



The Bear's Blooming Mate

Author: *Harmony Raines*

Category: Romance, Paranormal

Description: Meeting was a mistake. Falling in love wasn't.

After the death of her mother, Elsbeth moves to Bear Creek to fulfill a promise—and to finally build the cut-flower business she always dreamed of. Romance? That's not even on the to-do list.

What she never expected was one stray text—and a case of mistaken identity.

When she meets Philip Thornberg, it doesn't take long to realize there's no mistaking the way he makes her feel. But Elsbeth isn't ready to risk her still-healing heart—or her promise to her mother—for any man.

Philip, however, knows one thing the moment he senses Elsbeth: She's his fated mate.

But if this bear shifter has learned anything from years of tending vines, it's patience. Elsbeth is grieving her mother and fighting for her dream. So Philip stays close. He protects her. And together, they begin to build something beautiful—one bloom, one seed at a time. Until a sudden storm threatens everything they've created.

Can they save the farm—and their chance at love—before it's too late?

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Chapter One – Philip

If only.

Those two words had been bouncing around Philip Thornberg's head ever since his brother Kris had found his mate.

If only, his bear echoed, with such deep yearning that it pierced Philip's heart.

Not that they weren't happy for their brother. They were, truly. Kris deserved every bit of happiness that had come his way. He and Cassia were perfect together, their bond so effortless, so undeniable, it was almost painful to witness. Almost. Because while Philip was overjoyed for his brother, he could not deny it also left him feeling like the odd vine out, tangled and untended.

Philip shook his head and focused on the job at hand. He needed to get the last of these new vines planted before the end of the day. They were a hybrid variety he'd been experimenting with for a couple of years, and this year he was certain he'd gotten it right.

The young vine leaves quivered in a gentle breeze, and Philip's fingers brushed over their delicate surfaces almost automatically. The vineyard gave him purpose, steadied his restless heart, but even acres of thriving vines couldn't fill the void inside him.

But he would never begrudge Kris his mate. No one worked harder, loved deeper, or deserved more.

His bear stirred inside him, more restless than ever. We work hard, too, his bear pointed out. Kris might blend award-winning wines, but you gave him the best raw materials to work with.

Philip chuckled under his breath. True enough. From the time he could walk, he'd felt a pull to the land, an instinct for growing and nurturing the vines no amount of schooling could teach. His father often said he had inherited it from his grandfather, but Philip knew it was more than genetics. It was bone-deep. A calling.

See? his bear said. Kris isn't the only one who's put his life into the Thornberg Vineyard.

Yeah, Philip agreed. Still doesn't change the fact that he's got Cassia and we've got dirt under our nails.

If only we could find our mate, too, his bear sighed. Like Kris did. Devote our life to her...

As if on cue, the sound of laughter drifted from the direction of the old barn, now home to the vineyard's new restaurant.

Philip glanced up. Kris and Cassia were walking hand-in-hand, shoulders touching as they made their way over to him.

"How's it going?" Kris called out.

"Good. Good. I'm nearly done planting," Philip replied, standing and brushing off his jeans.

"They look amazing." Cassia leaned forward to inspect the young plants. "I swear you work magic with these vines."

“I wish,” Philip grinned. “But it’s just years of hard work and patience. And a sprinkling of luck.”

“Don’t sell yourself short.” Kris placed his hand on his brother’s shoulder and gave it a squeeze. “You have a rare talent.”

Philip shrugged off the compliment with a modest smile, reaching for a nearby spade. “Talent or not, these little guys don’t plant themselves.”

Cassia crouched beside one of the newly rooted vines and brushed her fingers across the young leaves. “But even so...there’s something about the way you do it, Philip. You’re a nurturer.”

Philip paused mid-motion, the spade heavy in his hands. “A nurturer?” he echoed, his lips pulling into a crooked smile. “Not sure anyone’s ever called me that.”

Cassia glanced up at him. “Well, you are. The way you care for these vines, the way you know what they require before they even seem to need it. It’s something special.” She waved at the neat rows that stretched out behind him, their leaves fluttering in the breeze like a hundred tiny green flags. “You don’t just grow grapes here; you grow life.”

Her words struck something deep inside. For as much as he longed to meet his mate, he also wanted children. A large brood who would dash up and down the rows of vines under his watchful gaze, playing hide and seek...

Yes, that is the kind of life we would love to grow, his bear said wistfully.

As if sensing his brother’s melancholy, Kris tried to lighten the mood. “Season’s looking good, though. If this carries on, we’re going to have an amazing harvest.”

Philip nodded as his eyes roamed the rows and rows of vines. “Best in years. Plenty of early rain. No late frosts. The vines have produced healthy buds across the board.” He glanced at Kris. “Your blends are going to be award bait again.”

Kris nodded and smiled with pride. Pride he deserved. “It’s a joint effort. My blends would be nothing without your grapes.”

“You know,” Cassia began, “you Thornbergs are terrible at taking compliments.”

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“We prefer modesty,” Kris replied.

“Modesty has its place,” Cassia teased. “But you should also give yourselves some credit. This vineyard? This family? It’s all because of the way you Thornbergs pour your hearts into everything you touch.”

“That told us,” Kris said, looking at Cassia with such a look of love that Philip had to glance away, his chest tightening with that familiar ache. He busied himself with the spade, plunging it into the soil with perhaps a bit more force than necessary.

Kris clapped him on the shoulder again. “Well, this particular Thornberg needs to get his mate into town before the hardware store closes. And I have some supplies to pick up for Mom.”

Cassia stood and brushed off her jeans, still smiling affectionately at him. Cassia was like the sister he’d never had. “Don’t work too hard.”

“You keeping busy helps,” Kris said, without looking up as he firmed down the ground around the freshly planted vine.

His bear stirred again. Busy’s good. But it would be so much better to have someone to stay busy with.

That’s something we have no control over, Philip muttered.

No, we do not, his bear said forlornly.

Cassia nudged Kris. “Come on, loverboy. We’ve got errands to run and not much time before we need to be back to help open the restaurant.”

“Your wish is my command,” Kris said with a mock bow.

“Really?” Cassia asked with an arched eyebrow.

“Really,” Kris replied, leaning in to kiss her lips tenderly.

Philip averted his gaze, focusing intently on the soil beneath his fingers. The way they could be so casually affectionate with each other, so completely in tune, it was both beautiful and a reminder of everything he didn’t have.

“We’ll see you later,” Kris called as they walked away, their hands finding each other’s again as naturally as breathing.

Philip watched them go, heart tightening just a little. They made it look so easy.

It could be, his bear said. If only.

Maybe we should get Finn to place an ad for us, Philip joked, just as his phone buzzed in his pocket. He brushed the dirt off his hands and pulled it out.

Talk of the devil, his bear muttered, as his brother’s face appeared on the screen.

Philip answered. “Hey, Finn. Are you calling to tell me you’ve found my mate?”

Finn laughed. “I would if I could. But no. I’m calling about Mom and Dad’s anniversary. I figured it was about time we all got together to make plans.”

“You’re right, we should get on it,” Philip said, leaning against a post. “Time goes by

so fast.”

“It sure does,” Finn replied.

“So, what do you have in mind?” Philip asked, balancing the phone between his ear and shoulder as he moved to check on the next row of vines.

“I was thinking we could throw them a surprise party,” Finn said, his voice crackling slightly over the connection, which wasn’t unusual out here in the mountains. “Something big, with everyone there. They’re always doing things for us, and I can’t remember the last time we properly celebrated them.”

Philip nodded, though Finn couldn’t see him. “I like it. They deserve something special.”

“Exactly!” Finn’s enthusiasm was obvious even through the phone. “I’ve already talked to Stanley, and he’s in. He suggested we dig out some old photos to make a slideshow.”

“Perfect,” Philip replied. “Although Mom will definitely cry.”

“Oh, she will,” Finn agreed. “So, the best thing is if we all get together and trade ideas. I figured Kris and Cassia might organize the catering.”

“And I could organize the decorations,” Philip offered. “I can use the vines and add in some flowers...”

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“Great. We should all meet up,” Finn said.

“Let me know when and where,” Philip replied, already picturing how he’d decorate the venue.

Maybe we could use the new restaurant building, his bear suggested.

“Hang on. I’ve got another call,” Finn said, sounding breathless. “I have to go. But I’ll text you the time and place!”

“Sounds good.” Philip shook his head as the line went dead. “Classic Finn.”

A party, Philip’s bear said happily. For Mom and Dad.

Philip’s phone buzzed as Finn’s message came through: Meet at the Old Larson place, 4:00 PM today.

Philip frowned. Strange spot. I thought the Larson farm was abandoned.

That would make it the perfect place to plan a surprise party, his bear said.

That’s true, Philip agreed as he texted Finn to confirm and checked the time. 2:30. Plenty of time to finish planting and clean up.

As he wrapped up the last of the planting, his mind wandered to the upcoming celebration. His mom and dad were an inspiration. Not just for expanding the vineyard, or the way they raised their sons, but for how they loved each other

unconditionally. Fifty years together, and they still looked at each other like they'd just met.

If only,his bear whispered.

He gathered his tools, put them away, and headed back to the house, where the scent of freshly baked bread greeted him. His mother stood at the kitchen counter, chopping carrots.

“Do you want something to eat?” she called, without looking up.

“No, I’m going to head upstairs for a shower and then I’m popping out for an hour or so,” Philip said as he passed through the kitchen.

“Meeting anyone?” Leanne glanced at her son with hope in her eyes.

“Finn,” Philip replied, pausing in the doorway.

“Oh,” Leanne said, her hopes dashed.

She was wondering if we were going to meet our mate,his bear said, hating the look of disappointment on their mom’s face.

If only,Philip sighed.

“Will you be in for dinner?” Leanne asked, going back to her chopping.

“Yeah, I should be back around seven at the latest.” He paused again. “If you and Dad want to eat earlier, I can heat something up.”

“I’ll make a plate for you,” she said, ever the caregiver.

“Thanks, Mom,” Philip said. As he ran upstairs, it was as if he had been transported back in time. As if he were a ten-year-old kid, not a forty-two-year-old man.

Damn, he needed a mate. A family. A home of his own. It wasn’t right to still be living with his parents at his age. But since his life revolved around the vineyard, and his mate had remained elusive, there never seemed much point in moving out.

But as he showered quickly, scrubbing the dirt from beneath his fingernails, the thought persisted.

Because something feels different, his bear said. Can you feel it?

Philip rolled his shoulders. It did feel different. He didn’t know how. And he certainly didn’t know why. But it did.

Maybe our “if only” is about to come true.

Chapter Two – Elsbeth

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Elsbeth wiped the sweat from her forehead as she looked out over the fields which, if all went well, would soon become a sea of blooms.

Her stomach was knotted with what was now a familiar mix of anxiety and excitement. She'd sunk every penny of her savings into buying the Old Larson place. And then some.

Drawn by its sprawling acreage and the rich, dark soil hidden beneath a thick covering of weeds, she'd taken a gamble and bought the place.

The realtor had called it "fixer-upper charm" when showing her the weathered farmhouse with its peeling blue paint and creaking porch steps. Elsbeth called it "barely habitable," but it was hers. All hers. And that thought alone made the knot in her stomach loosen just a little.

Elsbeth glanced down at the dog-eared sketchpad in her hand. The pages were filled with notes, rough designs, and hopeful ideas that had taken root long before she'd even seen the place. Her mother's voice echoed in her mind: Don't let your dreams slip away.

"I don't intend to, Mom," she murmured under her breath.

As the wild grass rustled in the breeze, it was as if her mom was right there with her, her words of encouragement carried on the wind. Elsbeth inhaled deeply, taking in the earthy scent of her land—herland—and closed her eyes for a moment.

If only. Tears pricked her eyes. How many times had she said those two words over

the last year?

And what had she learned? That life didn't care for if onlys. That sometimes, you had to grip opportunity with both hands even when your heart was still healing.

And if onlys didn't plant seeds or fix roofs or make dreams come true. Action did.

Her gaze drifted away from the field of weeds to where an old barn stood. It was a beautiful building, solid and weathered, and soon to become her new workspace. She'd spent the last few days cleaning out cobwebs, replacing broken panes, and imagining the freshly cut flowers she'd grow in the weed-infested field arranged on the wide plank table she planned to build. She could already picture the bundles of lavender hanging from the rafters, the buckets of dahlias and cosmos lining the walls, the sweet scent of stock and snapdragons filling the air.

The fragrance would be as remarkable as the bright hues of the petals.

As she dreamed her dreams, her phone buzzed in her pocket. Elsbeth pulled it out and tapped the screen to turn off the alarm she'd set. 3:50PM, Finn Thornberg would be here soon to help solidify her plans.

He'd been recommended by the realtor as a friendly and reliable landscape architect. When Elsbeth had done a little background research on him, she'd learned his family owned a very successful local vineyard, so he should have some experience in what she was trying to achieve here.

Hopefully. There was a chance Finn hated plants, and that was why he'd chosen his career path rather than following in the family tradition of winemaking.

However, when she'd spoken to him on the phone to arrange a meeting, he'd seemed enthusiastic and knowledgeable. He'd asked pointed questions about drainage and

soil quality that had impressed her.

She checked the time again and headed back toward the house. As she rounded the corner, she spotted a sleek blue pickup truck making its way up her long, rutted driveway. Dust billowed behind it, catching the golden late afternoon light.

Right on time. Always a good sign.

The knot in her stomach tightened again, and Elsbeth hastily tucked her sketchpad under her arm and ran a hand through her wind-tousled hair. First impressions mattered, even if this was just a professional consultation. She straightened her shoulders and walked to meet the vehicle as it pulled to a stop next to the porch.

But as the man stepped out of the truck, the knot in her stomach unraveled, replaced by the flutter of butterflies. He was tall, broad-shouldered, with dark hair that curled slightly at the nape of his neck. He wore work boots, jeans, and a chambray shirt with the sleeves rolled up to the elbows, revealing sun-bronzed forearms.

He looked...nothing like she'd imagined. Not that she had a clear picture of Finn in her head. It was just that his voice over the phone had sounded a bit more...well, architect than farmer. This man looked like he'd been out wrangling the land, not drafting plans.

Still, he smiled, a little distractedly, and offered a nod as he stood, feet hip-width apart, and studied her.

"Hi," Elsbeth said, trying to brush off her moment of surprise. "Thanks for coming. I've been really looking forward to getting your input on my plans."

The man blinked, just once, then nodded again. "Sure."

Although he didn't exactly sound sure. She chalked it up to unfamiliar surroundings and gestured toward the fields. "I thought I'd walk you through the place and show you what I'm thinking." She held up her sketchbook. "I know it's still rough, but I've mapped out the beds."

He followed her as she led him along the outer edge of the future farm. Her future farm.

Excitement bubbled up inside her. As if she had suddenly tapped into a wellspring of enthusiasm that had been buried beneath all her anxieties.

There was something about Finn that made her buzz like a bee on a particularly sweet blossom. Maybe it was the way he studied everything with such intensity, his dark eyes missing nothing as they swept across her property. Although they landed on her more often than she'd expected, sending little shivers of awareness down her spine.

She launched into her vision without hesitation. It was easy to talk about the land, the plans, the future. Easy to fill the silence. "I'm focusing mostly on heirloom varieties, dahlias, cosmos, snapdragons. And roses. Oh, and I've got a spot for tulips next year, and a section for drying flowers, too. I'd love to build a seating area under the oak tree, maybe a pergola with climbing roses. But I'm not quite sure about the slope here. I don't want rainwater pooling in the wrong place."

She paused beside a rough patch where the earth dipped slightly and turned to him, expecting a professional opinion.

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Instead, he crouched down, ran his fingers through the soil, and murmured, almost reverently, “This is good dirt.”

Elsbeth blinked. “Sorry?”

He looked up at her, a bit sheepishly. “The soil. It’s rich...dark, loamy. You’ve got good drainage here. But down there...” He pointed to the slope. “You’re right. That patch will need some terracing, maybe a French drain, to redirect runoff.”

She tilted her head, studying him more closely. “You sound different than I expected.”

His brow furrowed. “Expected?”

She chuckled. “I guess I pictured someone more...architectural.”

That drew the faintest smile from him, one corner of his mouth twitching up. “Sorry to disappoint.”

“Oh no, not at all.” She felt a flush creep up her neck. “I mean, you clearly know your stuff. And honestly, this is the kind of advice I need. Practical. Grounded.”

“Right,” he said, still sounding faintly stunned.

She couldn’t blame him, really. The property wasn’t much to look at yet. But he was kind enough not to say so, and instead gently brushed the dirt from his palms as he stood.

There was something endearing about him. A little awkward, maybe. A little...soft-spoken for a man with such broad shoulders.

She smiled, trying to shake off the faint flutter in her chest. “Would you like some lemonade before we go over the rest of the plans? We can sit at the table and I can show you my sketches...”

He opened his mouth like he was about to speak but then he snapped it shut and he turned his gaze toward the driveway.

A second car pulled up, dust trailing in its wake.

Elsbeth frowned. “Were you expecting someone else?”

The man beside her didn’t answer.

The new car door opened, and a man dressed in khakis and a windbreaker stepped out, waving as he jogged up the path.

“Elsbeth! Sorry, I’m late.”

She stared at him. Then at the man beside her. Then back again.

The puzzle pieces clicked together.

“Oh.” Elsbeth’s cheeks burned as realization sank in. She’d just spent the last fifteen minutes talking a mile a minute...to the wrong man.

Finn—theactualFinn—was striding toward them with an easy confidence. “Traffic was a nightmare,” he said, casting a questioning glance at the other guy. Whoever he was.

“That’s okay...” She turned to the man beside her. The one who’d crouched in her dirt, offered thoughtful advice, and listened with a distracted kind of gentleness. “You’re not Finn,” she whispered, almost more to herself than to him.

He cleared his throat. “No. I’m...I’m Philip.”

“Philip?” she repeated, eyes narrowing in confusion. Then she turned to Finn, who had finally reached them.

Finn stopped just short, giving her a slightly sheepish grin. “I, uh...think I might’ve sent you the wrong text, Philip.”

“You think?” Elsbeth echoed, trying not to laugh. Or cry. Her hands flailed lightly in exasperation. “I thought he was you.”

Finn pulled out his phone and scrolled, eyes widening a moment later. “Yep. I was putting the meeting in my calendar, and I sent it to Philip instead.” He winced and looked between the two of them. “Sorry, Elsbeth. Sorry, Philip.” Although the look he shot Philip lacked genuine remorse. In fact, there was something self-satisfied about it.

Philip rubbed the back of his neck, shifting awkwardly beside her. “No harm done.”

“No harm? I didn’t even let you get a word in edge-wise!” she said, flustered now. “I just kept talking like some over-caFFEinated event planner.”

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“I enjoyed listening.” Philip gave a lopsided smile. That disarmed her more than it should have.

“My brother is not a big talker, believe me,” Finn said.

Brother! She glanced between the two men, the family resemblance clearer now that they stood side by side. Although where Finn was polished and easygoing, Philip had a rougher, steadier air about him.

“Well,” Finn said, sensing the awkwardness stretching between them, “shall we take a look at your plans?”

Elsbeth nodded, eager to move the spotlight off herself. “Right. Yes. Of course.”

She turned back to Philip. “I imagine you have better things to do than be dragged into someone else’s flower farm drama. But thank you again for being so polite.”

Philip hesitated. “Actually...I don’t mind hanging around. And I might be able to help.”

Finn perked up. “Philip’s in charge of the vines over at Thornberg Vineyard. He’s the reason the wines taste as good as they do.”

“Oh.” Elsbeth blinked. That explained the dirt under his nails and the way he spoke about the land like it was an old friend. “I don’t want to put you to any trouble.”

“No trouble at all,” Philip said, and she believed him.

“I made lemonade,” she said a little too brightly and nodded toward the porch.

“Wonderful,” Finn said, with that same self-satisfied look at his brother, who rolled his eyes and shook his head.

But whatever was going on between them seemed good-natured enough. Elsbeth kind of enjoyed seeing their interactions. As an only child, family drama was something she had no actual experience with.

If only. Her throat constricted. If only she’d had a sibling, losing her mother might not have seemed so absolute. It might not have left her feeling so completely alone in this world.

The farmhouse porch was cool and shaded, the wood creaking gently beneath their feet. It needed work, but it was her favorite place to sit in the evening and look out across the farm.

“Please, sit.” She indicated the wicker chairs she’d rescued from a thrift store, their faded cushions giving them a worn-in, homey feel.

“I’ll just grab that lemonade,” Elsbeth said, ducking into the house as the two men settled into the chairs.

In the kitchen, she pressed her palms against the cool countertop and took a steadying breath. What a first impression she’d made, mistaking one brother for another and then rambling about her plans like a nervous schoolgirl. She filled three glasses with lemonade. The ice cubes clinked against the glass, and the scent of lemon and mint filled the air, bright and summery. Reminding her of long afternoons helping her mom weed her precious flowerbeds.

Elsbeth took a moment to compose herself as grief threatened to paralyze her. Then

she took a deep breath, lifted the tray of drinks, and headed back outside.

On the porch, the brothers were engaged in a quiet conversation that ceased as she approached. Philip straightened in his chair, his eyes finding hers with an intensity that made her pulse quicken.

“Here we go,” she said, handing them each a glass. “It’s my mother’s recipe.”

“Thank you,” Philip said, his fingers brushing hers as he accepted the drink. A jolt of electricity coursed through her and she nearly spilt her glass. What was it about this man?

Finn took a long sip and made an appreciative sound. “This is wonderful.”

“Thanks,” she said as she took the farthest seat away from Philip. His presence was far too unsettling. In a good way. But a way she did not need.

Elsbeth had come to Bear Creek to fulfill her mother’s dying wish of making her dreams come true. Of owning her own flower farm. Not falling for the first man who showed up at her door. Even if he did make her feel special in a way no other man ever had.

“So,” Finn said, stretching his legs out in front of him, “why don’t you walk us through your plans? Sounds like you’ve already covered a lot of ground. Figuratively and literally.”

Relieved to be getting down to business, Elsbeth nodded, set her glass down on the small table, and flipped open her sketchpad. “I’ve mapped out the entire growing area,” she said, spreading the sheets across the table. “Each bed will be around thirty inches wide, with walking paths in between. I’ve got succession planting schedules set up, zinnias, cosmos, snapdragons, you name it. But the slope here worries me.”

She pointed to a corner of the page. “Heavy rain could ruin everything before it even gets started. And then this section needs irrigation. I have the pipework in the shed, I just need advice on laying it.”

Finn leaned in, studying the sketch. “I can draw up some plans for low retaining walls here,” he said, tracing a finger along the edge. “As for this section, Philip is the man you should talk to about irrigation pipes. Philip?”

“Sure.” Philip leaned forward then, setting his glass aside. “If you don’t mind, can I see the soil there again?”

Elsbeth blinked, then nodded. “Of course.” Although it seemed strange that Finn was handing part of the job over to his brother.

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They walked a few yards out to the edge of the field, Finn a few paces behind, snapping a few reference photos on his phone. Philip crouched and pressed his fingers to the earth again, sifting it through his hands as if listening to its story.

As she watched him, something warm pooled in her chest. A deep kind of longing.

He wasn't flashy. He didn't try to impress her. But when he looked at the land, it was like watching someone listen. Like he respected it.

"You've got a lot of clay here," he said finally. "It's workable, but you'll need to add compost. Mushroom mulch. I have a contact I can give you. That'll improve the texture. You'll also want to watch for runoff from that ridge and maybe dig a swale over there." He pointed to a line that matched her own concern. "But you are right, you will need an irrigation system in place. If not, a long dry spell could ruin your plants."

Elsbeth glanced at Finn. "Did he just out-architect you?"

Finn grinned. "Happens more often than you'd think."

Philip stood, brushing his hands on his jeans. "Sorry. I didn't mean to overstep."

"You didn't," Elsbeth said quickly. "That was...helpful. Really helpful."

And it was. In more ways than one.

Finn leaned back against the fence post. "Told you he was good. Philip knows how to

read the land better than anyone I know.”

Elsbeth looked at him, really looked, and something about the way he stood, solid and quiet in the sunlight, made her heart give a traitorous little twist.

It had been so long since she’d looked at someone and felt anything.

But no. No. That wasn’t the plan.

“I appreciate the advice,” she said, forcing a lightness into her voice.

She looked out over the empty field, trying to ignore the voice in her head that told her plans could change. And that there should always be room for love.

Philip followed her gaze. “It will be beautiful,” he whispered. “You can already feel it.”

She swallowed hard.

Yes, she thought. I can.

Chapter Three – Philip

Philip could barely focus.

How could he when his mate was so close?

His mate. It all seemed so...

Unexpected, his bear offered.

Yes, Philip agreed. He thought he was coming here to meet up with his brothers to discuss their mom and dad's anniversary celebrations, and instead...

We've created our own anniversary, his bear remarked. It's the day we met our mate.

This is certainly a day we will never forget, Philip agreed.

And it's all thanks to Finn, his bear said happily.

Philip chuckled to himself, thinking about the misdirected text. Finn was definitely going to earn a reputation once people found out he had made another accidental match.

Maybe he can work the same magic for our other brothers, his bear suggested.

And himself, Philip agreed.

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But now we need to focus on how we tell Elsbeth that she is ours,his bear said.

Philip flexed his fingers against his thigh, grounding himself.We can't risk rushing this and scaring her.

But she is our mate. How can she be scared of us?his bear asked.

Patience,Philip said, glancing sideways at Elsbeth. It was going to take all his self-control not to simply reach out and pull her close. Every fiber of his being wanted to hold her in his arms, to breathe in her scent and kiss her lips.

Oh, how he wanted to kiss her lips...

“Philip?” Elsbeth’s voice broke through his thoughts. Her brow was furrowed with concern as she studied his face. “Are you sure there isn’t somewhere else you need to be...”

There is nowhere else,his bear roared in his head.Ever!

He cleared his throat. “No, I’m fine. Just...picturing...the future.”

Tell her she is our future,his bear insisted.

“I mean, how the farm will look when your dreams have had a chance to...bloom.” He winced inwardly. It was as if his brain had short-circuited.

“How about we walk the property?” Finn suggested, smothering a smile. His brother

knew exactly what was going on here. He'd known the moment he arrived at the Old Larson place and saw Philip and Elsbeth together. "Nothing like seeing things in person to understand them better."

Philip caught the subtle weight behind Finn's words. This wasn't just about learning the lay of the land, it was about learning about their mate: who she was and what she wanted. Philip nodded gratefully.

"That's a great idea," Philip managed, rising to his feet, careful not to move too quickly. The last thing he wanted was to appear overeager, despite the way his bear was practically pawing at his insides, desperate to claim their mate.

"That sounds great. I'd love to show you both the rest of the property." Elsbeth seemed hesitant as she gazed out across the overgrown fields. "Although it's still rough. I mean, you can barely tell what's what yet."

"All things start out a little rough around the edges. But we're here to help you smooth them out." Finn smiled. There was no hint of mockery in it and Philip was glad his brother was here. Finn always had a knack for knowing exactly what to say to set others at ease.

Elsbeth exhaled and nodded. "All right. Let's walk."

She led them down a narrow dirt path, pushing aside tall grass that brushed against their legs. Philip followed close behind, acutely aware of every movement she made, every breath she took. His bear rumbled contentedly inside him, reveling in their proximity.

"I'm thinking of planting sunflowers along this fence line," Elsbeth said, gesturing toward an old wooden fence that had seen better days. "They'll create a natural border and attract pollinators for the other flowers."

“Smart,” Philip said, finding his voice. “Sunflowers also help detoxify soil. But I expect you know that.”

Elsbeth shook her head as she turned to him. “I didn’t, actually. That’s fascinating.”

“They can pull heavy metals and other contaminants from the earth,” he continued, warming to the subject. Talking about plants was safe ground, familiar territory. “They’re quite remarkable.”

Like you, his bear said, practically drooling over their mate.

“This area over here,” Elsbeth said, pointing to a sheltered patch nestled against a gentle slope, “I’m thinking of dedicating to more delicate blooms. Flowers that need a bit more protection from the elements.”

Philip nodded, his expert eye assessing the location. “Good choice. The hill will block the worst of the wind, and you’ll get morning sun but afternoon shade.” He crouched down, running his fingers through the soil again. The simple act of touching the earth centered him and helped him focus despite her intoxicating nearness.

“Although, I can’t finalize my planting plan until we have set out the drainage,” Elsbeth said, directing her focus to Finn.

Philip experienced a twinge of jealousy but pushed it aside—after all, that was why they were here. For Finn to give his expert advice and draw up the plans Elsbeth needed to help turn her dreams into reality.

“I can design something efficient,” Finn replied, pulling out a small notebook from his back pocket. “Something that works with the natural contours of the land rather than against them.”

Philip watched Elsbeth's face light up as she and Finn discussed technical details. She was passionate and knowledgeable, her hands moving animatedly as she described her vision. Every gesture, every smile, every thoughtful pause only confirmed what his bear already knew...she was perfect.

Philip rose from his crouched position, brushing the soil from his hands. "What's your water source looking like?"

"There's an old well," Elsbeth said, pointing toward a spot near the barn. "And I've been told there's a natural spring somewhere on the property, though I haven't located it yet."

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A spring? Philip's interest was piqued immediately. His bear stirred with excitement, too.

"If we can find that spring," Philip said, his voice taking on a quiet intensity, "it could change everything for your irrigation plans."

Elsbeth tilted her head, studying him with such intensity it made his heart stutter. "How do we find it?"

We,his bear said, practically swooning.

"It shouldn't be too hard," Philip assured her. "And it would be worth the effort. The spring that feeds the vineyard is what helps to make our wines so successful."

Finn nodded. "It's true." His phone buzzed loudly in his pocket. "Excuse me."

"No problem," Elsbeth said as she wrapped her arms around herself and stared out across the fields.

"I need to take this," he said, and turned back toward the house, already answering the call.

Philip and Elsbeth were left alone, and for a moment the silence stretched out awkwardly between them.

Say something,his bear told him.

Like what? Philip asked.

Anything, his bear replied.

“You made a good choice,” he said, nodding toward the land. “It’s good ground. It’ll give back to you if you give it time.”

Elsbeth smiled faintly. “I hope so. It’s scary sometimes. Starting over.”

He understood that. Deeply.

“Nothing worth doing isn’t a little scary,” he said. “You’re brave for trying.”

Their eyes locked, and something heavy, sweet, and unspoken passed between them.

Philip shifted first, bending down to brush the tops of some nearby wildflowers.

“These,” he said, “are bachelor’s buttons.”

You should pick one and put it in your buttonhole, Philip’s bear said.

I don’t have a buttonhole, Philip told his bear.

“Cornflowers,” Elsbeth crouched beside him, running her fingers through the blue petals. “I’ve never heard them called bachelor’s buttons before.” Her fingers were so close to his, he could feel the warmth radiating from her skin.

He turned his hand slightly, brushing against hers. It was barely a touch. But it lit every nerve ending in his body on fire.

She didn’t pull away.

“It’s an old folk tale,” Philip murmured, barely trusting himself to speak. “It’s said that if a bachelor picks a flower and puts it in his buttonhole and it stays fresh throughout the day, the love he seeks is returned.”

Elsbeth’s eyes widened slightly, her fingers still hovering near his. “And if it wilts?”

“Then he must keep looking,” Philip said, not daring to look at her in case he gave himself away. In case she could see the longing in his eyes.

“I wonder if it works for flower farmers, too,” she said with a small smile, breaking the tension.

Philip chuckled. “I suppose you could test the theory.”

It would last for eternity, like our love, his bear said happily.

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“It would be a waste of a flower.” She brushed her fingers across the petals, then straightened. “I’m not looking for love right now.”

She might not be looking, but it’s found her anyway, Philip’s bear said.

“Yarrow,” Philip said abruptly, pointing to another plant. “For healing.”

“I need some of that,” Elsbeth said but did not elaborate. She took a couple of steps away from him and crouched down. “Forget-me-nots. For remembrance.” As she stared at the small blue flowers, her shoulders hunched, he could sense her sadness. He longed to gather her in his arms and hold her close, to kiss her forehead and promise he would chase her pain away.

“Snapdragons,” Philip said, trying to lighten the mood. “Deception.”

Elsbeth sniffed loudly and brushed her hand across her eyes as she stood up and came to join him. “Well, that’s not encouraging. Are you deceiving me, Philip?”

“Me?” he asked, his voice coming out a little high. “Never. Maybe it just means things aren’t always what they seem.”

She gave him a considering look. “Maybe.”

Every second he spent near her made it harder to think straight.

“All I know...” Philip said, then cleared his throat. “Is that wildflowers have their own wisdom. They grow where they please, or where they are needed—even when

no one plants them.”

“Like dreams,” she murmured. “They find a way, don’t they?” She looked out across the farm with such hope in her eyes it made his heart ache.

“They do,” Philip said, wishing he could know the source of her sorrow. Wishing he could make her dreams come true.

Because she had made his dreams come true just by being here.

“I should check on Finn,” Elsbeth said suddenly, breaking the spell.

Philip nodded, not trusting himself to speak. As they made their way back toward the house, he caught a whiff of her scent and his bear practically purred with delight. She smelled like sunshine and flowers and something uniquely Elsbeth that he couldn’t quite name...but he would recognize it instantly for the rest of his life.

Finn was waiting for them by the porch, his phone in his hand. “Sorry about that,” he said, flashing an apologetic smile. But Philip sensed his brother was not sorry at all. Finn had used the phone call as an excuse to leave Philip alone with his mate.

“No problem,” Elsbeth said. “Shall we go inside and go over the plans?”

“Yes,” Finn replied and shoved his phone in his pocket.

“I am going to get going,” Philip said, although he wanted nothing more than to go inside the house and never leave. But he was a distraction. It was time to leave Elsbeth alone with Finn so she could get the professional advice she needed. It was the best thing for her, even if every step away from the house would be torture. “I have some jobs that need doing before sunset.”

“Oh.” Was that disappointment in her voice? Or was he just hearing what he wanted to hear? “Well, thank you for all your help today. And for...identifying the wildflowers.”

“My pleasure,” Philip said, meaning it more than she could possibly know.

Finn shot him a look that clearly said, What are you doing?

“I’ll walk you to your truck,” Finn said pointedly.

“I’ll wait inside,” Elsbeth said. “And get those sketches ready.” She disappeared into the farmhouse, leaving the brothers alone.

“Why don’t you stay?” Finn hissed as soon as she was out of earshot. “Philip, she’s your mate. You can’t just leave. Whatever jobs need doing can wait. This is more important.”

“I know. Trust me, I know.” Philip ran a hand through his hair, his gaze fixed on the farmhouse door where Elsbeth had disappeared. “But she doesn’t know that yet. And she just said she’s not looking for love.”

“That’s what she said. But she doesn’t know what’s happening between you two,” Finn argued, keeping his voice low. “And she won’t unless you tell her.”

His bear growled in agreement, but Philip was resolute. “I need to take this slowly. She’s starting a new life here, chasing her dreams. The last thing she needs is some bear shifter telling her they’re destined to be together.”

“So your plan is to what? Just walk away?” Finn looked incredulous.

“No,” Philip sighed. “My plan is to give her space. Let her get to know me naturally.

Build something real before I spring the whole ‘we’re mates’ thing on her.”

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Finn's expression softened. "That's actually...surprisingly thoughtful."

"Don't sound so shocked," Philip muttered as they reached his truck. With a sigh, Philip glanced back at the farmhouse, his heart tugging him toward it with an almost physical force. "Tell her I'll be back tomorrow. Say I want to look for that spring."

Finn nodded. "Will do. And Philip?"

"Yeah?"

"This whole found my mate thing..." Finn grinned. "It suits you."

Chapter Four – Elsbeth

Elsbeth stared out of the kitchen window, hugging her sketchbook to her chest, and watched as the dust cloud behind Philip's truck faded into the distance. And for one wild, ridiculous heartbeat, she wished it was Philip who'd stayed instead of Finn.

The thought shocked her.

After all, she needed Finn's expert opinion on her plans for the farm. But there was something about Philip, an undeniable connection...and attraction.

She turned sharply, retreating toward the steps, scolding herself.

You're not here for a man, Elsbeth. You're here for your dream. For Mom. For yourself.

Finn was the one helping her with plans. He was the professional. The one she was supposed to focus on.

Still, as she set her sketchbook down on the table and reached for the coffee pot, she couldn't quite shake the hollow feeling Philip's absence left behind.

Focusing on making a fresh pot of coffee, she measured out the grounds with careful precision. It was a small, manageable task...unlike her thoughts, which kept wandering back to Philip's hands in the soil, the quiet intensity of his gaze when he spoke about the land.

How she liked it when he turned that intense gaze on her... And how his hands brushing hers made her stomach clench with longing...

It was as if he had cast a spell on her. One she did not want to break.

Elsbeth jumped guiltily and nearly spilled the coffee grounds as the screen door creaked open and Finn stepped inside. "Philip said to tell you he'll be back tomorrow to help locate that spring."

Her heart skipped a beat. "Oh? He doesn't need to do that."

"Trust me," Finn said with a knowing smile. "He wants to."

"That's...nice of him." Elsbeth busied herself with the coffee maker, hoping Finn couldn't see the flush creeping up her neck. "Why don't you take a seat? I'm just making coffee." As if Finn couldn't see for himself!

Finn smiled and settled himself at the kitchen table. "Coffee sounds perfect."

As the machine gurgled to life, Elsbeth busied herself gathering mugs and spoons,

grateful for the distraction.

“So,” Finn said casually, “how long have you been planning this flower farm?”

Elsbeth’s hands stilled momentarily on the cupboard door. “All my life, in a way. My mother had a garden when I was growing up, and I loved helping her plant seeds and nurture the plants. Nothing like what I’m planning here, but it was magical to me.” She pulled down two mugs and set them on the counter as a wave of emotion swept over her.

“And now you’re here making it a reality,” Finn said as he took his notebook out of his pocket and opened it up.

“Yes.” She swallowed past the sudden tightness in her throat. “At least, trying to.”

“Okay, I’m here to help make your dream a reality.”

Did he have any idea that he already had, by bringing Philip into her life?

She shook off that thought as she poured the coffee. There could be no distractions. None at all. Especially none with broad shoulders and eyes that seemed to see into the depths of her soul.

“Where do we start?” Elsbeth asked as she set two steaming mugs of coffee down on the table.

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“You have sketches?” Finn asked.

“I do.” She flipped open her sketchbook, and as they discussed fencing materials, gate placements, and irrigation lines, Elsbeth found herself relaxing slightly.

Finn was good at what he did. Extremely thorough without being overwhelming, suggesting smart, cost-effective solutions without talking down to her.

“Okay,” he finally said as he flipped his notebook closed. “I think I have everything I need for now. I suggest you start on the irrigation system first. If you find the spring, we can tweak the plans. If not, the system we’ve designed will still work just fine.”

“Thanks, Finn,” Elsbeth said with some relief at his confident tone.

“No, thank you for making my job easier. You have good instincts.” He tapped her hand-drawn map. “The way you laid things out has saved me a lot of work.”

Elsbeth flushed, a little embarrassed but pleased. “I’m just hoping it’ll work out.”

Finn gave her a long, steady look. “It will. You’ve already done the hardest part.”

She tilted her head, curious. “What’s that?”

He smiled. “You believed enough to try.”

Her eyes misted with tears. It had felt like anything but brave most days. Half the time, she still worried she was making a fool of herself, chasing a dream better suited

to someone stronger. Someone less...breakable. Because a part of her was broken. And she didn't know how to heal.

"Thank you for saying that," she whispered, tracing her finger along the edge of her mug. "Sometimes I wonder if I've bitten off more than I can chew."

Finn leaned back in his chair. "That's how all good dreams feel. Too big, too much."

"Yeah, you're right," Elsbeth agreed. "I guess it feels scary because I barely know anyone in town yet."

"You know me," Finn said with a friendly smile. "And Philip."

Her cheeks warmed at the mention of Philip's name. "I suppose I do."

"Trust me, knowing Philip is like having a whole army on your side. He's the most reliable person I know." Finn cracked a grin. She loved the way he spoke about his brother. There was a genuine love there—she could feel it.

"Are you saying I should thank you for sending him the wrong text?" she asked lightly.

"What can I say?" Finn leaned back, crossing his arms loosely. "Sometimes life gives you more than you planned for. And in this instance, it's Philip."

She looked away, pretending to study the fields beyond the porch. "I'm not looking for anything except a fresh start."

"You might not say that when Philip finds that spring for you," Finn said, a small smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

“I would have to agree with you,” Elsbeth admitted with a soft laugh. “A spring would make things so much easier.”

“Exactly. Philip has this uncanny ability to read the land. It’s like he can sense what’s beneath the surface.” Finn gathered his notes, sliding them into his pocket. “Our grandfather was the same way.”

“Is that why he works with the vines at your family vineyard?” Elsbeth asked, curious to learn more about Philip.

“Partly. But it’s more than that.” Finn’s expression grew thoughtful. “Philip has this connection to growing things that goes beyond knowledge or experience. He understands them. Nurtures them.” He paused, giving her a meaningful look. “Not just vines, either.”

Elsbeth felt heat rising to her cheeks again. Was Finn implying something?

“Well,” she said, clearing her throat, “I appreciate his help. And yours.”

Finn stood, stretching slightly. “I should head out. I’ll draw up those plans and get them to you by the end of the week.” He hesitated at the door. “And Elsbeth? Bear Creek has a way of giving people exactly what they need, even when they don’t know they need it.”

With that cryptic comment, he headed down the porch steps, leaving Elsbeth to wonder what exactly he meant. She stood there watching him as he got into his car and, with one last wave, drove away, leaving her alone.

As she went back inside, the farmhouse felt too big, too empty. So instead, she went back outside, picked up her spade, and headed toward her newly designated dahlia beds. There was work to be done, and dwelling on mysterious comments from Finn,

or the way Philip's eyes crinkled when he spoke about the land, wouldn't get her flowers planted.

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The evening sun warmed her shoulders as she broke ground on the first bed. This was why she was here. This was the dream.

“What do you think, Mom?” she whispered, pausing to wipe sweat from her brow. “Is this what you imagined for me?”

The breeze rustled through the tall grass, carrying no answer but bringing the scent of wildflowers—those bachelor’s buttons Philip had shown her. She smiled despite herself, remembering the way he’d explained the old folk tale, his voice low and gentle.

By the time the sun began to dip toward the horizon, Elsbeth had marked out three beds and turned the soil in one. Her muscles ached pleasantly from the work, a reminder that she was doing something real, something tangible. That her flower farm was not simply a dream anymore.

She leaned on her spade, surveying her progress with satisfaction. Tomorrow she would work on the next bed...until Philip came.

Would he come and help her find the spring? Or had he simply been polite? The thought of him not returning made her heart sink in a way that was both surprising and unsettling.

As darkness settled over the farm, Elsbeth reluctantly gathered her tools and headed inside. The old farmhouse creaked and settled around her as she showered off the day’s dirt and sweat, her mind still out in the fields, planning and dreaming.

After toweling her hair dry, Elsbeth slipped into her soft cotton robe and padded toward her bedroom. The floorboards creaked beneath her bare feet as she moved through the shadowy hallway.

Suddenly, she froze mid-step.

A tingling sensation crawled up her spine, raising the fine hairs at the nape of her neck. She shivered, despite the lingering warmth from her shower. Something felt...different. The air in the room seemed to thicken as if charged with invisible energy.

Elsbeth clutched her robe tighter around her body, pulling the belt into a firmer knot. Her heartbeat quickened as she moved cautiously toward the bedroom window.

She pushed the curtains aside and peered into the darkness, eyes straining to make out shapes in the moonlit yard. The fields stretched out before her, silver-blue in the moonlight, peaceful and still.

Nothing. Just shadows and starlight.

And yet...

She couldn't shake the feeling that she wasn't alone. That someone—or something—was out there, watching. But strangely, the sensation didn't feel threatening. Not at all.

Elsbeth pressed her palm against the cool glass, her breath creating a small cloud of condensation. "Is someone there?" she whispered, though she knew no human ears could hear her through the closed window.

The night remained still, but the feeling persisted. A watchful presence, attentive

and...protective. That was the word that surfaced in her mind. Whatever was out there wasn't meant to frighten her. If anything, it felt more like a guardian.

"Mom?" The word escaped her lips before she could stop it, soft and hopeful. Her mother had always promised she'd watch over her, even after she was gone. Was this her spirit, keeping an eye on her daughter's new beginning?

But as she gazed deeper into the darkness, a realization washed over her. This presence didn't have her mother's gentle energy. It was something else entirely, something wilder, more primal. Yet somehow...familiar.

Elsbeth leaned her forehead against the cool glass, tears welling in her eyes. The ache of missing her mother mingled with this strange new feeling, overwhelming her senses.

Movement caught her eye. There, among the moonlit wildflowers, a shadow shifted. A large, bulky form moved with surprising grace through the field, pausing occasionally as if scenting the air. Her breath caught in her throat. Was she seeing a ghost? Some spirit of the land?

The creature stopped abruptly, as if sensing her gaze, and turned toward the house. Two eyes reflected the moonlight, looking directly at her window.

A bear!

In that moment, something passed between them, a connection that resonated through her entire body. It was the same inexplicable feeling she'd experienced when Philip's fingers had brushed against hers in the field, that same electric current of recognition.

Elsbeth took a sudden step backward, her hand releasing the curtain, which fell back into place with a soft swish. Her heart thudded in her chest as she pressed her hand

against her mouth, an unexpected burst of laughter escaping between her fingers.

“I’m losing my mind,” she whispered to the empty room, her laughter edged with something like hysteria. “Completely losing it.”

First Philip, now imaginary bears prowling through her wildflowers? The stress of moving, of starting over, of carrying her mother’s dreams on her shoulders...it was clearly taking its toll. She was seeing connections where there were none, feeling things that couldn’t possibly be real.

But deep down, she knew. What she felt was real. The connection to Philip...the bear...

It was more real than anything she had ever known.

Yeah, she was surely going crazy. But if this was what crazy felt like...she’d take it.

Chapter Five – Philip

As Philip drove home, he replayed every moment of their encounter with Elsbeth. The way she gestured with her hands when explaining her vision for the flower beds, the slight furrow between her brows when she concentrated, the depth of sadness that shadowed her eyes when she spoke of remembrance.

We shouldn't have left, his bear grumbled as Philip pulled into the vineyard's long driveway.

We needed to, Philip replied softly. She needs space.

She needs us, his bear countered.

Philip couldn't argue with that. Every cell in his body ached to turn around, to race back to the Old Larson place and tell Elsbeth everything. That they were meant to be together. That fate had brought them together because that was exactly where they were meant to be.

But he knew better. Some flowers needed time to bloom.

The hacienda-style house came into view. The sight always filled him with a sense of pride and belonging. Tonight, though, the feeling was different, bittersweet, almost. As if this were his past, while his future lay back at the Old Larson place.

The same place where he'd left his heart—with Elsbeth.

He parked his truck and sat for a moment, hands still gripping the steering wheel.

We should go back,his bear said mournfully.

We'll see her tomorrow,he replied, trying to placate his restless bear.

Tomorrow is too far away,his bear protested.

Philip glanced at the dashboard clock. 7:15 PM. Later than he'd planned, and he'd likely missed dinner. But his mom would have left him a plate.

Are you going to tell them?his bear demanded.This isn't the kind of news we should keep to ourselves, especially since Finn knows already.

You're right. We should tell Mom and Dad before anyone else does,Philip said, climbing out of the truck and heading toward the house. He loved Finn dearly, but he doubted his brother could keep news this big to himself.

Philip crossed to the house and climbed the porch steps. His hand froze on the doorknob, a sudden wave of nervousness washing over him.

This is it,he murmured.Once I walk through this door, they'll know.

I don't know if it'll be theinstantyou open the door. But they'll know something's up theinstantthey see your face,his bear said with a chuckle.

What's wrong with my face?Philip rubbed his hand over his face, worried he'd been walking around with dirt smudged across his cheeks.

Nothing's wrong with it,his bear assured him.But you've got that struck by lightning look written all over it.

I feel like I've been struck by lightning, Philip admitted, drawing a deep breath before pushing the door open.

He stepped inside, and the familiar scent of his mother's cooking greeted him, but he kept his gaze fixed on the scrubbed-clean floorboards. Through his lowered lashes, he could see his parents at the kitchen table, sharing a bottle of their latest vintage, two half-empty glasses between them.

"Philip?" His mother's voice carried a note of concern. "Is everything all right?"

Told you, his bear said smugly.

Philip nodded wordlessly as he bent to remove his boots, setting them carefully by the door.

"Are you sure?" Leanne pressed, her brow furrowing. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

Not a ghost. His bear practically purred. Our mate.

"Something...something happened," Philip managed, his voice catching in his throat.

Hugo stood quickly, alarm spreading across his features. "There's been an accident?"

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“No, no,” Philip assured him hastily. He crossed to the table and sank into an empty chair, the room tilting slightly around him as he tried to gather his thoughts.

“Oh my,” Hugo murmured, dropping back into his seat.

“What is it?” Leanne glanced between her husband and son.

Hugo’s expression softened. “It’s happened again.”

“What has happened again?” Leanne asked, though something in her eyes suggested she already knew.

“Our son has found his mate,” Hugo said simply.

Leanne’s eyes widened. “He has?” She turned to Philip, hope blooming on her face. “You have?”

Philip nodded, a smile finally breaking through. “I have.”

Hugo clapped his hands together with delight. “I knew it!”

“How could you possibly know?” Leanne asked, though her cheeks had turned a delicate shade of pink.

Hugo reached across the table and took his wife’s hand. “That look on his face. It’s the same one I wore when I first met you.”

“The same one Kris had,” Philip added, finding his voice at last. “I never understood it until now.”

Leanne squeezed Hugo’s hand before releasing it to pour Philip a glass of wine. “Tell us everything. Who is she? How did you meet?”

Philip accepted the glass gratefully, taking a sip to steady himself. The rich notes of blackberry and oak grounded him, reminding him of his place in this family, in this legacy.

“Her name is Elsbeth,” he said, the name feeling like honey on his tongue. “She bought the Old Larson place. She’s starting a flower farm.”

“The Old Larson place?” Hugo’s eyebrows shot up. “That’s going to take some work...”

“I believe she’s more than equal to the task,” Philip said, a note of pride coloring his voice. “You should see her sketches. She knows exactly what she’s doing.”

“And how exactly did you end up at the Old Larson place?” Leanne asked, leaning forward with interest.

Don’t tell her about the surprise anniversary party, his bear reminded him.

I won’t, Philip replied.

Just checking, his bear said. Right now, you look like you’ve been hit over the head by a bag full of fairy dust.

Philip chuckled, shaking his head. “Finn. He accidentally sent me a text meant for himself. About meeting Elsbeth to discuss him drawing up plans for the farm.”

Hugo laughed, the sound warm and full of unbridled happiness for his son. “That boy and his mix-ups! First Kris and Cassia, now you and Elsbeth.”

“Maybe we should put him in charge of matchmaking for all your brothers—and your cousins,” Leanne suggested with a twinkle in her eye.

“Why stop there?” Hugo said. “He could be the town matchmaker!”

“So does she know?” Leanne asked.

“No,” Philip admitted quietly, his fingers tracing the rim of his wineglass. “At least not as far as I know. I mean, about us being mates. Or shifters. Or any of it.”

His parents exchanged a knowing look, as they often did. They were so attuned to each other that Philip and his brothers had often joked they could read each other’s thoughts.

“Ah,” Hugo nodded. “So you’re taking it slow.”

“I have to,” Philip said. “She’s new to Bear Creek. Starting a business. The last thing she needs is...”

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“A bear shifter declaring his undying love?” Leanne finished, her lips twitching with amusement.

Philip felt heat rise to his cheeks. “Something like that.”

We would do it with more dignity than that, his bear grumbled.

We might...when my head clears, Philip said, rubbing his temples. His bear might be right about having a head full of fairy dust. It was as if he were floating along on a cloud.

“So, what’s the plan?” Hugo asked, always looking for a practical solution.

“I’m going back tomorrow,” Philip replied. “She has a spring somewhere on her property. I offered to help find it.”

“Smart,” Hugo approved. “Lead with your strengths. Show her your talents.”

“You’ll need your strength if you’re going to be wooing a mate.” Leanne stood and moved to the oven, pulling out a covered plate. The rich aroma of pot roast and roasted vegetables filled the kitchen as she set it before Philip.

“I’m not wooing...” Philip began, then stopped at his mother’s raised eyebrow. “Fine. Maybe I am.”

A wooing we will go! His bear purred with satisfaction.

“I just don’t want to blow it with Elsbeth,” Philip said after taking a few bites.

“Why would you?” Leanne asked as she sat back down and picked up her wine glass, watching her son eat.

Philip paused, his fork hovering over his plate. “I don’t know. But Elsbeth seemed...sad at times. Like she’s carrying a heavy burden.”

Leanne’s expression softened. “New beginnings often come from painful endings.”

Philip nodded, remembering the way Elsbeth had touched the forget-me-nots, the shadow that had passed over her face.

“Just be patient,” Hugo advised. “When she’s ready, she’ll share her burdens with you.”

“And until then?” Philip asked.

“Until then, you be the steady ground beneath her feet,” Leanne said simply. “Sometimes that’s all anyone needs to bloom.”

Philip smiled at his mother’s choice of words. How fitting for his flower-farming mate.

“I can do that,” Philip said, warmth spreading through his chest at his mother’s wisdom. “Be the steady ground.”

“And find her spring,” Hugo added with a wink. “Nothing says ‘I’m your mate’ like finding water.”

Philip laughed despite himself. “I’m not sure that’s in any of the old legends.”

“Should be,” his father replied, raising his glass. “To Philip and Elsbeth.”

“To Philip and Elsbeth,” Leanne echoed, her eyes shining with unshed tears of joy.

Philip raised his own glass, the wine catching the light. “To new beginnings,” he murmured.

“So, do you have any clue where this spring is?” Hugo asked as he set his glass down.

“Nope. I just hope I can find it for her,” Philip replied, his mind already mapping the contours of Elsbeth’s land, trying to pinpoint where water might flow beneath the surface.

His bear stirred restlessly. We will find it. It’ll be our gift to her.

“You will,” Leanne said with such certainty that Philip couldn’t help but believe her. “And speaking of gifts, I think I might put together a little welcome basket for your Elsbeth. Some preserves, maybe some of that lavender honey from last season’s harvest.”

“Mom,” Philip protested weakly, “she’s not my Elsbeth.”

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Not yet, his bear added smugly. But soon.

“Semantics.” Leanne waved her hand dismissively. “Fate has spoken. She’s yours, you’re hers. The rest is just...formalities.”

Hugo chuckled. “Your mother has always been a romantic.”

“And you’ve always pretended not to be,” Leanne countered with a fond smile.

“Well, at least when Philip has found this spring at the Old Larson place and Elsbeth has grown her flowers, I’ll know where to go for the perfect bouquet for my wife.” He caught hold of her hand and kissed it.

Philip watched his parents’ easy banter, the way they moved in perfect harmony even after so many years together. This was what being mates meant. This enduring connection.

It was what awaited him with Elsbeth, if he could just be patient enough to let it unfold naturally.

“I think I’ll turn in early,” Philip said, finishing the last bite of his dinner. “Tomorrow’s going to be a big day.”

“Of course it is,” Leanne agreed, standing to take his empty plate. She pressed a kiss to the top of his head as she passed. “Sleep well, my son.”

“I’ll try.” But as Philip climbed the stairs to his bedroom, exhaustion and excitement

battled within him. He'd barely closed his door before his bear was pacing restlessly inside him.

We should go back tonight, his bear insisted. Just to check on her.

You mean to check she's real? Philip said.

His bear huffed. The longer we are apart, the more I begin to worry that it was all a dream.

Then let's go.

Philip headed back downstairs and out of the front door, avoiding the kitchen, not wanting to talk to anyone. All he wanted was to run on four paws to the Old Larson place and bask in the nearness of their mate.

As he closed the door behind him, he shifted, the air crackling and popping as he let go of the world. An instant later, his bear took his place and ran through the vineyard, the vines a blur as he dodged between the neat rows. The night welcomed him like an old friend, the darkness no barrier to his keen vision. His paws barely touched the ground as he raced, each powerful stride carrying him closer to her.

The vineyard gave way to forest as he climbed higher into the mountains, taking the most direct route to the Old Larson place. Pine needles cushioned his steps, branches parting as if making way for his urgent journey. The forest itself seemed to whisper encouragement, the rustling leaves urging him onward.

Go to her, they seemed to say. Run, bear, run.

His heart thundered in his chest, matching the rhythm of his pounding paws. The cool night air filled his lungs as he ran faster than he had in years, perhaps faster than he

ever had before. This was no casual lope through familiar territory. This was purpose. This was destiny.

As he crested the final ridge, her presence hit him like a physical force. Elsbeth. His mate. The recognition surged through him, primal and undeniable. He pushed harder, muscles burning with exertion, lungs heaving.

The trees thinned, revealing the moonlit expanse of the Old Larson place. Her property. Their future. He slowed at the edge of the wild meadow, suddenly conscious of his thundering heart and labored breathing. He needed to calm himself, to savor this moment.

Philip's bear moved with deliberate steps now, crossing through knee-high grasses and wildflowers that bent gently beneath his weight. Bachelor's buttons and forget-me-nots brushed against his fur as he padded forward.

The farmhouse stood silhouetted against the starry sky, a single light glowing from an upstairs window. Her window. He knew without question which room held his mate. He could feel her presence like a beacon calling him home.

He stopped in the middle of the field, sitting back on his haunches, content for now just to be near her. To stand guard over her dreams. To breathe the same air.

Movement caught his attention as the curtain shifted. His breath caught as Elsbeth appeared at the window, her silhouette framed by the soft light behind her. She was looking directly at him.

Their eyes met across the moonlit field, and in that moment, Philip knew with bone-deep certainty that she felt it, too.

The connection.

The pull.

The mate bond that hummed between them like a living thing.

A profound calm washed over him as the curtain slowly slid back into place.

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She had seen him. Known him.

That was enough for tonight.

Chapter Six – Elsbeth

The soft glow of dawn slipped through the old lace curtains that still hung at the window, waking Elsbeth before her alarm had a chance.

For a moment, she simply lay still, listening to the creaks and sighs of the farmhouse settling around her.

She felt...better. More rested than she had been in weeks.

Yet something lingered at the edges of her mind, the memory of last night, the unmistakable sensation of a presence just beyond her window. Had it really been a bear, or had her eyes been playing tricks on her?

But if it had been a bear, it hadn't frightened her. If anything, it had felt reassuring, as if a guardian was keeping an eye on her.

Was she crazy to think her mother was the one out there somewhere, watching over her?

Yes, was the answer from the voice in her head.

And even though the idea that her mom might be watching over her comforted her,

made her feel less alone, the idea that her mom was not resting in peace did not.

She shivered and sat up, shaking the feeling off. This was no time for ghost stories.

She had work to do.

Swinging her legs out of bed, she stretched and breathed in the cool morning air that carried the faint scent of dew and wildflowers.

Today was about progress. It was about taking those first tentative steps toward building the life she had promised herself. And her mother.

Grabbing a hair tie from the nightstand, she quickly braided her hair and pulled on jeans and a worn flannel shirt.

It was her mother's shirt, faded from years of wear and sun-bleached in patches, but still soft against her skin. She breathed in deeply, catching the faintest hint of her mother's scent that somehow lingered in the fabric despite countless washings.

Wearing it always gave her comfort. Gave her confidence in herself. It was almost like armor against any self-doubt she might feel. Her mom had always been her greatest cheerleader.

Elsbeth stifled a sob. How she wished her mom were here by her side. This new beginning would be so much easier if she were not alone.

For a moment, she stood in the center of the room, her arms wrapped around her body, hugging the flannel close as if it could somehow bring her mother back. But her mom was gone, and all the wishing in the world wouldn't change that.

The one thing she could change was her life. Her fate. Which meant she had to get on

with her day and start working her way through the long list of jobs that needed completing before her dream could become a reality.

And that list needed prioritizing.

She hurried downstairs and put on a fresh pot of coffee. While it brewed, she opened the back door and let in the new morning. The sound of birdsong always cheered her up, and the birds on the farm sure knew how to sing.

With a freshly poured cup of coffee in one hand and her trusty notebook in the other, she padded outside in socked feet to sit on the worn steps of the back porch. The dew-soaked grass glistened in the early light, and a gentle mist hovered just above the ground, giving the fields a dreamlike quality.

This was her favorite time of day, when the world felt made anew and full of possibility.

Elsbeth flipped open her notebook, a pencil hovering over a fresh page as she sighed contentedly. Then she set to work.

The list grew quickly. Repair the chicken coop, clear the overgrown garden beds nearest the house, and call about getting the tractor serviced. Small tasks that would add up to something bigger. Something that would honor her mother's memory and the promise Elsbeth had made.

But the biggest task for the day involved the irrigation system—or lack of one.

Without water, her flowers would die. And her dream would die with them.

Her gaze drifted to the road, searching for Philip's truck. Would he come back today to help her find the spring? Or had he forgotten about her already?

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Ugh. Since when had she become the kind of woman who waited around for a man to help her? Finn had confirmed what she already knew: that the irrigation system was a priority. So today, she would make a start on it. If Philip came back, if he found the spring, that would be a bonus. If not, she would search for it herself. And, if she didn't find it, she'd simply return to her original plan of using water from the well.

However things turned out, she needed to get the pipes in place.

Turning to a fresh page in her notebook, Elsbeth sketched out a rough outline of the property and then carefully added dotted lines where the main irrigation pipes would run, branching into the future flower beds.

As she stared at the sketch, her stomach lurched. It was a big job. And she was only one woman.

In an ideal world, she would pay someone to do the work. But this was not an ideal world, and her funds only stretched so far.

You can do it, her mom's voice said in her head, repeating the same advice she had always given her daughter in life, when challenges seemed too great.

"I can do it," Elsbeth whispered to herself, taking a sip of her coffee.

She'd watched her mother tackle far bigger problems on her own. Elsbeth wasn't always sure if that stubbornness was admirable or foolish, but she'd inherited it all the same.

So, she set to work. By midday, she had crossed the smaller jobs off her to-do list. After a lunch of freshly picked tomatoes from the garden, coupled with locally made cheese and freshly baked bread, Elsbeth stood at the edge of the field, surveying the land that would soon—hopefully—be awash with color.

Hers.

With a satisfied smile, Elsbeth headed to the shed and opened it to reveal an array of pipes and other equipment. Time to get to work.

The first roll of tubing was heavier than she'd expected, and she paused to catch her breath. Maybe she should hire some help after all. But no, this was her farm. Her dream. She could handle a little manual labor.

As she stood wiping her brow, the distant rumble of an engine caught her attention. A familiar blue pickup was making its way up the winding dirt road toward her property.

Her heart skipped a beat. Philip.

She watched as the truck pulled up beside the barn, and Philip got out. He wore a simple white T-shirt that contrasted with his tanned skin and faded jeans that had clearly seen their share of manual work.

“You started without me,” he called out as he strode toward her.

Elsbeth straightened, suddenly conscious of her appearance. Her hair escaping from her braid, dirt smudged across her cheek, her mother's flannel shirt damp with sweat.

“I wasn't sure you'd come back,” she admitted, brushing a strand of hair from her face.

Philip's expression grew serious. "I said I would, didn't I? A Thornberg always keeps his word." He gestured toward the tubing. "Besides, this is a two-person job, at minimum."

"I was managing," she said, though the ache in her shoulders suggested otherwise.

"I'm sure you were," he said, with no hint of teasing. "But why don't we go look for this spring first?"

"Sure," she replied. She could come back to the heavy pipe later in the day when the heat had eased.

"Do you have a map of the property?" Philip asked, his eyes scanning the landscape with practiced ease.

"I do," Elsbeth nodded. "It's in the house. Let me grab it."

She hurried inside, grateful for a moment to collect herself. Her heart was racing, and not just from the physical exertion of moving pipes. There was something about Philip's presence that made her feel both unsettled and completely at ease. A contradiction that both confused and intrigued her.

And there was something else. Something she wasn't sure she was ready to admit.

When she returned with the map, Philip was still scanning the farm, his hands on his hips. For a moment, she stood with the map in her hands, staring at him. Then he turned to face her, a broad smile on his face.

"I have the map." She held it up, hoping he hadn't noticed her staring.

"Okay, let's take a look." He nodded toward his truck.

“Sure.” She opened the map and spread it across the hood of his truck.

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“Springs typically follow the natural contours of the land,” he explained, moving to stand beside her. “They’re drawn to low points, but they originate from higher ground.”

“Makes sense.” Elsbeth was acutely aware of how close Philip was to her.

His finger traced the topographical lines, his touch deliberate and sure. “If I were a spring, I’d be somewhere...here.” He tapped a spot near the eastern boundary where the property dipped into a gentle hollow.

“Great. Let’s go take a look,” Elsbeth said, folding up the map.

“Okay.” Philip smiled, a gentle curve of his lips that made her stomach flutter. “Let’s go.”

They set off across the field, walking side by side through the tall grass. Wildflowers nodded in the breeze around them, and Elsbeth found herself stealing glances at Philip’s profile as he walked with quiet confidence.

“You seem to know a lot about water,” she ventured.

“Water is life,” he replied simply. “Especially when you’re growing things.”

“Is that why you work with the vines? Because you like to help things grow?” she asked as they walked through the field of wildflowers.

Philip’s pace slowed slightly. “Partly. There’s something about helping things grow

that gets under your skin. And your fingernails..." He glanced at her. "I imagine you understand that."

She did. Deeply. "I inherited it from my mom."

"Your mom taught you well," Philip said as they went through a gate at the top of the field and headed toward a stand of trees. "She must be a wise woman."

"She was." The words caught in Elsbeth's throat.

Philip stopped walking, turning to face her fully. "Was?"

Elsbeth nodded, unable to meet his eyes. "Cancer. Last year."

"I'm sorry," he said, as if he could feel her sorrow.

"That's why I'm here," Elsbeth admitted, surprised at herself for sharing something so personal. "She knew I always dreamed of owning a flower farm, but life got in the way. When she got sick, I promised her I'd make it happen."

Philip was quiet for a moment. "This is a beautiful tribute to your mom."

"If I can pull it off," she said with a nervous laugh.

"You will," he said with such certainty that she believed it, too. It was as if his confidence and encouragement gave her courage.

"I will if we can find this spring," she said lightly. The last thing she wanted was to burst into tears in front of Philip.

"Then we'd better find it," Philip said, nodding toward the rise ahead of them. "I

think our best bet is to head up there first.”

As they climbed higher, the land began to slope upward more steeply. The wild grasses gave way to rockier terrain, dotted with clusters of pine and aspen. Philip moved with sure-footed confidence, occasionally pausing to examine the ground or a particular formation of rocks.

Elsbeth breathed harder as they ascended, but the exertion felt good, purposeful. When they reached a small clearing, she turned back to look at her farm spread out below them.

“Great view, huh?” Philip asked, coming to stand beside her.

“Sometimes I have to pinch myself to make sure I’m not dreaming,” she admitted, taking in the patchwork of fields, the weathered barn, and the farmhouse with its faded blue paint.

“Me, too,” he said, and gave her a look she couldn’t quite decipher. One so intense and meaningful that it made her heart stutter strangely in her chest.

“Listen!” He suddenly held up his finger, his head tilted slightly.

Elsbeth strained her ears. “I don’t hear anything other than the breeze through the trees.”

“Come on.” He held out his hand to her, and she took it without hesitation, his warm palm engulfing hers.

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Together they headed higher, skirting around the trees, and then he cut across a small outcrop of rock. He moved like a bloodhound on a scent, walking with such certainty that Elsbeth struggled to keep up. If he could hear water from this distance, he must have superhuman hearing.

But then, faint but unmistakable, she heard it, too. The softest trickle of water over stone.

“I hear it!” she said excitedly, squeezing his hand.

Philip half-turned to look at her and grinned, his eyes crinkling at the corners. “I told you I would find it.”

“You must have a sixth sense,” Elsbeth said, shaking her head in wonder.

“What would you say if I told you I did?” Philip asked, and she swore he was serious.

“I’d believe you,” she said, equally serious. Because of the way he made her feel, she would trust him. Whatever he said, whatever he did. Which was the strangest thing since she barely knew him. And yet it felt as if she had known him all her life.

Philip’s eyes widened slightly, as if her answer surprised him. Then his expression softened into something that made her breath catch.

“It’s just up ahead,” he said quietly, still holding her hand as they navigated around a cluster of boulders.

The sound grew louder as they approached, and then suddenly, there it was, a small, crystal-clear spring bubbling up from between rocks, forming a narrow stream.

“I can hardly believe it!” Elsbeth said as she reluctantly let go of his hand and kneeled beside the spring, cupping her hand to catch the water. The liquid sparkled in her palm, pure and pristine.

“It’s probably from a similar source to the one at the vineyard,” he replied, scooping up a handful and taking a drink. “Tastes like it.”

She took a sip of the water. It was cool, refreshing, and laced with minerals. “It’s wonderful,” she murmured, and she didn’t just mean the water, but the man beside her. Something about Philip felt as natural and necessary as the spring itself.

“We can lay the irrigation pipes and use the water for your flowers,” Philip explained, his voice deep against the musical backdrop of the flowing water.

“But won’t that cut off the water from wherever it goes?” she asked, suddenly concerned.

“Some,” he replied, “but we don’t take all of it. We just use what we need.”

There it was—we, as if they were truly in this together, as if she were not alone.

Elsbeth sat down on the grass and hugged her knees to her chest as she watched the water trickle over stones into a pool. It was tempting to take her shoes off and dip her feet in the water, but that seemed too childlike. And she was not a child. Not when Philip was around. He made her feel all woman.

“I can’t thank you enough,” she finally said as she drew her gaze from the water and looked at him.

Philip shook his head as he sat down beside her, his thigh nestled against hers. His touch sent an electric current through her body.

“I want this to work out for you, Elsbeth. I want you to fulfill the promise you made to your mom.” He took a breath and then added, “I want you to be happy.”

And in that moment, she was. Completely and utterly.

The realization washed over her like the spring water over stones, gentle but unmistakable. For the first time since her mother’s passing, Elsbeth felt a genuine sense of contentment, of possibility. It was as if the water had washed away all her fears.

Or maybe it was the knowledge that Philip had her back. That if ever she needed him, he would be there for her. No question. No hesitation.

“You know,” she said, “when I bought this place, everyone told me I was crazy. That it was too much for one person to handle.” She traced patterns in the grass with her fingertip. “Sometimes I believed them.”

Philip’s gaze remained steady on her face. “And now?”

“Now I’m starting to think that maybe I’m not as alone as I thought.” She glanced at him, then quickly away, heat rising to her cheeks.

“You’re not alone, Elsbeth.” He bumped his shoulder against hers. “But those irrigation lines are not going to lay themselves.”

“They are not,” she said with a smile.

“So, let’s go do some work.” He sprang up lithely and held his hand out to her.

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When she placed her hand in his, that now-familiar shock of recognition shot up her arm. And when she looked into his eyes, she knew he felt it, too.

But there was something more in his eyes. Something deeper.

A secret.

One he longed to share.

Chapter Seven – Philip

The afternoon had passed in a haze of steady work. They had hauled the irrigation pipes into place and made a list of everything else they would need to make use of the spring.

He'd enjoyed the work. Seeing a plan come together had always given him a thrill. But the real thrill had come from seeing Elsbeth so darn happy.

Her smile makes me smile. Her laughter makes me laugh. His bear chuckled.

I know exactly what you mean, Philip said as he packed up the last of the tools into the back of his truck.

And now it's time to go, his bear said forlornly.

Philip sighed as he shut the truck. But then he had an idea and turned to Elsbeth with a glint in his eye.

“You know what this calls for?” he asked.

Elsbeth lifted an eyebrow. “A nap?”

He chuckled. “Close. A reward.”

“A reward?” she repeated, her eyes narrowing.

He nodded seriously. “Yep. Hard work deserves celebration.”

“And what exactly did you have in mind?”

Philip just grinned and jerked his thumb toward the passenger seat of his truck. “Trust me.”

Elsbeth hesitated, and for a moment he thought she was going to say no.

“All right,” she said, casting him a sidelong look. “I’m trusting you. But you had better not let me down.”

“Never.” Philip’s grin widened, lighting up his whole face. “I promise you won’t regret it.”

He ran around to the driver’s side of the truck and climbed in. A moment later, they were driving away from the Old Larson place and heading toward town.

But as they drove, Philip’s excitement waned, leaving him feeling jittery.

Not nervous, exactly.

More...uneasy. Restless in his own skin.

The reason for that nervous energy threading through his veins sat beside him in the passenger seat. Elsbeth.

So close, all he had to do was reach out, and he'd touch her.

No wonder you are restless, his bear said, feeling that same jitteriness.

As she sat there with her hands loosely folded in her lap, gazing out at the passing landscape, she was so close and yet still so far.

Until he told her about their connection, about the bond they shared, she would never be close enough. Never know how deeply he felt about her. How the sight of her smile made his chest ache with longing.

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One day. One day very soon, she'll know,his bear purred, so content it made Philip smile without meaning to.

One day soon,Philip repeated.As long as she doesn't ditch us when she learns the truth.

Why would she, when we fit together so perfectly?his bear rumbled lazily.Like she's always been a part of us, a part of our lives.

Philip tightened his grip on the wheel, hoping his bear was right. He didn't want to scare her off by moving too fast.

It'll be fine,his bear assured him.Just remember—patience. Respect.

His bear was right. It was how he'd been raised and how he'd lived his life so far, and there was no reason to change.

Even if everything had changed, now thatshewas here.

Philip couldn't help himself as he sneaked another glance at her, just to make sure she was real. That his mate wasn't something he'd conjured from his imagination. Because she was everything he had always imagined.

She caught him looking and lifted a brow, an amused tilt to her mouth.

“You planning to tell me where we're going?” she asked lightly.

Philip chuckled. “Nope. It’s a surprise.”

She mock-sighed, leaning back against the seat. “I’m not sure I signed up for surprise adventures when I agreed to trust you.”

“You’ll like it,” Philip said, grinning. “I promise.”

He watched the familiar fields roll by and allowed himself to relax a little.

This—being beside his mate, sharing these simple moments—felt better than anything he could remember.

Still, a flicker of doubt crept in.

He cleared his throat, glancing sideways at her again. What if he was wrong?

He’d promised her she’d like the surprise, but she had a lot of work to do at the farm. And he’d dragged her away from it.

For a second, uncertainty gnawed at him.

Maybe she’d only agreed because she was polite. Maybe she’d rather be elbow-deep in irrigation pipe than sitting here with him.

She needs this, his bear murmured. We know all too well that work isn’t everything.

You’re right, Philip conceded. Work used to be everything to me. The vineyard, vines, grapes, seasons. That was it. But now...

He tapped the wheel lightly with one finger, feeling the truth of it settle in his bones.

But now we have our mate, and everything has changed,his bear said happily.

The road wound through the low hills, the sun high and bright overhead.

Philip's bear settled inside him, a steady presence as always. But now he felt different. Content.

No more waiting. No more wondering if they would ever find the other half that would make them whole, because she was here beside them. At last.

Philip's chest swelled with hope.

Big, blooming, unstoppable hope.

Hope that they had found their elusive happily ever after, just like his brother Kris had in Cassia.

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The small wooden sign came into view around the next bend, swinging gently in the summer breeze: Bear Creek Garden Center — Family Owned and Operated Since 1997.

Philip slowed the truck, gravel crunching under the tires as they pulled into the shaded lot.

Clusters of potted flowers flanked the drive, brilliant bursts of color spilling from the beds in front of the greenhouses. Beyond them, a labyrinth of shaded paths wound through rows of fruit trees, herbs, and seedlings.

It was impressive. He just hoped Elsbeth thought so, too.

Philip risked a sideways glance at Elsbeth, that same sense of nervousness threading through his veins.

“Wow,” she breathed, her eyes widening slightly as she took it all in. And then she smiled.

Relief loosened the knot in his stomach and washed away all his nerves. She likes it.

Told you, his bear rumbled smugly.

Yeah, yeah, Philip teased as he parked near the main greenhouse and cut the engine.

“Welcome to Bear Creek’s best-kept secret,” he said, grinning as he climbed out and rounded the truck to open her door.

Elsbeth slid out, looking around with open wonder. “This is...” She trailed off, shaking her head. “It’s beautiful.”

He didn’t say anything, he simply sat there and watched her soak it all in. The same way he wanted to soak her all in.

You know that sounds creepy,his bear grumbled.

Philip suppressed a laugh and instead said, “I thought maybe you could get some inspiration for your farm.” He gestured toward the rows of plants. “My brother Alfie owns this place, and what he doesn’t know about growing plants in this climate isn’t worth knowing.”

“Your brother?” Elsbeth asked. “How many brothers do you have?”

“Five.” Philip held up a hand with his fingers spread apart.

I think she knows how to count to five,his bear said.

“Five.” Elsbeth’s expression took on a wistful quality. “That must be nice. I’m an only child.”

Philip caught the note of longing in her voice. “It is nice. Noisy and chaotic sometimes, but nice.”

Wait until she learns she’s part of that noisy and chaotic family now,his bear chuckled.

I don’t know what might scare her more,Philip replied.Learning that she’s the mate of a bear shifter, or that she’s part of the Thornberg clan now.

But in truth, both he and his bear loved every one of his brothers and their extended family. He couldn't imagine being an only child. They were a constant in his life. Always had been. Always would be.

He gestured toward the entrance. "Come on, let's go inside. I want to introduce you to Alfie."

As they headed toward the main entrance, Philip spotted a familiar figure near the loading dock, stacking trays of seedling flats onto a wooden cart.

Alfie. Broad-shouldered, with untamable hair, wearing a T-shirt that said Talk Dirt to Mein faded letters.

Philip lifted a hand in greeting.

Alfie looked up, squinting into the sunlight, then grinned when he recognized them.

"Well, well, if it isn't my favorite brother," Alfie called, wiping his hands on his jeans and crossing the lot to meet them.

"He says that to all his brothers," Philip murmured to Elsbeth.

"How adorable," Elsbeth replied.

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I have never considered Alfie adorable,his bear grumbled.

Alfie clapped Philip on the back hard enough to jostle him. “Didn’t expect to see you here on a workday, slacker.”

Philip laughed. “Dragged myself away from the vineyard for a worthy cause.”

“So I can see.” Alfie’s gaze slid curiously to Elsbeth, one brow lifting.

Maybe this was a mistake,his bear said.

It’ll be fine,Philip assured him. Alfie might be a joker, but he would never do anything to harm Philip’s relationship with his mate.

“Alfie, this is Elsbeth,” he said, voice steady. “She’s new to Bear Creek. She bought the Old Larson place, just up the ridge.”

“I know it well.” Alfie wiped his hand again on his jeans and offered it to her. “It’s good to meet you. Any friend of Philip’s is a friend of ours.”

Elsbeth smiled shyly as she shook his hand. “It’s good to meet you, too. This place is amazing.”

Alfie beamed, like she’d handed him a trophy. “Thanks. It’s my little kingdom of chaos.”

Philip chuckled. “He’s being modest. Alfie’s got the best plant stock in the valley.”

Alfie scratched the back of his neck, looking pleased but embarrassed. “I try. You know how it is. You plant things, you hope they take root.”

The words were light, but something in Alfie’s tone caught Philip’s attention. A hint of weariness, maybe. Or loneliness.

He needs a mate, too, his bear said quietly.

We need Finn to work his accidental magic again—for all our brothers.

“I’m planning a cut flower farm,” Elsbeth said enthusiastically. “My focus is on hardy perennials, with some annuals to fill in gaps. I’d love your advice on some local native varieties for the pollinators.”

Alfie’s grin widened. “I am all yours. If you need help, I’m mulch-obliged to offer my expertise.”

“Oh, goodness,” Philip said with a roll of his eyes.

“What?” Alfie asked innocently.

“You know what,” Philip retorted.

“Take no notice of him.” Alfie nodded toward his brother. “Feel free to leaf through my knowledge. I’m here to help plant ideas.”

Elsbeth covered her mouth with her hand as she burst into laughter. “I would love to leaf through your knowledge.”

“See?” Alfie shot Philip a withering look. Then he linked arms with Elsbeth. “Tell me your plans.”

“Roses. Lots of roses.” Elsbeth nodded eagerly, clearly in her element. “I was thinking of adding peonies and delphiniums once I get the beds established.”

Alfie gave an approving grunt. “You know your stuff. Watch your planting times. June’s usually safe for tender stuff, but don’t rush early spring. Let the soil warm.”

“I won’t,” Elsbeth promised. “I learned that lesson the hard way the year when my mom lost half her seedlings.”

Philip watched her with undisguised admiration. Even carrying the heartache of her loss, Elsbeth hadn’t lost her passion. Or her determination.

And she knows what she’s doing. This isn’t some ill-thought-out attempt to fulfill her mom’s wishes, his bear rumbled in pure approval.

Alfie opened his mouth to reply, but was interrupted by the sharp trill of the garden center’s landline from inside the main office.

He grimaced. “Duty calls. Help yourself to a wander. You’ll want to see the greenhouses, anyway. Oh, and make sure you get Welland to hook you up with coffee and cake. Best-kept secret in Bear Creek.”

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With a quick wave, Alfie jogged off toward the office, already answering the phone before he disappeared through the door.

“So the best-kept secret in Bear Creek is the coffee and cake?” Elsbeth asked.

“Shall we have a look around, and then you can judge for yourself?” Philip asked.

“That sounds like a plan.” She smiled up at him in a way that made his heart somersault.

I could do a somersault, too, his bear said happily.

Me, too, Philip replied, relieved that his surprise had been so well received.

“Where first?” Philip asked.

“Roses,” Elsbeth said with a dreamy smile. “I’d love to see the roses.”

Philip nodded and glanced around. “This way.”

He led her through an archway covered in climbing vines, their path winding between rows of vibrant blooms. The sweet perfume of flowers filled the air, mingling with the earthy scent of rich soil and plant life. As they walked, Elsbeth paused occasionally to examine tags or run her fingers gently along delicate petals.

“Oh, look at these!” She stopped at a display of heritage roses, their blooms full and lush in various shades of pink, cream, and deep crimson. “Aren’t they beautiful?”

“They are,” he agreed, not looking at the plants at all. Instead, Philip found himself watching her face rather than the flowers. The way her eyes lit up, the gentle curve of her lips as she smiled. To Philip these were far more captivating than any rose.

She glanced up, catching his gaze, and a blush spread across her cheeks. For a moment, they simply looked at each other, something unspoken passing between them.

“What’s next?” she asked as she straightened up.

“I know just the place,” Philip said, offering his arm. “The perennial garden is this way.”

Elsbeth slipped her hand into the crook of his elbow, the gesture feeling as natural as breathing. As they strolled deeper into the garden center, Philip pointed out his favorite varieties, sharing little tidbits of knowledge, which his bear found amusing.

Are you worried our mate might be more impressed with Alfie’s knowledge of plants than ours?his bear asked.

No. I know Alfie knows more about a wider variety of plants,Philip replied.

But you have a specialist subject,his bear said with understanding.You just haven’t had the chance to share it with our mate yet.

I’d love to show her the vineyard and tell her about the vines,Philip admitted.

And I’d love to show her me and tell her about the mating bond,his bear replied.

“These lavender plants are particularly hardy for our climate,” he explained, guiding her down a shaded path lined with fragrant herbs. “They’ll bloom twice if you prune

them right after the first flowering.”

“My mom always said lavender was good for the soul,” Elsbeth said, brushing her fingers against the silvery foliage.

Our mate is good for our soul, Philip’s bear said.

“Your mom talked a lot of sense,” Philip murmured, his voice gruff as sorrow flickered across her face. “Sorry, I shouldn’t have...”

“No.” Elsbeth turned to face him. “I like that you talk about her. She is the reason why I am here.” She looked down at her feet, and for a long moment silence stretched out between them. “I was thinking of naming the farm after her.”

“You should. What was her name?” Philip asked gently.

Elsbeth’s eyes misted. “Rose. Her name was Rose.”

“Rose’s Blooms,” Philip suggested, the words coming naturally. “Or maybe just Rose Farm.”

“Rose Farm,” Elsbeth repeated, testing the words. “I like that. Simple but meaningful.”

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They wandered through a tunnel of climbing clematis, its star-shaped blooms creating a canopy of purple and white overhead.

“It’s like walking through a fairy tale,” Elsbeth said as she stopped and looked up at the flowers.

Then she looked at him, and the temptation to pull her into his arms and hold her close, to kiss her lips and murmur sweet words in her ear, was overwhelming.

Instead, he asked, “How about that coffee and cake?”

“Yes.” Elsbeth laughed and twirled around, arms outstretched. “I think we’ve earned it.”

“This way.” Philip led her over to the café, a cozy outdoor space under a sprawling pergola dripping with wisteria.

Behind the small counter stood Welland, a thin, wiry man with a shock of white hair and a perpetual twinkle in his eye. As if he knew the secret to eternal happiness.

“Philip Thornberg,” Welland called out, wiping his hands on a towel. “Come to corrupt another innocent soul with my lemon cake?”

Philip grinned. “Wouldn’t dream of it. This one’s entirely capable of corrupting herself.”

Elsbeth flushed but smiled, shaking her head.

“Coffee and cake, then?” Welland asked, already reaching for two floral mismatched cups.

“Yes, please,” Philip said. “The biggest slice you’ve got. Don’t you think?”

Elsbeth nodded. “I believe we deserve a big slice of cake.”

“A woman after my heart,” Philip said lightly.

More like the woman who owns our heart, his bear said.

“You go find yourselves a seat,” Welland said. “And I’ll bring it over.”

“Thanks, Welland.” Philip turned around and scanned the area. It was late afternoon, and the café was quiet, so they had their pick of tables. “Over there?”

“Sure.” Elsbeth followed him to a small wrought-iron table tucked under the fragrant flowers. “This is perfect.” She closed her eyes and breathed in deeply.

Oh, it is, Philip’s bear agreed.

The perfect end to a perfect day.

And the perfect start to his life with Elsbeth.

Chapter Eight – Elsbeth

Elsbeth leaned her head against the window as they drove back to the farm...

Rose Farm.

The name was perfect. A fitting memorial to the woman who had inspired her whole life.

Tears misted her eyes, but this time they were not so much tears of sadness and loss, but of hope. Hope for a future she had been brave enough to claim.

For a moment, she didn't fight her emotions. She simply let herself be.

She hadn't realized how tightly she'd been wound until now. How much pressure she'd carried on her shoulders without even noticing.

But sitting here beside Philip, with the sweet scent of flowers still clinging to her clothes and the faint hum of a future blooming in her mind, something inside her had finally—mercifully—begun to loosen.

He didn't fill the silence with chatter or questions. He simply was.

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Steady. Present. Solid in a way that made her ache with something she didn't quite dare name.

Pushing aside thoughts of Philip, which was almost impossible, she switched her focus to her plans for the Old Larson place... She gave a small shake of her head. Her plans for Rose Farm.

The visit to the garden center had been just what she needed. The abundant blooms that had been carefully nurtured by Alfie had given her new ideas and inspiration. If she'd learned one thing since she decided to open her own flower farm, it was that her plans were constantly in flux.

But then that was one lesson life had taught her again and again. Nothing stayed the same, nothing was ever permanent or set in stone. All you could do was bend like a tree in the wind and not break.

"Here we are," Philip said as he pulled into the drive and cut the engine. For a moment, neither of them moved.

Elsbeth shifted, unbuckling her seatbelt, suddenly unsure of what came next.

"Thanks for today," she said finally, her voice a little rough with emotion. "I didn't realize how much I needed..." She trailed off, her cheeks flushing pink.

Philip smiled. The kind of smile that felt like sunlight cracking through cloud cover.

"I know how easy it is to get caught up in work," he said simply. "Sometimes you

just have to stop..." He paused and cracked a grin. "And smell the roses."

"Are you trying to compete with Alfie?" Elsbeth asked.

"No one can compete with Alfie." Philip reached for the door and cracked it open.

Elsbeth's stomach did a small flip as Philip stepped out of the truck. She'd expected him to leave after dropping her off, but instead, he circled around to her side and opened her door, extending his hand.

"Let me help you," he said, his deep voice sending a thrill through her.

But it was nothing like the thrill that consumed her as they touched. There was that same sense of connection, that same sense of familiarity.

"Thank you." She didn't need help getting out of the truck, but there was something so courteous, so old-fashioned about the gesture that she could not refuse.

Together they walked toward the house, their footsteps crunching in unison on the weed-filled gravel path. The silence between them felt charged, like the air before a thunderstorm.

"Thank you again for today," she said when they reached her porch, turning to face him. "For everything."

"You're welcome," he replied, his eyes meeting hers.

He lifted his hand, and Elsbeth's breath caught. She closed her eyes instinctively, heart hammering against her ribs as she waited for the touch of his fingers against her cheek.

Instead, she felt a gentle tug at her hair.

“A petal,” he murmured.

Elsbeth opened her eyes, feeling a little foolish for having expected something else.

“A rose petal,” she said softly, recognizing it from her earlier explorations at the garden center.

Philip smiled and reached for her hand. That same unmistakable connection sparked between them as he gently uncurled her fingers and placed the rose petal in her palm, the feather-light touch sending shivers cascading through her body.

“For remembrance,” he said, giving a sheepish grin. “At least, I hope it will remind you of me.”

“It will,” she whispered, closing her fingers around it. How could she tell him that today had been one of the best days of her life?

It would sound so absurd, since today had been a normal day in so many ways. And yet it had been so special. Finding the spring, the visit to the garden center, coffee and cake...all because he had been there by her side.

Drawn to him, Elsbeth leaned forward slightly, her gaze dropping to his lips, wishing...

But Philip suddenly stepped back, breaking the spell. He turned abruptly and strode toward his truck. Elsbeth’s heart sank, confusion and embarrassment washing over her. Had she done something wrong? Been too forward? Too obvious?

Her cheeks burned as she watched him, mortified at the thought that she might have

misread everything. What a fool she was!

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But then she realized he wasn't leaving at all. Instead, Philip was at the back of his truck, lifting the tailgate. Relief washed through her as he strode back toward her, something cradled in his hands.

"Here, I nearly forgot," he said, holding up a bottle with a familiar label. "Mom and Dad insisted I bring this over as a welcome present."

He held out a bottle of wine with a beautifully designed label bearing the Thornberg Vineyard logo.

"It's good," he added, a hint of pride in his voice. "One of our best vintages."

Elsbeth stared at the bottle, tracing the elegant script of the Thornberg logo with her thumb, feeling a little lost for words. The thoughtfulness of the gesture touched something deep inside her.

"Would you like to share it with me?" she asked before she could stop herself, her voice cracking slightly on the last word.

Philip's jaw tensed, and for one terrible moment, Elsbeth thought she had overstepped some invisible boundary. But then his expression softened.

"I'd love to," he said, his voice low and sincere. Then he glanced at his watch and frowned.

"But I have to go to work." His expression turned regretful. "I have to check on the vines I recently planted."

“Oh, of course,” she said quickly, embarrassment flooding her cheeks. “I’ve taken up too much of your time already.”

“Never,” Philip replied with a smile that made her heart skip. Then his eyes darkened slightly, and he shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “But I will be done in a couple of hours.”

She nodded, suddenly feeling tongue-tied. The question she wanted to ask burned in her mind, but the words seemed stuck somewhere between her brain and her mouth.

“Dinner?” she finally managed to say. “I mean, would you like to come back for dinner? With me. Here.” She pointed awkwardly at the house, feeling utterly foolish.

“I would love to,” he said, his smile shy.

“Around seven?” she suggested, already mentally cataloguing the contents of her refrigerator. There wasn’t much, she’d been meaning to go grocery shopping, but she was sure she could cobble together something decent.

“Perfect.” Philip took a step back, as if reluctant to leave her side. “I’ll see you then.”

“I’ll be here.” She watched him walk away, watched him get into his truck. When he raised his hand and waved goodbye, she mirrored him, wishing he didn’t have to go.

There was no use trying to fight her feelings for him. She knew that now. Knew that she would regret it if she denied herself a chance at finding love.

Yes, she might have a dream, a promise to fulfill. But somehow, she’d developed tunnel vision. Elsbeth had become so focused on the flower farm, she had forgotten that her mom also wanted her to find love.

And as Philip's truck disappeared from view, Elsbeth finally accepted that she might find love with Philip. He was everything she could want in a partner—thoughtful, kind, passionate about the land. They understood each other in a way that felt almost supernatural, sharing the same values, the same dreams, the same connection to growing things. They were in perfect harmony, like two plants thriving in the same soil.

Even after his truck had vanished from sight, she could still feel his presence lingering around her. The strange connection between them didn't fade with distance. If anything, it intensified, as if invisible threads linked them together across the miles.

And he would be back, she reminded herself. For dinner.

The thought sent a wave of panic through her. Dinner. She'd invited him for dinner, and the contents of her fridge were no match for the wine she held in her hand.

Elsbeth hurried inside, closing the door and leaning against it as her heart raced.

Oh no! She uncurled her fingers to look at the rose petal resting in her palm. Had she squashed it?

No, there it was, delicate, velvety, perfect. She smiled down at it as she walked to the kitchen counter and carefully placed the wine bottle beside the petal. She really needed to make dinner, but first...

The petal. She needed to preserve it.

She went to the bookshelf in the living room where her mother's old flower press lay.

She hadn't used it yet in the new house, but it seemed fitting that the first thing she'd press here would be this rose petal. With careful movements, she placed it between

sheets of absorbent paper, tightened the screws on the wooden press, and set it aside.

When this was done, she returned to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator, surveying its meager contents. There was cheese and fresh bread left over from her lunch. She had pasta in the pantry, and there were more tomatoes ripening in the small kitchen garden. The addition of fresh herbs would make a simple but tasty meal.

First things first, though. She needed a shower.

Upstairs, she stripped off her clothes and stepped under the warm spray of water. As she washed away the day's work, her mind wandered to Philip. What would it feel like to have him here beside her? His strong hands caressing her skin, tracing the curves of her body? Heat bloomed in her core at the thought, making her breath catch.

"This is crazy," she murmured, rinsing her hair. She barely knew him, and yet she felt like she'd known him forever. As if their souls recognized each other instantly.

She was falling for him. Falling hard and fast in a way that should have terrified her. But somehow, it didn't. It felt right.

As if it was always meant to be.

Goodness, now that she had decided to give in to the attraction between them, she was becoming a romantic fool.

But there was nothing foolish about the way he made her feel.

After her shower, Elsbeth wrapped herself in a towel and stood before her closet, suddenly self-conscious. What did one wear for an impromptu dinner date with a man who made your heart race just by existing?

She settled on a simple sundress. Blue with tiny white flowers that her mother had always said brought out the warmth in her eyes. With damp hair twisted into a loose

braid over one shoulder, she felt almost ready. But something was missing.

Elsbeth's hand drifted to her mother's old jewelry box. Inside, nestled among costume pieces and a few modest heirlooms, lay a delicate silver bracelet with a single charm. A miniature rose. She slipped it onto her wrist, the cool metal warming against her skin. Her mother had worn it on special occasions, always saying it brought good luck.

Maybe some of that luck would rub off on Elsbeth this evening. But that wasn't why she wore it.

She touched her fingers to the rose charm. No, she wore it because it made her feel closer to her mom.

After months of feeling only loss and sadness when she thought of her mom, today, something had changed.

Today, Philip's suggestion for the new name of the farm had flipped something inside her. Now she was ready to let go of the sadness. Not all at once, she knew that was impossible.

But she could start to focus on the joy her mother had brought into her life. The laughter they'd shared over failed gardening experiments, the quiet evenings spent planning future gardens while sharing a bottle of wine.

Rose Farm would be a celebration of her mother's life, not just a memorial to her death.

Chapter Nine – Philip

Philip parked his truck outside Rose Farm and cut the engine. He could sense his

mate inside the house, and all he wanted to do was go to her.

But he didn't. Instead, he sat there for a moment, his fingers drumming against the steering wheel as he stared at the potted vine sitting on the passenger seat. It was one of his special hybrids, hardy, resilient, with grapes that would produce a complex, rich wine unlike any other. He'd been working on this particular strain for years.

Maybe I should have bought flowers instead, like a normal person?he asked his bear as doubt crept in. His mate liked flowers, their colors, their perfumes...

She'll like it,his bear assured him.She'll see this gift for what it is—personal. To you. As if you are entrusting a part of yourself to her.

Philip screwed up his face.I'm not sure that's a good idea. She might think it's too much.

Make your mind up,his bear replied lightly.Is it too much, or not enough?

I'm overthinking this, aren't I?he asked.

Yep,his bear chuckled.But what's new?

Our relationship with our mate,Philip said, and with a deep breath, he grabbed the pot and climbed out of the truck.

And that was the problem, their relationship was so new that they didn't know enough about each other to choose the perfect gift.

But we know enough,his bear said.We know we are mates. And that is all that matters.

We know, but Elsbeth does not, he reminded his bear, as if his bear needed reminding. On the drive over here, his bear had been quite vocal about how tonight was the perfect opportunity to tell her their secret.

If the opportunity arises, I'll tell her, Philip said, reiterating the same reply he'd given countless times.

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We make our own opportunities in life,his bear said, sounding like their father.

I don't think I have ever been this nervous,Philip said as he approached the farmhouse, with the vine tucked under one arm.

When he'd gotten back to the vineyard after the visit to the garden center, he'd rushed through his chores. He'd worked with focused intensity. So focused, in fact, that he had been completely unaware of Kris talking to him. Only when Kris placed a hand on Philip's shoulder, making him start, did he realize his brother was there.

When Philip explained to Kris that he'd been invited over to Elsbeth's for dinner, his brother had offered to finish the rest of the chores, which mostly involved tying in some of the new vines and making sure they had a good watering.

He's a good brother,Philip's bear said appreciatively.

He is, but then it helps because he knows exactly how this feels,Philip replied, remembering the look of understanding in Kris's eyes.

Yes, he knows exactly how we feel,his bear said.

You mean excited and terrified all at the same time?Philip asked.

Kris had assured him that once they had told their mate about shifters and the mating bond, it would be easier, but until then...

The farmhouse door swung open before he could knock, and there stood Elsbeth,

framed in the doorway. Her hair fell in loose waves around her shoulders, and she wore a simple blue dress that hugged her curves in all the right places. The sight of her stole the breath from his lungs.

And when she smiled, his terrors dissolved in an instant.

“I was worried you might not come,” she admitted, as she tilted her head to one side.

“I said I would,” Philip replied. “And I am a man of my word.”

“I believe you are,” she said with a small smile, her gaze switching from his face to the pot in his hand.

“Oh, I brought you this.” He thrust it out to her. “It’s one of the new ones I’ve been working on. The grapes will make amazing wine.”

“Really?” Elsbeth’s eyes widened as she looked at the plant. Then she smiled and gave a short laugh. “I love it.”

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“I do,” she said, and stepped forward and placed a light kiss on his cheek, leaving him feeling flustered. “You are spoiling me. First the wine and now the vine.”

She deserves it, his bear said happily.

“Dinner smells good,” Philip said, as he tried to keep his cool, even though his skin tingled where her lips had touched his cheek.

“It’s nothing special,” she said modestly, stepping back to let him in. “Just a simple pasta with herbs from the garden and tomatoes from the greenhouse.”

Philip followed her inside. The table had been set for two, with a single candle waiting to be lit beside a small vase of wildflowers...bachelor's buttons, he realized with a smile.

"Where would you like me to put this?" he asked, still holding the potted vine.

"Right here," Elsbeth said, clearing a spot by the kitchen window where sunlight would stream in during the day. "It's perfect. I've never grown grapes before. I will need all your best advice to help it thrive."

"They're not hard," Philip said, setting the pot down carefully. "Just a little care and attention." He straightened, and their eyes met as something unspoken passed between them.

"Like most living things." Elsbeth caressed the leaves with her fingertips.

His bear rumbled contentedly inside him, wishing he could shower her with all the care and attention she deserved.

"I'll take good care of it," she promised, turning to face him. "And someday, we'll taste the wine it makes. Which I will also need help with."

The casual way she spoke of the future, their future, gave him hope. Hope that when she learned the truth about him, about their bond, that she would understand.

"I'd like that," he said. "Although my brother Kris is the wine-making expert."

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His bear groaned. Don't sell yourself short.

But Philip had never been one to boast about his skills, and he certainly wasn't about to start now. He wanted—needed—Elsbeth to get to know the real him. Not some persona he'd put on to impress her.

Elsbeth moved to the stove, stirring the sauce, which smelled divine. "Would you open the wine? Glasses are in that cabinet."

Philip retrieved two glasses and opened the bottle, letting it breathe. As he poured, he noticed the bracelet on her wrist catching the light, a delicate silver chain with a small rose charm.

"That's beautiful," he said, nodding toward it.

"It was my mother's," Elsbeth replied, her expression softening. "I thought... I thought she should be here tonight, in a way."

For this, his bear said solemnly. The beginning of our life together.

"I wish I could have met her," Philip said truthfully.

"She would have liked you," Elsbeth said, turning back to the pasta. "She always said you could tell a person's character by how they treated growing things."

Philip chuckled. "Your mother and mine would have gotten along well."

“I hope I get to meet your mother soon,” Elsbeth said, then flushed slightly. “I mean, to thank her for the wine. And I would love to see your vineyard.”

“Oh, she cannot wait to meet you,” Philip said, a little too enthusiastically.

“Really?” Elsbeth looked up, a hint of surprise in her eyes as she reached for the wooden spoon to give the sauce a final stir.

Philip’s bear groaned. Now you’ve done it.

He cleared his throat, realizing his slip. “Well, you know, the whole mix-up with Finn’s texts...”

“Oh, of course,” Elsbeth said, sounding a little disappointed.

This is a minefield, Philip said to his bear.

Well, you’d better tread carefully then, his bear replied.

Philip passed Elsbeth her glass with care, resisting the urge to let his fingers linger against hers.

She stared into the glass, swirling it slowly. “I should probably admit something,” she said, glancing up at him through her lashes. “I don’t really know anything about wine.”

Philip’s mouth curved. “Good thing I do.”

His bear perked up immediately. Teach her. Teach her everything. Start with wine. End with forever.

“Want a crash course?” he asked, swirling his own glass gently.

She nodded, and he leaned forward slightly, keeping his tone light even as his pulse picked up.

“First step. Hold the glass by the stem. Keeps your hand from warming the wine.”

She adjusted her grip, imitating his. “Like this?”

Philip nodded in approval, struggling to tear his eyes away from the way her fingers curled around the glass stem. An irresistible desire surged through him, a longing to feel the heat of her touch on his skin.

He cleared his throat. “Next, give it a swirl,” he said, demonstrating. “Not too fast. Just enough to let it breathe.”

She did, her brow furrowed in concentration.

“Now,” Philip said, “stick your nose in the glass. Seriously. Don’t be shy.”

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Elsbeth laughed, but she did it, breathing in slowly. “Smells...like berries. And something warming?” she asked.

“Black cherry, maybe. Bit of oak.” He paused, watching her face as she inhaled again, slower this time. “That warmth is from where it’s aged in the barrel. It helps add depth.”

She lowered the glass and looked at him with a small, proud smile. “Not bad for a beginner?”

“Not bad at all,” he said, and suddenly his voice felt too thick, the air too charged.

For a long moment, they just looked at each other.

Not as friends. Not even as new acquaintances.

But as two people very much aware that the space between them was shrinking, that something real and full of promise had taken root and was about to come into full bloom.

Now, his bear whispered. Kiss her.

No, Philip told him firmly, even as the longing threatened to choke him. Not yet.

Instead, he raised his glass. “To new beginnings,” he murmured.

She smiled. “To dirt and sweat and sore muscles.”

“And maybe,” he added, “a little wine at the end of it.”

“And good company.”

“And good company.” He touched his glass to hers and then took a sip.

She lifted the glass to her lips and took a small sip, closing her eyes as the flavors unfolded across her tongue. Philip watched, entranced, as a smile slowly spread across her face.

“Oh,” she breathed, opening her eyes. “That’s...that’s wonderful.”

“You sound surprised,” he said.

“I am. I always thought wine was just...wine.” She took another sip, more confidently this time. “But this tastes like...” she paused, searching for words, “I don’t know how to put it into words.”

“You don’t have to,” Philip told her. “Not everything has to be distilled down to words. Sometimes, feeling is enough.”

“I guess you’re right,” she said, holding his gaze for a moment longer than necessary. “Speaking of feelings, this pasta is going to be overcooked if I don’t serve it now.”

She set her glass down and turned to the stove, lifting the pot of pasta to drain it in the colander she’d prepared in the sink. Steam billowed up, momentarily veiling her face, and Philip took the opportunity to steady himself.

“Can I help with anything?” he asked, finding his voice.

“You could light the candle,” she suggested over her shoulder.

Philip's bear practically purred with satisfaction. Candlelight dinner with our mate. Perfect.

He struck a match and touched it to the wick, watching as the flame caught and grew, casting a warm glow over the simple table setting. The wildflowers—those bachelor's buttons—seemed to shimmer in the flickering light.

“There,” Elsbeth said, bringing two plates to the table. “I hope you're hungry.”

“Starving,” Philip said as he sat down at the table across from her and picked up his fork. Despite Elsbeth's fears that the pasta might be overcooked, it was perfectly al dente, and the sauce was beautifully seasoned. “This is delicious.”

You could say love at first bite, his bear said with some amusement.

“Thank you.” She smiled, twirling pasta around her fork. “I've always found cooking relaxing. My mom taught me that good food doesn't have to be complicated.”

“My mom says the same thing,” Philip replied. “Although with five hungry sons, she learned to cook in large quantities.”

“I can only imagine,” Elsbeth said.

He chuckled, remembering the chaos of dinnertime at the Thornberg house. “It was always chaotic growing up. The noise, the fighting over the last dinner roll, everyone talking over each other.” He shook his head, smiling at the memories. “I used to hide in my room sometimes, dreaming about what it would be like to be an only child.”

Really?” she asked.

“Yeah.” His expression grew serious, his eyes meeting hers across the candlelight. “But honestly? I couldn’t imagine my life being any other way. My brothers drive me crazy sometimes, but they’re also my best friends. They’ve always been there, through everything.”

“I often wonder what that would be like,” Elsbeth said softly, her fork pausing above her plate. “Having siblings. A big family around the table. Someone to share everything with.”

Philip could hear the loneliness in her voice, see it in the slight droop of her shoulders. His heart ached for her.

Wait until she knows she’s part of our big, chaotic family now, his bear said with satisfaction.

Philip chuckled at his bear, only to quickly realize that he had laughed out loud. It wasn’t quite the right moment, given how serious their conversation had been.

“What’s so funny?” Elsbeth asked, tilting her head at him.

“Oh, nothing.” He shook his head, still smiling. “I was just thinking that being part of the Thornberg clan might scare you more than...” He trailed off, realizing what he’d almost said.

More than learning you are a bear shifter and she is our mate,his bear finished.

“More than what?” she prompted.

“More than anything else you might encounter in Bear Creek,” he finished lamely.

“Sounds nice, actually,” Elsbeth said quietly, looking down at her plate. “Having people who care about you.”

Philip studied her face, noticing how the light seemed to have dimmed in her eyes.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” she said automatically, pushing her pasta around her plate.

“You don’t need to be fine,” Philip said gently. “Not here. Not with me.”

Something in his voice must have reached her, because she set down her fork and took a deep breath. When she looked up, her eyes were swimming with unshed tears.

“My mom was my whole world,” she whispered. “We were a team, just the two of us against everything. And then she got sick, and I watched her slip away a little more each day.” A tear slid down her cheek. “The worst part was knowing that when she was gone, I’d be alone. Really alone.”

She wiped her cheek with the back of her hand. “Sometimes I wonder if it would have hit me so hard if I’d had a sibling. Someone who understood exactly what I was losing, someone to share the grief with.”

Philip reached across the table and took her hand in his. Her fingers were cold, and he wrapped both his hands around hers, warming them.

“She’ll always be with you,” he said softly. “Not just in your memories, but in the way she shaped who you are.” He glanced at her bracelet. “And in the things she left behind.”

Elsbeth lifted her other hand, touching the small rose charm on her bracelet.

“Sometimes I think I can feel her presence,” she admitted. “But it’s just my imagination.”

He wished he could fix things for her, take away her pain, and replace it with joy. But some wounds needed time to heal, and all he could do was be there while they did.

There is nothing you can fix, his bear said gently. All you can do is be there for her. To help her dreams grow.

Philip reached for his wine glass, lifting it in the soft glow of the candle. “To family,” he said solemnly. “May they always be in our hearts.”

“To family,” Elsbeth echoed with a shuddering breath, raising her glass to meet his. “So,” she said, visibly pulling herself together, “tell me more about the vineyard. I’d love to hear about how it all works.”

Philip recognized what she was doing. Steering the conversation toward safer ground, he respected her need to shift away from the raw emotion of the moment. He

launched into a description of Thornberg Vineyard, painting a picture of the sprawling property with its neat rows of vines climbing gently sloping hills and the hacienda-style house that sat at the center of it all.

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As he spoke about the rhythms of the vineyard, the seasonal cycles that governed their work, the pain in her eyes gradually receded, and she picked up her fork and began to eat.

Tonight is not the time, is it? his bear asked.

To tell her about us? Philip replied. No.

Instead, tonight was a night of sharing a part of themselves. The raw, vulnerable parts—and the parts that were precious for so many reasons.

The rest could wait.

Chapter Ten – Elsbeth

Elsbeth woke to the now familiar sounds of Rose Farm. Every time she heard the name mentioned, she'd remember her mom, remember the promise that had brought her here.

It would be as if her mom truly were walking this new path with Elsbeth.

She really did need to thank Philip again for making the suggestion. Elsbeth doubted she would have come up with the idea on her own. It would have felt too...raw.

Oh, Philip.

For a long moment, she simply lay there, staring at the ceiling, letting the memory of

last night play through her mind.

Their dinner had been simple, pasta and homemade sauce, crusty bread, and that exquisite Thornberg wine, yet somehow more intimate than any elaborate restaurant meal she'd ever shared. The way Philip had looked at her across the candlelit table, as if memorizing every feature of her face... The fond look in his eyes when he'd spoken of his family... And the way he had listened when she spoke of her mom.

Elsbeth swallowed down the lump of emotion forming in her throat. She hadn't meant to speak of her grief, hadn't planned to let her guard down so completely. But something about Philip made vulnerability feel like strength rather than weakness.

"What are you doing to me, Philip Thornberg?" she whispered to the empty room.

Whatever it was, she liked it.

She rolled to her side, eyeing the clock on her nightstand. 6:17. It was early, but the sun was up, the birds were singing, and there was work to do. Elsbeth sat up, pushing her hair back from her face, and swung her legs over the side of the bed.

She stretched, feeling the pleasant ache in her muscles from yesterday's work. With a contented sigh, she reached for her mother's flannel shirt and pulled it on. The worn fabric against her skin felt like a hug, a reminder that she wasn't entirely alone. After pulling on a pair of well-worn jeans, she padded downstairs in bare feet.

The kitchen still carried the aroma of last night's meal, garlic, tomatoes, and herbs. Her gaze drifted to the sink where two wine glasses stood side by side, a reminder of the wine they had shared.

How different this morning would be if he were here now. She could almost picture him leaning against the counter, sleep-rumpled and smiling, coffee mug in hand.

They would share breakfast and a quiet conversation about the day ahead. Maybe, just maybe, his lips would find hers in a gentle good morning kiss...

Elsbeth shook her head firmly. “Don’t get ahead of yourself,” she muttered. “It was one dinner. One evening.”

Despite the connection she felt, despite the way his eyes had lingered on hers, he hadn’t actually said anything about seeing her again. Not romantically, anyway.

There had certainly been no mention of dating.

For all she knew, Philip was this generous with his time with every newcomer in town.

Now that was a sobering thought!

What she needed now was coffee. After she filled the coffeepot with water, Elsbeth measured the coffee grounds into the filter and set the pot to brew.

While it percolated, she leaned against the counter and stared at the growing light outside the window. Her mother had always said coffee time was thinking time, a time to enjoy the stillness before the day began. As she glanced around the kitchen, she imagined her mom sitting at the table, her hands wrapped around a mug of coffee.

If only.

But her mom wasn’t there. With a deep breath, she brushed the thought aside and went outside to the porch. The morning air was cool and sweet, with dew still clinging to the grass. Birds called to one another from the trees that rustled in the morning breeze.

This was why she'd come here. This peace, this connection to the land. The farm—Rose Farm—was her priority now. The rest would follow. Or not. Either way, she had a business to build.

Because that was why she was here. To build a business. If she failed, she would have no choice but to leave Rose Farm, and that would break her heart all over again when it had just started to heal.

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When the coffee finished brewing, Elsbeth filled her favorite working mug—a chipped ceramic one with faded wildflowers painted around the rim—and grabbed her notebook from the counter. The irrigation system wouldn't finish installing itself, and if she could get water flowing to the fields today, she'd be that much closer to planting.

She made her way across the dewy grass to where they'd left the irrigation pipes yesterday. Setting her coffee on a nearby stump, she flipped open her notebook to review her plans once more before getting started.

She'd forgotten how heavy the pipes were to haul on her own, and Elsbeth grunted with effort as she wrestled one into position.

Her boots slipped slightly on the damp grass as she dragged the end of the pipe into place. She wiped her forehead with her sleeve, breathing hard. Her muscles ached from the previous day, and a cramp was on the verge of forming in her shoulder.

"You've got this," she muttered, adjusting her grip and forcing herself to keep moving. By the time she had one pipe section in place, her breath came in pants, and her braid was sticking to her neck. But she'd done it. One piece down, a dozen more to go.

She was so focused on the task that she almost missed the distant rumble of an engine approaching.

Her hands stilled. Her heart stuttered in her chest.

Philip.

She knew it with absolute certainty even before he appeared. But then, sure enough, his blue truck appeared around the bend and her heart gave a traitorous little flutter, refusing to believe he was just being neighborly.

Elsbeth went to meet him as he pulled to a stop next to the house. He climbed out, wearing work clothes, a pair of faded jeans, and a well-worn flannel shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows, looking as if he'd stepped right out of her dreams from last night.

"Morning," he called, as he walked toward her with a box under his arm.

"Morning," Elsbeth replied, trying to sound casual despite the butterflies in her stomach.

He smiled that slow, sensual smile that ignited a deep desire inside her. She wanted to be everything he needed. Everything he wanted.

"Brought you a present," he called as she got closer. "Not as pretty as a vine but might save your flowers just the same."

So that's why he was here. Not because he wanted to see her, but because he'd gotten something she needed. Little did he know that right now, all she needed was him.

"What is it?" she asked, keeping her voice steady so as not to betray her feelings.

"Filter regulator," he said. "Should help balance the water pressure once you get everything hooked up."

"Thanks." She peered into the box as he handed it over.

“The one you have is good. But this one is better.” He shrugged, the faintest flush creeping up his neck.

“You didn’t have to,” she said, avoiding his gaze.

He ducked his head, smiling. “It was the least I could do after the amazing meal you cooked last night.”

“It was nothing special,” she replied. “And anyway, last night’s dinner was my way of thanking you for everything you have already done for me.”

Then Philip shifted slightly, clearing his throat. “So, uh,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck in a way that made him look almost boyish, “talking of dinner. You know I said my mom could not wait to meet you.”

“Yes,” she replied warily.

“Well, my mom wanted me to ask you over for dinner tonight. Nothing fancy,” he insisted. “Like I said, my mom would love to meet you.”

Elsbeth blinked, caught completely off guard.

Family dinner.

Meeting his parents.

Her stomach twisted as she opened and closed her mouth. “I...” She hesitated, the word sticking in her throat.

Philip immediately backed off a step, his hands held out in surrender.

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“No pressure,” he blurted. “I just thought...well, you are kind of family now, whether you know it or not.”

His words, meant to be light, hit deeper than he probably realized.

Kind of family.

The longing in her chest ached so sharply she had to look away for a second, pretending to brush dirt from her hands.

She could say no. She could keep things simple, safe, and distant.

But when she looked up and met Philip’s intense gaze, she found herself nodding.

“I’d like that,” she murmured.

Relief flickered across his face, and he grinned.

“Six o’clock?” he asked.

“Six,” she confirmed.

“Great.” He grinned, looking so darn happy that she grinned right back at him, her nerves forgotten. “Well, I would love to stay and fit that filter regulator for you, but I have a full day of work ahead of me.”

“Of course,” she said, cradling the box in her hand as if it were the most precious gift

anyone had ever given her.

“But I’ll see you at six?” he asked, as he backed away toward his truck.

“I’ll see you at six,” Elsbeth replied.

“Promise?” He swung open the truck door but didn’t climb in.

“I promise,” she said.

“You want me to text you directions?” he asked as he swung himself into the driver’s seat.

“I’m sure I can find it,” she replied, still grinning.

“Does that mean you already looked me up?” he asked in a teasing tone.

“I looked up the Thornberg Vineyard,” she admitted. “Because I was told their wine is so delicious.”

He closed the door, but she heard his laughter through the open window. “If that’s the way you want to play it.” He started the engine and, with a wave, he was gone, disappearing back down the driveway and out of her life.

As she stood there and watched him go, the box still in her hands, she knew she’d crossed some invisible line. Stepped a little deeper into a future she was still afraid to hope for.

For a moment, she allowed herself to wonder what it would be like to belong somewhere again, to have a family. Not just any family, but the Thornbergs. Philip’s family.

Elsbeth shook her head and returned to the irrigation pipes, but her mind remained distracted. Meeting his parents meant something. She wasn't naïve enough to believe it was just a casual invitation. There was something in Philip's eyes when he'd asked—a hopeful vulnerability.

She'd never expected to see it in a man like Philip. A man so strong, so self-assured in so many ways. Then she reminded herself she'd never met a man like Philip before. He was one of a kind.

And the more she got to know him, she was sure he was the one for her.

Chapter Eleven – Philip

Philip crouched beside the middle row of vines, running his thumb along the underside of a leaf, inspecting for signs of stress or pests. There were none. The row was healthy, thriving, right on track.

But he checked again and then moved to the next one.

Are you planning on checking every single vine? his bear said with gentle amusement.

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Philip grunted. I just want everything to look good.

His bear huffed. Everything already looks good. You're fussing because you're nervous. Which is adorable. But also unnecessary.

Philip ignored the teasing, straightening slowly and shielding his eyes from the late-afternoon sun. The rows stretched in tidy, green waves across the valley. Vines he'd nurtured year after year, season after season. He'd walked these rows through hailstorms, harvests, and heatwaves.

He knew every inch of this place.

It was like a second home.

But in all that time, nothing had ever unsettled him the way Elsbeth did.

Not in a bad way. In a way that made everything else feel too...mundane. Too routine.

As if life without her lacked color, vibrancy... He didn't know how to explain it.

Because there are no words to explain the way we feel about our mate, his bear said.

No, Philip replied, moving down the row and gently adjusting a training wire. There were no words. Because words could never be enough to describe how she made him feel.

And the way she made him feel was unlike anything he had ever experienced before.

It was as if his emotions were a vast ocean, deeper and more profound than he had ever imagined possible.

And last night...

The way she'd opened up about her mother, her dreams.

The way she'd let her guard down just enough for him to see the raw, hurting tenderness underneath.

It made his chest ache with something fierce, protective, primal.

Someone's coming, his bear said as Philip reached down to pluck a tiny weed from the ground.

Dad. Philip looked up to see his father walking toward him, a pair of gloves tucked into his back pocket, and a smile on his weathered face. His gait was steady, deliberate, with the confidence of a man who had spent decades walking these rows.

"Been a while since I've seen you this nervous," Hugo said, coming to stand beside him.

Philip chuckled under his breath. "Didn't think I was that obvious."

"You're not," Hugo replied, crouching to examine a vine. "But I've known you since you were born, son. And I know the difference between vineyard nerves and woman nerves."

Philip groaned. "Please don't call it that."

Hugo laughed, clapping him on the back. "Fair enough."

They stood in silence for a moment, the wind tugging gently at the leaves.

“She’s coming for dinner tonight,” Philip said eventually.

“I know.”

“I want it to go well.”

Hugo turned to look at him, eyes steady. “Why wouldn’t it?”

Philip hesitated. “Because she’s...been through a lot. Lost her mom not that long ago. I don’t want to overwhelm her. Or make her feel like she’s got to fill some space she’s not ready to.”

A space in our heart, his bear said.

Hugo’s gaze softened. “Just take it slow, one step at a time. There’s no need to rush things. You two will be together for the rest of your lives. You’ve waited this long. A little more time is not going to kill you...”

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Philip chuckled and shook his head. "I'm not so sure."

"I am," Hugo said. "You are one of the most patient men I know, Philip. The vines have taught you that."

Philip nodded, running his hand along the sturdy vine beside him. "I see what you mean. But it's different with the vines. I know exactly what they need...water, sunlight, pruning at just the right time." He sighed, his shoulders dropping slightly. "With Elsbeth... It's not that simple."

Hugo's face softened with understanding. He placed a hand on Philip's shoulder, his touch as reassuring as ever. "Trust yourself, son. Trust your heart. It knows what to do even when your head doesn't."

"That's just it," Philip admitted. "Now that she's actually here, I'm terrified of getting it wrong. What if I mistime everything? Move too slow and she thinks I'm not interested, or come on too strong before she's ready?"

Hugo chuckled, the sound familiar and comforting. "You don't think every shifter since the beginning of time has had those exact same thoughts?"

Philip gave a short laugh, some of the tension leaving his body. "What, you mean I'm not special?" He arched an eyebrow at his father, the corner of his mouth lifting in a half-smile.

"Oh, you're special all right," Hugo laughed, punching him lightly on the shoulder. "All our sons are. And I think Elsbeth already knows just how special you are." His

eyes crinkled at the corners. “That’s all that matters.”

He gestured toward the house with a tilt of his head. “Why don’t you go get cleaned up and leave these vines to do what they do best? Grow.”

Just as our love for Elsbeth will grow, his bear added dreamily.

Philip smiled, feeling lighter than he had all day. He peeled off his work gloves and tucked them into his back pocket. “Thanks, Dad.” He stepped forward and wrapped his arms around his father in a tight hug. “Love you.”

“Love you, too, son.” Hugo’s voice was gruff with emotion. “And if you ever need anything—advice or whatever—I’m here.”

Philip squeezed his father tighter. “I know. I’m incredibly grateful for that.”

“Now go wash up.” Hugo pulled back, giving Philip a gentle push toward the house. “Get ready for dinner. I’m sure your mate will appreciate it if you don’t have dirt under your fingernails.”

As he walked toward the house, he wondered what Elsbeth was doing right now. Was she nervous about tonight, too?

The screen door slammed shut behind Philip as he entered the kitchen. The warm aroma of garlic and herbs made his stomach growl. His mom stood at the stove, her back to him, humming softly as she stirred something that smelled divine.

“That smells amazing, Mom,” Philip said, bending to unlace his work boots.

Leanne turned, wooden spoon in hand, and smiled. “Garlic chicken. Your favorite.” Her eyes twinkled. “I hope Elsbeth will like it, too.”

Philip set his boots by the door and straightened up. "I have no idea what her favorite food is...yet. But I'm sure she'll love whatever you cooked."

"Well, I don't know about that. But I guess we'll find out soon enough," Leanne replied, turning back to the stove.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Philip offered as he padded over to the stove.

Leanne gave him a once-over and wrinkled her nose. "What you can do is go upstairs and take a shower. You smell like vineyard soil and hard work." She waved the wooden spoon at him. "I've got everything covered down here."

"Yes, ma'am," Philip said with a mock salute, already backing toward the stairs.

"And wear a clean shirt," she called after him. "One that isn't worn half through."

"I will!" Philip called as he took the stairs two at a time, his bear practically skipping with anticipation.

In his bedroom, he peeled off his dirt-streaked clothes, tossing them into the hamper before stepping into the shower. The hot water cascaded over his shoulders, washing away the day's toil.

As he worked shampoo through his hair, his thoughts drifted to Elsbeth. His father's words echoed in his mind: Trust yourself. Trust your heart.

His bear rumbled contentedly. Dad is right. We've waited this long for our mate. What's a little more time?

Says the bear who has been pestering me every minute of the day to reveal our true selves, Philip retorted.

I don't know what you mean.His bear settled down and sighed contentedly.Our mate is worth waiting for.

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Philip chuckled to himself as he rinsed the shampoo. "Patience," he murmured aloud. The vineyard had been a great teacher, showing him the importance of watching, waiting, and trusting the process. He could already see Elsbeth opening up to him, like a flower unfurling its petals to the sun. All he needed to do was create the right conditions and trust fate to do the rest.

In the same way, he trusted the vines.

After toweling off, Philip pulled on clean jeans and a button-up shirt he'd bought some time ago but had never gotten around to wearing. He ran a hand through his damp hair and took a deep breath. The nerves were still there, but tempered now with a quiet confidence that everything would turn out all right.

It will,his bear said.It has to.

When he returned to the kitchen, Leanne turned from arranging flowers on the dining table and nodded approvingly. "That's better. Much better."

"Glad you approve," Philip said. "Now, what can I do to help?"

"You can lay the table," Leanne said as she checked the contents of the oven. "There's just the four of us."

"Okay," Philip said, going to the cupboard for plates.

That's a relief,his bear said.I had suspected everyone would have turned up to dinner to meet our mate.

So did I, Philip confessed, glad his mate was not going to be overwhelmed by the Thornberg clan.

“I figured Elsbeth could meet everyone else once you had explained everything to her.”

Everything. That was such a big, complicated word.

“Mom?” he asked as he set the table. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course, honey.” She glanced at him over her shoulder. “You know you can.”

“How did you feel when Dad told you...everything? About...us. About shifters.” The question had been weighing on him all day. He knew the story of how his dad had told his mom. But he’d never truly considered how Leanne might have felt.

Leanne’s laugh was as warm and rich as the sauce she was stirring on the stove. “Relieved.”

“Relieved?” Philip paused, plate in hand. “Because you knew there was a connection between you, but you didn’t know exactly what it was?”

“Oh no,” Leanne replied, stirring the sauce one final time. “I was relieved he wasn’t an axe murderer, or something.”

“An axe murderer?” Philip turned his full attention to his mom.

Does Dad have a secret past we are not aware of? his bear asked.

I have no clue, Philip replied.

“Well, I could tell he was hiding something from me, and I didn’t think he was a secret millionaire, or a criminal mastermind...” She laughed. “So, when he told me he was a bear shifter and we were mates, I was relieved. I was never the sort of girl who would have let herself fall for a bad boy.”

Philip laughed and went back to laying the table, carefully arranging the silverware beside each plate.

I wonder what Elsbeth thinks we are hiding, his bear said.

Philip tugged his brows together. He hadn’t thought of things that way. “So, Elsbeth will sense there’s a connection between us?” Philip asked his mom, more somber now.

“Of course, the mating bond might not be as strong for her, but your mate will still feel it.” Leanne set the spoon down and came to him. “This will all be confusing for her, son.”

Philip nodded. “I was going to tell her last night, but then she opened up about how much she missed her mom and, well, it just didn’t seem like the right time.”

“Then it wasn’t,” Leanne said, placing a comforting hand on his upper arm. “But you will know when it is.”

“I hope so.” He nodded and sighed. “When you found out, you never thought about running away?”

“Oh no,” Leanne said, her eyes distant. “I knew from the first moment I saw your father, he was the one for me.”

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“You did?” Philip asked, hopeful that Elsbeth might have felt that way, too, when they first met.

“Yes. Of course, I wasn’t ready to admit it to myself, let alone your father.” She smiled wistfully. “But I knew deep down in my soul.”

Then he stiffened. He could sense Elsbeth.

“She’s here,” he whispered, suddenly feeling like a teenager about to go on his first date.

Leanne patted his arm. “Relax. Just be yourself.”

“Which self?” he muttered. “The human or the bear?”

His mother laughed. “Both. They’re both you, and they’re both wonderful.”

Philip took a deep breath as he headed for the door. “Thanks, Mom.”

With that, he headed for the door, hoping that tonight might be the night he told her the truth.

And also that his mate didn’t think he was an axe murderer.

Or a criminal mastermind, his bear teased.

But he did hope she believed he was the one for her.

The one and only, his bear added.

Chapter Twelve – Elsbeth

Elsbeth gripped the steering wheel so tightly her knuckles turned white. She'd faced down bank managers for her farm loan with less anxiety than she felt now, driving up the winding road to Thornberg Vineyard.

She was nervous, more nervous than she had been when she bought Rose Farm. Back then, it had been just her dream at stake. Now, it felt like her heart hung in the balance, too.

What if his parents didn't like her?

What if they weren't happy about the amount of time he was spending over at Rose Farm?

It seemed as if her if only had been replaced by what ifs.

So, what if they did like her? What if they were happy that Philip was helping out a new neighbor?

That was much better.

Ever since her mom's cancer diagnosis, it was as if a dark cloud loomed over her. But she needed to step out from under that dark cloud and start looking for the sun to break out from behind it.

As she rounded the final curve, Thornberg Vineyard came into view, and Elsbeth's breath caught in her throat. The hacienda-style house stood proudly against the backdrop of the mountains, its terra-cotta roof and cream-colored walls bathed in the

golden light of early evening. Surrounding it, row upon perfect row of vines stretched across the gentle slopes, their leaves rippling like waves in the breeze.

“Oh,” she whispered, slowing the car to better absorb the view.

It was beautiful, more beautiful than she had imagined. And it gave her hope. If these amazing vines could thrive in the mountain climate, then her flowers should, too.

She eased her foot down on the gas and followed the gravel drive toward the house, where she spotted Philip’s blue truck parked to one side. Pulling in beside it, Elsbeth cut the engine but didn’t immediately get out. Instead, she took a moment to compose herself, breathing deeply as she gazed across the vineyard.

Suddenly, the hairs on her forearms stood on end. A ripple of awareness coursed through her body, and she looked up to see Philip striding toward her across the gravel. The sight of him took her breath away. Tall and broad-shouldered, his dark hair slightly tousled by the breeze, he moved with the easy confidence of a man perfectly at home in his surroundings.

She could feel the connection they shared. She’d felt it from the moment they’d met. But did he feel the same way?

That was the question burning a hole in her brain. That was the question she was too scared to ask, because the fear that he might not paralyzed her.

Why? She didn’t want to lose him. It was as simple as that.

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If she admitted her feelings to him and he didn't reciprocate those feelings, it might ruin the friendship they had. It wasn't worth the risk. At least, that was what she told herself—but each time she saw him, it was harder to stick to that resolve.

With a deep breath to compose herself, she got out of the car and stood watching him as he approached. He was everything she'd ever wanted in a man. Not just physically, though there was no denying his rugged appeal. It was more than that. Philip was caring and attentive. She could see it in the meticulously kept vines, in the way his hands had gently guided hers when teaching her about irrigation, in the thoughtful way he listened when she spoke about her mother.

"Hi," he said with a smile as he came toward her.

"Hi." Elsbeth blushed, feeling suddenly shy. Taking a step toward him, she gestured to the sprawling property. "This place is amazing."

"After dinner, I'd love to give you a tour," Philip offered, his face radiating with well-earned pride.

"That would be perfect," Elsbeth replied, hoping she'd make it through dinner first. Her stomach was already tied in knots, and she hadn't even met his parents yet.

"Shall we?" He offered his arm, the gesture so old-fashioned and courtly that it made her heart flutter.

She nodded and slipped her arm through his. The moment they touched, that current of recognition flowed between them again. It was unlike anything she'd ever

experienced. His touch left her feeling as if she could conquer the world.

Or at least, dinner with his parents.

With this newfound confidence, she walked with him to the house. The wraparound porch was adorned with flowering plants in terracotta pots, and comfortable-looking chairs that begged to be sat in. And the view... She stared out across the endless rows of vines. The view was to die for.

Elsbeth tore her gaze from the vines, and Philip led her through to the kitchen. The heavenly aroma of garlic chicken filled the air, making Elsbeth's stomach growl so loudly that Philip turned to look at her.

She covered her mouth with her hand, mortified. "Sorry, I was too nervous to eat earlier."

Philip's brow furrowed with concern. "You shouldn't be nervous. My family likes you already."

Before she could ask how that was possible when they hadn't even met her, an older woman came into the kitchen, smoothing down the skirt of her sundress. Her silver-streaked hair was pulled back in a loose bun, and her eyes—the same warm brown as Philip's—crinkled with kindness.

"This is my mom, Leanne," Philip said, his voice filled with such pride and affection that it made Elsbeth's heart ache. "Mom, this is Elsbeth." He said her name as if she were royalty, and in his presence, she did feel like a queen.

"Elsbeth, it's wonderful to meet you at last," Leanne said, stepping forward to envelop her in a warm hug.

The embrace caught Elsbeth off guard, and for a moment, she froze. It reminded her so much of when her mom held her that tears misted her eyes, and she could barely breathe.

Slowly, Elsbeth relaxed into the hug, her body surrendering to the maternal warmth as she rested her head on Leanne's shoulder. She closed her eyes, allowing herself this moment of comfort that transported her back in time. It felt so much like her mother's hugs that for a heartbeat, she could almost believe it was her mom holding her.

The kindness of Philip's mom, a woman she had only just met, overwhelmed her. Leanne seemed to sense what Elsbeth needed, rubbing small circles on her back as Elsbeth took a shuddering breath, fighting back tears.

With a final squeeze, Leanne inched away, her eyes glistening. "Philip," she whispered, her voice thick with emotion, "why don't you pour Elsbeth a glass of wine? Your dad chose a couple of bottles specially for tonight. They're on the counter."

"Sure," Philip replied, moving toward the counter, though his concerned gaze lingered on Elsbeth.

As he stepped away, Leanne straightened and placed her hands gently on Elsbeth's arms. "It really is so good to meet you, Elsbeth." She reached up and brushed a stray tear from Elsbeth's cheek with her thumb. "And I want you to know that you're a part of this family now. So if you ever need anything, even if it's just someone to talk to, my door is always open."

"Thank you, Leanne," Elsbeth whispered hoarsely, touched beyond words by the genuine warmth radiating from this woman.

“Now, you sit down and...” Leanne suddenly turned toward the door, a smile spreading across her face.

A moment later, an older man with Philip’s same dark features entered the kitchen. His salt-and-pepper hair was neatly trimmed, and he carried himself with quiet confidence. His eyes instantly sought out Leanne, and they exchanged a look of pure love and connection that made Elsbeth’s heart ache with longing.

She stared at their silent exchange, mesmerized by the depth of feeling that passed between them. Then she looked away, only to find her gaze meeting Philip’s across the room. The same look was there in his eyes—that same intensity, that same devotion—and Elsbeth realized with startling clarity that the emotions it conveyed matched exactly what she felt in her heart whenever Philip was near. Or far.

Love.

Confused by the sudden realization, she looked away, her cheeks flushing.

“Elsbeth,” the man said, approaching her with an extended hand, “I’m Hugo, Philip’s dad. Welcome to our home.”

“Thank you,” she said, trying to compose herself. “Your home is beautiful.” She glanced around the kitchen, taking in the colorful tiles, the hand-painted plates, and the woven textiles. “Have you traveled a lot?”

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“We have,” Hugo confirmed. “When we were younger, we went out into the world to sample the various wines, from different countries and different regions,” Hugo explained. “We took a little inspiration from here, and a little from there, and made something of our own.”

“And the house reflects that,” Leanne added as she returned to the oven, checking its contents. “Now, dinner is ready. Let’s eat and drink, and then Philip must show you the vineyard.”

Elsbeth nodded, still trying to process the flood of emotions washing through her.

Philip appeared at her side with a glass of deep red wine. “Here you go,” he said, his fingers brushing hers as he handed her the glass. That familiar spark jumped between them, and Elsbeth knew from his slight intake of breath that he felt it, too.

“Thank you,” she murmured, taking a sip to steady herself. The wine was exquisite, rich and complex with notes of blackberry and something earthy she couldn’t quite identify.

“Do you like it?” Hugo asked, watching her reaction closely.

“It’s wonderful,” she replied honestly. “I’m still learning about wine, but this is...special.”

Hugo beamed with pride. “It’s from our reserve collection. From vines Philip helped plant when he was just a boy.”

“Really?” Elsbeth turned to Philip, who ducked his head modestly.

“I wasn’t much help back then,” he admitted. “More of a hindrance, probably.”

“Nonsense,” Hugo countered, clapping his son on the shoulder. “You’ve always had a gift with the vines. Even then.”

Leanne began bringing serving dishes to the table. “Enough shop talk for now. Let’s eat before everything gets cold.”

They settled around the table, which had been beautifully set with mismatched ceramics that somehow worked perfectly together. Candles flickered in the center, casting a warm glow over their faces.

“This looks amazing,” Elsbeth said as Leanne served her a portion of garlic chicken and roasted vegetables.

“Family recipe,” Leanne replied with a wink. “Philip mentioned you enjoyed cooking.”

Elsbeth glanced at Philip, touched that he’d shared such details about her. “I do. My mother taught me.”

“She taught you well, from what I hear,” Hugo said, passing her a basket of freshly baked bread.

“Philip is being kind,” Elsbeth replied as she helped herself to bread.

“That’s how we raised him,” Leanne said with an adoring smile at her son. “Now, tuck in.”

A comfortable silence fell as they began to eat. Elsbeth couldn't remember the last time she'd felt so...at home. The Thornbergs had welcomed her as if she'd always been a part of their lives, not like someone they'd just met.

"So, Elsbeth," Leanne said after a few moments, "Philip tells us you're turning the Old Larson place into a flower farm."

"Yes," Elsbeth nodded, warming to the topic. "I'm calling it Rose Farm, after my mother."

"What a beautiful tribute," Leanne said.

"Philip suggested it, actually," Elsbeth admitted, glancing at him. Their eyes met briefly, and she felt that now-familiar flutter in her chest.

Hugo nodded approvingly. "The name suits the place. That land has been waiting for someone to bring it back to life. It's been abandoned for years. Just waiting for you."

"I hope I'm up to the task," Elsbeth said, taking another sip of wine. "There's so much to do."

"You've already made remarkable progress," Philip interjected. "The irrigation system is nearly complete, and we found that spring, which changes everything."

"You found the water," Elsbeth said, not wanting to take the credit away from Philip.

"Philip has always had a knack for finding water," Hugo chuckled as he glanced at his wife.

"It's true!" Leanne insisted. "Although when he was younger, Philip finding water usually meant he came home dripping wet from head to foot."

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“Mom,” Philip said, with a teasing warning in his voice.

“Let’s make a toast,” Hugo said, raising his glass. “To all things that grow.”

“Especially love,” Leanne added.

And Elsbeth could not agree more.

Chapter Thirteen – Elsbeth

“That was delicious,” Elsbeth said, setting her napkin beside her empty plate. The meal had surpassed her expectations. Not just the food, which was outstanding, but the easy conversation and genuine warmth that flowed around the table.

“I’m so glad you enjoyed it,” Leanne smiled, reaching across to refill Elsbeth’s wine glass. “It’s been a joy having you here and hearing all about your plans for Rose Farm.”

“Thanks,” Elsbeth said as she reached for her glass.

“And don’t forget my offer,” Hugo said. “When you’re ready to sell your flowers, I would be more than happy to introduce you to Martha Horton, who organizes the farmers’ markets around this area. The farmers’ market in Bear Creek gets good foot traffic, especially during tourist season.”

“I’d appreciate that. I had done some research but hadn’t gotten as far as looking up contacts,” Elsbeth admitted. “I’ve been so focused on getting the irrigation set up so I

can start planting.”

“Martha would be more than willing to drop by and offer you her advice,” Hugo said. “She’s always looking for quality local vendors.”

“And when you are ready to make bouquets,” Leanne added, leaning forward with enthusiasm, “there’s this wonderful warehouse about thirty minutes from here that carries the most beautiful ribbons and vases. I go there for my crafting supplies. We should make a day of it sometime. Maybe invite Cassia, too.”

“I’d love that,” Elsbeth said, surprised at how natural it felt to make future plans with Philip’s family. As she placed her wine glass down on the table, she snuck a glance at Philip.

Throughout dinner, he’d been attentive and encouraging, drawing her into the conversation whenever she fell quiet. He’d made such an effort to make her feel part of the family. And he’d succeeded.

“Thanks for dinner, Mom,” Philip said as he stood up and began clearing the dishes.

“Yes, it was wonderful.” Elsbeth pushed her chair back. “Let me help with the dishes. It’s the least I can do after such an amazing meal.”

“Absolutely not,” Leanne said, gently taking the plates from her hands. “You’re our guest.”

“Besides,” Hugo added, nodding toward the door, “Philip owes you a tour of the vineyard. And sunset is the best time. The light makes everything golden.”

“Yes, you two go on and enjoy the sunset,” Leanne encouraged.

Hugo chuckled and winked at his son. “Plus, you really should see those vines he’s been fussing over all day. Not a dead leaf in sight. I’ve never seen them looking so pristine.”

Philip’s cheeks flushed as he shook his head at his father. “Dad...”

“What?” Hugo spread his hands innocently. “I’m just saying you’ve been particularly...thorough...today.”

Elsbeth bit back a smile as Philip placed the dishes next to the sink and then offered his hand to her. “Shall we?”

She placed her hand in his, that familiar electricity sparking between them. “I’d love to see the vineyard.”

As Philip led her back out onto the porch, the setting sun bathed everything in amber light. The rows of vines stretched before them like ribbons of gold and green. The sight took Elsbeth’s breath away.

“It’s even more beautiful than I imagined,” she whispered, her hand still clasped in Philip’s.

“Come on,” he said, tugging her gently toward a path that wound between the vines. “I want to show you my favorite spot.”

They walked in comfortable silence, enjoying the sweet scent of ripening grapes mingled with the earthiness of soil and the faint perfume of wildflowers growing along the edges of the vineyard.

“Your parents are wonderful,” Elsbeth said finally, glancing up at Philip’s profile. The golden light caught in his dark hair, highlighting strands she hadn’t noticed

before.

“They like you,” he replied as he cast a sideways glance her way. “I knew they would.”

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“I like them, too.” She paused, gathering courage. “I can see where you get your kindness from.”

Philip’s hand tightened almost imperceptibly around hers. “They’ve taught me everything I know about growing things. About patience.” He looked down at her, his eyes intense. “About waiting for the right moment.”

Something in his tone made her pulse quicken. There was a weight to his words, as if he were trying to tell her something more.

They crested a small rise, and Philip stopped. Before them, the vineyard spread out in all directions, the mountains rising majestically in the distance. A rustic wooden bench sat facing the view, weathered by years of sun and rain.

“This is it,” Philip said, leading her to the bench. “My favorite spot. I like to come here and simply sit and look out across the vineyard.”

“I can see why,” Elsbeth said as he led her closer to the bench.

They sat down on the bench together, their shoulders touching. The simple contact sent warmth cascading through Elsbeth’s body. She couldn’t imagine a more perfect end to the evening.

Well, perhaps one thing could make it more perfect.

She glanced at Philip, wondering if he might kiss her. Her heart fluttered at the thought, but he was staring at the vines, his expression distant, as though his mind

had traveled somewhere far away. The connection she'd felt so strongly moments ago seemed to have dimmed.

Maybe she'd misread everything. Maybe this was just friendship after all.

Philip blinked suddenly and drew a deep breath, as if returning to himself. He squeezed her hand gently and half-turned toward her, his eyes intense with something unspoken.

Elsbeth's pulse quickened. There was clearly something he wanted to tell her. She could see it in the way he held himself, in the slight furrow of his brow. But a flicker of anxiety rose in her chest. What if his secret changed everything between them? What if it ruined this beautiful connection they'd built?

She didn't want that. Even if tonight was all they ever had, she wanted to preserve it as something perfect and untarnished.

"So, this is where the grapes grow," she said, breaking the silence, "but where does the magic happen that changes them into wine?"

Philip hesitated, his expression unreadable. His mouth opened as if to speak, then closed again. Whatever he'd been about to say remained unsaid as he stood and gently pulled her to her feet.

"This way," he said, his voice slightly rough.

Elsbeth knew immediately she'd broken the moment. Whatever he'd wanted to share would remain his secret for now. Part of her felt guilty for not giving him the space to open up, but another part felt relieved.

Her mind flashed back to that terrible day in her mother's kitchen, the moment when

her mom had sat her down and said those words that had changed everything: “I have cancer.” How many times had she replayed that scene, wishing she could somehow change the script, alter the ending?

What if Philip’s news was something she could never unhear? Never unknow? Not that anything could be as devastating as learning her mother was sick, but still...

“The winery is just down this path,” Philip said, leading her through the vines. His hand remained firmly clasped around hers, warm and reassuring. “My brother Kris is the real expert, but I know my way around the tasting barrels.”

As they walked, the tension between them gradually eased. Elsbeth found herself relaxing into the moment once more, appreciating the beauty surrounding them. Fireflies had begun to appear, tiny pinpricks of light dancing between the vines.

“It’s magical,” she whispered.

Philip looked down at her, his expression softening. “It is one of my favorite times of the day. There’s a hush that settles over the place.”

They stopped walking and turned to look out across the vines. It truly was magical. And so was the man beside her.

Watching his profile in the fading light, Elsbeth realized she’d been unfair. If he had something he wanted to say, she should let him say it. She owed him that much. And it wasn’t as if it was necessarily going to be bad news. She often forgot that there were good things in the world, too, that people had good news to share.

“Philip,” she turned to him and placed her hand on his chest, feeling the beat of his heart, so steady, so strong, like Philip himself. He looked down at her, his eyes lingering on her lips, the moment suspended between them like honey dripping from

a spoon.

But then the sound of voices broke the silence.

“Kris and Cassia,” he said, and held up a hand and waved.

Elsbeth turned, cursing herself for not letting Philip speak before. Two figures emerged from between the rows of vines, walking hand in hand toward them.

“Hey there, Philip,” Kris called as he walked. “We were just finishing up for the evening.”

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“We recently converted one of the old barns into a restaurant,” Philip explained to Elsbeth, his hand moving to rest lightly on the small of her back. It was a small but intimate gesture.

“Oh, really?” Elsbeth asked, trying to mask her disappointment at the interrupted moment.

“It’s how we met,” Cassia said with a smile. “It’s good to meet you, Elsbeth.”

“You, too,” Elsbeth said, immediately warming to the woman’s friendly attitude.

“Yes, we were the first victims of Finn’s matchmaking,” Kris said with a wide grin, but Philip shot him a look that wiped the smile off his face.

But Elsbeth felt a profound sense of relief. She was not imagining things at all. Philip did feel the same way.

“Matchmaking?” she asked, glancing between the brothers.

“It’s kind of a family joke,” Philip said quickly.

Kris cleared his throat, looking slightly abashed. “Our brother Finn has a knack for...bringing people together. Though he’d probably say it was just a happy coincidence.”

“He thought it was funny to make up an advert for me. You know, like a mail-order bride type thing,” Kris explained, his arm slipping around his partner’s waist. “And

then he accidentally posted it online.”

“And I saw the ad, thinking it was for real. And so I came here...” Cassia glanced sideways at Kris.

“And so we opened a restaurant, so that Cassia would stay,” Philip added.

“Wow.” And Elsbeth had thought Philip had gone out of his way to help her. This took things to a whole new level.

“Not that I would have left anyway. You know how sometimes you meet someone and just know?” Cassia added, leaning into Kris’s embrace. “Like your souls recognize each other?”

Elsbeth’s heart skipped a beat. “Yes,” she whispered, unable to stop herself from looking at Philip.

“Of course you do,” Cassia said and reached out and squeezed Elsbeth’s hand.

Elsbeth swallowed hard as heat rushed to her face. Cassia’s words echoed in her mind, making her feel exposed, as if everyone could see right through her. Was it truly that obvious? Could they all see how deeply she’d fallen for Philip?

“I should probably get going,” she said suddenly, glancing at her watch though she couldn’t focus enough to read the time. “I have an early start tomorrow. The irrigation system still needs work.”

Cassia’s eyes widened slightly, her expression shifting to one of embarrassment. She shot Philip an apologetic look, clearly realizing she’d overstepped.

Philip merely smiled reassuringly at his brother’s partner. “I’ll walk you to your car,

Elsbeth.”

Relief washed over her. He didn’t mention the unfinished tour of the winery, didn’t try to convince her to stay. He simply understood her need to retreat and respected it without question. It was one of the many things she loved about him—his quiet empathy, the way he seemed to read her moods and respond to them without judgment.

They said quick goodbyes to Kris and Cassia before heading back through the vineyard toward the house. The walk was quiet, but not uncomfortable. Fireflies continued their dance around them, and the first stars had appeared in the deepening blue of the evening sky.

As they passed a particularly lush section of vines, Philip paused and reached into the foliage. With practiced fingers, he plucked a small, purple-black grape and offered it to her.

“Try this one,” he said. “These will make our Cabernet. They’re still a bit tart, but you can already taste the complexity.”

Elsbeth accepted the grape, their fingers brushing momentarily. She popped it into her mouth, surprised by the burst of flavor. Sharp and sweet at once, with hints of something deeper.

“It’s amazing. The way you describe it, I can just imagine the wine it will make,” she said, genuinely impressed.

Philip smiled, pleased by her reaction. He moved a few steps farther and plucked another grape from a different vine.

“And this one will go into our Merlot blend,” he explained, handing it to her. “Notice

the difference?”

As she tasted the second grape, the tension that had gripped her began to melt away. This was the Philip she'd come to know—passionate about his work, eager to share his knowledge, with no expectations beyond the moment they were sharing.

“I can. They are very distinct,” Elsbeth replied.

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By the time they reached her car, the easy rapport between them had returned. Philip opened her car door with that old-fashioned courtesy she'd come to expect from him.

Elsbeth slid inside quickly, not trusting herself to linger. Her feelings were too raw, too overwhelming. If she stayed another moment, standing close to him in the moonlight, she might do something foolish, like pull him close and confess everything she was feeling. She wasn't ready for that—not when she still needed to sort through the chaos in her heart.

“Thank you for a wonderful evening,” she said, looking up at him. “Please thank your mom and dad for their hospitality. The dinner was amazing.”

“I will,” Philip promised, his hand resting on the car door as he leaned down slightly. His eyes searched hers, a sad smile playing at the corners of his mouth. “Goodnight, Elsbeth. Sweet dreams.”

He closed the door gently, and Elsbeth started the engine, her hands trembling slightly on the steering wheel. As she drove away, she caught a glimpse of him in her rearview mirror, standing exactly where she'd left him, watching her go.

The road wound through the darkened vineyard, each curve taking her farther from Philip but not from her thoughts of him. She knew with absolute certainty that when she closed her eyes tonight, her dreams would be filled with Philip Thornberg. His gentle hands, his warm eyes, and all the unspoken words that hung between them.

What did Cassia mean about souls recognizing each other? The question circled in Elsbeth's mind as she navigated the moonlit road. There was clearly something

special about the Thornberg family, something she couldn't quite put her finger on.

But then she barely knew him.

That wasn't true, was it? She felt as though she'd known Philip forever, as if some part of her had been waiting for him all along.

As she pulled into her driveway, she wondered if Philip was looking at the same moon right now, thinking of her.

"Sweet dreams," she whispered, echoing his parting words. And for the first time since her mother's passing, Elsbeth felt a surge of hope.

Perhaps her dreams—all of them—might actually come true.

Chapter Fourteen – Philip

As Philip tended the vines the next morning, he could not make up his mind whether or not last night had been a success.

Yes, his bear answered emphatically. It was.

But Philip was not convinced. There had been times when he'd felt so close to Elsbeth, as if the final barriers between them had crumbled, and when they sat on the bench, he'd known the moment was right to tell her who he was and what they shared.

But then the moment had abruptly gone. Broken by Elsbeth. He was certain she'd known he was about to speak, and for some reason, she hadn't wanted to hear what he had to say.

Do you think she knows about shifters?his bear said.Someone in town might have told her.

And she might have put two and two together and realized I was about to tell her we were mates,Philip mused.

And she didn't want to know. She didn't want to hear the words, and know it was true,his bear said forlornly.

Or maybe he was overthinking it all. Philip paused, secateurs in hand, and straightened up to look across the vineyard. The morning sun shimmered on the dew-covered leaves, weaving a pattern of light and shadow that always brought him peace.

What if it wasn't about shifters at all?

He thought back to dinner, to the way Elsbeth had spoken about her mother. The raw grief that still lingered in her voice. The way she'd touched that rose charm bracelet throughout the evening, like a talisman connecting her to someone she'd lost.

Maybe she's just not ready,he said.

His bear stirred, considering this new perspective.She lost her mother less than a year ago. Her whole world changed. She needs time.

Philip nodded slowly.And we're strangers to her, really. We've only known each other for a short time.

Even though we don't feel like strangers,his bear added.

It made perfect sense now. Elsbeth wasn't rejecting him or the bond. In fact, it was probably nothing to do with him at all. She simply wasn't ready to take on anything

else when she was still healing from such a devastating loss. She had uprooted her entire life to fulfill a promise to her mother, bought a farm, and was pouring everything into making her dream a reality.

Last night, she'd probably sensed that he was about to share something with her. Something important. And she didn't feel strong enough to take on any more.

She needs a friend right now, Philip murmured, a new sense of purpose filling him. Someone to support her dreams, not complicate them.

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Yes!his bear agreed enthusiastically.We can be that for her. Until she is ready for more.

A weight lifted from Philip’s shoulders. He would be there for Elsbeth, however she needed him to be—friend, helper, and confidant. He would prove himself worthy of her trust first, and the rest would follow when she was ready.

With renewed energy, Philip finished pruning the last section of vines. He gathered his tools, giving the vineyard one final satisfied look before heading back to the house.

In the kitchen garden, his parents worked side by side, a picture of contentment that made his heart ache with longing. His mother was on her knees, planting seedlings, while his father turned the soil nearby. They moved in perfect harmony, occasionally exchanging glances that spoke volumes.

“I’m heading over to Rose Farm,” Philip announced as he approached.

Hugo looked up, wiping his brow with the back of his hand. “Okay, see you later, son.”

“Give Elsbeth our love,” Leanne added, standing slowly with one hand pressed against the small of her back.

Hugo immediately went to her side, his arm wrapping protectively around her waist as they watched Philip walk toward his truck.

They are all rooting for us,his bear said happily.

I know,Philip replied, trying not to feel the pressure of expectation.

They can't wait to welcome Elsbeth to the family properly,his bear said.

Neither can I,Philip replied.But we can't rush things. Not now.

They understand,his bear replied with certainty.

Philip slid behind the wheel of his truck, placing his tools in the passenger seat. As he drove the winding mountain roads toward Rose Farm, he turned on the radio, letting the music fill the cab. Some upbeat country song played, and he found himself humming along, tapping his fingers against the steering wheel.

The tension that had gripped him all morning had dissolved, replaced by a calm certainty. This was right. Being there for Elsbeth, supporting her dreams, and becoming someone she could depend on. That was what mattered now. The rest would come in its own time.

The mating bond was not going anywhere—and neither was he.

And she feels it, too,his bear said.

She does,Philip replied. It was there in the way her eyes widened and her cheeks flushed pink when they touched. It was there in the way she looked at him when she thought he wasn't looking.

She had no idea he didn't need to see her to know she was looking at him—he could feel her.

As he rounded the final curve in the road, Rose Farm came into view. The old farmhouse stood proud against the backdrop of mountains. Elsbeth had already started to transform the place: she'd painted the front door, weeded the flower beds around the house, and cleared the pathways between the outbuildings.

She was bringing the place back to life, just as she had done to his heart.

Philip parked beside her car and grabbed his tools. He could sense her nearby, probably working in the fields where they'd left the irrigation system half-finished. The thought of seeing her again sent heat searing through his veins.

He found her exactly where he expected—wrestling with a section of pipe, her brow furrowed in concentration. She wore her mother's flannel shirt again, the sleeves rolled up to her elbows, dirt smudged across one cheek. Her hair was pulled back in a messy braid, tendrils escaping to frame her face.

To Philip, she had never looked more beautiful.

"Need a hand?" he called, approaching with his toolbox.

Elsbeth looked up, surprise giving way to a smile that lit her entire face. "Philip! I didn't expect to see you today."

"I promised to help with the irrigation system," he said simply, setting down his tools. "And I always keep my promises."

Something flickered in her eyes. Relief, perhaps, or gratitude. She straightened, brushing dirt from her hands. "I'm beginning to think I'm never going to get this finished."

"That's what friends are for," Philip replied, the word 'friends' feeling both right and

not quite enough. But it was a start. “To help when things get tough.”

Elsbeth’s smile softened. “I’m lucky to have found a friend like you in Bear Creek.”

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“You’ve found more than just me,” Philip assured her, kneeling to examine the section of pipe. “This coupling seems loose. Do you have that regulator I gave you yesterday? We’ll need it to properly connect these sections.”

“It’s in the shed,” Elsbeth said, already backing away. “I’ll go get it.”

“Perfect,” Philip called after her retreating form, watching as she jogged toward the weathered outbuilding.

We’re helping her build her dream,his bear rumbled contentedly.

Elsbeth has already made our dreams come true,Philip murmured, examining the irrigation layout.

She’d made decent progress on her own, but some of the connections needed adjusting to ensure proper water flow.

Elsbeth returned moments later, slightly out of breath, the regulator clutched in her hands. “Found it!” she announced triumphantly.

“Great,” Philip said, taking it from her. Their fingers brushed, sending that familiar spark through his body. He noticed her quick intake of breath and knew she felt it, too.

Together, they worked side by side, fitting the pipes together with the regulator as the central connection point. Philip guided her hands with his own, showing her how to tighten the fittings just enough without stripping the threads.

“Like this?” she asked, her face inches from his as they both crouched over the pipe junction.

“Perfect,” he said softly. “You’re a natural.”

“I am not planning on doing anything on this scale again,” Elsbeth told him. “But thanks for the compliment.”

“Ready for the next phase?” Philip asked, wiping sweat from his brow as he grinned at her.

Elsbeth nodded eagerly. “Let’s do it.”

They gathered the remaining sections of pipe and hiked up toward the spring, following the path they’d discovered together. The climb was steep in places, but Elsbeth kept pace with him effortlessly, her determination to see this through evident in every step.

At the spring, Philip set down his tools and surveyed the area. “We’ll need to create a small dam to collect the water before it enters the pipes,” he explained. “That way, we can control the flow and filter out any debris.”

“I’ve never built a dam before,” Elsbeth admitted.

“First time for everything,” Philip grinned, rolling up his sleeves. “Watch and learn. And help, if you want.”

“I do want,” Elsbeth said, watching him dig with a small shovel he’d brought.

The earth was soft and rich, yielding easily to his efforts. As he worked, he became increasingly aware of Elsbeth’s gaze following his movements. Her eyes traced the

flex of his muscles, the set of his shoulders as he dug deeper into the earth.

She likes what she sees, his bear teased.

“Want to give it a try?” Philip asked.

“Sure,” Elsbeth said, and he handed her the small shovel.

“See how I’ve sloped it slightly?” Philip explained, forcing himself to focus on the task rather than the heat of her gaze. “That creates a natural filter as the water settles.”

“It’s fascinating,” Elsbeth nodded. “Like this?”

“Just like that,” he replied, sitting back on his heels to inspect their work. “Now we need to line it with stones to prevent erosion. Mind helping me gather some?”

“Absolutely.”

They worked together, collecting smooth rocks from the surrounding area and placing them carefully along the edges of the small depression. Philip’s hands moved with practiced precision, arranging the stones to create a natural-looking basin.

“The rocks help filter the water, too,” he explained. “And they prevent soil from washing into your irrigation system.”

“So the pipes don’t get clogged,” Elsbeth added more flat stones along the base of the dam.

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As the last stone fell into place, water began to pool in their makeshift dam, clear and sparkling in the midday sun.

“It’s working!” Elsbeth exclaimed, kneeling beside the growing pool of water.

“Of course it is,” Philip replied with a playful wink. “Did you doubt me?”

“Never. You’ve proven yourself quite reliable, Philip Thornberg.”

Something about her tone gave him butterflies. Without thinking, he dipped his hand into the cool water and flicked a few droplets in her direction.

Elsbeth gasped, eyes narrowing playfully. “You did not just do that.”

“Looks like I did.”

She stared at him for a moment, then retaliated with both hands.

What followed was nothing short of glorious chaos. They splashed and dodged, laughter echoing through the trees as they soaked each other. Elsbeth’s shriek when he got water down the back of her neck had Philip laughing so hard he nearly fell over.

This is how it should be, his bear said, rumbling with delight.

For those few precious minutes, they weren’t a vineyard manager and a flower farmer. They weren’t even adults. They were simply two souls, having fun.

When they finally collapsed on the grass beside the spring, breathless and dripping, Philip couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so light.

And if this is how things have to be for now—just friends—I'm okay with it.

More than okay, his bear said.

You're right, Philip said as he stared up at the sky, his mate by his side.

He was happy.

Chapter Fifteen – Elsbeth

Goodness, Elsbeth could not remember the last time she'd laughed so much. Or felt so free.

Or so wet!

Or so happy.

She turned her head to look at the man lying beside her. It would be so easy to turn onto her side, place her hand on his chest and nestle closer.

She felt drawn to him like a flower turning toward the sun. The water dripping from her hair and clothes seemed insignificant compared to the warmth building inside her chest. His eyes met hers, and the world around them stilled.

Philip reached over, his fingers gentle as they brushed a wet strand of hair from her cheek. The touch lingered, his palm cupping her face with such tenderness that her breath caught. Time slowed as he leaned toward her, his gaze dropping to her lips before meeting her eyes again, asking a silent question.

She answered by closing the distance between them.

Their lips met. Softly at first, a gentle kiss that quickly deepened, igniting a fire in her core. The kiss was everything she'd imagined and more—slow, deliberate, filled with unspoken promises. His hand slid to the nape of her neck, fingers threading through her damp hair as he drew her closer.

Heat surged through her body, her hands finding their way to his chest, feeling his heartbeat race beneath her palm. She melted into him, savoring the taste of spring water on his lips and the earthy scent that was uniquely Philip.

When they finally broke apart, Elsbeth kept her eyes closed for a moment, afraid that opening them might somehow break the spell. That perhaps she'd imagined it all.

A flutter of anxiety rippled through her. Had she hurt his feelings last night? Is that why he'd pulled away? She'd worried she'd ruined everything when she'd cut him off, changed the subject before he could say whatever he'd been about to tell her.

But he was here now, his hands still cradling her face as if she were something precious, so perhaps she hadn't ruined anything after all.

"It's full," Philip said suddenly, his attention shifting to something behind her.

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Elsbeth turned to look, surprised to see their makeshift dam had indeed filled completely, water now spilling over the edge they'd constructed. How had he known without even looking? It was just one more mystery about this man.

This man who seemed to have an almost supernatural connection to the land and its resources.

"Come on!" Philip sprang to his feet with boyish enthusiasm, extending his hand to her. She placed her palm in his without hesitation, that now-familiar current of electricity shooting up her arm at his touch.

"It's working," she breathed, momentarily distracted from thoughts of their kiss as she took in the sight of the water pooling exactly as they'd planned.

This would be the lifeblood of Rose Farm.

"Let's go finish the job," Philip said, his face alight with excitement as he turned to look at her. Then he froze, his eyes lingering on her lips. The air between them charged with electricity. Elsbeth's heart hammered against her ribs as she moistened her lips instinctively, waiting, hoping.

But instead of leaning in, Philip turned away. "We should finish the system and check for leaks."

Disappointment washed over her as he began making his way back toward the pipes, his long strides carrying him quickly down the path. She followed, trying to figure out if she'd missed something.

Had she done something wrong? Was he regretting their kiss already? Questions tumbled through her mind as they reached the collection of pipes waiting to be connected.

“Do you want to do the honors?” Philip asked, gesturing toward the final connection.

“The honors?” Elsbeth blinked, pulled from her thoughts.

His smile returned, though it didn’t quite reach his eyes. “This is your flower farm. This is your irrigation system,” he said, holding out his hand toward the pipes.

“Oh, you should do it,” she replied. “Since you’ve worked so hard on it.”

Philip shook his head. “We do it together.”

He picked up the main pipe, and she moved beside him to grasp the connecting piece. She stood so close that she could feel the heat radiating from his body through their wet clothes, smell the earthy scent of him mingled with spring water.

Together, they aligned the pieces, their hands working in tandem to create the final connection that would bring water from the spring down to her fields. With a satisfying click, the pipes locked into place.

“Now for the moment of truth,” Philip said, his voice low as he reached for the valve. “Ready?”

Elsbeth nodded, her throat suddenly tight with emotion. “Yes.”

Philip’s hand covered hers as they turned the valve together. For a breathless moment, nothing happened. Then came a gurgling sound, followed by the unmistakable rush of water flowing through the pipes.

“It’s working!” Elsbeth exclaimed, unable to contain her joy as she watched the water emerge from the pipe end and begin to fill the small reservoir they’d constructed at the edge of her first field.

Philip’s arm slipped around her waist, pulling her against his side as they watched the water flow. “You did it,” he murmured.

“We did it,” she corrected, leaning into him. “I couldn’t have done this without you, Philip.”

She turned her face up to his, and the look in his eyes stole her breath away. There was pride there, yes, but something deeper, too—something that made her feel...desired.

“Philip,” she whispered.

The sound of his name broke something inside him. He lowered his head, capturing her mouth with his. This kiss was different from the first—hungrier, more demanding. He nipped gently at her lower lip, and when she gasped, he deepened the kiss, his tongue exploring the warmth of her mouth.

Elsbeth yielded completely, her body melting against his hard, toned chest. She wanted more—wanted everything he could give her. His strong arms encircled her waist, pulling her flush against him until she could feel the hard evidence of his desire pressing against her belly.

Heat pooled low in her stomach as his hands roamed her back, tangling in her damp hair. She wanted to surrender entirely, to feel his skin against hers, to discover every inch of him. Her fingers clutched at his shoulders as the world spun around her.

When their lips finally parted, Elsbeth’s knees buckled. Philip caught her, holding her

steady against his chest as they both struggled to catch their breath.

“I’m sor—” she began, embarrassed by her reaction.

“I’m not,” he interrupted hoarsely, his eyes dark with desire. “I’ve been wanting to kiss you like that since the first moment we met.”

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Elsbeth blinked up at him, her heart pounding. “You have?”

“Oh yes,” he nodded, his voice rough with raw emotion. “Most definitely yes.”

“Me, too,” she admitted.

Philip’s eyebrows rose slightly. “Really?”

“Yes.” She smiled shyly. “I just...wasn’t ready to admit it until now.”

His thumb traced the curve of her cheek. “And now?” he asked, his gaze intense.

The cool water from the newly connected pipes trickled over her boots, soaking into the soil beneath her feet. She glanced down, watching as the life-giving moisture spread across the thirsty earth.

“Now I’d like to celebrate by planting some flowers,” she said softly.

Philip tilted his head, looking a little bemused. “Okay.”

“I want to mark this moment,” she explained, her fingers playing with the collar of his shirt. “Make a permanent reminder.”

“You do?” His voice was tender, understanding dawning in his eyes.

“I do,” she whispered, rising on her tiptoes to press another kiss to his lips, this one gentle and sweet with promise.

When they separated, Philip's smile was so bright it rivaled the sun overhead. "What kind of flowers did you have in mind?"

Elsbeth took his hand, leading him toward the small greenhouse where she'd been nurturing seedlings. "Roses, of course. For my mother." Her voice caught slightly.

"Perfect," he said.

"This way." She took hold of his hand and pulled him toward the greenhouse. "I brought some with me. They were my mom's favorite."

They went hand in hand to the greenhouse, and as she opened the door, she tilted her face to his. "Kiss me again," she whispered, her voice barely audible above the gentle patter of water dripping from their clothes.

He arched an eyebrow at her and said, "With pleasure." He pulled her close, his lips on hers, as he slid his tongue along her lower lip, leaving her trembling with need.

It would be so easy to give in to temptation. And what a temptation he was—strong arms, gentle hands, and a mouth that made her forget everything except the feeling of him against her.

"The roses," he whispered in her ear, and inched away from her, his eyes dark with desire.

"The roses," she repeated, her voice unsteady. Her body protested the loss of contact as he let her go, but she understood. This moment was about honoring her mother, about putting down roots—both literally and figuratively.

She went to the roses and picked one up, passing it to Philip before selecting another—her mom's favorite, a deep crimson bloom with a heady fragrance that

transported her instantly back in time. She smiled down at the rose as she remembered her mom cutting them and placing them in a vase in the kitchen where the scent would fill the room.

They went together to a spot near the newly installed irrigation line, the perfect place where the roses would thrive. Philip dug a hole while Elsbeth mixed in rich compost, their movements synchronized as if they'd been gardening together for years.

"Your mother would be proud," Philip said softly as they lowered the first rose into the ground.

Elsbeth's throat tightened with emotion. "I think she would," she agreed, gently patting soil around the base of the plant. "She always said roses need love to truly flourish."

"Like people," Philip murmured, his eyes meeting hers over the freshly planted rose.

They stood back, arm in arm, and admired their work. The two roses looked perfect against the backdrop of the mountains, sentinels marking the beginning of Rose Farm's transformation.

Then Philip said, "I have something I need to tell you."

"I know," she said, surprising herself with the certainty in her voice.

And whatever it was, she was ready to hear.

Chapter Sixteen – Philip

“You know?” Philip arched an eyebrow in question.

This is going to be a whole lot easier if Elsbeth already knows about shifters, his bear said.

But it also confirmed his worst fears, that she hadn’t wanted to hear what he had to say last night because she didn’t want him to confirm they were mates.

“I mean, I know you have something on your mind,” she replied.

“Oh,” Philip said with relief.

She doesn’t know, does she? his bear asked.

No, I don’t think she does, Philip answered, his relief short-lived. This felt a little like out of the frying pan and into the fire.

Because now he had to find the words to tell her about shifters, about the mating bond, about who she was to him.

“I’ve noticed something’s been on your mind,” Elsbeth said, twisting her hands together. “Like there’s something important you want to tell me.” She looked up at him with those eyes that seemed to see right into his soul. “Last night, on the bench at the vineyard, I could feel it.”

His bear stirred restlessly inside him, eager to finally be acknowledged. This is it. Tell her the truth, his bear urged.

“I did want to tell you something,” Philip admitted. “I still do.”

Elsbeth reached for his hand, her fingers entwined with his, and a shock of recognition threaded through his veins. “I’m sorry I cut you off. I was afraid that...that it might be bad news,” she admitted, her voice small. “And so it was easier not to listen, but that was unfair. Whatever you have to say, you should say it.”

She was scared, his bear’s heart went out to their mate.

He should have guessed. Should have sensed her unease. But he hadn’t, perhaps because he’d been scared, too.

“I never meant to upset you,” Philip said, squeezing her hand. A weight lifted from his shoulders. She hadn’t been rejecting him, she’d been protecting herself.

But will she still be scared when we show her the truth? Philip wondered.

I am not scary, his bear insisted.

Not to me, not to people who know about shifters, Philip reasoned, but to someone who has no idea shifters exist? It is going to be scary.

Not as scary as losing her mom, his bear replied forlornly, wishing he could take that pain from his mate.

No, Philip agreed. For Elsbeth, I doubt there’s anything as scary as losing your mom.

Elsbeth tilted her head, confusion crossing her features. “Philip?” She touched his

cheek gently, her eyes searching his. “You seem so far away.”

“No, I’m right here.” Philip leaned into her touch, savoring the connection. “I have something I want to show you,” he said, his voice low and serious.

“Does this involve another trip in your truck?” she asked lightly, trying to ease the tension between them.

“No,” Philip replied with a small smile. “But maybe...” He looked around at the open fields surrounding them. “We could go somewhere a little more private.”

He didn’t want to shift in the open in the middle of the day, even though he couldn’t sense anyone nearby. Being around his mate confused his senses, especially when his emotions were so heightened.

“The house?” she asked, pointing toward the farmhouse.

“No,” he chuckled, imagining Elsbeth’s reaction if he shifted in her living room. “Why don’t we take a walk back to the spring?”

She looked over her shoulder toward the path they’d followed earlier, then nodded. “Okay.”

They walked back up the hill in comfortable silence, their fingers intertwined. Elsbeth didn’t question what he wanted to show her—she trusted him completely, and that meant everything to him.

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The spring came into view. The small pool they had created with their dam was working perfectly, cascading down through the pipes to feed the irrigation system. Philip watched the current with satisfaction, feeling a deep sense of accomplishment.

“Look at that,” he said.

Elsbeth stood beside him, watching the water. “I can’t believe we actually did it.”

“You did most of the hard work,” Philip said, unable to keep the pride from his voice. “I just helped with the technical parts.”

His bear stirred restlessly within him. We have so much more to do, his bear reminded him. So much more to accomplish together.

Like a family, Philip whispered, hardly daring to believe that the future he wanted with Elsbeth was so close. Like children.

It was close enough that he could touch it, could taste it...this dream of a shared life with the woman standing beside him.

Elsbeth turned to him, her expression curious. “Here?” she asked, glancing around the secluded clearing by the spring.

“Perfect,” he said, releasing her hand and stepping away. His heart thudded against his ribs as he put a little distance between them.

“Philip?” She tugged her brows together in confusion as she watched him.

“Trust me,” he said, his voice steady despite his racing pulse. “Trust that I will never hurt you.”

Her eyes searched his, and after a moment, she nodded. “I do,” she whispered.

Philip took a deep breath and closed his eyes. Then he let go of the world, and the air around him popped and crackled with static electricity as his human form disappeared.

For a moment, Elsbeth was lost to him. But then his bear emerged in his place, standing on all fours before her.

And there stood their mate, her mouth open in shock. But she didn’t run. She simply stared at him, frozen in place.

“You’re a bear?” Elsbeth said, then let out a small, hysterical laugh. “You’re a bear. Of course you are.” She shook her head as if she couldn’t believe what she was seeing. “I mean, of course, bear shifters are real. Why wouldn’t they be?”

She doesn’t sound too sure, his bear observed worriedly.

Go to her, Philip urged. When she touches you, she’ll know you’re real, that we are one and the same.

His bear took a cautious step forward, then paused, not wanting to frighten her. Then another step. And another.

“You are real, aren’t you?” Elsbeth whispered, her voice trembling.

The bear nodded his massive head slowly.

“How?” she asked, a question for which there was no simple answer.

It just was, just as his love for her just was.

Elsbeth’s hands shook as she reached out toward him, hesitant at first. Philip’s bear stood perfectly still, patient and watchful as her fingers finally made contact with his thick fur. The sensation sent a ripple through his massive form.

“You’re so soft,” she whispered, her touch becoming more confident as she stroked his head.

The bear closed his eyes, savoring her gentle caress. When he opened them again, Elsbeth was staring directly into his eyes with wonder.

“It really is you in there, isn’t it?” she murmured, leaning forward until her forehead rested against his. “Your eyes...they’re still Philip’s eyes.”

She pressed a gentle kiss to the top of his head, and a tremor ran through his entire body. Then, as if the simple act of acceptance had unleashed something long buried inside her, tears began streaming down Elsbeth’s face.

“You’re the most incredible thing I’ve ever seen,” she said through her tears. “I never knew... I never imagined...”

The dam within her seemed to break completely. Her shoulders shook with sobs that seemed to come from somewhere deep inside her. The bear moved closer, instinctively rubbing his head against her shoulder in comfort.

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She wrapped her arms around his neck, burying her face in his fur as she cried. His bear held perfectly still, offering his silent strength while she released emotions that seemed to have been bottled up for far too long.

When her sobs finally subsided, she pulled back slightly, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. Without a word, she lowered herself to sit beside the spring. Philip's bear joined her, settling his massive form next to her.

Together they watched the water flow, the gentle gurgling of the spring the only sound between them. It was as if she found peace in her silent furry companion.

And Philip's bear had found peace, too. There, beside his mate at last.

After some time had passed, Elsbeth reached out absently to stroke his fur, her breathing finally steady again. "I think I need to talk to Philip now," she whispered. "Not that you aren't Philip. I can see in your eyes that you are." She tilted her head, studying him. "But you can't talk like this, can you?"

The bear shook his massive head slowly.

"I thought not," she said with a small smile.

The bear rose to his feet, rubbing his head affectionately against her shoulder one more time before moving away. The air around him began to shimmer and pop with that same electric energy, the sound of crackling intensifying as his bear disappeared.

Elsbeth pushed herself to her feet, watching in awe as Philip stood before her, a

tentative smile on his face.

“This is what you wanted to tell me,” she said. It wasn’t a question.

“It is,” Philip replied warily.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t ready to listen,” Elsbeth said, her voice barely above a whisper.

“It’s okay,” he replied. “My mom and dad both told me I would know when the time was right, and last night, the time was not right. And now it is.”

She took one tentative step toward him, then another, more confident one. Philip held his breath, afraid to move, afraid to break this fragile moment between them. Then suddenly she was in his arms, her body pressed against his, her face buried in his shoulder.

“Last night, I was afraid you were going to tell me bad news. And I didn’t want anything to spoil the evening. It had been so perfect,” she murmured against his chest. “But if I’d have known this was what you were going to show me...” She lifted her head. “It’s like you’ve brought magic to my world.”

Philip’s heart ached as he held her close. “You brought magic to my world when you arrived here,” he confessed, his voice rough with emotion.

His bear rumbled with satisfaction, urging him to speak the words they’d both been waiting to say. Philip drew a deep breath, knowing this was the moment that would change everything between them.

“Elsbeth,” he said solemnly, “you are my mate.”

His bear let out a joyous roar inside him as he finally spoke the truth aloud.

“Mate?” She inched away slightly, looking up into his eyes with a mixture of confusion and dawning comprehension.

“We are meant to be together. Forever.” Philip’s hands tightened on her waist, anchoring her to him. “You are the only one for me, and I hope I am the only one for you.”

“You are,” she whispered, slipping her arms around his neck. She tilted her head, her eyes searching his. “I thought I was going crazy, that I was feeling this intense connection to you because I was lonely.”

“No,” he said firmly, “it’s because we are connected. By fate. By the mating bond.” He cupped her face in his hand, his thumb gently stroking her cheek. “You will never be lonely again.”

Then he kissed his mate, pouring all his love, all his longing, all his hope into that single, perfect connection. She melted against him, her lips soft and yielding as they moved beneath his. The kiss deepened, and Philip felt the last barriers between them dissolve.

When they finally broke apart, both breathing heavily, Elsbeth’s eyes were shining with unshed tears of joy. “All this time,” she whispered, “I thought I was imagining things. The way I felt drawn to you from the first moment we met. The electricity when we touched.”

“It was real,” Philip assured her, pressing his forehead against hers. “All of it.”

His bear purred contentedly inside him, finally at peace now that their mate knew the truth. Our mate accepts us for who we are.

Chapter Seventeen – Elsbeth

Elsbeth had been working hard to get the irrigation system working. It had been her main focus, and now she had water to feed her flowers.

And Philip to help feed her soul.

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Elsbeth could hardly believe how quickly her life had changed. Just a few weeks ago, she'd been a woman with nothing but a promise to keep and a dream to fulfill. Now, she had water flowing through her fields, roses planted in honor of her mother, and a man...a bear shifter...who called her his mate.

“What are you thinking about?” He held her close, gazing down as he spoke.

“Just...everything,” she replied.

She felt like a child on Christmas morning, unwrapping one beautiful gift after another. The farm, the spring, the roses beginning to take root—and Philip. Especially Philip. After the pain of losing her mom, it was as if the universe had been saving up all its blessings to shower upon her at once.

“I realize it's been a shock,” he murmured against her hair.

“It has,” she agreed, “but it's explained so much.” She lifted her face to his. “And I... I like that things will never be complicated between us.”

Philip gave a short laugh. “You don't think having a bear shifter as your fated mate is complicated?”

“No,” she answered simply. “It means I don't have to second-guess myself. We are meant to be together, and we will be together.” Her gaze drifted over his shoulder toward the farmhouse. “Here.”

Philip turned to look at the farmhouse. “Yes,” he said, sounding slightly shocked, “if

you'll have me."

"I'll have you," she murmured, leaning into his embrace, "although we might set tongues wagging if you move in too soon."

"Not really," Philip assured her. "There are plenty of shifters in Bear Creek, and whirlwind romances are a common everyday occurrence."

"Well then," Elsbeth said, taking his hand, "why don't I show you our room?"

"Our room?" he asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Our room." Taking his hand, Elsbeth led him toward the house, her heart racing at the suddenness of everything that had happened.

Philip didn't follow her, and when she turned, he wore a conflicted expression.

"What is it?" she asked, worry creeping into her voice.

Philip's eyes softened as he looked at her. Filled with something she wanted to believe was love. But surely it was too fast, too soon. But then he had told her that fate had already decided they were going to be together forever. Mates.

"Are you sure about this?" he asked. "There's no rush."

Elsbeth closed the distance between them, rising on her tiptoes to press a gentle kiss to his cheek. "We're mates, aren't we?" she whispered against his skin.

"We are," he answered hoarsely, his hands resting on her waist.

She pulled back just enough to meet his gaze. "Then why don't we go inside and you

can show me exactly what that means?” She looked up at him through her lashes, emboldened by the knowledge that they were connected at some profound level. The certainty of their bond was intoxicating and more potent than even the finest Thornberg wine.

“Showyou exactly?” he asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Yes,” Elsbeth said as she turned toward the house and tugged his hand. “And I don’t mean your adorable bear.”

Philip chuckled, a deep rumbling sound that wasn’t quite the reaction she’d expected. She cast a questioning look over her shoulder, feeling her newfound courage beginning to slip away.

“My bear is thrilled you find him adorable,” Philip said, his eyes twinkling with amusement.

Her confidence returned in a rush. “He is, and I want to get to know him,” she replied, “but first I want to get to know you...intimately.”

“Lead the way,” Philip said, his earlier hesitation gone completely.

When they reached the house, she was suddenly nervous. He’d seen the kitchen where she’d put most of her efforts when she first moved in, but the rest of the house needed serious work—work she hadn’t gotten around to yet. But when she looked up at Philip and saw the hunger in his eyes, she knew it didn’t matter what state the house was in, or even if they were in a house at all. All that mattered was that they were together.

Elsbeth opened the door, and they went inside. Philip closed it firmly behind them, and she turned, walking backward as she led him through the house. At the foot of the

stairs, he wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her close, claiming her mouth with his. His lips moved against hers with urgent need, his tongue tracing her bottom lip. The kiss was deep and consuming, stealing her breath and making her knees weak with desire.

When they finally broke apart, she was gasping for air, her body aching with need. In one fluid motion, he lifted her into his arms. She wrapped her legs around his waist, feeling his hardness pressed against her. Unable to resist, she wriggled against him, drawing a deep groan from her lips as his body tensed against hers. His eyes darkened with desire, becoming almost black as he carried her up the stairs.

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She nuzzled his neck and grazed his skin with her teeth, nipping the sensitive spot where his neck met his shoulder. His whole body shuddered against hers.

“Which room?” he growled, his voice rough with need.

“Second on the left,” she murmured against his skin.

He strode down the hallway, not breaking stride as he shouldered the door open. Crossing the room in three long strides, he gently laid her on the bed, stepping back to look down at her. His eyes roamed over her body with such intensity that she could almost feel them, like a physical touch.

Philip stood at the side of the bed, his chest rising and falling with each ragged breath. Then, with deliberate slowness, he undressed. First, his shirt revealing the sculpted planes of his chest and abdomen. Then his jeans, sliding them down powerful thighs. Finally, his underwear, until he stood before her completely naked, magnificent in his arousal.

Elsbeth bit her lower lip as heat coursed through her body. The sight of him—all of him—awakened a primal hunger within her. Need bloomed in her core, spreading outward like wildfire through her veins.

She reached out, curling her fingers around his hardness. As she stroked him, his eyes fluttered closed, a groan escaping his lips.

“You’re still wearing too many clothes,” Philip said, his voice strained as he gently caught her wrist, stilling her movements.

“Then do something about it,” she challenged, her own voice barely recognizable through her desire.

With a growl that was more bear than man, Philip knelt on the bed, and with reverent care, he began unbuttoning her flannel shirt, his eyes never leaving hers as his fingers worked each button free. The fabric parted beneath his touch, revealing glimpses of her skin that made his breath catch. Elsbeth sat up, their faces inches apart, and shrugged the shirt from her shoulders. She placed it carefully on the floor beside the bed, suddenly shy despite her earlier boldness.

When she looked up, his eyes had darkened with hunger, a primal need that made her shiver with anticipation.

“Beautiful,” he whispered, reaching out to trace the swell of her breasts above her lacy bra.

His fingers found the clasp between her breasts, deftly releasing it with a flick of his wrist. As the fabric fell away, exposing her to his gaze, Elsbeth’s momentary flash of shyness quickly dissolved beneath the heat of his stare.

Philip cupped one breast in his palm and brushed his thumb across her hardened nipple, drawing slow, maddening circles that sent sparks of pleasure straight to her core. Elsbeth bit her lower lip, unable to stop herself from writhing beneath his touch as the ache between her thighs intensified to an almost unbearable degree.

A smile of pure male satisfaction crossed Philip’s face as he witnessed her reaction. Lowering his head, he flattened his tongue against her nipple, drawing a desperate whimper from her throat. She clenched her thighs together, seeking relief from the ache building between them, but found none.

“Philip,” she gasped as he took her nipple into his mouth, sucking gently before

swirling his tongue around the hardened peak. His hand kneaded her other breast, fingers teasing and plucking at the nipple until she was arching into his touch.

He took his time, lavishing attention on one breast before moving to the other. His mouth closed around her neglected nipple, teeth grazing the sensitive bud while his tongue flicked back and forth. The sensation was exquisite torture, pleasure so intense it bordered on pain.

Elsbeth's hands weren't idle. They explored the broad expanse of his chest, tracing the defined muscles of his abdomen, following the trail of dark hair that led downward. When her fingers finally wrapped around his hardness, Philip tensed above her, his teeth grazing her nipple more sharply than before.

The slight pain mixed with pleasure sent electricity racing through her veins. Her back arched off the bed as she stroked him, wanting him to feel even a fraction of the desperate need consuming her.

Philip groaned against her breast before releasing her nipple. His eyes, dark with desire, met hers as he moved lower, his hands finding the button of her jeans. He made quick work of the zipper, and Elsbeth lifted her hips to help as he tugged both jeans and panties down over her thighs, discarding them on the floor.

His eyes never left hers as he kissed his way back up her legs, his lips leaving a trail of fire along her calves, the sensitive skin behind her knees, her inner thighs. Each press of his mouth against her skin was reverent, worshipful, as if he couldn't believe she was finally his.

Then he gently nudged her knees apart, opening her to his gaze. The vulnerability of being so exposed made her breath catch, but the hunger in his eyes chased away any hesitation.

He looked up, his eyes locking with hers as his fingers stroked along her inner thighs, moving ever closer to where she ached for him. When his thumb finally brushed across her sensitive bundle of nerves, Elsbeth's back arched off the bed, a gasp escaping her lips.

That same satisfied smile crossed his features as he watched her reaction. Then he lowered his head and licked her with the flat of his tongue, one long, deliberate stroke that made her cry out.

"Philip!" His name was a breathless plea as he slid two fingers inside her, curling them to find that perfect spot while his tongue circled her mound with exquisite precision.

The dual sensations were overwhelming—his talented fingers stretching and filling her while his mouth worked magic on her most sensitive flesh. He alternated between broad strokes and focused attention, sometimes sucking gently, sometimes flicking his tongue in rapid movements that had her writhing beneath him.

She whimpered, her hands finding their way into his hair, holding him against her as pleasure built to an impossible peak.

Philip's movements grew more insistent, his fingers thrusting deeper as his tongue tortured her. The tension inside her coiled tighter and tighter, a spring wound to its breaking point. And when he hummed against her, the vibrations sent her over the edge.

Her climax crashed through her in waves, her body convulsing as pleasure radiated outward from her core. She cried out, her body arching off the bed as waves of ecstasy swept through her. Her inner walls clenched around his fingers rhythmically as her orgasm left her trembling and breathless.

But Philip didn't relent, drawing out her pleasure until the aftershocks subsided and she collapsed back onto the bed, completely sated.

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As she lay there, gasping for breath, Philip pressed a gentle kiss to her inner thigh before moving up the bed to gather her in his arms.

“That was...” she trailed off, unable to find words adequate to describe the experience.

“Just the beginning,” he promised, his voice rough with restrained passion.

Elsbeth clung to him, her body still tingling with aftershocks. She could feel his hardness pressing against her hip, a reminder that his need remained unsatisfied. With newfound boldness, she reached between them and stroked his hard length.

“Make love to me,” she whispered against his ear.

“Now, that is a request no shifter could ever refuse his mate,” Philip said as he slipped his arm around her waist. Then he whispered, “Kneel for me.”

Chapter Eighteen – Philip

Philip was impossibly hard as Elsbeth obediently followed his command, slowly rolling over onto her stomach before gradually lifting herself onto her hands and knees.

His breath caught at the sight of her. So vulnerable, so trusting, so beautiful. The curve of her spine, the soft swell of her hips, the way her still-damp hair cascaded over one shoulder, leaving the nape of her neck exposed. It called to something primal within him.

He swallowed hard, his fingers twitching with the desire to trace the curve of her spine from the nape of her neck to...

“You’re staring,” she murmured, turning her head to look at him.

“Can you blame me?” He bent forward, pressing a line of kisses down her spine while he caressed the curve of her hip before stroking her bottom, inching his hand lower.

She gasped as he slid one finger inside her, then two, stroking her inner walls. When he curled his fingers just so, Elsbeth dropped her head with a gasp, pushing back against his hand to take him deeper. The sight of her seeking her pleasure so openly made his hardness throb with need.

“Philip,” she whimpered, her voice breaking. “Please...”

He couldn’t deny her—or himself—any longer. Positioning himself behind her, he guided himself to her entrance, teasing her with gentle pressure without pushing inside.

“Please, what?” he asked, needing to hear the words.

“Claim me,” she breathed, looking back over her shoulder with eyes dark with desire.

With exquisite control, Philip eased forward, penetrating her inch by torturous inch. The sensation was overwhelming. The way her inner walls gripped him so tightly, he had to grit his teeth against the urge to thrust deep and hard.

Instead, he moved with deliberate slowness, savoring every sensation, every small sound she made.

When he was finally buried to the hilt, he stilled completely, his hands gripping her hips as he fought for control. He'd waited a lifetime for this moment, and he wanted to savor it, commit it to memory...

He sucked in a breath as she tensed her inner muscles around him, and he fought once again for control as she moved her hips in a circular motion.

Then he began to move. With firm hands, he gripped her hips and withdrew completely, drawing a desperate whimper from her as she tried to follow his movement. Holding her still, he watched her tremble with need before sliding back into her fully, this time with more force than before.

Her gasp of pleasure vibrated through his entire being, but he withdrew almost completely once more, leaving just the head of his length inside her.

Elsbeth's breathing became ragged, her body trembling with anticipation as he hovered there. Then, unable to deny either of them any longer, Philip thrust into her harder, his hips flexing as he began to build a steady rhythm. Each stroke went deeper than the last, his pace gradually increasing as primal instinct took over.

He slid his hand from her hip, reaching beneath her to find the sensitive bundle of nerves between her thighs. As his fingers found their target, stroking in time with his thrusts, Elsbeth made a sound that was half-moan, half-whimper. Her arms trembled beneath her, and he watched in awe as her breasts swayed with each powerful thrust, the sight driving him to the edge of his control.

Philip could feel his release building, the tension coiling tight in his belly. The sensation of her tight inner walls gripping him was almost too much to bear, but he clenched his jaw against the mounting pressure. He wanted—needed—to feel her come around him first.

With expert precision, he pinched her sensitive bud gently between his fingers, applying just the right pressure as he continued to drive into her. The effect was immediate—her inner muscles clenched around him in rhythmic pulses, squeezing him with such exquisite pressure that his control finally shattered.

Philip let go with a guttural groan, his essence filling her in hot spurts as she cried out beneath him. The primal side of him surged to the surface as he jerked his hips forward hard, once, twice, three times, each thrust punctuating the waves of pleasure crashing through him as she continued to come around him.

Time seemed to suspend as they remained locked together, bodies trembling in the aftermath of shared ecstasy. Slowly, carefully, Philip leaned forward, pressing his chest against her back as they both struggled to catch their breath. He wrapped one arm around her waist, supporting her weight as her arms finally gave out.

With careful movements, he eased them both onto their sides, still joined intimately as he cradled her against his chest. His bear rumbled with satisfaction inside him, a deep contentment settling over them both as he nuzzled his face into the curve of her neck, breathing in her scent.

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The bond between them felt stronger than ever, sealed with their physical union in a way that transcended anything he'd ever experienced. He could feel her heartbeat, her breath, her very essence in a way that went beyond the physical.

"Elsbeth," he murmured against her skin, his voice rough with emotion. "My mate."

She sighed contentedly, her fingers entwining with his, where they rested against her stomach. "I never knew it could be like this," she whispered.

"Like what?" he asked, pressing a gentle kiss to her shoulder.

"So...complete." She turned her head to look at him, her expression so tender it made his heart ache. "Does it feel this way for all shifters when they find their mates?"

"I don't know," Philip admitted. "I only know how it feels for me. For us." He brushed his finger lightly across her cheek, and she shivered. "My parents have been together for decades, and they still look at each other the way they did last night at dinner."

"With that silent conversation passing between them," Elsbeth murmured. "I saw it."

Philip nodded. "The bond deepens with every shared experience."

"Like planting roses," she said softly.

"Like planting roses," he agreed, his voice rough with emotion. "Like building irrigation systems and making love in the afternoon sun."

She blushed, the pink flush spreading delightfully across her cheeks and down her neck to her chest. Philip couldn't resist leaning forward to press his lips to the hollow of her throat, feeling her pulse flutter beneath his touch.

"I have so many questions," Elsbeth said, her fingers combing through his hair as he continued to explore her neck with gentle kisses.

"Ask me anything," he murmured against her skin, reluctant to stop tasting her but willing to give her the answers she needed.

"Your bear...is he always with you? Even now?"

Philip lifted his head, meeting her curious gaze. "Yes. He's part of me, not separate. More like another facet of who I am. We share thoughts, feelings." He traced the curve of her shoulder with his fingertips. "Right now, he's incredibly content."

"What does he think of me?" she asked, a touch of vulnerability in her voice.

Philip smiled, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "He adores you. Though he's been impatient with me for not telling you sooner about what we are."

Her fingers traced patterns on his chest. "Are there others in Bear Creek? Other shifters?"

"Many," Philip nodded. "The town was founded by shifter families. Though there are plenty of humans, too."

"Like me," she murmured.

"Yes," he agreed, lifting her hand to his lips. "Like you. The perfect mate for a bear shifter who's been waiting his whole life to find you."

Her cheeks flushed again. “Is that why your family was so welcoming? Because they knew I was your mate?”

“They would like you whether you were my mate or not,” Philip assured her. “And they were thrilled another of their sons has found his mate.”

“Another? So, Kris and Cassia...” She shook her head. “Of course, the way they look at each other...”

“Yes, they’re mates, too. And hopefully the others will find theirs, too, someday soon.”

They should all feel what we feel, his bear said.

Elsbeth snuggled closer, her body fitting perfectly against his. “So, you just have to wait for it to happen?”

“Yes.” He pressed his lips to her shoulder. “You could spend a lifetime searching for your mate and then find them right where you started.”

“Because of fate.” She shook her head. “Isn’t that kind of sad?”

“The reward is worth the wait,” Philip said.

Oh, yeah, his bear agreed.

“Like waiting for a rare flower to bloom.” She nestled closer to him.

“Exactly,” Philip murmured against her hair.

Elsbeth traced her fingers along his chest, following the contours of his muscles. “All this time, I thought I was alone, starting over in a strange place. But I wasn’t.”

“You were never alone,” Philip said, his voice deepening with emotion.

She lifted her head to look at him. “When did you know? The exact moment you knew I was your mate?”

Philip’s expression grew wistful. “When I was driving over here that first day we met. It was the strangest sensation. And at first, I didn’t know what it was. But then, when I saw you, it all made sense.”

“Is that why you looked so...stunned?” A smile played at the corners of her mouth.

“It didn’t help that you seemed to be expecting me,” he said in his defense. “That was kind of confusing.”

“Have you thanked Finn for sending that text?” Elsbeth asked.

“Nowhere near enough times,” he said as he cupped her face in his hand and kissed her lips.

She shivered against him, her body responding instantly to his touch. “So, what happens now?” she asked, her voice dropping to a whisper.

“Now?” Philip rolled onto his back, pulling her on top of him. Her hair fell around them like a curtain as she braced her hands on his chest. “Now we build a life together. Your dream of Rose Farm. My work at the vineyard. Our future.”

“Our future,” she repeated, testing the words on her tongue. “I like the sound of that.”

Her eyes grew serious as she traced the line of his jaw with her fingertip. “I wish my mom could have met you. She would have loved you.” Her voice caught slightly. “She always said I’d know when I found the right person.”

“She is part of the reason we met,” Philip said.

Elsbeth nodded, her eyes misted with tears. “You’re right. She told me to follow my dreams, and that led me here. To you.”

“Is it too soon to tell you that I love you?” Philip asked gruffly.

“No,” she answered. “And I love you, too. Both sides of you.”

And that was all Philip had ever longed to hear.

Chapter Nineteen – Elsbeth

Elsbeth woke to sunlight streaming through the curtains and an empty space beside her where Philip had been. For a moment, she wondered if she had dreamed it all—the bear shifter, the mating bond, the way they had made love until the early hours of the morning. But then the rich aroma of freshly brewed coffee drifted up the stairs, and she smiled. It hadn’t been a dream after all.

She stretched languidly, her body pleasantly sore in ways that reminded her of every touch, every kiss they had shared. The memory of Philip's hands on her skin, his lips trailing fire down her body, sent a delicious shiver through her.

Elsbeth slipped out of bed and quickly dressed, pulling on a clean shirt and jeans. As she moved toward the door, something caught her eye—her mother's old flannel shirt on the floor beside the bed.

She bent to pick it up, holding it against her cheek, and tears pricked her eyes unexpectedly. She sank down onto the edge of the bed, overwhelmed with a mixture of emotions.

For so long, this shirt had been her lifeline, a tangible connection to the woman she'd lost. But as she sat there, listening to Philip humming downstairs, Elsbeth realized something had shifted inside her. The grief was still there—it would always be there—but it no longer threatened to drown her.

It was time to start letting go of the sorrow and embrace the joy. Her mother would always be a part of her, would always be part of Rose Farm. But Elsbeth now understood that when her mom had made her promise to pursue her dream of owning a flower farm, it wasn't just about the flowers—it was about finding happiness again.

And with Philip, she had done just that.

She carefully folded the flannel shirt and placed it on the bed. Then she headed downstairs toward the sound of Philip's humming and the promise of coffee.

Philip looked up as she entered the kitchen, his smile taking her breath away. Images from the night before flashed through her mind—their bodies entwined, whispered words of love, the connection that went beyond the physical.

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He crossed the room and pulled her into his arms, his lips finding hers in a kiss that made her knees weak. She nestled against his chest, breathing in his scent, feeling the steady beat of his heart.

“Good morning,” he murmured against her hair.

“Good morning,” she replied, tilting her face up to his.

Philip drew back slightly, his brow furrowing as he noticed the tears glistening in her eyes. “Are you okay?” he asked, his voice gentle with concern.

Elsbeth brushed the tears away with her fingertips. “Yes,” she assured him.

“Are you sure?” He wiped a stray tear from her cheek with his thumb.

“Yes.” She smiled up at him. “These are happy tears.”

“Then you must be very happy,” he said, brushing away another tear that had escaped.

“I am,” she whispered.

“Good.” Philip pressed a kiss to her forehead before moving to pour her a cup of coffee.

They took their mugs outside, sitting side by side on the deck steps, looking out over the fields that would soon bloom with flowers. Her dreams were coming true right before her eyes.

Elsbeth leaned against Philip's shoulder, absorbing his warmth and strength as she sipped her coffee. "I do have one question for you," she said after a comfortable silence.

"You do?" He turned to look at her, eyebrows raised.

"Why did you come here that first day?" she asked. "To Rose Farm?"

"Because of Finn's text," Philip replied.

"But the text was a mistake," she pressed. "You still came."

"Yes," he nodded, "because he was supposed to text me the time and place for us to meet to arrange my parents' anniversary party."

"Oh, wow," Elsbeth said. "So, when was the correct time and place?"

Philip looked a little confused, his brow furrowing. "You know, I don't know."

She laughed and shook her head. "You completely forgot about it."

"I had other things on my mind." He cupped her chin in his hand and kissed her lips softly. "My mate. I did tell you how much she means to me, didn't I?"

"Once or twice," she said when they parted. "But this is your mom and dad's anniversary. How many years have they been together?"

"Fifty," he replied.

"Wow." Her eyes widened in surprise. "That is a long time."

Elsbeth's mind drifted to the dinner at the vineyard with Philip's parents. After fifty years together, they still gazed at each other with such profound love and connection. It wasn't the infatuated passion of new lovers, but something deeper, more enduring. A love that had weathered seasons and storms, that had grown stronger with each passing year.

She glanced at Philip beside her, his profile gilded by the morning sun, and her heart ached for him. Would they still look at each other that way after half a century together? The thought both thrilled and humbled her. She could imagine them, gray-haired and weathered, sitting on this very porch, surrounded by blooming flowers, still finding each other's eyes across a room, still communicating without words.

"It is a long time," Philip agreed, as if reading her thoughts. He sipped his coffee as he gazed out over the fields. "But also, not long enough."

He was right. No matter how many years they were together, it would never be enough. But she didn't want to dwell on such thoughts now. Not when there was a party to plan.

"You'd better find out from Finn the right time and place," Elsbeth said, nudging him gently with her shoulder. "For the anniversary party."

Philip nodded, setting his mug down and reaching for his phone. "I should," he agreed, tapping the screen quickly. After a moment, he slipped the phone back in his pocket. "Done. He'll get back to me."

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“I’d like to help, too,” Elsbeth offered hesitantly. Though Philip had told her she was part of the family now, she hadn’t met all his brothers yet. She didn’t want them to think she was being pushy.

Philip seemed to sense her uncertainty. His face brightened as he turned to her. “Well, I was going to offer to help with the decorations,” he said. “I planned on making them natural, using vines and other greenery from the vineyard.” His eyes sparkled with mischief. “But now that I’ve met a flower farmer...”

“When is it?” Elsbeth asked, her mind already racing with ideas. She could picture arrangements of seasonal blooms complementing the natural beauty of the vineyard, perhaps reflecting the colors of the changing vines.

“Not for another couple of months,” Philip replied. “But we all get so busy, we decided to make an early start on the plans.”

“I’d love to help with the flowers,” she said excitedly, squeezing his arm. “If I get planting right away, I’ll have lots of choice by then.”

Philip’s eyebrows rose playfully. “Is that a hint?”

“I can handle things here,” she assured him, suddenly aware that he probably had work waiting for him at the vineyard. “You should get back and do your chores. I don’t want to get on the wrong side of my future in-laws.”

“Future in-laws,” Philip repeated.

“Shifters do get married, right?”

“Indeed, they do,” Philip replied, his eyes darkening with an intensity that made it hard to breathe.

“Oh,” she said, suddenly flustered. “That was not a hint.” The thought of him proposing right then and there filled her with panic. And longing.

Philip chuckled at her shocked expression. “Relax,” he said, leaning in to kiss her cheek. “I need to buy a ring first.”

Elsbeth’s heart fluttered in her chest. The promise in his words was unmistakable. Notif, butwhen. She leaned against him, savoring the warmth of his body next to hers.

“I should probably start planning what to plant for the anniversary flowers,” she said, choosing to change the subject. “Do you know what colors your mother prefers?”

Philip wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “She loves blues and purples. She says they remind her of the mountains at dusk.”

“Perfect,” Elsbeth nodded. “I can work with that. Bachelor’s buttons, larkspur, lavender...” She ticked off possibilities on her fingers. “And maybe some white roses for contrast.”

“You’re already planning,” Philip observed with a smile.

“That’s what flower farmers do,” she replied. “We’re always thinking seasons ahead.”

Philip stood up, pulling her gently to her feet. “And that’s why you’re perfect for this family. We vineyard folk understand planning for the future.” He brushed a strand of

hair from her face. “And you are my future.”

“I know,” she sighed, reluctant to see him go but understanding the demands of his work. “Will you come back tonight?”

“Try and stop me,” he murmured, lowering his head to capture her lips in a kiss that promised much more to come.

As he drove away, Elsbeth hugged herself, watching until his truck disappeared around the bend. Fifty years, she thought. It did seem both impossibly long and not nearly enough time to love Philip Thornberg. But they would make every moment count, starting right now.

With renewed purpose, she headed toward the greenhouse. She had flowers to plant, dreams to nurture, and a future to grow—one bloom at a time.

Chapter Twenty – Philip

Philip’s bear stirred uneasily beneath his skin as a sense of foreboding grew in his mind. Something is coming.

I can’t sense anything, Philip replied as he straightened up and surveyed the transformed landscape of Rose Farm. In the two months since Elsbeth had accepted him—both man and bear—as her mate, the barren fields had erupted into a riot of color that took his breath away. Row upon neat row of flowers stretched before him: bachelor’s buttons in vibrant blue, delicate purple larkspur swaying in the breeze, and his personal favorite, the deep crimson roses that honored Elsbeth’s mother.

“What do you think?” Elsbeth asked, appearing at his side with a basket of freshly cut blooms balanced on her hip. Her cheeks were flushed from the summer heat, while tendrils of hair escaped her practical braid to frame her face. Even with dirt smudged

across her forehead and sweat dampening her shirt, she was the most beautiful sight he'd ever beheld.

"It's incredible," Philip replied honestly. "You've worked miracles here."

"We've worked miracles," Elsbeth corrected. "There's no way I couldn't have done this alone."

"Oh, I think you can do anything you set your mind to." Philip slipped his arm around her waist and pulled her close as he pressed a kiss on her forehead.

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Elsbeth leaned into him, her free hand gesturing toward the farthest field. “The blue hydrangeas are coming along perfectly for your parents’ anniversary celebration. And the lavender field is almost ready for its first harvest.”

Philip was so darn proud of her he could burst. “Mom’s going to be overwhelmed when she sees all of this.”

“I hope so,” Elsbeth said, a hint of nervousness in her voice. “Fifty years of marriage deserves something special. Add to that, raising six sons, she deserves something extraspecial.”

It is going to be a party to remember, his bear rumbled contentedly.

As long as Stanley doesn’t get too carried away, Philip said. His brother owned the pet store in town and had floated many ideas for his contribution, ranging from a parrot to welcome all the guests, to goldfish bowl centerpieces, with real goldfish.

Eventually, they had settled on a live butterfly release, symbolizing new beginnings and eternal love. Philip thought it was actually perfect for his parents, who had always encouraged their sons to spread their wings while maintaining strong family bonds.

Philip tightened his hold on Elsbeth, feeling the familiar rush of gratitude that she had come into his life. Every day with her felt like a gift he’d never dared hope for—working side by side, building something together, falling asleep with her in his arms, and waking to her smile.

He looked toward the distant mountain peaks, detecting a subtle hint of ozone carried by the wind.

Something's coming, his bear warned again. I'm sure of it.

"Philip?" Elsbeth's voice pulled him back to the present. "You went somewhere else for a moment."

He frowned, tilting his head to better catch the shifting wind. "There's a storm coming."

Elsbeth gazed up at the clear blue sky, her brow furrowing in confusion. "The weather forecast said nothing but sunshine for the next three days."

"I can smell it," Philip insisted, his bear growing more restless by the minute. "Something in the air doesn't feel right."

She set her basket down on a nearby stump and placed both hands on his chest, looking up at him with those eyes that never failed to captivate him. "Philip Thornberg, are you trying to find an excuse to cancel your trip to the wine festival? Because it's not every day you get presented with an award for grape grower of the year!"

"No," he protested, though the thought had crossed his mind. This would be the first time they had been apart for a night since he'd revealed his bear to her, and he didn't want to leave her. "I just don't like the idea of leaving you alone if there's bad weather coming."

We should stay, his bear insisted. Protect our mate.

"I'll keep a close eye on the forecast," Elsbeth assured him. "But this is important. To

you and your family. It's an honor to be given such an award." Her mouth turned down at the corners. "I feel bad enough that I'm not coming with you..."

If we don't go, she's going to blame herself, his bear said. She's going to worry about what people will say.

I don't care what people say, Philip said.

But our mate does, his bear replied.

Philip sighed. You're right.

And Elsbeth is right, there is no storm forecasted, his bear said, but he was not convinced that meant there was not one coming this way. Maybe it is just the thought of leaving her that is messing with our senses.

"Don't feel bad," Philip told his mate. "There'll be a lot of grape talk..."

"Stop there," she said, and cupped his face in her hands and kissed his lips.

You really need to leave the puns to Alfie, his bear said.

"I'll be fine," she whispered. "I have it all under control."

"I know you're capable," Philip said, stroking her cheek. "That's not what worries me."

It's not being here that worries us, his bear added. Not being able to protect her if something happens.

Don't remind me, Philip said as his doubts returned.

“Then what is it?” Elsbeth asked, covering his hands with her own.

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“I’ve never been away from you overnight since we found each other,” he admitted. “My bear is...anxious about it.”

That’s right, blame me,his bear grumbled.

Understanding softened her features. “Your bear is overprotective,” she said with a teasing smile. “But he needs to trust that I can handle myself for a couple of days.”

“Okay,” Philip said, torn between duty and desire. The vineyard had been his life’s work, and Elsbeth was right. It was a great honor to receive such an award.

But our mate...his bear began.

“Go,” Elsbeth urged, breaking into his thoughts. “I’ll be right here when you get back.”

With a resigned sigh, Philip nodded. “All right. But promise me you’ll call if anything happens. Anything at all.”

“I promise,” she said solemnly, then brightened. “Now help me unload the last of the compost from the truck.”

They worked together in comfortable silence, as they often did. With hard work and dedication, Rose Farm had been transformed from a neglected property into a thriving business in just a few short months. The old farmhouse gleamed with fresh paint; the weathered barn now housed Elsbeth’s flower-arranging workshop; neat gravel paths wound between carefully planned beds of blooms in every color

imaginable.

And at the center of it all was Elsbeth—his mate, his heart, his future.

We've built something beautiful here, his bear said, momentarily distracted from his anxiety. Something worth protecting.

"I know," Philip murmured aloud as he carried the last bag of compost from the truck to the barn.

"Know what?" Elsbeth asked, looking up as she closed the tailgate.

"I know how lucky I am," he said, as he stacked the bag of compost next to the others and went back to her, pulling her into his arms. "To have found you. To be building this life with you."

She melted against him, her arms wrapping around his waist. "I'm the lucky one," she whispered. "I came here with nothing but a promise to keep, and I found everything I never knew I wanted."

"And in you, I found everything I knew I always wanted." Philip breathed in deeply, trying to memorize every detail of this moment. The softness of her body against his, the sweet fragrance of the flowers, the absolute certainty that this was where he belonged.

And yet, beneath it all, that nagging sense of unease persisted.

"Okay, you should go before I change my mind and keep you here," she said, stepping away from him.

"You'll call me?" he asked, heading for his truck, which was already packed and

ready for his trip. All he needed to do was swing by the vineyard and collect Kris, who was accompanying him to the wine festival.

“Wait,” she called, hurrying toward him. “I have something for you.”

She held out a perfect bachelor’s button, its vibrant blue petals fully open. “To remind you of me while you’re gone.” She carefully tucked the bloom into his buttonhole. “And since our love is everlasting, I am expecting it to still be perfect when you return.”

Philip’s throat tightened with emotion as he covered her hand with his. “I will love you forever, Elsbeth.”

“Are you trying to make me cry?” she asked, smoothing her hands across his chest. “Just come back to me safely.”

“Always,” he promised, bending to capture her lips in a kiss that left them both breathless.

When they finally parted, Philip rested his forehead against hers. “Two days,” he murmured. “Then I’m coming straight home to you.”

“I’ll be here,” she assured him, stepping back reluctantly. “Bring me back a present.”

“I will.” With one last kiss, Philip climbed into his truck. As he turned the key in the ignition, but before he pulled away, he couldn’t resist pulling out his phone to check the weather forecast one more time. The screen showed nothing but sun icons for the next three days, just as Elsbeth had said.

Maybe we’re overreacting, he told his bear as he backed down the driveway.

His bear remained unconvinced, pacing restlessly within him.

When he finally drove away, Philip watched Elsbeth in the rearview mirror as she stood waving, her figure growing smaller as he headed for the road. The bachelor's button in his buttonhole caught his eye, its blue as vibrant as Elsbeth's future seemed to be.

Two days. He could manage two days away from her.

But as he rounded the bend that would take Rose Farm and his mate out of sight, that sense of foreboding returned stronger than ever, and he had to fight the urge to turn around and race back to Elsbeth.

He didn't know what he would do if he lost her.

But he kept his foot on the gas. Perhaps all shifters felt this way the first time they left their mate.

He checked the clear sky again and told himself he was being ridiculous. But instincts ran deeper than logic, and his bear wouldn't settle. Not while their mate was alone, and the air felt so...wrong.

Chapter Twenty-One – Elsbeth

Something was wrong. Elsbeth jolted awake, her pulse racing, although she could not tell why. Was there someone outside? Or something?

Her mind conjured an image of the night when she looked out of the window, thinking her mother's ghost had come to visit her. But it hadn't been a ghost, it had been Philip's bear, come to bask in her presence. A small smile curved her lips. Had Philip returned?

Had the sound of his truck woken her?

No. There was no sense of him. No familiar prickle on the back of her neck she felt when he was close.

Pushing herself onto one elbow, she looked around the room, which lay in an eerie half-light, too dark for morning. She listened to the familiar creaks and groans of the house, but it too seemed eerily still, as if holding its breath.

She moved to sit up; the sheets tangled around her legs from a night of restless dreams filled with wilting flowers and Philip's worried face. The digital clock on her nightstand glowed 6:30 AM, but the darkness pressing against the windows suggested a much earlier hour.

Her sense of unease grew as she swung her legs over the side of the bed and sat up. Then she heard it, a tap on the window, like a pebble being thrown against the glass.

"Who is it?" she whispered, suddenly fully alert as thoughts of ghosts returned.

No, she did not believe in ghosts. But then, she hadn't believed in shifters until Philip.

Grabbing her robe from the end of the bed, Elsbeth pulled it on as she went to the window. She hesitated, as the sound came again and again in quick succession.

Rain. She pulled back the curtain to reveal a sky that looked like bruised fruit—purples and grays swirling together in ominous clouds that hung low over the distant mountains, obscuring the peaks.

A sudden wind bent the tops of the distant pines, and as she watched, another raindrop hit the glass, then another, until they came in a steady patter.

Philip had been right. The storm he'd sensed was here.

She grabbed her phone from the nightstand and pulled up the weather app, her stomach sinking as she read the updated forecast: severe thunderstorm warning, high winds, possible flash flooding. All the things that could destroy her flowers in a single morning.

No, a single hour!

“Philip,” she whispered to the empty room. As panic bloomed in her chest, she wished he were here. Wished she had not insisted he go.

She should have trusted his instincts. Instead, she had sent him away.

She was alone.

All her hard work, the anniversary flowers, the new plantings, the delicate seedlings. Everything she’d poured her heart and soul into could be ruined if she didn’t act fast.

Why had she insisted he go to that awards ceremony? Pride. Stubbornness. A desire to prove she could manage on her own. Now she faced this threat alone, and the weight of it pressed down on her shoulders, making it hard to breathe.

And then it came. The crushing absence of her mother hit her anew. Mom would have known exactly what to do. Mom would have checked the weather more carefully, prepared in advance, and not been caught unaware like this.

“I need you, Mom,” she whispered, her voice cracking as she let the curtain fall back into place, hiding the coming storm. “I need you both.”

But they were not here. At least not in person. But they were here in spirit. They had both taught her so much, helped her become resilient and courageous.

With no time to wallow in fear or regret, Elsbeth moved quickly to the closet. Her fingers brushed past her own clothes until they found what she was seeking—her mother’s flannel shirt, soft and worn from years of love. She hadn’t touched it since that first night with Philip, when she’d felt brave enough to finally let go. She’d needed it like a child needed a comfort blanket. But now she needed it for strength.

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With trembling fingers, she pulled the faded blue flannel over her shoulders, drawing in a deep breath of the faint scent that still clung to the fabric. “Okay, Mom,” she whispered, buttoning it up with determined fingers. “Let’s get to work.”

The storm’s intensity grew as Elsbeth pulled on a pair of jeans. Lightning flashed, illuminating her bedroom in stark white before plunging it back into shadow. Thunder followed almost immediately, rattling the window.

She ran downstairs to the kitchen, but there was no time for her usual morning coffee or breakfast, though her stomach growled in protest. The flowers wouldn’t wait; nature certainly wouldn’t. Elsbeth grabbed her rain jacket and yanked on a pair of mud boots, mentally cataloging everything that needed protection—the hydrangeas for the anniversary, the delicate new rose bushes, the trellises that could be flattened by wind.

Outside, the air felt electric, charged with the coming storm. The wind caught her hair, whipping strands across her face as she assessed the farm with growing dread. Dark clouds raced overhead, and the temperature had dropped significantly since the previous evening.

Elsbeth ran to the shed, hauling out protective tarps, stakes, and twine. Her hands worked mechanically, muscle memory taking over as she covered the most vulnerable beds first. The blue hydrangeas—Hugo and Leanne’s anniversary centerpieces—had to be secured. She worked methodically, driving stakes deep into the soil and covering the precious blooms with clear plastic that would protect without crushing.

Rain fell in earnest now, plastering her hair to her scalp. Her mother's flannel grew damp beneath the inadequate protection of her rain gear, but Elsbeth barely noticed. Her chest tightened with each gust of wind, fear gripping her as she imagined all her hard work, all her mother's dreams, washed away in a single storm.

"Please," she whispered, not sure who she was talking to—her mother, the universe, or the storm itself. "Please don't take this from me."

She moved to the rose trellises next, lowering them closer to the ground where they'd have less resistance against the wind. The rain came harder now, making the ground slippery beneath her boots. Her fingers grew numb with cold and dampness as she tied down the last of the protective coverings.

A sudden, powerful gust caught the edge of a tarp she'd just secured over a bed of bachelor's buttons. It ripped free from her hands, flapping wildly like a wounded bird.

"No!" Elsbeth cried, lunging after it. The precious flowers beneath would be pummeled by the intensifying rain without protection. She chased the escaping tarp across the muddy ground, stretching out her fingers to grasp the corner...

Strong arms wrapped around her waist from behind, steadying her just as she reached for the tarp. For a moment, she thought she might have imagined it...wished him into existence through sheer desperation. But the solid warmth against her back was unmistakably real.

"You're here," she whispered, leaning back against the familiar chest, relief flooding through her as Philip's scent enveloped her, more comforting than her mother's shirt could ever be.

Philip turned her in his arms and kissed her, the rain streaming down both their faces.

When he pulled back, his eyes were dark with worry, reflecting the storm clouds above.

“I couldn’t shake the feeling that I needed to be here,” he said, brushing wet hair from her face. “When I told Kris, he told me to turn around, to trust my instincts—that my mate was more important than any award.”

A sob of relief caught in Elsbeth’s throat as she pressed her face against his chest. “I was so scared,” she admitted. “Everything could have been ruined.”

“No, you have everything under control,” Philip said firmly. “Just tell me what you need me to do.”

Together, they moved with practiced efficiency, securing what Elsbeth had already done and tackling what remained. The wind howled around them, and the rain fell in sheets, but Elsbeth felt her fear receding with each task they completed. Philip’s presence was like an anchor, keeping her steady against the storm’s fury.

“Shouldn’t you be at the vineyard?” she asked as they wrestled with a particularly stubborn tarp, having to shout to be heard over the wind. “What about your family’s crops?”

“They have everything under control there,” Philip called back. “Dad and my brothers know what to do. You’re my priority.”

As the rain grew heavier and the wind more violent, they worked frantically to dig a trench along the edge of the flower beds, creating a channel to direct the water away from the newly planted sections. Mud splattered their clothes and faces as they dug, but neither complained. Elsbeth’s hands blistered, and her back ached, but she pushed through the pain, drawing strength from Philip working steadily beside her.

Finally, when they had done all they could, Philip caught her hand. “That’s enough!” he shouted over the howling wind. “We need to get inside!”

Hand in hand, they ran toward the farmhouse, the rain pelting them mercilessly. They burst through the door and slammed it shut behind them, cutting off the storm’s roar and plunging them into sudden, relative quiet. They stood in the entryway, dripping puddles onto the wooden floor, breathing hard from exertion and adrenaline.

Elsbeth looked up at Philip, his face streaked with mud and rain, his clothes soaked through, and felt a surge of love so powerful it nearly brought her to her knees.

“You came back for me,” she whispered, her voice raw with emotion.

“Always,” Philip murmured, his voice a deep rumble against her ear.

She wrapped her arms around him tightly, their soaked clothes creating small puddles beneath them on the wooden floor. For a moment, they simply held each other, the storm’s fury muted by the sturdy farmhouse walls.

Philip stroked her back through the sodden fabric. “As much as I enjoy holding you, we need to get out of these wet clothes before we catch our death.”

Elsbeth nodded, reluctantly pulling away. She peeled off her rain jacket first, hanging it carefully on the hook by the door. The rest of her sodden garments followed—muddy jeans, her mother’s flannel shirt now heavy with rain, socks that squelched as she removed them. She gathered everything into her arms and made her way to the laundry room, where she deposited the wet pile into the washing machine.

Before closing the lid, she paused, taking her mother’s shirt in her hands one more time. She squeezed it gently, watching water trickle between her fingers. Thank you, Mom, she thought, a silent prayer of gratitude for the strength she’d found today. She

knew it hadn't just been the shirt—it had been everything her mother had taught her, everything she'd instilled in her daughter.

As Elsbeth turned, clad only in her plain cotton bra and panties, a profound realization washed over her. She wasn't alone. She would never be truly alone again. The two people she loved most—her mother in spirit and Philip in flesh—would always be with her, guiding her, supporting her, loving her.

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Tears pricked at her eyes, blurring her vision as she stepped back into the entryway where Philip stood in nothing but his boxer briefs, his powerful body glistening with lingering raindrops.

His expression immediately shifted to concern. “Hey,” he said softly, crossing to her in two long strides. “It’ll be okay. Whatever the storm damages, we’ll fix it together. I promise.”

“These are happy tears,” she whispered, surprised by the emotion overwhelming her.

“Oh,” Philip said, his eyebrows rising in surprise as thunder crashed outside, punctuating the moment. Through the windows, lightning illuminated the world in stark flashes, but inside, Elsbeth had never felt more secure.

She moved to him, taking his large hand in both of hers. “You were right when you told me I’m never alone. I get it now.”

Philip cupped her face with his free hand, his thumb brushing away a tear. He leaned down and kissed her, a gentle press of lips that deepened as she responded. Elsbeth pressed herself against him, seeking his warmth as a shiver ran through her chilled body.

Without warning, Philip bent and swept her into his arms. “You should have a hot shower before you freeze,” he said, carrying her toward the stairs.

In the bathroom, he set her down carefully on the bath mat and reached to turn on the shower, adjusting the temperature until steam began to rise. Elsbeth watched him,

love and desire mingling in her chest as the room filled with steam.

She stepped into the shower, the hot water cascading over her skin, washing away mud and cold. “Aren’t you going to join me?” she asked, looking over her shoulder at him.

A slow smile spread across Philip’s face as he removed his underwear and stepped in behind her. The water streamed over both of them, hot against her chilled skin, but it was nothing compared to the heat that ignited inside her when his hands settled on her waist.

Elsbeth turned to face him, tilting her head back to meet his gaze. The desire she saw there made her breath catch. With sudden boldness, she placed her hands on his shoulders.

“Kneel for me,” she whispered.

Philip tilted his head questioningly for a moment before understanding dawned in his eyes. His smile turned wolfish as he lowered himself before her, his large hands gently inching her knees apart. His tongue traced over her most sensitive flesh, teasing the bundle of nerves that made her gasp.

When he slipped a finger inside her, stroking her inner walls with practiced precision, Elsbeth’s head fell back against the shower wall. His tongue continued its sweet torture while he added a second finger, stretching her deliciously. She curled her fingers into his wet hair, anchoring herself as pleasure built inside her. Her hips circled, seeking more, seeking release.

Then she came, crying out his name as waves of pleasure crashed through her. Philip did not relent, as his mouth and fingers worked in tandem to take her to new heights.

As the aftershocks subsided, Philip rose to his full height, water streaming down his powerful body. He kissed her deeply, and she wrapped her arms around his neck, her breasts crushed against his chest.

Outside, the storm continued to rage, but within these walls, within his arms, Elsbeth had never felt safer.

Chapter Twenty-Two – Philip

We should have trusted our instincts and never left, Philip's bear said as the storm raged outside. The wind howled like a wounded animal, rattling the windows of the old farmhouse with each gust.

But we trusted them and came back, Philip told his bear, watching raindrops race down the glass panes.

Only just in time, his bear grumbled, the deep voice in his mind tinged with lingering anxiety. The image of Elsbeth struggling alone against the elements still haunted them both.

But Elsbeth had it under control, and she proved to herself she is more than capable of looking after herself and Rose Farm. Philip felt a surge of pride, remembering how she'd already implemented protection measures before he'd even arrived. His brave, resourceful mate.

His bear huffed. Westill should have been here.

We're here now, Philip said as he watched Elsbeth enter the bedroom, her hair wrapped in a towel, while another covered her body. Pity. The glimpse of her bare shoulders and long legs made him want to see more. Much more.

He went to her, a towel wrapped around his midriff, while the memory of her crying out in pleasure as he kneeled before her in the shower made him harden. “I know of the perfect way to wait out the storm,” he said, as he slipped his hand beneath her towel and rubbed his thumb in a circular motion over her intimate flesh.

“Oh, you do, do you?” she asked breathlessly as he slipped his finger inside her.

“I do,” he reached for her towel, and in one fluid motion, it fell to the floor, revealing her soft curves.

“I haven’t had my morning coffee yet,” she said, biting down on her lower lip, but her eyes had darkened with desire.

In reply, he lowered his head and kissed the tip of her nipple. “Do you think you can wait?” He raised his eyes to look at her, loving the way her breath caught when he touched her.

“A few minutes,” she said as he sucked her nipple into his mouth and swirled his tongue around it. She wrapped her arms around his neck, cradling his head as he grazed his teeth over the taut bud.

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Cool air caressed his butt as she pulled the towel from his waist and curled her hand around his hardened length. He groaned as she stroked him up and down and thrust his fingers deeper into her in a steady rhythm that matched her hand. But he didn't want to come yet. He wanted to come inside her.

Edging her closer to the bed, he eased her down, and then joined her, hovering above her.

"Oh no," she said, pressing her hand against his chest and rolling him onto his back. Then she pulled the towel from her head, and her damp hair fell around her shoulders.

Without taking her eyes from his, she straddled him, hovering above him, while he grew painfully harder. Slowly, she moved, guiding his length toward her entrance. With her hand around him, she teased the head against her slick heat, and he raised his hips off the bed, needing to feel her around him.

"Patience," she said, toying with him until he thought he would explode.

Finally, she inched down on him as the lightning flashed and the thunder shook the house. But he hardly noticed. All he could focus on was the exquisite sensation of her warmth enveloping him, the perfect fit of their bodies joined together.

She inched down lower until she was fully impaled on him. The feel of her around him was incredible. His breath was ragged as she stilled, her inner walls gripping him as she ran her hands over his chest, teasing his nipples with her fingertips. The sensation sent electricity racing through his body, making him gasp.

After an agonizing moment, she rolled her hips in a slow, deliberate circle that made Philip's vision blur. He cupped her breasts in his hands, his thumbs brushing over her nipples until they hardened beneath his touch. A low moan escaped her lips as she rose on her knees until only the tip of his length remained inside her.

Philip flexed his hips instinctively, desperate to feel her warmth surrounding him again, but she placed her hands firmly on his chest, pushing him back down.

"Patience," she whispered, her voice thick with desire.

Philip surrendered, lowering himself to the bed as she took him again, slowly sinking down until he was buried to the hilt inside her. She rolled her hips, moving in a circular motion that created an exquisite friction as he stretched her inner walls. The sensation was overwhelming, threatening to push him over the edge too soon.

Philip gritted his teeth, focusing on his breathing as she rose again before taking him fully. Again and again she took him, riding him with increasing urgency as the storm outside matched their passion with its fury.

Unable to remain passive any longer, Philip sat up and held her close, his mouth finding her breasts, kissing and sucking her nipples as he sensed her approaching climax. Her breathing grew ragged, her movements more erratic.

She was close. So close.

He could barely hang on as they raced together toward release, like a storm sweeping across the mountains, wild and unstoppable. Her nails dug into his shoulders; her head thrown back in wild abandon. Then she came with a cry that mingled with the thunder, her inner muscles clenching around him in rhythmic waves.

The sensation triggered his own release. Philip jerked upward, filling her with his

seed as lightning illuminated the room in stark flashes. The thunder seemed to shake the very foundations of the house as they clung to each other, trembling in the aftermath of their shared pleasure.

Our mate,his bear growled with satisfaction as Philip held Elsbeth's trembling body against his chest, both of them breathless and sated.

Then they collapsed together onto the rumpled sheets and lay in each other's arms, watching the lightning through the window, listening to the rain beating against the glass. Gradually, their breathing slowed and deepened, their heartbeats returning to normal. Outside, the storm began to lose its intensity, the gaps between lightning and thunder growing longer.

It's moving away,his bear observed.The worst is over.

Philip kissed Elsbeth's shoulder, breathing in the scent of her skin. "Coffee?" he asked, his voice still rough with spent passion.

She looked up at him and nodded, her eyes soft with contentment. "That sounds perfect."

He slipped from the bed reluctantly, missing her warmth immediately. As he pulled on clean work clothes, his mind turned to the small velvet box hidden in his sock drawer. He'd been carrying it with him for days, waiting for the right moment.

This is it,his bear urged.After facing the storm together, there's nothing we can't handle.

Philip dressed quickly, his heart pounding with renewed anticipation. By the time Elsbeth joined him in the kitchen, dressed in clean clothes and with her damp hair combed back from her face, the coffee was already brewing, filling the room with its

rich aroma.

While he poured the coffee into two mugs, she went to the window and peered outside. “It’s not as bad as I feared,” she said, relief evident in her voice. “The tarps held. We got to everything in time.”

Now, his bear said insistently. This is the moment.

Philip set the mugs down on the counter and reached into his pocket where he’d slipped the ring box. His hands trembled slightly as he approached her. When she turned around, he dropped to one knee before her, the small velvet box open in his palm.

“Elsbeth,” he began, his voice thick with emotion, “from the moment I sensed you, I knew you were mine. When you accepted all of me—man and bear—you made me the happiest man alive. Will you marry me?”

Her eyes widened in surprise, filling with tears that spilled onto her cheeks. For a heart-stopping moment, Philip wondered if he’d made a mistake.

“Happy tears?” he asked hopefully, his heart in his throat.

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“Very happy tears,” she whispered, nodding vigorously. “Yes, Philip. Yes, I’ll marry you.”

“I love you,” he said, sliding the ring onto her finger. It fit perfectly, glinting in the soft morning light now breaking through the clouds.

“I love you, too,” she replied, pulling him to his feet and into her arms. “I want to marry you more than anything.”

Philip lifted her off her feet, spinning her around as joy surged through him. His bear rumbled with satisfaction deep within.

She’s ours forever now, his bear said.

“She always was,” Philip corrected aloud. “Just as we are hers.”

“What?” Elsbeth asked, looking up at him with curious eyes.

Philip smiled, setting her gently back on her feet. “My bear and I were just agreeing that we belong to you as much as you belong to us.”

“That’s right,” she said, admiring the ring on her finger before reaching for his hand. “And don’t either of you forget it.”

“Never,” he said, and then he kissed her. His mate. His woman. His fiancée.

Epilogue

“The flowers look wonderful,” Cassia complimented Elsbeth as they made the final preparations for Leanne and Hugo’s anniversary party.

“Thanks,” Elsbeth said as she adjusted a centerpiece, “I was afraid they wouldn’t all be ready in time after the storm, but everything grows so fast on Rose Farm.” She looked around the restaurant, which had been transformed for the evening. Garlands of delicate blooms and trailing vines draped from the ceiling, while each table boasted a unique arrangement that told its own story through color and form.

“It all looks wonderful,” Elsbeth said, “there’s so much love and care that’s been into it all.” Her fingers traced the edge of a blush-pink rose.

“I just hope Stanley’s butterflies don’t come into the restaurant, rather than flying free,” Cassia said, a hint of worry in her voice.

“Are you taking my brother’s name in vain?” Philip said as he came to join them, his hand finding the small of Elsbeth’s back in that familiar way that still sent shivers up her spine.

“Well, you know Stanley,” Cassia said with a knowing smile.

“All my life,” Philip cracked a wide grin, the corners of his eyes crinkling in that way Elsbeth loved.

“The vines look stunning against Elsbeth’s flowers,” Cassia said, but her eyes were not on the floral decorations. Instead, they were fixed on her mate as Kris came to join them.

“They complement each other perfectly,” Kris said as he slipped a hand around his mate’s waist. “Like us,” he added with a wink.

“I just hope the others get the chance to be this happy,” Philip said, glancing over to

the table where Alfie, Stanley, Nero, and Finn were gathered. Alfie had chosen a tree for their mom and dad to plant to commemorate their parents' fiftieth wedding anniversary, while Nero had designed a gold necklace...two halves of a whole heart. Finn had designed and secretly built, with the help of his brothers and cousins, a seating area looking over the vineyard.

"I hope they like the wine," Kris said, doubt in his voice. He had made a new blend for their anniversary and designed a commemorative label.

"It's one of your best," Philip told his brother.

Not that Elsbeth would be drinking any tonight. She glanced at Philip. They were going to save the news until after the party. Even so, she could not help the thrill of excitement that threaded through her veins as Philip looked at her with deep, unconditional love. He took her hand and kissed it. She could not believe she was carrying their child. Rose, if it were a girl, of course.

"They're coming," Alfie hissed, although they all knew there was no point in hiding since Hugo would have sensed them a mile off. But as the Thornberg extended family shouted, "Happy Anniversary!" it didn't matter. This was a night of celebration.

Leanne's eyes filled with tears as she took in the scene before her, her hand clutching Hugo's arm. "Oh my goodness," she whispered, and Elsbeth's eyes pricked with tears at the pure joy on the older woman's face.

Hugo, ever stoic, surveyed his family gathered together, his gaze lingering on each of his children, pride evident in every line of his face.

"You did all this?" Leanne asked, her voice trembling slightly as she moved toward the nearest floral arrangement, fingers hovering just above the delicate petals.

"It was a family effort," Kris said, stepping forward to hug his mother.

Elsbeth watched the family gather around Hugo and Leanne, her hand unconsciously drifting to her still-flat stomach. Someday, she thought, our child will be part of this beautiful chaos. The thought made her dizzy with happiness.

Philip appeared at her side, his arm slipping around her waist. “You okay?” he whispered, his breath warm against her ear.

“Never better,” she replied, leaning into his solid frame. “Just imagining our future.”

His hand covered hers where it rested on her abdomen, a secret gesture that spoke volumes. “It’s going to be beautiful,” he murmured. “Just like you.”

She touched her fingers to the heart charm on her wrist. She would never have believed that she would find such happiness after such heartache. But she had.

She turned to him, and her fingers caressed the bachelor’s button he wore. He swore it was the same one she’d given him the day he left before the storm. She didn’t know if she believed him. But she did believe in him and the love they shared.

And that would last forever.