternoon.”

Connor was about to fling his cell phone at the wall when Madison’s gentle hand stopped him.

“All we can do is be there for them. I hope they let me try to say goodbye, and thank you. He suffered so much denying himself my blood. His willpower saved me.” Madison leaned her head against Connor’s shoulder.

“It’s not right. This wasn’t his fault.” Connor’s voice broke.

“Maybe this will end his torment.” Madison wiped at her tears and Connor wrapped his arm around her, pulling her close.

“We need to head to the diner early. Ma planned a huge gift for Kate, Rebecca and Sebastian. But she didn’t know Ashby would have a baby too. We need to stop at the general store and pray they have another Pack ’N Play.”

“It doesn’t feel like Christmas anymore.” Madison pulled the afghan over her legs for comfort. Connor looked down at his depressed mate and decided that maybe she needed her Christmas gift early.

“How about you open a Christmas gift?”

“I’m not in the mood.” She sighed.

“How about that small square one. The one wrapped in green paper.” Connor suggested, smiling at his mate. She looked up and a grin started to tug at her lips.

“What’s in the box?”

“Open it and find out!” Connor said, nudging her leg with his own. Madison eyed the gift then looked at him, before her eyes wandered back to the small square box.

“Hmm I wonder what it could be?” Connor asked playfully.

“Argh! You got me!” Madison bounced off the sofa and sat in front of their tree like a kid at Christmas. Her eyes were still edged by sadness, but there was a sparkle back in her eye. She picked up the square box. She tore into the wrapping and stared down at the plain white box. Carefully she

lifted the top. When she moved aside the tissue paper he watched as her face was transformed into a look of wonder.

“How?” she asked, her trembling fingers reaching out to touch the textured canvas before she thought better of it, and continued to stare. She carefully lifted the small painting out of the box and walked back over to the sofa to sit next to her mate.

Connor looked down and was still impressed by the pure beauty that he saw. Right after mating with Madison and hearing that her sister was missing, he had gone to Doc to see if he had any pictures of the three of them together. He had found one, the three of them as babies. Connor had then taken the photograph to Caleb and commissioned a small painting. Caleb hadn't simply copied the photo. He had taken his own personal experiences with Doc and Madison, and stories about the missing Maddie, and he had brought them to life.

Little Maddie looked to the side of the painting with wide-eyed wonder, staring beyond her brother and sister at a landscape painting in the distance. Baby Maddox was staring at Madison, his tiny mouth quirked to one side, frowning slightly. Madison stared right back at her brother, her face full of laughter. In the background he had painted three white, Bengal tiger cubs. Caleb was truly a genius.

Madison couldn't stop staring at the painting. She propped it up on the coffee table and sat back on the sofa, her eyes never leaving the small canvas.

“I hope you like it.”

“I love it. It's the best Christmas gift I have ever received.” She looked up at him as the tears started to spill over onto her cheeks.

“Come here, wildcat.” Connor pulled her into his lap and held her close. She pulled back suddenly and looked him in the eye.

“Do you want a baby?”

He blinked. “Like now?”

“I'm not sure if I would be a good mother, but I know you would be a wonderful father. I look at that painting and I can't help but wonder what our baby would look like.”

Connor held her at arm's length, his heart racing. He desperately wanted a child, but only when his mate was ready.

“I would love to have a child, but only when you are ready. I think you’d make a wonderful mother. I mean look how much you look after Giddey,” he said, smiling. Madison grinned back at him.

“Do you really think so?” He nodded.

“You live to protect and help people. I can only imagine what you would do for our child.”

“What time do we need to leave to head to the diner?”

“About eleven.”

She looked over at the clock and turned back to him, licking her lips.

“Let’s try. If it happens it happens. But I want you to know, I’m not against it.” Madison ran her hands down his chest.

“Wildcat, you have me so hard thinking about getting you pregnant.” Connor groaned when she reached between them to cup his hardening dick.

“Then it’s a good thing I’m not wearing any panties under my nightgown and my pussy is dripping wet,” she said, leaning forward to bite his earlobe. That was all it took. Growling, he yanked the garment up over her head and attacked her hardening nipples like a starving man. She arched her back, thrusting her breast further into his mouth.

He stood, wrapping her legs around his waist, and then ran for the stairs. Through his T-shirt he could feel her damp, scorching hot pussy grind against his abdomen. He felt his eyes shift as he growled low and long. Tossing his mate on the bed he ripped his clothes from his body and descended on her.

She took one look at his advancing form and her eyes shifted to a light blue. She got on her hands and knees and looked at him from over one shoulder. Catlike, she arched her back before lowering her upper body to the bed, offering up her ass to him. He could see the moist, pink folds of her pussy beckoning to him. He had to grab the base of his cock to prevent himself from coming.

“I’m sorry, wildcat, I don’t think I can go slow,” he rumbled, climbing on the bed and taking up a position behind her. He slowly stroked his cock, looking down at her body.

“I don’t need slow right now, just you.” She wiggled her ass. Connor ran both hands over her perfect ass cheeks and pulled them apart. He could see her dark hole teasing him as her pussy dripped liquid down her thighs. He ran his thumb up her slit, sliding her juices to her sweet hole. He didn’t

know what he wanted more, her dew-soaked pussy or her tight ass. Grinning, he decided to have both.

With his other hand he grabbed his shaft and began to push himself inside her slick folds. He waited until he was about halfway in and then slammed inside his mate to the hilt. She went wild beneath him the way he knew she would. She loved to have her cervix bumped. He hammered into her over and over again. He loved the way her body stretched to take his cock.

He knew he wouldn't have long, his body was already primed. He reached forward and wrapped his fingers in her hair. He pulled backward until her back was bowed. She was keening her pleasure. Snapping his hips again and again he pushed his thumb into her dark star. She screamed and her pussy clamped down on his cock.

He saw stars explode behind his eyelids. He roared and pulled her hair until she was up and kneeling on her knees in front of him. He was still coming when he leaned forward and buried his canines deep into her shoulder. Her arms came up to hold his head. He impaled her with his thick cock one last time and was spent.

Breathing heavily, he retracted his canines and pulled out of her body. She simply fell forward onto the bed. On extremely shaky legs he got off the bed and went to the bathroom. He cleaned up and brought out a washcloth for her. She only moaned softly when he gently wiped her clean.

He went back to the bathroom and threw the washcloth in the hamper. He made his way back to bed and curled up around his mate.

"What time is it?" she asked. He looked over at their alarm clock and sighed.

"It's ten."

"Wake me up in half an hour."

*Yeah, fuck that.*

Connor set the alarm and went to sleep himself.

\* \* \* \*

Connor barely had enough time to set up the fourth Pack 'N Play out on the diner floor when the new parents and babies started showing up at the diner. Rebecca had been eyeing the new doorway that Duncan had cut last

week. He knew she was dying to see what was behind the new mysterious door. He could hardly wait to show them what they had done.

The entire idea started off with a sarcastic comment from him saying that if the group of new parents spent as much time at the diner after the babies as before, then there should be baby stations at the diner.

He remembered how his Ma's eyes had widened and she got a decidedly wolfish grin on her face, despite being a bear. At that point it became "The Project." Ma had told them what to build and what to buy and the Arkadion boys made sure it happened. Everyone except Aleks had lent a hand.

They had converted Ma's extra office into Baby Central. On one wall was a long counter that had two microwaves and two sinks with bottle-drying racks. Under the long counter were three mini-fridges that he knew were stocked with bottled water and formula. The other three walls were lined with dressers interspaced with six cribs, two on each wall. On top of each dresser were multiple changing pads in multiple colors and warming baby wipe dispensers. There were five Diaper Genies and what seemed to Connor to be an endless supply of clothes, diapers, toys, pacifiers, bottles and blankets.

They had closed off the back doorway, making it one solid wall, and Duncan had cut a doorway which opened up right into the diner. He had David and Daniel order a security system for the door where you had to have a fob to get into Baby Central. That way the new parents could monitor the only entrance and exit, and the number of people able to get in would be limited. Today the new parents would get their fobs.

"Can I see *now*??" Rebecca demanded. Ma laughed and waved Connor over. Madison grinned and pushed him forward.

"We're waiting on one more person," Connor said, eyeing the doorway. He knew the surprise that Ashby had and he didn't want to exclude him in this present. As if on cue, the bells to the door chimed and the vampires arrived.

Gabriel, David, Daniel and Ashby walked into the diner. He heard Rebecca's gasp and knew that she had figured out what the tiny bundle in Ashby's arms was.

"Oh! Oh! Oh!" Rebecca for once was speechless.

“Ashby, is that a baby?” Kate asked, eyes bright. She had already pulled one of the Pack 'N Plays over and set Landon and Lucas in it to play. She held Merrick and Bran held Matthew.

Ashby nodded and beamed at his friends. Everyone gathered around to inspect the newest member of their family. Connor and Madison made their way over. Connor met Gabriel's eye and the prince nodded. Connor nodded in return.

“Congratulations to you both,” he said.

“Ashby, how could you keep this from me?” Rebecca demanded, her hands on her hips.

“That would be my fault. I wasn't able to tell Ashby himself until right before this little one was on our doorstep. His parents were killed by Drainers, and since he had no other family, the council awarded us custody,” Gabriel explained.

“He is so tiny! He looks like you, Ashers!” Rebecca said excitedly.

“He's a fennec fox too, it's why they gave him to us. There aren't that many of us.” Ashby smiled down at the baby who had woken up and looked around with wide blue eyes.

“What is his name?” Sebastian asked, cradling his son against his chest.

“We have named him Arthur. How is baby Lucian?” Ashby asked. Sebastian grinned.

“He eats more than all our lions combined!” Sebastian laughed.

“Tell me about it! I have two. I don't know how I'm going to keep up. When one isn't hungry the other is, by the time you're finished feeding one, the other one is hungry again.” Kate rolled her eyes.

“Oh let me see!” Ashby said, looking at the baby in Kate's arms.

“This is Merrick, Bran is holding Matthew.” Kate turned so Ashby could see his face.

“Wow, he looks like a mini-Bran,” Ashby joked.

“They both have his hair, but it's the eyes I love. They both got his amber-colored eyes.” Kate smiled down at her son.

“Shifter babies are different than human ones. You usually don't know a human baby's eye color until they are six months old,” Rebecca said as Arthur grabbed her finger and began to wave it about.

“Shifter babies are only slightly more advanced but definitely stronger,” Ma said.

“Thank goodness you have the Pack ’N Plays here. I can’t imagine hefting two about, plus four babies and diaper bags.” Kate smiled her thanks at Ma.

Ma looked over to Connor and nodded.

“And on that note. Can I have everyone’s attention?” He walked to the back of the diner where the new doorway still looked out of place across the hall from the long serving counter.

“As you know we’ve had a bit of construction here lately. Now you will get to see why. David, Daniel, if you would?” Connor waved to the new parents.

David and Daniel split up. They handed fobs to each set of parents, including Ashby and Gabriel. Connor was willing to bet they worked double time last night to get those ready for today.

“What our technical geniuses have passed to you are fobs that will act as keys to get through this door. The only other people who have a fob are myself, Ma, and Pa.” Connor grinned. He deliberately waited, drawing out the suspense. He could see Rebecca practically coming unglued.

“Connor!” she wailed. He decided to take mercy on his little sister.

“Okay, Rebecca, we’ll let you go first. You can see what is behind door number one.” He bowed and gestured to the door. She quickly waddled forward and used the fob on the small black electronic box installed on the right. They heard a click as it unlocked and she opened the door. Behind her, Kate, Sebastian and Ashby followed, holding their babies.

“Welcome to Baby Central, your home away from home,” Connor announced.

The new mommies and daddies turned this way and that to take in everything that was in the room. Kate, then Rebecca, plowed into Connor to strangle him in a hug.

“You have no idea what this means.” Kate sniffled. Ashby wiped his eyes and Sebastian ran a hand along the smooth wood of one of the cribs, blinking back tears.

“This is your home too. I hope this means that you will be spending more time in the diner so I can play with those babies.” Ma grinned and Sebastian and Ashby went to her. She wrapped an arm around each of them and pulled them in for a hug.



“For nap time we’ve tied the baby monitors into the sound system. Anything louder than a whimper and it will mute the music and you will be able to hear them,” David explained, then blushed when Rebecca kissed him on the cheek.

“Come on everyone, let’s grab something to eat,” Connor said. Everyone laughed and headed out of the new room.

“You and your family are amazing,” Madison said, wrapping her arms around his neck.

“They’re your family too. But why do you say that?”

“You go out of your way to make this feel like a home. That means a lot.”

“Blame Rebecca.” He grinned and she rubbed noses with him.

“I don’t want to be pregnant anymore!” Rebecca yelled.

“Oh honey, your baby will come when he is ready,” Doc explained, rubbing her back.

“Are you sure he’s not all curled up comfy for the winter?” Rebecca asked.

Connor watched his brother-in-law fight to keep a straight face.

“I’m sure that poor little guy is out of room.”

“I don’t think I can do this six more times,” Rebecca complained.

“Well you have at least six more to get through.” Aleks smiled down at his mate. She scowled up at him.

“No way. This one is it.” She shook her head, sending her dark curls flying.

“No form of birth control works. Trust me, I know.” Ma laughed. Rebecca just smiled.

“I know one surefire way not to get pregnant.” She picked up a French fry and dipped it in her ketchup.

Connor could see Aleks’s brows snap together. He could tell his older brother was mentally going through all known forms of birth control. Connor couldn’t help grinning. He knew what she meant. Suddenly Aleks’s mouth dropped.

“You don’t mean that, do you, Becca?” he asked, sounding worried.

“Little Aloisius is okay with being an only child.” She rubbed her belly.

Connor couldn’t help it. He burst out laughing at his brother’s face. Liam looked over and winked at Connor. They had been teaming up to

torture Aleks for years.

Connor was about to chime in when his cell phone started to vibrate. He froze. He stood quickly and headed to Baby Central, using his fob to get in. He waited until the door shut behind him before he answered his phone.

“Hello.”

“We’re heading to the town square now.”

“I’ll let them know.”

“Thanks, and I’m sorry again,” Baron said.

“Not your fault. See you in a bit.” Connor closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

When he walked out the diner was quiet and all eyes were on him. He met Gabriel’s haunted eyes and nodded. He watched as Gabriel leaned in, and so quietly he couldn’t hear what was being said, began speaking to his mate.

Connor watched the joy drain out of Ashby’s face. The small man stood suddenly, clutching Arthur.

“No!” he yelled. Connor looked over to his Ma and Pa and nodded. When he had arrived at the diner earlier that afternoon he had explained what was planned. He watched as his Pa stood and silently walked outside to begin herding the children who were caroling inside for hot chocolate.

Ma walked over to where Kate, Nic, Sebastian, and Rebecca were trying to get answers out of a sobbing Ashby. Gabriel was talking quietly to David and Daniel. It was seconds later that they too dissolved into tears. Word spread quickly around the diner. Most of the patrons were shaking their heads.

Connor looked up and held his hand out to Madison, and she quickly walked over and took it.

“What do you mean that oily bastard is coming here!” Rebecca demanded, getting the story from Ashby between sobs.

Kate turned to Rian.

“RiRi, can you take my boys to Baby Central and watch over them? I’ll be standing with Gabriel and Ashby and I don’t want them anywhere near that son of a bitch.” Kate growled.

“Can you take Lucian too?” Sebastian asked, handing the baby over to Damian.

“Please?” Ashby asked, unable to wipe his tears with his son in his arms. Gently, Rex stepped forward and took tiny Arthur. Talon scooped up Landon and Lucas and Kaden helped Rian with Merrick and Matthew.

“Don’t worry about these little guys. Nothing is going to come near them.” Rian growled and nuzzled Merrick’s cheek. Beau joined the lions in Baby Central to guard the door.

Quietly, the group made their way outside into the cold, winter’s night. Inside, Ma and Pa kept things lively as the children headed in. Once the door to the diner was closed and they saw Pa’s silhouette through the frosted glass, they walked to the town square.

Baron, Salsiby and three wolf shifters waited for them in the middle of town. Baron’s mouth was drawn in a tight line.

“Professor.”

“Baron.” Connor nodded.

Baron turned to Gabriel and bowed.

“Prince Gabriel, I am truly sorry for what I have to do.”

Gabriel’s eyes had shifted to black.

“It is not your fault. Neither myself nor my coven bear you any ill will.”

Baron straightened.

“Where is the feral? Can you hurry it up please? I would like to get back to celebrate this monster’s execution with Alpha Devon. After tonight, shifters everywhere will be safer.” Salsiby’s smile was smug.

Connor took a step forward only to see that Caleb, Aleks and Liam had done the same thing. Gabriel remained exactly where he was but his black eyes began to smolder, turning to a dark red.

“Careful, Gabriel, or we may have to put you down as well,” Salsiby jeered.

David and Daniel stepped in front of their prince, growling low, their claws extended.

“That is Prince Gabriel to you. As for putting me down, I welcome you to try.” Gabriel’s fangs lengthened.

Behind them they heard multiple car doors shut. Baptista and most of the coven got out of their vehicles and surrounded Rhys. Slowly, in a stately manner, they walked forward to the center of town. At first Connor thought it was because they were acting as an honor guard but as they got closer he

could hear the clanks of the metal chains securing Rhys's hands and feet. The condemned man shuffled forward in a vacant daze.

"My Prince, we gave him the last of your blood you had stored for him. He is calm for the moment," Baptista reported. Gabriel nodded and swallowed hard. He took the chain lead from Baptista's hand and walked Rhys forward.

"Papa?" Rhys asked, confused. Connor looked on, fighting back his tears.

"That's right, Rhys, I am here. It's Christmas, we're out in the snow. You love Christmas, remember," Gabriel explained gently, walking him in front of Baron.

"I can't watch." Rebecca sobbed uncontrollably.

Connor watched as Gabriel positioned Rhys to kneel with his back to the large Sentinel.

"I am so sorry I failed you, my son. Please forgive me." Gabriel leaned forward and kissed Rhys on the forehead. When he stood and faced the other leaders there were pink tears streaming down his cheeks.

"No! It's not fair!" Ashby cried. Rebecca broke away from Aleks and wrapped her arms around Ashby. Sebastian, Kate and Nic walked forward to help ease the small man's pain.

"It's not fair." He sobbed brokenly.

"It's not fair," Kate repeated.

"Not fair," Rebecca said eerily.

"Not fair," Nic and Sebastian echoed. All five of them looked on, their eyes slightly unfocused.

Connor looked at the semicircle the Inner Court had formed facing Rhys. His eyes moved to Gabriel and Aleks, and they, too, looked surprised.

"It is law! Baron, what are you waiting for?" Salsiby demanded shrilly.

Baron was staring at Rebecca.

"Law."

"Is."

"Not."

"A."

"Weapon." Each member of the Inner Court spoke a different word.

"Our."

"Laws."

“Are.”

“A.”

“Shield.” Once again, starting with Rebecca, then Ashby, followed by Nic, Kate and Sebastian, the Inner Court spoke a different word of the sentence.

“Whatever you’re doing, stop it!” Salsiby demanded.

“This.”

“Was.”

“Not.”

“His.”

“Fate.” Their voices no longer sounded like their own.

“This.”

“Man.”

“Has.”

“Done.”

“No wrong.” The voice that spoke through the Inner Circle was kind and gentle.

“This.”

“Is.”

“My.”

“Gift.”

“To you.” Rebecca shook her head and looked around.

Gabriel’s eyes immediately went to Rhys, who stared back at them with the same blood-red eyes.

“Some gift,” Salsiby scoffed. “Kill him,” he ordered. Baron gripped the sword hilt at his waist and hesitated.

“You are under orders, now kill him!” Gritting his teeth, Baron drew his sword and held it in both hands in front of him.

Rhys, oblivious to what was going on around him, began to sway back and forth gently.

“Do it!” Salsiby screamed.

Behind them, faintly at first and then growing louder, the sound of singing filled the streets. The children were singing “Silent Night” inside the diner. Connor looked around, and the entire scene took a turn to the macabre.

Salsiby was reaching for Baron's sword when Rhys opened his mouth. What emerged had everyone rooted in place. He tilted his head back and his throat worked as golden note after golden note lifted effortlessly into the night air.

Rhys's song floated through the street until the song from the children quieted and the door to the diner opened. Ma and Pa stepped out, looking enchanted. From behind them people left the diner to listen to the man kneeling in the snow.

"Baron!" Salsiby yelled.

"Wait!" Gabriel exclaimed, stepping forward. Rebecca and Ashby began to laugh and hug one another.

Baron stepped around Rhys and looked down. His face broke out into a grin.

Connor looked back to Rhys to see two brilliant green eyes looking out at them. As the song ended, Rhys sat back on his heels.

"Baron, if you won't kill him I will." Salsiby grabbed the hilt of Baron's sword. With an annoyed look on his face, Baron calmly backhanded the small, rodent-like man.

"You hit me! You hit me unprovoked in Arkadia! I demand this man be banned from coming back here," Salsiby screeched from the ground, blood pouring from his nose.

"Technically I was defending an innocent Arkadian townsman." Baron grinned at Connor.

"That's right. You were about to kill an innocent man." Connor stepped forward.

"He is a monster!"

"It seems we have a different idea of what is a monster, here in Arkadia," Rebecca said, stepping forward.

Salsiby turned to Gabriel.

"You still can't feed him. I know you have been checking for a supplier of shifter blood and came up empty. It's only a matter of time before he kills." Salsiby was helped to his feet by one of the wolf shifters he had brought.

Rebecca frowned.

"He lives in a town full of shifters, why do you think getting shifter blood will be an issue?" she asked sensibly, looking around.

“I never wanted the townspeople to think we thought of them as food,” Gabriel admitted.

“You are a damn moron!” Rebecca exploded. If he weren’t so worried about his sister calling the most dangerous vampire on the planet a moron he would have enjoyed the stunned look on Gabriel’s face.

“I tried to tell him,” Ashby chimed in, standing next to his mate.

“Of course we would help. Gabriel, whether you like it or not, you are family,” Ma said.

“The vampires gave us blood when we needed it!” A woman yelled from the sidewalk in front of the diner.

“They saved my son!”

“And my wife!”

Rebecca turned to the crowd.

“Christmas blood drive! Use the emergency phone tree, let’s get people down here!” Rebecca bounced up and down on the balls of her feet. Immediately, people were reaching for cell phones.

“I may be feeling better, but it may not be such a good idea to have me around a town of shifters donating blood. I’m just sayin’.” Rhys smiled tiredly from the ground.

“We’ll get him home.” Roman stepped forward and pulled Rhys up before embracing the man.

“It wouldn’t have been Christmas without hearing you sing.” Roman smiled at his friend.

“Felix, let’s head to the clinic and start setting up,” Doc said, grinning from ear to ear.

“Right!”

“I can help,” Baptista said, stepping forward.

“This isn’t right! The council ruled that he be executed,” Salsiby contested.

“Will someone *please* drag him out of here?” Rebecca asked.

“Alpha Mother, if you would allow me?” Baron grinned.

“Are you staying for the party tomorrow?” Rebecca asked. Baron shook his head as he grabbed Salsiby by the back of the collar.

“No, I’m hosting the boy’s Christmas poker tournament this year. But thanks for the invitation.” He smiled and spoke politely as the small man thrashed around, not even making the large Sentinel budge.

“Don’t just stand there, help me!” the oily lawyer yelled at the wolves. Baron swung his head around and simply stared at them.

“Our job is done,” one said and all three hurriedly made their way out of town.

“You actually brought some smart ones with you this time,” Connor teased.

“You won’t get away with this. Baron, I’ll be speaking with your Commander!” Salsiby swung his arms in an attempt to strike Baron.

Holding the man at arm’s length, Baron watched the lawyer in disgust. Without changing his expression he threw the man forcibly on the ground. Connor heard a bone snap.

“I’m sorry, did you trip? Here, let me help you up.” Baron jerked him back up by the hair. He turned to Connor.

“Well, let me head out. Merry Christmas, everyone.”

“Bye, Baron, and thanks for taking the trash out.” Connor laughed.

“Anytime.” Baron waved and dragged the lawyer out of town by the hair.

“That man is super hot!” Rebecca sighed.

“What is it about the military types?” Madison watched as Salsiby ‘tripped’ again.

Aleks and Connor both growled at their mates.

“Now that the sneaky lawyer is gone, what happened with you guys?” Madison asked, turning to Rebecca.

She shrugged and looked at the other members of the Inner Court.

“For me, it was like, the words weren’t mine, but I felt what she did. We just all felt it at the same time,” Ashby tried to explain.

“She who?” Connor asked. Rebecca pursed her lips and tilted her head.

“I think it was Fate. I think she has plans for him that didn’t involve being executed,” Kate said.

“It’s nice to know someone is looking out for us.” Rebecca giggled.

“On that positive note, I’m going to take the boys home. We’ll have a long day again tomorrow for the Christmas party,” Kate said as Bran and Caleb walked up with their boys. Rian handed Lucian to Sebastian and Rex passed Arthur to Ashby.

“I’m not sure I’ll be able to sleep tonight,” Sebastian admitted, cuddling Lucian close.



“Me either,” Nic said, yawning. Everyone laughed.

Gabriel walked up from coordinating the vampires to assist in the blood drive.

“You have no idea what this means,” Gabriel said, pulling Rebecca into a hug. Aleks growled and pulled Rebecca into his arms. Rolling her eyes, she winked at Gabriel.

“You mean that someone else is giving their blood and saving someone I love? Yeah, no idea what that feels like. I want to make sure I’m one of the first to donate,” Connor said, though his words were meant to be light, they carried the weight of emotion with it.

“As soon as they set up I’m heading over there,” Aleks said, kissing the top of Rebecca’s head. She sighed.

“I can’t donate,” she said sadly. Connor slapped his forehead in disbelief.

“Rebecca, you’re the one who literally just kick-started this whole thing,” Madison reminded the tiny human.

“Besides, you’re pregnant,” Ashby reminded his friend.

“It’s just that Gabriel saved my baby, and I wanted to help Rhys, since he is like Gabriel’s child,” Rebecca explained.

“You and your Inner Court worked a miracle. I believe that Fate was only able to work through you, due to your close bonds. You did save my child.” Gabriel, uncaring that she stood in her mate’s arms, kissed her cheek. She sighed happily and Aleks snarled. Both Gabriel and Rebecca ignored him.

“Come on, everyone, let’s give up some red blood cells,” Rebecca cheered.

Connor laughed and followed Madison to the clinic. She also stood in line to donate.

“I insist on donating too.” Madison looped her arm through his.

“Why?”

“Because without the vampires, Arkadia would have fallen, and I would never have met you,” she said quietly.

“Fate knows best, doesn’t she?” Connor smiled.

“Of course.” Madison rested her head on his shoulder as they waited for their turn to return the gift that had been given to them that summer.

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## Chapter 8

*Rebecca*

*Dec 24<sup>th</sup> Sunset*

“I love Christmas trees!” Rebecca laughed in pure delight as the men secured the large tree in the center of town.

“Becca, go inside, it’s cold,” Aleks said, tying off one side.

“It’s winter.”

“Becca.”

“No.” Aleks sighed.

“Please.”

“Okay, but only because I want some of Ma’s hot chocolate.” Rebecca blew him a kiss and walked back to the diner. She walked inside and saw that her friends were already setting up tables for their Christmas party. Ma sat in the middle of four Pack ’N Plays surrounded by babies and looking completely in her element.

Her friends sat at the three tables closest to the Pack ’N Plays. None of the new parents wanted to let their babies out of their sight. The men walked in, bringing in a gust of cold air with them. Rebecca watched as Connor went to the counter to grab a cup of coffee. Out of nowhere a dark-haired, olive-skinned woman sauntered up to him. She leaned in, rubbing her breasts on his arm. Connor began to frown down at the woman.

Quicker than Rebecca could track, Madison was standing next to her mate. She opened her mouth and a long, angry hiss erupted. The dark-haired woman stepped back and then edged backward. Madison hissed again and the woman left the diner in a hurry. The men sat around their mates at the tables, getting warm.

“Brazen hussy!” Ma exclaimed, her cheeks heated in anger. No one dared remind her that she had fussed at Sebastian for using that term a few days ago, not when a strange woman was flirting with her mated son.

“Shameless!” Rebecca murmured, meeting Ashby’s eye. Both broke out into giggles. Ashby got a funny look on his face.

“How are you doing?” he asked.

“I’m good. But I so want to learn how to hiss, that was badass!” Rebecca opened her mouth and a faint hiss came out. Kate burst out laughing.

“You might want to stick to your tiny growl.” Liam grinned.

“It just takes practice,” Rian said, pulling up a seat. He opened his mouth and hissed beautifully.

Rebecca tried again.

“I sound like a bicycle tire that has a slow leak.”

“Maybe Lucian can teach you when he gets older.” Lachlan laughed and kissed his great-grandson on the head.

“I’ll just stick to shooting people, it’s easier,” Rebecca said.

“Have you got the lights on yet?” Sebastian asked.

“We’re working on it now, we just needed a quick break to grab some coffee and warm up some.” Connor sipped his coffee.

“All that tree needs now are presents.” Rian laughed.

“Oh! That reminds me. I got you something.” Rebecca reached under the table and handed Rian a box. His eyes lit up and he ripped into the present like a five year old. He lifted the lid and frowned.

“You got me clear plastic balls?” he asked.

“Look closer.” She grinned. She had been working non-stop on this project for days.

“There’s pictures in there!” Rian exclaimed, pulling more of the small spheres out.

“Liam told us about your family and Christmas. I figured if you had all of our pictures in these ornaments, you would never have to wait for family on Christmas again, we’d always be with you.” She dug into her pie. Around her the diner quieted, and she looked up to see what had happened. Rian sat uncharacteristically quiet staring down at the box in his hands. Rebecca looked at Ashby, who smiled at her. She looked back to Rian.

“I didn’t mean to make you mad,” she whispered. Rian set the box down on the table carefully, as if it were made of the most delicate crystal. He looked up and his normally laughing eyes were brimming with tears.

“How could I ever be mad at you? You’ve made so many wonderful changes in the past year, I barely recognize myself with how happy I am. The entire town is thriving and coming together because of you. We’re all

here and celebrating together because of you.” Rian stood and placed his fist over his heart, paying tribute to her.

Chairs scraped on the floor as everyone in the diner stood. Rebecca looked around at her friends who smiled down at her. Beside her Aleks took her hand. Kate, Bran and Caleb placed their fisted hands over their hearts. Liam, Kent and Sebastian smiled and raised their fists to their chests. The wolves and the lions throughout the diner followed suit.

Gabriel stepped forward and bowed elegantly. Behind him every vampire in the diner bowed after their Prince. Rebecca covered her mouth with both hands, overwhelmed at their display of acceptance and love.

“I don’t know what to say.” She sniffled.

“You could tell your mate that you’re in labor,” Sebastian suggested.

“What!” Aleks bellowed. Everyone in the diner began to talk at once, except for her bear who steadily and systematically began to lose his mind.

“Stand. Stand. Go.” Aleks pointed to the door. Rebecca rolled her eyes. He was down to simple one-syllable words already. Wonderful.

“In a minute, I want to finish my pie.” She was reaching for her fork when Aleks lifted her, chair and all, and strode toward the door.

“Pie! I want my pie!” she yelled.

“Doc. Come!” Kaden jumped up and opened the door, wide-eyed. The door shut behind Aleks as he carried his mate in a chair to the clinic, with her bellowing for pie. When it closed completely, the diner was suddenly quiet. Doc and Felix stared at each other at their table and both sighed.

Unable to contain his laughter a second more, Ashby began to chuckle.

“Can you imagine his reaction when he finds out she’s been in labor since last night?” Sebastian laughed.

“Good luck, Doc!” Connor yelled.

“Remember, bob and weave. Bob and weave.” Rian bobbed his head back and forth, holding up his fists.

“I have my taser in the car,” Madison offered.

“Don’t tempt me,” Doc murmured, getting his coat on.

“Doc. Now!” The roar from outside made the windows shake.

“It’s going to be a long fucking night.” Felix followed after his mate to the clinic to bring the new Arkadion prince into the world.

\* \* \* \*

Hours later, the Christmas party was still in full swing when Aleks burst through the door, grinning.

“It’s a boy!”

“We knew that already. How big is he? Is Rebecca okay?” Kate asked.

“We were worried for a while. Rebecca’s heart rate dropped a few times. But she is fine now, the baby is...hold on.” Aleks dashed back outside.

Ashby shook his head. A few minutes later the door was flung open again.

“He’s twenty-three inches long!” Aleks announced like the proud Papa he was.

“How much does he weigh?” Sebastian asked.

“Hold on.” Aleks ran back outside.

“It’s like what, two blocks to the clinic?” Liam asked as the door shut.

“Thereabout,” Kent confirmed.

Aleks came through the door a third time.

“He’s nine pounds twelve ounces!”

“What did you name him?” Ma asked. Aleks frowned.

“Hold on.” He turned back around and jogged out.

Ashby’s phone rang.

“Is he still there?” Rebecca asked, sounding tired.

“Just headed out.” Ashby popped a tater tot in his mouth.

“His phone is in his pocket.” Rebecca said, sounding amused. Ashby giggled.

“Crap, call you back, he’s here.” Rebecca ended the call.

“What do you think she named him?” Kate asked.

Sebastian, Ashby and Kate looked at each other and laughed. Nic shook his head.

“It’s Rebecca, it could end up anything.”

## Epilogue

Daniel heard the doorbell and veered off from his trek to the kitchen to answer it. Rule number one that everyone learned quickly: Don't wake the baby. He opened the door and was surprised to see the shifter Mojo at the door.

"Sorry to come by unannounced but I heard about the blood drive. I couldn't leave the bar the other night since I was looking after Peyton but I'd still like to donate."

"Come on in." Daniel walked the extremely large shifter to the kitchen where Baptista sat with David, eating one of Ashby's sandwiches. He knew shifters tended to be large, but this man took it to extremes.

"Baptista, Moe would like to donate, can you do the needle, bag thing." Daniel asked. Baptista nodded.

"We can do it in the family room." Baptista walked him to the front room and sat him down on a comfy recliner.

With steady hands he started the IV. Moe looked over to see the small plastic bag begin to fill slowly.

It didn't take long, and then Baptista was removing the needle from his arm.

"We can't thank you enough for coming by. Every drop helps." Baptista thanked him.

"It's no problem. If you all are compiling a list for on-demand donors, put my name down. I don't mind helping out," Moe offered.

"We appreciate it."

Baptista was showing him out when Moe caught the scent of snow, ice and strawberries. When he looked up he saw a thin man standing with Roman, staring at him with the most brilliant shade of green eyes he had ever seen. The man's mouth opened and his fangs descended.

*Holy shit!*

"Rhys, breathe through the craving. It will be okay." Roman stood between Moe and Rhys.

"It's not the addiction," Rhys whispered.

"Then what is it?"

"He's my mate."

**THE END**

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alanea loves reading almost as much as she loves writing and can be found at any given moment either in front of the computer lost in her own world or on the couch with her iPad reading some of her favorite authors. She believes that love truly conquers all and that everyone no matter what, deserves a chance at that love and a place they can call home.

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