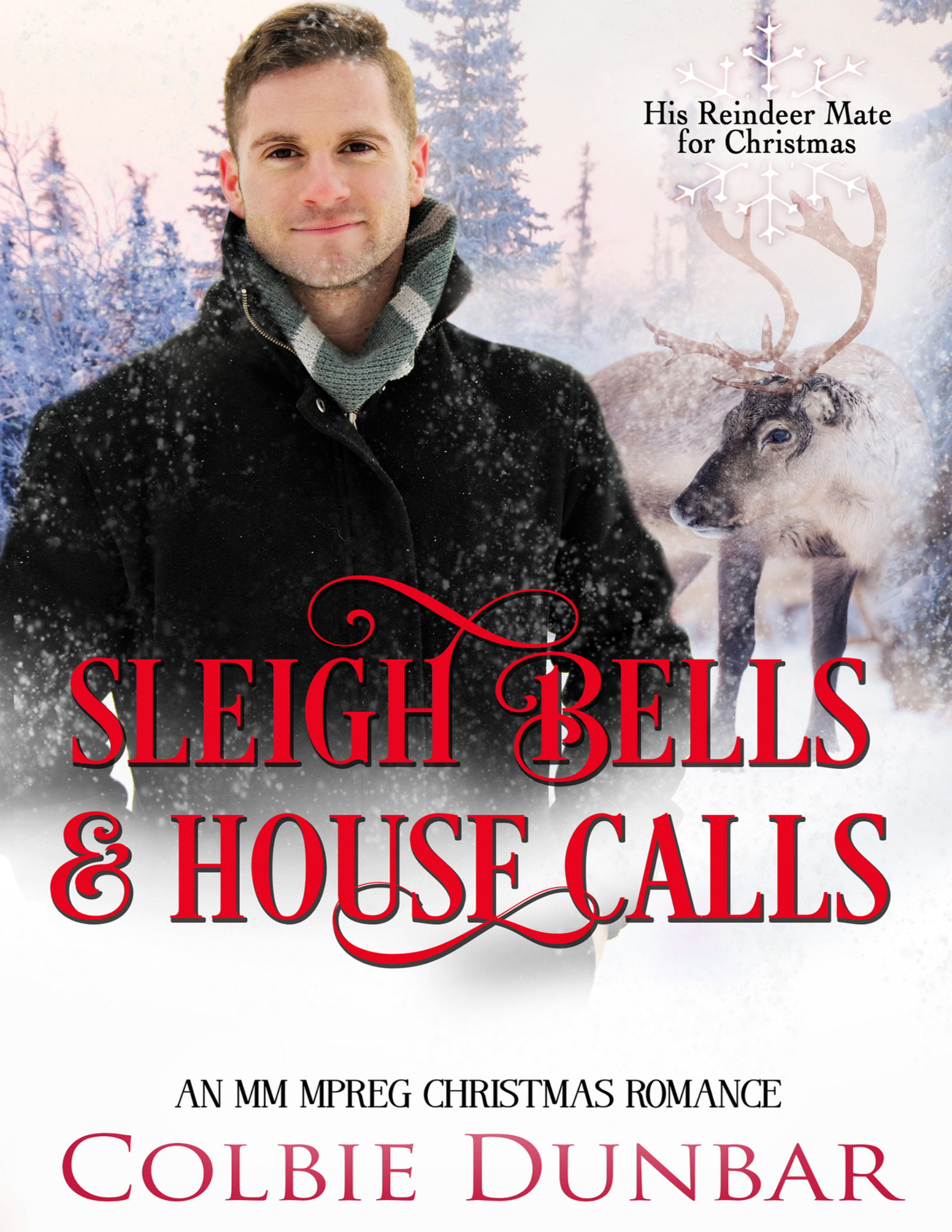

His Reindeer Mate
for Christmas
SLEIGH BELLS
& HOUSE CALLS
AN MM MPREG CHRISTMAS ROMANCE
COLBIE DUNBAR

SLEIGH BELLS & HOUSE CALLS

AN MM MPREG CHRISTMAS ROMANCE

HIS REINDEER MATE FOR CHRISTMAS

COLBIE DUNBAR

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About the Author
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ONE
ABBOTT

Before I moved to Dunmore, the coldest place I'd ever been was the frozen-food aisle at the grocery store.

I'd been the new vet here for two weeks, and I was still experiencing climate shock. The town I'd worked at previously was hot year round, and my patients often had heat-related ailments.

I'd been burned out and wondering about a new career, though I wasn't sure what I'd do, when I saw a listing for a small-town practice up north. The current vet was retiring, and the practice came with an apartment upstairs. Photos of the flower baskets in the main street, and of the hills in the surrounding countryside, sold the idea, and after a brief visit to meet Doc Sutton and sign documents, I bought the practice.

But the pics had been taken in July, and I'd visited in August. When I moved here, it was the first of November. It was snowing the day I arrived and hadn't stopped. Every morning the plow went down Main Street in front of the clinic. It buried the side of my car in a wall of snow, and I had to dig it out.

I'd been shivering since I got here. But Bev, who'd worked for the former vet for thirty years and who knew every animal inside and outside of town by name, marched me off to the general store for new clothes, saying my chattering teeth were making the animals nervous.

This morning, Bev arrived in the clinic holding a small plastic poinsettia. I knew enough about the climate by now not to wonder why it

wasn’t a real one.

“This is a decoration.” She went to the window and pointed at the hardware store and bank opposite. “There’s a light-up snowman on the hardware roof, and the bank has a tree. Even the feed store has a wreath.” She folded her arms and tapped her foot on the vinyl flooring. “But not us. We have nothing.”

I was used to spending Christmas around a pool before hurrying back to air-conditioning and rarely bothered putting up Christmas decorations.

“I promise I’ll buy… ummm… some garlands and, ummm, a blow-up Santa after work this evening.” The hardware store must sell that stuff or the gift shop two doors down. Maybe the grocery store on the corner.

“Mrs. Pickles is here, and she’s in a bad mood,” Bev announced.

I peered at the woman and her goat who’d just walked into the clinic. “Which one is Mrs. Pickles?” I whispered.

The goat headbutted me, and I hit the wall with a groan.

“That one.” Bev grinned.

After cleaning Mrs. Pickles’ ulcer as she tried to nibble my coat, a farmer brought in his cat who’d been in a fight. While I stitched the wound, his owner asked if I'd been out to the Merritt place yet.

“I don’t think so.”

“It’s the reindeer farm on Lake Road. They do sleigh rides at Christmas.”

“Simon.” Bev addressed the farmer.

He bristled and side-eyed her. “I’m just asking. That can’t hurt.”

“Well, don’t.”

I glanced between the pair, wondering what that was about. People in Dunmore were so kind. They brought me food, waved as I drove past and gave me directions when I couldn’t get a signal on the phone, which was often. In my former job, no one would have noticed if I didn’t come home from a night shift, so I enjoyed being part of a small community. The flip side of that was there was little privacy. People I passed on the street knew what I’d been up to when I’d made a house call the previous night.

I ignored whatever was going on between Bev and Simon and didn’t question Simon about the Merritts, their farm, or reindeer.

It got dark at three thirty, and my body clock told me it was quitting time, but I had hours to work and plenty of snow flurries to put up with before I could lock the door. When I finally made it upstairs, I was too tired

to cook and heated a can of soup and made toast. Even with the heating on full blast, I was cold and ate in bed huddled under a thick quilt. That damned snowman on the hardware store roof was mocking me with its slow blinking and the silly smile plastered on its fake face.

But after finally falling asleep, I was roused from a deep sleep in the middle of the night by a call that'd been forwarded from the clinic's after-hours line to my mobile.

"Sutton?" a gravelly voice asked as the wind roared in the background.

"No, sorry. Doc Sutton retired last month. I'm the new vet, Abbott."

There was silence from the caller, though the wind was still blowing. "Retired. Huh, he didn't tell me."

"Can I help you?" I was hoping he just wanted to check if Dr. Sutton received the invitation to his Christmas party because I didn't fancy venturing out in this weather.

"I've got a reindeer down with a bad leg. Pretty sure it's broken."

I'd never tended to a reindeer and had never seen one except on a Christmas card and TV. Would my car even start in this weather?

"Where are you?" I flung off the quilt and regretted it.

He gave me directions and added, "Look for the gate with the bells," before hanging up.

My car door was frozen again, but I'd learned I had to lean on it hard because the ice was in the seal. I threw my kit in the backseat and drove out of town at fifteen miles an hour.

The lake road wasn't plowed, and the snow hitting the windshield was so thick I couldn't tell where the road ended and the fields began. Fenceposts gave me some indication of where I was, and I almost hit more than one mailbox weighed down by snow.

As I came down a slippery slope, the back of the car slid across the road, and I yanked the wheel the wrong way, ending up in a ditch. The engine was still running as my heart thundered in my ears, and I patted my chest and legs, making sure I was in one piece.

With the wind raging around me, I picked out another sound, one that didn't belong out here. Bells. An image of Santa and his sleigh popped into my head. Maybe the old guy lived around here and he'd help me out.

Bells… bells… there was something about bells and the man who'd called. "Yes." He'd mentioned bells on his gate, so I must be close, but I couldn't see anything except a wavering light headed toward me.

Who would be out here in this weather except me? I gulped and gripped the steering wheel.

A shadow appeared beside the car, and I screamed. But a hand pushed snow away from the driver's door and got it open. Whoever it was held a flashlight in my face, and I blinked before shielding my eyes with my hands.

"The vet, I assume?"

"Ab-bott."

He didn't move or say anything else, though he did sniff.

"You're… the vet?" he repeated.

"Ummm, yeah."

Leaning over to the back seat, I got my kit and staggered out, but the car was at an angle, and I fell backward until a strong hand steadied me. Though the weather was terrible and I'd been in what could have been a fatal accident, I picked up the scent of his cologne. It reminded me of a warm fire, hay, and something earthy like moss.

"Stay in my tracks." He headed off, and I followed. His stride was much longer than mine, and I stumbled through the snow in my sneakers.

We must have gone through the gate because the ringing of the bells was close by, but the snow made it impossible to see anything until a huge dark structure loomed ahead, and he slid open the door of what was a barn. Reindeer were lying down in individual stalls, and each one had their head up, following my progress as we reached the last one.

A reindeer lay on his side in the straw with one leg at an awkward angle. I didn't need to examine him to know that leg was broken. A woman sat at his head with an older man at her side.

The man with the flashlight introduced the pair as his mother, Kitty, and Uncle Ray. "I'm Cutler."

He towered over me, and his jacket and dark hair were sprinkled with snowflakes. I guessed farmers out here were tough and didn't need to cover their heads or wear bulky coats. He spoke to someone outside and returned to my side.

I turned my attention to the reindeer who was breathing fast as I kneeled beside him. I ran my hands over the leg and noted the heat of the swelling.

"It's a closed fracture. I can put a splint on it tonight, and tomorrow, I'll bring the portable X-ray to see the break properly." I added that I'd put the cast on then. "If he keeps off it, it should heal."

I reached for a sedative so the reindeer wouldn't fight me. Cutler put a hand on my arm, and it was warm, even through my coat.

"He doesn't need that. He'll hold still."

The guy knew reindeer but didn't understand animals' pain and the instinct to lash out. It would hurt like heck, but Cutler whispered something in the reindeer's ear. I'd heard of horse whisperers, but a reindeer whisperer? He spoke so lovingly to the animal in a soft melodious voice, and I wondered how I'd react if he spoke as tenderly to me.

That was silly. I was here to do a job, and that included not getting injured.

I'd been headbutted by a goat who was in pain. No way was I going to be kicked through the barn wall, so we compromised with a light sedative while the three adults held him. The reindeer shuddered but didn't kick, and I worked as quickly as I could. The barn was warmer than my apartment, and I considered asking if I could sleep in one of the stalls.

"Jesse's such a good boy." Cutler's mother stroked the reindeer's head.

"He'll be off that leg for six to eight weeks."

There was an audible gasp from everyone, even the reindeer made a weird sound.

"He won't be up and around for Christmas." Cutler's mom brushed her fingers over the reindeer's ear.

I closed my kit and went to stand up, but one foot had gone to sleep and I toppled into Cutler's arms. He didn't push me away but held me against his chest. His heart skittered under my ear. I reared back, but with his head so close to mine, I thought for a moment he was going to kiss me. The warmth of the barn contrasting with the snow outside was messing with my head. The guy was worried about his prized reindeer, not the vet who had to be rescued.

"See you tomorrow." But then I remembered my car was in a ditch. That one empty stall looked inviting.

But Cutler explained his cousins had got my car on the road, and other than a couple of dents, it was fine. I said I'd be out here early tomorrow before the practice opened.

Cutler's mother looked from me to her son. "You can stay for breakfast."

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TWO
CUTLER

The vet drove away in his dinged-up car, though it was more crawling than driving.

I didn't move even when his taillights disappeared over the hill. The wind rustled the bells on the gate, and snow piled on my shoulders and hair, but all I could think about was the moment I'd yanked open his car door. I'd been about to haul a stranger out of a ditch and drag him to the barn to attend to my brother who was lying in the straw in agony. I'd had no one else to call when the voice on the phone told me Doc had retired.

But the warm air from inside the car hit me in the face, and he'd scented like a summer's day. In the middle of a snowstorm, he reminded me of freshly mown grass and sunshine with an underlying hint of an enticing floral scent, maybe lavender.

Mate. My reindeer was a beast of few words.

And I'd almost repeated the word to the man in the car. Instead, I'd asked him twice if he was the vet.

Follow him. My beast's words brought me back to the present. *Make sure he gets home*.

He'll get there. Maybe not until tomorrow though, when he'd have to turn around and come straight back. *I can walk faster than he's driving*.

I walked through the gate and back toward the barn and ran my mind over the last decade.

I’d been Alpha of the Merritt family herd since I was twenty-one, ten years ago, when my dad’s heart gave out. In that time, I’d managed the herd and kept the business afloat. I’d dealt with arguments, bank loans, tourists, and fires, but I was at a loss at what to do with a human driving a car with a dented bumper.

The stalls were empty when I slid open the barn door. Half my family were hopping around the storeroom trying to get into sweatpants, while the rest were already dressed and standing around Jesse’s stall talking loudly. We kept a big plastic bin of old clothes by the door for nights like this. It was mostly sweatpants and flannel shirts, and there were never enough socks.

My uncles, aunts, and a couple of cousins had been in the stalls while the vet worked because a reindeer farm with no reindeer in the barn would have looked strange even to a guy who’d probably never met a reindeer. Some family members lived farther away from Dunmore but had raced here after I spoke to Abbott on the phone. They had stayed in the straw with their heads up, watching him, and they’d all witnessed him falling and me catching him.

Ronnie, my cousin who was six years younger than me, pulled me aside. She’d spent the last hour in the back stall while her brothers took the truck and pulled the vet’s car out of the ditch.

“So.” She nudged me. “The vet, huh?”

“New guy.” I wasn’t taking the bait.

“You caught him and didn’t let go.”

“He left, so obviously I did, you know, let him go.”

My uncle Ray was leaning on a stall door. He’d had a front-row seat to what had happened with the vet. “But it was longer than you needed to.” He grinned and held up ten fingers. “Ten long seconds.”

“Oh, Cut.” Ronnie slung an arm over my shoulder.

My family shortening my name didn’t create problems on the farm, but it had caused confusion in town once when Ronnie yelled, “Cut,” across the street. Half the pedestrians ducked, and the others thought someone was filming a movie and they all demanded to be extras.

“He’s human.” She brushed snow off my cheek.

“I gathered that.”

“And he’s kinda special.” She bopped around me, and Uncle Ray joined her. They reeled off lyrics to a Christmas song about a reindeer that they

knew irritated me. “La-la-la-la.” They could never remember all the words.

I shrugged. “He’s a vet, the only one for fifty miles so yeah, he is special.”

My mom was kneeling in the straw beside Jesse. “What happened to Doc Sutton? And how are we going to deal with a human vet who doesn’t know shifters exist?”

That was potentially a huge problem, but my mom had steered the conversation away from a bigger one, and I was grateful.

Dr. Sutton was also human, but he’d been born in town and lived here all his life except when he was at college. He never asked questions about our shifter life, and he kept his mouth shut around other humans. And now he’d retired and hadn't told us. We weren’t the only shifter family in the area, so had he informed them or just scuttled off to retirement?

Jesse couldn’t shift, the break was too severe and he’d injure himself more if he tried. So a doctor was out of the question, and now we had a vet who’d be coming and going over the next eight weeks, and he was sure to have questions.

“We have to tell him, the vet, that Abbott guy.” Ronnie said his name which I’d been avoiding.

“No. Absolutely not, and risk him doing what? Running to the authorities? Having a heart attack?” I glanced around at my family. “When he comes here, the stalls are full. No one shifts near the barn or the house, and nobody speaks to Jesse as if he’s human.”

“He’s not human whether he has his fur or not,” Uncle Ray added unhelpfully.

“He’s my baby, so I can’t talk to him any other way, other than to Jesse.” My mother wrung her hands.

My brother was twenty. “Speak to him as though he’s a reindeer named Jesse. Please, Mom.”

“And Aunt Kitty invited him for breakfast.” Ronnie nudged my mother. She was enjoying this, and I was convinced she’d cause a spectacle at the breakfast table.

“I had to. He drove out here in a blizzard and he was shaking. And what was Bev thinking, not making him buy proper boots?”

Maybe Bev had retired with Doc. I’d rummage around the house and find an old pair of my brother’s or the new vet would end up with frostbite.

There was nothing else to add, and I put a blanket over Jesse who was already asleep thanks to the sedative. Some of my family made their way to the large rambling house that'd been added to every time a new generation was born. The rest of the extended family headed off.

Ronnie stayed behind. That wasn't a surprise, as she'd always enjoyed teasing me when I was a kid.

"He is very handsome."

"Go to bed." I used my Alpha with an uppercase A voice.

There was a rustle of hay, and Jesse opened his eyes. It was odd having him permanently in reindeer form and only being able to have a one-sided conversation. He had his head turned to the wall.

"I know, and I'm sorry, little brother."

He blew air out his nose, a sign he was upset. He used to do that as a kid when I'd leave him at home and spend the day with my friends riding bikes and swimming in the lake.

My brother had arrived home from college yesterday. He'd driven home for a long weekend because he couldn't go another week without shifting. He'd wanted to take his fur as soon as he arrived, but I'd told him to wait until the storm passed. But he'd gone out anyway, and he'd run along the lake road at full speed in the dark. He'd hit the ice by the culvert. His legs went out, and he banged his head before falling into a ditch. By the time he realized what had happened, his leg was broken and he couldn't take his skin. I'd heard the bellow from my bedroom.

If Dad had been alive, he would have run with Jesse and kept him off the ice.

"I should have come with you." Nobody had prepared me for how much guilt I'd feel when leading the herd.

My brother's beast looked at me before laying his head on my knee. Ronnie would have to lead one of the teams for the sleigh rides. Jesse would miss the end of the fall semester and either the first few weeks of spring semester or all of it and return to college in the fall.

I sat with him, rubbing the spot between his ears until he fell asleep. After easing his head off my leg, I covered him up again and walked back to the house. Everyone was in bed, and when I removed my jacket, I could scent the vet on it. He'd fallen against me for a few seconds, not the ten Uncle Ray insisted.

He'll be back in five hours. My reindeer was trying to be helpful.

I wanted him back, even though he was human. He was my mate, and yet I couldn’t shift in front of him, and if I did, he’d be horrified or terrified or both. I was scared that I’d lose him the moment I showed him. And how would my family deal with a human in their midst? That wasn’t fair to them. I had to choose between keeping our relationship professional and having him so scared that he'd leave Dunmore forever.

Tomorrow he’d X-ray my brother’s leg and eat pancakes and go back to his life. And I’d let him because I had no choice.

I hung the jacket by the door. It needed to be washed, but I’d leave it another day or week or maybe eight weeks.

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THREE
ABBOTT

The storm had blown over by morning, and the sky over Dunmore was blue.

I shaded my eyes and stared, unable to believe it was the same sky as yesterday. I'd assumed that after a blizzard, everything would be damp, gray, and miserable. But the sun bounced off the snow, and I squinted and put on sunglasses.

Seeing the sun, even though there was little heat in it, perked me up, and I had a spring in my step as I strolled to the car.

The plow had been down Lake Road before me and left snow banked on either side that was taller than my car. I stayed in the middle of the road and drove at twenty miles an hour, so I made the journey to the farm a little faster than last night.

The portable X-ray machine was strapped in the passenger seat with a seat belt, along with two boxes of plates and two lead aprons. It was Doc's old machine and nothing like the equipment at my last practice. I'd found the machine in the storeroom early this morning, and I'd read the instructions, so I felt confident I could use it and wouldn't look like a fool.

There was no mistaking the gate in daylight. It was painted dark green, and the wooden sign attached to it read *Merritt Farms*. *Sleigh Rides Weekends In December* was written in a separate sign below the name. A string of bells was strung across the top, along with a fresh wreath.

There was also a tall alpha waiting beside it with a shovel in one hand. He pointed to a dug-out space in the snow, and I assumed he'd done that so I could park there. Cutler was wearing a red flannel shirt with sleeves rolled to his elbows and no coat. The sun might've been out, but it was teeth-shatteringly cold. He was good to look at, and for a second, I was distracted and my foot slipped off the brakes and hit the accelerator.

He dashed to the side as I slammed on the brakes, and his graceful leap reminded me of a reindeer I'd watched in a documentary. Perhaps the cold weather not only made people hardy but gave them super-speedy reflexes.

There was no need to check the mirror because my cheeks were burning. I flapped my hand in front of my face which did nothing and wound down the window. The cold air hit my cheeks, cooling them, but they were sure to be still pink.

"Sorry. I was… I thought I… ummm, yeah, apologies for almost running you over."

I got out, but Cutler was so close I flattened myself against the side of the car.

"It takes some getting used to driving on these roads in winter."

"Right."

He could have yelled at me, but instead, he looked at my feet clad in another pair of sneakers. Last night's were still drying out.

"Is Bev still working at the practice?"

I nodded and sensed where this was going. "She took me to the general store and ordered me around while picking out clothes, but they didn't have any boots in my size. They're on order."

He grunted and peered at the X-ray machine. I opened the passenger door and was about to ask him to carry it when he swooped in and picked it up. He made it look as light as a lunch box. In the daylight, I could see his eyes were brown, and there was a tiny scar through one eyebrow.

But I was a professional, and a client's eyes were none of my business, so I got the plates and aprons and followed up the cleared path to the barn.

The barn looked different as the sun came through the high windows. It was bigger than I'd realized and had a hayloft along one side and two shiny red sleighs with bells on every corner by the far wall. The pens were full, and every reindeer was lying on the straw with their heads up watching me. I guessed they were used to being around humans and they were curious rather than fearful.

My patient was awake. As everyone called him Jesse and obviously adored him, that was how I was going to think of him, not “the reindeer.” When he saw me come in, he sort of huffed and turned toward the wall. If he was human, I would have said he was sulking.

Kitty was sitting on a small stool beside him, patting his shoulder. “Here’s the doctor, sweetheart.”

Farmers and their families really got attached to their animals.

I greeted her and took the splint off Jesse’s leg.

The swelling had gone down a little, so I put on a lead apron and handed the other one to Cutler. I showed him how to hold the plate behind Jesse’s leg without putting his hand in the way. I had Kitty stand outside the stall, and she sobbed and told me to be careful as if I was performing surgery.

After taking three pictures from different angles, I could see the cannon bone had snapped clean across, but the two ends were still lined up. There were no splinters of bone and no second break, so Jesse didn’t need a surgeon.

“That’s a really good break.”

Kitty sobbed louder, and Cutler glared at me.

“I meant it’s as good as a broken leg can be, and it should heal well in a cast.” I adjusted the screen so both Cutler and his mother could see. “That line is the break, and the two ends need to grow back together. But they can’t do that if he puts weight on it.”

Cutler leaned in, and his shoulder pressed against mine. I could smell his earthy cologne again, or maybe that was just him. The scent muddled my thoughts, and I forgot what I was doing. I froze until he looked at me with a raised brow, and I got to work.

The cast took forty minutes, and again, I gave Jesse a light sedative. When I was done, Jesse looked at the cast, then at me, and bumped his nose against my arm.

“He says thank you,” Kitty told me.

“Are you sure?” He didn’t look pleased.

“It’s a reindeer thank-you.” Cutler ushered his mother out of the stall. “I hope you’re hungry.”

The farmhouse was enormous, and I envied Cutler if he’d grown up here. It was the perfect place to play hide-and-seek, with a porch on three sides and four stories. There was a wreath on every door and colored lights

were strung around the outside. It reminded me of the houses in books I'd read as a kid. Bells were hanging over the door, and they trilled as Cutler pushed it open.

There were four people sitting around the kitchen table. Cutler's Uncle Ray who I'd met, and he introduced me to his cousin Ronnie and her brothers, Philip and Dale. The latter two had pulled my car out last night, and I thanked them.

"It only took about ten seconds." Dale shrugged.

"Ten long seconds." Ray looked at Cutler who rolled his eyes and bared his teeth. It must have been an inside joke.

I eyed the seven stockings hanging over the fireplace and the Christmas tree and thought how different it was to my upbringing with just my grandparents and me. Not that they hadn't been loving, and I'd lacked for nothing.

Kitty sat me down and piled my plate with pancakes, bacon, eggs, and sausages. I hoped she'd give me a doggy bag, otherwise I'd be here all day. As I ate, the family peppered me with questions.

"How long will the cast stay on?" Philip stabbed a piece of bacon.

"Six to eight weeks. I'll be here every two days to check on it."

"Eight weeks." Ray shook his head. "He'll miss the sleigh rides, New Year's, and the end of fall semest—"

"Of the season," Cutler butted in.

"The sleigh-ride season." Kitty smiled, but it appeared forced.

"Once the cast is dry, he can hobble around on three legs, but he can't run or go outside. And he mustn't be let out with the other reindeer."

"That'll be the hardest part. He loves being with our family." Kitty wiped away a tear.

I was beginning to wonder if Jesse was their pet and whether he usually slept in the house.

"He'll be so pleased to be back on two legs." Ray leaned back in his chair.

"Four. He means four legs." Cutler nudged his uncle.

I ate slowly while the others chatted around me. It was so strange to be seated at a crowded table after years of eating alone. The Merritt family didn't know how lucky they were to be part of a large family. Or maybe they did.

As I ate, I kept looking at Cutler. He kept one eye on his family as if he expected them to do or say something he didn’t like. Whenever they spoke, he’d put down his fork. He was also attentive to my needs and refilled my coffee cup before I’d finished. He laughed when I told them where I’d lived before, and his eyes creased, and I wanted him to do it again.

But I had to get back because the clinic waiting room would be full.

“Before you go, I have something for you.” Cutler disappeared.

Clients who came to the clinic paid on the day, but for house calls, we sent an invoice. Was he going to shove a fistful of cash in my hand?

He came back with a pair of brown leather boots. They were worn at the toes, but they had thick rubber soles and fleece inside.

“They were my brother’s. Try them.”

The word “were” worried me, and I hoped his brother was still alive.

“He won’t need them for a while.”

“Oh, I hope he’s not sick.”

Ronnie choked on her juice. “He’s away at college.”

Cutler kneeled at my feet after I put the boots on. He pressed the toes, something my grandparents used to do when they were buying me new shoes. I had to look away, worried I’d burst into tears.

“I’ll be back in two days.”

“Forty-eight hours.” He nodded. “Okay.”

As I drove away, I checked the rearview mirror. Cutler was still standing there without a coat.

Farmers here really were tough.

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FOUR
CUTLER

The diner on Main Street took two cords of firewood every November, and I always delivered it myself.

It didn't hurt that the diner was next to the hardware store and almost opposite the vet clinic. I wanted to park where I could see the clinic's front window and had to drive around the block twice before a space became available.

As I stacked the logs on the diner's front porch, I kept looking over at the clinic, hoping I'd catch Abbott saying goodbye to a client or hurrying to the diner for a coffee or snack. There were no Christmas decorations in the clinic window, unlike every other building in the street that were covered in colored lights and garlands. It looked so lonely.

He's in there. My reindeer was peering through my gaze.

I know. His dented car was parked outside, packed in with snow.

I stacked the last of the logs and brushed the bark off my gloves. I told the owner I'd send her an invoice and walked across the road to pay my vet bill.

The bell over the clinic door jingled as I pushed it open, and a combination of wet-dog smell and disinfectant wafted over me. A woman by the window had a cat carrier on her knee, and a teenage boy held a puppy wrapped in a towel. Bev looked up from her computer.

"Cutler Merritt." She got up and leaned on the counter.

"I came to pay the bill."

“I haven’t even sent the invoice. I do them at the end of the week.” She frowned and sat down, tapping on the computer keyboard. She’d worked here since I was a kid, and once she’d come to the farm with Doc when my beast broke his leg. It hadn’t been as bad as Jesse’s break, and I was much younger, so I healed fast. She’d given me a carrot and patted my head.

I handed over cash, and the printer burst into life and slowly printed out my receipt.

Bev leaned on the counter and whispered, “How’s Jesse?”

“What?” My loud voice got the attention of the other woman, and her cat hissed. The kid ignored me and chatted to his puppy.

“I worked for Doc for thirty years. You think I can’t tell the difference between a wild reindeer and the s-h-i-f-t-e-r kind.”

Her spelling out the word had the teen side-eying me. He may have had shifter friends or at his age he was more accepting of things he didn’t understand. When people reached adulthood, they’d usually reason why someone or something was different and come up with a very human explanation.

“Who was it who helped Doc and your dad when your cousin got her antler caught in the fence?”

That was Ronnie, and I’d been at college, but I’d heard the stories and how the family still teased her about it.

“Jesse’s sulking.”

Bev cocked her head. “That’s good. If he were in agonizing pain, he wouldn't have the energy to sulk.”

She opened a drawer and pulled out an envelope with my name on the front written in Doc’s terrible handwriting. “He left this for you. He said you’d be in before Christmas for the herd’s winter check, like every year, and I was to give it to you then.” She pressed her lips together.

I took the letter outside and read it on the clinic step.

It was hard to decipher Doc’s handwriting, but he said he was too old to deal with the cold and he was moving close to his daughter who wanted him near her and the grandkids.

I should have told you in person, and I’m sorry.

He said Abbott was a good guy, an excellent vet, and we’d find a way to work together.

Eventually he’ll work out something is different about the herd, and like me, I think he’ll keep it to himself.

I stuffed the letter in my pocket and was almost at the truck when I was distracted by someone yelling, “No, no, no.”

Abbott was kneeling in the snow beside a deflated plastic Santa that was about the same size as him. He had a mallet in one hand and a metal stake in the other, and he was trying to hammer the stake into the ground. But the ground was frozen cold, and every time he hit the stake, it bounced. The wind was blowing, and every gust lifted the half-inflated Santa off the snow with its arms flapping. I tried not to smile because it looked as though Santa was trying to escape.

He’s wearing Jesse’s boots, my reindeer pointed out.

Abbott dropped the mallet, and Santa rolled over him and wrapped an arm around his head. He shouted, but Santa had him in a tight grip and his voice was muffled. I made my way over to him, but he fought his way out. I bit my lip because he was adorable, all red-faced and angry.

“The ground’s frozen, Abbott. You’ll never get that stake in until spring.”

“At least it’d be in plenty of time for next Christmas, and Bev wouldn’t be chewing my ass out about not having any decorations.”

I crouched beside him and instantly regretted it because his scent hit me, almost sending me reeling. “Let me help. In this weather, you have to weigh it down.”

Grabbing the empty firewood sacks from the back of my truck, I filled them with snow and laid one over each of Santa’s feet. I could have sworn the jolly plastic guy gave me a look that said, “Thank gods someone knows what they’re doing.”

After tying down the guy ropes, Abbott plugged the cord into an outlet and the fan in Santa’s base started whirring. Santa rose up and wobbled before filling out. He stood beside the clinic steps smiling and waving one arm in the wind.

Abbott ran his eyes over Santa from his cap to his black boots. “Will Bev love or hate him? He might be better placed at the entrance of a secondhand car place.”

He was probably right, but this one could compete with the snowman on the hardware store roof as to who brought the most Christmas cheer.

Abbott thanked me, and there was a sprinkling of snow on his lashes. I longed to remove them or perhaps just stare at him as they sparkled in the

winter sun. And before I could stop myself, I brushed them away. He didn't step back, but his cheeks were pinker than before.

"You keep rescuing me." He wriggled his feet in the snow. "Please thank your brother for the boots. My toes have been toasty all day."

I'd tell Jesse tonight when he was pretending he wasn't bored out of his mind.

"Abbott!"

Walker, the hardware store owner, was an alpha about my age, and he was walking toward us with a cardboard box under one arm. His family had owned the store for as long as my family had lived in the area.

"You forgot your garland." He handed the box to Abbott. "I included an outdoor extension cord." He nodded at me. "Cutler, I heard you had trouble with a reindeer."

"He's fine. The vet here is treating him."

"Abbott's a good man in a crisis, I hear. Bev's been telling me great things about him." Walker smiled at the vet. "If you ever want someone to show you around, let me know. You'll want to see the Christmas market in a couple of weeks, and it's worth a look at the lake when it freezes over."

"That's so nice of you. Thank you." Abbott returned Walker's smile.

No, no. What's he doing? Say something. My beast was not pleased.

Walker was being kind as he was to everyone. He'd mow elderly people's lawns and organize the town's Christmas food drive every year. He was being his usual self, and I knew that. But I still wanted to pick him up and put him back on his side of the street.

I wanted to be the one to show Abbott around, to have him tuck his hand in mine and share a hot apple cider with me. But I was just the owner of a reindeer farm and one of Abbott's clients. Our only connection was Jesse who was pretending to be a full-time reindeer.

Walker left with a wave, and Abbott gave him a big smile in return. He watched the guy walk back to the hardware store. I pretended to sneeze, hoping to distract him.

"Are you getting a cold?" Abbott asked.

"I'm fine."

"Maybe you should dress warmer." He tugged the arm of my unzipped jacket before taking the zipper and pulling it up to my chin. He patted my chest as if he'd tucked a kid into bed.

I couldn’t move and breathing was difficult. He was so close, and his scent was all around me. The damned Santa was flapping in the background, and I was tempted to reach out and throttle it. My mate was standing beside me unaware he was… well, my destiny… and Santa just kept doing his thing.

But as I breathed in his scent, my beast said Abbott liked me standing so close.

Don’t do that, I told him. *You’re making that up, trying to make me ask him out*.

“I’d better get back or Bev will be yelling that I spend more time with Santa than my patients.” He told me he’d be at the farm around nine tomorrow.

I waited until he was inside the clinic, hoping he’d look back and wave or nod. But Bev handed him a tablet, and the woman with the cat followed him into the examination room. Santa waved at me, though.

As I drove out of town, I thought of how I'd have to once again pretend that Jesse was my prized reindeer and not my brother and that Abbott was the town’s vet and not the one the universe had sent me. I didn’t need destiny to tell me he was my mate because I’d already fallen for him. But in the end, to keep him safe, I might have to scare him away.

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FIVE
ABBOTT

I’d washed my face since Cutler brushed snow off my eyelashes, and I could still feel his thumb.

I ran my mind over how that had happened. He’d helped with the inflatable Santa and it’d been snowing. I could hardly see, and if he hadn’t removed the snowflakes, my lashes might have frozen and snapped off. It was a kind deed that anyone would have done, including Walker and Bev and perhaps even Mrs. Pickles’ owner.

But I kept returning to that moment all day as I worked, when I grabbed a quick lunch, and into the evening. I was still thinking about it a week and a half later when I headed out to the farm before nine. Cutler and I had talked at the gate every other day about Jesse’s leg and the weather, and he always carried my bag though it wasn’t heavy. Every time I went there, I checked my hair in the rearview mirror which was silly because I’d put a wooly hat on before getting out of the car.

Cutler wasn’t at the gate this time, and I experienced a pang of disappointment before parking in the space he’d dug which he must have shoveled every second day before my arrival. I carried my bag up a freshly dug path, and when I strolled into the barn, he was spreading fresh straw in the pen closest to the entrance. His jacket was hanging on a nail, and a flush spread over my cheeks as I remembered I’d zipped it up over a week ago when he’d been wearing it.

He glanced up as I walked in and smiled. My knees went weak, and I wobbled before getting my balance.

“Careful.”

“Always.” Why I said that I had no idea. I was the guy who had to be taken to the store to buy appropriate winter clothing in below-freezing weather.

“How’s the patient?”

He jerked his head toward Jesse’s stall. “See for yourself.”

Jesse was standing up. He was putting most of his weight on his three good legs with the cast touching the straw every so often for balance. When he saw me, he hobbled to the far corner of the stall.

Cutler sighed. “He’s been doing that all morning because he’s not happy being in the stall.”

I couldn’t reason with a reindeer, but the family spoke to him as though he could understand every word, so I’d try.

“I know you don’t want to be cooped up.” I leaned on the stall gate. “Give me two minutes and you can go back to ignoring me.”

He grunted and lay down. “The cast is holding, the hoof below it is warm, and there’s no swelling.” I spoke out loud for Cutler’s benefit, as he was behind me. Both he and Jesse huffed. Like farmer, like reindeer I guessed.

But as I straightened, something caught my eye. A tablet in a pink rubber case was propped up in a corner of Jesse’s stall. A football game was in progress, and the sound was low which was why I’d missed it initially.

“Does Jesse like football?” I couldn’t believe I was asking that question.

Cutler shuffled his feet and looked at Jesse. I almost expected him to answer. Maybe the smell of hay in the barn was getting to me. I was a little lightheaded.

“My cousin left that there. She says he likes the noise.”

I looked from the tablet to Jesse. “Does he have a favorite team?” I chortled at my joke, but Cutler didn’t join in. He plastered on a half-hearted smile and mumbled something about the Oceanview Owls.

On the screen, someone scored, and Jesse turned to look at it. He watched the replay, and I rubbed my head because he seemed to be following the players’ every move.

Needing to focus on something other than a football-loving reindeer, I studied an empty plate covered in crumbs by the stall gate. Cutler rushed

over and picked it up.

“Was that for Jesse?”

“My mother gave him a fresh cinnamon roll she baked. They’re his favorite.”

“What? No.” My voice echoed around the stall. “Reindeer can't eat pastries. He’ll get a stomachache and I’ll have to treat him for that too.”

“I’ll let her know.”

If the family was feeding their animals baked goods, I was surprised the beasts were as healthy as they appeared whenever I was here.

“Will she listen?” I asked.

“No.”

I shouldn’t have laughed, but I couldn’t help it, and now Cutler joined in. Jesse snorted, mimicking Cutler. The pair must spend a lot of time around one another. And in the past, my pet pig patients had worse diets, so I hoped Jesse’s digestive system was up for the challenge.

After washing my hands in freezing water in the sink, Cutler asked if I had time for a coffee. I nodded, and he beckoned me into the little office at the end of the barn. There was a ragged old sofa in front of a space heater, and I welcomed the change in temperature, though the barn was quite warm. There were two mugs of coffee on an upturned crate, and he told me to sit.

The heater was old and it rattled, but it threw out a lot of heat. He sat beside me, and the sofa squeaked and dipped, making me slide against his thigh. He didn’t move, and I stayed where I was, enjoying the contact.

“How are you liking Dunmore?”

I’d been expecting him to ask about Jesse, and I didn’t have an answer on the tip of my tongue. So I sipped my coffee which gave me a moment to think.

“Everyone is lovely and so kind, except Mrs. Pickles.”

“She has a reputation to uphold.” He picked up his coffee mug. “Do you miss where you lived before Dunmore?”

I’d worked in a large vet practice that was open 24/7, and I didn’t miss drinking coffee to keep me awake at three in the morning.

“The heat is the only thing really.”

He nodded and didn’t press me further. Neither of us spoke for a while, and it didn’t feel uncomfortable, but I was very aware of his thigh pressed against mine.

“Have you ever made a snowman?”

“Nope.” I took another sip of my hot drink. “And I’ve never thrown a snowball.” I’d watched plenty of Christmas movies where families and neighbors had snowball fights.

“We’ll have to fix that.” He slapped his thigh.

I liked the sound of “we.” I put my coffee mug down, and I missed the warmth of the ceramic, so I tucked my hands under my arms.

“You need better gloves.” He didn’t look at me as he said it, and I brought my hands out and studied the ones I was wearing. He took one of my gloved hands and pulled at the fabric. “May I?”

I wasn’t certain what he was asking. Maybe he was going to toss the gloves away and give me a pair of his brother’s as he did with the boots. I nodded, and he tugged off the glove. My skin was so pale it was almost translucent.

“These are for driving, not for being out in the cold.” His hands were warm, as though he’d put them inside an oven. He held mine between his two and rubbed until the color returned to my skin.

Cutler looked up, and his gaze locked on mine. He was so close, his cologne was overpowering, and I felt dizzy. I studied the scar through his brow and his dark eyes. I thought of them as knowing because I could have sworn there was a history behind them.

“And what about you?” I needed to think about something other than him holding my hand. “Did you always want to be here?”

“I had plans, but when my dad died, I needed to drop out of college and run the farm. Most days I have no regrets.”

The barn door opened before I could respond, and we pulled apart, jostling the coffee dregs in my mug. Kitty came in and waved through the office door.

“How’s my boy?”

I knew enough about her and the family to understand she was talking about Jesse, the reindeer.

“He’s doing well, but you must stop feeding him pastries.”

“These ones?” She lifted a cloth on top of the basket she was holding. The cinnamon aroma almost made me swoon, and my mouth watered. “They’re just out of the oven, and they’re for you.”

Oh, Kitty. That was a quick save. While she may have made some for me, I bet she’d been going to sneak one to Jesse.

“Did you hear about the Christmas market this weekend?” She pulled the cloth over the rolls.

I nodded.

“We take some of the reindeer every year. They pull Santa's sleigh at the end of the day. I sell my baking, and the family has a stall where we sell our maple syrup, ornaments, and wreaths.” She perched on the edge of the sofa. “Are you going?”

I explained that I’d be there at the petting zoo in the morning. Doc Sutton used to supervise the animals and the visitors. Mrs. Pickles’ owner said Mrs. Pickles loved the children petting her, but I’d be keeping little hands away from the goat.

“Wonderful. We go early to set up. Maybe Cutler will pick you up at eight.”

Cutler had been studying his boots, and he jerked his head up. “I will?”

“Yes. It’s going to snow, and Abbott’s car won’t make it up the hill.” She tapped the crate. “Remember the ditch?” She took off, saying she had something bubbling on the stove. “Jesse’s favorite.”

“I guess I’ll see you Sunday at eight.” Cutler walked me to my car, and his arm brushed against mine. “Wear two pairs of socks.”

“Yes, Doctor. Anything else?”

“Drive home carefully.” He waited while I backed out, but I couldn’t think of anything except his hands on mine and that I’d be in his car and with him for part of Sunday. It took me three tries to reverse and get on the road.

That night after work, I raced to the general store and banged on the door as they were closing, saying I needed new gloves.

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SIX
CUTLER

I pulled up outside the clinic ten minutes early.

I was almost late because my family decided why take two or three vehicles when I could drive the van and they'd come with me. There was also a discussion about where they'd shift just before sundown in preparation for pulling the sleigh and Santa. They used to do it in a patch of woods near the market, but some of the trees had died in last year's severe winter.

So instead of them driving there themselves, they were with me, arguing about anything and everything.

Abbott was peering out the window, and he bounded onto the pavement. "Morning."

Before getting in, he looked at my family who stopped arguing, waved, and greeted him, and then they sat there saying nothing except for the occasional snort.

Abbott leaned toward me and whispered, "Did I do something wrong?" He tugged his coat. "I'm wearing my new coat and gloves," he held up his hands and wiggled his fingers, "and I've got my two pairs of socks on."

"Pay no attention to them. They had to get up earlier than usual and they only had cereal rather than a full breakfast." I was glaring at Ronnie and the others in the rearview mirror because this drive, which was my mother's idea, should have been just me and Abbott.

I hit a pothole, and that got everyone talking, saying what an awful driver I was. They all had to be at the market to work on the family's stall, but that didn't stop them complaining about something.

"Where are the reindeer?" Abbott asked. "I thought you'd be pulling a trailer."

I cleared my throat as a warning to everyone not to say anything.

"They'll come later." As long as they weren't eating pastries, Abbott wouldn't question me on how to move reindeer around.

The huge field where the market was held was only a short drive out of town, but in that time, Abbott's shampoo or body wash filled the van. It was some tropical scent, and I pictured palm trees swaying and him sipping from a straw stuck in a coconut.

But my mom was right about the weather forecast. It started to snow as soon as I turned off Main Street.

"Oh, more snow. Yay." Abbott pressed his face to the window, and I stifled a laugh at his deadpan voice.

"I thought you said Abbott wasn't keen on this weather." Ronnie tapped me on the shoulder. "But he's loving it."

"And he wants more." Philip smirked as I rolled my eyes at him in the rearview mirror.

Abbott sent me a look. He slapped a hand over his mouth but didn't manage to muffle a giggle. I burst out laughing too and almost rolled through one of the only stop signs in town.

"What's so funny?" Uncle Ray looked at the family, and everyone shrugged.

"It's called sarcasm, guys." I was snorting, not in a reindeer way but as in I was unable to suppress laughter.

"What is?" Dale wore a mystified expression.

Poor Abbott was red-faced which appeared to be his default color. "I'm sorry, everyone. You obviously love the very wet, cold snow." He shuddered. "And I will get used to it, I promise, especially now I've got the right clothes."

"Oh, I get it." Ronnie grinned. "It's all right, Abbott. It's not a rule that you have to like snow."

"Yeah, your job is to look after the pets in town and Jesse. That's all we ask of you." Dale nodded.

"And all of us," Uncle Ray blurted out.

Abbott mouthed, “All of you what?”

“I’ll explain later.” I braked and turned onto the field.

“Oh, everyone’s here already.” Abbott twisted his head left and right studying the town’s people setting up their stalls.

The Dunmore Christmas market had been held here every November for decades. Every stall had a canvas roof with heat lamps between tables. When we arrived, the air smelled of hot cider and roasting chestnuts. Kids were running around as people were hauling out baked goods and handmade sleds from their vehicles.

“What are those?” Ronnie pointed to knitted hats with reindeer antlers sewn on top.

“Oh, they’re so cute.” Abbott clutched his gloved hands together. “I want one.”

“That’s sweet. Abbott wants to be a reindeer too.” Uncle Ray awwwed, and the rest of the family did too.

There were spots of pink on Abbott’s cheeks. If we were really together as a couple, I'd have squeezed his hand, but I just returned his smile.

We’d brought one of the sleighs here yesterday, and it was at the bottom of the field. Abbott gushed over it, saying it looked prettier than it had in the barn. The petting zoo didn’t open until later, so he had a free hour. Mrs. Pickles' owner waved and Abbott got behind me, grabbing my shoulders and twisting me toward the woman.

“I might have to muzzle her goat if she doesn’t headbutt me first.”

“Pretty sure she’s not here. Her owner usually had a stall selling knitted goods.”

“Dr. Pryor.” Mrs. Pickles’ owner took Abbott’s arm. “I’ve knitted you some hats.” She eyed what he was wearing and sniffed. “Not that inferior store-bought merchandise.” She dragged him away, and I strode toward our stall.

Part of me wished I could spend more time with Abbott, but what was the point? We were so different, and I hadn’t told him who I was. That was a huge lie by omission, so I busied myself with maple syrup.

My reindeer sighed because he wanted to be with Abbott and he hated the smell of maple syrup.

As the day progressed, the market filled with not only the town residents but people county-wide. Every time I looked up at the petting barn, Abbott was showing a bunch of kids how to pet with a flat hand and

not grab a fistful of wool or fur from the lamb, sheep, goats, and one rabbit. Mrs. Pickles had not made an appearance, as I suspected.

There was a lull just after lunch, and I couldn't stop peering at him. A little girl wanted to hold the rabbit, and Abbott put it into her arms and held a hand under the animal's belly. A boy asked if he could fix his toy dog that had a tear in one ear. Abbott promised to try.

"Cutler, what are you doing?" Mom nudged me aside, saying I'd given someone too much change.

He's good with small kids, my reindeer noted.

I wanted to sit in the straw in that petting barn and tell him everything, but I couldn't. He'd either laugh or run away.

"It's time." Ronnie elbowed me and told me to stop gazing into space.

My family decided there was enough vegetation to shift and scattered into the woods next to the sleigh and shifted, and I got everyone harnessed. Uncle Ray changed into Santa's outfit.

With Ronnie in the lead, I led her through the stalls with the bells ringing and the local choir singing carols in the background. Kids were squealing, and everyone was clapping and cheering as Santa waved and ho-ho-hoed.

But I wasn't looking at them. My gaze was on Abbott who was wearing a new wooly hat. He was standing at the edge of the crowd with his hands clasped together. When Uncle Ray threw candy canes into the crowd, Abbott caught one and waved it at me.

After our grand entrance, my mom told me to take Abbott and buy something hot to drink. I gave her a look because she was pushing us together despite the consequences. We wandered around, and my reindeer was pestering me. Abbott was my mate and I'd made no effort to mark him or tell him who I was. But revealing what was inside me was the problem. I couldn't expect him to mate a shifter and live a life with someone who was so different from him, someone who wasn't human.

We sipped cups of cider, and Abbott led me to the stall with the reindeer hats. He pulled one on over the top of the one he'd been gifted from Mrs. Pickles' owner, plus his original one from home, and studied himself in the stall mirror.

"It's really cute. I'm going to buy Ronnie one." He peered at the crowd. "Where did she disappear to?"

I shrugged.

Bev waved a reindeer ornament at us. “It’s for the clinic’s Christmas tree.”

“Do you have a tree?” I asked.

“No, it's on my list.” Abbott sighed. “I’ll have to learn how to wield an axe.”

“I might know someone who can help you with that.”

I thought he raised a brow, but under his three hats, it was hard to tell.

“Oh really? Please give them my number and tell them to get in touch.”

“I will.” We shared a glance, and for that one moment, those few seconds, I could almost believe that we had a future and that we could be happy.

The stalls gave way to the snow-covered field, and Abbott reminded me about fixing the snowball problem.

I scooped up a handful of snow. He copied me, and it fell apart, but he tried again and packed it hard.

“You did it. Well done.”

He threw it at me and ran away giggling. That sound reminded me of the little fountain in the hairdresser’s just off Main Street.

I had snow in my brows, mouth, and sliding inside my jacket. Abbott had both hands over his mouth.

“I didn’t think I’d hit you. I’m so sorry.” He bent over, and he was laughing so hard. “I mean, I was aiming at you. I just didn’t think I’d be any good.”

I bounced a snowball on my palm, and he shrieked and ran away, but he fell on his back wearing his ridiculous antler hat. He made a snow angel and yelled, “Look at me.”

I offered him my hand and yanked him up, but I pulled too hard. He slammed onto my chest and grabbed my jacket to keep his balance.

“Cutler.” He searched my eyes, and I kissed him.

His lips were cold and tasted of cider. He made a small sound against my mouth and tightened his grip on my jacket, and then he kissed me back. I put a hand on his cheek. I’d waited years to find my mate and had no idea what it would be like to have him in my arms and to press my lips on his.

I refused to think of the future or consider how to make him mine. That was for another day. Right now, my arms were holding him tight, and I didn’t want to let go.

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SEVEN
ABBOTT

The text arrived during the morning while I was vaccinating a litter of puppies. The phone was on the counter, and I took a peek at the display.

I hear you need someone who can wield an axe which I can do. Except in this case, it's a shovel.

There was one wriggling puppy under my arm and four others in the owner's rolling pet carrier, but I smiled, and the puppies' owner asked if it was good news.

No matter how I answered, it'd be all over town by lunchtime.

"It is." I nudged the phone across the counter, hoping the woman couldn't see Cutler's name.

After the puppies left, I went to the front desk.

Bev looked up. "You and Cutler, huh?"

"What?" Oh my gods, I was becoming part of this town, but everyone in my business was a hard no.

Bev raised her hands. "Hey, it wasn't me. Those puppies are nosy." She leaned toward me. "I think they're on the payroll of the local newspaper."

I made a face at her, and she told me to eat my lunch because the next patient was due in twenty minutes and it was a cat with an attitude problem.

Great. Now I could add cat therapist to my resumé.

I ate lunch at my desk and messaged Cutler between bites.

Are we chopping down a tree or digging it out, specifically a Christmas tree? Early evening after the sun had set hours before was an odd time to

choose a Christmas tree in the woods. But I was looking forward to spending time with him, so I didn’t pummel him with questions.

His last message was *Wear three pairs of socks, all your hats, and bring gloves*.

I’d worn three hats and two pairs of socks before, and I tried to fathom what activity would require three pairs of socks.

I’d lived in Dunmore for over a month, and before that, in the same apartment for six years. I used to eat dinner standing at the kitchen counter, and some weeks, the only people who said my name were my clients, though most just called me Doctor.

Now the owner of five puppies saw Cutler’s name, told my receptionist, and next time I poked my head outside, passersby would ask me why Cutler was texting me. Mrs. Pickles’ owner had knitted me a hat, and a man I'd kissed was telling me to wear more socks. I wasn't used to it, but despite my annoyance at the woman blabbing about the message, I was secretly loving the attention.

Cutler picked me up at six. There were no clouds, and stars were scattered across the dark sky. He was leaning against the truck wearing his usual jacket and no hat. He smiled when I got close, and my stomach flip flopped.

“Hi.” He opened the passenger door. “You look warm.”

“Hi, yourself. I’m wearing almost everything I own.”

When I got in the truck, he tucked the end of my scarf into my pocket. I had no idea why, but it was a sweet gesture.

“Where are we going?”

“You’ll see.”

We drove out of town past his farm and turned onto a track that I would’ve missed if I’d been behind the wheel. The truck bumped along, and finally, the trees thinned and we were at the lake.

It was frozen and covered in a layer of snow. The moon was shining on the ice, making it silvery. My inner child convinced me this was magic and a unicorn would prance through the woods and disappear between the trees. But Cutler slammed the truck door, bringing me back to reality.

He was holding a shovel and a pair of ice skates. “These should fit. They’re Jesse’s.”

I waited for him to laugh or add something about Jesse using skates on only three good legs instead of four. But he added, “He’s not using them.”

“Oh, come on. I know he’s almost part of the family, but a reindeer ice skating?”

He was so close to me with the moonlight on his face that I could see the blood draining from his cheeks. He recovered, slapped his thigh, and laughed, but that wasn’t his usual laugh.

“Sorry, I have so many things on my mind. My mom does that. She calls one of us and runs through a list of names until she gets the right one.” He tugged his shirt under the jacket. “They’re my brother’s, of course.”

I was about to ask his brother’s name because I’d never heard it, but what did it matter if he mixed up the names. I kept calling the woman who owned the goat, Mrs. Pickles’ owner. But I hoped his brother was okay with me wearing his things.

“Stay here.”

I didn’t need a warning because I’d seen on the news what happened to people who walked on too thin ice. Cutler took something out of the bag and drilled a hole in the ice and looked at it with the flashlight on his phone.

“It’s five inches, so it’ll hold us.”

It didn’t sound like much. That was less than six inches between me and certain death.

“Are you sure?”

“It’s plenty. Don’t worry.”

He was shoveling snow off the ice while I sat on the tailgate and laced up the skates. I giggled as I imagined the real Jesse, the one with three good legs and one healing, skating on two legs. But the reindeer would probably be better than me on the ice, and I waited for Cutler to put his skates on and take my hand.

“I’ve never done this.” I gripped his fingers because he was my safety line.

“You don’t say. I’m shocked.”

“Hey, you.” I whacked his arm. “I’m from a place where water is for drinking or swimming in.”

“I’ve got you.” Holding both my hands, he walked backward and pulled me onto the ice. My feet went in two directions, and I yelped and grabbed his forearms. He took hold of my elbows and held me up while I wobbled.

“Bend your knees more and look at me.”

The moon created a shadow over one of his cheeks, reminding me of a superhero, and his eyes were so dark. He pulled me with him, and I was

gliding and not falling, though I was holding him so tightly he'd probably have bruises.

"I'm doing it." But I looked at my feet and both of them went out under me. I landed with a thunk on the ice and took Cutler down with me.

He put his weight on his elbows and didn't crush me. My back was aching and the cold was seeping through my coat. I stared over his shoulders at the stars. His breath was warm in my face, and somehow, it didn't matter that I'd fallen because he was with me and he was close enough to kiss.

I reached up and kissed him. His mouth was warm, like his breath, and everything around us was freezing. He returned the kiss, and he put a gloved hand under my head so it wasn't on the ice. I draped my arms around his neck and held on tight as I breathed in his cologne that he wore day in and day out.

He pulled away and grinned, but there was rustling and he glanced toward the truck. Twisting my head around, I saw a reindeer at the edge of the trees.

"Go home." The reindeer did as Cutler asked and vanished into the woods.

He'd just told a wild animal to leave, and I guessed it had obeyed. But I started to shiver, and he picked me up and took me to the truck. After unlacing the skates and wrapping a blanket around me, he brought out a thermos of hot chocolate which we took turns sipping on the way back to town.

"Can I ask the real reason why you came to Dunmore?" he said as he wiped chocolate from his lips.

That was a biggie. "I was exhausted, not just from long hours, but I was tired of my life. I used to think if I died, the only reason people would discover my body was because I didn't turn up for work." I rambled on about living in a big city and it being hard to make friends. "I wanted a community, and that was what I found in Dunmore."

He nodded and braked at the stop sign. There were no other cars around, and the truck stayed at the intersection and didn't move.

"That makes sense."

"Your turn."

Now he pressed on the accelerator and drove down Main Street.

“I know your dad died, and that must have devastated your family. But the others could have managed the farm if you left again. Not that there’s anything wrong with Dunmore, but didn’t you want to see what else was out there?”

He didn’t look at me as he parked in front of the clinic, and I wondered if he was going to ask me to get out.

“It’s complicated.”

“Oh, come on.” I patted his arm. “I spend all day with animals who can’t tell me what’s wrong. *That’s* complicated.”

He sort of laughed, but there was no humor in it. “Ask me again another time.”

He kissed the top of my head, and after greeting the inflatable Santa, he accompanied me to the side door. With his hands shoved in his pockets, he waited as I fumbled with the keys.

I could have kissed him again and said good night, but I turned around because I wanted to be looking at him when I said what I wanted to ask.

“Do you want to come up?”

He removed his hands from his pockets. I tried to imagine what he was seeing. Me in my silly reindeer hat with two hats underneath.

“Yes.”

I took his hand and led him inside.

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EIGHT
CUTLER

We fumbled our way up the stairs as Abbott’s hands roamed over my chest.

He’d kissed me before I kicked the door closed and grabbed the front of my jacket in both hands before pulling me close until our lips were touching.

This was what I’d longed for since I opened his car door that snowy night. I walked him back until he hit the wall with a thunk. He smiled against my lips, and one hat fell off. He laughed, and the second hat slid onto the floor. I tangled my fingers in his hair, and the third hat rolled away.

“That’s all three,” he mumbled into my mouth. “Remember I told you I was wearing almost everything I own.”

“And I’m going to take the rest of your clothes off.”

He shivered and placed his lips on my ear. “I’d be disappointed if you didn't.”

The scarf took longer. He’d wound it twice around his neck and tied it. I couldn’t get it undone, so I worked the knot loose with my teeth. Abbott mumbled, “Hurry,” as I tugged, and he tipped his head back to give me room. I placed my lips at the base of his throat. His skin was warm and salty, despite the cold, and his moaning vibrated against my body.

Abbott pulled away with his jacket askew, his lips all red and swollen, and his hair tangled. He groaned. His scent became more intense, and my skin prickled as I breathed him in. He shoved the jacket off my shoulders and found the hem of my shirt.

I should have told him who I was before this, but I couldn’t do it now.

His palms slid under my shirt, and he pressed them against my stomach making goosebumps trail over me. He moved them over my chest and back, leaving me gasping for breath and wondering where he’d put his hands next.

“You’re so hot.” His lips were on my jaw before he kissed me again. The kiss was harder this time and matched my desperate need to have him naked in my arms.

“I’ve been thinking about us like this since the first night in the barn.”

I cupped his face and kissed him. His soft lips parted with a sigh, and I stroked the redness on his cheeks left by the wind. Even with the snow in his hair, he smelled of summer, and I wanted to breathe him in.

I yanked off his coat, then the sweater and the shirt. Gods, he wore too many layers. I got my hands on the soft cotton at his waist and then the skin beneath it. He shuddered and his breath sped up, but his body heated up under my palms as I stroked him.

I picked him up and headed to what I assumed was the bedroom. Abbott wrapped his legs around me and draped his arms around my neck. His mouth was on my ear, and he whispered how much he wanted me, but I cracked my head on the doorframe which could have ruined the moment. Instead, he kissed what he called “your owie” and it no longer hurt.

The bedroom was dark, other than the lights from Main Street. I laid him on the mattress, and he pulled me down with him.

“Wait, my boots.”

I silenced him with a finger to his lips. I didn’t want to leave him, so I ground my hips on his. He pulled me close and nipped my bottom lip before I pulled away and unlaced his boots. He kicked one off, and I tossed off the other. But even with multiple pairs of socks, his feet were ice cold. With the socks gone, I placed his feet on my stomach.

Abbott lifted his head. “That’s not fair. You have an advantage.”

“I’m just warming you.”

He tilted his head, and his tongue poked between his lips as I rubbed my thumbs over the arch of each foot.

“That’s not all you’re doing.” He leaned back on his elbows and smirked.

I crawled up and over him and braced my hands on either side of him. Falling back onto the mattress, he tugged at my shirt, and with my help, he

tossed it on the floor. He placed a hand on my chest, and my breathing sped up as he traced downward over the happy trail to my waistband.

Abbott looked at me and bit his bottom lip as I placed a hand over his and put the other over his heart. It thudded under my palm, and I leaned over and kissed him, directly over his heart.

He squirmed beneath me and ran his hands through my hair.

I kissed along his collarbone, and he moaned and dug his nails into my back. I kissed a trail over his body as he arched his back and whispered my name.

He was flushed from his throat to his stomach as he fumbled with my belt and swore when he couldn't undo it. I wrenched it off and paused, worried I'd been too rough. I had to be gentle because he was human and I had shifter strength.

But I wanted him naked first. "Lift your hips." I slid his pants over his hips, and he kicked them off.

I gazed at him wearing nothing but his briefs. Abbott reached for the waistband, but I nudged his hand away.

"That's my job."

Like I had with his scarf, I used my teeth to ease them over his hips. His hard length slapped my cheek, and I licked the tip. He groaned and wriggled out of his underwear before undoing the button on my pants.

I pushed back off the bed and lowered my jeans. Abbott's gaze was on my hands, and I shoved both inside my briefs and paused.

"Take them off." He stretched out his foot and ran the sole over my arousal, still covered in cotton.

I gulped and shivered and grabbed his foot, pressing it on my length. Taking deep breaths, I got rid of my underwear.

Abbott shuffled farther up the bed and stroked his cock. "Come here."

The mattress dipped under my knees, and Abbott's hands were on my shoulders as I hovered over him. He pulled me down, and my lips were on his as he wrapped his legs around my hips, and his arousal pressed against mine.

I took his trembling hand and pressed it onto the mattress, but he laced his fingers in mine and pressed it onto the pillow. Abbott lifted his head and peered between his legs. With his free hand, he guided me to his hole.

I gasped as the tip slid inside him, and his eyes widened. The red, green, and yellow lights from the opposite side of the street shimmered on his bare

chest. Neither of us moved, and I closed my eyes, allowing myself to feel him. The scent of slick that was uniquely Abbott swept over me and mingled with his scent.

He ran a finger over the scar on my eyebrow, and I shivered at his touch, taking his hand and kissing it.

“I need… need more of you than the… the head.” His voice cracked.

My instinct was to thrust into him because I wanted him so bad. But this wasn’t just about me. Taking a deep breath, I eased inside him. He was so tight, and he gripped around me. I bit my lip to distract me because I wanted to plow into him.

When I was fully seated, he stroked my cheek. “I’ve been longing to make love with you.”

I held back my tears, but a couple escaped, so I just nodded. With my weight on both hands, I heaved myself up. My cock was coated in his slick, and Abbott slid a finger over it and held it to the light. His eyes smoldered as he trailed his finger over his chest before opening his mouth and licking it. My gaze locked on his, and my mouth fell open. My chest heaved, and I was tempted to mark him and make him mine. I wanted this omega more than anything.

“Gods, you have to warn me before you do that again.” I kissed him and savored the slick smeared on his lips.

I glided back in, and we were both panting. I’d imagined having him in my arms and smothering him with kisses, but being so close was better than my imagination.

When I was buried deep inside him, I stroked his length, and pre-cum appeared on the end. Abbott wrapped his hand over mine, and we pumped his cock.

“More, please,” he begged. He raised his hips, and I plunged into him. The radiator clanked, reminding me of the outside world. The bed shook with it, and Abbott clung to me, and a tremor passed from his body to mine. I licked sweat from his chest, and he told me that tickled.

Abbott clamped a hand on my butt and squeezed as I entered him.

“I love having you inside me. We need to do this more often.” He slapped my ass and grinned.

“That can be arranged.” I nibbled the soft part of his ear, and he grunted and bucked his hips, making me slide in deeper.

I craved everything about him. His smell, the softness of his body, the little noises he made when I entered him, and even his cold feet.

Sweat mingled with slick as we moved together, and Abbott tossed his head from side to side and his breathing became uneven. He mumbled my name and raked his nails over my arms. I held him tight and tried to hold off my orgasm, wanting him to come first.

“I can’t…” A moan cut off his words.

“Yeah, you can,” I panted. “It’s okay.”

He dug his fingers into my arms and arched his back as cum sprayed from his cock.

I filled him once and twice and let go. My body shuddered as I yelled, “Yes!”

We were both trembling and covered in sweat. I lowered myself onto him and peppered his face with kisses as my knot swelled and filled him. When I could move, I eased onto my side. He rolled with me, tucking his head under my chin and pulling the quilt over us.

“Cutler?”

“Mmmm?”

“My toes are warm.”

We both laughed, and I kissed him.

“Stay the night.” He placed a hand on my chest.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

Abbott fell asleep, but I lay awake listening to his breathing. I should have told him who I was. I’d do it soon. But I wanted this, what we had tonight, a little longer before I did.

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NINE
ABBOTT

I woke up alone and thought I'd dreamed the previous night.

But the smell of coffee and bacon wafted into the bedroom. That was weird because I didn't own any bacon.

I pulled on clothes and padded down the hall. Cutler was in my tiny kitchen in his jeans and nothing else, standing at the stove and holding a spatula. The kitchen was built for one person, and he took up all the space. Every time he turned around, he had to duck under the cabinet.

"Where did you get bacon?"

"From the diner. They open at six." He slid two eggs onto a plate. "You're a doctor and yet your kitchen contained three eggs, bread, and a jar of pickles."

Most people didn't think of vets as doctors, and they only called me a doctor when pointing out a mistake.

"I eat at work, and I'm too tired to cook in the evening."

He waved the spatula at me. "Bev told my mother you eat soup out of a can for dinner and a sandwich at lunch."

Damn, she must have seen the cans in the garbage. Even my eating habits weren't secret in this town.

I sat at the small table near the window, and he put the plate in front of me and kissed the top of my head. That was our thing, I'd decided. I studied the eggs so he wouldn't see my face, because if he did, I might cry I was so happy.

Main Street was still dark, and the snow on the sidewalk was blue under the streetlights. I'd never noticed how pretty it was. Trucks were going past to the feed store, and there were customers headed to the diner.

The table was so tiny, we ate with our knees touching which was cute. I imagined waking up like this every day.

"What are you doing today?" I took a mouthful of coffee.

"I have to take two cords of firewood to the church and deliver hay out past Simon's place." He wiped his mouth. "And I'll be thinking about you, so that'll slow me down."

I nudged his knee, and my face flushed. "That's the cheesiest thing anyone's ever said to me." I dabbed my mouth with a napkin so he couldn't see me smiling.

"Did it work?"

"Maybe." I stared out the window, thinking I could use some of that snow on my cheeks.

"Your eyes crinkle when you smile."

Didn't everyone's? But when I glanced at Cutler, he had his napkin over his mouth and he was obviously smiling. His eyes were crinkled too. Well, damn. Neither of us could hide a smile.

He pulled on his shirt and boots and slung his jacket over his shoulders. If I didn't have a long list of appointments this morning, I'd have marched him back to bed. I walked him down to the side door, and he gave me a kiss on the bottom step that made my knees tremble.

He opened the door, and Bev was on the other side holding her key.

"Morning, Cutler."

"Morning." He walked to his truck as if this happened every day, and with a small wave, he was gone.

Bev stamped her feet and looked me up and down in my PJ pants, coat, and bare feet. I waited for her to say something, but she didn't. Instead, she went through to the front desk, humming a song about love.

At lunch time, Mrs. Pickles' owner had brought the goat in for a check-up which wasn't scheduled until next week. She was very eager to pay and spent a long time at the front desk talking to Bev while sneaking side glances at me.

Mid-afternoon a woman from the bakery had dropped off a box of gingerbread men "for you and your young man." And Walker waved from across the street and yelled, "I'm so happy for you."

The whole town was probably planning our wedding, and I had to warn Cutler or he might think I'd been telling everyone he stayed at my place last night.

Someone spread the news. Sorry. I was fairly certain it was Bev but preferred not to put the blame on her.

Nothing to be sorry about, and yes, I've heard. He added a heart emoji.

Oh, we were at the emoji stage of our relationship, not that we'd talked about what we were and where we were going. We'd shared a kiss at the market and he'd stayed the night. It was hardly a relationship. But I didn't need any confirmation. I was just enjoying being happy.

When I had a gap in appointments, I went upstairs to change the sheets. The pillowcase smelled of him, and I buried my face in it. But he'd come straight from the lake in the clothes he was wearing, and yet he still smelled the same as he had that first night in the barn. Maybe it wasn't cologne and just how he smelled.

I couldn't bear to wash it, so I put it back on the pillow so I could sleep on it tonight.

Cutler texted in the evening and then he called. We talked until almost midnight about nothing. He chatted about hay, the school roof, and whether Mrs. Pickles liked me. I fell asleep with the phone on the pillow.

Early the next morning, I drove out to the farm to check on Jesse's cast. Cutler was waiting by the gate, and before I'd switched off the engine, he opened the door, pulled me out, and kissed me. My back was against the car, and the bells were jingling in the wind, but holding onto his jacket with his lips on mine, I forgot about the cold.

When he let me go, the family—or the ones I'd met, anyway—were standing in the yard holding shovels. But there was no snow left to shovel because they'd cleared the yard down to the gravel. They were sniggering and nudging one another until Kitty shooed them away.

"You must stay for something to eat." Kitty waved and walked off.

Jesse was standing in his stall on three legs when I entered the barn. I examined him and he let me, and I was pleased there was no swelling. After I completed the examination, he turned away.

"Did his favorite football team lose the last game?"

Cutler side-eyed Jesse. "Ummm, maybe."

"Or did he have a tantrum and your mom took away the tablet?" I was just running with this, but it was getting more ridiculous and fanciful the

more I talked.

Jesse stamped one of his good legs, and I told him the Owls would win next time.

The next day Cutler brought me a Christmas tree. It was huge, bigger than him. But I'd told him when he'd asked that I wanted a normal one.

"This is Dunmore size," he said when I mentioned it wouldn't fit inside. "And it's from the farm."

It didn't fit through the door, and he had to cut off a foot at the bottom. And then we argued about it being straight. Straight enough was okay by me, but Cutler insisted there'd be no lean in this tree. I kissed him when it was done and picked pine needles out of his hair.

Doc Sutton had left boxes of decorations in the storeroom which Bev had forgotten to tell me about. I wouldn't have bought all that garland if I'd known. At the bottom of one box was a small wooden reindeer with one antler snapped off.

"Poor guy." I held it up. "I have to fix him."

"Are you sure?" Cutler examined the reindeer.

"Yeah, I'll use glue and a splint." I nudged him. "I'm a vet, remember?"

While I worked on the toothpick and surgical tape splint, Cutler watched my every move, and when I was done, he took it from me and hung it on a branch at the front where every kid who came to the clinic would see it.

I put the reindeer Bev had bought next to it. The garland from Walker's store went around the reception area, and we put the radio on and sang along to the carols. I didn't know all the words and just made them up, and Cutler laughed as he strung lights on the tree.

After plugging in the lights and turning off the overhead ones, the room lit up in red, gold, and green. The tree lights were on Cutler's face, and there was a pine needle stuck in his hair. I studied his dark eyes. Even though I'd known him only a short time, I adored this man and wanted to spend every day and every Christmas with him.

I hugged him and watched the snow falling outside. The clinic now looked like the rest of Main Street.

He took my hand, and we swayed around the room. I stepped on his foot, but he didn't complain. I'd been here such a short time and yet I'd fallen for this man. I'd never felt this way about anyone, and it scared me how much I didn't want to lose him. But I kept all that to myself.

“Cutler, in the truck the other night, you said I could ask you another time about why staying here was so complicated. Is it another time now?” I lifted my head, and he was looking at me as if he was trying to decide something.

“Soon, I promise.” He held me close. “It’s not bad.”

Both of us had to be up early, so he didn’t stay the night, and the next morning, I stumbled out of bed and put two slices of bread in the toaster. I was standing over it, but as soon as it started to brown, my stomach complained, and I slumped to the floor with my head between my knees.

The nausea passed after a minute. I put it down to eating too many gingerbread men and tossed the toast in the trash.

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TEN
CUTLER

I'd asked Abbott to give me a few more days. I'd used up three of them trying to work out how to tell him, and none of them helped.

But eventually, I summoned my courage and asked him to come to the farm after the clinic closed. After gathering my family in the kitchen, I told them to stay in the house, no one was to shift, and I insisted the curtains were closed.

My mom put down the onion she was peeling. "You're telling him." She nodded. "Good, it's about time."

She's right. This has gone on long enough. My beast had almost given up on me explaining to Abbott about shifters.

Nobody joked or elbowed me. Instead, they wished me luck, and Uncle Ray patted my shoulder.

Mom wiped her hands on her apron and hugged me. Her hands still smelled of onions. "He's a good man. Give him time to adjust." She kissed my cheek.

Tell him he's your mate, my reindeer added. *That's all he needs to know*.

If it were that simple, I'd have told him the night he fell out of the car and into my arms.

Abbott's car came over the hill just after six doing twenty miles an hour. I had to smile because it was adorable how careful he was on a road that had been plowed this morning. He parked in the usual spot, and the bells on the gate jingled in the wind. He was wearing Jesse's boots and the hat Mrs.

Pickles' owner had knitted him, but his cheeks were pale, and I put an arm around him.

“You’re not well.” Either that or he’d had no sleep.

“It’s a stomach bug and half the town has it.” He made a face. “Bev’s been spraying disinfectant on everything that doesn’t move. She sprayed me when I didn’t get out of her way fast enough.”

“We can do this another night.”

“Nope. You’ve been making me wait since the night we went skating.”

Okay, we were doing this.

I took his hand, and we walked behind the barn. It was a clear night and so cold that the snow squeaked under our boots. The track climbed through the pines to the top of the hill where you could see all of Dunmore, the Christmas lights on Main Street, the school, and the huge tree in the field.

I’d come up here the day my dad died, and I’d never brought anyone else.

Abbott was puffing when we reached the top. “How can you see where we're going?”

“I’ve walked this farm all my life.”

“In the dark?”

“Mmmm.”

He stamped his feet and looked at the town. “It’s very pretty, but don’t tell anyone I said that about snow.”

He leaned back on me, and I wrapped my arms around him and rested my chin on the top of his hat. He fit against me. With his hands on mine and the town in front of us, I let myself have one more minute of him not knowing. I wished we could just be an ordinary couple, enjoying being together and looking at the Christmas lights.

My reindeer was impatient and wouldn’t stop pacing inside me. *Do it now*.

“You asked me why I came back after dropping out of college.”

Abbott let go of my hands and faced me.

“My dad died, and someone had to look after the family. That part is true, but it’s not the whole story.” Damn, I’d practiced this in the barn in front of Jesse about fifty times, and my mouth was dry. “But my family is different from most other people.”

He put a hand on my cheek. “You’re all very close, I understand your mother and uncle wanting everyone under one roof.”

“That’s also true, but we’re different in a way that’s not human.”

The side-eye he gave me was a sign he wasn’t taking this seriously.

“I get that. You let a reindeer watch football and treat him as if he’s human. It’s cute.”

I took both his hands in mine. “Jesse is human, some of the time.”

That was the point when the humor left his eyes and he pulled away.

“Cutler, that’s not funny. I thought you’d brought me up here to tell me something real.”

“I’m not joking, and I can prove it.” I stepped back and unzipped my jacket. “My family and I are reindeer shifters. The family is a herd, and I’m the number one guy, the Alpha with an uppercase A. That’s why I had to come back.” Putting a hand on his arm, I urged him not to run. “There’s ice under the snow and you’ll fall if you take off.”

I tugged my shirt off and kicked away my boots. Abbott shrieked that I’d get frostbite. “Whatever the joke is, it’s not worth dying of the cold.”

Take your fur and show him.

I fell forward on all fours and closed my eyes as my beast took over. Antlers sprang up from his head, hooves replaced feet, and soft fur covered his body. The pine scent and smoke from the house that were faint before the shift became sharper.

Abbott had backed up against a tree and slid onto the snow with his hands over his mouth. I picked up the fluttering of his heart.

He’s so scared. My beast wanted to comfort Abbott, but I told him to keep his distance.

Take one slow step and wait. Then another. I didn’t want Abbott to tumble down the hill trying to get away from my beast. *Now make sure your antlers aren’t in his face*.

Abbott extended his hand and touched the spot above my beast’s eye. “You’ve got the same scar.”

His hand fell away, and his eyes grew wide. “Oh my gods, Jesse.”

I took my skin and pulled on my clothes because he needed an explanation.

“Jesse is… he’s… not… he’s…”

“My brother.”

“I’ve been treating a reindeer that has a human inside him.” He tugged his hat down farther so it was almost covering his eyes. “And the first night in the barn, all those reindeer were—”

“Ronnie and some of our extended family you haven’t met.” I squatted in front of him. “They were worried about Jesse, about a human treating him, and they wanted to make sure he was okay.”

He hauled himself up. I put a hand out to help him but pulled it back as I didn’t know if he wanted me to touch him.

“I ate breakfast with you and saw Jesse watch a football game and get surly when his team lost. I thought it was sweet and funny.” His face contorted, and he slapped a hand over his mouth and staggered behind a tree before throwing up.

Racing over to him, I went to hold him, but he shrugged me away. He wiped his mouth with a handful of snow and stayed bent over with his hands on his knees.

“That’s the bug.” He didn’t look up. “It’s not you being a shifter. I’m not letting that upset me.”

But I’d caused him to be sick. I’d dragged him up the hill in the snow when he wasn’t well and that might have made him worse.

He put a hand on the tree and hauled himself up. “Why tell me now? I've been out here every other day. What’s so special about today?”

There was no easy way to say this. I couldn’t put a bow on it, so I had to say it.

“You’re my mate.”

“Your what?”

“Some shifters meet their fated mate, but not all. I knew from the moment we met that you were the person for me.” I wished I could hold him close as I spoke because the words felt like a barrier between us. “It’s only ever going to be you.”

I thought that might help because I’d heard my mom talk about meeting my dad a hundred times, and it always made her cry happy tears.

But he didn’t blink, and his mouth was set in a straight line. “You knew this from the first night, and here I thought we were dating and it might become serious. That was what I hoped anyway.” He rubbed his belly. “But you’d decided my whole future without asking me.”

Tears pricked my eyes. “That’s not how it is.”

“Oh really? Then tell me, because you don’t get to keep anything else from me.”

I didn’t have an answer that would soothe his worries. “I was scared you’d leave.”

“So you made sure I didn’t know enough to choose.” He stormed past me. “I need to go home.” He put up a hand. “And no, do not offer to drive me.”

I followed him down the track but kept my distance. Halfway down, he tripped, and I caught his elbow. He let me hold his arm until we reached the bottom of the hill and then he pulled away.

The curtains in the house twitched, so my family were witnessing what was happening.

“Please don’t call me, Cutler. I need time to think.” He opened his car door. “I mean it.”

“Okay. I won’t.”

I watched his taillights disappear over the hill as I’d done that first night.

Follow him. My reindeer was worried Abbott might slide off the road. *Make sure he gets home*.

That would be creepy by human standards, but I agreed with my beast, unlike that first night. I got in my truck and stayed half a mile behind him. After parking in the street opposite the clinic and a little way down, I kept my eyes on the light in his apartment.

My phone was in my pocket, but I’d promised not to call him. He was sick and alone, and I’d been so worried about how he’d react that I never considered how it would be watching it happen.

His light went off, and I stayed for another hour until the inflatable Santa’s fan stopped and he folded over in the snow.

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ELEVEN
ABBOTT

I couldn’t sleep but lay in bed on the pillow that still smelled of him. Every time I closed my eyes, I pictured a reindeer lowering his antlers.

At 5AM I got up and made coffee, but I couldn’t drink it. The smell turned my stomach, and I poured it down the sink. Instead, I sat by the window and watched the snow plow go up Main Street under the streetlights.

When Bev walked in a little before eight, I was waiting at the front desk.

“Did you know? I’m not angry, but so many other people did and it was hidden from me, as though I was a child.”

She looked away as she put her purse down and took her gloves off one finger at a time. She didn’t ask what I was talking about.

“I was with Doc for thirty years.” She hung up her coat. “So, yes, I knew.”

“And you let me drive out there every other day and treat Jesse like he was a…” I couldn’t finish the sentence.

“It wasn’t my secret to tell, Abbott. It was Cutler’s.” She switched on the computer. “Doc found out by accident if that helps. Ray Merritt’s reindeer turned into a man as he was examining him and nearly gave him a heart attack. Doc, not Ray.”

She looked at me over the top of her glasses. “Why don’t you go upstairs and lie down for an hour. I’ll move your nine o’clock.”

“Nope, I need to work to keep my mind off… everything.” I couldn’t say it, that the man I loved could shift into a reindeer.

I kept myself busy vaccinating dogs and cleaning cats’ teeth. A farmer brought in a sheep who’d torn his side on a fence. I was tempted to lean in close to the animal and ask if he knew any shifters.

Every time the bell over the door rang, I looked up, thinking it was him. He said he wouldn’t call and he hadn’t, and that should have made me happy. But he hadn’t agreed to stay away from the clinic, and I hoped he’d charge in and scoop me up.

Every time I went into the waiting room, I couldn’t help but look at the tree. It was still straight, and the little reindeer hung on the same branch with his toothpick splint. A girl with a hamster asked why the reindeer had a bandage.

“Because I fixed him.” To myself, I added, “I’m a vet, and that’s what I do.” I smiled at her and went into my office and closed the door, muffling my sobs with the sweater from the back of my chair.

Cutler changing into a reindeer wasn’t the thing I couldn’t get past. He’d shifted in front of me and I’d touched his face. I knew him because he had the same scar and dark eyes. It was strange and would take some getting used to, but that wasn’t what kept me awake.

It was that he’d known. The night he pulled me out of the car, he knew what I was to him. He’d let me find my own way to him one step at a time. And I supposed seeing it from his perspective, he didn’t want to force me into anything.

I’d been scared of wanting too much too soon and had been treading carefully, but all that time, it was already decided. That was what I couldn’t get my head around.

We’d kissed, skated, slept together, and talked until long into the night. And he’d revealed who he was, something he’d not done for anyone else. I kept going around in circles until I was dizzy. Or maybe I was just sick.

When I staggered down the stairs to lock the side door, there was a box outside. Inside I found ginger ale, plain crackers, and a jar of homemade chicken soup.

There was a note taped to the soup lid that read *For the bug* and was signed *Kitty*. I peered inside the box in case I’d missed something, but there was nothing from Cutler. But the box had been tucked against the wall out

of the snow where nobody walking down Main Street would see it. I suspected Kitty hadn't placed it there.

I ate four crackers and sipped the ginger ale and kept them down. It was the first food I'd eaten all day.

At midnight when I'd been tossing and turning for an hour, I opened the messages on my phone and scrolled to the one with the heart emoji. I typed *Thank you for the crackers* and deleted it. *Miss you* was my next message, and I deleted that one as well. But I did miss him. I put the phone face down on *his* pillow and looked at it until I fell asleep.

The next morning, I debated whether I should go to the farm and thought about having Bev call and cancel. But as a vet, I had a professional responsibility to check my patient, even if he could change into human when he was healed. Right now, he was a reindeer, and I didn't shirk my duties. Besides, this mess wasn't Jesse's fault.

As I drove, I almost stopped to be sick, which could have been the bug or my nerves. But Cutler wasn't in sight when I arrived, and Kitty was waiting at the gate holding a thermos.

"He's out near the woodshed splitting logs," she said before I could greet her. "He's been doing that the last thirty-six hours. We won't need firewood until I'm a hundred." She handed me the thermos. "It's peppermint tea which is good for upset tummies."

I followed her into the barn. Jesse was standing, and when he saw me, he made a grunting sound and dropped his head. I'd been here many times and talked to him the way I spoke to every animal I treated. And I'd checked under his tail. Oh gods, the poor man… beast… reindeer.

"Morning, Jesse. Sorry your football team lost."

He snorted, and it sounded like a laugh.

I kneeled in the straw and checked the cast before pressing along his leg above it. When I asked if it hurt, he shook his head. I asked if it itched, and his antlers banged on the wall as he nodded.

"Don't scratch it." I sat back on my heels. "You'll be out of this by mid-January and then you can resume your life."

He put his nose on my shoulder. It was such a sweet gesture, and I stayed where I was, enjoying the warmth from his reindeer.

Kitty beckoned me toward the small office where she'd turned on the space heater. There was a plate of cinnamon rolls on the crate, but the smell made me nauseous, and I shoved a hand over my mouth and sat down.

“I’m sorry. I’m still not well.”

Kitty didn’t say anything, and she didn’t move. I wondered if she was also sick and patted the sofa beside me.

“Sweetheart, how long have you been sick?”

“A few days. Half the town has it.”

“They have a cold or the flu.” She took my hand. “But you don’t.”

Huh? Was Kitty a doctor? Or did she have information that I didn’t?

“What are you saying?”

“You’re a doctor, Abbott. You can do the math.”

I didn’t understand what arithmetic had to do with me being sick.

“There was a night when Cutler didn’t come home.”

Gods, no, she was talking about us sleeping together. My face burned, and I dropped my head and studied a bleach stain on my pants. But I still didn’t get what math had to do with… Oh no… she was talking about me being… pregnant.

“We only slept together once,” I blurted out, sounding like every pregnant teen when confronted by their parents. I lifted my head. “How can you tell or think you can?”

“Your scent.” She patted my hand. “We can smell it before it’d show up on any test. And some of us get sick right away. I was throwing up a week after Cutler’s dad and I… you know.” She looked away. “Next December we’ll have a little one with us for Christmas.”

My mind was buzzing, wondering how I’d cope with pregnancy, work, a baby, and Mrs. Pickles. I was thinking of everything, including a goat, except the one person I should be.

“Does he know?”

“Nope. If he did, he’d be on your doorstep, despite having promised he’d stay away. He told you who he was because he loves you and didn’t want to continue lying.”

I took her hands because I needed comforting. “I’m scared.”

“Of course. Most prospective parents are.” She squeezed my fingers. “But whatever you decide about my son, this baby and you have a family. That doesn’t change.”

I hadn’t cried when he shifted or when he gave me the mate explanation. I’d been teary in my office that one time, but now as I sat on the old sofa with busted springs, I howled. Kitty put her arm around me, and I sobbed on her shoulder.

When I was done and wiping my tears on my coat sleeve, she dabbed my cheeks with a dish towel.

“I can tell him if you want, but—”

“No. It has to come from me, but thank you.” I got up, and my legs were shaking.

Behind the barn, an axe came down and a log split. I waved to Kitty, and she draped the dish towel over my shoulder. That wasn’t a good sign. Did she expect me to cry more?

Taking a deep breath, I walked out of the barn and toward the woodshed.

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TWELVE
CUTLER

I’d split every log on the farm and started on the ones Philip and Dale kept bringing out of the back woods on the truck. They stacked them next to the chopping block and left without a word. Nobody told me to stop, sleep, or eat, though Ronnie left a sandwich on top of the woodpile.

A car was chugging slowly along the road. I didn’t need to see it to know it was Abbott. He was the only one in the county who drove at that speed, and besides, I’d memorized how his engine reacted when he braked, which was often.

The bells on the gate rang because there was always a gust of wind when he arrived. I split another log and tried to push Abbott out of my head, though I was proud of him for doing his job and tending to my brother despite what had happened between us.

I’d promised not to call and I hadn’t broken it, though I’d checked my phone every five minutes, making sure I hadn’t missed a call or message.

Go and find him. My reindeer had been saying this all day yesterday and this morning.

He said not to because he needs time to figure things out.

Looking at him isn’t calling.

He wouldn’t see it that way, especially if I stared at him as he went into and out of the barn. It’d be even worse if I was in the barn looking over his shoulder.

I set another round on the block and swung. The two halves fell into the snow, but I didn’t pick them up. I should go into the house and do something other than this mindless chopping. But that was the point. I didn’t have to think about it. It was muscle memory, and right now, it was keeping me from losing it and running after him.

But as I squatted and bent my head, wishing I could either go back in time or fast forward past the pain, boots crunched behind me. Abbott was coming this way. Just as I’d memorized the noise his car made, I recognized his footsteps. I got up and drove the axe into the block.

Abbott was standing at the corner of the woodshed with his hat pulled down. His nose was red, and he had swollen eyes, and there were blotches on his cheeks. He’d been crying, and there was one of Mom’s dish towels on his shoulder. I wanted to go to him and wrap my arms around him. I’d tell him it’d be okay no matter what he’d decided about the future.

“Is Jesse okay?” I worried that he’d only wanted to talk to me about complications with my brother’s injury.

“He’s fine. The leg looks good.” He pushed his hands into his pockets and took them out again. He sniffed and wiped his cheeks with the dish towel. “I have to tell you something.”

“Okay.”

“But you can’t interrupt until I finish.”

My stomach ached and my breathing was choppy. At least when I was splitting wood, there was a possibility he’d want to be with me. But now I was about to hear his verdict, and it didn’t sound positive.

“I can do that.”

He pressed his lips together. “Your mom picked up on it.”

I couldn’t process my mother finding out something that had to do with Abbott and me. She loved interfering, but that came from a place of love. And Abbott seemed to enjoy being around my family.

“I hope she didn’t upset you. She means well.”

He flapped the dish towel at me. “That’s not it. I adore her.”

I didn’t speak and let him find the words in his own time.

“She said I scented differently. I’m a doctor and I didn’t realize, which is ridiculous.”

His scent isn’t the same, my reindeer noted.

“I’m pregnant.”

I opened my mouth to say something but couldn't find the words. Instead, I breathed in his familiar scent of grass and sunshine, the scents of summer, even though it was getting close to Christmas.

There *was* something underneath his usual scent. It was sweeter than before. It was so faint I might not have picked it up for weeks.

Abbott is having a reindeer shifter baby. My beast was squeeing and already planning a future with the little reindeer.

My knees gave out, and I collapsed beside the woodpile. Abbott raced over and squatted beside me, asking if I was all right.

"Sorry." I got up, removed the axe, and patted the block so he could sit down. I didn't want him sitting in the snow. "I wasn't expecting you to say that." I'd been prepared for a lot of other things I hadn't wanted to hear but not that.

"Your mother has a good nose, and she says shifters can tell. I believe her. It's too early for a test to show anything, so we'll just have to trust her."

I took both his hands and rested my head on his palms. I'd spent every hour since the night I showed him my beast picturing him driving away for good. But I'd never allowed myself to want this.

"I was next to you on the hill, and I assumed you were suffering from a stomach bug. I couldn't tell that you were pregnant."

Abbott removed one hand and cupped my cheek. "Maybe it was best this way. I learned about shifters first and had time to consider what that meant for me before I discovered I was pregnant."

Now it was fear winding its way around my heart. "A decision about the baby?"

He bopped my nose. "No. The little one inside me and I are a team."

"Oh." That was one issue I didn't have to worry about.

Across the yard, my cousins were arguing over a snow shovel. Abbott moved to the edge of the block and patted it, and I sat beside him.

"I've been puzzling over this since the big reveal, and I understand why you didn't tell me." His hands were shaking, and I took them in mine again. "I can't imagine the dilemma of wanting to be with me but terrified I wouldn't want you once I knew the truth."

"But?"

"You should have had faith in me, that what I felt for you could survive whatever differences we had." He fiddled with his hat and stamped his feet.

“I would have told you sooner, and I’ve thought about what it would be like if you said yes.”

“Yes to what?” He faced me.

“Everything. You and I together forever.”

“Does that include making me breakfast?”

“Oh yeah, and so much more.”

“I’m still annoyed.” He put his head on my shoulder.

“I thought if I waited until you’d fallen for me, you’d be more likely to stay.”

“You haven’t actually asked me anything.” Abbott got to his feet and stood in front of me.

“I love you and want to spend the rest of my life with you.” I had one chance to do this right. “Do you love me? And if you do, do you want to do it in Dunmore where you’ll be surrounded by my family whether we live on the farm or in your apartment?”

He giggled. “You’d live at my place where you keep banging your head? Wow, that’s some commitment.”

I got up and put a hand under his chin. “You haven’t answered my question.”

“There was more than one, but yes. Yes to all of them, and I love you.” He rested his head on my chest, and my reindeer stopped pacing. “I don’t like the snow, but I’ll get used to it. I can’t promise I’ll love it, though.”

“Liking snow isn’t part of the contract.”

He pulled back. “There’s a shifter contract?”

“No, silly.” I brought him close again.

“Discovering my patient was a human sort of took a lot of getting used to, but in the scheme of things, I guess it's no biggie.” He pulled off his glove and yanked off mine. “I like that I have my own personal heater.”

“It’s a shifter thing.”

“Anything else I should know?”

I shrugged. “Some. It’s boring stuff, but I should get it out in the open now.”

“I’m ready. What could be more mind-blowing than you being a shifter and me being pregnant?”

“Mates usually mark one another with a tiny bite or a scratch. It’s similar to a wedding ring for humans but more permanent.”

His brow furrowed. “Does it hurt, and is it part of a ceremony like a wedding?”

“You don’t have to mark me, and no, it’s private, between two people.”

Abbott was pregnant, and while marking was safe during the nine months, I preferred to wait. I told him he didn’t have to make a decision now.

“No, I want to be your mate in every way possible.” He placed my hand on his belly.

“It’s a date after the baby’s born.” I bent over. “Hello, little one. I’m your alpha dad.”

Abbott giggled, and I led him toward the house.

“Are we going to tell the rest of your family we’re okay?”

I cocked my head. “Pretty sure that’s not necessary.” I pointed to Ronnie at the kitchen window.

“But what about the baby? We should tell them.”

“I think they guessed when I placed my hand on your stomach.”

We reached the porch, and I paused because I’d just thought of something.

“Remember when you asked if there was anything else you needed to know?”

He whacked my shoulder. “I’m not suffering from pregnancy forgetfulness yet.”

“Right, well, the baby will probably be a reindeer shifter.”

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THIRTEEN
ABBOTT

A baby reindeer shifter was something I could think about after Christmas.

"Do you want me to move in?" My mate stood at the side door a few days after our conversation near the woodshed with a duffel bag slung over his shoulder.

"Yes, please, at least for now."

"Huh? You're thinking temporary?"

I dragged him inside. "What I mean is my place is so small, we couldn't fit us, a baby and all the necessary baby paraphernalia." My apartment had one bedroom and a tiny living area, so I was pleased he was a light packer.

"Good thing I brought one bag of clothes." He stepped outside and brought in a small box. "And four library books about pregnancy."

As well as being small, the place wasn't built for a man his size. He had to duck to get past the wall cabinet, and he hit his head on the doorframe in the hall twice in the first hour. But when I climbed the stairs after work, dinner was cooking, his boots were by the door, and his jacket was hanging beside mine on the hook.

He wouldn't let me carry anything. He'd take my vet bag downstairs to the clinic, and when I went to lift the portable X-ray out of the storeroom, he carried it to the car and told me he'd bring it inside when I got home.

"I'm not sick or injured. I'm pregnant, and at this stage, I can do pretty much anything." I always made sure I was wearing an apron when doing the X-rays, pregnant or not.

“I know.” And he continued on carrying everything for me.

Cutler gave up coffee in the apartment because the smell made me nauseous, and instead, he’d go to the diner. And he’d always use breath freshener before kissing me.

“That jar of pickles finally came in useful.” The literature said cravings usually came later in pregnancy, but my little reindeer shifter must have had a thing for pickles.

“I forgot something.” He dashed out and returned with two jars of pickles, one in either jacket pocket. “I asked the clerk if pregnant omegas preferred sweet or dill, and she said both.” He held them up as if he won them at Bingo.

Pickles I could stomach, but not the usual breakfast food. A fried egg on a plate staring at me made me gag. Bacon was a huge no-no, so it was a choice between dry toast or plain oatmeal. Cutler would make both in the morning and he’d eat what I didn’t.

“Abbott, that’s a little gross.” He was watching me slice pickles into my oatmeal. He made a face and clutched his stomach. “Now I’m nauseous.”

The next morning, he appeared wearing a welding helmet. My heart leaped when I glimpsed him striding into the kitchen.

“I’m guessing you’re not auditioning for a movie, so is there a leaking pipe somewhere?”

He mumbled that it protected him from the smell. I almost choked on the damn pickles I was giggling so much.

“Go into the storeroom downstairs, first shelf on the left, and grab a surgical mask.” I snorted, and oatmeal sprayed over the table. “I can’t look at that helmet every morning.”

At night, he read to my stomach from the library books.

“This week you’re the size of a bean and you’re doing great.”

I put a hand over his as he read, and when he turned off the light, I asked what his reindeer thought about the pregnancy.

“He’s excited about the baby, but he worries you’re always cold.”

“I’m wearing two pairs of socks, and when I’m outside, three hats.”

Cutler was quiet for a moment. “He says you need three pairs.”

Bev didn’t say anything for the first week. She just eyed me eating plain crackers and holding my nose when her lunch consisted of a tuna sandwich. One morning, she brought in a can of ginger ale and placed it on my desk.

“I guessed it wasn’t a secret.” I popped the lid and took a mouthful. “It’s hard to keep things on the downlow in this town.”

“Congratulations. I won’t eat tuna at work for the next few weeks.”

Presents started to pile up on the front desk. Knitted baby booties appeared, along with children’s books and toys. Simon left a jar of plum jam he’d made, and Walker brought over a baby gate from the store. He said he’d ordered it specially. And someone from the bakery made a cake with “Congratulations” on top.

I told a woman with a pregnant beagle that the dog needed rest, small meals, and she shouldn’t be jumping off furniture. I’d examined hundreds of expectant mothers and finally understood why the beagle leaned against my hand the whole time. That night Cutler read me a similar list, minus the jumping off furniture, from one of his library books. I had to admit it was good advice.

Every kid who came to the clinic stopped at the tree to check the wooden reindeer with the splint. A boy holding a cat carrier asked if the antler would grow back.

“We’ll have to wait and see, but he’s being very brave.”

Cutler called from the farm during the day to see if I’d eaten, and if I didn’t answer, he’d phone Bev. If both of us were busy, he’d drive in with food Kitty had made to tempt me.

Mrs. Pickles came in on a leash and snatched Bev’s plastic poinsettia off the desk. I spent ten minutes prying the pieces out of her mouth and checking she hadn’t swallowed any. Her owner stood over us with a paper bag and waited until I’d finished. She didn’t seem concerned about Mrs. Pickles who had probably eaten worse things in the past.

“For the baby.” She handed the bag to me.

“That’s so sweet, thank you.” I ferreted around in my head for her name, and Bev was on the phone. So I called her what I’d always thought of her as. “It’s very kind of you, and I’m so sorry I can’t remember your name, Mrs. Pickles’ owner.”

She grinned. “I like it. It’s unique. I might get a name badge made and wear it.”

I peered into the bag and pulled out a teeny tiny wool hat with two small felt antlers attached to the top.

“That’s so kind of you. I love it.”

“It matches the one you bought at the market.”

Awww. Tears pricked my eyes as she paid her bill and left with a wave.

“Antlers are very big this year,” Cutler told me when I showed him the gift. “In Dunmore, anyway.”

Receiving presents reminded me Christmas was close and I needed to buy Cutler a gift. I thought I had to get something for each of his family members, but he said they stopped that years ago because they were all tired from the Christmas season. They each got their stockings filled, and then they did something as a family. One year they went on vacation in the new year.

“Bev, I need help. What do I buy Cutler for Christmas?”

“What does he like or need?”

He didn’t seem to need much, but he did enjoy hot chocolate. And that gave me an idea. I blew Bev a kiss and told her she was brilliant.

“I know. Glad I could help.”

I raced out to the hardware store, and Walker directed me to the aisle I needed. And when I found what I wanted, he arranged to have it engraved.

That evening, we drove out to the farm. The sleigh rides were fully booked, and with no Jesse, Ronnie was leading the first team in his place, and everyone else had to fill in where needed. We passed one of the sleighs that I hadn’t seen since the Christmas market.

“That’s Ronnie in the lead.” I recognized her because of the white tuft of fur on the top of her head, just like the visible streak when she was in human form.

“Dale is leading the second sleigh, and I’ll take Ronnie’s place for the next ride,” Cutler said.

After dinner, Cutler headed to the door.

“Off you go, Alpha,” Uncle Ray teased, and Cutler threw a napkin at him. The others followed him out, and I sat with Kitty sipping hot chocolate. The seven stockings—no, six, as Jesse’s was in the barn—were hanging over the fireplace as they had been the first time I was here. But now there *were* seven. And my name was stitched on that seventh stocking. It was next to Cutler’s that had a scorch mark on the bottom. Kitty said he’d hung it too close to the fire when he was a kid.

The rides went on until midnight, and I fell asleep in front of the fire. I was awakened by a kiss on my brow.

“Ready to go home or should we stay here the night?” He was squatting in front of me.

“Let’s sleep here. You have to be up early for sleigh rides.”

He carried me to his bedroom, and we passed a Christmas tree in every room. “It’s almost Christmas.” I nestled close to him.

“Technically, it’s our baby’s first Christmas, though they won’t experience it until next year.”

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FOURTEEN
CUTLER

The last ride of Christmas Eve belonged to my mate in the first sleigh.

Mom had arranged it. She'd closed the online bookings days ago but also hung a *Sold Out* sign on the gate because no matter what the website said, people still turned up expecting to get a sleigh ride.

When the last family drove away at eleven, she tucked a blanket around Abbott's knees in the back of the sleigh and gave him a mug of hot chocolate.

"Cutler, I feel a little weird having the family give us a sleigh ride."

"I agree, it's not something we usually do, but they insisted. This is their Christmas present to us." I pulled the blanket over my legs too, even though I didn't really need it.

Ronnie was in the lead, and she'd told the others before they shifted they'd better not argue with her. They didn't dare, as she was at the front. Philip and Dale were behind her, and Mom and Uncle Ray stood at the barn door and watched. Jesse hobbled to the door and snorted as we took off.

"You'll be doing this next year, little brother. Don't worry."

The snow hadn't fallen since dusk, and the sky was clear. The bells rang with each stride, and Abbott put his head on my shoulder.

"This is magical. I could almost make myself believe that we were going to take off into the air."

"Oh." I twisted around and looked at him. "Did I forget to tell you—"

"Ha-ha, very funny. Kitty already warned me you'd pull that stunt."

“Damn, my mom foiled my plans.” I draped an arm around Abbott’s shoulders as my family’s reindeer followed a track down the field. From there, they crossed into the woods and came out in the back pasture.

My dad had been in the lead on the last ride every Christmas Eve. After he died, I’d done it for some years and then I’d asked Jesse to do it, even though as the Alpha, my family believed it was my place. But out of all of us, Jesse adored Christmas the most, with an almost childlike delight. And he loved pulling the sleigh, so it was a double whammy when he broke his leg.

“Do you think there’s life on that star?” Abbott pointed to the brightest one.

“I like to think so because I’d hate to think we were alone in the universe.”

“Maybe they’re watching us and wondering what your family is doing pulling us around.”

I pointed out we didn’t need to look to the stars to find people who thought that. If the humans in Dunmore who didn’t know shifters existed discovered what we were doing, they might consider us extraterrestrials.

“This is the best ride I’ve ever been on,” he said as we pulled up in front of the barn.

I was fairly certain this was his first unless where he lived before they did a blow-up version of a sleigh and he paddled in it in a pool.

Jesse had gone back to his stall and was watching a repeat of a football game with his Oceanview Owls. There was garland attached to the stall walls and a tiny Christmas tree, though it was more of a branch I’d broken off a tree. We’d made an exception to the no-presents rule, and everyone had bought Jesse something and placed it under his Christmas branch.

His stocking was hanging on the stall gate with a sign in Mom’s handwriting. *Do not touch until Christmas.*

Judging by the smell, it was filled with reindeer favorites such as moss and lichen. Abbott sniffed and sent me a sideways glance. I mouthed, “*See, we’re taking your advice*.”

He made a face. “Your mother has been giving him treats every day. I’m surprised I haven’t had to pump out his stomach.”

Jesse huffed, and I stroked his head. “Not going to happen, buddy.”

“Hey.” Abbott kneeled in the straw, and Jesse turned his head. “I have something for you.”

He showed my brother his phone with a huge *IOU tickets to an Oceanview Owls game* on the screen.

Jesse snorted, and Abbott scratched his head.

We wanted Jesse included in our Christmas celebrations. But knowing it'd be late when we finished the sleigh ride, we'd discussed it with him and we decided he'd watch his game tonight and we'd celebrate in the morning by eating our Christmas breakfast in the barn.

Abbott moved the stocking so it was out of Jesse's reach and wagged his finger at him. "For tomorrow."

Poor Jesse. His expression was… pained. "Abbott, please," I said. "We'll be opening ours when we go up to the house." Jesse couldn't open a stocking with hooves, so we'd help him in the morning.

He's so sad, my reindeer sniffed. *I'm going to cry*.

"Fine," my mate huffed and broke off a tiny portion from some moss. "You thought you were going to get something else like pastries? Sorry, you need to wait a couple of weeks."

Jesse lay down and sighed, and we wished him good night.

It was close to midnight when we walked into the kitchen, and Abbott was already yawning. It was crowded and smelled of cocoa. Mom had filled the stockings, and everyone grabbed theirs and upended them. Abbott's contained an orange, a candy cane, and a pair of thick wool socks.

Mom caught my eye over the rim of her mug and stroked my cheek. "Your father would have loved this." Her lip trembled, and we were both teary-eyed as I hugged her.

"Who knows, maybe he can see us," I told her.

"I like that idea."

She shooed us all off to bed because it was late and we had to be up early to spend the morning in the barn.

"Nothing says Christmas like lying in the hay as your cousin, in reindeer form, tries to open his presents," Ronnie deadpanned.

Mom gave her a look, but Ronnie kissed her, saying she was joking and she was looking forward to it.

Before we went to my room, I filled a pitcher with hot water and placed it on my dresser.

Abbott dragged out a tall box with a red bow that he'd hidden under the bed. "You first," and he handed it to me.

I unwrapped it to discover a steel thermos. Engraved around the middle was the inscription, *For the man who's never cold. Love, A.*

I held it against my chest. This man who I loved with all my heart had given me a gift that kept things warm. "I'll use it every day."

"I should hope so. Fill it with hot chocolate."

I sat on the bed beside him and pulled him into my arms. "I love you too," and I tapped the engraving.

Now it was my turn, and I'd hidden his present in the bedding. He tore off the paper and studied the felt antlers and stitched-on smile.

"I, ummm, really love it."

But his tone wasn't convincing. "You don't know what it is, do you?"

"What? Of course I do. It's a reindeer."

I tilted my head to the side. "A reindeer what?"

"A thingie that… I'll also use it every day." He jiggled it, making it dance as the antlers flopped from side to side.

"Liar." I pulled out the plug between the antlers. "It's a hot water bottle to warm your cold feet."

"I knew that."

"Did not, but I love you anyway."

Abbott got into bed, and after filling the hot water bottle, I tucked it under his feet, but he wanted it on his belly.

"The baby enjoys the warmth as much as I do."

He closed his eyes, but by the time he was asleep, the water bottle was under his chin and one antler was poking his ear. I considered taking a photo but didn't want to wake him.

I woke at five, and in the Christmases since my dad passed away, I'd always been the first one up starting the fire and drinking my first coffee before my family got up and made food and noise. But today, I lay in bed with my pregnant mate and listened as first my mom got up, then Uncle Ray and various cousins made it into the kitchen. I'd been instructed by Mom to sleep in.

Abbott stirred and flung a leg over me. "Is it morning?"

"Sort of."

"Merry Christmas." He kissed my cheek and patted his belly. "Our first and the baby's."

I snuggled in to him and whispered against his skin. "Merry Christmas."

A knock at the door, following my mother’s voice telling me it was time, got me rolling out of bed and putting on a robe.

“You can stay here. No one expects you to sit in the barn while Jesse opens his presents.” Not that a reindeer could do that, but someone would help him.

“No, I’m part of this family and I want to be there with everyone. Besides, if I stay here, you all will be feeding him stuff he’s not supposed to eat. Christmas Day is not a day for surgery.”

He made a face and shoved a hand over his mouth. “Gods, I hope I didn’t jinx things.”

I wrapped him in the quilt, and he stumbled downstairs and greeted everyone as they were headed out the door with platters of pancakes, bacon and coffee.

Jesse was awake and nosing the gifts under his small tree.

“Don’t get any ideas.” Abbott was given a chair while the rest of us sat on the straw. “This food is for us. You have to make do with mushrooms and lichen. Yum.”

Jesse tossed his head, and we all laughed.

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FIFTEEN
ABBOTT

Jesse’s cast came off in the middle of January. I cut it off myself with the cast saw from the clinic while Cutler held Jesse’s antlers and Kitty twisted a dish towel in her hands. When the two halves of the cast fell into the straw, nobody spoke. I put the saw down and faced the wall.

There was a rustle and a lot of swearing, and a voice behind me yelled, “Abbott, I want to hug you.”

I turned and a young man in sweatpants flung himself at me, telling me I was the best vet in the county. Cutler was beside him saying, “Go easy on him. He’s pregnant.”

“I’m one of the few vets in the county, but you’re welcome. Remember, no running for a week.”

My words had no effect. Kitty was holding out a cinnamon roll which Jesse stuffed in his mouth before tearing out the barn door.

“Mom, I need more food. I still have lichen stuck in my teeth.” He groaned and cleared his throat.

Kitty hurried out behind her younger son.

“He’s already running on it.” Cutler stated the obvious.

“He’ll be back in college soon, and I’m going to miss him.” I put the saw in my bag and grinned. “Well, I don’t know him except in reindeer form.”

THE MONTHS PASSED and the snow melted. I decided mud was worse than snow, and I almost wished the year would speed up and we'd skip to winter. By June, I couldn't see my feet, and Cutler spent every evening on the rise behind the farm where the new house was going up. He'd come back to the apartment smelling of sawdust and would fall asleep with a hand on my belly. By August, Cutler's library books had run out of fruit and vegetables to compare the baby's size to.

Every morning, Cutler would tie my shoelaces. He'd kneel in front of me and double-knot them. One morning, he rested his forehead against my knee.

"I don't know that I'm ready for this, being a father. Or I should say being a good dad. What if I make a mistake?"

Putting one hand under his chin, I tilted his head so he was looking at me.

"I doubt any prospective parent is, and yes, you will make mistakes, we both will, just as we always have."

He got to his feet. "Great, so we'll be messing things up together." He squeezed my hand. "I feel so much better."

"Life is messy in case you haven't noticed, but we'll love and protect our little one, and that's the best we can do."

"Fine." He put on his work boots. "I'll be late again tonight."

He wouldn't let me see the progress of the new house. We'd planned it together, including the color scheme and finishes. Walker had worked with us because many of the faucets and light fixtures had to be ordered.

"Don't forget about the barbecue. Mom's been planning it for weeks."

Kitty had told me about it three times. It was a family event for a few people at the house.

"Wear something comfortable."

That was my entire wardrobe since I was four months along.

She'd refused to look at me as she spoke, which had me wondering what she was up to.

"Oh gods. I finally figured it out."

Cutler paused in the doorway with his back to me.

"It's a baby shower."

“Don’t tell Mom. She wants it to be a surprise.”

But on the day of the “barbecue,” Cutler drove to our new house which, though it was incomplete, had walls and a roof.

Cutler helped me out of the car, and I eyed the large banner strung across the front that read *Welcome Little One*. A goat I recognized was tied to a sawhorse and eating a daisy. I waved to her, and she side-eyed me and resumed chewing.

With one hand on my mate’s arm to steady me, I waddled over the plywood floor that eventually would be covered in carpet. In the main room, there were folding chairs in a circle, and everyone I was close to in Dunmore was standing beside a table heaving with food.

Bev, Walker, Simon, and Mrs. Pickles’ owner were present—all of whom were aware of shifters—along with grinning family members. Ronnie pressed a glass of punch into my hand. “Non-alcoholic, of course.”

Jesse popped out from behind his mother and uncle and gave me a hug. He’d been working a summer job, and I hadn’t seen him much. The familiar aroma of cinnamon wafted off him, and I held him tight. I always got teary when he came home because it was his broken leg that brought me to the farm. Cutler always poo-pooed that because I would have come to the farm anyway for the herd’s winter check in either November or December.

Though the humans were enjoying the summer heat, Uncle Ray fanned himself with a paper plate, and Ronnie kept mopping her face with a wet towel. Cutler was sweating through his shirt, probably wishing he could join Jesse who’d announced he and a group of his high school friends were headed to the lake later.

“Don’t worry, I’m not leaving,” Cutler told me. “This is a shower for our first child. Besides, you need me to help unwrap the presents.”

Each family member handed me a small sleigh bell on a ribbon. My lap was full of them, and when I asked what they were for, Kitty told me it was so I’d always know when someone was coming.

“They’re for the front door. Every house our family and extended family owns has bells.”

“Thank you so much.” I wasn’t sure why I had so many when we only had one front and one back door, but it was a sweet gesture.

Uncle Ray handed me a long pale piece of something that had been sanded until it was smooth. “It’s an antler. I shed it years ago.”

“Thank you.” This was becoming more of a housewarming occasion than a baby shower. I’d have to display it so he’d see it whenever he came to the house.

“It’s for teething.”

Oops, I was mistaken. I turned it over. I’d given hundreds of puppies something to chew but had never held a teething ring that had once been on someone’s head.

Walker put a large box on the floor, and Cutler opened it and brought out a mailbox with a reindeer on it.

“Oh, it’s beautiful, Walker.”

“I made it myself, so it’s one of a kind.”

Jesse’s present was a onesie with Oceanview Owls on the front and their logo which, not surprisingly, was an owl.

“The baby will be an Owls fan.” He held the onesie against my belly. “I’ll make sure of it.”

Mrs. Pickles’ owner had knitted a sweater, mittens, booties, and a second hat, all with antlers. “In case the baby needs them,” she said.

Jesse whispered that he had it on good authority she’d made a matching set for Mrs. Pickles.

Kitty’s present was the last one. She placed it in my hands without a word, and I gulped back tears. It was a tiny red stocking with white stitching around the top and no name on the front.

“I’ll add the name once the baby’s here.”

Ronnie leaped up. “Game time.”

Cutler groaned, and I shushed him.

Ronnie had written questions on index cards. Cutler and I sat with our backs to each other.

“This is for both of you. What were the first words Cutler said to Abbott?” she asked.

We held our answers and everyone cheered because we’d both written, *Are you the vet*? Cutler held up two fingers, and I remembered he’d asked twice.

“Cutler, what does Abbott call Mrs. Pickles’ owner?” Ronnie had well-thought-out questions.

“Mrs. Pickles’ owner,” was his answer.

“Abbott, what’s Cutler’s most irritating excuse?”

I didn’t bother writing it down and shouted, “It’s complicated.”

He got up and kissed me.

When the last guest had departed and the family had cleared away the food and trash, Cutler took my hand and led me through the house. I'd already seen the hole in the living room wall that would house the fireplace.

"Dale's cutting the stone from the creek for the fireplace."

I put my hands on either side of his face. His cheeks were still warm from the heat of the day. "And that's where the stockings will go." I pictured it and couldn't wait until our three stockings were hanging from the mantelpiece at Christmas.

As we wandered through the house, Cutler didn't duck when he walked through a doorway.

"It's reindeer-sized."

"And now the most important room in the house." He opened the door that would be the nursery. It was almost complete and plastered in the wallpaper Walker had taken months to track down after I saw it in a movie.

The baby kicked as if they knew this was their room. Cutler dropped to his knees and put an ear against my stomach, and the bells jingled as he brushed against them.

"The baby approves of the wallpaper but says the shelves need to be filled with books."

"Tell the baby they're on order."

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SIXTEEN
CUTLER

The leaves were turning as I walked from the building site to the house I'd grown up in.

Mom had been feeding Abbott for a month, and now that my mate was on paternity leave, we were living at the farm. The vet who was replacing Abbott until he returned to work had to live in the apartment over the clinic.

I shook the sawdust out of my hair and slipped off my boots before walking into the house as the bells rang over my head. The whole family was at the dinner table and they were already digging in.

"We couldn't wait for you because Abbott was starving." Ronnie grinned at me.

"Thanks for dropping me right in it." Abbott was nibbling on a fresh bread roll while Dale served him a helping of potatoes.

Though Jesse had returned to college, Uncle Ray and Philip were arguing about their chances this football season.

A fork clattered onto the floor, and all eyes were on my mate.

"I'll get you a clean one." Philip leaned over and opened the cutlery drawer, but Dale put a hand on his arm and shook his head.

I scrambled around the table to Abbott, knocking over a chair as I did.

"There's no need for panic. I'm a vet. I know what this is."

He's in pain, my reindeer said.

He's having a baby.

Make it better, he insisted.

“There’s plenty of time. It’s one contraction.” My mate took a sip of water.

“It’ll be hours before the baby comes.” My mother patted my hand.

She’d given birth twice, but I was a first-timer, and no matter how many puppies or kittens Abbott had delivered, they couldn’t compare to laboring with our baby.

My mate pushed away his plate, and Ronnie produced a pack of cards. “We’ll help get you through this.”

“I don’t think Abbott—” I started to say.

“No, it's fine. Being distracted is what I need.”

Ronnie dealt the cards to the cousins, herself, and me and Abbott.

“Abbott, you got a four?” Dale asked.

“Owww, owww.”

Uncle Ray whispered in my ear. “He’s supposed to say ‘Go fish.’”

“It’s f-fine,” my mate panted. “Go fish.”

“Do you remember the time one of the sleighs got stuck in a ditch?” Uncle Ray slapped his thigh.

“That was just like Abbott the first time he came here.” Ronnie was tee-heeing until we reminded her the sleigh was in the ditch thanks to her beast getting frightened by a bee.

My mate gripped the edge of the table, and everyone shut up as he panted.

“Seven.” Mom was keeping track of the time between cramps.

“You’re doing great.” I held his hand under the table. Whenever he tensed, he squeezed my hand, and I breathed with him.

“Just like on TV, right?”

“Better,” everyone said.

My mind went back to the morning I told him I wasn’t ready. I still wasn’t, but the baby didn’t care.

“Ouch, that one really hurt.” My mate was walking around the kitchen holding my arm.

“Six.” My mother scribbled in a notebook she usually kept by the phone. “That’s it. You can all go to your rooms and stay there or sleep in the barn if you prefer. But it’s just Cutler and Abbott from now on.”

They filed out, and Ronnie kissed Abbott’s cheek. Uncle Ray squeezed my mate’s shoulder.

As our new place wasn’t ready, Mom had prepared a room on the first floor for my mate to give birth.

“I’m scared.” Abbott whispered against my chest. “This is not how I thought it would be.”

“We can go to the hospital now.” I jingled the car keys.

While most humans gave birth in a hospital, shifters tended to have home births. My mate was confident enough that he’d wanted our little one born at home, in the same house where Jesse, my cousins, and I had come into the world.

“Nope. I’d be scared there too. I’m worried I won’t know what to do, which is weird considering my occupation.”

“This is different,” Mom told him. “Because this baby is yours. You’ll be fine.”

Abbott chuckled. “I’ve told heifers the same thing. Don’t think they believed me either.”

“And was it?” My mother flicked on a lamp.

“At least four of them kicked me.”

“In that case, I’ll stay at least ten feet away from you.”

The room had been used as a den, but now it contained a bed with clean sheets, a dresser, a pile of towels, and a warm quilt. The window was open to the night sky because it was a warm fall evening.

I fed Abbott ice chips between contractions. He was no longer pacing but sitting on an exercise ball and rolling back and forth. Mom was using a rolling pin on his back.

The hours passed, and Abbott managed a few minutes of sleep before his body cramped again. A wolf howled in the distance, and I wondered if it was a wild beast or Mr. Jenkins from the local pharmacy.

Jesse texted, and I gave the phone to Mom who messaged one word. *Labor.*

And when my mate needed to push, he was on hands and knees, and I was beside him telling him how great he was doing. Mom’s calm voice told him to breathe and to push on the contraction.

“I can’t.” He collapsed on the bed after pushing for however long he’d been pushing for.

“You can, and I’ll be at your side the entire time. I know you can do this.”

“I’m glad you do because I don’t.” I helped him lean forward as he grunted and bore down.

I wish we could take his pain. My reindeer was desperate to help. *Please, can you take it?*

I can’t.

“My first grandchild is taking their time. I can see this baby takes after their alpha father.”

Great, my mother was reminding my laboring mate how stubborn I was. Not the time, Mom.

With each push, I told my mate how strong he was and that I was proud of him and I loved him. My voice cracked, and even my reindeer was quiet as we waited.

“Nearly there, sweetheart,” Mom whispered.

Abbott pushed some more. I said, “Yes” over and over until I didn’t recognize my own voice. And then with one enormous push, a baby slid into my mother's arms.

A furious cry interrupted the silence.

“It’s a boy.” Her voice wobbled. “You have a beautiful little boy.”

There were cheers in the rest of the house, and Uncle Ray blew his nose as my mother laid the baby wrapped in a towel on my mate’s chest. He had a full head of dark hair, and his fist was resting on his cheek. The baby opened his mouth and yelled while my mate examined him.

“Respirations good, color’s good…”

My mom opened her mouth to speak, and I shook my head. Abbott had just pushed our son into the world, but he was also a doctor, and he couldn’t stop being one just because he’d become the other.

Mom tried and failed to stifle a sob. “I’ll leave you two… ummm, three alone,” and she left the room.

My mate counted ten fingers and ten toes, and I put a trembling finger on the baby’s cheek. He was so small. I’d carried hay bales, harnesses, and my beast helped pull a sleigh, but our son was so tiny I was worried I’d hurt him if I picked him up.

“Hi.” That wasn’t the way to greet my newborn son. But what was? I couldn’t find the words. “Hello.”

Tears were sliding over my mate’s cheeks, and I kissed them away. But I was crying too, and our tears mingled. I took Abbott’s hand and kissed it before placing it against my cheek, and he sobbed louder.

“Look what I have.” I reached into the dresser and pulled out the reindeer hat Mrs. Pickles’ owner had knitted. “Shall I put it on him?”

I slid it over our son’s head. “Remember I said antlers are very big this year.”

Abbott giggled and then complained I’d made him laugh and it hurt. “And if they’re not, our son will have started a trend.”

Outside the open window, crickets chirped and the air smelled of cut hay.

“You talked about making a mistake, remember?” I nodded. “Well you’ve been a dad for ten minutes, and so far, no mistakes.” He held up his hand and we high-fived.

I rested my brow on his. “There’s plenty of time, but now that he’s here, I feel that despite my future blunders, I’ll do okay. Is that weird?”

“Nope.” His eyes were closed as he spoke.

I picked up our son and got on the other side of the bed. With our little family snuggled under the quilt, I told our son to sleep and I’d stay awake all night watching over him and his dad.

I won’t close my eyes either, my reindeer assured me.

We hadn’t picked a name even though we’d had nine months. But that could wait until morning, and Mom could stitch our son’s name on his stocking.

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SEVENTEEN
ABBOTT

We'd moved into the new house the week before Thanksgiving.

I thought it would take a while to get used to the bells hanging over the front door that rang whenever anyone walked in. But they were part of the landscape now, just as I was. They'd ring and Ronnie would shout, "Hello." When Uncle Ray arrived, he never shut the door properly and let in a breeze.

But the most unexpected visitor was Mrs. Pickles' owner who often dropped by with a gift she'd made for Forrest. She'd knock but then let herself in, minus Mrs. Pickles herself. It hadn't taken long to understand she didn't have any family in Dunmore. Her children had moved across the country, and she sort of adopted us.

I ran my hand over the fireplace made of stone that Dale had cut and laid in October, and I walked barefoot on the thick carpet Cutler and Uncle Ray had put down.

I went back to work three mornings a week initially, and Dr. Marsh, the vet who'd covered for me during my paternity leave, stayed on. Now I'd increased to five mornings, but the practice had grown so busy that I employed Dr. Marsh full-time, and he lived in the apartment permanently. Every morning I'd walk past the stairs I used to climb and thought of that first night Cutler stayed over.

Kitty looked after Forrest most mornings while I was at work, and on the other days, we created a Mrs. Pickles-, puppy-, and kitten-proof playpen

behind Bev’s counter with Walker’s help.

Forrest was Cutler’s dad’s name, and he suggested it the night of the baby’s birth. It was still dark, but our little one was demanding to be fed. He was standing at the window when he asked me.

“I love it.” I looked down at our baby. “Did you hear that? You’re named after your grandfather, Forrest.”

When Cutler told Kitty, she cried and burned what she had been cooking on the stove.

And now it was Christmas. Forrest was three and a half months old and wearing his antler hat. He’d found his feet recently, and they kept him amused for hours as he lay on his back.

“One hot chocolate for my mate.” My eyes were barely open, but the enticing aroma had me reaching for the mug and taking a sip.

“And now, little man.” Cutler picked up our son and brought him into our bed. “You have a stocking that’s filled with goodies and you get to play with them today.”

Though the family had a tradition of taking the gifts out of their stockings on Christmas Eve, Forrest had fallen asleep early last night, and Kitty decided that everything revolved around the baby.

The bells rang at nine.

“Merry Christmas,” Ronnie shouted as she brought in an armful of gifts.

Philip and Dale arrived with a tray of baked goodies, and Kitty and Uncle Ray followed. Jesse had come home from college last week, and he was reminding everyone how he’d been in a cast last Christmas and couldn’t shift.

I rolled my eyes. “Jesse, do you think we’d forget?”

He shrugged. “I wanted to make sure you all remembered what a pitiful state I was in lying in the straw.”

“We’re on to you.” Ronnie threw an arm around his shoulder. “You’re expecting extra presents and treats this year.”

“Exactly.”

Dale slapped Jesse’s shoulder. “Sorry to disappoint you but all our attention is on Forrest.”

“Damn.” Jesse chuckled. “Overshadowed by a baby who until a few days ago didn’t know his feet belonged to him.” He tickled Forrest’s tummy, and our son giggled.

Everyone argued about who was going to hold the baby, and our son didn’t complain when he was handed from person to person, like the game hot potato. Except nobody wanted to get rid of the most adorable little guy in the world.

Mrs. Pickles' owner arrived after putting Mrs. Pickles in the barn for the day. She was wearing an identical hat to the baby, both of which she’d knitted. Forrest was the only one receiving gifts, as every family member gave us a “babysitting Forrest” coupon.

“Bad news, little man.” It was Jesse’s turn to cuddle his nephew. “The Owls finished three and nine this year, so I have to be patient and hope they do better next season.”

“What’s this, Forrest?” Kitty wiggled the stocking with the baby’s name on it.

The day after he was born, she’d added his name in white stitching, though Ronnie told us she hadn’t gone to bed after his birth and stayed up until morning finishing it.

We emptied the baby’s stocking, but he was more interested in the stocking itself than the contents of toys and books, and he stuffed it in his mouth. He pulled a face because felt wasn’t appetizing.

“Two PM at the main house for lunch.” Kitty reminded everyone. “And there’s no need to dress up.”

“I wasn’t planning on it,” Uncle Ray mumbled as he blew Forrest a kiss.

“Come on, Mrs. Pickles’ owner.” Kitty tittered and took the woman’s arm. She’d known her much longer than I had, but now, like the rest of the family, called her by the new name. “You’re my helper.” She looked over her shoulder. “Along with Uncle Ray.”

During lunch, Ronnie said she had to go on a training run in the evening.

“Training for what?” I raised a brow, wondering what was so important on Christmas Day.

“The sleighs will be running again tomorrow, and I’m training two distant cousins who’ve never pulled a sleigh.”

“Just make sure you don’t end up in a ditch tomorrow, not with paying passengers.” Uncle Ray waggled his finger at her.

“Okay, Dad, so it's all right if we go in the ditch without passengers.” Ronnie smirked.

“That’s not what I—” He flapped his hand at her. “Forget it.”

After the meal, when Forrest had fallen asleep and we were snuggled on the couch recovering from eating too much, Cutler kneeled on the floor.

“Today is a date after the baby’s born.”

Huh? I frowned, wondering what he was up to and not understanding what he was talking about. But memories flooded back to when I was pregnant. I sat up and took his hands. “Is it today?” I patted my very full belly. “Does it matter that I might have indigestion?”

“No, but we can wait until tomorrow.” That was what he said, but his eyes said differently.

“Nope. Not happening. You’ve waited long enough.” I looked around. “Should we be dressed in our best? Holding a glass of champagne? Anything?”

“Marking shows our commitment. We don’t need fancy clothes. Just us.”

“It won’t hurt, right?” I’d given birth and been bitten by dogs, cats, and a goat, and yet I was worried about a small bite from the man I loved.

Cutler explained it was similar to a bee sting. He told me to choose where to mark me. I wanted it visible so shifters would know and humans would wonder what caused my scar.

I held up my arm. “On my inner wrist.”

He curled his fingers around, and his reindeer teeth replaced his human ones. There was pressure and a stinging sensation, and then it was his mouth and breath on my skin and he kissed me. Heat spread along my arm and wound its way to my heart. The warmth reminded me of the hot chocolate he’d made this morning.

When Cutler lifted his head, there was a red crescent shape on my skin. I ran my fingers over it, knowing it would fade to silver. Cutler’s eyes were wet, and we kissed as he mumbled, “Your turn.”

Cutler pulled his shirt aside and tapped his shoulder. “Right here, please.”

I bit down hard, and then he put his arms around me.

We stayed on the floor in front of the fire until Forrest woke up. My mate brought him in, and I cuddled him as I studied the three now-empty stockings over the mantel.

It started to snow, and for the first time since I’d arrived in Dunmore, I didn’t mind.

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About The Author

My characters are sexy, hot, adorable—and often filthy—alphas and omegas. Feudal lords with dark secrets**,** lonely omegas running away from their past, and alphas who refuse to commit.
Lurking in the background are kings, mafia dons, undercover agents and highwaymen with a naughty gleam in their eye.
As for me? I dictate my steamy stories with a glass of champagne in one hand. Because why not?

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