



Wrong Number, Right Fox

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Category: Romance, M-m Romance, Paranormal

Description: Sometimes the wrong number is the exact one you need.

Most people think that being next in line for den Alpha equals me having my shit together. I categorically do not. It's more than being a leader. I also need to keep our den business going, and I'm flailing hard, and I'm only in charge of only one division. How am I supposed to handle them all?

I have two years to figure this out or step down and let my brother take the reins, and his idea of leadership is to bleed anyone who disagrees with him. My den needs me to be the Alpha they deserve, and I hire a shifter who runs a business consulting firm to be my shadow.

Only problem is, a website error has me actually hiring his co-worker instead, one who has no idea shifters exist, knows how to wear a suit in the most distracting way, and has me forgetting this is strictly business. Oops.

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GARNER

“I have faith in your ability to turn your division around so when you become Alpha, you’ll be able to run the entire company. Our fox den is depending on you.”

Those words from my uncle Cyrus, who handed me the position last year, rang in my ears every time I walked into the head office.

Redtail Global had been created by my father and uncle, but since Dad died and Uncle Cyrus took the reins, the company had been losing money. My dad had been the numbers guy, and he’d worked in the background while Uncle glad-handed potential and repeat customers, often splurging on wining and dining, expensive gifts, and weekends at a mountain resort, courtesy of Redtail Global.

Dad was able to rein in Uncle Cyrus because they’d grown up together and loved and respected one another. I loved Uncle too, but our relationship was different as uncle and nephew. We both grieved my dad’s death, as did my brother, Booker, though him not so much. No, that wasn’t fair. Booker didn’t reveal his emotions as I did, instead escaping the world by shifting.

That grieving—which from my experience never went away, just became more manageable—made me reluctant to criticize Uncle Cyrus. What he’d accepted from my dad, he bristled at when the words came from my mouth.

Booker was no help. Sure, he came to the office from nine to five, worked hard and

checked off items on his to-do list, but he'd made it clear that his aim was to be the next Alpha and head of the company.

"You're too soft. If you mess this up, everything Dad and Uncle worked for will be tossed in the trash and it'll be your fault." Booker had said those words or a variation of them countless times, and he noted my every step, criticizing me and saying how he would have done it.

Dad and the den council had designated Uncle as my dad's successor, but as he had no children, I was next in line. Uncle Cyrus was retiring in two years, and he expected the company to be healthy at the end of his term. Or else.

No one said "or else." But the words were implied because Uncle refused to leave the business unless it had recovered. There were not-so-secret meetings between him and the council where they discussed passing me over for Alpha and head of Redtail Global and handing the roles to Booker.

My brother was a smash-and-burn kinda guy. He'd put unattainable goals on the staff, burdening them and resulting in burnout and resignations.

"Morning, Garner."

The greeting from one of my colleagues brought me back to the present as we strode into Redtail Global Headquarters. I sighed as I glanced around, wishing Dad hadn't given in to Uncle's demands that we build a new home for the company. The business was thriving, and while my dad had qualms about spending so much capital on floors and lighting fixtures, he'd been swayed by Uncle Cyrus saying we had to project the right image and working out of an old warehouse didn't give our clients confidence we could handle their demands.

Our business was importing and exporting, and I specialized in finding hard-to-come-

by antiques and artifacts, including food, fabric, and spices if they'd gone viral on social media and the public was clamoring for them. I thought the old wooden building which was our former headquarters had been more fitting. It was dark, with long winding corridors, and it smelled of ancient secrets. Dad had nodded when I told him that, whereas Booker scoffed at me being able to scent a secret.

I'd lost more than a father when Dad died. He was a friend, a colleague, and someone I could confide in.

I stood for a moment in the lobby, inhaling the modern smells of shiny metal and glass, while gazing at the pointed edges and gleaming windows and floor. It was so bright. Uggh!

A large digital map on the far wall glowed with yellow dots, showing the countries and cities we exported to. Remembering Dad's map on his office wall where he stuck actual pins and he'd stand back and admire how the business had expanded, I yearned for the past.

My office was on the mezzanine floor, so there was no need for the elevator, and instead, I trotted up the stairs. I longed for the chipped desk that had Booker's and my names carved underneath. My brother had dared me to do it when Dad was out one afternoon but denied it when confronted. I took the blame, even though I was convinced Dad suspected my brother had spurred me on.

But in the years after that day, whenever I was in my father's office, I'd put my hand under the desk, ignoring my brother's name carved in the old wood, and run my fingers over the gouges that spelled Garner.

Before entering my division, I leaned on the railing and surveyed our domain. I always thought of it as ours because it belonged to the den, though when Booker talked up his big future as Alpha and CEO of Redtail Global, he centered it around

himself. It was “my company,” and “my vision,” and he never forgot to add “my money.”

The lobby bustled with staff heading to the elevators and clients waiting for whomever they were there to meet. Nothing about the surroundings or the people in it suggested the business was failing.

Taking a deep breath, I strolled into my office, ignoring the title on the door that read Manager, Rare Acquisitions. I dreaded opening the computer and checking the overnight logs. Instead, I studied the street below from my large window, the one that let in so much light that I had to close the blinds by mid-morning because it made me squint.

I sat in my ergonomic chair, wishing my butt was on the old squeaky one with the cracked leather. Uncle didn't know that I'd ferreted that chair out of our former headquarters and taken it to my home office. Not that I was ever there because my butt was firmly planted here until late every evening.

After Dad died, Uncle wanted to make a splash, even though he'd already done that with the new building. He made deals, extended credit, hired people with questionable ethics, and some of our most precious shipments had gone missing. I suspected “missing” was a euphemism for stolen and not that they were at the bottom of the ocean.

My dad had done business the old-fashioned way. Over tea or coffee, seated on a sofa, at a desk, during a meal, or cross-legged on the floor. Those meetings had taken place over hours. His contacts had been established and maintained over decades, unlike Uncle Cyrus who agreed to terms that favored the person on the other end of the deal and left us in a precarious position and in debt.

I'd spent a lot of time soothing clients so they wouldn't sue us into oblivion and

debtor's prison. My job was to start from the beginning and build a new... new everything, from the day-to-day logistics, including manifests, tracking, and chain-of-custody protocol. Our new suppliers had to be vetted and the division's internal systems rebuilt.

I didn't have the technological skill to start from the beginning and create something new. But with trust in the division being at an all-time low, having few repeat clients and numerous lost shipments, I was playing whack-a-mole, jumping from one aspect of the business to another.

I lay my head on the desk, wishing Dad were here. He'd know how to get us out of this hole.

Being Alpha wasn't my dream. I'd understood from a young age that it was probably where my future lay. I didn't mind if I wasn't the den's Numero Uno, but I did give a damn about the company that my dad had built.

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There was one solution: bring in a business consultant to set up new systems. It was an expense we couldn't afford, but Dad always weighed up the outlay with what we would gain. He never threw money away. If I hired someone, it would streamline the logistics, thereby saving us time and money and allow me to do what I was best at—acquiring and handling new clients.

But it was a huge risk.

Instead of making a decision, I nibbled my nails while cautiously opening the laptop. My inbox was bulging, and I slammed the lid, getting a coffee instead. It put off the horrors that awaited me on the computer for a few minutes, and the caffeine fueled my energy levels.

“Wasting time drinking coffee when you should have your head down and your butt up working to pull the division out of the hole... or should I say the crater it's in.” Booker leaned on my door, arms folded, his smug expression needing to be wiped off.

“Give it a rest, bro. I'm not in the mood.”

“Now, when I'm Alpha...”

I pitched a paperweight, which was purely ornamental, at his head.

“And one Americano.” I set Harold’s coffee in front of him and flopped in the armchair across from him. Harold and I had been co-workers since we got the idea to do this consulting firm. We’d been college roommates freshman year and somehow managed to not hate each other, sticking together through all four years and then again for two more, for our MBAs. We worked well together. I was more the creative one. He was more the “how to keep track of everything” one.

Together, we’d built up quite a strong company. Each year, we grew and grew. At first it was just the two of us and a shoestring budget. And now? Now we had a staff of eight who were paid well and spoiled with benefits, were looking to add a few more to our list, and stopped living paycheck to paycheck ages ago.

Things had changed a lot since we began. We’d started in an on-campus apartment and were now in our own office space. We didn’t even take a salary for three years, living off our second jobs. But one thing we always did was start our office days with a cup of coffee. In the early days it was a crappy cup made in a drip maker I found at a yard sale. Now it was the good stuff from the local coffee shop next door. But no matter how good or bad the beverage was, it was our tradition and was one thing I hoped would never change.

Today was my turn to bring it, and I was a little bored and decided to mess with Harold. If I didn’t, he might get bored too. It was like I was doing him a favor.

“You know I don’t like Americanos.” He rolled his eyes. “Is this yours?”

“No. It’s yours... a caramel latte. I’m surprised you can’t smell all that sugary syrup from here.” He liked his coffee less coffee and more milk and syrup.

He smiled and picked it up, leaning back in his chair. “I thought it was yours.” He winked. Harold was messing with me right back. Of course he was.

“Like I would actually give you Americano.” He’d just make me go back, or worse, get me one of those sugar bombs when it was his turn. “Why would you even think I would?”

“Because you’re always on me about my sugar.”

“Once, once in college, I told you you probably shouldn’t eat the entire bag of taffy because that much sugar wasn’t good for you. Once.” He was never going to let me forget that. It hadn’t even been a real attempt to get him to change. I was trying to angle for a piece of his candy. That backfired.

“I enjoyed every last bite of it, and I’ll probably do it again.”

He enjoyed every last bite of it because it was his prize sent to him by his sister. I didn’t even know what for, but he won some bet, and he walked around proud as a peacock over it. It was funny—to the outside world, everybody looked at Harold as the straight-laced, prim and proper one, but neither of us were. He just held up the facade better.

“What do we have going on this week?”

“I’m leaving on Wednesday to go to Houston. I’ve got a den there figuring out how to up their game.”

“A what?” I needed to pay attention better. He looked at me, confused. “You said you had a something that wanted to...”

“Oh, a small company...”

That wasn’t what he said, but then again, I’d only been half paying attention.

“They’re working on increasing their reach.”

“Oh. That’s promising.” And well within our wheelhouse.

He went on to talk about how they were a value-added agricultural business, and honestly, I lost track partway through. I’ve been restless lately, beyond restless. Here I had pretty much accomplished my dreams, but still I felt like there was more out there, more that I needed to know, more that I needed to be able to accomplish, which was ridiculous.

You set a goal, you achieved it, then you maybe found a new goal, or maybe, just maybe, you settled down and finally were happy. And maybe that was it. I wasn’t really happy. It wasn’t like I was depressed or anything like that. I was just going through the motions.

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“Well, you can have fun in Texas. I’d rather stay out of the tin cans in the air.” I’d never been a big fan of flying. So if he wanted to take the long-distance gigs, he could have at it. “But don’t think you’re getting out of your coffee days just because you’re not there. I expect mine to be delivered daily.”

He barked out a laugh. “Yeah. Since when did you ever have coffee sent when you weren’t gonna be here?”

“Fair.” I took a long sip of my cafe au lait. Boring, I know, but it was my favorite. “It can be a new tradition.”

He ignored me and instead went through the rest of our agenda for the day, my mind still wandering.

“And don’t forget, we’re going to happy hour tonight,” I reminded him.

“I...” He let out a groan.

“It’s Julie’s birthday, and all she wants is to go to ten-cent wing night.” And goddess knew why they called them ten-cent wings, because they were now 50 cents each, despite the name.

It was Julie’s birthday, and she wasn’t going to be paying, so to her the discount didn’t play a part in it. She just loved the trivia that came with wing night and was really good at it. I was not.

Harold and I always tried to make sure the people that worked for us were happy,

because that was how you got them to continue working for you. No one wanted to go into an office and be underappreciated on a daily basis. That was for sure. And besides, sharing part of our dreams with like-minded people always felt good, too.

“I know... it’s just so people-y there.” He scrunched his nose.

“Yeah, it is, but it’s also ten-cent wing night.”

“Fine, don’t let me forget,” he conceded.

And I didn’t let him forget. At ten to five, I marched back into his office and told to shut down the computer. It was wing night, and we were going to be there with smiles on... and a cake, because birthday.

Everyone from the office came, all ten of us crowding into the little dive bar. We drank pitchers of beer and margaritas, ate gobs of wings, and got more questions wrong on trivia than right—still coming out victorious by some miracle.

We talked about work too much and a little about home lives. Mark just got a cat. Sally was thinking about buying a new sofa. Frances was on the lookout for a new babysitter, not for her children, they were all grown, but for her parrot. It was nice, normal, almost like family, without the whole toxic work vibes. But once again, a feeling that something was missing, a feeling that there could be something more for me, settled in.

Maybe this was what a midlife crisis felt like. I wouldn’t exactly call myself midlife, or at least I hoped I wasn’t at midlife. There was so much left to experience, but I needed to snap out of whatever funk this was, because just going through the motions, was that really life at all?

I paid our tab and went back to my place, where I took a shower to wash the scent of

stale beer and grease off of me before heading to bed. I was really exhausted and made the false assumption that I'd fall quickly to sleep.

Two hours of tossing and turning later, I was still awake, wondering if maybe I should take some time off from work to travel. I could be like one of those vloggers and travel by van across the country. It wasn't my normal thing. I was a homebody, usually, but this feeling that something was missing and I needed to find it was taking root.

And it was hard to find something you'd lost or maybe never had when you didn't know what it even was. Going from one random odd tourist destination to the next was as good of a plan as there was to locate it. It was better than what I was doing about it now, which was exactly nothing.

But first I needed to talk to Harold and see what he thought. We'd been running this together for too long for me to leave him high and dry, especially when he was going to be out of town for a while. And who knew. Maybe by the time he came back, I'd be all settled and living a life of sunshine and rainbows.

Stranger things had been known to happen.

3

GARNER

"Today's the day." I was talking to myself. Even my fox was snoozing, having no interest in our company.

I'd spent a sleepless night, tossing and turning, getting up to pace the floor, my toes curling into the carpet. I'd chugged a bottle of water and stared at the night sky, wondering if Dad was up amongst the stars with the goddess.

On my computer were estimates of what I needed from a business consultant and what I predicted it would cost after trawling websites and chat rooms. After reaching out to former college classmates, I'd been recommended a firm run by a fox shifter. Not that I had any objections to working with humans, but if someone was going to be poking their nose into the division's every nook and cranny, it would be easier if they were a shifter.

The initial inquiry was waiting patiently in my outbox—not that one email locked me into a deal, but before I hit send, I had to be committed to following this through to the end. If I pulled the plug in the middle because I was worried about money, I'd have solved nothing, be left with a large bill, and at a dead end.

Finally, at five in the morning, I sent the email, hoping the MD would check his messages first thing. To have sent the inquiry and not hear back would be agonizing and I might flood their inbox with questions, or worse, call them.

But as I was heading out the door to work, my phone rang. I didn't recognize the number, but that wasn't unusual. New clients often didn't waste time with an email, they phoned, especially if a current customer had recommended us.

As I walked to the car, I opened the laptop to the information I might need if this was an inquiry. I was so focused on who I assumed the caller was that I missed his name, but he was from Denmarke Solutions. Ahhh, the fox shifter consulting firm. I applauded how he got den into the name.

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“I received your email and I’d like to meet you today if that’s possible.”

Today? I wondered if I’d made a mistake. Who had enough spare time that they would schedule a meeting in a few hours? Maybe they were crap at their business and were desperate for clients.

“I have a lunch meeting close to your office and could see you around two?”

That he was going to be working close by gave me a little more confidence that maybe he was booked and busy. But this was so quick, I wasn’t ready. I wanted to ease into it, like a swimmer getting into cold water, rather than diving in head first.

But I heard two voices in my head. Dad telling me to trust my gut and Booker sneering at me for dithering. My gut was empty and needing breakfast, so I didn’t trust it to give me guidance. Instead it was Booker in my head telling me I was destroying Dad’s legacy that spurred me to accept a two o’clock meet-up.

The conversation ended, and instead of driving straight to the office, I stopped for coffee and a croissant, eating them in the café rather than getting takeout. I took my time nibbling and sipping my latte while people-watching. Whenever I wasn’t at work during the day, I’d study passersby, wondering why they were out and about rather than being cooped up in an office. Maybe they were thinking the same about me.

“You’re late.” Of course Booker had to be hovering when I arrived, brushing pastry crumbs off my tie.

I ignored him, because if I gave an explanation, he'd continue badgering me.

"Sleep in?" He was pushing to find out why, and I wasn't giving him anything.

I shoved him out of the way and closed the door, delighted at his folded arms and slack-jawed expression. Maybe I should ignore him more often.

The hours sped away as I prepared what the business consultant would need before making a decision. I flipped through my notes and found his name. Harold. After printing out reams of information, I skipped lunch and regretted it because my tummy grumbled just before two. I made do with a stale cereal bar I discovered at the back of a drawer. Yuck. But if the meeting went well, I'd celebrate with Chinese food.

My assistant buzzed that Joss McLain was on his way up. Who? I got on the phone, telling him to put off Mr. McLain because I had a prior commitment.

"He says he has an appointment. He's from Denmarke Solutions."

"Oh." Perhaps Harold couldn't make it or he thought I wasn't worthy of his time and had sent an underling. Damn! We hadn't met and already there was a sinking feeling in my belly. Thank gods no money had been paid.

I got up and opened the door. Yikes. So many thoughts demanded my attention while my body swayed and my legs buckled. I leaned against the door, thanking it for making me not look like a fool who fainted. I'd probably make an idiot of myself later, but at least I was still standing. Or sagging.

My fox, who'd been bored by my earlier frantic activity, pricked his ears and urged me to shift.

No! Not in the office. Our employees were mostly shifters, but there were humans in

the warehouse, not that our first meeting would likely include a visit to where we housed our goods.

“Joss McLain.” He stuck out his hand, and I stood there, not shaking it but staring at his jaw, his parted lips, and how he wore the heck out of his suit rather than the suit wearing him.

“You were expecting me?”

“Yes.” I recovered enough to get one word out. “Yes.” But I messed up by repeating it. I was making the worst first impression, and if he tried to leave, I’d grab his coat and beg him to stay.

“Garner.” I had a family name, but it was just out of reach. It’d come to me, hopefully in the next few seconds. “Come in. Coffee?” Please say yes because that would give me an excuse to step outside while instructing my assistant.

You can’t let him leave. My fox was prepared to take his fur and leap on the guy.

He’s human.

Why did my life have to be so complicated? Not only was the business at a crossroads but I’d just come face to face with my mate and he had no idea who I was and that I had a fox secreted inside me.

“No, thanks. I’m hyped up on caffeine from my lunch.”

I steeled myself not to glance at his crotch to see if a part of him was up.

“You weren’t expecting me.” It was a statement, not a question. “I can tell by your face.”

I was glad there was no mirror in my office because I expected I'd worn a multitude of expressions in the seconds since we met. I imagined them as a great melting pot, swirling over my face and confusing Joss.

"Harold. I thought it was Harold I was meeting."

A smile tugged at his lips. "Mmmm. Maybe Harold introduces himself as Joss on the phone just to mess with people's heads."

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He was messing with mine, both the one on my shoulders and in my pants.

“Sorry, I was doing two things at once when you called.” Gods, not the way to start a relationship, business or otherwise, by making an excuse. I should have apologized and left it at that.

“Would you prefer to deal with Harold? I’d assumed as you emailed me that it was my expertise you wanted.”

I needed his expertise so badly. Did he give blow jobs that were rated as 10+? And what about kissing or fondling, not to mention being penetrated and tightening around me?

“No, I hope my reaction didn’t give you the wrong impression.”

Joss tilted his head, our gazes locking on one another. He was killing me and he had no idea what he was doing.

“You have a problem you need me to solve.”

Why did he have to put it like that? Yeah, I had a number of them, and only one of them was to do with the business. My head was spinning, I was sweating, and my pants were too small to contain my arousal. But unless Joss was ready to get naked and bend over, none of those problems would be erased.

So, I sat behind my desk to hide my crotch. My voice trembled as I ran over what I needed, and I handed him the points I’d listed that needed immediate attention.

“You need me to build a system from the ground up.”

I nodded because I had to conserve my voice, not wanting to squeak or rasp or twitter.

Foxes don't twitter. My beast was indignant that I was comparing myself to a bird.

Just watch me.

4

JOSS

Getting Redtail Global as clients was a pretty big deal. They were well known for being leaders in their industry, and were going to open a great deal of doors for us just by being one of our clients. Honestly, I'd been a little surprised they didn't do everything in-house.

That surprise ran away very quickly once I got in and saw the hot mess of organization that they had. It was beyond unbelievable that they were managing to be as successful as they were with the system they had in place. It was going to take a lot of work to get it all fixed, but when it did, there was no stopping this company.

When I first went in, it was a job. No big deal. I didn't think much of it other than what it could possibly do for our bottom line. But now that I was here, something had changed. I was excited, and I didn't really want to leave the building... ever. I—I wanted to stay for reasons I couldn't place my finger on..

And no, that didn't have anything to do with Garner, despite how incredibly attractive he was... and kind... and sexy... and did I mention hot? He was a client. Nothing more. Or at least that was what I kept trying to tell myself.

My feelings about Garner were complicated in ways I didn't fully understand. When I thought that he wanted Harold instead of me, something inside me just—well, it struggled. It was jealousy. I recognized it as that. But it made no sense. Since when did I become jealous of Harold?

We were two halves of a whole. We'd worked this entire time together to make this company. Never before did I care who took a job.

Well, that was a lie. If it was a plane-distance type job, I was happy to pass because I preferred the ones I could drive to. But other than that, there was no ownership in any of it. It didn't matter.

Except for some reason, with this one—it did.

But I tried not to think too much about that, instead focusing on all of the things that I could do to help them. It was gonna take a lot. Definitely more than I'd suspected when I gave them a quote. When I mentioned that to Garner, he told me not to worry about the money and to focus on doing it right, so I did. Still... this was an undertaking of mammoth proportions.

It was my third day here, and I was starting the day with Garner, once again. This wasn't how I usually worked. Most companies had a team I met with and I pretty much directed them on what to do. But Garner wanted to be very hands-on, and I did too. His assistant offered to take over multiple times, and one of those times, I swore I'd heard Garner growl.

To each their own. Everyone ran their business the way they wanted it to run. And Redtail had been doing well, even in their disorganization, so if growling fostered that, so be it.

Then again, maybe I wanted him to growl at me, and that was warping my view on

the entire thing. No, that was weird. Why would I want a human to growl?

Because it was Garner. I could see it now: him tossing me on the bed and crawling across it growling. Yeah, that could work. Only no, it couldn't. I needed to shut that shit right down.

Being attracted to my clients wasn't fair. And there was no denying that was exactly what was happening here. I was woefully attracted to Garner, and it had my mind wandering all sorts of places.

Like... if he did growl, would he only do that in bed? Would he say my name under his breath as he did, no matter who was there? Would his eyes be locked with mine? Would he be licking his lip, sharing all of his desire with that one tiny gesture? Would the growl rumble in his chest?

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Yeah. I was being ridiculous. A thousand percent ridiculous. And I needed to get back to work. Only it was difficult with him being so close to me, close enough that I barely had to lean in to be able to touch him.

“I think we’re on the right track.” It was going to be a long-ass track, but at least we knew the direction we were heading, which was miles ahead of the job Harold had recently finished up.

He leaned back in his chair. “I knew it was bad, but I never—I never realized it was this bad. I’m so glad I called you.” He grabbed the back of his neck, and I itched to replace his hands with mine so I could give him a little massage.

I couldn’t help but puff up at his praise—or what I accepted as such. I was glad he’d called me, too. But also, part of me was wondering if things would be better after the job was over. Because then maybe I could, I don’t know, reach out and see if he had any interest in me at all. And no amount of pushing down my feelings was going to change the fact that I wanted this man in a way I’d never wanted another.

There were times when I didn’t think he even noticed me. And others when I wondered if I were the unsuspecting prey.

But one thing was for sure—the time spent here with him was never boring.

“The system you're currently working off of... I'll be quite honest with you—it shouldn't have worked. It should have full-on failed years ago. But you've got good people here, and they work hard. And when I'm done helping you implement this, it won't be as hard for them anymore. And that's when you can grow.”

Gods, I sounded like a sales pitch.

He smiled, his phone going off on the desk for the four bazillionth time since we started. He kept ignoring it, instead focusing on me—until I couldn't take it anymore.

“Please answer that. Maybe someone, I don't know, needs you.”

He met my eyes as if looking for answers, then picked it up and barked a “Hello” into the phone.

“Yeah, I'll be right there.” He shoved the phone in his front pocket. “I'm sorry. I gotta go. There's a situation I need to deal with.”

“Oh, I can leave?—”

“No.” He gave my shoulder a squeeze. “Stay. Do what you need to do.”

And then he walked on his way. And I'd be lying if I said I wasn't watching every single step he took out that door. The man was gorgeous walking toward me, but there was just something about watching him walk away.

I finished going through what we had set for the morning and then went back to my workstation. I didn't love it, because it was away from him, but it was close by. And I had to give them credit—the office was really bright, and even though not everyone had windows, there were lots of glass panels preventing light from becoming blocked.

“Hey, I brought this for you.”

A paper cup was placed in front of me. I looked up. I didn't know the person there, but there was no mistaking it—he was related to Garner. They had similar facial

structures. And their eyes—they were identical, while at the same time being... not.

There was no warmth in these ones, the way there was with Garner's, but the color palette? Identical.

"Thanks?" It came out as a question because I had no idea what was going on. Who this man was. What he wanted.

"I'm Booker. Garner's brother."

I'd known he existed, and there was something about the way Garner said his name that told me there was, at the very least, mistrust between them.

"Oh. Nice to meet you." I didn't give him my hand, hoping he wouldn't notice the slight.

"Aren't you gonna drink it?" So much for that.

"Oh, I'll just let it cool first." Because there was nothing creepy about someone telling you they wanted you to drink. Nope. Especially not when you didn't order it in the first place.

"Are you as good as they say?" The man was standing far too close.

"Oh. Denmarke Solutions? Yeah. We're that good." I didn't pretend to be shy or humble when it came to what our company could do. We were the best. Full stop.

"I didn't mean that." He leaned in, his hand now on the arm of my chair, his face far too close to mine.

I pushed back the chair with my feet and hoped he'd get the hint. He did... but then

went right back to the same position.

Asshole.

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How could he be related to Garner, who was so nice and so considerate?

Booker leaned in closer yet again and inhaled deeply, almost like he was smelling a plant or something.

It was so gross.

“I’m gonna get back to work here. Thanks for the coffee.”

“Yeah. Okay.”

I turned back to my work. But there he stood.

Weird.

5

GARNER

I have to stop this. Joss is our mate!

Red fur rippled over my underarms, and I slammed the door, resulting in Joss’s head swiveling toward the glass panel between his desk and my office. Shit, there was too much glass in this damned place. Every part of my working life was on display, from the window overlooking the street to the panel that allowed my employees to gawk at me. I could hardly lower the blind because it’d be so obvious that I was hiding from or maybe annoyed with Joss.

I mouthed, “Sorry,” and took my laptop to the sofa which was tucked into a corner and hidden from my mate. Fur poked out from my cuffs, and I demanded my fox take back the partial shift. Thank gods none had appeared on my face or Joss would have hightailed it out of here.

Hightailed? Make it make sense.

It’s an expression. We had more to worry about than my beast’s command of English idioms.

My brother, the one who mocked me and who held his breath waiting for me to F up, was chatting to Joss. I’d hired the guy to work, not flirt with my asshat brother. Booker! Always inserting himself where I didn’t want him.

He hadn’t picked up that Joss was my mate, because if he had, he would have carted Joss off to lunch and sent me pics every second of him salivating over my mate-to-be. He’d be in my face, taunting me for my mate being human and how the den might not accept that from their incoming Alpha.

But he was just being Booker, the guy who expected every omega to fall at his feet, profess undying love, only to have my brother lose interest. He needed affirmation, and I wondered what would happen if and when he met his fated mate.

Joss wasn’t his mate, the universe didn’t make mistakes like that. Or I’d never read or heard of any.

Always a first! My fox needed sensitivity lessons.

“You must give me the name of your tailor.”

Ahhh, my super-sensitive shifter hearing allowed me to hear Booker complimenting

Joss. If I accused him of flirting, he'd deny it, saying he just appreciated omegas, unlike me who was more standoffish. For sure he'd add a jab about the business being in better shape if I got along with people.

"I don't have one." There was a pause. "I get my suits from a department store. Off the rack, I think it's called." That was Joss. Poor guy, he was trying to work and Booker was waylaying him.

I had to do something to get my brother away from my mate and to tell him to back the F off.

"Booker!" Shit, that was louder than I'd planned, and Joss jumped, his hands splaying over the keyboard.

"We have that thing in thirty minutes."

My brother's lips curled into a lazy smile. "What thing?" That grin reminded me of the human saying, "Sly as a fox." Ugh! No matter how Booker irritated me, I'd never describe him that way.

Thought it was an idiom, not a saying! If my beast was trying to bug me, he was succeeding.

"I'm sure Joss has plenty to keep him busy." I took my brother's arm and steered him toward the elevator, not trusting myself to take the stairs.

"He'll never leave, trying to fix your mistakes."

I took deep breaths, in and out, in and out. Booker had to think I was annoyed he was wasting Joss's time, not that the human and I had a special connection.

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“Where are we going?” Booker leaned against the back of the elevator while I pummeled the button for the lobby.

“A quick shift. My beast needs out, and I have to escape from the office.”

Booker rubbed his jaw. “Oh, really? When was the last time we shifted together?”

I shrugged, but it had been months. No, years. Since before Dad died.

“You have an ulterior motive. Out with it.”

I jumped into the driver’s seat of my car while my brother leaned into the vehicle on the passenger side.

“Will you just get in?”

“Nah.” He drummed his fingers on the car roof, knowing how that annoyed me.

“You’re deliberately trying to sidetrack Joss so he can’t do the job I hired him for.”

“What?” Booker flounced into the passenger seat, and I reversed, though he hadn’t bothered to put his seat belt on. “I was being nice.”

“Ahhh!” My yell echoed around the car, and I slammed on the brakes, still in the parking garage, and pummeled the steering wheel. “Stop it, Booker. You forget, I know you better than anyone else on the planet, and I can see what you’re doing.”

He smirked but stared straight ahead, pointing out there was a line of cars behind me. Gods, he was so irritating.

“Explain it to me like I’m five. What am I doing that’s got you and your fox so pissed off?”

Oops! Me getting upset he’d understand, but my beast didn’t get involved in our sibling quarrels.

“He’s peeved about English idioms.” If I could have reversed time and taken that back I would have, especially as my brother’s beast thought of nothing except hunting and sleeping and occasionally being snarky.

“Seriously, bro, your fox needs to understand he’s a fox, not a scholar.”

We were getting off the point. So far off that I couldn’t even see that damned tip.

“Just do your work.” Booker accomplished plenty at the office, but he left at five on the dot. His deputy covered for him and did everything my brother didn’t get around to finishing. “And let Joss get on with helping me.”

I’d considered putting Joss into a small office, but I’d needed him close by at the time and had been thankful for that pane of glass. But I’d made a mistake and would rectify that when we returned.

“I don’t need to hamper your little consultant because the task is so overwhelming, I doubt he’ll make much headway.”

I pressed my foot on the gas, ignoring the speed limit as we sped out of town to the area owned by the den. After driving onto the den land, I was so furious with my brother, my hands were fisted, and not bothering to close the car door, I flung off my

clothes as my beast took his fur.

Freedom!

I pulled back, deep inside my fox, and closed my eyes, ignoring the scent of a rabbit. Booker's beast was close behind, but if he started a fight, I'd unleash my anger and wrestle him, biting him hard if I could.

How I wished Dad were here. He'd tell my brother to back off. Unlike Uncle Cyrus, Dad had been able to goad Booker into actually working rather than playing and pretending he was accomplishing anything. Perhaps if my brother met his mate, he wouldn't be as much of an asshat.

But even if my brother's temperament was softened, his beast wouldn't change. He raced past us and snatched the rabbit my beast had been tracking.

Despite my earlier intention to have it out with Booker, I told my fox to ignore him and find more prey. I didn't have the energy for a fight and needed to focus on a) the business and b) how I could introduce Joss to my beast without him running away. Or calling animal control.

My fox focused on a squirrel who'd left the safety of a nearby tree. Big mistake, squirrel, but know that your life wasn't in vain.

We made our way back to the car, and I was dressed and checking my messages when Booker's beast appeared.

"I was always faster than you and could sniff out a rabbit better than your fox. Superior scenting skills." He made the chef's kiss gesture where he kissed the tips of his fingers. Blech, I rued Uncle Cyrus teaching him that when we were kids.

We sat in silence on the drive back to the office. My mind was elsewhere, on Joss, and I'd said all I had to say to my brother. He may not take any notice of what I'd told him, and if he didn't, I might have to lock Joss in a cupboard.

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As long as we're with him, that's fine.

Now that my beast had eaten, he was back to thinking about our mate.

"Remember that if you screw this up and you become Alpha, it'll be your mess to fix." I strode toward the stairs, leaving my words hanging and hoping Booker considered the daunting task of taking over. Of course he'd try to pass it off to his underlings, but if he failed, the council might snatch the role of Alpha from him. Or the business would go belly up and we'd be in bankruptcy court.

Joss had his head down studying spreadsheets and glanced up to give me a brief smile before returning to the reams of pages. Booker didn't follow me up the stairs, so he'd probably taken himself off to an early lunch.

Fine! As long as he left Joss alone.

6

JOSS

I'd been putting in too much actual time at Redtail Global. My job was to consult, and I was taking on an active role. I'd always been good about keeping boundaries and also charging if I needed to go beyond the typical components of my position. But with Garner, he had my head in a tailspin, and I just couldn't keep away.

It was a problem. I knew that from the get-go, but things had finally gotten to the point where I needed to do something about it.

This morning when I woke up, my first thought was wondering if Garner would like my slacks. For some reason that simple thought was exactly what I needed to snap out of this.

It was time to step back from the consulting job. I shot Garner a text letting him know that I'd check on them in a couple of days and to reach out if he had any issues.

Hitting that "send" button took far more energy than any of the monumental tasks I'd done since this project began. Sending it meant I wasn't going to see him today. That... that stung really deeply, only solidifying my resolve. There was a thing called professional boundaries, and somehow, I'd lost track of each and every one of them.

Instead of staying home and having a pity party for one, which would've been really easy to do, I headed into my office. I even stopped at the coffee shop to get Harold the coffee special for the day, as I had my boring café au lait. Maybe if I pretended it was just a normal day, it would feel that way.

"Hey, you." He rocked up as I walked in the doorway. "I wasn't expecting you today. You've been all hands on deck at Redtail."

"Yeah, they needed me... I mean us... They needed us... They needed Denmark Solutions." I was babbling.

Harold gave me a knowing look and pointed to the coffee. "What is that? That's not my caramel."

"No, it's not. It's the special of the day."

"And what is the special?"

"Barista surprise." It was a game I wouldn't play with my coffee, but I didn't love the

sweet foo-foo stuff my friend did. If he hated it, it wasn't far and I could grab him another, but the barista, Sam, had been so excited by her creation, it had been nearly impossible to say no.

"You know it's going to be hazelnut." His head hit the back of his chair. "I hate hazelnut coffee."

"Nope, it's not hazelnut. Promise. I asked." I set the cup in front of him. "You think I'd chance giving you your least favorite flavor? Although I seem to remember a time in our lives when it was your go-to."

"Yeah, that was before I decided to throw rum in my coffee. A lot of rum." He'd been so sick the next day.

College was wild like that, because by any reasonable measure, most of us shouldn't have survived that freshman year. We were just... yeah, making bad choices left and right. And yet, here we were, at the top of our game. Lucky as could be.

"Yeah, I came in today. I was thinking, maybe... maybe this should be your job."

"Why is that?" He sounded gruffer than I'd heard him in a long time. I hadn't meant?—

"I don't know. It's just—getting too involved."

I wasn't one to keep secrets from him, especially not when they had to do with work.

"Involved, meaning?" He got up and walked around his desk, and plopped in the chair beside me.

"You're gonna make me say it, aren't you?" He had a way of making me confess all

things. Always had.

“Now that you say it like that,” he let out a chuckle, “yeah, I think I am gonna need to make you say it. Because what you’ve got to say is clearly a lot more interesting than what I had floating through my head.”

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“Great.” I walked right into that one. “It’s gonna sound like—I don’t know—I need a year-long vacation or something. But ever since the day I first walked into that office and met Garner, it’s like I belong there. Like I need to stay there. Like leaving hurts.”

“I see.” He took a long sip of his drink and set it back down again. “Is that why you’ve been there so much?”

I nodded.

“Anything else I need to know?”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “Yeah, there’s more. I have dreams about the CEO.”

“Unless those are dreams of you harming him, I don’t see what the problem is.”

“No, not those kind of dreams. Like... the other kind.” Please don’t make me tell you they were sex dreams.

He squinched his nose. “I think you’re gonna have to give me more details. Spell it out.”

“You’re enjoying this too much.” I pretended to drink my coffee, which was actually still too hot.

“I am enjoying it. But tell me. What kind of dreams?”

“Naughty dreams, okay?” And they’d become progressively hotter, but I left that part

out. It was already embarrassing enough.

“Anything else?”

Gods, why did I have to open my mouth?

“Yeah, so... he thought you were going to be his point person. And that seemed to really bother me far more than it should.”

Harold’s face got suddenly serious. “Wait, who are we talking about again—still Garner?”

I nodded, and his mouth formed a little “O,” but he quickly schooled it. I brushed it off, because honestly, there was way more going on in this conversation than that.

“Okay, so he wanted me. Not unusual. We’ve always had people who requested each of us specifically.”

Harold said that, but really, there were people who requested him specifically. I didn’t have his popularity. And I wasn’t really sure how he got it, other than, I don’t know, maybe charm, word of mouth. It didn’t really matter. There was plenty of work to go around.

“Yeah, and when he did... I got jealous. Jealous of work. I know, right? It doesn’t make sense. But I guess... I guess what I’m saying is, I think we need to switch. I’ll man here for a little while if you finish up this contract.”

Harold stared at me for a full 30 seconds before speaking again. “Here’s the thing. There’s a lot you don’t know—things he needs to tell you.”

“Are you trying to help with this? This is like a pep talk?” Because if it was, it sure

wasn't working.

"What I mean is... trust me, you want to stay with this job."

"Did I mention his brother's creepy?" I probably should've led with that, because the more I replayed our conversation, the less comfortable with it I became.

"No. But still... think about it... Don't rush off too quickly. This job is exactly where you need to be. I just need you to trust me on this. Have I ever steered you wrong?"

He had me there.

"No. But to be fair, I've steered you wrong multiple times. So it kind of balances out."

"Your logic isn't logicking." He pointed toward the door. "Now go. Skedaddle. Work."

"Yes, sir."

I walked out, just as confused as I was when I went in. Only this time, about different things. Why was Harold so sure I needed to stay there? At no point in the conversation did it feel like he was looking for a way to dodge responsibilities. He had no problem doing the gig, from anything I could tell. It felt like he was being very sincere in his belief that I needed to do it.

It didn't make sense. But also, if Harold was going to give me more information, he'd have already done so. He had his reasons. Would I ever discover what those were? Probably not, but they existed, and if I couldn't trust him now after all these years, I wasn't ever going to be able to.

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I went to my office, sat in my chair with my laptop open in front of me, more of a prop than anything else, and was trying to figure out what to do next, when my phone binged.

It was Garner letting me know it was slow going, but they were making progress. That was my hint that I could take the day to get over these big feelings and get back to work. They had it under control.

Only I did the exact opposite, heading right to their headquarters, only stopping long enough to get Garner a coffee and a muffin. I wasn't even sure if he liked them, but I figured it was the thought that counted.

Goodies in hand, I walked in, ready to conquer the day, choosing to trust Harold and unwilling to stay away any longer.

7

GARNER

As I headed to my office, hiding a yawn behind my hand, I paused.

Joss was leaning against my office door, two coffees in hand and a paper bag with the name of my favorite bakery emblazoned on the side. This had become his habit, and I loved it.

“Rough night?” He wasn't smirking as Booker would have been, but there was concern in his voice and those deep brown eyes.

“Ummm, didn’t get much sleep.” I should have said that I couldn’t sleep because my response suggested I’d been busy, and I didn’t want Joss to think I’d been clubbing or someone was sharing my bed. “Had a lot on my mind,” I clarified.

I took the proffered coffee and gulped a huge mouthful.

“Can you spare ten or fifteen minutes?” Joss jerked his head at the window. “Beautiful day.”

For once I was grateful Uncle had insisted on including a terrace in the new building, and I slid open the sliding door. There was a gentle breeze that ruffled Joss’s hair, and I drank more coffee so he wouldn’t catch me staring.

“I have an ulterior motive for bringing you out here.”

Hmmm. I stared at the street below and the people bustling across the street. “Hoping you’re not planning on throwing me over the railing.”

Joss spat out his coffee, and he wiped his mouth with a paper napkin. “Why would you say that?”

“Because I gave you an almost impossible task and you’ve been buried in paperwork since you got here.”

Joss shrugged. “That’s my job. I pull all the threads together into a manageable strategy so that my clients can do what they do best.”

“Do you say that to all your clients?”

He chortled. “I try to keep upbeat while tearing my hair out, but yeah, pretty much.”

I clutched my chest. “You’re telling me I’m not special? I’m hurt.”

“You definitely are,” he murmured under his breath. He wouldn’t have any idea that I picked up what he’d said. He sipped his drink and his face brightened. “But I have a proposal.”

Oh gods no, not more money. That wasn’t possible.

“I’d like to do a trial run of the new software.”

Did that involve money?

“Okay. What do you need from me?”

“Your time.” He extended his hand toward the doors. “But if we do it here, you’ll be distracted. At Denmarke Solutions, we prefer to take the CEO out of their regular environment so we can introduce and review our solution and conduct training.”

It would be more beneficial if he trained the entire department, though goosebumps paraded over my skin when I pictured Joss and me having a candlelight dinner. But when I brought it up—about my employees, not the romantic evening—he explained I needed to approve the new system first.

But I didn’t want to, because when I did, Joss’s contract would end and he’d leave. I plastered a smile on my face and agreed because I had to put the business and the den before my personal feelings, and Joss didn’t know who I was. He might not like me, as we’d not shared a meal or talked of anything besides work.

“I’m in. Should we rent a meeting room somewhere?” We had plenty of space, but if I was on the premises, my staff would badger me with questions.

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“No, a hotel. Our company gets a special rate, as we stay there frequently. I’ve booked us two rooms for three nights.”

I relished being away from the office and spending time with Joss without my brother inserting himself in our conversations. But there was ading, ding, dingin my head when he mentioned a hotel. Nights under the same roof as my mate. If we had adjoining rooms, I could put my ear to the connecting wall and listen to him breathing. Not creepy, especially for a shifter.

I had twenty-four hours to organize everything at the office. Luckily, there were no pending shipments, as the last one for the month was dispatched this morning.

While I hadn’t slept much last night, I didn’t close my eyes this evening while staring at the time and calculating how many hours before Joss picked me up. It was a little odd that the consultant was driving, and it was rare that I sat in the passenger seat. Booker was a maniac behind the wheel, and Uncle Cyrus had a driver, one of many luxuries he refused to give up.

An hour before the alarm went off, I was showered, dressed, and standing by the window waiting for Joss to pull up. The house was locked, plants watered, and I’d instructed my fox to be on his best behavior..

Five minutes away, he texted.

That was my signal to hotfoot it outside. If the new system made no improvements to the business, I’d have to sell my home and move to a smaller one, though if we went bankrupt, I might be couch surfing.

“Hi.”

I’d never seen my mate in anything but a suit, and while it was a cliché, he took my breath away. Literally. He was wearing jeans that fit so snugly, my eyes were drawn to his crotch. His tee showed off his bulging muscles. He must go to the gym regularly. If he needed to work out while we were at the hotel, I’d offer my services. Sex used a lot of calories, or so I’d read.

“Morning.” I put my bag in the back and tried to buckle the seat belt, but it wouldn’t lock in.

“Let me help you. It’s a little cantankerous.” When Joss grabbed the belt and inserted it, his fingertips brushed over me, and I shivered. He made no comment, but he had to have witnessed the goosebumps scurrying over my skin.

After a satisfying click, my mate lifted his head, and his eyes met mine. For a second, I thought he was going to kiss me, and I almost closed my eyes and puckered my lips.

But I was disappointed.

“There you go. All done.” He held my gaze longer than was the norm, and my chest was so tight, I couldn’t get air into my lungs. I longed to pull him closer and plant my lips on his, but the voice in my head, not my beast, whispered that I was doing this for the pack.

We chatted while he drove out of town and headed in the direction of the den land, but Joss turned off the highway beforehand.

“This is a small family-run hotel, not part of a huge chain, so I hope you won’t be disappointed. There’s no ballroom or boutique, but there is hiking, waterfalls, and stunning views.”

I doubted we'd have much time outside the hotel, but I wasn't a fan of the ubiquitous hotel that could be translated anywhere in the world.

"This is lovely." We pulled up, and I admired the wooden building that was originally built in the early twentieth century. The same family had owned it for over a hundred years.

The manager greeted Joss like the regular guest that he was. My belly roiled when I thought of other alphas he'd brought here. Had their business relationship morphed into something more personal?

"Joss, I must apologize."

Oh no, they don't have a room or it'd been renovated or a water pipe burst.

"There's been a mistake. The booking system allocated you one room instead of two. My sincere apologies." He explained our first night was complimentary, but I was picturing me in bed with my mate. Or maybe we'd argue about who would have the bed while the other slept on the couch.

"Sounds as though you need my services, Luke." Joss turned to me, a plea in his eyes. But I didn't speak silent-message Joss. Was I supposed to say that was fine or suggest we leave? I wanted to stay. I'd sleep on the floor if I got to stay in the same room as my mate.

"I think we'll be fine for a few nights."

Joss mouthed, "Thank you." But I couldn't figure out if that was because he didn't want to cause a scene or he couldn't be bothered returning to the city.

I paused in the doorway before entering our room. The bed was a wooden four-poster

with a handmade quilt and piled with embroidered cushions. There was a chest at the foot of the bed, and with the wooden dresser and oval mirror, it reminded me of a film set in the nineteenth century.

“This is lovely.” But along with the old charm was a settee, not a plush twenty-first century sofa. The floor would definitely be more comfortable than that.

“There is a bolster.” Joss pointed out the long cushion that ran the width of the bed. “We could put that between us as the unmarried omega used to do in movies when forced to share a bed with the other main character.”

That bolster needed to be tossed out the window, but I offered to take the settee.

“You won’t get any sleep on that.”

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Sleep was the last thing on my mind.

8

JOSS

From the moment I heard there was only one room, I knew I was in trouble. It was already hard enough being around Garner—the pull to brush past him a smidgeon too close so that our bodies touched, to reach out and grab his hand, to sit close enough to feel his breath—it was all getting stronger and stronger by the day.

I'd been able to refrain. There were times I'd catch myself just on time, but I managed. But now? Now we were sharing a room. One room. One bed. A sad little settee that could barely hold a throw pillow or the floor were our only other options. I was in trouble. Big trouble.

The moment we stepped into that enclosed space together, all I wanted was to wrap my arms around him and pull him in close.

So instead of getting myself fired, sued, or worse... rejected, I panicked. I announced that I needed food and walked out the door like that would fix the problem. Obviously, I couldn't hide from him the entire trip, and honestly, I didn't want to. But this—whatever this thing between us was—wasn't exactly appropriate. I needed air and time to compose myself.

I took the stairs instead of the elevator. Burning off the energy might help, and waiting for the elevator meant it was easy enough for me to go back and pull him in

for that kiss. This was better.

When I hit the bottom landing, there he was... Garner, waiting, a smile already on his face. What was funny about me walking out on him, not even offering to bring him back food?

“Were you planning on taking us somewhere that required cardio first?” he teased.

He was kidding. Probably. Maybe. I didn’t know. Something in him had shifted. He seemed almost... giddy.

Then he reached out and took my hand. Just like that. Reach and grab as if it were the most natural thing in the world. And the really messed-up thing was, it was.

“I get it,” he said gently, giving it a squeeze. “We don’t have to talk about it. But I get it.”

And then he led me out onto the street, and suddenly all that spinning—my mind, my emotions—stilled and centered right where our hands touched. I didn’t care about work or boundaries. I didn’t care about what this meant for the company or the contract. All I cared about was him and where our bodies met.

“You don’t have to hold my hand,” I murmured.

“No,” he said, and brought it to his lips. “But I want to. Is that okay?”

I nodded, heart thumping loudly in my chest. “Yeah. It’s okay.” It was more than okay. It was everything.

We walked a few blocks to a Mediterranean place and grabbed a table. I ordered the first thing I saw because I didn’t want to take my eyes off him long enough to read

the menu. We didn't talk about what was happening between us—we didn't need to. Acknowledging it in silence felt like enough. And when dinner was over, he took my hand again as we stepped outside.

We barely made it half a block before he pulled me into a shadowed alleyway, crowding me gently against the brick.

“Tell me you want this too,” he whispered, voice rough, mouth hovering just above mine.

I didn't answer with words. I tilted my chin up and kissed him—soft at first, just a brush. Then again. And again. Until his lips parted and his tongue swept into my mouth like he'd been waiting all night.

My knees wobbled. I clutched his jacket.

“This will change things,” I said when we broke apart. “But I'll still get the work done.”

Garner smiled, leaning close, lips brushing my cheek. “Oh, it's definitely going to change things. And I don't care about the work right now.”

Truth was, I didn't either. Harold would understand—or not. But that was a worry for tomorrow.

“Let's go back to the hotel.” I couldn't wait to peel his clothing from his body.

He pulled back enough to grin, his eyes looking at the bulge in my pants.

“We should probably wait a minute.” I gestured to the very obvious erection he was sporting.

“I don’t have to hide mine,” he said, bold and warm. “No one could see you by my side and be shocked.”

Back in the room, we barely had the door shut when both our phones started ringing. Mine was Harold—of course it was Harold. Persistent bastard. I stepped into the hallway to answer it while Garner fielded a call of his own, something about Denmarke. When I came back in, he was pacing in front of the window, still mid-call, so I slipped into the bathroom for a second, took a breath, and let the heat in my face settle before cleaning up a bit.

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When I came out, he was hanging up.

“Everything okay?” I asked.

“Yeah. My brother is being my brother.”

“Oh—I thought it was work.”

He shook his head. “Yes and no. But even if it was news that the company was part of a hostile takeover, it could wait. I have much better things to do right now.”

Then he disappeared into the bathroom with a wink. Gods, he was going to be the death of me.

Garner was still brushing his teeth or whatever when I crawled up onto the mattress, already half laughing at myself for how obvious I was being. I’d pulled the sweater I borrowed from him on—if borrowing meant stealing it from the back of the chair—and curled up against the pillows.

He stepped out a minute later, towel around his neck, face freshly scrubbed, and just... stopped when he saw me.

“You okay?” he asked, as if I hadn’t just made the most obvious invitation in the world. Even the front desk clerk gave me a knowing smirk.

“I’m great,” I said, patting the mattress next to me. “But I’d be better if you were right here.”

His smile turned crooked in that way that made my stomach drop. “You sure?”

“I wouldn’t be asking if I wasn’t.”

Garner came over, the weight of him dipping the mattress as he sat beside me. “Touching okay?”

“Please,” I said, without hesitation.

His hand landed on my thigh, warm and solid. My breath caught. He leaned in slowly, kissing my cheek, then my jaw. I tilted toward him, instinctive and ready.

“You want to stop, say it,” he whispered.

“I won’t,” I whispered back, already tugging at the hem of his shirt. “But I will tell you if anything’s off.”

His eyes told me he wanted this as much as I did, but I believed one hundred percent that if I asked him to stop at any point, he immediately would. I was safe in this man’s arms.

“Good,” he murmured. “That’s really good.”

We kissed again, but this time it was different, as if it was somehow more important. Slow at first, curious and sweet. But it didn’t stay slow. Not when he climbed over me, eyeslit up and hungry, almost animalistic. He grinned so warm I felt worshiped, desired, needed. I laughed when he straddled me, my back hitting the sheets. The playfulness came easy, something I’d never experienced before.

“You’re so goddamn beautiful,” he said, hands framing my face.

I gave him a look, that based on his response, shouted my insecurities.

“I’m saying it because it’s true, not to get you into bed.” He kissed my forehead. “I have to admit, I like being up here—I can’t wait to see you come apart underneath me.”

“Yes. Please. Now.” I was to the point of begging.

“Oh,” he sassed, “I intend to.”

Clothes came off in bits and pieces—mine first, then his. There was laughter and playfulness between kisses. He teased my choice in sweaters; I pointed out his bear socks. That kind of thing. But it felt right, safe. And when he finally settled between my legs, both of us bare and shaking a little, I cupped his face and kissed him slowly.

“I want you,” I said. There was no point hiding it or being coy. We were adults, communication was key.

“Then you’ll have me.”

He reached for the lube I hadn’t even seen him bring in. Not that I needed it. I was so slick and ready for him, something he noted as his fingers circled my entrance, and then one slipped in, sliding in and out until I was bucking beneath him. That’s when he added a second and then finally a third.

Every shift, every motion came with soft check-ins: “Still good?” “This okay?” “Too much?”

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Each time I answered, at first quietly, almost unsure because I'd never been treated this way before, but as my need ratched up, my answer became please.

"I need you inside me." I grabbed his shoulders, pulling him closed. "Please."

"If you insist." He gave me a searing kiss before lining himself up with my entrance and slowly entering, inch by glorious inch, until he bottomed out. He stayed there, watching my face, his eyes glued to mine.

"You feel so—" He pressed his forehead to mine.

"I know the feeling," I moved my hips. "Now move already."

He barked out a laugh. "Bossy much?"

Before I could sass back, he did. Slowly at first and then faster and harder, my hips bucking beneath him. He thrust into me over and over again, his hands wandering, his mouth finding mine for brief heated kisses. I wrapped my legs around him, unwilling to let him disappear, even for a second.

It was fucking amazing.

"Garner." I wasn't even sure what I was asking for.

"I've got you." He waited until I met his eyes and said again, "I've got you."

And he did.

I held back my orgasm as long as I could, wanting this moment to last longer, but eventually there was no keeping it back, my cum shooting between us with barely a brush of his hand. He sped up slightly, and moments later he followed, his cum shooting into me, his knot growing—filling me to the point where it hit that fine line between pleasure and pain. Gods, this man was amazing.

We stayed tangled up after, connected by his knot, breathless and sweaty. My eyes fluttered closed, my consciousness slipping away, the orgasm taking everything out of me.

The last thing I remembered hearing before falling asleep was the word, “Mate.”

Did he think this was a game of chess? If so, he definitely won.

9

GARNER

I woke early, but not because I couldn't sleep. Whoever designed the rooms had placed a twentieth-first century mattress on the four-poster. Thank gods.

Nope, I pulled myself awake because I didn't want to miss one minute of being beside my sleeping mate.

He's your mate but you're not mated.

I could always count on my beast to keep me up to date.

Not wanting to disturb Joss, I lay still, content to have his body resting against mine. Lying underneath sumptuous bedding with a proper goose feather quilt was a luxury, though I'd had to calm my fox when he scented the feathers, thinking there was prey

in the bed. I stifled a laugh as I pictured Joss being woken up by a fox attacking the quilt and feathers flying everywhere.

I almost did it.

Very glad you didn't.

Joss stirred, and my breathing sped up as I practiced what to say and how to position myself. I got up on one elbow, thinking that was a sexy position. But would Joss appreciate opening his eyes to me posing like a model? Perhaps not.

Rolling onto my side facing him, I reconsidered when I pictured it from my mate's point of view. With eyes drilling into him, just inches from his face, he might freak and leap out of bed.

I rolled the other way, then got on my belly, but ended up pulling the quilt up to my chin and closing my eyes.

There was always the possibility that the morning after the night before would be awkward, especially if it was a one-and-done. And though Joss was my happy ever after, I couldn't read his mind

"You move around a lot."

My eyes snapped open. "Sorry, did I wake you?"

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“No, I assumed you were tired and were trying to go back to sleep.”

“Nah, it’s all good.”

Joss sat up and tucked a pillow behind him. He folded his arms, not a good sign when the omega you had sex with was protecting himself with a barrier.

“Did you want to talk?”

I didn’t. I wanted breakfast and more sex, in that order, but “talking” suggested we had to examine what and why we did what we did.

“Ummm...” It was best to jump right in and get it over with. If the discussion went south—the only thing I wanted headed in that direction was my mouth, sliding over his skin—I hoped we could act professionally so Joss could finish the job he’d be contracted to do.

“I don’t regret having sex with you and would like to have more.” Hmmm, that wasn’t the impression I wanted to give. Sounded as though I wanted him for a sex toy. “And I’d like to get to know you better.”

A ghost of a smile appeared on his lips. “I second that.”

My belly grumbled, and Joss cupped his ear. “Hark! Someone is trying to tell us something.”

The tension that I’d bottled up inside me burst out, and I snorted. “It’s not very

subtle.”

Now we had the should we or shouldn't we decision of did we shower together or should I assume Joss wanted to be alone.

“Let's get room service.”

One pitfall avoided.

He pulled up the menu on his phone, and we ordered a variety of hot and cold dishes. Vigorous sex had made me hungry, but it was the intimacy, the closeness with my forever mate, that had me ravenous.

Joss put on a robe and signed for the food, and I crawled to the bottom of the bed and stole a piece of bacon.

“Ahhh, you're that sort of breakfast person.”

Lying on my face and studying Joss upside down, I held up what remained of the piece. “Want some?”

He tapped his lips. “Let me think. Do I want to eat the remains of some bacon when you've devoured most of it?” He grabbed another piece and shoved the whole bit into his mouth. His cheeks bulged, reminding me of a chipmunk. But the best part was when he finished and licked the bacon grease off his lips.

I was jealous of his tongue because I wanted to do that.

“Coffee?” He held up the pot.

“Please, with just a touch of milk.”

He raised a brow. “Really? I prefer my milk with coffee. Just shows how different we are. ”

If he only knew just how true that was, seeing as he was human and I wasn’t.

Turned out my mate liked runny eggs, while that grossed me out. He spread lashings of butter on his toast, and I tamped down the desire to talk of cholesterol.

“That was so good.” My mate only had one coffee while I drained the pot.

Now that my belly was sated, I was looking forward to giving him a blow job. If he was into it.

Stop! You have to introduce me to him.

I can’t do it inside. He might jump out the window. We were only on the second floor, but humans were fragile.

Joss picked up the now-empty pot. “We should order more because we have a lot to get through.”

I guessed he was talking about work, not us giving one another mutual blow jobs. It was why we’d come here, but now that we’d had sex, work was far from my mind.

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“Perhaps we shouldn’t do it in the room.” I jerked my head at the rumpled bed.

“Right, the staff will want to clean it.”

He was so adorable I wanted to plant my lips on his, but my brother phoned, and I told Joss to shower first. I was reluctant to remove his scent from my skin, but I was covered in dried sweat and slick.

“How’s it going?” Booker was never interested in what I was doing unless I was F-ing up and he announced he could do better.

“Fine.”

“Is it going to rock your world?” He was referring to the new systems Joss had designed.

“It already has.” I said it with such finality I heard the whoosh of air from my brother's mouth.

“Okay then... I’ll let you get on with it.”

I wished it was, theitbeing back in bed with my mate or out in the woods, taking my fur and showing him who I really was.

“See you soon.”

He ended the call, but I wasn’t going to waste time thinking of my brother when my

mate was in the bathroom, naked and standing under a steaming stream of water.

I must have stood still, daydreaming about bending over a very wet Joss and plowing into him, because suddenly he was in front of me, dressed in a soft white robe and asking if I was okay.

“Fine.” I waved the phone at him. “Booker just being his usual self.”

“I sense some rivalry between you. What’s that about?” Joss toweled his hair.

I screwed up my face in anit’s nothingkinda way. “The usual sibling crap.” Discussing Booker was not on my to-do list during our stay.

“Your turn.”

“To do what?” Damn, my brother being in my head, I’d lost track of what my mate was saying.

“Shower?” He made a face. “Unless you’re one of those people who believes water and soap remove the natural oils from your skin.”

“Definitely not.” I was a two showers a day guy.

I went into the bathroom, swaying my butt and hoping Joss was looking. Again, it was Booker’s fault I didn’t get to be naked with my mate while soaping his body.

Anything that went wrong today, I was going to blame on my brother.

“There are secluded tables on the terrace where we won’t be overheard.” I followed Joss as he led me outside.

But with a view of the woods, my beast clamored to be let out.

“You don’t enjoy the great outdoors.” Joss opened his laptop as he spoke. It was a statement.

“Why do you say that? I leave the city at least twice a week and spend time on land the company owns.”

My mate peered at me over his computer. “Never would have guessed. The look on your face said otherwise.”

This is your fault, wanting to shift without me talking to Joss first. Back down.

My fox grumbled about never having any fun, but he curled up and said he was going to nap.

Joss ordered coffee but waited until the waiter delivered it before placing the computer between us. “Are you ready for this?”

I shuffled my chair closer to his so our thighs were touching. “For it to revolutionize my life and save the company from going ass up? Absolutely.”

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Focus, Garner. I told myself. My skin tickled as it rubbed against my mate's leg. I had to put Joss, my mate, out of my head, and treat him as the consultant he was.

“Let's do this because time is running out.”

10

JOSS

It was time to go back to the real world. No more nice rooms with only one bed. No more arms wrapped around me all night long. No more Garner and I spending all of our time together. Nope. We were going back to our normal life.

I was dreading it.

There was no part of me that wanted to leave our room to go to our meetings, much less leaving it for the last time. It had been like a private oasis—just the two of us, tucked into this tiny, borrowed slice of just us—and now it was like we were being thrown into a tub of ice water.

There was a possibility I was being a wee bit dramatic about the whole thing, but I couldn't help it. I wanted to be grumpy about it, to sulk, to do all the unproductive things one does when they're disappointed. But instead, I slipped on a happy face and suggested we go to lunch after the closing meeting at eleven.

It wasn't the same as hiding out from real life in our room, but it meant we'd get that much more time.

We ended up at a little sandwich place across the street. It was nothing special, but it was fast, and we didn't have much time if we wanted to get home according to plan. Which I didn't, but I could hardly approach that subject.

The shop was loud, crowded, the kind of place that seemed to funnel every sound right into your ears. It was annoying but better than the alternative, which was to already be on our drive home.

We smushed ourselves into a tiny table for two. Our knees kept brushing under the table, not in some flirty, intentional way—just because there literally wasn't space not to. I didn't move mine, not wanting to lose the contact. This might be the closest I'd get to him again.

My sandwich was... fine, I guess. It tasted like... a... sandwich. But I could barely pay attention to what I was chewing. My entire focus was on the man in front of me—on his face, the way his brow crinkled as he concentrated on unwrapping his food, the way he smiled at me when he caught me looking. It was safe to say that I had officially become an expert in watching Garner. It was my new second-favorite thing. The first-favorite thing... not the stuff I wanted to do in public.

There was so much I wanted to say.

And I would say it. But not today. And definitely not here.

I liked him. I more than liked him. I wanted him for more than just this trip, more than a weekend in a hotel room. I wanted to find out what it would feel like to have him be part of my regular life. I wanted to text him about silly things and fall asleep next to him without wondering how many hours we had left before checkout or if there was enough gas in the company car we'd taken.

But reality was here again, despite my best efforts to pretend otherwise. It had slipped

into the tiny booth beside us like a third wheel, and part of that reality was that he'd hired my company. Nothing we did was appropriate. In fact, it was the stuff lawyers drooled over and HR had nightmares about.

I needed to finish the job. After that... maybe we could be something. Maybe we'd become more than something. Or maybe we wouldn't. Maybe this was all he wanted. There were far too many maybes for me.

I didn't like not knowing. Not that I had a choice in it. Because we hadn't talked about any of it. Not one single thing.

Which was ridiculous, considering how good he was at communicating during sex. Every step of the way, he made sure I was comfortable, checked in with every new position, every caress. But the rest of it? The real-life stuff? It was like it didn't exist between us. And I was just as much to blame. I hadn't asked, hadn't nudged us toward that conversation.

Because I didn't want to risk it. I didn't want to hear him say no, say that this was a one-time thing, that it didn't mean anything. What would I have done then? Cried? Pretended I didn't care? Lied and said, "Yeah, me neither?"

There was no good outcome there. So instead, I shoved it all down and tried to pretend it didn't matter. But that was getting exponentially harder the closer we got to going home.

"You didn't like your sandwich," Garner said, drawing me out of my spiral. He was looking down at my barely touched food.

"It's fine," I said, which was always the biggest lie.

"Fine is never fine," he said, starting to stand. "Let me get you something else?—"

I grabbed his hand. “No, really. I’m fine. I’m just not a big lover of the travel part of traveling.”

What I didn’t say was: I’m not a big lover of the going-back-alone part. That I was going back to my life, I was going back to my place, a place that suddenly felt too quiet, too empty. A place that needed him. What was it about this man?

“Thanks for coming with me.” Garner sounded like he was going to say more and then didn’t.

When the silence started to get awkward, I finally responded. I wasn’t sure what more I wanted him to say. No, that was a lie. Not too deep down, I knew. I just wasn’t ready to admit it yet.

“Sure. It was a lot to dig into, but I think it was good.”

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“Good for work.” Something about the word work felt like a sucker punch. He didn’t mean anything by it. Of course he was talking about work. We both were. It was a work trip. And yet, it felt like a good-bye—one I wasn’t ready for.

“I was interested in possibly reaching out about the beta testing they’re doing on the new app for employee phones.” And just like that, our lunch pivoted into a full-on business meeting.

Exactly as it should be.

His brother called in the middle of it—again. That seemed to be Booker’s new favorite thing to do... pestering his brother. I’d worked with Garner enough to know this wasn’t how it normally was, and I couldn’t help but wonder why he was being like this. It was weird, because each time Garner answered, he sounded less and less impressed. I didn’t know if that was just sibling stuff or if there was something beyond that.

Not that I was going to ask. I couldn’t even ask him if he wanted to date me. I probably shouldn’t be poking around in family business either.

The drive home was filled with a lively and far-too-thorough discussion of the pros and cons about the beta-testing offer. Ultimately, we decided it probably wasn’t for the best, given that we hadn’t fully integrated their systems yet. There was already enough trial and error going on.

It was good, in a way. Talking about work gave me something to focus on. Something that wasn’t how badly I wanted to kiss Garner again, how much I was

hoping for a sign that this wasn't ending when he dropped me off, how much I wanted to reach across the seat and take his hand.

"You're probably exhausted," he said when we pulled up to my place.

It was at that moment I wished we hadn't made the deal where I'd pick up the company car and drive us there and he'd do the return trip. It would be easier to drop him off than it was going to be to walk away from him. I hadn't even opened the car door yet and I was already struggling.

He popped the trunk and climbed out, already walking around to grab my suitcase. I followed, not for wanting to go but needing to be close to him.

As I reached him, he gave me a look I couldn't quite decipher. Worry, maybe? I went with that, saying "I'm tired" as a way to comfort him.

Only I wasn't tired. Or maybe I was beyond tired. It wasn't like we'd gotten a lot of sleep. But that wasn't why I was off, and I very much was off.

I wanted to ask him in and was struggling with deciding if I should. I wanted to tell him to stay, just one more night. One more day of pretending like this was real life, like this was just our life.

But I didn't. It wasn't appropriate. It was a work-trip fling, nothing more. At least not yet.

I thanked him, grabbed my suitcase, and rushed inside, not daring to look back.

I didn't even have the suitcase fully in the house before I was already regretting my decision.

I should have asked.

I should have said something... done something... been braver.

But I didn't and wasn't.

And now I was standing in my entryway, staring at the door, heart thudding, wondering if it was too late. Wondering if I'd just walked away from something that could have been everything.

I was just scared.

Scared that if I took the leap, he wouldn't be there to catch me.

So maybe this was better.

Even if it sucked.

11

GARNER

I peered at Joss's empty chair, wishing he was here.

That was the problem with consultants; sometimes they were here, other times they worked for you remotely, and some days they were with other clients. My inner green-eyed monster roared at the idea of another customer being at the hotel with my mate.

What monster? Where? Anyone else comes in here and I'm going to kick their butt.

It's an expression. Refers to jealousy.

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If any of my shifter kin created an English Idioms Course for Shifter Beasts, I'd enroll mine. Not sure how it would work, though, because I'd have to be present too. Hmmm, I'd have to think about that. Someone would have to work out how to separate us first.

No way!

Yeah, that's not happening. Don't worry.

Back to what I was contemplating earlier which was... damn, missing my mate. It was easier wrestling with my fox about English idioms.

Staring at the empty chair as if by doing so I could make Joss materialize, I sighed 'cause nothing happened. And I'd given him my chair, the brand-new one I wasn't keen on, and he'd loved it. Should have gifted it to him.

No. He'd never come back if you did that.

Good thinking.

This relationship that wasn't one had been going on for months, and I hadn't revealed who I was to Joss. We'd had sex many times, had casual, work-related coffees, and while he'd never come out and confronted me, I sensed he expected us to move forward. And he was right, but it was me being a chicken that had us treading water.

"You look as though someone hid your puppy." Booker leaned over my shoulder. He knew from years of experience that saying "hid" instead of kicking didn't have me

breaking down in tears and pummeling him with my fists, though hiding a pet was also pretty bad.

“Do you have to sneak up on me? That’s creepy.”

“You should have scented me, but you were in your head and oblivious to anything else.”

Damn, he knew me too well. But while he could fuck with my head, perhaps he could give me advice. I dragged Booker into my office and closed the door.

“Oh no. This is serious.” He plonked himself on the sofa and put his feet up. “Hit me.”

“Promise not to snark, whine, or bitch. Or freak out.”

“I’ll do no such thing.” My brother folded his arms.

“Why is everything so hard? Just be my brother, not an asshat, and don’t mention how you’re going to be the Alpha when I F up the company.”

Booker’s face softened, and he rolled his eyes. “I’ll try. No promises, though.”

That was as good as he’d give, and I had to be satisfied with it.

“I met my mate.”

That got a reaction, and he leaped off the sofa and grabbed me by the shoulders.

“Your one true mate? Are you sure?”

I shoved him back onto the couch and nodded.

“That’s huge.” He looked under the sofa. “Where is he? Have you marked him? When can I meet him?” Booker furrowed his brow, and he smirked. I knew he couldn’t go five minutes without sporting his trademark expression.

“Have you told him every horrible thing I ever did to you and he refuses to meet me?” He tossed a cushion into the air. “Bro, I need to meet this guy and soon.”

Taking a deep breath and telling myself the worst that could happen was my brother reported me to the council and asked that I be removed from the line of succession. I’d survive, maybe even welcome being pushed aside.

“He’s not a fox shifter.”

Booker shrugged. “Okay, but I hope he’s a mammal and a predator, because shifting with a dragonfly won’t be much fun.”

Another breath. Maybe two more. “You don’t have to worry about that.”

“Excellent.”

“Because he is...” I paused, because once I said it, it was out there forever and there were no take-backsies. “Ummm, he’s human!”

“What?” That got my brother off the couch again. “Bro, that is going to cause so many problems.”

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Again, my brain paused because Booker hadn't lobbed the insult I'd been expecting. And what he said was right. It wouldn't be easy, and we had obstacles to overcome. Big ones.

"Humans are ignorant of our world. How can he be integrated into your life and the pack?"

There was only one answer to that. "By being honest."

Booker stood before me and said to straighten up. He always complained about me slouching my shoulders.

"As you're talking to me and your mate isn't around, my guess is he didn't take it well. Bet your fox hates him now."

"No, no, and no." No matter how Joss reacted, my beast would always adore him, as I would.

"Great."

Booker's one-word answer unnerved me more than him haranguing me, and I tore off my nail and regretted it.

"I've not told him." I positioned myself near the door so I could make a quick escape if needed.

My brother dragged me to the couch and plonked me down. "You gotta tell him,

Garner. This is eating you up inside.”

True. I narrowed my eyes at Booker because he was being, for him, kinda, sorta supportive. “Why are you being so nice?”

He made a face. “Nice? Don’t call me that. I’m the ass who calls you out on your shit. That’s my job.”

“Fine, Mr. Nice Guy. So what do I do?”

My brother shrugged. “You’re asking me how to deal with a human? I don’t know. Watch a rom com or read a romance novel? All I’ve gleaned from living among them is that humans like and expect to date.”

Dating, yeah, we’d had business lunches and coffee meet-ups to discuss work, but we’d never gone out purely for pleasure and to get to know one another. The three days away didn’t count. That was work and with a ton of sex thrown in.

“Now spill. Who is it?”

“Joss.”

“Who?”

That was how much my brother was interested in what I did in the office. Other than criticizing me, he paid little attention.

“The consultant? The one you were flirting with?”

“Jog my memory, bro.”

“The guy who’s helping the division get out of the huge-ass hole we’re in.”

“Oh, that guy? I never flirted with him.”

Booker wasn’t lying. That was just his usual spiel when he met someone new. Turn on the charm to make a good impression.

“If I’m flirting with a guy, I charm the pants off them, and much as I like humans, I wouldn’t consider one for my mate.” At my sharp intake of breath, he continued.

“Tossing a human into our world complicates our life.”

I understood where he was coming from. If Joss had been a shifter, we would have mated, marked one another, and been living together. And placing a human into a world of predators where whenever I shifted, my beast killed another creature, might be too much.

Most humans didn’t enjoy watching a fox fell a bunny and eating it because they were shielded from the realities of life. They bought their meat at the grocery store or a market and didn’t witness the animal being killed.

Booker got up and clapped me on the shoulder. “You better figure it out because your beast will take his fur without your permission if you don’t.” He waved. “Good luck, and if you need a buddy when you shift the first time, let me know. My beast is so damned cute.”

He isn’t. He just thinks he is. My fox had a running beef with my brother’s, much like us when we were in human form.

Sitting at my desk, I scrolled through dating suggestions, but they were all so blah. I wanted to do something exciting like stargazing or paragliding, but perhaps I should lower my expectations. If Joss broke his neck or was scared of the dark, it would set

back the shifter reaction timetable by months or years.

Keep it simple.

But I should wait until the contract was complete and the work finished before I invited Joss on a date. That was more professional, though us having sex was amateur hour. How was I supposed to wait until then? I'd have to immerse myself in work, so I buckled down.

One piece of expensive rare silk was wending its way to a client, and I was determined it would not be lost or stolen. I had a photo of the fabric in a digital sticky note on the computer, and I marveled at the exquisite craftsmanship that created it. That was what my division was all about. Beautiful, rare pieces created with skills passed down for generations.

But every few minutes, Joss crept into my head. I put on my noise-canceling headphones and told him to keep out.

I turned the music up louder.

12

JOSS

The Redtail Global job was almost done. It should've felt like a triumph, something I could be proud of, a professional milestone. But instead, I sat at my desk with a cooling cup of coffee in front of me. I didn't even want it, but it was Harold's turn this week, and I didn't have the heart to turn it down.

I didn't want the contract to be finished, to be in the office away from Garner, or to make small talk with my business partner, but here I was. What I wanted, what I couldn't stop thinking about, was getting going to Redtail. Not for the project. No. To see Garner.

I wanted to see him. Touch him. Be near him.

We hadn't defined what we were—if we were anything at all. Friends with benefits at best. Coworkers with benefits, maybe. Or possibly not even that. Maybe we were just people who'd gotten caught up in a moment—fine, several moments, and were pretending it hadn't meant more than it did. A fling, that was all it was—all it could be. If he wanted more, he'd have said so, right?

Or was he like me, unsure what to say. He'd been nothing but wonderful to me. At no point in time did I ever feel used or unwanted. In the past, this would've been the ideal situation. But now? Now, I wanted more. I wanted everything.

Just because he hadn't said it didn't mean I couldn't. Right?

So why hadn't I?

Once again, it came back to fear. That sick, choking fear that if I put myself out there—if I told him what I felt—he wouldn't feel the same. And I wasn't sure I could survive that. He owned a piece of my heart.

No. Not a piece. All of it. I was officially screwed.

"You look awful." Harold didn't say it like an insult. It was more like he was worried, and I appreciated that. Really, I did. But still... it stung.

"Sorry." I sighed, sucked in a deep breath, closed my eyes, and tried to find the

words. "I just... I'm off." It went far deeper than that, but it was a start.

"Joss, we've been friends for years. You can tell me anything." And with anyone else, I'd have taken that as someone being polite, offering because it was the right thing to do. But with Harold, he meant it. He never made an offer he didn't want to willingly fulfill. He was a nice guy and would rarely say no in the time of need, but offers? Those were precious.

"Yeah. It's just... Redtail's contract is nearly fulfilled." I stared at the rim of my cup. People called coffee morning magic; was it too much for it to magically give me all the answers that I needed? "And... and I think... I mean, I know... I'm in love with Garner."

Harold didn't say a word, watching my face, patiently. He knew me well enough to know there was more... so much more.

"I'm in love with Garner, and he's not in love with me. And I know this is wrong, but I've been sleeping with him since the trip." I spoke as fast as my lips would go, afraid that I'd chicken out along the way.

I braced for his disapproval, for the well-meaning-friend face that would try not to judge me but still would because how could he not. But when I looked up, Harold was grinning. Really grinning, the kind of smile that reached all the way to his eyes.

"I don't get why you're looking at me like that." It was making me kind of nervous.

"Because," he said, shrugging, "he does like you like that. I knew it!"

"What are you talking about?" It was not riddle time.

"Think about it. What evidence do you have that he doesn't love you?"

“You can’t prove things don’t exist, only that things do.” I refused to get my hopes too far up. It would only make it harder.

“What a crock, Joss. You can’t tell me there haven’t been moments—little things he’s said to you—that made your stomach flip.”

I started to protest, but I couldn’t. He was right. But also, was he or was I about to tread into the dangerous village of wishful thinking.

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“Then riddle me this... has he ever told you he’s glad you’re in his life?”

“Well... yeah. But I’m saving his company.” Anyone would’ve been glad to have our help, right?

“Bullshit.”

“It’s not bullshit,” I muttered.

“It’s bullshit,” he said firmly. “Has he ever said anything like, I don’t know... about Fate and her looking down on him?”

That stopped me. I shook my head.

“He’s never mentioned fate?” Gods, Harold was being persistent. He wasn’t going to let this go.

“Well... he thanked the fates once. But that was just sex talk. That doesn’t count.”

“Uh-huh.” Harold raised an eyebrow. “And does he come close to you? Make silly excuses to lean over your desk while you’re typing? Like, I don’t know—‘need more paper clips’?”

I snorted. “They don’t use paper clips.”

“But binder clips, maybe?”

I didn't answer. He didn't need me to, my gasp gave it away. He was there for binder clips—every single day.

“This isn't a fling. And it's definitely not just coworkers with benefits. You need to talk to him.”

I wish I had his confidence.

“Does he know how you feel?” he asked.

“No.”

“And why is that?”

“Because... it's complicated,” I said. “He hired us. What if he doesn't feel the same?” And really, that was it. I was terrified that he didn't feel the same. So terrified that I actively talked myself out of seeing the hints he'd been leaving me, if I were to believe Harold.

“Oh my gods.” Harold threw his hands up. “I want to wring your neck. How can you be so oblivious?”

“I—”

“No. Get up. Bring your coffee. Go spend whatever time you can with him before this is officially done. And maybe... I don't know... tell him how you feel?” He flicked my forehead. It was well deserved.

I just stared at him.

“And listen,” he added. “If he turns you down, I'll be there with chocolate and ice

cream and cookies and pretzels.”

All my favorite things when I was down.

“All together?” Because they only reached their true potential when they were all stirred up in a bowl.

“Yes, even though that’s an abomination.” He patted my head like I was a small boy or possibly a puppy. “That’s how good of a friend I am.”

I laughed. I couldn’t help it. It was laugh or cry. “Thanks for talking me off the ledge.”

“No one was falling yet. But you were damn close.” He pointed toward the door. “Go.”

So I went. He was right, and dawdling wasn’t going to do me any good.

I spent the morning preparing for an important meeting, and when the time came, it went well. It was a combination of information sharing and tech teaching, so it could’ve easily gone either way. I spent a half-hour going over some of the new backend systems to the middle management team so they’d understand the reason for the procedural shifts. I focused on what was working, where we were headed, and how to streamline the final integrations, trying not to overwhelm them, while at the same time keeping them informed.

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But the entire time, I felt eyes on me. Eyes that weren't there to figure out how my position here had changed their jobs. Nope. It was Garner.

Every time I glanced up, he was looking at me. So was his brother, but that wasn't the same. His brother looked amused, like he knew something. Garner... Garner looked upset. Tight-lipped. Tense.

It was weird.

Maybe he was mad at me. I had taken longer than planned to come back. Maybe he thought I was putting off the end of the project—or worse, avoiding him.

After I answered a final question, my stomach let out a growl so loud it echoed off the glass walls.

Garner stood abruptly and said, "That's all for now. Thanks, everyone." Then he came over and grabbed my hand... in front of everyone. "Come on."

"Where are we going?" I was so confused.

"You're hungry," he said. "I'm feeding you."

"I'm fine?—"

"No, you're not fine." His voice was firm. "You worked through lunch, and now your body's reminding you. Come on. I'll make dinner. We'll go to my house."

His house.

Something about that shift made my pulse stutter.

As we walked out together, our hands still linked, I felt the question rise again in my throat. The one I'd rehearsed. The one Harold told me to ask.

If there was ever a time to be brave, this was it.

I just had to find the courage to say it.

13

GARNER

"You're an excellent cook." Joss dabbed at his mouth with a napkin.

I considered fibbing and saying he had a little something in the corner of his mouth and I'd take the napkin and do it myself. But Joss had seen the same movies and watched the same TV shows as me. That was a tired old trope and he'd recognize it for what it was.

But it might work.

I didn't, though, because he twisted the napkin as though he was uncomfortable or wanted to break bad news.

"Dessert and coffee?"

He pursed his lips. "Does dessert come with a side of Garner?"

I pictured myself lying on a platter, slathered in cream and surrounded by chocolate mousse. My body tingled, and I brushed my bare foot over his. He shivered and leaned forward, grabbing my hand.

“It can, I suppose. At the moment, it’s in the fridge.”

Joss giggled. “You’re too far away.”

Oh, I’d witnessed this scene in movies where one person swiped everything off the table, flung the other person on the table, and they had hot, frantic sex. I mentally prepped myself, and my fingers gripped my pants zipper pull tab, ready to lower it.

“You’re too cute.” He placed a light kiss on my lips and sat back. Hmmm, so much for my sex-on-the-table fantasy. I could conjure up a scenario for both of us, I didn’t need Joss to be the instigator.

But he got up and rummaged in the fridge and brought out the mousse and the whipped cream. “Yum. Chocolate is my favorite.”

If we’d been dating before this, I might have learned his favorite color and the movie that he’d watched a hundred times.

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We ate the dessert on the sofa, feeding each other mouthfuls of chocolatey goodness and cream. Joss scraped off the last bit of mousse with the spoon and then used his fingers to gather what was left. He sucked them, his eyes smoldering as he gazed at me.

My length responded, and I shuffled my butt on the couch, trying to get comfortable.

“I like you, Garner.”

I was still puzzling over how to tell him who I was and lay out the fated mate deal where he was my one and only, but not knowing if I’d be accepted or rejected. Him liking me was a small step but I’d figured that out weeks ago. I envisioned a chasm with me on one side and Joss on the other. Just as in the movies, the earth was erupting, and the gap between us was getting wider.

“M-me t-too.” I stumbled over my words, needing to tell him what was in my heart but fearful I’d scare him away. “I do like you, not me, is what I was trying to say.”

“I got it.”

Joss had opened the door as lawyers put it, so I charged ahead. “We’ve had sex, amazing sex, but it wasn’t just a fling for me.” There, I said it. “I’m hoping we can spend more time together outside the office.”

Joss put his feet in my lap and rubbed the sole of his foot on my arousal. “The sex was beyond amazing. But I was hoping it was more than friends with benefits.”

I couldn't think with his foot pressing on my growing arousal, and I removed it. Joss's face fell.

"There'll be more of that later, but first, I need to explain a few things."

His foot found its way back to between my legs. My head fell back and my breathing quickened. We could have sex and then I'd tell him about my other side. Pleasure rippled through me, and I so wanted to get naked and be with my mate.

But if we had sex, we'd snuggle and I'd doze off and it'd be tomorrow and I still wouldn't have done the big reveal.

"I'm so sorry, but we can't put this off."

His face grew serious. "Whatever it is, it doesn't matter. I'll stay by your side."

Poor guy. I'd given him the impression I had a life-threatening disease. But to a human, finding out that shifters existed was life-changing. And there was no way to predict how he would react. I couldn't imagine being in his position.

I can show him. You don't need to do anything.

Thanks, but this has to be done slowly and carefully.

I got up because I needed to pace. "This is hard because you might not understand."

"I care about you, Garner, and nothing you tell me will make me run away."

Hold that thought.

There was a thump against the kitchen door. Joss might not have picked up on it, as

we were in the living area. But I got up, expecting to see the neighbor's cat charging through the cat door. When he wasn't getting enough attention at home, he came to my house for a not a stay-cation but a next-door-neighbor-cation.

"What's that? Do you have a dog?" Joss was at my side, his voice warbling with uncertainty.

"Nah. My friendly neighborhood feline. He does the rounds of everyone's house." That was the reason for the cat door.

But I caught a familiar scent. Shit, no, he wouldn't. What in the heck was he doing? He promised not to mess with me. At least I think he did. This was my moment when I'd intended to show my mate who I was. Make or break, and now I had to contend with that damned fool interfering.

"Joss, go back to the couch. I'll deal with this." I gave him a gentle push. "Maybe put your feet up. Or stand on the kitchen island."

"What?" Instead of running away, Joss was beside me, color draining from his cheeks. "Call 911." He fumbled for his phone.

He was the one who said I wasn't comfortable in the countryside? My mate had come across as a guy who loved being away from the city, but the man in front of me was terrified of what might be coming through the cat door.

"See, I like nature's creatures and being in the woods."

Joss's glazed eyes fixed on me. "We're not in the damn woods."

"But you thought I was uneasy in the great outdoors." I was determined to make a point. Why, I couldn't say. No, I knew why. Because my life was about to go ass

backward, and I was pretending it wasn't. Shit, I was being an asshat, just like my brother.

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The flap tilted, and Joss screamed and leaped on a chair while fumbling his phone.

“Don’t phone emergency services.” I should contact pest control, though.

“I didn’t expect an intruder to crawl through that tiny opening.” Poor Joss was screeching.

“It’s not human. Don’t worry.”

A fox, his red fur and black-tipped tail illuminated in the kitchen light tore through the flap.

“What are you doing? Trying to destroy my life.” I glared at the fox. If I tried to catch it, he’d bite me. He’d done it many times when we were kids. And Joss might insist I get a rabies shot. Probably a good idea because who knew what nasty viruses my brother harbored.

“Don’t shout at me. You’re the one bringing a wild animal into the house.”

“I wasn’t talking to you.” This was a disaster, especially as my brother’s beast was leaping from sofa to coffee table to armchair. If he tried to run past me, I’d grab him. Yes, he was a fox, but my shifter reflexes would allow me to grab him, and I’d wring his neck, the human one.

“Call me crazy but I doubt the fox understands you.” Joss was tearing at his hair and had given up on his phone. I had to get my brother’s beast out of the house before I could begin to calm Joss.

“Is this what they mean when they say crazy like a fox?”

Please don't use that expression. My beast wasn't amused, but he also questioned why my brother's fox was having all the fun.

He's showing off. Ignore him.

The chair Joss was standing on wobbled, and I stabilized it. Gods, if he fell on the floor and the fox jumped over him, my mate might faint.

“Hey, you. You've done enough damage.” I pointed to the kitchen door. “Now scoot and I'll deal with you later.” Did he just wink at me? What the freak?

The fox scooted out with a final flourish of his tail, and the cat flap tilted back and forth, the creaking getting on my nerves. But Joss's heavy breathing was a worry. He needed to breathe into a paper bag.

“The fox has gone. It's okay, you can come down.”

“C-c-can't.”

I pulled out a chair beside him and got on it. “Look at me, Joss.” His lashes fluttered, and his eyes slid to the left and right, constantly moving. “Joss. You're safe. I'm here, and I want you to breathe with me.” I put out my hands, but it was his decision whether he took them. Eventually he did, and we breathed together and got off the chairs.

I placed him on the couch and put a blanket around his shoulders. He sipped on water, and I waited until he was ready to speak.

“Thank you. Sorry I yelled earlier.”

“I’m sorry too. Didn’t mean to bring up a previous conversation and use it against you. And most humans would have reacted the same way you did.”

“Humans?”

Oops!

14

JOSS

Human. Did he just say human? No. That wouldn’t make any sense, would it?

“Human,” a voice from the other side of the door the fox had just exited through said.

Garner barked in reply, “Go home.”

The door handle turned, the door pushing open as if in slow motion. The scene before me was making absolutely no sense, and it was about to get worse.

Standing there, like it was no big deal, was his brother, Booker. Only he wasn’t the same Booker I knew from work. Nope. He was buck-ass naked. Not a single stitch of clothing on him.

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“I told you to go home,” Garner snapped again, this time sounding less annoyed and more... nervous? I couldn’t quite tell.

There was a full-grown naked man standing in his doorway, and nobody seemed as concerned about that as I felt they should be. How did he even get here? Was he wandering around like this? Was nude jogging a thing?

I flinched at the thought of my family jewels bouncing as I ran. No, thank you.

“Do you want me to get you a towel or something?” I asked, because what else could I offer? Hospitality seemed like the only rational path forward, because at least it had some semblance of rules. Even if my brain was short-circuiting and I had about a hundred and twelve questions, I didn’t think I’d have the nerve to ask why he was standing there with his dick out.

But Booker just shook his head. “Yeah, no. I don’t need a towel.” His voice was calm. Almost too calm. And he didn’t even pretend to get a bit of modesty.

“My brother needs me to go home,” he continued, “but I needed to come here and give my brother a push. He can be so stubborn.” Booker rolled his eyes, a gesture I didn’t fail to see because my eyes were on his, unwilling to look anywhere else.

Then, without warning, Booker wasn’t standing there anymore. One second, there was a man. The next, on the floor in his place, was a fox. A real one. Cute and furry and not a man.

The creature trotted off into the back yard like this was just any normal Tuesday. Like

he hadn't just shapeshifted into woodland wildlife in front of my face.

I gawked at the spot he'd vanished from like I could rewind time, watch it play out again, and make it make sense.

"Did we have any special mushrooms in dinner?" I muttered. "Because something's not—I..." I stammered, unable to even finish the thought.

The next thing I knew, Garner's arms were around me, his warmth enveloping me. He pulled me in, holding me close, his cheek pressed against mine.

"Don't be scared," he whispered.

"I'm not scared," I said honestly. "Confused, yeah. Maybe a little scared, but not that kind of scared." Even with all of this, the worry over him not wanting me rose above all else. "But mostly confused."

"Let me show you something." He pulled back just enough to look me in the eye. "Do you trust me?"

I nodded. My heart was trying to beat its way out of my chest, but I did trust him. He would never hurt me. Even if I was nothing more than a fuck buddy to him, I knew that was true.

"I do trust you."

"There were no mushrooms of any kind in dinner," he said. "No drugs. No alcohol. Nothing. Let me show you."

He stepped away, and I felt the absence of his touch like a sudden chill. He went to the door, shut it, and pulled his shirt off.

“I’ve seen that before,” I teased weakly. I had. A lot. Not that I was complaining.

“Stop looking at me like that,” he groaned. “You’re making this harder.”

“What way?”

“Like you want to lick me from head to toe.”

I grinned. “I don’t know if I can control that... because I do.”

He sighed. “Do me a favor, sweetheart. Hold on to that, okay?”

“Okay,” I agreed, but my voice wavered. I could feel something coming, something I hadn’t prepared for, and nothing could have.

He stripped completely, eyes on mine the whole time. He was shaking slightly. “Remember... no matter what.... I’m still me, okay?”

I nodded, bracing myself.

And then, just like his brother, one moment he was a man, and the next, he wasn’t. He was a fox. Beautiful, sleek, and real.

I stumbled backward until I hit the wall. I stared at him, at his small body and wide eyes, and tried to process it all.

His words echoed in my mind: I’m still me. Don’t be scared.

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“Okay,” I breathed, sinking to the floor. “You said you’re still you in there. Does that mean you understand me?”

The fox nodded. Actually nodded. Or, well, did a fox-ish version of one.

“This can’t be real.” I shook my head. “It’s not real. This is some weird stress dream. Or a hallucination. Or maybe—maybe it’s the coffee. It didn’t taste right this morning.”

The fox cocked his head at me. I took that as a sign.

“I feel like we need to talk about this with... words.”

A few seconds later, Garner, the man, was there, every bit as naked as his brother had been.

I remained seated as he pulled on his jeans, leaving himself shirtless. My mouth went dry.

“I wanted to tell you,” he said softly, inching toward me. “I’m... I’m a shifter. That’s why we hired Denmarke.”

I blinked. “I don’t get it. What is this?” I waved my hand up and down his body, then gestured to the door. “What does this have to do with Denmarke?”

“You don’t know?” he asked.

I shook my head. “No.”

“Remember when I was looking for Harold?”

And suddenly, it clicked. My partner was like them. “Oh. He’s a fox?”

Garner smiled. “He’s part of our world, yes.” Which was not the same as yes.

“You can’t say anything,” he added. “We’re not supposed to talk about it.”

I groaned. “So I have to pretend to my best friend that I don’t know what he is?” And technically, I didn’t, but I pretty much did know he wasn’t human.

“No—yes—I mean...” He exhaled, rubbed his temples, and then took my hand. “That’s better,” he said.

And yeah, it was. I didn’t even realize how tightly wound I’d been until that moment. His mere touch gave such comfort.

“Let’s sit and talk. There’s a lot.”

So we did. We went into the living room, and he explained everything—how they were all foxes, how the company was owned by shifters, how being a shifter meant they were human but carried an animal inside of them.

He told me what it meant to him, to his family, to his den. What hiding that part of himself had cost him... especially when it came to me. How much it meant to him that I didn’t run or cower when I saw him shift.

It was a lot to take in. I wanted to understand, I really did, but somewhere in the middle of his explanation, my brain latched onto one thing: This was why we weren’t

more. This was the secret. The reason he didn't want me.

"So that's why we're not... more?" Saying that one sentence took all of my strength.

"No, no, no." He took both my hands again, firmer this time. "I knew the very first day I met you," he said, voice low. "I knew you were my forever. That you were my mate."

There it was. That word. Mate.

He'd said it a couple of times in the past, but it had always been vague, nestled into the afterglow or whispered nearly too low for me to hear. Never directly. Never this seriously.

"A mate is like marriage," he continued. "Only... more."

"But you acted like?—"

"I acted like someone who was scared that if I put it all out there the first day, you'd freak out and leave."

I wanted to argue with that. To say I wouldn't have. But I probably would have.

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“I’m still kind of worried you will,” he added with a sheepish, or was it foxish?, smile. “It doesn’t help that you thought Booker was a wild animal in my kitchen.”

“That’s because I did think he was a wild animal.” Looking back, poor Booker. Or maybe not poor Booker, given he did it on purpose.

“He’s just a meddling brother,” Garner said. “That was what that was—he wanted me to tell you.”

I nodded slowly. “This is a lot. I... I think I need some time to think.”

Garner pulled back slightly, not offended, but bracing himself.

“No, it’s not a rejection,” I rushed to clarify. “I just need to absorb it all. And honestly, with you here, it’s really... distracting.”

He raised an eyebrow.

“All I can think about is why you don’t have your clothes on when I’m still fully dressed,” I teased.

He laughed. That easy, honest laugh I’d fallen for.

“I... I think I might talk to Harold,” I said.

“Yeah. Or you can call me. Or Booker, even.”

Booker. I thought about all the times he'd barged in on us while we were away. Was that him being helpful? I still didn't understand their dynamic, but I didn't have siblings, so maybe that was just a thing.

I stood, reluctantly. "I need to go."

Garner nodded. "Okay."

"Would it be okay if I got a hug first?"

He didn't answer, just stood and pulled me into his arms. I stayed there until I felt like I could breathe again.

Until I felt strong enough to go home.

I didn't want to leave. Not even a little bit. But it was true—thinking clearly wasn't going to happen with him standing that close, smelling like cedar and wild air, and holding me like I mattered more than anything.

And I did matter to him.

That part, at least, I believed now.

I just didn't want to mess it up. I wanted to do it right.

Because at the end of the day, this was still my Garner—and I was terrified of losing him.

I was late to the office. On purpose.

Joss was coming in for a few hours to meet with a department, and this was the first time I'd seen him since that night. I was still peeved at Booker, but there was a method to his madness, though I hated that he'd goaded me into revealing myself to Joss.

That thought made me smile, because it brought back memories of my brother's beast causing chaos.

It was too much. My fox was annoyed because the first beast Joss witnessed wasn't him. The only person not fed up with me was Booker. That had to be a first.

Damn, I should have gotten here at the crack of dawn and hid in my office. Pulled down the blinds so Joss couldn't see me. Now I had to walk past the office he was using, and even if he had the door closed, I'd be visible through that huge glass panel. I cursed Uncle Cyrus yet again for his insistence on so much glass.

He's our mate. We should be together.

That's up to him.

Straightening my spine, I strode into the office, greeting my colleagues. The plan was not to glance into Joss's section, but his scent captivated me, and my head swung to the right even though I told it not to. The mating instinct was so strong it overrode my instructions.

He was staring at me, not blinking, and I couldn't pick up that he was breathing. Shit, he was holding his breath, perhaps worried the fox in the kitchen incident was about to be repeated. I couldn't blame him 'cause that was a bonkers way of being introduced to the shifter world. A smile tugged at my lips once again because of the memory, but there was no change in Joss's impassive expression.

A trickle of sweat made its way down my spine and into my briefs. Flinging myself into my chair, I thought about how the improvements Joss had made would streamline our process and possibly not only save the company but be the catalyst for us making a huge profit.

Work. I had to put my head down and check off items on my to-do list, the one that never ended and just got added to. But thanks to Joss, he'd come up with the program with bells and whistles that integrated the department's goals and broke them down into short, medium, and long term. I'd tried so many apps that had promised the same and more and had given up after a few days because I had to input so much data.

A soft knock at the door accompanied by a seductive scent jolted my heart. I'd allowed myself to forget about my mate for a few minutes, and now he was here and I couldn't escape. I'd be forced to hear whatever he was going to say. I clenched my

butt, wishing we could postpone this moment.

“Hi.” His timid voice affected me and my fox, with both of us wanting to hug him.

No, I’d groom him because foxes don’t wrap their paws around their mate.

“Wonder if we could have a moment to talk.” He white-knuckled the door jamb, and his head bobbed as though it was in water and being buffeted by a breeze.

“Of course.”

He jerked his head toward the outer office. “Maybe not here.”

After grabbing my coat, I flung it over my shoulder as if we were two colleagues going for coffee. But my belly was in turmoil, and I asked my fox for help in settling it.

There, there, he chorused, not that it did much good.

We stood in silence waiting for the elevator when we could have taken the stairs. We were acting like strangers sharing a short ride in a metal box. I’d done that countless times, stared at the panel, the doors, or the floor, wishing the ride would end but also fearing what would happen when it did. But the journey from the mezzanine to the first floor was mercifully short.

We wandered along the sidewalk, which at this time of day wasn’t crowded because this was the business district and most people were at work.

Joss bought two coffees from a cart and leaned on the side of a sandstone building, sipping his. I brought my cup to my lips and only pretended to drink, thinking I might throw up if caffeine mingled with the quagmire in my belly.

“I spoke to Harold.”

Okay, that was positive, because I’d been half expecting Harold to tell me Joss had quit and left the country.

“That night with the fox, your brother, and then you, I got home, locked the doors, and sat hunched on the floor, thinking the world was ending or I was going mad.”

I couldn’t say, “I understand,” because no matter how much I tried to put myself in his position, I would never experience what he had.

“I can’t imagine what that was like for you.” I hoped that conveyed the appropriate amount of sympathy.

“Harold took me to dinner and he talked for hours, with me interjecting asking him questions and to clarify points.”

I’d have to call and thank him because he’d done my job.

“We laughed at Booker’s fox running around your house, and he said he’d never heard of any shifter beast being so bold.”

Only Booker would get into a book of records for such an outrageous act.

“I’m so sorry. He didn’t warn me.”

Joss grinned, the first one today, at least the first directed at me. He waved away my apology. “He explained that the shifter mating instinct never wavered, even after death, and mates are linked for all eternity.”

Harold went all in, and I wondered how my mate felt about us being coupled until the

end of time.

“That’s true, but did he also tell you that humans can opt out?”

“Yeah.” He put the cup in his left hand while the right one edged toward my own. His fingertips brushed over mine, the warmth traveling up my arm and to my belly, calming it.

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“Harold mentioned that, but he pointed out you can’t.”

I had to stop him because if we were to be mates, and that was still a huge if, it had to be because he wanted it, not to do with any guilt.

I gripped his arm and faced him. “Forget me, think only of yourself.”

He tilted his head. “Problem is, I can’t get you out of my head.”

“Maybe we should ask Booker for help. His fox can chase any thoughts of me away.”

Joss guffawed. “Him rushing in was the most bizarre incident of my life until you shifted, and then it paled in comparison.”

He removed my hand from his arm and squeezed it, and I returned the favor. “I can’t speak to the instinct that draws you to me, but I don’t want to live without you.”

I tossed what remained of my coffee in a nearby trashcan and wrapped my arms around him.

“Watch the coffee.” He lifted it above his head.

I glanced up. “Is this the business consulting equivalent of mistletoe?”

My mate’s chest shook with laughter, and I removed the cup from his hand.

“Just kiss me, please.”

I pressed my lips to his, inhaling his scent and savoring his taste. He put a hand to my butt and a passerby commented to the person at his side, “Why don’t we fondle one another in public any more?”

“Maybe we should take this inside? You have a reputation to uphold,” he said.

Perhaps this wasn’t the moment to explain that most of the companies in the area were run by shifters and mates often stuck their tongues down each other’s throats in public.

“I need to know that you’re in this 100%.”

“I am.” Joss took the coffee from me and got rid of it. “And to prove it, I want you to mark me.”

“That’s the final step.” For me. He could walk, though the mating bond was strong even in humans, I suspected.

“I understand, and I want to show the world, or the shifters in it, that we are mated. We belong to one another.”

My fox was overjoyed, he jumped around until I reminded him about my dodgy belly.

Sorry, but I don’t care. This is the best news.

“How do we do this?” Joss whispered in my ear. My dick responded, and I had to gather my thoughts together before answering.

“Not in public.”

“Shame, I expected us to get naked on the street.” His wicked grin was a sign he was jerking me around.

“Even shifters are not that brazen, though I wouldn’t put it past Booker.”

“Your place or mine?”

I sighed because we both had a job to do, and that had to come before we mated.

I pointed upward. “We have to go back to the office, and this evening we’ll do something that’s a very human experience.”

He frowned. “I thought you’d introduce me to the shifter world.”

“That will happen eventually.” Baby steps. “But for now, let’s try going on a date.”

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His lips curled into a grin. “Isn’t that what we’re doing?”

“Nah, just you wait to see what I have planned.”

16

JOSS

It was date night, and I couldn’t wait.

Well, technically, I had to wait, because it was the official last day of the project. I’d already wrapped everything up this morning, my goodbyes half-said, the desk I’d been using unusually tidy, all my spare binder clips sitting in a nice pile on Garner’s desk.

I’d planned to sneak out early, maybe even grab a few extra minutes to get ready for my time with Garner. It was our first official date, and while we were already miles past that stage, I was just as giddy. His secret was behind us, I no longer worked for him in any capacity, and I’d gotten past most of my insecurities. This was the reset we needed... and it was time to head home.

Only it wasn’t. Geoff, one of the administrative assistants, casually told me I needed to “accidentally” wander past the large conference room at exactly 2:45 p.m. and not to be late.

I think, on some level, I already knew something was up. He’d made the right call telling me about it. If he hadn’t said anything, I probably would’ve bounced. But his

tone, the way he grinned and waved me off with a little wink, told me to trust the process.

And I'm glad I did.

As I turned the corner and strolled past the room like I was just stretching my legs, the door flew open. There were claps and cheers, everyone was calling me in, pulling me into the room like I belonged there. At the center of the table was a massive cake, decorated with the company logo... and my own. Someone had taken the time to add our personal consulting logo right next to theirs. That little detail floored me.

I've worked with a lot of different companies over the years. Bounced around more than most people would be comfortable with. It was the nature of my kind of consulting. You go in, you solve the problem, you get out. No one gets attached.

But this place—this company—was different.

Even putting Garner aside, there was something in the culture that ran deep. People cared. Not in the performative way a lot of places brag about, the whole “we’re just like family” thing that really means “we’re a toxic mess, please work weekends and don’t complain.” No, this was real. People here gave a damn. They listened. They problem-solved.

And somewhere along the way, without me even realizing it, I’d become one of them.

I didn’t even fully understand the connection yet. I knew the company was tied to the den in some way, the politics and business side intermingled in a way humans wouldn’t consider. And it worked. It took a while to get used to it, waiting for the toxicity to leach in, but it never did. I was starting to get the hang of that now... now when I had my foot out the door.

There was still so much I didn't understand about Garner's world—about my world, maybe, if things kept going the way they were. But I had time. According to Garner, I had a lifetime.

Not that we were officially mated. Not yet. That was its own confusing little limbo. We were mates, in the way that shifters used the word, but we weren't mated. That required something called "marking," which I was still wrapping my head around. Garner had tried to explain it to me, in between soft kisses and playful warnings that it wasn't just about the fun part. That mark meant something, something deeply personal and emotional.

Still. The fun part did sound like fun.

After cake, the enormous, frosting-covered slab of sugar that I absolutely didn't need but fully devoured not one, but two slices of, I collected the stack of cards they'd given me, said my thank-yous, and offered to help tidy up. They waved me off immediately, promising they had it covered. And when they said it, I believed them. That was the kind of place this was.

I rushed home, practically skipping to the bathroom, and jumped in the shower. I might've squealed. Fine, I did squeal. I was excited. I tried on five different outfits—five—before finally settling on the one for the evening.

A pair of dark jeans, the perfect cut, which sat low on my hips were the easy choice. Dressy enough for a sit-down dinner, casual enough for a walk in the park. I layered a snug tee under a button-down so I had options—buttoned up if we ended up somewhere classy, unbuttoned and relaxed if we went a different route. Either way, I was ready. Comfortable. Pulled together. And looking pretty darn good.

I sent Garner a text: Ready whenever you are, just like he'd asked.

Then I waited outside.

I tried to wait inside, I did. But the second I heard the soft rumble of a vehicle, I bolted out the front door. It wasn't his, but why go back inside? At least that was my logic.

When he finally arrived, I jogged toward the street, grinning like a fool. He parked and climbed out, shutting the door behind him. His smile when he saw me mirrored my own and made my chest ache in the best way.

"Hey," he said softly, coming to meet me.

His hand cupped my cheek, thumb brushing over my skin. I leaned into his touch instinctively, greedy for it, soaking in the grounding presence of him.

"I'm so excited," I whispered. I was practically bouncing, fighting the urge to drag him in for a kiss before he could even say another word.

For one wild second, I thought, Screw it. Let's go back inside and screw.

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But I wanted this night. I wanted the date.

We'd spent so much time together already—at work, on that trip, at each other's places, even waking up next to each other on lazy mornings, but this was different. This was intentional. A line drawn between the everyday and something more.

Something romantic.

And then he reached into the back seat and pulled out a bunch of daffodils.

I stopped. Just... stopped, wondering if this was real or if I'd fallen into the most wonderful dream. "You remembered," I whispered.

He nodded. I kissed his cheek.

I'd told him once about how my grandmother used to plant daffodils in our front yard. It was one of my best memories of her. Of that whole era of my life, really. Summers with her had been the best. And he'd remembered.

"I'm gonna go put these inside," I said, blinking fast. "I'd invite you in, but then we might not come back out until morning."

He smirked, and I ducked inside before I changed my mind.

By the time I came back out, he was standing by the passenger side door, holding it open for me. Helping me in. He didn't need to, but he did it anyway. He was being a gentleman.

That washim, though. From the very first night we were together, he'd made sure I felt safe, seen, comfortable. He never pushed. Never expected more than I was ready to give.

And now, seeing that same care in the daylight, with my heart fully his and my mind beginning to catch up—it hit differently.

He knew who he was. He knew whoIwas. And from the moment he saw me, he'd already decided I was it for him. But he let me get there in my own time. He led the way without pulling. And now, knowing everything I knew about him—fox shifter, protector, mate—it only made what we had feel even more solid.

We went to a dinner theater. One of those murder mystery set-ups with actors pretending to be patrons, where everyone got a little menu card and had to guess who the killer was.

It was cheesy. Delightful, and did I mention... cheesy?

We could spot the actors right away with their abundant stage makeup, overly enunciated speech, a little too eager to chat, but we didn't care. We were in it together. Laughing, whispering guesses between bites of too-dry chicken and slightly overcooked pasta.

We didn't talk about anything serious. Not about the den. Not about contracts or consulting or shifter politics. Just the murder of a fictional restaurant owner by an overly ambitious busboy.

It was perfect.

And when the evening wound down and we drove home, the air was quiet and warm, and I didn't hesitate this time.

When he pulled up to my house, I didn't play coy. "I'd like you to come in."

An invite. One I had wanted to make the day we came back from our trip but was afraid to. I wouldn't let that happen again.

He didn't say anything. Just parked, followed me through the door like he belonged here. Because he did.

And like I predicted, like I promised, he didn't leave again until morning.

17

GARNER

"So." I pushed away my coffee cup. "What do we do now?"

My heart wasn't thumping but instead was thundering in my chest. I glanced down, expecting my shirt to be billowing up with each loud beat.

Joss slid his foot over my calf, sending goosebumps shooting up my thigh. They crawled over my body's dips and curves, and if I'd peeked inside my briefs, I'd have seen tiny spikes on my cock, the same cock that was hard and pulsing with heat. Go figure!

"I can think of a few things."

"Such as?" My voice was more of a squeak than a commanding question or a holler.

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Not that I'd shout at my mate-to-be when he was getting me so hot that I needed to rip off my clothes and pour a bucket of ice water over me. Or fuck Joss and then have a shower. Or do both at the same time. My mind was a whirling mass of questions that I had no answers to colliding with a hot sexy tingling flooding every part of me.

"Fucking, more fucking, and yet more fucking. That's three." He smirked, looking pretty pleased with himself.

I'd been longing for this moment since we met, but instead of broaching the subject gradually and subtly, he'd dumped a possible scenario on my head, and I had no response. Other than drooling and squirming as my dick threatened to bust out of my pants, though the zipper was holding firm, for now.

"We... we can do that." My response sounded as though I was agreeing to a colleague's suggestion at work. But my befuddled brain couldn't string more words together.

Joss dropped his gaze and peered under the table. "Did you want to do it here? Not sure that chair would hold both of us."

My omega mate was taking the lead. Not that I had a problem with that, but I wanted to be his equal in this relationship. Instead, I was gulping, sweating, and saliva was sliding over my chin. I had to snap out of it.

Deciding to snatch the initiative, I stood up and my chair tipped backward and slammed onto the floor, confirming Joss's claim that it was too flimsy for sex. I could have caught it but my eyes were locked on Joss's as I beckoned him to follow me. I

swaggered toward my bedroom, swaying my ass as I yanked off my shirt and undid my belt.

There was a whoosh of air from my mate, and I straightened my spine, knowing he'd be studying my back, rippling with taut muscles. Sliding my pants lower so they sat on my hips, I sashayed into the bedroom.

"I know what you're doing," he hissed over my shoulder.

I half-turned, raising a brow. "What's that?" I plastered an innocent expression on my face, and Joss rolled his eyes and stuck out his tongue.

But I'd had enough of us playing silly games, and I scooped him up and dumped him in the middle of the mattress. He bounced a little as he sported a cat-like grin.

"Is this what you want?" I yanked both my pants and briefs to my knees and my engorged cock bounded out.

Joss's tongue peeked between his lips before he licked around his mouth. "More, please. I'm greedy."

I kicked off my clothes and grabbed my mate's ankles. He shrieked as I pulled him over the mattress.

"You're too far away."

He fumbled with his buttons, but I grasped the shirt and yanked, tearing and shredding the fabric. Tiny threads caught the light as they floated onto the bed while he wiggled out of his pants.

But he was still clad in his underwear, and I whispered, "Off."

His smirk returned, and he raised his hips. “That’s your job.”

Hoping his cute briefs weren’t a favorite pair, I wrenched them off him. His arousal pointed upward, a droplet of pre-cum on the tip. Shoving his legs apart, I crawled between them, ignoring his length and kissing behind his knee and upper thigh. I grazed my teeth over the soft flesh, knowing his skin would be streaked with red in the morning.

He ground his butt into the bedding, moaning and gripping the duvet in both fists while begging me to fuck him.

I nudged his cock, leaving a streak of pre-cum on my cheek. Sitting on my haunches, I captured it with a finger and smeared it over my mouth.

Joss draped a hand around my neck, pulling me close before licking off the sticky droplets. “Mmmm. I’m tasting you and me combined.” His smoldering eyes ended my playful meandering up his body, and I trailed my fingers from the tip of his dick to the base. Wrapping my fingers around his cock, I slid my hand over the shaft. Joss’s head fell back as my other hand prodded his hole.

My fingers were coated in slick as I eased one and then a second into his channel, up to the first knuckle, while tugging at his cock. He bucked his hips, matching my rhythm. But my dick probed his entrance, and I eased inside him, alongside my two fingers.

Joss’s head jerked up. “What are you doing? I feel so full.”

I paused. “Too much?”

“Gods, no.” He clenched around me. “Don’t stop. I love it.”

I pushed my cock inside him, along with my fingers, as Joss begged me to ram into him harder and faster. He angled his hips, and I slid in deeper, making him purr.

Much as I wanted to finger him and fuck him and get handsy with his dick, it was awkward, and I removed my fingers from his hole and let go of his length. He pushed out his bottom lip and pouted, mumbling he wanted all of me.

“You have me. For all eternity, but right this minute, your hole has my cock.”

Placing both hands on the mattress beside him, I pulled out. Glancing down, my dick was shimmering in the dim light, coated and smeared with slick. I rammed back in, and Joss slid over the bed.

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“Mmmm, that’s what I like.” His lazy smile and half-lidded eyes ramped up the tension inside me. “My alpha who can move... maybe not mountains but?—”

I cut him off by plowing into him, my cock silencing my mate as I thrust inside his channel. He whimpered, his breath coming in tiny spurts and starts. Sweat dribbled over his chest into his belly button while our bodies jerked and bumped. The headboard joined in by thumping against the wall.

Joss lifted one leg and flung it over my shoulder, and my cock lodged deeper inside him. Grabbing his ankle, I smothered it with kisses while twisting my hips and entering him from a different angle.

“I love the way you fuck.” Joss’s glistening, half-parted lips and his come-hither gaze ramped up the temperature inside me as heat blistered over my skin.

My cock surged into him, silencing the words on his lips as my hand made its way to his length, bopping on his thigh, a delicious slapping of flesh on skin that spurred me to lunge into him again and again. I grasped his dick, and he covered my hand with his own.

“Together,” he mouthed as his lids closed, and we pumped and I fucked him in tandem. His hair flopped adorably with each thrust and tug, and I wished I could paint him in that moment, with his damp locks, his cheeks and chest tinged with pink, while covered in a sheen of sweat.

Neither of us spoke as my cock filled him, but little groans, grunts, and sighs escaped our lips. I fit so perfectly inside him, it was where I was meant to be. The climax

building inside me forced my eyes shut, and surrounded by darkness, the smells, sounds, and sensations of us making love enveloped me like a hug. The squeaking bed, the rustling of the sheets, his tight channel and damp skin, and the musky sensation of sweat and slick mingling.

Joss panted, and his body jerked and spasmed. He cried out and trembled, clamping his hands on me as he climaxed, cum spurting over us.

My cock slammed into him, the room spun around as all thoughts were shoved out of my head, and there was only him and me. The orgasm crashed over me, and my body bowed as though I'd been hit by a gust of wind.

"I love you."

I lowered Joss's limp leg to the bed and bent over him, kissing the sweat dotted over his brow and upper lip. As my knot claimed his ass, my fox's front teeth elongated and broke the skin on my mate's shoulder. He winced, closed his eyes, and clamped his teeth together as I mopped up the trickle of blood.

"Sorry." I kissed the mark, wishing it would heal as quickly as a shifter's wound.

"No. It's the most significant event of my life, so it has to be memorable." He traced his fingers over my chest. "I want my mark here on your pecs." He bit me hard, and it was more painful than expected but mixed with desire and a prickling that signified we were as one.

"Mate." He grinned and poked out his tongue again. "Now you can't get rid of me."

"Oh really." I chuckled and snuggled into him. "I'm sure I can come up with ways."

"Don't kid yourself. You're stuck with me for always and ever more."

JOSS

It was hard to believe that not long ago, I was just a consultant, and now I was moving in with the CEO. The sexy CEO who had won my heart.

And when I say moving in, I meant physically because everything was finally coming over from my place. But emotionally? We'd already moved in together. The two of us hadn't spent a single night apart since he marked me. We'd been alternating between my place and his, pretending like there was still some reason to keep both. But the truth was, we were already living together, just in a split residency, and that got old quick. This was just us catching up the logistics.

It had taken a while to get to this point. Not for lack of desire, but life had been hectic. I'd taken on another consulting gig after my contract with Redtail had concluded, and unfortunately, it was a beast. Labor-intensive. High stakes. Long hours. All the things I craved when we first started and now... not so much.

When you only get a few hours a day with your mate, you're not using that time to pack up boxes or haul furniture. At least I wasn't. I spent it curled into his chest, or cooking together, or just watching crappy TV while our fingers stayed intertwined the entire time.

But finally I was in a lull between contracts. An intentional one.

Because it was time.

I wanted to fall asleep in his arms every night. I wanted to wake up in them every morning. I wanted the whole package—the scent of his soap in my towels, our books tangled together on the shelves, mismatched mugs in the cupboard because we

couldn't decide which set to keep. I wanted a home that was ours. Not a his-and-his situation with overnight bags. Something real.

Something rooted.

It was time to embrace my position in the den, too. If I were honest with myself, that was one of the reasons I dragged my feet. I knew with no doubt that Garner was mine and I was his. But knowing how I would fit in with a den full of shifters I didn't know and were so very different. That terrified me.

It shouldn't have. They had been nothing but wonderful to me. I'd gotten invitations from other omegas to go to brunch, movies, walks. I was included in more conversations. It was no longer a case of me walking in and feeling like I was interrupting. And yesterday, for the first time, I felt like I was truly one of them when the den was having a big old picnic and group run. The kids who were too young to take their fox forms were playing different games, and when they were picking teams for their favorite version of tag, the two "captains" fought over who could pick me. It was silly.

This wasn't gym class and I wasn't five, but in that moment, it clicked that in their eyes, I was den. And if they saw me that way, it was time for me to see myself that way as well.

"What are you smiling about?" Garner's arms wrapped around me from behind.

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“Just thinking about how happy I am and how much happier I will be when this is done. There is sooooo much stuff here.”

I stood in the middle of the living room, surrounded by boxes. Half-labeled, half-unpacked, half-unnecessary. And I leaned back, exhaling, into the warmth of my mate’s arms. His chest against my back, his chin resting on my shoulder.

“It’s not that much,” he lied or underestimated. One of the two.

I let out a laugh. “Maybe not in square footage, but I’ve got enough books here to open a small-town library.”

And it was true. Box after box after box—novels, art books, old field guides, paperbacks so worn they barely held together, books from my childhood. Every one of them had meaning. Every one of them had followed me through a different chapter of my life.

But still. There were a lot.

We’d already sorted most of the big stuff—decided whose dishes were staying (his mostly), which small appliances were redundant (goodbye, extra stand mixer), and which furniture worked best in the shared space. The truck for donations had already come and gone, leaving behind only the things that truly mattered. Or at least hadn’t been completely discarded yet.

And the books. So many books. I’d accumulated them over a lifetime, and the size of the collection had grown slowly over time. But had it grown.

“I only brought the box truck,” he said. “Because I thought, maybe we won’t need it all.”

I tilted my head, brow raised.

“But now?” He sighed.

“Yeah. We’re gonna need it. Don’t say I didn’t warn you,” I said. “Should’ve trusted me.”

Turns out, love makes you want to bring it all. Every part of you. Every worn book, every memory-stuffed mug, every soft blanket that’s ever made you feel safe. You want your person to know it all. To live in it with you. Gods, I was turning into such a sap.

It took two trips, but we finally had everything at my new home. Then came the fun part. Or the not fun but necessary part, to be more exact.

I looked around the room again, the floor a mix of clutter, piles, and broken-down boxes.

And yet it already felt like home.

“I’m organizing,” I said, more for my own benefit than his. “I have a plan.” Not really. I was attempting to manifest. “We just need to?—”

“Breathe.” He took my hand and held it tightly.

And I did.

“We don’t need to do this all tonight,” he reassured me.

“I know, but I...”

“No buts. The important thing is that you are here... with me... and this is now our home.”

We stayed there like that for another minute. Maybe two. Long enough for the noise in my head to quiet down, long enough for the dust in the sunlight to settle. When he finally let go, it was only so he could pull me gently toward the couch, nudging aside a box labeled KITCHEN—MAYBE?? with his foot.

“Sit,” he said. “You look like you’re about to pass out in a pile of hardcover biographies.” He seemed to have a connection to my extensive collection of biographies. I guessed they reminded him of one of the elders he spent a lot of time with growing up.

“I might,” I admitted, flopping down. “If I disappear under a stack of novels, tell my story with better pacing.”

He snorted. “Absolutely not. I’ll tell it exactly as chaotic and wordy as it really was.”

I stretched my legs out, the hem of my jeans catching on one of the cardboard corners. “Okay, maybe we take a break. Five minutes.”

He was already disappearing into the kitchen. “I’ll make tea.”

It was so stupidly domestic, I could’ve cried.

And I might’ve, just a little.

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When he came back, he had two mugs and a small plate with some of the good chocolate from the back of the cabinet—the one we both swore we were saving for special occasions. Why? Because my grandmother had one of those and it seemed like a nice tradition for us to adopt. And just like with her, special occasion sounded like it was going to mean, “when we want one.”

He handed me the mug first and then dropped a kiss onto the top of my head before settling beside me. We sipped in silence for a while, shoulder to shoulder, our thighs pressed together. The warmth of the tea seeped into my fingers.

“Want to open a box?” he asked, nudging one with his socked foot.

“Sure,” I said. “Dealer’s choice.”

He reached for one near the coffee table. It was one I hadn’t labeled well—just “STUFF” written in Sharpie.

Dangerous territory. At the time I’d labeled the boxes, I swore I’d remember what they all meant. I’d been a liar face. I remembered none of them.

He opened the flaps slowly, like it might bite. Inside were the contents of not one, not two, but three junk drawers.

And at the bottom of the box, a shoebox. Slightly dented. Taped shut.

He looked at me. “This one important?”

“Yeah. Open it.” Inside were photographs. I always planned to put them in an actual album, but never did. Some were from when I was small, others from generations before me. Each one telling a story, most of which I understood. There was one picture of my grandfather with a man I had no recognition of and another of a couple that looked as familiar as a random stranger at the grocery store.

“Tell me about this one.” He held out a picture of my great-grandfather next to a tomato plant that had somehow grown taller than his over six feet.

“I’ll tell you about them all.” I snuggled into him, and we traveled down memory lane together, the clutter forgotten until another time.

19

GARNER

I couldn’t sleep. Not on my left side, right side, or on my back. There was no way I’d get on my belly because I’d never close my eyes in that position.

My fox was restless too, telling me to open the curtains so he could look at the moon. Being shifters, we had a special connection to that celestial body. In the wild, our lives were regulated by the lunar cycles.

I’d once made the mistake of telling my beast the moon had no light of its own, but it was reflected from the sun. He refused to speak to me for days, believing I was fibbing.

What is that noise?

Inside or out? Life was rarely 100% quiet for a shifter, and sometimes I longed for human hearing.

In the other room?

Joss's clock. It was an antique that had belonged to his grandparents. It ding-donged at the hour, half-hour, and at the quarter past and to. Gods, it was annoying, but he said it chimed through his childhood, so it stayed in our house.

Wish I could muzzle it.

Me too.

But it wasn't just the clock that made us both restless. Not knowing what it was or how I could resolve it, I lay sleepless, counting the hours until Joss woke.

I brought him breakfast in bed, and though he nibbled a piece of toast, he said he was too wound up to eat as he had to work on a project that was due in a week.

It was Sunday, so he was in the home office and I shuttled back and forth with drinks, hot and cold, and food.

"What are you staring at, Garner?"

Gods, I hadn't realized I was, but my mate was gorgeous, wearing an old shirt of mine and shorts, his bare feet planted on the wooden floor. He was leaning against the desk, the laptop balanced on one hand.

"I'm not." I was and not just because I was besotted with my mate.

"Stop it!"

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“Sorry but?—”

“What’s wrong with you? You’ve been like this all week, as though you’re walking on hot coals or you’re expecting something bad to happen.” He placed the computer on the desk. “Your brother isn’t about to burst through the cat door, is he?”

I growled, not a very fox-like sound, it was almost a warning but not to Joss. To whom? I hadn’t a clue.

“Booker’s away for the weekend.”

“You look as you do when you are in your fur, as though you’re about to pounce.”

Are you shining through my eyes?

No. But I want to kill something. Not our mate but anything that moves or comes close.

We were both agitated, and I couldn’t fathom the reason. Joss was right. We’d been behaving like this for days. But our den wasn’t at war, neither of us had dangerous occupations, and I was far removed from whomever had smuggled our shipments off the boats. I lived a quiet life, except when my fox took down his prey.

Joss went to the window and peered outside. “Are we in some sort of danger? I can’t see anyone.”

He was so innocent. If another den declared war, my adorable, oh so innocent human

would be the last to find out.

“It’s not Uncle Cyrus, is it?”

That was a joke around the office when Uncle’s assistant announced he wanted a meeting and everyone ducked, thinking he was on the warpath, when in reality, Uncle was a teddy bear, one with teeth.

“No. It’s more my fox than me.”

No, it’s both of us.

“Sorry, my beast called me out on the fib. It’s me too. I just feel very protective of you.”

We’d had this discussion previously when we were walking on the pavement, I was on the side closest to the road. Joss complained, saying no one was going to lose control of their vehicle and run him over. But there were always stories like that in the news where unsuspecting humans had been mowed down because a human put their foot on the gas rather than the brakes.

“Maybe it’s you that’s making your beast anxious.”

I considered that but dismissed it. “No.”

“Why don’t you take yourself off to den land and hunt.”

“No!” That came out too fast and much too loud. “We’re staying with you.”

Joss walked across the room and into my arms. Having him so close should have made the world right again, but I was more agitated. I sniffed his hair, and beneath

the superficial layer of shampoo, there was his scent. But there was nothing unusual about that.

Except, there was another aroma, a fleeting one that mimicked my mate's.

“Joss, have you done anything different lately? Used a new bath wash or laundry detergent?”

My heart was beating so loudly it echoed in my ears and my fox told me to turn it down.

“No.” Joss pulled away and lifted my chin. His eyes searched mine, and he shivered because even without a mirror, I was aware my eyes had darkened.

“Garner, you're scaring me.”

“Oh my love, I'm sorry. It's the opposite. I'm ecstatic and so is my beast.”

He closed one eye and gave me a look. “Oh yeah, well, instead of terrifying me, perhaps you two asshats can share why you're so damned happy.

Fuck, I'd made this about me, when I should have centered my mate. I dropped to one knee, and he made a face.

“Now, after we've dated and mated, you want to propose?”

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“My darling, you smell differently.”

“What?” His screech hurt my ears.

Shit. “But in a good way.”

“Out with it. Why have you been acting like the ass end of a... a... I don’t know... a pig.

Pigs are very clean animals. My beast chimed in at the worst time.

“You’re pregnant.” I hadn’t intended to blurt it out, but I’d messed up so badly I had to tell him it was good news, the best.

“Pregnant? How?”

“I can give you a demonstration.”

My mate slapped my hand away. “I know how babies are made. But how do you know I’m pregnant?”

“Because of your scent.”

He plopped onto the couch, and I crouched before him.

“Your scent has another layer, a tiny sweet hint of an aroma, and this only happens when an omega is pregnant.”

“But you’re familiar with shifter omegas. Humans don’t go around sniffing one another to discover if someone is pregnant.”

And that was one advantage in being a shifter. We had heightened senses.

“Do you remember me telling you I recognized you as my mate the instant we met?”

He nodded.

“I scented you.” I tapped my nose. “My supersonic sense of smell would have discovered you in a crowd.”

“Awww.” He fell into me. “We’d have found one another, even if you consulted about the project with Harold, instead of me.”

“Ummm, aren’t you forgetting something?”

My mate giggled. “I’m getting to that.” He nuzzled my ear. “Pregnant? Are you sure? What if you’re wrong? Should I get a test from the pharmacy to be sure?”

“You can. I won’t be offended, but I’m certain.”

“Then I trust your supersonic nose. Is that why you and your fox were so growly and protective this last week?”

“I guess so.”

I’m proud of you,I told my fox.

Proud of you too, partner.

“You’re carrying something precious.” I patted Joss’s belly. “A baby we made together.” How cool was that?

Joss picked up the coffee I’d brought him earlier, sniffed it, and made a face. “There were signs. I’ve been off coffee for a few days, and I’ve fallen into bed earlier than usual which is why I’m behind on this project.”

He sat at the desk and tapped the keyboard.

“But while I’m doing this, tell me everything about humans impregnated with a baby from a shifter.”

“I don’t know much.” The den elders would have stories. “But the baby has a fifty percent chance of being a shifter.”

Joss shrugged. “Okay.”

I strode over to him and swiveled the chair to face me. “Don’t have more questions like will our little one shift in front of human visitors?”

He tapped my nose. “Shifters have existed for centuries without humans being aware of them. That was what you told me. Or Harold did. One of the two.”

“Okay.”

“That wouldn’t have been possible if every shifter kid blabbed about the animals, so shifters must have some method of keeping the secret.”

Huh. I’d never thought of it like that.

“We do.” The universe had made sure of it.

“Cool. If our child is a shifter, I’ll have years to prepare.”

“Maybe we’ll have more than one.” I’d always wanted to be a dad and wished both my fathers were around to enjoy being grandparents.

“Wait, do foxes have litters?”

“In the wild they have four or five little ones.”

Horror was etched on Joss’s face. “Maybe we need a bigger house.”

JOSS

When I was single, I didn't realize just how much my life revolved around work. Now that I was mated and pregnant—and feeling the exhaustion that came with growing a little one...or possibly multiples, the whole fox litter thing still freaked me out a little—I could see clearly how encompassing my job had been.

And I loved it. I loved my work. Loved Harold. Loved all we accomplished. But I loved Garner more.

It was time to shift priorities.

I'd talked to my mate about it, curled up in bed with him the night before while his hand rubbed gently over the growing swell of my belly. His first suggestion had been simple—just take leave. Tell Harold I needed time off. He'd understand. Harold was a shifter. He knew the difference between mates and random hookups or even long-term human partnerships. He'd get it.

And he was right about all those things. Harold was amazing, and our bond went far deeper than simply co-workers. He was my brother in all ways but blood.

I had to admit, it was a tempting prospect. I almost said yes. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that I wouldn't be home with Garner if I did that. I'd just be home. Alone. Garner would still be working. That wasn't what I wanted either.

That's when I started to consider the idea of working at Redtail, not as a consultant this time, but as an actual employee.

I already knew the ins and outs of the company after my time consulting there. I

loved the people. They were my kind of people and now were my den. Smart, kind, collaborative... family. And more than that, I wanted to be near Garner. I didn't want to waste a second away from him. I wanted our lives fully meshed together—not just mornings and nights, but the in between too.

Of course, I didn't want to let Harold down. It would be so much easier if I'd had a random job. Then I could quit with none of the guilt. But our company had been everything to both of us for so long, and just because my life choices were going down a different path, that didn't give me the right to force him to do the same.

We had built Denmarke Global together. We were a team. I needed to talk to him before any decisions were made. It was the right thing to do.

"I'm going to do it today," I said aloud, more to myself than anyone.

I set my tea down in front of me, eggs untouched on the plate. I'd thought eggs were the best idea ever until I smelled them. Pregnancy was wild like that—everything I once loved turned against me, and things I used to avoid suddenly became cravings.

"You're going to do what today, love?" Garner asked, glancing at me from across the table. He was dressed for work, enjoying the last of his breakfast before he had to leave.

"I'm going to talk to Harold. See how he feels about everything. He's important to me too."

I loved that Garner trusted me unconditionally. I had dated guys in the past who were jealous of Harold, who thought I needed to spend less time with him because obviously, since we were both hot, we'd bang. It was exhausting and a big part of the reason I'd given up on dating altogether for a long time. Garner never once even looked at Harold sideways. He understood that Harold was my den before I even

knew what one was.

Garner reached across the table, placing his hand over mine, his touch exactly what I craved. “Whatever you decide to do,” he said, his voice soft and sure, “I’ll be right beside you. If the two of you talk and you don’t want to make any decisions yet, that’s okay too. If you want me to come in with you, just say the word. One phone call and I’ll be there. Just tell me what you need.”

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I rubbed my thumb gently over the back of his hand. “I’ll just go in,” I said. “I’ve got this.”

He squeezed my hand. “I know you do, Joss. I know you do.”

We left the house at the same time, him headed to Redtail, me to Denmarke Global. I made my usual stop for coffee along the way, though I skipped ordering one for myself. Coffee and I were not currently on good terms—one of many recent betrayals by my pregnant body. It also hated diet cola. Water and tea it was.

I walked into Harold’s office without knocking, setting the coffee in front of him and plopping down into the chair across from his desk.

“Hey, Harold, can we talk?”

He looked up from his computer, a knowing look already on his face. “And by talk, you mean you want to not take on clients for a while.”

I blinked. He was so close. “How’d you know that? Did Garner call you?”

“No, nothing like that.” He leaned back in his chair, folding his arms over his chest. “You’re pregnant. You’re mated. All your instincts are going to be screaming at you to stay close to your den, to your mate. Am I wrong?”

I sighed. “No. You’re right. But I can’t figure out the best way to deal with that.”

“I have an idea, if you want to hear it.” He picked up his coffee and took a long sip.

“Is this one of today’s specials? Barista’s choice?”

I smiled.

“Coconut, almond, mocha?” he guessed.

“You’re getting good at these.” It was my favorite milkshake combination, so I figured it was worth a shot for Harold.

“I like the combo.” He set his cup down and dove back into work talk. “Or... what about just being a silent partner for a while? No pressure, nothing formal. Nothing permanent unless you want it to be. Just step back. Let the machine run without you for a bit.”

“That’s not fair to you.”

“It is,” he said firmly. “This company is what it is because of the work we’ve done together. But right now, it’s on autopilot. I’ve already handed off more tasks to the new hires we brought on. Honestly, I think it’s time we both slowed down a little.”

I swallowed. “I’ve also been thinking about... maybe getting another job.”

His eyebrows rose and he smiled wide. “At Redtail?”

I nodded. “Seriously. Did Garner call you?”

“No.” He laughed. “He didn’t. I guessed. Because if I were in your shoes, that’s exactly where I’d go.”

We spent the rest of the morning going over logistics. He insisted I keep my desk but forward my phone line to him so I wouldn’t have to worry about anything. I couldn’t

have asked for a more understanding friend—or a better business partner.

From there, I went straight to Redtail, right to my mate's office, and knocked on his door.

“Come in.”

I opened the door and stepped inside. “Hey, I was wondering if you're hiring?”

Garner looked up, and the moment his eyes met mine, he crossed the room in a few long strides and pulled me into a hug that lifted my feet off the ground.

“As it happens,” he murmured into my ear, “I need a personal assistant.”

“You're not afraid you'll be accused of nepotism?” I teased, nuzzling into his shoulder.

“They can accuse away. It wouldn't be wrong.” He kissed my cheek with a smack. “It is nepotism. I'm the CEO. That's kind of the perk of the job—hiring your mate.”

I laughed, holding onto him tightly. “You're ridiculous.”

“You love it.”

“I really do.”

And I did. I loved him. I loved that he wanted me beside him—not just in the quiet hours of the morning or as we fell asleep, but here, in the in-between moments of everyday life.

We stood there for a long moment, wrapped up in each other. This was it. This was what it meant to build a life together.

I wasn’t leaving anything behind. I was stepping into something new—something real. Something we were creating together.

And I couldn’t wait.

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GARNER

I was determined to get the work done before Joss got up.

Not that I was an expert, but I’d done okay so far.

My mate’s slow breathing assured me he was still asleep. If he woke up before I’d completed my tasks, I’d have to rush and make his tea and toast, because since we’d discovered he was pregnant, that was my morning routine.

Joss was carrying the baby, so I had to do everything to make his job as easy as

possible. I wasn't exactly a morning person, but I forced myself to get up before my mate each morning of his pregnancy.

The soft padding of feet on the carpet and then the wooden floor alerted me to Joss having woken.

"Garner? Are you here?" His voice was underlaid with concern, and I had to hotfoot it into the living room.

"Oof." There was a thunk and a clank, and I raced around the corner. Joss was standing, thank gods, but he'd run into the baby gate I'd installed.

"What's this doing here?" He rolled his eyes. "We're not expecting your brother, are we?"

"No." Besides, a baby gate wouldn't stop a fox.

"I'm baby-proofing the house."

My mate cradled his tiny bump. "I'm only twenty weeks. It's a little early."

"I want to be prepared. If the baby comes early and I haven't done it, we'll have to stay in a hotel."

My mate grinned. "Newborns can't exactly run a mini marathon." He squinted at my hips, and my mind immediately went to sex.

"What's that around your waist?"

I jiggled my hips and turned around, giving him the 360 view. "My tool belt. Like it?"

Joss cupped his chin. “It’s very professional.”

I smacked my hip and puffed out my chest. Yes, my mate approved.

“Can you help me with this, please?” Joss fumbled with the baby gate. “It’s difficult to open.”

That was the idea, so the baby wouldn’t get into the kitchen.

“What do you think of my work so far?” I twirled around yet again. “I’ve installed drawer locks.” I yanked at a drawer to demonstrate. “And I’ve attached padding to the sharper corners.”

I took my mate’s hand. “Follow me.” Leading him into the bathroom, I pointed at the toilet. “Ta da!” He cocked a brow. “I zip-tied it. There’ll be no falling into the toilet.”

Joss folded his arms and crossed his legs. “What if I need to pee, as I do right now?”

“Oh. Right.”

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He charged out, yelling over his shoulder, “You haven’t done the other toilet, have you? If so, we have a problem.”

“No, not yet.” Hmmm, my plan had a few hiccups which I’d have to iron out.

Joss trudged out of the second bathroom and headed for the couch. He flung himself on it and cocked his head.

“That’s odd. Usually when I jump on here, it shifts a little.”

I held up a hand, so pleased he’d picked up on that. “It’s bolted to the floor.”

“Why?”

“Because we don’t want our little one to tip it over.”

Joss’s eyes wandered around the room. “Our child won’t come from Planet Krypton.”

“Huh?” I’d studied the planets as a kid but had never heard of that one.

“Never mind. One day I’ll introduce you to human comics.”

I was never a comic fan unless the hero was a fox shifter, and there weren’t many of those.

“What is this?”

My mate peered over the back of the sofa as I crouched near the stove.

A tinny voice rang out, and Joss cringed. “A small person is approaching the stove. Danger, danger.”

I leaped up, smiling and clapping. “It works.” Next I tried to open the cupboard under the sink and both our phones buzzed, followed by an alert. “Possible intruder near the sink.”

Joss clutched a cushion and begged me to make tea and toast. “This is so much to take in.” His clenched teeth and weird expression suggested he was in pain, but when I asked, he begged for his food.

My mind was occupied with how much baby-proofing I still had to do, and I dropped a spoon. Odd for a shifter, but I’d been distracted.

“Danger, danger. Small person detected.”

“Sorry.” I stood up. Had to make sure I didn’t drop anything again.

The floor lit up with fox paw prints. This was intended to show the baby the way out and far from danger. I jumped from one print to the other as Joss gave me side-eye.

“It’s cute. You gotta admit it, but...” I deliberately allowed my voice to trail off to get my mate’s attention. I stood in front of what looked like a lock box. “Look, instead of waiting until we get our little one a snack, they hold their palm under here and a cracker topples out.”

“Babe, we need to talk.”

I was a little deflated because my mate didn’t sound overly enthusiastic about my

progress. He patted the couch, and I sat beside him with coffee in hand.

“I love how you’re forward thinking, wanting to protect our child, but I don’t want to live in a home that screams danger at me if I bend down.”

I was silent, trying to imagine the situation from Joss’s point of view. “I’m sorry. I’m just so excited about being a dad, and I want to protect our little one just as I do you.”

He took both my hands. “And I love that about you. But perhaps you could scale back a little.” He looked at me, his expression hopeful.

“Fine. I’ll work on that. I suppose I could get rid of the laser trip wires.”

Joss slapped a hand on his brow.

I burst out laughing. “Kidding.” But I made a note on my phone, Remove laser trip wires.

“You know what I’d love? If you got all the pillows, blankets, and duvets in the house and piled them on our bed.’

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I sat up, my mind grasping what he was saying. “A nest?”

“Yeah, not to give birth in but so we can snuggle and it’s warm and we can talk about our baby and how life will change.”

“I’ll get right on it.”

My shifter abilities helped, and I tore about the house, at twice the speed of a human. I arranged everything in the middle of the bed, then tossed them on the floor because I didn’t like what I’d done.

“How’s it going in there?” Joss’s voice reached me as I stood in the doorway, thinking whether the cushions should be placed around the edge, or in the middle with the pillows. Or should it be arranged like a color wheel, so red to orange to yellow and so on.

“Harder than I thought.”

My mate appeared in the doorway. “I need something soft, so let’s toss everything on the bed. It doesn’t matter if it’s messy, and we can bounce into it.”

My mate was pregnant. There couldn’t be any of that.

“I know that look.” He wagged his finger at me. “I’m not going to run and leap face first or do a somersault. Just butt first and bounce.”

“Fine. Let’s get messy.” We got everything onto the mattress in a big jumble, and I

held out my hand and he clasped it. We bounced together and lay on our backs snuggling, covered and surrounded my softness.

“This is nice.” The gentleness of this temporary nest contracted with the harsh warnings I had installed. I placed my hand on Joss’s belly and whispered to our baby that I’d always be there to make sure they avoided the sharp corners of life.

“Oh, Garner, that’s so sweet. You are going to be the best dad.” My mate’s eyes filled with tears. “I love you.”

“Love you right back.”

I hoped I’d measure up as a dad. My dad reared me and Booker to be the best people we could be and to always chase our dreams. But my dream came true when I met Joss, and another dream was fulfilled when he got pregnant.

We lay in one another’s arms and talked of how we’d decorate the nursery. I agreed with whatever my mate wanted, because if I’d consulted him on the safety features I was installing, I wouldn’t have messed up.

“But there is one thing I bought that I hope you’ll love.” Our little one would have a tricycle, and they needed a helmet. And when they were older, they’d have a bike and we’d be cycling together as a family. I pulled three boxes from under the bed.

Joss’s eyes lit up. “For me?” He squeed.

“One of them is. One’s mine, and the other’s for the baby.”

Joss opened the smallest box first and tears filled his eyes. “It’s adorable.” It was a bike helmet shaped like a fox’s head with pointed red ears. “I love it. The fox family.”

Ours were similar, only adult size. We put them on and snapped pics. Shame they were so hard ‘cause I would have liked to sleep in mine.

“I can’t wait to meet our little one.”

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JOSS

I was the size of a house. Or at least, it felt that way.

And unlike some people, I didn’t hate it. Not one bit. From the moment my belly started popping out, I’d embraced it like it was a second career. I grabbed those paternity clothes without hesitation. I wore shirts to work that said “baby bump” with a giant arrow pointing straight to my middle.

Was it business casual? Absolutely not. Did I care? Also absolutely not. I knew the CEO. What were they going to do about it?

And as the weeks ticked by, those shirts—those adorable, stretchy, meant-to-grow-with-you shirts—got tighter and tighter. My belly extended further and further out until it was basically a shelf. A warm, solid, curved shelf. When I sat down, I would rest my tea on it during movie nights with Garner, both of us pretending that was normal behavior while I marveled at the ridiculousness of it.

Still, the food things were weird. Not bad, just... unpredictable. I found things I liked, like citrus popsicles, instant oatmeal with peanut butter, and this one brand of canned peaches that tasted like childhood and gold, but part of me kept wondering if my normal food preferences would return.

Would I like coffee again? Would I like my diet soda again? Would I ever eat an egg

and think it was the best thing ever again?

Only time would tell.

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I stood in front of the mirror in our bedroom, checking myself over to make sure I was at least semi-presentable for work. I'd had a few days recently where I didn't even realize my socks didn't match until someone at the office pointed it out. In my defense, I couldn't exactly see my feet anymore. At this point, socks were a leap of faith.

"You ready for work?" Garner leaned against the doorway, a giant insulated lunch bag slung over one arm like he was heading off to camp.

We'd gone from last-minute takeout or grabbing random sandwiches to full-scale picnic lunches for a family of five. It was easier that way, because what I thought sounded good in the morning had about a 50/50 chance of still sounding good at lunchtime. So he packed a little of everything—cheese sticks, applesauce pouches, crackers, fruit, grilled chicken, yogurt. You name it, it was probably in there.

And somehow, despite all of that, I still ended up ordering pizza some days. Or a specific, very random salad that had to be from one particular café with exactly seven olives.

"You look adorable carrying that lunch sack," I told him with a grin.

He winked. "Just getting ready for baby diaper bag days."

If it had been anyone else, I might have thought they were teasing. But not Garner. He meant it. He was full-on, all-in, completely invested in this fatherhood thing. From midnight changings to laundry duty, from installing the car seat to learning baby sign language, he'd made it abundantly clear from day one that he wanted to be

there—not as a helper, but as a parent.

And not because he thought he needed to do “his share,” but because he genuinely wanted to be involved. Fully. I was lucky. So lucky. So many omega fathers didn’t get that kind of partner. I knew that firsthand from my own childhood.

“Yeah, I’m almost ready,” I said, still facing the mirror. “Just noticed this shirt might have a soy sauce stain from when I got those dumplings last week. I didn’t soak it soon enough.”

He stepped further into the room. “Want me to grab you something else to wear?”

I blinked. That wasn’t the response I expected. I thought he’d say something like “Oh, it’s fine, no one will notice.” But he didn’t. He just turned and walked out of the room like a man on a mission.

When he came back, it wasn’t with a regular shirt. He held a gift bag like he’d been waiting for this moment, like this was his time to shine.

“What did you do?” I asked, eyeing the bag suspiciously and stepping closer.

“I maybe had something made for you.”

I pulled the tissue paper aside and reached in, tugging out a new paternity shirt, made of soft fabric, with a design that was clearly ordered custom. Right where my belly would stretch it widest was an embroidered image of a fox, curled up in a tight little ball, fast asleep.

I covered my mouth, instantly blinking back tears. “Okay, you’re gonna make me cry.”

“Because you hate it?” he asked, eyes wide.

I shook my head, voice choked. “No, you ridiculous alpha. Because it’s the sweetest thing I have ever seen in my entire life. Like, ever.” I sniffled. “And maybe fifty percent hormones.”

He came over and gently lifted the hem of my current shirt, pulling it up and over my head. He helped me into the new one, kissing my bare belly before covering it with the new cloth.

“It looks good on you,” he murmured, brushing his lips over mine.

His arms couldn’t quite get all the way around me anymore—not with the belly in the way, but that didn’t stop him from trying. And honestly, the effort? That did something to me. Something warm and deep and unshakably good.

I started to deepen the kiss, leaning into him, and then his alarm beeped in his pocket.

“Stupid work,” he muttered.

“I know.” I tried not to sound disappointed.

He kissed my forehead and stepped back, taking out his phone to shut off the beeping.

“That boss of yours,” I said, teasing, “they expect too much from you.”

He chuckled. “Right?”

I laced my fingers through his. “So... I’ve got a question for you.”

“I’m listening.” He stepped closer.

“Do you think maybe... we could call in sick today?”

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His brow lifted. “Call in sick?”

“I mean, not really sick, but...” I shrugged. “Call in mated? Call in desperately wanting a day on the couch with my alpha? I don’t know. Just... us.”

Garner had his phone out in 2.5 seconds flat.

“Calling one of the VPs,” he said. “It’s a medical emergency.”

I blinked. “It is?” It was a needy pregnant omega emergency, but hardly medical.

“Yeah.” He kissed me again, his hand cradling my cheek. “My mate needs all the kisses I can give him. Immediate care required.”

He kissed me again, slower this time. Less of a brush, more of a promise.

“Immediate care required,” he murmured again, his voice deeper now, and I didn’t miss the flicker of heat behind his eyes. “My patient appears to be overheating.”

“Could be,” I said. “Might need to lie down. Doctor’s orders.”

“Lying down would be good,” he agreed, pressing his mouth to my throat, his stubble scraping just enough to make me shiver. “I should do a full-body exam. Strictly professional.”

I laughed breathlessly. “Sure. Because I’m definitely not your mate or anything.”

He growled low in his chest, and it hit me right in the spine.

“No, you’re mine. Completely.” His hand splayed wide across my belly, reverent and possessive. “And right now, I want you in our bed. Shirt on or off?”

“On,” I said immediately, touching the little fox curled across the front. “I like this one.”

His pupils dilated, like somehow that was what did it for him—the fact that I wanted to stay in this silly, sweet little shirt he’d had made. He kissed me again, slower this time, his hands guiding me back step by step.

“I like it too,” he said between kisses, “especially when you’re wearing it... and nothing else.”

He helped me onto the bed. “You’re so beautiful like this,” he murmured. “I want to make you feel good.”

“You already do,” I whispered, and I meant it. Every inch of me ached, but not in a bad way.

“I love you,” he whispered, his breath warm against my skin.

“I know,” I said. “You made me a fox shirt. That’s furever-level commitment.”

He laughed and pulled me in tighter, like he never wanted to let go, which worked for me. There was no place I’d rather be than in his arms.

“We should have done this earlier.”

“Say diaper blowout,” the photographer told us.

Joss and I giggled, lightening the mood at our pregnancy photoshoot. We should have scheduled it last month but Booker’s photographer friend was busy and today was the first time he could fit us in.

We were on den land, and with the sun shining, the wild flowers in bloom, and the tall grass waving in the breeze, it was a stunning location to have our photos taken.

Ralph, the photographer, issued more instructions.

“To the left a little, Garner.”

“That’s perfect, Joss.”

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“Can you look at one another, please?”

He had a box full of props. A fox stuffie and signs that read, “Counting the days til you’re here.”

We’d brought the fox bicycle helmets and tiny shoes and baby clothes.

“I hope my bladder lasts until the end of the shoot.” There were no buildings on the den land, and I should have hired a portable potty, but Joss insisted he could pee behind a bush no problem.

“Garner, I’d like you to kneel and kiss Joss’s belly, please.”

I caressed my mate’s bump and placed my lips on his paternity shirt. Joss put a hand at the back of my head.

“Don’t move.” Ralph snapped away.

My mate was pressing his hand harder on my scalp, but I didn’t want to complain and ruin the shot. He was squishing my face on his big belly, and the world went dark as my eyes and lips were squeezed into the fabric.

“Babe,” I mumbled. “Not so hard.”

Joss’s body clenched, and his bump was harder than it had been seconds earlier. It had to be indigestion or acid reflux because he’d been suffering from both as the birth date drew closer.

“Maybe a little less grunting and more smiling, Joss. Shall we try again?” Ralph pleaded.

My mate let out a long breath and released me. I got up, thinking we’d end the shoot and head home. Joss had been sitting, also in my arms, and now he was standing and it was too much. He should be on the sofa holding lemonade with his feet up.

“I think Joss is tired, Ralph.”

“Perfect timing. I have everything I need. Wanna have a look?”

“No!” Joss’s screech had Ralph freeze, the camera extended in one hand.

“Ummm, okaaaay.” He backed off.

“That was a contraction. The baby wants out.”

Ralph’s eyes bugged out, and he held up his hands. “I know nothing about birthing babies.”

My gaze rested on the sign that read, “Counting the days til you’re here.” It couldn’t be today. We weren’t at home or the shifter birthing unit Joss had chosen because he wasn’t comfortable bringing the baby into the world without medical professionals assisting.

“We’ll get you back to town.” I unlocked the car and took my mate’s arm, but after a few steps he doubled up in pain and panted. Instinctively I breathed with him, and for those seconds, I experienced a sense of, not calm, because my mate was in pain, but as if this was meant to be. We were following in the footsteps of generations of shifters.

But once Joss's body stopped cramping, I tried to pick him up, but he declared we'd never make it back to the city

"Ralph, make yourself useful and google birthing a baby in the woods." Shifters had been bringing babies into the world by themselves since time began. I needed hints as to what I should be doing. "Wait, there are towels in a bag in the trunk and a blanket and cushion in the back seat. Also grab wet wipes from the glove compartment."

Booker and I had started playing squash, hence the towels. And despite being hotter than normal, thanks to the little one inside him, Joss had taken to turning the car air-conditioning to freezing and covering himself with a blanket while I shivered beside him.

"What are the towels for?" My mate scrunched up his face.

"No idea, but they need them in the movies."

Ralph deposited the items I'd asked for on the ground and then edged his way to his vehicle.

"Hey, we might need your help. Don't go."

Joss squeezed my shoulder. "Let him leave. There's nothing he can do."

"What?" I'd be alone with my mate, and I had no idea what to expect, despite watching videos and going to shifter birthing classes. Knowing the doctors and midwives at the birthing unit would step in had been reassuring, and my job was to support my mate. That was my role. Not to be a birthing coach.

"But he could... ummm..."

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“Don’t you dare say take photos.” Joss rested his head on my chest and grunted as another contraction wrapped around his belly.

“No, I thought he could... ummm... hold the towels.”

“I trust... m-my body to tell m-me what to d-do.” Joss’s voice had a touch of certainty buried beneath the doubt. He’d been emphatic that the baby should come into the world in the birthing unit, but now there was a stretch behind his words. And I couldn’t argue with a laboring omega.

“Okay, go. We’ve got this.” Joss may have, but I didn’t, and I watched Ralph leave as a man would being left alone on a raft in the middle of an ocean.

My mate insisted on pacing around the car, leaning on the hood or me when another contraction gripped his belly.

“Lay the blanket on the grass in the shade.”

With his clothes off, the breeze kissed my mate’s belly, and he’d never looked more beautiful. I wished Ralph was here to capture this moment, but it was fixed in my memory.

After helping my mate onto the blanket, he turned around to face me, and I squatted while he kneeled and grunted as more contractions took hold of him. When he said he was ready to push, I sat behind him, and he rested his arms on my legs.

I lifted my head and studied the landscape, seemingly so calm while our lives were a

frenzy of contractions and nagging doubts that I could be the alpha Joss needed me to be.

“Laurie, Archie, Mac, Stefanie, Katrina.” Joss let out a stream of names.

“Babe?”

“We haven’t chosen a name,” he said between pants. “And I’m chanting any name that pops into my head. It helps somehow.”

Joss dug his elbows into me as he bore down. “Bob!”

He fell back, gasping mouthfuls of air. “This is hard.” He leaned forward, every sinew in his body straining with him as he pushed. “Marigold, Nancy, Herbert, Eddie.”

I wiped sweat from his face each time he finished pushing.

“It feels... it feels like... I don’t know.” My mate sobbed, and I held him tight with one hand and wiped away his tears with the other. “Can you see anything?”

His limp body suggested he had little strength left, but he had to get the baby out. And this would have been a good time to have a third person here. One who would support my mate while I checked the baby’s progress.

Do you know how to do that?

In the movies, they always yell that they can see the baby’s hair.

I peered over Joss’s shoulder between his legs, but the angle was wrong and I couldn’t leave him.

“How about trying to feel for the baby?”

He gingerly put his hand down. “Oh my gods, Garner. I can feel the baby’s hair.”

Huh, maybe I should pay more attention to medical dramas. Seemed like they had a clue.

“Ocean, Angela, Tamzin, Eric.” Joss grunted and groaned, and now I could see the head.

“That’s the hard part, babe. Yell those names. You’re doing this.”

“Sammy, Thorn, Tanisha, and freaking Gerald.”

The baby slid out, and I crawled to my mate’s side and picked up the squirming little bundle. Wrapping him, the baby was a boy, in a towel—now I understood what the towels were for—I lay him on Joss’s chest and tucked the cushion behind my mate’s head.

Covering them both with more towels that were so useful, I put a hand on our son’s back, enjoying the warmth of his tiny body.

“Can’t believe he’s here.” Joss kissed our son’s damp head.

I grabbed the sign we’d used in the photo and dug a pen from my shirt pocket. I drew an arrow from the word “days” and wrote “zero.”

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“May I take a pic? Just for us, not to share.”

Joss nodded, his heavy lids beginning to close.

I selfied the three of us with the sign, both new dads kissing our son.

He’s so small. My fox was shining through my eyes at our newborn.

That’s how human babies are born. Most babies were small at birth, even elephants, though the word small was relative for them.

“You need to sleep, babe.” The sun was sinking, and I needed to get my family home. Tucking our little boy under one arm, I helped Joss to the car. Thank gods we’d been testing how to set up the infant car seat—a feat that took a lot of practice—so our little one was safe on the drive.

“Where have you been?” Booker was sitting on the front step. “I’ve been calling you. We were supposed to play pickleball.”

“Joss has been busy.”

EPILOGUE

JOSS

“Is it time to go, Papa?” Wayne, our barely three-year-old’s voice, carried through the kitchen, as he came barreling in, holding his little backpack with both hands like it

was full of treasures. It wasn't treasure by most people's standards, but it was by his.

It had a crumpled drawing the barista at our local coffee shop drew for him on a menu at his request, a single sock he was sure someone was going to need if they stepped in a puddle, and a plastic dinosaur with one leg missing he'd found at the park.

Garner looked up from where he was zipping the main baby bag and smiled. "I'm just about done, buddy. Gotta finish packing your sister's things, and then we can go."

His sister Liz was barely a year old and as cute as a bug. I might've been biased on that one, though.

Wayne tapped his nose, his face serious. "I'm three. Do I get to be with the big kits?"

He was very proud of being three. It was something he announced anytime he saw an opportunity. It was adorable. Hewould hold up three chubby fingers wherever we went and to everyone he met—the post office, the bakery, to strangers in the elevator. He might not introduce himself by name, but hewouldlet you know how old he was. It was his trademark.

The bag Garner was packing technically had things for both Liz and Wayne, but lately Wayne had insisted he didn't need a bag anymore because he was, quote, "three now." That usually lasted until we were halfway to wherever we were going and he realized he wanted a snacky-snack or a drink. We pretended it was for Liz. Sometimes, it was just easier to let a three-year-old win.

"I'll get Daddy!" he shouted, spinning around to break into giggles as he saw me standing behind him. He'd been so focused on Garner that he hadn't heard me come in, Liz taking a nap in her wrap.

“Daddy! We’re gonna go Run Night! Run Night!” He absolutely adored den runs.

“Yep, it is,” I said, lifting the deviled eggs container from the counter. I’d spent an hour peeling the eggs and they didn’t look the best, but they were a den favorite, and I had a feeling I was going to be bringing them until I met the goddess.

Wayne darted back to Garner’s side, asking for the fifth time whether the foxes would be running in a circle again. He liked it when they did that—something about the symmetry, or maybe the chaos of it. Who knew what clicked in a toddler brain?

Den Run Night had quickly become one of my favorite parts of den life. Even though I couldn’t shift, I felt like I belonged just as much as those who did. There was something grounding about it, watching everyone come together, letting go of the day’s stress, being a part of the community. And I wasn’t sidelined. I helped wrangle the kids while some of the other omegas got the chance to take their fur and let loose.

I was good at that part, the herding of the littles, setting up the food table, making sure we didn’t run out of wipes or apple slices. It made me feel useful. Present. A part of things.

And now, pregnant again—verypregnant—I took a step back. I still helped, but not like I used to. I couldn’t run after toddlers, and waddling was nowhere near as fast, but I could read stories, blow bubbles, and sing songs like a boss.

This pregnancy was different from the last two. With Wayne and Liz, it had been just one baby at a time. This time, we were having a full-on litter. Multiple heartbeats. Multiple kicks. Multiple late-night bathroom runs, and belly size that defied logic.

I looked like a beach ball smuggler. Garner even had to get special shirts made for me. He loved it though, especially the one with four sleeping foxes over the widest part of my belly.

I had no idea how I was going to juggle four infants, a one-and-a-half-year-old, and a three-year-old. That kind of math didn't add up to "relaxed and chill." But somehow, it didn't scare me. Not really. Not with Garner beside me. Not with the den surrounding us.

A woman at the grocery store had looked me up and down the other day, in full on judgy mode. She'd said, "You're gonna have your hands full."

And yeah. That was probably true.

But they wouldn't be as full as my heart.

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We got to the clearing a little after dusk. The long grass still held the heat of the day, and the big picnic tables were already laid out with food—crock pots plugged into portable batteries, salads in huge plastic bowls, drinks in coolers filled with ice, and more chips than the den needed for a year. Kids were pretending to be foxes and running on their hands and feet, looking nothing at all fox-like.

Wayne ran off without hesitation, shouting to his den mates about bubbles. Liz, tucked into her sling, let out a little sigh but didn't fully wake. She was just over a year old now and getting heavy enough that I felt every ounce of her on my back and hips, especially carrying the extra weight of the pregnancy. She really needed to be in a stroller, but this was her favorite place, and I was never going to deny her that.

“Deviled eggs!” I turned just in time to see Booker peeling back the lid of the container I was still holding.

I smacked his hand. “Wait your turn.”

He stuck out his tongue, grinning. Booker and I had gotten close in that sibling-adjacent way where we could tease each other without it ever hitting a nerve. Sometimes we even teamed up to poke fun at Garner, which always made him roll his eyes, making it more fun.

After everyone had eaten and after Wayne had dramatically declared he didn't like carrots unless they were “the crunchy small ones,” I set up the bubble machine.

It was my secret weapon. A couple of the older kids helped by blowing their own to add to the mix while the little ones screamed and chased after them. It kept them

distracted just long enough for the omegas who wanted to shift without little hands clinging to them.

Garner came up behind me, brushing his hand over the small of my back. “You good?”

“Better than good.” I smiled up at him.

He kissed me quickly, then stepped back, his fingers already going to the hem of his shirt. I watched as he stripped down. They might have all been used to nudity, growing up in a den, but I wasn’t, and if I could see my sexy mate naked, I wasn’t going to waste the time ignoring it.

Then he shifted into his fox. Beautiful. Sleek. And adorable. All copper and white with piercing eyes that still somehow looked like his even without the human shape. I never got tired of watching him take his beast and seeing the animal in him come forward.

He was Alpha of the den, and it showed. The others followed his lead, and he ran with purpose... just one loop around the clearing, a signal to start the hunt, a signal that everything was safe and they were ready.

Then, just like he always did when I was pregnant, once he led them into the woods, he returned to me.

He padded over to the edge of the blanket I’d laid out and settled beside me, tail curling around his feet. Liz, now awake, reached out and patted his head. She recognized her papa.

Wayne came over and plopped down with a juice box, pressing into my side. “That’s my papa,” he said proudly. “He’s my bestest fox.”

And honestly? Same, kid. Same.

We sat like that for a long time. Watching the stars come out. Listening to the laughter and the rustle of paws in the underbrush, only getting up to add more bubbles to the machine.

Garner eventually shifted back, pulling his jeans on and wrapping an arm around my shoulders.

I leaned into him.

“I don’t know how we’re gonna manage four babies,” I whispered.

“We will,” he said without hesitation. “We always do.”

I rested my hand on my belly, feeling the flutter of kicks just beneath the surface. “I can’t believe how lucky I am.”

“You’re not the only one,” he murmured, kissing my temple.

And for a while, we just sat there, watching our den mates coming back and join their families.

This was what life was meant to be. Surrounded by pack, by laughter, by family. The deviled eggs were long gone. The juice boxes empty. Even the chips were in bellies. My feet were sore, and I was pretty sure I had mashed banana in my hair.

But my heart?

Full.

Overflowing.

The lady in the grocery store might not have understood, but I did. This was what life was all about.

Sometimes the wrong number is the exact one you need.

When my phone rings and I don't recognize it, I ignore it. Full stop. Never once have I regretted that habit... until today.

The message left on my voicemail was a plea for help, his car stuck on a country road as the rain cascades down. He had meant to call a tow company, but got me instead. No big deal. I just need to call him back, right? Wrong?

Cell service dies one ring in and I'm left with one two choices: Hope they called someone else in the 20 seconds it took me to try and call them back or go and try to help them myself. I pick the latter.