



An Omega for Anders (Council of the Snow Leopards #4)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Sometimes it's more than love that sparkles.

Omega unicorn shifter Brett wants a new start, one where he can be Brett and not “that unicorn”. He appreciates that his foster parents took him into their wolf pack and loves them very much. But growing up a herbivore in a pack of predators sucks. He’s ready for a change and when a job opens up at a small community hospital hundreds of miles away, he jumps at the opportunity.

Alpha snow leopard Anders loves being part of Snowford’s sizzle. Snow leopards might not traditionally be pack animals, but his beast prefers it, and so does he. Really he does. But lately, seeing his friends with their true mates has him longing for more—for everything. Maybe the sizzle isn’t where he belongs, after all.

When Anders drives a co-worker to the hospital for an appointment, he scents him immediately—his mate. But when he follows the scent, it ends in the parking lot. His mate is gone and he’s left with only the mating pull. His heart is already beginning to ache.

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Chapter 1

Brett

When I accepted the job at the community hospital, I knew the hospital was tiny, but I didn't realize how small until I drove up on the day of my intake paperwork.

I knew instantly that it wouldn't be like my last position where I only knew the people in my department and no one else. That place was just too big to foster those kinds of relationships. Even when I went to the cafeteria for my break, I rarely saw anybody I knew. It was nice when I needed to decompress and escape into myself, but it was also very isolating.

This was going to be better. I could feel it.

Sure, it was hundreds of miles away from everyone I knew, but I never really fit in there anyway. Being the only unicorn in a pack of wolves was not ideal. I was orphaned after my parents were hit by a semi whose brakes failed when I was only a baby. I remembered nothing other than the pack. I loved my foster parents, and they would've adopted me and made me theirs if the pack was open to interspecies members.

They weren't, though. They called it being "old-fashioned." I called it discrimination. They let me live there, go to school, and complete chores everyone was expected to do, but I'd never be pack.

I used to get mad at my foster parents. Why didn't they fight for me? Did they really

love me? Why didn't they move where we could be a real family? It wasn't until I was in my late teens that I understood their choices. They were trapped. I didn't like it, but I got it.

In hindsight that was probably for the best. It made it easier for me to go to nursing school and apply to hospitals all over the country. If I'd had one friend, I might not have taken the leap, the one that led me to this very hospital.

I walked in the front doors and studied the signs as I tried to figure out how to get to human resources. They were less than helpful. There were arrows pointing to elevators they named after people, wings they named after other people, and offices they named after yet more people. I supposed if I lived around here all my life, those names might've meant something, but Albert Elevator and The Wendy Wing gave nothing away.

"You need help finding someone?" the woman behind the far counter asked.

Upon closer inspection, it was a volunteer check-in station. I wasn't a volunteer, but she had a warm, welcoming smile, and she offered, so I might as well take her up on it.

"I'm so lost," I admitted. "I'm Brett, and I'm new here. I was trying to find human resources. It says here that it's in AL6."

"I got you." She leaned over the counter and pointed down a long corridor. "If you go down this hall, on the left-hand side there'll be two elevators. You have to take Trevor, the right one. Go down one floor, and Albert 6 will be right in front of you."

Albert. Of course it was another name. I was going to need a study guide. "Thanks so much."

“No problem. I’m Claire, by the way. I’m here most Mondays, but other days as needed. I help coordinate the volunteers.” She kept gushing about what she did. I didn’t want to be late, but she was so proud of her work. That passion was obvious in her voice and demeanor. She must make so many people’s days brighter. “Here.” She handed me a map. I so needed that. “It’s my pleasure to welcome you aboard.”

I gave her a final smile and thank-you and went down the hallway, looking to the left and getting in the right elevator and going into HR. It was just as easy as she said.

Because I’d applied from a distance, my previous meetings had all been on Zoom. I’d already done a lot of the preliminary paperwork online, but parts of it needed to be signed by hand and scanned in, which was a whole level of ridiculous if you asked me. That was fine. Whatever it took to help me start the new job in my new town as I forged my new life.

Lily from HR had me fill everything in and then took pictures for my ID. We went over details on how to fill out my time sheets, how to request shifts, and all the protocol details that involved her department in some capacity or another.

When we were done with all the boring stuff, she walked me up to my floor. I was in a general wing named Victoria. They’d had two positions open, and I opted to be here over the heart unit because I liked the diversity. The only downside to this position was I was on call for the emergency department one day a pay period.

Emergency wasn’t my favorite place to be assigned. I wasn’t great with the wait periods and seeing people not being helped for hours, unable to do anything to remedy it. Emotionally it wore on me. I was good under pressure, and it was a department that they were currently lacking, so I didn’t mind helping. But it was not a place I could be long-term, that was for sure.

As I walked through the halls, I couldn’t help but notice the atmosphere of the

hospital. It was friendly and welcoming, a stark contrast to my previous workplace. The walls were adorned with cheerful murals that were recreations of children's artwork from the local school. And the number of people who stopped to say hello and introduce themselves was novel—to me, anyway. When the hiring manager had explained there was a sense of community here, I'd assumed it was similar to when they told people it was "like family," in that it was nothing like one and meant you had to work too hard. I was happy to be proven wrong.

Lily gave me a tour of the different nurses' stations, and an empty room on my new floor. I even got to meet my supervisor, Stan, who sounded thrilled that I was coming. He seemed like a genuinely nice person, someone who really cared about his staff. I loved that.

Then Lily and I went down to the ER so I could see where I'd be working some of the time. The person whose job I was replacing had retired after being in the hospital for 35 years. I considered that a really good sign that this was an excellent place to work. Like me, they were the person to be called if needed in the ER, and they'd only been called twice in the past six months, which I didn't think was too bad.

I was starting on nights, which I didn't love, but that was okay. It was a four-day work week, great pay, a new town, and a fresh start. Didn't get much better than that. I thanked everybody and told them I'd be there for my first shift.

It was still early enough that I could get some of my errands done. I'd flown in last night with two suitcases and a carry-on. That was all I owned at this point. The small cabin I was renting came furnished, so I didn't need a lot, but I did need to get some food for the fridge and pantry, a shower curtain, some cleaning supplies, and a very basic tool kit. A quick stop at the hardware store and the grocers was in order.

The grocery store was remarkably decent here. I gathered up a ton of fruit and veggies. My beast being a herbivore meant it was the big bulk of my diet, and my one

big concern about coming here was that they might not have the variety I was used to, but they did. They even had one kind of melon I hadn't heard of.

As the day went on, a weight lifted from my chest regarding the decision to move here. This was the place for me. People were nice, the scenery was beautiful, and I wasn't "that unicorn" anymore. I was Brett the nurse, and sure, I was still a unicorn, but not in the same way.

I wasn't even sure that my old pack realized what they were doing when they referred to me like that:

"Oh, what's Harry doing?"

"He's over there with that unicorn."

I think to them it was just a descriptor, but it hurt. It made me feel less than. I was happy to be leaving all of that back in the city.

Errands done, I came back to my new home.

I hung the shower curtain, put my groceries away, and made myself a sandwich to eat outside. I think that was my favorite thing about my cabin: the stoop overlooked a wildlife preserve.

"What do you think? Could we be happy here?" I asked my beast.

He responded with a cross between a neigh and a grunt. Why was he always so grumpy?

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Chapter 2

Anders

“Coffee, Anders?” Darcy asked as I sauntered over to Damon’s café.

“Nah, slow day, so I’m treating myself to lunch.” I bypassed the coffee shop and sat outside the restaurant next door.

“We’re out of duck.” She handed me the menu.

“Don’t like duck.” It was too fatty for me.

Darcy giggled. “Not you. Jonah.” She jerked her head at my friend as he loped over from the community center.

“That’s fine. I’m cutting back on the duck.” He patted his belly, but his pained expression suggested he was disappointed.

“Sit.” I pulled out a chair, and he plonked himself down. “How’s life?”

“Great. Bit hectic at work with Waylon on vacation.”

Waylon was the Snow Leopard Alpha, or the head of the sizzle as we’d named our group.

Jonah was Waylon’s right-hand man. With the sizzle expanding and new members

arriving every week looking for a place to live, searching for schools, and asking all the questions newcomers needed answering when moving to a new town or neighborhood, the staff at the community center were overwhelmed.

“Sounds like you need to hire more people.”

“We do, we are. Isadora and I are conducting the interviews.”

Kyle, the restaurant’s head chef, popped out onto the terrace and kissed Jonah on the head.

“Hi. Are you on a break?”

“If you can call spending one minute kissing your mate a break, then yes.” He waved at me before racing inside.

Everyone around me was mated, or that was how it seemed. I was often around the center when parents were dropping their kids off or collecting them from the toddler group. Or I had a job near the school as kids were streaming out, telling their folks about their day and showing their drawings. Movie night at the center was full of couples smooching, whereas I only had popcorn and soda to keep me company.

“He’s a good man.” I jerked my chin at Kyle as he disappeared before ordering fish and chips, and Jonah said he’d have the special which was shrimp in white wine sauce.

“Oh no, I hear the ‘I wish it was me’ tone in your voice.’ He took a slice of bread from the basket and dipped it in olive oil.

“Sorry.” Maybe I should keep my complaints to myself. My friends, who were all mated, must be tired of me wishing I’d met my one and only.

“No, I shouldn’t be so hard on you.” Jonah put a hand on my shoulder. “Have you tried looking outside of the sizzle?”

Damn, I hadn’t wanted to voice my thoughts on this issue, but now he’d brought it up.

“Not yet, but I was thinking maybe this isn’t where I’m supposed to be.”

“Where aren’t you supposed to be?” Our friend, Dylan, pulled out an empty chair. “And can I join you?”

“What would you do if we said no?” Jonah asked.

“I’d move to the next table and listen to your conversation.” Dylan grinned.

“I doubt that.” Jonah elbowed him. “You’d be joining in and be almost as close to us as you are now.” He chuckled.

“Maybe.” Dylan studied the menu. “Oh no, I see they don’t have any duck.” He snuck a glance at Jonah.

“Why does everything think I always order the duck?” Jonah’s voice was loud enough for all the diners on the terrace to hear.

“Because you do,” everyone said in unison, and we all burst out laughing.

“Forget ducks.” Dylan leaned forward. “What were you saying, Anders, about not being where you’re supposed to be? Do you have a client with a flooded basement and you’re here eating lunch?”

“No. I would never do that.” I’d skipped many meals and had sleepless nights where

I'd been out on emergency jobs, especially in the early days of the sizzle.

"So spill." Dylan added butter to his bread before tearing off a mouthful.

"I'm considering leaving the sizzle."

"What?" Dylan glanced at Jonah who shrugged. "You can't do that. This is the one place where snow leopards congregate in a group."

We were solitary creatures, and before Waylon and the council elders created the community in Snowford, we lived alone, often with none of our kin close by.

"I'm lonely." Now that I said it out loud, it sounded silly. I had friends, my own business, I got invited to dinner and barbecues. From the outside looking in, I had a great life.

"Shifter dating apps. They're perfect for anyone looking for a mate. There's one that's been popular for years, but I think it's recently changed hands. Can't recall the name." He got out his phone and scrolled through different sites.

Chatting to someone on an app wasn't my style. I preferred meeting an omega organically. But no matter how long I lingered in the library, or pretended to be choosing the right avocado in the grocery store produce section, I never met anyone. There was one guy who complained I was squeezing an avocado and bruising it. Or the omega at the library who tried to snatch a book out of my hand when we both reached for it. Neither was mate material.

"No, I can't do an app. But thanks for trying to cheer me up."

As I was a contractor, I could start a business or get a job somewhere else easily. The upheaval of moving away from friends when I'd only been in Snowford a few years

would be stressful, especially as I might not meet my forever mate outside the sizzle.

But the ache in my chest, which wasn't from heart failure, needed an antidote. And that was finding my one true love.

Sure, there were alphas and omegas who never mated and seemed content. But that wasn't for me. I was supposed to be part of a couple, I knew that deep down.

A howl from across the road had us swiveling as Isadora, holding one of her twins, Edgar, blood streaming from his hand, staggered out of the community center. The three of us jumped up and charged over to her.

"He fell and cut himself." The little boy had a towel wrapped around his hand, but the blood was leaking down his arm and he was whimpering. Poor kid. "Can one of you drive us to the hospital?"

"My truck's right here." I unlocked the doors and settled my friend and her little one in the back seat.

Shifters would have been able to heal themselves by taking their fur, but Edgar hadn't met his beast yet, and he was in pain and losing a lot of blood. He'd need stitches.

"Don't speed," Jonah yelled as I swung into traffic and did exactly that. Edgar's crying and Isadora's comforting her son tugged at my heart. The way she held him and brushed hair from his brow, her murmuring how the doctors would make him all better told me how much she adored her son.

I swung into the hospital driveway and stopped at the emergency entrance. Isadora and Edgar were helped out of the truck and bustled inside. I yelled I'd follow her after I'd parked, but she probably didn't hear me.

The parking lot was full, but this hospital wasn't in Snowford but in an adjoining suburb. Most of the patients were human. I drove around and around, hoping a car would pull out, and when it finally did, I parked at an awkward angle and jumped out, not bothering to straighten up.

But a scent so strong that I fell back against the truck, thrust itself at me.

What was that? My snow leopard had been asleep during lunch, as talk of food bored him, unless it was prey we were discussing.

The intoxicating scent had to be coming from the hospital, but I had to stay with Isadora and not be roaming around the building, shoving my head into patients' rooms looking for the source.

Is that—? I cut off my beast with a growl because we couldn't make a mistake about this.

It appeared to be a scent that matched my own, that was the other half to mine, calling to me saying, "I'm over here." But it might've been my mind playing tricks. How much of a coincidence was it to be talking to my friends about finding my mate and then bam! Scenting them less than thirty minutes later? Didn't seem likely.

Find it , my beast insisted.

But I had to check on Edgar first. It took a while to discover Isadora and her son were with the doctor. I couldn't barge in and say, "Hurry this up because I might have found my mate."

And so I waited. Why were the chairs so hard? And why were they such an awful color? And why were the walls so bland? I filled my mind with nonsense while trying not to think of my mate somewhere in the hospital.

I leaped up. I'd assumed my mate worked here, but what if he was injured and on life support? Or being operated on with only a slim chance of surviving the operation.

"I'm coming," I yelled. "I'll find you, mate."

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Chapter 3

Brett

I never realized how poorly I slept when I lived in the city. I guess I always just figured it was me waking up repeatedly because I was working the later shifts and that messed with my internal clock. It made sense and I went with it. But now that I was here? I saw that it had far less to do with the scheduling than it did the location.

My new home was surrounded by the quiet of nature, and as a result, I was sleeping more soundly than I ever had. No longer was I hearing trains or buses go by, or neighbors going about their day when I was attempting to sleep. And as a result, I was feeling better than I had in a long time. This town was good for me. Even my unicorn agreed. He was perking up and significantly less grumpy.

Moving here was a good decision. Fingers crossed my choice of jobs was also. It wasn't like in more populated areas where if I didn't like the hospital, there was another a half-mile away. This was it. Love it or not, it was my choice.

Thankfully, I had a great feeling about it. Stan had even called to give me some tips about what to bring with me to work, including my own coffee pods. Apparently the ones that were provided shouldn't be given to anyone—ever. It was nice to have someone looking out for me.

Unfortunately, he was human. I had nothing against humans. I liked them a lot, but there were some questions I had about the area that were very shifter specific, and it would've been nice if we'd had that connection too.

I'd spent the afternoon rearranging the living room half a dozen times. It wasn't a large space, and there were only so many places the couch could go, but I tried them all. I loved the space, but had to choose between seeing the trees and local wildlife or the television. Selfishly, I wanted both, but opted for nature when I'd exhausted my options. I could always watch shows on my laptop, it wasn't like I had other people living here who needed to see also.

It was getting close to dinner time, which meant it was time to get ready for my first day of work. The nurses ran on a 7-to-7 shift cycle and mine was beginning soon.

I'd picked up food for my break at the local store. I tended to have my big meal at home and to basically bring grazing type foods for work. It made it easier to pack and less problematic if things were hectic and I wasn't able to sit down and enjoy a meal. I tossed random items into my lunch bag. I never knew what I wanted to eat in advance, so I just brought a little bit of everything, from the hummus to the veggies to some tuna salad I made. As long as I appeased my beast with enough vegetables and fruits, he was quite happy to let me indulge in the things that I wanted, including tuna, which had always been a favorite of mine.

Bags packed and water bottle filled, I drove the short distance to work. It was my first official day, and it was just like when I was a kid going to the first day of school—I was excited, but also nervous. Only this time, instead of worrying if the teacher would like me, I was thinking about my co-workers and if they were going to accept me, the new guy... a city dweller at that. And instead of worrying if I was going to get good grades, I was hyper aware that if I made mistakes, patients would be the ones who suffered.

When they used to tell us school prepared us for real life, I'd always assumed they meant by knowing how to read and do math, not worrying.

After finding and utilizing the staff parking lot, I grabbed my things and walked to

the front door and up to Claire, who was sitting at the information desk, to say hello, when the scent hit me.

It was my mate.

He was here.

There was no denying his scent. Even my unicorn was prancing around, and he was a grumpy Gus if I ever met one.

“Are you okay?” Claire asked as I stood at her desk and closed my eyes, inhaling deeply, loving the notes of my mate’s scent.

I opened my eyes and nodded. “Yeah, sorry. I just think I forgot something. I’ll be back.”

Technically, I had a little bit of time before I needed to be at my nursing station. Normally, I’d go right up there and get settled in and see how they did shift changes, but there was nothing normal about today. I’d scented my mate and now the only thing that mattered was finding him. My heart thumped loudly in my chest and my nerves were on overload.

My mate was at the hospital. If he’d been an employee, I’d have scented him while I was on the tour. Sure, it might’ve been an older scent if he was on vacation or something, but it would’ve been there. That left the most probable reason for him being here was needing medical services for either himself or a family member.

I couldn’t have found my mate only to have them be sick or worse. Fate wouldn’t be that cruel. And what if it was a sick parent or bestie? I didn’t wish that on him either.

After giving Claire a little wave so she wouldn’t think I was flaking out on my job or

something, I followed the scent, determined to get to my mate.

I followed it directly to the emergency department, the last place I wanted to be. I'd been holding onto unrealistic hope that he'd been a delivery driver or someone who came to the cafeteria for dinner, because why not? It wasn't a closed club, and it was cheap enough.

The scent was faded, cleaning supplies far overpowering it, but it was still solid enough that I wasn't worried about losing it. I relaxed slightly as we passed the two "heavy hitter" rooms. Everyone else was divided by curtains, but those two spaces were designed for emergency patients with the greatest needs or sometimes the greatest risk of spreading their illness. My mate hadn't entered those spaces, thank fuck.

But as I wound around the ER, I ended up back outside and to the parking lot where the trail went cold.

My mate was gone.

He'd been here.

Now he wasn't.

I should've been happy. He was healthy enough to go home. That was a bazillion times better than being in the ICU.

But he was gone, and while I didn't know a great deal about him, I knew he wasn't admitted and that he wasn't a co-worker. It was hardly enough to give me a solid lead, but it was something.

Unsure what to do next, I went to see what I could find out from the emergency

department. I didn't really know anybody in the ER, but one of the people I'd met on my tour was a squirrel shifter. If anyone understood what I needed, it would be them, right?

I went and found them, asking them if they knew anything about any shifters that were there. Unfortunately, the scent alone wasn't letting me know the beast. Sadly, they'd been on vacation for a week and this was the end of their first shift back. They'd been really sweet and promised to tell me anything they might learn.

Mate, my unicorn grumbled. Mate.

I know. I miss him too .

Find .

I will. But first I need to work . There wouldn't be any fresh veggies without me making enough to buy my beast the finer things.

That had him calming down. Not by much, but enough to focus on getting to my floor and starting my new shift. As much as I wanted to trace my mate across the city, I needed this job.

My mate could be anyone. The only bright side was that he was most likely a local. It wasn't the time of year when tourists would come to camp—too much rain. That meant he was most probably from around here. And if that was the case, I'd find him. It might take longer than I wanted, which was more than turning around and having him walk in right this second, but I'd get to him.

Giving up sucked. But that was all I could do. I needed this job. And more importantly, the patients needed me. They had to come first.

It didn't matter how lonely I'd been since long before I accepted this job. That wasn't going to change a single thing, not when it came to my mate. The best... the only course of action was doing my job while I was here and using my awake time to scent them and let them know that I was theirs... and they were mine.

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Chapter 4

Anders

“Be quiet, please,” a bunch of nurses hissed as I rounded a corner, searching for my mate.

I’d have to use my nose and not my voice.

My beast harrumphed. Should have done that in the first place .

But the scent was everywhere, on the walls, the floor, in a storeroom that I slipped into when I wasn’t supposed to. I’d search one floor and then race back to emergency to check on Edgar and Isabella. Poor Edgar was being so brave about getting stitches.

I bought Isabella a lousy hospital coffee and a candy bar for Edgar, both from a vending machine.

Ewww! My beast did the beast version of flapping a paw in front of his face. That stinks!

Coming from a snow leopard who tore animals apart with his bare teeth, that was saying something. But he was right, the coffee smelled like stewed drain water.

Gross!

I apologized to my friend as I handed over the coffee. Edgar’s teary eyes lit up on

sighting the candy, and Isabella gulped down the coffee. Maybe she needed the caffeine and didn't notice the taste or the smell.

After studying the information board, I took the stairs down to the canteen. Sniffing between and under tables got me weird looks from staff and visitors.

"Looking for my wallet," I said as I tried to get into the kitchen, only to be met with a huge wolf shifter, his arms crossed and his beast showing in his gaze.

"Not in here, though." I scampered back into the canteen, bumping into a guy collecting trays. My beast put his hands over his eyes as all heads in the room swiveled in my direction.

Charging through the swinging doors into the corridor, I paused and leaned on a wall to catch my breath. Maybe I should have borrowed a pair of PJs and pretended I was a patient.

Was this how all shifters behaved when they scented their mate? Thoughts were zinging and zigzagging in my head while heated blood surged through my veins. What if he got away? He might have been visiting town, sprained an ankle and then left.

But if he was a shifter, his beast could cure a minor injury. I scrunched my eyes closed and clawed my scalp, hoping when I opened my eyes, my mate would have scented me and be standing in front of me.

Nope! My beast could see even when I couldn't. Not here!

Right . I checked off the cafeteria and three or was it four floors I'd searched. Emergency I'd done and... and... as his scent was in multiple places, that suggested he worked here. So, I went down to reception and lurked around, trying not to attract

attention.

“May I help you, sir?” A man wearing a security guard’s uniform blocked my way.

Didn’t work . The not-attracting-attention part .

I can see that .

“Lost my wallet.” I patted my shirt pocket and pulled out the interior of my pants pocket.

“Go to Lost and Found and file a report.” His gruff tone suggested he wasn’t to be messed with.

“Right.” I saluted and then bowed, hoping one or both actions would temper his annoyance.

He didn’t move, other than a twitching in the corner of his mouth.

“Going there right now.”

I skedaddled toward the door, but each time I glanced over my shoulder, the guy was still staring at me, his expression unchanged. Charging into the parking lot, I decided to hunker down and wait for a few minutes. Maybe the security guard would give up on me and deal with a pickpocket or someone kicking the vending machine.

But as I hid behind someone’s car, I caught a scent. Not a scent, the scent. And it was more recent than the stale one I’d picked up on inside the building. I wove in between the cars, keeping my eyes on the surveillance cameras.

A member of staff in the hospital basement was probably looking at me and speaking

into a walkie-talkie, saying there was someone suspicious in the parking lot.

I arrived at an empty parking space, the scent so fresh, my body tingled. Falling to my knees, I sniffed the asphalt. My mate had been here minutes before while the security guard confronted me. But I should thank the guy, kiss him maybe, because if he hadn't made me run outside, I might have missed my mate's scent.

Ouch, my knees hurt, and I stood, brushing dirt and small pebbles off my knees.

Give me my fur .

Not here. People will see .

Behind the buildings .

Circling around the parking lot and avoiding the main entrance, I trudged behind the building where laundry vans were being loaded and unloaded and people were hefting boxes of food from delivery trucks.

We can't shift here . I continued until we reached a sort of alleyway, between two buildings. I didn't understand the purpose of shifting because my beast couldn't go anywhere. The areas in and around the hospital were teeming with people.

I want my fur .

Wait! If he shifted now, my clothes would be shredded and I'd be not only the guy lurking around and looking suspicious, but I'd be a naked guy doing the same thing. I might get put in a straightjacket and marched into a locked psych ward. That would only be a plus if my mate worked there, but I doubted I'd be that fortunate.

I shimmied out of my clothes, only just, but my briefs ripped as my beast tore through

my skin. He padded to the end of the building, pawed the ground, sniffed it, then lifted his head and sniffed again.

He's gone , he announced.

You don't say .

I do say .

Fine. I took my skin and put on my clothes, minus my underwear, and tossed the ragged remains in a garbage bin.

“Hey, who are you and what are you doing here? Where's your ID badge?” Another security guard glared at me, his nostrils flared.

Gods, not again. Words wouldn't satisfy him, so I took off. He was human and he wouldn't catch me, so I raced out of the hospital complex, around the block, and into a clothing store where I bought a loud patterned shirt and a bucket hat.

Clad in my new clothes, I made my way back to the hospital entrance, I veered to the right toward the Emergency Department. Edgar was eating the candy bar while his mom spoke to a doctor.

But as I sat with Edgar, an older man barreled into the room. Waylon's dad, Andrew, the former snow leopard Alpha. He was now Isabella's mate and the dad to their kids, including Edgar. Andrew picked up his son and kissed him before examining his wound and hugging his mate.

I bid them goodbye after Andrew thanked me for looking after his family.

Now can I shift? My beast was eager to find our mate.

No. We need a plan. You can't scent him when he's in a car.

The guy could be anywhere by now. While I should have been bereft at losing my mate's scent, I was ecstatic at discovering I did have a mate. I had to tell Jonah and Dylan and Isabella. Waylon and Daxon were on holiday. Maybe I could text them, I've found my mate. Yippee. But I also lost him .

It was probably best I put a pause on the announcement until I'd met the guy.

Instead of leaving, I sat in my car, pondering how to find my one true love. I could put a notice on the Snowford notice board in the community center. Or the digital version on the sizzle website.

But if he wasn't a snow leopard or he didn't live in the area, he wouldn't see it. Maybe an old-style notice in the grocery store window or Damon's coffee shops, as the Alpha Omega also had a second venue in another part of town.

I could hire a loudspeaker and drive up and down the streets of Oakheart, but I might get arrested for disturbing the peace. Maybe if I stayed here in the parking lot at the hospital overnight, the guy might come back in the morning.

My phone beeped, reminding me I had a plumbing job at Cecily's house at 4 p.m. She was a member of the snow leopard council and she had a toilet that wouldn't stop running. It should be an easy fix, but I refused to cancel because I was thinking about my mate. Maybe I could engage Cecily in conversation and ask her advice.

Reluctantly, I started the car and drove to Cecily's. Like most of the council members who'd been the first to buy the unfinished houses in the area that became Snowford, Cecily lived within walking distance of the community center.

She greeted me with a smile and said there was coffee and cake when I was done. As

well as the toilet, she had a leaking tap, but I was finished in fifteen minutes.

“Tell me. What’s going on in your life, Anders.”

I warmed my hands on the coffee cup, wondering if I should spill the details of my day.

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Chapter 5

Brett

I adjusted my scrubs, the fabric stiff and uncomfortable. But that had been the theme since I scented my mate. I was uncomfortable in my hooves, my skin, my bed, the shower... I'd been uncomfortable every waking second, and I had come to accept that I'd continue to be so until I either found my mate or took my last breath.

Melodramatic? Me? Pretty much. But that was my current reality, and I couldn't pull myself from it.

The hospital had the same sterile smell, a blend of antiseptic and something I couldn't quite place, but it was oddly comforting in its own way. My mate's scent no longer clung to the air, and it was both a blessing and a curse. I missed it, but I also knew that having it here would hinder my ability to do my job, and my patients deserved better than that.

The fluorescent lights buzzed softly above, casting a pale glow over the patient lying in bed, the buzz from them louder than normal. They really needed to upgrade to LED lighting.

In the bed was an older woman, her looks epitomizing the stereotypical grandmother from storybooks right down to her white hair neatly braided over one shoulder. The lines on her face were deep, but her eyes sparkled with warmth and vitality. I immediately liked her. There was something so warm about her presence. It wasn't my first time seeing her today, and once again I wished she were a shifter so I could

confide in her and gain her insight.

“Good morning, Mrs. Harrison,” I greeted, forcing a smile. I picked up her chart, quickly scanning it before setting it aside. One day they would have all of this on computers. Today was not that day. It was currently a mishmash of the two. “How are we feeling today?”

“Better than yesterday, dear,” she replied, her voice a soft rasp. “But I’ve been better.” She chuckled lightly, a sound that seemed to come from deep within her chest.

“And tomorrow you’ll be even better yet.” I grabbed the blood pressure cuff from my cart. “It’s time for vitals.”

“I hate that stupid thing.” She pointed to the blood pressure cuff.

She wasn’t alone in that. To some people, it was painful.

“If I want a hug, I’d rather it be from a person,” she teased. “You know, I was about your age when I got married and a hug sealed the deal. My Will gave the best hugs.”

“Hugs are the best.”

“They are. And when you find someone you’d be happy living in their embrace, snag them quick. Youth these days, always looking for something better.” And for humans, she was probably right. But I wasn’t looking for better. I already knew who I wanted—I just needed to find him.

“I plan to do just that, Mrs. Harrison.” I walked over to her, and she gave me the look, the one that said she was going to allow me to do this but she wasn’t pleased about it. “Tell me about Mr. Harrison.”

That had her chatting on and on, all about how they met, the over fifty years together, and how there wasn't a second of the day she didn't miss him. It was sweet and sad all wrapped into one. I knew that humans didn't have fated mates, but it sure sounded like they had exactly that.

That conversation kept me going for the rest of my shift. If humans could find what they had without the help of fate, surely I could find it with fate by my side. And they were, right? If not, why would they have brought me this close?

I always thought I would scent my mate and it would be like in the movies. We'd run to meet each other, our arms open wide. And to me it would feel like we were in slow motion, hurtling toward our new lives together, joining in the middle and kissing each other until our knees buckled and proclaiming each other mates.

Was it ridiculous, childlike, and never going to happen? Of course, it was all those things and more, and I'd always known that subconsciously. But still, that was the vision I'd had, and now that I'd scented him, I realized just how beyond wrong I was.

He hadn't even been there, just his scent, and it clung to the air, teasing me, tormenting me. It was too much and had my beast on the edge, and me acting full-on irrationally. It was so bad that I could see my irrationality as it was happening, but couldn't stop myself. I needed to get to my mate. That was what drove every single decision I made all day.

When I left work, instead of going straight home, I drove around the city, stopping at different places along the way, hoping to catch his scent again. Anybody who had seen me probably thought I was up to some sort of criminal activity, stalking places or something, because no person just goes up into buildings and starts smelling around, then goes to another one to do the same. And yet, there I was doing exactly that.

And when that became fruitless, and the fifth person asked me if I could use some help, I got the message. It was time for me to go home. There would be another day or maybe another time today, but what I was doing? It wasn't going to accomplish my goals, and if anything, was going to make me the town weirdo, making it more difficult for me in the long run.

This was a small town, and I needed to be careful.

I went home thinking, well, maybe being in my own space, as new as it was, would help. It didn't. It only reminded me that I was alone—alone in a world where fate said I didn't have to be alone, in a world where fate sent me a mate, alone in a world where I blew my chance at happiness by who knew—ten minutes, fifteen minutes, maybe an hour. It sucked.

Shucking my clothes and dumping them straight into the washer, I went out into the backyard, took my hooves, and ran into the woods. I wasn't sure what I was looking for, but my beast ran with intention. He wasn't looking for our mate—he wasn't scenting around at all; that would make sense, though. This didn't. Not at first anyway. He was running, running, running, almost as if he was trying to wear himself out. But when I tried to talk to him, he ignored me, pushing me down, acting like I wasn't even there, rejecting me. In his way, he blamed me for all of this.

It wasn't my fault, it wasn't his fault. It was timing. Stupid fucking timing. If only he could understand that.

We ended up in a patch of sun, the birds around us getting louder, more cheerful. Unlike the members of my birth pack, when I went into the woods, nature surrounded me, enveloped me, cherished me.

My foster parents? Yeah, when they took their fur, everything went dead silent. They were the predator, and the life of the forest sensed that and reacted accordingly.

They told me once I was like Snow White—that I would frolic in the woods on my own and have birds singing with me and mice dancing with me, and squirrels building flower chains for me. It wasn't quite like that, but they did welcome me, and it staved off the loneliness for a time.

I lifted my head and my horn to the sun and I absorbed its rays. My beast had been right. We needed this. We needed to be surrounded by others who made me feel less alone. But it only worked for so long, and he started trotting back.

And honestly, it wasn't a great idea to be out alone too much. My horn was useless, by all measures. It didn't do anything for anyone. There was no magic to it. Sure, I could use it as a weapon when I was defending myself, but that didn't stop certain subsets of people from believing that if they possessed it, they would have magic powers. Heck, one book even promised that it could help alphas keep their boners longer, which, given that there were little blue pills, I wasn't sure why that was even a thing anymore.

But staying away from hunters, especially human hunters, was always a good idea. I didn't sense that there were any nearby, but my ability to think coherently had been stripped from me the second I scented my mate, so it was best not to tempt things.

Once home, I took a shower, washing away the day, letting the warmth of the water beat upon my skin.

This wasn't sustainable. I needed a plan, a solid plan, none of this wandering around and looking like I was about to cause a crime spree. But I didn't have one, and so I did what every grown-ass human did— and after my shower, I called my mommy. My foster mom, anyway.

She picked up on the first ring. “Hey, honey.”

I had to give her credit. I never fit in with the pack. Never really fit in with them, but in her own way, she loved me. I hadn't always seen it, but it was there, never wavering.

"Hey. I have a question for you about when you and Dad mated." Maybe they could guide me through this clusterfuck.

"Is this a question just for me, or is this a question you want to share with both of us?"

I told her it was for both of them, and a few minutes later, he was on the phone with us as well.

"What's this about, Son?" I did like it when he called me that. He didn't do it often, he wasn't that kind of guy, but I needed to hear it today, and he must've understood that on some level.

"I scented my mate."

The phone filled with congratulations, and when I didn't respond back immediately, my mom picked up on it. "It's not as easy as that, is it, honey?"

"No. I scented him at work, but he was already gone."

"Gone? Gone? He passed away?" Leave it to my dad to be overdramatic. Although, to be fair, I did work in a hospital and sounded like someone kicked my puppy. It wasn't that wild of a jump.

"Not that kind of gone. He'd been there and left before I got there. He was at the ER, and then he wasn't."

There was a long pause, and I wasn't sure if my parents were silently duking it out to see who would go first or what.

"I know you're a rule follower, but did you think to look up records and go find him? Sure, he wants to see you too." My mother meant well.

"Mom, even if he was a patient, which at this point, I don't think he was, do you think losing my job was on my list of things to do today?"

"But he's your mate and..."

She wasn't wrong. Had I thought it would work, I'd probably have done it. It wasn't like I hadn't tried to some extent.

"I know this, but... Anyway, I went around town looking for him... a few times... and I just don't know what to do now. I can't give up."

"Well, I'll tell you right now what you shouldn't do. Don't freak out." My dad pretending he actually spoke like the youth instead of his over seventy years was amusing.

"Don't freak out?" At least he had me chuckling.

"You know what I mean. Fate isn't gonna dangle your mate in front of you, and then yank him away. That's not how that works. You need to relax and know that you will see each other soon, and all will be good."

From his lips to the goddesses' ears.

"You say that with such confidence. Confidence I wish I had."

“I do, because that’s how fate does their thing. And when you do come together, it’s going to be wonderful.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

“I understand why you’re not here, and it’s the right thing, but we do miss you.” Had I been there, he’d be hugging me. I really needed that hug about now, but this would have to do.

“I miss you too, Dad.”

“If you need us, call. We’ll be there for you... always.” There was a tinge of hurt in my mom’s voice. I knew that it had been difficult for them, raising me in the environment they did. I didn’t always see that, but the further I got from the situation, the clearer it became.

“Thanks, guys. I love you both.” And I did. Our relationship was complicated and not always easy, but I loved them and appreciated all they’d done for me... still did for me.

Calling them had been the right call. It had calmed me enough so that when I climbed into bed, I was able to catch a decent sleep.

Baby steps.

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Chapter 6

Anders

“Anders, what are you doing?”

I leaped up, bumping my head on Isabella’s desk, and fell back on the floor. “Ouch!”
I lay where I was, staring up at Isabella.

“There are no leaky pipes under my desk, and if there were, I’d be very worried.”

Rubbing the back of my head, I asked, “How’s Edgar?”

Her face brightened. “Fine. Showing all his friends his war wounds.” She held out a hand, and I grabbed it. “But he’s not under there either, though he and his siblings have holed up in some off places in our house.”

“I dropped something.”

“Didn’t Waylon call you about the furnace? In the basement?”

“He did.” Alpha had returned from holidays, and I scuttled toward the door, calling over my shoulder, “See you later.”

There was a hint of my mate outside the community center, and as Isabella had been at the hospital with me and Edgar, I figured she or her son might have come in contact with my mate.

I'd snuck into her office and sniffed her coat hanging behind the door. Her sneakers that she wore around the office and that she'd been wearing when Edgar had his accident were under her desk. Nothing, nada, and no luck!

I was hot, sweaty, and stinky when I finished dealing with the furnace and telling Waylon the bad news: he needed a new one.

Jonah came up behind me and waved a hand in front of his face. "What have you been doing?"

"Working, whereas whenever I see you, you're heading out for lunch."

"My kids are at school, and I'm hoping to get some smooching in with my mate."

I was hungry, as I'd forgotten to eat this morning and instead had been inspecting my neighbors garbage bins up and down the street. My mate had to live somewhere, and he must throw out trash.

But no luck, and all I got for my efforts was getting covered in gods only knew what grossness. My respect for sanitation workers had increased. They needed a raise.

I needed to go to the hardware store and pick up a new pipe wrench and extension cord. If my mate was a DIY guy, I might meet him there. I got in my car and put my foot on the accelerator, convinced the hardware store was the place I needed to be.

Hurry. My beast was fed up with not finding our mate's whereabouts and didn't understand why I had to interrupt our investigation with work. Work, bah!

I raced into the hardware store, a place I visited frequently. Marge, one of the women who worked there, waved and yelled out, "Hi, Anders."

“No time to talk, Marge. I’m on a mission.”

“Oh, big project. Can I help?”

“I’m good, thanks.”

Which aisle first? If my mate was here, was he in need of paint? Pliers? Nails? Power tools? I pictured him, shirt off, sweat rippling over his pecs while he used a circular saw and cut wood. Oh yeah. I could see it now.

I can’t . My snow leopard was bumming me out.

I headed for the power tools, where I could stop and examine the power drills. But I was on a mission, and that was to find my mate! I pictured myself as a swashbuckling adventurer seeking out his one and only, enduring whatever hardship was thrown at him and overcoming it.

My beast groaned, saying I’d watched too many movies.

But after scenting everyone standing, examining, and bending over in the power tool section, my mate wasn’t here. Paint was next, and I punched the air when I picked up a residual scent.

He painted. Maybe he was a hobbyist or he was doing up his place or he was a professional painter.

Perhaps he brushed against someone who came to the store . My beast was close to taking his fur and scaring the crap out of anyone who wasn’t my mate.

“Marge, have you seen a guy...” Hmmm, I hadn’t thought this through. How was I going to describe him? “...A guy who likes to paint and buys paint?”

Her brow furrowed, and she gave me some scary side-eye. “Is this for my birthday?” She did a 360, her eyes flicking in one direction and the next. “There’s a stripper about to pop out of a giant paint tin.” She hugged me. “I love my job.”

“Ummm, it’s not today,” I whispered to Glen, another staff member. “Better get on that. Marge is expecting something special for her birthday, and you can’t disappoint her.”

I made a quick exit and sat in my truck, a place I’d spent a lot of time lately, drumming my fingers on the steering wheel.

“Post office!” I reversed out and zoomed to Snowford’s tiny post office. It was a place to start, though I hadn’t found definitive evidence my mate lived in or near our sizzle.

The place was busy, as it usually was in the middle of the day. I lined up in there while people weighed their parcels, bought shipping supplies, and cashed money orders—or tried to but they’d forgotten their ID.

I frequented the hardware most weeks, but I didn’t know anyone who worked at the post office. I couldn’t skulk around inside. But if my mate had a P. O. box, I could pretend I’d forgotten my key while scenting the area.

Good plan!

And yet again, I caught a faint whiff of my mate. I inhaled deeply, taking the scent into my lungs. It was the closest I could get to my mate for now, but when we finally met, I wanted to be inside him.

Thinking of being buried in my mate’s hole sent heated blood to my cock. It engorged, and I grimaced. Unless I jerked off in the car, I’d have this hard-on for

hours while I was at my next job.

It was late afternoon before I was free, and not knowing where to go next, I headed to the community center. My mate might not be there, but my friends would be finishing work and maybe we could grab a bite to eat.

“Back again?” Jonah raised a brow in his very Jonah way so that it arched to a sharp point.

“I’m missing something or someone.”

“I know you wish you had a mate but?—”

I cut him off. “No, I do have a mate. I scented him at the hospital.”

“Are you sure?” Jonah felt my brow. “Not feverish.”

“And I’ve been looking for him. I get a hint of him in one place, a whiff in another, a trace of his scent somewhere else.”

Jonah put a hand on my back. “Anders, I had no idea. Hints, whiffs, traces... sounds like you’re cooking up something.”

He was teasing me. “This is serious.” I detailed where I’d been, causing chaos along the way.

“Oh, was that you I read about causing a turmoil at the gas station?”

Gas station. The guy probably had a car. I’d have to check out all the ones in town. Thank gods Oakheart was a small place.

The smile was wiped off Jonah's lips as I typed "gas station" on my list. "It was a joke."

"What?"

"Never mind." He took my phone and read the places I'd checked off. "You've been a busy man."

I'd had very little sleep the last few days. Even though my snow leopard wanted to meet and mark our mate, he needed to hunt, but I explained hunting for our mate took priority.

"Everyone needs to eat."

Jonah was thinking about his stomach, and I rolled my eyes at him eating more duck.

"Fine, off you go. Is Kyle working this evening?"

He turned me around and around and around until I was dizzy.

Tell him to stop, my beast insisted.

"What did I say?" he asked.

I couldn't recall but said the first thing that popped into my head. "Duck!"

He rolled his eyes. "Eating. The guy, whoever he is, needs to eat."

I glanced over my shoulder at Damon's restaurant. I could sit on the terrace nursing a soda, hoping my mate wanted to sample Kyle's food.

“The restaurant.”

“No, the grocery store.”

I slapped a hand on my brow. Of course. Why didn't I think of that? I could loiter in the produce section and examine the peaches while thinking about my mate's ass. Stroking the eggplant while imagining him giving me a hand job was a possibility.

“Jonah, you're a genius.”

“I know.” He blew on his fingertips and buffed his nails on his shirt.

I kissed him on both cheeks and told him to enjoy his duck before taking off. Snowford had one large grocery store, but there were many others in Oakheart I'd visit if I had no luck in ours.

My mate was out there, and I was going to find him.

Let's hope he wants to be found .

He does . Wait, what if he had scented me and he was running away?

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Chapter 7

Brett

The sun had just begun to peek over the horizon, casting a warm golden light across my backyard. I'd been up since dawn, my hands already smudged with dirt and streaked with paint. One frustrating thing about my job was the way my body needed to adjust to different sleep schedules. Spoiler alert: it didn't.

The flower boxes out back needed a fresh coat of paint. They were chipped and faded from neglect, sun, and wind, but they had potential. I'd had fun picking out the colors at the hardware store; the current color trends were exactly in tune with this place. At least something was going right.

I dipped my brush into the can of pink paint and started on the first box. I'd originally planned to sand it—make it perfect. But then I realized, this place didn't embrace perfect, it embraced natural, and the unevenness was only going to make it that much more beautiful. Instead, I washed them yesterday, letting them dry in the sun.

I was hardly a painter, but I kept my movements steady and methodical, and so far, it was working well. This was the kind of work that didn't require much thought, allowing my mind to wander, which probably made it a bad choice for my day off, but so be it. At least when I was out here, nature surrounded me, giving me a sense of belonging. That was something.

My hand cramped, and I took a moment to take a break. I glanced over at the raised garden bed a few feet away. It was in worse shape than I'd thought when I first

moved in. The previous occupant hadn't taken care of it at all—overgrown weeds choked the few struggling plants that remained, and the soil looked depleted and in need of fertilizer and possibly some peat. It would take some serious effort to get it back into decent shape, but I was up for the challenge. There was something rewarding about bringing a plot of earth back to vitality.

As I painted, a small movement caught my eye in the weeds. A chipmunk darted around near the garden bed, its tiny paws moving quickly as it searched for food. It wasn't scared of me. They never were, not even in my human form. If anything, the cuties were drawn to me.

I couldn't help but smile at the little creature. It had been hanging around a lot lately, as if it were curious about what I was doing and wanting to make friends. I was up for making friends. Goodness knew I could use one.

"Hey there, little guy," I said softly. "You here to supervise and make sure I get the job done right?"

The chipmunk twitched its nose and looked at me, as if considering my words. For half a second I thought he might come over, but he stayed where he was, watching me intently. I chuckled and went back to painting. It was nice having a companion—even if it was just a tiny one who never took human form.

"I bet you don't have to worry about finding a mate, do you? You just go out there, do your little chipmunk thing, and before you know it, you've got a whole family."

That probably wasn't true. It wasn't going to be the same as it was for shifters, but in their own way, they'd have one. At least I thought they did. Not all of nature was that way, and yes, I was side-eyeing the praying mantises of the world.

I dipped the brush back into the paint and continued my work. "Me, though? I've

been searching, waiting, and I keep missing him by hours, sometimes minutes. It's frustrating, you know?"

The chipmunk came a little closer, as if he was listening intently. I liked to think he was, anyway.

"I've got this vision, you know?" I continued. "We'll finally meet, and everything will just fall into place, and in thirty years we'll laugh about all of this." Not that I could see any humor in it now. "I keep telling myself to be patient, but it's hard when I feel like I'm so close. I mean, I can almost scent him sometimes, but then... nothing. Just a trace left behind."

This poor little chipmunk needed to charge me for his time at the rate I was going.

I sighed, leaning back on my heels to admire my work. The first flower box was done, looking much better with its fresh coat of paint. Once it was dry, I'd know for sure if I needed to go back and touch it up, but it didn't need to be perfect. I cleaned my brush, and instead of starting on the next box, I went over to the garden bed.

"Guess it's time to tackle this mess, huh?" I said, glancing at the chipmunk who was still there. "What do you think? You gonna stick around and keep me company?"

The chipmunk scampered up onto a rock nearby, watching as I knelt down and began pulling at the stubborn weeds. This wasn't a season of neglect, it was years. The soil was dry and hard, clinging to the roots like it didn't want to let go. It didn't help that the roots were so intertwined.

It was slow work, but I didn't mind. There was something satisfying about getting my hands dirty, about helping something near death come back to life.

As I worked, I kept talking, my voice low and steady, more for myself than anything.

“I just want what my parents had, you know? They found each other, and that was it. They were together through everything. I want that too.” It hadn’t always been easy for them, especially after they took me in, but they loved each other completely and that was everything.

The chipmunk tilted its head, its small eyes bright with curiosity.

“I’m going to call you Pixie.” If they were going to be my new bestie, they needed a name. “It suits you.”

I went back to work, the time ticking away. I pulled out another handful of weeds, tossing them into a growing pile beside me. The raised garden bed was going to take time, just like everything else in my life. But with each weed I pulled, with each inch of soil I turned, it was getting there. Right now, everything was being choked out, except for the ants. They seemed to be having a grand old time.

The wind shifted, and for a split second, I thought I scented my mate. It wasn’t the first, nor would it be the last time. It was getting ridiculous. At least some of the times I caught his scent it was real—old but present. It told me he lived locally, and that gave me so much hope.

Everywhere I went, I was starting to scent him, and it was always faded, always like I’d missed him by hours, possibly minutes. It was just getting to be too much.

Today was my day off, and the first one where I actually had an evening free. After I showered from my gardening, I decided to check out the restaurant I’d been eyeing. It didn’t have hours conducive to my work schedule, making today the perfect time. Even if I hadn’t wanted to check it out, to see if maybe—just maybe—he went there, it was the type of place I’d want to explore.

I’d been trying to hold on to my parents’ words, to understand that it was gonna work

out and I just needed to wait. But I sucked at being patient, and besides, I was hungry. So this wasn't the same as pushing fate, right? It would be more like killing two birds with one stone.

Not sure what the dress code might be, I opted to go with business casual. This wasn't the city where you might run into a place that demanded jackets or ties, but still, I wanted to be respectful.

I walked in and was greeted by a woman who immediately asked if I had a reservation. I didn't, of course. But the second I stepped in that room, I knew that wasn't going to hinder me. This was the place I needed to be.

Shifters were everywhere, which was great. But also... underneath all of that, I could scent my mate. And it was in different layers of the scent, like he'd been here more than once. All this time, there was a location I could've come to—one that he frequented or maybe worked at, and my stupid work schedule had prevented it.

Well played, fate. Well played.

It was hard to tell with all the food aromas dancing around how long since he was last here, but this was definitely where I was going to find him. I could feel it.

"Reservation?" I asked, buying myself time to figure out what to say. And because it was my day to be awkward, I came out with, "I think I'm meeting someone here."

She looked at me like I had five heads. "You think? Is this one of those dating app scenarios? Because, uh, they usually don't show," she whispered the last part. "I can seat you, but maybe don't order until they do, or order like you're here alone, and if they show up, yay."

She was coming from a kind place, and I took it as such.

“No, it’s not a dating app. I was hoping I could talk to a manager or something?”

Just then, a group of about eight people all came in, all of them scenting human, which was very unhelpful. A middle-aged man came up to her and started demanding attention. Apparently, his party was very important and needed all of her focus. Jerks.

I gave her a half wave, and she indicated a guy standing in the back. I’d have thanked her, but the guy was becoming louder. May they be sold out of what he wanted and his friends spill their red wine on him. Not really, because you get back what you put out there, but for the fleeting moment it passed through my mind, it made me smile.

On my way to the manager at the back, I scented deeply as I passed every table, trying not to look too obvious. And when I walked up to him, the man was a shifter—thank gods. It was going to make this whole thing so much easier.

“Hey, I’m looking for someone and she said you might be able to help me find them,” I said.

He leaned in, and I knew he was scenting me too. “Unicorn,” I mouthed, and dawning realization crossed his face. “I’m Kyle. Who can I help you find?”

“I don’t know if he works here or if he’s a regular, or?—”

“I think you’re gonna have to start at the beginning.”

And so I did, and as I told the story, he started to smile wider and wider. I’d come to the right place. I was sure of it. I was finally going to meet my mate. Maybe it wasn’t going to be today, but soon. And this man, this Kyle, he was going to be the one to help me.

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Chapter 8

Anders

I can't do this anymore!

Exhaustion had seeped into my bones, but it was my head that was tired of playing the hide-and-go-seek-and-never-be-found game. Darcy was kind, showing me some guy who had also been searching.

For what, I wondered. A job? A meal? My aim was to find the guy who was looking for me, not to fill his tummy or his bank account—not that there was anything wrong in wanting a job.

“Look, Anders.”

Darcy's voice brought me back to the present, and she indicated a guy chatting to Kyle. But a whooshing past my head blurred my vision as my body swayed and was buffeted by a scent so strong it pricked at my skin, demanding attention.

A man, a shifter, his hair streaked with silver and glitter in his eyes, was in deep conversation with Kyle. I froze, and he looked up. Emotion flashed across his face: confusion, anticipation, anxiety, and gratitude.

Neither of us made a move until Darcy nudged me forward, saying she had work to do. Kyle grinned and whispered in the guy's ear.

But he wasn't any guy; he was the mate I'd been searching for, and now that I'd found him, I had no words. I'd rehearsed what I was doing to say in the grocery store baking products aisle or as he uncooked his post office box. If he'd been shoving the gas pump in his car, I'd have made a joke about holes—no, maybe not, that would have been inappropriate.

We were face to face. My search was over, and my mind was blank. I wished I could rewind time because the knot of anticipation in my belly had dissolved, and I was left wondering what now? There should've been fireworks and a choir singing, but we were on a landing dock assessing one another.

“Hi.”

He speaks . My snow leopard was overjoyed. Mark him .

Slow down. He's said one word . While two fated shifters often marked and then introduced themselves, I wasn't about that. I couldn't ignore the mating pull, but I expected more than exchanging one word.

“Hi again.”

That's two words.

Repeating a word doesn't count. It's still one .

And you've said none . My beast was having none of my ridiculousness.

“Hello.”

Kyle excused himself and went inside, leaving me and my mate regarding one another.

“Brett.”

“Anders.”

We’d staggered over the first hurdle, but I was balking at the next stage. Which was what?

“I’m a unicorn shifter.”

Oh, that was different. I’d never met a unicorn previously. That explained the silvery streak in his hair and the twinkling eyes. Interesting.

“I’m not.” My brain needed recircuiting. He had every right to reconsider what fate had handed him and say no thanks.

But Brett grinned. “Snow leopard. Most people in Snowford are.”

“Yes.” Oh gods, I needed to spit out something other than one syllable words. “You’re my mate.” There, I did it. Maybe I could lie down and gather my strength now.

“You are, and I’m so excited to finally meet you.”

He didn’t run away as I struggled to speak, and his smile lit up his whole face. Damn, it wasn’t the only thing “lighting up” because my dick was engorging. I was wearing my work clothes and not tight jeans or shorts. There was room to expand.

Not knowing where Brett lived, I suggested he come to my place. “We can...” I lowered my voice, “fuck and mark one another.” I was so proud of myself for going from zero to sixty in... not a minute but a tad longer.

Brett smirked and folded his arms. “I am hungry.”

“Great.” We were thinking alike.

“And as much as I’d like to see you naked,” his gaze fell to my crotch, “I’m here to eat.”

“Exactly. There will be eating, I assure you.”

He chuckled, a sound that tickled my heart. “I look forward to it. But I want food. Maybe pasta or curry—I hear Kyle’s curry is excellent.”

“Not the duck,” I blurted out. “Or have the duck. My friend enjoys it.” Why did I care if my mate wanted duck? We could have different likes and dislikes.

“Shall we eat?” He tucked his arm in mine, and we strolled through the kitchen, earning us startled and annoyed glances from the kitchen staff.

“Inside or out?” I surveyed the terrace, and there was one free table.

Brett got up close and placed his lips close to my ear. His scent swept around me, making me his prisoner while his warm breath billowed over me.

“You’re talking about eating, right? Not bedroom activities?”

Goosebumps erupted over my skin. “Why restrict them only to the bedroom?”

There was a sharp intake of breath from Brett, and I clarified that I was talking about sex in general and not referring to us dining out. “But I’m all for sex in the woods or in the water. Anywhere, really.”

“I’ll make a note of that. I know a storeroom at work that would be perfect.”

I was tempted to say let’s go there now, but he wanted food, and I could eat.

Darcy brought us water and the menu and left to serve another table.

“I’m not a big meat eater. My beast doesn’t eat flesh, and my human side usually doesn’t either.”

So I wouldn’t be subjected to my mate eating duck. Excellent.

“The vegetable curry looks good.”

I wavered between ordering the same, wondering if he would be offended if I ate meat. I didn’t have to. My beast was a meat eater. I could give it up.

“Order what you want, Anders.” Brett reached across the table and took my hand. “If you want meat, get that.”

I ordered fish and chips, one of my favorite dishes, though my beast turned his nose up at deep-fried anything.

“I’ve been looking for you.” I gulped water, and it dribbled over my chin onto my shirt. Brett grabbed a napkin and dabbed at my skin, and I wished we’d chosen the “let’s fuck” option.

“And I you. For a small town, Oakheart has a lot of hiding places.”

Darcy took our orders. I thought back to my conversation with Dylan and Jonah and how everyone else was coupled up. I inspected the diners around us, wondering if there was another alpha feeling sad at not having a mate. If there was, I wanted to tell

him to be patient.

“Do you come here a lot? The chef and the server seem to know you.”

I explained that Kyle was mated to my good friend, and yeah, I hung out here quite a bit. “Being across from the community center ensures there are always snow leopards dining here And it’s owned by our Alpha Omega.”

Brett chewed his lip. “Did you expect your mate would be a snow leopard?”

“I didn’t have a preference, just that we were fated to one another.” My mate would have easily been human as a shifter. Love was love, whether my mate was the same species as me or not.

“Same here.”

Darcy brought the food, and I almost regretted ordering the fish. Brett’s curry and rice was aromatic, and when he gave me a taste, I almost converted to vegetarianism.

“We can share.” Brett went into the restaurant and came out with another bowl, spooning some of his curry into it and pushing it toward me. He put the bowl of rice between us and we tucked in.

“You’re not going to share your fries?” His eyes twinkled.

“Oh, right.”

He dunked a fry in the curry and ate it. “Yum. Spicy chili and deep-fried potato. A great combination.” Dipping another fry into the sauce, he said, “Open wide.”

That was what I hoped I’d be saying to him later. I opened my mouth, and he popped

the deep-fried potato between my lips. A multitude of flavors flooded my mouth: chili, garlic, lemon grass, ginger, lime, tamarind, and cilantro.

I swallowed and sniffed. Brett handed me a tissue.

“That’s delicious. Hot and spicy but yummy.”

“I make a mean vegetable curry.” Brett licked around his lips.

“I can’t wait to try it.” I blew my nose before scooping up some rice with my curry.

Brett asked Darcy for some milk and explained it was better than water when eating spicy food. Good to know because I was drowning in sweat, and I sniffed under my arms, hoping I didn’t stink.

“Shall we order dessert?” Brett asked as he wiped curry sauce from his mouth.

I focused on his long, tapered fingers and his plump lips, hardly hearing what he was saying.

“Dessert, Anders?”

“Okay. Kyle makes a delicious key lime pie.” That would help ease the heat from the curry.

“I wasn’t thinking about that kind of dessert.”

Maybe the chili was affecting my brain because what other type of dessert was there?

“The kind where we eat in the bedroom?”

That sounded messy, but we could do that.

“Wait,” I grabbed his arm. “When you say dessert in the bedroom, are you saying...”

He shut me up with a kiss.

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Chapter 9

Brett

I found my mate, and he was everything I dreamed of and more. We had such a nice time. Fine, it was frustrating because all I wanted to do was to get him naked and feast on his flesh, but still, it was wonderful. I'd learned that he too had scented me and the two of us had been a hot mess looking for each other. But that time was over.

I knew it.

Anders knew it.

But my unicorn... he was still being a butt, only in a different way. I thought once we found our mate he'd be happy happy, and for a few seconds he was, but then he got mad. He was blaming our mate for all our suffering, as if Anders had anything to do with that.

I didn't have time to deal with him. This was what I'd been waiting for, being with my mate. I was thrilled, and if my unicorn wanted to be a butt, he could do so silently. I pushed him way down. I'd deal with his attitude later. I knew it came from a place of trauma, having grown up the way we did, never being accepted by the other pack members. But projecting that on our mate? Yeah, that wasn't going to be a thing.

He'd be fine after we shifted together for the first time. I was sure of it.

“Excuse me.” I got up, wanting to make sure nothing was in my teeth or on my face before we left—an activity I was hoping we were going to be doing together. “I’ll be right back.”

“Please do. I’m not ready to let you out of my sight just yet.”

I walked to the bathroom, and on the way there, my phone buzzed in my pocket. Once inside, I checked it; it was my dad sending a meme he didn’t understand. Pretty much an everyday occurrence since I moved here.

Normally I’d give it a laughing emoji or a quick commentary, but today, I responded with, I found my mate. More news to come. Shutting off my phone. Love you.

And then I did shut it down before they called or bombarded my messages with questions. We’d chat soon. Tonight was for my mate and me.

When I worked my way back to the table, my mate was chatting with some people who worked here, all of them smiling, and I didn’t need to hear their conversation to know that it was about me. He was proud to have found his mate, and they were all exceedingly happy for him.

“Hi.” I wasn’t sure what to do because there were people blocking me from my chair, and also, I was ready to go... but also wanted to be polite.

“You ready?” Anders popped up. Either he read my body language or he was feeling the same. I didn’t care which, I was just happy we were leaving.

“So very.” More than one of them chuckled. There would be a day when I’d meet them all and learn about who they were. Today was not that day.

Anders intertwined our fingers and led me outside.

“My place or yours?” he asked, cutting through any pretense.

“Who’s closer?”

We ended up going to his. I didn’t even get a decent look at it, both of us racing into the house. The getting-to-know-you stuff was fun and all, but it was time. Time for us to get naked.

The cool evening breeze was abruptly shut out as the door slammed closed behind us, and before I could draw a breath to steady my racing heart, my alpha’s arms were around me, his presence engulfing, his scent enveloping me. The force of his body pushed me back against the solid wood of the door, his hands now framing my face with a gentleness that managed to get me even harder, something I didn’t know was even possible.

“Finally,” he breathed, the single word laden with all the hunger we’d both been holding at bay... barely.

His lips crashed onto mine, fierce and demanding, tasting of raw need and something tantalizingly wild. His beast was so close to the surface, and it was sexy as fuck. Our breaths mingled, hot and fast, as if we were trying to consume each other whole, to make up for lost time.

“Alpha,” I gasped when his mouth finally left mine, a plea, for what I wasn’t sure. Everything.

He looked at me then, eyes blazing with an intensity that sent a shiver down my spine. “You have no idea how much I’ve wanted this,” he said.

Except I did, because I felt the same way.

“Let me take you to bed,” he murmured against my neck.

I shook my head, the thought of waiting even a second longer unbearable. “It’s too far. Take me here, Anders.” My hands clawed at the fabric of his shirt, needing him closer... needing more. “I can’t wait. Please, alpha, please.”

A growl rumbled deep within his chest, vibrating through me.

“Here it is then,” he said, his voice thick with lust.

With an urgency that mirrored the passion of our kiss, we shed our clothes, not pretending to be slow and sweet about it. That was for another time.

The cool air of the room chilled my fevered skin as I stood bare before him, trembling from anticipation and the intensity of his gaze, loving the approval I saw in his eyes, in the way his body responded just to the sight of my flesh. And his body, gods, it was fucking perfect, his cock thick and hard.

In one swift movement, he was on his knees, his breath teasing my length.

“Mate,” I breathed, a plea wrapped in a single word as he took me into his mouth. The world narrowed down to the sensation of warmth, the smooth glide, his suction strong and steady. My fingers twisted into his hair, anchoring myself to something solid as he brought me to the brink as his head bobbed up and down, his every move designed to unravel me completely. It took everything I had not to come down his throat right then and there. But I wanted him inside me when I came for the first time.

“Stop... please, I want—you inside me—I need—gods, how I need,” I gasped, tugging gently at his hair.

He rose like the predator he was, his eyes dark with promise, and without a word, he

turned me and pressed me over the arm of the couch. The leather was cool against my heated skin, a stark contrast to the fire ignited within me. This was dirty and raw and naughty, and I fucking loved it.

He tapped the inside of my feet, encouraging me to spread my stance. I expected to feel his length pressing against my entrance, instead I felt the warmth of his breath, followed by the lap of his tongue. He was going to kill me, but I couldn't think of a better way to go.

Scratch that. I couldn't think at all.

He lapped at my entrance, his tongue circling my hole, teasing it, and then breeching it, and the entire time, he spoke against my flesh, telling me how slick I was, how perfect my ass was, how he couldn't wait to be inside me.

Whimpers came from my lips, but I couldn't form a single word. He'd officially stolen my brain. And just as I was about to come, he nipped at my ass and stood up, lining himself up with my entrance.

The moment he entered me, it was as if two halves of the same soul found each other, fitting together perfectly. With each thrust, he claimed me, The power of the alpha driving us both toward an edge that felt higher, sharper than any I'd known. His hands gripped my hips, guiding me back onto him with a rhythm that was both relentless and reverent.

"Yours," I moaned, giving voice to the bond that was tightening with every push, every pull. "Only yours." It was a vow. Now that I'd found him, I refused to let him go. I wasn't sure I even could.

"Mine," he growled back, the sound vibrating through me, his possessiveness mimicking my own.

There was no holding back anymore. And as I felt my release building, a tidal wave ready to crash, he reached around, his hand a firm pressure where I needed him most. It was all I could do to brace myself as pleasure exploded through me, waves of it crashing over and over as I called out his name.

“Anders. Anders. Anders.” It was a freaking prayer.

His own climax followed, his knot growing and locking us together in the most intimate of embraces. Bound, we rode out the aftershocks, the only sound in the room our panting breaths and our hearts beating—beating as one.

And in that moment, I knew with certainty.

He was mine as much as I was his.

And together, we would face whatever came our way.

Chapter 10

Anders

So this was what it was like to wake up with a mate.

I lay with my hands behind my head, enjoying the stillness of the morning and wishing Brett would open his eyes. I side-eyed him, the bedding tucked up around his hips.

A little lower and I'd get a glimpse of his cock. Not that I hadn't eyeballed it last night and had a mouthful and fondled it and tasted his pre-cum as well as his slick. I grew hard recalling the mingled flavors exploding in my mouth.

I bounced up and down on the bed, but Brett didn't stir, and then I recalled he said he was working the night shift this evening.

Sorry , I mouthed to his sleeping form.

Today was Sunday, my day off, so I could go back to sleep. Closing my eyes, I lay still for a minute, before adjusting my pillow. Much better, now I could snooze. Two minutes later I gave up.

As neither of us had to work this morning, there was no need to wake Brett. But having met him only yesterday and spending one night together, there was so much we had to learn about one another.

“Guess you’re not waking up.” I slipped out of bed and put on a robe, leaving a spare one on the bed for my mate.

Yes , he was my mate, though we hadn’t marked one another yet. My snow leopard was kinda snarky last night, wanting to get his claws out and draw blood. But unicorns were different in many ways, not just in a mating ritual.

They weren’t knock ‘em down and kill ‘em creatures, as wolves and snow leopards were. Also they were so different from other shifters. Snow leopards were part big cats, like lions and tigers. But unicorns had no cousins in the wild or in the shifter community.

And while Brett hadn’t spilled a lot about his background, I sensed he harbored a lot of trauma.

After putting on the coffee, I peeked in the fridge. I had salmon, but while Brett’s beast ate no animal products, I wasn’t certain if he did. Bacon was ruled out. Pancakes were a safe choice, unless he didn’t eat eggs.

After getting online, I found a recipe for vegan apple pancakes. Yum. That sounded so good. I had all the ingredients, including soy milk, maple syrup, and olive oil instead of butter.

I was grating the apples when Brett trudged in, rubbing his eyes and yawning, his hair tousled.

“Morning.”

He trudged over to me and leaned on my chest, not moving for over a minute. Not sure if he’d fallen asleep or if this was a unicorn shifter habit, I waited, an apple in one hand, the grater in the other. I had to get the apple into the batter and cooking

before they turned brown.

Brett stood up and gave me a lopsided grin.

“I’m making apple pancakes in your honor.”

“That’s sweet of you. What can I do to help?”

“Grab a cup of coffee and sit down.” There wasn’t anything difficult about making pancakes, and they were a one-person job, especially when my one and only was sitting at my kitchen table and ogling my ass. At least I hoped that was what he was doing and not just thinking, wow, this coffee is amazing!

My snow leopard grumbled, wishing he could shift and tell Brett’s beast to stop being a butt and get with the program. I shushed him, telling him not to ruin our first morning together.

“Mmmm, nice.”

I shoulder shimmied and shook my butt, hoping his comment was about my ass.

“If you weren’t cooking, I’d yank your robe up and shove my fingers in that gorgeous ass.”

I froze. Oh, I wanted his fingers so badly, and as an alpha, many of my former bedmates had been reluctant to shove anything in my hole.

“Once we eat, you can do whatever you want to me.”

I was flipping a pancake, when he pushed his body against mine, his cock engorged and pressed into my butt. Brett kissed the back of my neck and moved away. I was

both pleased and disappointed, wanting not to flip the pancake on the floor but also missing him, his warm breath and his hot body sending goosebumps charging over my skin.

“Can we eat in bed?” Brett poured syrup over the pile of pancakes I’d made for him.

“We can.” What did it matter if we got syrup on the sheets? That was why washing machines were invented. Besides, dick with syrup would be a nice Sunday treat. Maybe we could start a tradition, though coffee spilled on my cock would be more than an owie. But I could shift and rid myself of the pain.

My mate carried his coffee and food into the bedroom, and I followed him. He stuck his fork in the pancakes and ate the mouthful, smearing his mouth in syrup. I kissed him, licking off the sticky substance and smacking my lips.

“So good.” He forked more pancake and offered it to me. “Both what I was eating and kissing.”

“Glad you liked the whole package.”

We ate the rest of our food and sipped our coffee, chatting about his new workplace and colleagues.

“This is so different to what I’m used to.” Brett peered at me over the rim of his mug.

“In a good way, I hope.”

“Absolutely.” But the smile faded from his face, and I avoided commenting.

Instead, I took the dishes into the kitchen and dumped them in the sink. When I returned to the bedroom, my mate appeared to be talking to himself. That was fine, I

often did that before having to give someone bad news.

“More coffee?”

“I’d love some but I’ll get it.” He regarded his empty cup. “My unicorn is being difficult, saying he feels uncomfortable being here.”

What? What is he saying? My snow leopard was outraged. Maybe he’s going to leave and gallop off into the distance?

Just wait. He might want to shift . That was reasonable for a shifter.

“He’s wary of new places and people, even though you’re my mate.”

I’d never heard anything similar from my mated friends. Their beast had fallen in love with their mate’s humans and animal forms. Was I going to be the only one whose beast didn’t like me? That would make mating awkward and would go some way to expelling why we hadn’t marked one another.

“But he said he senses you’re a good guy.”

“Tell him he can take all the time he needs.”

No, he can’t. My snow leopard did the shifter version of stamping his feet.

Now who’s being a butthead?

No idea , he harrumphed.

“What if we went for a walk?” Unicorns might prefer fresh air or he could be claustrophobic.

“He’d like that.” Brett grabbed my robe and pulled me close. “Thank you for understanding.” His cheeks were a delicious shade of pink. “Raincheck on disrobing and finger-fucking you?”

“Absolutely.” We had a lifetime of finger and cock fucking and maybe tongue fucking to look forward to! “There’s a lovely park nearby with a waterfall and plenty of greenery and wide-open spaces.”

I filled two flasks with more coffee, cut up fruit, and grabbed a packet of crackers. I didn’t have vegan cheese, but I’d put it on my shopping list.

“Wow! You come prepared.” Brett peered into my backpack.

We strolled down the street, our hands brushing against one another. My fingers curled around his, and I sized up his expression, hoping this was okay. We’d been intimate, more than once, my cock had been inside his hole, so surely a bit of handholding wouldn’t upset Brett’s unicorn.

But a shifter’s beast was usually asleep or in a trance-like state during sex, so perhaps I couldn’t compare the two situations.

“I had no idea this was here.” My mate took in the weeping willows and the more manicured part of the park with the untamed section. “I think my beast will enjoy coming here.”

There wasn’t enough private space to shift, but if Brett’s unicorn preferred being out of doors, I imagined spending a lot of time here.

“Coffee?” I got the flasks out of my pack.

“You’re so organized.” He flipped his head back and drank. “I am at work, I have to

be, but in my private life I need some nudging. Socks on the floor, empty fridge. That sort of thing.”

“Don’t worry. I’m happy to nudge you.” Among other things. There’d be thrusting, probing, inserting, plunging, ramming... and that was just my cock. My fingers were agile, and my tongue could slip into nooks and crannies.

“I haven’t met many people in the snow leopard community, but this place feels more like home than where I grew up.”

“You are my home,” I told him, and I put my hand over his heart. I hoped his unicorn agreed, but I refused to consider what would happen if he didn’t.

Chapter 11

Brett

Shifting with my mate was something I had longed to do even before I saw his face for the first time. I wanted my beast to know his, and his to know mine. But now that we had met and been together, the need to meet his beast was on a different level.

I wanted to see his leopard, to run my fingers through his fur, to snuggle against him, to watch him take down prey. He was the polar opposite of my beast, who literally frolicked through the forest as the animals came around and greeted him. He was what those same animals feared. Only, I knew I could never fear him. He had already become my everything.

Growing up I was grossed out by the idea of hunting. And now? Now I got it. Not that my mate bragged about hunting or even explained it to me. It was more that I understood that it was part of who he was, and that, by default, made it important to me.

“I want to show you my favorite place,” I said, giving his hand a squeeze.

We were in my kitchen, finishing up a late lunch. Tomorrow, we’d go back to our normal lives, but today, today was for us and us alone. I couldn’t think of a better way to spend it than in our fur.

“Ooh, you want to show me something.” He wagged his eyebrows. “Does it require getting a little more comfortable?”

He winked as his eyes raked over me. I hadn't been heading in that direction, but now? Now my cock was all for it, because of course it was.

"Yes, but not in the way you think." I went over to the back door and started to pull off my clothes, setting them on the bench I kept there. "I want to meet your beast, and I want you to see my unicorn."

"I'd love that," he said, following my lead and removing his clothes as well. "I can see why you love it here, with all of the woods behind you."

I followed his gaze. He was taking in the magnificence that was my location. His home was great, but I wouldn't be able to shift there, not with my size. We'd figure something out, but not yet.

First I needed to get my unicorn on board. He was still hiding away and ignoring me. I didn't love it. I could be stubborn too, so I got it, I just didn't like it.

"I do love it. It's nice to be able to go out, run, or play whenever I want. I don't blend in, in case you were wondering." There was a time when people were slapping fake horns on horses to take pictures. Maybe, just maybe then I might've been able to get away with being seen. Probably not, but I'd considered it.

"No." He kissed my cheek. "Absolutely no part of me suspected that you did." He kissed my lips this time, far too short for my liking. "Let's go before your sexy naked body distracts me completely."

We went outside, and Pixie stood off to the side, not coming as close as she often did, just watching me. It had to be confusing for the little creature. All of their instincts told them I was safe and he was deadly. The two of us together... it couldn't make any sense to them.

“Hey, Pixie, we’re just gonna go for a run.”

“Pixie?”

“Yes, Pixie, my friend the chipmunk—please don’t eat him.” I felt guilty adding the last part on. I’d already told Anders the fluffy cuteness was my friend. Of course he wasn’t going to eat him. But also—he was a predator.

“I generally don’t like small prey, but friend? He doesn’t smell like a shifter.” He focused on the chipmunk, his head tilted to the side.

“He’s not a shifter. We just have an understanding. He’s my gardening buddy.” It sounded off the wall spoken aloud, but it was true, and I wasn’t ashamed.

“Well, nice to meet you, Pixie.”

At that, she ran off, or he did—I didn’t even know which, but his fight or flight kicked in, just as it should.

“That’s amazing,” he said. “It’s like he really knows you.”

“He does, but it’s not really that special. Unicorns are sort of the Snow White of the shifter kingdom.”

He looked at me, confused.

“What I mean is the animals like me... a lot. I’m guessing they tend to run from you, given your beast could gobble them up.”

“They only run if they’re smart.” He chuckled.

We walked toward the woods, hand in hand, buck-ass naked. This right here was why I could never live in a city again. I wanted this freedom.

“Take your fur first. I wanna... I wanna not pet you, but...” I wasn’t sure how to ask for what I wanted without it sounding... rude.

“You wanna pet me, and don’t worry, you can.”

He took his fur before I could respond. He came up to me, and I bent down—not that I had to kneel far. He was large for a snow leopard, at least I thought he was. I wasn’t up on my big cats the way I probably should be, considering I was mated to one.

Not yet mated, but soon to be mated—at least if my unicorn would stop their argh.

I ran my fingers through his fur. “You’re gorgeous.”

Pressing my forehead to his, I closed my eyes and inhaled deeply, and for the first time since we met, my unicorn perked up. I was sick of his silent treatment and even sicker of the way he kept pulling my mood down. This? This was promising.

Maybe meeting his snow leopard was exactly what he needed. Please, let this be exactly what he needs.

“Okay, stand back.”

He did, and I took my hooves, bringing my head down so he could rub his cheek against mine, that was after he stopped staring at my horn. It was beautiful. I wasn’t going to pretend that it wasn’t, but the way people were enamored with it always amused me.

I’d heard that beasts of prey liked to play hunt and chase, and so I went down, licked

the tip of his nose, and then shot off into the woods. He followed behind, and gods, he was fast. More than once I was sure he was going to catch up to me, and I made horses look slow. In hindsight, I wasn't sure if he was staying slow enough to not catch me out of kindness, or if his beast was waiting for me to falter so he could jump ahead.

But in any case, I didn't care. I was having fun too, and my unicorn—he was in his glory. We ran and ran and ran. I jumped over him, he jumped over me, and straight into the water. Then we both ended up in there, playing.

The woods were different when sharing it with Anders. They were reminiscent of my childhood when no animals ever came near me unless I was alone. But unlike then, it didn't bother me, because, also unlike then, I wasn't alone around other people. I was with my mate, and we were having the best of times.

The breeze started to pick up, and I jumped out of the water, shaking my body, getting the excess water off me, and finding a spot in the sun where I could lie down. As a rule, my unicorn wasn't big on lying down. There were times, of course, that he did, but it wasn't common. But today, he wanted to. He longed to snuggle with our mate, to act like the big cat that our mate was instead of his unicorn self. My mate got the message, snuggling in beside us, the two of us lying in the sun, just enjoying each other's warmth and comfort.

It was magnificent.

Soon enough, the sun began to set, and it was time to go home. We trotted back, taking our skin as we reached the back stoop, and I sat down on it.

“Your snow leopard is stunning.” I snuggled into his side. “Thank you for today.”

“Look at you, thinking my snow leopard's stunning, when you—my beautiful, sexy

mate—you're a unicorn."

I'd never heard it said that way. I was always "that unicorn" or "the unicorn," but with Anders, he said it with such reverence, such respect. He loved my unicorn. He didn't have to say the words—everything about him shouted it.

"Thanks for saying that. I guess... I guess I needed to hear it." I stood up and held my hand out for him. "What do snow leopards like to do after they shift?"

He took my hand and stood up. "I feel like there's a right answer to this question."

"There's not a right or a wrong answer, but if your answer involves slamming that cock of yours into me, well then, I'd approve."

"I see," he said, schooling his face.

"So, what do you like to do?"

"When I get done shifting, I like to climb into bed with my omega."

"Perfect answer."

Chapter 12

Anders

I miss you .

Brett was in Rockhill on a five-day course. I told him to check out Daxon's coffee shop there, though someone said he might have sold it.

But Brett and I kept playing telephone tennis or message tennis. I'd be on a job if he was on a break, but when I finally got done, he'd have muted his phone or been in bed.

This reminded me of when I was single. I was lonely and couldn't concentrate on anything in my spare time, wondering if Brett was free to chat.

But as I was drinking my morning coffee in the back garden, I told myself I was effing silly. Missing my mate was to be expected, but my life didn't end because he wasn't at my side. Brett didn't need or want a lap dog that existed solely to be with him. He needed a mate who had a full life, a circle of friends, hobbies, and a community.

Wanna hunt? It was late afternoon, and barring any plumbing emergencies, I was done for the day.

My beast agreed, he was tired of my moping. Allowing him to run and eat might allow me to get out of my head and enjoy the outdoors.

And not be looking at your phone every five minutes , he suggested.

True . Though it was more like every minute.

I drove a ways out of town, farther than where we usually shifted and gave my snow leopard his fur. While the terrain around Oakheart wasn't similar to a wild snow leopard habitat, there were plenty of deer and small mammals for my beast to feast on.

While my beast ate his kill, I tried to enjoy the last rays of the sun on our head, the birds flying home to nest in the canopy over our head, and the chirping of the insects.

When my beast had his fill and before I took my skin, he asked, How far is Rockhill from here?

What? We were just outside Oakheart, and Rockhill was a good three-hour drive.

Isn't that why you chose this location to shift?

No . I took my skin and got dressed before getting into the car and slamming the door. I was annoyed that he'd suggested I had an ulterior motive when I drove here.

But instead of putting my foot on the accelerator and tearing off down the narrow dirt road, I thought about what my beast had said. Why did I come here when our usual hunting ground was much closer?

Maybe in the back of my mind I did want to drive to Rockhill and surprise Brett? Was that ridiculous?

Perhaps. It was a good idea. I was only a little over two hours away. But if I did go, I'd have to leave at 5 a.m. tomorrow.

Do it .

So much for being my own man and living my life while my one and only was gone for a few days.

Okay .

I started the car, and Brett messaged saying he was headed back to the guest house. I fibbed, telling him I was on a job and we'd speak later. Hoping he wasn't planning a night out with his classmates, I turned right onto the highway rather than left. But he texted again saying he was going to nap and we'd chat when I was free.

As I hadn't planned on driving to Rockhill I pulled into a gas station halfway to my destination. Just as I had finished filling the car and was about to pay, a car drove in and parked on the other side of the gas pumps.

I didn't look up but noted the car was the same color as Brett's.

"Hello, stranger. Fancy meeting you here."

I swung around at hearing my mate's voice. "What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same thing."

"I was planning on surprising you."

"Call me surprised." He fell into my arms, but the forecourt of a gas station wasn't the place to greet your mate and maybe squeeze his beautiful butt.

While I paid for my gas, Brett filled his car, and I parked at the gas station café.

“This is a reminder that surprise visits might end in disaster.” He rested his head on my chest while I leaned on my car. “Do we drive to Oakheart or back to Rockhill?”

While spending the night with my mate was what I’d planned—what we’d planned—he would return to Oakheart in two days. That option would leave neither of us with a long drive early in the morning.

“How about we eat here, and I go home and you return to your guest house. We can celebrate on the weekend when you’ve finished your course.”

Brett agreed while saying he’d hoped to sleep in my arms tonight.

“Sleeping wasn’t on my mind.” I grinned, and he returned my smile.

We sat in a booth at the back of the café and ordered burgers and fries. Brett told me about his course, and I related how I’d been up to my knees in water after a pipe broke in a client’s basement.

“These are really good burgers. We should come here some time.” I dipped a fry in ketchup and popped it between my lips.

Brett tapped the corner of his mouth. “You have a little something something.”

“Here?” I pointed to the end of my nose. He giggled and shook his head. “Here?” I tapped my brow, and he rolled his eyes. “What about here?” I pointed under the table to my crotch.

“Stop it.” Using a paper napkin from a pile on the table, he dabbed at the corner of my mouth.

“Oh, there!” I winked, and taking hold of his hand, I kissed the palm.

“That’s ticklish.” He squirmed and tugged his hand, but I held it tight.

Running my finger over the lines on his palm, I said, “You have a long lifeline and so do I.” I showed him my hand. “We’re destined to spend many happy years together.”

“Good. I look forward to every minute of every day of every year.”

It was getting late, and we both had over an hour to drive, so after paying the bill, we stood by our cars that were parked side by side. Neither of us wanted to be the first to leave.

“You go and I’ll wave you off,” Brett suggested.

“That sounds like I’m a racecar driver.”

“Hmmm. You do drive a little fast.”

He had a point, and now that I had a mate, I needed to think of someone other than myself.

You’ve always had me . My leopard never let me get away with anything.

“No, you go first.” I hated goodbyes and wanted to say farewell to him, in case I burst into tears. It was silly because we’d see one another in two, maybe three days.

“No, you,” he insisted.

“Let’s do it at the same time.” We kissed and hugged, promising to message when we reached our respective destinations.

One final wave and I turned left, checking the rearview mirror as Brett went in the

opposite direction. Though we didn't get to sleep in the same bed and wake up beside one another, being with my mate had tamped down the desire to be with him every minute. Just as I had fueled the car, us having dinner had filled my contentment, and I was ready to sleep and face a new day tomorrow.

I got home before Brett reached his guest house, as I'd had a head start because of where I'd shifted, and I'd showered and was in bed when he arrived. We chatted until I told him to sleep, as he had an early class in the morning.

But I missed him being beside me, so I hugged a pillow all night, wishing it was my mate.

The phone dinged and woke me. I fumbled for it, but it was under the covers and I tossed off the bedding while crawling over the mattress.

Are you alone? he texted.

What sort of question is that? Did he think I'd snuck another omega into my bed?

I wanted to make sure you weren't out having coffee or had been called to an emergency job .

My heart sped up as I came up with all the reasons why he needed me to be alone.

Yes, I'm still in bed .

Me too, though I'm about to get up and shower. But I wanted to show you something.

Whatever it was, I was ready. Go on.

Morning wood .

Oh gods, he sent me a dick pic.

I dreamed we had sex last night, and I was so hard when I woke up . It hurt .

Maybe I should drive to Rockhill this evening and help you out .

Being in love and finding my mate had made me giddy. But what was a three-hour drive tonight if I got to be with the omega I adored?

I like the way you think. See you in twelve hours .

Chapter 13

Brett

When you go into the medical field, it's pretty much a given that there will come a time when one of your patients will pass. It doesn't matter what area of medicine you're in, it's going to be your reality. And working in the hospital, the odds increase because you're not seeing people just coming in because they have an earache or because they need to get a refill on their suppressants.

At the emergency department, you're seeing people who, a lot of times, are in medical crisis. Sure, sometimes it's someone who panics over something that's no big deal, but for the most part, it's people who need to be seen and stat.

The thing is, even knowing that going into this profession with your eyes wide open, knowing that it's a very real possibility you'll be there when someone takes their last breath, nothing prepares you for it. Nothing gets you ready for the way your first patient loss tears your heart open, the way it has you questioning every decision you made, the way that memory will forever be seared upon your soul.

For me, I popped my cherry during college. I was shadowing a nurse, not even participating in much of anything yet. Aside from interacting with patients and taking their temperature, my job was to watch and learn, to discover what I was really getting into. And it did that, for sure.

I was there with Nurse Sandy for three shifts in a row. Mr. Lawson was the very first patient I met, and I genuinely liked the guy. It had been odd to call him mister. He

was younger than me by a few years, barely out of high school.

He'd been hit with a baseball while watching his little brother's championship game—it wasn't even him playing. It was a freak accident, a foul ball popping back and smacking him straight in the temple. Everything looked like it was healing right, and that he was okay—all the scans, all the tests, all the indicators. He was talking, happy as can be. They were just keeping him for one more night, you know, to keep an eye on him, to make sure everything was fine.

Spoiler alert: Everything was not fine.

The next day, when I went in for my shift, he was gone from the floor, having crashed during the night. In a last ditch effort to save him, he was put in a medically induced coma and moved to the ICU. I didn't find out until two days later that he'd left this world.

I'd barely known the guy. I'd never truly worked with him other than a few sentences of chitchat after my introduction, and yet meeting him left an indelible mark on my heart.

You'd think the next loss would be easier on me, and the next one after that, and so on—that I'd somehow become immune to the pain. It never happened, and seeing the people who did get numb, I was glad for that. There was a coldness to them that no patient deserved.

One of the reasons that made shifts in the ER so much more difficult than my normal shifts was knowing this was a very real possibility every shift. Sure, it was true in all shifts, but the odds were higher that someone was going to come in to be seen too late, not realizing they had had a stroke, or not recognizing the signs of a heart attack or that they'd accidentally ingested one of their allergens, or had pneumonia that had crossed over to sepsis. There were so many different scenarios in the ER, and life was

so fragile.

It still sucked and hurt deeply, but over the years, I'd figured out how to handle it, how to prepare myself, how to keep my guard up at least until I got home. Patients didn't need me at my worst. They deserved better.

At least I thought I had figured it out.

Today was different. Today, Mrs. Harrison left this world, and it hit me so much deeper than any loss I'd had in recent years. With her, I let my guard down. I let her get close. Heck, I talked to her about love and listened to her talk about her husband and their lives together. She was supposed to be going home tomorrow, and now, I guess, in a way, she was home—just not the one she'd planned to be at.

I finished my shift, did the shift change, and updated the system, making sure everything was dotted and crossed. The entire time, I was faking it, acting like it was no big deal. And each minute I did so made the pain stronger. It took all I had not to go into the supply closet, lock the door, and cry—letting it all out.

Finally it was time to leave. I wasn't even out of the building when I started dialing my mate. I just needed to hear his voice, needed to know that he was okay, to let him calm my beast. He picked up on the first ring.

“Just getting off?” His sleepy voice was adorable—not that I'd tell my sexy snow leopard that he was adorable—but he was.

“Getting off from work? Yeah. Not like getting off getting off—getting off.”

His rich chuckle over the phone soothed me—slightly. Nothing could do so completely—not even Anders. It was going to take time.

“Hey, something feels off,” he said, the sleepiness in his tone gone. I wasn’t even in the same room with him, and he saw me.

“Yeah, it was just kind of a shitty day.” I wasn’t going to pretend to be strong for him. He wasn’t my co-worker or a patient. He was my mate, and hiding things that mattered from him would never work out well.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“No. Yes. I don’t know.” I reached my car and leaned against it, wanting to finish my phone call first. “I lost a patient.”

“Oh, sweetheart, I’m so sorry. Do you want to come over?”

“Yeah, yeah, I do.”

We’d been spending a lot of time at each other’s houses. But even so, I hadn’t wanted to push. It wasn’t like I was going to be good company.

“I’ll be there soon.”

When I arrived, he was already outside waiting for me, and I barely made it out of the car before his arms wrapped around me and he held me tight. It was exactly what I needed.

“I got you, Brett, I got you,” he whispered against the top of my head, and I let the tears finally come, sobbing into his shirt, sucking snot—basically being the grossness that was an emotional letdown.

“Come inside, let me shower you, get you something to eat, and then put you to bed.”

“I’m not five.” I forced a chuckle.

“No, you’re not, but everybody needs to be taken care of sometimes.”

And just like he promised me, he took me inside, set a nice hot shower, washed me from head to toe—ignoring the erection that his mere touch gave, knowing that wasn’t what I needed—and when I was dried off and in a pair of his old sweats, he fed me apple pancakes, this time with peanut butter on top.

By the time he led me to bed, I was ready for sleep. He climbed in behind me, holding me close, telling me how special I was, how important I was to him, how much me being in his life meant to him, until I dozed off.

I slept for hours, and when I woke up, he was still there, keeping the bad dreams at bay.

“Thank you.” I rolled to face him. “I needed this.”

“I’m here for whatever you need. Always. And that includes if you want to talk about what happened.”

“It was Mrs. Harrison...” He’d already heard about her in passing, but this time was different. It was as if I were keeping her alive by sharing her with the person who meant the most to me in this world.

Anders listened intently, asking questions along the way, opening doors for me to share more.

“She was lucky to have you in her life for the short time she did. Being in the hospital and all alone, that’s rough. You made her less alone and treated her with dignity and compassion.” He cupped my cheek. “She was so lucky to have you in her life.”

“I feel the same about her.” It was weird having such a connection, but I wasn’t going to try to explain it away. Instead, I was going to cherish it.

“Want to run? I’ll even let you win.” He tapped my nose.

“You—let me?” I sat up. “As if.” I made sure he was looking directly at me before rolling my eyes, even though I had already suspected he never ran full speed around me to keep our playtime... playful. “First one to the river gets a blow job.”

“So you’re saying everyone wins?”

“Yeah, everyone wins, alpha mine. Everyone wins.”

Chapter 14

Anders

I want to thank you for everything you've done for me .

I scanned the text from Brett. Goody, I loved thank-yous of the sexual kind. As I was between jobs and at the hardware store, I couldn't whip myself out and send him a dick pic. Maybe in the car?

After paying for my purchases lickety split, I tore out to the car. The parking lot was empty of people and only a few cars, none parked nearby, so I hunkered down in the front seat and unzipped my pants.

"Anders, you forgot your angle valves." Marge's frantic voice reached through the open window as I snapped a pic.

Shit and double damn. I scooted up and stuck my head out the window so Marge wouldn't see my length. It was hard to miss 'cause I was big. I was kinda proud of that. But also, it was stiff and a little hard to hide if she leaned in the window. Yikes, poor Marge!

"Silly me. I was so distracted with work, they slipped my mind."

"Work, huh?" She handed over my purchases, but as she strode back to the store, she muttered, "Work? Is that what they call it?"

Damn. I peered at my face in the rearview mirror, my cheeks burning with embarrassment. Brett would laugh when I told him, or I hoped he would.

I thought better of sending the NSFW image in case my mate was still at work. He should have finished his shift fifteen minutes ago, but it was better to confirm he was out of the hospital before sending him images of my nether region.

Can't wait . I pressed send.

What would you like to eat?

He was giving me a choice. Yum! Have you left work?

Yes, I just arrived home .

Okay. All systems go . It was too difficult to send a pic of my hole, and if Marge saw me with my naked butt in the air trying to take a photo, I'd have to frequent another hardware store on the other side of Oakheart. But the dick pic I could do.

Brett texted. No peaches?

I'm in the car .

Don't text and drive . He added a grumpy face emoji.

I'm not.

Fine. I should have explained. I want to cook dinner for you. We can do peaches and eggplants afterward .

Anything re the food . I didn't want to be prescriptive and tell him to cook steaks

when his unicorn might take off and I'd have to leave Snowford and follow them.

It'll be a surprise. Come over when you finish work .

Can't wait . I added heart emojis and started the car.

I had to run home at the end of the day and shower, and on the way to Brett's I picked up vegan chocolate and a bunch of flowers. My mate met me at the door saying we were having soufflé for starters, shrimp for the main meal, and lemon chiffon pie for dessert.

While I was hungry, I secretly hoped we could skip the first two courses and jump to dessert, eating it in bed.

The pie was in the oven, and Brett said he'd make the soufflés and put them in once the pie was cooked.

"How can I help?" I assumed he was making something simple like a stir fry with rice. Seemed like a lot of work, but I appreciated him making the effort for me.

"Beat the egg whites." I pictured myself using a rotary beater like my mom had as a kid. I was often roped into it when her arms got tired. But Brett had bought handheld electric beaters, so I didn't have to do much except hold it and watch the peaks form.

My mate had already separated the yolks and the whites, so I set to work, the beater's mechanical grinding pulsing through my hand as I held it. But I peered into the bowl as the egg whites stayed as they were.

"They're not fluffing up. Maybe there was a bit of yolk in there."

"Keep beating." Brett threw a dish towel over his shoulder as he washed the shrimp.

While I wasn't much of a cook, I was pretty sure the shrimp were changing color under the water... the hot water.

"Ummm, sweetheart, maybe use cold water."

"Huh?" He had one hand under the running water as he bent over and peered into the oven. He stood up, and I jerked my head at the shrimp that were pinkening. "Shite. What have I done?"

Cooked the shrimp under hot water was my take, but I zipped my mouth. I'd said enough.

"Ewww." We both studied the shrimp, their tails were raw, their middles partly cooked, and their heads were saying, "What the rickety fuck?"

Brett tossed them in the garbage as I was saying, "We could do something with them. Not sure what. Make soup." Oops, too late.

"We still have the soufflés and the pie." As the words left my mouth, the oven dinged. Brett slipped on oven gloves and removed the pie. But as he set it atop the stove, the filling spilled over the side.

"It should have gelled." Brett stuck his face close to the filling, and I turned off the beaters and did the same. "Maybe I got the cooking time wrong." He checked the recipe. "Nope. It's more like soup."

"We could eat it with a spoon," I suggested. "It'd be yummy." Maybe.

My snow leopard made a face at the slurpy mess and muttered how raw food was better.

“It’s a disaster.” Tears streamed over my mate’s cheeks, and I rested the beaters on the counter and hugged him. “But we can eat the soufflés.”

We turned our attention to the egg whites, the ones that looked the same as when I started beating them. Trying to stay positive, I suggested we mix the whites and the unused yolks and make scrambled eggs.

Brett and I shared a glance and shook our heads. The poor egg whites had been mistreated enough and neither of us wanted to eat them in any form.

“I have fancy cheese.” Brett opened the fridge and waved a packet of slices at me. “And I have yummy bread.”

“And I brought dark chocolate.” I kissed the end of his nose. “It’ll be a feast.”

When dinner was ready, we each took a tray containing soda, grilled cheese, and chocolate outside, as Brett’s unicorn needed fresh air. My snow leopard wasn’t bothered about being cooped up inside, but after being confronted with a sloppy pie, half-cooked shrimp, and egg whites, he agreed we had to escape the kitchen.

“I’m so sorry.” Brett popped a piece of chocolate in his mouth and bit into the grilled cheese sandwich. “Yum, cheese and chocolate are a great combination. Try it.”

I did and agreed with him. “See, we made a discovery tonight that we mightn’t have if not for the three-course disaster.”

Brett cackled. “Three. I ruined not one, not two, but three courses. That takes some doing.”

“I think you deserve a medal.”

He licked a smidgeon of chocolate from his lips. “And where will you place said medal?”

Hmmm, I needed to consider the location. “Not here.” I kissed his brow. “Not here either.” Another kiss but on his ear. “Probably not here either.” I placed my lips on his chest. I blew a kiss at his crotch. “There. That’s where I’ll put it.”

Brett planted a kiss on my mouth. “You taste delicious.”

“Back at ya.”

We sat in silence, enjoying the cool evening air and mulching on our food.

“What was that?” Brett half stood, holding his tray. He didn’t say, “Did you hear that?” because as two shifters, we knew the other person would have picked it up.

“Yes, it sounds like a puppy.” We walked out to the sidewalk, and as it was garbage night, Brett and his neighbors had their wheelie bins lined up on the curb.

“No, surely not. People wouldn’t be so cruel, would they?” He lifted the lid of his bin and a puppy with dark brown eyes and a forlorn expression stared up at us. Brett lifted the dog out and the little pup clung to my mate’s chest.

“I can’t keep him here. There’s a no-pet rule.”

He’d gone from finding the little guy to “I’m keeping him but not in my house” in less than ten seconds. But I was a softie when it came to babies. Human, shifter, or animal.

“He can live with me.” I’d have to convince someone at the community center to look after him during the day. That was doable.

We didn't have any puppy food, so I dashed to the closest pet store before it closed while Brett gave the puppy a bath because he was a stink-a-roo having been in the wheeled bin. Ewww!

When I arrived back, he was freshly washed, and he devoured the soft food I brought.

My mate grinned as we sat on the floor while the puppy ate. "Meet the newest member of our family: Chocolate."

Chapter 15

Brett

There's something I want to talk about tonight.

Anders' words from this morning played in my head over and over again. Nothing about the way he said them had indicated there was a problem. But leave it to me to have my brain formulate a thousand bad things that it could be. I'm fun like that.

I'd been trying to sleep so that I could be awake when he got home and failing miserably. Working opposite shifts wasn't easy, but most of the time, I slept when he worked, so it meshed. Not today. Today, sleep evaded me like a boss.

Giving up, I went out back, took my hooves, and ran and ran and ran and ran and ran. If I couldn't get out of my own head, I was gonna make myself so tired that it kicked me out on its own. At least that was the theory.

Two hours later, I finally accomplished the task. I came back inside, crawled under the covers, and fell sound asleep, waking up only when my alarm went off.

We were having dinner at Anders' house—nothing special or fancy, nothing homemade even. He was grabbing sandwiches from the coffee shop, which didn't sound like a great place to get sandwiches but was actually by far the best location to do so in the county.

I quickly showered and changed, not wanting to be late, still worried about what it

was that he wanted to talk to me about. Could I have handled it like a grown-up and asked him straight out? Absolutely. But did I? No. Every time I thought it might be a good idea, fifty reasons not to reared their ugly heads.

My timing was perfect. I pulled in right behind him, my mate not even fully out of his car when I arrived.

“I’ll help you with that,” I offered.

He hadn’t purchased a sandwich. He had a bag that looked like it was more designed for catering clients than it was for an average person picking up dinner.

“I wasn’t sure what you wanted,” he shrugged, “so I got everything I thought had potential.”

“We’re gonna be eating sandwiches for a week.” Which I didn’t mind.

We went inside, and I unpacked all the food onto the counter while he took care of the sweet pup. As I did, I looked at all the names scribbled across them. None of them made sense. Instead of calling a turkey sandwich a turkey sandwich or a BLT a BLT, they had fancy names for them based on different local landmarks. Like, yeah, the river’s cool and all, but a sandwich named after it? What did that even mean?

“Let’s play guess the sandwich.” He held it up. “Winner gets first choice of dessert.” The way he looked me up and down told me he meant the fun kind, too.

“Game on. This one is tuna—because rivers have flowing water and water is where fish live.”

“I guess chicken, a play on chicken of the sea.”

We were both wrong. It was roast beef, and neither of us could find any logic in that whatsoever.

We had a blast, with me ending up with a grilled mushroom work of magic and my mate with an Italian.

“Maybe take the rest to work?” He stacked the last one in the fridge.

“Yeah. That sounds good.” I closed my eyes. “You said you wanted to talk about something.”

When I opened them again, his eyes were opened wide in recognition.

“I said that, didn’t I?”

I nodded, and he crossed over and hugged me.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean it like it was a... were you thinking about it all day?”

Another nod.

“I was saying it so I didn’t forget, not to cause you stress.” He kissed my cheek.

“Okay. I don’t know why I was so emotional about it.”

“No need to be sorry. I want to do some work on this house and make it so it can be our home and wanted your input on it all.”

“Wait. I’ve been trying to figure things out all day long, and you’re asking me to move in?” I had to laugh at myself.

“Is that a yes to moving in?”

“Of course it’s a yes.” My place did have a better backyard, but it wasn’t really mine. This was his. The choice was obvious. “So what are your ideas?”

He started in the kitchen and then went from room to room. He wasn’t looking for a face lift. My mate was wanting to customize this place for us, and he’d obviously put some serious thought into it. He wanted this not to be me moving into his place, but us creating our own.

“I thought we could turn the spare bedroom into a nursery.”

It was a good size for it, and I could see his point, but the mention of its use had me seeing for the first time that he might not understand what being mated to a unicorn meant.

“Nursery, like for a baby?”

“Yeah, I mean, I sort of thought we were on the track to having children. Is that not what you want?”

I reached for his hand. “No, I very much want children with you. But the thing is, I thought you knew... a lot of unicorns are barren, and those that aren’t? Pregnancy doesn’t come easy. That’s one of the reasons there are so few of us.”

He picked up our joined hands and kissed mine sweetly. “The goddess knows what our future holds, not us,” he said. “Let’s not borrow trouble. If it’s meant to be, do you want children with me?”

“More than anything.”

“Well, then there’s that. We can use this room if we need, and if not, we’ll find something else.”

“You won’t be mad?” I seriously assumed he knew.

“No. Of course not. Don’t you see, my love?” He pressed his hand against my cheek. “There is nothing that could make me want you less, that I wouldn’t do for you, that was a deal breaker. Nothing.”

I stared into his eyes, feeling the warmth of his hand against my cheek, and it struck me again how lucky I was to have found him. Anders wasn’t just my mate—he was my best friend, the one person who saw me just as I was and loved me anyway.

He leaned in, pressing his forehead to mine, and we stayed like that for a moment, breathing each other in. “I’m serious about this, you know. Whatever it takes, whatever you want, we’ll make it happen. This house is ours, and it should feel that way.”

“Thank you.” My words didn’t cover the depths of my appreciation.

“Then let’s start with something small. How about tonight? We’ll make a list of all the things we want to do to the house, and then we’ll work through them together, one by one. No rush, no pressure—just us.”

“Just us,” I echoed, the words tasting sweet on my tongue.

He kissed me, soft and lingering, before pulling back. “But first, I think we deserve a treat.”

I raised an eyebrow, intrigued. “A treat?” Technically neither of us had won the sandwich contest, neither of us getting any correct. But I was willing to concede

victory since there was no loser in either scenario.

“Yeah,” he said, grinning. “I don’t know if you noticed, but there’s a new frozen yogurt shop that just opened up in town. I’ve been waiting for the right moment to check it out, and I think this is it. They allow dogs.”

“Frozen yogurt?” I raised my eyebrows, and he nodded. “You mean the place everyone’s been talking about and not...?” I tilted my head toward the bedroom.

“I was more along the line of both.” He winked.

“Deal.”

The yogurt shop was cute and had a fabulous array of choices. As a surprise to no one, Choccie won a few hearts.

The yogurt was absolutely delicious, but not nearly as wonderful as the dessert I had when we got back home. I wasn’t sure I could ever get enough of my mate, but was looking forward to a lifetime of trying.

Chapter 16

Anders

“Anyone else we should invite?” I showed Brett the names I’d typed out.

He added two colleagues from work who both happened to be shifters. While my mate was friends with humans at work, this was an occasion for our shifter friends to get to know Brett and for his colleagues to meet our community.

Despite my mate not eating meat, he insisted he could cook a mean steak and his sausages would sizzle to perfection, having been brought up with wolves.

“Right, so you’re manning the barbecue.”

Choccie, as we’d nicknamed our puppy, whined until Brett picked him up and sat him on the sofa. He was too little to jump up, and we spoiled him rotten. He’d already torn to shreds his first and second lot of toys and had dug up the new plants I’d put in the garden. He was more work than a baby, not that I’d brought up any babies.

“Will there be enough food for the vegetarians and vegans?” I studied my list. Our friends were bringing desserts and salads, and I was crossing my fingers they all didn’t bring one and not the other. I had considered polling them but decided against it. That felt more like work and this was supposed to be a fun event. I wanted them to enjoy themselves and not feel pressured about what they were making.

“Yeah, I have a recipe for vegan burgers if anyone wants one.”

My snow leopard rolled his eyes at that, and I told him to stop being disrespectful, thankful neither my mate nor his unicorn could see my beast. I got up and removed the dog carrier I'd bought from a drawer.

Brett raised a brow. But if we locked Choccie in a room, he'd bark and destroy the place, and if we let him out, he'd be underfoot and near the grill. On my back, he'd be with me and not crying, and I could give him doggie snacks if he got irritated.

"He's family."

The weather report said the next day would be fine, and it didn't lie. It dawned sunny with a hint of a breeze. I worked from a list, completing one task and checking it off before going on to the next, while Brett whipped up some of his vegan burgers, dip, and salad dressing made with cashews.

Jonah and Kyle and their kids were the first ones through the door. We'd set up an arts and craft station, and there'd be a scavenger hunt in the garden when all the kids had arrived.

Kyle had met my mate before I did, and I introduced him to Jonah. Dylan and Truman and their girls arrived, and Brett and Truman were in a corner of the garden chatting. Having beasts that didn't exist in the wild but were part of human mythology might create a bond, and I hoped they'd be friends.

When Brett's colleagues arrived, he introduced them to everyone and one tech suggested he'd like to move to Snowford. They shared how good Brett was at his job. "He's so empathetic with the patients, he never hurries them, and listens to their hopes and fears. But he always has our back too. We can really depend on him in an emergency."

I kissed Brett 'cause I was so proud of him. I fixed people's toilets, leaky faucets, and

flooded basements, but he changed people's lives.

Isabella, Andrew, and their passel of kids arrived and the noise level rose. Cecily came and finally Alpha Waylon and Daxon walked in with their family. The Alpha Omega and my mate had something in common; being brought up in a pack which their beast was not part of.

Brett was at the barbecue, swaying his hips as he seared and flipped the meat, lightly toasted the buns, and skewered meat and vegetables for kebabs. My playlist was on blast, and Choccie, having run himself ragged whenever more children arrived, was asleep on my back.

And Isabella, being as organized as she was, had polled everyone coming, making sure there was a balance of desserts and salads.

Some of the kids wanted to see Truman fly, so he arranged a night when we'd congregate outside Oakheart and he'd take his wings and fly. I tensed, thinking they'd want to see my mate's unicorn. While dragons had a reputation for being temperamental—uncalled for, in my opinion—they may not be aware of Brett's beast's reaction to being with people. Had most of them met a unicorn shifter previously? Andrew, the former Alpha, had mentioned meeting one years ago.

"This is delicious." Cecily was munching on her vegan burger with the special spicy sauce Brett had made. "You must give me the recipe."

I hid a smile, thinking back to the night my mate had ruined three courses.

"Should I make a speech or something?" I whispered to Brett.

"Only if you want to." We'd both circulated and chatted to all the guests, and everyone had welcomed Brett to the sizzle, even though technically he wasn't a

member because we hadn't marked one another.

I tapped a glass and Choccie woke up, but I handed him a snack over my shoulder and he quietened.

After thanking everyone for coming, I added, "I apologize to my friends for moaning about not being mated when everyone else was." Our friends laughed, and Jonah nodded.

"But maybe putting my complaints into the universe was what brought Brett and me together." I raised my glass. "To people who complain and get what they deserve." People clapped, I took Brett in my arms, and we clinked glasses.

"I deserve a mention too," Edgar piped up. "If I hadn't hurt myself, you wouldn't have been at the hospital."

"You're a hundred percent correct. Another toast, everyone. To Edgar."

"To Edgar," they echoed.

Isabella and Andrew supervised the scavenger hunt, as it had been her idea, knowing how her kids needed lots of stimulation, while Brett and I sat in loungers and surveyed our friends and colleagues, celebrating our soon-to-be mating.

"Thank you for today. It's so nice to meet your family," Waylon said as he and his mate and kids were leaving. For a moment, I didn't know how to respond. My family? Was he saying my mate was pregnant?

"I didn't..." I gulped, "... didn't... Brett didn't tell me."

Waylon's eyes clouded in confusion, but my mate put a hand under my elbow.

“Choccie is our darling boy, and life would be very different without him.”

Right, the little boy on my back. I nodded, not having the words to recover from the misunderstanding.

Awkward . My beast, the master of understatement.

After everyone had departed and many of them issued invitations to us for dinners, brunch, and weekends away, we surveyed the back garden and the mess.

“You take the food inside, and I’ll get garbage bags and scoop up all the trash.” The dishwasher wasn’t big enough to hold all the dirty dishes, and we’d have to run it multiple times.

“Remind me next time we have a group of people here not to have them here. Maybe a picnic in the park where everyone brings their own food.” Brett was putting away leftovers when I came in from dumping the garbage.

He paused, his hand on the fridge. “Have you forgotten something?”

I craned my neck and checked outside. “Don’t think so.” I yawned. “Can we rinse the rest of the dishes and wash them in the morning?”

“First, it’s only 5 p.m. Were you thinking of going to bed? And second, you have forgotten our furry son who’s in the carrier on your back.”

“Choccie, awww, our little boy.” He’d been petted and kissed and given too much food, most of which wasn’t suitable for puppies. I hoped his tummy wouldn’t react and we’d be up all night, racing him outside. Oh, the joys of being a dad.

“Your community is so welcoming, considering we’re not actually mated yet.”

We were, and it was because we'd all been alone for much of our lives, not having a pack or a den. And my mate had been alone too, though surrounded by shifters, but not shifters who accepted him for who he was.

"It's the first time in my life I feel as though I belong."

"If the sizzle didn't accept you, I would have left. A place where you weren't welcome, would be somewhere I wouldn't want to be."

Choccie scratched at the door, and I let him out. We both stood and stared at our little boy while he did his business and then sniffed around the outdoor table, probably hoping to pick up a bit of sausage.

"It might only be late afternoon, but I say we go to bed here. Don't go home. Maybe we stay in bed for the night or just a nap." I was pooped. Being sociable was exhausting.

"I like the way you think."

But Choccie bounded into the house, a ball in his mouth, a hopeful expression on his little face. We looked at one another and got our coats. Our fur baby needed a walk.

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Chapter 17

Brett

The gentle click of the front door closing felt louder today, somehow. I winced, my senses always heightened after another overnight shift at the hospital. The yuck of antiseptic still clung to me, and my unicorn was not having it. My muscles ached for the comfort of my mate and our bed. Waking him up by being loud was the last thing I wanted to do.

I toed off my shoes and padded across the floor, careful not to step too loudly, or worse, accidentally kick a piece of furniture and cry out in pain. I shed my scrubs and plopped them straight into the washer. I'd turn it on later, the wash cycle far too noisy.

The need for silence battled against my need to shower. Had I still been single, I'd probably have climbed into bed and dealt with having to wash all the bedding and myself when I woke up. But I wasn't, and my mate deserved better.

I turned the shower knob, waiting for it to run hot before stepping into the spray. The steam embraced me, the water cascading over my skin, as I washed away any remnants of work

My beast yearned for Anders. We hadn't been together long, but he had become my entire world. I couldn't imagine coming home to anyone else. The thought of slipping into bed, curling up beside him, and feeling his steady breath against my neck had me picking up speed.

I lathered soap on my cloth and rubbed the soft soapy fabric all over my skin. A quiet click and a faint gust of cool air announced my mate's presence before his arms encircled my waist.

"Anders." Now I was home.

"Morning," he murmured, his voice husky with sleep, breath warm against the nape of my neck.

"Thought you'd be asleep," I replied, leaning back into his solid frame.

"Missed you too much," he confessed, his lips tracing the curve of my shoulder.

We moved in harmony beneath the cascade of water, hands gliding over wet and slightly soapy skin. I reached for the soap, working up a lather in my palms before smoothing it over his chest. I didn't want a washcloth between us. My fingers traced the lines of his muscles, down the valley between them. There was something so sexy about the way his breath hitched when I circled his nipples.

Anders reciprocated, his touch tender yet assured. He explored every inch of me, as if committing each contour to memory. When his soapy hands wrapped around my erection, I stifled a moan, the sensation intimate but not pushing toward release. I loved that he could read me, anticipate my needs like this.

"Perfect," he whispered against my ear.

I leaned back, wanting to take in his form. Our eyes locked, and his lips curled into a mischievous smile. We were only just beginning.

As the shower washed away the suds, we rinsed each other's bodies, Anders' gaze never leaving mine. It was an act so ordinary yet laden with unspoken promises that

left my chest tight with love for this alpha, my mate.

We stepped out onto the bath mat, and Anders reached for a towel and patted my skin dry. When I was no longer dripping, Anders knelt before me, his breath ghosting over my still-hard length.

“Let me take care of you,” he said, and there was no command in his tone—only devotion.

His mouth enveloped me then, heat and wetness contrasting with the cool air of the room. I threaded my fingers through his damp hair, anchoring myself as he took me in, slow and unhurried. His tongue swirled, teasing, his eyes peering up at me through thick lashes. A deep groan rumbled in my throat, but I resisted the urge to thrust deeper, to seek release.

“Stop,” I managed to gasp, more plea than demand. “Not yet.”

Anders complied immediately, releasing me with a soft pop, a smirk playing on his lips. “As you wish.”

“Bed,” I breathed, the single word heavy with need and affection. “I need more... everything.”

“Your wish is my command,” he answered, his voice laced with laughter and something richer, something that said without words: I am yours, as you are mine.

He quickly toweled off. I felt weightless as Anders scooped me up into his arms with such strength and assurance.

“Bed,” I whispered again, my body squirming against his.

We reached the bed, and he set me down gently upon the soft sheets, his touch lingering as he joined me, his body a welcome weight atop mine.

Our lips met, a kiss that spoke of all the unsaid words between us, the life we'd built together. It was tender and familiar, yet every time felt like discovering something new, something thrilling. His hands roamed over my body, mapping the contours as though committing each detail to memory.

"Please," I murmured against his mouth, my breath hitching as one hand slipped lower, teasing over my sensitive skin. The flutter of anticipation twisted inside me, a sweet ache that only Anders could soothe.

His fingers traced circles around my slick entrance. I bucked my hips toward him, silently begging for more.

"Is this what you want?" Anders asked, his voice husky with his own need.

"More," I gasped, unable to form more coherent thought. "You."

Anders obliged, slipping a finger inside me, and my body clenched around the welcomed intrusion, and he slowly began to pump in and out of me, a preview of what was to come. A second finger joined the first, stretching me, preparing me for his girth. Our mouths never parted, the sounds of our kisses mingling with my moans.

"Please, Anders," I pleaded, feeling the build-up of something intense and overwhelming. "I need you inside of me."

Anders hovered over me, and his eyes locked onto mine with an intensity that sent my heart racing and my unicorn so close to the surface I could scent him.

"Are you sure?" he whispered, the words barely audible above the sound of our

synchronized breathing. He recognized what was happening before I did. My beast was finally ready to mark our mate. About time.

“More than anything,” I replied, my voice steady despite the whirlwind of emotions churning inside me.

Anders nodded, his gaze never leaving mine as he aligned himself with my slick entrance. The moment he entered me, a sigh escaped my lips, a feeling of completeness filling my being.

We moved together, like we had done many times before, yet it felt new, better, important.

“I’m so lucky to have you, omega mine,” Anders murmured, each word punctuated by a gentle push that sent waves of pleasure coursing through me.

“No. I’m the lucky one, alpha mine,” I responded, my arms wrapping around his neck, drawing him closer.

Our rhythm sped up, our bodies knowing, anticipating each other’s needs. As my orgasm barreled toward me, my unicorn nature rose to the surface, pushing to take over. He was ready.

As we approached completion together, I gazed into Anders’ eyes, seeing my future, our future, reflected back at me. And then, as we came, my mouth found his shoulder, teeth grazing the skin until they found purchase. It wasn’t pain—it was a claim, a brand of belonging. A surge of energy passed between us as Anders reciprocated, his own teeth marking me even as his knot swelled, locking us together in the most intimate of connections.

We lay there, still joined, my head resting on his chest, listening to the steady beat of

his heart. His fingers stroked my hair gently, a soothing rhythm that matched our breaths. I had never felt so complete, so utterly content. We were mates in every sense of the word, and as I drifted on the edge of sleep, I couldn't help but feel that this was exactly where I was meant to be—in Anders' arms, connected by more than just the physical—connected by love, friendship, and some unicorn magic.

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Chapter 18

Anders

“This is exciting.” Brett closed the picnic basket and picked it up, while I grabbed a second basket and cushions.

Choccie wagged his tail.

“I’m sorry to disappoint you, little man, but you’re going to Jonah and Kyle’s for the evening.”

Much as we adored our four-legged boy, if he came with us, he’d have to be on a lead, and he’d want all the food and for us to play with him. Better if he was with Jonah’s kids who would give him lots of attention.

“Just don’t pee or spit up or worse, poop in the house or Jonah might faint.” Though since having kids, Jonah wasn’t quite as much of a neat freak—sorta.

Brett took Choccie out before we got in the car and dropped him off. He didn’t give us a backward glance as he raced inside with the kids, his tail was wagging.

“I thought he might at least spill a tear.” I leaned on the steering wheel, peering at the front door Jonah had closed.

“Yeah, there wasn’t even a whimper.”

We shared a glance. “What’s wrong with us? Choccie’s happy, and we wanted him to be sad?” I rested my head on the steering wheel and laughed, my shoulders heaving.

“Let’s go before he hears us and starts howling.”

I left the car near the community center, and we wandered into the park, holding hands.

“Do you think we have enough stuff?” Brett had the blanket tucked under his arm and lifted the huge picnic basket with one hand. “Feels as though we’re going on an expedition.”

“We could pitch a tent and live here for a few weeks until the food runs out.”

“But we’d have to go home for showers ‘cause ewww at being stinky and sweaty.”

That I agreed with one hundred percent.

Pushing through the thick vegetation near the waterfall, we chose a spot where we wouldn’t get sprayed by water. Though Waylon and Daxon had shifted here before they mated, it wasn’t suitable for a unicorn who needed more space to gallop. Besides, if a snow leopard whizzed past a human, they’d probably scream and alert animal control. But if they spied a unicorn, that might create an international incident.

But tonight we weren’t shifting; we were just us, Anders and Brett, spending time together as mates.

With the blanket on the grass, the cushions scattered and two camping lamps for light, we opened the baskets. We’d each made or bought food that we thought the other would enjoy. But before I could bring out anything, Brett put a hand on my arm.

“Let’s do one at a time. You first.”

I pulled out the vegan sausage rolls.

“For me?”

I nodded. “Made with mushrooms and a lot of spices.”

“Yum. Can’t wait to try one.” He popped one in his mouth. “I think I just did.” His eyes lit up as he chewed. “I need the recipe.”

“Sorry, I bought them from the vegan deli.” I pointed to his basket. “Your turn.”

Brett bought out a spinach quiche, and I took a bite of one slice. Buttery pastry, creamy feta, and sweet spinach. Perfect for outdoor eating.

We tried to outdo one another as we brought out the salads, pastas, sandwiches, dips, and fruit by yelling, “Ta-da!”

Brett lay on his side, a hand propping up his chin, and popped a grape in his mouth. “This is the life. I never imagined growing up I’d be so... at peace.”

My heart swelled with happiness. My mate was in a good place, and his beast was seemingly adjusted to this new life. While he and my snow leopard might not be besties, they rubbed along together, each respecting the other’s choices.

“Look!” Brett sat up and pointed upward. “A falling star.”

I squinted. Not wanting to dampen his enthusiasm, I didn’t point out it was a tiny rock shooting through the atmosphere.

“Make a wish,” I told him.

Brett reached for my hand. “Nope. I don’t need any more luck. I have you, the love of my life, and if finding you was part luck, part serendipity, I’m not tempting fate by asking for more than my fair share.”

Blinking away tears, I leaned over the food, and we kissed. That was the sweetest thing. He was right. We had a good life, a great one even.

“I love you,” I mumbled against his lips and licked off some beetroot dip.

“Awww. That’s my first ‘I love you.’”

I tilted my head. “Wasn’t it mine? I said it.” I was hoping he was going to say it back.

“But I’m the receiver so it’s my first.” He sniggered.

“Okay if you say so.” I made a face.

“But I love you too.” We kissed again. “We’ll always remember our first I love you.” He held up his drink to the sky. “Enjoy your journey.”

“Enjoy the journey.” I said that as much to myself as to the speck of sand streaming across the night sky.

“I miss Choccie.” Brett got his phone out.

“Please tell me you’re not calling him.” Our dog kinda went bonkers when he heard our voices, and he loved video conferencing. He was also a big soccer fan and he’d spend hours watching a match on the TV.

“No, I was hoping Jonah had sent an update.” He scrolled through his messages. “What if he’s pining for us?”

“He and the kids are probably running riot, and when he gets tired, I told Jonah to turn on the TV. He’s fine.”

My phone dinged, and we looked at one another. Gods, had the universe been listening in to our conversation and decided to mess with us? I clicked the image from Kyle. It was Choccie lying on his back, mouth open and eyes closed. The caption read, He’s exhausted .

Brett took my phone and enlarged the image. Knowing him, he was checking for any injuries.

“He’s fine,” I repeated and held my hand out for the phone. “Turning it off.” Brett’s brows shot up. “Okay, it’s on silent.” The vibrating would alert us to any messages or calls.

My mate studied the moon. “Human legends associate unicorns with the moon.”

“Is there any truth to that?” Perhaps the moon played a part in getting us together.

Brett shrugged. “My beast thinks the full moon rebuilds his strength, and he likes to bathe beneath its beams.”

I had to see that. Even my snow leopard took note and commented that the unicorn’s body would shimmer under the moonlight.

Magical , I told him.

“But humans think the crescent moon is shaped like my beast’s horn.” He took

another chocolate muffin and stuffed it in his mouth, crumbs tumbling over his shirt.

I preferred Brett's beast's version.

"Wanna be naughty?" My mate stood up and pulled his tee over his head.

"Here? Now? What if someone comes by?" This park was popular with families and kids.

"Not sex, silly. A swim under the waterfall. Keep your underwear on. This is not X-rated."

Brett dived into the water, and I followed after tossing off my clothes. Gods, it was so cold. Goosebumps sprawled over my skin as the cold water sent shockwaves through my body.

I surfaced and yelled, "It's freezing."

"Yes. That's the point, to wake us up and feel something!"

I feel plenty, and I didn't need a bath in cold water. My beast was less than impressed.

"We're alive, Anders, and it's so good." Brett smacked his forearms onto the water.

I wasn't as enthusiastic as my mate, but I copied him and tilted my head back, scrutinizing the moon and imagining a unicorn dancing under the moonlight.

Brett climbed out and outstretched his hand.

"I thought we were celebrating life," I said as he pulled me out.

“We are, we did. You think I want to stay in that cold water until my bits shrivel and my fingers are pruneey?”

“We didn’t bring towels.” I jumped from one foot to another, trying to keep warm.

“Good thing we have the blanket.” We put the leftovers in the baskets and wrapped the blanket around us as we walked awkwardly to the car.

“Who’s going in to collect Choccie?” I pulled up outside Jonah and Kyle’s. We were both wet and hadn’t gotten dressed.

But someone must have seen the car. The front door opened and our puppy barreled out, barking at the gate. Brett raced out, clad in the blanket and his briefs.

“No time to talk, Jonah. Thanks.”

“Must have been some date night,” our friend commented.

“The best,” I agreed. “You’re staying at my place tonight, right?” It was a silly question because Brett spent most nights at my house.

Choccie lay on the bathroom floor as we showered and got into our PJs, and she joined us in bed, after having a mouthful of muffin.

“Where are we going for our next date night?” I asked as the dog wormed her way under the covers.

“Let’s make it a full moon,” Brett suggested.

I shivered, wondering if the moon did possess powers, meant only for a unicorn.

Chapter 19

Brett

To say I was exhausted was an understatement. I still had two hours left in my shift, and I was dragging. I came to work already tired and that was after sleeping ten hours straight. No matter how much I slept lately, I couldn't get enough.

It was a slow night, which didn't help. I learned early on that the fewer patients we had, the slower time ticked by. On nights when we were overworked and filled to the brim, it was almost as if we started our shift only to be done. That was very much not tonight.

I went to grab a cup of coffee from the nurses' station, hoping it would help me wake up. I'd poured three already today, but kept forgetting about them until they were chilled and yuck. Three steps before I reached it, my stomach started to lurch, and I froze, hoping it would settle, but realizing very quickly that wasn't going to happen. I bolted for the bathroom, barely reaching the toilet in time to empty my entire stomach.

Great.

I'd caught whatever was going around the ER, which had apparently been full of people needing to be rehydrated thanks to some sort of GI bug going around. It wasn't as serious as some viruses and most of the people were sent home with some medication, and so far, none had ended up on my unit. Those poor doctors and nurses down there tonight. If they avoided catching it, it would be a miracle.

Grabbing some paper towels, I cleaned myself up, not loving the face that was looking back at me in the mirror. My eyes were sunken in and my skin wasn't quite the right color. Not awful, but anyone looking would know that I was unwell.

Feeling oddly better just from being sick and a quick wash, I went back out to see who was next for medication. I nearly knocked over the doctor on the floor for the night, Dr. Lawson. He was a nice older doctor and didn't deserve to be pushed over by my sorry butt.

"You don't look good," he said.

"Nah, I'm okay. I just think I caught what's going around the ER." Which was probably not the best thing to say.

He flinched. He'd been there the night before and knew how bad it was. Rumor had it, today was worse.

"Well, let's get you checked out, then, because you might need to leave." Most shifts I wouldn't be able to leave without a replacement, but given how late into the shift it was and how slow we were, it would be easy enough to get coverage from the floor. It was far better than spreading the stomach bug around.

"Okay."

He led me back to the nurses' station.

"You don't have a temperature," he said after zapping my forehead with the thermometer.

"No, I didn't think I did." He didn't know I was a unicorn or he wouldn't have been surprised by that. Shifters could get sick, sure. But as a rule, we rarely did.

“Everybody who has this bug runs a high one.” He set the thermometer down.

“Maybe I just don’t run a fever?” I wasn’t exactly going to tell him I was a unicorn, but if I could get him to take the fever out of the equation, that would be great.

“Which end is it coming out?” It was one thing to go to the doctor and have these kinds of questions, but when it was a colleague—doctor or not—it was a little awkward.

“I threw up once, that’s all.”

He gave me some serious side-eye.

“And I’m tired, just so, so tired.”

“Oh.” He turned around and grabbed a pee cup from the ledge. “Do me a favor, go fill this up.”

“I don’t do drugs.” Which I thought was a given.

“It’s not for that, it’s for something else.” He could ask me what end I was sick at, but telling me why he wanted me to pee in a cup was his frustration?

“Protein?”

“No, more like a little parasite.” On my list of things he might be testing me for, that one didn’t even make the top 100.

“A what?” Parasites were gross.

“Don’t worry, it’ll be out of your system in—I don’t know, about nine months.” He

looked straight to my belly.

“I see.” Not really, but I snatched the cup anyway, and then he handed me a test strip, one I recognized. “Wait, you think I’m pregnant?” Which made sense based on the hints he’d just given, and somehow, I still missed it.

“You’re exhausted. You threw up for no reason. You’re moving in with a hot alpha. Yeah, kind of checks out.”

“Then I’m mad at you.” I was teasing. I wasn’t mad, I was more trying to buy a few seconds to process this.

“Why? I’m a ray of sunshine.” And truly, he was.

“Because you think I’m pregnant, and you called my baby a parasite.” I rested my hands on my middle, the truth of the word “baby” resonating so clearly. I was pregnant, suddenly I was sure of it.

“Fair.” He eyed the cup. “Now into the bathroom you go.”

I shook my head.

“Not now. I want to wait. I need to take the test with Anders.” It wouldn’t feel right doing it without him. Coming home to tell him I was pregnant and the first person who knew wasn’t him—yeah, I didn’t want to be that guy.

“Okay.” He shrugged. “It’s up to you, but congratulations.”

“We don’t even know if it’s positive.” Although I did. I might not have figured it out on my own, but now that I did, I felt it in my bones.

“Correction, you don’t even know if it’s positive.”

Before I could sass back, he was being called by the pharmacy, something about not having enough of a med he ordered. Good times.

I spent the next hour-ish of my shift planning out how I was going to tell Anders. First, I needed a rapid test from the pharmacy, so I’d be a little late getting home—not by much but enough that Anders would know. Would I pick up flowers to go with it? Or chocolate? Or maybe a little stuffed animal for a new one or something? And, yeah, I was getting ahead of myself, but also, this was important. Possibly the most important thing I’d ever done.

When it was finally time for me to leave, sitting in my locker with the keys was a small bag with my name on it. When I opened it up, inside was a pee cup with a couple of test strips. I didn’t need to go to the store after all.

I owed him all the thanks.

Once home, I dumped my clothes in the washer and headed to the shower, putting the little cup on the back of the toilet, waiting for me.

We were gonna do this.

We were gonna be dads.

Probably.

Maybe.

Anders needed to wake up soon, the suspense was killing me. I could wake him up, sure, but I didn’t want to, not when he could have an hour’s more sleep.

When I came out of the shower, the smell of his coffee was already filling the air, making me wish I had woken him up and asked him not to make the coffee. As much as I wanted him to have his sleep, I very much did not want that scent attacking my senses. At least not today.

My mate came in and wrapped his arms around me.

“You’re a sight for sore eyes.” He kissed my cheek and walked around me. “I’ll be right back,” and into the bathroom he went.

I’d forgotten that I left the cup on the back of the toilet until he called me.

“Yeah?” I poked my head in the door.

“Is there something you need to tell me?” He pointed to the cup. Oops.

“That’s a pregnancy test.” Which I wasn’t sure he’d pick up on without my hint because they didn’t look like the kind you bought in the store.

“I was guessing. But why is it here?” He was hesitant, and it gave me a slight pause.

“The doctor on duty thought maybe I might be pregnant.”

“And what does my sexy mate think?” He was already getting excited. Please don’t let me disappoint him by failing the pee test.

“That I might be pregnant?”

He grabbed the cup and placed it in my hand. “Only one way to find out.”

I took the test, and we waited and waited. Unlike those sticks, it didn’t take long, and

we watched as one line, then two, appeared.

“I’m pregnant. We’re gonna have a baby.” I squealed, wrapping my arms around him, the towel falling to the floor. “We’re gonna be dads.”

He kissed my mating mark. “We’re gonna be dads.”

Chapter 20

Anders

“Wait, is that all you’ve got?”

Even though Brett had been spending most nights and weekends at my place when he wasn’t working, today was finally move-in day. I’d borrowed the community center truck and had parked in his driveway nice and early so we could get this done by sundown.

He had a suitcase, a backpack, a box of condiments and dry goods, and a cooler.

“Yeah. It’s more than I arrived with.” He side-eyed the vehicle. “Did you expect me to fill that with all my worldly belongings?”

I shrugged. Stuff didn’t matter, I understood that. Things were meaningless, and what counted was love, safety, and community, and my mate had all of those now that he’d begun this new life.

But I liked mementos; a photo here, a shirt I’d worn the day I formed my company, the parking ticket I got when I double-parked when I arrived in Oakville, not knowing anyone, and a pic of us both with our pregnancy test.

“Let’s go home.” Unpacking would be quick.

Brett already had a drawer and hanging space in my closet for the nights he stayed

with me, which was most of the time. He'd had space in the bathroom for his toothbrush and razor, but I hadn't let him see the renovated main bedroom and bathroom.

In the last few weeks, we'd used the guest bathroom and second bedroom, and I kept the doors to the renovated spaces locked, wanting it to be a surprise. When I showed them to Brett after completing the finishing touches, I needed them to be perfect.

But now it was official and my house would be our home, I was a little nervous.

Why? My beast failed to understand why Brett moving in should be the happiest day of my life.

Make that second happiest . Finding out we were going to be dads was the best day ever. The guest room will have to be redecorated, as it'll be the nursery .

This bedroom was currently a dumping ground for all items that didn't have a home. We could make the decisions regarding the nursery as mates.

Great. More noise. More dust . My snow leopard grumbled.

No .

“What's going on in that head of yours?” Brett slammed the truck door and buckled up.

“Thinking of how much fun we'll have decorating the nursery?”

He shuddered. “Dust and noise.”

“That's what my beast said, but it'll be painting, maybe wallpapering, curtains, light

fixtures, maybe a sofa, crib, and other baby paraphernalia.” I redid the carpet this year, so that didn’t need to be changed. “There’ll be very little dust or noise.”

My mate squeezed my hand. “Great. I look forward to swatches of fabric, paint samples, and shopping for our little one.”

Hard to believe a short time ago I’d been complaining to Jonah about my life and the lack of love. Now I had a mate and a baby. My heart was full.

Brett told me he’d settle in while I returned the truck, but I wanted to see his reaction when he took in the renovations.

“Ta-da!” I opened the door to the master bedroom. I was hit with more self-doubt because the choices were all mine and this space was a shared one. A panic attack loomed, but I took a couple of deep breaths.

I longed to say, “What do you think?” But that would pressure him into saying something positive about the changes.

I tried to see it from his eyes. Neutral walls and bedding with pops of color on the cushions, a rug, and the curtains. The atmosphere was now soothing instead of being a chaotic shamble of colors and patterns.

Brett made a running leap toward the new bed and bounced onto the mattress, and Choccie followed him.

“We approve, don’t we, little man.”

I cut off, “Be careful. Think of the baby.” He was a grown man.

“I love it and look forward to waking up here every morning.”

“There’s more.” I stood in front of the bathroom door.

Brett picked up our puppy, whispering, “There’s more!” Choccie barked, and my mate cheered.

I let my mate open the door into the newly renovated bathroom while I waited in the bedroom. Instead of a shower over the bath, we had a separate shower enclosure and tub, twin sinks, and new lighting.

His slack-jawed expression could have indicated horror, excitement, or something in between.

“Did you do this? Is this ours?”

“I had help, but yes, welcome to our new spa.” It wasn’t a spa, but there was a hint of luxury that made it special, where we could sit in the tub after a long day, warm water soothing our bodies.

My mate flung his arms around me, peppering my face with kisses. “I never imagined I’d live in such luxury. Thank you.”

He ripped off his clothes and turned on the water over the bath. “No. Don’t go anywhere.”

I had no plans to leave, and he took off, his cock bobbing, and came back with the cooler he brought from his place. He removed the lid and pulled out chocolate, grapes, and strawberries.

“Bubbles?” He didn’t wait for me to reply and tossed bubble bath solution into the tub. “Oops.” The bubbles sparkled and peaked. “Too much? Nah, you can never have too many bubbles.”

He climbed in and popped a grape in his mouth. Choccie whined, and I dragged his bed and toys in, along with a packet of snacks. He narrowed his big chocolatey eyes at me but took a snack and lay down with his toys.

Ridding myself of my clothes, I climbed in with my mate. I'd chosen a big enough tub that we could stretch our legs.

"Could we live in here?" Brett fed me a strawberry, followed by a piece of chocolate. Yum. The combination had me closing my eyes and leaning back. This was the life. Shame we had to work to pay for it.

Choccie put his paws on the side of the bath, and I bopped his nose with bubbles. He sneezed and returned to his bed.

"Should we start planning the nursery?" Brett asked.

"We could." I didn't open my eyes. I was done with renovating, but making the other bedroom into a nursery would be a breeze compared to what I'd done in here.

My mate chuckled and stroked my leg with his foot. "You don't sound terribly enthusiastic."

"The hot water is putting me to sleep. But I'll summon my energy when you're ready to make plans."

We had plenty of time before the baby arrived.

"No problem." Even with my eyes closed, the crunching from the other end of the bath along with a whiff of cocoa suggested he was biting into chocolate. But moments later the water heaved from side to side and my mate got out.

When my eyes fluttered open, he was staring at me from beside the tub, wearing the new robe I'd bought, one that matched my own.

"Are you coming?"

"If you put your mouth on my dick, yes, or if I insert my cock in your hole, yes. I'll come if you give me a hand job."

"No, let's look at paint samples for the nursery."

My face must have registered something other than enthusiasm, because his crestfallen expression stabbed at my heart.

"Absolutely. I'm ready."

"Liar."

I was half out of the bath, but Brett pushed me back in. "We can use a phone. Just don't drop it." He handed me a piece of chocolate. "Before perusing paint chips, we need caffeine and sugar."

"Shame we don't have a coffee machine in here." But the caffeine in the chocolate would have to suffice.

"A soft gray would be nice." My mate gave me his device, and I scrolled through fifty shades of gray paint.

"Excellent choice. Paint done."

"Anders! No. Which one?"

I had a solution, but my mate might not like it. I'd been through this with the recent renovations, but I'd only looked at five paint samples.

"How about we use the same color as the one in the main bedroom?"

Brett got out of the tub again and stuck his head into the bedroom. "Oh, I like it. Good choice."

Go me!

"Now let's look at wallpaper."

There wouldn't be an easy solution with the wallpaper as there was with the paint because I didn't use any in our bedroom. But I had a suggestion that would keep Brett occupied.

"Look at Jonah's social media and scroll back a few years to when his kids were little. Do the same for Dylan. And Isabella. They all had wallpaper in their nurseries."

"I think the way you think."

The warm water lulled me close to sleep until my mate shook me, saying he'd found three wallpapers he liked; one from each of our friends. We decided on the bunny one Isabella had used.

"We're doing so well. And now to cribs."

"How about we look at cribs in person." From listening to my friends' conversations, they'd all visited the stores so they could examine the cribs.

"Excellent idea. You're amazing. Let's go."

I grunted as I left the warm bath. Sometimes I wished I wasn't as amazing as I was. A less amazing person could have stayed in the bath!

Chapter 21

Brett

Was I the size of our house?

Yes. Yes, I was.

Did I mind?

Not even a little bit. That was until today, when I put my shirt on and discovered that it was a crop top—and not a sexy crop top either. No, it was just short enough that it looked like I was wearing someone else's shirt, with the tiniest bit of my underbelly showing. I looked absolutely ridiculous.

It was time to suck it up and buy some paternity clothes. I wasn't even sure why I'd been so stubborn about it. Maybe because I was used to trying to be cautious with my money. Things were different when you were living alone. If anything happened, I had to be the one to cover the repairs. Being frugal made sense.

Or maybe it had nothing to do with that and everything to do with giving up an afternoon to go to the mall. I was hardly a fan of the place, but they had the shop we needed, the other one nearby-ish closed due to a leak.

But whatever the reason, I was ready.

I looked in the closet, counted how many things I had that might fit, and realized it

was just better to buy new everything.

After downloading the store's app, I looked for Anders to discover he was in the bathroom brushing his teeth.

I waited until he was done and asked him, "Want to go to the mall?"

"Never," he replied, which was a pretty accurate reflection of how I felt about the place as a rule. Except the mall was the only place I knew of that had paternity clothes close by, and it didn't seem like the kind of thing you could buy without trying on.

"Fair enough." I kissed his minty-fresh mouth. "I'm gonna go. I'll see you later." I gave a half wave. If I hurried, I might be able to salvage half the day.

"Wait," he said, and I turned to face him. "I never want to go to the mall, but I always want to spend time with you. What are we getting?"

Talk about misreading my mate. I had to shake myself. "You just saw my belly, and you're asking me what I'm getting?"

He picked me up, hugged me tight, and twirled me around in a few full circles. "Yes, I've been wanting to do this. You are going to be the hottest omega in this county." More than once, he had offered to take me to buy paternity clothes and I'd brushed him off. I was so glad it was still on the table.

I chuckled, remembering how in the beginning of my pregnancy, he offered to take me and I didn't even have a belly yet. He was quite the doting father-to-be.

The mall wasn't super close, which meant this was most likely going to be a day trip.

“What about the pup?” I asked, noticing him sleeping in the corner on a little bed that looked more like a stuffed animal.

“Don’t worry. He’ll probably just sleep there all day.”

“You think so?” Because I was far from sure. “We could bring him to the mall?”

“How about instead of the vet, we use the doggie daycare and we can drop them off on the way.”

Never in a million years did I think I was going to be the kind of pet owner that had a doggie daycare on my speed dial. But here I was. It sounded ridiculous, and maybe it was for a lot of dog owners, but dogs liked to play.

The mall itself wasn’t very busy. In fact, if you drove by, you might think that the only people there were the ones at the restaurant, and even that area of the parking lot wasn’t very full.

We parked at the entrance we thought was close to the paternity store, but it ended up being on the absolute opposite side. They really needed better signs.

Anders offered to drive the car around so I didn’t have to waddle that distance—because, yes, I was on waddle time—but I declined, saying that the walking was good for me. Which it was, but what was better for me was holding my mate’s hand and feeling his warmth against mine as I did so.

The paternity store had a big “Last Chance” sign up. When we inquired at the front desk, they said that they were no longer going to have this store and would just stick with their flagship which was not super far. Still, they slashed prices, and I loved that.

I picked out so many clothes, unsure which, if any, I was going to try on. I only had

so much energy to get undressed and redressed in a tiny dressing room. It wasn't actually tiny, but with my belly it felt that way.

Every time I found something that looked good, my mate tried to get me to buy it in every color. There were a couple of things I did just that, but for the most part, I just bought singles. It wasn't like I was going to have a lot of time to enjoy these items. Pregnancy only lasted so long.

Shopping with my mate was an adventure. He was adorable, the way he seemed more excited than I was, immediately pulling shirts off the racks and holding them up to me with a grin. There were other alphas in the store with their mates who were far less into the experience, that was for sure. More than one looked like they would rather be anywhere but here.

"This one," he said, showing me a soft, heather-gray shirt that looked like it might actually cover my entire belly. "And this one too," he added, grabbing another in navy.

"Hold on," I laughed. "Let me try them on first."

I tried on the gray shirt first. He was right, it looked great. And best of all, it was soft and fit perfectly, snug enough not to look like I was wearing someone else's clothes, but also loose enough that none of it felt tight. Anders was waiting outside, and when I stepped out to show him, his face lit up.

"You look amazing," he said, taking my hand and pulling me into a little twirl. "But let's see how the other colors look."

We went through more shirts, Anders insisting on at least three different colors for each style I liked. I tried on a deep green, a soft lavender, and even a fun striped one that I wasn't sure about at first but ended up loving once it was on. Each time I

emerged from the changing room, Anders' face would leave no room for me to doubt that he thought I was the sexiest omega in the place.

Next were the pants. I hadn't realized how uncomfortable my regular jeans had become until I slid into a pair of paternity jeans. The waistband was a revelation—soft, stretchy, and designed to fit comfortably over my belly. Trying them on sucked, so it was good the first pair fit. They were officially going to become my pregnancy uniform. I was buying five of them... done.

"These are perfect," I said, doing a little happy dance that made one of the grumpy alphas break out into a little smile.

After discovering how much better I felt with new pants, I decided to try the new "comfort fit" boxer briefs. They were a gift from the gods. I suspected I was going to be wearing them long after the baby was born. Who knew clothing could be this comfortable?

By the time we were done, we were carrying three large shopping bags filled with shirts, pants, pajamas, and boxer briefs. Was it a bit overkill? Maybe, but it was on clearance. Leaving them there was like losing money. Omega math.

As we walked back through the mall, Anders insisted on carrying all the bags, even though I offered to help. "You've done enough work today," he said with a wink, and I couldn't argue with that. Changing with my belly this round wasn't for the meek.

We made our way to the food court, which was as empty as the majority of the mall seemed to be. I wouldn't be surprised if it wasn't just the paternity store that went out of business.

The smell of freshly baked pretzels hit us as soon as we got close, and I couldn't resist. We walked up to the pretzel stand, and I ordered two hot pretzels, one for each

of us, with a side of cheese dip. I'd be the first to admit that pretzels were merely a vessel for cheese sauce. A delicious vessel, but without the cheese sauce the pretzel was of no interest to me.

We found a quiet table in the corner, and I watched as Anders bit into his pretzel. He was doing it wrong. I tore a hunk off of mine and dipped it in the cheese. The pretzels were warm and soft, the perfect comfort food after a long day of shopping.

"I take it back."

I looked up at my mate, confused by his words.

"About?"

"I do like going to the mall... as long as it's with you." He reached up and rubbed his thumb along the corner of my mouth. "Cheese."

"Mine." I licked it from his finger, and he laughed and laughed.

It was a good day. A very good day.

Chapter 22

Anders

“I’m bored.” Brett licked his fingers as he lay on the bed, a box of chocolate ginger balanced on his big belly.

I handed him the tablet. “Lots of new shows on the streaming service.”

“Mmmm, but as much as I love the bedroom, I want to get outside.”

My mate was at the waddling stage—his words, not mine—so there’d be no hiking, he wouldn’t shift again until after the baby was born, and we’d checked off everything off his baby to-do list.

“I have an idea, so tell me if you’d be up for it.”

My mate popped another chocolate in his mouth and tossed one to me. We’d discovered a shared passion for ginger coated in chocolate, and the vegan place where Anders got a lot of his specialty items ordered some for him. Some being a huge carton containing twenty boxes.

“Try me.”

I gave him the short version, and he was all in. I bundled Choccie into the car, making sure we had snacks and water for him and human snacks for Brett.

“First stop, the hospital.”

Brett put a hand on my arm. “Shouldn’t it be the restaurant where you were talking to Jonah before you scented me?”

I agreed and started the car.

Ten minutes later we were on the restaurant terrace with Choccie in his carry case.

“This is the table.” I took out my phone and snapped a pic as Darcy approached.

“We’re not eating, just commemorating our meeting and courtship, and I’m making a digital album for the baby.”

“Sounds fascinating,” Darcy deadpanned. “Bet your little one will be super excited looking at a pic of a table and chair.”

I glared at her, and she tapped my elbow. “Just joshing you, Anders. It’s sweet you are recreating it.” She placed the menus on the table.

“I could eat.” Brett sank into a chair and ordered an avocado-and-tomato baguette. “It’s just a little break in the tour, love.”

I ordered noodles, and Brett stole some, winding them around his fork and popping them in his mouth.

“Hey, “ I protested. “Get your own.”

“I think I will.” And he called Darcy over.

“Looking back, I felt so alone not being mated, and yet my friends invited me

everywhere. I was never left out.”

“And now they’re our friends.” He patted my hand. “My situation was bleak, but I knew there was something better waiting for me.”

“And that would be me!”

He laughed. “I was talking about my job, babe, but yes, my new position led me to you.” He sucked in a noodle. Gods, my mate was hot, his big beautiful belly under the paternity tee. If we weren’t in public, I’d put my hand under the table and stroke his cock. Maybe crawl under and give him a blow job.

“Anders, you have your sexy face on,” Brett hissed.

“Can’t help it. It’s your fault.”

Pleased we’d taken a break, we enjoyed the rest of our lunch and walked over to the community center, and I took another pic.

“Poor Edgar’s accident is what led me to you.”

On we went to the hospital, but not wanting to get thrown out and also endanger my mate’s job, we took a photo outside the emergency room and then in the parking lot where I’d also scented my mate.

“Where to now? I’m peckish and I hope it’s the grocery store.” Brett rubbed his belly and munched on crackers we’d brought with us.

“Soon.” I checked my list. “Garbage bins.” Off we zoomed to our street. As it was Sunday, people were mowing their lawns and kids were kicking balls in the front yards. I got odd looks as I waved and tried to take a photo of the wheelie bins without

anyone catching on.

“People are staring,” Brett observed, his cheeks bulging with crackers.

“Okay. The hardware store.”

“Do they sell food?” My mate peered into the snack bag and pulled out a lonesome chip.

“There’s a café near the plant section.” Perhaps I should rename this an Oakheart food tour instead of retracing my steps on the journey to meet my mate.

I needed some rechargeable batteries, so I had a reason to go there. Brett snapped a pic of me in front of the store, and inside, he went one way to get food while I held the dog in her carrier and picked up my batteries before joining him.

Damn, I was reconnecting with my journey, forgetting about Brett’s. I rubbed one eye with the heel of my hand. What an asshat I was.

“Love, I’m so sorry for excluding you.”

My mate was slurping a fresh lemon tea and was attacking a plate of nachos.

“Huh?”

I explained and said we could crisscross town, taking pics of where he’d scented me.

“Nah, I’m good.” He picked up a corn chip, laden with guacamole and melted cheese.

“This is delicious.” He pushed the plate toward me.

“Yum.” We fed one another corn chips and gooey cheese while offering Choccie his

snacks.

“Where to next and what food do they serve?”

“The post office, and they’re closed today, but after a quick photo, it’s on to the grocery store.”

“Yippee!” Brett leaned over and kissed me. His eyes lit up. “Give me your hand.”

He placed my palm on the bump. The baby kicked and kicked again. “Maybe our little one enjoys nachos.” Choccie whined, and I picked up his carrier and Brett swiveled. Our little boy sniffed my mate’s bump.

“You’re such a cute family.” Of course Marge was working today. “And I’m aware of how much Anders loves taking photos.”

Covering my face with my hands, I lay my head on the table as Marge giggled and said my secret was safe with her.

“What was that about?”

My cheeks burned, and I took some wet wipes from Brett’s snack bag and wiped my face. “She caught me in the parking lot taking a dick pic for you.”

Brett giggled, and I helped him up, anxious to be away from Marge’s knowing gaze.

Choccie wasn’t allowed in the grocery store, so we dropped him at home. He was bored being in the carrier and had whined from the hardware store to home. I settled him in his bed, surrounded by his favorite toys, and we took off for the grocery store.

Brett yawned as we pulled up. “Why don’t you take the photo and buy all the snacks

and we head home.”

“Sounds good.” I’d need to take the last pic back at the restaurant, maybe with Kyle and the two of us. But I could do it another day.

I filled a cart with goodies, plus a vegetarian pizza for dinner, took my photo, and we headed home.

“I’m pooped.” Brett headed to bed while I put the groceries away and let Choccie outside.

“That was fun.” My mate nibbled on fruit I’d cut up. “Maybe we could make it a thing. We could do a restaurant tour. You take me to all the places you ate before you met me.”

“That would be Daxon’s restaurant, Daxon’s restaurant, and let me think... oh yeah, Daxon’s restaurant with a dash of fast food thrown in.”

“You’re exaggerating.”

I was a little, but I was a creature of habit. “And thank gods I did eat there a lot because it led me to you eventually.” But it was the perfect place to take a baby. Everyone in the sizzle ate there with their kids.

“Just think. Next time we eat there, we’ll probably have the baby with us.” Brett’s due date was a couple of weeks away.

“I know.” My mate giggled. “We’ll hire a babysitter and do a tour of all the places where you showed me your cock. The cock tour.”

“Does that include here?” We could go from room to room, recreating where we’d

made love.

“We can.” He stuck his hand under the covers. “Wanna start now?”

I yanked down the bedding and pulled out my dick.

“How about we do rock paper scissors and the winner gets a blow job,” Brett suggested.

“How is that fair?” I joked. My mate always won when we did that. Every single time.

He shrugged. “It’s just luck.”

I suspected my mate had made a deal with the universe which was why he always beat me.

“Our lives are going to change, babe.” Brett wriggled his paternity pants over his hips. “Sleepless nights, midnight feeds, burping, diapers, poop, and not much sex.”

My mate was anticipating a win and bringing out his dick and stroking it, knowing how it turned me on and I’d lunge at him and swallow his length.

“In that case, we’d better stock up on blow jobs now.” Now that he was hugely pregnant, he preferred my mouth on him rather than my dick in his hole.

“No rock paper scissors?” He raised a brow.

“What’s the point?” I swallowed his length.

“I think the point is in your mouth.”

Chapter 23

Brett

I grabbed the cart and headed straight to the produce department. Today, I was on a mission. I wanted watermelon. Now. And I didn't just want watermelon—I needed it. A lot of it. I was craving watermelon so badly that it was even in my dreams. Sure, in my dreams, it was less about eating watermelon and more about remembering an old comedian who used to smash them, but still—watermelons had all my attention.

When I got to the cooler with the shelf that always had the chunked-up watermelon, the entire section was empty. All of it—the watermelon, the cantaloupe, the grapes, all of the fresh-cut fruit—gone. Sitting there was a little stand that said, “Sorry for your inconvenience. Our shipment did not come in.”

This was not an inconvenience. It was the destruction of dreams. And yes, I was being melodramatic, but I was pregnant and couldn't help it.

My gut reaction was to cry out, but while my hormones might've been raging, I could still pull it together—or at least, that's what I told myself as I started wandering through the rest of the produce section, looking for a whole watermelon. There were none. Absolutely none. Not even the ones with the seeds that tended to be the last men standing.

I found someone with a badge that said they worked here. “I'm looking for watermelon,” I said, trying to keep the desperation out of my voice.

“You’re gonna have to check again in a couple of days. We’re all out. Sorry.”

I told him it was no big deal, and he went back to work. But as I stood there, my eyes started to fill up with tears.

Pregnancy was wild—the way everything felt so big. Like, in my head, I knew that not having watermelon didn’t matter—not even close—but right then, it felt like the end of the world.

When an older gentleman came up to me and asked if I was okay, I sucked back my snot and told him, “There’s no watermelon,” expecting him to judge. He didn’t.

“That’s okay, honey, I’ve got you.” He walked away, and when he came back, he had a bottle of fresh watermelon juice with him. “It’s not quite the same, but it might hit that craving of yours.”

“Thanks,” I said, taking the bottle from him. “I don’t know what’s come over me. No, that’s not true. I do, but I don’t know how to control it.”

“If the goddess wanted us to control it, she wouldn’t have given us these hormones. Just know that the reason they’re high and making you feel all this way is because your body’s doing exactly what it needs to do for your little one.” His words calmed me. “When are you due?”

“Last week,” I put my hand on my belly.

I’d been foolish enough to think that I was going to have my baby on my due date. I worked in the hospital; I knew better. But in my head, they were coming that day. That did not happen. I was officially one week past due. That one week felt like a year. Not gonna lie.

“Well, guess they’ll be coming soon, then,” he said.

I thanked him again, and he went on his way.

I started wandering through the aisles, my Braxton Hicks acting up. They weren’t awful, but they were a nuisance.

I grabbed easy-to-fix items that I thought might hit the spot after the child was born and tossed them in the cart. I knew I wasn’t going to want to cook once the baby came, and probably neither would my mate. We were going to be spending time with our little one, and they weren’t exactly known for sleeping well. We were going to be tired.

I could hardly wait.

The dog aisle had become one of my favorites, and I grabbed a bunch of new treats to bring home. I didn’t want Choccie to think his place in the house was being taken over by a little one, so some spoiling was in order. Thankfully, I loved to spoil him. So did Anders. The dog wasn’t lacking spoiling, that was sure.

As I turned the corner, someone else did the same, and our carts crashed into one another, causing me to fall backward and land on my ass. It hurt. It really hurt. How I didn’t cry out in pain was a miracle.

The other person felt awful, rushing to my side as I assured them I was fine. But as I got up and nearly slipped, I realized I wasn’t fine—because I wasn’t slipping on just any random paper on the floor. Nope. The floor was wet thanks to me—my water had broken.

I felt guilty telling the staff that they had to clean up my mess, but they felt equally bad about me falling and insisted that I seek medical treatment. It was over the

top—absolutely—but I agreed, calling my mate and letting him know that an ambulance was on the way. How embarrassing.

Taking an ambulance trip to the place where you work was a weird experience. I knew everyone there and exactly where we were going, and I also knew how ridiculous it was that they insisted on the ambulance. It was funny how people would do anything to avoid a lawsuit.

When I got to the hospital, they brought me into the ER. The nurse took one look at me and said, “You in labor?”

“No,” I assured her, because I was an idiot and hadn’t figured out that I was yet.

“Then why are you here?”

“I fell, and my water broke.”

To her credit, she didn’t laugh at me. “I’ll have you go to triage. I’ll call up for you.”

They brought me up, and sure enough, everybody was waiting for me. It was one of the benefits of working in the hospital—you knew everyone. They had me in a room, hooked up to monitors, talking about whether I needed any sort of tests to see if I hurt my back or not, as if I wasn’t there. That’s when I found out my Braxton Hicks weren’t Braxton Hicks—they were full-on contractions.

The doctor wasn’t loving how weak the contractions were, and being a fox shifter himself, he knew what to give me to kick the labor into a far more productive state. I was already pacing the room in my hospital gown, staving off new contractions, when my mate came in.

“I’m so sorry I let you go to the grocery store,” he said.

I stopped dead in my tracks. “You let me?”

“I didn’t mean it like that. I just meant I wish I was with you.”

“Well, you are now, when it counts.” I had a monitor on, which limited where I could go. There’d be no hall walking for me. Not that anything in my birth plan had worked out so far.

A few minutes later, the doctor came in to look at the readings from the monitor and talk about whether I needed to get any kind of scans. He wasn’t liking what he was seeing. I could tell before he even said one word.

“You’re not going to want to hear this,” he said.

“Is my baby okay?” That was all that mattered.

“Yes, your baby is fine. But I think he needs more help getting out than just what you’ve already had.” He started to point out different things on the printout to me. Paternity wasn’t my strong suit, but even I could see the concerning increases and decreases in our child’s heartbeat during contractions.

“Okay, yes. But we need to get him out, and quickly.”

“By quickly you mean C-section?”

He nodded. And my birth plan was officially trash. There had been a time when I thought that would matter to me. But now that I was here, facing the decision, the only thing I cared about was the safety of our baby.

My mate stayed by my side like a boss, keeping his beast at bay even when they curtained off part of my body so he couldn’t see what they were doing. That might

have bugged him, but it was for the best—no one wanted to see their mate sliced open and a human being pulled out of them.

The doctors were swift and cautious, and soon, our son Andri was placed on my chest, having his first snuggle. I still wasn't completely sewn up yet, my arms were still pinned down, but he was there—my mate, holding him to me. He was perfect.

They did sutures and used glue to close me up, not realizing that all I was going to do was shift when I got home to take care of it. Then they wheeled me to recovery, where it was just my small family and a nurse who did her best to stay out of our way. Paternity nurses were a special breed—able to help protect your most precious cargo while being like wallflowers, so you could enjoy those first few days of bonding.

“He’s beautiful,” I said, relieved to finally be able to wrap him in my arms.

“He really is,” Anders said, kissing the top of my head. “And he’s beautiful because he looks just like you, Papa Bear.”

“That’s funny. I was thinking he looked just like you.”

“Are you excited, Choccie?”

Our dog looked up at me with his melty brown eyes and wagged his tail while standing in front of the door.

Brett had Andri in a carrier nestled on his chest. Getting both a baby and puppy out the door with all their stuff and going to a dog park just for an hour was a major undertaking.

My mate sat in the back seat with our son and Choccie. During the short ride, the baby cried, and the dog howled. I caught Brett’s eye in the rearview mirror, and we laughed.

Life was messy, and I was loving every minute of it.

We were a little apprehensive about the dog park. Though Choccie had been around our friends’ dogs, he hadn’t mixed with a group of unknown dogs. And while he responded to the come command, we decided to keep him on the leash, at least initially.

When we arrived, Choccie wagged his tail. We stood outside for a few minutes, checking the number and types of dogs. Though it was Sunday when we expected the park to be full, it was early and there were only a handful of dogs and owners here.

I gripped the leash and gave Choccie a pep talk, explaining I’d be with him the whole time. He was still a puppy and small enough that I could pick him up if necessary.

Brett stayed outside the enclosure with Andri, and I led Choccie in. One small yippy, happy dog ran up to us, and Choccie froze, but the little guy gave him a sniff and took off.

Choccie stayed by my side as we wandered around the park perimeter. As this was our first time, he might not interact with anyone else, and that was fine. Slowly, slowly.

Brett's shout got my attention. He and the baby were walking around the fence toward us, and he was pointing to the middle of the park. I picked up Choccie, thinking a huge dog was headed our way.

But a little girl, who looked almost identical to Choccie, raced up to us.

"Cocoa." A man, presumably her owner, was behind her, a leash dangling from his pocket.

The man paused as he took in Choccie. His scent announced him as human, but Choccie wriggled to get down, and Cocoa jumped up, resting her paws on my legs and yelped, trying to reach him.

"Sorry," the man said as he picked up Cocoa. "She's never done that before."

"They could be siblings." As both dogs were being held, they leaned toward one another and sniffed, their wagging tails slapping against us.

"Shall we put them down?" the guy asked.

I nodded, and the dogs greeted one another as though they were long lost friends.

I was curious about Cocoa and asked how old she was but discovered, like Choccie, she had been abandoned as a puppy. The vet had estimated her age, which was the

same as our dog.

“Did you get her from the shelter?” They were so similar, and the way they reacted to one another suggested maybe they were siblings. But how likely was that?

“No, we found her on the street.”

When he gave the address, I turned to Brett who was on the other side of the fence.

“That’s around the corner from your old place.”

“Are they brother and sister?” Cocoa’s owner asked.

“I think so.”

I introduced myself and Brett and the baby. The guy said his name was Archer and his mate would be here soon.

“Mate?” I said under my breath. He was human, but there was a hint of shifter on his clothes. But he could’ve been referring to a friend.

He leaned in close. “I’ve been around shifters long enough to scent them. And there are a lot in Snowford.”

Brett squeaked behind me, and I swirled around, thinking of Andri. But my mate was focused on a man walking toward him and pushing a stroller.

“That’s my mate and daughter,” Archer whispered. “He’s a?—”

“Unicorn,” Brett yelled a little too loudly. He clarified, when heads swiveled in his direction by saying, “My son reminds me of a little unicorn.” That wasn’t much better, but people went back to chatting and taking care of their dogs.

I hurried over to him and leaned on the fence, with Choccie reluctantly following as he was on the lead.

“This is Sirius and our daughter, Betsy.” Brett’s slack-jawed expression told me he wasn’t expecting to meet one of his kind at the dog park—or maybe anywhere.

There was a doggie café across the road, and I suggested we go there. I picked Choccie up, as he was pulling at the leash and whining, wanting to be near Cocoa.

“She’s coming with us, little boy. Don’t worry.”

We sat outside and ordered coffees and puppuccinos for the dogs.

“I didn’t know there was another unicorn in Snowford. How did I not scent you?” Brett said.

Sirius explained they’d been renting in another area of Oakheart and had only just moved to Snowford.

The dogs were curled up under the table until their puppuccinos arrived. Archer and I held the paper cups, and the dogs lapped at their treats in unison. Anyone observing them couldn’t mistake them for anything but siblings. They were adorable.

“How old is Betsy?” Brett asked as I helped him take Andri out of the carrier, as he was fussing and ready for a feed.

“She’s four weeks old today.” Archer kissed his daughter’s head.

Brett and I stared at the couple, our mouths gaping.

“So is Andri.”

“I hope you don’t mind me saying this or think I’m being too forward, but I think we’re destined to be best friends.” Sirius took his mate’s hand.

I almost blurted out, “Yes, I think so too,” but this had to be a joint decision between Brett and myself. And his beast hadn’t been around many unicorns, so if they didn’t get along, it was no.

“My unicorn is excited but a little wary.” My mate pulled a muslin cloth off his shoulder and fed our son.

“Mine too. Our kind are rare, not like wolves and bears. He doesn’t know how to be around someone like himself.

We agreed the two unicorn shifters would meet the following night, just the two of them, hoping they would bond. The two dogs wailed when we parted, but I got one of Choccie’s toys from the car and exchanged it for one of Cocoa’s. Both toys were infused with their puppy owner’s scent, so I hoped that would pacify Choccie until they met again.

We exchanged phone numbers and said our goodbyes.

At home, Choccie ran to her bed and fell asleep, resting her chin on Cocoa’s toy.

“What if the unicorns don’t like one another?” Brett nibbled his bottom lip and dragged his fingers through his already tousled hair. I’d never seen him so nervous.

“Maybe it will take time. Look how long it took your beast to be around my snow leopard and me.” It would be sad for the dogs if the two families couldn’t be friends.

The following evening, Archer, Sirius, and family came to our house. The babies were asleep, the puppies were in Choccie’s bed destroying a new toy, and my mate and Sirius left the house.

Archer and I sat in the kitchen and drank tea and more tea as we waited. I was surrounded by snow leopard shifters in Snowford, and while Brett had made friends in our community, it would be nice to know someone of his own kind.

“How long before they return? If they return?” Archer asked.

Maybe he thought the beasts would take off, not allowing their human side to take their skin.

A shimmering in the back garden had me up and moving closer to the window. I beckoned Archer to my side. Under a clear sky, the two unicorns stood in the back garden, bathed in the moonlight. While we didn’t have human neighbors on either side of us, I worried someone, not a shifter, would see them.

The two beasts pawed the ground before the men took their skin and raced into the house, their clothes remaining wherever they had shifted.

Dressed in our bathrobes, the pair joined us at the table.

Brett was bouncing up and down, his cheeks pink, his eyes blazing with excitement. He kissed me and kissed me again, and I wished we were alone so we could get naked.

“That was amazing. Who knew coming to Oakheart would change my life. A mate, a puppy, a baby, and now a unicorn friend.”

After Sirius and family left, promising to meet for dinner, Brett and I climbed into bed.

“What a contrast my life has been. Growing up, I never fit in, was teased and regarded as other, and now?—”

Taking him in my arms, I finished his sentence. “Now you are loved.”

Other books in this universe...

Aspen didn't know you could accidentally become Alpha of a Den, but that's exactly what he just did.

Alpha bear shifter Aspen was ready to begin his new life in the big city. He has a job lined up, a lease signed, and his truck packed. All he has left is to get there. Too bad that's easier said than done, because his truck picked the middle of nowhere to break down—alongside a bear den's land of all places. When Aspen seeks permission to spend the night, he plans to keep his head down and just mind his own business and he does, until he hears the scream that changes everything.

Omega bear shifter Lucian hates his den. No, that isn't fair. It isn't the den he hates as much as the leadership. When the Alpha he had most of his life died, he crossed his fingers the new one would bring their den into this century. He didn't—the new Alpha is not only old-school, but also cruel. When rumors of an alpha bear seeking refuge until his truck is repaired reach him, Lucien forms a plan. If he can convince the shifter to take him when he leaves, he can escape this horrible life.

Sneaking out to find the new bear sounded like a great idea, until Lucian gets caught. His den Alpha is a strike first kind of guy, and strike he does. Lucien knows better than to scream, as it only makes the punishments worse, but scream he does, the pain too much to hold inside. A flurry of fur and teeth, a dead Alpha, and the scenting of his fated mate leaves the visiting shifter as their new Alpha.

So much for best laid plans.