

Shadow Mate
By Alexis Calder

Chapter 1

Morgan

Water seeped from under the locked door and I pounded again. "Open it now or I'm tearing it down."

The unmistakable sounds of sex mixed with the running water of the faucet seemed to be masking the sounds of my pounding and my screams. My little bar didn't need any other issues. I already had enough to repair as it was. A flooded bathroom destroyed by a pair of shifters trying to get it on was not in the budget.

Shaking with rage, I stomped away from the bathroom, my shoes slipping on the aging wood floor. "Free beer for whoever can get my bathroom door open with the least amount of damage."

Several patrons looked up at me and Kenny Jones was the first to stand. His girlfriend grabbed his sleeve and yanked him back to his stool. "Don't you dare," she hissed.

"Come on. One of you has to be willing to tear it down." I glanced around the space. All the bar stools were full and several groups were gathered around the wobbly tables to my right. Shifters had good hearing, so I knew the rock music on the jukebox wasn't the reason I was being ignored.

Nobody in this town gave a shit about anybody else. That was just the way things were. And usually, it suited me just fine. But today I had a couple of shifters about the flood my entire bar.

Stella's wasn't much. If I was being honest, it was more of a hallway than an actual bar. It would never pass a health inspection in human city, and the only reason I had patrons in the first place was because I didn't water down the booze like my competition. But that wasn't enough to earn me loyalty. I groaned. This was what I got for avoiding most pack gatherings. I wasn't seen as one of them. Even if I'd kept them in drinks for the last five years.

"I can knock it down for you, Morgan, but it'll be messy," Charles, one of my regulars said.

"Same, sweetheart. I'd probably knock out most of the drywall around the door," Manny, another regular added.

Some of my tension eased. At least I had a few shifters who were in my corner. "Thanks, guys. I'll come get you if I can't get it off."

Gritting my teeth I marched toward the bar. There had to be a way to do this that wouldn't cost me all my repair savings. I grabbed a screwdriver from the cabinet under the cash register.

"Want me to give it a try?" Jasmine asked.

I shook my head. Jasmine was a witch so she didn't have the brute strength the shifters possessed. I was worried she'd try and end up hurting herself and I couldn't afford for her to go

down, either. Jasmine worked for a room. I knew I should pay her, but I was barely making enough to keep the bar running. Plus, she was my best friend. I couldn't ask her to do this when it was possible whoever was in there would attack anyone who tried to open the door. "Thanks but someone needs to stay out here and monitor all these deadbeats."

"I'll help. But I'm going to need something in return," Stewart Mackenzie slurred.

I lifted a brow. "I'm not giving you a blowjob."

"Suit yourself." Stewart shrugged and took a drink of his beer. "But you'd get a lot more response if you sweetened the pot by shaking those hips around."

I set the screwdriver down, then leaned across the bar and yanked his mug away from him.

"Hey!"

"You will not disrespect me in my own bar," I said. "Apologize. Now."

"I was just teasing you," he said with what was probably supposed to be a flirty smile.

I glared at him, holding his beer captive. "You apologize if you can start drinking at Lou's for the rest of your miserable existence."

His upper lip twitched and he wrinkled his nose. Lou's was even worse than my place and everyone knew he used the cheap stuff mixed with water. Sometimes his drinks were even made with questionable moonshine. You never knew what you'd get there. The only shifters who drank at Lou's were those who were too old-fashioned to support a female business or too broke to afford even my low prices. As far as I was concerned, Stewart could go join them.

"Sorry, Morgan," he said quietly.

I put my hand to my ear. "What was that?"

"I said, I'm sorry," he was louder this time.

I wrinkled my brow and acted as if I was straining to hear him.

He let out an exasperated huff. "Sorry, Morgan." He shouted this time and half the patrons turned and laughed.

His expression darkened and I lowered my hand from my ear, a smug smile of satisfaction on my lips. I passed his beer back to him. "Don't do it again."

He grumbled something under his breath but grabbed the beer from me, avoiding making eye-contact.

I'd grown up surrounded by the most powerful males in the pack and I had to learn at far too young an age that if I didn't stand up for myself, they'd take things too far. Unfortunately, too many bad things happened to me before I learned that lesson. I refused to ever be that scared, abused little girl again.

"Well done," Jasmine said in my ear.

I nodded in response, then picked back up the screwdriver and stormed toward the bathroom.

I had started out as a much nicer proprietor. But years of getting hit on, and even some rather dangerous situations where I could have been seriously hurt or worse, I learned it was easier to be the cold hearted bitch than play sweet. It was the only thing these shifters responded to.

It didn't take long for me to remove the doorknob so I could push open the bathroom door. Water gushed out and the door only opened so wide because someone's naked ass was blocking it.

Rage bubbled up. I recognized that ass. Of course, of all the shifters to walk in on having sex in the bathroom at *my* bar. "Gods dammit, Owen. Can't you keep your penis to yourself ever?" I shoved him aside so I could turn off the faucet.

Owen growled then spun to face me, his eyes widening when he realized who had interrupted him. I didn't even bother to mask the anger in my expression.

"In my bar, Owen? You could have done this anywhere else and you do it here?"

"I thought you said you two broke up."

I winced at the grating sound of Suzanne's voice. Of course it was Suzanne Carter. Because my luck and my distrust of men really couldn't get any worse.

"We are broken up," Owen said. "So you have no right to be mad at me, Morgan."

"Out. Now." I was seething. My face hot, my hands balled into fists. It was one thing to flood my bathroom, it was another to fuck my childhood bully a week after we decided to take a break.

"Fuck, Morgan. Aren't you at least a little jealous?" Owen stood naked in all his six-five, muscled glory.

When he'd asked me out, I'd been flattered. He was the most desirable single male in the pack. I turned him down several times before finally giving in and going on a date. Somehow, that obligatory date had turned into six months of bad sex and half-assed attempts at an actual relationship.

I'd tried so hard to play along. So hard to fall into step with the pack's expectations. I'd even gone off my tonic for a month and shifted during the full moon with the rest of the pack.

But it wasn't right. None of it felt right. It never did.

Last week, I told him I was done. It didn't feel right to keep faking things with him. He'd begged me to reconsider. Told me he loved me, which scared the shit out of me. Sex with him wasn't great, but at least he'd never hurt me. Well, not physically.

When I'd hesitated, he suggested a break for a month to see if we missed each other. Reluctantly, I'd agreed.

I should have seen this coming. But I had started to wonder if maybe he was one of the good ones. Secretly, that was probably why I'd risked not taking my tonic for a month. If there was a bond between us, it would have surfaced in that time. It didn't show. We weren't mates, but I had wondered if being with him would be better than being alone.

I was wrong.

"I thought this might get a rise out of you," he said. "Show you what you're missing out on."

Suzanne scoffed and picked a sopping wet dress off the floor. "Don't call me, Owen." She tugged the soaked garment over her head, then shoved past him without looking at me once.

"That was your plan?" I said. "Flood my bar and have sex with the girl who made high school a living hell for me? To make me jealous?"

He was even more stupid than I thought. I regretted every single time I ever fucked him.

“You have to know what a mistake you made,” he said. “Every female in this pack wants me. You walk away from now and there are no second chances.”

I rolled my eyes then turned away from him. I was so done. He was the one who begged for a *break* instead of a break-up. He made the decision so much easier. “You better clean up my bathroom or I’m filing a formal complaint with the alpha.”

“Oh, yes, run to daddy,” he said.

Without turning around, I flipped him off, then went back to the bar. I didn’t owe him an explanation. He, and every other member of this pack, knew my dad might be the alpha, but I was his least favorite shifter. In fact, I think the only time he might have tolerated me was the one time I’d shown up to run on the full moon with Owen in tow.

My dad would be more upset about this breakup than I was. Now, my relationship history was limited, but I’m guessing the person in the actual relationship should be more upset than their parents. But maybe that’s just wishful thinking.

A few catcalls and whistles sounded in my wake but they weren’t for me. I moved aside and Owen walked past me, fully naked, toward the door.

“Looking good, man,” someone called.

“You forgot your pants,” another added.

“I’m available if she’s not going to keep her claws in you,” a female voice added.

“He’s all yours,” I said.

Laughter filled the small space.

Owen growled and his body rippled as he doubled over. His transition was impressive. Graceful and fluid. The kind of shifting abilities that any shifter would kill to possess. I’d only shifted a few times, but it was always painful and forced. As if my body was rebelling against the action.

Gods damn show off.

More whistles and a few cheers. Someone opened the door and the huge gray wolf bolted out of the dingy bar.

My shoulders sagged in relief. I shouldn’t have caved when he countered my break-up, but it was officially over now. Until that moment, I hadn’t realized how tense I’d been with the unresolved issue of our relationship. I really needed to stick to my *no dating shifters* policy.

Not that there was much of a choice here. Aside from our pack of wolf shifters, there was a nearby witch coven. The nearest major city was hours away and mostly occupied by humans and I wasn’t *that* desperate to get away. As much as I sometimes hated it here, Copper Springs was home.

The patrons were back to their drinks and Jasmine was working fast to keep everyone topped off. As long as their drinks were full, they weren’t going to even remember any of this. I wish I could say it was unusual, but there was always something going on here. Typically, it was a brawl, but it wasn’t even the first couple I had to throw out of the bathroom. With only one bathroom, if anyone was in there too long I heard about it.

I ducked behind the bar and checked on the status of the bottles of booze and the kegs. We probably had enough for the rest of the night.

"That was interesting," Jasmine said as she pushed through the swinging door separating the bar from the patrons.

"I'm only mad at myself for not breaking it off sooner. All the red flags were there," I said.

"Don't blame yourself. We all know what he looks like naked. I'm guilty of making those mistakes too. I mean, sometimes you just need to work off some shit in the bedroom, right?" She rimmed a glass with a lime then set it in the plate of salt.

"He wasn't even that good in bed," I admitted.

She turned the glass over and scooped ice into it. "Sorry to hear that, girl. But at least he was pretty."

I shrugged, trying to give myself at least that. He really was and I'd been completely blinded by it. There was no way I'd make that mistake again. "Yeah, he was."

"You good out here?" I asked. "I'm going to try to get the bathroom cleaned up."

"I'll happily keep pouring drinks if it keeps me from cleaning out the bathroom," she said.

"I guess this is why they pay me the big bucks," I teased.

She laughed as she filled the glass with a generous pour of tequila. "I'm not sure this dump is worth it."

"It's absolutely not worth it," I agreed. "But it's home."

She finished making the margarita and lifted it in a salute as she sidestepped me to leave. "To home."

I had to smile at that. This bar was run-down and probably a public health hazard. I kept the glasses clean and used decent booze, but the floors squeaked, the walls were soft in places, and it was a miracle the roof hadn't caved in on us.

Sandwiched between a laundromat and a liquor store, I was limited on what I could do with the space, but I did my best. More than once I'd been offered a decent sum to sell it to one of the shops on either side, but I always declined.

This bar was all I had left of my mom. It was my only inheritance and it kept me from being dependent on my father. If not for the tiny apartments upstairs, I might not bother with the work it took to keep it running. But in a pack where unmarried females were supposed to remain under their father's care, the independence of this place was worth more than all the money in the world. Besides, I was able to offer assistance to Jasmine as well. I couldn't help everyone who was down on their luck, but Stella's Bar kept the two of us from a much worse fate.

Growing up in the alpha's house wasn't easy. Things got worse after my mom died. But my dad was all about appearances. Having a daughter who ran a successful business made him look good. Even if he was disappointed that I hadn't settled down, he could tell people it was because I was waiting for my mate. He'd proudly crow about how I had such high standards that I'd rather die alone than settle. As if it was some kind of measure of his worth. Imagine how it would change if my mate showed up and was a complete loser.

Little did he know, I'd never have to find my mate. Thanks to the tonic Jasmine made me every month, I didn't shift, which meant I didn't go into heat and give off the scent that would attract my mate. After watching my dad abuse my mom, his mate, her whole life, I refused to follow in her footsteps.

This bar, shitty as it was, was my sanctuary. Which I had to remind myself over and over as I pushed water toward the drain with a squeegee. I couldn't afford to hire anyone, but this was far better than the alternative.