



The Bear's Reluctant Mate

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Category: Romance, Paranormal

Description: She's all roots and responsibility. He's puns, plants, and persistent charm. But even the most guarded hearts can bloom—especially with a little bear shifter magic.

After a tragedy turns her world upside down, Marion is left with one purpose: raise her nephew and keep life simple.

Love? Off the table. And certainly not with a man who wears T-shirts that say "Let's Root For Each Other" and calls compost "black gold." But Alfie Thornberg isn't just any man. He's a bear shifter with a heart as big as his garden center—and patience that runs even deeper. When they're accidentally thrown together at a community gardening project, he falls fast and hard. Even though, she's everything he never expected his mate to be: serious, skeptical, and determined to keep him at arm's length.

Still, Alfie knows that the best things take time to grow.

Between slow smiles, gardening mishaps, and unexpected moments of tenderness, the walls she's built start to crack. And when her carefully guarded life begins to bloom in ways she never saw coming, she'll have to decide: can she trust a man who won't stop showing up—and a love that just won't quit?

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Chapter One – Alfie

What a wonderful day! Alfie strolled through Bear Creek Garden Center, making the most of this quiet time before the doors opened. Not that he didn't appreciate the people who came to buy the plants he and his team had nurtured from cuttings and seeds.

Even so, there was something magical about these early morning moments, when the dew still sparkled on the leaves and the first rays of sunlight filtered through the greenhouse glass.

He ran his fingers along a row of young tomato plants, their fuzzy stems sturdy beneath his touch. "Looking good, little ones," he murmured. Talking to plants might seem silly to some, but Alfie knew better. These green beings responded to care and attention just like any creature.

He sucked in a deep breath, filling his lungs with a mixture of the sweet scent of blooming gardenias and the earthy richness of fresh potting soil. It was a perfume no fancy cologne could ever replicate.

This place was his life's work, and it filled him with pride and happiness every single day.

It sure would be a lot better if we had our mate by our side, his bear grumbled, interrupting his peaceful moment.

Alfie's shoulders sagged as his smile faded. It sure would. But you know that finding

her is out of our control.

His bear let out a long sigh. What we need is for Finn to make a matchmaking mix-up.

A small laugh escaped Alfie's lips, despite his melancholy. I'm sure he's sick of hearing that.

His mood lightened as he thought about his brother, who had somehow gained quite a reputation as an accidental matchmaker. Poor Finn was constantly being pestered by their brothers and cousins to create what they'd jokingly dubbed a "matchmaking mix-up."

Maybe we should call him, his bear suggested hopefully.

And say what? Alfie asked, as he checked on a batch of young seedlings. Hey, Finn, can you conjure up my mate out of thin air? I'm feeling particularly lonely today and my bear won't shut up about it.

He snorted at the thought, gently pressing his fingertips into the soil around a tender sprout. The earth was just damp enough. Perfect.

I'm just saying, his bear persisted. Both Kris and Philip found their mates after Finn got involved. It can't be a coincidence.

It absolutely can, Alfie muttered, reaching for his watering can. The morning customers wouldn't arrive for another hour, giving him precious time alone with his plants. That's literally what a coincidence is.

His bear huffed indignantly. No, it's fate.

So now you think Finn is working for fate? Alfie asked.

He might be an instrument of fate. His bear had been particularly restless lately, more vocal about their solitary state. Who could blame him after they'd witnessed their brothers' happiness?

And he would be lying if he said he didn't feel the same way. He would give anything to have his mate by his side. To share his life with her, his hopes, his dreams.

But hoping and dreaming would not bring her to him. Nor would calling Finn and asking him to make a matchmaking mix-up on his behalf.

Alfie was sure that fate would bring his mate to him when the time was right. He just had to be patient.

"Talking to your bear again?" A cheerful voice broke through his thoughts.

Alfie looked up to see his assistant manager, Daisy, standing at the entrance to the greenhouse with a knowing smile. Her gray hair was pulled back in its usual practical bun, and her gardening apron already had smudges of soil on it.

"Is it that obvious?" he asked, setting down the watering can.

"You get this faraway look," she said, tapping her temple. "Plus, your lips move a little. Been working with you long enough to know the signs."

He chuckled. "Well, he's being particularly persistent today."

"About the mate thing again?" Daisy had been with the garden center since before Alfie took over, and she knew all about shifter dynamics. Her sister had married a wolf from the next town over.

“Always about the mate thing,” Alfie confirmed, reaching to check on a row of hanging fuchsias. “He gets more restless every day.”

“It’ll happen when it happens,” Daisy said, picking up a pair of pruning shears. “Can’t rush these things.”

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“That’s what I keep telling him,” Alfie said.

You can’t blame me for wanting to push things along,his bear responded with a disgruntled rumble.

No,Alfie agreed.I cannot blame you for that at all.

“Do you want me to head over to the greenhouse and grab the plants for the gardening project?” Daisy asked. “Mary-Ann will be here shortly to collect them.”

“No, I’ll do it,” Alfie said as he headed for the door. “Could you just check if the roses need dead-heading?”

“Sure thing,” Daisy replied with a mock salute.

Alfie left the seedlings behind and strode toward the large, expansive greenhouse that dominated the eastern side of the property.

His bear perked up as they approached the greenhouse door.Wait...do you feel that?

Feel what?Alfie asked, pushing open the door, and was immediately hit by the humid, earthy air inside.

His bear stirred within him, suddenly alert.Something’s different today. Maybe this is it! This is where Finn’s matchmaking magic will happen.

Alfie chuckled under his breath as he made his way to the back corner, where he’d

prepared the trays for the community garden project. It was Finn's latest community project, something his brother had started to bring the town together, and Alfie was more than happy to contribute with his time, expertise, and plants. Although not today. Saturday was a particularly busy day at the garden center, but he planned to head over there in the week and do whatever he could to help. Growing things and being in nature had always brought him peace, and he hoped to help others find that same sense of calm.

You know Mary-Ann is coming to collect the plants, and we both know she is not our mate, Alfie reminded his bear gently. Mary-Ann Lewis, a lovely woman in her late sixties with a husband of forty years or more, had been helping to run community projects alongside Finn for years. But this garden project particularly appealed to her and her passion for growing things.

His bear huffed but remained restless, pacing back and forth inside his head, mumbling something about matchmaking mix-ups and fate.

Alfie felt a pang of sympathy for his other half. The bear's longing mirrored his own, even if he was better at hiding it. Wishful thinking would not bring their mate into their lives any sooner.

"The roses are all looking fine," Daisy said as she followed him into the greenhouse.

"Great, thanks, Daisy," Alfie replied, carefully lifting one of the trays. "Why don't you go and grab a cup of coffee before the doors open? I'm sure Welland has a fresh pot on the go by now."

"If you're sure..." Daisy's cheeks flushed as pink as a peony at the sound of Welland's name.

Now who's playing matchmaker? his bear asked, with some amusement.

I don't know what you mean, Alfie thought with a self-satisfied smile as Daisy headed toward the café at the front of the garden center.

He was certain something was brewing between Welland and Daisy, and they just needed a little nudge. Welland had been casting admiring glances at Daisy for months now, and she always seemed to find reasons to visit the café multiple times a day.

It would be nice to see them get their happily ever after, even if we don't, his bear said wistfully.

It sure would, Alfie murmured as he gathered the rest of the trays and went outside.

However, as he walked back toward the entrance, a strange sensation crept over him. A tingling awareness that started at the base of his spine and radiated outward. Maybe he needed a fresh cup of Welland's coffee or even a pile of those fluffy pancakes drizzled with wild mountain honey the café was famous for.

No, this was different. This was...

His bear practically leaped to attention inside him, suddenly wide awake and alert. I knew it! She's close!

The trays in his hands suddenly seemed impossibly heavy. Perhaps because the idea that his mate might finally be here seemed impossible, too.

It's not impossible, his bear insisted. I can sense her.

Alfie took a couple more steps forward and then carefully set the trays down on the ground. As he straightened up, he stared into the distance, trying to pinpoint her exact location.

What if she drives on past and we never actually meet her?his bear asked.

No,Alfie said,fate would not be that cruel.

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His bear snorted. Are you sure? It's already made us wait decades to meet her.

Yes, I'm sure, Alfie said as he took a faltering step forward, then another.

I hope you are right, his bear said with growing anxiety.

She was getting closer. He could sense her, and with each heartbeat, that sense of her grew stronger. Surely, she must be coming to the garden center. And if she was...

She likes plants, Alfie thought giddily.

His bear snorted. Of course, she does. She is our mate. For his mate not to like plants would be the real cruel twist of fate.

There! A car turned off the road, heading for the parking lot in front of the garden center. It was her! Alfie's sense of anticipation grew until he thought he might explode.

She is here, his bear said.

See? I told you we did not need Finn, Alfie said.

Maybe our brothers and cousins will go a little easier on him, his bear said.

But then all thoughts of Finn were swept from their minds as the car came to a stop, and a woman got out. His woman. His mate!

Alfie stood frozen by the entrance, his heart hammering against his ribs like it wanted to break free.

It was not the only thing wanting to break free. His bear was so near the surface Alfie had to fight for control.

We have waited so long, his bear whispered in awe.

Alfie couldn't respond. His throat had gone dry, and his palms were suddenly damp with sweat. This was the moment he'd been waiting for, dreaming about, and now that it was here, he found himself utterly unprepared.

The woman, his mate...boy, that word sounded good!...his mate reached back into her car and pulled out a canvas tote bag. She slung it over her shoulder and started walking toward the garden center entrance, her steps purposeful.

Go to her, his bear urged. What are you waiting for?

But Alfie's feet seemed rooted to the spot. What if I scare her off? What if she's not ready to meet her mate? What if...

His bear let out a frustrated growl. If you don't move, I will.

That was enough to jolt Alfie into action. The last thing he needed was his bear taking control and bounding up to the woman like an overeager puppy. He forced himself to move, stepping into her line of sight.

She stopped when she saw him, her head tilting slightly to one side as their eyes met across the distance. For a heartbeat, the world around them seemed to fall away—the garden center, the mountains, Bear Creek itself, all of it fading into insignificance compared to...her, and the connection they shared.

Which he was certain she felt, too.

Didn't she? Alfie's confidence faltered as she rolled her shoulders and glanced back toward the car.

Is she thinking of making a run for it? he asked his bear.

If she is, you'd better do something to stop her, his bear replied.

"Can I help you?" Alfie asked in his best customer care voice.

He winced. His mate wasn't a customer, she was his life, as vital as the air he breathed.

"Maybe..." she began.

Definitely, added his bear.

Their mate unhooked her tote bag and fished inside before producing her phone. "I'm here to pick up some plants for the garden project."

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She is not Mary-Ann,his bear said.

No, she is not,Alfie answered as he closed the distance between him and his mate.

“Then you are in the right place,” Alfie said, trying to sound normal, even though he was sure life would never be normal again. “Is Mary-Ann okay?”

“Mary-Ann?” She quirked her eyebrow, obviously unaware that Alfie was expecting Mary-Ann, not her. Then her expression cleared. “Oh, that might explain it.” She scrolled through her phone and tapped on the screen. “I think the DM I got might have been sent to me by mistake.”

“I guess our meeting was just bemintto be,” Alfie replied with a sheepish grin.

Finn!his bear roared.

Yes, it seemed Finn had indeed struck again. And he was never going to live it down!

Chapter Two – Marion

She’d come to Bear Creek Garden Center by mistake, so why did it feel as if she were standing exactly where she was meant to be?

Perhaps because there was something about the man who had come to greet her that made her feel...something. And that was more than she’d felt for a while now. Numb. That’s what she’d been. Going through the motions of each day, focused solely on Charlie’s needs, on making their new life work.

Or maybe it was his easy smile, the way it lit up his whole face like sunshine breaking through clouds. Or his broad shoulders that stretched the fabric of his shirt just right, and sun-kissed skin that spoke of hours spent outdoors. While his boyishly tousled hair gave him an approachable quality that made her fingers itch to smooth it down.

Or maybe it was his T-shirt emblazoned with the words, “I’m Rooting for You.” As she read the words, her throat constricted, and she had to blink and swallow hard to stop the tears that threatened her. Such a simple message, but it hit her like a physical blow. When was the last time anyone had rooted for her? For them?

“Did my brother send you the DM?” the man asked, and Marion came back down to earth with a jolt.

“Your brother?” she asked, sounding like a fool. She glanced at the name on her phone, even though she already knew the DM had come from Finn Thornberg.

“Yes, my brother Finn?” The guy stepped forward and thrust out his hand. “I’m Alfie Thornberg. Alfred.” He screwed up his face. “But everyone calls me Alfie.”

He sounded like a child wanting to be taken seriously as an adult, but Alfie suited his rugged yet boyish good looks perfectly. The name matched the warmth in his eyes and the genuine quality of his smile.

“Yes, Finn,” she replied, taking his hand. The contact sent an unexpected jolt through her body, and she quickly pulled back. “I suppose he must have typed Marion instead of Mary-Ann.”

“He’s good at making mistakes,” Alfie replied. “Very good,” he added somewhat cryptically, a knowing look crossing his face.

“I see,” she said and glanced back toward the car again, needing to ground herself. Charlie was her anchor, her responsibility, her reason for being here.

“Is everything all right?” Alfie asked, following her gaze.

“Oh, yes, my nephew is in the car,” Marion explained. “I was just checking he was okay.”

“Your nephew?” Alfie bent to the right and stared at the car. “So he is.”

Alfie sounded surprised. As if he hadn’t been aware there was someone else in the car, but why would he? Charlie was slumped down in the backseat, the glow from his game illuminating his face. It was the reason she had volunteered to help with the Bear Creek Garden Project, to get him out of the house and into the fresh air. Plus, she’d hoped they might both make friends. Or at least acquaintances.

And she would sure like to get better acquainted with Alfie. No, no, she was not here for romance. She needed to focus on Charlie. On their new life. And anyway, he was not her type. That much was obvious from his T-shirt. Men who wore their hearts on their sleeves—or, in this case, clothing—were dangerous. They made you hope for things you couldn’t have.

“Would he like to come look around? See the plants?” Alfie asked, glancing back at the building behind him. “We have a butterfly garden that kids usually love. And the fountain makes rainbows when the sun hits it just right.” He glanced up at the early morning sun. “And that would be about now.”

Marion hesitated. Charlie didn’t do well with strangers, especially men. But there was something about Alfie that felt...right. He wasn’t pushy, he certainly didn’t come over all alpha male... How could he when he was wearing that T-shirt?

“Believe me, it’s a blooming showstopper,” Alfie added.

“I can ask him,” she said, looking over her shoulder. “He’s a bit...shy.”

“No pressure,” Alfie said quickly. “The plants aren’t growing anywhere. Well, except home with my customers...eventually. Hopefully.” He grinned, and Marion found herself almost smiling back.

She walked back to the car and opened Charlie’s door. Shy wasn’t exactly an accurate description of her nephew. Guarded would be better. “Hey, buddy. Want to come see some plants? Alfie says there’s a butterfly garden.”

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Charlie looked up from his game, his eyes wary. “Do I have to?”

“No, you don’t have to. But it might be nice to stretch your legs.” She shrugged. “Get some fresh air.”

He glanced past her to where Alfie stood waiting by the garden center entrance, hands in his pockets, deliberately not watching them. “Whoishe?”

Marion’s heart squeezed. Even at nine, Charlie had learned to be cautious. “He’s the man with the plants for the garden project.” She gave an easy smile. “Maybe you could help carry the plants to the car after we’ve had a quick tour.”

“He looks more than capable of carrying them himself,” Charlie observed moodily.

“I know, but this is our hometown now and it wouldn’t hurt to make friends.” Marion held out her hand to Charlie. “What do you say?”

“That we’re doing fine without friends,” Charlie answered bluntly.

“I know, but you never know when you might need them. So it’s a good idea to make them whenever and wherever you can.” She raised her eyebrows, trying to encourage him to get out of the car.

Charlie considered for a moment, then slowly unbuckled his seatbelt. “Maybe just for a minute.”

As they walked back toward Alfie, Marion kept her hand on Charlie’s shoulder,

feeling the tension in his small body. But Alfie seemed to understand. He didn't move toward them, didn't try to engage Charlie directly. Instead, he addressed Marion. "The community garden plants are just through here. I've got tomatoes, peppers, and some herbs. All good starter plants that should do well in our climate."

They followed him into the garden center, and Marion's senses were immediately overwhelmed. The sweet perfume of flowers mixed with the earthy scent of damp soil. While everywhere she looked, life seemed to burst forth in a riot of colors and textures.

"Wow," Charlie breathed beside her, his game forgotten.

"Pretty amazing, right?" Alfie said, still keeping his distance but including Charlie in the conversation. "My favorite part is over here."

He led them to a corner where a small fountain bubbled merrily, surrounded by flowering plants that attracted a dozen butterflies. They danced in the air, their wings catching the light.

Charlie took a step forward, mesmerized. "Are they real?"

"As real as you and me," Alfie said. "That orange one there is a monarch. They're getting ready to migrate soon."

"Cool." Charlie held out his hand palm toward the sky, watching in awe as the butterflies fluttered around the flowers. There was a look of such serenity on his face that Marion felt tears threatening again. She hadn't seen that expression on his face in months.

"They like the buddleia," Alfie said softly, moving to stand near a purple flowering bush. "Some people call it the butterfly bush. See how they're all gathering there?"

Charlie nodded, taking another tentative step closer to the fountain. A blue butterfly landed briefly on his outstretched fingers before fluttering away, and for the first time since they'd arrived in Bear Creek, Marion heard him laugh. A real, heartfelt laugh that made her chest tight with emotion.

"That tickled," Charlie said, wonder replacing the wariness in his eyes.

"They have tiny feet," Alfie explained, his voice gentle. "Like little hooks that help them hold on to flowers. Would you like to see where we grow the butterfly plants from seeds?"

Charlie glanced back at Marion, seeking permission. She nodded, trying not to show how moved she was by this small breakthrough.

"Okay," Charlie whispered.

As Alfie led them deeper into the garden center, pointing out different plants and explaining which ones attracted butterflies, Marion found herself studying him. The way he spoke to Charlie, not talking down to him, but treating him like a person whose opinion mattered. The careful distance he maintained, letting Charlie set the pace. It was...unexpected.

Most people either ignored Charlie completely or tried too hard, overwhelming him with forced friendliness. But Alfie seemed to understand instinctively what her nephew needed.

What she needed.

Connection. That feeling that you were not alone, not on the outside looking in.

"Look at this." Charlie beckoned to her, pointing to a cluster of tiny caterpillars on a

milkweed plant. “Alfie says these will be monarchs.”

“That’s right,” Alfie confirmed, crouching down to Charlie’s level but still maintaining that careful distance. “In about two weeks, they’ll form their chrysalis. It’s like nature’s magic trick.”

Marion moved closer, drawn by Charlie’s enthusiasm. As she leaned in to look at the caterpillars, she was drawn to Alfie, as if there was an invisible force reeling her in. She straightened quickly, heat rising to her cheeks.

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“Can we come back and see them change?” Charlie asked, then caught himself, the wariness creeping back. “I mean, if that’s okay.” He glanced up at Alfie, unsure of himself.

“Of course. You are always welcome. The garden center is open every day,” Alfie said easily. “The caterpillars would probably enjoy the company. Plants and bugs tend to grow better when people talk to them.”

Charlie’s brow furrowed. “That’s not scientific.”

“Maybe not,” Alfie agreed with a grin. “But I’ve been doing this a long time, and the plants I talk to always seem happier. Could be coincidence, could be magic. Who’s to say?”

Marion watched the exchange, and the tightness in her chest loosened. Charlie was actually engaging, asking questions, showing interest in something beyond his games and his carefully constructed walls.

“We should probably get those plants to the community garden,” she said reluctantly, not wanting to break the spell but aware they’d already been here longer than intended.

“Right, of course.” Alfie stood slowly, brushing his hands on his jeans. “I left them by the entrance. Charlie, would you like to help me carry them out to your car? They’re not heavy, but I could use an extra pair of hands.”

Charlie looked at Marion again, and she could see the internal struggle, his natural

caution warring with his newfound interest in this place and, surprisingly, this man.

“It’s up to you,” Marion said gently. “I can help if you don’t feel up to it.”

“No, I’ll do it,” Charlie said, squaring his small shoulders. “I’m strong enough.”

“I bet you are,” Alfie said, leading the way. “The trays have handles on each side. Perfect for team carrying.”

As they walked, Marion noticed how Alfie kept up a gentle stream of conversation about the plants they passed, never demanding responses but leaving openings for Charlie to contribute if he wanted. And increasingly, he did, pointing out a weird-looking succulent, asking about a plant with leaves that looked like purple hearts.

They reached the entrance, where several trays of seedlings waited. Alfie picked up one side of a tray and waited patiently while Charlie positioned himself at the other end.

“On three?” Alfie suggested. “One, two, three, and lift!”

They carried the tray together toward Marion’s car, Charlie concentrating hard on keeping his end steady. Marion hurried ahead to open the trunk with a surge of happiness at the sight of Charlie working alongside Alfie.

“Perfect teamwork,” Alfie said as they settled the tray into the trunk. “Think we can manage two more?”

Charlie nodded, a hint of pride creeping into his expression. “That wasn’t so heavy.”

As they headed back for the second tray, Marion found herself memorizing this moment, the way Charlie’s shoulders had relaxed, how his steps had gained

confidence, and the patient encouragement in Alfie's voice. It was more progress than she'd seen in months of careful coaxing.

"These tomatoes are determinate varieties," Alfie was explaining to Charlie as they lifted the next tray. "That means they grow to a certain height and stop. Good for beginners because they don't need as much staking."

"What happens if they aren't determine...ate?" Charlie asked, as he carefully pronounced the unfamiliar word.

"Then they keep growing until frost kills them. Like Jack's beanstalk, except with tomatoes instead of giants at the top."

Charlie actually smiled at that, and Marion had to turn away, pretending to arrange the first tray in the trunk to hide the emotion overwhelming her.

By the time they'd loaded all three trays, Charlie was chattering about the different varieties, from cherry tomatoes and bell peppers to herbs with names he struggled to pronounce. Marion hadn't heard him talk this much to a stranger since... Well, since before everything changed.

"Thank you," she said to Alfie as Charlie climbed back into the car, clutching a small lavender plant Alfie had given him as a companion plant to attract butterflies to the tomatoes. "This was...this was really nice."

His eyes met hers, filled with warmth and understanding. "Anytime. Really. The butterfly garden is always here, and those caterpillars aren't going anywhere fast. Well, not too fast." He glanced at Charlie, who was peering into the trunk at their plant haul. "Plus, I could always use an assistant to help me check on them. Someone to make sure I'm talking to them properly."

“Could I?” Charlie asked, whipping around to look at Marion. “Could I come back?”

Marion’s throat tightened. “We’ll see,” she managed, which was what she always said when she needed time to think, to weigh the risks against the benefits.

Charlie’s face fell slightly, recognizing the non-answer for what it was. But Alfie stepped in smoothly.

“You’re gonna be kept busy at the garden project, and it would be good to create a habitat for the butterflies there, too.”

“Alfie is right,” Marion encouraged. “The more wildlife places, the better.”

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“I guess,” Charlie said, his voice small as his gaze drifted back toward the fountain where butterflies still danced in the morning light.

Marion caught that longing look and felt the familiar tug of guilt. She’d love to say yes. But she had to take extra care with her responsibilities. She had to be practical and think about what was best for her nephew. If she got this wrong... Well, the consequences were unthinkable.

“Okay, let’s go,” she said with a gentle finality, watching Charlie’s shoulders slump as he climbed into the backseat.

Alfie closed the trunk with a solid thunk, his previously bright expression dimming. He hesitated by the driver’s side door, with one hand on the roof of the car.

“I should have mentioned that there is a café inside,” he said suddenly, nodding toward the building. “It’s the best-kept secret in Bear Creek.”

Marion paused with her hand on the door handle. “The best-kept secret, huh?”

“Well, one of them,” he replied with a cryptic smile that made her wonder what other secrets Bear Creek—or Alfie himself—might be hiding.

As she looked up at him, she found herself wanting to stay, to learn more about this man with his plant-whispering ways and gentle manner with Charlie.

Which meant it was definitely time to go.

Chapter Three – Alfie

Alfie stood rooted to the spot as Marion drove away, taking Charlie and a piece of his heart with her.

His bear paced restlessly inside him, torn between euphoria at finally meeting their mate and dismay at watching her leave. We found her, his bear whispered in wonder. After all this time, we finally found her.

And let her go, Alfie added, his chest tight with an ache that felt both ancient and brand new.

“So Mary-Ann came for the plants for the garden project?”

Alfie was startled by Daisy’s voice and turned to see her approaching with two steaming mugs of coffee. The morning sun caught the wisps of gray in her hair, and he could swear there was something different about her. A glow that hadn’t been there when she’d left for the café.

“Mary-Ann?” The name felt foreign on his tongue, belonging to a world that existed before Marion had walked into his life and rearranged everything he thought he knew about himself.

Because he was different.

Maybe we are glowing, too, his bear said.

Maybe, Alfie murmured, casting one last look in the direction his mate had disappeared in.

Daisy’s brows tugged together as she studied him, her keen eyes missing nothing.

“Are you okay? You look...” She paused, searching for the right word. “Different.”

He accepted the coffee with hands that weren't quite steady, taking a sip to buy himself time to compose himself. The familiarbitter warmth did nothing to fill the Marion-shaped void already forming in his chest.

“Alfie?” Daisy pressed, and he should have known better than to think he could hide anything from her. She'd known him too long, seen him through too many seasons of growth and change.

But before he could formulate a response, before he could even begin to explain what had just happened, Daisy's eyes widened. She took a step back, one hand flying to cover her mouth.

“You met her?”

Alfie could only nod, not trusting his voice. Now that Marion had left, he was beginning to think he had dreamed the whole thing.

No!his bear said.She was not a dream. She's as real as the monarch butterflies.

But then Alfie's coffee mug nearly went flying as Daisy squealed and threw her arms around his neck. He barely managed to keep hold of it as he wrapped his arm around her and hugged her back.

When Daisy stepped back, her eyes were bright with tears of joy. “So where is she? Who is she?” She craned her neck, looking over his shoulder as if Marion might materialize in the parking lot through sheer force of will.

“Marion.” He grinned as he said her name. “Her name is Marion.”

“Is she still here?” Daisy asked, grinning right along with him.

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“No.” He shook his head, and his grin faded. “She left.”

“She left?” Daisy’s expression shifted from joy to disbelief to something that looked suspiciously like exasperation. The unspoken accusation hung heavily between them: You met your mate and then you let her go?

“Marion came to collect the plants for the garden project,” Alfie explained, needing Daisy to understand it wasn’t that simple. But then, he sensed that nothing about Marion was simple. Not the wariness in her eyes, not the protective way she watched over her nephew, not the way she’d tensed when their hands touched.

“Instead of Mary-Ann?” Daisy’s voice climbed an octave. “What are the chances?”

Tell her the rest, his bear huffed with amusement, finally finding humor in the situation.

“Finn asked her to come collect them,” Alfie admitted.

“Hedid?” Interest sparked in Daisy’s eyes, replacing the disbelief.

“By mistake,” Alfie added, and saying it out loud made the cosmic joke of it all impossible to ignore.

Daisy’s hand went to her mouth again, but this time she was trying to hold back laughter. Her shoulders shook with the effort, and then it burst free and her laughter rang out across the garden center.

You have to admit, it is funny, his bear said.

Oh, yeah! Alfie agreed as the absurdity of it all hit him.

The weeks of teasing Finn about his matchmaking mix-ups, the desperate hope that maybe it would happen for him, too, and then it had, exactly as his bear had wished that very morning. His own laughter joined hers, deep and rumbling, as tears misted his eyes.

But they were happy tears. Joyful tears.

When they finally stopped, both wiping tears from their eyes, Daisy gave him a tap on the arm that was equal parts affection and reproach.

“So what are you doing still here?”

“What am I doing still here?” he echoed Daisy’s question.

She’s right, his bear said. What are we doing still here?

“I should go after her,” Alfie said, bewildered that the thought had not occurred to him before.

“I think that is a fine idea.” Daisy grinned, her eyes bright with amusement. “Not a moment to waste.”

“I’m going,” Alfie said, already backing away from her. Then he stopped, his brow furrowing. “But wait...the garden center...”

“Will still be standing when you get back,” Daisy finished for him, making a shooing motion with her free hand. “I’ve lived and breathed this place for more years than I

care to recall. So, I think I can handle a Saturday morning. Don't you, Alfie Thornberg?"

His bear was practically clawing at him now. Go, go, GO!

"Call if there's any..."

"Alfie!" Daisy's voice took on that no-nonsense tone she reserved for particularly stubborn customers. "Go find your mate. That's an order."

The word 'mate' sent a thrill through him.

Our mate, his bear said with satisfaction.

"You're sure..."

"I've worked with shifters long enough to know you will be no use to anyone until you have found her again," she said. "The way you looked at her car driving away was...well, let's just say I've seen that look before. Now stop wasting time!"

Alfie didn't need to be told a third time. He darted around to the greenhouse, grabbed his keys from the hook in the back office, and practically leaped into his truck. The engine roared to life, and he pulled out of the garden center parking lot with more speed than caution.

The community garden was on the outskirts of town, next to a warehouse complex that had been converted into craft studios, one of Finn and Mary-Ann's previous projects. But their vision for the garden project was more ambitious. They weren't going to stop at just vegetable plots, no, they planned to create a gathering place for the whole town, with benches and pathways and spaces for children to explore and play. To connect with the natural world around them.

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And what a world it was!

Alfie pressed his foot a little harder on the accelerator, weaving through the light morning traffic of Bear Creek. His heart seemed to thud against his ribs, each beat seeming to say, “Marion, Marion, Marion.”

What am I going to say to her?he muttered as he turned onto Maple Street.

His bear huffed.The truth.

I can’t just blurt out ‘You’re my mate’ to a human woman I just met,Alfie argued.She’d think I was insane.

And everyone else will think you are insane if you don’t,his bear replied lightly.

Alfie chuckled.You know that is not true. Neither Kris nor Philip blurted that out when they first met their mates.

But this is our second meeting,his bear reminded him as they neared the entrance to the garden project.

It was busier than Alfie had expected, but then he realized Saturday morning volunteers always showed up in droves. Cars filled the small parking area, and people spilled out onto the grass, carrying tools and wearing work gloves. There was a sense of camaraderie as neighbors greeted each other, and children ran around together like spring lambs. It was as if everyone was eager to be part of something bigger than themselves.

But beyond all that, Alfie could sense his mate. It was as if there was a thread connecting them, an unbreakable thread that pulled taut the moment he turned off the engine. She was here, somewhere among the crowd, and his bear stirred with anticipation, needing to see her, touch her again.

He parked his truck at the edge of the lot and got out, his palms suddenly damp. What was he doing? He didn't want Marion to think he was stalking her. The thought made his stomach clench. He had given no sign back at the garden center that he was coming over here today, so to suddenly turn up would take some explaining.

He cursed under his breath. Stupid, stupid. He should have collected another couple of trays of plants from the greenhouse. Then he could have said that he'd forgotten to give them to Marion and that was why he was here. It would have been believable, reasonable, not at all like a man desperately following his mate across town.

We could still do that, his bear suggested hopefully.

We could. Alfie glanced back at his truck. There was still time to turn around and head back to the garden center. Marion had not seen him yet. She would never know he'd been here. He could preserve his dignity, give her space, and approach this whole thing more cautiously...

But then his breath caught.

It was as if the people milling around the parking lot, talking excitedly about the project, suddenly parted like a living sea. And there she was.

Looking straight at him.

Their eyes met across the distance, and Alfie felt that same jolt of recognition, of rightness, that had knocked him sideways at the garden center. But then Marion's

expression shifted from surprise to something unreadable, then to a set expression of careful neutrality that didn't quite hide the pink rising in her cheeks.

Too late, his bear said happily.

Alfie swallowed hard. There was no turning back now. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, forcing his feet to move. One step, then another, each one carrying him closer to his mate, who was standing next to Charlie. The boy looked a little lost, overwhelmed by the other people, but then he noticed Alfie. He smiled and tugged on Marion's sleeve, pointing.

Alfie raised his hand, but then Alfie's stomach dropped as he realized who Marion was talking to.

Finn.

This added an extra layer of complications since Finn did not know that he had made another matchmaking mix-up. Alfie's mind raced. How was he going to explain showing up here? How was he going to act normal around his brother when every instinct screamed at him to pull Marion into his arms?

"Hi, Alfie!" Finn raised his hand as he saw his brother approaching, a clipboard tucked under one arm. "I didn't think you were going to make it."

"Morning, Finn." Alfie tore his gaze from his mate and glanced around, trying to look casual. "Quite the turnout."

But he could not resist stealing another look at her. It was almost impossible to resist. Marion watched him, one hand resting protectively on Charlie's shoulder.

"Yes!" Finn grinned widely as he looked around at the bustling crowd. But then his

brows tugged together, and he studied Alfie closely as his brother closed the distance between them, trying to act natural, even though it felt as if he had forgotten how to walk properly. “Everything okay at the garden center?”

“Yes,” Alfie replied bluntly.

“Marion was just telling me about the mix-up with the messages,” Finn went on, and there was something in his voice, a dawning suspicion that made Alfie’s pulse quicken.

“Yes, I was expecting Mary-Ann,” Alfie said, proud of how steady his voice sounded.

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But instead, we got our mate, his bear roared inside his head. Which was not off-putting at all.

“I don’t know how it happened,” Finn said, not taking his eyes off his brother. The look was penetrating, and assessing, and Alfie had the uncomfortable feeling that his brother was putting pieces together far too quickly.

“No problem,” Marion replied, her voice carefully polite. “We enjoyed the garden center, didn’t we, Charlie?”

Charlie nodded, distractedly eyeing the other people surrounding them who were now beginning to organize themselves into work groups. “The butterflies were cool,” he offered absently, then seemed to remember Alfie was there and added, “Hi.”

“Hi, Charlie,” Alfie said gently, giving the boy a small smile before his attention was inevitably drawn back to Marion.

“Yes, a definite mix-up,” Finn said, glancing between Marion and Alfie with increasing interest. “Still, it all worked out in the end, didn’t it, Alfie?”

Alfie nodded. “It did.”

Was he that obvious? He could see that Finn suspected something. His brother’s eyes had taken on that sharp, calculating look he got when he was figuring out a particularly complex design problem.

“I didn’t know you were coming to the garden project,” Marion said, and there was a

definite accusation in her voice. Her chin lifted slightly, a defensive gesture that made his bear whine.

“I...” Alfie began, scrambling for an explanation that wouldn’t make him sound like a stalker.

“I texted him,” Finn interrupted smoothly, though his eyes danced with barely suppressed amusement. “Asked him to bring some extra tools from the garden center. We’re short on trowels.”

Alfie shot his brother a grateful look, even as he knew he’d be paying for this favor later. Finn’s grin widened infinitesimally.

“Though I don’t see any tools,” Marion observed, her gaze flicking to Alfie’s empty hands.

“Oh,” Alfie said quickly. “I wanted to find Finn first, see where he needed them.”

It was a flimsy excuse, and from the skeptical arch of Marion’s eyebrow, she wasn’t entirely buying it. But Charlie tugged on her sleeve before she could pursue it further.

“Aunt Marion, can we start?”

“Of course,” she said finally. “Where do you want us, Finn?”

“I’ve assigned you plot twelve,” Finn said, consulting his clipboard with exaggerated professionalism. “It’s one of the sunnier spots, perfect for those tomatoes. Alfie, why don’t you show them where it is? I need to check on the group working on the irrigation system.”

Before anyone could protest, Finn strode away, calling out to someone about water

pressure. But not before shooting Alfie a look that clearly said you owe me and we're definitely talking about this later.

Alfie stood there, suddenly alone with Marion and Charlie, the morning sun warming his back and his mate within arm's reach. His bear practically purred.

"Plot twelve?" Marion prompted, her tone carefully neutral.

"This way," Alfie said, gesturing toward the eastern side of the garden. As they walked, he kept a careful distance, hyperaware of every movement Marion made. The way she kept Charlie close, how her eyes tracked the other families working nearby, the tension in her shoulders that spoke of someone stuck in fight-or-flight mode.

"So," she said as they reached the freshly tilled plot marked with a wooden stake labeled '12.' "Tools?"

Heat crept up Alfie's neck. "Right. I should go get those."

"Mmm-hmm." Marion set down the bag she'd been carrying and pulled out some gardening gloves. "Charlie, honey, can you start clearing those little rocks from the soil?"

Charlie dropped to his knees eagerly, apparently happy to have a task. Marion straightened, fixing Alfie with a look that made him feel like a butterfly pinned to a board.

"You don't have any tools in your truck, do you?"

The question was soft, almost conversational, but there was steel underneath it. This was a woman used to people disappointing her, and lying to her. A woman protecting not just herself but the precious boy now humming tunelessly as he picked stones

from the dirt.

Tell her the truth,his bear urged.

“No,” Alfie admitted, the word escaping before he could think better of it. “I don’t.”

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“So, why exactly are you here?” Marion folded her arms across her body as if trying to put a physical barrier between them.

One he planned to break down piece by piece. But first, he had to know why she felt she needed the barrier at all.

And that would take time. And patience.

And for once, his bear agreed.

Chapter Four – Marion

Panic gripped Marion. Why had Alfie followed her here?

But that panic was quickly followed by another overwhelming emotion. Disappointment.

Meeting Alfie at the garden center, watching how he interacted with Charlie, how she had drawn him out of his shell, had given her hope. Faith even.

Faith that there were good men in this world.

But this...

This behavior was exactly what she'd learned to recognize as a red flag. Following someone who hadn't invited you, having others cover for you...these were the warning signs she'd ignored once before when her sister, Heather, met Razor and

allowed him to take over her life.

Yet as she studied Alfie's face, searching for the telltale signs of deception or manipulation, she found only genuine concern mixed with something that looked remarkably like embarrassment. His hands hung loose at his sides, not clenched. His body language was open, with no sign of aggression. And his eyes—those warm, expressive eyes—held no hint of the cold calculation she'd learned to fear.

Marion's gaze drifted to Charlie, who was creating a small pile of stones beside their plot, completely absorbed in his task. The same boy who'd been practically mute for weeks had chatted about butterflies on the drive over. Because of Alfie.

She thought of Heather, still defending Razor even after everything. Still insisting he was misunderstood, that his temper was just passion, that his control was just love. The familiar rage bubbled up in Marion's chest. Rage at her sister for choosing that man over her own son's safety, rage at herself for not seeing it sooner, rage at a system that had taken so long to protect Charlie.

Marion forced herself to take a long, steadying breath. The rage had nearly consumed her in those early days when she'd fully understood what Charlie had become...a shadow of the bright, curious boy she'd known. Holding onto that anger would only poison her ability to create the safe, stable life Charlie deserved.

She looked back at Alfie, really looked at him as he stood there patiently. Not pushing, not demanding, just...waiting. Giving her the space she needed to process, to decide...

"Why are you really here?" she asked, her voice low enough that Charlie wouldn't hear.

Alfie glanced at Charlie, then back at her. Something shifted in his expression, and

for a fleeting moment, she saw...vulnerability.

“The truth is...” He paused, seeming to weigh his words carefully. “I felt bad about the mix-up. And I also wanted to make sure that you and Charlie...” Another pause, heavier this time. “I wanted to make sure you were both okay.”

The words hit her like a physical blow. Marion pressed her lips together, swallowing hard against the sudden lump in her throat. Was it that obvious? Could everyone see the cracks in her carefully constructed facade? That things hadn’t been okay for so long she’d forgotten what okay even looked like.

“We can take care of ourselves,” she said, the words automatic, reinforcing the walls she’d built so carefully. The walls that kept them safe. That let her function.

“I have no doubt.” Alfie’s face broke into that affable grin, but his eyes remained serious. “But that doesn’t mean we don’t all need a little support. I thought a friendly face might help.”

It had helped. Marion couldn’t deny that when she’d spotted him through the crowd, she’d felt a rush of relief so strong it had surprised her. That strange sense of connection she’d felt at the garden center had only intensified.

“Aunt Marion, look!” Charlie called, holding up a stone. “This one looks like a heart.”

“It does,” she agreed, grateful for the distraction. “Save that one. We can paint it later if you want.”

Charlie’s face lit up at the suggestion, and he carefully set the heart-shaped stone apart from the others.

“He’s a great kid,” Alfie said with a smile.

“He is.” Marion’s voice caught slightly. “He’s been through a lot.”

“Kids are resilient,” Alfie said, then seemed to reconsider. “But that doesn’t mean they don’t need support, too.”

Marion studied him, this man who spoke to plants and understood without being told that Charlie needed space and patience. Who’d followed her here out of concern, not control.

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“The tomatoes go in the back,” she found herself saying. “They’ll need the most sun.”

Alfie’s smile was swift and true. He really did wear his heart on his sleeve. “I can help if you’d like. I mean, I do this for a living.”

“I noticed the shirt,” Marion said dryly and was rewarded with a startled laugh.

“Best birthday present ever,” Alfie said, plucking at the fabric. “From my brother. Not Finn, a different brother. He said it suited me because I’m sentimental with a soft spot for seedlings. He thought it was hilarious.”

“How many brothers do you have?”

“Five.” Alfie knelt beside the plot. Not too close to Charlie, but near enough to be included. “Big family. You?”

“Just me and...” Marion’s throat closed. “Just me and Charlie now.”

Alfie didn’t push for more. He didn’t ask the questions she could see forming behind his eyes. Instead, he picked up one of the tomato plants. “Hey, Charlie, do you want to learn how to plant tomatoes for the best crop?”

“Sure.” Charlie placed the rock in his hands down on the pile and came to hunker down next to Alfie.

“Okay. See how the stem has these little fuzzy hairs?” Alfie held the plant out so

Charlie could take a closer look. “When you plant tomatoes, you want to bury them deep, right up to the first set of true leaves. Those hairs will become roots.”

Charlie scooted closer, fascinated. “Roots? Really?”

“Really. Makes the plant stronger. Want to dig the first hole?”

As Charlie eagerly began digging, Marion felt a rush of relief. Maybe she’d been wrong to be suspicious. Maybe, just maybe, Alfie was exactly what he seemed, a kind man who grew things and made terrible puns and somehow understood that the way to her heart was through kindness to Charlie.

“Thank you,” she said quietly.

Alfie looked up at her, dirt already smudging his hands. “For what?”

“For following us,” she said, surprising herself with the admission. “For caring enough to check if we were okay.”

His expression softened. “Anytime, Marion. Anytime.”

The way he said her name sent an unexpected shiver through her. Not of fear or wariness, but something warm and unfamiliar. Something she was not ready to name. But was she ready to let herself feel? To be vulnerable. To trust again.

“Look what I found!” Charlie’s excited voice broke through the moment. He held up a worm, grinning.

“That’s a good sign the soil here is healthy,” Alfie said, crouching down to Charlie’s level but maintaining that careful distance Marion had noticed earlier. “Worms are a gardener’s best friend. They help make the soil rich and healthy.”

“Really?” Charlie carefully placed the worm back in the dirt. “How?”

As Alfie explained about worm castings and soil aeration, Marion found herself studying him again. The patience in his voice. The way he let Charlie lead the conversation. The genuine enthusiasm that lit up his features when he talked about growing things.

“You know a lot about dirt,” Charlie observed when Alfie finished.

“I know a lot about helping things grow,” Alfie corrected gently. “Sometimes that means understanding the dirt. Sometimes it means knowing when to water or when to wait. And sometimes...” He glanced up at Marion. “Sometimes it means planting yourself nearby even when you’re not sure you’re wanted, just in case someone needs an extra pair of hands.”

Marion felt her defenses wavering, and that scared her. In some ways, Alfie might be more dangerous than Razor.

“Can you teach me more about worms?” Charlie asked. “And maybe about the butterflies, too? Do butterflies like tomato plants?”

“Some do,” Alfie said, straightening up. “We could plant some marigolds between the tomatoes. They help keep pests away and attract beneficial insects.”

“Can we, Aunt Marion?” Charlie turned those big eyes on her, more animated than she’d seen him in months.

How could she say no to that? How could she deny him this small happiness when he’d had so little to smile about for so long?

“If Alfie doesn’t mind coming back to help us plant them,” she said, carefully testing

the waters. Giving him an out if this was just about today, just about making sure they were okay before moving on.

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Boy, she hoped this wasn't just about today.

"I'll bring some from the garden center," Alfie offered immediately. "Different varieties. Charlie can pick which ones he likes best."

"Tomorrow?" Charlie asked hopefully.

Alfie looked at Marion, leaving the decision in her hands. There was nothing pushy in his expression, no assumption that he had the right to insert himself into their lives. Just that patient hope, waiting for her verdict.

"We'll see," Marion said, her standard non-answer when she needed time to think.

But this time, instead of disappointment, Charlie just nodded and went back to his stone-picking, humming under his breath. As if he somehow knew that "we'll see" was already softening into "probably" in Marion's mind.

"I should get some stakes to help support the tomatoes as they grow," Alfie said. "And some twine. I'll just pop back to the garden center to get what we need."

"You don't have to..." Marion began.

"I want to," he said simply. "I mean, Finn did say I was bringing tools. So, I'd better go get them."

There was something self-deprecating in his smile that made Marion's heart ache. He was trying so hard, and not in the overwhelming, boundary-pushing way she'd

witnessed in her sister's relationship with Razor. It was as if he was trying to prove himself to her. Even though she had no idea why.

"Okay," she said with a nod. She wanted to addhurry back, but she didn't.

As Alfie headed toward the parking lot, Charlie looked up from his work. "He's nice," he said matter-of-factly. "Not scary like..." He trailed off, but Marion knew exactly who he meant.

"No," she agreed, watching Alfie's retreating figure. "Not scary."

"Do you think he really knows about butterflies and worms and stuff? Or was he just being nice?"

Marion thought about the way Alfie had moved through the garden center, the reverence in his touch when he'd checked the seedlings, the genuine joy in his voice when he'd talked about plants responding to human attention.

"I think he really knows," she said. "I think he loves growing things."

"That's good," Charlie decided, adding another stone to his pile. "Maybe he can teach us. We don't know much about growing things, do we?"

"No," Marion admitted. "We don't."

And she didn't just mean plants.

Chapter Five – Alfie

Now we're the ones doing the walking away?Alfie's bear asked incredulously.

We are. Alfie gritted his teeth as he did just that even though it was one of the hardest things he'd ever done in his life, each step was like torture, as if a part of him were being stripped away. But he could not turn back now. He had to fulfill his promise to go and collect the canes and the tools from the garden center.

He needed to show her he was a man of his word.

I guess they do say absence makes the heart grow fonder, his bear said, as he took some satisfaction at seeing Marion's expression when he'd promised to return. That tiny flicker of hope, quickly hidden but unmistakably there. It was enough to sustain him through this brief separation.

"Alfie!" The call stopped him just as he reached his truck. He recognized his brother's voice immediately.

Here we go, his bear said with a roll of his eyes. But there was no denying the gratitude they both felt for Finn. He'd made their lives complete, even if it was by mistake.

Alfie turned to see Finn hurrying across the parking lot with a wide grin on his face. Although there was an undercurrent of apprehension about the way he looked over his shoulder.

He's probably worried he's going to get mobbed by every single shifter in town. Once word gets out he's performed another match-making mix-up. His bear chuckled happily.

Oh, yeah, Alfie said. And I hope with all my heart that he can do the same for all our brothers and cousins, and everyone else. But more importantly, perhaps, himself. He deserves it.

He does,his bear agreed.No words would ever be enough to show his brother how grateful he was.

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“Hey, Finn,” he said, trying to sound casual despite the emotions churning inside him.

Finn stopped a few feet away, his eyes searching Alfie’s face with almost painful scrutiny. “Is Marion...” he began, then seemed to struggle for words. “Is she your mate?”

Alfie couldn’t help glancing back toward plot number twelve, where Marion and Charlie were working side by side. Even at this distance, he could feel her presence like a physical thing. Could sense her, smell her scent carried on the gentle mountain breeze.

Then he turned back to Finn and nodded once, unable to keep the wonder from his expression.

“I don’t believe it!” Finn’s face drained of color at his brother’s confirmation.

“You mean you don’t believe I met my mate, or that it’s all down to you and your magical matchmaking mix-ups?” Alfie asked, unable to resist the opportunity to tease his normally composed brother.

Finn ran a hand through his hair and let out a surprised chuckle, the tension in his shoulders easing slightly. “I am so happy for you, Alfie. But this does put more pressure on me. I mean...” His voice trailed off, and Alfie could see the weight of responsibility settling on him.

“I know.” Alfie placed a reassuring hand on his brother’s shoulder. He could only

imagine Finn's conflicting emotions, joy for his brother finding his mate, warring with the growing expectations from other single shifters. "I can't thank you enough for what you did, even if it was accidental."

"Oh, Alfie," Finn looked up, his expression brightening. "No, thanks required. I'm truly happy for you. And for Marion and Charlie, too." He glanced toward the garden plots where Charlie's small figure was visible, still diligently clearing stones. "I don't know their full story, but they deserve happiness. And I know you'll give them that, and the stability Charlie needs."

"I'm gonna try," Alfie promised, his throat tightening. He wished he knew Marion's story, understood what haunted her, what made her so guarded. But that would come with time. He wanted to hear it from her when she was ready to share it.

"I don't know how it keeps happening," Finn admitted, shaking his head in bewilderment. "I could have sworn I sent that message to Mary-Ann."

"Fate," Alfie said with a shrug and a small smile.

"Fate," Finn repeated with a mirthless laugh. "I guess I just wish I could control it, so Nero and Stanley could find their mates, too. Not to mention our cousins."

"And you," Alfie added quietly, recognizing the loneliness his brother tried so hard to hide.

"A man can dream," Finn murmured, his gaze distant for a moment.

"And I am proof dreams come true," Alfie replied, with arms spread wide and a smile on his face.

"You are," Finn agreed and pulled his brother into a bear hug.

“Thanks, Finn.” Alfie hugged him right back.

“So, what’s your plan now?” Finn asked, as he finally let Alfie go.

“Honestly?” Alfie leaned against his truck. “I have no idea. She’s...cautious. And Charlie...” He thought of the boy’s swariness, the way Marion protected him. “There’s something there. Something they’ve been through.”

Finn nodded thoughtfully. “Take it slow, then.”

“That’s the plan,” Alfie agreed, though his bear grumbled in disagreement. Patience wasn’t exactly a bear trait.

“Does she know? About us?” Finn lowered his voice, though there was no one nearby to overhear.

Alfie shook his head. “Not yet. That’s...going to be a conversation.”

“You’ll be okay,” Finn reassured. “So, where are you going?”

“To get some stakes for the tomatoes and to grab those tools...” He arched his eyebrow at Finn.

“It was the first thing that came to mind,” Finn confessed.

“I know you were trying to help,” Alfie said.

“And we all know I do a better job when I amnottrying to help,” Finn said lightly.

“One thing I know, Finn, is that your heart is always in the right place.” Alfie clapped his brother on the shoulder. “And that is what counts.”

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Finn swallowed hard and nodded, then sniffed loudly. “Well, you’d better get those stakes. Don’t want to keep your mate waiting.”

Mate.

The word sent a thrill through Alfie every time he heard it. Mate. After all these years of waiting, wondering, watching his brothers and cousins find their other halves, it was finally his turn.

As he climbed into his truck and started the engine, Alfie thought of the journey ahead. Marion clearly carried wounds, and Charlie did, too. Gaining their trust wouldn’t be easy or quick. But if planting seeds and watching them grow had taught him anything, it was patience.

And Marion was worth waiting for. Worth fighting for. Worth whatever time it took to show her that he was nothing like the shadows in her past.

We’ll take it day by day, he told his bear as Alfie pulled out of the parking lot. Starting with tomato stakes and marigolds.

His bear rumbled in agreement, settling into a contented hum that vibrated through Alfie’s chest. They’d found their mate. Everything else was just details.

We’ll take it slow, his bear agreed as Alfie drove back to the garden center, the familiar mountain roads barely registering in his consciousness. His mind was consumed with images of Marion, how her rare smiles lit up her face, the fierce protectiveness in her eyes when she looked at Charlie. And the thrill of her touch.

And Charlie, so bright and curious, who'd been so delighted by butterflies and worms, who seemed to be carrying a weight no child should have to bear. Already Alfie felt a deep, primal need to protect him, to see him laugh more often, to help him feel safe.

A family. His family. The thought was overwhelming in its rightness, even as questions tumbled through his mind. What had happened to Charlie's parents? Why was Marion his guardian? What shadows lurked in their past that made Marion so wary, so ready to expect the worst?

Alfie gripped the steering wheel tighter. Whatever it was, he would help them heal from it. But first, he needed to earn their trust.

Before he knew it, he was pulling into the garden center's back entrance. Saturday's crowd had arrived in full force. Cars filled the parking lot, and he could see customers wandering between the rows of plants, employees answering questions, and carrying purchases to vehicles.

All working like clockwork, just as Daisy had promised.

He parked and headed straight for the greenhouse, mentally cataloging what he needed: tomato stakes, twine, perhaps some organic fertilizer, and definitely those marigolds he'd promised Charlie. The bright orange and yellow flowers would be perfect companions for the tomatoes, both practical and beautiful.

As he entered the greenhouse, the humid air welcomed him, as always. The scent of damp soil and green growing things was as familiar to him as his own heartbeat, but today it seemed somehow sweeter, more vibrant, as if meeting Marion had heightened all his senses.

"You're back so soon," Daisy said, turning up at his side.

“I am,” Alfie replied, moving purposefully along the rows of seedlings until he found what he was looking for, a tray of bright, healthy marigolds, their foliage lush and green, buds just beginning to unfurl into blooms.

Just as our love is unfurling and blooming, his bear said with a happy sigh.

“Don’t tell me you never found her,” Daisy said, following close behind him.

“I found her,” Alfie confirmed, carefully lifting the tray of marigolds. The weight of it was satisfying in his hands, solid, real, just like the connection he’d felt with Marion.

“So, how did it go?” Daisy asked, a note of exasperation creeping into her voice at his brevity.

“It was good...” Alfie began, then paused, remembering the wariness in Marion’s eyes. “Apart from the fact that she thought I was stalking her.”

“Stalking?” Daisy’s voice rose in shock, her eyes widening.

“Yeah, because I turned up at the project,” Alfie explained, moving toward the section where they kept the gardening supplies. “Finn tried to cover for me by saying he’d texted me to bring some tools over, but she saw through that.”

“The lack of tools would have been a clue,” Daisy remarked dryly.

“Exactly,” Alfie agreed, selecting several sturdy tomato stakes. “But I told her that I was there to check up on them because I wanted them to fit in.”

“And she believed it,” Daisy said, her expression softening as she reached out to place a comforting hand on his shoulder. “Because it is the truth. You want the best

for them.”

“I do,” Alfie said, his voice rough with emotion. “I want the world for them.”

“And you’ll give it to them,” Daisy assured him, her eyes crinkling with warmth. “One plant at a time, if that’s what it takes.”

Alfie nodded, gathering twine and a bag of organic fertilizer. “Charlie seemed to really take to gardening. You should have seen his face when he found a worm.”

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“Children know instinctively when something, or someone, is good for them,” Daisy observed, helping him arrange his supplies. “Even when the adults in their lives are more...cautious.”

“Marion has her reasons,” Alfie said, feeling protective of his mate even in her absence. “I just don’t know what they are yet.”

“And you won’t push,” Daisy said, not a question but a statement of faith in his character.

“No,” Alfie agreed. “I won’t push. But I will be there. For both of them.” He picked up the stakes and supplies, balancing them carefully. “I should get back. I promised Charlie we’d plant the marigolds together.”

“Go,” Daisy said with a smile. “We’ve got things covered here. And Welland is making sure we’re all fed and watered.”

“Are you sure?” Alfie glanced around at the busy greenhouse with a twinge of guilt. He’d never been torn like this before.

We’ve never had a mate before, his bear reminded him. As if he could ever forget.

“Alfie Thornberg.” Daisy fixed him with a stern look that didn’t quite hide her affection. “If you think for one second that I’m going to let you spend your time here when your mate is waiting for you, then you’ve gone completely mad. Now shoo!”

“Yes, ma’am,” Alfie laughed, heading for the door. “Call if there’s an emergency.”

“The only emergency would be if you didn’t go back to that garden project right now,” Daisy called after him. “And if you are all in need of refreshment after your morning at the project, you know where we are!”

“I will,” he promised, smiling at the thought of bringing Marion and Charlie back here. Of sharing a coffee and perhaps some of Welland’s delicious bakes with them.

As he loaded the supplies into his truck, Alfie was struck by the sudden fundamental shift in his life.

All in the space of a single morning, his bear agreed.

Yes, Alfie mused. In so many ways, everything is the same. The garden center, Bear Creek, the mountains...

And yet everything is different, his bear finished.

So very different. Because now there was Marion. And Charlie. And the possibility of a future together.

But he didn’t want to rush ahead. He needed to go slow.

One day at a time, he reminded himself as he started the engine.

One marigold at a time, his bear said happily.

Chapter Six – Marion

“Do you think he’ll come back?” Charlie asked as he placed another stone on the ever-growing pile he was making.

Marion straightened up and placed a hand on the small of her back. She didn't have to ask who Charlie meant. Even though the question had been asked before, many times, about someone else.

Razor.

But this time, the question was not being asked in fear.

"I'm sure he will," Marion replied, hoping that Alfie would not let her nephew down.

Because if he did, she feared she might lose another small part of Charlie. The boy had lost so much already.

"I'd like to learn more about soil and growing things," Charlie said as he carried on sifting out the stones.

"We could learn together," Marion said.

Charlie looked up at her, considering her words. After a moment, he nodded. "Do you think Alfie will teach us?"

Heat crept across Marion's cheeks. She could think of no better teacher. Alfie was patient, attentive, and empathetic. Everything she could want in a man.

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She mentally shook herself. She was not interested in romance. They had moved to Bear Creek for a fresh start, and she planned to focus entirely on Charlie. And anyway, how could she ever trust her heart to a man who made plant puns? It was obvious Alfie was a nice guy, but not a serious guy. And she needed serious, she needed sensible...

But when the hairs on the back of her neck stood on end and she turned to see his truck pulling into the parking lot, her heart gave a treacherous jolt that said perhaps Alfie and his puns were exactly what she needed.

“He’s here!” Charlie ran a couple of steps forward, dropped the two stones he’d been carrying on the pile, and then jogged away to meet Alfie.

Marion opened her mouth to shout a warning, to call him back, but then she clamped it firmly shut. This was what Charlie needed, a new focus, and plants were so much better than some of the alternatives.

As Marion brushed the dirt off her hands and followed Charlie to meet Alfie, resisting the urge to run, she felt lighter. As if today was a turning point. That at last the past was behind them and they had a bright future ahead.

Alfie was heading toward them, his arms loaded with supplies, when Charlie reached him.

“Whoa there,” he laughed as Charlie skidded to a stop. “Do you want to help me carry these?” He nodded toward the collection of stakes, twine, and a tray of bright marigolds balanced precariously in his arms.

“Are those for us?” Charlie asked, reaching for the tray of flowers.

“They sure are,” Alfie said, carefully transferring the marigolds to Charlie’s waiting hands. “I promised you butterfly attractors, didn’t I?”

The boy’s face lit up as he examined the bright orange and yellow blooms. “They’re so bright!”

“That’s how they catch the butterflies’ attention,” Alfie explained, adjusting his hold on the remaining supplies. “Butterflies are attracted to bright colors, especially yellows and purples.”

Marion approached more slowly, watching the easy interaction between them. Charlie was actually smiling. A real smile that reached his eyes. When was the last time she’d seen that?

“Need a hand?” she asked, reaching for some of the stakes Alfie was juggling.

“Thanks,” he said, their fingers brushing as she took them. That same jolt of awareness shot through her, and from the way his eyes widened slightly, she knew he felt it, too.

“I brought everything we’ll need,” Alfie said, clearing his throat. “Stakes for the tomatoes, twine to tie them up as they grow, some organic fertilizer, and of course, the marigolds.”

“And tools?” Marion couldn’t resist asking, one eyebrow raised.

Alfie’s cheeks colored slightly, but his smile remained steady. “Those, too. Trowels, a small rake, even some gloves for Charlie.”

“You thought of everything,” she said, impressed.

“I tried to,” he admitted. “I wanted to make sure you both had what you needed.”

There was something in his voice, a sincerity that made her defenses waver. No one had simply given her what she needed in a very long time. She’d been the one giving, supporting, fighting for Charlie when no one else would.

“Let’s get these planted then,” she said, turning back toward their plot to hide the tears pricking her eyes.

As they walked, Charlie proudly carrying the marigolds, Alfie fell into step beside Marion.

“Thank you,” she said quietly. “For coming back.”

“I said I would,” he replied as if it were the simplest thing in the world. As if promises were always kept, and people always returned when they said they would.

“People don’t always do what they say,” Marion said, the words slipping out before she could stop them. She felt exposed suddenly, vulnerable in a way she hadn’t allowed herself to be in years.

Alfie paused mid-step, his expression thoughtful rather than offended. “No,” he agreed. “They don’t. But I’m a reap what you sow kind of a guy.”

The honesty in his voice caught her off guard. She’d expected him to defend himself, to insist he was different. Instead, he simply acknowledged the truth of her statement.

Marion kept her eyes on Charlie, who darted ahead, eager to get back to the plot with his tray of marigolds. She never shared a part of herself with anyone. Not since

Heather had thrown her concerns back in her face, accused her of jealousy, of trying to ruin her happiness with Razor.

What was happening to her? What was this man doing to her?

Nothing. He wasn't doing anything to her. Alfie was just being Alfie. Marion glanced sideways at him and had the sudden thought that he was the most genuine person she had ever met. Puns and all.

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“But I try,” he murmured. “To do what I say, I mean. I’ve found it’s easier that way. No complicated stories to remember.”

A small laugh escaped her. “Is that your secret? Honesty as the path of least resistance?”

“Busted,” he grinned, shifting the supplies in his arms. “Plus, my mom would kill me if I broke a promise. She raised us better than that.”

“She sounds formidable.”

“Oh, she is,” Alfie chuckled. “Although she has a heart of gold. You’d like her, I think.”

The casual way he seemed it was a foregone conclusion that she would meet his mom made her breath catch. Or was she once again reading too much into his casual comments?

“Aunt Marion!” Charlie called, breaking the moment, as he reached the plot and set his tray down. “Can we plant these now? Alfie said they’ll bring butterflies!”

“Yes. I’ll come help you,” she called back, grateful for the interruption before she could say something foolish. Something that might ruin this perfect morning.

They spent the next hour working side by side, Alfie demonstrating how to stake the tomatoes properly, and showing Charlie the perfect depth for the marigold seedlings. His hands were gentle with the plants, patient when Charlie’s enthusiasm led to a few

crushed leaves.

“It’s okay,” he assured the boy when Charlie apologized. “Plants are tougher than they look. Just like people.”

Marion watched them together, the way Alfie seemed to know exactly when to offer help and when to step back. How he listened intently when Charlie spoke, never making him feel stupid no matter what the question.

“You’re good with him,” she said quietly as Charlie proudly watered the newly planted marigolds.

Alfie’s smile was warm but tinged with something like sadness. “He’s easy to be good with. Smart. Observant.” He hesitated, then added, “Careful.”

The word hung between them, loaded with meaning. Yes, Charlie was careful.

Had learned to be careful in ways no child should have to learn.

“He hasn’t always been,” Marion admitted, surprised at herself for sharing even this much. “He used to be fearless. Reckless, even.”

“Life has a way of teaching us caution,” Alfie said with a sideways glance at her. “Sometimes too well.”

Their eyes met, and Marion felt that strange connection again. As if Alfie could see past her defenses to the person she’d been before when she too hadn’t been so careful.

So damaged.

How she missed that person. How she wished one day she could be her again.

“Aunt Marion, look!” Charlie’s excited voice drew their attention. A small yellow butterfly had landed on one of the marigolds, its wings slowly opening and closing in the sunlight.

“Already?” Marion marveled, moving closer.

“They know good things when they see them,” Alfie said, his eyes on her rather than the butterfly.

Heat bloomed on her cheeks, but she didn’t look away. For the first time in longer than she could remember, Marion allowed herself to feel the pull of attraction, of connection, without immediately shutting it down.

Maybe, just maybe, there was room in their new life for more than just safety and stability. Maybe there was room for joy, too. For trust. For a man who kept his promises and talked to plants and looked at her like she was a rare and precious flower.

“I guess you could say the butterfly is experiencing love at firstplant,” Alfie said, gesturing toward the insect still perched on the marigold.

Marion couldn’t help but laugh, bubbled up from somewhere deep inside her, somewhere that had been silent for too long. The sound surprised her almost as much as the heat that threaded through her veins at Alfie’s expression.

His eyes crinkled at the corners as he grinned, clearly delighted by her response. There was something so infectious about his joy, his openness, the way he found delight in small moments, and found herself wishing that one day Charlie could approach life with that same unguarded enthusiasm.

“How’s it going?” Finn’s voice interrupted her thoughts as he approached their plot, clipboard still in hand, but his attention fully on them.

“I think we’re going to have an amazing crop of tomatoes,” Alfie replied, standing to greet his brother. “I believe Charlie has green fingers.”

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Charlie looked up from where he was patting soil around the final marigold, examining his hands with serious concentration. He held them up, wiggling his fingers in the sunlight. “Nope, not green.”

Marion grinned at her nephew’s literal interpretation, her heart lightening at the glimpse of the old Charlie. The one who had always taken things at face value, who had seen the world in straightforward terms, before life had taught him to look for hidden meanings and threats.

“It’s just an expression,” Finn explained kindly. “It means you’re good with plants.”

“Oh.” Charlie considered this, looking at the neat rows they’d created. “Maybe I am.”

“There’s no maybe about it,” Alfie replied. “Those marigolds couldn’t have been planted better if I’d done it myself.”

The pride that bloomed across Charlie’s face was worth every ache in Marion’s back, every worry about letting someone new into their carefully constructed world.

“The plot looks great,” Finn said, admiring their work. “Must be all that expert guidance.” He shot his brother a knowing look that Marion couldn’t quite interpret.

“It was a team effort,” Alfie replied, his eyes finding Marion’s. “Some things just...work well together.”

The double meaning wasn’t lost on her, and she found herself unable to look away from his warm gaze. Something was happening between them.

Something she hadn't planned for, hadn't expected, and hadn't budgeted for emotionally.

Chapter Seven – Alfie

I think we've done it, Alfie's bear said.

Yeah, if by it, you mean made a good impression, Alfie replied with some relief. Things could have gone so very wrong after he'd turned up at the garden project like a stalker. In his haste to see his mate again, he hadn't considered the optics.

The optics are that we did not want to lose our mate when we had only just met her, his bear said.

But that's exactly what we nearly did, Alfie said as he straightened up.

"Alfie." Finn was looking at him, eyebrow raised.

"We're done here for now," Alfie said, realizing he'd zoned out while talking to his bear. He looked around. "Does anyone need help with their plot?"

"I..." Finn looked around, then glanced back to Alfie as if trying to read his mind. "I think most folks are close to finishing up for the day." He paused and Alfie could almost see his brother's mind working.

"Well, in that case..." Alfie began.

Finn's expression brightened. "You guys should reward yourselves with coffee and cake at the garden center." He looked at Marion. "Has Alfie told you it's..."

"The best kept secret in Bear Creek," Marion finished, then she chuckled, sounding

so completely different from the woman who had arrived at the garden center by mistake. “Although I’m beginning to think it’s not a secret at all.”

“You might be right there,” Alfie said.

We’re gonna have to thank Finn for this, too,his bear said.

Marion hasn’t said yes yet,Alfie replied.

True,his bear said.But who can resist cake?

Thankfully, not Charlie. “Can we, Aunt Marion?” he asked.

And Marion could not resist her nephew’s plea. “Sure, I think we need a reward.” She turned to Alfie. “My treat.”

“Oh, you don’t have to,” Alfie replied.

“I think I do,” Marion said, “for all the help you’ve given us, and the project.”

“You know better than to turn down an offer like that,” Finn said to his brother, looking a little smug with himself.

“True,” Alfie said.

“Okay, let’s go,” Charlie said as he started collecting the tools.

Marion bent down to help Charlie, gathering the trowels and small rake they’d used. Her movements were more relaxed now. Even the way she smiled at Charlie had changed, becoming more open, less guarded.

As for Charlie, in just a few hours, the boy had been transformed from the wary, withdrawn child who’d hidden in the car to this eager helper who couldn’t wait to get back to the garden center.

“I’ll take those,” Alfie offered, holding out his hands for the tools Marion had collected. Their fingers brushed as she passed them over, and that now-familiar spark danced between them.

“Thanks,” she smiled shyly at him before she turned away and began packing up their few personal belongings, tucking Charlie’s water bottle into her tote bag. There was a softness to her movements now, a slight relaxation in her shoulders that hadn’t been there before. As if some invisible weight had been temporarily lifted.

“Welland’s carrot cake is legendary,” Finn said casually, though his eyes gleamed with mischief as he glanced between Marion and Alfie. “And his hot chocolate might actually change your life.”

“That’s a big claim,” Marion said, raising an eyebrow.

“It’s the secret ingredient,” Alfie explained, as he checked they had left nothing behind. “He refuses to tell anyone what it is, but there are theories.”

“Cinnamon,” Finn suggested.

“Cardamom,” Alfie countered.

“Magic,” Charlie offered seriously, making all three adults turn to look at him.

For a moment, there was silence, and then Alfie burst into delighted laughter. “You know what, Charlie? I think you might be right.”

The boy ducked his head, pleased but shy about the attention. He tugged at Marion’s sleeve. “Can I bring my heart stone?”

“Of course,” Marion said, her voice filled with affection. “We could paint it and then use it to mark the plot.”

“Cool,” Charlie said as he retrieved his special stone from their pile.

“I’m heading back to the vineyard,” Finn murmured as he leaned closer to Alfie. “Mom’s expecting me for lunch.”

“Tell her I said hi,” Alfie replied, suddenly realizing he’d have to introduce Marion to their mother soon. The thought was both thrilling and terrifying. “But as for…”

“Your secret is safe with me.” Finn clapped him on the shoulder.

Is it? Alfie’s bear asked, not sure their brother could keep this big a secret for long.

“Tell Mom and Dad I’ll pop by later,” Alfie said. His bear was right, he needed to tell

his parents at the earliest opportunity. But he had other priorities right now.

Coffee and cake with our mate, his bear said excitedly.

“Will do, Alfie.” He raised his voice to call out to Marion and Charlie. “Enjoy the cake! I’ve got to run, but I’ll see you both on the next garden day.” He paused and then added, “If not before.”

Alfie rolled his eyes, but thankfully, Marion had not thought Finn’s last comment strange.

“Ready?” Marion asked, approaching with Charlie at her side, the heart-shaped stone clutched carefully in his small hand.

“Absolutely,” Alfie replied, his heart fit to burst.

“We’ll follow you in our car,” she said, glancing up at Alfie.

“Perfect,” he replied, trying not to show how the simple phrase ‘follow you’ sent a thrill through him.

As they walked to their respective vehicles, Alfie could not resist stealing glances at Marion, memorizing the way the sunlight caught in her dark hair, the curve of her cheek when she smiled down at Charlie.

His bear rumbled contentedly inside him, already feeling possessive, already considering them part of their world.

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Slow, he reminded himself as he stowed the tools and empty trays in the back of the truck and then climbed into the driver's seat. We're taking this slow.

But his bear only huffed in response, clearly unconvinced that slow was the way to go when they'd already waited so long to find their mate.

He started the engine and edged forward, watching as Marion helped Charlie into the car. He could tell by the way Charlie was waving his hands around that he was having an animated conversation with his aunt. Damn, it was a wonderful sight to see.

A few minutes later, Alfie pulled out of the parking lot with his mate's car right behind him. It was hard to resist looking in the rearview mirror as he drove. But then, he found it impossible to resist his partner, period.

The drive back to the garden center was both too long and too short. Too long to be separated from Marion, too short to prepare himself for what came next. Because coffee and cake meant conversation. It meant learning more about her, about Charlie, about the shadows that lurked behind their careful smiles.

And it meant sharing himself with them. Not everything—not yet—but enough to start building that bridge of trust between them.

As he pulled into the garden center parking lot, Alfie took a deep breath, centering himself. "Ready or not," he murmured to himself, "here we go."

Alfie stepped out of his truck and felt a wave of nervousness wash over him. The sensation was so foreign here that it stopped him in his tracks. This was his domain,

more of a home than his cabin in the mountains.

A cabin that might not be big enough for our new family,his bear said.

The thought caught Alfie by surprise. His mountain cabin had always seemed perfectly sized for him. With two bedrooms, a spacious living area with windows that looked out over the valley, and a kitchen where he experimented with recipes using herbs from his garden. But now, trying to imagine Marion and Charlie there...

We could extend,he suggested.Add another bedroom for Charlie, maybe expand the kitchen.

But it's not just our decision,his bear reminded him.

No, it's not,Alfie agreed.He'd lived alone for so long, making his own decisions, never having to consider anyone else's opinion.

Except Daisy's,his bear said lightly.

Alfie chuckled. Yeah, where the garden center was concerned, Daisy was more of a partner than an employee. But this wasn't about his work life.

It was about his home life. His family life.

A family he did not know. Hell, he didn't even know where Marion lived in Bear Creek. Was she renting? Had she bought a place? What did she do for work? The questions tumbled through his mind, highlighting how little he actually knew about the woman he had instantly recognized as their mate.

We do not know why she came to Bear Creek. Or what she's running from,his bear added soberly.

Because she was definitely running from something. Alfie had seen that look before. The heightened vigilance, the careful way she positioned herself to keep Charlie in sight at all times. It was the same haunted wariness he'd seen in the faces of the young shifters who came to his reach-out programs, the ones who struggled with their dual nature, who'd had their transformations come on unexpectedly or traumatically.

To some, being a shifter wasn't always the gift his family considered it. Especially those who only discovered their true nature when they had their first shift. Without family, or community support, it could be terrifying and isolating.

Maybe we should talk to Dougray, his bear suggested. His cousin's adopted son had gone through his own struggles adapting to shifter life. He might have insights on how to approach someone carrying deep wounds.

That's good thinking, Alfie acknowledged. We could...

Marion's car pulled up beside his truck, and every coherent thought in Alfie's head scattered like fall leaves in a strong wind. As she got out, his breath caught in his throat. He still could not believe she was real.

"Is everything okay?" she asked, her brow furrowing slightly as she took in his expression.

"Perfect," Alfie managed, his voice rougher than he intended. He cleared his throat. "Just thinking about which cake you might like best."

Charlie scrambled out of the backseat, the heart-shaped stone still clutched in his hand. "I want chocolate!" he declared, some of his earlier shyness replaced by the simple enthusiasm of a child anticipating a treat.

Marion smiled down at him, and the tenderness in her expression made Alfie's chest

ache. “We’ll see what they have,” she said, ruffling Charlie’s hair.

“Welland makesthebest chocolate cake,” Alfie said, falling into step beside them as they walked toward the garden center entrance. “But his lemon drizzle is pretty legendary, too.”

“Sounds like we might need to try both,” Marion said as she flashed Alfie a smile.

“I like the way you think,” Alfie grinned, holding the door open for them.

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I like everything about you,his bear said to Marion even though she could not hear him.

“This place is even bigger than I thought,” Charlie said, his eyes wide as they walked deeper into the sprawling garden center with its greenhouse domes and outdoor displays.

“It does have a way ofgrowingon you,” Alfie replied, unable to resist the pun.

Marion rolled her eyes, but the smile tugging at her lips told him she wasn’t truly annoyed. “I should have expected more plant jokes.”

“They grow on you, too,” he said with a wink and was rewarded with that laugh again. The one that made his bear rumble with satisfaction.

Maybeweare growing on her, too,Alfie’s bear said.

A shifter can dream,Alfie replied.

“The café’s this way,” Alfie said, leading them past displays of hanging baskets and patio furniture.

They rounded a corner, and the café came into view, a light and airy space with rustic wooden tables, hanging plants creating natural dividers between seating areas, and large windows that let in streams of sunlight. The scent of coffee and baked goods mingled with the garden center’s earthy aroma, creating something uniquely comforting.

“Alfie!” Welland’s booming voice carried across the space. The white-haired café owner waved from behind the counter, a wide grin on his face. “And you’ve brought guests!”

Daisy’s already told Welland about Marion, hasn’t she? Alfie’s bear asked.

Oh yeah, Alfie said, hoping the news hadn’t spread too far. He kind of wanted to tell his mom and dad himself. But he knew how fast good news traveled in Bear Creek. And a shifter meeting their mate was always good news.

“Welland, this is Marion and Charlie,” Alfie said as they approached. “They’re working on the community garden project and have earned themselves some of your famous cake.”

“Welcome, welcome!” Welland beamed, his eyes twinkling with pleasure. “Any friend of Alfie’s is a friend of mine. And first-time visitors get the special treatment.”

“What’s the special treatment?” Charlie asked, his natural curiosity overcoming his shyness at meeting someone new. But then Welland had always had a way with people.

“Extra whipped cream on the hot chocolate.” Welland leaned down conspiratorially. “And marshmallows and sprinkles,” he added with a wink.

Charlie’s eyes widened, and he looked up at Marion as if unable to believe their good fortune. She nodded her permission, and his face broke into a smile that made Alfie’s heart clench.

“Thank you,” Charlie said politely.

“My pleasure,” Welland replied, straightening up. “Now, why don’t I take your

orders, and then you all take that table by the window? Best view in the house.”

“So,” Marion said once they’d placed their orders, coffee and lemon drizzle cake for her, a chocolate cake and hot chocolate for Charlie, and coffee and a slice of apple pie for Alfie. “How long have you owned the garden center?”

“More years than I care to remember,” Alfie replied, leaning back in his chair. “But this is all I ever wanted to do.”

“You must really love it,” she observed.

“I do,” he admitted. “There’s something about helping things grow, about being part of that cycle of life. It grounds me.” He smiled, unable to resist. “Literally and figuratively.”

Marion groaned at the pun, but there was laughter in her eyes. “Do you live here, too? At the garden center?”

“I have a cabin up in the mountains,” Alfie said, thinking of his simple, comfortable home nestled among the pines. “It’s small, but it suits me.”

For now, his bear added silently.

“And all your family is here in Bear Creek?” Marion asked, her fingers tracing patterns on the wooden tabletop.

“Yes,” Alfie nodded. “My parents have a vineyard in the mountains. A couple of my brothers work there. The rest live locally.”

“You could say your family is rooted in Bear Creek.” Marion smiled up at him through her lashes.

“Oh!” Alfie cracked a grin. “I see what you did there.”

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“Planting tomatoes is not the only thing you have taught me this morning,” Marion replied. Their eyes met and a long moment of silence stretched out before she cleared her throat and said, “It must be nice,” Marion said softly, “having everyone so near.”

There was a wistfulness in her voice that made Alfie want to reach across the table and take her hand. But he restrained himself, sensing she wasn’t ready for that yet.

“It is,” Alfie said. “What about you? What brought you to Bear Creek?”

Marion’s expression closed slightly, her fingers stalling on the table. “A fresh start,” she said after a moment. “For both of us.”

Charlie, who had been watching a hummingbird at the feeder outside the window, turned at her words. His face took on that careful, guarded look again, and Alfie could almost see the invisible wall going up between them and the world.

“Bear Creek is good for fresh starts,” Alfie said gently, not pushing for details. “Something about the mountains and the forest. It feels like anything is possible here.”

Marion’s eyes met his, searching, assessing. Whatever she saw there must have reassured her, because some of the tension left her shoulders. “That’s what I’m hoping for,” she admitted. “New possibilities.”

Their conversation was interrupted by Welland arriving with their order, the promised extra whipped cream, marshmallows, and sprinkles on Charlie’s hot chocolate making the boy’s eyes widen with delight.

“One hot chocolate fit for a king,” Welland announced, setting it down with a flourish. “And the rest of your order, of course.”

“Thank you,” Marion said, her eyes widening at the size of the lemon drizzle cake slice. “This is enormous!”

“Welland doesn’t believe in small portions,” Alfie explained with a grin.

“Life’s too short for tiny cake slices,” Welland declared as if they were the wisest words he’d ever spoken. “Enjoy!”

“We will,” Marion said, catching Alfie’s eyes.

For a moment, they simply looked at each other, something unspoken passing between them. Alfie felt his bear stir with contentment and anticipation.

This felt right. This was destiny.

Their destiny.

Now, all he needed to do was show Marion what his heart already knew.

That they were meant to be together. Forever.

Chapter Eight – Marion

“I think you are wrong,” Marion said as she sipped her coffee and looked around the café.

Alfie swallowed the last piece of his apple pie. “I am?” he asked warily.

“Yes,” Marion replied, keeping her face serious.

“Can I ask about what?” Alfie asked warily.

She leaned forward and whispered, “This isn’t the best-kept secret in Bear Creek.” She nodded knowingly and leaned back in her seat, watching him. And he was very easy on the eye. She winced at that thought. There was so much more to Alfie than his infectious smile, and his broad chest, and toned thighs...

Alfie chuckled, “It isn’t? You don’t think the lemon drizzle cake is the best you have ever tasted?”

“Oh, no, you are right there,” Marion replied. “But that is not the reason this café is busy.”

“No, it’s not,” Alfie said as he glanced toward Welland, who was spouting lyrical about his carrot cake.

“Welland’s the main attraction,” Marion said. “He’s the best-kept secret in Bear Creek.”

It was Alfie’s turn to lean forward and say, “Don’t go telling everyone, though. I don’t want him thinking the grass is greener elsewhere.”

“Oh, I don’t think he is going anywhere,” Marion said. She gathered up her tote bag and hooked it on her shoulder. “But unfortunately, we have to.”

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“Oh,” he looked incredibly disappointed. And she felt the same, but it was time for her and Charlie to get going. She’d only planned on being out for the morning, and it was way past noon. The cake might have been amazing, but Charlie needed a proper meal for lunch.

“We’re leaving?” Charlie complained, standing behind her, staring out at the butterflies fluttering around the potted plants near the window.

“We have to go, buddy. We still need to unpack those boxes in your room,” Marion reminded him, sensing she might have a tantrum on her hands if she wasn’t careful.

Although he had once outgrown such outbursts, he now resorted to them as a means of expressing his frustrations. It felt as though, in some respects, he had reverted to a more childlike state because of his turbulent home life under Razor’s roof.

Marion knew he didn’t mean anything by these outbursts, and he was always apologetic afterward. But a full-blown tantrum in the middle of a crowded café would spoil their otherwise amazing morning.

Charlie’s shoulders slumped. “But I wanted to ask Alfie more about the caterpillars.”

Alfie stood up, brushing crumbs from his shirt. “Well, you think of all the questions you want to ask and next time I see you, I’ll answer them all.”

“When?” Charlie asked his tone on the verge of demanding as he fixed Alfie with an intense stare that made the man blink in surprise.

Alfie's mouth opened, then closed again as he looked at Marion, clearly hesitant to make promises without her approval. The question hung in the air between them, and Marion was grateful to Alfie for not making plans without consulting her first.

For a moment, Marion's mind flashed to Razor. How he'd always made plans involving Charlie without consulting her sister. After they met, he'd quickly positioned himself as the decision-maker. Often railroading Heather into agreeing to things she didn't want to do. It was as if Razor had held Heather in his thrall.

But Alfie was different. The contrast couldn't be more stark.

Or maybe he was just better at the long game? No. She pushed the cynical thought away. She couldn't judge every man by Razor's standards. That wasn't fair, not to Alfie, and not to herself or Charlie, either.

"Um," Alfie said, rubbing the back of his neck. "That would be up to your aunt, buddy."

Marion smiled, making her decision. "We're coming back to the garden project next Saturday. Maybe Alfie could meet us there?"

"I'll be there," Alfie said with a nod. "Maybe we can make a log garden."

"A log garden?" Charlie tugged his brows together and added a pout. "Logs don't grow in a garden."

"Oh, no," Alfie waved his hand at Charlie. "We don't plant the logs. We make piles of them in among the plants. Places for the bugs to hide."

"Oh," Charlie said, his expression clearing. He'd thought Alfie was teasing him, belittling him like Razor used to. It was painful for Marion to watch as it brought

back a whole lot of other memories she'd tried to forget.

"I'll gather up some logs we can use. There's a woodland at the top of the vineyard and there's always lots of fallen branches I can collect." Alfie had a wistful look in his eyes as he spoke about the vineyard.

"Can I help?" Charlie piped up.

"Oh, err..." Alfie cast a questioning look at Marion, which did not go unnoticed.

"Can we?" Charlie asked, turning those pleading eyes on Marion. "It's for the garden project. It needs bugs."

Marion hesitated, then nodded. "If you're sure it's okay with your parents."

"They would love to meet you both," Alfie replied, then looked a little flustered as if he'd said too much.

"How about Wednesday after school?" Marion suggested. She'd love to see the vineyard.

And Alfie.

She pushed that treacherous thought from her mind, but it was persistent. Spending the morning with Alfie had been wonderful. She'd be lying to herself if she denied it.

But she'd be a fool to read too much into it.

"Wednesday is perfect," he replied, his smile growing wider. "I'm at the garden center all day, but I can come by and pick you up around four?"

“Four works for us,” Marion said, surprised at how natural it felt to be making plans with this man she’d only met hours ago.

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Charlie sucked in a deep breath. “And I can bring all my questions about caterpillars?”

“Absolutely. There are lots in the wildlife areas around the vines,” Alfie said. “I’ll even dig out my special magnifying glass so we can see them up close.”

“You have a special magnifying glass?” Charlie asked in awe.

“I do.” Alfie nodded, his face lighting up with the memory. “I got it as a birthday present when I was about your age. It’s one of my most prized possessions.”

“It is?” Charlie looked genuinely impressed.

“You could say it gave me a whole new perspective on life,” Alfie said with a wink. “It helped me focus on the little things.”

In some ways, Marion suspected Alfie was still a little like that boy, and that made her wary. Alfie was good and kind and obviously had a connection with Charlie that few people did, but he probably had no actual experience with children or family life.

“I spent much of my childhood looking at plants and insects. I was lucky that I lived at the vineyard. You should see what vine leaves look like through a magnifying glass.” Alfie chuckled.

“Can we look at the vines, too?” Charlie asked excitedly.

“Charlie, the vineyard belongs to Alfie’s parents. We can’t invite ourselves to go

wandering all over it,” Marion said.

She could already picture him running off to explore every corner of the property, and she didn’t want to impose on Alfie’s family.

“Actually,” Alfie said gently, “my parents would be thrilled to have you explore. They miss having a houseful of boys tearing around the place.”

Marion chuckled and shook her head. “I can’t imagine how they coped. I find it hard enough with one.”

Alfie tilted his head, his expression softening as he looked at her. “You’re doing a great job.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” Marion said quietly, glancing at Charlie, who was still daydreaming about exploring the vineyard. “I worry I’m making too many mistakes. Sometimes I think...maybe if he’d been my child from the beginning...”

Alfie reached across the table and placed his hand on her shoulder. The touch sent an electric current through her body, warming places that had been cold for too long.

“I don’t know your story, Marion,” he said in a low voice meant only for her, “but I do know that Charlie loves you and he’s happy.”

Marion shook her head, blinking rapidly. “He is today, thanks to you. You’ve inspired him.”

“And you inspire me,” Alfie said. “I can’t imagine how much courage it must have taken to become a parent to your sister’s child.”

Marion’s eyes misted with tears at the mention of her sister. She looked away, unable

to meet his understanding gaze. “I should get Charlie home.”

Alfie squeezed her arm gently. “I’m here if you need me.”

A tear escaped, trickling down her cheek. She brushed it away quickly, hoping Charlie wouldn’t notice. “Thanks for everything today.”

“You’re more than welcome,” Alfie replied. “You know I enjoyed it, too.”

Marion smiled up at him shyly. “Me, too.”

With that, she stood up. It was all a little too much. Too intense and she needed air. Needed to think.

Thankfully, Charlie did not object as they left the café. Instead, he gave Welland a cheerful wave and said, “Thanks for the special hot chocolate.”

“You are welcome,” Welland said as he returned the wave. “Come back soon.”

“We will,” Charlie promised as he skipped on ahead toward the parking lot, his heart-shaped stone still in his hand.

When they reached her car, Charlie said a cheerful goodbye to Alfie before climbing into the backseat.

Alfie opened the driver’s door for Marion. “Wednesday then?” he asked.

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“Wednesday,” she confirmed, their eyes meeting as that now-familiar spark flickered between them.

“And Alfie?” Marion whispered.

“Yes?”

“I’m glad I got the message by mistake.”

His smile was radiant. “Best mistake ever.”

Marion got into the car, offering him one last smile before pulling away. In the rearview mirror, she could see him standing in the parking lot, watching until they drove out of view.

“I like Alfie,” Charlie announced from the backseat.

“I do, too,” Marion agreed, surprised at how easily the admission came.

As they drove through Bear Creek toward their small rental house, Marion reflected on the day. Charlie wasn’t the only one who had changed this morning. She felt lighter somehow, more hopeful than she had in months.

“The hot chocolate was fantastic,” Charlie said, interrupting her thoughts. “And I like bugs. And plants, too.”

“I noticed,” Marion smiled at him in the mirror. “You were a natural gardener today.”

“Alfie said so, too,” Charlie replied, pride evident in his voice. “Do you think I could grow my own garden? Just a small one?”

“I think that’s a wonderful idea,” Marion said. “We could start with a few pots on the back porch.”

“Really?” Charlie’s excitement filled the car. “Can we get some marigolds? For the butterflies?”

“Absolutely.”

When they arrived home, Marion put on a pot of coffee and heated some leftover soup for their lunch.

For the first time since the judge had granted her custody, she truly believed she could do this. She could be Charlie’s mom. Not just his guardian, not just his aunt stepping in during a crisis...but the parent he needed, for as long as he needed her.

“Do you think we could get a magnifying glass, too?” Charlie asked, dipping his grilled cheese into his soup. “Not as good as Alfie’s special one, but maybe our own?”

“I think that’s a wonderful idea,” Marion said. “We could start our own collection of interesting things to look at.”

“Like our own nature museum?” Charlie’s eyes widened with excitement.

“Exactly like that,” Marion agreed. “We could even make labels for everything, just like in a real museum.”

As Charlie launched into plans for their nature collection, Marion thought of Alfie’s

words and took courage. Perhaps she'd been too hard on herself. Maybe she didn't need to be perfect. Maybe being present and trying her best was enough.

And maybe, just maybe, having someone like Alfie in their corner would make the journey a little easier.

"Can we text Alfie to tell him about our museum idea?" Charlie asked, interrupting her thoughts.

Marion hesitated. "I don't have his number."

Charlie's face fell momentarily before brightening again. "We can tell him on Wednesday! He might even have ideas for our collection."

"I'm sure he will," Marion said, smiling at her nephew's enthusiasm.

As they finished their lunch and began tackling the boxes in Charlie's room, Marion found herself looking forward to Wednesday with an anticipation she hadn't felt in years. It wasn't just Charlie who was changing. She was changing, too, opening up to emotions she'd closed herself off from long ago.

And it had all started with a message sent by mistake.

Chapter Nine – Alfie

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Alfie stood rooted to the spot long after Marion's car had disappeared around the bend. Even without seeing her, he could sense her presence, a gentle tug that seemed to pull him in the direction her car had taken.

Did you hear her admit she was glad Finn sent the message by mistake?his bear asked, basking in the afterglow of their mate's company.

I did,Alfie said with a contented sigh.

"It's good to see you so happy, Alfie," came Daisy's voice from behind him.

Alfie spun around. He'd been so engrossed in his mate that he had not sensed Daisy approaching.

That's what happens when you find your mate,his bear said happily.

"Thanks, Daisy," he said, unable to stop the grin that spread across his face. "And thanks for taking charge of things this morning."

"It's the least I could do," Daisy replied, moving to stand beside him. "You've been good to me, Alfie."

Alfie looked down at her, this woman who had always been so much more than an employee. "Hey, I don't know how I would have ever managed without you. You have taught me so much over the years."

Daisy leaned closer and rested her head on his shoulder, her silver hair catching the

sunlight. “We make a good team.” She paused, her voice trembling faintly. “When my husband passed, and we had to sell this place, it felt as if...” She cleared her throat and sniffed. “I think if I’d had to leave the garden center, it would have felt like two deaths.”

Alfie slipped an arm around her shoulders and hugged her. “Do you ever think you might find love again?”

Daisy chuckled and slapped his chest playfully. “I know what you are doing, Alfred Thornberg.”

Alfie chuckled, feeling the familiar warmth of their friendship. “I think you and Welland are perfectly suited, and I think you would make each other very happy.”

Daisy sniffed again and said, “I don’t want to spoil a good thing.”

“But what if that good thing could be a great thing?” Alfie replied, thinking of the transformation he’d witnessed in Marion and Charlie today. How a chance meeting had bloomed into something full of promise.

“And what about your great thing?” Daisy asked, tilting her head to look up at him with those keen eyes that missed nothing.

“Marion and Charlie are...incredible,” Alfie replied, the words feeling inadequate for the emotions swelling in his chest.

“Your mom and dad are going to be overjoyed,” Daisy said. “That’s three down, three to go.”

“Halfway there,” Alfie said, shaking his head in wonder. “Before Kris met Cassia, my mom was starting to believe none of her six sons would find their mates. But look

at us now.”

“Have you told her?” Daisy asked.

“No, not yet. I haven’t had the chance,” Alfie admitted.

“Then why don’t you go and tell them? I can handle things here, and I’m sure they would love to hear the news from you,” Daisy said, straightening up.

“Do you mind?” Alfie asked, even though he knew the answer already.

“No, you go.” She straightened up. “Welland and I can handle things here.” She cracked a smile, and Alfie kissed her on the cheek.

“Thanks, Daisy.”

“Go,” she whispered. And he did, sprinting back to his truck.

She is like a second mother to us, his bear said.

She is, Alfie agreed. He was so lucky Daisy had become a part of his life, a guiding hand that had helped make Bear Creek Garden Center the place it was today.

Alfie reached his truck and got in, his mind already racing ahead to the vineyard, to his parents’ reaction. As he drove away, he could still sense Marion, that invisible thread connecting them growing taut with distance but never breaking.

When he reached the road, he was tempted to turn right and follow her, to close the distance between them. But instead, he turned left and headed home to the Thornberg Vineyard. Yes, even though he had not lived at the vineyard for decades, he still thought of it as home.

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Our third home, his bear chuckled.

Alfie arched an eyebrow. Yeah, our cabin, the vineyard, the garden center...But now, his home would be wherever his mate was.

His mate.

He drove along the mountain roads whistling, his heart as light as the spring breeze dancing through the trees.

Life is good, his bear said, stretching contentedly inside him.

Life is amazing, Alfie corrected, feeling the truth of it down to his bones.

His bear rumbled in agreement. The weight of longing that had been his constant companion had lifted, replaced by a carefree sense of anticipation of all that was to come.

And there was so much to come. So many memories to make with his mate. So much time to get to know her. Because this was the beginning of forever.

Alfie slowed the truck as he reached the vineyard, drinking in the sight of the neat rows of vines stretching across the hillside. The hacienda-style house nestled among them looked just as it always had, with its warm stone walls, terracotta roof tiles, and the wide porch where they often gathered for family dinners on summer evenings. It was all exactly the same, and yet everything felt different.

No, Alfie realized. The vineyard hadn't changed. He had.

He pulled up to the house and parked, cutting the engine. Through his open window, he could smell the distinctive scent of the vineyard, rich earth, and greenery seasoned with the faint sweetness of developing grapes.

As he stepped out of the truck, he sensed his mother before he saw her. A lifetime of connection allowed him to pinpoint her location among the vines. His father was farther along the same row, the two of them working in the comfortable silence of mates who had been together so long, that words were not always necessary to communicate.

Leanne Thornberg looked up as if she'd sensed him, too, her face breaking into a smile that quickly shifted to concern. She pulled off her gardening gloves and hurried toward him, her movements still supple despite decades of physical labor.

"Alfie? Is everything all right?" she asked, her eyes scanning him for any sign of trouble.

"It is," Alfie said, suddenly finding it difficult to put his joy into words. How could he explain what had happened? How could he make her understand the magnitude of this day?

"Are you sure?" Leanne pressed, reaching up to touch his cheek. "Only it's a Saturday, your busiest day. And you are here."

Alfie caught her hand, squeezing it gently. "Mom, I met her today."

"Her?" Leanne's brow furrowed, then her eyes widened as understanding dawned. "Her? Your mate?"

Alfie nodded, a laugh bubbling up from deep inside him. “Yes. My mate. Her name is Marion.”

Leanne’s hands flew to her mouth as her eyes filled with tears. “Oh, Alfie! That’s wonderful!”

She threw her arms around him, and Alfie hugged her tightly, lifting her slightly off the ground in his enthusiasm. When he set her down, she was laughing and crying at once, her hands fluttering between wiping her eyes and gripping his arms as if to assure herself he was real.

“Hugo!” she called over her shoulder. “Hugo, come quickly!”

Alfie’s father looked up from his work, concern crossing his weathered face at his wife’s call. He dropped his pruning shears and hurried toward them, his long strides eating up the distance between the rows of vines.

“What is it? What’s happened?” Hugo demanded as he reached them, his eyes moving from his wife’s tear-streaked face to his son’s beaming one.

“Tell him,” Leanne urged, her voice trembling with emotion.

“Dad,” Alfie said, reaching out to clasp his father’s shoulder. “I found my mate today.”

Hugo Thornberg stood perfectly still for a moment, processing the words. Then his face transformed, decades seeming to fall away as joy overtook him. “Your mate? Today?”

“This morning,” Alfie confirmed. “At the garden center.”

“Oh, my!” Hugo wrapped him in a bear hug that would have crushed a normal man, his deep laugh rumbling through both of them. “I knew it would happen. I always knew.”

When they pulled apart, Hugo kept one arm around Alfie’s shoulders, his other hand reaching for Leanne’s. “Tell us everything. Who is she? What’s she like?”

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“Her name is Marion,” Alfie said, the name sweet on his tongue. “She came to pick up plants for the community garden project. There was a mix-up with the messages—”

“Finn,” Hugo and Leanne said in unison, exchanging knowing looks.

“Yes,” Alfie laughed. “Another one of his famous matchmaking mix-ups.”

“That boy.” Leanne shook her head, but her expression was filled with love. “He’s got a gift, whether or not he wants it.”

“Does he know?” Hugo asked.

“He does,” Alfie confirmed.

“I thought he looked a little shifty over lunch.” Hugo chuckled. “He kept that to himself.”

“I think he’s worried that when words gets out he has helped another brother meet his mate, he’s going to be inundated with requests for matchmaking mix-ups.”

“Well, I’ll put in my request to him now. I have three more sons that need a mate, including Finn himself,” Leanne said. “Not to mention your cousins.”

“And the rest of Bear Creek,” Hugo said. “But enough of that. Come.” Hugo guided them toward the house. “We need drinks. This calls for celebration.”

As they walked up the path to the hacienda, Alfie told them everything about meeting his mate. How he'd sensed Marion's presence before he'd seen her, the instant connection he'd felt, the way Charlie had warmed to him over butterflies and worms.

"Charlie?" Leanne asked, her expression softening further. "Her son?"

"Her nephew," Alfie explained. "She's raising him. I don't know the full story yet, but I think... I think they've been through something difficult."

Hugo nodded thoughtfully as he held the door open for them. "Many who come to Bear Creek are looking for healing."

"And find it," Leanne added, squeezing Alfie's arm. "Just as you will help them find it."

Inside, the house was cool and dim after the bright sunshine, and so familiar. He had such happy memories of his childhood, and he hoped he could help give Charlie that same carefree feeling.

We will, his bear said.

Hugo went to the cabinet where they kept the special-occasion bottles, selecting one of the vineyard's best vintages.

"I was saving this for something important," he said, examining the label with satisfaction. "I can't think of anything more important than this."

As his father opened the wine and his mother gathered glasses, Alfie leaned against the kitchen counter, watching them move around each other with the easy synchronicity of decades living together. This was what he wanted with Marion. This deep understanding, this partnership that grew stronger with each passing year.

“When do we get to meet her?” Leanne asked, setting the glasses on the table.

“Wednesday,” Alfie said. “I’m bringing her and Charlie here to collect logs for the bug hotel we’re making at the garden project.”

“A bug hotel?” Hugo’s eyebrows rose as he poured the ruby-red wine.

“Charlie likes insects,” Alfie explained, feeling a rush of affection for the boy. “I thought it would be a good way to help him feel connected to the garden.”

“And to you,” Leanne observed shrewdly, handing him a glass.

Alfie nodded, accepting the wine. “I want him to like me. To know he can trust me. And to understand that he is as much a part of my life as Marion.”

“You’ll get there, son,” Hugo said, raising his glass.

“To Marion and Charlie,” Leanne said, lifting her glass. “And to our son, finding his happiness at last.”

“To Marion and Charlie,” Hugo echoed. “May they find their place in our family.”

Alfie touched his glass to theirs. “To family,” he added.

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As they sipped the wine—rich with notes of blackberry and oak, the culmination of years of patient blending—Alfie felt a profound sense of love and belonging wash over him. This was his heritage, his roots. And now he had the chance to share it with Marion and Charlie, to show them what it meant to belong somewhere, to someone.

To us. His bear rumbled contentedly inside him, already considering Marion and Charlie as theirs to protect, to cherish. And Alfie was in complete agreement with his other half.

Life wasn't just good. Life was extraordinary.

Chapter Ten – Marion

Marion sat on the back porch of the rental house sipping her first coffee of the day as a fluffy bumblebee worked its way methodically from flower to flower. As she watched, her mind drifted back to yesterday and her encounter with Alfie Thornberg.

There was something about him that made her heart race, and yet he also gave her a sense of peace. A peace that was shattered as the screen door creaked open behind her, and Charlie padded out in his dinosaur pajamas, his hair tousled and eyes still heavy with sleep.

Not that she minded her nephew shattering her peace. She loved these quiet moments, just the two of them.

Marion shifted to make room as he slid onto the seat next to her. “Good morning, sleepyhead. You’re up early.”

Charlie didn't answer immediately, his attention captured by the bumblebee as it hovered momentarily before diving into another lavender blossom.

"The bees are busy," he observed, voice rough from sleep.

"They have important work to do." Marion took another sip of coffee.

They sat side by side for a while in companionable silence, watching the bee's industrious movements. Marion stole a glance at her nephew's profile. He appeared far more relaxed this morning, as though he had finally shed the tense wariness he'd developed over the last few months.

It was as if there had been a profound shift in Charlie.

Alfie.

The name drifted through her mind, warm and comforting. She couldn't deny the impact he'd had on Charlie, drawing him out with talk of butterflies and plants, treating him with such gentle kindness.

"I've been thinking," Charlie said suddenly, turning to look at her with an earnestness that tugged at her heart. "We should make a bug hotel."

Marion blinked in surprise. "A bug hotel?"

"Yeah." He nodded, enthusiasm building in his voice. "I looked it up online this morning. It's like a special house where bugs can live safely. Because we all need somewhere safe, right?"

"We do," she said, forcing herself to keep her emotions in check. "Where did you learn about bug hotels?"

“I searched for ‘how to help bugs in your garden’ after we got home yesterday,” Charlie explained. “There were lots of videos. Some people make them really fancy, with different sections for different kinds of bugs.”

Marion smiled, reaching out to rub his back. “I think that’s a project we can definitely tackle.”

“Really?” Charlie’s eyes lit up.

“Really,” she confirmed. “But first, breakfast and getting dressed. Bug architects need fuel and proper attire.”

Charlie groaned theatrically but was already on his feet, full of energy as he shook off the last of his sleepiness. “Can we start right after breakfast?”

“As soon as you’re dressed,” Marion promised.

With a whoop of excitement, Charlie darted back into the house, the screen door banging behind him. Marion remained on the porch for a moment longer, savoring the dregs of her coffee and the sweet mountain air that filled her lungs. She’d been so afraid when they’d first arrived in Bear Creek. Afraid they wouldn’t fit in, afraid she wouldn’t be able to provide Charlie with what he needed, afraid the shadows of the past would follow them here.

But now she was filled with tentative hope. She’d found the courage to make this move, to start over. Maybe that had been the hardest part.

With a decisive nod, she drained the last of her coffee and went inside to make breakfast.

In the kitchen, she pulled out cereal and milk, setting them on the table before

popping bread into the toaster.

Charlie reappeared, dressed in jeans and his favorite blue t-shirt, hair still unruly despite his apparent attempt to smooth it down.

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“That was fast,” Marion observed, placing a bowl in front of him.

“I want to start on the bug hotel,” he explained, reaching for the cereal box. “I was thinking we could invite Alfie over to help. He knows a lot about bugs.”

Marion hesitated, the butter knife suspended over her toast. “I think we should do this one ourselves, buddy. We took up a lot of Alfie’s time yesterday.”

Charlie’s face fell, his spoon clattering against the side of his bowl. “But he likes bugs. And he said he wanted to see us again.”

“I know,” Marion said gently, sitting down across from him. “And we will see him on Wednesday at the vineyard, remember?”

Charlie nodded reluctantly, stirring his cereal without enthusiasm.

“I was thinking,” Marion continued, a new idea forming, “if we make the bug hotel ourselves, it could be a surprise for Alfie. To show him how serious we are about the bug garden.”

Charlie’s head snapped up, his expression brightening. “Like a thank-you present?”

“Exactly,” Marion smiled, relieved to see the spark return to his eyes. “We can show him on Wednesday when he picks us up.”

“That’s a good idea,” Charlie agreed, digging into his cereal with renewed vigor. “We could make it really special.”

As they ate, Charlie outlined his plans for the bug hotel. The different sections they would need, the materials they could use, and the ideal placement to attract the most beneficial insects. Marion listened, marveling at how much research he'd done in the short time since their visit to the garden center.

When they finished breakfast, Charlie bolted outside, eager to begin. Marion cleared the table more slowly, washing the dishes and setting them on the rack to dry. Through the kitchen window, she could see Charlie already scouting the yard, examining potential building materials with serious concentration.

She dried her hands on a dish towel and stepped outside, breathing deeply of the mountain air. Moving to Bear Creek had been a risk. She'd uprooted them to start over in a place where they knew no one. But standing here now, watching Charlie explore their small backyard with such enthusiasm, she knew it had been the right choice.

"I found some pine cones!" Charlie called, holding up his treasures. "And there are lots of twigs under the big tree."

"Perfect," Marion said, joining him. "I think there's an old terracotta pot in the shed that would make a good base."

They spent the morning gathering materials, a selection of hollow stems, dried leaves, strips of bark, and smooth stones. Charlie organized everything into piles, explaining which bugs would prefer which materials with a confidence that filled Marion with relief.

They had undoubtedly turned a corner, and much sooner than she had expected.

The old pot, once cleaned of cobwebs and dust, became the foundation of their creation. Layer by layer, they built the bug hotel, tucking materials into different

sections with careful precision.

As they worked, the scent of lavender wafted over from the bush, triggering a cascade of memories. Marion remembered the small sachets she'd sewn years ago, filled with dried lavender to help Charlie sleep when nightmares plagued him.

"What are you thinking about?" Charlie asked, noticing her distraction.

"Just remembering," Marion said, reaching for the lavender bush and snipping a few stems. "I used to make lavender sachets to help you sleep when you were smaller."

"The little pillows that smelled nice?" Charlie's brow furrowed with the effort of recollection.

"That's right," Marion nodded, twisting a piece of twine around the lavender stems to hang them for drying. "I thought I might make some again. Or maybe some handmade soaps."

"With lavender?" Charlie asked, placing a pine cone carefully in the upper section of their bug hotel.

"Yes. And other flowers," Marion said, the idea taking shape in her mind. "I might start making things to sell. There are plenty of farmer's markets I could sell them at."

"Like a business?" Charlie looked interested.

"A small one," Marion clarified. "Something I could do from home, so I could still be here for you after school."

Charlie nodded solemnly. "That would be good."

They finished the bug hotel as the sun climbed higher in the sky and stood back to admire their creation. It was rustic but charming, with different sections carefully designed to attract various beneficial insects.

“It looks great,” Marion said, genuinely impressed. “I think Alfie will love it.”

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“I hope so,” Charlie said, a hint of worry creeping into his voice. “What if he thinks it’s silly?”

“He won’t,” Marion assured him, resting her hand on his shoulder. “He’ll see how much thought and care you put into it.”

Charlie nodded, his confidence restored. “I’m going to check if any bugs have moved in yet,” he declared, dropping to his knees to examine their creation more closely.

Marion smiled and gathered the leftover lavender stems, taking them inside to hang in the kitchen window. But then the same worry Charlie had voiced hit her.

Was the idea of making scented soap silly? Was she wasting her time and effort when she should go and get a proper job?

She took a moment and took a breath. If necessary, she could do both. Get a job while building her soap business. It would be hard work, but worth it.

Once the lavender was secured, she went to the boxes that she hadn’t gotten around to unpacking and opened up the one labeled crafts. Inside were the molds she used to use, and various essential oils. Digging deeper, she found a bag of pure soy wax. Not a lot, but enough to get started.

She carried everything to the kitchen and set the items down on the counter. It had been a while since she’d made soap, but a quick online search would give her some recipes to follow, and maybe some tips on selling handmade soaps online.

Marion opened her laptop and typed “soy lavender soap recipes” into the search bar. But as the results loaded, a news headline in the sidebar caught her eye:

“Trial Date Set for Ralph ‘Razor’ Malone in Drug Case”

Her throat constricted, fingers hovering over the trackpad. She shouldn’t click on it. She knew she shouldn’t. They were building a new life here, away from all that.

But her finger moved of its own accord, opening the article.

The details were sparse but chilling. Razor had pleaded not guilty, despite the overwhelming evidence. The trial was set for next month. Heather was standing by him and had even made a statement about her confidence in his innocence.

Marion felt sick. After everything that had happened, after what Charlie had endured, Heather was still defending him.

The sound of footsteps made her jump, and she quickly closed the tab as Charlie appeared in the doorway.

“A spider already found our hotel!” he announced triumphantly. “A little one with really long legs.”

“That’s wonderful,” Marion said, forcing brightness into her voice as she turned away from the computer. “It must be an excellent design if bugs are moving in already.”

Charlie beamed with pride. “I can’t wait to show Alfie on Wednesday. Do you think he’ll be impressed that we did it all ourselves?”

“I think he’ll be very impressed,” Marion said, her heart filled with gratitude for this gentle man who had, in just one day, given Charlie something she’d been trying to

provide for months—a sense of purpose, of being valued, of normal childhood enthusiasm and joy.

As Charlie chattered about the spider's long legs and quick movements, Marion pushed thoughts of Razor and the upcoming trial from her mind. That was the past.

And this was their future. And it was going to be a good one.

Chapter Eleven – Alfie

Why does time pass so slowly? Alfie's bear asked impatiently.

Alfie chuckled. It was Wednesday and his bear had been wishing the day away, counting down the hours, minutes, and seconds until it was time to leave to pick up Marion and Charlie.

As if you have not been counting down those same hours, minutes, and seconds, his bear snorted.

Alfie glanced at the clock on the wall, squinting through the humid greenhouse air. Three-thirty. Still fifteen minutes before he needed to leave to pick up Marion and Charlie. Each minute seemed to crawl by with excruciating slowness.

He returned his attention to the delicate seedlings, carefully transferring them from their starter trays to larger pots. The repetitive motions should have been soothing. However, today his mind kept wandering to his mate's eyes, and a guarded smile that had haunted his dreams for days.

Since Saturday, when Marion had driven away with Charlie after their impromptu café visit, Alfie had felt her absence like a physical ache. Monday had been the worst. He'd sensed her presence while delivering plants to the hardware store, that invisible

thread between them pulling taut. His bear had nearly clawed its way to the surface, desperate to follow that connection to its source.

We should have gone to her, his bear grumbled. Even now, he still sulked about the missed opportunity.

And risk scaring her off completely? Alfie had been worried that if he suddenly appeared unannounced in the middle of town, then Marion would think he was a stalker. No, it was not worth the risk.

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He pressed another seedling into its new home, tamping down the soil with perhaps more force than necessary. Their relationship was too new, too fragile, to risk any missteps.

I miss her,his bear said plaintively.And Charlie.

I know,Alfie sighed, straightening to stretch his back.I miss them, too.

It was ridiculous how much he missed someone he'd spent less than a day with. And yet the feeling was undeniable, like a piece of himself had driven away in that car with Marion and Charlie. Today, for a few precious hours at the vineyard, he would feel whole again.

If you would just tell her we are mates and meant to be together forever, then we would be complete always,his bear pointed out, not for the first time.

And that wouldn't freak her out at all,Alfie replied dryly.Nothing says 'I'm completely normal and trustworthy' like declaring eternal love after one coffee date.

But when she knows we are fated mates, she will understand,his bear said.

The greenhouse door creaked open, and Alfie looked up to see Daisy entering, her arms full of empty seed trays.

"I can finish up here," she offered, setting down her load on a nearby workbench.

"I'm nearly done," Alfie said, carefully pressing the compost down around a tiny

seedling.

Daisy studied him with knowing eyes. “You aren’t going home to change first?”

Alfie glanced down at his t-shirt, which read “I PLANT TO BE DIFFERENT” across the chest, complete with a small illustration of a seedling.

“No,” he replied, suddenly self-conscious. “Why, do you think I should?”

He’d always been apun-loving guy. He enjoyed how they brought smiles to most folks’ faces. But now he wondered if his casual attire was too unprofessional, too childish for someone like Marion.

Daisy reached out and brushed dirt from his shoulder. “No, I guess Marion should get used to you just the way you are.”

“Charming, adorable, and patient?” he asked with a raised eyebrow.

Daisy chuckled. “Let’s go with that.”

Alfie straightened up and held out his hands. “Maybe you could take over. I don’t have time to get changed, but I should go get washed up.”

“Good idea,” Daisy nodded. “Scrub under your fingernails.”

“I will.” Alfie chuckled and walked away, heading for the washroom. He quickly scrubbed his hands, paying special attention to the dirt that always seemed to find its way under his nails. He splashed water on his face and ran damp fingers through his hair, trying to tame the wayward strands.

Studying his reflection in the mirror, he wished he’d thought to bring a change of

clothes, but it was too late now. After waiting what felt like an eternity to see Marion again, he was out of time.

He headed out of the garden center, crossed the parking lot to his truck, and climbed inside, feeling a flutter of butterflies in his stomach. What if Charlie wasn't as enthusiastic about the bugs as he had been on Saturday? What if the evening ended in disaster and he lost his mate before he even truly had her?

It'll be fine, his bear assured him. Charlie is still going to be enthusiastic about bugs and plants. It was obvious how enthralled he was.

Alfie nodded in agreement. The boy had reminded him so much of himself as a kid. The same wonder at the natural world, the same careful attention to details others might miss.

He drove over to Marion's rented house and parked in the driveway, taking a deep breath before cutting the engine. But he hesitated as he reached for the door, as the sudden enormity of the situation hit him. What if he messed this up and lost them forever?

Before he could overthink things any further, the front door opened, and Charlie burst out, practically vibrating with excitement.

"Alfie! You're here!" the boy called, racing down the steps. "Come see what we made!"

Marion appeared in the doorway behind him, smiling at her nephew's enthusiasm. When her eyes met Alfie's, that now-familiar jolt of connection shot through him.

"Hi," she said simply, but the warmth in that single word was enough to chase away any lingering doubts.

Alfie stepped out of the truck, grinning. “Hi yourself.”

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Charlie rushed to Alfie's side, tugging at his sleeve. "Come see what we made! It's a bug hotel! We built it ourselves!"

Alfie followed Charlie to the handcrafted structure, crouching down to examine it properly. The care and attention to detail were impressive. It had different sections for various insects, carefully arranged materials, and even a small roof to keep everything dry.

"This is incredible," Alfie said, genuinely impressed. "You've created different chambers for different bugs. That's exactly right."

Charlie beamed with pride. "I researched it online. The spider section is already occupied!"

Marion approached, watching them with a look Alfie could not quite read. "He's been checking it every hour to see who's moved in."

Alfie stood, his eyes meeting hers. The connection between them hummed like electricity, making his breath catch. "You've both been busy."

"Charlie's enthusiasm is contagious," she replied, nervously tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

They stood there for a moment, simply looking at each other, the world around them fading away until Charlie tugged at Alfie's sleeve again.

"Are we going?" Charlie asked, breaking the moment.

There'll be plenty of time for googly-eyed staring later,his bear told him.

Alfie grinned down at him. "Yes, we are."

"Great! We have logs to collect," Charlie said excitedly, already heading toward the truck.

Alfie gestured toward his vehicle. "Shall we?"

"I just need to grab my bag." Marion hurried back to the house and then joined them, her tote bag on her shoulder. "Okay, I'm ready."

Me, too,Alfie's bear said.

"Here we go." Alfie opened the passenger door and offered Marion his hand to help her up. When their fingers touched,that now-familiar spark traveled up his arm, and he relished the sense of connection, the recognition that pulsed between them.

She smiled shyly at him as she held his hand, and he knew she felt the inexplicable bond that had formed between them.

As if to confirm this, her fingers lingered in his for just a moment longer than necessary before she climbed into the truck. Alfie hesitated for a moment, relishing the nearness of her, then he turned around and helped Charlie clamber into the truck beside his aunt.

His bear rumbled contentedly inside him.This is our family.

Alfie smiled at his bear, as he went around to the driver's side and climbed in. He was right, this was their family. He started the engine, feeling like he was living in a dream he never wanted to wake from.

It's not a dream,his bear told him.

I know, but it sure feels like one,Alfie said as he glanced sideways at Marion and Charlie.

As they drove out of town and into the mountains, Charlie chattered excitedly, his face pressed against the window. "I've never seen mountains so tall!" he exclaimed, eyes wide with wonder. "They go right up into the clouds!"

"Wait until you see them from the vineyard," Alfie promised. "The view is breathtaking."

Marion seemed equally enthralled as she watched the landscape unfold, pointing something out to Charlie, from a hawk circling overhead, to a cluster of wildflowers painting a hillside purple, or the way the sunlight dappled through the pine forest.

When they finally turned onto the winding drive that led to Thornberg Vineyard, Alfie felt a surge of pride watching Marion's reaction. Her lips parted in surprise as the vista openedup before them. "Wow," she breathed as she took in neat rows of vines stretching across the hillside, the hacienda-style house nestled among them, and beyond it all, the majestic mountains rising against a crystal-blue sky. "This is...incredible."

"Wait until you taste the wine," Alfie joked, pulling up in front of the house.

As they got out of the truck, Alfie sensed his parents hovering inside, their anticipation even from this distance.

We should put them out of their misery and introduce them to our mate,his bear suggested eagerly.

Alfie agreed though he didn't want to overwhelm either Charlie or Marion. This was all unfamiliar territory. For all of them.

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Charlie spun in a slow circle, taking in the sweeping views and endless sky. “This is amazing,” he said, his voice filled with awe. “You’re so lucky you grew up here.”

“You are,” Marion agreed, glancing at Charlie with a hint of sadness in her eyes.

Alfie placed a hand on her shoulder and smiled reassuringly. Their eyes met, and she smiled gratefully back at him. In that one look, he understood how thankful she was that he’d brought them here, that he’d helped nurture Charlie’s love of the outdoors.

“My mom and dad would love to meet you,” Alfie said, but then added, “but we could wait until after we collect the logs if you prefer.”

Marion shook her head. “Maybe now would be better. I have no idea what state Charlie might be in after we’ve collected the wood for the bugs.” She tilted her head and looked back at his truck. “Especially since I think he plans to crawl around looking for bugs. Maybe I should have brought a change of clothes or a tarp to wrap him in.”

Alfie chuckled. “It’s okay. I don’t mind dirt in there.”

“Good, because I don’t fancy a long walk back to town,” Marion replied with a wry smile.

Alfie led them toward the house. “I need to get my magnifying glass, too.”

“The special one?” Charlie asked, racing to catch up with him.

“The special one,” Alfie confirmed, just as the front door opened and Leanne and Hugo stepped out to meet them.

“Mom, Dad, this is Marion. Marion, this is my mom, Leanne, and my dad, Hugo.” He then placed a hand on Charlie’s shoulder. “And this is Charlie, Marion’s nephew.”

His mother beamed, her eyes shining with joy. “Oh, it’s just wonderful to finally meet Marion,” she said, her voice trembling slightly. “And you, too, Charlie.”

Alfie’s father cleared his throat, clearly emotional. “Yes, yes indeed,” he added, nodding vigorously.

Marion smiled politely, seemingly unfazed by their enthusiasm. “It’s lovely to meet you both as well,” she replied graciously. “You have a lovely home. And the vineyard is amazing.”

“It’s a labor of love,” Leanne said. “And a wonderful place for exploring and finding bugs.” She looked down at Charlie.

“Which is what we intend to do,” Alfie said. “I’ll just grab my magnifying glass from the kitchen, and I’ll be right back.” He darted inside the house, relieved the introductions had gone smoothly. “Okay, got it.”

“Can we go look at the vines now?” Charlie asked eagerly, providing Alfie with the perfect excuse to break up the greetings before his parents could say something revealing.

“Absolutely,” Alfie agreed, catching his mother’s knowing smile. “There’s an entire world waiting to be explored out there.”

As they headed back outside, Marion fell into step beside him. “Your parents are

lovely,” she said quietly. “They seem so...happy.”

“They are,” Alfie replied, watching Charlie skip ahead of them. “They love this place.”

“They must miss having you all close by,” Marion observed.

“In some ways, but I think they are enjoying this time having the house to themselves,” Alfie chuckled. “My brother lived here until he met his mate recently.”

“Mate?” Marion asked.

“His partner...” Alfie said, realizing his mistake.

“Alfie, come look at this!” Charlie called out, and Alfie was more than happy with the distraction.

You could just tell her, his bear said.

But now was not the time.

They followed Charlie toward the nearest row of vines, where he was already examining the leaves with intense concentration.

“Can I use your magnifying glass now?” he asked as they approached.

Alfie handed over the cherished tool, showing Charlie how to hold it at the right distance to focus properly. “See those tiny structures on the underside of the leaf? Those help the plant breathe.”

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Charlie's eyes widened as he peered through the glass. "Wow! They look like little star patterns!"

Marion kneeled beside them, her shoulder brushing against Alfie's. "May I see?"

As Alfie guided her hand with the magnifying glass, their fingers touching, he felt that now-familiar spark between them intensify. Looking up, he found her eyes on him rather than the leaf, and the heat of her gaze made his heart race.

"It's beautiful," she murmured, and Alfie wasn't sure if she meant the leaf or something else entirely.

His bear rumbled with satisfaction. She feels it, too. She knows we belong together.

"Come on!" Charlie called, already moving farther down the row. "Let's find some bugs to study!"

Alfie stood and offered Marion his hand and she took it without hesitation, letting him pull her to her feet. For a brief moment, they stood close enough that he could smell the scent of lavender soap and feel the warmth radiating from her skin.

"We should probably catch up before he discovers the compost heap," Alfie said with a smile. "That's where all the really interesting bugs live."

Marion groaned, but her eyes danced with amusement. "Lead the way, bug expert."

"Whatever you say," Alfie replied.

Because he would do anything for her. And Charlie.

Because they were his. And he was most certainly theirs.

Chapter Twelve – Marion

“This place is magical.” Marion shifted the weight of the fallen branches in her arms and stared up at the muted sunlight as it filtered through the canopy of trees.

“It was always one of my favorite places when I was a kid.” Alfie stood by her side, close but not touching as he followed her gaze toward the branches above their heads. They’d been exploring the woodland at the edge of the vineyard for almost two hours now, and the afternoon had slipped away in a haze of wood gathering and excited discovery.

“Look!” Charlie exclaimed, dropping to his knees as he spotted another bug. He scampered after it with Alfie’s special magnifying glass clutched carefully in his hand. “This one has stripes!”

Marion nodded toward her nephew. “You’d better go and identify it for him,” she told Alfie, even though she longed for him to stay by her side.

Alfie glanced at Charlie, and then back at her, giving her the impression he was torn between who he would rather spend time with. With a wistful smile that made her blush, Alfie nodded. “I’ll be right there.”

She liked that Alfie put Charlie first, that he understood her nephew needed this sense of connection.

“I can gather more logs,” she assured Alfie, hoisting them higher in her arms to prove her point.

Alfie chuckled, his eyes crinkling at the corners in that way that made her stomach do a slow flip. “I think we have enough,” he said, tucking his own pile under his arm as he went to Charlie and crouched down beside him.

Marion watched as Alfie patiently identified the bug and then explained how it was eating the leaf, his voice hushed but animated. Charlie hung on every word, his face filled with fascination. Her affection for Alfie threatened to grow into something more.

How could it not? He’d spent hours showing her nephew the wonders hidden in fallen logs and forest undergrowth, never once growing impatient or bored.

“I’m hungry,” Charlie announced suddenly, looking up from the bug with the abrupt shift in focus only a child could manage.

Marion glanced at her watch, surprised to see how late it had grown. “We should get home for dinner,” she said, already mentally cataloging what she had in the refrigerator that could be quickly transformed into a meal.

“Can Alfie stay for dinner?” Charlie piped up, his hopeful gaze darting between the two adults.

Marion opened her mouth, but no words came out. She would love Alfie to stay for dinner, and longer. But she didn’t want to pressure him. He’d already been so generous with his time, once again.

Alfie cast a look over his shoulder at her, as if trying to assess her reaction.

So Marion took the plunge. “Would you like to stay for dinner?” she asked, surprising herself with how steady her voice sounded despite the nervous flutter in her chest.

Alfie's face lit up with a smile that seemed to radiate pure happiness. "I'd love to," he said.

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Charlie whooped with delight, punching the air with his free hand. “Yes! Alfie’s coming for dinner! Alfie’s coming for dinner!”

“We’d better head back then,” Marion said, smiling at her nephew’s enthusiasm.

Alfie and Marion carried the logs, while Charlie gathered the small treasures he’d found, a few interesting stones, and a pine cone dropped by a squirrel. They were the start of his nature museum, and as they made their way back through the forest toward the vineyard, he scoured the forest floor for any other interesting objects.

“Look!” Charlie crouched down and carefully picked up a piece of eggshell.

“It’s belongs to a robin,” Alfie told him. “See how blue it is?” Alfie looked up into the tree above. “Look, there’s the nest.”

“Does it have baby birds in it?” Charlie whispered as if he didn’t want to disturb them.

Alfie was silent for a moment, his head tilted to one side. “No, they have flown the nest.”

“Can I keep the eggshell for my nature museum?” Charlie asked.

“You can,” Alfie said. “But you must never take eggs from a nest.”

“I know,” Charlie said, running his finger lightly over the eggshell.

“So, a nature museum?” Alfie asked. “That is a cool idea.”

As they emerged from the tree line, the view stole Marion’s breath away all over again. The terracotta roof gleamed golden in the late afternoon sun, while the leaves of the vines seemed to sparkle like emeralds as they fluttered in the breeze.

It was perfect.

Just like the man walking beside her, Marion thought, stealing a glance at Alfie’s profile. His quiet strength, his patience, his gentle kindness, all of it wrapped in a package that made her heart beat faster whenever he smiled at her.

“Oh!” Alfie stopped suddenly beside her. “Before we go, I should grab a bottle of wine for dinner. Would you mind a quick detour?”

“Not at all,” Marion replied, even though her arms ached from holding the branches.

“Is it from your grapes?” Charlie asked, skipping alongside them as they changed direction.

“Some of them,” Alfie nodded. “My parents have been making wine here for over thirty years.”

He led them toward a stone building set partially into the hillside and set down his logs. Marion did the same, thankful for the chance to stretch her arms. Then he pulled open the heavy wooden door and cool air wafted out, carrying with it the rich, earthy scent of aging wine.

“Whoa,” Charlie breathed, stepping inside. His eyes widened as he took in the enormous oak barrels lining the walls and the racks of bottles stretching into the shadows.

“This is where the magic happens,” Alfie said, his voice dropping to a reverent tone that matched the hushed atmosphere. “The wine ages here, developing its character.”

Marion moved deeper into the room, drawn by its quiet serenity. “It’s incredible,” she murmured, running her fingers lightly over the smooth surface of a barrel.

“My father calls it the heart of the vineyard,” Alfie said, moving to a rack of bottles. He studied the labels carefully before selecting one. “I think you’ll like this. It’s one of our Cabernets, not too heavy.”

“I’m sure it will be perfect,” Marion said, watching as he cradled the bottle with obvious affection.

“Can we explore?” Charlie asked, his hunger obviously forgotten.

“Another time,” Alfie said, and Charlie didn’t argue as they headed back toward the entrance.

When they emerged back into the sunlight, Charlie blinked rapidly, adjusting to the brightness. “That was so cool! Like a secret cave, but for wine!”

Alfie laughed. “That’s a pretty good description, actually.”

“I’d like to live in a cave,” Charlie announced as they collected their stacks of wood. “Are there caves in the mountains?”

“There are,” Alfie replied.

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“Can we camp in them?” Charlie asked. “Or do bears and wolves live in them?”

“Sometimes,” Alfie said. “The bears that live in the mountains sometimes hibernate in them.”

“Cool!” Charlie said as he ran off through the rows of vines, pretending to be a bear.

“He looks so carefree,” Marion said as she watched him go.

“He’s not the only one,” Alfie said.

She ducked her head as heat flared across her face. “We’ve had a rough time of things before we moved to Bear Creek.”

“I gathered,” Alfie said as if choosing his words carefully.

“I was worried I might have made a mistake coming here,” she admitted.

“And now?” he asked.

She didn’t dare look at him as she said, “Now, I think it’s the best decision I could have made. For both of us.”

“I’m glad,” Alfie said as they reached the truck and carefully arranged the logs in the bed. As Alfie helped her stack the branches, their hands brushed, and Marion felt that now-familiar tingle of awareness dance up her arm. She glanced up to find him watching her, something unreadable in his eyes.

For a moment, standing there with Alfie and Charlie, the three of them working together with the vineyard spread out behind them, Marion could almost believe they were a family. That this was their life, collecting logs for bug hotels, exploring forests, heading home for dinner together.

The thought squeezed her heart painfully. She couldn't afford to think like that. Fairy tales weren't real, and happy endings were for storybooks, not for women who'd seen the darker side of relationships through her sister's experience. Alfie was kind and considerate, but she couldn't read too much into his actions.

Even if she desperately wanted to.

"All set?" Alfie asked, closing the tailgate.

Marion nodded, pushing away her wistful thoughts. "Ready when you are."

The drive back to town was peaceful, with Charlie pressed against the window, watching the scenery flow by as he clutched Alfie's magnifying glass. Marion stared straight ahead, not daring to look at Alfie.

He made her feel things that she'd denied herself. Dare she risk opening her heart to him?

So, instead of thinking of the man seated close to her, she thought of her refrigerator and its contents. By the time they reached the little rental house, she had a dinner menu all figured out.

As soon as Alfie turned off the engine, Charlie jumped out of the truck, still full of energy despite the long afternoon.

"Go get cleaned up," Marion told him as they entered the house. "Hands and face,

please.”

“Okay!” Charlie darted down the hallway, his footsteps echoing through the small house.

In the kitchen, Marion set down her bag and turned to Alfie. “Coffee?”

“Please,” he said, setting the wine bottle carefully on the counter.

Marion busied herself with the coffeemaker while Alfie washed his hands at the sink. The domesticity of the moment wasn’t lost on her. How natural it felt to have him in her kitchen, moving around each other with easy familiarity.

She opened the refrigerator and began pulling out ingredients, bell peppers, zucchini, onions, garlic, and chicken breasts. When she turned around, Alfie had already found a cutting board and knife and was reaching for the vegetables.

“May I?” he asked.

Marion nodded, handing him the peppers. They worked in comfortable silence, Alfie chopping vegetables while Marion prepared the chicken and started boiling water for the pasta. They moved around each other as if they’d done this a hundred times before, anticipating each other’s needs without having to ask.

When Alfie reached for the salt at the exact moment she was about to ask for it, Marion felt something shift inside her. A recognition that went beyond the physical attraction she’d been fighting since they met. This felt like something more. Something deeper.

As she watched him expertly dice an onion, his strong hands moving with surprising grace, Marion felt herself falling. Not just for the idea of being in love, but for Alfie

himself. This man who talked to plants and made terrible puns and looked at her as if she were the most important thing in the world. Or, at least, his world.

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“What?” Alfie asked, catching her staring.

Marion shook her head, feeling heat rise to her cheeks. “Nothing. Just...thank you for today. Charlie had a wonderful time.”

“So did I,” Alfie murmured. “So did I.”

Their eyes met over the cutting board, and for a moment, Marion allowed herself to believe that maybe, just maybe, fairy tales could come true after all.

Chapter Thirteen – Alfie

“This is one of our best,” Alfie said, as he carefully popped the cork on the wine he’d chosen from the vineyard. It was one of his brother Kris’s finest blends, and sure to impress.

I believe Marion is already impressed by your chopping skills, his bear said.

Are you teasing me? Alfie asked as he carefully poured the ruby liquid into two glasses.

Never, his bear replied with a roll of his eyes.

“Here, try this.” Alfie passed a glass of wine to Marion and for an instant, her fingers brushed against his and that familiar electric current raced up his arm.

He wanted to pinch himself to make sure he was awake, and this was real. That he

was here, standing in Marion's kitchen while Charlie played upstairs, the three of them about to have dinner together like...like a family.

Oh, it's real,his bear told him, bristling with excitement.Gloriously, wonderfully real.

Alfie raised his glass and locked eyes with Marion as she touched her glass to his. "Let's make a toast to the future," Alfie said, his voice rough with emotion. Because his future was right here, right now.

And forever more,his bear added.

"To the future, may it be everything we hope for." She smiled at him and his heart stuttered in his chest.

If only she knows she is everything we hoped for,and so much more, his bear said, equally moved by the moment.

Marion took a sip of her wine and nodded appreciatively. "Oh, this is good. I mean, I'm not a wine connoisseur or anything. I usually choose the bottle based on the label." She covered her face with her hand, embarrassment coloring her cheeks. "That must sound terrible when such work has gone into the wine..."

Alfie shook his head. "Not at all, the label is important, it's like a book cover..." He smiled, watching as she took another sip.

Alfie drank his wine, savoring the familiar taste. He could name the grapes Kris used in the blend and the individual flavors...

But you are not going to,his bear told him.

Marion might want to know,Alfie replied.

Or she might think you are trying too hard,his bear said.

“Do you help at the vineyard at all?” Marion asked, watching him over the over the rim of her glass.

I hope your lips aren’t moving when you talk to me,his bear said.

Oh,Alfie said, recalling what Daisy had told him before he met his mate.

“I help out at harvest time. It’s a tradition,” he said, trying to look at ease as he leaned against the counter.

“You help pick the grapes by hand?” Marion asked, setting her wine glass down as she went to check on dinner, lifting the lid of a pot that filled the kitchen with the aroma of simmering herbs and tomatoes.

“Yes, it’s something I have done since I was nine or ten. We pick the grapes when they are at their best, and then they are processed straight away,” he said, admiring the way his mate moved around the kitchen. The sway of her hips, the way she flicked her hair back from her face.

“So, you trample them with bare feet?” she asked lightly, a teasing glint in her eyes.

Alfie chuckled, “No. Although we tried it once when we were kids. It was...squelchy.”

Marion giggled, the sound making his heart skip. “Squelchy?”

“Not exactly a word you want to associate with wine,” Alfie said, looking around the kitchen. “Do you want me to lay the table?”

“That would be great,” Marion said, gesturing with a wooden spoon. “The silverware is in the drawer there and the plates are in that cupboard.”

Alfie followed her directions and set the table for three while Marion put the finishing touches to dinner. The domestic simplicity of the task filled him with unexpected joy. This was what he wanted, these quiet moments of togetherness, building a life with Marion and Charlie.

“Do you want to call Charlie?” Marion asked, stirring the pot one last time before she turned off the heat.

“Sure,” Alfie left the kitchen, glancing into the living room. It was relatively sparse and uncluttered, as if Marion and Charlie had left their lives behind when they moved here. No family photos, no trinkets, nothing that spoke of their past. Just the essentials and a few books.

“Charlie, dinner is ready,” Alfie called up the stairs, and he smiled to himself at the sound of his footsteps thundering toward the stairs.

“Coming!” Charlie appeared with a slightly crumpled piece of paper clutched in his hand.

“Take it steady,” Alfie warned as Charlie ran down the stairs.

“I never asked all my questions,” he announced, waving the paper triumphantly as he reached the bottom and rushed along the hallway to the kitchen.

“I wondered what you had been doing so quietly up there,” Marion said as Charlie climbed onto his chair and carefully placed the paper beside his plate, smoothing it with his hand.

Well, I suppose this means we won’t have any awkward silences at dinner, Alfie’s bear commented with amusement.

Alfie suppressed a smile as he took his seat, and Marion placed the steaming pot of pasta on the table.

After dishing up a portion for Charlie, she said, “Please, help yourself. There’s plenty.”

“It smells delicious,” Alfie said, his mouthwatering as he inhaled the aroma.

“It’s nothing fancy,” Marion said, but she looked pleased with the comment. “Unlike your wine.” She reached for her glass and took a sip.

“I can’t take any credit for the wine,” Alfie replied. “Except for knowing where my brother keeps the good stuff.”

Marion covered her mouth as she nearly choked on her wine and Alfie shrugged and grinned, happy he’d made her laugh. It was such a good sound to hear.

“Are you ready for my questions?” Charlie patted his piece of paper.

“Okay, ask away,” he said to Charlie, unfolding his napkin and placing it in his lap.

Charlie took a deep breath, his eyes serious as he picked up his fork. “First question: How old were you when you started growing things?”

“I was about five,” Alfie answered, watching as Charlie carefully wrote something on his paper. “My mom gave me my own little patch in the garden. I grew carrots, but they came out all twisted and funny-looking.”

He twirled pasta around his fork and took a bite. The flavors burst across his tongue. The tomato sauce was rich, the herbs fragrant and the pasta perfectly cooked.

“This is delicious,” he complimented Marion, who ducked her head slightly, a blush coloring her cheeks.

She is so beautiful. His bear sighed.

“Do plants have feelings?” Charlie asked, already moving to his next question, fork suspended halfway to his mouth.

Alfie considered this thoughtfully. “Not like people do, but they do respond to their environment. They can sense light and turn toward it. Some plants even release chemicals when they’re being eaten by insects to warn other plants.”

“So they talk to each other?” Charlie’s eyes widened.

“In their own way, yes,” Alfie nodded.

Marion smiled across the table, adding, “That’s why Alfie talks to his plants at the garden center. They respond to his voice.”

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“And his plant puns,” Charlie giggled as he eyed Alfie’s shirt.

“Plants have a sense of humor, too,” Alfie said, glancing down at his shirt, glad he hadn’t spilled his dinner on it.

As they ate, Charlie methodically worked his way down his list. Why do leaves change color in fall? How do bees make honey? What’s the biggest plant in the world?

Alfie answered the questions one by one, happy to pass on his knowledge. But happier still to see Charlie so animated.

Marion remained mostly quiet, occasionally adding a comment or gently reminding Charlie to eat between questions. It was as if she were content to simply sit there and enjoy the moment.

If Charlie is happy, then Marion is happy, his bear observed sagely.

Alfie understood that completely. Charlie’s happiness and wellbeing had become important to him, too.

As they finished the main course, Marion rose to clear their plates. “Who’s ready for dessert? I made apple crumble.”

“Me!” Charlie exclaimed, finally setting down his question sheet.

Marion returned with three bowls of warm crumble topped with vanilla ice cream that

was already beginning to melt. As they dug in, the conversation shifted.

“Do you enjoy living in Bear Creek?” Charlie asked, this time without consulting his paper.

“I do,” Alfie replied, savoring the sweet-tart flavor of the apples. “I’ve lived here my whole life.”

“Have you ever seen a wolf or a bear?” Charlie asked, eyes wide with excitement.

Alfie nearly choked on his dessert but managed to swallow smoothly. “Yes, I have,” he answered truthfully, though not elaborating that he’d seen them primarily in mirrors and family gatherings.

When have you ever seen me in a mirror?his bear asked indignantly.

You know what I mean,Alfie answered.

“I would love to see a wolf and a bear,” Charlie said dreamily, scraping his spoon around his empty bowl.

Marion cleared her throat. “I think perhaps Alfie could give you some lessons on staying safe around wild animals. The mountains have plenty of wildlife.”

“I would love to,” Alfie agreed, grateful for the slight change in subject. “It’s important to know how to behave if you encounter them in the wild.”

Charlie opened his mouth, presumably to ask another question, but it transformed into a wide yawn instead.

“I think it’s time for bed,” Marion said, noting the drooping of Charlie’s eyelids.

“But I’m not tired,” Charlie protested, only to betray himself with another enormous yawn.

“Bedtime,” Marion repeated firmly. “You’ve had a big day. And you have school tomorrow.”

Charlie sighed dramatically but slid off his chair. He paused, looking hopefully at Alfie. “Would you come up and say goodnight?”

Alfie glanced at Marion and caught the moment of hesitation in her eyes before she nodded her consent.

“I’ll be right up,” Alfie promised as Charlie trudged from the room.

Together, Marion and Alfie cleared the table in companionable silence. Their hands brushed as they loaded the dishwasher, each touch sending a spark through him. The air between them felt charged with all the things they’d left unsaid, questions far more complex than Charlie’s innocent list.

“I’m ready!” Charlie called down the stairs.

“Shall I?” Alfie asked, wanting to make sure she was completely okay with it.

“Of course,” she replied, although there was a hesitant edge to her voice.

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He climbed the stairs, each step filling him with a bittersweet ache. How he wished this was his home, that Charlie and Marion were already his family. His bear rumbled in agreement, impatient for what they both knew was inevitable.

“Thanks for answering all my questions,” Charlie said sleepily as Alfie went into his room and sat on the edge of the bed.

“Anytime,” Alfie replied, meaning it completely. “That’s what I’m here for.”

Charlie’s eyes were fighting to stay open. “Will you come back tomorrow?”

“That’s up to your aunt,” Alfie answered.

“She likes you,” Charlie mumbled, his voice thick with approaching sleep. “I can tell.”

Alfie smiled, gently tucking the comforter around Charlie’s shoulders. “I like her, too. And you.”

“Good,” Charlie sighed, his eyes finally closing. “We like you back.”

Alfie sat there for a moment longer, watching as Charlie’s breathing evened out into sleep. Then he quietly stood and made his way back downstairs, each step taking him closer to Marion.

He found her in the kitchen, pouring more wine into their glasses. She looked up as he entered, a question in her eyes.

“He’s already asleep,” Alfie said softly.

Marion nodded, handing him a glass. “Would you like to sit outside for a bit?”

They stepped onto the back porch, where the first stars were beginning to appear in the darkening sky. The scent of night-blooming jasmine hung heavy in the air, intoxicating and sweet. Alfie breathed it in as he took a seat next to Marion.

“How are you liking Bear Creek?” Alfie asked, his voice low to match the intimacy of the moment.

“A lot,” Marion replied, her profile illuminated by the soft glow from the kitchen windows. “More than I expected to, actually. It already feels like home.”

“It’s a great place to raise a child,” Alfie said, wishing he could raise a child or two with Marion.

Suddenly, a streak of light blazed across the sky—a shooting star, brilliant and fleeting.

“Make a wish,” Alfie whispered, turning to find Marion already looking at him.

Time seemed to slow as their eyes held. Marion set her glass down on the small table between them, and Alfie did the same. Neither spoke as they leaned toward each other, drawn by a force as ancient and inevitable as the stars above them.

Their lips met, tentative at first, then deepened as Marion’s hand came up to rest against his chest. Alfie cupped her face gently, pouring everything he couldn’t yet say into the kiss. His need for her, his promise to protect her and Charlie, his certainty that they belonged together.

When they finally pulled apart, both slightly breathless, Marion's eyes were shining in the starlight.

"I've wanted to do that since the moment I saw you," Alfie admitted, his thumb gently stroking her cheek.

"Me, too," Marion whispered back, her voice carrying a note of wonder. "I just didn't want to admit it to myself."

Alfie smiled, leaning his forehead against hers. "Well, I'm glad we got that off our chests," he murmured.

"You mean you're glad we finally rooted out the truth?" she asked and then giggled.

It wasn't quite the effect his kiss would have on her.

But at least it means we are growing on her, his bear said.

Not you as well! Alfie said. It seemed everyone was stealing his puns. But only one woman would ever steal his heart.

Chapter Fourteen – Marion

Marion's lips still tingled from where Alfie had kissed her last night. Or maybe she had kissed him. It had all happened so suddenly, so unexpectedly, she could not be sure who kissed who. But what a kiss it was. Their first kiss, one of many she hoped, under a shooting star no less.

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“You look different,” Charlie’s voice from the table where he sat eating his breakfast made her jump. She had been lost in thoughts of Alfie, and how it would feel to be in his arms...

“Do I?” Marion smoothed her hair down as color flushed her cheeks.

“Yes,” Charlie said, tilting his head to one side and studying her for a long moment.

“It’s all this fresh mountain air,” she said as she finished her coffee. “Now, you need to get a wriggle on if we’re not going to be late for school.”

Charlie shoveled the last of his cereals into his mouth and then slid off his chair. “See, I have my wriggle on,” he said as he wriggled his whole body like a wriggly worm as he ran out of the room.

Marion chuckled. She wasn’t the only one who looked different and acted differently. Since meeting Alfie and discovering his love of nature, Charlie had undergone a kind of metamorphosis. He was no longer a shy, withdrawn child; instead, he was bold and animated.

She cleared the breakfast things from the table as she waited for Charlie to come back downstairs. As Alfie left last night after that kiss... Marion took a moment to relive it once more. Alfie had asked her to meet him at the garden center after she’d dropped Charlie off at school. She’d agreed, even though she really needed to start focusing on how she was going to earn an income.

It had been a rash move to leave their old lives behind, and her old job, and move to

Bear Creek, but Marion knew without a doubt that they had both needed a completely fresh start. And she was right. But now she needed to make sure their move here was secure.

She glanced at the scented soaps she had made. Could she turn them into a business? Alfie had certainly liked them, but then after that kiss, there was a chance Alfie was biased.

Marion was still dreaming of Alfie's lips on hers when Charlie ran back into the kitchen. She'd never seen him so eager to go to school as he grabbed his bag and shoved his feet in his shoes.

Then, like a whirlwind, they were heading out of the door, into the car, and driving to school. As Marion drove across town, she glanced in the rearview mirror and smiled to herself. Charlie was humming a tune while he looked out of the window. There was no sign of the game he used to play for hours on end. She'd always known it was a coping mechanism and had expected a battle to wean him off it. But she hadn't seen him playing on it for days now. Instead, he often had his head buried in books on insects he'd borrowed from the school library.

"Bye," Charlie called as he unbuckled his seatbelt and raced to meet his friends.

"Bye, have a good day," Marion replied, even though Charlie was already chatting away to his new friends, using his hands as gestures. Tears pricked her eyes to see him so happy.

Then she thought of her own happiness, and Alfie was at the center of that, which was scary. She'd gotten used to not relying on anyone, especially for her happiness.

As she pulled away from the school, her phone chimed with a text message. She waited until she was safely parked before checking it.

Looking forward to seeing you, Alfie had written, followed by a plant emoji that made her smile despite herself.

Marion's fingers hovered over the screen. What should she say? That she couldn't stop thinking about him? That she was terrified by how quickly he'd become important to her? That last night's kiss had awakened something she'd thought long dead?

In the end, she simply wrote: Me, too. See you soon.

Should she add a kiss? Or an emoji?

This was hard! She added a smiley face emoji. It seemed safe enough. No mistaken meaning.

Then she put her phone on the passenger seat and started the car again, heading toward the garden center. The morning sunlight filtered through the trees lining Bear Creek's main street, casting dappled patterns across her windshield. Everything looked more vibrant somehow, the colors sharper, the air clearer, the world more alive.

It was as if that kiss had awakened not just her heart, but her senses, too.

Marion parked in front of the garden center, checking her reflection in the rearview mirror. She looked the same as always, same practical ponytail, same minimal makeup, same cautious eyes. Yet Charlie had noticed something different. Was it that obvious? Could everyone see the way Alfie had affected her?

Taking a deep breath, she stepped out of the car. After seeing Alfie, she needed to make some decisions. If she was going to build a life here in Bear Creek, she needed a plan, income, and stability.

Even if what her heart wanted most was the man waiting for her inside.

As she approached the entrance, Marion spotted Alfie standing by the door, his face lighting up the moment he saw her. It was as if he'd sensed her arrival somehow.

Her steps faltered, suddenly unsure how to greet him after last night's kiss. Should she offer her cheek? Her hand? Act casual?

But Alfie solved the dilemma by stepping forward with a warm smile that set her at ease. "I'm so glad you could make it," he said. "I was worried you might have second thoughts and leave me waiting."

The plant pun was so unexpected that Marion burst into giggles, her residual tension dissolving instantly. "That was terrible," she managed between laughs.

"But effective," he countered, his eyes twinkling. "You're laughing."

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And she was. Something about Alfie made her feel lighter, younger somehow. As if the careful walls she'd built around herself over the years simply melted away in his presence.

"Coffee?" he asked, gesturing toward the café.

"Yes, please," she replied, falling into step beside him as they entered the garden center.

The café was quiet this early in the morning, with only a few tables occupied. Near the counter, Welland was deep in conversation with an older woman whose silver hair was pulled back in a practical bun. She had kind eyes that crinkled with laughter at something Welland said.

"Marion," Alfie said, guiding her toward them with a hand at the small of her back that sent a shiver down her spine, "I'd like you to meet Daisy. She's been here at the garden center longer than I have, and knows more about plants than anyone in Bear Creek."

"Oh, stop it," Daisy waved him off, but her eyes sparkled with pleasure at the compliment. She extended her hand to Marion. "It's lovely to finally meet you. I've heard so much about you."

Marion shook her hand, feeling an immediate warmth from the woman. "All good things, I hope?"

"The best," Daisy assured her with a knowing look that made Marion's cheeks heat.

Welland winked at Marion. “The usual for you both?”

“Please,” Alfie nodded, then led Marion to a table by the window, the same one where they’d sat with Charlie just days ago.

As they settled into their seats, Marion glanced around, struck by how familiar it all felt already. The sunlight streaming through the windows, the scent of coffee and fresh-baked muffins, Alfie sitting across from her with that easy smile. It seemed impossible that she’d known him for such a short time. He felt like a fixture in her life, as if he’d always been there. And always would be.

“How’s Charlie this morning?” Alfie asked, leaning forward slightly.

“Full of the joys of nature,” Marion replied with a smile. “He was wriggling like a worm at breakfast. I’ve never seen him so...happy.”

“That’s wonderful,” Alfie said, but there was something in his tone, a slight hesitation that made Marion’s stomach tighten.

“Enjoy.” Welland arrived with their coffees, setting them down with a flourish before returning to his conversation with Daisy.

“Thank you.” Marion watched as Alfie took a sip of his coffee, his eyes drifting to the window where a hummingbird hovered near the feeder outside. The silence stretched between them, not uncomfortable but weighted with something unspoken.

“Is everything all right?” she finally asked, unable to bear the suspense any longer.

Alfie turned back to her, his expression clearing. “I have an idea.”

“About the garden project?” Marion asked, feeling a small measure of relief. This

was safe territory, something practical she could focus on rather than the way her heart raced whenever he looked at her.

“No,” he shook his head. “I was thinking about your soaps.”

Marion’s eyes widened in surprise. “You were?”

“I spoke to Daisy about it earlier, and she agrees.” Alfie nodded, his eyes serious now, focused entirely on her.

Marion swallowed hard, her grip tightening on her coffee cup. The idea of Alfie discussing her with others made her uncomfortable at first, but then she realized how silly that was. This was Bear Creek, not the city. People talked to each other in small towns. They helped each other. And she’d be a fool not to accept help.

“Go on,” she said, her voice steadier than she felt.

“I’m always looking at expanding the garden center, you know, new ideas...” Alfie began, leaning forward with growing enthusiasm. “And I thought your soaps would complement the flowers and plants we sell here.”

Marion cupped her coffee mug, feeling the heat warm her palms as she considered his words. It was exactly the opportunity she needed, a chance to build something real here, to secure their future. Yet she hesitated.

“I don’t know,” she said finally.

“Oh.” Alfie’s face fell, disappointment evident in the slump of his shoulders.

“I mean, it’s a wonderful idea and a wonderful opportunity,” Marion hastened to add, “but I don’t want you to see me as a charity case.”

Alfie shook his head emphatically. “I don’t.”

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“And I don’t want you to do this for other reasons,” she continued, feeling heat rise to her cheeks as she alluded to what had grown between them.

Alfie’s brows drew together in confusion. “Other reasons?” Then understanding dawned in his eyes. “Oh no, it’s not like that. That’s why I ran the idea past Daisy,” he blurted. “She is levelheaded and would have shot me down if she thought I was doing it for other reasons.”

Marion let out a long breath, considering his words. Could she take this risk? If it didn’t work out, she would struggle financially...and worse...she might lose Alfie. But if it did work out...

“We could draw up a business plan,” Alfie suggested, his tone shifting to something more professional. “Figure out pricing, placement, and marketing strategy. I think your soaps would be especially popular with our regular customers who come for plants, especially herbs, with therapeutic properties.”

Marion nodded slowly, her mind racing with ideas. “I could experiment with different essential oil blends. Lavender and chamomile for relaxation, eucalyptus and mint for clarity...”

“Exactly!” Alfie’s eyes lit up. “We could create displays that pair your soaps with the corresponding plants. Customers could see the lavender growing, then purchase your soap made with its essence.”

The idea was brilliant in its simplicity. It would connect her creations directly to the natural world, to the very plants that inspired them. Charlie would love the idea! And

so did she.

“I’d need to figure out how to increase production,” Marion mused, already mentally calculating the supplies she’d need. “And develop consistent packaging.”

“We have plenty of space you could use,” Alfie went on. “And Daisy mentioned she has a friend who designs beautiful labels.”

Marion looked across the café to where Daisy was leaning on the counter talking to Welland. She smiled. It seemed as if they also shared a connection.

“So, what do you think?” Alfie asked.

“I think,” Marion said slowly, turning back to Alfie, “that I’d like to see that business plan.”

Alfie’s face lit up with a smile so bright it rivaled the morning sun streaming through the window. “Really? That’s fantastic! I can draft something over the next couple of days, and we can go over it together.”

His enthusiasm was contagious, and Marion found herself smiling back. “I should warn you, I have very little business experience. My background is in administrative work.”

“That’s perfect,” Alfie assured her. “You already understand organization and systems. The creative part—the soap making—you’ve clearly mastered. The rest we can figure out together.”

Together. The word hung between them, full of promise.

“And if it doesn’t work out?” Marion asked, needing to voice her deepest fear.

Alfie grew serious. “Then we try something else. But it will work, Marion. I believe in you and your products.”

The sincerity in his voice made her throat tighten with emotion. When was the last time someone had believed in her like that?

“You really think people would buy them?” she asked, allowing herself to believe it might be possible.

“I know they would,” Alfie replied with such certainty that Marion couldn’t help but trust him. “Your creations are special, Marion. Just like you.”

His hand reached across the table, covering hers with gentle warmth. The contact sent that now-familiar spark through her, a reminder of last night’s kiss under the stars.

“It sounds perfect,” she admitted. “Almost too perfect.”

“And that’s a problem?” Alfie prompted gently, his eyes searching hers.

“I need some time to think about it,” she said finally. “It’s a big decision.” What was she doing? Why didn’t she trust in Alfie, and believe in herself?

Alfie’s face fell slightly, though he quickly masked his disappointment with a nod. “Of course. Take all the time you need. No pressure.”

“Thank you for understanding,” Marion said, feeling guilty at the shadows that had crept into his eyes. “Would you excuse me for a moment?”

In the small bathroom, Marion gripped the edge of the sink and stared at her reflection. Her eyes looked tired, wary. The eyes of someone who had learned to expect the worst.

“Why are you doing this?” she whispered to herself. “Alfie is not Razor.”

The memory of the man who had ruined her sister’s life flashed into her mind. Razor, with his charming smile that never reached his eyes and his grand promises he had never fulfilled. And the way he’d manipulated Heather until she couldn’t recognize herself anymore.

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Marion had watched her once-vibrant sister transform into a hollow-eyed stranger who defended Razor even as he destroyed their lives. Heather had believed in him, trusted him, and Marion had trusted her sister's judgment. Until it was too late and Heather had lost everything. Including her son.

"Alfie is different," she told her reflection firmly. "He's kind. Genuine."

The kiss they'd shared last night had been real. The connection between them was real. She was being paranoid, letting old fears poison something beautiful before it had a chance to grow.

Taking a deep breath, Marion smoothed her hair and squared her shoulders. She would accept Alfie's offer. They would build something together, both the soap business and whatever was blossoming between them.

She pushed open the bathroom door, a smile already forming on her lips, then froze.

Alfie stood near their table, holding hands with another woman. They were laughing together, looking relaxed and...intimate. As Marion watched, the woman leaned forward and pressed a lingering kiss to Alfie's cheek. His face lit up with a wide, delighted grin that made Marion's stomach clench.

Before either could notice her, Marion ducked back into the bathroom, her heart thudding painfully against her ribs. She leaned against the door and squeezed her eyes shut.

How could she have been so stupid? So naïve? Of course, someone like

Alfie—handsome, funny, and kind—would already have someone in his life. The kiss they'd shared clearly hadn't meant to him what it had to her.

Humiliation burned through her, followed quickly by anger—at herself more than Alfie. She'd let her guard down and started to believe in fairy tales again.

“Fool me once,” she whispered bitterly, thinking of how Heather had insisted Razor was different, special, misunderstood.

Marion splashed cold water on her face, willing her hands to stop shaking. She needed to leave—now—before she had to face Alfie and pretend she hadn't seen anything. She couldn't bear to hear his explanations or, worse, his pity.

Pulling out her phone, she texted him quickly: Something came up with Charlie. Have to go. Talk later.

It wasn't her proudest moment, using Charlie as an excuse, but she needed to escape. Time to think, to rebuild her walls before facing Alfie again.

She waited until she heard the distinctive chime of his phone receiving her message, then slipped out of the bathroom and headed straight for the side exit, keeping her head down. The bright morning that had seemed so full of promise now felt harsh and mocking as she hurried to her car.

As she drove away, tears blurred her vision. One kiss under the stars, and she'd forgotten everything life had taught her about trust and caution. She wouldn't make that mistake again.

Marion drove through Bear Creek's winding streets, trying to organize her thoughts. Charlie would be in school for hours yet—she had time to pull herself together before he saw her. The last thing he needed was to see her upset, to have his own fragile

happiness threatened.

As she pulled up on the drive, her phone buzzed with a text from Alfie: Is Charlie okay? Can I help?

But Alfie's concern for Charlie made everything worse somehow.

Another text followed quickly: About the business proposal. No pressure. Just know the offer stands regardless.

What could she say? That she'd been ready to say yes until she'd seen him with another woman? That she'd foolishly believed their connection was unique and special?

That she'd started to fall in love with him?

The realization hit her with stunning clarity. She wasn't just attracted to Alfie, wasn't just grateful for his kindness to Charlie. She was falling in love with him.

And now she had to stop before it was too late. But deep down, she knew it already was too late.

Alfie Thornberg owned her heart.

Chapter Fifteen – Alfie

Alfie checked his phone for what must be the thousandth time that day. Nothing. Which left him more than a little confused.

Everything had been going great when Marion visited the garden center yesterday. His mate had been excited about the prospect of opening her own business making

and selling handmade soaps, and then she had left.

Just like that.

She'd blamed it on Charlie needing her, but Alfie sensed that was just an excuse. But why?

You must have said something, his bear accused.

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You tell me since you heard the whole conversation, Alfie replied.

His bear grumbled to himself as he paced back and forth in the back of Alfie's mind.

But whatever the reason, Marion had not replied to his texts with more than one-word answers, which made it plain she was putting up a barrier between them. But why?

Daisy came into the greenhouse, where he'd hidden himself away, not wanting to speak to people as he dissected his last interaction with Marion.

"Why don't you go over there and talk to her?" Daisy asked.

Alfie slipped his phone back into his pocket and sighed. "Because I don't think she wants me to."

Daisy came to stand next to him. "Are you sure you aren't reading more into this than you should?"

Alfie shook his head. "No, something has changed. Something happened."

Maybe something really did happen with Charlie, his bear suggested, and they need time alone.

Alfie pressed his lips together. You might have a point.

Which means Daisy has a point, too, his bear said with a little more hope. Maybe we are reading too much into this.

Alfie placed his hands on the shelf where row upon row of seedlings sat doing their thing. Plants were so much easier to understand than people. Give them the right soil, enough water, and sunlight, and they grow.

But people...

Perhaps if he knew why they had moved to Bear Creek for a fresh start. It would be so much easier to understand Marion's actions if they knew the truth about what happened to make Charlie so withdrawn, and Marion so untrusting.

"Alfie," Daisy rested a hand on his shoulder, "there's no point brooding here. Go for a run, or something. Let off some steam."

A run!his bear said.That might help.

Alfie looked around. The garden center was quiet; there was only another hour to go until they closed. "Are you sure?" he asked Daisy. "I seem to have been leaving you in charge a lot lately."

Daisy nodded. "We're a team. We help each other out. Like you helped me out when I had that...scare."

Alfie placed his hand over hers, recalling those awful weeks when Daisy had found a lump in her breast. He'd told her to take all the time she needed.

Instead, Daisy had buried herself in work, getting in early, and staying late, until she eventually simply stopped. It was as if she'd simply hit a wall. Alfie had found her curled up on the floor of the greenhouse, unable to move.

He'd sat with her, held her, cried with her. Then he'd taken her home and stayed with her. The next day he'd organized a schedule, so she was never alone unless she

wanted to be.

Then when she got the all-clear, he'd celebrated with her. And planted a buddleia bush with her. The same one that attracted the butterflies at the center of the garden center.

"You're right," Alfie said, squeezing Daisy's hand before letting go. "A run is exactly what I need."

Daisy nodded approvingly. "Go on, then. Clear your head. The garden center will still be here tomorrow."

Alfie hoped the same could be said of his mate.

She won't leave town without telling us, his bear insisted.

I hope you're right. Alfie grabbed his keys from the office and headed out to his truck. He started the engine and pulled out of the parking lot, deliberately turning away from the direction of Marion's rental house.

Even so, as he drove through Bear Creek's main street, he could sense her, feel that invisible thread between them tugging at him, telling him exactly where she was. Both she and Charlie were at home.

He could feel their presence like a beacon, which made his bear stir restlessly.

Just a quick visit, his bear suggested. Just to make sure they are okay.

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No, Alfie said firmly, gripping the steering wheel tighter. If she wanted to see us, she would have responded to our messages.

So Alfie headed for the mountains, following the winding road that led deeper into the wilderness. The higher he climbed, the more the tension in his shoulders began to ease. This was what he needed—wide open spaces had always helped him gain some perspective when things got hard.

He pulled off at a familiar overlook, parking his truck in the empty gravel lot. The view stretched out before him. Bear Creek was nestled in the valley below, surrounded by endless forest and rugged peaks. Somewhere in that tiny collection of buildings was Marion, the woman his soul had recognized instantly as his mate. The woman who was now pulling away for reasons he couldn't understand.

Alfie stepped out of the truck and stretched his muscles, which were tight from hours of work and worry. But it was time to let go of his fears. It was time to let his bear run free.

As Alfie let go of the world, the air around him popped and crackled with energy as his human form disappeared, replaced in an instant by his bear.

His bear huffed with satisfaction, shaking out his thick fur. This was what they needed. No more overthinking, just movement, and instinct.

He set off at a loping run through the forest, his enormous paws silent on the pine-needle floor. On and on he ran for miles, through dense forest and open meadows, along ridgelines, and across valleys. The physical exertion burned away his

frustration, leaving only the essential question: what did Marion need from him right now?

But no answer came.

What he needed was advice. From someone who had experience of troubled pasts.

Dougray, his bear said as he headed toward his cousin's place.

Ten minutes later, they headed down the trail that led to the cabin Dougray shared with his mate, Tammy, and their adopted son, Finlay. Their home was an extension of Tammy's Uncle Gavin's cabin.

It'll give us ideas of how we can extend our home, his bear said, still confident that one day—and one day soon—Marion and Charlie would come live with them.

Alfie wished he could share his bear's belief that everything would work out all right.

It will, his bear replied.

Alfie shifted back into his human form and almost immediately, the cabin door opened, and Dougray appeared. "Alfie! What brings you up this way?"

"Just needed to clear my head," Alfie replied as he approached the porch.

His cousin tugged his brows together. "Problems?"

Alfie nodded. "Do you have time to talk?"

"Always," his cousin replied. "Come in. I'll grab us a beer."

Inside, the cabin was warm and inviting, with all the trappings of a family home.

You mean it has a woman's touch, his bear said.

Yeah. Alfie ran his hand over the patchwork quilt draped over the back of a chair while his eyes rested on the jumble of shoes by the door.

Dougray grabbed two beers from the refrigerator and handed one to Alfie. "So, you found your mate?"

"You heard?" Alfie said.

"Are you surprised?" Dougray clinked his bottle against Alfie's. "Congratulations."

"Thanks." Alfie grinned despite himself. "You heard it was one of Finn's mix-ups?"

"Oh yeah," Dougray chuckled, but then he grew serious. "But you are not here to talk about Finn."

"No, I am not," Alfie said, and then took a long drink.

"So, tell me why you are here," Dougray said as he led the way to the living room.

"Well, I met my mate," Alfie began. "Her name is Marion. She's raising her nephew, Charlie."

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“And?” his cousin prompted, settling into an armchair.

“And something’s wrong,” Alfie said, sinking onto the couch. “Everything was going great—we even kissed—and then suddenly she’s pulling away. Barely responding to my texts.”

His cousin nodded thoughtfully. “And you don’t know why.”

“No, all I know is something bad happened before they came to Bear Creek.” Alfie took another drink. “And I need to know how to help them.”

“Ah, I see why you came to me,” Dougray said.

“Yeah, I thought you might have some wisdom to share,” Alfie replied. “Charlie...something traumatic happened in his past. The day I met him I could see it in his eyes. There was this haunted look... And then there’s the way Marion watches him like she’s afraid something bad is going to happen.”

His cousin’s expression grew serious. “It sounds like Finlay when he first came to us.”

Alfie nodded. Finlay had been older than Charlie when his cousin and Tammy first found him. He was an orphan on the run after he shifted for the first time...with no clue that shifters existed. Injured and alone, he’d been withdrawn at first. But slowly, Dougray and Tammy had helped him overcome his trauma.

“How did you handle it?” Alfie asked. “The withdrawal, the mistrust?”

His cousin leaned forward, elbows on his knees. “Time,” he said simply. “And patience. So much patience. And understanding that none of it was personal.”

“Not personal?” Alfie echoed.

“That was the hardest part,” his cousin admitted. “When Finlay would push us away, or have a meltdown, or accuse us of not really wanting him, it felt personal. But it wasn’t about us at all. It was about what happened before us.”

Alfie thought about Marion’s sudden withdrawal. Was it possible that something had triggered old fears, old wounds?

“The thing about trauma,” his cousin continued, “is that healing isn’t linear. There are good days and bad days. Progress and setbacks.”

“Charlie was doing so well,” Alfie said quietly. “Opening up, getting excited about plants and bugs.”

“That’s great,” his cousin smiled. “But it doesn’t mean there won’t be steps backward. And Marion, she’s probably carrying her own trauma, too, plus the responsibility of helping Charlie through his.”

Alfie nodded slowly, understanding dawning. “So what do I do?”

“Be there,” his cousin said simply. “Not pushing, not demanding, just...present. Let them know you’re not going anywhere, but give them the space they need when they need it.”

“That’s the hard part,” Alfie admitted. “She’s my mate. I want...need to protect them.”

His cousin nodded. “Yeah, I get it. But sometimes the most protective thing you can do is step back.”

Alfie nodded, those words resonating deeply. “I need to let Marion set the pace.”

“Exactly,” Dougray said.

“I can do that,” Alfie said.

“You can,” Dougray agreed. “Because once you come through this, when you get to the other side, you will be stronger. Together.”

“Thanks for the advice, Dougray,” Alfie said, leaning back on the sofa.

“Anytime.” Dougray grinned. “So... Finn...”

Alfie chuckled and shook his head. “Don’t ask me how he did it!”

But boy, was he glad his brother had. Even if the road to happiness was a whole lot bumpier than he’d ever imagined.

Chapter Sixteen – Marion

Urgh! Marion untangled her legs from her sheets and turned to look at the time. 5:47 a.m.

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Urgh! She'd spent the night replaying Thursday's disaster at the garden center over and over in her head.

Alfie with another woman.

She covered her eyes with her arm. How was she supposed to face him today at the garden project? What was she supposed to say? How would she explain her leaving like that?

But what choice did she have? She couldn't disappoint Charlie.

Not when this was a problem of her own making. If only she'd had the courage to confront Alfie on Thursday. Instead, she'd run out on him and the situation had festered like an untreated wound.

Urgh! She dragged herself from bed and padded to the window. Dawn was just breaking over Bear Creek, the mountains silhouetted against a sky tinged with pink and gold. It would be a beautiful day for gardening. A perfect day for building the bug corner Charlie had been talking about non-stop since Wednesday.

"We're going to make a special section just for the beetles," he'd told her enthusiastically, over dinner last night. "Alfie says they need hiding places made of bark and hollow stems."

Marion pressed her forehead against the cool glass. There was no way she could tell Charlie they weren't going. That she'd seen Alfie with another woman and fled the garden center like a coward instead of confronting him. That she'd used

Charlie himself as an excuse in her hasty text message and now didn't know how to deal with the situation.

She was supposed to be the adult here.

No, she couldn't disappoint him. Not when he was finally coming out of his shell, finally acting like a normal nine-year-old boy instead of the frightened, withdrawn child who'd arrived in Bear Creek.

She would go. She would smile. She would pretend everything was fine—just as she had done for years around Heather and Razor. She was an expert at hiding her feelings, at swallowing her own needs to protect those she loved.

Marion went to the bathroom, splashing cold water on her face. The woman in the mirror looked tired, with shadows like bruises beneath her eyes. But she'd covered worse with makeup before, back when she needed to hide the evidence of sleepless nights spent worrying about Charlie.

Downstairs in the kitchen, she put the coffee pot on, measuring out extra scoops. She'd need industrial-strength caffeine to get through today. The thought of facing Alfie made her stomach clench painfully. What would she say? How could she act normal when just days ago they'd shared that magical kiss under the stars when she'd foolishly believed they might have a future together?

The sound of Charlie's feet thumping on the floor above her head broke through her spiraling thoughts. She heard him dragging on his clothes, probably the gardening outfit he'd laid out last night with such care—his work jeans as he now called them, and the t-shirt with beetles printed on it they'd found at the thrift store.

Marion took a deep breath, squaring her shoulders. She'd do anything for Charlie, go through anything for him. Even this.

“Is breakfast ready?” Charlie asked as he thundered down the stairs and skidded into the kitchen with his hair sticking up in wild tufts.

“Cereal or pancakes?” Marion asked, smothering a smile at his enthusiasm despite her own inner turmoil.

Charlie scrunched up his face thoughtfully. “Which is faster?”

Marion shook her head with a smile. “Cereal.”

“Cereal it is!” Charlie declared, though he had never before turned down pancakes for breakfast.

“Grab a bowl,” Marion instructed, reaching for the cereal box and placing it on the table.

While Charlie got a bowl and spoon, Marion poured herself another cup of coffee, breathing in the rich aroma. The caffeine was already helping clear her head, but her stomach still roiled with anxiety.

“What are you having for breakfast?” Charlie asked as he poured cereal into his bowl. At least most of it made it in.

Marion’s stomach churned at the thought of food. “I had some toast,” she lied, the words bitter on her tongue. Her second lie in nearly as many days.

She should never have used Charlie as an excuse to leave the garden center. No, when she saw Alfie today, she’d come clean and tell him the truth. And then turn down his generous business offer. She glanced at her laptop on the counter. She’d scoured the local online bulletin boards last night and come up with nothing, but first thing Monday she would hit the streets and find a job. Any job.

“Are you excited about today?” Charlie asked around a mouthful of cereal, milk dribbling down his chin.

Marion handed him a napkin. “Don’t talk with your mouthful, please. And yes, it should be fun.”

“I can’t wait to see Alfie,” Charlie continued, wiping his mouth. “Do you think he’ll bring his special magnifying glass again?”

Marion’s heart squeezed painfully. “I’m sure he will,” she managed, turning away to rinse her coffee cup so Charlie wouldn’t see her expression.

The garden project. Alfie. The woman in his arms. It all swirled together in her mind as she stared out the kitchen window at the bug hotel she’d built with Charlie.

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Everything had seemed so perfect, so promising. And now...

“Aunt Marion?” Charlie’s voice pulled her back to the present. “Are you okay?”

Marion turned, forcing a smile. “Of course, buddy. Just thinking about all the bugs we’re going to help today.”

Charlie’s eyes narrowed as he studied her before returning to his cereal with renewed enthusiasm.

Marion leaned against the counter, watching her nephew. For him, she would face Alfie. For him, she would put on a brave face and pretend her heart wasn’t breaking. And somehow, she would find the strength to rebuild the walls that Alfie Thornberg had so effortlessly dismantled.

Because that’s what she did. That’s what she had always done.

A half-hour later, they were heading out the door, Charlie practically bouncing with each step while Marion’s feet felt leaden. She locked up behind them, her keys jangling in trembling hands.

“Do you think we’ll finish the bug corner today?” Charlie asked, buckling himself into the backseat.

“Maybe,” Marion replied, trying to infuse her voice with an enthusiasm she didn’t feel. “But I think the bug corner will evolve.”

“Like dinosaurs evolved from reptiles?” Charlie asked.

Marion chuckled. “Something like that. What I mean is that I don’t know if the bug corner will ever be finished because there will always be things to add to it, and bits of it that need maintaining.”

“Cool,” Charlie replied, nodding as he looked out of the window. “I’d like to keep working on it and helping it evolve.”

When they pulled into the community garden parking area, Marion’s heart lurched painfully. Alfie’s truck was already there, parked beneath a sprawling oak tree. For one brief, treacherous moment, excitement fluttered in her chest at the thought of seeing him again. Then anxiety crashed over her like a wave, leaving her breathless.

“Come on!” Charlie called, already unbuckling and reaching for the door handle.

Marion took a steadying breath. “Wait a second. Remember, there are other cars.”

“Okay.” Charlie got out of the car and then waited for her to grab her tote bag and gardening gloves. “Ready?”

“As I’ll ever be,” she replied, hitching her bag higher on her shoulder.

They walked together toward their plot, Charlie skipping ahead while Marion’s steps grew heavier with each passing moment. When they reached their section, she scanned the area, relief and disappointment warring within her when she didn’t see Alfie anywhere.

Charlie looked up at her, his expression falling. “Where’s Alfie?”

Marion swallowed hard, hating how her nephew’s excitement dimmed. “I’m sure

he's just busy helping others," she said, forcing a smile. "There are a lot of gardeners here today."

Charlie nodded, but his shoulders slumped slightly. The sight confirmed her deepest fears. If she let Alfie further into their lives and things went wrong, Charlie would be the one hurt most. Just like with Razor. Just like with Heather.

"Let's check on our tomatoes while we wait," Marion suggested, desperate to distract him.

Charlie crouched beside the plants, his expression brightening. "Wow! They've grown so much!"

"They certainly have," Marion agreed, genuinely surprised by how much the plants had flourished in just one week.

Just like Charlie, she thought with a bittersweet smile.

As Charlie counted the tiny green tomatoes forming on the vines, Marion glanced around the garden again and froze. Across the way, near the new greenhouse, stood Alfie with the same woman from Thursday. They were laughing together, the woman's hand resting casually on Alfie's arm.

Nausea rose in Marion's throat. She wanted to grab Charlie's hand and flee, to protect them both from further heartbreak. The woman leaned in to say something to Alfie, and he nodded, his face lighting up with that warm smile that had once been directed at Marion.

Oh no! They were heading this way. Together.

Marion stood rooted to the spot, willing her face to remain neutral as anger and hurt

bubbled inside her. She knew it wasn't fair to blame Alfie. He'd never actually promised her anything. But that kiss! Had it meant nothing to him? Did he go around kissing all the women in Bear Creek?

"Alfie!" Charlie's shout cut through her spiraling thoughts. Before she could stop him, he was racing across their plot and launching himself at Alfie with complete trust and abandon.

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Alfie caught him easily, his strong arms lifting Charlie in a brief hug before setting him back down. The genuine affection on his face as he looked at Charlie made Marion's heart twist painfully. Perhaps Alfie truly cared for her nephew, even if his feelings for her had been exaggerated or misinterpreted.

"Hi there," Alfie said warily as they approached, his eyes searching Marion's face.

"Morning," Marion replied stiffly, proud of how steady her voice sounded despite the chaos inside her.

Charlie tugged on Alfie's sleeve. "Are we going to build the bug corner?"

"I've found the perfect spot for it," Alfie said, his smile returning as he looked down at Charlie. "It's by the old oak stump where there's already lots of natural shelter."

"Hello," Alfie's female companion said, extending her hand to Marion with a warm smile.

"Morning," Marion managed, wishing she could be anywhere else in the world.

The woman's eyes narrowed slightly as she studied Marion's face, and then something like understanding dawned on her expression. "I'm Elsbeth, Alfie's brother's ma...partner." She held up her left hand, where a sparkling diamond caught the morning light. "Fiancée. I'm still getting used to being engaged."

"Oh," Marion exhaled, the single syllable carrying all her confusion, relief, and sudden, delirious happiness. She felt stupid and giddy and lightheaded all at once.

“Alfie persuaded me to come and help start a cut flower plot,” Elsbeth continued, “Not that I needed much persuading, I love growing flowers. And this garden project is such a wonderful idea. Great for building community spirit.”

“That’s...wonderful,” Marion said, feeling a foolish grin spread across her face. “I mean, yes. Community spirit.”

“And it’s good to finally meet you. And Charlie.” Elsbeth beamed. “Alfie’s told us so much about you both.”

Marion glanced at Alfie, who was watching her with cautious hope in his eyes. “He has?”

“Don’t worry, all good things,” Elsbeth assured her with a knowing smile. “Well, I should head back to my patch. It was lovely meeting you, Marion. I hope we’ll see more of you at the vineyard. Bye, Charlie.”

“Bye,” Charlie said but was instantly distracted by a ladybird on the marigolds.

So, as Elsbeth walked away, Marion found herself alone with Alfie.

“I thought...” Marion began, then stopped, embarrassment washing over her.

“You thought what?” Alfie asked gently, taking a small step closer.

“Thursday, at the garden center,” Marion explained haltingly. “I saw you with Elsbeth, and you seemed so...close. I jumped to conclusions.”

Understanding dawned in Alfie’s eyes. “That’s why you left so suddenly. Why you’ve been distant.”

Marion nodded, unable to meet his gaze. “I feel like such an idiot.”

“You’re not an idiot,” Alfie said softly, reaching out to tilt her chin up, forcing her to meet his eyes. “You’re cautious. You’ve been hurt before.”

“How did you know?” Marion whispered.

“I recognize the signs,” Alfie replied, his thumb gently brushing her cheek. “My cousin’s son came to them after similar experiences. It takes time to learn to trust again.”

Marion swallowed hard, the kindness in his eyes almost too much to bear. “I should have asked you directly instead of running away.”

“And I should have made my feelings clearer,” Alfie countered, his hand dropping reluctantly from her face. “Marion, there’s no one else for me. There couldn’t be. Not since the moment I met you.”

The sincerity in his voice made her breath catch. “That sounds like something from a fairy tale.”

Alfie smiled, his eyes crinkling at the corners in that way that made her heart skip. “Bear Creek has a way of making fairy tales come true. If you’re willing to believe in them.”

“I’m trying,” Marion admitted. “It’s just...hard sometimes.”

“We have time,” Alfie assured her, glancing over to where Charlie was carefully examining a beetle crawling across a leaf. “All the time in the world.”

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Marion nodded as tears pricked her eyes. “Charlie’s been talking about this bug corner all week. We should probably help him get started.”

“Absolutely,” Alfie agreed, his smile widening. “But first...”

He leaned forward and pressed a soft kiss to her cheek. “No more running away,” he whispered against her skin. “Talk to me next time. Please.”

“I will,” Marion murmured.

As they walked toward Charlie, Alfie’s hand found hers, their fingers intertwining naturally. Marion felt like a fool.

But a fool in love, and somehow, that made all the difference.

Charlie looked up as they approached, his face lighting up at the sight of their joined hands. “Are we going to build the bug corner now?”

“We sure are,” Alfie replied, squeezing Marion’s hand gently. “And I brought something special for it.”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small wooden sign with “Charlie’s Bug Hotel” burned into the surface. “I thought every good hotel needs a sign.”

Charlie’s eyes widened as he took the gift, running his fingers over the carved letters. “You made this for me?”

“I did,” Alfie nodded. “Do you like it?”

Instead of answering, Charlie threw his arms around Alfie’s waist, hugging him tightly. Over the boy’s head, Alfie’s eyes met Marion’s, filled with such tenderness that she felt tears spring to her own.

This was what healing looked like, Marion realized. Not a straight line, but a series of steps forward and back, moments of trust and fear, courage and retreat. And somehow, incredibly, she had found someone willing to walk that winding path with her.

With them.

Chapter Seventeen – Alfie

Now it was all starting to make sense. Marion had seen him with Elsbeth and jumped to the wrong conclusion. Alfie could see Marion was embarrassed, so he decided to simply move on, not dwelling on the misunderstanding that had nearly derailed their blooming relationship.

Dougray was right, his bear said, satisfaction rumbling through their shared consciousness. We just needed to give our mate space.

Alfie snorted as he walked hand in hand with his mate. No, all we needed was dumb luck. If Elsbeth hadn’t come along today to help plant a cut flower garden, then Marion would never have found out the truth.

His bear chuckled. Dumb luck, or fate?

You do have a point, Alfie agreed. Had fate stepped in once more, just as it had when Finn sent the message to the wrong person? The message that brought Marion into his

life?

It gave him hope for the future. Hope that everything would turn out all right.

It will, his bear said with renewed confidence.

“So, where do we start?” Charlie asked as they reached the spot Alfie had earmarked as the perfect place for their bug corner.

Before Alfie could answer, Charlie sprinted forward and jumped on the stump.

“Whoa there, little explorer,” Alfie laughed, watching as Charlie balanced on the weathered oak stump. “That’s actually going to be part of our bug hotel. Old wood like this is already home to all sorts of critters.”

Marion squeezed his hand before letting go to set down her tote bag. “Charlie, careful with your jumping. We don’t want to disturb any bugs that might already be living there.”

Charlie immediately froze mid-bounce, his expression turning serious. “Are there bugs in there right now?” he whispered, crouching down to examine the stump’s rough surface.

“Most likely,” Alfie said, kneeling beside the stump. He ran his fingers along the grooved bark, feeling the texture beneath his fingertips. “See these tiny holes? Those could be beetle tunnels. And these cracks here make perfect hiding spots for all sorts of insects.”

Charlie’s eyes widened as he leaned in closer. “Can I use your magnifying glass to look?”

“No.” Alfie’s refusal caused Charlie to jerk his head around.

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“Why not?” Charlie asked as he straightened up.

“Because I got you your own special magnifying glass and a book to help you identify all the bugs and plants...” Alfie beckoned to Charlie. “It’s in my truck. Want to go and get it, and we can grab some of the logs we collected and bring them over?”

“My own magnifying glass?” Charlie asked.

“If that’s all right with your aunt?” Alfie asked, realizing he hadn’t asked Marion if it was okay.

“As long as I get a turn,” Marion said.

“Of course,” Charlie answered.

“Okay then.” Marion mouthed, thank you, at Alfie.

“Let’s go!” Charlie said with his usual enthusiasm as he caught hold of Alfie’s hand and propelled him toward the truck.

This is going to be the best bug corner ever, Alfie’s bear predicted.

When they reached the truck, Alfie lowered the tailgate and reached for a wrapped package tucked behind the driver’s seat. “This is for you,” he said, handing it to Charlie.

Charlie’s hands trembled slightly as he unwrapped the gift, revealing a professional-

grade magnifying glass with a sturdy handle and a field guide to insects and plants.

“Wow,” Charlie breathed, holding the magnifying glass up to examine it closely. “It’s perfect. Thank you, Alfie.”

“You’re welcome, buddy. Every serious naturalist needs proper equipment,” Alfie said.

“What’s a naturalist?” Charlie asked.

Alfie smiled, crouching down to Charlie’s level. “A naturalist is someone who studies plants, animals, and insects in their natural environment. They observe how everything in nature works together. How plants provide food and shelter for insects, and how insects help pollinate plants. Naturalists are like nature’s detectives, always curious, always watching and learning.”

Charlie’s eyes lit up. “That’s what I want to be! A naturalist!”

“I think you’re already on your way,” Alfie said, ruffling Charlie’s hair. “Now, let’s grab these logs for our bug corner.”

As Charlie eagerly began selecting pieces of wood from the truck bed, Marion stepped closer to Alfie. She reached for a log, her arm brushing against his.

“You know,” she whispered, her voice quiet enough that only Alfie could hear, “you’re a natural with Charlie. The way you explain things, how you encourage his curiosity...it’s exactly what he needs.”

Alfie turned toward her, their faces suddenly inches apart. He leaned in slightly, inexplicably drawn to her.

“Get a wriggle on, you two!” Charlie called out, already dragging a sizable log across the garden. “The bugs are waiting!”

They broke apart, both laughing at Charlie’s enthusiastic command.

“You heard the naturalist,” Marion said with a smile, grabbing an armload of smaller branches.

I want to have a whole brood of naturalists, Alfie’s bear said.

Now, that sounds like a plan, Alfie said as he loaded his arms with some of the larger logs. Side by side, they carried their bounty back to the oak stump where Charlie was already arranging his log with intense concentration.

For the next hour, they worked as a team, creating a complex structure of logs, branches, and hollow stems. Alfie showed Charlie how to stack the wood to create different-sized gaps and tunnels.

“The smaller spaces are for tiny insects,” he explained, “while these larger chambers might attract beetles or even solitary bees.”

Marion added handfuls of dried leaves and pine needles to some of the spaces. “Cozy bedding,” she said with a wink at Charlie. “You know bugs like to snuggle.”

“Do they?” Charlie asked.

“Hmm, maybe I am getting mixed up with boys.” Marion rubbed her chin in thought.

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“Alfie?” Charlie asked.

“Well, I guess you could call it snuggling,” Alfie said. “Because they like to hibernate in the leaves.”

I’d sure like to snuggle with our mate,his bear said, imagining lying out under the stars, with Marion resting against him.

Alfie could think of nothing better. But for now, he had work to do.

When they finished, they stood back to admire their creation. The bug corner looked like a miniature woodland village, with the weathered oak stump serving as its centerpiece.

“It’s perfect,” Charlie breathed, clutching his new magnifying glass.

“Let’s take a break,” Marion suggested, reaching for her tote bag. “I packed some snacks and drinks.”

They sat together on the ground, sharing apple slices, cheese, and cookies while sipping cold lemonade from a thermos. Charlie perched between them, occasionally jumping up to check if any bugs had discovered their new habitat.

Alfie’s bear was practically purring with contentment.This is how it should be,his bear said.The three of us together.

Perfect,Alfie agreed.

I wish Charlie knew about me,his bear added wistfully.He would love to know bears can be naturalists, too.

Soon,Alfie promised.Very soon.

Now that he and Marion had reached an understanding about their relationship, the next step would be telling her about their mating bond. He knew he couldn't keep his shifter nature secret much longer, not if they were going to build a life together.

“Alfie!” Charlie called, excitement threading through his voice. “I found a roly-poly bug already moving in!”

“That’s great!” Alfie called back. “They’re excellent decomposers. They help turn dead plants into soil.”

Marion leaned against his shoulder, her warmth seeping through his shirt. “Thank you for this,” she said quietly. “For all of it.”

“You are welcome,” he said, inhaling her scent. “But you don’t have to thank me. I get a kick out of doing this, too.”

Marion chuckled. “You and Charlie are like two peas in a pod.”

“He does make this all more fun,” Alfie said. “Seeing things through his eyes takes me back to my own childhood.”

“Well, look at this magnificent creation!” Elsbeth exclaimed, admiring the bug corner. “Charlie, you’ve built a five-star insect resort!”

Charlie beamed with pride. “We made different rooms for different bugs. And I already saw one moving in!”

“That’s wonderful,” Elsbeth said, coming to join them with a basket on her arm. “I brought some bulbs for you to plant nearby. Pollinators like bees and butterflies will love them, and they’ll visit your bug hotel, too.”

“Can I see?” Charlie stuck his head in the basket.

“Why don’t we take a look with your magnifying glass?” Alfie plucked a bulb from the basket.

“Okay.”

While Charlie examined the flowers with his magnifying glass, Elsbeth turned to Marion. “Alfie mentioned you make handcrafted soaps. I’d love to hear more about that.”

“It’s just a small hobby right now,” Marion said, her cheeks coloring slightly. “But I’m hoping to turn it into something more.”

“You absolutely should,” Elsbeth encouraged. “Would you like to visit my flower farm sometime? I grow all sorts of botanicals specifically suited to natural products.”

Marion’s eyes widened. “I’d love that.”

“Wonderful!” Elsbeth grinned as she watched Charlie and Alfie dig a hole for the bulbs. “Some of my flower petals and seeds would make perfect ingredients for your soaps. Calendula, lavender, chamomile—they all have wonderful properties for the skin.”

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“That sounds amazing,” Marion said, genuine excitement in her voice. “I’ve been experimenting with different natural ingredients, but having access to fresh, local flowers would be incredible.”

“It’s settled then,” Elsbeth said. “How about Tuesday? We could make a day of it after you drop Charlie off at school.”

As the women continued chatting, making plans, and sharing ideas, Alfie felt his bear sigh with deep satisfaction.

She’s going to fit right in, his bear thought. Like she was always meant to be here.

Alfie couldn’t agree more. Watching Marion laugh with Elsbeth, and seeing Charlie carefully planting bulbs around their bug hotel, it all felt as if all the pieces of his life had finally come together.

As if they finally made sense.

And what a perfect picture they made.

Chapter Eighteen – Marion

“You look happy,” Charlie announced as he carried his dinner plate to the sink and set it down.

Marion smiled down at him. “So do you.” She could not believe the difference in him. He was so much more open and relaxed. And she swore he’d grown a couple of

inches.

Charlie grinned mischievously, leaning against the counter with a knowing look that seemed too wise for his nine years. “Alfie looked happy, too.”

Marion felt her cheeks flush pink, the heat rising to her face unbidden as she thought back over the morning they’d all spent together making the bug corner. “He did. I think he likes bugs as much as you.”

Charlie looked up at her, his expression suddenly serious. “I don’t think it was just the bugs that made him happy.”

“You don’t?” she asked evasively.

Damn, this was hard. She was scared of moving too fast, too soon. Scared that if she pursued a relationship with Alfie, and it all went wrong, Charlie would end up getting hurt, too.

However, she also wanted Charlie to see what good relationships looked like. After witnessing the toxic dynamic between his mother and Razor, he deserved to know that love could be kind, respectful, and nurturing.

“I was thinking of maybe inviting him over for dinner again sometime soon,” Marion said, holding her breath as she waited for Charlie’s answer, though she already knew he would jump at the idea.

“When?” Charlie asked eagerly. “Tomorrow?”

Marion nodded, unable to contain her smile at his enthusiasm as she went back to washing the dishes. “Maybe tomorrow, if he’s not too busy.”

Charlie considered this for a moment, then shook his head confidently. “I don’t think he’ll be too busy.”

“Me neither,” Marion agreed, surprised by her own certainty. The way Alfie looked at her, made her believe he would rearrange mountains to spend time with them. “Okay, it’s time for you to have a bath and then bed.”

“Off I buzz!” Charlie spun around and ran from the kitchen, making the sound of a bee buzzing, his arms outstretched at his sides. The sight made Marion chuckle as she turned back to the sink and began washing the dishes, her head filled with images of Alfie.

The feel of his touch lingered in her memory. He had no idea of the effect he’d had on their lives, how he’d helped them both open up again after they’d closed themselves off to protect their wounded hearts.

She wished she had the courage to tell him, to open her heart to him completely. To tell him of her past and how much she wanted him to be a part of their future.

As she finished the dishes, the hair on the back of her neck prickled suddenly. Marion froze, her hands dripping soapy water onto the floor. She turned slowly, going to the window and looking out, afraid there might be someone watching. But she could not see anyone lurking out there.

She must be tired, Marion decided, drying her hands on a dish towel. It had been a long day after her sleepless night. Maybe she should have a soak in the bath and an early night.

Upstairs, she found Charlie already in the tub, creating a foamy landscape of bubbles. She knelt beside the bathtub, smiling as he fashioned a bubble hat and then a bubble beard.

“Look! I’m Santa Claus!” he proclaimed, his face barely visible beneath the mountain of bubbles.

“Very convincing,” Marion laughed, reaching for the shampoo. “Tilt your head back for me.”

As she washed Charlie’s hair and then checked all the dirt was gone from under his fingernails, Marion found herself grateful for these simple moments. She was happy to see him getting his hands dirty, playing outside like a normal child. It was good for children to play in the earth, to connect with nature.

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The thought transported her back to a year ago when Charlie had been dirty not from play but from neglect. Heather had gone away for a week with her girlfriends, leaving Razor in charge.

But when Marion called around on a spontaneous visit, she found Charlie shut in his room while Razor was preoccupied with some deal or other. When Heather returned, Marion had confronted her sister, but Heather had taken Razor's side and called her an interfering old spinster.

The words had stung, and for a few weeks afterward, Marion had withdrawn, doubting herself, wondering if she was overreacting. But then came the incident that changed everything.

"Aunt Marion?" Charlie's voice pulled her back to the present. "You're making your worried face again."

Marion smoothed her expression, reaching for a towel. "Sorry, buddy. Just thinking."

"About Alfie?" Charlie asked hopefully, standing up as she wrapped the towel around him.

"Among other things," she replied, helping him step carefully out of the tub.

"I think he's going to say yes to dinner," Charlie declared with the absolute certainty only a child could muster. "When you ask him, tell him I have more questions for him."

“Then I am sure he’ll say yes.” Marion smiled, helping him into his pajamas. “Now, teeth brushed and then story time.”

Later, with Charlie tucked into bed and the house quiet around her, Marion ran her bath, adding a generous pour of the lavender bath salts she’d made. As she sank into the warm water, she let her thoughts return to Alfie, with his smile that made her insides squirm in a good way. And she would forgive him for his terrible plant puns because of the way he treated Charlie.

Tomorrow, she would call him and invite him to dinner. The thought sent a flutter of anticipation through her chest. Perhaps it was time to be brave, to trust that what was growing between them could withstand the shadows of her past. After all, as Alfie had shown her in the garden, even the most delicate seedlings could become strong with proper care and attention.

Marion closed her eyes, letting the lavender-scented steam envelop her. For the first time in longer than she could remember, she allowed herself to imagine a bright, hopeful future—and at the center of that future, standing beside her and Charlie, was Alfie.

Alfie, the word was like a whisper on the wind, and she opened her eyes, as that same sensation she’d felt earlier prickled her neck.

Marion sat up straight in the bath, water sloshing around her as she strained to listen. Was there someone there? She held her breath, waiting, but heard nothing except the quiet dripping of the faucet and Charlie’s soft snores from down the hall.

“You’re being ridiculous,” she murmured to herself, sinking back into the water. The lavender scent enveloped her once more, but the peaceful feeling had evaporated. She couldn’t shake the sensation of being watched, though she knew it was impossible. The bathroom window was frosted glass, and they were alone in the house.

With a sigh, she pulled the plug, got out of the bath, and pulled on her fluffy robe. As the water gurgled down the drain, she wrapped her hair in a towel and then headed along the hall to her bedroom.

But the feeling that something was off intensified. Marion found herself drawn to the window and peered out into the darkness. There was no one there. At least no one she could see.

But what if there was someone out there lurking in the shadows?

Not wanting to face another sleepless night, Marion turned away from the window. She'd get dressed, grab a flashlight, and go out there and check it out.

What if it's a bear or a wolf?

The temptation to call Alfie and ask him to come over was almost too much.

But would he read more into it? Marion had never been a damsel in distress before.

And she didn't want to start being one now.

Marion turned away from the window and went to her closet. She had just slipped on a pair of comfortable slacks and a soft sweater when she heard it...a gentle knock at the front door. Marion froze, her heart hammering against her ribs. Who would be calling at this hour?

She crept down the stairs, one hand trailing along the wall for support. The knock came again, slightly louder this time. Despite her racing pulse, something deeper, more instinctive, told her there was no danger waiting on the other side.

Taking a deep breath, Marion unlocked the door and pulled it open.

Alfie stood on her porch, his hair slightly disheveled. “I’m sorry to be calling so late,” he said huskily. “I just... I needed to see you.”

Marion stepped back, making space for him to enter. “Come in.”

Alfie hesitated for a heartbeat, as if he’d been expecting to have to convince her to let him in. But then he stepped over the threshold and into her house.

In the narrow entryway, his presence seemed to fill the space completely. Marion could barely breathe as she closed the door behind him, acutely aware of his presence.

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“Charlie’s asleep?” Alfie asked, glancing toward the stairs. But it was more of a statement than a question.

Marion nodded. “Out like a light. All that gardening wore him out.”

She slipped past him, her arm brushing against his chest as she moved toward the kitchen. The brief contact sent electricity racing across her skin. She didn’t need to hear his footsteps to know he was following close behind her. So close all she had to do was reach out and...

She took a steadying breath, reminding herself she had no idea why he was here at this time of night. But her imagination sure could conjure up a few...

In the kitchen, Marion turned to face him, suddenly unsure what to do with her hands. “Do you want a drink?”

“No,” Alfie replied, his voice cracking slightly on the single syllable.

The way he looked at her made her breath catch. His eyes were so dark and intense, filled with unmistakable desire, and the air between them seemed to crackle with tension. With all the things they’d left unsaid.

Marion moved toward him slowly, drawn by an irresistible pull. When she reached him, she placed her hands lightly on his chest, feeling his heart thundering beneath her palms.

“Alfie,” she whispered, her voice barely audible.

He reached out and placed his hand on her waist. Heat spread through her body. Heat and desire for this man. Desire she saw mirrored in his eyes.

For a moment, they simply stood there, neither of them daring to move. Then Marion rose onto her tiptoes and pressed her lips to his.

The kiss started soft and tentative. Then Alfie groaned, his arms tightening around her as he deepened the kiss. Marion melted against him, her hands sliding up to tangle in his hair.

Heat bloomed between them as the kiss grew more urgent, years of loneliness and longing pouring out in each touch. Marion pressed herself against him, feeling the hard evidence of his desire. The knowledge that he wanted her as desperately as she wanted him was intoxicating.

Alfie's hands roamed her back, pulling her impossibly closer as his tongue entwined with hers. Marion felt dizzy with want, every nerve ending alive, her skin tingling under his touch.

Then suddenly, with what seemed like tremendous effort, Alfie broke the kiss and pulled back slightly. His breathing was ragged, his eyes dark pools of desire as he gazed down at her.

"There's something I need to tell you," he said, his voice strained.

Marion's stomach dropped, ice replacing the warmth that had suffused her moments before. This was it...the moment when everything would fall apart. Just like it always did.

Chapter Nineteen – Alfie

The taste of her lips lingered on his, sweet and intoxicating as wildflower honey, but Alfie knew he couldn't delay any longer. Tonight was the night Marion would learn the truth.

"There's something I need to tell you," he said, as his desire was replaced by anxiety.

Marion's eyes widened, and Alfie watched as the happiness in them was swiftly replaced by fear. A change so sudden it made his heart ache. Her body tensed beneath his hands, already preparing for disappointment.

Say something, his bear urged frantically. She thinks you're rejecting her.

"It's nothing bad," Alfie blurted out, his arms still wrapped around her waist. "At least, I hope you don't think it's bad."

Marion let out a long breath, her shoulders relaxing slightly. "Okay."

That single word, spoken with such cautious hope, told Alfie everything he needed to know about her past. Marion had been let down so often she had been expecting bad things to happen.

Alfie hoped with all his heart that what he was about to share with her would be a good thing. The beginning of something extraordinary.

He cupped her face in his hand, and she leaned into his touch, her eyes fluttering closed for a moment. The trust in that simple gesture nearly broke his resolve.

Now, his bear demanded.

I know. Alfie stroked her cheek with his thumb, then leaned forward and pressed his lips to hers once more...softly, reverently. A promise sealed with a kiss.

Then he took her hand and led her through the house to the back door.

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“Where are we going?” she asked, glancing toward the stairs where Charlie slept soundly.

“What I have to show you is best...outside,” he said in a hushed whisper. “For reasons that will come clear.”

She nodded and followed him out into the backyard, moonlight bathing everything in silver. Alfie could tell she was fighting an internal battle, but thankfully, the part that trusted him won.

“Alfie,” she began, and her voice trailed off, uncertainty creeping back in.

“It’s okay,” he assured her, hoping his words would prove true. “I just need you to trust me a little while longer.”

Marion nodded, her eyes never leaving his. “I do.”

And that meant more to him than she could possibly know. He raised her hand to his lips and kissed the back of it, inhaling her scent, then let it go and stepped away.

He turned to look at her, smiling reassuringly, before he took a deep breath and let go of the world. The air around him popped and cracked with static electricity, and then he was gone.

A split second later, his bear stood in his place, in front of their mate.

He waited for her reaction, his bear gripped with fear that she might reject him, but

also hope that she might understand. That she might accept all of him.

Marion stepped back in shock. With a sharp gasp, she covered her mouth with her hand. But the bear stood steadfast and true, watching her with Alfie's same gentle eyes.

It was as if she was frozen in place for what felt like an eternity. Then, slowly, she took a tentative step forward, and then another. She dropped her hand to her sides and reached out to him, fingers trembling in the moonlight.

Alfie's bear leaned forward, reaching for her, eager for the first touch of their mate. When her fingers finally made contact with his fur, a jolt of recognition passed between them. A connection as ancient as the mountains surrounding Bear Creek.

"This is better than bugs," Marion whispered as she threaded her fingers through his thick fur, a breathless laugh escaping her.

Alfie's bear nuzzled her hand, rumbling with pleasure at the contact, feeling the connection between fated mates solidify and strengthen. Marion stroked him, her touch growing more confident as she explored his face, his massive shoulders, and the powerful muscles beneath his fur.

"This is amazing," she whispered, wonder replacing fear in her eyes. "You're amazing."

Alfie's bear was ecstatic, preening under her admiration. It is amazing, he said, wishing he could tell her how long he'd waited for this moment.

Marion ran her hands through his fur, scratching behind his ears in a way that made his bear practically purr with contentment. She talked to him softly, asking questions he could not answer, marveling at the impossibility of what she was witnessing.

“I can see now,” Marion said finally, her hand resting on his massive head. “The bear and the man are one and the same, aren’t they?”

The bear nodded, his intelligent eyes holding hers.

“But what does it mean?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper. “For us?”

Alfie’s bear stepped away, looking at her for one last lingering moment before he let go of the world. The air crackled and popped once more as the bear disappeared and then Alfie returned in his human form, standing before her.

“It means,” he said hoarsely, reaching for her hands, “that I’ve been waiting my entire life for you.”

Was that too dramatic? Alfie asked his bear.

How can it be when it’s the truth? his bear answered.

But would Marion see it as the truth, know it as the truth...

“Your whole life?” Marion repeated, her voice barely audible in the moonlit garden.

Alfie nodded, his eyes never leaving hers. “Yes. You are my fated mate, Marion. The one person in the world meant for me.”

Her lips parted in surprise, and he watched as emotions flickered across her face, wonder, disbelief, and then something that looked painfully like sorrow.

“Then fate has played a cruel trick on you,” she whispered, her eyes misting with tears.

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“I don’t think so,” Alfie said, reaching to brush a tear from her cheek. “No, I know so,” he added more firmly.

“Alfie, you’re so sweet and kind and considerate, but...” she began, shaking her head.

“No buts,” Alfie said firmly. “Fate isn’t wrong. It brought us together for a reason.”

Marion gave a short laugh that sounded almost pained. “You’ve been wonderful for Charlie, and for me...”

“But you don’t think you’ve been wonderful for me?” He tilted his head, studying her expression. How could she think so little of herself?

“I have so much baggage,” Marion admitted, wrapping her arms around herself as if suddenly cold.

Alfie stepped closer, his hands settling on her shoulders. “I have strong arms to help you carry it,” he replied simply.

She laughed then—a real laugh this time—and wiped another tear from her cheek. The sound warmed him more than he could ever put into words.

He took her hand in his, feeling the connection between them pulse like a living thing. “Don’t you want this?”

Marion met his gaze and he could see the vulnerability there. “I’m not sure what ‘this’ is.”

“This is forever,” Alfie said without hesitation. “You and me, side by side, through thick and thin.”

Marion’s breath shuddered through her body. “You don’t know what you’re getting into.”

“Then tell me,” he urged.

Marion half-turned and looked up toward the window, where Charlie slept soundly. “My sister...Charlie’s mom has always had terrible taste in me. But she always tried to do her best by Charlie. But then she met this guy. He calls himself Razor. I mean, what kind of man chooses a name like that?” She sucked in a breath. “Heather was smitten with him. So smitten she couldn’t see the damage she was doing to her son.”

“Are you on the run?” Alfie asked the question that had nagged at him since he’d seen the haunted look in her eyes.

“No,” she blurted, turning to face him. “Heather and Razor are in prison awaiting trial. I was handed guardianship of Charlie by the courts.”

Alfie let out a long breath, feeling a weight lift from his shoulders. “And you’re doing an amazing job.”

She cocked her head at him. “Did you really think we were on the run?”

Alfie shrugged, feeling a little overdramatic. “It had crossed my mind.”

“And if we were?” she murmured, watching him closely.

“Then I would have protected you, or run with you,” Alfie admitted without hesitation.

“What about your life here?” she asked.

“Marion, from the moment I first sensed you, you and Charlie are my life,” he said, needing her to understand that simple truth.

Something shifted in her expression then, as if he’d finally broken through her barriers. She closed the distance between them and slid her hands up his chest, her touch igniting a fire that had been smoldering since they met.

Alfie lowered his head and captured her lips in a searing kiss. As the kiss deepened, she pressed her body against his, moving against his hardness in a way that made him groan with need. He slipped his hand beneath her sweater and discovered she wasn’t wearing a bra. As he caressed her smooth skin, his thumb grazed her nipple, feeling it stiffen in response.

“I want you,” she murmured breathlessly against his mouth. “Here.”

Alfie fought for control at her words, his body trembling with need. He wanted nothing more than to claim his mate, to worship every inch of her body, to make her his in every way.

In one fluid motion, he scooped her up in his arms and carried her into the kitchen. There he sat her on the edge of the table, his body nestled between her thighs as he lowered his head and captured her lips in a searing kiss that spoke of longing and promises made.

As the kiss deepened, she pressed her body against his, driving him insane.

Marion reached for the hem of his shirt, tugging it upward. He helped her pull it over his head, and it fell forgotten to the floor beside them.

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Her eyes widened appreciatively as she took in his bare chest. “So that’s what you’ve been hiding under all those dreadful puns,” she teased, her voice husky with desire.

“Like what you see?” he asked, a smile playing on his lips.

“Oh, yes,” she purred, running her hands over his toned chest, exploring the planes and contours of his body.

Alfie closed his eyes as she tweaked his nipple between her finger and thumb, his arousal growing painfully hard against the confines of his jeans.

Unable to wait any longer, he tugged at her sweater, pulling it over her head. His breath caught at the sight of her luscious breasts and he lowered his head, drawing her nipple into his mouth.

Marion gasped as he rolled his tongue over the sensitive peak, her back arching to press herself closer to him. Encouraged by her response, Alfie slid his hand down between their bodies, slipping inside her slacks to find her already wet and ready for him.

She whimpered as he rubbed her sensitive flesh, her hips moving against his hand. He slipped a finger inside her, stroking her inner walls as she moaned his name. Marion’s hand found its way to his hardness, curling around him through his jeans and stroking him in rhythm with his own movements.

Her lips found his ear, nibbling and sucking on the lobe while he continued to lavish attention on her breast. The dual sensation nearly drove him wild as she arched into

his touch, her breathing growing more ragged.

Alfie could feel himself getting close already, the culmination of weeks of wanting her threatening to overwhelm him. But he wanted—needed—to be inside her when he found his release.

Not yet, he told himself. First, he would ensure her pleasure.

He stepped back slightly, hooking his fingers into the waistband of her slacks and lifting her slightly off the table. Marion helped, wriggling her hips as he slid the fabric down her legs, taking her panties with them. He cast them aside, then gently set her back on the edge of the table.

Alfie nudged her thighs apart, dropping to his knees before her. For a moment, he simply gazed at her, drinking in the sight of her most intimate flesh displayed for him alone. She was beautiful everywhere, perfect in every way.

When he leaned forward and tasted her for the first time, they both moaned. He slipped two fingers inside her as his tongue circled her most sensitive spot, slowly and deliberately driving her toward the edge.

Marion writhed beneath him, her hands tangling in his hair as she gasped his name. He could feel her getting close, her inner walls beginning to flutter around his fingers. He increased his pace slightly, curling his fingers to find that special spot inside her.

When her climax hit, she cried out, her body trembling as waves of pleasure washed over her. Alfie didn't let up, continuing his exquisite torture until she was completely sated, her body limp and her breathing heavy.

Only then did he kiss his way up her inner thighs, rising to his feet between her spread legs. He unfastened his jeans, pushing them down just enough to free his

aching hardness. He rubbed himself against her still-sensitive flesh, teasing them both with the promise of what was to come.

But Marion had apparently had enough of his teasing. She placed her hands on his buttocks, drawing him forward insistently until he was poised at her entrance. Alfie entered her slowly, savoring every inch as her slick heat enveloped him.

When he was fully seated within her, she tightened her inner muscles around him, gripping him in a way that nearly shattered his control. He stilled, fighting desperately for composure, not wanting this moment to end too soon.

“Alfie,” she whispered, her voice thick with need. “Please.”

That single word broke his restraint. He began to move, withdrawing almost completely before thrusting back into her welcoming body. Marion matched his rhythm, her hips rising to meet each thrust.

She leaned forward, capturing one of his nipples between her teeth, the sharp pleasure-pain sending jolts of electricity straight to his groin. Alfie groaned, his pace increasing as desire built within him like a gathering storm.

His hand cupped her breast, teasing the nipple as he continued to move within her. Marion’s breath came in short gasps, her eyes half-closed with pleasure as she climbed toward another peak.

Alfie slipped his hand between their bodies, finding that sensitive bundle of nerves and circling it with his thumb. The effect was immediate—Marion cried out, her body tensing as her second orgasm overtook her.

The feeling of her pulsing around him was too much for Alfie. With a final thrust, he joined her in bliss, his release crashing over him in waves of intense pleasure. His

bear roared in triumph inside him as they claimed their mate completely.

For several long moments, they remained locked together, foreheads touching as they struggled to catch their breath. Alfie's heart felt so full it might burst, overflowing with love for this woman who had become his everything.

"Are you okay?" he whispered, pressing a gentle kiss to her temple.

Marion nodded, a smile spreading across her face as she looked up at him. "More than okay," she assured him, her fingers tracing patterns on his chest. "That was..."

"Just the beginning," Alfie finished for her, capturing her lips in a tender kiss.

A soft sound from upstairs made them both freeze—Charlie shifting in his sleep. They looked at each other for a moment before bursting into quiet laughter.

"Stay with me tonight?" Marion asked as their laughter subsided.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“How would you put it?” she mused. “Oh yes, I believe we are meant to be together.”

Chapter Twenty – Marion

“Good morning.” Alfie kissed her shoulder as she rolled over to face him.

“Is it?” she asked, her voice croaky as her eyes adjusted to the dim light.

His expression faltered, and she cupped his face and pressed her lips to his.

As their kiss deepened, Marion pulled back just enough to murmur against his lips, “I meant, is it morning already? It’s still dark outside.”

Alfie chuckled, his chest vibrating against her hand where it rested over his heart. “Yes, it is. Technically.” He inched away from her reluctantly. “I didn’t want Charlie to find me in your bed, so I wanted to leave early.”

“Oh, yes, of course,” Marion said as she glanced at the clock. It was only five, and Charlie didn’t usually wake for another couple of hours, but she didn’t want to take any chances. Not that she was ashamed or embarrassed about her relationship with Alfie. And she knew Charlie would be over the moon when he found out. But Alfie was right. This needed to be handled carefully. The last thing she wanted was to cause confusion or complicate Charlie’s life further.

Still, as Alfie slipped from her bed and dragged on his clothes, she wanted nothing

more than to reach for him and pull him back to her.

“Will I see you today?” Alfie asked as he perched on the edge of the bed, stroking her shoulder with fingertips that sent shivers down her spine.

She reached for his hand and pressed light kisses on his palm before tracing small circles with her tongue. He groaned, and the sound ignited a fire in her core. Maybe they had time to make love one more time before he left. The memory of his hands on her body, his mouth exploring her intimately, flicked her desire up a notch.

“You’re not making this easy,” he murmured as he leaned forward, pushed the covers down over her breasts, and sucked her nipple into his mouth.

A shock of electricity coursed through her, and heat built in her core as he rolled his tongue over the taut bud. She whimpered as he slid his hand beneath the sheets and stroked her inner thigh before caressing her bundle of nerves. She opened her thighs, and he slipped two fingers inside her, while his thumb stroked her mound and his mouth teased her breasts.

As her orgasm built, she covered his hand with hers, relishing the feel of him inside her. He’d learned quickly what she liked, and he was merciless at bringing her pleasure. She turned her head to the side, her hands gripping the sheets as he flicked his tongue over her nipples, pushing her over the edge.

Damn, he was good. And he was hers.

As she closed her eyes, her body tensed and as her orgasm swept over her, she pictured the man turning into a bear. A shifter, he’d called it—hershifter. Fated to be hers forever. Just as she was fated to be his.

For some people, the lack of choice in their life partner might be hard. But for

Marion, it was a blessing. It meant she would never make the same mistake her sister had and choose the wrong man. A man who had no regard for others.

When her breathing steadied, she opened her eyes to find Alfie watching her with such tenderness it made her heart ache. He pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead, then her nose, and finally her lips.

“I should go,” he whispered, though he made no move to leave.

Marion nodded, running her fingers through his tousled hair. “I know. But I’ll see you later? Charlie wanted to ask you to dinner this evening.”

“Wild bears couldn’t keep me away,” he said with a grin, then winced at his own joke. “Sorry, that was terrible, even for me.”

Marion laughed softly. “I’m getting used to your terrible jokes. They’re growing on me.”

“Like moss?” Alfie suggested, wiggling his eyebrows.

“Exactly like moss,” she agreed, pulling him down for one last kiss.

This time, he did stand, adjusting his clothes and running a hand through his hair in a futile attempt to tame it. “I’ll text you when I get to the garden center.”

“Okay,” Marion said, watching him move toward her bedroom door. “Be careful going down the stairs. The third one creaks.”

He nodded, blowing her a kiss before slipping out the door. Marion listened as he navigated the stairs, holding her breath at the slight squeak of the third step. Then came the soft click of the front door, and he was gone.

She sank back against the pillows, still warm from where he'd lain beside her. Her body hummed with satisfaction, but more than that, her heart felt full in a way she'd never experienced before. Not just because of the physical connection they'd shared, but because of the deeper bond forming between them.

The mating bond. She liked that. And they sure had mated last night. Many times. She snuggled down under the covers, still warm from where Alfie had slept. Then she closed her eyes, and drifted off to sleep, to dream of a bear who had the same eyes as Alfie. Who was hers as much as the man.

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She woke sometime later, the room lighter, the sun brighter. She lay still for a moment. Had last night been a dream? Without Alfie by her side, it was easy to think her mind had conjured the whole thing. But her body still thrummed to his touch, to the feel of him inside her. His lips on hers, his hands roaming her body.

She threw the covers off. If she didn't get up and get dressed and make a pot of coffee, she'd get lost in her dreams and need a cold shower. An ice-cold shower might be the only way to cool her desire for her shifter mate.

Marion pulled on her clothes and went downstairs, filled the coffeepot, and waited for it to brew. As she listened to it, she went to the window and looked out. If the weather was nice, she and Charlie would...

Oh! She let out a cry, quickly smothering it with her hand. She stood there, listening. Had she woken Charlie? The house was quiet. With trembling hands, she went to the front door and opened it.

"What are you doing here?" she hissed.

"Is that any way to greet your sister?" Heather asked in return.

Marion's blood ran cold as she stared at the woman standing on her porch. Heather looked thinner than when Marion had last seen her, her once-vibrant blonde hair now dull and pulled back in a severe ponytail. Dark circles shadowed her eyes, but the defiant tilt of her chin was exactly the same.

"You're supposed to be in prison," Marion whispered, glancing over her shoulder

toward the stairs. Charlie couldn't see her. Not now. Not like this.

"Out on bail," Heather replied with a brittle smile. "Pending the trial. Turns out they didn't have as much evidence on me as they thought."

Marion's grip tightened on the door. "You shouldn't be here. The court order—"

"I know what the court order says," Heather interrupted, her voice hardening. "I'm not allowed to see Charlie without supervision. So supervise me. I want to see my son."

"He's sleeping," Marion said, stepping outside and pulling the door nearly closed behind her. The morning air was cool against her skin, but her insides felt like ice. "How did you find us?"

Heather let out a harsh laugh. "You're not exactly in witness protection, Marion. You still have the same email address, same phone number. It wasn't hard. If you know how to look."

Marion crossed her arms over her chest, fighting to keep her voice steady. "You need to leave."

"Not until I see Charlie," Heather insisted, taking a step forward.

"No." Marion stood her ground, though her heart was hammering so hard she felt dizzy. "He's doing well here. He's healing. I won't let you disrupt that."

Something flickered in Heather's eyes—pain, perhaps, or regret. But it was quickly replaced by the familiar stubbornness Marion had dealt with all her life.

"He's my son," Heather said, her voice dropping to a dangerous whisper.

“And you lost the right to see him when you chose Razor over his safety,” Marion shot back, anger finally breaking through her shock. “When you let that man...”

“Don’t,” Heather warned, holding up a hand. “Don’t pretend you understand what happened.”

“I understand enough,” Marion replied. “I understand that Charlie still has nightmares. That he flinches when someone raises their voice. That he’s only now beginning to act like a normal child again.”

Heather’s face crumpled slightly, but she quickly composed herself. “I made mistakes. I know that. But I’m his mother.”

“And I’m his legal guardian,” Marion reminded her. “By court order. The same court that’s going to try you as an accessory to Razor’s crimes.”

Heather’s eyes narrowed. “My lawyer says the charges will be dropped.”

“For your sake, I hope that’s true,” Marion said, meaning it despite everything. “But it doesn’t change the fact that you can’t see Charlie right now.”

“You always were self-righteous,” Heather spat, her voice rising. “Always thought you knew better than everyone else.”

Marion flinched at the familiar accusation but held firm. “This isn’t about me. It’s about what’s best for Charlie.”

“And you get to decide that?” Heather challenged.

“Yes,” Marion said simply. “For now, I do.”

They stared at each other, the silence stretching between them like a chasm. Marion could see the calculation in her sister's eyes, the desperate need warring with the knowledge that making a scene would only hurt her case.

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Finally, Heather stepped back. “This isn’t over.”

“I know,” Marion acknowledged, her shoulders sagging slightly. “But for now, please leave. If you want to arrange a supervised visit, contact my lawyer.”

Heather’s laugh was hollow. “Your lawyer. Listen to you.”

If only you had, Marion wanted to say but bit back the words, knowing it would only make things worse.

Heather turned to go, then paused, looking back over her shoulder. “He asks about me, doesn’t he?”

The vulnerability in her voice nearly broke Marion’s resolve. “Sometimes,” she admitted.

Heather nodded once, then walked away, her steps hurried. Marion watched until she disappeared around the corner, then went back inside, locking the door behind her.

She leaned against it, her legs suddenly too weak to support her. The coffee pot had finished brewing, its rich aroma filling the kitchen, but she couldn’t bring herself to move. All she could think about was Charlie upstairs, blissfully unaware that his mother had been standing just outside.

Her hand trembled as she reached for her phone. She needed to call her lawyer. And then she needed to call Alfie. The thought of him steadied her. She needed his strength, his unwavering support. Last night, he had promised to protect her and

Charlie, and now she would need to hold him to that promise.

Because Heather wouldn't give up easily. She never had.

Chapter Twenty-One – Alfie

Alfie Thornberg couldn't remember the last time he'd whistled on his way to work, but this morning he could not help himself. The memory of Marion's skin against his, her scent lingering on his clothes. Damn, he might just burst into song!

Please don't, his bear said.

"Somebody looks happy," Daisy said as Alfie placed a cup of coffee down on the table in the office they shared.

That's because we are happy, his bear said, thrilled that he had met their mate in person for the first time.

"Marion has decided to take up the offer of selling her handmade soaps," Alfie said as he sat down, unable to keep the smile from his face.

Daisy's eyebrows shot up with interest. "Does that mean you two have made up?"

Alfie grinned and nodded. "Marion saw me with Elsbeth on Thursday and jumped to the wrong conclusion."

"Ah," Daisy nodded knowingly, "she thought you were playing the field. Planting your seeds..."

"Yes," Alfie held up his hand, stopping her before she could continue with the gardening innuendos. "But yesterday she met Elsbeth, and I explained she was

Philip's mate. And..." he paused, his voice dropping to a near whisper, "then I told her everything, showed her everything."

Daisy's eyes widened. "At last!" Then she chuckled. "No wonder you look like the cat who got the cream."

Or the bear that got the honey, his bear teased.

"So, I thought we could arrange a meeting this week," Alfie continued, trying to sound professional despite the giddiness bubbling inside him. "Invite Marion in so that we can flesh out a business plan."

Daisy nodded. "Absolutely. I think the handmade soaps will sell well."

Alfie let out a long breath. "I can't tell you how relieved I am that everything is working out."

Daisy chuckled as she sipped her coffee. "You don't have to tell me. I can see it written all over your face."

Alfie cracked a wide smile, but then his phone rang. He took it from his pocket and his heart leaped as he saw Marion's name displayed.

"Hi there," he answered, trying to sound cool, calm, and collected, which was nearly impossible.

"Alfie." He could tell instantly she was upset.

"What's wrong? Are you okay?" Alfie asked, sitting up straighter. "Is Charlie, okay?"

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Daisy's expression shifted to concern as she watched his face darken.

"My sister, Heather," Marion explained, her voice tight with tension. "She showed up on my doorstep this morning. She wants Charlie back."

Alfie's blood ran cold. "I'll come straight over."

"No," Marion said quickly. "I'll come to you. Maybe we can talk alone, while Charlie watches the butterflies."

"Of course. Come over when you're ready," Alfie agreed, already on his feet. "I'll be waiting."

He ended the call and stood there for a moment, the morning's joy evaporating like dew on a hot summer's day.

"What happened?" Daisy asked, setting down her mug.

"Marion's sister showed up," Alfie explained, running a hand through his hair. "The one who's supposed to be in prison. She wants Charlie back."

Daisy's face hardened with concern. "That poor boy. And after he's just starting to feel safe."

"They're coming here," Alfie said, pacing the small office. "Marion wants to talk somewhere Charlie won't overhear."

“Don’t worry,” Daisy said, rising from her chair. “I’ll care for Charlie while you two talk. We can look at the butterflies, or Charlie can help me water the plants.”

Alfie stopped pacing long enough to give Daisy a grateful look. “Thank you.”

He drained his coffee in one long gulp, his mind racing through possible scenarios for how this might play out, each one worse than the last.

His bear was already in protective mode, growling at the idea of anyone threatening their mate’s happiness—or Charlie’s.

No one is taking him from us, his bear vowed fiercely.

We need to stay calm, he told his bear. For Marion’s sake.

Alfie walked out to the front of the garden center, scanning the parking lot anxiously. Ten minutes crawled by like hours before Marion’s car finally pulled in. He watched as she helped Charlie from the backseat, her movements steady and controlled despite the strain evident on her face.

As they approached, Alfie could see she was holding it together but was obviously upset. Something he could tell Charlie had picked up on. The boy was unusually quiet as he walked by his aunt’s side.

“Alfie!” Charlie called out when he spotted him, some of his usual enthusiasm returning.

“Hey, buddy,” Alfie replied, crouching down to Charlie’s level. “Daisy is about to check on the butterflies. Want to help her?”

Charlie’s eyes lit up. “Really? Can I?”

“Of course,” Alfie said, ruffling the boy’s hair. “Daisy’s waiting for you in the café. I think Welland has some cakes he’d like you to sample, too.”

Charlie looked up at Marion, silently seeking permission.

“Go ahead,” she nodded, her voice encouraging despite the worry in her eyes. “I just need to talk to Alfie.”

They watched as Charlie raced toward the café, his momentary concern forgotten in his excitement.

When he was out of earshot, Alfie turned to Marion, taking her hands in his. “Tell me everything.”

Marion’s hands trembled in his, her fingers cold despite the warm morning. Alfie gave them a gentle squeeze, trying to infuse his strength into her.

“She was just...standing there on the porch when I opened the door,” Marion said, her voice barely above a whisper. “Like she had every right to be there.”

“Let’s go somewhere more private,” Alfie suggested, glancing toward the café where Charlie had disappeared.

He guided her toward the office, his hand resting protectively at the small of her back. She was so tense, just like that first morning they’d met. And he hated seeing her like this.

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When they reached his office, Marion stopped in the doorway, her eyes widening at the sight before her. On the small table by the window sat two steaming cups of coffee and a slice of lemon drizzle cake—her favorite from Welland’s selection.

“Daisy must have brought it over,” Alfie said.

“That’s so kind,” she said, her voice cracking.

“Come on, sit down. You’ll feel better after you’ve had some cake. The sugar will be good for the shock.” He guided her toward the chair Daisy usually sat in.

“Thank you.” As she sat down, the careful composure Marion had maintained for Charlie’s sake finally crumbled. Her face crumpled, and tears spilled down her cheeks.

“Oh, Marion,” Alfie murmured, hunkering down beside her and holding her in his arms.

She buried her face against his chest, her body shaking with silent sobs. Alfie held her close, one hand cradling the back of her head while the other rubbed soothing circles on her back. He pressed his lips to her hair, murmuring soft reassurances.

“It’s okay,” he whispered. “Let it out. I’ve got you.”

For several minutes, he simply held her, letting her release the fear and tension she’d been carrying since her sister’s appearance. His bear rumbled protectively inside him, longing to shield her from any pain.

When her tears finally subsided, Alfie handed her a tissue from the box on his desk. “What exactly did Heather say?” he asked gently.

Marion dabbed at her eyes, taking a shaky breath. “She said she’s out on bail and her lawyer thinks the charges will be dropped.” She looked up at him, her eyes red-rimmed but clear. “She wants Charlie back, Alfie.”

“What did you tell her?”

“That she couldn’t see him without supervision. That she needs to contact my lawyer.” Marion’s voice grew stronger as she spoke. “She didn’t like that.”

“I’m sure she didn’t,” Alfie said, his jaw tightening. “But you did the right thing.”

Marion nodded, then looked down at their joined hands. “She said it isn’t over. And I know my sister. She won’t give up.”

“Is there a chance she’ll get her way?” Alfie asked, though he already knew the answer.

“She’ll convince the court she’s changed,” Marion said, her voice breaking. “And they’ll decide Charlie belongs with his mother, not his aunt. They’ll send him back to her. What if Razor gets out, too? I’ll have to watch him withdraw into himself again, become that frightened little boy again.”

Alfie squeezed her hand. “I won’t let that happen.”

“You might not be able to stop it,” Marion said, finally meeting his eyes. “The courts will side with his mom even if...” She broke off, shaking her head.

“Even when they’re clearly not the best option,” Alfie finished for her. “But Marion,

anyone who spends five minutes with Charlie can see how much he's thriving with you. The difference is astonishing."

"You think so?" she asked, a flicker of hope in her eyes.

"I know so," Alfie assured her. "When I first met him, he barely spoke. Now he's asking questions, exploring, laughing. That's because of you, because of the stability and love you've given him."

Marion's gaze drifted past him to his desk, where papers were spread out filled with sketches for soap displays, pricing structures, and marketing ideas. Her face fell.

"We should put the business plans on hold," she said quietly.

"What? Why?" Alfie asked, genuinely confused.

"If Charlie has to leave Bear Creek..." Marion swallowed hard. "I'll go with him wherever he goes. I have to make sure he's safe."

Alfie felt his heart constrict at the thought of losing them both, but he kept his expression steady. "Of course you would."

"I know that's not what you want to hear," Marion continued, her voice thick with emotion. "And I'm so sorry. We just found each other, and now..." She shook her head. "I know we're mates, but I can't ask you to..."

"Marion," Alfie interrupted, cupping her face in his hands. "Look at me."

She raised her eyes to his, tears threatening to spill over again.

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“I would go with you,” he said firmly. “Wherever you are, that’s where I’ll be.”

Marion stared at him, disbelief written across her face. “You can’t mean that. Your life is here. You have the garden center, your family...”

“My life is with you now,” Alfie said simply. “Both of you. That’s what being mates means.”

“I can’t ask you to give up everything...”

“You’re not asking me to,” Alfie interrupted gently. “I’m offering. There are other garden centers, Marion. But there’s only one you.”

A tear slipped down her cheek, and he brushed it away with his thumb. “Besides,” he continued with a small smile, “we’re getting ahead of ourselves. Charlie isn’t going anywhere.”

“But if he does...”

“Then we’ll face it together,” Alfie promised. “I meant what I said last night. You and Charlie are my family now. We’re in this together. Forever.”

Marion searched his face as if looking for any sign of hesitation or doubt. Finding none, she leaned forward and pressed her forehead against his.

“I don’t know what I did to deserve you,” she whispered.

“You exist,” Alfie said simply. “That’s enough for me.”

Marion let out a watery laugh. “That’s the most terrible, most romantic line I’ve ever heard.”

Alfie grinned, relieved to see a glimpse of her humor returning. “I’ve got plenty more where that came from.”

“I believe you,” Marion said, wiping away her tears.

“And I love you.” The words slipped out naturally, and Alfie didn’t regret them for a second. He watched as they registered with Marion, her eyes widening slightly.

“You love me?” she whispered.

“With everything I am,” Alfie replied without hesitation. “Bear and man both.”

Fresh tears welled in her eyes, but these were different...tears of joy rather than fear. She cupped his face in her hands.

“I love you, too,” she said, her voice unwavering. “I think I have since that first day when you showed Charlie the butterflies.”

“Well, I did say I was rooting for you,” Alfie said.

“But what you were really doing was sowing the seeds of love,” she said, and then she kissed him.

Chapter Twenty-Two – Marion

“What do you think?” Charlie asked, his voice breaking through her troubled

thoughts.

Marion looked up from her plate, which contained her barely eaten lunch, realizing she hadn't heard a word Charlie said. Anger bubbled up inside her. Heather had only been back in their lives for a couple of hours and already she was affecting them. And if the charges against her were dropped, and she got hold of a lawyer, things would only get worse. Much worse. The temptation to pack up their belongings and simply disappear, leaving no trace, was almost too tempting. But Marion knew running away was not the answer. Because if she did, that might lead to her losing Charlie for good.

"I'm sorry, what were you saying?" Marion asked, forcing herself back to focus on the present and the young boy who meant the world to her.

"I said that Daisy has a beehive in her backyard and she said I could go and look at it," Charlie repeated as he picked up his grilled cheese sandwich and took a bite.

"A beehive, huh?" Marion asked, trying to summon enthusiasm. They had been so lucky to have made friends so fast in Bear Creek. Everyone had been so welcoming. Anger simmered to the surface once more, but she pushed it down.

She didn't want Charlie to see her like this. Didn't want him to feel unsafe.

"Is something wrong?" Charlie asked, staring straight at her.

She could lie to him, but she wouldn't. Because lies tended to come back and bite you in the ass.

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From the determined look on Heather's face, it seemed she was not going to simply walk away. Which meant there was every chance Heather suddenly came by again or met them in the street. No, she was going to be open and honest with Charlie so that he was forewarned.

She set down her glass and folded her hands. "There's something we need to talk about."

His eyes sharpened, wary now. He knew how to read moods better than most adults. It was the cost of learning to read the room as a form of survival when he was under Razor's roof.

"Your mom is in town," Marion began.

His face lit up, which broke her heart. Even after everything, Charlie still loved his mom.

"She's here in Bear Creek?" he asked, leaning forward, his grilled cheese sandwich forgotten.

"Yes, she knocked on the door early this morning," Marion explained.

"On our door?" he asked, his expression confused. "This morning?"

"Yes, you were still asleep," Marion explained gently.

"You should have woken me up," Charlie said, his face petulant as he kicked his foot

against the chair leg.

Marion's heart sank as unease swept over her. Everything they had built, all the progress they had made, was about to be torn apart. And there was nothing she could do to stop it. She felt so powerless.

She'd failed him. Despite everything, she had made things worse.

"I..." She didn't have an answer. How could she explain she was trying to protect him from his own mother? That she was scared she might lose him. That if he went back to Heather, she might not see him again. Or worse, that something terrible might happen to him.

"Why?" Charlie demanded.

Marion took a deep breath. "I didn't wake you because I wanted to talk to her first. I needed to understand why she was here."

The truth was, Marion had never wanted to be the person who kept Charlie from his mother. Despite everything that had happened, she'd always hoped that someday Heather might change. That once she was free of Razor's influence and got the help she needed, Charlie could have the relationship with his mom that he deserved. A healthy one. A safe one.

"Does she want to see me?" Charlie asked, his voice small but hopeful.

"Yes, she does," Marion admitted. "But there are some things we need to figure out first. The court said..."

"I don't care what the court said!" Charlie's voice rose suddenly. "She's my mom!"

“I know that, sweetheart. And I’m not trying to…”

But Charlie wasn’t listening. Instead, he pushed away from the table and slid off his chair.

“Charlie,” Marion reached for him, but he shrugged her off.

“I’m going to look at the bugs!” He grabbed the insect book and magnifying glass Alfie had given him and stomped off outside, letting the screen door slam behind him.

Marion sighed, watching him go. She’d seen him like this enough times to know he needed time to cool off. The fact that he was going to check on his bugs rather than hiding under his bed was actually progress, even if it didn’t feel like it right now.

With her appetite now gone, Marion started clearing their plates, stacking them carefully in the sink, trying to keep her hands busy while her thoughts raced. What was the right thing to do? How could she protect Charlie without making him resent her? And what would happen if the courts decided to send him back to Heather?

Was it possible that Heather had changed? Marion dared not hope. And dared not risk Charlie going back to his mom unless she could prove she had changed.

Her phone buzzed on the windowsill. Heather.

Marion’s stomach flipped. She debated ignoring it, but something told her it was better to hear whatever Heather had to say now, rather than risk her showing up on the doorstep again.

She answered with a sharp, “Hello?”

“Don’t hang up, Marion,” Heather said, not even giving her a chance to breathe.
“You know you can’t ignore me. He’s my son.”

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“You made your choices, Heather. You chose Razor, remember?” Marion replied, trying to keep calm as anger burned inside her.

“I made a mistake,” Heather said.

“A mistake?” Marion’s voice cracked. “Do you know what Charlie went through while you were off chasing after that loser? The neglect? The nights he cried himself to sleep?”

“I’m still his mother!” Heather insisted.

“That doesn’t mean you’re what’s best for him!” Marion replied sharply.

“I’ll get my life together,” Heather snapped. “I’ve got a place lined up, and...”

“Charlie is happy here, Heather. He’s got friends and stability, and you want to take that away from him?” Marion asked.

“I can give him all those things,” Heather said.

“Heather, for once, think about what is best for Charlie.” Marion moved to the back door, casting a glance out into the yard, needing to see the little boy who deserved the best in life.

Empty.

She stepped onto the porch, eyes sweeping the garden. “Charlie?” she called. The

only reply was the rustle of leaves. Panic flared inside her and she had to force air into her lungs.

“Heather,” she said slowly, trying to keep her voice even. “What did you do?”

“What do you mean, what did I do?” Heather asked.

“Charlie!” Marion called, but no answer came.

“Marion, what’s happening?” Heather demanded.

“Do you expect me to believe it’s a coincidence that Charlie disappears the same day you arrive in town?” Marion snapped. “Just tell me what you did!”

“Nothing! I haven’t seen him!” Heather replied.

“Then why is he gone?” Marion’s voice rose as panic consumed her. “He’s not in the garden. He’s not here!”

“Don’t blame me...” Heather said.

Marion hung up and rushed down the porch steps, her blood pounding in her ears. “Charlie!” she called again, louder this time. She checked around the lavender bush first, then behind the shed, growing more frantic with each passing moment.

He couldn’t have gone far. She’d only been on the phone for a minute or two. Unless...had he been planning this? Had he slipped away while she was clearing the dishes, determined to find his mother on his own?

“Charlie!” she shouted, hysteria taking hold as she finally accepted the truth. Charlie was gone...

Panic clawed at her throat as she looked at her phone, the screen a blur through her tears. Swiping them away, she tapped the screen and dialed Alfie's number. Her fingers trembled so much she nearly dropped the phone but at last, it began to ring.

He answered on the second ring. "Hey there..."

"He's gone," she said, not even bothering with hello. "Charlie. I told him about Heather, and then she called, and now he's gone."

"Stay put," Alfie said. His voice was calm, steady, and already focused. "I'm coming right now."

Marion didn't even nod. She ended the call and circled the yard once more, checking every possible hiding spot, even places too small for a boy his size. But she knew he was gone. She could feel it. The emptiness...

She stifled a sob as a car door slammed out front. Marion ran around the side of the house to find Heather standing in the driveway, out of breath and defensive.

"I swear I had nothing to do with this," Heather said, holding up her hands. "I came as soon as you hung up."

"We were doing just fine until you showed up," Marion snapped, fury and fear making her voice shake. "He was happy here. He was healing."

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“Where is my son?” Heather demanded, her face flushing with anger.

“I don’t know!” Marion shouted, gesturing wildly at the empty yard. “He was right here, and then he was gone!”

“You probably staged this whole thing,” Heather accused, stepping closer. “To keep me from seeing him. What did you do, hide him at a neighbor’s?”

“I would never do that,” Marion said, her voice breaking. “Never.”

Something in her tone must have reached through Heather’s anger because her sister’s face suddenly crumpled. “This is all my fault,” Heather sobbed. “Everything is always my fault. I’ve let him down again and again, and now he’s run away because of me.”

Despite everything, Marion couldn’t bear to see her sister in such pain. She sat down beside Heather, placing a tentative hand on her shoulder.

“We’ll find him,” she promised. “He can’t have gone far.”

Heather looked up, mascara streaking down her cheeks. “I’ve made such a mess of everything, haven’t I? I always thought I’d have time to fix things, to be better, but...”

The sound of tires on gravel interrupted her. Alfie’s truck skidded to a stop in the driveway, and he was out and running toward them before the engine had fully quieted.

“Any sign of him?” he asked, his eyes scanning the yard even as he spoke.

Marion shook her head, rising to her feet. “Nothing. I’ve looked everywhere.”

As Alfie approached, Marion wasn’t sure what scared her more, what Charlie might have overheard, or how deep she knew his pain must run to disappear this way. She only knew one thing...he couldn’t have gone far. Not without someone knowing.

And if anyone could find him, it was Alfie.

Chapter Twenty-Three – Alfie

The journey to Marion’s house was a blur. Alfie’s bear paced anxiously within him, claws scraping against his consciousness with each passing second. They both knew how fragile Charlie’s progress had been, how much the boy had opened up in recent days, and how quickly that progress could be ripped away. The thought of him alone and upset made Alfie press harder on the accelerator.

When he pulled into Marion’s driveway, the first thing he noticed was the unfamiliar car parked haphazardly behind his mate’s car.

His bear’s hackles rose immediately. That’s her, his bear growled. The one who hurt our cub.

Alfie took a steadying breath as he climbed out of his truck. Let’s not make things worse.

How could they be worse? His bear moaned like a wounded animal.

Let’s not try to find out, Alfie said as he walked toward the house.

Through the screen door, he could see Marion sitting on the couch, her arm around a blonde woman who was sobbing into her hands. The family resemblance was unmistakable, the same heart-shaped face, the same slope of the nose, although Heather's features were sharper, harder somehow.

His bear snarled in disgust. How could a mother abandon her child for a man who hurt him? The very concept was anathema to his bear's protective instincts.

Marion looked up, relief flooding her face as she spotted him through the door. "Alfie," she called, her voice breaking with emotion.

He wanted nothing more than to pull her into his arms, to absorb her fear and replace it with his strength. But that wasn't what she needed right now. It wasn't the reason she had called and asked for his help.

Every moment Charlie was missing was another moment he might be in danger. And Alfie was the one person who might be able to find Charlie because he had super senses.

"Where did you see him last?" Alfie asked, getting straight to business as he entered the house.

Marion disengaged from her sister and stood. "The backyard. He was looking at bugs with his magnifying glass."

Without another word, Alfie strode through the house, Marion close behind him. He could feel Heather watching them, but he didn't spare her another glance. His focus was entirely on finding Charlie.

We know he's not here, his bear said impatiently as they stepped into the yard.

Patience. Alfie closed his eyes, pushing out his senses in a way unique to shifters. He searched for that spark of connection he'd formed with Charlie, but there was nothing. Their connection was not as strong as the one he shared with Marion. He could find her in a crowd a mile away... But Charlie was not in the immediate vicinity and his presence was lost among the other folks of Bear Creek.

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“Do you know where he is?” Marion asked quietly, glancing over her shoulder to ensure Heather hadn’t followed them outside.

“I can’t sense him,” Alfie admitted, then lifted his head and inhaled deeply. “But I can scent him.”

Marion’s eyebrow arched skeptically. “You can smell him?”

“All my senses are heightened,” Alfie explained. “And since the trail is fresh, I should be able to follow it.”

Marion’s face paled suddenly. “Is he alone?”

Alfie took another deep breath, filtering out the neighborhood smells—the barbecue three houses down, the freshly cut grass next door, the lavender in Marion’s garden. There—Charlie’s scent. Untainted by any other human presence.

“Yes,” Alfie confirmed, closing the distance between them to pull Marion into his arms. “I will find him, I promise.” He pressed a reassuring kiss to her cheek.

“As a bear or a man?” she whispered against his ear, her breath warm on his skin.

“A man,” Alfie replied reluctantly, letting her go. “It’s too busy on the streets for my bear.”

Even in a town like Bear Creek, where shifters were common, folks would panic at the sight of a bear loping down the sidewalk in broad daylight. And Charlie still had

no idea about shifters. The poor kid had been traumatized enough without a bear encounter.

Maybe he would like a bear encounter,his bear countered hopefully.

Not today,Alfie replied.

“What do I do?” Marion asked, her hands twisting together anxiously.

Alfie was already heading back toward the street, Charlie’s scent pulling him forward like an invisible thread. “Keep your phone on you. I’ll let you know where he is.”

He nodded briefly at Heather as he jogged past her on the porch, ignoring her startled expression. Skirting around his truck, he set off down the street, his focus narrowing to the invisible trail only he could detect.

Charlie’s scent led him past the neighbor’s house, around the corner, and down the street toward the small park three blocks away. The boy had been moving quickly at first. Almost running, Alfie guessed from the spacing of the scent markers but had slowed as he approached the park.

Alfie pulled out his phone, sending Marion a quick text:Heading to Maple Street Park. He’s on foot.

The park came into view, a modest green space with swings, a slide, and a small wooded area in the back. Charlie’s scent veered away from the playground, where a few children were playing under parental supervision, and toward the trees instead.

Smart kid,Alfie thought. Charlie had sought solitude, not wanting to be found or questioned by well-meaning adults.

The scent grew stronger as Alfie approached the tree line. He slowed his pace, not wanting to startle the boy if he was hiding nearby. The last thing he needed was for Charlie to bolt deeper into the woods in fear.

We would find him, Alfie's bear said.

But it would be better if this did not become a hunt, Alfie told his bear.

There, his bear said. He's in that tree.

I see him, Alfie said, relief making his stomach twist.

"Charlie?" he called softly, just loud enough to be heard but not so loud as to carry to the playground. "It's Alfie. Are you in there, buddy?"

Of course, Alfie knew he was there. But he wanted Charlie to answer, to want to be found.

"Alfie?" Charlie said in a small voice from a low branch.

"Hey," Alfie said, relief washing through him. "That's quite a climbing spot you found."

Charlie didn't respond, just hugged his knees tighter.

"Mind if I join you?" Alfie asked, already reaching for a low branch.

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Charlie shrugged, which Alfie took as permission. He climbed easily, his shifter strength and agility making short work of the ascent. He settled on the branch next to Charlie, letting his legs dangle in the air.

“Your aunt is really worried about you,” Alfie said after a moment of silence.

Charlie stared down at his feet, his small legs swinging in the air. “I didn’t mean to worry her,” he said finally, his voice barely above a whisper.

“I know, buddy.” Alfie kept his tone gentle, giving the boy space to open up. “Sometimes we just need to get away and think.”

Charlie nodded, picking at the bark with his fingers. “I wanted to go to the garden center and look at the butterflies,” he admitted. “It’s peaceful there.”

Alfie nodded, understanding dawning. “You know you shouldn’t go off alone. And you should always tell your aunt where you are.”

Charlie sighed, his shoulders slumping. “She was arguing with my mom.”

“Ah,” Alfie said, the simple syllable conveying his understanding.

“My mom wants to take me away.” Charlie looked up at Alfie, his eyes wide with worry. “But I like it here.”

“I do, too,” Alfie agreed, feeling a tingle at the base of his spine as he sensed Marion and Heather approaching.

His bear stirred within him, alert and protective. They must have driven here, his bear observed.

“I want to learn about the bugs and the plants and see wolves and bears,” Charlie continued, his words tumbling out faster now. “I don’t want to go back to the city. There was no backyard. No flowers.”

“Hey,” Alfie said, putting his arm around Charlie and hugging him close. The boy’s small body felt fragile against his side, but there was strength there, too.

And resilience, his bear added.

“And I don’t like it when Aunt Marion cries,” Charlie added, his voice breaking. “She is happy here, too.”

“I am,” Marion’s voice called from below them.

Charlie stiffened in Alfie’s embrace. “Aunt Marion,” he whispered, guilt washing over his face. “I’m sorry.”

“And I am sorry, too,” she said, her face tilted up toward them, tears glistening on her cheeks. “I should have woken you up when your mom came to visit this morning.”

Alfie held Charlie’s hands and carefully lowered him into his aunt’s waiting arms. She caught him easily, pulling him tight against her chest.

“I was so worried about you,” she murmured into his hair, holding him tight.

Heather stepped forward hesitantly, her eyes red-rimmed from crying. “And I shouldn’t have come by unannounced and made demands without asking you what you wanted to do, Charlie bear,” she said.

“Mom.” Charlie reached out one arm while keeping the other wrapped firmly around Marion. Heather stepped forward, and for a moment, the three of them stood locked together, a tangle of arms and tears, and whispered apologies.

This is how it should be, his bear said, grudgingly ready to forgive Heather if she did the right thing by Charlie now.

“Does that mean I can stay in Bear Creek?” Charlie asked, pulling back just enough to look between the two women.

“If that’s what you want,” Heather said. She glanced at Alfie, something like respect flickering across her face. “I can see that you have good people here who care for you and your aunt.”

Charlie’s face lit up with hope. “Really? You mean it?”

Heather nodded, though Alfie could see the pain it cost her. “I do. Your happiness matters more than anything, Charlie bear. I see that now.”

Marion looked at her sister with surprise and open gratitude. “Thank you, Heather.”

Alfie climbed down from the tree, giving the family their moment while remaining close enough to offer support if needed. His bear paced contentedly within him, pleased that the situation had been resolved peacefully.

“Maybe,” Marion suggested cautiously, “we could all have dinner together tonight? Talk about how we might make this work?”

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Heather wiped her eyes and nodded. "I'd like that. Very much."

Charlie looked between his mother and aunt, then up at Alfie. "Can Alfie come, too?" he asked.

Marion's eyes met Alfie's over Charlie's head, a silent question in them. Alfie nodded slightly, letting her know he was there for whatever she needed.

"Of course, Alfie can come," Marion said with a small smile playing on her lips.

"Great!" Charlie exclaimed, his earlier distress seemingly forgotten in the way only children can manage. "And maybe tomorrow we can all go to the garden center and see the butterflies?"

Alfie chuckled, ruffling Charlie's hair. "The butterflies will definitely still be there tomorrow."

As they walked back toward the car, Charlie skipped ahead, telling his mom about the butterflies and his bug house. Marion fell into step beside Alfie, her hand finding his and squeezing gently.

"Thank you," she whispered. "For finding him. For being here."

Alfie squeezed back and looked down at her. "Always," he promised.

"And forever?" she asked.

“And forever,” he replied and sucked in a deep breath. “I think everything is going to come up roses.”

“I’d like you to lay me down in a bed of roses,” she whispered in his ear.

“I can see this really is abuddingromance.” He slipped his arm around her shoulders and held her close.

“Then it’s a good thing I have decided Bear Creek is definitely the place Charlie and I are going to set down roots,” Marion countered.

“And I am going to help you bloom,” Alfie said, cupping her face in his hands before he lowered her head and kissed her.

“You know my love for you is growing like a weed,” she murmured as their kiss broke.

Alfie shook his head and laughed. “Thismatebloomer loves you, too. Very much.”

“Enough with the plant puns?” Marion asked.

“I think so,” Alfie said and took her hand. “Let’s go home.”

Because home is where the heart is,his bear said happily.

Epilogue

Marion lay back on the ground, the scent of chamomile soothing as she stared up at the sky. It was so peaceful here, at Alfie’s cabin. The place she and Charlie would soon call home.

“There you are.” Alfie sat down beside her, and she turned to look at him.

“Wine?” she asked, propping herself up on one elbow. “Isn’t it a little early in the day?”

“I wanted to take this moment while we were alone to celebrate the launch of your soaps this afternoon.” He handed her a glass. “Kris made this blend for you. It’s got hints of roses and honeysuckle.”

“That’s so kind of him,” she said as she sat up and accepted the glass. “It smells wonderful.” She took a tentative sip. “And tastes even better.”

“My brother sure knows how to make an excellent wine,” Alfie said as he drank from his glass with an appreciative murmur.

“Your family has been so kind,” Marion said as she leaned against him.

“You and Charlie are part of the Thornberg clan now,” he said, threading his arm around her waist and pulling her closer.

“I am so lucky,” she said, her voice cracking with emotion.

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“You okay?” he murmured, his breath tickling her ear.

“Yes,” she said, covering his hand with hers where it rested on her stomach.

He placed his glass on the ground and turned her to face him, his eyes searching hers with that gentle intensity that always made her feel seen. “Charlie will be okay.”

Marion nodded. “I know.” Alfie always seemed able to read her thoughts. Or at least her emotions. It’s how he could tell she was thinking more about Charlie than about the launch this afternoon.

Charlie had gone to the garden project with Heather. Finn had offered to supervise the visit, and she trusted him. Trusted that he wouldn’t let anything happen to Charlie. Then Marion realized that, actually, she trusted Heather, too. Her sister seemed to have turned over a new leaf since Charlie ran away. When the case against her was dropped, she severed all ties with Razor and instead began focusing on her sobriety and rebuilding her relationship with her son.

She groaned inwardly. What had Alfie done to her? Two months ago, she wouldn’t have trusted anyone with Charlie, let alone her sister.

Marion smiled up at him and threaded her arms around his neck. She knew exactly what he’d done to her. He’d opened her heart to love and given her room to grow. And this afternoon she would launch her handmade soaps at the garden center, turning a hobby into a business because he’d believed in her.

“I love it here,” she told him as she set her wine glass down.

Alfie glanced around the wooden cabin and the surrounding clearing. “It’ll be amazing when the extension is finished.”

“I mean, I like the seclusion.” She moved to straddle him, feeling the immediate response as his hands tightened on her waist.

“The seclusion, huh?” He leaned down and nuzzled her neck, his lips brushing against the sensitive spot below her ear, igniting a fire in her core.

“Yes,” she breathed, tilting her head to give him better access. “I was thinking I need a distraction, a way of releasing tensions since today is such a big day.” She slipped her hand beneath his shirt and stroked his chest, feeling the muscles tense beneath her fingers.

“Well, we could chop some wood for the fire,” Alfie suggested, his voice husky with desire. “It gets cold up here in the winter.”

“I was thinking of something more intimate,” she murmured and nipped the sensitive skin on his neck.

Alfie sucked in a breath, his eyes darkening as he looked down at her. Without another word, he captured her lips in a searing kiss that made her stomach flip. His hands roamed down her back, cupping her bottom and pulling her tighter against him so she could feel the hard evidence of his desire through his jeans.

Marion melted into him, her body thrumming with need as she kissed him back with equal need. His tongue explored her mouth, and she could taste hints of roses and honeysuckle.

When they finally broke apart, both breathing heavily, Alfie’s eyes gleamed with mischief. “You know, there’s something about making love outdoors....”

A thrill ran through her at the thought. The clearing around the cabin was private, surrounded by thick forest on three sides and a steep drop on the fourth. No one would see them here.

“Show me,” she whispered and stood up. With her eyes locked on his, Marion reached for the hem of her sundress and pulled it over her head in one fluid motion, leaving her standing before him in nothing but her pale blue underwear. The mountain air kissed her skin, raising goosebumps across her flesh.

Alfie’s eyes roamed over her body with reverent appreciation. “You are so beautiful,” he murmured, as he pushed himself to his feet and trailed his fingers down her bare shoulder. “So perfect.”

Marion shivered under his touch, her nipples hardening beneath the thin fabric of her bra. She reached for him, tugging at his t-shirt until he helped her pull it off, revealing the broad chest she loved to explore.

His skin was hot beneath her palms as she ran her hands over his muscled torso. She pressed her lips to his collarbone, tasting the salt of his skin, as her fingers worked at the button of his jeans.

Alfie groaned as her hand brushed against his hardness. With a swift movement, he unhooked her bra, letting it fall away. His hands cupped her breasts, thumbs circling her nipples as he lowered his head to take one into his mouth.

Marion gasped at the sensation, arching into him as pleasure sparked through her body. His tongue swirled around the sensitive peak, sending jolts of electricity straight to her core.

“Alfie,” she breathed, tangling her fingers in his hair.

He lowered her gently onto his shirt, the chamomile tickling her back where the fabric didn't cover. Kneeling between her legs, he hooked his fingers into her underwear and slowly slid them down her thighs, his eyes never leaving hers.

The afternoon sun warmed her bare skin as Alfie gazed down at her, his expression filled with such love and desire that it made her heart ache. He leaned forward, pressing soft kisses to her inner thighs, working his way upward with agonizing slowness.

When his mouth finally found her center, Marion cried out, her back arching off the ground. His tongue moved in slow, deliberate circles, building a delicious tension that had her gasping his name. Her hands clutched at the grass beside her as he slipped two fingers inside her, curling them to find that spot that made stars explode behind her eyelids.

The dual sensation of his tongue and fingers brought her quickly to the edge. She could feel her release building, her muscles tensing as she climbed higher and higher. When she finally came, her body trembled with waves of pleasure that seemed to go on forever.

Before she could fully recover, Alfie was moving up her body, his jeans cast aside. He positioned himself between her thighs, the hard length of him pressing against her still-sensitive flesh.

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“I need you,” she whispered, wrapping her legs around his waist.

With one smooth thrust, he entered her, filling her completely. They both gasped at the sensation, their bodies perfectly joined beneath the open sky.

Alfie began to move, setting a rhythm that had her meeting him thrust for thrust. His eyes never left hers, the connection between them transcending the physical as they moved together in perfect harmony.

Alfie cupped her breast in his hand, his calloused palm creating delicious friction against her sensitive skin as he massaged her soft flesh. His thumb and forefinger found her nipple, teasing the hardened peak with gentle twists that sent sparks of pleasure straight to her core. Marion gasped, arching into his touch as he lavished attention on both breasts, alternating between tender caresses and more insistent pressure. The friction of his touch sent electric currents racing through her body as his skilled hands worked their magic on her sensitive flesh.

She bit down on her lower lip as he increased his tempo, driving deeper with each thrust. Her inner walls clenched around him as her body trembled on the precipice of release. Marion wrapped her legs tighter around his waist, her fingernails digging into his shoulders as she matched his pace.

Alfie slipped a hand beneath her and held her close as he jerked into her hard, filling her with his essence. His thrusts set off a chain reaction in her body and she came, her inner walls pulsing around him as the mountain breeze caressed her heated skin.

When they were both completely spent, Alfie rolled to his side, pulling her close

against his chest. He pressed a tender kiss to her forehead, his fingers tracing lazy patterns on her bare shoulder.

“I love you,” he murmured against her hair.

Marion smiled, feeling utterly content in his arms. “I love you, too.”

As she lay there, she realized it was never too late to fully bloom.