



Good Luck Charm for the Wolf (Uncle Uzzi's Date to Mate #2)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: You only need one charm to change your luck.

But what if said charm happens to be a woman?

Douglas McGregor enjoys his work as a private investigator. Even if its mostly employee background checks.

A run of bad luck sends him running for cover, and Doug finds himself stuck in an impossible situation with an old Witch doling out romantic advice. Hes not in the market for a mate,, but his Wolf sure is interested.

Geraldine Coppola loves the new pizzeria she and her sisters just opened. What she doesnt love is the snarky customers with bad attitudes. Burned by the love bug before, she is positive some guys just dont get it.

Can Uncle Uzzi finagle a romance from these two unlucky lovers?

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Greetings, my dearest darlings!

You know I love to celebrate just about everything—full moons, new moons, Tuesday discounts at the potion shop—but this one is extra special!

It's official!

We're throwing an informal grand opening pizza party for the Date to Mate app at none other than Pizza Girls, the finest purveyor of garlic knots this side of the Veil!

Why a pizza party, you ask?

Because it was the only form of payment Horace Vanderbilt—our very own happily mated Bear Shifter and tech wizard extraordinaire—would accept in exchange for helping code my beloved matchmaking app into existence.

Honestly, the Bear runs on marinara and joy. And considering Date to Mate matched him with his fated mate (one of the owners of Pizza Girls), it felt like the perfect tribute.

Now, yes, yes, yes, I know the app is technically for supernaturals—Wolves, Witches, Dragons, Dhampirs, and the like—but don't let that stop you!

Love is delightfully unruly, and several of you charming normals found your mates during the beta phase. (You're welcome, by the way .)

I'm so proud of what we've built together. My Liebling, my sweet soul flame, she

always believed in love— wild, magical, imperfect love —and I know she's watching, probably sipping spirit wine and gossiping with Cupid as we speak.

So, my magical misfits, bring your appetite, and maybe a love offering or two—flowers or fried calamari, whatever works.

Pizza Girls is serving up slices with extra destiny and a sprinkle of Pecorino Romano .

But you don't have to wait for the party to get your Date to Mate profile set up!

Log in, enchant your profile, upload your best spell-safe selfie, and get ready to meet the one the Fates picked just for you.

And if you think you've already met them, but the stars didn't quite align? Don't worry. The Fates are patient, and a little pushy .

See you under the twinkling lights, my loves.

Yours truly,

Uncle Uzzi

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Chapter 1

Doug

“ Y ou have got to be shitting me.”

But no, alas, the steaming pile of actual dog shit at my feet is very, very real.

Average, human, mundane dog shit. And here I am, squatting next to it like a deranged dog whisperer, as I wait for my latest cheating bastard of a target to make his move.

Fuck. My. Life.

I know better than to take cheating spouse gigs. They're always messy, always depressing, and always smell like disappointment and cheap perfume. But what can I say?

Daddy's got bills.

Ugh. Note to self: Never refer to yourself as “ Daddy ” again, you creepy tool.

Anyway, the guy I'm tailing?

A painfully average human. Guy is rocking his dad bod, thinning hairline, but he might overdose on that complex he's got.

You know the kind. Supreme confidence inflated by protein shakes and delusion.

He's mated to a Witch, and she's the one who hired me, convinced he's stepping out on her.

Spoiler alert: he is.

I watch him now through the zoom lens of my camera, laughing a little too loudly as he wraps his arm around a petite blonde whose aura is so non-magical it's practically beige.

Not his mate. Not even close.

Click-click. Gotcha.

Before you go clutching your pearls, let's get something straight.

I'm a Wolf. A lone one. A PI by trade and a predator by nature.

I don't enjoy this kind of work, but it pays. And unfortunately for me, rent doesn't magically pay itself just because I'm morally conflicted.

Do I wish I was investigating art thefts and corporate espionage instead of photographing seedy hookups at eight PM on a Thursday? Sure.

But that's not the world we live in.

This world is corrupt, dirty, and full of people who screw up spectacularly. I'm just here to document the aftermath.

Could I ask my old Pack for financial help? Maybe.

But I left that life behind two decades ago, and let me tell you, no one throws a goodbye party for a lone Wolf. Except maybe with pitchforks.

Rafe Maccon, our local Alpha and all-around decent guy, let me go clean.

No blood, no fuss, no banishment flames.

I stuck around Jersey, rented an attic apartment that smelled like mildew and unfulfilled dreams, and built a life of sorts.

I don't cause trouble.

Not unless someone pays me to.

Sometimes that means getting punched by a cheating husband who doesn't appreciate being caught mid-thrust.

Sometimes it means out-running a furious Siren with boundary issues.

But hey, not my fault. I'm just the messenger with receipts.

Do I have friends? Not really. But if we're being generous, there's Horace.

Grizzly Bear Shifter. Former hacker, now head tech guy for Date to Mate . He throws me gigs now and then.

Background checks.

Digital digs.

The occasional stakeout.

We have an unspoken agreement. He pays well. I don't make him talk about his feelings. It's beautiful.

I like to think we're friends, in a gruff, if-you-touch-my-honey-cake-I'll-rip-your-arm-off kind of way.

He's newly mated, actually. Big, growly Bear with googly eyes.

It's disgusting.

But, I don't know. Sometimes I wonder.

Mated .

Imagine that.

I shake my head, trying real hard not to inhale, because let me tell you—that pile of dog shit is still waging chemical warfare on my nostrils.

Finally, Dad Bod McMistress exits the house of ill repute, looking entirely too pleased with himself for a man who just cheated on a Witch.

I mean, really? That's how you end up as a toad. Or a smoking crater.

I follow at a safe distance, hugging the shadows.

He lives close enough that I don't bother with my truck. I'll circle back for it once I'm done playing sneak-and-snoop.

Idiot is shitting where he eats, or rather, fucking someone else way too close to his own home.

At least the guy has the basic decency to swing by the local bodega for a bouquet of half-wilted roses and a heart-shaped box of chocolates.

A guilt offering for his magical wife, no doubt.

Another spoiler alert: it's not gonna help.

I watch them reunite. Him laying it on thick, her wrapping stiff arms around him like she's hugging a tax deduction.

Yeah, that's gonna be a fun conversation later.

Satisfied I've got what I need, I head back to my ride, the smell of betrayal, and possibly dog crap, still clinging to my clothes.

About ten minutes later, my phone lights up.

Esmerelda Goyle, my client.

Cue the dramatics.

“ Well? Was he with someone? ” Her voice is muffled, breathy.

I picture her pacing, probably clutching a black tourmaline crystal in one hand and a bottle of merlot in the other.

I hesitate for a millisecond. Not because I'm squeamish, but because I know this'll sting.

Still, she paid for the truth, and in this business, truth ain't always pretty.

“I tailed Mr. Goyle from his office on Park Avenue to a secondary residence where, unfortunately, your suspicions were confirmed.”

There’s a pregnant pause.

“ That louse! That bastard! ”

Ah, the classics.

Insults like that never go out of style. And really, I can’t say I blame her.

This is why I don’t get involved. I am a one and done deal kinda Wolf.

No relationships.

No risk.

Just a single guy who occasionally likes to shift into my fur and run through the park.

Sure, I’ve had dames on the go, but nothing serious. Never that.

And Goyle and her wayward hubby are exactly the reason why I prefer to be single.

And when the women I date get clingy?

When the women I date start with the whole my boyfriend this and that shit. Then it’s my cue to leave.

No, thank you.

But back to my client.

“All photographic evidence has been uploaded to your file, Mrs. Goyle. You’ll receive the password as soon as the remainder of your invoice is settled. Thank you for hiring Wolf PI.”

“Fine, yes, I’ll pay right now. I need to see those pictures. And then I’m going to ki?—”

Click.

I end the call before she finishes the thought. I’m not about to play witness to a premeditated crime of passion. I do not do courtrooms. Or orange jumpsuits.

Phone buzzes again.

This time, it’s a text from Mrs. Giancarlo, my landlady, and the closest thing I’ve got to family.

Sweet old Kitchen Witch with a spine of steel and the world’s draftiest two family home masquerading as an apartment building in all of Newark.

She's holding onto that property like it's a winning lottery ticket, but her jerk of a nephew's trying to swoop in and have her committed just to snatch the deed.

Not on my watch.

I promised her I’d buy the place outright, fix it up, and let her live the rest of her days exactly how she wants.

Herbal tea, cats, haunted basement and all.

I figure she’s earned it.

But dreams like that? They don't come cheap.

I shoot her a quick text.

All's good, Mrs. G. Working on it. No one's sending you anywhere.

Then I start the truck and grin when I hear that blessed ding of a payment received.

Mrs. Goyle came through. One step closer to saving the house.

Just a few thousand more, and I'll have the deed in hand.

Then maybe— just maybe —I'll do something reckless.

Like sign up for that ridiculous Date to Mate app.

Horace did it and somehow ended up mated and blissfully obnoxious.

Who knows? Maybe the Fates have someone for a lone Wolf like me.

Or maybe I'll just end up swiping on a bunch of vampires who don't do sunlight and Witches looking for a sacrificial softie .

Either way, it's gotta be more fun than tailing cheating normals and dodging dog feces.

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Chapter 2

Dina

I pull my headband up after freshening up my face, securing my short curls behind it in a riot of soft coils that immediately bounce free like rebellious little gremlins.

Figures. Even my hair refuses to be tamed.

The headband's black with hot pink zebra stripes, because duh, subtlety is boring , and it perfectly matches my hot pink leggings and the Pizza Girls t-shirt I'm rockin' today.

Yeah, I'm cute and coordinated. Sue me.

Besides, I designed the logo on this shirt. I painted the mural that greets every customer who walks through our doors. It's bright, whimsical, and just a little bit weird—in a good way .

Kind of like me.

What can I say? I'm a creative girly.

Not the suffering-for-my-art type, though.

Sorry-not-sorry, but you will not find me chain-smoking clove cigarettes in a Parisian garret while crying over unrequited love.

I prefer my masterpieces with a side of mozzarella and a drizzle of garlic oil.

And yet— here's the kicker —some people, ahem, my sisters , think I'm wasting myself, squandering my talents here.

Carina and MJ love me, obviously.

They'd straight-up murder anyone who hurt me, and I'm not ruling out the possibility that Carina literally could, now that she's dating a Bear Shifter who looks like he wrestles trees for fun.

But still, they worry.

They think I'm stifling myself by working in our family-run pizzeria instead of taking my art seriously.

But the truth? I love it here.

I love the rhythm of the kitchen, the crackle of the oven, the warmth of people gathering, laughing, and connecting.

I love creating the perfect pizza. I mean, hey, that's art too, no matter what the snobs say.

Watching someone bite into my work and let out a satisfied moan? Chef's kiss.

I live for that moment. It's like painting the Sistine Chapel, but with pepperoni.

Maybe it's not stylish to want simple things, but I do.

I like New Jersey. I like my small, loud, weird life.

And hey, I'm still finishing my degree at Rutgers. I'm still making art. It's not like I gave up on my dreams.

I simply redefined them.

Moving on from my ex, Eric, aka The Human Dumpster Fire , has been harder than I admit out loud.

Especially since he and his obnoxious bro-pack keep showing up here.

No shame.

No tips.

Just entitlement and the lingering odor of too much body spray.

And yeah, I am this close to making a sign that says:

No shoes. No shirt. No respect? Get the fuck out.

Carina would probably veto the language, but honestly? Worth it.

Still, my sisters expect me to eventually find my calling .

But maybe my calling isn't some fancy gallery or prestigious art collective.

Maybe it's right here.

Making food.

Creating colorful murals and pizza logos.

And sketching magical things hardly anyone sees but me.

God, though, sometimes it's lonely being the only sister currently not dating.

Carina has Horace now. He's gruff, sometimes furry, and head over heels for her.

It's disgustingly adorable.

MJ is always going on dates. She is a natural flirt, flitting about like the social butterfly she is.

Meanwhile, me?

I'm over here doodling Werewolves and Witches in my sketchbook, listening to love songs, and pretending it doesn't sting when nobody looks at me that way.

Because that's the thing, isn't it?

I don't want a fling.

I don't want a nice guy who thinks I'm cute, even though I'm chubby, and then tries to change me.

I want someone. My someone.

Someone who sees me, the pizza-slinging, headband-wearing, art-loving hot mess that I am, and still wants me.

Someone who gets me.

Who thinks my short curls are adorable and my weird art is brilliant.

Who understands that simple doesn't mean dumb.

Someone who chooses me.

And yeah, recently, ever since the supernatural world sort of crash-landed into my orbit, I've found myself wondering, could that someone be something more than human?

I mean, lately, my art's been full of Wolves, Bears, and beings that don't belong to fairy tales anymore.

I even sold a few of those pieces under my secret alter ego, DinArt (yes, cheesy, but whatever—branding matters).

Maybe it's nothing.

Or maybe, just maybe, it's the universe, or the Fates themselves, leaving neon-bright breadcrumbs right in front of me, practically screaming this way, dummy!

I glance down at my phone, and there it is.

That little pink icon for Date to Mate practically winks at me, like some mischievous digital cupid.

Uncle Uzzi's creation.

Equal parts charming and wildly chaotic. Kind of like that sweet old man himself, now that I think about it.

I hesitate, chewing my bottom lip like it holds all the answers to the universe.

The screen glows softly, patient but persistent.

My half-finished profile stares back at me.

Judging. Waiting. Teasing.

Just grab your ovaries and do it, Dina.

Bold words for someone currently being bullied by an app.

I take a breath, summon whatever reckless, lonely, slightly lovesick goddess lives deep in my soul, and hit save.

There. Done.

Somehow, the air feels different.

Charged.

Like I've just signed up for something bigger than pizza orders and mural commissions.

Like destiny might actually be paying attention.

Something tells me things are about to get a whole lot weirder.

And you know what?

I really, really hope so.

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Chapter 3

Doug

F ucking Bear.

I know he's home. His car's in the lot. His lights are on. And I can practically hear him growling all the way on the sidewalk from his fucking reinforced penthouse fortress.

Still no answer.

I jab the buzzer again like my life depends on it because, well , it kinda does right now.

I immediately swat at yet another hornet trying to make sweet, painful love to my earlobe.

That makes seventeen?

No, eighteen.

Eighteen homicidal little bastards that followed me all the way from the damn park.

Look, was getting stung half to death while butt naked during my nightly run the way I envisioned spending my Friday night?

No. No, it fucking wasn't.

Shifting in the city was never easy. But it was necessary.

It was supposed to be stress relief for my kind.

Stretch the legs.

Clear the head.

Not Welcome to Nature's Sadism Hour: featuring Doug the Unlucky Lone Wolf.

I thought it was a mere coincidence the couple of buzzers floating around my head while I shifted back from my Wolf form.

But it only got worse.

Dragging on my jeans quickly, though awkwardly, thanks to all the angry red welts, I checked my phone only to find a slew of texts from Esmerelda the Cuckolded .

You know. The Witch who hired me.

To catch her cheating husband.

Which I did.

Flawlessly, I might add.

Apparently, she wasn't a fan of the truth.

Also, wait—can a Witch even be cuckolded?

Isn't that like a dude thing?

Whatever. Not the point.

The point is, she's pissed.

And who does she take it out on? Me.

Not the cheating husband.

Not the sparkly eyed sidepiece.

Nope.

Her ire is aimed squarely at Doug.

Because clearly, I'm the villain here.

Before I can spiral deeper, Horace's gravel-thick voice finally crackles through the intercom, cutting through my panic and bug-swatting like a grizzly-shaped buzzkill.

“ What do you want? ”

He sounds exactly as thrilled as I feel.

“Took you long enough!” I snap, ducking as a hornet tries to kamikaze my nose.

“ Fuck off, Wolf. ”

Rude.

“You gotta let me in, Horace. Come on, I’m being attacked here!”

“ Attacked? By what? ” he deadpans.

“Is that really important right now?!” I yelp, doing a wild dance that probably looks like a bad TikTok challenge for supernatural pest control.

“My skin is practically melting, dude!”

I’m itchy, I’m welted, and I’m ninety percent sure these aren’t regular hornets.

They have purpose.

Like tiny hitmen hired by a vengeful Witch who didn’t appreciate photographic proof of her husband’s afternoon delight.

By some miracle, or maybe just Carina’s good influence, Horace eventually buzzes me up.

Ten minutes later, I’m standing in his living room— post emergency shower —wrapped in one of his giant robes that smells faintly like Bear and judgment.

Carina, bless her patient heart, hands me a mug of chamomile like I haven’t just ruined their cozy Friday night.

“Gosh, Doug. You look awful,” she says sweetly, concern knitting her brow.

Nice lady. Way too good for the walking forest fire she mated.

Horace grunts from the couch.

Carina gives him a scolding look, which somehow morphs into a fond smile as she presses a kiss to his cheek and snuggles in next to him, honey bun in hand.

Ugh. Lucky bastard.

Meanwhile, I'm single, stung to hell, and possibly cursed.

"So, what did you do? Pee on their hive or something?" Horace asks, smirking like he thinks he's hilarious.

"Of course not. I have standards, thank you very much."

I gesture helplessly to my welt-covered arms.

"I was just running. You know. Healthy lone Wolf habits. Then boom! Hornet Hell: Doug Edition . And I am telling you. These things aren't normal. They're like weaponized . Probably spelled up the wazoo."

Horace gives me that look. The one that says you are the author of your own misfortune .

"Piss anyone off lately?"

"Seriously? That's your question?" I sputter.

Then I sigh, because yeah. Yeah, I totally did.

"I'm a PI, man. Making people mad is literally my job."

Horace narrows his eyes. "You can tell us everything or get the fuck out."

So much for the Grizzly growing a heart. Sheesh.

“Fine!” I huff, scratching miserably at a welt behind my ear. “I took a job. For a Witch. She wanted dirt on her scumbag husband. I got it. And now, this .”

I gesture dramatically to my very unfortunate existence.

Horace groans like he’s aged five years from listening to me.

“So you took a spouse snooping job. Brilliant.”

“I prefer domestic investigation,” I grumble.

Carina, who’s been quietly sipping tea and eyeing me like I’m an idiot (fair), finally chimes in.

“Wait. What’s a spouse snooping job?”

Horace snorts. “Genius here got hired to spy on a Witch’s man. Caught him cheating. And now she’s magically punishing him.”

He jerks a thumb at me.

“Except ‘him’ is actually Doug, because why take it out on the dirtbag husband when you can hex the messenger?” Horace grins as he explains.

I think the fucker is enjoying my pain.

Carina gasps, peeking out the window.

Horace and I both turn our heads in the same direction, you know, cause curiosity and

shit.

“Oh my God, Horace! There’s still a swarm of them out there. We can’t send him out to get stung to death,” she says, clearly the smart one in the relationship.

“Thank you, Carina,” I say, clutching my mug like it’s holy.

Horace curses under his breath.

“Doug, you dumbass.”

“Not my fault!” I shout, clutching my probably cursed tea like it’s the last life raft on the S.S. Bad Decisions .

But even as the words leave my mouth, they feel a little flimsy.

A little not entirely true.

Okay.

So, maybe it’s slightly my fault.

A smidge.

Like, maybe I accidentally poked the Witch-shaped beehive and now I’m paying for it in stingy installments.

Whatever.

I’m a PI, not a priest.

I don't do confessionals.

I do stakeouts, zoom lenses, and occasionally catching married dudes with wandering wands.

Moral codes? Please.

If I had those, I wouldn't be photographing a Witch's hubby with his mistress' ass mid-squeeze.

Still, mental note for future Doug: Add a no hex clause to all Witch-related contracts.

Right between no clients who pay in exposure and no cases involving haunted dolls after midnight —do not ask.

Horace, ever the charitable Grizzly, finally relents with a sigh that probably registers on the Richter scale.

“Fine. Stay the night. Spare room's over there.”

He gets rewarded with a kiss from Carina, which he takes like it's no big deal while I, from my itchy, welted perch on the couch, practically wilt from secondhand yearning.

Something inside me twinges.

Jealousy?

Envy?

Deep-seated dread mixed with the faint whiff of calamine lotion?

Whatever it is, it's green, ugly, and sitting heavy on my shoulder.

He's all like, " Oh hey, Doug, remember how single you are? Let's talk about that. "

Not because I want Carina. No offense—she's lovely, but she's also very much the Grizzly's girl and I enjoy having all my limbs intact.

But I do want what they have.

That thing.

That someone-to-come-home-to thing.

That you had a crap day, let me make you forget all about it with snacks and cuddles and smexy fun times thing.

I want someone whose smile makes me forget that hornets think I'm target practice.

Someone who gives me a reason to not just exist, but to actually be .

A mate.

Yeah right.

Who am I kidding?

I'm Doug.

Lone Wolf.

Zero prospects.

Barely making rent and rocking a solid record of bad decisions and worse exes.

Not exactly starring in anyone's romantic fantasy unless their kink is sad paranormal PI with commitment issues and recent recurring bug trauma.

Fantastic.

Now we've officially hit the Self-Deprecation and Despair portion of tonight's programming.

Next stop: probably Spiraling Into Existential Crisis , sponsored by chamomile tea and poor life choices.

FML .

"Thanks," I mutter, dragging myself up from the couch like a man twice my age and three times my level of defeat.

Clutching my mug like it contains answers (it doesn't), I shuffle toward the spare room Horace so graciously offered.

I'm grateful. Really.

But gratitude tastes a lot like defeat right now.

I shut the door behind me, lean against it, and let out a breath that sounds like a dying accordion.

Worst. Friday. Ever.

And considering my last exciting Friday night involved silver handcuffs and a very

enthusiastic banshee who thought a safe word was optional, that's really saying something.

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Chapter 4

Dina

The bell over the door jingles as I push into Pizza Girls, and I'm immediately hit with the familiar scent of baked dough, garlic, and melted cheese.

Ah, my happy place.

I tug my hoodie off, slinging it over my arm as I catch MJ hustling out the door like she's late for a hot date.

Which, knowing MJ, she probably is.

She winks as she passes. "You're up, sis. Don't burn the place down."

"Have fun charming the pants off Mr. Tinder," I call after her, earning a cheeky laugh as the door swings shut behind her.

I sigh, cracking my knuckles as I head behind the counter, ready to jump into my shift. Friday night rush, here we come.

Except, it's weirdly quiet.

Like, too quiet.

Where's the usual hum of conversation and clatter of plates?

I glance around and spot Carina near the register, nervously twisting the ties of her apron into some sort of macramé nightmare.

Uh-oh. That's never a good sign.

My sister only does that when something, or someone, is stressing her out.

I grab an apron and make my way over.

“Okay. What's with the worried face? Did someone send back the smoked clam and roasted pepper pizza again? Because if so, I vote we ban them for life.”

Carina's eyes dart toward the back corner of the restaurant.

“No. Worse. Look,” she whispers, jerking her chin subtly like we're in some kind of pizza-based spy movie.

I follow her gaze and spot a table tucked away in the shadows.

Oh boy.

Horace, Carina's main squeeze, is sitting at a table with Uncle Uzzi, and some unfortunate slob with a bandage on his head, like he'd been recently brained, and a dozen or more welts in various stages of healing on his otherwise handsome face.

I know I've seen him before, but I can't place him. Not yet.

“Hey, who is that?” I whisper. Curiosity making me anxious.

“That's Doug. You met him at Horace's.”

“Oh,” I reply noncommittally.

He’s slouched in the chair, and I frown because he’s a big guy. Athletically built.

But he must be accident prone as all get to be sporting that many fresh bruises. Or maybe he’s just really unlucky.

Either way he looks miserable, and the very angry hives on his skin must be itching him like hell.

“He’s in trouble and Horace is trying to help,” Carina fills me in.

I nod, but I am already moving to the soda fountain where, instead of making myself a tall glass of delicious iced green tea, I grab a plastic baggie and fill it with ice.

The poor guy is trying to act like everything is cool while a woman and some beefy, scowling dude stare him down like he’s about to be served medium rare.

“Uh, so is Doug molting or something?” I murmur, arching a brow and tying the ends of the baggie together.

Carina snorts, but it’s tight.

“Dina! You are so bad! But no, he is not molting. He’s a Wolf, not a Parakeet. And he’s meeting with a former client— she’s a Witch. See, Doug caught her husband cheating on her. But you know how it goes when you interfere?—”

“Right. She’s pissed at him now, isn’t she?” I conclude correctly.

“Yep. Apparently, she cursed him after the job and now he’s having the world’s worst luck. He’s here to try to make peace with them and Horace and Uncle Uzzi are

moderating.”

I blink.

“Wait, so this is, like, a magical truce summit over pizza?”

“Pretty much. I mean Uncle Uzzi was coming to meet Horace about Date to Mate , anyway. It’s good he offered to mediate the whole thing. With conditions, of course.”

I frown. “Conditions?”

Carina rolls her eyes, though there’s amusement under the worry.

“If Doug wants Uzzi’s help to break the curse, making peace, he has to sign up for Date to Mate . Uncle Uzzi’s logic? If you're cursed and unlucky in love, maybe it’s time you stop dodging fate and let the app help .”

I stifle a laugh.

“So, the Big Bad Wolf is basically being magically blackmailed into online dating? That’s hilarious and tragic all at once.”

Carina shrugs.

“Honestly, he’s been a grump about the whole thing, but from what Horace says, Doug’s been through it lately. Hornet attacks not being the worst of it. This morning he tried to use our microwave, the one over the oven range, and it fell on his head. Then he tried to drive, and his car broke down.”

“Yikes. Poor guy.”

Poor, grumpy, very-bruiseable guy.

I glance back over at Doug.

He shifts in his chair, flexing his shoulders with a grimace like even sitting hurts.

Despite the disaster vibes radiating off him in waves, there's something positively attractive about him.

Tall.

Broad shoulders.

Five o'clock shadow like he's been too busy surviving supernatural smack downs to shave.

And his eyes.

They flick up, almost as if he feels me staring.

They meet mine—and wow.

Warm, amber-hued, and tired.

Like, really tired.

But still, kind of intense in a way that makes my stomach do a little flip.

Oh, stop it, I scold myself, heat creeping up my neck.

He's literally covered in hives and bruises.

This is so not the time for my ovaries to be like “ Hello, who’s this scruffy-faced walking disaster and can we have him? ”

And yet there’s something there.

Something impossible to ignore.

Some sort of weird little zap of awareness that makes me suddenly very aware that I am standing here in my work best with a melting bag of ice in my hands.

Pull it together, Dina. You’re being ridiculous.

“This man tried to wreck my marriage! I will not be appeased until he proves he is sorry!” The woman, his former client according to Carina, is still staring angrily at Doug as she snaps her fingers.

I watch, getting madder by the second, as the poor guy winces, hissing through his teeth.

Then, before I know what I am doing, I move.

“Hi everyone,” I say with false brightness as I unobtrusively hand Doug the ice pack and greet my soon-to-be brother-in-law. “Horace. Uncle Uzzi. Are we all set here? Can I bring you anything?”

“What’s this for?” Doug asks, frowning at the ice pack.

But Horace beats me to the punch as he grabs it and smacks it on Doug’s neck.

“Fuc—I mean ouch! Oh, wow, that’s nice .”

He sounds so relieved, I actually feel good about interrupting.

“Hello, Dina. How are you, my dear?” Uncle Uzzi is all charm.

“Fine. Just taking over the night shift. So, can I bring you anything?”

“We are in a meeting,” the nasty woman replies.

“No, thank you, lieblich. Perhaps when our business is finalized.”

“Okay. I’ll be here if you need me,” I reply, ignoring the woman as I turn to leave.

I feel tingles up and down my spine and I can’t help but sneak another peek behind me.

Uncle Uzzi’s blue eyes sparkle and he leans in toward Doug, saying something that has the Wolf’s eyebrows going sky high.

I can barely make it out.

“Now Douglas...sign up for the app...I’ll help smooth things over,” Uzzi says, voice carrying just enough for me to catch.

I watch as Doug sighs, scrubbing a hand down his face like a man defeated.

“Fine. Whatever. I’ll Date to Mate or whatever it’s called. Just—please—make this stop.”

Carina snickers softly, suddenly she is standing beside me. “I almost feel bad for him.”

I hum, watching Doug nod solemnly as Uzzi claps him on the back like this is the best decision of his life.

Almost.

But not quite.

Because as ridiculous as it is, and as very much not ready as he looks for love, part of me wonders.

If this Wolf gets his curse lifted, and if he really does join Date to Mate , does that mean Doug will find his mate?

And even more, could he maybe be my match ?

I shake the thought away, but I can't quite wipe the stupid little smile off my face.

No way. Right?

That would be crazy.

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Chapter 5

Doug

“ O h my fucking fuck, why won’t this thing work?”

I jab at the screen like that’s gonna make it any easier.

Stupid hunk of metal!

How did normals make it look so easy?

“It won’t work, Doug ,” Horace rumbles with the patience of a boulder, “because you can’t scream at it or shred it with your clumsy Wolf claws. That is a state-of-the-art piece of machinery, you moron!”

He snatches the phone right out of my hands like I’m a misbehaving cub.

Okay. Fine. My claws did pop out for a second.

Maybe two.

But seriously. Have you ever tried typing in your height, weight, occupation, and deepest personal insecurities while your fingertips keep threatening to turn into lethal weapons?

Not easy, my friend.

Not fucking easy.

“Technology is stupid, not me. I got Bs and Cs in school, Mr. Grumpy Face,” I mutter, crossing my arms like a grumpy toddler.

Horace gives me the look. The you are the biggest idiot I know look.

And I just sigh.

I get that look a lot.

Mostly from a certain know-it-all Bear.

Still, he’s not wrong.

I roll my neck, still trying to shake off the residual creep factor clinging to me after Mrs. Goyle, a real life Bad Witch and my former client from hell, left Pizza Girls a few minutes earlier.

Uncle Uzzi worked his matchmaking magic and got her to kind of agree to lift the curse.

Kind of.

Instead of straight-up removing the bad luck hex, she amended it.

Now, if I didn’t put myself out there and trust the Fates to hook me up, my already shitty luck would come back times ten.

Yeah. Fantastic. Exactly what I wanted.

Magically mandated dating.

Awesome.

“ Trust the Fates. ”

“ It’ll be fun. ”

“ You won’t understand the pain you’ve caused unless you find love yourself! ”

It’s so unfair! I mean, I don’t want to fall in love with anyone.

Being a Lone Wolf means not trusting anyone but yourself.

No Pack.

No doting mate.

No family to nag me about settling down or bringing side dishes to Sunday dinner.

Just me, my PI gigs, and a serious addiction to late-night diner milkshakes.

I sure do love me a good black and white milkshake! And no, it’s not the same as a chocolate shake, you peasant!

Okay, so, yeah, sometimes it’s a little lonely.

Especially when guys like Horace sit around getting doted on by their mates while I’m basically the mascot for Single and Cursed Anonymous .

But whatever. That’s life.

“Stop scratching,” Horace snaps.

I freeze, one hand halfway to my neck.

“Was I scratching? I wasn’t scratching.”

His unimpressed glare says otherwise.

Fine. Maybe I was.

A little.

But honestly, how am I supposed to chill when my skin still feels like it’s hosting a demon mosquito rave?

He tosses the semi-melted and forgotten ice pack the little waitress brought earlier at me. And I pick it up and drop it on my itchiest hive. Right on my neck.

“Ahhh.”

It feels much better.

I groan and sink into the chair as Horace types in the last few details on my profile like the tech wizard he apparently is when pizza and sarcasm aren’t involved.

That’s when I feel it.

A prickle.

A shift in the air.

Wolf senses tingling.

Not danger.

Maybe prey.

I'm curious.

I glance up, eyes drawn to movement near the counter.

Oh.

Her.

Dina.

Short curls bouncing as she laughs at something Carina says, her Pizza Girls tee slouchy and adorable over leggings that should not be that distracting.

She catches me looking and offers a hesitant smile, one of those shy-lipped, soft kinds that somehow punches you right in the chest.

Damn. That's cute .

And not good.

Because humans?

Not my thing.

They're soft.

Sweet. Sure.

But also, and more importantly, they're breakable .

Not built for the kind of chaos that follows me around like a cosmic joke.

She's the type who gives you an ice pack without asking questions, tries to interrupt awkward arguments just to cut the tension, and actually cares when you look like you've been hit by a truck full of bad decisions.

Nope.

Not for me.

I don't deserve soft things like that. I'm too clumsy. Too oafish.

Someone like Dina deserves a guy who can go a week without getting cursed or hexed or nearly eaten by enchanted furniture.

Not some grumpy Lone Wolf disaster who wears sarcasm like armor.

Still, she's looking at me.

And my Wolf?

He perks up like hey, pay attention, she's cute and smells like yummy things and sunshine.

I breathe deep. Yeah, she does. Pure fucking sunshine and daffodils.

This girl is practically oozing possibilities.

She's springtime personified.

I clear my throat as she comes over, arms crossed and mischief dancing in her eyes.

"So," she says, tilting her head, "does the phone usually win, or is tonight special?"

I blink.

Then snort.

Okay, that was good.

"Special," I admit, smirking despite myself. "Usually I only lose fights with weaponized wasps and magicked microwaves."

Her eyes dart to the bandage on my head, and I wince and grab it. I know my supernatural healing has it fixed by now.

She grins, leaning just a little closer.

Close enough that my Wolf definitely takes notice.

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Chapter 6

Doug

“Looks good. Just a bit yellow.”

“Yeah?”

I swallow and breathe in, allowing her scent to fill my nostrils, intoxicating me.

“Yeah. You know, if you need lessons, I happen to be pretty handy with apps. I could teach you. For a price.”

“Oh, yeah?” I arch a brow. “What’s the going rate these days for tech support? Yard work? My eternal gratitude? The right to name my firstborn?”

She laughs, and I swear the whole damn room feels warmer.

“We can discuss terms, but I have to warn you,” she says. “I’m pretty easy.”

Don’t say it, Doug. Don’t say it!

“Darlin’, I sincerely doubt a single thing about you is easy,” I murmur before I can stop myself.

Her eyes go wide for half a second before she laughs even harder and swats me with a towel.

“Wow. You are as charming as advertised,” she teases, shaking her head as she walks away, hips swaying just enough to make my Wolf whine internally.

“Dude! She’s practically my sister-in-law,” Horace grumbles and tosses a wadded up napkin at me.

Okay. But that’s not her fault. I mean, she can’t choose her family or who her sister dates.

And well, the thing is, maybe I think she’s kind of adorable.

But nope.

It is still a very bad idea.

No way am I dragging a sweet thing like her into my mess.

I’m about to mentally double-down on that decision when Horace lets out a loud, rumbling snort from the other side of the room.

“Oh shit. Um, Doug?”

“What?” I grunt, already regretting whatever’s coming next.

He spins the phone toward me, Date to Mate app glowing cheerfully like it’s mocking me from another dimension.

“Congrats, man,” Horace drawls, tapping the screen.

“Looks like you’ve got your first match.”

I stare.

Blink.

Read the name on the profile.

Dina Coppola.

Oh, fuck me sideways.

My Wolf practically does backflips.

Horace wheezes out a laugh like he's just found an abandoned jar of honey.

And me?

I just groan and drop my face into my hands.

Worst. Fate. Ever.

“No. Nope. Absolutely not.”

I'm mumbling into my hands like that's going to erase the screen currently blaring my doom in neon pink.

99% Compatibility!

The app practically sparkles as if it's proud of itself for ruining my life.

Horace is doubled over laughing, his big Bear shoulders shaking so hard he nearly spills his tea.

I try to follow suit, but the damn liquid gets stuck, and I choke. Literally.

Horace claps a hand on my back. Hard.

Probably harder than necessary.

“Breathe, Doug. It’s just a match. Not a mating ceremony.”

“Easy for you to say. You’ve got your mate and your happily-ever-after. I’ve got hornets, hexes, and now this.”

I jab a finger at the screen like it just betrayed me.

Horace just keeps chuckling, the smug bastard.

Uncle Uzzi, who has magically reappeared with a plate of garlic knots like he’s watching the best sitcom of his immortal life, just winks at me.

“Fate works in mysterious ways, my boy,” Uzzi says, popping a knot into his mouth.

“Or in this case, extremely obvious ones.”

Before I can launch into another very reasonable and not at all panicked rant about how humans are not my type, and how I’m not mate material, Dina suddenly appears.

She places a bowl of marinara for dipping on the table along with two enormous platters with fries and cheesesteaks that smell so good, I fucking salivate.

She puts one in front of Horace. And the other? She sets it down right in front of me, hovering directly in front of my face, and I know I shouldn’t, but I breathe her in deeper this time.

Like my stupid ego wants to prove there must be some kind of mistake. Surely if the normal was mine, I would have scented it by now.

But then I remember the other time I met her, my nose had been busted up, and today I was stuffy as a result of fighting all that damn wasp venom.

But even though my body has a way to go to heal itself, I feel it.

That prickle .

That knowing sensation.

My Wolf senses going haywire.

“Is everything, alright?” she asks, her big blue eyes wide and guileless.

I shake my head slowly because no, nothing is alright.

And I force myself to lower my hands slowly—so I don’t do anything stupid.

Like grab onto her for dear life.

I close my eyes, but when I reopen them, Dina is still standing right there.

She looks confused. And so fucking cute. Her brows are lifted in pure, radiant curiosity.

Eyes sparkling like she’s already amused at my expense.

“So, what’s not alright? I’ll fix it if I can,” she says, and goddamn, but the way she looks, like sweetness and sin wrapped up in soft cotton, makes my brain short circuit.

Horace? Zero help.

He just grins wider and flashes the screen in her direction like a kid tattling at recess.

“What’s that?” she asks, cocking her head to the side so her pretty curls hover just out of reach.

“Oh, nothing,” he says, oozing fake innocence. “Just that Date to Mate thinks you’re this loser’s perfect match.”

Dina blinks.

Looks at the screen.

Looks at me.

Then?

She laughs.

Not a little giggle.

No, no.

Full-on, head-tipping, curl-bouncing laughter that hits me square in the ego and somehow makes me grin, anyway.

“Well,” she says after catching her breath, eyes twinkling with far too much delight, “looks like you’re stuck with me, Wolfman.”

I groan and scrub my face again. “It’s a glitch. Gotta be.”

“Wow. Rude,” she says, mock-pouting before smirking again. “Here I was, thinking you were into me after you practically undressed me with your eyes earlier.”

“I did not,” I protest, feeling my ears heat up.

Okay. Maybe I did. A little.

Wolves are visual creatures, alright?

“Mm hmm,” she hums, clearly not buying it.

She leans closer, eyes dancing with mischief.

This woman is different. I mean, my experience with dating humans is pretty much nil, but she isn’t playing coy.

Like not at all.

I mean, I know she knows about me. About us. Supernaturals.

Because of her sister and Horace. But still. I have to admit I’m surprised she isn’t running away, screaming bloody murder.

Not that I would.

Murder her or anything.

No, but we could eat her, My Wolf unhelpfully supplies.

“Admit it. You’re secretly thrilled. Fate picked me. I’m adorable. I make killer pizza. And,” she winks, “I promise I won’t hex you.”

“That is a point in your favor,” I deadpan, fighting the very inconvenient urge to smile.

She steps back, balancing the pizza on her hip, head tilted playfully.

“Well, don’t stress too much, Mr. Fluffles. We don’t have to rush. You know, I mean, unless you can’t help yourself. But that’s okay. I believe in second chances.”

“Nice. Real nice,” I mutter, but even I can hear the reluctant amusement in my voice.

She starts to walk away, but glances over her shoulder with a saucy grin that does dangerous things to my insides.

“Better brush up on your flirting skills, and maybe search for some fun date stuff,” she calls.

“Fun date stuff?”

“Yeah. Because if we’re 99% compatible, I expect witty banter with my hot fudge sundae.”

“Is that so?”

“That’s the minimum, Spike. Go on. Get googling.”

I stare after her, jaw slack, while Horace makes some extremely unnecessary kissy noises from behind me.

“What a darling girl,” Uncle Uzzi chimes in.

“A darling girl? Uncle Uzzi, she’s human. It won’t work.”

“Oh, son, I would not tell the Fates that,” he replies easily, kinda like he’s narrating my downfall.

“Face it. You’re doomed,” Horace the asshole adds.

I groan, slumping back in my chair and feeling like I’ve just been hit by a Mack truck.

This can’t be happening.

Except it is.

Because in the great cosmic game of life Doug the Lone Wolf? Yeah, he ain’t alone no more.

Apparently, I just got matched.

And judging by the way Dina’s still smiling at me from across the room?

I might be a lot of things, but deep down, even I know they’re all right.

I’m so, so screwed.

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Chapter 7

Dina

Friday Night (technically very early Saturday morning), I am finally in my own room.

Closing the pizzeria is always a long process, but one of our cleaning crew didn't show and I had to pick up the slack. So yeah, I got in way later than usual. And I broke a nail.

But the weird thing is I don't even care.

And I know it is all because of him. Doug.

The Werewolf.

I flop back onto my bed with a satisfied sigh, hair wrapped in a towel, skin soft and clean from a long, steamy shower that successfully banished pizza grease, flour, and whatever awkward, maybe magical, tension clung to me after the weirdest shift ever.

The sheets are cool, the room dim and peaceful, and for the first time all day, everything feels calm.

Until my phone buzzes.

I glance at the screen, and my lips quirk when I see the notification:

A familiar glowing pink logo sits at the top of the screen, and I can't help but bite my lip.

It's the Date to Mate App.

DATE TO MATE INBOX

YOU HAVE A NEW MESSAGE FROM DOUG.

Oh ho.

"Look who caved," I murmur and don a pair of tiny PJs, perfect for the heat of the season.

I pull the towel off my head and finger-brush my shortish curls. I have a lot of hair. It's thick and texturized, so I keep it cut right above my shoulders.

I'm usually on the go and don't have the time or the inclination for elaborate hairstyles. And I can't do ponytails because they give me a headache.

Anyway, back to the Big Bad Wolf finally figuring out how apps work.

I snuggle deeper into the pillows and tap it open, half-expecting the text to be something gruff or begrudging.

DOUG

So, is it too soon to lodge a formal complaint about being cursed into dating?

I grin instantly.

DINA

Depends. Are you about to say something charming or are you going to scare me off with grumpy PI energy?

DOUG

Define charming.

I'm not great with soft stuff.

My idea of sweet talk is "You don't look like a dumpster fire. Wanna grab dinner and fuck?"

I snort out loud. Is this guy for real? He's probably trying to scare me off. But I have to tell you, I'm intrigued.

I mean, I know he has a rep, and yeah, Carina pulled me into her office before she left with Horace and gave me the third degree.

She even brought up safe sex, using protection, followed by a warning not to fall for some sexy Shifter moves because apparently they can do things with their mouths no humans can do—which I promise is nothing I ever want to hear from my sister's mouth. Ever.

So gross.

Still, nothing she said makes me want to not follow through on this thing with Doug. Beneath the bandages and bee stings, the man is fine as hell.

DINA

Wow. Be still my beating heart.

You sure know how to sweep a girl off her feet, Wolfman.

DOUG

What can I say? I'm a catch.

Slightly hexed. Chronically unlucky. But I grill a mean steak.

I should warn you though, I also growl, I bite (playfully), and I'm house trained.

I laugh so hard I startle the cat, who gives me a death glare and curls up tighter.

Oh, this is dangerous.

Doug's self-deprecating humor is just the kind of thing I like.

I should not find this so hot. And yet, I do.

DINA

So, is this your idea of flirting?

DOUG

No. This is just my natural charming self. Flirting requires effort.

I bite my lip, heat pooling low as my fingers hover over the keys.

Two can play this game.

DINA

I see. Well, go on then. Let's see it.

Flirt, Wolf. Impress me.

There's a pause.

Then my phone buzzes again.

DOUG

Time to get off the app, Sunshine. Text me your number.

My stomach flips. But I do it. I send him my cell number and four seconds later I have an incoming text message.

DOUG

You're in bed right now, aren't you?

DINA

Who is this?

DOUG

Who is this? How many guys you got texting you tonight—never mind, I can't think about that or I'll go Wolf. Now, answer the question, Sunshine.

DINA

Maybe.

DOUG

Yeah, you are. I bet you still have a pink comforter, and an eyelet trimmed pillowcase.

Bet your hair's still damp from the shower.

Bet you're under the covers, warm and soft, looking at your screen and wondering what it'd be like if I wasn't cursed and bruised to hell and actually there.

Holy. Hell.

Okay.

Now, that's some prime time flirting.

I took a moment to swallow my jitters before typing again. Slower now because my thumbs are suddenly clumsy.

DINA

Good for you, Doug. You're doing so much better now.

DOUG

Oh, Sunshine, this is nothing.

You have no idea what I really wanna do to you.

DINA

Tell me.

DOUG

If I were there, I wouldn't just flirt.

I'd make you forget all about my bad luck.

I'd make you forget your name, Geraldine Coppola.

My cheeks are burning.

This escalated fast.

And dammit if I don't love it.

Before I can respond, my phone rings.

It's him.

Doug.

Oh.

Oh boy.

Chapter 8

Dina

My fingers hesitate only a second before I answer.

“Hey, Wolfman,” I say, breathless, trying to play it cool.

His voice comes through, rough and low and full of heat.

“Couldn’t wait for you to type back. You’re too slow.”

“Am I?” I tease, tightening my legs instinctively under the blanket.

“Yeah. And I’ve been thinking, Sunshine.”

His voice drops an octave and goes straight to throbbing pulse zone.

“Sounds dangerous. Don’t hurt yourself, now.”

“Ha! You really are a firecracker, aren’t you?”

I chuckle softly because this kind of thing? This kind of naughty flirting with him? It just feels so good. So right .

“Truth is, I wanted to hear your voice. You know, you sound real pretty when you get worked up, Sunshine.”

Oh, hell.

I bite my lip.

“You’re very confident for someone who spent last night losing to hornets.”

He chuckles darkly.

“I do, huh? Well, cocky is kinda my middle name. But I promise to make it up to you. Close your eyes.”

The command is recognizable, but I don’t mind.

I do what he says.

“Tell me,” he murmurs, his rumble voice like silk and sin, “what are you wearing right now?”

“A tank top and sleep shorts,” I admit, breath hitching. “Nothing special.”

He groans softly, and it’s filthy .

“Color?”

“Pink,” I confess.

“Fuck. Bet you look gorgeous. Bet you’re warm and soft and already squirming, aren’t you, sweetheart?”

I am.

Holy hell, I am.

His words roll over me, dirty and reverent all at once, and before long, the teasing turns into heavy breathing, soft moans, and frantic whispers between us.

“Slip your fingers past the elastic waistband of those little bitty shorts.”

I don’t know how he knows they are tiny, but he isn’t wrong.

His voice is pure sin, rough and commanding in my ear, curling around my spine and sliding molten-hot straight between my thighs.

Shit.

Yes.

I don’t even hesitate. My free hand slides down my stomach, fingers slipping past the waistband and over soft, sensitive skin until they find exactly where I need them.

“Are you wet for me, Sunshine?”

His voice drops to a low, wicked rasp.

I nod frantically, then remember he can’t see me.

“Words,” he growls, all gravel and need.

Like the very idea of me getting off without properly answering him pisses him off on a primal level.

“Y-yes,” I whisper, breath hitching as my fingers brush against my own slick heat.

“Oh God, I’m soaked.”

Just from his voice. From the way he says my name, like I’m already his.

“Good girl.”

Those two little words hit like a lightning strike, and I actually whimper, thighs instinctively squeezing together as pleasure hums through me.

He chuckles darkly, and I can practically picture his smug grin on the other end of the line.

“Yeah, you like that, don't you? Like being my good girl, doing exactly what I say.”

I moan softly, already starting to rub lazy, torturous circles as instructed, my hips shifting restlessly beneath the sheets.

“That's it,” he murmurs approvingly. “Touch yourself for me, Sunshine. Nice and slow. I want you aching for it. For me.”

I obey, because how could I not?

Every filthy, possessive word from his mouth drags me deeper into the haze, into the deliciously dirty spell he’s weaving.

“Describe it,” he demands, his voice harsher now, raw with his own growing need. “Tell me what those sweet fingers are doing. Tell me how wet and needy you are for me.”

I shudder, breathless. “I-I'm circling my clit. It's so sensitive. I'm so wet, Doug. It's- it's dripping down my thighs.”

He lets out a low, feral sound that sends goosebumps skittering across my skin.

“Fuck. That’s it, Baby Girl. Make yourself nice and messy for me. Imagine it’s my fingers instead. Imagine how deep I’d go. How rough I’d be.”

I whimper again, sliding two fingers inside just like I know he wants.

“Doug,” I moan.

“Yeah, you want me deep, don't you, Sunshine?” His voice is pure heat now, heavy and possessive.

“Want me to stretch that pretty pussy, make you take it all? Want to feel me filling you up, fucking you slow until you beg for me to go harder?”

“Yes,” I gasp, fingers pumping faster now, hips rocking helplessly. “God, yes. Harder, please.”

“You'd take it so good, wouldn't you?” he groans, sounding wrecked now too. “Such a good girl. My girl.”

Those words send me spiraling, and I can't hold back anymore.

“I'm-I'm so close. I'm gonna,” I whimper desperately, every nerve ending lit up like fireworks.

“Do it, Dina. Now. Fucking let go,” Doug snarls, voice tight with his own need. “Come for me, Sunshine. Come while I imagine your tight, soaked pussy clenching all over my cock.”

That's all it takes.

Pleasure slams into me like a freight train, my back arching, mouth falling open on a broken cry as I shatter apart in his name.

“Shit. Oh, fuck! Doug!”

I hear him curse on the other end, deep and guttural, like he’s right there with me, losing control as he listens to me fall apart for him.

“Fucking hell, Baby,” he pants, and I hear the telltale hitch in his breath, the groan as he comes right along with me, even from miles away.

For a few seconds, all I can hear is heavy breathing.

His and mine tangled across the phone line like we just burned up the connection between us.

Then he speaks again, voice soft now. Rough but tender.

“Sunshine,” he murmurs, and somehow my name in his voice feels just as intimate as the orgasm I’m still floating down from.

“Yeah?” I whisper, boneless and wrecked in the best way.

“Shit,” Doug mutters on his end, voice full of awe and sated exhaustion. “You’re dangerous, Dina.”

I laugh weakly. “You’re the one who called me, Wolfboy.”

There’s a pause. A softer edge creeps into his voice.

“Maybe I should make this official. Meet you tomorrow. Take you out. Proper date

and all.”

My heart somersaults in my chest.

“Yeah?” I ask, feeling like a teenager with a hopeless crush.

“Yeah,” he says. “Saturday night. You and me. I’ll even wear real pants.”

I laugh again, feeling stupidly giddy.

“Deal.”

“Mm. I hope you're ready for tomorrow night,” he says, already sounding smug again. “Because this? This was just a preview.”

I laugh breathlessly, completely and utterly undone.

“Bring it on, Fido. I can handle you,” I challenge softly, already half in love with the idea of what’s coming next.

And as I drift off into satisfied sleep, one thing is very, very clear.

Tomorrow night can’t come fast enough.

“Night, Dina,” he says softly, and somehow it feels too intimate for just a phone call.

“Night, Wolfman,” I whisper back.

When I hang up, I can’t stop smiling.

Or thinking about the way he made me feel.

Maybe this isn't just fun and games.

Maybe this is something.

By the time I drift off to sleep, one very clear, very premature thought sneaks through.

I think I'm gonna marry that Wolf.

Chapter 9

Doug

I wake up with a raging hard-on and absolutely no idea what day it is.

Which, honestly, feels about right for my life these days.

I scrub a hand over my face and stare at the ceiling of Horace's ridiculously fancy penthouse spare bedroom, replaying the previous night's very educational phone call.

I tried to go home. But the angry cloud of swarming hornets that seemed glued to the side entrance of my apartment kept me away.

My former client didn't exactly keep up her part of the bargain, and I had a phone call in to Uncle Uzzi already, seeing if he could somehow convince her to lighten up the hex a touch more.

Lucky for me, Carina answered the buzzer when I retreated to Horace's place. Though, I suppose now it's her place too.

The Bear wasn't inclined to let me in, but his mate insisted. So, at least I got to spend the night inside on a bed and not trying to sleep in my truck.

Trust me when I tell you with my height and bulk, that wasn't a very comfortable prospect.

Speaking of last night...my mind immediately went to the curvy, sexy goddess of a woman I spent the night talking dirty to.

Geezus.

I admit it feels wrong to dismiss it as a one and done.

Last night wasn't just phone sex.

That was art.

And Dina? That sweet, smiley pizza slinger?

She's a lot more than meets the eye.

Apparently, the female turns into a wicked little siren when the lights are out and the phone's pressed tight to her lips.

I groan and turn over, dragging the pillow over my head like that'll block out the memory of her soft moans and breathy whimpers that are still lodged firmly in my brain.

And my cock, for that matter.

Not that I'm complaining.

Nope. Definitely not.

Last night was, well , it was incredible.

Fun. Hot. Surprising.

And yeah, my Wolf is still doing metaphorical backflips like a damn cheerleader.

Mate! Mate! Mine!

I groan again.

“Calm the fuck down,” I mutter, smacking the side of my head like that’s going to silence the primal idiot living rent free inside my soul.

Because here’s the thing.

Last night? That wasn’t mate stuff.

That was scratch-an-itch stuff.

A little mutual stress relief.

Two adults blowing off steam.

That’s it.

That has to be it.

Simple. Easy.

No complicated feelings or strings or soulmate nonsense.

I don’t do that.

Mates?

Forever love?

Someone to come home to?

That's not in the cards for me.

Hell, it never was.

I'm the guy people hire to dig up dirt and catch cheaters.

I sleep in late, forget birthdays, and eat sad bachelor dinners straight from the can.

I am not the meet-cute, fall-in-love, build-a-white-picket-fence-together type.

Some Wolves are built for love stories. But that was never gonna be me.

Lone Wolf, remember?

Who the hell would want to take me on?

Even if I was inclined to give it a try, the idea of disappointing her? Fuck. It's too much.

I can't do it.

I won't.

She deserves someone better. Someone not broken like I am.

See, I'm built for solo missions and keeping everyone at arm's length.

Because when people get close? That's when shit goes sideways.

When I was younger, Pack life taught me that.

When my first and only girlfriend bailed the minute things got hard, it just hammered it home.

So yeah. Dina?

Sweet, sunshine-soaked Dina with her pizza flour dusted curls, pink pjs, and snarky smile?

She deserves better than me.

Hell, she deserves a fated mate who knows how to be one.

Not some grumpy PI whose biggest accomplishment this week was surviving homicidal hornets and a vengeful Witch with abandonment issues.

But we can have some fun.

Tonight, when I take her out, I'll let her know all I have to offer is some sweaty time between the sheets.

But that's it.

Because as much as I hated to admit it, last night was fucking amazing and I can only imagine what it'll be like to be there in person when she comes apart.

Last night was exactly what it needed to be.

And tonight, maybe we can go a little farther. No complications. Just sex. If she is willing.

Hot. Temporary. No pressure sex.

My mind is made up, even if my Wolf is snarling and scratching at my insides.

Take it or leave it, Wolf. We have her on my terms or not at all.

Bargaining with my inner beast is never easy. Especially when the fucker goes all silent on me.

I shake my head and stand, remaking the bed because I am not an inconsiderate houseguest, fuck you very much .

My phone buzzes on the nightstand, catching my attention.

I glare at it.

But my Wolf perks up like a teenager getting a text from his crush.

I shouldn't care.

I don't care.

It's probably nothing.

I roll over and snatch the phone.

DINA

Morning, Wolfboy. Still planning on taking me out tonight? Or was last night your best work?

I stare at the screen for a solid ten seconds before exhaling loudly.

Fuck.

Because right there, right in that teasing, flirty message , is everything I should ignore.

Everything I know is dangerous.

Because sweet Dina isn't just looking for a good time.

She's thinking about tonight.

And tomorrow.

And maybe even forever.

Meanwhile, me? I'm still here thinking maybe we can satisfy this itch.

Scratch each other where it hurts. Enjoy it while it lasts.

That's all this should be.

That's all it can be.

But deep down, even as I type back something flirty and casual, I know the truth.

DOUG

Morning, Baby Girl. You just wear something pretty (and maybe with easy access),
Sunshine and I'll give you a whirl.

My Wolf isn't satisfied with temporary .

And if I'm not careful, this thing with Dina?

It's gonna break every single rule I've lived by since the day I left the Pack.

Chapter 10

Dina

Have you heard of the morning after blues? Me too.

But surprisingly, I am not feeling any.

Nope. Not me.

In fact, I practically skipped to my first class this morning—yeah I know, weekend classes might sound bad, but I love mine.

Today was productive. My professor was constructively critical. But I leave my art class feeling good.

No, scratch that —feeling great.

I nailed my charcoal piece, my professor complimented my composition (which basically never happens), and for once, I wasn't internally screaming about deadlines or customer complaints or whether mozzarella was technically a food group— it so is, by the way.

Today feels light.

Hopeful.

Easy.

Happy.

I am glowing with it, until suddenly, a big, fat shadow falls over me, blocking out the sun.

I'm halfway down the steps of the fine arts building, tote bag over one shoulder, still riding my little high, when I hear a voice I'd hoped I'd permanently muted.

“Dina, hey.”

I freeze.

No.

No no no.

I turn slowly and there he is.

Eric. The Human Dumpster Fire himself.

Complete with his signature backwards hat, smug grin, and that irritatingly casual stance like the world just owes him something.

He's leaning against the railing like he's starring in his own cologne ad.

If that cologne was Eau de Overconfidence and Shitty Taste in Clothes .

“Eric,” I say flatly, gripping my tote tighter. “What do you want?”

He flashes a smile that used to charm me, but now makes my skin crawl.

“I was thinking about swinging by Pizza Girls later. You know, we can catch up. Talk.”

His beady eyes rake over me from head to foot, and suddenly I feel dirty and not in a sexy way. More in a I want to take a shower right now way.

I blink.

“Talk? About what?”

He shrugs, stepping closer, too close, and drops his voice like he’s auditioning for a bad soap opera.

“Us, Deen. I mean, you can’t tell me you don’t still think about what we had.”

I hate that he calls me Deen. And I’m kind of stunned that he is really trying this nonsense.

I snort so loudly my professor, who is walking behind me gathering her things, glances over.

Oh great. An audience.

Exactly what I needed right now.

I force a polite smile because Professor Wren is literally within earshot, and I refuse to be that girl who causes a scene on campus.

“Eric, there’s nothing to talk about,” I say sweetly through clenched teeth. “You and I

are ancient history. Fossils, even.”

He looks momentarily confused, but recovers fast with a lazy smirk.

“Come on, Deen. We always had chemistry?—”

“Nope. We didn’t, and I have nothing to discuss with you,” I cut him off, grabbing my bag more firmly. “Goodbye, Eric.”

I turn before he can toss out another pathetic attempt at rekindling and head toward the parking lot, with my pulse ticking a little too fast.

Ugh.

What a freaking joke.

If chemistry meant him forgetting my birthday two years in a row and treating me like an afterthought unless he was horny or hungry, then sure.

We were practically Einstein and Madame Curie.

I make it to my car and sit for a minute, willing the frustration to leave me.

I don’t need this energy in my space today.

Not when I have a real date with a real man tonight.

As if on cue, my phone pings.

Doug

[Image: dopey husky with its tongue out and crossed eyes]

When you accidentally open the camera app but still try to look cool.

Also me, getting ready for our date later.

I stare at the screen for a second, and then I'm laughing.

Loud, genuine laughter that bubbles up so fast it actually makes my eyes water a little.

God. He's such a dork.

Immediately I reply with a laughter emoji.

Because this bit of silly nothing? It's really, really endearing.

Eric never made me laugh like this.

Not once.

He made me self-conscious.

Made me feel lucky to have his attention, even when it came in breadcrumbs.

Being chubby meant I spent a long time in relationships convinced I should just accept what I got.

That I should be grateful for any scraps of affection because, well, I wasn't anyone's fantasy.

It took me years to unlearn that toxic crap.

Years of figuring out that I was worthy, and beautiful, and didn't need to settle for assholes who made me feel small.

And yet sometimes that old doubt tries to creep back in.

But Doug?

So far, Doug makes it easy to ignore those voices.

He makes me laugh.

He flirts like I'm irresistible.

He checks in.

He wants to make plans.

For once, it's not complicated or confusing.

For once, I'm not decoding texts or wondering where I stand.

For once, someone seems really into me.

I stare at his silly text and grin so wide it hurts.

Maybe this is it, I think, heart flipping as I find a meme that's equally goofy and flirty to send back to him.

Maybe this thing with Doug is the start of something real.

Something easy.

Something worth it.

And tonight?

Tonight, I'm going to wear my favorite dress, style my curls, and walk into our date ready to see if my Wolfman really is as good in person as he is over the phone.

Spoiler alert: I really, really hope he is.

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Chapter 11

Doug

I am such a fucking jerk.

The thought hits me like a freight train as I stare down at my phone screen... again.

Yep. I did it.

Again.

I texted her.

A dumb dog meme.

A stupid, grinning mutt with its tongue hanging out and some ridiculous caption.

It's not even that funny.

Not even that clever.

And yet, I sent it.

Because she'll laugh.

Because I want her to laugh.

Hell, I want to know what her face looks like when she gets it.

I want to hear the soft little snort I know she makes when something catches her off guard.

I want to imagine her curled up on her bed, phone in hand, cheeks pink as she shakes her head at me like Doug, you're such a dork .

What. The. Hell.

I sit there, phone still in hand, rubbing my face like I can physically scrub the pathetic out of myself.

What's wrong with me?

I'm not this guy.

I'm not the text-happy, emoji-sending, can't-stop-thinking-about-her asshole who looks for reasons to connect.

I'm supposed to be casual.

Cool.

Detached.

The bad boy she should stay away from.

Not whatever the fuck this is.

Not some lovesick teenager who wants to send every meme, every stupid

observation, every this reminded me of you thing I see all damn day.

But here I am.

Again.

Every time I see something silly? I want to share it with her.

Every time I stumble across something pretty? I want to know what she'd think about it.

Hell, I passed a damn pizza-themed potholder at the store earlier and almost bought it just so I could text her a pic just to say thought of you, Sunshine .

Pathetic.

And yeah, I couldn't stop calling her little cutesy nicknames either.

Sunshine. Baby Girl.

I never had the inclination to do that before. In the past, if I called a woman anything other than her name, it was likely because I forgot it.

But not with Dina.

I called her all those things because I wanted to.

Because she felt like that to me.

Like Sunshine.

Like mine.

I am so fucked.

I toss my phone onto the couch like it's personally responsible for this downward spiral.

Except it dings.

My Wolf perks up immediately.

My other half is snapping in my head all snarls and growls like did she text back? Did she laugh? Did she say something sweet?

I actually growl at myself.

“Get a fucking grip,” I mutter, scrubbing a hand through my hair.

But even as I say it, I know the truth.

I'm gone.

I'm so far down this rabbit hole I'm about two seconds away from posting a Date to Mate review praising the frigging app!

“Cursed Lone Wolf finds beautiful pizza sorceress for emotionally reckless snuggles and possible HEA. Hooray for Uncle Uzzi's magical machinations!”

I flop back onto the couch, arm thrown over my face as the realization sinks deeper and deeper into my bones.

This isn't casual anymore.

Not even close.

Because I don't just want Dina.

I crave her.

Her smile.

Her laugh.

The way she bit her lower lip when she was thinking about something in the pizzeria yesterday afternoon.

The way she looked at me like I was worth her time—even though I know damn well I'm not.

And that's the real kicker, isn't it?

That's what's eating me alive from the inside out.

I don't deserve her.

Not even a little.

Not with the mess I carry. Not with the curse still clinging to me. Not with the life I lead.

But none of that seems to matter to my Wolf.

Because every time I try to pull back?

I end up right here.

Staring at my phone.

Texting her.

Again.

And hoping like hell she texts me back.

Please text me back, Sunshine.

Chapter 12

Doug

I tried working for all of three hours today, but my concentration is nil.

“This is insane. Completely fucking insane.”

I pace Horace’s living room like a caged animal, which, let’s face it, I basically am at this point.

My nerves are shot.

My skin still itches, thanks to Mrs. Goyle, Queen of Petty Spells, but I am on the mend.

Thank fuck.

I don’t wanna look like a monster for my date tonight.

Truth is, I feel like a green as grass teenager going on his first date with a girl.

To complicate matters, my mind is stuck on replay of every filthy, addictive sound Dina made last night while I whispered her through what was easily the hottest damn phone call of my life.

So yeah, my new permanent boner is being suffocated in my fucking jeans.

And now?

Now, apparently, the universe thinks I'm ready for more than just a casual encounter no matter how much I protest.

No thanks, Fate. Hard pass.

"I mean, come on," I continue, running a hand through my hair as I turn on Uncle Uzzi and Horace, who are both lounging like they're watching their favorite soap opera.

"There's gotta be a glitch in Date to Mate . Dina and me? No. Nope. Not compatible. She's sunshine and soft curves and smiles. I'm cursed, cranky, and allergic to hope. Not exactly soulmate material."

Horace raises an unimpressed brow.

"Doug, you're literally her match. You saw the app."

"Algorithms can be wrong!" I insist, pointing dramatically at Uzzi. "Tell him, Uncle Uzzi! Horace, you coded this thing with Bear hands or whatever."

Uncle Uzzi smirks like a man who's heard every excuse in the history of single supernatural males and is not buying a word of it.

"My hands are very nimble, thank you. And no, Doug. The app's fine. You? Not fine."

Horace grunts, arms folded over his massive chest.

"Yeah, you're the problem, Wolf. Not the app. Or the lovely Dina."

“Easy with the pet names,” I growl at the amused older Witch.

“Take it easy, dear boy. Why not tell us the real problem?”

“YOU mean the one where I know I’m going to fuck this up and I’m scared to death to even try?”

“Pussy,” coughs Horace.

“Really? Thanks for the support, Asshole,” I mutter, flopping onto the couch like my bones have given up.

Uncle Uzzi leans forward, steepling his fingers like he’s about to lay down divine wisdom.

“Doug, let me be blunt.”

“Like you’re ever not?”

He ignores me.

“You’ve spent your whole life convincing yourself you don’t deserve more. You think being a Lone Wolf, Packless, mateless, friendless, not to mention miserable, is a safer way to live. Easier.”

“Because it is,” I shoot back. “People leave. They get hurt. Hell, I get hurt. Look at me! I’ve spent the last week as a walking, talking PSA for supernatural disaster insurance.”

Uzzi just snorts.

“Right. Because nothing says emotional health like avoiding happiness, just so you don’t risk losing it. Doug, this is exactly what Mrs. Goyle is trying to teach you with her spell!”

Uncle Uzzi is just being honest with me, but dammit if I don’t resent him for it.

Horace jumps in, voice gruff but surprisingly earnest.

“Look, man, I get it. Before Carina, I figured I’d end up old and bitter, fighting with squirrels in the woods and dying alone.”

“That still might happen,” Uzzi mutters— so helpful .

“I thought we were friends, Uncle Uzzi? Never mind,” Horace says, before turning serious again. “Look, the truth is, mating changed everything. Yeah, it’s scary. Yeah, it’s intense. But you know what’s worse? Waking up every day thinking you don’t deserve someone who makes your life better.”

His words hit harder than I want to admit.

“Love,” Uzzi says softly now, “is the only thing that breaks curses, Doug. Not half-assed attempts. Not scratching an itch. Real love. Effort. Vulnerability. That’s why Goyle’s spell is still clinging to you like supernatural herpes.”

“Classy,” I mutter, rubbing my face.

“You need to try,” Uzzi finishes. “Not sleep with Dina and ghost her when it scares you. Not shove her away the second she gets close. You, my friend, need to really try.”

“Fuck,” I breathe, leaning back and staring at the ceiling like it has answers.

Because they're right.

I know they're right.

But knowing doesn't mean I'm ready.

Dina is just— Dina.

Too sweet.

Too bright.

Too damn good.

And me?

I'm the guy people hire to catch cheaters and lie for a living.

The guy who sleeps in temporary places and never unpacks all his boxes.

The guy whose last serious relationship ended with them calling me emotionally unavailable—and that was putting it nicely.

What the hell do I know about being a mate?

Uzzi claps me on the knee like this is settled.

“You've got your date tonight, Wolf. You're going. You're smiling. And you're going to try. Because if you don't?”

Horace nods grimly.

“The curse gets worse. And no one’s gonna wanna hang out with Cursed Doug when your bad luck starts setting shit on fire.”

“Great,” I grumble, dragging my hands down my face again. “No pressure or anything.”

Uzzi just laughs as he stands and heads for the door.

“Pressure makes diamonds, Doug. Or in your case, maybe a slightly less emotionally constipated Wolf.”

Horace follows him out, leaving me alone in the Bear’s penthouse with my spiraling thoughts and the Date to Mate reminder still blinking on my phone.

Tonight.

I’m seeing Dina tonight.

And while my Wolf is pacing excitedly like yes, ours, mine, mate , I simply can’t stop thinking.

This isn’t forever. Can’t be forever.

But maybe— just maybe —it can be for now.

And for a guy like me?

That’s already terrifying as fuck.

Chapter 13

Dina

“O kay,” I say, adjusting the neckline of my wrap dress nervously in the mirror, “be honest. Do I look like I’m trying too hard?”

This really is one of my best dresses.

I mean, it hugs my curves perfectly and makes me feel pretty. But what if I look desperate instead?

Carina perches on the edge of my bed, legs crossed, wearing that big-sister-knows-best smirk that both comforts and annoys the hell out of me.

She’s been slowly moving her things out of our rental and into Horace’s penthouse, which both sucks and rocks at the same time.

Because yay to having more room and less waiting time to get in the bathroom. But serious boo to me and MJ missing our big sis.

“You look perfect,” she says immediately, waving her hand like it’s obvious. “Sexy and cute at the same time. Not to mention the tatas are on point!”

“Carina!”

“What? You got great tits, Dina, own that shit. Confidence is king. What are you so

worried about?”

“What if he hates it or thinks I’m being too obvious?”

“Girl, this is Doug we’re talking about. He is literally a Wolf. I don’t think he has a problem with obvious. But fine, your dress is flirty but also makes you seem fun and approachable. He’ll pick up all the kiss me later vibes, trust me.”

I roll my eyes. “You are so annoying.”

“Thank you,” she says, completely unfazed.

Then her gaze softens a little, and she rests her chin in her palm, watching me fuss with my hair.

“But seriously, you look amazing. And you deserve to. I mean, this is big. You and Doug? Fate literally shoved you together.”

I pause, blinking at her in the mirror.

“I mean, I guess so, but it’s really just the app, right? He hasn’t said anything like that to me.”

“Have you seen him since the other day?” Carina asks.

“Um, no. But we talked,” I reply, but I heard my voice go all high at the end and I know she did, too.

“Talked?”

Carina crosses her arms, but I ignore her death glare.

“Yeah. We talked . Anyway, that whole fated mates thing didn’t come up. Besides, it?—”

“Is everything,” Carina cuts in, voice going dreamy in a way that makes my stomach flutter.

“Seriously, Dina,” she continues, her expression turning soft and sincere now, “being fated is special. It’s not just some gimmick Uncle Uzzi made up, so folks use his app. It’s not just about some instalove trope or whatever. It’s about finding the one person in the universe who makes everything just click .”

“Just click?”

“Exactly! See, your fated mate is the person who gets you without you having to explain yourself. Who makes you feel safe and wanted and like you’re exactly where you’re supposed to be.”

I swallow, my heart thudding a little harder.

“That’s a lot, Car. I don’t know if I have that in me, or if he is even capable of feeling like that about me.”

Carina laughs softly and stands, coming over to fix a stray curl on my head like she used to when we were kids.

“It is very possible. Don’t you dare tell yourself otherwise,” she says. “But it’s also so easy once it happens. Being with Horace? It’s not perfect all the time, but it’s right. There’s no wondering where I stand. No games. Just this certainty that we’re meant to be.”

I bite my lip, staring at my reflection.

Certainty.

God, after years of dating guys who made me feel like a convenience, or worse, a last resort, it all sounds so incredible.

Too good to be true.

And as much as my head is shouting warning bells, my heart is galloping at full steam ahead.

“Do you think Doug feels it, too?” I ask, voice small and hopeful.

Carina just grins, wicked and knowing.

“Sweetheart, if he’s half the Shifter Horace is, he’s probably already halfway feral trying to figure out how to make you his. These guys don’t play it cool when fate knocks them on their asses.”

I laugh, but it comes out breathless.

Because part of me really, really wants to believe that.

That this isn’t just fun.

That tonight could be the start of everything.

Carina kisses my cheek and grabs her purse.

“You’ve got this, Dina. Now go knock your Wolf off his feet, er , paws.”

I snort a laugh.

As she leaves, I glance at my reflection one more time, smoothing my dress and taking a steadying breath.

Fated mates. Certainty. No more settling.

I square my shoulders and smile.

“Okay, Doug,” I whisper to myself. “Let’s see if you’re ready for your fate.”

Chapter 14

Dina

By the time I get to Doug's apartment, I'm a bundle of nerves wrapped in breathable cotton and sass.

The wrap dress I chose hugs my curves just right, dipping low enough to be flirty but not obscene, cinching at my waist like the designer knew just how to highlight women built like me in all our plus size glory.

I even wore sandals with wedge heels.

Yup. Heels .

Not my usual comfy flats or sneaks.

I don't know what's wrong with me.

I haven't felt this giddy about a date in, well, ever , actually.

So when Doug opens the door, looking very much like temptation itself in a pair of blue jeans that mold to his thick thighs and a dark tee that fits him entirely too well, all broad shoulders and easy smirk, I nearly melt on the spot.

But before I can say anything, I glance past him into his place and frown.

“Wait. I thought you were having wasp issues?” I ask, arching a brow as I step inside.

Doug rubs the back of his neck sheepishly, closing the door behind me.

“Yeah, uh, got them gone before inviting you over.”

He flashes a grin that is equal parts smug and boy caught cheating at poker .

“I know people,” he adds with a wink.

I laugh softly, because of course he does.

Doug is the type to handle his supernatural hornet infestation and still have time to text me silly memes before cooking a full meal apparently, if the scents permeating in the air are anything to go by.

His attic apartment is warm and surprisingly homey. Masculine, sure, I mean, it’s all wrought iron, dark stained wood, and leather.

But it’s unmistakably clean and uncluttered.

Spacious, really, especially for the city.

There’s a vase on the table. It’s tiny but pretty, filled with half a dozen white carnations.

“I love carnations! Totally underrated flower,” I tell him, and he answers with a dip of his chin.

Sexy, sweet man.

The faint scent of something delicious wafts from the kitchen.

“So, did you cook for me?” I ask, genuinely surprised, and secretly thrilled as I slide the light shawl I have around my shoulders off and drape it over the back of his couch.

Doug shoves his hands in his pockets and shifts on his heels like a nervous schoolboy.

“I mean, yeah. I figured I’d take you out, but then I thought why not cook instead? More private. Less chance of me running into vengeful ex-clients or, you know, swarms of insects.”

He pauses, glancing at the neatly set table.

“But now that I’m saying it out loud, it probably sounds lame. You probably wanted something fancier.”

I blink at him, then shake my head firmly.

“No. This is perfect , Doug.”

His shoulders relax a little, and when he guides me over to the small, tastefully decorated dining table, I feel this rush of affection for him.

He clearly tried.

And honestly?

The spread is honestly impressive.

Cheese, crackers, pickled veggies, and tomato bruschetta on toasted French bread slices sit perfectly arranged on the table like he's trying to win Date Night Olympics .

"This is great," I say, smiling as I grab a little of everything.

I eat, because obviously I do. Besides, the food is really good.

But I can't help noticing Doug watching me. Intently.

Like weirdly intently.

Like he's memorizing the way I chew.

I pause, raising a brow.

"Uh, do I have something in my teeth or what?"

Doug blinks like I snapped him out of a trance.

"What? No. No, you're good."

Then he grins, boyish and a little flustered.

"You've just got the best mouth, Dina."

I choke a little, laughing.

"Do I?"

"Yeah," he says, already sounding like he regrets how fast that came out. He clears his throat. "Um, are you ready for the main course?"

I nod, still laughing softly as he flashes me a crooked smile.

It's the kind of grin that pretty much ruins me for every other man on Earth.

He rises from his chair effortlessly, moving with this casual, predatory grace that has no business being that sexy.

And okay, yes, I absolutely look at his ass while he walks away.

I'm human. Sue me.

"Here ya go, Sunshine," he says, returning and placing a fully loaded plate in front of me like he's delivering treasure.

Perfectly seared steak.

Herb roasted potatoes.

A side of steamed green beans that somehow don't look sad or obligatory.

I stare at the plate, jaw dropping.

"This is—wow! Oh my God, Doug! You're secretly a chef or something?"

He snorts, shaking his head like I'm crazy.

"Who, me? Nah. My landlady's a Kitchen Witch. She taught me a few things so I wouldn't starve or poison myself."

"Well, can she teach me? Because I'm like seriously impressed," I say, completely serious as I dig in.

Every bite is perfect. The kind of perfect that makes you hum without meaning to.

I glance up and Doug is watching again, but this time with a smug little smile, clearly pleased.

His eyes flash gold and my insides tremble.

He is so damn sexy, I drop my fork. Doug shakes his head and tsks.

“Eat your dinner like a good girl, Baby. Or you don’t get any dessert.”

I almost choke on the potato in my mouth.

Dirty. Hot.

I think he’s talking about sex, only he dips his head in the direction of the kitchen counter, and I glance that way.

He isn’t lying about dessert.

Right on the polished surface, I spy a small, decadent chocolate cake, practically glowing under the lights like the crown jewel of date night.

I lean back, already full but so, so ready for dessert.

“Doug,” I say, shaking my head and grinning. “You’re making the rest of the male population look really bad right now.”

He winks, lifting his fork with the last bite of his steak to my mouth.

“Good. That’s the plan. Try the rare,” he says.

I do, and I moan as the perfectly seasoned, tender meat hits my palette.

“Mmm,” I swallow. “Color me impressed, Wolfman. Didn’t know you could chef it up like this.”

Doug smirks as he refills my wineglass, just like the perfect gentleman.

“What can I say? I’m full of surprises. Also, YouTube exists for a reason, Sunshine.”

We both laugh as we finish our meal and clean up, and holy hell— the food is good .

Like, really good.

He puts on a pot of coffee, and we flirt the whole time.

All the tension I’ve been feeling smooths away into something easy and playful.

We talk about everything.

My art classes.

Some of his PI disasters.

“You did not find the Polar Bear Alpha wearing a pink tutu and sitting in the corner because his mistress put him in time out!”

“I one hundred percent did, and it took me months to get the image out of my head, believe me.”

I laugh so hard, I snort.

We swap more embarrassing stories.

I admit I had, once upon a time , accidentally used white paint instead of sour cream on a baked potato during an all-nighter.

He confesses he once growled at a teacher in a normal-run school because he'd caught fleas the night before when running in his fur and was so damn cranky after being up all night.

I'm laughing so hard by the time we start to pour the coffee and eat our dessert, my sides hurt.

But when Doug cuts us both thick slices of chocolate cake and carries them over to the couch, the mood shifts just slightly.

Because now we're sitting closer.

His thigh is right against mine.

And as I take my first bite, humming appreciatively, Doug watches me with heat in his eyes.

"Good?" he asks, voice low and rougher than before.

"Good?" I echo, licking a bit of frosting off my fork.

"In fact, Doug, this is positively sinful. You may have just unlocked my ultimate weakness."

Doug chuckles, and before I can process what's happening, he leans in, swiping his thumb at the corner of my mouth.

“You missed a spot,” he murmurs.

My breath catches as his thumb lingers, his eyes darkening with intent.

“You know,” I say slowly, pulse skittering, “if you’re going to steal cake from my face, the least you could do is make it worth my while.”

Doug’s lips curve wickedly.

“Yeah? What would make it worth it, Sunshine?”

Before I can answer, he leans in fully and kisses me.

Soft at first. Testing.

But when I kiss him back— hungry, needy, ready —he groans and deepens it instantly.

His tongue slides against mine, tasting of chocolate and something that is just pure Doug.

Masculine. Hedy. Hot.

His hands find my hips, gripping tightly as he tugs me closer, pulling me practically into his lap.

The kiss turns messy fast, our laughter melting into soft moans and frantic little gasps as the need flares hotter.

“Fuck, Dina,” Doug growls against my lips, kissing me again and again. “Been wanting to do this since the second you walked in wearing this damn dress.”

I shiver, my fingers sliding into his hair as he goes for the ties to my dress, unwrapping me like I'm a present.

"Fuck. Just look at you, Baby."

I moan and kiss him harder.

"Glad you like it. I wore it for you."

He breaks the kiss just long enough to pull the dress off my shoulders, and I help him, reaching for his shirt next.

Dear. God.

The man has more muscles than I can count, and I know my mouth is hanging open.

Doug grips the back of my neck with his hand and forces my gaze to his. He looks at me, eyes glowing like molten gold.

"I'm going to ruin you for every other guy," he says, voice filled with both teasing promise and serious, raw hunger.

"Those are big words, Fido."

My entire body tightens at the implication.

"Big talk, Wolf," I breathe, running my nails lightly down his chest.

"Not talk, Sunshine." His lips curl into a feral smile.

"Promise."

Before I can even sass him back, he's kissing me again, pressing me down into the couch cushions as our coffee and cake sit forgotten on the small table behind me, cooling off while we heat up.

And for the first time in a long time?

I don't care about anything else.

Not my doubts.

Not tomorrow.

Just Doug.

Just this.

And the way his body fits perfectly against mine like he was always meant to be here.

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Chapter 15

Doug

D on't fuck this up, Doug.

Do. Not. Fuck. This. Up.

I'm not sure exactly how we got here.

One minute, we were laughing over cake.

The next?

Dina was crawling into my lap, soft and eager. Next thing I know, her wrap dress untied and gaping open like a gift I've waited my whole damn life to unwrap.

Now?

Now I'm down to my boxers. She's in nothing but a lacy bra and panties that are already soaked through, clinging to every perfect curve like a second skin.

She's straddling me, thighs spread wide around my hips, body pressed against mine as we kiss deep and hungry, devouring each other like we'll starve if we stop.

Fuck me, she's everything.

Her lips taste like chocolate and pure, undiluted need.

She is just as into this as I am, which is saying something because my dick has been hard ever since I saw her.

Her hands are everywhere. In my hair, gripping my shoulders, sliding down my chest with the kind of desperation that makes my cock ache painfully against my briefs.

I grind up against her instinctively, groaning low in my throat when I feel how warm and wet she already is through that thin scrap of lace.

“Doug,” she gasps against my mouth, rocking down just right and making me see fucking stars.

“God, you feel so good.

“You have no idea what you do to me, Sunshine,” I growl, sliding my hands down to her ass and squeezing hard, pulling her tight against me as my cock throbs for her.

I want her.

Want to push those panties aside and fill her up right here, right now.

My Wolf is fucking howling for it, urging me to claim, mark, own .

But no.

Not yet.

Maybe not ever.

Grrrr.

Ouch! Fine, I tell my asshole Wolf.

But not until we talk.

Not until I make sure she knows exactly what this means.

Taking me on as a mate isn't for the faint of heart, and Dina deserves some warning.

Besides, tonight isn't about rushing.

It's about her.

All of her.

Yeah, she might run screaming tomorrow, but that doesn't mean I can't enjoy every single inch of her while I've got her spread across my lap.

"Lift up for me, baby," I murmur, voice low and rough with restraint.

She obeys immediately, rising up slightly as I hook my fingers in the waistband of her panties and drag them down those gorgeous thighs as far as I can.

"I'll buy you more," I grunt as I tug, tearing them from her sweet, hot body.

She shivers as I pull the useless material off completely, tossing it somewhere behind me like it doesn't exist anymore.

Because right now? It doesn't.

It's not important.

Nothing matters but her.

I slide my hands up her thighs, spreading her wider as I lean forward and inhale deeply right against her bare pussy.

Pure. Fucking. Sunshine.

Oh, this woman is gonna be the death of me.

So sweet.

Warm.

Wet.

Her scent slams into me, wild and intoxicating, like promises and sex and something uniquely Dina.

Her hips jerk, needy and restless.

"Doug," she whispers, like she's pleading with me and already breathless, her fingers gripping my hair harder.

"Please, Doug. I need?—"

"I got what you need, Baby Girl," I rasp, dragging my tongue slowly, so fucking slowly, right up her slick seam.

Her entire body jolts like I just shot electricity through her.

“Oh my God!”

I grin wickedly before doing it again, this time flattening my tongue and licking her from base to clit, savoring every drop of her arousal like it’s my new favorite meal.

Because, let’s face it, it really fucking is.

Better than pizza or steak or even fucking chocolate.

“Doug—oh fuck—Doug!”

I growl against her, loving how responsive she is, how she rides my face like she was made to.

I wrap my lips around her clit, sucking gently at first, then harder, flicking the sensitive nub with my tongue until she’s panting and writhing above me, completely lost in sensation.

Her thighs clamp tight around my head, and I couldn’t be happier. Seriously, I know so many women think they’re gonna hurt their partners like this, but they’re not.

And Dina sure ain’t hurtin’ me.

But if death is the price I have to pay for the pleasure of eating her wholly, then I will choose death every fucking time.

Mine.

“Please—please—I’m so close,” she whimpers, voice breaking on the edge of bliss.

“I gotcha. Good girl,” I murmur between licks, teasing her entrance with my fingers

now, sliding two inside her slowly, curling just right until I find that spongy sweet spot that makes her cry out.

“That's it, Sunshine. Let go for me. Come on my tongue.”

She shatters with a scream that echoes through the apartment, pussy clenching and fluttering wildly around my fingers as her orgasm rolls through her like a tidal wave.

I lap up everything she gives me with relish. Fuck, she is beautiful, writhing and moaning, riding out her release. I groan when she shakes and whimpers my name like a prayer.

When she finally collapses against me, boneless and panting, I pull back and lick my lips, staring at her with absolute awe and pure worship shining in my gaze.

“You're fucking perfect,” I tell her simply, because it's true.

Dina opens her eyes slowly, dazed and glowing.

But when she sees the tent still straining my boxers, she bites her lip and gives me the look.

The I want more look.

“You've been taking care of me all night,” she says softly, sliding her hand down between us.

“Let me return the favor, Wolfman.”

Before I can stop her— not that I would —she's tugging my boxers down and freeing my cock.

I suck in a sharp breath when her fingers wrap around me, stroking softly, then firmer, spreading the precum leaking from the tip as she gazes down at me like I'm the best thing she ever saw.

"Geezus. Sunshine," I groan, hips rocking up into her hand.

"Condom?" she asks, voice husky.

I nod frantically, grabbing one from the drawer of the coffee table and rolling it on in record time.

As soon as I'm covered, she positions herself above me, sliding the blunt head of my cock through her soaked folds, teasing us both.

"You're sure?" I ask, gripping her hips tightly, teetering on the edge of sanity.

She leans down, kissing me deeply.

"More than sure."

That's all I need.

With one slow, steady push, I slide into her.

Fuck.

She's tight. So tight.

Hot and wet and squeezing me perfectly, inch by inch, until I'm buried to the hilt.

We both groan at the same time, our heads falling together as we cling to each other.

“Fuck, Baby Girl, you feel incredible,” I rasp, fighting the urge to just start slamming into her.

She shifts her hips experimentally and we both moan again, because holy fuck the friction is everything.

Hot. Wet. Heavy. Perfect.

She starts moving slowly, rolling her hips and grinding down on me, dragging my cock through her fluttering walls in the most delicious, torturous way.

My hands roam everywhere. She feels so good to me. I touch her waist, her hips, her ass, coasting my fingers up her spine to cup the back of her neck as she rides me.

“You're so fucking beautiful,” I pant, watching her bounce and writhe above me, her big tits jiggling and her face flushed with pleasure.

“Doug,” she gasps, getting more frantic now, chasing her next high.

“I'm—I'm close again.”

“So fucking perfect. Show me what you got, Baby Girl, come all over this dick,” I urge, thrusting up into her harder now, losing the slow control as we both start chasing that edge together.

“Come for me, while I'm deep inside you. I wanna feel you pull the cum right from my balls.”

That's all it takes.

She cries out my name, body convulsing as she tightens impossibly around me, her

pussy fluttering wildly as another orgasm crashes over her.

The sensation is too much, too perfect, too fated.

I let go, roaring her name as I spill into the condom, my hips jerking as I ride out the most intense orgasm of my life, locked deep inside my mate.

When we finally collapse together, sweaty and tangled and gasping, I can't stop kissing her.

Soft, reverent kisses now.

Like I'm sealing this thing between us with every brush of my lips.

She smiles lazily against my mouth.

"Wow," she breathes.

I grin, pulling her tight to my chest, already knowing this is so much more than scratching an itch.

"Yeah," I murmur.

"Wow."

There's a lot to do now. A lot that I gotta make right.

Because I know deep down, there's no going back now.

Dina Coppola is mine.

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Chapter 16

Dina

A few days later, I'm at Pizza Girls, closing again.

I don't mind because I am really a night owl.

But the pizzeria is quiet.

Like, too quiet.

No clatter of pans.

No customers laughing and chatting.

No MJ or Carina shouting about oven temps or delivery routes.

Just me.

And my very loud, very nosy thoughts throwing a damn party in my head.

Carina told me what it was like with her and Horace.

Not that I'm trying to compare.

But yeah. I kinda am.

Horace was all I need you forever right from the start with her.

But Doug?

I mean, Doug's amazing when we're together.

Sweet. Hot. Protective.

But when we're not? It feels more like cool, catch ya later .

And honestly? I have no freaking clue where I stand.

Maybe I should just suck it up and ask Uncle Uzzi.

He's literally running the supernatural version of Tinder. If anyone knows what's going on with fated mates, it's him.

But I'm too much of a coward to do that right now. I mean, how would I even manage that?

Hey Uncle Uzzi, can you check my dating chart or something cause I think it must be wrong?

Truth is, it sounds presumptuous. Like blaming his app and not the possibility that maybe Doug doesn't feel that way about me.

Maybe I'm not good enough for him.

I shake my head and get rid of those thoughts. It's not helpful, and quite frankly I'm mad I even went there for a second.

I promised myself a long time ago, I wouldn't ever let any man make me think less of myself for any reason.

And honestly, Doug never gave me cause to think those things.

Maybe he's just emotionally constipated like most men .

Standing behind the counter, sleeves rolled up, surrounded by bowls of prepped veggies, grated cheeses, and stacks of containers for tomorrow's catering order.

The low hum of the fridge is the only sound, and weirdly? I don't mind.

In fact, I prefer it to my annoying thoughts and the otherwise creepy quiet filling the place.

I say a voice command to the little robot gadget thingy Carina hooked up in here—feeling oddly like Judy Jetson for a minute—but that moment of strangeness goes away the second my playlist starts to play softly in the background.

I hum along and dice tomatoes, my thoughts wandering, just like they have all dang day, back to Doug.

It's been twenty-four hours since I've seen him.

Not that I'm counting.

Okay. I'm totally counting.

I know he's working.

Tracking some deadbeat dad who skipped town and left his kid without paying his

child support.

Loser.

And really, what a classic Doug move.

He likes to act like he's this Big Bad Wolf.

Mr. Lone PI who doesn't do feelings or compassion .

None of that messy stuff for him.

But I know better.

I see him.

The way he only takes cases that really matter.

Sure, he grabs the occasional corporate gig to pay the bills, but most of his work?

Helping the people who were left behind.

The scorned.

The forgotten.

The ones who should have been cherished by the people who were supposed to love them best.

Like his landlady, who told me when I left his apartment the other morning what a superhero he was, keeping her safe from her meddling family and trying to buy the

building so she could stay right where she was.

“Those brats. I raised them and now they want to put me away and sell my house! But Douglas is a good boy. He won’t let them!”

“Don’t you worry, Mrs. Giancarlo. It’ll all be okay. I’m this close to having the closing costs any day now,” he told her, holding two of his fingers mere centimeters apart.

The older woman hugged him tight and kissed his cheek, and I swear Doug blushed ten different shades of pink. He was so damn cute, embarrassed and humbled by the praise she offered.

I just smiled and watched, feeling proud of him myself. As if I had any right to. But honestly, can you blame me?

I know Doug might disagree and he’d likely hate hearing it, but he’s a really good guy.

His heart is about a mile wide.

And honestly? It makes me fall for him harder every single day.

Shit. I am, aren’t I?

I pause with my knife in the air, staring off toward the empty dining room as warmth fills my chest.

And I know my feelings are already there.

Falling.

Fallen.

Head over heels for the grumpy Wolf with the smart mouth and the softest damn heart I've ever met.

I smile to myself, cheeks heating at the memory of our last night together.

The way he kissed me.

Like he couldn't get enough of me.

The way he touched me.

Like I was something precious and not just convenient.

Swoon.

I'm so totally gone for him. I should probably tell him.

If I could pin him down long enough.

I'm halfway lost in a daydream about Doug cooking for me again or just feeding me some of his chocolate cake— naked this time . Yes, please.

Then, suddenly, the soft jingle of the front door cuts through my thoughts.

Chapter 17

Dina

I blink, frowning.

The place is closed.

Lights half off.

Chairs turned upside down on the tables.

Sign flipped over.

Only the cleaning crew is supposed to be coming, and they're late.

"Sorry, we're closed!" I call out automatically, wiping my hands on a towel as I round the counter.

But when I step into view, my stomach sinks straight to my toes.

Because standing there, bold as ever, is Eric, my ex, who seems to be hard of hearing.

And not just Eric.

Eric and two of his frat-boy rejects, all laughing and swaggering like they own the place.

Drunk. Great.

I hate unruly people under the influence. It's one of my biggest icks .

Oh, fuck me. Not tonight.

I just don't think I have the mental bandwidth to deal with his crap right now. Pandering to egos was never my thing. And Eric's ego is already the size of the Washington Monument, for fuck's sake.

I believed in straight talk, and I'd been just about as forward as a person could be when a relationship ended.

He just didn't seem to get the hint. It'd been months since we were together, but I guess I wasn't firm enough.

"Eric," I say, plastering on my best I am so done with your shit face. "We're closed. You need to leave."

He grins, and it's every bit as slimy and smug as I remember.

"I'm not here for pizza."

"Even better. Now, leave."

"Aw, come on, Deen. That's no way to treat an old flame."

I cross my arms tightly.

"There's no flame. No smoke. Nothing. Just yesterday's trash."

His buddies snicker like I didn't just verbally roast him alive, which figures.

Eric steps closer, ignoring every ounce of nope radiating off me. Like he can't see how disgusted I am by him.

He sniffs the air deeply.

"Looks like you've been hanging out with a dog."

"What?"

My heart starts pounding. The hair on the back of my neck rises.

Warning. Warning.

"Relax, Deen. We're old friends here. I just wanted to hang out. Maybe talk about us... you know, like adults."

"There is no us," I say firmly, backing up toward the counter, closer to my phone, and the knife I was using. Just in case .

"And I need you and your pals to leave. Now."

But he doesn't listen.

Of course he doesn't.

He steps right into my space, hands brushing my arms like he has any right to touch me.

"Don't be like that," he murmurs, voice low and patronizing.

“You used to like it when I stopped by. Thought maybe you were lonely. No dog can give you what I can, Deen.”

It dawns on me then, he means Doug. Which means Eric and his two friends aren't human.

Fuck.

My pulse spikes.

Suddenly, this doesn't feel like a pathetic ex fishing for ego boosts anymore.

This feels threatening.

“Eric. Back. Off.”

My voice is sharp now. No warmth. No invitation.

But he doesn't move.

His fingers tighten just slightly on my arm, and the realization hits me hard and fast, I'm alone.

The cleaning crew isn't here yet.

No MJ.

No Carina.

No one.

Except Eric and his meathead friends, who are definitely not human. Not with the way their eyes are glowing, and their movements are all jerky and unnatural.

Shit. Now they're blocking the door.

Panic starts to flicker in my chest, cold and quick.

"Eric, I'm serious," I snap, my heart pounding in my throat.

"Look, I need to finish up, and you need to go. Get. Out. Now."

He laughs. His buddies take out two cans of spray paint and my eyes widen in horror.

"No!" But I am too late.

They start to spray obscenities over the mural.

My mural.

The one I painted on the wall of mine and my sisters' place.

This bastard.

I should probably stay quiet, but do you always do the things you should?

Me neither.

"You prick!" I snap and stomp my sneaker-clad foot, which doesn't sound half as loud as I want it to.

"You used to like my prick, Deen. Don't you remember?"

“Fuck you,” I yell, fear and rage warring within me.

“Soon, Deen. Real soon. First, we’re gonna have a little fun.”

Eric laughs again and chills race down my spine, the bad kind. It’s low, mean, and way too confident.

This asshole.

“Eric, you better leave now?—”

“Or what, Dina? You gonna call your little boyfriend? You think I’m scared of some mangy fucking Wolf?”

I spin, reaching desperately for my phone, but I’m too slow.

Eric’s arms wrap tight around me, yanking me back against him.

I freeze.

Shit. Shit. SHIT.

This is so not good. He’s strong. Bigger than me. And I admit, I’m scared.

He leans in, breath hot and disgusting against my ear.

“You can scream if you want. I might even let you call him, Deen. But I doubt he’ll get here in time,” he hisses.

And then, like this couldn’t get worse, this motherfucker licks my cheek.

It's hot and slimy, and his breath smells mildly like tuna salad.

Rage and disgust explode inside me.

But before I can even shout, a voice slices through the tension like a blade.

“Taking bets on that, Cat?”

Eric stiffens instantly.

So do I.

Because that voice?

That growl?

It's Doug.

My Doug.

Relief hits so hard I almost collapse.

The entire room shifts.

Eric turns, still holding me like a coward, but his friends? Gone.

They bail fast, muttering excuses as they slip out without so much as a glance back. They always looked so big to me, but they have nothing on Doug.

He has to be a head taller and wider by far.

Eric's head whips toward the doorway, and when he sees Doug standing there— eyes glowing faint gold, muscles bunched, radiating lethal, predatory alpha fury —it's like he knows he's in deep shit.

Good. Asshole.

Doug crosses the room with slow, deliberate steps. It's like his presence alone swallows the entire space whole.

His jaw is tight.

His voice is a low, deadly rumble when he speaks.

“Get your fucking hands off her before I rip them off your goddamn body .”

Electricity sizzles through the air, and it seems to radiate from him.

Doug is all quiet fury. And honestly, I've never been so happy to see someone in my life.

Eric hesitates.

Which is the wrong fucking move.

Doug's eyes narrow, lips curling back to reveal sharp, dangerous teeth.

“Don't make me say it again, Cat,” he growls, and I swear I glimpse his elongated canines behind his lips.

His amber eyes burn gold, glowing with wild intensity as the air thickens around us.

It feels heavy. Charged.

A heady mix of raw, unfiltered testosterone and the undeniable pull of Shifter magic that rolls off him in waves, thick enough to make my skin prickle and my breath catch.

It's not just anger.

It's power .

Like his Wolf and human sides are in perfect harmony in this moment.

And his goal? Me.

I know it deep inside.

Doug won't let Eric hurt me.

I believe that with my entire being. And it's the only reason I'm still standing.

“You think I can't smell your fear? You wanna play apex predator with me? Come a little closer.”

Eric falters now, clearly exposed and stripped of his bravado.

Yep.

Cat Shifter.

Makes sense now.

All the attitude, the sleaze, the false confidence, and overabundant use of hair products.

“She was mine first,” Eric tries weakly, already retreating.

Doug’s laugh is low and dark, pure Wolf.

“She ain’t yours. Never was. You think pawing at a woman and licking her like a creep makes her yours? I’d say someone wasn’t raised right. But no worries, Cat, I give lessons.”

Eric drops his hold on me fast, like I burned him.

Good. Let him.

I back away immediately, chest heaving, eyes locked on Doug like he’s the only safe place left in the world.

Doug steps right up to Eric, chest to chest now. He’s taller, wider, and meaner looking than the Cat Shifter who is sweating bullets right now.

Gross.

“You’ve got two choices, Cat. Get out before I ruin your life or make this physical and let me do it the fun way.”

Eric opens his mouth, ready to argue, fist pulled back like he’s going to swing.

But Doug moves first, and he is fast as lightning.

His fist slams into Eric’s jaw with brutal force.

The crack echoes through the empty pizzeria as Eric stumbles back, clutching his face, eyes wide in pure shock.

Doug shakes his hand out like he didn't just nearly knock the guy's head clean off.

"You come here again, you touch my woman again," Doug growls, towering over him now, all feral menace and crackling dominance, "and I'll do a lot worse than break your fucking face."

"But she?—"

"This is your one chance to leave here on your own feet. Stay gone, or I swear I'm gonna tear you limb from limb. And if, by some miracle, you manage to put all the pieces of you back together, I'll make sure you have nowhere to run. Nowhere, Cat. No Pride in the country will take you when I'm finished. There. Will. Be. Nothing. For. You."

Eric doesn't argue.

He scrambles toward the exit, practically tripping over himself to get out the door and into the night.

Doug locks the door behind him, then turns back to me.

His eyes soften immediately as they land on me.

I stand there, wide-eyed, shaken, but safe.

Because of him.

It's just us again.

The silence is thick with adrenaline and leftover rage.

“Dina,” he says softly, voice losing its bite the second he looks at my ruined mural and back at me.

“I’ll fix it,” I explain, not even caring that those assholes ruined my work.

That’s not important right now.

Doug sucks in a deep breath and exhales slowly, like he’s trying to compose himself.

Then he crosses the space between us in two long strides and pulls me flush against him, hands cupping my face like he needs to feel every inch of me breathing and okay.

“Mine,” he murmurs fiercely, before kissing me like he needs to seal that vow deep into my soul.

And honestly?

Right then?

I don’t care that it’s possessive or wild or totally, utterly Wolf.

I melt right into it.

Because I’m his.

And he’s mine.

Even if he doesn’t quite realize it yet.

I don't waste another moment thinking or overthinking .

I just launch myself at him, arms wrapping tight around his neck as relief rushes through me in waves.

He catches me easily, arms banding tight around my waist, pulling me close like he's afraid I'll vanish.

"I got you, Sunshine," he murmurs, lips brushing my temple as he holds me tighter.

"Always."

And it's exactly what I needed to hear.

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Chapter 18

Doug

Rage. Anger. Pure fucking homicidal mania runs through my veins like a bullet train.

I was just going to surprise Dina at the pizzeria, knowing she was closing tonight.

But the second I pulled up outside and saw those three assholes in with her, I knew something was wrong.

My Wolf went nuts as I exited my truck and caught the scent of Shifter in the air. Not just any Shifter.

But goddam Tigers. I recognized one of them as being from a Streak I hunted for the Shifter Council not too long ago.

A Streak was a group of asshole Cats with no allegiance to a Pride. No real leader, either. So, of course, they have no fucking morals.

And they were messing with my Dina.

Hell. No.

I might be fucked up emotionally about where we stand with each other, but I will never allow harm to come to one single hair on her head.

So, after I deal with those losers, I mean, the very next second after the door clicks shut behind them , it's like the whole world exhales.

I go to her. Reach for her. Kiss her like my life depends on it, because I think it actually does.

My whole life I've had nothing but bad luck, but this woman doesn't feel like anything bad. She feels like everything good in the world.

She feels like mine .

And what is she doing right this second, my sweet, sexy Dina?

She's tense until the moment I wrap my arms around her. I feel her quick breath against my neck as I pull her tight to me for a reassuring hug.

I ease back, cupping my hands around her neck and pressing my thumb to her sweet lips.

Her beautiful blue eyes go wide and glossy, probably from leftover fear and adrenaline.

Fuck.

The Wolf in me wants to go after those fucking pussies and finish what I started. I wanna make sure that prick never even thinks about her again.

But right now, that part of me takes a backseat.

Because she is priority one .

I grip her face gently, forcing her to look at me.

“Are you okay?” I ask, voice rough but soft.

She nods quickly, but I can tell she’s still shaking.

I kiss her.

Not hard or claiming this time.

Just slow, deep, and grounding.

I pour every ounce of relief and affection into that kiss, letting her feel it.

Safe. Protected. Mine.

“I’ve got you, Sunshine,” I murmur against her lips. “You’re safe now. He won’t ever touch you again.”

A little sob breaks free then, and she clutches my shirt like it’s a lifeline.

“Doug,” she whimpers.

“I know,” I whisper, pressing kisses along her jaw, her cheek, her temple. “I know, Baby Girl. He’s gone. You’re okay.”

She presses in closer, practically climbing me now, and something snaps loose inside me.

I need to make her feel good.

Make her forget the way that bastard made her feel.

Small, powerless, scared.

I need to replace that with something better.

With me.

With us.

“Come here,” I murmur, lifting her easily and carrying her to the back room.

I think it’s the office her sister uses, but whatever. Beggars can’t be choosers, and at this point, I would do anything to have her.

I place her on top of a filing cabinet like she weighs nothing.

She watches me with huge, trusting eyes as I set her down gently and tug at her shirt.

“Let me take care of you,” I whisper, already pulling the fabric up and over her head.

She nods without hesitation, and fuck if that doesn’t undo me.

She trusts me.

Even after all that.

I know I can’t strip her like I want to here. But I need her skin. I need her bare in some way, so I work efficiently, pulling her bra down, sliding her pants and panties off, kissing every inch of soft skin I reveal.

By the time her pussy is bare to me, I'm so hard it hurts.

But this isn't about me. Not yet.

I kiss down her body.

Slow.

Worshipful.

Until I'm leaning down between her spread thighs, and fuck, she's already glistening.

"Doug," she whispers, voice wrecked and needy.

"I got you. Let me make you feel good."

"Yesss," she hisses, and sighs as I fall into her.

My tongue slides through her folds, licking up her arousal as she cries out softly and arches for me.

I take my time.

No rushing.

No distractions.

Nothing but her. And my soft, deliberate licks.

I suck her clit gently. Loving the way she squirms for me.

I slide two fingers inside her tight, wet heat and I curl them just right until she's gasping and rolling her hips against my face.

"That's it, Sunshine," I murmur, lips pressed against her soaked folds. "Give it to me. Give me everything you've got. Let me taste everything."

That's all it takes. Baby Girl comes with a soft, broken moan, thighs trembling around my head, pussy fluttering tight around my fingers as she shudders through it.

But I'm not done.

I kiss my way back up her body, kissing her ribs, her breasts, her neck, her lips.

"You okay?" I murmur, brushing a damp curl from her face.

She nods, eyes still hazy with pleasure.

"More," she whispers. "I want more, Doug. I want you."

Fuck yes.

I don't hesitate.

I shove my pants and briefs down, roll on a condom with shaking hands, and settle between her spread thighs.

When I slide inside her, it's not frantic like before.

It's so slow.

So deep.

So fucking intimate.

“Geezus, Dina,” I groan, pressing my forehead to hers as I fill her completely. “You feel so fucking good.”

She wraps her legs around my waist and clings to me, and I can’t stop kissing her.

Her lips.

Her jaw.

Her neck.

Every thrust is slow and steady, grinding deep inside her, making her gasp and shudder.

I feel every inch of her, and I fucking love it. I’m addicted to it. To her.

She is pressed as tight to me as I can get her.

“This is mine,” I murmur into her skin, thrusting a little harder now as her walls clench tighter. “You’re mine.”

“Yes,” she moans, nails digging into my shoulders. “Yours, Doug, oh God, I’m yours.”

Hearing her say it undoes me.

I thrust harder now. The sounds of our skin slapping together are loud.

Lewd.

But I never heard anything better. I grip her hips tight.

Probably too tight.

But I don't let up. I can't. I'm chasing both our highs as the need to mark and claim her properly takes over again.

Her cries grow louder, more desperate, as I piston into her harder, dragging my cock through her clenching, fluttering pussy until she breaks again, sobbing my name, her body shaking apart beneath me.

That tight, wet grip pulls me under fast.

I growl deep in my chest, turning my head away from the crux of her throat just as I feel my fangs descend so I don't do anything stupid. Like claim her right now.

My Wolf is snapping his jaws, growling at me inside my mind's eye. But even the pain of his anger is muted by the increasing pleasure I feel.

I thrust deep one last time before I spill inside her, hips jerking as I ride out my release with her wrapped tight around me.

When it's over, I collapse against her, both of us panting, sticky, spent.

I kiss her softly, everywhere I can reach.

Whispers of "beautiful" and "perfect" and "I got you" spill from my lips as I hold her until she stops shivering.

She clings to me tightly right before her body goes soft and boneless, but still, I cling to her through all the aftershocks.

And for the first time in forever, I don't feel cursed.

I feel right.

Because Dina is magic. Like my very own personal good luck charm.

And I'm not sure that I deserve her. In fact, I know I don't. But there's no way I'm giving her up.

Not without a fight.

Whether or not this curvy, little human knows it, she is mine.

The scent of her contentment fills me with pride as I straighten my jeans and bend down to get her clothes.

I dress her, I can't help myself.

And Dina lets me, which really is nothing short of a fucking miracle.

I've never been tender with anyone before. But this woman just brings it out in me.

I right her bra, pull her top gently over her head. Kiss her temple and help her stand. Then I crouch and pull on her panties and leggings.

Her shoes are last and even then, I can't help but rub my fingers over her sweet angles and calves, standing as I go, touching every inch of her that I can.

"Doug, I want to ask you something," she says, breaking the silence and I turn to her when BZZT BZZT.

Chapter 19

Doug

Moments before blowing up my own damn life my phone goes off.

I groan and pull back reluctantly to check my text messages.

Informant

Got him. Deadbeat at 5th and Main. Better move fast. Probably leaving town tonight.

“Fuck.”

The word leaves me on a breathless groan as I yank my shirt over my head, adrenaline still pumping hard from the case update.

I glance at Dina—sweet, soft, glowing Dina—standing there with her hair mussed, lips swollen from kisses, and looking at me like I personally hung the goddamn moon.

I honestly wish I could.

For her? I’d do anything.

“I have to go, Sunshine,” I say, leaning in for a rushed kiss that feels like an insult after what we just shared. “Big break on the case. I’m sorry.”

She nods, trying to play it cool, but I see the disappointment flicker through her eyes like a dimming lightbulb.

And fuck, I hate leaving her like this.

“I’ll call you the second I wrap this, okay?” I say, squeezing her hand and feeling the soft press of her fingers as I bend down to grab my keys.

Which, naturally, have rolled under the goddamn desk because the universe hates me.

As I fumble blindly beneath the counter, my phone buzzes in my other hand. Dina reaches for it automatically.

I don’t even think twice.

I pass it off without a second thought, because why the hell would I care?

I’ve got nothing to hide.

Except apparently, I do .

Because the second I stand up and see her face, everything inside me screeches to a halt.

Her expression isn’t confused anymore.

It’s devastated.

Her lips tremble slightly as she stares down at the screen.

“No, no, no, no,” I mutter, piecing it together way too late.

And then she does it.

She reads it out loud.

“ ‘Dina, Look, just because an app says we’re meant to be doesn’t mean it’s true. I’m sure you’ll understand when I say that for me things just aren’t written in the stars. I’m not a forever kind of guy.’ ”

Her voice is soft. Broken.

Her face?

Completely wrecked.

“Sunshine,” I croak, panic roaring through my bloodstream like fire.

“Let me explain?—”

But it’s too late.

Because I see it—the exact second everything changes.

Her bright, trusting eyes turn guarded.

The warmth in her deep blue eyes disappears, replaced by something cold and hollow. It turns shallow when she flicks her gaze at me.

And just like that, the woman who had trusted me, touched me, given herself to me—gone.

“Dina, please.”

I step forward, desperate now.

But she shakes her head, and the softest, deadliest whisper leaves her lips.

“Get out.”

I freeze.

My whole body locks up like I’ve been struck by lightning.

“Wait. Please, just wait.”

“GET. OUT.”

This time it’s louder, edged with fury and heartbreak.

The kind of heartbreak that makes my Wolf whimper inside me like a kicked pup.

It destroys me.

But I can’t argue.

I can’t stay and make this worse.

So I do the only thing that feels right, even though it’s fucking killing me from the inside out.

I nod slowly, backing away with my hands up like I’m the danger here.

Which, I guess, right now?

I am.

“I’ll go for now, Sunshine,” I say quietly, throat so tight I’m choking on every word.

“But this isn’t over.”

Her response?

Cold. Final.

“Goodbye, Doug.”

It guts me.

I swallow hard, turn away before I crumble right there in front of her, and walk out like my feet weigh a thousand pounds each.

Outside, I don’t even make it past the front steps before I punch the nearest brick wall.

Hard.

I definitely broke it. Pain shoots up my arm.

I put a hole in it. Concrete shards fly and some even hit me.

Good. I deserve that. I deserve all of that.

I rake my other hand through my hair, pacing like a fucking lunatic, breathing too fast, on the verge of going full-on feral.

I can't leave her vulnerable, no matter how badly she wants me gone.

Not after what happened with that Cat bastard.

So I do the only thing I can.

I pull out my phone, thumb hovering for half a second before I hit the name I never thought I'd actually need in a pinch.

Horace.

Grumpy Bear. Happily mated. Big brother type, apparently.

And the only fucking friend I have in the whole world.

It rings twice.

“What the fuck do you want, Dog Breath?” he answers, voice thick with sleep and zero patience.

“Not the time,” I growl, already pacing again.

“Get your furry fat ass down here. Cats tried to mess with Dina. She's alone now. I can't—she doesn't want me there. But she shouldn't be alone.”

Instant change.

The Bear's tone sharpens like steel.

“What happened? Where are you?”

“I—I fucked up, Horace.”

The words tear right out of me, honest and raw.

“I’ll make it right. I have to. But she asked me to leave, and I won’t disrespect her like that.”

I swallow hard, biting back everything breaking inside me.

“She shouldn’t be alone. Just please , man. Get down here.”

Silence on the other end for a beat.

Then Horace sighs heavily, all Bear gruffness but maybe a little sympathy buried in there too.

“I’m on it. But fix your shit, Doug. Fated mates aren’t forever unless you fight for them.”

“I know,” I whisper. “And I will. I swear I will.”

I hang up, lean back against the ruined brick wall, and let the reality crash down on me in full.

I lost her.

Only for now , my Wolf supplies.

And he’s right.

Because this isn’t the end.

Not for me.

Not for us.

No matter how hard I have to fight, through fear, her anger, and my own bullshit, I'm going to make her believe in us again.

I have to.

Because she's not just my fated mate.

She's everything.

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Chapter 20

Dina

Early the next morning, I am back at Pizza Girls .

I couldn't sleep all night.

Yes, it's because of the shambles my life is currently in.

And yeah, maybe I spent a good hour last night trolling through the Date to Mate app's review section, looking for other mistakes and only finding thank you posts and reviewers raving about how awesome the app is.

Lucky fuckers.

The smell of pizza dough and tomato sauce usually makes me smile.

This morning?

Not so much.

I slip my key into the lock and push open the door, shivering as the cool air of the AC hits my face.

It's early. Way too early.

But I couldn't sleep, and the mural needs repairing anyway after what those morons did to it yesterday.

So here I am.

Paintbrush in hand.

Trying not to cry in front of my ruined vision of the city street just outside the windows, made cutesy and cartoony with a pizza moon and smiling customers.

Only Eric and his band of merry assholes painted penises on my pepperoni pies and scribbled words like bitch and fat whore across the bottom.

Pathetic. Losers.

Still, a tear escapes my eye, but it's an angry one. Not sad.

Those assholes don't get to make me sad.

Doug? He's made me sad.

Again, that's my fault. I gave him that power, and it was wrong of me. I jumped in too early. Trusted him when I should have used caution.

Stupid, Dina. Really stupid.

I drag the roller over the wall, biting my lip so hard I taste copper.

I should be over this by now. Over him.

It's been almost twelve hours.

He left. He lied. He didn't mean forever.

Case closed, right?

Except every time I try to shove my feelings into a mental box and seal it tight, my stupid heart whispers to me and hope springs eternal.

Because what if he did mean it and just got scared?

"Morning, Dina."

I turn around, startled to find MJ breezing in through the side entrance with a coffee in each hand.

Her newly dyed purple hair is up in a messy bun, and she's already dressed in leggings and a Pizza Girls tee like it's battle armor.

Maybe it is.

"Hey, what are you doing here?"

"Uh, inventory. Remember?"

I mumble something noncommittal, turning back to the mural and pretending to be very, very invested in making sure the basecoat is thick, and I have a fan blowing directly on it, so it dries before I start re-outlining the basics of the scene.

Sure, I am an artist who is usually all about my work.

But not today.

And it doesn't matter. Because my sister?

She doesn't buy it.

MJ never buys it.

"I'm going to open the doors, so we get some circulation," I tell her, and am on it.

"Okay, but we are going to have a conversation, young lady. And I brought back up, so don't get any ideas about skipping out," MJ says, right before Carina walks in too.

She is already pulling off her borrowed sweatshirt— I know it is Horace's because it comes down to her knees and has some nerdy algorithm written across the chest—and giving me that look .

The big sister knows you're spiraling look.

I groan. I am not in the mood.

"Seriously? Did you guys hold a sad sister summit and decide I needed an intervention?"

"Yes," MJ says cheerfully.

"Absolutely."

Carina leans against the counter, crossing her arms in that big sister way that makes me want to confess all my sins from birth onward.

"So." MJ slurps her coffee. "Are we going to pretend you didn't cry your face off in the group chat at midnight, or what?"

“Oh my God, you are the worst sisters,” I hiss, mortified.

“What?” MJ says, completely unrepentant.

“It’s okay to cry, Dina, but you’re our baby sister. You don’t get to suffer alone. Spill it,” Carina adds, and shoots MJ a dirty look.

I sigh, dropping the roller and paint brush onto the tray, I sink my tired ass into one of the nearby chairs.

I’ve gone through the entire gamut of emotions overnight and now? My whole body feels heavy and wrung out.

“I just, I really thought this was it , you know?” I whisper, voice cracking more than I want it to.

“Oh, honey.”

“It’s true. And I know I’m naïve. But I actually believed in it this time. I didn’t second guess. I didn’t wait for the other shoe to drop. I just jumped right in because it felt so good. He felt so good. Like it was fated. But I guess we don’t all get one of those, huh?”

I’m trying for humor, but it comes out sad. Just plain sad.

MJ sits next to me and nudges my shoulder gently.

“Guess this is the first big Date to Mate fail, huh?”

I snort, tears burning my eyes.

“Yeah. Apparently, even magic matchmaking apps don’t guarantee anything.”

“Well, duh. I coulda told you that after my last Tinder faux pas.” MJ rolls her eyes and chortles.

But Carina crouches in front of me, grabbing my hands in her warm and steady ones.

Her eyes are soft when she speaks, no judgement there at all. Only patience and understanding.

“Dina, honey,” she says quietly. “Magic exists. It does. I mean, of course, it does. And the Fates? They’re real, too. But none of that replaces the hard stuff. Relationships still take work.”

I sniff, frowning.

“But if you’re fated , shouldn’t it just work? Shouldn’t he know?”

Carina smiles gently, shaking her head and squeezing my hands.

“No, sweet girl. Fate may push you together, but love ? Real love? That’s a choice you make every day. It takes communication. Honesty. You can’t expect him to read your mind. Or to even know what he’s feeling right away.”

“True,” MJ adds, stretching out her legs with a sigh. “Guys are dumb. And from what you all tell me, Shifters seem especially dumb. Doesn’t mean they don’t love hard. They just process on a delay.”

I laugh weakly, because that is painfully true.

“But I mean, he had this text message all ready to send. Like at any moment, he was

just gonna drop the ax.”

“Wow. Brutal. But,” MJ adds, “maybe he was just scared? Like maybe the big dummy thought you’d reject him, so he was contemplating rejecting you first?”

“What? That makes no sense.” I scoff. But then again. She could be on to something.

Carina tilts her head, her face turning serious again.

“You know. That might actually be it. I mean, Doug is Doug. Of course, he was going to mess this up, Dina,” she says, and I swear she seems actually happy about it.

“Well, gee, I’m glad my heartbreak has opened you two bozos up to your inner psychotherapists. I’ll be sure to hang up a shingle!”

“Oh my God. We’d be so good at that,” MJ snorts, and we all chuckle.

“Stop it. All I meant was it was bound to happen. Doug fucked up. So what? We all do. No one is perfect.”

“I’m not saying I’m perfect, but I didn’t lie about wanting him.”

“But did you tell him you love him?” she asks with surprising clarity.

“Um, how do you know—you know what, never mind. The answer is no. I haven’t told him.”

The confession hangs in the air between us like a heavy cloud.

Doug hid his doubts, true. But I’m just as guilty of hiding my own emotions.

“Then don’t you think cutting him off completely without giving him the chance to fix it is a little premature, honey?” Carina pauses, letting that sink in.

“That’s not fair either. Not to him, and not to you.” MJ nods and crosses her arms.

I wipe my eyes, feeling so small and foolish in that moment.

“You’re right. You’re both right,” I admit, my voice soft.

“Of course we are. Big sisters are always annoyingly right.”

Carina grins and tugs me into a hug.

“It’s literally our job,” she adds.

“And mine is to bring snacks while you cry!” MJ waves the second coffee like a trophy.

I let out a watery laugh, pulling both of them in close.

Their warmth steadies me, untangling the tight knot of doubt and hurt inside my chest.

I’m still scared.

Still unsure.

But maybe, just maybe, I don’t really want this to be over.

Not yet.

Because deep down?

I love him.

And maybe he doesn't want it to be over either.

One thing I know for certain, Doug and I need to talk.

I only hope he's willing to hear me out.

And maybe, just maybe, we can be one of those couples leaving glowing reviews in the user's section on Uncle Uzzi's Date to Mate app?

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Chapter 21

Doug

After slapping that deadbeat dad with the court documents instructing him that a hearing was set for ten days from now and he better show up or else a warrant will be on his head, I hoof it back to my place.

An angry swarm of wasps is there to greet me, but I brandished my old friend—a big can of Bugg Off—and I manage to slip inside without issue.

Operation Get My Mate Back is taking shape inside my head.

The last few hours play through my brain from the second I hung up with Horace, after Dina threw my sorry ass out.

I was frozen in place. I just stood and stared out at the empty parking lot like it held the answers.

Spoiler alert: it didn't.

It's hours later.

Almost morning.

And I feel like shit.

No, scratch that.

I feel worse than shit.

Like the lowest of the low.

A complete, utter idiot.

I mean, I had her.

My fated mate.

In my arms.

In my life.

She was mine.

She is mine.

And then I went and fumbled the damn thing right at the finish line.

Good job, Doug.

Ruined your mate's faith in you faster than a drunk Santa ruins Christmas at karaoke night.

My Wolf inside is pacing, snapping and snarling, claws dragging deep lines through my insides.

He's pissed.

No. He's wrecked.

Because he knows what I know now.

We lost her. Maybe forever.

I rake both hands through my hair, tugging until it hurts, but even that doesn't ease the brutal pressure crushing my chest.

I can't stop seeing her face.

Replay after replay, like some cruel highlight reel.

That soft, glowy, I adore you expression?

Gone.

Wiped clean and replaced with heartbreak.

And worse.

So much worse.

Disappointment took its place.

She looked at me like she didn't recognize me anymore.

My Wolf howls inside, a sharp, guttural sound that feels like claws raking across bone.

Because in a way?

We're already dying.

I was supposed to protect her.

Make her feel wanted.

Make her feel like she was everything.

Instead, I made her think she was temporary.

Some for now girl.

Just a way to scratch an itch.

A notch on a bedpost.

Fuck no.

NO WAY!

That's not it.

That's never been it.

She's my mate.

My. Mate.

She's supposed to be my forever.

And I trashed that like a goddamn moron too scared to admit he wanted forever more

than his next breath.

I pull out my phone again, fingers trembling as I swipe and stab at the screen.

There's only one person crazy and powerful enough to talk me off this ledge. And he's probably already lighting candles and muttering about the Fates laughing at dumb Wolves like me.

Uncle Uzzi.

It rings once. Twice. Then he finally answers.

"Douglas Wolfgang McGregor."

Yep. He's already using the full name.

"You've got balls of brass, son, calling me at this ungodly hour."

His voice is pure disapproval, layered with a healthy splash of I told you so. I yelp and pull the phone back, watching in disbelief as blue sparkles flicker out of existence presumably from the little speaker where my ear was resting.

"Did you just zap me through the phone?"

"What do you want? Be quick now."

"Uncle Uzzi," I groan, dragging a hand down my face, shame pooling thick and ugly in my gut. "I fucked up."

No point sugarcoating now.

“Dina’s pissed. No, it’s worse. She’s hurt.”

Saying it out loud makes my throat tighten, my Wolf pacing harder, letting out mournful, angry yips in the back of my head.

“I hurt her. I did the wrong thing. I thought the wrong thing. I panicked, and she kicked me out of Pizza Girls like some loser who never deserved her in the first place.”

I pause, breathing hard.

“I feel like I’m dying, Uzzi. Like I’m some monster who lost his mate because I’m too emotionally constipated to admit I wanted her more than I wanted air.”

Uzzi doesn’t rush to fill the silence.

He lets me stew in it, which, honestly?

I deserve.

When he speaks, it’s low and sharp.

Measured like a man who has walked through every storm already.

“I see,” he says simply. “So. You messed up.”

He lets that hang a beat too long, twisting the blade.

“Tell me about it.”

And I do.

No pride left, I spill my guts to the old Witch.

Every ugly, stupid mistake.

Every fear and flaw.

The way I froze up, held her at bay, and then sabotaged something precious because I couldn't admit I didn't want to be a Lone Wolf anymore.

When I finally stop talking, Uzzi goes quiet again.

It feels like judgment day.

Then, finally, he speaks.

“Tell me, Douglas,” he says slowly.

“Do you want sympathy, or solutions? What will it be, Wolf?”

There's no hesitation in me anymore.

Because I know.

I need her.

More than I need air.

More than I need pride or comfort or my stupid, Wolfish ego.

I need Dina to look at me like she cares again.

Like I matter to her even if it's only a sliver compared to how much she matters to me.

“Solutions,” I say, my voice breaking a little.

Because sympathy won't bring her back.

But fighting for her?

Fighting like my life depends on it?

Which let's be honest, it fucking does.

It's a no brainer.

I will do anything to get Dina back. Anything.

Uzzi sighs dramatically like this is all so exhausting but also like he's secretly been waiting for me to grovel since this whole Date to Mate thing began.

“Look, I know I might not count as a real client because I only used Date to Mate to break that Witch's curse?—”

“First, stop being an idiot. You think you used the app because you wanted to break a hex, Douglas? Pish posh. That's not why.”

“It's not?”

“No. The Fates already chose the lovely Dina for you. The app was just a means to bring you together, but it might have happened a dozen other ways.”

“Do you really think so, Uncle Uzzi?”

“My boy, I know so. Fated mates can’t stay apart for long. Especially when they live so close together. And do not question me again, I’ve been doing this since before you were even an idea, Wolf.”

He pauses and in the background, it sounds like he is moving from one room to another.

“Like I said. I have been at this a very long time, indeed. Bringing supernaturals together with their fated mates is the reason I exist. And Dina is the reason you exist. The only question is, what are you going to do about it?”

“Okay. I am sorry I blamed the app?—”

“The Fates, boy, they chose her for you. But you, you chose fear. Tell me, did you ever tell her how you feel? Ask her how she feels?”

“Um. No. Not really,” I confess.

“Well, you must fix it. Make her see she’s your mate. Not an option. Not a maybe. The one.”

“Right. Great. Except she won’t talk to me right now,” I mutter, slumping against my kitchen counter. “She told me to get out.”

“You left her alone after she was attacked?”

“What? No! I would never! Horace went over there in case any more Cats came sniffing around. He brought her back to her place.”

“Good. So, she doesn’t know you love her?”

“Love? Um, n-no,” I stutter, because the truth is, I’ve never loved anyone before.

Never said those three little words to another living soul.

But the second Uncle Uzzi says the dreaded L word, it all clicks.

I love her.

I love her!

My Wolf wants to howl it from the rooftop, but Uncle Uzzi’s voice grounds me.

“Then you’re going to show her,” Uzzi says firmly.

“I will! I’ll tell her I love her as soon as she’ll listen?—”

“Not tell. Show. Wolves don’t win mates back with words, Doug. They show up. They make a claim. They make it undeniable.”

I blink, thinking hard.

Show up.

Make it undeniable.

“I can do that.”

An idea starts forming, stupid and bold and probably ridiculous, but also, it’s very me

.

“Wunderbar!”

“Okay,” I say slowly, the beginnings of a plan forming. “Okay. I think I know what to do.”

“Good boy, I knew you had it in you,” Uzzi says, clearly amused. “Now go fix your mess, Wolf.”

Chapter 22

Doug

I hang up and immediately call Horace.

He answers on the first ring.

“Look, you might not like to sleep anymore, but I sure as fuck do ? —”

“Horace, please, just listen to the man. It’s my sister’s happiness on the line.”

“Carina—”

“I’ll owe you, Big Guy.”

I hear Carina in the background, coaxing her mate, and Horace’s responding growl. And yeah, I appreciate it because she is bartering with her mate on my behalf.

But I’m also trying not to puke. Because those two?

They can’t keep their hands off each other. And I do not need to be a party to that.

Like never, ever.

“Guys? I need a favor.”

Pause.

Growl.

“A huge favor.”

“Doug, I swear to every God there is,” Horace groans, already wary.

“Relax. It’s simple. I need a few volunteers is all. And also? Maybe some help breaking into Pizza Girls before they open Friday.”

Silence. Followed by a rumble.

“Okay. Why Friday?”

“Because that’s when everything will be ready,” I reply, because duh.

“Doug.”

“Horace.”

“Doug.”

“I’m not tagging the walls or stealing mozzarella. Just helping the Fates get me my mate.”

More silence.

Then the Bear sighs heavily.

“Fuck. Fine. You get one big grand gesture, Wolf. Use it wisely.”

“Oh, I will.”

“One sec, Carina wants you.”

“Doug?” Her voice sounds clear over the phone.

“Yeah?”

“You fuck this up and my Bear will make me a nice Wolf rug out of you, you got that?”

“Yes, ma’am. I won’t fuck this up.”

I hang up, grinning despite myself.

Nerves tingling up and down my spine because, as much as I don’t want to fuck this up, I can’t know for sure if Dina will be receptive. I can only hope.

Please, Fates, if you’re listening, I can use a hand. I promise not to mess up this time.

And I mean it.

I fucking mean it.

Because yeah, I know exactly what Dina means to me now.

She’s not temporary.

Not just a girl I fell into bed with.

Not even just my mate because some damn app said so.

She's everything.

And Friday?

Friday I'm going to knock her socks off.

And maybe her panties, too, if things go my way.

I'm going full on Wolf for this.

No more holding back.

Hunter mode activated.

I'll get down on my knees in front of the whole damn Pack, my pride, and whoever else wants to witness it, with my heart in my hands and my throat bared if that's what it takes.

Mine , my Wolf growls deep inside me, practically vibrating with the need to get this done.

But first?

I need to finish some other business.

Specifically, with one very pissed Witch and her cheating husband.

Closure.

No loose ends.

I shower like a man preparing for war —or maybe a mating ceremony.

Same thing, really.

I scrub myself raw, then take extra time getting dressed despite the heat already creeping through the open window.

Clean jeans.

Button-down.

Even comb my damn hair.

Yeah, I'm that guy today.

When I step out into the stairwell that leads to the private entrance, Mrs. Giancarlo is there, fussing with her mail.

She spots me immediately and smiles, eyes crinkling like the sweet old Kitchen Witch that she is.

“Where are you going so handsome today?” she teases, leaning on her cane like she’s about to interrogate me.

“Good morning,” I say, returning her smile as I hold up the thick envelope in my hand.

I pass it to her gently. Like it’s something precious.

Because honestly? It is.

“It’s done,” I tell her softly.

Pride fills me and I’m almost overcome with it. I never imagined I could accomplish anything in my life, but I have a purpose now.

I have goals. And this here, this is step one to achieving those goals.

“Here’s the final agreement, plus the receipt for the wire transfer. My house is yours now, for life, Mrs. G. No one’s kicking you out. Ever.”

Her lips wobble before she beams, eyes glassy with unshed tears.

“Dear boy, you did it.”

“I did,” I agree, warmth swelling in my chest.

“And now you can keep puttering in your garden and yelling at the neighbor kids like always.”

She lets out a watery laugh, pulling me into one of her signature grandmotherly hugs that somehow manages to both soothe and suffocate.

I let her, even though my Wolf whines a little.

He’s single-minded right now.

Dina. Mate. Fix this. Claim.

Still, Mrs. Giancarlo deserves this moment.

“And hey,” I add, pulling back with a grin.

“In honor of this big win, and something even bigger I’ve got planned , I’d love if you’d come to a little get-together this Friday. My treat. I’ll send a car and everything.”

She blinks, clearly touched.

“Oh, Douglas, of course I’ll come! You’re just like a son to me, you know that? I’m so proud of you.”

Yeah, that hits me right in the soft spot.

“Thanks,” I murmur, feeling way more emotional than I planned to before noon.

I clear my throat and point back to the paperwork.

“Make sure you call your lawyer and accountant, though. Everything’s above board. Also, included in there? My plans to build on top of this place. I’ll make it nice, I swear. Won’t interfere with your space.”

Mrs. Giancarlo waves her hand like I’m being ridiculous.

“Nonsense. You don’t need my approval, Doug. You own it now.”

That makes me pause.

You own it now.

The words reverberate through me in a way I didn’t expect.

Because yeah. I do.

For the first time in my life, I have something real.

Something mine.

Not borrowed.

Not temporary.

Mine.

My Wolf preens in my mind, pacing proudly as he surveys the mental territory.

Ours.

Secure.

Permanent.

And all I can think is none of this would have happened without her.

Dina made me want this.

She made me believe I could have something good.

That I could be better.

And now?

There's just one more thing to fix before I can truly claim what matters most.

Her.

I roll my shoulders, shaking out the nerves, and head out the door, feeling more focused than I have in years.

Because Friday? Just two days from now. I'm laying it all down. For her.

I'm not half-assing anything.

I'm going all in.

Mate.

Forever.

Mine.

And I am going to make sure Dina damn well knows it.

I'll finally be ready to say exactly what I was too stupid to say before:

You're my forever, Sunshine. Fated or not, I choose you. Every day. Always.

Because screw fear.

Screw panic.

Screw whatever leftover lone Wolf bullshit I've been clinging to.

She's it.

And I'm done running away from my fate, from what's meant to be.

This time I'm running towards my future.

This time, I'm fucking flying, and it's straight to her.

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Chapter 23

Dina

Forty-eight hours have passed since I last saw Doug.

Oh, I wanted to text. But I was sure he would first.

Then I guess I just let too much time pass, and now, now I'm stuck.

I feel like a complete ass.

How could I be so wrong about him?

I thought he was the one.

My one.

My heart squeezes and I stare at my reflection in the bathroom mirror and give myself the pep talk of champions.

"Okay, Dina," I say to my tired, slightly puffy-eyed face.

It's not my fault, I've spent most of every waking moment repainting the mural at the pizzeria during closing hours.

That means late nights and early mornings.

Even my professor mentioned my exhaustion when I fell asleep with my face smashed into the palette of paint I was supposed to be working with.

Lucky for me, they were acrylics and washed off easily.

Back to my pep talk.

“You’re going to survive this shift. You’re going to make a few pizzas, smile at some customers, pretend you’re totally fine , and not cry into the mozzarella.”

Easier said than done.

But hey, I have sisters who believe in me and a job that keeps my hands busy.

I take a deep breath, smooth my hands over my hips, and push out into the restaurant.

Except something’s off .

The lights are lower.

Soft music plays from the speakers. Not the usual pop playlist.

This is something sweeter.

Romantic, even.

And the smell isn’t pizza.

It’s, I don’t know. Flowers?

I blink, scanning the room, and nearly stumble as my brain tries to process what I’m

seeing.

Flowers. And not just flowers.

But carnations.

Like from our first dinner together.

My heart squeezes as I take them in.

Carnations.

In every color.

Dozens.

And they are everywhere.

I am talking vases on every table. Garlands of them hanging from the ceiling.

My sisters are standing next to one another, and Horace is behind Carina, his big hands on her shoulders. They're smiling, their eyes glistening with unshed tears as I try to comprehend.

Something catches my gaze and there, just above the mural, I see it.

A giant banner stretched across the back wall that reads in bold, playful script:

FATE MAY HAVE STARTED THIS, BUT I CHOOSE YOU.

My heart stops.

No.

No way.

Can it be?

I step further in, completely disoriented now, and that's when I see the rest of the people gathered.

Uncle Uzzi. Mrs. Giancarlo. That woman, the ex-client , and her husband who were with Doug the first time I really saw him inside this place.

A few regulars, too. And some people I vaguely recognize from previous encounters.

They're all gathered in a semi-circle, looking far too pleased with themselves.

They part. And standing dead center?

Doug.

My Doug.

Dressed in jeans and a fitted black t-shirt that clings to his muscles. His dark hair is a little wild. His scruffy jaw is a little tight. And his golden eyes are trained on me.

He looks serious. Intense. Like he's about to face a firing squad.

And in his hands? He's holding more carnations.

Pink ones.

Of course he is.

It's my favorite color.

"Dina," he says, voice hoarse but strong as he steps toward me.

His amber-gold eyes are glowing faintly, and when he drops to one knee, my knees almost give out too.

"Oh my god," I whisper, hands flying to my mouth.

He laughs softly, a little shaky, a lot nervous. "Yeah. This is happening."

My sisters are behind him, MJ fist-pumping and Carina wiping away tears like the traitorous softy she is.

Doug shifts on his knee, suddenly all serious, and my heart lurches painfully in my chest.

"I screwed up," he says, no preamble, no dodging.

"I never had anything of my own, and just the prospect, well, it scared me," he admits, and I'm just stunned.

"I panicked because, well, because I'm a dumbass who's been afraid to put myself out there. Scared shitless of trying to imagine my forever for way too long."

"Damn right he was," someone interrupts and I see his ex-client, Mrs. Goyle approach us.

"I apologize for the, uh, run of bad luck," Mrs. Goyle says, touching her finger to her

nose in a way that I assume means magic.

But this is a public place, so I guess she is keeping it hush-hush .

“You see, my husband strayed, and I blamed Douglas for not understanding how I felt at the time and adding to my hurt with the uh, collected evidence. But he was only doing what I hired him to do. And the thing is, sometimes people do wrong in relationships,” she says and her eyes flash to the very contrite looking man on her arm.

“But sometimes the fault isn’t with just one person. Relationships are a partnership. Now, I release you from my hex Douglas McGregor,” she whispers loud enough for me and Doug only.

I see my Wolf’s shoulders slump slightly, as if in relief.

“My wife is right. Relationships require two people in order to work. Thank you, Mr. McGregor, for helping me see the error of my ways. Good luck to you both.”

Doug nods his head and we both watch as the odd couple leave.

I am happy for them giving it a second chance, but too focused on Doug to give them much thought.

“Sorry for the interruption,” he says, and my attention is back on him. “But, uh, she has a point. See, jobs like that, they added to all my fear. I mean, relationships? I never thought they could be real. And I convinced myself I wasn’t meant for this. For you. That I didn’t have a right to any of it.”

I blink hard, trying not to cry again, but it’s a losing battle.

“But when you asked me to leave?” He swallows thickly.

“When I saw your face and knew I’d broken something I didn’t even deserve in the first place, I realized something.”

He holds the flowers tighter.

“I don’t want to be without you, Dina. Not for a day, not for a second. Fate might have put us together, but I’m choosing this. Choosing you. ”

My breath hitches. His voice cracks a little as he says the next part.

“I’m in. All in. For the messy parts and the good parts and the parts where I screw up and you have to remind me that I’m being a stubborn ass. I want us , Sunshine. Every single version of us. I love you, Sunshine. With every inch of my soul, I love you. And I’ll do better. I swear it.”

Someone sniffles loudly behind him.

Probably MJ.

I can’t speak.

Can’t move.

Can only stare as Doug rises slowly, still watching me with that raw, open expression.

“So, if you’ll have me,” he says, stepping closer now, close enough that I can feel the heat rolling off him, “I’d really, really like to spend the rest of forever figuring this out with you.”

I don't even realize I'm crying until the first tear falls.

And then I'm moving.

I launch at him, crushing the flowers between us as I wrap my arms tight around his neck and kiss him so hard I swear time stops.

Doug groans, then he moves. His arms slide around my waist as he kisses me back, hungry and desperate and completely mine .

When we finally break apart, breathless and laughing, I lean my forehead against his.

"You're such a dumb Wolf," I whisper, voice thick with tears and joy.

He chuckles, squeezing my hips.

"Yeah. But I'm your dumb Wolf."

"You are," I say softly, kissing him again. "All mine."

The crowd behind us cheers and claps, and somewhere in the chaos, Horace grunts. "Finally. Took you long enough, Dog Breath."

Doug just smiles and kisses me again, slower this time, softer.

Forever doesn't feel far away or even scary anymore.

It feels right .

He feels right.

“Let’s get outta here,” I whisper.

“But there’s cake?”

“Would you rather have cake, or some of my sweet pie?” I tease and lick my lips.

Doug just groans and I laugh out loud. Then he bends and picks me up, tossing me over his shoulder.

“Wait! Where are you going? There’s cake!” Carina shouts after us.

But her voice disappears beneath our laughter as my man jogs to his truck and puts me inside, kissing me hard before he runs to the driver’s side and takes off like a bat, er , make that Wolf out of Hell.

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Chapter 24

Doug

H ours later. My place.

She's asleep when it hits me.

Or maybe not quite asleep.

It's that lull.

That calm.

That peace you feel after you have fanfuckingtastic, mind blowing, earth shattering sex.

You know, the life-changing kind.

She's soft and warm, smelling like sunshine and me.

It's perfect.

She is perfect.

I can't stop touching her.

I don't want to.

Not now, not ever.

We're all tangled up in each other and the simple white sheets.

Her face and body are still flushed from earlier when I worshipped every inch of her and made her fall apart on my tongue more times than I can count.

But this?

This is different.

This is the moment I need to say it.

I need to make sure there are no misunderstandings.

Because I can't hold it anymore.

I brush my fingers down the curve of her back, sliding slowly over the dip of her spine until she shivers, turning sleepy eyes up toward me.

"Doug?" she whispers, voice all husky and wrecked from hours of being thoroughly fucked and loved.

I lean in, nuzzling the curve of her shoulder, letting my lips brush over her luscious, soft skin.

It's where I intend to mark her with my claiming bite. But I need her permission first.

"My Dina," I murmur, voice low and reverent. "My mate."

Her breath catches, and I kiss up to her jaw, slow and sweet.

“I love you,” I whisper, the words raw and real as they crack open everything inside me.

“Oh, Doug.”

“I know I said it at the pizzeria. But I need you to know I mean it. Not just then. Not just tonight. Forever. I love you so damn much, it’s terrifying.”

Her eyes glisten, and I don’t let her speak because I’m too full, too needy to stop now.

I kiss her again, deeper this time, tongue sliding between her lips as she melts against me, already pliant and eager even half-asleep.

But I need more.

I need her writhing.

I need her marked.

I need her claimed.

I trail my mouth down her throat, licking and nibbling the soft flesh, leaving a wet path as I shift lower.

Her legs part instinctively as I kiss over her collarbone and down between her breasts.

“Doug, I-I,” she whispers, already breathless.

“Shh, Baby Girl,” I murmur, dragging my tongue over her nipple before sucking it deep into my mouth.

Her back arches beautifully as I tease and tug, alternating between flicks of my tongue and light grazes of my teeth.

Her scent changes. Sweet, heady arousal floods the air, and my Wolf growls low and hungry.

I slide lower, lips brushing over the softness of her belly, hands gripping her thighs as I press them apart and settle between them.

Her pussy is glistening already, swollen and needy.

Perfect.

Mine.

“Tell me you’re mine. Say I can have you.”

“You already do, Doug. I’m yours,” she moans.

And I feel the victory of it down to my marrow.

I drag my tongue slowly through her folds, savoring the taste of her like it’s the best fucking thing in existence.

She cries out softly, hips rolling, fingers threading in my hair and tugging just enough to make me groan.

I lap at her clit, flicking it softly then flattening my tongue, pressing in until her legs

tremble and she gasps my name.

“Doug, oh please?—”

“I know, Sunshine. I got what you need,” I growl, dipping two fingers deep inside her as I keep sucking on that sensitive little bundle of nerves.

She’s so wet and tight, her walls fluttering around my fingers as I fuck them in slow, deep strokes, curling them perfectly against that spot that makes her sob.

“That’s it,” I murmur, voice hoarse with hunger. “Give it to me. Let me feel you come for me before I fuck you. Because this time, I’m claiming you for keeps, Sunshine. You want that? Want me to claim you?”

“Yes! Please, yes!”

She breaks apart with a desperate cry, her pussy clenching so tightly around my fingers it almost hurts.

But I’m not done.

Not fucking close .

While she’s still trembling, I crawl up her body, kissing her deeply so she can taste herself on my tongue.

Then I line my cock up.

“Bare. I need you bare.”

She nods, gripping at my hips frantically, like she knows my Wolf needs to fill her

with cum.

Pride and humility fill me. She is a goddamn blessing I don't deserve.

But I'm taking her. And I'm keeping her all the same.

Then I press inside her in one long, smooth thrust.

"Fuck," I groan, burying deep as her slick, tight heat envelops me. "So fucking perfect, Dina. You were made for me."

She whimpers, legs wrapping around my waist, heels digging in as I start to move.

Slow at first.

Deep, grinding strokes that have her clutching at me like I'm the only thing keeping her grounded.

"Harder," she gasps, voice desperate and needy. "Please, Doug, I need?—"

I snap.

My Wolf surges up, taking control as I slam into her harder, faster, making the whole damn bed shake.

Her cries grow louder, broken little gasps of my name as I pound into her, sweat slicking our bodies together as the room fills with the filthy sound of my cock sliding in and out of her soaked pussy.

"Mine," I growl, biting at her throat.

Not hard enough to mark, not yet, but a warning of what's coming.

She moans loudly, clutching my ass, pulling me deeper.

“Yours,” she gasps, eyes glassy and wild. “Always yours. I love you, Doug.”

That's all I need.

I shift my angle, grinding my hips as I thrust, making sure to hit her clit with every pass.

She breaks again, screaming my name, body convulsing as she falls apart beneath me.

And while she's still riding that wave, I lean in and bite.

Right where neck meets shoulder.

Deep enough to break skin.

Deep enough to bind .

Magic explodes between us, a rush of heat and power that slams into me like a freight train.

I feel it.

Our matebond.

Wrapping around us like silken chains, unbreakable and eternal, tethering her soul to mine in a way that makes everything inside me settle, finally fucking whole .

Her body arches, mouth open in a silent cry as she feels it, too.

Like my sweet human mate is just as aware as I am that our magic is twisting and tangling, sealing us together forever.

I keep fucking her through it, thrusting deep and claiming every part of her until I finally let go, roaring as I come hard, spilling deep inside her as our bond locks into place.

The orgasm crashes through me like lightning, every nerve ending lighting up as I empty myself completely inside my mate.

When it's over, I collapse against her, still inside, unwilling to let her go for even a second.

She strokes my hair, soft and lazy, and whispers, "Claimed as in forever, right?"

I smile against her skin, my fangs still aching from the claiming bite.

"Forever, Sunshine," I murmur, voice thick with love and possession.

"You're mine. And now I'm yours. No takebacks."

She laughs, sleepy and sweet, pulling me closer as we drift off tangled together, still joined, still humming with the aftermath of fate and magic.

I thought I was destined to be a Lone Wolf, but that was all a lie.

No Pack?

Doesn't matter.

I have her.

We have family and friends.

And that? That's all the Pack I'll ever need.

"I love you, Doug. No takebacks," she says softly, grinning like she owns me.

And she does.

God, this woman wrecks me.

That sweet, honest smile?

It hits harder than claws or fangs ever could.

She undoes me with nothing more than her warmth.

Her words.

Her.

I'd burn the whole world down for her.

But leave?

Not a chance in hell.

Before I can even get the words out, she tilts her head, eyes sparkling with that mischievous light that always makes me weak.

“Who says I want you to leave?” she teases, arching a brow.

I narrow my eyes playfully, my Wolf already preening.

“Wait a second, you reading my mind now, Sunshine?”

She laughs, eyes wide with mock innocence and wonder.

“You know, I think I just did.”

“Uh huh. Fated mates,” I say, giving her a mock-serious nod.

“No privacy. No escape. Definitely no secrets.”

Her grin turns downright dangerous then.

“Good. Because you’re stuck with me forever, Fido. Besides,” she whispers.

Then She scoots closer, running her fingers through my hair like she knows exactly how to turn me into complete mush.

“Did you see my mural?”

I nod.

“It’s better than the first one. Even my professor said so. You know, I think you’re the best good luck charm I’ve ever had,” she murmurs, voice soft but full of meaning.

I groan, letting my head fall back dramatically.

“Sunshine, you say stuff like that and I’m never letting you out of bed again.”

“Promises, promises,” she quips, biting her lip like she knows exactly how badly I want to make good on that right now.

And yeah, I will.

Because fated or not, this woman?

Best damn good luck charm I’ll ever have.

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Six weeks later.

Mated life is better than I expected.

Business is good. Uncle Uzzi has me running down background checks on some of the new Date to Mate applicants.

He's testing the accuracy of his software, and I appreciate that.

But nothing beats good old-fashioned PI work.

I enter our newly renovated apartment complete with a rooftop garden and studio where my beautiful mate can be inspired and paint to her heart's content.

She's got one more class she's taking this summer before her degree in fine arts is in the bag, and I am just so damn proud of her.

I'm throwing her the biggest graduation party at Pizza Girls, but I'm keeping it a secret.

Spoiling my mate is just one of the perks I wasn't expecting when the Fates, along with Uncle Uzzi's Date to Mate , paired us up.

"Where you at, Mate? Don't make me huff and puff and blow your socks off?" I call out, hunting her sweet scent all the way to her studio.

The door is open and when I see her standing there in a pair of denim cut-offs and a

paint-splattered tank top, all my blood immediately travels below my belt.

“Goddamn, Baby Girl. You look good enough for this Wolf to eat.”

“Promises, promises,” Dina teases, her lips curving in that way that kills me.

Challenge accepted, Sunshine.

I growl low, already stalking her across the room. I cage her in against the far wall, using my body as I hoist her up and crush her lips to mine.

My muscles are tight and yeah, I’m hungry in all the ways that matter.

“Bed. Now,” she commands.

Who am I to deny her?

Her eyes heat, and that grin turns breathless as I drag my mouth over hers in a slow, claiming kiss.

She squeaks as I grab her ass and carry her down the stairs to our bedroom.

I don’t stop kissing her. Well, I do. But only long enough to strip us bare and lay her down before me like a goddamn sacrifice.

I hover over her and kiss her again, just because I can.

Deep and thorough.

The kind of kiss that says mine without a single word spoken.

By the time I pull back, she's panting softly, cheeks flushed.

"Doug, don't tease me."

"Nope. Never," I cut her off, voice rough and edged with need as I press my hips into hers, letting her feel exactly how far gone I am for her.

"Tell me again how it's you and me forever and how I'm your good luck charm."

She squirms beneath me, arching just right, and my control unravels.

"I love you so fucking much, Sunshine. You are the best thing that ever happened to me. My forever kinda good luck charm and I am never letting you go."

I lean back, dragging my palm down the valley between her tits and over her soft belly and mound. Then I give her hip a playful slap.

"Now get on all fours, so I can fuck you hard and deep from behind. Make you come screaming my name."

"Fuck. Yes, Doug," she gasps, voice going all high and needy as she moves to obey me.

I love her like this. So damn submissive and hot for me.

Dina is—well, she's sensual—the sexiest woman I have ever seen.

Her body is designed to take me and when she's in this position, I can watch my thick dick disappear inside her glistening pussy as I take her.

We both moan.

I growl deep in my throat, jaw clenching gently, and I move my cock in and out of her heavenly body.

“Good girl,” I rumble, sliding my hands down her back, lower until my thumb is circling her pretty little rosebud.

There’s nothing I won’t do to please her. She knows this. And while we’ve dabbled, I have yet to take her here.

But I will. Soon.

Right now, I content myself with teasing her pretty little circle until she’s pushing back, begging me to move.

“Look how good you take me. So fucking wet. You need me, don’t you Sunshine? Tell me.”

“I need you, Doug. So much,” she whimpers.

Her gasp turns into a moan as I cage her in, bringing one hand up to cup her tits, teasing her nipples.

My teeth lightly scrape over our claiming mark, and I know she’s close. Her pussy squeezes me, and I am so fucking ready to blow.

But not without her. My mate is so hot and turned on, she’s writhing and clutching at the blankets.

“Doug! Oh my god.”

“That’s right, Sunshine.” I move faster, harder, and deeper.

I can feel her flowing through me.

Her presence. Her passion. Her love.

Our matebond is strong, and it just keeps getting stronger.

I can see it when I close my eyes. The golden rope is so thick, and it glows with blue and amber hued magic.

“Doug!”

“Yeah! Say my name while I fuck you like you deserve.”

Her head falls back, and I swipe my tongue across her shoulder.

The feel of her is so addictive.

Better than anything I’ve ever had or will ever need.

“Please, Doug... more.”

I give it to her.

I give her everything.

Fingers sinking into her hips, I hold her still as I drive into her, then I reach between her legs, stroking her clit again until her whole body tenses.

“Doug, I’m?—”

I don’t stop.

I don't fucking stop until she shatters for me, sobbing my name as she falls apart, hips bucking, pussy fluttering around my cock, like her body is clinging to me, holding me inside even as she breaks.

She gasps, looking over her shoulder with a dazed, needy look that wrecks me all over again.

"Claim me again," she whispers.

My Wolf roars at that.

"Always," I growl, thrusting deep in one hard, brutal push that has us both gasping.

She's tight, soaking wet, her pussy clenching around me like she can't stop coming.

I'm—well, I'm rough, rutting into her again and again, setting a fast, filthy pace that has her crying out into the sheets, her body giving me everything.

"Mine," I snarl, leaning down to bite at her shoulder again, but not quite going through with it until she tells me what I need to hear.

"Say it, Dina."

"Yours," she sobs, pushing back to meet every hard thrust.

"Yours, yours, always yours."

I lose it.

I fuck her hard and deep, grinding against her clit until she's shaking again, body tensing before she screams my name and comes violently around my cock.

That's it.

That's the end for me.

I slam into her once, my canines slice through her skin. I buck twice more and then I'm spilling inside her, filling her so deep I swear she's going to feel it for days.

We collapse together, still joined, tangled up in sweat and kisses and everything we are.

Breathless, wrecked, and completely fucking happy.

She turns her head just enough to whisper, "I hope our luck never runs out."

Tugging her closer, pressing kisses to her damp hair, I give her the only response I have.

"It never will, Sunshine. We're forever."

"That's right. Forever. No takebacks," she agrees sleepily, already drifting.

And me?

I hold her tighter, our bond humming between us like a living thing, knowing I'll never let her go.

Because this?

This is home.

This is mine.

This is us.

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I wake up to warmth. Every day now.

And it's not just the sunlight peeking through the curtains, but the heavy, solid Doug-shaped warmth wrapped tightly around me.

His arm is draped across my waist, his face buried against my neck like he has zero intention of letting me out of this bed anytime soon.

Not that I mind.

A soft, secret smile tugs at my lips as I shift slightly, my whole body aching in the best possible ways.

I'm pretty sure my thighs are still trembling, and honestly?

I'm still stunned anyone can feel this good.

Doug is such a passionate lover. Considerate. Intense.

He just gets me.

"Morning, Sunshine," he murmurs against my skin, his voice thick and rough in that sleep-deepened way that sends ridiculous little shivers through me.

"Mmm." I stretch slowly, my body still deliciously sensitive as I feel every sore, used inch of me.

“You’re too chipper for someone who wrecked me half the night.”

Doug chuckles low, and it vibrates against my back in the most distracting way.

“No regrets though, right?”

I laugh softly, biting my lip as I turn just enough to meet his wicked, smug grin.

“None. Though I might need food before you get any more ideas.”

He kisses my shoulder and nips lightly.

“Fine. But only because I don’t want my mate passing out before we even get started.”

I roll my eyes, but I’m grinning.

God, he’s impossible.

But he’s mine.

All mine.

As he slips out of bed and tugs on a pair of gray sweats, and wow, yes, I ogle him the entire time, I pull the sheet tighter around me and let myself just be in the moment.

Happy .

I feel so happy.

Loved.

Claimed.

The thought makes my chest ache, but in that full-to-bursting kind of way.

Doug returns a little while later, balancing a tray with eggs, toast, bacon, and two coffees like the world's hottest room service delivery.

"You trying to wife me up with food?" I tease as he climbs back into bed beside me.

"Babe," he says seriously, "you're already wifed up. You just don't have the fancy title yet."

I flush so hard I almost burn the sheets.

But I take the coffee anyway, because priorities.

We eat mostly in comfortable silence, except for the occasional lazy kiss and Doug's wandering hands that can't seem to not be touching me.

At one point, he starts stroking my thigh under the sheet, fingers inching higher until I nearly choke on my toast.

"Doug," I gasp, glaring at him as he just smirks. "I said food first."

"I'm feeding you me next," he says, totally unrepentant.

I roll my eyes and shove him lightly, but he only laughs, grabbing my hand and threading our fingers together.

"You're clingy this morning," I point out, though my voice is soft and teasing, not annoyed.

“Forever privilege,” he says with a lazy smile. “Mate rights. Get used to it.”

I should argue.

But honestly?

I love it.

Love how much he touches me.

Love the way his eyes soften when he looks at me like I hung the moon.

Love how safe and wanted I feel tangled up in him.

“You really can’t keep your hands off me, can you?”

“Nope,” he says simply, kissing my knuckles. “Not now. Not ever.”

And maybe I should be used to how intense and overwhelming Doug can be, but his words still melt me right into the mattress.

I sigh dramatically and tease, “You probably want me to have your puppies too, huh?”

It’s supposed to be a joke.

Light. Silly.

Except. Doug freezes.

Then his eyes glow gold with heat so fast I swear the room tilts.

His entire body goes tense and predatory, and oh, oh no.

“Sunshine,” he says slowly, his voice a deep growl of pure, dirty intent.

“You shouldn’t say shit like that unless you want to spend the rest of the day stuck right here while I make that happen.”

My entire face goes up in flames.

“Doug!”

But he’s already moving, tossing the tray aside and hauling me onto his lap, his lips brushing my ear as his cock presses hard and thick against me.

“Later,” he promises, his voice molten. “Right now, I just want to hold you.”

I melt instantly, curling into his lap as his arms tighten and his lips press soft, worshipful kisses to my temple, my cheek, my mouth.

He hums low, content and possessive, as I settle against him.

“I’m never letting you go,” he whispers against my lips, voice thick with love and forever.

“Good,” I whisper back, smiling so wide my cheeks ache. “Because I’m never letting you go, either.”

We stay like that, tangled and lazy and utterly ours, while the sun climbs higher and the matebond between us thrums softly like a heartbeat.

Forever isn’t scary anymore.

It's right here.

Naked, clingy, a little wild.

And perfect.

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My dearest Lieblings,

I have just finished reading a rather heartfelt (and, dare I say, slightly rambling) thank-you text from a certain Wolf PI who, not that long ago, insisted he was absolutely not the forever type.

Ha!

I knew better.

He claimed he didn't believe in destiny. That he wasn't built for love.

That he was too much of a lone Wolf for matebonds, shared bank accounts, or early morning snuggles with a beautiful, whip-smart artist who makes the sun look dim.

And yet, here we are.

Fully claimed. Fully mated.

Blissfully wrapped up in domesticity, shared laundry, and what I suspect may soon be a very positive pregnancy test.

But shh . Let's not rush the reveal.

All thanks to a humble little spell-coded, fate-enhanced app I have named Date to Mate.

“One swipe to forever!”

(Don’t roll your eyes. Branding matters.)

When I first began this magical matchmaking journey, I relied solely on visions, tea leaves, ancestral whispers, and the occasional enchanted ferret.

But the world moves fast, my loves. Faster than a comet in orbit. And I? I adapt.

I took my old ways, mixed in a dash of pixel dust, some algorithmic charm from a few special colleagues, and voilà, a supernatural dating app powered by destiny and well-placed code.

It has been my honor (and absolute chaos) to unite Shifters, Witches, Fae, and Vampires of all stripes, and I must admit, the Wolf PI and his Sunshine may be one of my favorite matches to date.

Their story is messy, beautiful, and wildly inappropriate in the best ways.

Just like true love should be.

Now, if you’re wondering what comes next, rest assured, Uncle Uzzi is not done meddling—er, matching.

I’ve packed my white suit, my most trustworthy scrying mirror, and several extremely judgmental familiars and am en route to a delightful little town in New York state.

Why?

Because I’ve been invited to debut the Date to Mate app at the East Coast Supernatural Summit !

Can you imagine? Love in the air, magic in the WiFi, and at least six soul-bonded couples finding each other over coffee and cursed croissants.

Fingers crossed, lieblings— this could be very good.

Until next time.

May your hearts stay open, your fates stay sticky, and your phones stay charged.

Yours magically,

Uncle Uzzi Stregovich

Magical Matchmaker Extraordinaire

and creator of Uncle Uzzi's Date to Mate App?

(Now available in thirteen enchanted realms and select major cities!)

P.S.

To the grumpy Vampire reading this and muttering “Apps are for fools”—your mate's profile just went live.

Don't keep destiny waiting.

The end.

Thank you for taking this journey with Uncle Uzzi & me! I hope you enjoyed it. Maybe you can leave a review for others to find it, too.

For more Date to Mate books please visit my website: [https:// www. cdgorri. com/](https://www.cdgorri.com/)

books/ uncle- uzzis- date- to-mate .

Happy reading!

del mare alla stella,

C.D. Gorri