

New Year Bear

December 28th

"Sir, your mate is on the phone."

"Ex-mate," snarled William Draper the Fourth as his inner bear howled.

His secretary barely blinked – she was used to him by now. "She says she needs to talk to you."

"Humph."

He was sure she did. Since her allowance had abruptly come to an end the previous month, she had suddenly changed her mind about never wanting to speak to him again, and couldn't get enough of him.

"Tell her I'm busy," he growled.

Which wasn't a lie – it was December 30th and their post-Christmas sale was in full swing. It was only second to Black Friday for their most manic time of year. His secretary nodded and silently withdrew. She was stealthier than a ghost.

William leaned back in his chair and stared at the photo of his son, Bill – William Draper the Fifth – on his desk. In spite of Bill's more irritating personality traits, William adored him. He just wished that he wasn't still dealing with the fallout of his mating to Bill's mother.

"Hey, old man!"

Bill burst into his office, grinning and making enough noise to raise the dead.

William grunted but his bear chuffed. "Boy."

Bill slumped into the chair opposite him and immediately put his feet on William's antique desk.

"Never a day off, huh, Dad?"

"I took a day off less than a week ago," William grumbled, almost in regret.

Bill snorted. "That was Christmas dad, Dad, even the store was closed."

"And I could have gotten so much work done without the constant distractions," he retorted pointedly.

Bill merely rolled his eyes in amusement.

William was the alpha of their bear clan, and owner of the chain of Draper's Department Stores. He kept his office in their flagship store, as his father and grandfather had before him. It had been their family's first store, and William had fond memories of playing in it. One day it would be Bill sitting in his chair, though, he sincerely hoped that Bill had inherited more of his qualities than his mother's. If his former mate had her way, they would have sold all the stores and retired to some hot climate to waste away on the bear all day, every day. Though, knowing how fast she could burn through money, undoubtedly she would have been looking for another payday after two years.

He wasn't too worried about Bill. He certainly seemed attached to his clan, and respectful of the fact that, while William legally owned the stores, the proceeds supported the clan mates, and they were all employed in various capacities at the stores. Draper's Department Stores would not have survived without the support and tireless help of the clan, and the clan mates trusted their alpha to do what was best for them. He didn't think Bill would be as callous as his mother had urged William to be, particularly as his son seemed like a different person this past week. Well, almost like a different person – the feet on his desk were a testament to the fact that he was still the same old Bill.

William looked down at his paperwork. "I'm very busy, tell me what you want and make it quick."

"I just wanted to check it was cool that I invited Mellie's family to our New Year's Eve party."

William looked up sharply as his bear grunted in surprise. "The mole shifter?"

Bill had briefly introduced them on Christmas Day. She came as a complete surprise, and not just because when he saw his son on Christmas Eve, he was single. No, but because she was so... different to the females his son usually brought around. His usual females were gold diggers, and William could spot them from two miles away. But this female – Mellie – was timid, and nervous, and somewhat naïve and his son seemed absolutely smitten with every aspect of her.

"Yep, she said they don't usually celebrate, so I figured they would enjoy it. It's not a problem, right?"

William stared at the happy, goofy look on his son's face and his bear growled uneasily, somehow missing the usual irritating smirk. He waved a hand to indicate he didn't mind and sighed inwardly. He couldn't say he had any real objection to the female, though, her hold over his son irked a little. He remembered what it was like to be so enamored with a female. However, it occurred to him that his former mate purposefully trapped him, while Mellie probably had no clue as to how she had charmed his son.

Bill's smile widened even more. "Great. I told Mellie it was fine, but she insisted I ask you."

He shook his head and chuckled in pleasure, as if saying, 'mole shifters, huh?'

"She's downstairs shopping in the sale with her mom if you wanna say hi."

William stared at his son while his bear balked in surprise. There was just the slightest hint of vulnerability in his son's voice – suggesting that if his dad said no, he would be hurt. Not something that had ever been present before. His son was pretty fearless about most things – particularly females. He had never cared whether his dad liked them before, and honestly, hadn't been put out if they turned him down. Not that many ever did. Money made males attractive to females he thought with a sigh. But he was loath to let his son down, and frankly, interested to see this female that made him so happy.

"Fine," he rumbled as he got to his feet and pulled his jacket on.

"Great!"

The enthusiasm in his son's voice was rather pleasing.

"But I only have a few minutes."

"That's fine, I don't like Mellie being here for too long. She gets anxious in crowds, and also anxious when she's on her own." He smiled goofily, and on seeing his William's questioning look added, "We're working on it with her therapist."

"You've known her less than a week," scoffed William.

Bill shrugged. "Things are moving fast. We've practically spent every moment together since we met. Did you know that all mole shifters are either blind or need glasses?"

"Really?" muttered William disinterestedly.

"Yeah, but they have amazing senses of smell. Mellie's mom made these amazing spice cookies the other night and all of Mellie's family could scent every single spice in them and how much she put in them."

"Indeed," he said only half-listening

"Yeah, she's amazing. I'm going to propose on New Years."

That, however, managed to get through to him. "What?!" Both man and bear snarled.

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Katherine winced as she glanced at the price tag of some gloves. Her mole mewled. Even half off the price was so far north of her current budget it was practically in the North Pole.

She sighed, put them back, and rubbed Mellie's back soothingly. Her poor little Mellie was always very anxious, and truthfully, Katherine had been just the same when she was younger. But, when widowed at twenty-six, and with four young pups relying on her to feed them and keep a roof over their heads, it wasn't the time to be fearful and fainthearted, at least, not out in the open. She had to keep all that bottled up while being outwardly brave for her little darlings. Her shy inner mole had forced herself to be brave.

Though, Mellie didn't seem half as anxious as usual since she met her bear shifter boyfriend. At first, when Mellie introduced him to their family on Christmas day, she had been wary. Katherine's experiences with predator shifters were hardly positive, but Bill had quickly charmed each and every member of their family, and considering how happy he made Mellie, it was hard not to like him.

"I can't wait for you to meet his clan – they're ever so nice," gushed Mellie.

"I'm sure they are," murmured Katherine supportively.

Again, she was pretty wary about the New Year's party, but there wasn't much she wouldn't do for any of her pups, and a party may be fun – usually they just had a quiet meal and stayed up for fireworks at midnight. She was sure her other children would enjoy the party too.

"I'm so glad I met Bill," said Mellie, blushing profusely.

Katherine tinkled with laughter. "I'm glad too, I haven't seen you so happy in a long time."

They shared a smile before Mellie let out an eep as a wolf shifter stood on her foot. She started hopping around in pain.

"Excuse me, that was my daughter's foot," said Katherine, sternly, and her inner mole chittered in annoyance.

The male wolf sneered, sniffed their scents and then smirked. "Then she should watch that she gets it out of my way."

"Mom, it's okay," murmured Mellie.

Katherine drew herself up and gave the male a severe look. "That's no way for a male to behave. You should be ashamed of yourself."

The male snorted and was about to give her a blasting retort, but he suddenly stilled and looked over the top of her head. He paled and quickly mumbled a reply before scampering away like a bunny shifter.

Mellie, the pain in her foot forgotten, squealed. "Bill!"

Katherine turned around to see Bill glowering behind them.

"How dare he?!" seethed Bill, glaring in the direction of the wolf.

Katherine agreed; her mole was cross on her pup's behalf.

"I ought to..."

"It's nothing," dismissed Mellie, beaming at Bill, and in the sight of her happiness, he was slightly mollified.

Katherine flushed slightly as Mellie and Bill kissed and cooed at one another. She looked away and found herself caught in the gaze of a large bear shifter lurking a few steps behind Bill. He was older, larger and broader than Bill, and unlike the generally good-natured Bill, his face was grim and set in hard lines, but this was clearly his father. His dark eyes glittered as he looked her up and down and she flushed even more.

Bill dragged himself away from Mellie and grinned. "Hey, Dad, you remember Mellie, and this is her mom, Katherine. This is my dad, William."

Almost reluctantly, William stepped forward, and in spite of herself, and what they were doing, Katherine felt her inner mole coo. Despite the serious, annoyed look on his face, William was a very attractive man. Well, if you liked men who were tall, dark and handsome she added, inwardly flustering as she felt a flare of arousal. Katherine gulped as she felt her body heat. Well, it had been a long time since her last foray into dating, and that had not gone well.

"Pleasure," rumbled William, sticking out a large dinner plate of a hand.

Katherine felt her cheeks redden as she pressed her own, slim hand into his and he gave it a vigorous shake before holding it for a few moments and then letting it go. It seemed to her that he held it for a shade too long, but that may have been her imagination. Things seemed to be happening in slow motion around her.

She opened her mouth to say something, but all that came out was a strangled gasp.

"It's so kind of you to allow us to come to your New Year party," said Mellie.

William grunted. "Of course."

"Yes, so kind," said Katherine weakly. Why couldn't she think of something to say?

William grunted again.

"You're going to love it," said Bill enthusiastically. "Just wait until you see the fireworks display we have planned. Mellie said your grandkids love fireworks, right?"

"Yes, my grandkids love fireworks," said Katherine, starting to feel like a parrot, rather than just a simpering mole.

William stared at her and she wanted to melt into her shoes. There was something about him – she could barely think around him.

"Will your mate be there?" asked William sharply.

Katherine shook her head as Mellie eeped sadly. "No, we lost him, twenty years ago now."

"I am sorry to hear that," rumbled William slowly.

"And your mate?" asked Katherine.

She almost feared the female whom William had chosen to mate. He was unbelievably attractive and had more money than Katherine could spend in a lifetime – she must be something special.

Bill scoffed while William's wooden expression went from pine to oak.

"No," snorted Bill, "I had my Christmas phone call from her last week – she was drunk and at a party. She considers her mothering duty to be done until my birthday – or at least until a couple of weeks after my birthday."

"Oh, my," exclaimed Katherine under her breath, who rarely went a day without communicating with all of her children in one way, shape or form. She couldn't imagine the kind of woman who barely wanted anything to do with their child.

She thought no one had heard her, but William bristled and his eyes flashed. She immediately blushed in embarrassment as her mole mewled. She had no idea of the circumstances concerning Bill's mother, and had no place in judging others.

"Perhaps we should go," she said quickly. "I'm sure William is busy and I am babysitting tonight."

"Oh, but didn't you want some gloves?" asked Mellie.

Katherine looked at the gloves with regret – they were beautiful, but far too expensive for her. She was hardly destitute, but she had one child in college and a new kitchen stove to pay for.

“No, sweetie, I already have a pair.”

“But...”

Katherine smiled significantly and Mellie hushed.

“I’ll drive you home,” offered Bill.

“Thank you,” said Katherine and looked at William, trying not to quiver. “It was nice to meet you. I will see you on New Year’s.”

“Indeed.”

He muttered some goodbyes and stalked away.

“That went better than expected – he was actually in one of his happy moods,” said Bill cheerfully, and Mellie giggled happily.

Katherine just felt like a wreck. Her mole chittered. Oh, it had been a long time since she had felt like this.

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“Sir, your mate...”

“Ex-mate,” William snarled.

“Is on the phone and...”

“I’m not feeling well. I’m going home.”

His secretary stared at him in surprise. He could have sworn or howled or even screamed and she wouldn’t even bat an eyelid, but that did shock her. William hadn’t taken a sick day since... ever. Even if he did feel sick he would come into work. But right now, he was feeling discombobulated and annoyed and not at all sure why – he knew the cause, he just wasn’t sure of his feelings.

“I’ll take my work home,” he added, and she nodded in relief – now, that was like him.

He grabbed his coat, loaded his briefcase and took off to his car. William stared out the window all the way home, and when he was finally in his house, he insisted his housekeeper leave and go home to her family.

His bear growled moodily and he poured himself a scotch before settling into an armchair and staring into the fire. He thought over what happened at the store and his insides churned. Meeting Mellie’s mother had bothered him, but he didn’t understand why it should.

She had seemed like a perfectly fine female. A perfectly lovely female. A perfect female. His bear yowled at the memory of her talking to the wolf shifter who had dared hurt her daughter. The wolf had been nearly three times her diminutive size and yet she hadn’t hesitated. She wasn’t fiery or

angry; she was soft spoken yet forceful, and his bear had flipped the moment he saw her. She was just doing what any good mother would in protecting her pup, and yet, William had been taken with her, and found himself unusually tongue-tied around her.

William shook his head and sifted through the messages his housekeeper had taken. They were all from his former mate. His inner bear flexed his claws furiously while William scowled. He had always been such a careful man – even when he was young. Always wary, and prudent where money and relationships were concerned. Except for her.

He'd thought he could spot a golddigger, thought he could see the phoniness of their attentions, and the greediness of their intentions coming from a mile away. But Alison slipped past his defenses. She'd been charming and poised, and certainly in no hurry. It took a year to convince him they were in love and meant to be together. Then they were mated, and less than a year later, he realized what a mistake he had made.

She was careful to keep him happy for a little while, even giving him a child in spite of the fact that she had no desire to mother anyone – thought that might have been simply to give her some leverage when it came to the inevitable divorce. But, soon she was nearly bankrupting the clan with her excessive spending and partying all night every night. Not to mention that she treated him with the obvious disdain she felt for him.

Alison was careful never to cheat on William, or at least, never to get caught cheating, and so when William could no longer take her behavior he divorced her. He had to give her half of the clan's money – it took them years to recover – as well as child maintenance. William kept Bill, but he had to pay Alison to ensure that she never tried to take him away.

Of course, that money was now ending. As per their divorce settlement, William had agreed to pay her a monthly child maintenance payment until Bill turned twenty-five – an excessive age, but his lawyer had talked her down to that from forty. But, Bill had turned twenty-five a month ago, and so the allowance was at an end, and now she was apparently feeling the loss. William imagined the lump sum she received – although enormous – was probably all gone, and she had been living on the allowance. Now, she was trying to hound him into giving her more money.

His bear snorted. He couldn't imagine that her latest husband – the twenty-two-year-old snowboard instructor could afford to keep her in the lifestyle she considered befitting her. He kept tabs on her, fearing that she may return and try and manipulate Bill into giving her more money. Though, it appeared that Bill might be a better man than him after all. He hadn't been foolish enough to lose half of their money to a female. No, he seemed to be obsessed with a tiny, guileless mole shifter, who happened to have a mother who gave his bear some very funny feelings...

William leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. He imagined her in her home, surrounded by adoring children and grandchildren, smiling that enchanting smile. Then he imagined her blushing at him and he smiled slightly. He knew he was old fashioned, but he had always wanted that – a cozy, happy family, but it was never to be.

He had tried dating after his mating came to an end – hoping to find a mate who wanted to mate and raise a family, but it had all come to nothing. In every female who crossed his path, he saw a cruel golddigger who only cared about who he was and the wealth mating him would offer them,

and not one he would trust with his son, his money, or his heart – his son being most important and his heart the least.

William cringed as he thought of the way he had grunted and barked at Katherine. Usually, he could manage a little more politeness. He hoped she didn't think too badly of him. Usually, he didn't care what anyone thought of him. But this female, she was... well, she was different, and if her daughter was about to become a member of his family, then he wanted to impress her. Yes, he definitely wanted her to be impressed. Rawr.

He replayed their interaction over and over and finally resolved to do something nice for her. Yes, because of her daughter and his son, but that was all.

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Katherine sighed as she tipped the ruined fudge into the trash. Usually, she could make the recipe in her sleep, but today, she was completely distracted. Instead of tipping in pecan nuts, she had mistakenly poured some dried chili flakes into the batter. Desperately, she had hoped that the flavors would work together, but one taste test followed by running her mouth under the faucet for a minute proved that eggnog and chili flakes did not go together.

She was just so distracted. She felt like a foolish teenager mooning over her first crush, but she could not get William out of her mind. He's certainly handsome though giggled her inner mole. Yes, Katherine had to agree with that.

After meeting him, she looked him up online. He was certainly an impressive male. Under his management, Draper's Department Stores had spread across the country. When he took charge there were only two, and he had opened four more, and was preparing for two more. By far and away their profits exceeded any other store in every city they inhabited, and under his direction they had launched their own ranges of clothes, shoes, handbags, gloves, food and were branching out into furniture. It wasn't just that though, his philanthropic efforts were very impressive, and his company gave millions to charity. Katherine felt depressingly lazy in comparison.

What would it be like to be with a male like him? No, she couldn't imagine. Her mate had been so like her – sweet and generally ineffectual, and when he died she had been so unbearably lonely. She had tried dating over the years, but not many males were interested in raising another male's four children. Oh, there had been the squirrel shifter, who wanted to sponge off her while he tried to start his own social networking site – he was barely computer literate. Then there was the rabbit who wanted her to pack her kids off to their grandparents so they could be together. Not to mention the mole who was just after her savings account – he targeted lonely women and drained their accounts before moving onto his next victim. But he found her account severely lacking.

Sigh. After that she gave up. All she had wanted was a male who wanted to share her life with her, who wanted to spend time with her children and be a part of their lives too. She was so tired of having to be brave and alone all the time, and she wanted a male she could rely on. But she couldn't face the disappointment after that.

There was a knock at the door and Katherine eeped as she ran to answer it – lest they use her doorbell, currently tuned to Jingle Bells, and wake up her sleeping grandbaby.

She tore the door open and immediately put her finger to her lips. The person standing in front of her smiled politely. Katherine didn't know whom she was expecting, but not this smartly dressed young woman.

"Mrs. Carter?" she asked.

"Yes," replied Katherine.

The young woman smiled. "This is for you with compliments from William Draper."

Katherine gaped at the perfectly wrapped package. "For me?" she repeated numbly.

"Yes, take care now."

The young woman pushed it into her hands and walked away. Katherine shut the door and stared at the package while her inner mole mewled in interest. Her surprise lasted only a few seconds more, and then Katherine was tearing at the paper.

"Ooh!" she cooed as she realized he had sent her the gloves she had so coveted earlier. Her burgeoning crush certainly wasn't going away.

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"Mr. Draper, it's..."

"I'm busy," William growled, not wanting to hear that his ex-mate was on the phone yet again.

He had finally talked to her the previous evening, and it had not been pleasant. She had alternately screamed, cajoled and snarled at him, but he would not budge. Humph. Why on earth should he? He had been paying her money to allow him to keep his son – did she really think that would go on forever! Ha – she had nothing left with which to blackmail him. He was finally free of her. Free to live his life, working non-stop...

"I'm sorry, I'm afraid Mr. Draper is busy right now."

"Oh, that's quite all right," trilled a soft, familiar voice, "would you mind just giving him..."

"Katherine?" growled William, jumping to his feet and running outside his office.

His bear howled in delight as he saw it was indeed her. It may have been his imagination, but he could have sworn that her eyes lit up when she saw him.

"Oh, William, I'm so sorry to interrupt..."

"Nonsense," he rumbled, "come in and sit down."

He ushered her into his office, and firmly shut the door in the face of his interested secretary.

Katherine smiled and flushed at him and his bear stirred. He'd considered Mellie to be pretty, but she wasn't half so lovely as her mother.

He sat on the edge of his desk, trying not to cringe as he recalled all the times he had snapped at his son for doing the same.

"What can I do for you?" he asked, trying to sound a little livelier and more genial than the last time they met.

"I just wanted to give you this," she said, and her cheeks reddened even more as she held out some tupperware. "It's just some fudge."

William took it, opened it, sniffed and nearly drooled. "Thank you, that's very kind," he said, taking a piece. "It tastes wonderful," he rumbled as he swallowed, the sinfully sweet confection.

He wasn't kidding either, and not just saying it because he loved the way her eyes sparkled at the compliment.

"That's very kind. It's just a thank you for the gloves. I love them - that was such a generous thought."

"It was nothing," he said gruffly before inhaling two more pieces. "You should sell this fudge."

"I do," admitted Katherine shyly.

"Humph, you should sell it to me and I'll sell it in my store." Katherine winced and bit her lip.
"What?"

Katherine appeared uneasy. "I did try to, but the person I was trying to persuade to buy my fudge said it didn't taste very nice. They said it was far too grainy and oily."

William narrowed his eyes. "Who did you speak to?" he asked tersely.

His bear was immediately furious at whoever had insulted Katherine and out for blood, but William was trying to hold back. They were just doing their job and didn't deserve an immediate mauling. His bear disagreed.

Katherine hesitated. "Umm, I don't remember," she said obviously untruthfully. William raised an eyebrow and she flushed. "I just don't want to get anyone into trouble."

"Hmm. Well, it's no matter, you can negotiate your contract with me."

"With you?" she squeaked.

William nodded as he finished the last piece of fudge. "Yes, I'm tied up all day, but why don't you come by my house tonight and we can hammer out the details."

"Well, ah..."

"Good. My driver will collect you at seven."

"Yes, I..."

"I'll see you then," he said, ushering her out of the office.

He took her hand and shook it while she let out an ‘ooh.’

William found himself almost buzzing excitedly. He couldn’t wait for that evening.

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Katherine gulped as William led her into his mansion of a house.

“Your house is beautiful,” she commented as her mole squealed in delight.

“Thank you, my grandfather designed it,” he rumbled as he took her coat. His fingers brushed the back of her neck and she shivered.

“Well, it’s lovely.”

He smiled slightly. “Please, make yourself at home in the den, and I’ll fetch us something to eat.”

“Oh, ah, that sounds nice.”

“I started drawing up a contract for us to buy your fudge – I’ll just need some details from you. It’s in the top of my briefcase – please take a look,” he said as he disappeared into the recesses of his massive house.

Katherine nodded and realized he couldn’t see her nodding. She shook her head and found his briefcase, open atop a coffee table. She fumbled as she pulled out the top document.

She was ridiculously nervous and she had no idea why. This was just a business meeting... wasn’t it? Except, although her experience of business meetings was incredibly limited, she didn’t think they usually took place in a den, in a house, at night, and she didn’t think they usually involved wine. Yes, she noted there was a bottle of wine and two glasses already prepared. But, if his sole reason for bringing her here wasn’t business then did that mean...

Katherine’s inner mole fluttered excitedly. Did he really want to seduce her? The idea that he did was exhilarating, and also quite unbelievable. William was probably her age, but he was handsome, and while a little gruff, he could be charming, and could easily attract any number of females. She couldn’t believe there was a single female alive who wouldn’t be interested.

She sighed and her mole mewled as her excitement dimmed. She was probably getting a little ahead of herself – it was probably nothing. Maybe he was just being a little more familiar with her because of their children.

Katherine pulled the contract out and let out a sound of dismay as she knocked another contract out of the case. Her eye caught her daughter’s name and she blinked as she realized it was a pre-nuptial agreement.

“Here we go,” rumbled William as he strode into the room. He placed a tray of delectable looking food onto the table and frowned at her surprised expression. “Everything okay?”

“Ah...”

He glanced at what she was holding and his face shuttered as he took it from her. "That wasn't for your eyes."

Katherine flushed. "No, of course not, I am so sorry..."

"I just want to make sure my son is protected," grumbled William defensively.

Katherine blinked at him and then she smiled as it dawned on her. "Are you saying that Bill intends to propose?"

William nodded and pursed his lips. "At the New Year's party."

She pressed her hands to her heated cheeks and giggled as her mole whooped. "Oh, that's wonderful. I'm sure Mellie will be thrilled."

William shrugged uneasily. "It's very fast."

"It was the same for me when I met my mate," she admitted fondly.

"Well, I waited for a year and got to know my mate and..." William growled and cursed under his breath. "And it was a disaster," he admitted grimly.

Katherine placed a hand on his arm and his chest inflated slightly. "I don't know that the kids are making a mistake, but it is up to them."

William looked into her eyes for a few beats and she let out an 'ooh' as she stared into those black, searing pools.

"Uh, I just want to make sure my son is protected," he said, glancing down at the agreement in his hands.

She nodded. "I understand."

"I mean, we have a lot to protect and trusting people is hard and..."

"I agree."

"We can't just... what did you say?" His mounting frustration stilled and he stared at her as if she had grown another head.

"I said I agree."

"You agree that a pre-nup is a good idea?" he asked slowly, not quite believing his ears.

Katherine nodded. "Oh yes. Your clan has a lot of assets, and it's important that they be protected. I know that my daughter has no interest in money, but you don't know that, and it's very important for Mellie to be protected too."

"Yes, indeed... wait, what do you mean that Mellie needs to be protected?" His huge brow furrowed.

Katherine frowned. "Exactly what you mean – protecting our children."

"Yes but, what does Mellie need protecting from?" he rumbled.

"Well, from anything," she said, surprised at his mounting annoyance. "What would happen to Mellie if, in a few years, Bill tired of her and left her. She would need to be taken care of – especially if there are pups involved. Or what would happen if Bill died – Mellie needs some security."

William growled. "The clan would take care of her, of course. There would be no question of that."

Katherine felt her inner mole bristle – the same way she did whenever she felt one of her pups was being slighted. "Well, there is no question that Mellie will ever try to take your money, but you seem to think it is necessary to have a pre-nup to avoid it."

"Well, what would I... Bill do if she tired of him and decided she wanted more out of life than him and that she would find it by spending all his money on yachts and trips around the world and clothes and jewelry that could feed a whole family for a year!"

Katherine gasped. "Oh! I... Mellie would never waste all his money on extravagant things like that. For one thing, she's scared of water and traveling, and as for wasting money on expensive clothes, I would think she has more sense than that."

William humped. "Money can ruin even the kindest people."

"Well, I suppose, but I don't think that will be the case with Mellie, but I feel that it cannot be a one-sided agreement."

William's eyes flashed and his huge chest inflated even more. "I... that is, Bill, would never leave Mellie."

"Maybe, but maybe it wouldn't be on purpose," countered Katherine, feeling her docile little mole getting het up. "But what would I... Mellie do if he died, and she was left with four young pups and fifty-seven dollars in her bank account!"

Katherine hadn't even realized she was yelling until sudden silence descended. William breathed in and out a few times. She gasped as William pressed a hand to her cheek.

"Is that what happened to you?" he asked gently.

Katherine sniffed fighting back some unshed tears. "Yes."

"I'm sorry," he murmured as he soothingly ran his thumb over her cheek.

Her mole cooed. "We should have made plans, just in case something happened to either of us, but we didn't, and then he was... gone. I just wouldn't want Mellie to feel so alone. What about you and your mate?"

William's cheek ticked. "She only ever wanted my money. Not me. I wanted a mate and a family. She wanted... everything but that."

"She was a fool," breathed Katherine with feeling. "Who would choose money when they could have you? I'm sorry, I didn't..."

She blushed the moment she said it and looked away, but he carefully drew her face back to his.

"Don't be sorry," he murmured.

"No," she breathed.

Her heart thudded erratically. Was he going to kiss her? It certainly felt like he was going to kiss her. Her inner mole chittered hopefully. Katherine leaned a little closer, almost inviting him closer, and... and...

A loud buzzer sounded. For a second, she wondered whether it was her – that some long-dormant part of her had woken up and was throwing a party

William let out a long, impatient grunt. "That would be the mini quiches."

"Mini quiches?" she repeated, baffled and still a little fuddled by lust.

"Yes, my housekeeper left us some quiches and I was... heating them up. Grrr."

Katherine chirruped with laughter. William stared at her, and she did it again until her cheeks were red and she was giggling nearly uncontrollably. William started chuckling, and soon they were both hiccupping with mirth. She had barely been there for ten minutes and they had gone from angry to sad to horny, and yes, she found this sudden rollercoaster of emotion amusing.

William finally calmed. "I should really get those quiches," he murmured.

"Yes," agreed Katherine with a smile.

He darted away, almost running, and she sank onto the couch and buried her head in her hands, unsure whether she should laugh or cry.

"Oh, William always has that effect on me too."

Katherine whipped around to see a svelte wolf smirking at her. She was probably about Katherine's age, but with her beautifully styled hair, designer clothes, and natural beauty, she made Katherine feel old and dowdy.

"Umm, who are you?" asked Katherine as her mole squeaked uncertainly.

The female huffed. "I'm William's mate."

*

William scowled at the offending and now burnt quiches. Why on earth did he bother with them at all – he hated quiches! They had ruined the moment with Katherine. Though, perhaps it can still be recaptured. There was still time. It had been so long since he had this kind of reaction to a woman. In fact, he wasn't sure he had ever had this kind of reaction to a woman. Katherine was... rather special. Sweet but forward, and trying so hard to hide her loneliness it made him ache. His bear rumbled in desire for her. Yes, she was certainly beautiful.

His bear growled, pulling him out of his reverie. The bear sensed danger. He ran out to the den still carrying the hot quiches. They were promptly dropped to the floor when he saw the full horror of the situation.

"Alison!" he snarled furiously.

His ex-mate smiled coldly at him and dropped onto the couch next to Katherine.

"Darling!" she trilled, though the way she said made it sound like an insult. "I can't believe you never changed the locks."

"If I'd known you were coming back I certainly would have," he growled and then looked at the sweetly confused Katherine. "Katherine, I'm..."

"If I'd known there was any chance you would have a female in here I might have knocked," scoffed Alison. "Ooh," she cooed, leaning forward and grabbing the bottle of wine, "my favorite. Did you know I was coming?"

"That's for Katherine," hissed William as he struggled to control his inner angry bear. "And given that you'll drink anything, I'd hardly say you could call it your favorite."

"I don't really drink, so I really don't mine," said Katherine with an awkward but reassuring smile.

"More for me!" crowed Alison as she pulled the cork.

"Story of our marriage," growled William.

"Except when in bed. Sharing a bed with him is insufferable – have you noticed that he always wants to sleep on top of you? Like he thinks you're going to bolt in the night or something." Katherine blushed profusely. "Oh, maybe you don't know," sniffed Alison.

His beast snarled as William reflected things might have been easier if she had bolted one night.

"Enough, Alison. Get out, now!" he roared.

Alison ignored him but Katherine blanched.

"I really think I should go," said Katherine, "we can... umm, talk about the fudge later."

William blinked. Oh yes – that was why she was there. He'd completely forgotten!

"No, Katherine, stay," he protested. "Alison is leaving."

She smiled sweetly. "I really think that I should go so you two can talk."

"No, Katherine," he howled as she got up and started moving to the door.

His bear urged him to stop her, but what could he do? He couldn't physically stop her... could he? No, he couldn't. He could feel something wonderful slipping through his paws, and he didn't know how to stop it.

"Bye, Katherine," called Alison.

William snarled at her, but she ignored him – it was like being married again.

“Katherine,” he pleaded as he helped her into her coat.

“It’s fine,” she murmured, though he thought he saw some regret in her expression. “But she is Bill’s mother. Me being here would just complicate things.”

William nodded and grunted ungraciously. “I’ll walk you out,” he grumbled.

He chauffeur was already outside and waiting. The male gave him a look of understanding and William nodded wearily. He had worked for William for many years, and on seeing that William’s erstwhile mate had returned, he knew he would be needed one way or the other.

William took her hand and helped her into the car. He stood at the door, looking at her awkwardly.

“This evening hasn’t gone how I hoped.”

Katherine’s eyes sparkled expectantly. “What were you hoping for?”

Honestly, he wasn’t sure. He was just... hoping.

“I should really deal with her,” he grunted nodding at his house.

Katherine deflated a little. “Yes.”

He stared at the house. It looked as uninviting as a morgue.

“On the other hand...”

“Yes?”

“Move over, I’m coming with you.”

Katherine beamed and giggled as she duly scooted across the seat. He lumbered in after her, and the moment they started moving he did what he should have done ten minutes ago, he dragged her into his arms and kissed her soundly. Rawr.

*

New Year’s Eve

William beamed at Katherine and she blushed. They hadn’t been apart since the moment they ran away from his house, and he now knew that the blush reached everywhere over her body, and she knew that Alison wasn’t blowing steam about his sleeping habits. Though, Katherine said she rather liked him nearly smothering her in her sleep – she said she found it reassuring and his bear thoroughly preened at that.

He had decided to step back and sent his lawyer to deal with his ex-mate, and if that hadn’t of worked, the cops would have been next. Foolish maybe, but he had given Alison some money to go away and leave him alone. But, at the end of the day, it was only money, and it was worth it to be with Katherine. Besides, he was planning on retiring this year, to spend more time doing the important things – like being with Katherine and her grandkids. He had met them all already, and

they delighted in climbing all over him and insisted he read them stories and do all the deep voices. Plus, perhaps Bill and Mellie would have kids soon – he wouldn't want to miss spending time with them.

"Ooh!" she cooed.

He also knew that was a voice she made when she was very excited. He grinned lasciviously and she blushed even more.

"Not that," she teased. "Look over there – Bill is proposing."

He swung his eyes in the direction of his son and Mellie, and smiled proudly as Bill got down on one knee, asked Mellie to marry him and Mellie squealed and threw herself into his arms. The clan and all of Mellie's relatives broke out in calls of congratulations and applause.

"Oh, I'm so pleased for them," trilled Katherine as tears of happiness sparkled in her eyes.

"Me too," he rumbled and leaned down to kiss Katherine's temple.

Who knew? Perhaps it would be him and Katherine next. There was no rush though. He'd give it a few more days thought before he popped the question – he certainly didn't want to rush these things! Though, if he were to mate Katherine, he had some serious doubts about his stepdaughter mating Bill – he needed to up his game to be good enough for her!

Katherine hugged him and giggled as the clock struck twelve. "Happy New Year! I have this feeling it's going to be an amazing year."

"Happy New Year," he growled happily and kissed her thoroughly. He had a feeling she was right. Rawr.

The end