



ABIGAIL BARNETTE

# Awakening Delilah

WAKING MOON

Phases

# *Awakening Delilah*

*A Phases Story*

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***This one is for all the Yoopers out there gettin' it on.***

## *Chapter One*

Running freed her. Freed her from the expectations of her mother, the obligations of her career. Freed her from her own expectations, which could be just as crushing as the ones her mother held for her.

Delilah's hooves snapped twigs as she raced through the forest, her head down as she dodged between the trees. She'd only been living in Michigan's Upper Peninsula for two weeks, but already she had begun to recognize the scents on the wind and the plants sprouting from the barely-thawed ground. The nightly runs—an indulgence she would have never allowed herself in Atlanta—had lifted a burden from her she hadn't realized she carried. She'd never been one to toss around words like soul, but out here, in the form she'd restricted herself from for so many years, she felt like her vocabulary might expand.

A low growl pricked her ears, and they twitched above her head. Somewhere in the forest, an animal hunted. Not close enough to be an immediate threat, but she didn't want to take a chance. A wolf wouldn't care if she was a human shifter with a human job and a human mortgage. A wolf would just be disappointed when its meal turned from a nice, juicy doe into a less-savory human.

The only problem was...the scent of a predatory animal stood between her and home. She would have to be insanely careful. Why had she done this? She'd known it would only be a matter of time before she did something stupid to get herself seriously injured.

And that something stupid had been coming out here, and not noticing the wolf that had stalked her, and now it was looking at her through the trees.

She froze for a full heartbeat. Then she took off, in the opposite direction of home but damn safer than toward the animal. It gave a yip, and she didn't have to look back to know it chased her. She dodged the trees, that seemed to be working against her now, and kept her ears

back to hear the animal closing in. And it was closing in, gaining two steps for each one of hers. She didn't have much of a choice. Either in deer form or human form, he was going to catch her. At least in human form, she had a chance of scaring him off.

She just hoped this wolf wasn't hungry enough that he wasn't afraid of people.

Leaping over a fallen log, she willed herself to change. She turned in mid-air, her body hitting the ground half-woman, half-deer, and rolled into a defensive posture. The position left her staring directly at her pursuer...but he wasn't a wolf anymore. She got to her feet, brushing off the leaves that clung to her bleeding knees.

"Damn, baby, why you running around the woods in the U.P. all dressed up like a deer? You ain't from around here." A round-sounding accent dipped the vowels and softened a few key consonants.

"Apparently you are." Delilah smirked as she straightened, but that smirk faded when she remembered just how naked she was in her human form, how naked he was in his human form, and how completely gorgeous he was. U.P. accent aside, he looked like a statue cast in bronze standing in the clearing, and the cold blue dawn could have been the white-hot fire from the forge. The eerie morning light painted silver highlights over every sinuous line of him, from the plump curves of his calves to the long, round muscles of his thighs, to his...sight a good girl averts her eyes from, a voice disturbingly like her mother's snapped, and she brought her eyes up north to join the rest of her. She did briefly glimpse the hard, upside-down L curve above his hip bones. The guy looked like he'd been carved, not born.

He reached out to her, leaning slightly into the handshake like they were meeting at a pharmaceutical convention and not naked in the woods, sweaty from a chase. "Miguel Paz."

"Miguel?" She took his hand and shook it. If he was going to pretend they weren't bare-ass naked in the woods, she could play along.

You're naked in the woods with a naked man. You should be running from naked men. What's wrong with you?

True, if she'd run into a naked man in Atlanta, she wouldn't have stuck around for introductions. But this wasn't just any man. He was a shifter. The first shifter she'd talked to in her life, other than the guy who'd convinced her to move to Gwinn Close, the gated community built exclusively for shifters. Two weeks, and she hadn't talked to a single soul. Naked or not, he

was her kind, and curiosity had been the reason she'd given up the sweet Atlanta spring for the cold, muddy Michigan April.

As they let go of each other's hands, she said quickly, "I'm Delilah. Like in the Bible."

The smile that curved his lips would have been mocking, if his big, brown eyes hadn't been so damn nice. "Ya, I heard of that."

A high-pitched screech broke the air, and Miguel jerked his head up, scanning the canopy of trees above them. "Down here. New girl."

The biggest bat Delilah had ever seen—okay, she'd never actually seen a bat that wasn't on tv—flapped into the clearing. It circled once then stopped abruptly in midair. As it fell, the shape of the animal poured itself into a different shape, like plastic flowing into an injector mold.

"So, what brings a new girl to Gwinn Close?" Miguel asked, as if seeing a bat become a man was something that happened every day and not just in vampire movies. "You picked a real good year. Early spring."

"Um, what?" She looked back to Miguel. "Did you just see a bat turn into a guy?"

"He did." The bat-man didn't offer his hand. Like shaking hands with her was beneath him. "I'm Darius."

"Okay, hi, Darius. Are you a...vampire?" She felt stupid asking the question, but even more stupid when they looked at each other and laughed. "Yeah, it's real funny, two naked guys laughing at me in the woods."

"He's not a vampire," Miguel said, that teasing smile still playing on his lips. Delilah didn't care for teasing usually, but when it came in such a yummy package...

Okay, definitely not thinking about anyone's package, she scolded herself, keeping her eyes firmly up.

"I get that a lot," Darius said, with the tone of person who really did get that a lot. "I'm just a shifter. My form just happens to be a bat."

"He's a were-bat," Miguel said with a wink.

"Okay, well." She crossed her arms over her chest. "It was nice to meet you, Miguel the dog—"

"Red wolf."

"Miguel the red wolf and Darius the not-vampire bat. I'm going to go home now. Put some clothes on. Still a little too chilly out here to be running around naked."

“Come with us,” Miguel said. “Our truck is just over there. We can give you a ride back to wherever you’re going.”

“Gee, get in an enclosed space with two naked dudes who want to drive me to a second location? No, that doesn’t go against anything my mother ever taught me.” She shook her head firmly. “I think I’ll just shift and head back to my house on my own.”

“You’re real new here, huh?” Darius said, and it sounded more like an insult than a question.

She wasn’t going to let him bait her into some display of bravado that would end up with her dead body in a ditch. “I’ve only been here about two weeks, why?”

“Where are you from? Before, I mean.”

Okay, so brother did have one of those deep voices that put her immediately at ease. But serial killers probably had those, too. “Atlanta.”

“This ain’t the big city Atlanta is,” Darius replied, and Delilah couldn’t figure out if it was a warning or a reassurance.

“What he’s trying to say, but failing at on account of being all serious and scary, is people don’t take to trespassers up here. You come across some poachers in your deer form, they’re gonna shoot you. You come across some poachers in your nekkid black girl form, well, they’re just as likely to shoot you.” Miguel shrugged. “But you could handle yourself in the big city? You’ll be fine.”

Delilah struggled through her fog of horror to remember what the guy had told her when she’d first moved to Gwinn Close. Being shot was definitely not on her bucket list, and though she had lived in the “big city” of Atlanta, she’d grown up in the affluent Ansley Park neighborhood. The closest she’d ever come to being shot was playing paintball at her friend Ronnie’s sixteenth birthday party. “Okay, hold up a minute. That guy, Mitchell...the guy who started the place? He said there weren’t any poachers in Gwinn Close.”

Darius nodded. “There aren’t any poachers. In Gwinn Close. But you crossed the easement line about two miles back. You’re in Hiawatha state forest now.”

“What?” She’d never been good with distance, and the only thing she was good for in shifter form was running. She must have overshot the line considerably. “Then what are you two doing out here?”



“Looking for you,” Darius said, his deep voice as dark as a hot summer night. Delilah’s skin went all tight and flushed. It was a good thing she had her arms over her chest.

Miguel cut in. “I caught your scent and didn’t recognize you. Figured you had to be the new girl. Didn’t want to see you get into any trouble.”

Darius nodded. “There are campers past the sand hill to the west. Now, they had guns. Could be for protection from bears. But you can’t be too careful, especially of nutjobs who want to camp in April.”

The full import of what he said sank in, and Delilah shivered.

Miguel broke the silence. “You don’t have to get in a car with us. But at least let us take you your place.”

“What’s with the ‘me Tarzan, you Jane?’” Delilah laughed to break the tension that arose from almost being a poacher’s trophy doe, but it didn’t quite work.

Darius smiled anyway. “Miguel speaks more Yoopenese than Spanish. Don’t mind him dropping important clauses here and there.”

Miguel held up his hands, “It’s the language of God’s country. I’m sorry youse don’t speak it.”

“We better get moving, if we don’t want to break curfew,” Darius said, suddenly back to all serious, all business mode. He shook his head, like someone trying to get water out of his ears, and before Delilah could blink, his body sucked up into his bat form.

She’d never thought to change in front of a mirror before. She doubted she looked anywhere near as smooth as he did when she changed.

Miguel dropped to all fours, and the tawny fur of his Red Wolf form grew up his arms like kudzu vines growing on a time lapse video. Within seconds, all that remained was a sort of mangy, feral-looking dog who watched her expectantly.

“Oh, hell. All right, follow me home.” Delilah took a step back, her arms raised over her head like she’d learned in gymnastics class, then sprang forward and dove at the ground. She loved the feeling of the change, of the long bones of her arms and legs lengthening, her joints easing to new places. Her hands touched the ground as if to spring into a forward round-off, but were replaced at once with hooves. Her back bowed and her feet hit the ground, toes spreading into hooves as well. She raised her head, shaking her face into an elongated snout. Then, with a muffled snort, she headed back the way she’d come.

If the guys had been following her somewhere in a car, she would have driven safely and considerately in front of them, making sure they never got left behind. But they weren't in cars, and something primal wanted competition. She took off without a signal, sprinting through the trees, her nimble hooves dashing the bracken underfoot into the soil. Over head, Darius sent out a shriek that prickled her fur. Something nipped at her heels, just as Miguel rushed past her, looking truly ridiculous, the way dogs always did when they ran. Whatever the deer equivalent of laughing was, Delilah did it.

Running through the woods had been exhilarating alone, but with companions, competitors, it was enough to get her higher than any drug that had circulated at college parties. She closed her eyes briefly as she jumped over a fallen log. For the brief, weightless moment, everything, her past, her family, her uncertain future, evaporated.

Then, a gunshot rang out.

Panic tore through her guts. She didn't know where the sound came from and didn't really care. A fucking white-tailed deer and you decide to move to the U.P. You're brilliant, Delilah.

Miguel fell back, growling as they ran. If it was to urge her on, she didn't need any more urging than a gunshot. Overhead, Darius screeched again as he dove between tightly spaced branches. Delilah's right front hoof caught in a rut and she stumbled. Don't worry about what they're doing. Keep your eyes on the goal.

The goal in question wasn't exactly within her sight, not yet. She'd eaten up the ground like birthday cake on her way into the woods, getting out wouldn't be quick and easy. But no other shots followed, and her fear turned to resolve that pounded through her with every step. I will make it. I will make it.

The mantra still spun in her head as she broke through the tree line and into the clearing around her house, a big pine-log cabin with the lights inside all lit up like Christmas because she didn't like coming home to a dark house. Her bare, human feet hit the yellow grass as soon as she cleared the trees, and her momentum carried her forward, rolling to the ground with painful shocks to her elbows and knees.

Miguel shifted and knelt beside her, as breathless as she was, and Darius fell to the earth in a crouch.

"Welcome to town, huh?" Miguel said with a wheezy laugh.

Delilah sat up, laughing too, until the laughing turned to hysterical sobs that shook her back and seared her gasping lungs.

“Hey, don’t do that,” Miguel patted her back timidly. “Hey. Chica, don’t do that.”

“I could have gotten shot!” She pulled her legs to her chest, resting her eyes on her knees. “I could have been killed!”

“Never a dull moment,” Darius said quietly.

“This is nuts.” She squeezed her eyes shut. “My momma was right. This is not going to work out.”

Miguel laughed softly. “What she say? ‘You’re gonna go up there and get yourself shot?’”

“No. She said, ‘This is not going to work out.’” Delilah sprang to her feet and headed for the house. “What the fuck am I doing?”

The guys followed her. She subdued the powerful urge to slam the door on them, to scream for help because suddenly it didn’t seem like the best idea to be hanging out naked with strangers. Instead, she went to her bathroom, pulled on her bathrobe, and came back downstairs, where they waited for her.

Darius had the good manners to remain standing by the back door, but Miguel had sat down at the kitchen table. She frowned. “I don’t recall the section in Emily Post about putting your naked butt in my kitchen chairs. I eat here, you know.”

“Miguel doesn’t have any manners.” Darius nodded toward her. “Are you gonna be okay?”

“I’ll be fine.” She’d be fine, just as soon as she got her shit packed and got out of Dodge. “Does this kind of thing happen all the time?”

Miguel shook his head. “Not on our land. We have our own way of dealing with predators here.”

Predators. Not poachers, not hunters, predators. “You talk like we’re animals.”

“Aren’t we?” Darius took a step toward her. “You don’t seem like you understand the way things work here. This isn’t Atlanta.”

“That’s pretty damn clear,” Delilah snapped.

Miguel’s voice was gentler, but it might have been just the goofy accent. “Look...the shifters that come to live here do it because we want to indulge in our animal sides. We don’t

want to live the secret life, nine-to-five, maybe run around a state park on the weekends. Tell me that when you were running out there, that wasn't the most alive you've ever felt."

"No. I feel alive now. Because I didn't get shot out there." Her fingers shook as she pushed her hair back. "I feel like I need a fucking cigarette."

Miguel chuckled. "Then that's a good run, baby. I don't think exercise ever made me feel that good."

Okay, she had to laugh at that. "Okay, maybe not that good. I haven't felt that good in a long time."

"That's a shame," Miguel said with genuine sympathy. "You leave a boyfriend behind in Atlanta?"

She laughed awkwardly. As if the situation could be any more awkward. "Um, no. I don't really date that much."

"I think we could help you out with that."

"Miguel—" Darius warned quietly.

"I'm not looking to be fixed up, thanks." She tucked her braids behind her ears and flicked away a piece of leaf that had straggled in from the woods.

"Maybe not fixed up," he said, drumming his fingers on the table. "But I certainly know two guys who really wouldn't mind breaking up your dry spell."

She laughed, until she realized that he was dead serious.

## *Chapter Two*

The awkward silence that followed needed to be broken by something, but Delilah wished it hadn't been her forced laughter. That just made everyone in the room more aware of what Miguel had just said. And it was clear from Darius's reaction that he'd meant it.

The worst part was, if she was anyone other than Delilah Lewis, she might have considered it. See, while Delilah Lewis hadn't gotten laid in three years, Delilah Lewis had also been raised by a really strict mother who had always made it absolutely clear that her daughter wasn't going to be one of "those girls". And only one of "those girls" would entertain the notion of sleeping with two men she'd just met. At the same time.

That was what he was suggesting, right?

"You look interested," Miguel said softly, taking a step toward her.

Still naked. Still looking so, so fine.

And it had been so, so long.

"You're talking both of you, at the same time?" It was almost difficult to say out loud. Not that it wasn't one of her most forbidden fantasies. A lot of nights, the idea of two men fucking her was what sent her over the edge. But fantasizing about it and doing it were two different animals.

Technically, they are two different animals, her libido urged her. Maybe you need to find out if that's in more ways than one.

Miguel approached her as though she were still in her shifted form, still primed for flight and wary of humans. It was almost comical, but she'd made up her mind, at least sixty percent of it, at least. This was happening, whether the other forty percent was in on it or not. When he reached his hand out for her waist, she stepped toward him. When he lowered his mouth to hers, she rose up on her toes to meet him. His lips were warm and soft, and like riding a bicycle, she

remembered how to open her mouth under his and let him inside. She groaned and slid her hands over his chest, looping her arms around his neck as his tongue stroked and teased hers.

“Miguel.”

Darius’s voice broke through the pure sensation that had distracted her and brought her back to the here and now. Miguel lifted his head, reluctantly breaking contact with Delilah. “Are you in, man?”

Darius rolled his eyes. Actually rolled his eyes!

“If you don’t want to, don’t force yourself,” Delilah snapped, turning away from Miguel. Damn it, why did she think this was a good idea?

A hand touched her waist, and she pushed it away. It came back, joined by its brother, twining together over the knot in her bathrobe sash. Darius’s hands, not Miguel’s.

“I don’t have any reservations about you,” Darius purred in her ear. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean for you to think that. It’s my partner, here. He’s a heartbreaker. I’m trying to watch out for you.”

“Partner? What, you guys in business together?” She turned in Darius’s arms. His very strong, very big arms. She glided her hands up his biceps. The guy who’d just rolled his eyes at the thought of sex with her.

Damn, I must be hard up for it.

“Actually,” Miguel said, coming to stand beside Darius. He put one hand on the other man’s shoulder.

He didn’t have to finish. “Oh my gosh, you guys are ga—”

“Bi,” Darius interrupted. “Bisexual. In a relationship. I don’t want you to do this under false pretenses. I’m all for having a good time—”

“Then let’s have a good time.” She placed her palms flat on Darius’s chest.

Darius looked at Miguel as if this was something they’d argued about before. Maybe she wasn’t open to it, at least not the part where she got involved in someone else’s personal shit.

“Come on, D,” Miguel urged. “The lady knows what she wants.”

Darius turned back to face Delilah. If any uncertainty showed on her face, he either missed it or didn’t care, because he swooped down on her mouth like he’d been dying to taste her all night. He tightened his arms around her, bringing her up against his chest, his groin,

where he swelled against her stomach. He was big, damn he was big, and her pussy tingled at the thought of him stretching her, that first brush against her hole before the head popped in—

She moaned against Darius's mouth.

"I know he's good, but I didn't realize he was that good," Miguel chuckled, putting his arm around her shoulders. He nuzzled her neck, his lips brushing back and forth over her pulse point as he blew a stream of warm air against her skin.

She broke away from Darius's mouth and turned to catch Miguel's with her own. Between brushes of their lips, she said, "It's been a really, really long time for me."

"How long?" Darius asked, dipping his head to kiss her shoulder.

"Um...three years?" she answered, struggling from under the sensation of dual mouths exploring her.

Miguel's hand drifted down her back, skimming her spine before cupping her booty, his fingers tantalizingly close to her vulva. "That's criminal, baby."

Darius dropped to one knee, bringing himself face-to-face with her breasts when he parted her robe. He held her breasts with his fingertips, tracing gentle circles over her skin, drawing closer and closer to her nipples but never touching them. Miguel moved behind her and pulled the robe from her shoulders. It fell to a puddle on the floor. She closed her eyes and swayed on her feet between the solid assurance of their bodies.

"If you can't take just this," Darius murmured, his fingers finally circling her nipples, drawing them up to hard peaks, "then you're in so much trouble."

She gasped and steadied herself with a hand on Darius's shoulder, looping her other arm around Miguel's neck as he buried his face in her shoulder. His lips roved over her neck, up to her jaw, and he took her chin in his hand and turned her head to claim her lips. At the same time, Darius's hot, wet mouth closed over her nipple, and she moaned against Miguel's lips. While he kissed her, he let his other hand wander, cupping her other breast. He pressed his hips into her, grinding his cock against her ass. She almost came right then, just from imagining what it would feel like when they finally filled her up.

Darius moved south, leaving a trail of kisses that cooled rapidly in the early morning air. He circled her navel, tracing the slight dip with his tongue. Between her legs she was slippery and aching, and every maddening detour Darius's mouth took made her a little bit crazier. When

he finally reached for her calf, urging her leg up and over his shoulder, she almost sobbed with relief.

“Lean back on me, baby,” Miguel instructed, lifting her other arm to twine around his neck. His solid weight and the nibble of his lips against her ear made her head drop back to rest on his shoulder, like settling into a warm bath. Then Darius licked her, one long, slow stroke from her honeypot to her clit, and her knee buckled. It was a good thing someone was remembering to hold her up, even if that someone wasn’t her.

Darius buried his lips between hers, seeking out her slick bud. She rose up on the toes that remained on the floor, not sure if she wanted to escape the unrelenting pressure on her clit. Darius didn’t give her a choice, trapping her leg with his elbow and lifting her completely off the floor. Strung between them with her legs around Darius’s head and her arms around Miguel’s neck, she felt weightless, supported solely by the pleasure that coursed through her. She bucked her hips, arching up to grind against Darius’s face. His tongue drew maddening figure eights over her clit, his lips caressed her and sucked her in with a teasing brush of teeth. She panted, sweated, shouted, and finally came with a scream that should have alerted the neighbors. Her fingers dug into Miguel’s shoulders, and she would have fallen if he hadn’t caught her under her armpits and supported her.

“Oh my god,” she whispered, her rasping breath turning her post-climax exclamation into a ragged plea. She didn’t know how her feet got back to the floor, or how she landed upright with her knees still turned to water. Her legs trembled as they supported her between them.

“Maybe we should move this party somewhere more...horizontal,” Miguel whispered close to her ear, and a shiver raced down her spine.

“Bedroom is upstairs.” She let them loop their arms around her waist as she shuffled from the kitchen into the open floor plan of the rest of the house, to the dining area just outside the kitchen door, then down the steps to the living room with its sunken sitting area and massive fireplace.

Darius whistled. “They really did a good job with this one.”

Though Gwinn Close was a planned community, the lots were bigger for privacy, and to accommodate their owners’ shifting activity. The houses weren’t cookie cutter like a planned community, either, each with their own personalities and designed with input from the buyer.



The wood floor in the living room was covered with a huge, plush area rug that Delilah loved walking around on in her bare feet. It would probably feel just as good on the rest of her body.

Instead of leading them to the stairs, she took their hands and tugged them toward the steps descending into the living room. Miguel smiled a slow smile. "I thought the bedroom was upstairs."

"I don't let strange men in my bedroom," she said, pulling a few pillows from the couch. "New rule."

"I have a new rule, myself," Miguel said, standing behind her again. "Don't let Darius have all the fun."

He turned her in his arms and lowered her to the couch, slumped down so her hips rested at the edge of the cushion. He slid down her body, to her already wet and glistening pussy, and kissed one thigh, then the other, before diving right on in. Her butt came up from her seat at the sudden shock of feeling that returned to her center, and she gripped the back of the couch with a muttered curse. His lips fixed over her clit, Miguel moaned, and she opened her eyes. Darius knelt behind Miguel, his arm looped around his midsection, and there was no doubt from the motion of his arm what he was doing to his lover. Miguel's tongue swirled over and over as he sucked with unrelenting pressure on Delilah's nub, but it was the sight of Darius working Miguel's cock, kissing his back and shoulders as he did, that sent her over the edge. She'd never seen two men together before, had never even been curious, but seeing it right in front of her, being...involved, was surprisingly erotic. Her legs trembled at the force of her orgasm, and she held Miguel's head tight to her body as she rode wave after wave of bliss.

"Okay, baby," Darius whispered beside her ear, shocking her out of her haze. "You ready for this?"

She moaned and nodded.

"Condoms?" Miguel prompted, and Delilah had the presence of mind to stammer, "My purse. By the door."

It seemed like forever while Miguel sprinted to the coat rack by the door and rummaged through her bag. All the while, she stared in helpless need at Darius as he stroked his long, thick shaft. She had never in her life seen one that big, let alone actually had one that big inside of her, but there was no doubt in her mind she could take him. Take all of him, and still want more. Her pussy clenched in anticipation, and she bit her lip to stifle a groan of impatience.

“Here,” Miguel said, tearing the package open with his teeth. He dropped to his knees and slid the condom over his partner’s cock, pumping up and down the length.

“Are you gonna keep screwing around, or are you gonna fuck me?” Delilah snapped, with an uncharacteristic whimper to punctuate her sentence.

“Oh, I’m gonna fuck you,” Darius purred. He leaned over her, letting her feel his weight. The tip of his cock brushed her dripping flesh, slicking her juices over the head. She held her breath as he pushed forward, parting her, opening her up wide in a long, slow stroke. All the while he eased his entire length into her, she whimpered a mantra of “oh god oh yes oh god”. It had been way too long since she’d felt this, and absence certainly had made her fonder of it. She rocked her hips to help accommodate him, and he surged forward, then retreated until he’d completely withdrawn. He remained, poised teasingly at her opening, pulling back entirely when she tried to buck her hips and recapture him. She panted in desperation, came close to begging him out loud when he slammed back inside of her, a brutal thrust that curled her toes, then another and another, until she wrapped her arms around him and came, shouting “Fuck!” louder than she would ever have dared if she’d had closer neighbors.

Hands cupped her breasts, and she turned her head to see Miguel there, leaning beside Darius for access to her body. She bit her lip, suddenly aware of how very much attention she’d been receiving, but unsure how her request might go over. Fuck it, she decided, then crooked her finger at Miguel. “Come up here. Let me suck your cock.”

“That’s the spirit,” Darius murmured, landing his hand with a smack against her backside.

She laughed and arched her hips, taking him deeper while Miguel seated himself on the couch beside her. When she leaned over to take hold of Miguel’s impressive shaft, Darius withdrew and flipped her over, taking her completely by surprise. She gave a startled yelp, and he silenced her with another slap on the behind. She’d never have put up with something like that from any of her former lovers, but something about these guys made giving up control, giving herself over to her desire, fun. Maybe it was because they were shifters, too. Maybe it was just that starting a new life had emboldened her sexually. She didn’t really care to analyze it at that moment. She moved where Darius instructed her, kneeling between Miguel’s legs and bending low so Darius could enter her again.

Miguel's cock pointed straight to his navel, and nearly touched it. She gripped him in her fist and pumped a few times, in rhythm with Darius pounding in and out of her. She'd come three times, but she wanted, needed more of both of them. She pulled herself up to wrap her lips around the head of Miguel's cock, still encircling him with her hand. He groaned, his abs rippling as he shuddered. His hot flesh stretched her mouth, and she wriggled her trapped tongue around him, his whispered exclamations raising her arousal to a fevered pitch. She bobbed her head, sucking him deep, but lost the motion when Darius's fingers found her clit. He teased her, strumming her like a string, and she ground her hips against his, moaning around Miguel's cock.

"I can't watch you come again without feeling you," Miguel managed through tightly ground teeth. "Darius, get me that other condom."

Delilah nearly collapsed when Darius pulled out. Her head swam with an overload of sensation, the cold leather of the couch at her back as she lay on it, the loud pounding of her own heartbeat in her ears. The rapid cooling of her own juices on her thighs, the unrelenting throb of her clit. She pressed the heel of her hand against herself, moaning in frustration.

"Hang on baby, we'll be right there," Miguel reassured her with a laugh. "You got any lube lying around?"

She flushed, though why she would be embarrassed at this point, she had no idea. "Upstairs. Bedside table."

Darius nodded and headed up the stairs, and Miguel returned, climbing on the couch with her and sinking between her legs. "What about your strangers rule?"

She laughed and rubbed her nose against his. "I don't think you guys qualify as strangers at this point."

Miguel laughed with her, but when his cock touched her cunt, things became much more serious. He sank deep with a sigh of relief, and Delilah marveled at how different he felt. Different, but no less amazing. He pumped against her once, twice, grinding her breath from her lungs.

"Starting without me?" Darius knelt on the couch behind Miguel, and Delilah realized what the lube was for.

"Are you going to fuck him?" Her internal muscles tightened involuntarily, and Miguel dipped his head and stifled a groan.

"Is that a problem?" Miguel asked, his voice strained as he pressed hard against her.

No, it wasn't a problem at all. In fact, Delilah would have never thought something would turn her on so much. She shook her head, but couldn't manage anything other than a moan.

Darius squeezed lube out onto his fingers and slicked them over the new condom he'd donned. He leaned over Miguel's back and asked, "Are you ready for me?"

"Fuck yes I'm ready for you," Miguel snapped, pulling Delilah's legs up higher, so her knees nearly touched her chest. He thrust down, his wide cock dragging against her already buzzing clit, and she saw stars. She fought the desire to close her eyes, wanting to see Miguel's face when he took Darius's huge cock. Impossibly, another gush of wetness flooded her core, making Miguel's movements smoother, faster. He went still inside of her, pressed his forehead against hers. She wished she could see more, but she had a feeling that from the look of relief and elation on Miguel's face, Darius had sunk the head of his huge cock into Miguel's straining body. She remembered the way it had felt when Darius had been inside of her, as if every inch of him had been in direct communication with every nerve in her. She squeezed down with internal muscles and felt Miguel's arms tremble on either side of her.

"Don't move," she teased as he withdrew a bit then gasped as he impaled himself further on Darius.

"You feel so fucking good," Darius groaned. From her vantage point, Delilah could see Darius's fingertips digging into Miguel's flesh, his grip almost proprietary. God, what would it be like to have that intimacy with someone, to know exactly where your hands would lay when you touched them? Suddenly, she felt like a third wheel, and it wasn't a good feeling.

"Hey," Darius said softly, and she knew it was intended for her. Their eyes met over Miguel's shoulder, and Darius held her gaze. "Come back to us. There's no reason to get shy now."

That, she had to agree with. She clamped down on Miguel again, giving him a fluttering squeeze as he withdrew from her and pushed back onto Darius's cock.

Somehow, that feeling of being an outsider evaporated as the three of them moved together, their breath and sweat mingling as they strove toward their ends. Miguel was the first to give over, his pace speeding frantically as he rocked between them. As if he'd been holding back, Darius pounded into Miguel's ass without rhythm.

Delilah wasn't sure who actually came first. She opened her legs wide to wrap them around Darius as much as she could, accepting all of both of them. All of their weight, all of their power, all of their pleasure. She dug her fingernails into Miguel's shoulders as she rushed headfirst over the edge, while the two men who'd fucked her and teased her to such a frenzy added their own shouts to hers.

They didn't lie together long. The uncomfortable closeness of the moment separated them neatly, and Delilah didn't know what to say. While the guys cleaned up, she found her robe and wrapped up in it. What was she going to do when they came back from the bathroom? She thought about offering them breakfast, but then she would have to look them in the eyes over ham and eggs. Not to mention the fact that she probably wouldn't be able to keep her eyes open. She'd never realized that threesomes were so tiring.

"I hate to say it, because I'm going to sound like a jerk," Miguel said when they returned. "But we need to get back home. Our car and our clothes are still way out by the easement line, and I really don't want to explain to some electric company worker what we're doing out in the woods nekkid."

While she was grateful that she was going to get some immediate alone time to process what had just happened, she wasn't as grateful that they had clearly discussed their plan to ditch her while they were out of earshot. Still, she pasted on an understanding smile and said, "Well, that's good, because I always feel like a heel when I kick a guy out before breakfast."

Why did you go and say that? You sound like you're doing this every single weekend.

"Well, thanks for the hospitality," Darius said, too awkward to be teasing, too sincere for Delilah to laugh. "If you're out tonight, be careful, okay?"

"Yeah, try to learn some major landmarks, so you don't cross the boundary again." Miguel leaned down to hug her. "You need anything, we're over on Fir Lake drive, third house down from the stop sign."

Ah, another distinctly Yooper thing Delilah had noticed since she'd moved north. People gave their exact coordinates instead of a simple phone number. Still, it was unlikely there would be any reason for them to get in contact with each other again. Delilah had agreed to some harmless fun, not a dating relationship, and she didn't want to make things weird. "I will. Thanks for the advice, and for saving my life."

They were nearly at the door, and Miguel turned back. “Saving your life? I didn’t realize you were that hard up for it.”

This time, her smile was genuine, and lasted all the way up the stairs to her bedroom.

“So, I’m the heartbreak kid now?” Miguel quipped as he slid into the driver’s seat of the pickup.

Darius still stood outside the open passenger door, meticulously buttoning his shirt. “Well, it’s kind of true. You’re getting to the point where you’re down with inviting anyone in, like we’re some kind of double-up stud service.”

“I didn’t realize it bothered you.”

They rode home in silence. They’d been doing that more often lately, and Miguel didn’t like it. He didn’t like wondering what he’d done wrong.

Their house, like the other houses in Gwinn Close, stood at the back of sprawling ten acre lot. They had opted to leave their driveway a simple dirt two-track through the trees that they hadn’t bothered to remove. Some of the houses in Gwinn Close had huge lawns and paved driveways, but that wasn’t their style.

The house itself had been largely informed by Darius’s tastes, which was okay with Miguel. All he needed to be happy was a bed and a crapper, and the second was debatable since you could always find a tree. Darius hadn’t grown up in the U.P., though, so he was pickier. The house was tan sandstone brick with a huge cedar porch in front and matching second-story deck in the back. They parked in the attached garage and Miguel left the keys in the ignition when they went inside.

He had prepared himself for a long, uncomfortably silent, day when Darius followed him into the kitchen and put his hands on his shoulders, turning him so they stood face to face. “I’m sorry.”

“Nothing to apologize for.” Miguel leaned in for a kiss, but Darius leaned back.

“I don’t want to close this up right now. I need to know something.”

It was so unlike Darius to confront situations in their relationship, Miguel knew he couldn’t turn away from the chance to have a discussion like rational adults. “Okay, shoot.”

Darius took a deep breath. “I’m worried that the reason you’re suddenly into this whole threesome thing is because you think it’s something I need.”

That came as a shock. Miguel had thought it was something Darius needed, but that's not why he'd done it. "I just thought she was a cool chick and it would be a good time. That's all. Didn't you have a good time?"

"I did," Darius admitted. "I just...I don't want you to ever do anything that you're not into, just because you think it's what I want."

Miguel did kiss him then, hard and deep, digging his fingers into Darius's back as he held him close. When they broke apart, Miguel leaned his forehead against Darius's. "I would do anything for you. You know that. But sometimes, a fuck is just a fuck."

Something troubling passed through Darius's eyes, but in an instant it was gone. Good thing, too. Somehow, Miguel's words felt like a lie, and he didn't like that. "Let's go to bed, get at least some sleep while we can."

Darius nodded, "Yeah, I don't think anyone wants a zombie for a personal trainer. Maybe they'd want to run from one, but definitely not with one. And I don't think they'd pay for it, either."

"You go on ahead, I'll be right there," Miguel said, and when he was alone, he slid into one of the kitchen chairs. Maybe he hadn't lied, not outright, about what had happened between them and Delilah. He'd just minimized it. Because the truth was, Delilah wasn't just another fuck, another third they welcomed in for a little fun. Miguel wanted to see her again.

And he wasn't sure he would be able to sleep at all.

## *Chapter Three*

Delilah practically had to peel open her eyes when someone knocked on the door at noon. She mumbled something then, realizing that whoever knocked couldn't possibly hear her, called, "Hang on a minute!" and scrambled for a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. She gripped the railing on her way down the stairs, sleep drunk and unsteady. By the time she got to the front door, she'd managed to put on a completely fake awake face.

Standing on the other side was Mitchell Andrews, founder of Gwinn Close. He was the shifter who'd contacted her in Atlanta. He'd never told her how he'd found her, but the same sense of kinship that had made Delilah trust Miguel and Darius had made her trust Mitchell completely.

"Mitchell, come in," she said, her smile more genuine than it had been seconds before she opened the door. "Can I get you something from the kitchen?"

He smiled as he shook his head politely, the corners of his blue eyes crinkling. His eyes were just as startlingly blue in his animal form, a Malaysian tiger. Too bad he wasn't interested in the female species. Delilah had always wanted to get with a toned, blond, all-American hottie.

"What brings you around today?" she asked, leading him toward the living room. Then she remembered what she'd done down there just hours ago, and switched her destination. She pulled out a chair at the dining room table and said, "Have a seat, I'm gonna grab a bowl of cereal."

"I hope I'm not intruding," Mitchell began. "I just wanted to see how you're getting on."

She pulled a bowl from the dishwasher and stood on tiptoe to reach the cereal. "The house is amazing!"

"They did a good job on it," Mitchell agreed from the other room.



“I’ve got so much more space. I don’t know how I lived in that little apartment for so long.” She shook some cornflakes from the box.

Mitchell appeared in the doorway, crossing his arms as he leaned against the frame. “I’m glad you like it here, but I wasn’t really asking about the house.”

She laughed nervously and concentrated needlessly hard on pouring milk over her cereal. This was the part she really did not want to get into, because she didn’t know. That morning, she’d been ready to pack up and leave Michigan altogether. Then, she’d slept with two guys, and suddenly the thought of leaving made her feel strangely homesick. After she’d assured them that it was just fun, and she wouldn’t get emotionally involved, she felt like a traitor admitting that she wanted to see them again, wanted there to be potential for something...more? But they hadn’t offered the possibility. They’d expressly ruled it out, even, and here she was, doing a complete one-eighty in her feelings about this place.

She looked up at Mitchell and smiled. “It takes some getting used to, I’ll admit to that. But it is nice to be able to run, to just be myself out there, alone with my thoughts and my true nature.”

“Not always alone, I hope.” That was something Mitchell had been on her case about since before she made the decision to move to the U.P. In Atlanta, she’d lived a pretty solitary life. She’d had her girlfriends from high school and college that she’d seen on occasion, for bachelorette parties and baby showers. But after college, she’d been so intent on building her career as a corporate grant writer, she hadn’t really had time for friends. Besides, she was never truly herself with the friends she had. How could she be, if she were hiding a huge part of her life?

When Mitchell had contacted her to write a grant for his research facility, she’d guessed right away that he was a shifter. No other human would be that interested in animal and human genetic mutations. He’d told her about Gwinn Close, and how it was the perfect place to meet other shifters and make friends. Delilah hadn’t realized the making friends part would be mandatory.

She sighed. “I don’t have a lot of free time. I’m still working. I’ll meet people eventually.”

It was a total lie. Ever since she’d started working from home, she’d had nothing but free time. When she wasn’t in the office, being asked to help multiple people with multiple projects

while trying to oversee her own, she'd had better focus, and her projects came together in half the time. It drove her crazy. She didn't like not working.

"Or, you could meet them tonight." Mitchell snapped his fingers as she moved past him, into the dining room. He followed her and took the chair across from hers. "There's a welcome mixer down at the town hall tonight."

"Wow. That is...small town." Delilah took an extra long time chewing so she could come up with a credible sounding excuse. "But I have a conference call tonight from the west coast."

"It's at seven," he said cheerfully. "Goes until nine. You're not going to be on a two hour conference call."

She rolled her eyes. "If I show up, will it get you off my back?"

"Delilah, listen to me." He reached across the table and took her hand in his. "I invite a very select group of people to join this community. I invited you because you reminded me of myself, fifteen years ago. I was lonely, I was solitary, and it wasn't good for me. It isn't good for any of our kind. I'm not asking you to make an intimate connection with someone, but at least some kind of connection. We aren't made to be alone."

She took a shuddering breath. "I suppose you're right. I've just spent so long hiding who I am from people, keeping them at a distance whether I wanted to or not...I'm not used to letting people get closer than arm's length."

He squeezed her hand, then let go. "Look, I have to get going. Rafael over at the Birch Thorn is making some new creation for lunch. He wants me to put it on the menu. But I really want to see you at the mixer tonight. Promise me you'll at least drop in."

With a heavy sigh, she nodded. "Fine. Yes, I promise."

"I'll show myself out," Mitchell said with a wink. "Wouldn't want your cornflakes to get soggy."

She laughed and listened to his heavy tread across the floor, then the closing of the door. Somehow, a visit from Mitchell always managed to lighten her mood. That was a good reason to stay, that wasn't connected to Miguel and Darius.

I'm such an idiot. Miguel and Darius might be at that mixer. How awkward would that be? Her heart fluttered against her ribs. Maybe it wouldn't be awkward at all. Maybe they would want to come back to her place again and...

No way. Damnit, Delilah, you're smarter than this! How did she expect to overcome the tiny bit of feeling she had toward them if she was going to run straight back into their arms? Especially when their connection had only been physical. She could just imagine how dumb she'd act if she fucked them again.

She pushed her cereal around with her spoon. She suddenly wasn't hungry anymore. Probably because of those damned butterflies taking up all the room in her stomach.

\* \* \* \*

The Gwinn Close town hall was a sandstone building in the center of town, with a wide concrete walk and a fountain that was waiting for water after the winter. The back of the building housed the fire trucks, ambulance, and police cars, while the front of the building was used for community functions. The solar lights along the walkway gave a pale blue glow to guide the people heading to the doors. A banner strung above them read "Welcome Mixer!" and someone had pinned balloons to the corners.

"Very festive," Delilah said as she stopped beside Mitchell.

He turned and put his arm out for a one-armed hug. "I'm glad you showed up."

"I am, too. It's a beautiful night." A big, round moon hung low in the trees, and frogs chirping echoed around them.

"Yeah," Mitchell said with a smirk. "Wait until we get some mosquitoes."

"Please, you think anything you guys have to offer is going to be as bad as Atlanta?" They'd had this friendly argument before, comparing northern and southern bug plagues. "Many people inside?"

"Plenty. You should get in there before all the lemon bars are gone." He nodded toward the doors. "Go on ahead. I'm gonna stay out here to welcome stragglers."

So, that was it, then. He was going to throw her to the lion's den. Or tiger, as the case was. She smiled to herself over her own private joke. It was nice living around people who were just like her.

Inside, Mitchell's partner, Jason, stood near the punch bowl, chatting with a woman who held a toddler on her hip. The boy stared, the way all children under five seemed drawn to stare at Delilah, and she waggled her fingers in a wave. The boy blinked, and his blue eyes shifted to feline yellow.

Okay, so that was a lot different than standing behind a random baby at a grocery store. She'd never really thought much about the possibility of there being children out there who weren't paranoid about hiding their abilities. From the time her differences first started exhibiting themselves, her mother had trained her with loving guidance and a swat on the behind if she were ever to show the slightest inkling of being anything other than normal.

"Do you want them to find out what you are and take you away?" her mother had threatened over and over, filling Delilah's terrified head with thoughts of shadowy figures that would come and rip her away from her family and everything she'd ever known. That fear had faded over time, but Delilah wondered if her mother had realized the damage she'd done to her daughter.

"Cute kid."

The deep voice, so familiar in its intimacy that it was scorched onto her brain, startled her. "Jesus, sneak up on a person, why don't you?"

Darius gave her a smile that wasn't quite genuine. "So, you've been here for almost a month now, and you're just coming out to meet everybody?"

"It takes me a minute to get into the pool, you know. Gotta test it with my toes." Why did her voice sound so...try-hard?

"I have to be honest, I don't like these things. I'm more of a loner, myself, but Miguel..."

She followed Darius's gaze to the other side of the room, where Miguel told an animated story to a man who looked a lot like a lumberjack.

"He's a bear," Darius explained without her asking.

That seemed like a kind of personal thing to tell a body, but that was one term she'd heard from her gay acquaintances down south. "Yeah, I can see that."

"No." Darius gave an embarrassed laugh. "That's his animal. He shifts into a Kodiak grizzly."

"Well, I'll be sure to keep my trash cans in the garage." She cleared her throat, wondering why it was so difficult to talk to a man, but not so difficult to let him have sex with you, then have sex with his boyfriend while his boyfriend is having sex with you? A spark engaged in her brain, and she remembered something Miguel had said that morning. "You had to meet with a client today, huh?"

Darius nodded like he would have rather kept talking about bears, either kind. “Yes, I did.”

Pulling words from him was much how she imagined pulling teeth from him might be. “What do you do, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“No, I don’t mind,” he said automatically. “I’m a personal fitness trainer.”

She looked around the room, populated with more doughy bodies than she’d ever seen in one place before. “Really?”

At least that made him laugh. “I didn’t say business was booming. But I’m not that kind of personal fitness trainer. I own a gym and I pick up clients every once in a while.”

“You know, I used to run down in Atlanta—”

To her dismay, a man across the room waved at Darius, and he excused himself politely, leaving Delilah once again alone in a room full of people socializing. And he’d left her mid-sentence. Wasn’t that...awkward

“Hi there.” The woman with the toddler approached shyly. Her butter-blond hair fell in a chic, blunt line to her shoulders, and her clothes looked way too clean for someone with a kid.

“You’re new here, right?”

Delilah pasted on a friendly smile and hoped the woman wouldn’t ask her to hold that baby. “I moved in about a month ago, but I haven’t really been social.”

Emboldened by the friendly response, the woman stuck out her free hand. “Hi, I’m Pam. My husband and I own the lot over on Sand Piper court? The only one that’s filled on that street right now.”

Delilah nodded, though she wasn’t entirely sure she knew where Sand Piper court was. “I’m over on Sturgeon Chase. Delilah.”

“So, are you on your own out there?” Pam rocked slightly for the benefit of the boy on her hip, who now buried his face against his mother’s shoulder in shyness. “Oh, and this is Peter.”

“Hi there, Peter.” Delilah suddenly wished for a cup of punch, just so she would have something to do with her hands. “Yeah, I moved up here on my own. From Atlanta.”

“Ooh, that’s a long way. We’re from Detroit. Just outside, actually. Farmington Hills. My husband works for GM.” Pam made an uneasy face at the company name. “At least for now, right? He’s not here, he stays down there during the week and joins us up here on the weekends.”

“That’s nice.” I don’t remember when I asked you for your life story, lady. Delilah stopped her sarcasm in its tracks. The entire reason she was here was to meet the people who lived in Gwinn Close. The entire reason she’d moved to Gwinn Close was to be near other shifters. “It must be cool to get out and run together on the weekends, as a family.”

“Oh, we’re not shifters.” Pam sounded slightly embarrassed to have been mistaken for one. “I mean, Robert and I aren’t. But Rob’s father was. I guess it must skip a generation, because we got little Peter here.”

That set Delilah back a moment. “You moved all the way up here for your son?”

“Well, yeah.” Pam seemed taken aback at the suggestion that they would have done anything differently. “We didn’t want Peter growing up the way his grandfather did, feeling constantly isolated and hunted... We got in touch with Mitchell through a message board, and, it was like a sign from God. I mean, I’m not religious, but you know what I’m saying.”

“You want the best for your son.” The words came out mechanically, from some hollow spot in Delilah’s soul.

If Pam noticed, she didn’t let on. “We’re so happy up here, even though it’s been a huge change. Oh, gosh, speaking of change...”

Delilah took a step back as a whiff of what Pam was talking about reached her nose. “You go take care of that. I’ll talk to you later.”

The next hour passed in a blur of people introducing themselves, telling her where they lived in the community and what kind of animal they were. All without her ever asking. It was at once comforting and disturbing. They didn’t know her from Eve, what if she started showing up and robbing their places?

“Hey, there’s my chica!” Miguel looped an arm around Delilah’s shoulders as she stood at the punch bowl. The easy way he pressed against her side, like they were old friends, sent a flash of heat through her that had nothing to do with the unusually warm April night.

“Hey there.” She gave him a one armed hug before retreating back to her own personal space. What had happened at her place that morning had been a nice welcome to the neighborhood, but she wasn’t going to make a habit of it.

“So, you getting the lay of the land here?” He scooped up one of the clear, shallow plastic cups and dipped some punch into it.

“As much as I can absorb. Is everyone this friendly here?” She hated the way she’d phrased that, as though friendly were an insult. She had to be deeply flawed if she couldn’t even handle people being friendly.

Miguel grinned. “You’ll get used to it. It’s what comes from living in the best place on Earth. You just...overflow with happiness.”

“You should write those ‘Pure Michigan’ ads.” She rolled her eyes at him and laughed. “I’m actually heading out. But it was really cool meeting everyone.”

“Well, what are you doing later? You up for a run?” Miguel raised one dark eyebrow in what had to be the sexiest question mark ever.

And that, right there, was the problem. He was sexy. Beyond sexy. Everything about him seemed designed to be attractive to her, and he was taken. “No, I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Okay, well, I’ll check in later. Let me give you my number.” He reached into the breast pocket of his flannel shirt and pulled out a business card.

Delilah raised an eyebrow. “Plowman?”

“Lots of snow up here.” He winked. “Talk to you later.”

She left with a little swing to her step, and she didn’t like that, at all. You did not come up here to meet a man, let alone a taken man. You came up here to meet other shifters and learn about your kind. She crossed the parking lot with a more serious gait.

“Hey, wait up.” It was Darius, following with his head down and his hands in his pockets.

Guilt washed over her as she slowed her walk, allowing him to catch up. Here he was, being perfectly nice, and she’d just been thinking about how hot his boyfriend was. “Hey, yourself. Again.”

He didn’t smile this time. “Can I talk to you for a second?”

Her smile froze on her face. He knew. It was all over his body language. He was sizing her up, getting ready to intimidate the competition. “Yeah, sure.”

He motioned toward her car, and they stopped to stand by the trunk. “Look, I don’t know what Miguel is doing, but I want to give you some friendly advice.”

“Is this the ‘stay away from him, he’s mine’ portion of our program?” Why did she sound so defensive? Wasn’t she the one creeping on another man’s man?

Darius snorted a humorless laugh. “Yeah, all right. We can go with that. I just want you to know that Miguel is a guy who likes to have fun. But that’s it. At the end of the day, he comes home to me. I don’t want you going into this thinking it’s going to be anything more.”

She raised her chin a notch. “What makes you think I want something more?”

He looked away with a disbelieving smile. Like he’d heard it all before. Like she was the dumbest woman he’d ever met. Like they’d been in this situation before, with a lot of dumb women. “Okay. We’ll leave it at that, then.”

As he walked away, a familiar sinking feeling gripped her guts. Her hands shook as she slid the key into the ignition. Because as much as she’d wanted to deny it, she did hope to be more to Miguel than just a good time. And she’d had the same hope for Darius. What did that make her?



## *Chapter Four*

“Hey, where were you at the end, there? Jim Robinson was looking for you.”

Darius cleared his throat instinctively. Now, anything he said, Miguel would know to be a lie. It was why he couldn’t play poker, or go into politics. Too big of a tell.

“I walked that new girl out to her car.”

“New girl?” Miguel laughed. “Delilah? You can use her name, we’ve been naked with her.”

“Yeah, and maybe that was a mistake.” Damnit, why did he always have to be the bad guy? They’d done this before, time and again. But enough was enough. Darius wasn’t going to put himself through this, even one last time. Even for a funny, gorgeous woman that set his blood on fire. She’d looked so sweet tonight with her little cotton sun dress and pink sweater, the quintessential Southern peach with a golden glow to her dark skin and her braids pulled back to swing against her shoulders. And that orangey-pink lipstick, I guess they called it coral, that drove him crazy faster than a painted up red mouth, any day.

Misinterpreting his silence for a bad mood, Miguel groaned, “Here we go.”

No way in hell was he going to admit what he was thinking of. “Yeah, here we go. Here we go, since you decided we needed to have a three-way with the new girl.”

“Delilah. Her name is Delilah.”

“Delilah. Am I supposed to add her to the white board? Do we need to start a database so we don’t get confused and do this twice with one person?” God, why did he always sound exactly the way he was feeling? Miguel could always manage to sound cool and disaffected. It gave him the upper hand in their arguments, and usually got him what he wanted. Darius loved him, but sometimes it was a chore to like him.

“Look, you’re the one who’s making this into a big deal. I just gave her my number because she’s new. You want her to get into the same trouble she got into last night?” He paused and switched tactics. “I didn’t go out looking for her, okay? You’re the one that spotted her in the first place, remember?”

Darius remembered. He’d caught sight of her in the forest, knew that no actual deer would run so recklessly, like the only thing chasing her was her desire to be one with her truest nature. That’s what had drawn him to her. And when he’d seen her eyes...

“You know, lots of people in G.C. have a third,” Miguel said softly.

“I know.” It was something they had discussed before, when Laney had been in the picture. But it wasn’t worth the risk. “I won’t ask you to do that.”

Miguel shrugged. “You’re worried about what happened with Laney happening again. I get that. But Delilah is different.”

It was a lot different. When Darius had fallen for Laney, he hadn’t been honest. He’d snuck around. He’d hurt Miguel in a way he would never be able to repair, even though he’d forgiven him. “No. We said we weren’t going to do this again.”

“Okay.” Miguel lapsed into silence, but like most of his silences, it didn’t last very long. “I trust you, you know. I’m not looking at this woman like she’s going to be your next mistake.”

“Maybe you aren’t.” Darius kept his eyes on the road as he downshifted the truck. “But maybe I am.”

Miguel put his hand over Darius’s. “I love you. I don’t want you to beat yourself up over things that we resolved two years ago.”

Easier said than done, Darius thought, but he kept that to himself as they turned into the driveway.

While Darius went over his schedule for the week, Miguel stood in the kitchen and allowed himself a blissful, momentary space-out. He’d been with Darius for three years, and he’d known early on that his partner, no matter what his good intentions, would never be a one-man-man. Darius’s indiscretion with Laney had been a brutal shock, and though they’d tried to make things work, the polyamorous relationship had been doomed from the start by Darius’s dishonesty.

It hadn't been just that Darius had slept with Laney. Miguel had taken one look at her long, toned legs and her impressive implants—and they had been fun to play with, so what if they'd been fake—and he'd understood why Darius had done it. But what Miguel hadn't understood was why Darius hadn't come to him to begin with, to...not ask permission, because Miguel wasn't Darius's warden. Ask for his blessing? No, that hadn't been it either. Miguel had always thought that there were no secrets in a relationship, had thought that Darius was looking for the same kind of honesty. That's what had torn Miguel's heart out. Darius had hidden his affair with Laney, and he'd shared the secret of his infidelity with her and her alone. Miguel hadn't known until the fateful day that Darius had accidentally played one of her voicemail messages over speakerphone.

They'd moved on since then, and as much as Miguel hated to admit it and give Laney any credit, the situation had improved his bond with Darius. Their love was the most precious possession Miguel had, so he could certainly see why Darius wouldn't want to jeopardize it.

But she's nothing like Laney, he argued with himself. Laney was catty, jealous and delusional. Delilah is a good person. So what if he couldn't know for sure that she was a good person. He'd always believed that first impressions, gut instincts, were the way to go. He hadn't liked Laney when he'd first met her. He'd had to force himself to like her, and most of that had been a cover so he'd get a chance to play with her giant fake boobs some more. He liked Delilah, probably more than he should. He liked her in the way that made school children send each other notes asking them to check yes or no.

It wasn't like the idea of a poly-relationship was completely out of the question in Gwinn Close. He didn't know why, but it seemed like hardly anyone who moved in as a couple stayed that way for long. Same with singles who moved in. It might have been their shifter nature that encouraged them to branch beyond pairs and into packs. It might have been just that after living so long with the huge secret of their natures, they were willing to be totally open with anyone who would take on that level of intimacy. Either way, the society in Gwinn Close seemed to be functioning okay, so Miguel didn't bother to question it.

Still, his feelings toward Delilah had nothing to do with trying to maintain the status quo. Something about her had him operating on all cylinders. It almost felt like a betrayal, to feel that way toward her when he had Darius in his life.

"I can hear you thinking from in here," Darius called from his office, and Miguel sighed.

“You’re going to be mad at me, so I don’t even want to say anything,” he said, holding his hands up defensively as he stepped through the office doors. Darius’s office was connected to the living room via French doors that were almost never closed. Darius liked having an “open door policy” even though he no longer worked at a gym.

He looked up from his laptop. “You don’t know that I’m going to be mad at you. I’m actually in a pretty good mood.”

“You won’t be.” Miguel scratched the back of his head. He wasn’t an “ease into it” kind of guy. He was a straight shooter, always had been. He’d just say it, like ripping off a band-aid. Or the top of a can of worms. “I want to talk to you about Delilah.”

Darius leaned back in his desk chair. “You do?”

“I want to see her again.” He looked Darius in the eye. “I don’t want to ruin what we’ve got. But we agreed that we have to be honest with each other. And I don’t want to hurt you.”

“The only hitch in your plan is that we don’t know if she’s even into it.”

Miguel nodded. “Yup. And I don’t know if you’re into her. You’ve been trying so hard to act like you’re not interested. Maybe you’re really not interested.”

Darius sighed and dropped his head to his hands. His answer was muffled. “I’m interested.”

“Then maybe tomorrow morning you should go over there and apologize for giving her the cold shoulder.” The next part, he wasn’t entirely sure Darius would go for. “But you should go by yourself.”

Darius started to protest, and Miguel held up his hand. “No, seriously, man. I trust you. But you need to trust yourself.”

Miguel left the office and headed upstairs to their bedroom. Darius would probably be up all night, working and fretting. He needed his space to work it all out, and far be it from Miguel to crowd him. He’d do whatever it took to make sure Delilah came into their lives, and never left.

\* \* \* \*

Delilah had just come in from her morning run—the human, jogging kind—when the doorbell rang. “Damn, you’re not even gonna give a girl time for a shower?” she mumbled to herself as she dragged herself to the door.

The sight of Darius standing outside put the cherry on the shit sundae. He motioned to the door. “Can I come in?”

“Why, so you can warn me to stay away from your boyfriend? You can’t do that from the stoop?” But she dropped her arm from the doorframe and made a sweeping gesture to invite him inside.

“I wanted to apologize,” he said as he stepped over the threshold. “For what I said to you last night. I know you’re not out to steal Miguel from me or anything like that.”

“Well, what tipped you off? The fact that I specifically told you that I’m not after him?” She shrugged out of her windbreaker and tossed it over the back of the couch as she stepped down into the living room. “Look, I get it. He’s cheated on you before. It’s obvious. But that doesn’t have anything to do with me. I’m not the kind of woman who snatches up men.”

Darius followed her, closing the door quietly. “He didn’t cheat on me. I cheated on him.”

Well, that was a shock. She’d sensed there was something uneasy between the two of them, but she’d assumed that Miguel was the one with the wandering eye. He’d come on so strong, after all, and Darius had been so protective—

“Well, that’s perfect.” Delilah dropped onto the couch, all too aware of what she’d done with Darius just one cushion over. “You’re afraid he’s going to cheat on you to get back at you? Or are you just projecting your own dishonesty onto him?”

“That’s not—”

She didn’t let him finish. “I moved up here to get to know my kind. I want to do that without getting involved in a bunch of silly games. We’re all grown-ups, for god’s sake.”

“You’re right, you’re absolutely right. And we don’t want to play games.” Darius sat down in the easy chair. “Actually, I’m here because Miguel and I both...we like you, Delilah.”

“Well, that’s a relief.” To say that she’d been lonely, even with the entire community of Gwinn Close waiting to welcome her with open arms, would have been an understatement. “I can always use friends. It doesn’t even have to be with benefits.”

He smiled a little at her joke. “That’s not really what we had in mind.”

The urge to snap, “So what do you have in mind?” rose to her tongue, and she swallowed it back, letting her silence ask the question.

“I have to be honest here, I don’t quite know how to put this to an outsider.” He laughed, embarrassed.

Delilah was not as amused. "Is this Witness? Are you Amish?"

"No. I'm Methodist." He sat in the armchair and rubbed his hands on the knees of his jeans. "Things are different here. We tend to live in larger family groups. Packs, some people like to call them."

"Packs. Because we can all turn into animals." She snorted. "I have to tell you, I get embracing your animal side, but I was kind of hoping to hang onto my human side."

"That's not what I mean." He made a frustrated noise. "This was a bad idea. Miguel should have come instead."

"Look, I don't know what you think is going to happen when you tell me this incredibly difficult thing you want to tell me," she began, trying to remain as patient as possible. "But I'm a big girl. Maybe I can handle it."

"We want to date you." He spread his hands in a "that's it" gesture.

"We?" Not exactly what she'd been expecting to hear. "You mean like, both of you?"

He nodded. "Both of us."

She stood up and paced to the fireplace and back. There were all sorts of words that wanted to come out of her mouth, but they all came at once and bottlenecked, so nothing got out but a few disbelieving laughs. Finally, she found her voice. "Wait, what makes you think I want to have anything to do with you? You, Darius, I mean. Yeah, we had sex, but you did it almost grudgingly. Not the way to win a girl over. Then you accused me of being some kind of home-wrecking tramp out to steal your man. Not the best impression there, either."

"I know, and I'm sorry." He blew out a long breath. "I know I was rude. But I've messed up before, and I don't want to hurt Miguel again. I love him, and he deserves better than to have me running around on him, after what I put him through. I did try to push you away, because I didn't want to get close. I like you, Delilah. Ever since I saw you running in the forest, I liked you."

There wasn't much she could say to that, either, because her brain had completely shut off. "You like me?"

"I know, it sounds childish. But Miguel and I both think that you'd be a good fit for us." He shook his head. "I'm getting way out there. We're not asking you to marry us or anything like that. But come over, have dinner, see how things go. We've already had sex, so the awkward part is over."

“Oh, so you think that is the awkward part.” She laughed in disbelief. “Look, I’m going to have to sleep on this. Maybe hibernate on it.”

“You’re completely freaked out.” He hung his head. “I knew Miguel should have come instead. I’m not good at this kind of thing.”

“In fairness to you, it’s not like there’s a handbook.” She bit her thumbnail. Isn’t this exactly what she’d been thinking before? That she liked them, both of them? She hadn’t had a problem getting into bed—okay, couch—with them. Why would dating them be somehow worse?

Because it just was. Romantic relationships were between one man and one woman. Her mother had been quite clear on that point after she’d caught Delilah and a girlfriend practicing kissing in her room. She guessed her mother would like her daughter being caught up in a three-way dating situation just about as much as she would have liked Delilah bringing a girlfriend-girlfriend home from college. Not at all.

When are you going to stop living for what she wants, and start living for what you want? Delilah pushed that voice firmly out of her head. She didn’t need to rationalize away the fact that she knew it was wrong, so she could just go ahead and do whatever she felt like. That’s not the way she’d been raised.

And that’s the problem, her sullen inner monologue complained. She cleared her throat. “Just...give me a few days. I mean, I like Miguel. But I have to be honest, I’m not thrilled with you. I don’t want to be in some relationship where you’re moody and distant all the time and I’m always a bone of contention between you and your partner and your feelings for your partner.”

He shrugged. “It’s okay to say boyfriend, I know we’re not work colleagues.”

“Fine.” She shook her head. “I don’t want two boyfriends who can’t get along because of me. And I think it’s completely fair to ask for time to adjust to a completely new and bizarre normalcy before I jump into the dating pool again.”

“So, the thought of being with us is bizarre?” It looked like he might smile, but Delilah didn’t hold out hope.

“No. Everything about this place is bizarre.” She had to laugh at that, because if she didn’t laugh, she’d just cry. “I don’t even know if I’m staying here or not. Life was a lot less complicated back in Atlanta.”

“Less complicated,” he repeated slowly, “but less interesting, too, I bet.”

Less freedom. The thought of going back to Atlanta made her feel weirdly hollow inside. She'd gone for years hiding her true identity. Turning her back on her kind when they'd welcomed her into their sanctuary was unimaginable.

"Look, your choice isn't 'fuck these guys' or 'go back to Atlanta'." Darius stood, putting his hands into the pockets of his leather jacket. "If you decide it's a no go with us, we're not going to run you out of town. And we're not roping you into some weird alternative lifestyle right now. We're just asking for a chance. Think about it."

After he'd gone, she had nothing to do but think about it. What would a date with two guys be like? Would they both hold the door for her? Both try to pay the check? It would be too confusing. Better to nip this in the bud, before she sat through an unbearable night at the local watering hole, feeling like the third wheel or the bone two dogs were fighting over.

Well, a dog and a bat.

What she needed to do was take a run and clear her head, shake out the weird visions of awkward relationship milestones and thoughts of the fantastic sex she could be having.



## *Chapter Five*

It had rained overnight and the forest floor was still mushy under Delilah's hooves as she ran. Shimmering drops, undisturbed in the shelter of the forest, still clung to the mayapples and dotted her legs. She sniffed the wind, drinking in the scents the woods offered, and caught the sharp smells of freshly turned soil and the sweat of hard work. She followed the scent. Nothing like spying on the neighbors a little bit.

When she reached the edge of the forest, she saw Mitchell, his blond hair gleaming in the sun, the muscles in his shirtless back and arms bunching as he wielded the shovel. So, he played for the other team. Delilah figured there was no harm in looking.

He straightened and leaned on the shovel, scanning the tree-line before he lifted a hand in greeting. "Hi, Delilah."

She snorted a greeting, and he motioned to a simple wooden structure at the corner of the property. "Robes in the privy, unless you're just dropping by."

It seemed rude to run off without explanation, and it wasn't like she could explain in doe form. She stepped to the door of the outhouse and let her shape change, then opened the door and snagged one of the plush terrycloth robes from inside. "Why do y'all have an outhouse?" she asked as she joined him at the edge of the path of soil he'd turned up.

He wiped his face with a handkerchief pulled from his back pocket. "It was here when we bought the place. Gwinn Close started out as this plot, and I just sort of kept buying up land. When I first moved in, there was nothing but a campsite and a shitter here."

"I'm impressed," she said, holding back her giggle at his raw description. The place was far more than a campsite now, with a great big house and a manicured lawn for Mitchell to destroy with his shovel. "What's with the digging?"

“Oh, this.” He smiled sheepishly. “It’s kind of a present for Jason. Ornamental koi pond. I’ve got a backhoe rented, but it’s not available until tomorrow, and I wanted to finish it up before he gets back from New York. I started as soon as I got back from dropping him at the airfield over in Munising..”

“Good luck.” Ornamental koi pond. That was something she wouldn’t have bet on seeing up here. Back home, definitely. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure. If you don’t mind me working while you ask?” He picked up the shovel and dug it into the earth.

“I was talking to Darius...oh my god. I don’t even know his last name.” Her face burned, and she was glad Mitchell was distracted so he didn’t see her so flustered. “So many names to remember, you know?”

“Uh-huh,” he answered, non-committal.

She went on. “So, I was talking to him, and he said that people in Gwinn Close are a little different when it comes to families. I haven’t noticed, I mean, I haven’t gotten out much. But he said that people are forming packs?”

He stopped shoveling again. “I don’t know if I would call them packs. More like poly-relationships. I assume that’s what you’re asking about?”

She felt about as transparent as she had whenever she’d tried to bring up some new toy or after school activity to her mother in the hopes she’d get what she wanted without asking. “Yeah, that’s pretty much what I was asking about.”

“It’s not for everyone, I’ll tell you that for free.” Mitchell squinted at the tree line, not meeting her eyes. “It’s a lot of work, a lot of communication. And everyone involved has to be completely honest with themselves. It doesn’t work any other way.”

Completely honest. When had she ever been completely honest with herself?

“But, from what I’ve seen, it’s worth it. We’ve got at least three families here who are three or more, and they’re happy. I don’t know why it’s so much more accepted in Gwinn Close. Probably because people feel like they can be themselves here.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever been myself.” The fact that she’d said it out loud, to a casual acquaintance, shocked her, and she hurried to correct herself. “I mean—”

“No, don’t be embarrassed. Believe me, that’s something we all struggled with in our pasts.” He paused. “So, Darius was telling you this?”

“Yeah. He and Miguel were...I guess they were asking me out.” She thought about crawling into the hole Mitchell had already dug and dying.

But Mitchell didn’t appear to find the request unusual. “Are you interested? If you don’t mind my asking.”

She was interested, but she wasn’t about to admit that her primary motivation was somewhere below the belt of that robe. “I might be. I haven’t decided.”

To her surprised, Mitchell sighed. Like he was disappointed. “Well, if it helps your decision at all, they’re good guys. And they must think you’re pretty amazing, if they’re considering altering what they’ve got. They’re one of the tightest couples I know.”

That’s what she was worried about. How would she fit in to what already seemed like a pretty good thing? “Well, I’ll keep thinking about it. Thanks for the advice. I’d offer to help with the hole, but I don’t do yard work.”

“Aren’t we a princess?” Mitchell quipped, laughing as he started to dig once more. “Drop in any time. I like to keep an open dialogue around here. The community doesn’t work any other way.”

On her trip home, Delilah thought about what Mitchell said. How he got so wise, she had no clue. He was roughly her age, but he seemed light years ahead of her in the “having shit figured out” department.

Maybe because he’s not afraid to be himself, that pesky inner monologue suggested. And for once, she decided not to silence it.

\* \* \* \*

Miguel put his glass on the island and reached for the phone, catching it on the second ring. “Miguel.”

There was a brief silence on the other end. “Hi. Wow, it barely rang on this end.”

Delilah. Just the sound of her voice was enough to drive him wild. “Well, you know, I’ve been waiting around the phone, hoping you’d call.” When she didn’t immediately respond, he said, “That’s a joke.”

“I-I know.” Her defensive stutter told him everything he needed to know about how she felt about them and their proposal. But he still needed to hear it, so he waited for her to continue. She took an audible breath and said, “So, I was thinking about it, and...yeah, I think maybe I would like to see you guys again. Not just for...you know.”

“Huh, I was kind of hoping that there would be some ‘you know’ eventually.” He couldn’t help the smile that crept into his voice. “I’m glad you want to see us. How about you come over here? I’ll cook.”

She laughed. “Are you any good at cooking?”

“I’m the best, baby.” He went to the freezer and pulled out three venison steaks to thaw, then thought better of it. Delilah would probably not want to eat deer. “You like spaghetti?”

“I like food I don’t have to cook myself. Seven o’clock okay?”

“Seven is perfect.” They said their goodbyes and he hung up the phone with a smile still on his face.

Then, the reality set in. She was actually coming over here, tonight. If it was going to work out, this was their chance. No pressure or anything, he chided himself. But it was serious. He couldn’t explain why he was so drawn to her, and so quickly, but the why didn’t matter. He needed this to work out. Darius needed it, too, even though it seemed like he didn’t know it yet.

It wasn’t that they weren’t good on their own. They were, and if things didn’t work out with Delilah, they’d still be as strong as they ever were. But they would always feel like something was missing. He was as sure of that as he was sure of where the good fishing spots were on Grimes.

Tonight would either be the first night of the rest of their lives, or the night they let Delilah get away. He couldn’t let that happen.

Delilah smoothed the skirt of her sundress for the hundredth time as she stood beside the car, and pulled her cardigan tighter around her shoulders. The house she’d driven up to was nothing like she’d expected. She’d imagined Miguel and Darius living in a log cabin, but more rustic than hers. Probably because they were both so...guy. It was difficult to imagine Darius living in a sandstone brick palace, skulking around living in fear of breaking something. It was even harder to imagine Miguel living here, when he was the most Yooper Yooper she’d met so far.

Taking a deep breath, she started for the door, only to have it open before she got there. Darius stood inside, looking absolutely like the most delicious strawberry sundae in a deep red, button down shirt.

“You didn’t have to get all dressed up on account of me,” she said as she made her way up the textured concrete walk.

“Neither did you, but I’m glad you did.” He gave a low whistle. “Damn girl, you have some legs on you.”

“You didn’t notice on our first date?” she laughed, and it felt fucking great to not give into her programming and become embarrassed by his compliment or ashamed that they’d had sex. “Oh my god, I can smell that spaghetti sauce out here.”

“Miguel is the most amazing cook. I think I gained ten pounds the first year we were together.” He held the door open for her and closed it behind them. “Come on, kitchen’s this way.”

The house was as nice as any in Ansley Park, what her mother would have called “grand”. Either Miguel or Darius must have been an interior decorator in a past life, because the paint colors, flooring, and woodwork all looked straight out of a Better Homes and Gardens feature. It still felt homey, though, definitely more homey than the house she’d grown up in, that had always been “company ready” and devoid of any trace of human occupation. In fact, the house she lived in now was that way. She would never think to leave a book open over the arm of a chair. Years of programming condemned that kind of innocent action as slovenly.

“Hey, she’s here!” Miguel stood at the huge commercial stove, sautéing something heavenly in a small pan. He gave the contents a shake and pushed it to the rear of the range before wiping his hands and coming to greet her. Even he had spruced up, in a black henley that hugged his lean body instead of the bulky plaid uniform of Alger county. He opened his arms and she stepped into them, awkward at first, then returning his hug in earnest.

“You feel good here,” he whispered against her ear, giving her a quick peck on the cheek before going back to the stove. “You’re going to love this. I put buttery morels on top that melt in your mouth.”

“On top? You don’t put them in the sauce?” She went to the stove and peered over his shoulder at the pan.

“Sacrilege!” He motioned with his head to Darius. “Tell her. No, wait. Go get a bottle of wine then tell her.”

“I’ll do you one better and take her with me.” Darius came over and put his arm around her shoulders. “Want to see the wine cellar?”

“Wine cellar?” she walked with him down the hallway, to a door he opened with a flourish that made her giggle.

“Have to have a wine cellar. Watch your step.” He offered his hand as she followed him down the stairs.

“I had a completely different picture in my mind of what two guys’ house would look like,” she admitted sheepishly. “I thought less wine cellar, more beer cellar.”

“Well...” At the bottom of the stairs, a few racks of wine were lined up in neat rows beside a huge neon Budweiser sign and an ancient, rusty refrigerator. “The beer is in there.”

She had to laugh at that. “Okay, you got me.”

“Grab one for Miguel, would you? I’ll get us a good vintage.”

“So, tell me about the mushrooms,” she prompted as she opened the fridge.

Darius’s voice came from behind one of the racks. “Oh, he has this thing. Up here, they don’t buy their morels in the store. They go out looking for them and they would never think to dice them up in a sauce. You have to ‘enjoy those motherfuckers one at a time’, as Miguel would say.”

“Well, far be it from me to tell him how to cook a motherfuckin’ mushroom.” She pulled a beer from the fridge and went to find Darius. “You have a thing for wine, huh?”

“Not a ‘thing’. An appreciation. And all my little appreciations help overcome Miguel’s tackiness. I think he likes being a native Yooper a little too much sometimes.” Darius laughed with her and wrapped one arm around her waist. “Come here.”

She stiffened up a little as he dipped his head toward hers. What had Mitchell said about being honest with herself? Just being herself? She’d lived her entire life according to the rules other people had made for her. She’d let everyone else define her. Maybe it was time to try being true to what she wanted.

She wanted to kiss him back. Their lips met, and her stomach dissolved into butterflies. She didn’t mind that he wrapped his arms tighter around her, or that he was probably smudging her lip gloss. She cared that this gorgeous man wanted her. She opened her mouth under his and let him stroke his tongue along hers, let him grab her butt and pull her flush against him. She groaned and ground her hips tighter against him, breathing heavy when their mouths parted.

“So, let’s find that wine we came down here for,” he said, clearing his throat as he released her.

When they'd found the perfect red to go with dinner and returned to the kitchen, Miguel had already plated their meals and set them on the table. "I thought we'd eat in the kitchen instead of the dining room," he explained. "You know, more casual."

Except for the part where the simple wooden table had been set like something out Martha Stewart living. The gleaming white plates sat on ruby red, square chargers that matched the chunky candle holders in the center of the table. Delilah felt like the worst hostess ever. She hadn't even offered them a glass of water when they were at her house. "You do all this?"

"Miguel is a caterer," Darius explained as he pulled out a chair for Delilah.

"It's all about the presentation," Miguel admitted sheepishly.

"No shit?" She shook her head. "I would have thought lumberjack or ice road trucker. Deadliest fisherman. Not caterer."

The dinner was delicious, with two simple courses, the piles of fluffy spaghetti with heavenly, "completely non-venison" sauce with buttery morels nestled in whorls of the pasta, and a salad that made Delilah think that maybe she could have stuck with the vegan thing back in college if someone had given it to her then. She asked Miguel and Darius lots of questions, like where they were from and how they met.

"I lost money on him in a fight," Miguel said, grinning broadly.

"Well, that's one I haven't heard before." She didn't ask a follow up question, preferring to chew thoughtfully and wait for them to volunteer.

Darius looked embarrassed. "I used to be a fighter. Low level pro, nobody you ever would have heard of, obviously. I was fighting at a gym in Detroit, and a little money exchanged hands."

"Four thousand dollars," Miguel corrected. "Not a little money."

Delilah covered her mouth with her napkin and swallowed quickly. "You lost four thousand dollars on a boxing match?"

"Not boxing," Darius corrected. "Mixed Marital Arts."

"He lost the fight by forfeit. I was pissed!" Miguel laughed and reached over as if to ruffle Darius's hair, but since Darius had no hair it turned into a bare knuckle noogie. "I waited for him out back to kick his ass."

Delilah raised an eyebrow and glanced between the two of them. "Is this what guys do for fun?"

Miguel shrugged. "Once I was face to face with him, though..."

"He became a lover, not a fighter," Darius finished.

"So, you were a fighter, and you're a caterer. If you don't mind my asking..." She held up her hands, wrist bent back loosely as she looked around the huge kitchen with its professional appliances. "Wine cellar?"

"Right." Darius rubbed a hand over his head. "This is kind of embarrassing—"

"Darius is a millionaire." Miguel spun his fork in the pasta on his plate.

"At the very small end of the scale, yes. I'm not the Monopoly guy." Darius smiled an apologetic smile. "Shortly before I met Miguel, I'd invested some of my fighting money in a gym. I got some of the other MMA guys I knew to invest, either their time or their money or their expertise. It started out as a shitty little storefront, but since MMA was so hot, we were in demand. Then a major fitness chain noticed and bought us out."

"He's still involved with running the MMA training program nationwide, though," Darius interjected. "And he trains fighters and boxers privately."

"I'm impressed." She raised her wine glass before taking another sip. "What about you, Miguel? How'd you get into catering?"

"I honestly have no idea. I'm kind of a jack of all trades. I started out in my dad's snowplowing business, and when he died, I took it over."

"He was seventeen, that's the part he always leaves out. He took over the family business and ran it successfully at seventeen." There was a glow of pride in Darius's eyes that made Delilah ache. No one had ever been proud of her, that was for sure. If she'd ever done anything worth being proud of.

"He likes to brag on me," Miguel said, capturing Darius's hand and pressing it to his lips for a quick kiss. "But really, running a plow service isn't that big a deal, especially when there are guys who have been doing it for twenty years who can show you the ropes. I started going to vocational school for automotive, figured that would be handy when trucks broke down. One day they had a career fair, and there was this totally hot redhead running the Food Service/Hospitality booth. We started talking and I started eating the free samples, and then I figured, hell, if I was gonna be covered in grease, I'd rather it be from mutton."

"What about you?" Darius asked. "We're telling you our life stories—"

"By request!" she reminded them with a laugh.



“But still,” Darius pressed. “What’s up with you?”

She sighed. “All right, all right. But it’s not exciting.” Where should she jump in? Telling them that she’d grown up privileged, that her mother had encouraged her, the only black kid at her private Christian high school, to not make friends “outside the neighborhood”? That she’d always felt like an outsider, no matter where she’d gone? She looked guilty at Darius then dropped her gaze. That would have been a great thing to say: “If I brought either of you home, my mother would have made you go out the back door to hide you from the neighbors.”

“Well, I already told you I’m from Atlanta,” she began cautiously. “I went to a private school and then I went to Beulah Heights for my MBA which absolutely thrilled my mother, and now I do freelance work writing grants for independent medical research labs.”

“That sounds incredibly boring,” Miguel said.

Darius rolled his eyes at him then looked back to Delilah. “Why didn’t your mother approve of your MBA?”

“I think she was hoping I would do something a little more...spectacular? A family down the street from us had a son who got into Princeton. I think she wanted me to be a doctor or a lawyer or something she could easily identify as a money-maker to her friends.” The bitterness in her own words seriously turned her off, so she cleared her throat. “Anyway, I’m glad I have the job I do. I have a lot of freedom, and that freedom allowed me to move up here.”

“And if you hadn’t moved up here, you never would have met us,” Miguel pointed out.

“And I never would have gotten shot at either,” she said, following it up with an exaggerated, “ha ha.”

“I’m a bad guy. I didn’t make dessert,” Miguel said with a nod to her empty plate. “You want more?”

“No, I’m fine.” She pulled her napkin from her lap and dropped it onto the plate. “It was delicious, thank you.”

“Morels, right?” Miguel didn’t wait for her to agree. “I told you.”

Darius stood and helped Miguel clear the table. “I was thinking we might take a ride out on the lake, see who’s mingling out there tonight. Do you like boats?”

“I guess. I’ve only been in one once or twice. Are you a good driver?” Maybe if she shifted into a fish or a bird or something, she’d feel better about being stranded on the water, but deer—and Delilah—did not swim well.

“He’s an excellent driver,” Miguel called from behind the refrigerator door. “Or captain, if you will.”

“I think I’d rather be a skipper,” Darius mused aloud. “You know, because then I’d get stranded with Ginger, Mary-Anne and the Professor.”

“Oh my god, was that a joke?” Delilah drained her glass of wine and set it back on the table. “I can’t believe it. He made a joke.”

“And it only takes a bottle of wine to loosen him up that much,” Miguel quipped.

“Ha ha, tease the skipper and he’ll strand your ass out on a sand bar.” Darius wadded up a cloth napkin and threw it at Miguel. “Everyone’s got their boats in already. The second the ice broke. We’ve been dying for an easy winter.”

After Miguel put away the leftovers and Delilah helped Darius load the dishwasher—despite his protestations—they went out into the cooling night air. Miguel dropped a comfy quilted flannel jacket over her shoulders and slipped an arm around her waist to steer her away from the cars. “We’re taking the boat.”

Delilah paused, confused. She’d thought they’d need to at least drive to the marina. Instead, they followed a concrete path around the house and into the woods. After about fifty yards, the foliage cleared, and they stepped onto a huge deck built into the side of a sudden, steep hill. Stairs descended toward the inky blackness of water, and at the bottom a pristine white dock gleamed in the dusk.

“Oh, so this is the lake that was all bought up when I got here.” She’d heard there was a public access for all Gwinn Close residents, but she hadn’t bothered to look for it. It definitely hadn’t been warm enough for swimming, and she’d never been a big fan of getting into the water with fish she couldn’t see that might want to taste her toes. She was strictly a pool girl.

“You haven’t been out to the lake yet?” Miguel said in disbelief. “Are you kidding?”

Darius agreed. “The lake is a huge part of Gwinn Close social life. I can’t believe Mitchell didn’t force you to come out here.”

Social life? What the hell would she do with one of those? It was strange enough that she was on a date.

They climbed aboard the pontoon, Darius seating himself at the steering column to bring the engine to life while Miguel pulled the ropes, then went to the back bench to sit beside Delilah. He pulled her close to snuggle at his side while they put out to water.

At first, while her eyes adjusted to the fading light, she couldn't see any evidence of a social scene at all. Then she began to notice the darker shapes against the reflective blackness of the water, signaling their presence with small green and red lights. "Other boats?"

"Other shifter families, out for an evening cruise," Darius answered.

"Take her over by the island," Miguel prompted, gesturing at a far off shape, and Darius spun the wheel.

Delilah relaxed a little against Miguel's side. "Wow, so everyone is into fishing up here, then? It's not just a stereotype?"

"No, no fishing allowed on Tiger Lake." Miguel tightened the arm that looped around her waist. "We have fish shifters, I think Gil Jacobs is a hermit crab..."

"Plus, this is kind of a holy place. Not to sound too corny," Darius explained.

That did sound corny. It also sounded welcoming and loving.

As they neared the island ahead, they passed close enough to another boat that they could trade hellos with the family on board. The two human parents, Delilah remembered from the social. The two human parents and their little boy, now running happily in the form of a wildcat around their pontoon. The child looked so normal, so natural in his shifted state. She wanted to feel that comfort, to know the difference between what she held true and what was another person's truth imposed on her.

"You look sad," Miguel said softly, stroking her cheek with his knuckles.

"I was just thinking." She took a breath and hated the familiar sting of tears she'd have to hold back. "About growing up. How confusing it was."

"You think you had it confusing?" Darius asked over his shoulder, with a wink to Miguel.

She knew he was trying to make her smile, but if he'd known what she was feeling, he'd have known it was a paltry effort. "I mean, because of the shifting. My mother wanted me to be so normal, so...what everyone else had. I spent my entire childhood being told that I needed to hide, that my differentness wasn't something to be proud of. And that was on top of the message I was already getting that something was wrong with me. I mean, damn, I'd dress up like Cinderella for Halloween, like all the other girls in the neighborhood did, and I knew I didn't look like Cinderella the way they looked like Cinderella. And they sure as hell didn't turn into an animal and run around the backyard, so I must have been a double freak."

“You’re not a freak.” Darius reached back and squeezed her knee, and the touch was oddly comforting. As he guided the boat closer to the island, he continued, “It sounds like you were raised up a lot differently than I was. Because I never thought I was a freak for not being like the people on TV. My mom always had the attitude that the people on TV were freaks for not being like us. But I feel you on the shifting. My parents thought it was some kind of health problem. That’s probably why they got me into so many different sports. I guess they thought they could tire it out of me.”

“My dad was so worried that someone would see me in their yard and shoot me,” Miguel added. “Like it was worth avoiding the risk by suppressing who I was. I don’t think anyone who isn’t a shifter can know what it’s like. So you really don’t need to listen to anyone’s advice but your own.”

“And ours, of course,” Darius laughed.

“Well, that’s a given, because we’re so wise,” Miguel agreed.

They glided along, just beyond the buoys that warned boaters of the shallows near the island. On the sandy shore, a huge tiger lay blinking slowly as he watched them pass. In the trees, a family of squirrels chased with a family of monkeys. A lizard-like creature with an elongated skull stood on its hind legs and chewed on a tree branch.

“Is that a dinosaur?” Delilah sat forward, unable to believe her eyes. “Does someone here shift into a dinosaur?”

Miguel shrugged. “Yeah, Don Arlen. He’s a huge hit at Halloween parties.”

“Everyone gets along,” Darius said, nodding to the tiger, who had turned his attention to a chicken wandering nearby. “Everyone here is in the same boat, more or less.”

Her heart ached in her chest at the thought that this acceptance could be hers, too, if she were only able to accept herself. She swiped at the tears that spilled over her cheeks and hoped the darkness would disguise her crying.

No such luck. Miguel leaned over and kissed one tear, then another, away from her skin. “You’re one of us, Delilah. We’re all in this.”

They circled the little island, waving to the shifters who played close to the water. Delilah leaned against Miguel, letting his warmth and comfort wash over her, until the rocking of the waves and the gentle presence of the two men protecting her, treasuring her, made her eyelids

and body heavy. She didn't know how long she'd been asleep by the time they reached the dock once more.

"Wake up, sleeping beauty," Darius whispered as he scooped her up in his arms.

"I can walk," she mumbled against his neck, but she didn't do anything to facilitate the walking.

"You can ride," Miguel said behind them. "How come you don't carry me around like that, D?"

They entered the house through a back door. Darius set her on her feet, and she rubbed her eyes. "What time is it?"

Miguel checked his watch. "Ten. You look beat. Want us to drive you home?"

She took a breath. Did she want them to take her home? She thought about her house, cold and sterile despite her attempts to the contrary. She thought about getting into her bed all alone. Then she thought about the safety she felt when she was with them, the inviting way they coaxed her into being the person she truly was, no matter how abnormal she might seem to others. She thought about the love she felt between the two of them, and the love she already felt for both of them. That's crazy. You've never been in love. You're probably not capable of it and definitely not with two guys at the same time, days after you met them.

Silencing that voice, locking it in a mental closet, hopefully forever, she squared her shoulders and said, "No. I don't want you to drive me home."

Darius caught her up in his arms again and crushed his mouth over hers as he walked her through the living room and up the stairs. Miguel followed behind, pulling his shirt off as fast as he could unbutton it.

The master bedroom was as amazing as the rest of the house. Darius sat her on the edge of the huge bed, and Miguel flipped the switch to the gas fireplace as he came to join them. He sat beside her and gently pushed his hand into her braids, pushing them back from her face. He kissed her tenderly, his soft lips parting hers to reacquaint himself with her mouth. Sparks shot through her body, pleasant bubbles of desire that prickled her skin all over with goosebumps. Darius sat to her left and pushed the jacket off her shoulders to nibble and lick a path up her arm, to her neck and over the hollow behind her ear. She shrugged off the jacket, needing more skin, more contact.

It was as though she'd been starved for them, and their first encounter had just whetted her appetite more. She turned her face to Darius's, let him kiss her with as much fervor as she felt while she gripped his shirt and pulled him closer. Desperately closer, like she could consume him, or be consumed by him.

Miguel unzipped the back of her dress, dropping kisses along her spine as he eased the straps down her arms. She pushed Darius back and stood up, holding her dress over her chest and facing them.

The alarm on their faces was enough to bring a laugh bubbling up behind her lips, but she suppressed it. "Don't worry, I'm not changing my mind." She pushed the fabric down her hips, standing before them, completely bare.

"No panties?" Miguel laughed softly. "Had your mind made up when you got here, huh?"

Her hands drifted down her body, over her stomach and across her hips. "Leaving my options open."

"Open is good." Miguel got to his feet and stepped closer to her, close enough that her nipples brushed the smooth plane of his chest.

"But I want you guys to know something, first," she said, pressing her hand to Miguel's skin and taking a step back. "We don't know each other real well—"

"I think that could be debated at this point," Darius interrupted.

"You know what I mean. I met you just a few days ago. But I feel safer with you than with people I've known my whole life. I feel like I can be myself with the two of you, and you like me, not in spite of the fact I'm a shifter. You seem to just like me."

"More than like you," Miguel said quietly. "Delilah, I've been in love with you since we met out in the woods."

"Ever since I first saw you running." Darius stood, as well. "We were sold on you when I came to your house this morning. We wouldn't have started this if we weren't serious."

Tears came to her eyes again. "How did you know I was worth being serious over? Or that I would go for it?"

"We knew you'd come around." Miguel spoke with absolute certainty. "At least, I did."

"And I'm glad you did." Darius put his hands on her hips, pulled her bare body against his jeans. "Not just for this, but it's a big plus."

Their mouths met in a greedy tangle. She swayed on her feet like she was drunk, like she was weightless, and he supported her with an arm around her back.

Miguel leaned back on the bed and kicked off his shoes, his unzipped jeans providing a teasing view of the hard curve of muscle above his hip. Delilah stepped away from Darius and slid onto the bed, straddling Miguel and leaning down to lick a path up his chest.

“Hey, I thought he was supposed to do the pouncing,” Darius joked, lying down beside them.

Miguel’s breath hitched as Delilah’s tongue circled his nipple. She left sucking kisses on his throat, his late-in-the-day stubble pricking her lips. Darius’s hand slid between them, bumping her mound as he skimmed lower to dip into the waist of Miguel’s jeans. Miguel groaned under Delilah’s mouth. He filled his hands with her breasts, lifted his head from the bed to chase her mouth when she pulled away. Her hot, naked cunt slicked over the bare skin of his stomach, and she rocked her hips, grinding against him.

“Oh fuck,” he groaned. “Darius, you’re gonna make me come.”

“Well, I wouldn’t want to do that,” Darius whispered. “Not yet.”

Turning his attention from Miguel to Delilah, Darius slipped one finger into her cleft, dipping into her core to rub her wetness over her clit. She dropped her head back as he pinched her nub between two fingers and rolled it gently.

“You know what, baby?” Miguel whispered, his hands joining Darius’s. “I’ve never gotten to taste you.”

He gave her ass a smack and wriggled out from under her. Darius sat on the bed beside her and patted his thighs. “Come over here.”

She moved to straddle him, and he turned her gently with his hands on her hips. On her knees on the edge of the bed, she was poised above his cock, her ass brushing against Darius’s hard chest. He unrolled a condom over his shaft and rubbed the tip against her. Suddenly, he grasped her wrists, holding her in place.

Turning her head to nip at his mouth, she laughed. “Kinky.”

Miguel knelt on the floor, between Darius’s legs. He bracketed his hands on either side of her mound and slowly lowered his head. She held her breath, waiting, waiting, and finally his lips touched her, his tongue parted her.

At the same time, Darius pulled her arms down, her body following and pushing onto his cock. They gasped in unison when Miguel's tongue flicked around Darius's cock where it slid into her body. Slowly, he pushed deeper, letting her feel every inch, until she took him all the way. She rocked against Miguel's tongue, her head thrown back, every muscle tight as she held her pose. The need to balance and the need to stay impaled on Darius's cock, kept her helplessly motionless while he slowly pumped into her. Miguel found her clit and sucked it into his mouth, tapping and stroking with his tongue. She wanted to thrust her hips against his face: the fact that she couldn't drove her wild. The tireless swirl of his tongue pushed her higher and higher, the thrust of Darius's big cock against her g-spot sent her over. Her legs shook and a low wail wrenched from her lungs as she came.

Miguel sat back and reached for a condom, sheathing himself quickly. He lay on his back on the bed and reached for her. Darius's hands closed over Delilah's hips again, lifting her off his lap, helping her straddle Miguel's waist with her boneless legs. Miguel's cock brushed her wet folds, and her breath escaped in a desperate hiccup. When the tip of him pushed in with one quick, uncontrolled thrust, she shuddered and whimpered, unable to control her body under the brutal relief of being filled once more. He jerked beneath her, driving further inside, and she straightened her back, trembling, as she rose up and then sank back over him.

"That's it, baby," Darius murmured behind her. He straddled Miguel's legs, mimicking Delilah's pose and bracketing her thighs with his as she rode their lover. The tips of Darius's fingers skimmed over her breasts, down her stomach, delved between her thighs. He worked her slippery flesh in lazy circles with one hand while he kneaded her breast with the other. She leaned against him for support, Miguel's cock still rocking up and down within her, the tilt of her body as she held onto Darius bringing Miguel into sharp contact with the soft, sensitive spot inside of her. The pressure in her cunt and the pleasure from Darius's determined stroking brought her higher and higher, left her dangling at the very peak of her desire for a heart stopping moment, then crashed her down, hard, the full force of her orgasm shaking her limbs and pulling a howl from her throat.

"You stole my line again," Miguel said with a tight laugh. "Turn around, baby."

Lost in the bliss of her fading release, she didn't quite understand what he was asking, until he withdrew from her and Darius helped her turn, positioning her so that the head of Miguel's still erect cock brushed against her ass.



“Oh, I don’t know about this,” she managed in a hoarse voice. “I’ve never—”

“Do you want to try?” Darius asked, rolling his thumb over her clit.

Her mouth went dry at the thought of both of them filling her at the same time, being trapped between their hard bodies as they brought her over the edge again and again. But she could only nod, not brave enough to trust her voice.

“We can make it good for you,” Miguel assured her. “But we don’t have to do it, if you’re uncomfortable.”

She shook her head and squared her shoulders. “I want you both to take me.”

Darius reached into the bedside drawer and pulled out a bottle of lube. He pumped some into her hands and into his, then reached down and slathered Miguel’s cock with the cool lotion. Delilah followed suit, smoothing her slippery hands up and down his shaft as he bucked beneath her. Darius’s hands slipped over and beneath hers, the two of them working Miguel into a frenzy of wordless gasps.

Her empty cunt ached for him, and she rose to her knees, wanting to call the whole thing off and climb on his shaft again. Then she felt Miguel’s fingers on her, parting her labia and dipping into her cream. He pumped two fingers into her in a beckoning motion, coating them with her juices and pulling back to circle her tight opening. She stiffened unconsciously, her hands freezing where they gripped his cock, too concerned with what he intended to do with those fingers to remember to breathe or do anything else.

“Relax,” Darius soothed her. “Nothing’s going to happen here that you don’t want to happen.”

She wasn’t so sure. She’d had a boyfriend who’d wanted to “experiment” before, and his attempts to make her enjoy sex that way hadn’t been very successful. But then again, she hadn’t been that into him in the first place, and Miguel and Darius seemed to know what would turn her on without having to ask. The pressure of his fingers against her hole felt nothing like her previous experience, which had been clumsy and uncertain. He didn’t let up, pushing firmly against the resistance of her body until the ring of tight muscle relaxed and he slipped in to the second knuckle.

An “oh!” of surprise escaped her, and incredibly, she found herself pushing back, wanting to take in more. It was unlike anything she’d felt before, the brush of his finger against supersensitive nerves setting up a hot flutter in her stomach. She closed her eyes as he sawed his

finger in and out, opened them again when the cold shock of lubricant hit her and he pushed another finger inside, stretching her open.

“Is that okay?” Miguel asked, still slowly moving his hand. “You let me know if you want to stop.”

She nodded, almost annoyed at the intrusion of his voice. One of Darius’s hands found her clit, and he teased it while still stroking Miguel’s cock. She rolled her hips, trying to capture more of Miguel’s fingers, more stimulation from Darius. What was it about them that they could make her come over and over but never satiate her, not until they had all gotten off? Her mind raced with hundreds of things she wanted to do to them, all the positions and acts they could enjoy together, and she wanted it all, and right away.

She spread her thighs a little wider, bucking her hips to rub her clit against the steel column of Miguel’s erection. The silky lube made them both almost too slick, or at least Delilah thought so just before Darius helped her lay back on Miguel. Miguel pulled his fingers from her body and whispered, “Are you ready, baby?” against her ear.

Was she ready to have both of them deep inside of her, claiming her with every powerful stroke until she screamed their names as she climaxed? “Fuck, yes.”

Darius guided the head of Miguel’s cock into the cleft of her ass, sliding along her flesh until he found the place where resistance gave way. He pumped Miguel in his fist once, twice, then pushed the head in.

Delilah’s breath caught in her chest as her body convulsed under the onslaught of the most intense pain-tinged pleasure she’d ever felt. Darius whispered a reverent, “Oh my God,” from where he knelt between their legs, then he covered her body with his and kissed her, swallowing up her moans like they were candy.

Miguel moved in her slowly, pumping into her inch by inch until he couldn’t go any further and she lay, arched and gasping atop him. Darius’s huge cock prodded her, and she whimpered a plea comprised mostly of “now” and “yes” repeated over and over. Her skin burned everywhere they touched her, she breathed like she was running a marathon. Darius hesitated, poised at the entrance of her cunt, and said, “Open your eyes.”

She obeyed, willing to do anything to feel the pleasure she knew they could both give her. Darius held her gaze with his deep brown eyes as he entered her, pushing into her channel and into her soul. She clung to his shoulders, gasping. They held her firmly pinned between their

bodies, like a butterfly in a frame, and she could only ride with their motion, an orchestrated rhythm that tugged at her, filled her up, stretched her muscles ever tighter as they strove toward their shared goal. Miguel came first, losing his rhythm in his urgent need, his hips raising both Delilah and Darius off the bed as he stiffened and shouted below them. The hot throb as he spent himself deep in her ass sent Delilah over the edge one last time, and she clawed Darius's back as he spilled inside of her, the twitching of his cock sending delicious aftershocks through her.

They didn't speak for a long while, their harsh respirations co-mingling in the quiet bedroom. Finally, Darius eased off of her and dropped to their side, and Miguel helped Delilah roll over to lie between them.

"I hope you're okay with me spending the night," she said, a sleepy slur creeping into her words. "Because I don't think I can walk as far as the door, and I don't think it would be polite to carry me out after this."

"Yeah, I'm not going anywhere." Darius laughed, and even that sounded exhausted.

Miguel put his arm around her and nuzzled her ear. "And you're not either. Because we wouldn't mind you spending the rest of your nights here."

"I don't think I'd mind that, either." She closed her eyes, a tear of happiness sliding down her cheek. "I think I'm finally where I belong."

## *Epilogue*

“Got everything?”

Delilah turned, feeling slightly silly at the tears in her eyes. She shouldn't be so attached to the place, when she'd only lived there for a few weeks. She and Darius and Miguel had tried to take things slowly, with her in her house and them in theirs, but since the night of their first date, they'd either all ended up staying at one place or the other, always together. It just seemed natural to combine their households, and Miguel and Darius had already had her name put on the title of their house.

Our house, she amended silently, because she knew both the guys would have corrected her if she had said it out loud.

“Yeah.” She wiped her eyes. “I'm just emotional. This is where we were...together for the first time.”

Miguel shrugged. “I don't think the first time is the important one. What's important is that there are more times, and more, and more...”

His arms snaked around her waist and he pulled her close, and she laughed and pushed him away. Outside, the truck's horn honked. With another quick glance around her empty house, she walked to the door with Miguel and stood out on the porch. In the driveway, Darius waited in the driver's seat. “You guys comin'?”

She slid into the seat next to him, between her two men, and gave the house a little wave as they pulled out of the driveway. Whoever ended up getting her place would hopefully get her good luck.

When they pulled up to their house and she climbed out of the truck, ready to help with the last load of boxes, Miguel stopped her. “Wait. There's something I've always wanted to do.”

Darius grinned and hefted a carton from the bed of the truck. “Go ahead.”

Before Delilah could ask what he intended, Miguel swept her up in his arms, cradled to his chest. She hooked her elbow around his neck and gave him a peck on the cheek. “Okay, you got me. Now what?”

“Now, I’m gonna carry you over the threshold.” He carried her to the door and pushed it open with his foot.

Delilah laughed and let him carry her in. “Every feminist bone in my body is crying out against this, you know.”

“Well, thanks for humoring me.” Once they stood in the foyer, surrounded by the boxes she’d already moved in, he set her on her feet.

Darius stepped through the door behind them. “So, I guess that makes it official.”

She slid her hands into her back pockets and gave the place an appraising look. “Yup, looks like.”

“Well, we better get that stuff inside.” Miguel started for the door, only to be stopped by Darius.

“I think,” Delilah said quietly, as she slowly stripped off her tank top, “the boxes might have to wait.”

Miguel kicked the door shut. Darius smiled.

Delilah flicked her shirt at them and took a few steps backward, ready to sprint. “Race you to the bedroom?”

## *About the Author*

The alter-ego of USA Today Bestselling Author [Jennifer Armintrout](#), Abigail Barnette was born during a conversation with author [Bronwyn Green](#), who encouraged Jennifer to develop an elaborate fantasy persona-- complete with nom de plume-- under which to pen erotic romance. Abigail enjoys long naps in fairy-filled glades, running through corridors in tragically romantic haunted castles, and drinking goblet after goblet of spiced wine.

Abigail loves to talk to her readers and can be found at [abigailbarnette.com](http://abigailbarnette.com).

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***Taken by the Pack* by Cheryl Dragon**

**Phases: Book One**

Danny loves Alaska, but it doesn't seem to love him back. The full Wolf Moon sparkles over Fairbanks, but he's alone for those long nights. He wants to come out of the closet and date, but his frail family might implode. All he wants is the right man in his bed.

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***Coyote Savage* by Kris Norris**

**Phases: Book Two**

*February's full moon is rising, only this year, it's bringing a new brand of hunger...*

For coyote shifters Caden and Talon Brady, the upcoming hunger moon has ignited a different kind of appetite. They've been waiting several years for a chance to court their intended mate, and now that she's finally in their sights, they'll stop at nothing to win her over. But when local livestock start disappearing, their coyote refuge is put in the hot seat, and more than just their way of life is suddenly in jeopardy.

Sheriff Rebecca Savage never planned on returning to Becket Falls, or for falling for two handsome men. But fate seems to have different plans for her. Unfortunately not all of them are sexy and look fantastic in jeans. The local mayor is trying to run the Brady boys and their coyote refuge out of town. Nothing seems to make sense, but when she starts digging deeper, a new danger rises with the full moon—one that just might get them all killed.

***Unchaste* by Mia Watts**

## Phases: Book Three

The mystical Portal of the Gods transports Flynn Chula, shifter and descendant of the Cahokia Indians, six hundred years in the past. Right into a tribal feud between Amaro and Koda, warriors of the empire. While Flynn finds his new circumstances impossible, Amaro and Koda know exactly what to do. Their culture dictates that shifters have to be tested, proving their place among the people--as priests. Only one high priest can rule the empire at a time, but the current apprentice reigns with blood sacrifice and fear.

As the sexual preparations begin, Koda and Amaro do their duty to rid him of any possible heterosexual leanings...by giving themselves to him wholly. Flynn, who's never wanted a woman in his life, can't believe his luck. Two hunky men can't get enough of him, and their eager to learn all the tricks.

When the blood priest discovers the plot to overthrow him, will Flynn, Koda, and Amaro escape alive, or will more than blood be lost on the altar?

## ***Infernal Devices* by Abigail Barnette**

*All Steamed Up: Book One*

The Two Aces. Victorian London's most salacious secret, the club is a place where erotic fantasies are played out among clockwork automatons and aether powered machines. Where nothing is off limits and the pleasures are as wicked as the imagination will allow...

Permilia Deering goes to The Two Aces looking for the sexual excitement that she knows she will not find with the man to whom she is affianced, notorious cold-fish Wallace Sterling. On her first visit to the club, she meets the Ace of Spades, a masked stranger who drives her to heights of passion she's never dreamed possible—and makes her seriously reconsider becoming a mannerly society wife.

When Wallace Sterling first glimpses his fiancée standing outside The Two Aces, he assumes she's uncovered his secret identity—the Ace of Spades. But Permilia has no idea that her intended is living a double life, and Wallace worries that he'll be out of the picture once she gets a taste of what the Ace of Spades can offer her...

## ***New Orleans* by Demi Alex**

*Who makes life-altering decisions based on a fortune cookie?*



Sans her family and sans a job, Lilly Marie is completely alone in the world. With only a broken heart in tow, she has nothing to lose by packing it up and starting over in the sultry Big Easy. And after all she's been through the past year, encountering an eccentric woman in Jackson Square and *actually* following her instructions to "step onto Bourbon Street and into her future" doesn't seem so weird. Who is she to question "destiny" when she'd uprooted herself because of a tiny piece of paper tucked inside a cookie?

What Lilly doesn't expect is for a hero to save her from a rampant bicyclist and whisk her away to a place called *El Destino* to meet his family – "family" being four of the handsomest men Lilly has ever seen. Whether it is fate or coincidence, the sizzling and sexy men of *El Destino* take her into their capable hands to prove that there is no such thing as happenstance, and that undeniable passion and true love can cure any ailment, including a broken heart.

### ***Alpheli Solution*** by Anny Cook

Bootcamp class seems to be the answer to her prayers. In her wildest dreams, she doesn't consider meeting not just one, but two hunky vampires who take her – in the car, in the shower, in the living room, in the hot tub, in hand – as they teach her everything she'll need to know about her new vampire life.

For centuries, Pierre has loved and pursued Julian with no success. After a hostile takeover of Julian's financial assets, Pierre is positive Julian will have nowhere else to turn. Julian, though, chooses to teach the Vampire Bootcamp class rather than surrender to Pierre on unequal terms. When one of Julian's students approaches him for help identifying her sire, Julian is stunned that she is his alpheli – an extremely rare mate whose blood will allow him to subsist on real food. What will that mean to his love-hate relationship with Pierre?

There are just one or two problems. Danamara is descended from Pierre's bloodline. And she's on someone's hit list. Julian and Pierre find unexpected erotic rewards and eternal love when they join together in a brutal war to protect their alpheli's life.

### ***Belonging to Them*** by Brynn Paulin

On the run from her past, Rayna Halliday is devastated when her old car breaks down in the middle of nowhere. She soon finds that her ex has managed to block her credit cards, her accounts and even her cell phones in an attempt to exert his control over her. Giving in to him is something she refuses to do.

When the owners of O’Keefe’s Gas and Repair come to her rescue, they make her an offer that tantalizes the forbidden desires within her—she can find a way to pay for the car repairs, or she can belong to them for two weeks and they’ll see to her repairs for free. At the sexual mercy of four gorgeous men for two weeks... Why not? She can have fun and get things straightened out, all at once. But there are two problems heading her way: an ex on a rampage and her heart that’s in for more than just fun.

### ***FU*** by Mia Watts

When a screw-up by the Fullerton University Housing Office leaves Parker Galloway shackled up with four sexy men, Parker thinks four just might be her lucky number...as long as she can get Kei Yamamoto to join in the fun.

But will taking advantage of FU’s mistake end up getting all five roomies kicked off campus, or will it be the closest thing to heaven Parker has ever experienced?

### ***Oriana and the Three Werebears*** by Tia Fanning

Oriana Ricci has taken over the family business—flying cargo and rich tourists around Alaska’s barely inhabited Kodiak Archipelago. When her plane malfunctions and she’s forced to make an emergency landing, she finds herself stranded in the middle of a National Wildlife Refuge. With no civilization for miles and no hope of rescue, she thinks all is lost... Until she stumbles upon the entrance to an underground bunker.

Jack, Jordan, and Jonathan McMathan own and operate a secret intelligence firm contracted by the US Government. Hidden away in an old Cold War spy station located the middle of the Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge, the brothers are not only able to do their top secret jobs safely without fear of discovery, but are better to protect their other, more personal secret: They have the ability to shift into Kodiak bears.

Like a fairy tale gone bad, the brothers return home to find their lunch tasted—or eaten, their computer chairs adjusted—or broken, and a beautiful blonde sleeping in one of their beds. This situation poses a big problem for the brothers... Their location is now compromised. But more importantly, what are they to do with the lady?

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