



Sweet Heart for the Bear (Uncle Uzzi's Date to Mate #1)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: One date can lead to love. You just have to believe.

Horace Vanderbilt is not your ordinary Bear Shifter. He has a few quirks that make dating a little bit difficult. Like his beastly temper. He needs a mate and fast, but with his rep Horace's options are limited.

Carina Coppola runs the new pizzeria in town with her sisters. The buxom beauty is excellent with dough, but not so great when it comes to romance. She doesn't believe in happy ever afters, but the right man could change all that.

Can Uncle Uzzi's Magical Matchmaking App, Date to Mate, help this growly grump find true love?

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Hello, Darlings!

How are you all doing?

You might have noticed that things feel a little different this time, yes? I can now chat with you effortlessly through this marvelous little app—crafted with love and magic by my brilliant friends, Randall Graves and Menon Blau.

It has always been my heart's mission to unite as many fated mates as possible. But alas, I am only one Witch, and the multiverse is vast beyond imagination.

Thus, Date to Mate—my magical matchmaking app—was born!

Of course, you all know this already, as you've eagerly signed up. However, I must remind you: honesty is key when filling out your profile. Be truthful, or the results will be less than magical!

Remember, you're here to connect with your forever mate, not merely swipe right for a fleeting dalliance. Understood?

Now, it's true that you may need to venture on more than one date to discover your one true and fated mate—but that's perfectly fine. We are seekers of destiny, and we do not give up, do we?

Wunderbar!

And, my darlings, don't forget that Uncle Uzzi's Date to Mate App offers live chat

support from my wonderful staff and helpers. Be courteous! I can't promise protection from an irate Witch, Wizard, or Supernatural being, should you choose to be rude.

Good luck to you all.

My beloved Liebling is watching from the beyond, and I can assure you, she's absolutely radiant with pride over this new venture.

May the Fates smile warmly upon you!

Sincerely yours,

Uncle Uzzi

P.S.

Read all the way through the end for a Valentine's Day bonus scene with one of my favorite couples, Elissa & Hunter Maverick!

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Chapter 1

Horace

I got you now, you little shit.

I'm scrambling to shut down the hacker that's been trying to break into the system I've been securing for the better of a week now.

It hasn't been easy, but I finally find what I need to nail the fucker.

"Done!" I slap my hands down and push away from the desk, ready for a little victory protein shake.

The thing about being a computer guru is I very rarely have time to go out and I don't do a lot of celebrating.

Being a Shifter, though, I need to consume copious amounts of calories, and protein shakes, with a little added ice cream and fruit for fat and flavor, often make up a lot of my meals.

Vanderbilt Systems is the name of my company.

We rent space in an office building in downtown Newark, which is where my employees do their thing.

I live a few minutes away, in the penthouse of a high rise, but I haven't ever visited

the office.

I leave that to my cousin, and the vice president of Vanderbilt Systems , Josh, to handle.

We both grew up in Newark, and I'm the first to admit this area has come a long way.

There's an old world, historic charm I can appreciate when I seldom leave my penthouse.

Something about the concrete buildings and iron railways, the cozy cafes, and the beautifying projects all make for a lively and interesting place for a curious Bear like me.

See, I get bored easily. I need constant stimulation.

Which is how I got into tech. It's always changing and constantly reinventing itself.

I build firewalls and software, which can technically be done anywhere, and my clients run the gamut from small businesses to global conglomerates and foreign governments who trust us to keep their data safe.

Usually, I can do that with my eyes closed.

But this project is for a rather unique client.

Uzzi Stregovich.

Oh, his reputation precedes him. The man is a legend. A Witch and the sole owner and operator of Uncle Uzzi's Magical Matchmaking Services .

He specializes in finding fated mates for supernaturals like me.

Only, I don't believe in all that.

But I am interested in the fact he's recently developed an app. Uncle Uzzi's Date to Mate app, to be precise.

I've been working on solving a little bug for him and I have to admit some of the code is like nothing I have ever seen.

He won't disclose his partners. Something about privacy, and no amount of looking tells me who is responsible for some of the app's finer features.

Like how the fuck did he think of using astronomy and astrology to map out a path to one's true love?

But I'm not the only one interested in finding out more about this app.

See, the bugs I'd been hired to find aren't bugs.

It's a hacker.

And a good one, too.

The fucker has been sneaking in behind the scenes and fucking shit up as he goes.

I caught him now, though. And I already corrected the mess he made.

Done and done.

This gig came to me by means of my favorite private investigator, Douglas

McGregor.

He's a nephew or something of the old Witch who commissioned the software.

Uzzi Stregovich is pretty famous in Supernatural circles.

Me and Doug go way back.

I use his services from time to time, and I'm now just sending the hacker's information over to Doug.

The Wolf can go have a chat with the asshole on my behalf.

I would go, but I hate people. Seriously. Communication is not my strong point. But do not get the wrong idea.

I don't want Doug to hurt him. I want him to offer this guy a job.

I am completely serious.

Most hackers make brilliant programmers, and anyone this savvy needed to be on my payroll.

My phone buzzes and I glance at the text coming through from Doug.

Got your message.

On my way.

Terrific.

That's all done.

I now have a little time for some R&R, which means I have about ten minutes before I get bored out of my fucking mind.

A bored Bear gets into trouble.

And trouble equals an unhappy Bear.

Most people, even other supes, often thought of Bears as slow, lumbering, or lazy.

But that couldn't be farther from the truth.

See, I'm not lazy.

My mind is always going at lightning speed.

If I'm quiet, it's probably because I'm thinking of something you have no hope of understanding.

I'm not trying to insult you. I really am that smart.

It's just facts.

Does that make me a dick?

Maybe.

It's probably why I'm still single, too.

But what am I supposed to do? I can't just shut off my brain.

Right as I'm about to open the door to my rooftop sanctuary—a little mini forest in the middle of the city where I have the privacy to shift into my Bear and give the big guy some exercise, my doorbell rings.

What the actual fuck?

No one comes here.

I hate visitors. Plus, I chose this building specifically because of the security.

Shifter run, you know.

Can't get much better than that.

I pull the door open, eyebrows raised as I take in the older man in a pristine white suit.

“Yeah?”

“Horace Vanderbilt, I presume,” he says, and his lightly accented voice seems amused.

“That's me. Can I help you?”

“I wanted to come meet the man who fixed my little problem.”

“What?”

“Date to Mate. The app? It's mine,” he says, and now I'm nodding.

“I fixed it like five minutes ago. How did you get here so fast?”

“I have my ways, Horace. May I come in?”

Shit. Where were my manners?

“Sure, come in,” I say and step up to give him some room.

“Thank you, but just for a moment. There is a lovely pizzeria opening in the lobby downstairs, and I find myself with a craving,” he says, and my stomach growls.

Pizza always sounds good to a hungry Bear.

“I see I am not the only one with a craving,” he remarks, and I shrug with good humor.

“I’m always up for pizza. But what is it I can do for you, Mr. Stregovich?” I ask because really, I am curious.

“Please, won’t you call me Uncle Uzzi? And I believe it is I who can help you, Horace,” he says and walks into my penthouse, stopping to look at some framed paintings on the wall.

I don’t know what they are or how they got there. The interior decorator I hired when I first bought the place was the likely answer.

“Are you a fan of Klimt?”

“Who?”

“Never mind, dear boy,” he says, and his blue eyes are twinkling. “I wanted to thank you for the fine job you did for me in person. You know, this app took ages to complete. But I fear some are not eager to have me entering the digital age with my

service,” he murmurs.

He’s not wrong. The hacker was good.

“I blocked the hacker and reinforced your firewall, Mr.—er, I mean, Uncle Uzzi.”

“Indeed, you have. But there is something else, perhaps we can discuss it over an early lunch?”

“Alright,” I agree, my Bear hyper focused on his earlier mention of pizza.

“Wunderbar!”

“Just give me a second to grab my things.”

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Chapter 2

Carina

“O h my freaking gah! I can’t do anything with this piece of crap website already!” I scream into my hands.

“Yo, Carina? Are you alright?” Dina asks.

Dina is short for Geraldine, but she always hates it when we call her that. And our dad’s name was Jerry, so that’s a no go, too.

She’s the sensitive one. Sweet and shy. Nothing like my no nonsense blabbermouth self.

Dina leans on the doorframe to the small office in back of the pizzeria we, along with our other sister, Marianne, just opened in the lobby of a posh new high rise in Newark, waiting for me to respond.

I wish we could afford to live in the gorgeous building, but after sinking every dollar we have into this place, I’m just grateful we aren’t out on the streets.

Yet.

Rent is due and our slimy landlord, Mr. O’Doyle, isn’t known for showing mercy.

Sure, he’s hinted he is willing to accept other forms of payment.

But I'd rather sleep in a box than submit to that creepy fucker. And I sure as heck am not telling Dina about any of that.

"I'm fine. Just having issues with the Wi-Fi," I lie.

Truth is, I could only afford the free version of the software I'm using to host our website, Pizza Girls.

It isn't a big deal, except I have us signed up for several delivery services that all hinge on the site working.

And it's not.

Fuck my life.

"You want something to eat before we open?" she asks.

Dina's apron is liberally doused in flour, and she's so adorable with her big blue eyes and short curly hair. She wears her curves proudly, and I am in awe of her and MJ.

That's what we call Marianne for short. Her middle name is Jeanne. I have no idea why.

I think our parents might have been trying to make us sound more American. They were both born in Italy and came here in their forties.

They never thought they would have kids, but then the three of us were born, one right after the other.

"Are you wearing yoga pants instead of the chef pants I bought?" I ask, eyebrows raised.

“So? I’m wearing the t-shirt,” she says.

I grin at her as she does a curtsy and spins for me.

The hot pink cotton shirt has Pizza Girls scrolled across the front in bold black script. Dina designed it, so I know she is proud.

That she has said t-shirt tied at the small of her back and tucked under to emphasize her waist is beside the point.

“You look fine,” I say.

“Fine? Damn. I was hoping for a cute at least,” she says, looking down at herself.

“Oh my gah! Yes, you’re cute. Go make pizza!” I laugh and wave my hand to shoo her away.

She giggles and skitters away like a squirrel hopped up on sugar. Freaking adorable.

Truth is, I wish I had half my little sister’s confidence.

But as my last boyfriend, Edgar the Asshole, always said, “No one wants to see all that unless it is tucked in and covered.”

I look down at my baggie chef’s pants and my own t-shirt that I wear two sizes big to cover my boobs. My bra size isn’t obscene, but it’s big.

My ex always hated it when I wore anything even mildly revealing.

I know I shouldn’t care what he thinks anymore, and really, I don’t.

But I guess some things take longer to get over.

His cheating on me?

No problem. Get out. Good riddance.

His constantly putting me down?

That's proving harder to resolve.

Right now, I feel like I can never wear yoga pants in public.

Not with my wide hips and extra-large bubble-butt. But maybe someday I'll get there.

Right now, I have bigger fish to fry. Like fixing our site so we can take orders or else we might go out of business before we even start.

It would be a real shame, too, because we make really good pizza.

MJ is the master chef behind our recipes.

I perfected our mom's basic pizza dough and tomato sauce a long time ago, but it was MJ who found a way to produce it on a larger scale without sacrificing flavor or quality.

It is a lot trickier than it sounds.

But none of it will matter if we don't get any customers.

If only I was better at technology.

I step away from my desk for a moment. It's really in my and my laptop's best interest at this point—before I throw it out the window or drown it in the nearest pitcher of sweet tea.

Don't ask. I mean, okay, I know it isn't a New Jersey kinda thing, but we went to Savannah when we were teenagers on a road trip and well, it stuck.

Dina and MJ are in the kitchen, busy prepping pies we'll sell by the slice, making sure everything is perfect for our soft opening.

I push open the front door, inhaling deeply, ready for a moment of fresh air, and— oh my gah —almost swallow my own gasp when I come face-to-face with an old man in a pristine white suit and a literal mountain of a man beside him.

I freeze, blinking at them.

The old man looks like he belongs in some eccentric novel, but it's the giant next to him that short-circuits my brain.

The sheer size of him is staggering—like someone took a regular man and accidentally hit the "supersize" button. I forget to stop walking, and because I am the very essence of grace, I plow straight into his solid, immovable chest.

“Ooh!”

“Whoa!”

Before I can embarrass myself further, two large hands clamp onto my upper arms, steadying me before I can go full human bowling pin. His grip is firm, warm, and annoyingly helpful.

I look up. And up. And up .

Oh no. He's devastatingly handsome.

Like, star of a made-for-TV romance movie handsome, complete with a strong jaw, unfairly perfect stubble, and deep, unreadable eyes.

My brain scrambles for words, but all I can process is big, warm, smells nice. Don't send help .

"Goodness, so sorry, my dear. We didn't mean to frighten you," the older man says, his voice smooth and his tone amused.

His smile is the kind that immediately makes you want to trust him, maybe even invite him to sit with you so you can just confess all your deepest, darkest secrets.

I exhale, tension easing from my shoulders.

The old guy? Harmless.

The big guy? Still touching me.

I clear my throat, stepping back— or at least attempting to , but his hands are still there.

Immovable.

He's looking down at me with an expression that might be concern, but also might be something else.

Hard to tell. My brain is still in malfunction mode.

“Uh, thanks,” I mumble, because I’m eloquent like that.

He lets go— finally —and I resist the urge to shake out my arms as if to rid myself of the residual warmth of his touch.

Not that I even want to.

Nope.

No, sir.

Because the truth is, I’m attracted to the big guy.

My nipples are hard as rocks and I’m going to need new panties any second now.

Thank fuck I wore my black chef’s pants and not the white ones. That would’ve been bad.

“So,” I say, attempting a casual, totally normal smile. “What can I do you for—um, I mean, for you? What can I do for you?”

And just like that, the old man’s grin widens, the big guy’s eyes twinkle in a way that should be illegal, and I have the distinct feeling my day just got a whole lot more interesting.

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Chapter 3

Horace

Cute. Soft. Smells like sweet basil and sunshine.

When Uncle Uzzi came knocking on my door to thank me for the work I did—only moments before—I suspected he was not an ordinary man.

Witches were just as real as Shifters in my world, but I don't have any real working knowledge of them.

He asked me to grab a slice of pizza with him, and since I was still hungry after consuming my calorie loaded protein shake, I figured, why not?

But I wasn't ready for this.

For her.

She's a tiny little thing. Her height, I mean. The rest of her is lush and full of curves she tries to hide behind baggy clothes, but I know they are there.

I felt them myself when she crashed into me. Now I want to get to know them on an up close and personal basis.

My inner Bear growls.

She's caught his interest, too.

"What can I do you for—um, I mean, for you? What can I do for you?" she says, but instead of answering her, I just stand there like a moron.

Of course, I do.

"Are we too early to dine in?" Uncle Uzzi replies.

"No! No, not at all. Follow me," she says, then offers a sweet smile to the old man.

She is so damn cute, but I'm kinda stuck between wanting to growl at him for talking to her and wanting to thank him for being the only one of us capable of answering the lovely little female.

"Wow," I say, pointing at the mural that completely covers one entire wall, as if words alone could do it justice.

It's a cityscape.

No, it's more than that.

It's my block.

The bottom half of my building, the familiar fire escapes, the bodega with the dusty cat in the window, even the crooked stop sign that leans a little too far to the left like it's had one too many drinks.

It's all there in varying shades of black and white, inked with painstaking detail.

But there's one splash of color.

One bold, unapologetic pop of hot pink .

A sign. Her sign.

The store's name stands out against the monochrome world around it.

Pizza Girls —the words in bold black letters, impossible to miss.

I glance from the mural to her, my gaze flicking to the oversized t-shirt she's wearing, bearing the same logo.

Pizza Girls . She's the walking, talking, breathing embodiment of the place.

And yeah. She breathes real good.

The shirt is big—probably meant to be casual, unassuming—but it's fighting a losing battle trying to hide what's underneath.

She's curves on curves. A masterpiece of soft, strong, and stunning. Every breath she takes causes the fabric to stretch across her bountiful breasts.

My body reacts before my brain can issue any kind of command.

Shit.

I clear my throat, forcing myself to calm the fuck down before I embarrass myself in broad daylight.

I already know— know —this woman is off-limits.

She works here, which means I'll be eating here often.

I'm a sucker for good food, especially local joints. And this place?

It's literally downstairs .

The last thing I need is to get tangled up in some awkward thing with the hot pizza girl who happens to be serving my favorite slices.

And it'll be awkward cause I'm that guy, remember?

The curious Bear with zero attention span.

And yet...

Something tells me she's capable of capturing all my attention.

I steal another glance at her. She's busy, hands on her hips as she watches me take it all in, a smirk playing at her lips.

It's not the kind of look that says I don't notice you .

It's the kind that says I definitely do .

Damn .

Yeah. She is something .

“Yeah, my sister painted it. She's a real artist. Did the logo, too.”

I smile at the hint of pride in her voice. That's nice.

Family is supposed to be proud of one another. Supportive.

I suppose Josh is like that. I should call him more.

“So, you own this place?”

“Uh huh,” she says, and turns away.

But before she does, I notice her smile dim a little, and I swear I hear her say ‘for now’ at the end of that sentence.

Curiosity gets the better of me, and I follow her to the table she selects for me and Uncle Uzzi.

“Let me grab you a menu,” she says and turns around to get one from the counter, giving me a terrific view of her fantastic ass.

“See anything you like?” Uncle Uzzi asks, and the old man is grinning.

“Um, yeah, I like all pizza,” I reply, fighting my blush when she spins back to face me her mouth fashioned in a cute little o .

“So, we have daily specials, you can see them here. The rest is our standard menu. How about drinks?”

“My dear, I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name. Now, do my eyes deceive me, or do you really make homestyle Southern sweet tea ?” Uncle Uzzi asks.

“My name is Carina, and yes, we do,” she says, and is smiling back at him.

Once more, I find myself in the awkward position of wanting to punch the old Witch. I manage to control myself.

Barely.

“My sisters and I visited Georgia as teenagers, and we fell in love with the stuff,” she explains .

For some reason, my heart squeezes when she says the L word.

“I’ll have a glass, please,” Uzzi replies easily. “What about you, Horace?”

“Your name is Horace?” she interrupts.

Her big brown eyes are locked on my face and fuck me if the whole world doesn’t tilt a little on its axis.

“Yeah. Horace Vanderbilt,” I say and offer my hand like a complete dolt.

This isn’t a business meeting, for fuck’s sake. But I can’t help it.

I have to touch her.

She looks down at my hand before pushing hers into it, and fuck me, it’s like a lightning bolt.

“Ooh! Sorry, must be static electricity,” she apologizes, but I’m just sitting and staring.

Like a creeper.

“That’s alright, Carina. He’ll have the tea, too.”

“Okay. Um, yeah, I’ll be right back,” she says and bites her plump lower lip before

turning away.

And that's what I'm afraid of.

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Chapter 4

Carina

I head back to the drink station, giving myself a moment to reset.

It's a standard setup—nothing fancy, but it gets the job done.

A commercial ice machine hums beside the soda fountain, the milkshake blender sits ready for action, and our ice cream selection, though small, is mighty.

The real stars of the drink station, though? Three massive five-gallon jugs of tea chilled in the fridge.

Unsweetened black tea. For people who enjoy suffering.

Mint green tea. For the health-conscious and, apparently, my sister Dina's latest obsession.

And finally—the king of them all—sweet tea. For the people with taste.

I grab two tall glasses and start pouring, the ice clinking as the golden liquid fills them.

My sisters' voices carry from the open kitchen, where they're busy prepping.

The kitchen is separated from the front by a half-wall with a plexiglass window that

slides open when needed.

It keeps things running smoothly—orders up, pizzas out, no unnecessary chaos.

To the left, the pizza oven radiates heat, and just in front of it, a high counter allows us—me, my sisters, and the part-timers we hired—to serve up the good stuff without customers wandering into the workspace. The place is small, but we use every inch well.

We can seat over two dozen people, but let's be real— takeout is where the real money is .

That's why getting our website up and running for online orders is top priority.

Or at least, it should be.

Right now?

Right now, my brain is stuck on my new customers.

Especially the big one.

Horace. Who even names their kid that anymore?

I don't know if it is his soulful brown eyes and imposing frame that have me all hot and bothered, but I am.

He isn't doing anything. Just sitting there in jeans and a light sweater. Like it's not twenty degrees outside.

I mean, come on. Who just walks around in freezing weather like it's nothing?

That's either peak overconfidence or some sort of supernatural heat source at work.

The old man with him is all warmth and kindness, the type of person who instantly makes you feel at ease. But Horace?

Horace is different.

Not in a he's gonna rob the place kind of way—nothing like that.

No, it's more like he's holding something back.

Like there's some hidden power there, coiled tight, carefully controlled.

He doesn't look restless, doesn't fidget or shift like some big guy uncomfortable in his surroundings. He simply is.

And I should be wary.

But if anything? I'm curious.

And worse? I'm attracted.

Two things I definitely do not need to be feeling, not with everything else I've got going on.

Shaking it off, I grab the drinks and walk them over to their table, setting them down without spilling a drop .

Thank. Fuck.

I'd say forgive the potty mouth, but I'm a jersey Girl and we all have them.

You can deal with it or get lost.

I've had enough of folks trying to make me over. And I am not interested in changing myself to suit anyone else's needs.

That kind of behavior falls directly into the fuck no column of my internal to do list.

"Here you are," I say, exhaling like I didn't just go through a whole inner monologue over a man's presence. "Have you decided?"

Uncle Uzzi gives me a warm smile. "Thank you, Carina."

"My pleasure, Mr....?"

"Please, call me Uncle Uzzi. Everyone does."

"My pleasure, Uncle Uzzi," I say with a little nod, already liking him.

And then I glance at Horace.

He's still staring at the menu, completely oblivious to the fact that I exist.

A tiny flicker of something—disappointment?—stirs in my chest before I shove it aside.

Don't be silly. He's not here for you.

I turn my attention back to Uncle Uzzi, who's still smiling like he knows things.

"Everything looks marvelous, and it smells even better," he says, patting his stomach.

"I think I'll start with the house salad and a personal spinach and ricotta pie."

“Wonderful,” I say, jotting it down. “And for you, Horace?”

Finally, finally , he looks up at me.

“I’ll have a meat lover’s, please. Sixteen-inch pie.”

Classic. A man after my own heart.

“That’s a great pizza,” I say, my smile stretching across my face before I can stop it.

“We make our own sausage and meatballs fresh daily. But can I tell you a secret?”

“What’s that?” he asks.

His gaze flickers, just for a second, to my mouth—like he noticed how wide my smile got. And then he nods.

“It’s even better drizzled with hot honey. Would you like to try it?” I ask, and I’m waiting for him to either comment on how gross that sounds or how good.

The seconds tick. Then finally, he replies, and his voice sounds impossibly deep when he does, sending shivers running through me.

“Sounds good,” Horace grumbles. “Can you make it well-done?”

“S-sure thing,” I say, scribbling it down. “I’ll be back in a few.”

I turn and head toward the kitchen, my feet mercifully cooperating and not betraying me by tripping over absolutely nothing , as they are prone to do.

Another victory.

I do not look back and am about to congratulate myself when I feel something stirring in my belly.

Butterflies? Or fighter jets?

...Okay, maybe just one glance.

Just one.

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Chapter 5

Horace

I 'm starting to think eating is going to be a challenge.

Not because I'm not hungry—I'm starving, again—but because my appetite is currently competing with a whole mess of feelings I should not be having over a woman I just met.

This curvy little goddess who moves around her pizzeria like she owns the world, flashing smiles that could bring a man to his knees.

I should know better.

But then she goes and offers to drizzle hot honey over my well-done meat lover's pie like she's reading straight from my damn soul.

Put a fork in me. I am done .

Has any other woman ever understood me so well?

My Bear—the other part of me, the part that's always just beneath the surface, watching, waiting—is already stirring.

Scratching at my insides like the restless animal he is. Like he's seen what he wants and doesn't give a damn about logic or consequences.

But I should know better.

Because relationships? They don't work out for me.

And this one? It could have disastrous consequences.

“As I was saying, Horace,” Uncle Uzzi says, dabbing at his mouth with a napkin like he's discussing the weather and not potentially upending my entire life,

“I'd really like your input on how to make the app more user-friendly. But also, I'm wondering if perhaps you wouldn't like to try it out?”

I drag my attention away from Carina—who has just disappeared back into the kitchen, her scent still lingering in the air—and focus on Uncle Uzzi. I narrow my eyes. The old man is up to something.

“Oh, I'm happy to work on the app,” I say, taking a sip of my sweet tea, because priorities.

“The coding is... strange. Unlike anything I've encountered before.” I sip and swallow and lower my voice slightly. “But as for using it? I'm not in the market for a mate, Uncle Uzzi.”

I whisper the word mate , barely more than a breath.

It doesn't matter. He hears me anyway.

Uncle Uzzi hums, eyes twinkling in that knowing way of his. Like he sees more than he should.

More than I want him to.

“I see. Well, that is to be expected about the code. You see, I have a connection in a parallel dimension who did most of the mapping for this app.”

I freeze mid-swallow.

Goddamn, this sweet tea is addicting.

I blink. Once. Twice. Slowly.

Then I set my glass down very carefully, because I must have misheard him.

“Pardon me?” I say, staring at him. “Did you just say parallel dimension ?”

“Indeed,” he replies, completely unbothered, taking a sip of his tea like this is an ordinary conversation and not the single most insane thing I’ve heard in, well, ever .

“But I suppose you could call it another plane of existence. An alternate reality. However you phrase it, it all boils down to the same multiverse.”

He says it so casually. Like this is just standard pizzeria talk.

Meanwhile, my entire world is recalibrating.

I look at the mural on the wall. Then back at him.

Then back at the mural, because I’m going to need a minute.

“Uh, excuse me,” Carina interrupts.

She’s holding Uzzi’s salad and something else I know I didn’t order.

But goddamn, it smells fantastic.

“Since you two are technically our first customers, I thought you might like to try this hot antipasto platter on the house,” Carina says, setting down an absolute feast of bite-sized Italian delicacies.

Golden, crispy arancini.

Melted mozzarella wrapped in prosciutto.

Sautéed mushrooms glistening in olive oil.

Garlic knots so perfectly baked they look like they might just melt in my mouth.

My stomach growls its approval.

But my brain? My brain is malfunctioning.

Because Carina is clearly puzzled by whatever bits of conversation she overheard, and it’s just another reminder of why humans and supes don’t mix.

And yet, here I am. Staring at her like an idiot. Frozen solid, like some kind of overgrown deer in headlights.

Worse? My traitorous gaze drops—completely unbidden—to her tits.

Shit.

Not my fault. It’s just her shirt stretches just right when she leans forward, and it’s got me wondering.

Are her nipples hard right now?

Because mine sure are.

I mean—No!

That's not what I meant. That's not even how that works .

I clear my throat, mortified, suddenly hyperaware of how much blood has been diverted from my brain at the worst possible moment.

My cock thumps behind my zipper, and I swear I go cross-eyed.

“Thank you, Carina. This looks incredible!” Uzzi says, all warmth and appreciation, completely oblivious to the fact that I'm in the middle of a full-blown crisis.

His voice yanks me back to reality.

“Thanks,” I mutter, barely stringing together the one syllable.

Carina nods, that gorgeous smile still lingering on her lips, before she moves away.

And I experience two very conflicting emotions.

1. Relief —because I desperately need oxygenated blood to return to my brain.

2. Deep, gut-level disappointment —because I want her to stay.

I exhale and rub a hand down my face. I need to get a grip.

Good idea. Take her some place quiet and grip away , my unhelpful and very naughty

Bear supplies.

Meanwhile, more customers start trickling in, and I watch as Carina seamlessly switches gears, taking orders, handing out menus, offering samples and coupons, and charming the absolute hell out of everyone.

I should be listening to Uzzi.

I should be focusing on the fact that he just casually dropped the phrase parallel dimension into conversation like it's nothing extraordinary.

But instead?

The other half of my brain—the half that is fully compromised at this point—is hyper-focused on one thing and one thing only.

Her. Carina.

Her sisters come out to help every now and then, and yeah, they look alike—same dark curls, same lively eyes, same confident energy.

But where they're cute?

Carina is stunning.

And worse?

I don't even think she knows it.

“So,” Uzzi's voice cuts through my thoughts, his tone far too knowing, “will you do it? Add some functionality and maybe test the app yourself?”

I drag my eyes away from Carina— again —and force myself to focus on the actual reason I'm here.

Multiverse coding.

Parallel dimension developers.

The kind of tech that shouldn't exist.

You know. Just regular afternoon things.

I pick up a garlic knot, take a bite, and chew slowly, using the moment to pretend like I haven't just spent the last few minutes mentally spiraling over a woman who is absolutely off-limits.

A neighbor, for fuck's sake.

Finally, I swallow and answer nonchalantly.

“Yeah. Sure. I'll do it.”

And why will I do it? Because I'm an idiot.

And because, against all logic, I kind of want to see where all this leads.

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Chapter 6

Horace

“What app?” a female voice asks as she settles both our pizzas down on the table.

This woman is young and sweet looking. But it’s not her .

Not my Carina.

Shit.

I can’t think of her like that.

“Hello, my dear. You must be Carina’s sister. I’m Uncle Uzzi, this is Horace.”

“I am! My name’s MJ. I’m the head chef at Pizza Girls ,” she says, and her smile is welcoming.

“So, what app are you working on if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Oh, uh,” I stutter.

I might not know a lot about this apparent multiverse we live in, but I know I shouldn’t just talk about it. Especially not with a normal.

“Actually, dear, it’s a dating app. See, I’m a matchmaker—yes, people still use

us—and I’ve come up with this app designed to find, well, I suppose you could say your soul mate ,” Uzzi explains.

“A matchmaker? Cool! Ooh, let’s see, Date to Mate ,” she reads over his shoulder, “sounds awesome! Is it live? Can we use it?”

“We?” I ask stupidly.

“Yeah, me and my sisters. We are like so single, it’s ridiculous. Carina just got out of the worst relationship, and Dina doesn’t trust anyone,” she emphasizes and chuckles at herself.

“I see, well, my dear, tell me, do you believe in magic?” Uzzi asks.

“Sure. Why not?” she shrugs.

“Then I would highly recommend you sign up. But right now, the app is by invitation only.”

“Oh, well, here’s my number and my sisters’ numbers. Invite away,” she says and takes his phone.

I want to snatch it from her and delete Carina’s number, but how can I?

If she wants to use a dating app, I certainly can’t stop her.

“That would be fantastic. Wunderbar!” Uncle Uzzi exclaims.

But I’m not excited or happy about this.

In fact, I’m growling.

“Wow. Is that your stomach? Eat up. It really is delicious,” MJ says nodding at my pizza.

Fuck.

I just dip my chin and grab a slice, shoving half of it in my mouth.

Only, it’s hot. Like really freaking hot.

So, of course, I make a spectacle of myself.

I start to gasp and hiss.

“MJ! Don’t kill our customers. Not everyone can swallow their food straight from the oven,” Carina tsks, coming over and patting my back while offering me a glass of ice water.

“I’m not! I mean, I didn’t know he was going to take such a big bite while it was still smoking,” she says, and she’s not wrong.

I don’t know what’s worse. The fact I can’t seem to swallow my food like a normal person, or that my cock is getting even harder with every pat of her hand on my back.

Geezus.

“Are you okay, Horace?” Uzzi asks and I glare at him.

“Should I call an ambulance?” Carina asks, and I can scent her alarm.

Shit.

It's difficult, but I manage to swallow.

Barely.

I clear my throat, trying not to choke in front of Carina, of all people. That would be a hell of a first impression.

"No, I'm fine. Really, I'm okay," I assure them, my voice a little rough. "I can be a Bear about food."

Only half joking.

Carina's eyes flicker, lips twitching just slightly at the joke. Like she wants to smile but won't let herself.

Meanwhile, MJ, who clearly has no fear, gives me a smirk and says, "Wow. Chew slowly next time, buddy."

I grin at the death glare Carina shoots her, as if MJ has personally betrayed the family by pointing out my near-death experience.

"Hey! I know! You guys are good at tech, right?" MJ continues, completely unfazed.

"My sister's been having a beast of a time getting our site up and running so we can take online orders. Maybe you can help?"

Carina's head snaps toward her so fast I'm surprised she doesn't give herself whiplash.

"You can't ask customers things like that," she hisses, low and sharp.

I shouldn't get involved.

I really, really shouldn't.

But instead of taking that as my cue to stay out of it, I lean forward, elbow on the table, curiosity piqued.

Because now I want to know what's been troubling her.

And—because I am, apparently, a glutton for punishment—I offer to help.

Like I know being near this woman is a bad idea, but I cannot stop putting myself directly in her path.

“Sure,” I say, looking directly at her.

“Once we've finished our meeting, I'll be happy to take a look.”

And fuck, if I don't mean it.

This woman could ask me for the moon, and I'd be standing here like an idiot trying to figure out how to lasso it down for her.

Trouble . That's what this is.

But like most Bears, I seem to have an incredibly dumb habit of running straight toward trouble when I should be going the other way.

“Well, that is interesting,” Uncle Uzzi states once the women leave.

I glance at him, narrowing my eyes

“What’s that?”

“Oh, not a thing, dear boy.”

But his blue eyes are twinkling.

Like he knows exactly what’s happening here.

Like he’s already three steps ahead of me and is just sitting back, enjoying the show.

Doesn’t matter.

I can work on his dating app.

I can help my pretty new neighbor with her website.

And I can do all of that without going full Bear over her.

Right?

Yeah...right.

I grab my third slice and start munching because again, this is just so fucking good.

The sausage and meatballs are definitely made in-house like she said.

But that hot honey?

It gives it just the right amount of kick and a dose of sweetness my Bear simply adores.

Uzzi is enjoying his spinach whatever— gag . And now my brain circles back to his app.

Date to Mate.

The idea behind the app is solid. In fact, I wish I'd thought of it myself.

Dating is already a nightmare in the best of circumstances.

But when you've got a half-ton furry secret to safeguard? It's even more of a minefield.

Still, I don't have to use the app to work on it.

Just like I don't have to kiss my neighbor to help her out.

Even if I want to.

Badly.

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Chapter 7

Carina

I lock myself in my office, staring at my laptop screen like it personally offended me, punching numbers into spreadsheets and silently cursing at the IT guys from this fuckwad website platform I'm stuck using.

Any minute now, they'll get back to me with something helpful.

Any. Minute. Now.

Still nothing.

I groan and flop back in my chair, rubbing my temples.

Okay, fine. So I'm not just sitting here, waiting for them to email me back.

I'm hiding .

Dina, MJ, and Shawnee— one of our new hires —have the front completely locked down, so no one actually needs me out there.

The lunch rush is steady. A nice flow of customers coming in, grabbing slices, sitting at tables, enjoying themselves.

And that's good.

But it's not enough.

Not enough to cover the rent. Not enough to expand.

I need bigger orders.

Big customers.

The office buildings in the area— they're the real gold mine .

If we can get just a couple of them to start placing orders daily, especially for those big catered work lunches, everything would be solid.

Sure, we're already set up with third-party delivery services, but I've also got Emilio, a kid fresh out of high school, on standby as our in-house driver.

I just need this damn website to start working so people can actually place those orders.

I tap my fingers against my desk, muttering under my breath.

Please freaking work.

But as much as the website situation sucks, that's not the real reason I'm holed up in here.

Truth is?

I'm a little mortified that MJ asked that cute-as-hell customer to help me.

I mean, what the heck was she thinking?

He's not just cute— he's big, broad-shouldered, and unfairly attractive, with those deep brown eyes that look like they could see straight through me .

And now he's going to be helping me fix my disaster of a website?

I groan again, dropping my head onto my desk.

This is so embarrassing.

Why couldn't MJ just let me suffer in silence like a normal business owner?

The sound of someone rapping on the wall has me lifting my head, and—BAM.

I feel like I've just entered another dimension.

Because standing in my doorway like he was plucked straight from the pages of one of my romance books is Horace the Hottie.

Hands braced on either side of the open door.

Tall, broad, and unreasonably built.

Leaning forward just enough that I get the full effect of his size.

It's like he knows exactly what he's doing.

Like he's some leading man on the cover of a novel I'd one-click without hesitation.

Then— because apparently, he's not already taking up enough space in my office or my brain —he turns sideways just so he can fit his big-ass shoulders through the entry.

I swallow.

Oh no.

“Hey,” he says, casual as can be, nodding toward my laptop. “I thought I’d check out your site before I head back to work.”

I blink.

Then blink again.

Because what?

“What?” I say brilliantly, because obviously, I have an incredible way with words.

His lips twitch like he’s holding back a laugh.

“Your site?” he says slowly, like he’s testing to see if I understand basic language.

“Your sister said you needed help? I work in tech?”

Oh. Oh. Right.

The website. The thing I’ve been stressing about for days.

The thing I literally locked myself in here to fix.

The thing I should be focusing on instead of the fact that this man is currently taking up all the air in this room just by existing.

I clear my throat, frantically grasping for some level of dignity.

“Right. Yes. The website.”

I turn toward my laptop, suddenly hyper-aware of everything.

The mess on my desk.

The wayward curl falling into my face.

The sauce stain on my t-shirt.

The fact that I probably look way too flustered for someone who’s just been offered free tech support.

I force myself to look up at him.

Mistake.

Because he’s still watching me, dark eyes warm, his mouth still curled in that almost-smile.

And for the first time today, my website disaster is the least of my problems.

I have a terrible track record with men. I know better than to get the hots for this one.

Horace is simply out of my league. He’s somehow managed to combine hot boy body with brains, a real geek meets jock kind of vibe, and God knows, my ability to resist temptation is low.

Must be vigilant, I remind myself.

“Can I sit here?” he asks nodding at the tiny folding chair I have in front of my desk.

“Sure,” I say acutely aware of the fact that thing is way too small for him.

But he moves gracefully and sits best he can. Then he dips his head at the laptop and again I’m blushing like a buffoon.

“Here ya go,” I say and turn my laptop towards him.

Right away, he falls into some super geek tech mode. His perfectly arched brows furrow and those near black eyes seem to darken as he focuses on the screen.

He frowns.

“What is it?”

“Huh? Oh, well this site is garbage, What they’re doing is a classic bait and switch, promising you all kinds of security and flexibility, but denying you access. With your permission, I’d like to move your whole website to a more secure server,” he says, and I don’t even pretend I understand.

“Um, I have no idea what you are saying, but also, I’m broke. That is, my budget for this is nil until we start making some money?—”

“No worries. This is what my company does. And seeing as how this is already my new favorite restaurant, I figure we can work out a trade?”

“So like, free pizza for IT support?”

“Something like that,” he says, and his eyes seem to glitter at me.

“How do I know you’re not some psycho stealing all my information?” I ask, because hello, it is the 21 st Century and cybercrime is a real thing.

“Good question. Here’s my card. You can scan the QR-code and look up my company.”

I nod and do just that while he waits while I read.

Holy fucking shit.

He owns one of the biggest and most renowned cyber security firms on the east coast.

I swallow. When I lift my gaze to his, I see that wicked twinkle in his eyes is still there.

“Okay, fine. This seems within your wheelhouse, and I can definitely barter pizza for help.”

“Good. I am sending myself a copy of this, and I’ll take it upstairs to work on at my desk. I live in the penthouse. Shouldn’t take me more than a couple of hours,” he says, and I nod.

Just sitting with my mouth open while he unfurls himself from the seat. I try not to stare and simply look straight ahead.

Which turns out to be a very bad idea since I am now eye level with the enormous rod he’s packing behind his jeans.

Dear Lord, is this man gigantic everywhere?

“I, uh, I’ll call down when I’m finished,” he rumbles and I, finally, lift my gaze.

“Yep. Sure. No problem. Here’s a menu with our number,” I reply and hand him one of the tri-fold takeout menus we had printed up.

His fingertips brush against my hand and dang it, there go those fighter pilots again.

I ignore them and clear my throat, standing when he moves sideways to get through the doorway.

Horace turns back to me, and I give a little wave— again , this is because I am that cool. He smirks and dips his chin before leaving.

And I just stay there. Like a freaking statue.

“Carina? We can use some help up front!” Dina yells after five minutes pass and I am still standing in my office.

“Coming!” I shout back.

I close my eyes and shake my head, because, of course, I would choose that word.

And now it’s all I can think about.

Coming.

All. Over. Him. My sexy geeky neighbor.

I am in so much trouble.

Gulp.

Chapter 8

Horace

I have Carina's website switched over to my server in ten minutes flat.

By the time I'm done, I've not only rewritten her entire ordering system, but I've made it scalable, flexible, and so smooth it practically purrs .

But— and this is important —I stay within the boundaries of what she actually wants.

No unnecessary bells and whistles.

No overcomplicated tech nonsense.

Just pure, streamlined efficiency designed to support what she's already built.

And maybe one or two hacks, just so I can keep an eye on things.

She'll never notice and it's for her own good.

Really, it is.

Judging by her business model and menu, what she's built is a damn good plan—one that hinges on a thriving lunch delivery service to take Pizza Girls to the next level.

So I make sure her system is compatible with every delivery service out there—

UberEats, DoorDash, Postmates, you name it.

But I also optimize her in-house delivery because why should some third-party app take a cut of her profits?

Nope. Not on my watch.

And then, because I'm on a roll, I set up a whole separate ordering system for corporate accounts—because trust me, companies love a set-it-and-forget-it approach to feeding their overworked employees.

Speaking of which.

I go ahead and create an account for Vanderbilt Systems .

And, oh look , I immediately sign us up for a bi-weekly lunch plan provided exclusively by Pizza Girls .

Total coincidence.

Nothing to see here.

The first order? Something Carina has on the menu as a “Hero & Pizza-palooza”, which is exactly what it sounds like— a glorious spread of pizzas and overstuffed hero sandwiches.

The second? The “Appy Salad Bonanza.”

Now, before you ask—no, this is not some weirdly happy salad .

It's hot appetizers, like gooey mozzarella sticks, crispy chicken fingers, and enough

dipping sauces to make anyone question their life choices—all served alongside trays of Caesar and their signature antipasto salads.

And because Vanderbilt already pays for our employees' lunches every day, this isn't even a blip in our budget.

But it will help my girl out.

Yeah. My girl.

Shit.

Carina is not my girl.

Just thinking it makes my Bear growl.

Because let's be real—I ran straight toward trouble the second I walked into this pizzeria, and now I have a standing order to keep coming back.

No regrets.

Well. Maybe.

No. Absolutely not.

Because she is not my girl.

I repeat that to myself at least six more times, like some kind of personal mantra, before finally summoning the courage to pick up my phone and dial downstairs.

It rings twice before— she picks up.

“You’ve reached Pizza Girls, where it’s always love at first slice! What can I do you for?”

Fuck.

It’s her.

Carina.

My brain short-circuits. My heart pounds like I just ran a marathon, which is absurd, because I could literally shift into a Bear and take down a full-grown elk, but this woman —this sweet, curvy, dangerously charming woman—has me on the ropes.

I try closing my eyes to regain control, but all that does is make things worse, because now she’s all I see behind my eyelids— smiling, laughing, licking pizza sauce off her finger— no.

No.

NO.

I shake my head violently like that’ll somehow dislodge her from my brain.

I have to be insane to be thinking about her like this.

Didn’t I learn anything from my father’s mistakes?

Humans and Shifters do not get happily-ever-afters.

It’s a disaster waiting to happen.

"Hello? Is anyone there?"

Shit.

I forgot to talk.

I fumble the phone like a complete idiot and finally manage to clear my throat.

"Uh, yeah, it's Horace. Um, from earlier? With the computer?"

"Hi! I recognize your voice," she says and waits a beat, "so, did you want something to eat, or?"

She says it so easily, like it's nothing, like she isn't completely unraveling my composure with a single damn sentence.

And I swear, I can almost hear her smiling.

This might be the first genuinely nice person I've ever met.

And it is killing me that she's so sweet.

Because I can't have her.

And I really want to maim any bastard who can.

I swallow hard.

Focus, Horace.

"Um, I finished your website," I say, a little too quickly.

“You did? Awesome! I’ll check it out right now, then I’ll bring you up something yummy to say thanks.”

Oh no.

Oh yes , my Bear chuffs.

Oh hell no.

Yummy. Nibble. Bite.

And there goes my cock.

Betrayal. Utter betrayal.

“Um, no need,” I say hastily, already hating myself for it. “I’m still pretty, um, full from earlier, but you can email or text me any questions you have, okay? Gotta run. Bye-bye.”

And before I can stop myself, I blurt it all out in one breath and slam the call ended button like my life depends on it.

I drop my phone onto the desk and drag my hands down my face.

What the actual hell is happening to me?

I don’t know, and I don’t like it. Not one bit. One thing is certain, I can’t be near that woman again.

Good thing I have plenty of work to keep me busy, right?

Chapter 9

Carina

It's been two weeks since we flung open the doors of Pizza Girls , and I am super proud to say—we're totally crushing it.

Like full-on, dough-slinging, cheese-bubbling success.

We've got regulars. We've got raving Yelp reviews.

We've got one minor issue with our bank account that I refuse to acknowledge right now.

Because, in the grand scheme of things, everything is perfect!

Well. Sorta. Kinda.

Anyway.

"Carina?" Dina's voice calls from the front as she steps inside, already untying her scarf and shaking out her hair like she's about to take on a mob of hungry customers.

"Mr. O'Doyle left a notice under the door today. I thought we paid the rent?"

Ugh. Landlord.

Why are you like this?

I snatch the letter from her and rip it open.

Yup. Another late notice.

I squeeze my eyes shut and inhale through my nose, counting to three like a normal, non-panicking business owner.

“Carina,” Dina’s voice lowers, the way it does when she’s about to Mom Voice me.

“Is he wrong? We just paid him.”

“I know,” I groan, already flipping open my laptop and logging into our bank account. “We were already a month behind, though. No worries. You just take care of the front while I figure this out.”

Dina crosses her arms. “If I need to drop out of my classes?—”

I snap my head up so fast I nearly get whiplash.

“No. Absolutely not.”

Her education has been on hold long enough, thanks to life, money, and that one time we accidentally adopted a runaway cat that cost us an entire month’s rent in vet bills.

But I’ll be damned if I let her put her dreams on hold again just because we’re still playing financial hopscotch with Mr. O’Doyle.

No. Freaking. Way.

Plus, I love Mr. Whiskers. He’s the only date I’ve had in months.

She sighs, watching me like she knows I'm about to do something reckless. Which, let's be real, I probably am.

But it's fine.

Everything is fine.

I just need to find an extra thousand bucks somewhere before Friday.

Totally doable. Right?

Right.

"Shoo while I do this," I tell her.

"Okay, okay. I'll be up front if you need me," she says, and I wave her off.

A couple of hours, a few deep breaths, and some creative financial acrobatics later, I manage to wiggle things around enough to send that creeper his rent money.

Good news: we're in the clear for another month.

Bad news: I think my bank account just burst into tears.

We really need a better place to live.

Something with, oh, I don't know, functioning plumbing and a landlord who doesn't lurk around like a horror movie villain.

But for now? We're stuck. So, we make the most of it.

Tonight is special.

It's the first time all three of us— me, MJ, and Dina —are closing the pizzeria together, and judging by the empty display case, it was a damn good night.

Eduardo, our night-shift cleanup guy, is already in the kitchen doing his thing. That man is a saint.

He hums while he works, totally unbothered by the pizza flour and chaos we leave in our wake.

“Come on, Carina,” MJ calls, waving me over. “I poured us all a glass of sweet tea.”

MJ, ever the mother hen, always making sure we sit down, breathe, and act like actual humans instead of exhausted pizza gremlins.

I nod and slide into the booth with them. The place is quiet now, the kind of peaceful that comes after a long but satisfying day.

We've always been close, even for sisters. Had to be.

Losing our mom so young meant we learned early how to hold each other up. And when Dad passed last year?

Well... it just cemented the fact that we were all we had left.

Medical bills don't just disappear because you cry into them, and keeping this business afloat is the only way I know how to make sure we don't drown.

But right now, for this one moment, I let myself relax.

“So, guys, I, um, kinda did a thing,” Dina blurts, stirring her tea like she’s trying to will it into giving her courage.

MJ and I lock eyes before simultaneously turning our very skeptical attention to our youngest sister.

Dina, the baby of the family. The Queen of Shenanigans. The Architect of Chaos.

I love her to pieces— I do .

But if she’s about to drop something insane on us, I need at least a ten-second warning and possibly another glass of sweet tea with bourbon this time.

“What is it?” I ask cautiously.

“Well, don’t get mad,” she starts, already looking guilty as hell. “I only did this to help?—”

“Oh my God,” MJ interrupts, eyes wide. “Dina, did you start an OnlyFans selling feet pics?”

Dina gasps so hard she nearly inhales her straw.

“What?! NO! I did not! Who the hell wants to see my feet?” she screeches, looking genuinely horrified.

MJ and I immediately lose it, laughing so hard I nearly choke on my tea.

“You’d be surprised,” I mumble, wiping my eyes.

“Oh my gah! That’s seriously sick.”

She shudders dramatically, then shakes her head like she's physically trying to erase the thought. "Anyway, no, I am not selling feet pics."

MJ leans forward. "Okay, then what did you do?"

Dina clears her throat, eyes flicking toward MJ in a way that instantly raises my suspicion.

Oh no.

Not this again.

"I signed us up for Uncle Uzzi's Date to Mate app."

Three seconds of silence pass.

"What?"

MJ sits up straighter. "You remember Uncle Uzzi, Carina. He was that nice old man dressed in white? The one who came in with the hunky guy who fixed our website?"

Of course, I freaking remember him. And why is MJ calling Horace hunky?

My heart does this weird, panicked thump, like it knows something ridiculous is coming.

I narrow my gaze and swallow hard.

"When you say us, you mean you, right?" I ask.

Dina grins. The grin that says, Oh, Big Sis, you are about to be so mad at me but also

maybe low-key impressed .

“Actually,” she drags the word out, way too pleased with herself.

Her eyes flick to MJ again.

Oh. My. God.

MJ knows what’s coming.

I snap my gaze to her, but instead of looking guilty, she just takes a sip of her tea like she’s washing her hands of the situation.

“Dina,” I say slowly, “who exactly did you sign up?”

Dina claps her hands together, practically vibrating with excitement.

“You!”

I blink. “What.”

She beams. “And guess what? You have a date and it's tomorrow night!”

Oh no.

No, no, no.

I am so going to kill my little sister.

Right after I find out who the hell she signed me up to date.

Chapter 10

Horace

“O f course, it makes sense you had to put yourself in the app to test it out,” Doug, the completely obnoxious Wolf Shifter I sometimes hire to research people or projects for me, states around a mouthful of pizza.

I glare at him from my seat on the couch, trying to decide if I have the patience to deal with his nonsense or if I should just launch him out the nearest window.

To make things worse, the fucker isn't eating just any pizza.

Oh no. He's devouring a slice from Pizza Girls , the one place I've been actively avoiding for the past two weeks.

Bad enough their food is addictive as hell.

But also, my Bear is obsessed with the place.

The craving is so bad I started going into the office on purpose just to be there when our standing order for lunch twice a week from Pizza Girls arrived.

Four days in the office in two weeks.

That's more than I went in for all of last quarter.

And now? On top of that shame spiral, I just got a notification from Date to Mate telling me I have a match.

A date.

For tonight.

Which— no. Absolutely not .

What? Don't blame me. It's not unusual to set up dummy accounts when testing software.

Uncle Uzzi had requested a few new features, mainly a user anonymity option— basically, an incognito mode where people could choose to keep their names and pictures hidden until the actual date.

Which, yeah, made sense.

So I did what any responsible tech consultant would do—I filled out a test profile. Honestly, even.

But did I expect to meet anyone?

Hell no.

Yet, here I am.

With a match.

A real one.

And my Bear? He's not even curious about the person on the other side of that screen.

No interest. No excitement. Just one big, grumpy, territorial growl rolling through my chest like distant thunder.

Doug pauses mid-chew, his stupid Wolf eyes narrowing.

"Dude, are you hungry?" he asks, holding his pizza like he's ready to defend it with his life.

"What? No!"

"Then why are you growling at my pizza?"

He takes another bite, eyeing me like I might lunge. "It's really good, by the way."

"I'm not growling at your pizza." I scrub a hand down my face, exhaling sharply.

Because this— all of this —is ridiculous.

I am a grown man.

I have control over my cravings.

I am not going to let one tiny, too-good-to-be-true pizzeria drive me insane.

Even if I do secretly dream about their garlic knots and their meat lover's pie with hot honey .

Fuck. My. Life.

Even if my Bear has been pacing like a caged animal every time I don't let myself go in there.

Even if I have a really bad feeling about the fact that my mystery match is already making my instincts go haywire.

Doug sniffs the air dramatically, then wrinkles his nose.

“Yo, you're making my Wolf all snarly. Spill. What is up with you?”

I sigh, pinching the bridge of my nose.

How the hell do I explain that my inner Bear is irrationally angry at a date I haven't even been on yet?

And worse—why do I have a sinking suspicion that this is all somehow, some way, connected to Pizza Girls ?

Fuck. Fine.

I sigh, rubbing a hand over my face because, honestly? I might as well tell him.

Wolves are the worst when it comes to being nosy. Probably why he makes such a good PI.

“My Bear is kinda stuck on one of the owners downstairs.”

The words taste like defeat as they leave my mouth.

“And?” Doug asks.

“ And now, with this date, he’s all out of sorts.”

Doug’s chewing slows as his eyes light up with recognition.

“Oh shit . A normal, huh?” He lets out a low whistle. “Yeah, my uncle married a normal.”

I arch a brow. “Yeah? How’d that go? Because, for my dad, it was pretty fucking terrible.”

Doug grimaces but shrugs.

“I mean, they’re still together. Happily, actually. But, yeah, there were some adjustments. Lotta yelling. Lotta broken furniture. And definitely some ‘why is my husband suddenly a giant furry monster’ moments.”

I grunt. “Yeah, sounds about right.”

“So maybe your Bear should be happy you found a match on Uncle Uzzi’s app,” Doug points out, waving his half-eaten pizza slice in the air like a makeshift pointer. “I mean, the man’s a genius, right?”

He’s got a point.

Uzzi’s app isn’t some regular, algorithmic mess of random profiles. The guy knows things. And if he matched me with someone? There’s a reason.

“I know,” I admit. “But I can’t help but feel like I’m cheating if I go on this date.”

Because that’s the truth.

I've been living like an absolute psycho for the past fourteen days. Avoiding Pizza Girls like my life depended on it.

Taking the long way around the block.

Literally forcing myself to stay away— just so I wouldn't catch a glimpse of Carina's sweet face.

And why?

Because I'm a freaking coward, that's why.

Hiding my feelings because I don't want to face the possibility that she might be mine—and worse, that she might not want me back.

Just like my human mother didn't want me.

The thought makes my Bear snarl, deep and guttural, the pain rising up before I can shove it back down where it belongs.

I don't think about her.

I refuse to think about her.

A heartless woman who abandoned her sons and husband right when we needed her the most? She doesn't deserve space in my head.

But Carina?

She's not like that.

Don't ask me how I know— I just do.

Even if she's clueless about the supernatural world. Even if she has no idea that a whole different reality lives in tandem with the human one.

Mates usually understand, don't they?

Real mates. Fated mates.

On some level, they feel it.

And my gut? My instincts? My Bear?

They're screaming that she's the one.

But now I'm stuck with this damn date.

What the hell am I supposed to do?

Doug stretches out in his seat, looking completely unbothered, before casually asking, "So, what happens if you don't go?"

I blink, realizing I've been talking out loud this entire time.

I exhale sharply. "When you sign on to the app, you're magically and contractually obligated to attend at least one date with your match."

Doug freezes mid-bite.

His jaw drops slightly, eyes going wide with amusement.

“Well, shit.” He claps his hands together. “You better get dressed, Hoss.”

I groan, letting my head thunk against the coffee table.

This is not how I planned my night.

Or my life.

But apparently? My plans don't mean shit.

Because I've got a date.

Chapter 11

Carina

“S o, what do you think?” I ask, tugging my oversized sweater down over my hips like it’ll somehow transform into a magical fashion statement if I stretch it hard enough.

Silence.

Dina frowns. MJ crinkles her nose.

Sigh.

I know that look.

That’s the ‘Oh, honey... no’ look.

It’s bad. I look frumpy as hell.

Dina claps her hands together like she’s just decided my entire fate.

“Try the black dress. The one you wore for New Year’s Eve two years ago.”

Before I can protest, she’s already sprinting to my closet like a woman on a mission.

Oh. She means that dress.

The one that's super tight.

The one that hugs every inch of my body.

The one that, once upon a time, I would've worn without a second thought before I dated Edgar the Asshole and let his snide little comments warp my self-image.

"Here it is!" Dina crows, spinning around with the dress in hand, mischief sparkling in her eyes.

I hesitate, fingers brushing against the tag, already bracing myself for disappointment.

"I've gained a little weight since the last time I wore this."

"Yeah." MJ shrugs. "All in your tits. I don't think your date will mind, Car."

I roll my eyes so hard I might sprain something, but there's no use arguing when she's not wrong.

I tend to gain most of my weight in my boobs and belly.

As long as it is boobs over belly, I am fine with that.

Thank you, Aunt Janet.

Without another word, I grab the dress and retreat into my room.

I change fast— before I can overthink it —before I can talk myself out of it. No mirror.

No self-critique. Just zip and go.

Taking a deep breath— as deep as this dress will allow —I step out.

Silence reigns for a few seconds.

“Wowza. Really, Car, you look amazing,” MJ says, her eyes actually misting.

Like I’m her child, heading off to prom.

Dina lets out a low whistle, eyes twinkling.

“Hubba hubba! We won’t wait up for you tonight.”

“Oh my gah!” I groan, snorting. “I’m not going home with him.”

Because, obviously .

I mean, I’m not a one-night-stand kind of girl.

Even if the guy was willing, who says I’d even want to?

Not that most guys are interested in me like that anyway.

The few dates I’ve been on since Edgar the Asshole have been... seriously lackluster .

Like lukewarm oatmeal levels of boring.

I don’t know if it’s men in general who’ve changed, or if the whole swipe-right-to-fuck culture has killed actual dating.

Either way, I’m not looking for a quick lay.

I'm not looking for anything, actually.

I mean, I'm too busy.

I have the pizzeria. MJ and Dina. I have bills to juggle.

I don't even have time for this date.

But Dina had looked so hopeful when she told me about the app.

And MJ, ever the skeptic, actually agreed.

So here I am.

Dressed up. Checking my Uber driver's status.

MJ leans over, peering at my phone. "So, you're meeting him at the restaurant, right? The meat place?"

"Yeah. It's a Brazilian rodízio restaurant," I tell them, quickly sending the location so they have it. Just in case .

Dina snatches my phone, zooming in on the menu. "Ooooh. That looks amazing."

I nod. It does.

But my mind isn't focused on getting my meat on—not in the culinary sense, anyway.

Instead, it's spinning over the mystery man I'm about to meet.

Who is he?

What does he look like?

Is he normal?

Please, for the love of carbs, let him be normal.

Luckily, thanks to Dina's incognito settings, neither of us has any idea what the other actually looks like.

No name, no face—just two mystery users thrown together by an algorithm and fate

My profile? CC2319 .

CC for my initials. 2319 because—well, let's just say my love for a certain Disney movie runs deep.

What can I say? I've always had a soft spot for furry monsters.

And my date? HV1234.

HV—no idea. 1234 seems pretty literal. And unimaginative.

I do not have high hopes.

Briefly, my mind flits to my elusive neighbor —if you can even call him that.

Horace .

He doesn't technically live near me, just above the pizzeria. But it's not like he's ever

around.

He came in once —fixed our website like some kind of tech wizard —then vanished.

Hasn't been back.

Hasn't even sampled our pizza again, as far as I know. Of course, there is a corporate account that has the same last name, but that might be a coincidence.

I haven't had the time to research it just yet.

Oh, Horace, why haven't you come back?

The thought of what might've been makes something twist in my chest, but I shove it aside.

Why am I even thinking about him?

There is no might've been .

I don't know him.

I don't think about him.

I don't wonder where he is or why he reminds me of a teddy bear— wait, what?

I shake my head, trying to dislodge that ridiculous thought before it takes root.

Focus, Carina

Tonight is about HV1234 .

Not my mysterious, broody, definitely-not-into-Pizza-Girls upstairs neighbor.

I knock on wood, literally, and tell myself I'm not about to walk into something awful.

It's just a date.

Just dinner.

What could go wrong?

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Chapter 12

Horace

Everything is going wrong.

First, I'm late getting to the restaurant.

I hate that.

I am never late.

Something about my high-tech, easily bored, hyper-focused brain makes me despise tardiness in any way, shape, or form.

It irritates me. Makes my skin crawl.

And yet—here I am.

Two minutes late for being five minutes early, which is precisely when I planned to arrive.

I know what I'm like, but sorry not sorry that is just how I am.

And this? This is a travesty. An absolute nightmare .

And then? Oh, then—it gets worse .

The restaurant has valet parking.

I fucking hate valet parking.

Every single time, the workers mess with my seat, and I get it. I do.

I'm a big guy. Not many people can reach the damn pedals when my seat is pushed back as far as it goes.

But that doesn't mean I want to spend three minutes post-date wrestling my own car settings back into place while mentally composing a strongly worded complaint to whoever decided valet parking was necessary in the first place.

So instead of dealing with that headache, I slap a crisp hundred-dollar bill into the valet's hand and say, "Hey, how about you let me park my own car? Right there. Where I can get it. Nice and quick."

Because, let's be honest, this date ?

It's going to go south.

I can already feel it.

It's inevitable.

They all go south . And that is not a euphemism for getting in anyone's pants.

I mean south as in going to hell in a handbasket .

Blind dates are not fun.

Nope. Not at all.

My nerves have my palms sweating, and I wipe them on my black slacks before heading inside.

It's early March, so you'd think the weather would give us a break. A little mercy, a touch of warmth— something .

But no.

It's a crisp thirty-eight degrees, and the sun is already dipping, which means it's only going to get colder. Because, of course, it is.

By the end of the month, we might hit the mid-sixties, but this is March. This is chaos weather. Anything could happen.

Kind of like this date.

I glance at my watch. One minute till go-time.

I don't want to show up flustered or looking like I've been wrestling demons in the parking lot.

Sure, my heart might not be in this, but that's no excuse for bad manners.

And what would Uncle Uzzi say if my date told him I arrived looking like a sweaty, distracted, unkempt mess?

I hate to disappoint the old Witch.

Ironically, the ancient spell-caster behind the matchmaking app has turned out to be

one of the most fascinating people I've ever met.

We've had several phone calls since I started working on the app, and every time, he's dropped some new mind-bending revelation about the multiverse, fate, and soul connections.

And I have to admit—his theories have piqued my interest.

Almost as much as a certain pizzeria owner.

But not quite.

Nope .

My Bear chuffs in agreement.

Not quite.

The restaurant is nice and bright, and it smells delicious inside like roasted meat and spices.

My Bear rumbles, a deep, irritated growl vibrating through my chest as the hostess leads me to my table.

I breathe through it, reminding myself this is just a test date.

I'm here before my match, which is good—gives me a second to focus. To get my head in the game.

Except.

That plan?

Shot to absolute shit.

Because two seconds after I sit down, another waiter arrives—this time, with a woman in tow.

And the moment I look up, I know .

Something primal—something bigger than me—locks into place.

The waiter beams. “Miss Coppola, here’s your table.”

I stop breathing.

She steps forward.

“Hi, I’m Ca—oh,” she starts, her voice light, casual— until she gets a good look at me.

Her mouth pauses mid-sentence.

Velvet brown eyes go wide.

“Wow.”

A beat of silence.

Followed by a— a smile .

A smile so wide, so bright, it damn near knocks the breath from my lungs.

And just like that, everything clicks.

Because it's her.

It's Carina.

My Carina.

But— she doesn't look like her .

Not the way I'm used to seeing her.

Gone are the baggy clothes, the oversized sweaters that swallowed her shape, the casual, comfortable layers she always wears.

And her hair?

Not pulled back in that practical ponytail, the one that always made her look effortlessly cute and annoyingly off-limits.

Oh no.

Instead, she's in a form-fitting black dress.

And it's lethal .

My cock hardens to steel as I take her in.

It hugs her body in a way that should be illegal, emphasizing the full curve of her hips, the dip of her waist, and— holy hell —her marvelous tits.

I'm not the only one who notices, either.

The waiter catches a look and lingers for half a second too long.

Big mistake, buddy.

A snarl rumbles up from my chest before I can stop it, deep and guttural, vibrating through my entire body.

Back off.

The waiter flinches.

Good.

But I barely even register him anymore because my entire focus is on her.

Her hair is loose, tumbling down her back and shoulders in big, glossy brown curls that look so soft I'm fighting the urge to reach out and touch them.

She looks so—sigh.

Amazing.

Beautiful.

All those things.

She looks like mine.

My entire body coils tight, ready to move, ready to close the space between us, ready

to pull her into me like some crazed territorial beast.

And then I realize she's still standing.

Because I haven't moved.

Haven't spoken.

Just sat here like a star struck idiot , openly gawking at her while my brain went completely off the rails.

Smooth, Horace.

Real smooth.

I shake myself out of it, forcing words past the absolute chaos in my head.

“You look beautiful,” I say—because, hell , how could I not?

Her cheeks flush pink.

A soft blush.

And I like it.

I like that I did that.

That I made her cheeks go pink.

That it was me.

She smiles— shy, pleased —and murmurs, “Thank you.”

I’m on my feet in an instant, moving before I even think about it, reaching for her chair and pulling it out for her, effectively shoving the waiter out of the way in the process.

Mine.

She’s mine.

She just doesn’t know it yet.

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Chapter 13

Carina

My pulse is racing like mad.

But who could blame me?

It's him.

Him.

Big, beautiful, burly Horace—the upstairs neighbor I've been not-so-secretly fantasizing about for weeks.

And now?

Now he's sitting across from me in this intimate, candlelit restaurant, ordering wine like a damn romance novel hero.

Dark red wine.

My favorite.

Does he somehow know ?

His deep, gravelly voice pulls me out of my daze.

“Have you ever been here before?” he asks, watching me carefully.

I shake my head, swallowing hard. “No.”

His brows furrow. “Do you not like it? We can leave if?—”

Before he can stand up, I reach for his hand, stopping him.

His hand. Oh. My. Gah.

It’s warm, solid, and big enough to make even me feel small.

He freezes, eyes flicking down to where our fingers are now touching, and for a moment, neither of us moves.

Oh.

Oh, this is dangerous.

“No! Nothing like that,” I rush to explain, hating the way his expression softens like he’s about to accommodate me when I don’t even need him to.

“It’s just, well, you know my sisters, and I just started our business. It, uh, took a little time to get us there, financially speaking. So going out like this? It’s been a while.”

I glance down, suddenly hyper-aware of how our hands are still connected.

Horace is quiet for a beat, then he says, softly, “You’ve worked really hard.”

And— damn it .

That— that shouldn't mean anything .

Not from him.

Not from this practically-a-stranger sitting across from me.

But it does.

I feel something when he says it.

Like warmth. Recognition.

Like something deep in me has been waiting to hear those words.

I start to smile, but then— oh God —a horrifying realization slaps me in the face.

“Oh! But I didn't mean I can't pay my share of dinner or anything like that,” I blurt out, panicking that I might have accidentally implied otherwise.

Horace chuckles, squeezing my fingers before I can pull away.

Then— before I can process it —he lifts my hand to his lips and presses the briefest, softest kiss against my knuckles.

My entire body short-circuits.

“Carina,” he murmurs, his deep voice rolling over my skin like a warm caress, “you are an absolute delight. And I never imagined for a second that's what you meant. But if you'd allow it...”

He leans in, grinning slightly, like he knows he's about to ruin me.

“I’d love for tonight to be my treat.”

I manage to whisper, “We’ll see,” before I finally pull my hand away.

Barely.

And only because— thankfully —the first round of servers arrives, carrying skewers of sizzling meats.

Including— oh my God —bacon-wrapped chicken thighs, and juicy, tender picanha .

A tri-tip sirloin cap, grilled to perfection, its thick fat layer crisped with sea salt.

But truthfully?

I don’t even notice the food.

Because Horace and I?

We’re too wrapped up in each other.

We talk. About everything. About nothing.

He’s so easy to talk to— which is ridiculous, because I barely know him .

But here I am, telling him things I never tell anyone.

Like how I love watching rugby matches.

How it’s my dream to see the All Blacks perform a haka before a big game.

And Horace?

He tells me how he got into coding as a kid.

“I probably would’ve been diagnosed with ADHD if Dad had sent me to a psychiatrist,” he says, shrugging. “But he was an engineer. So instead, he sat me down in front of my first computer—which was in pieces—gave me a manual and challenged me to fix it.”

I blink, impressed despite myself.

“And?”

Horace grins. “After that, I started messing around with programming. And, well, now here we are.”

I shake my head, grinning back at him. “You are something else, Horace.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I mean it.”

And I do.

Halfway through the meal, I sigh happily, leaning back in my chair.

“Everything is delicious,” I say, finally acknowledging the food.

Horace watches me, his eyes darkening slightly, before he says, low and warm, “I’m glad you like it.”

Then, with a teasing smirk, he adds, “It’s refreshing to see a woman actually enjoying her food.”

The words hit me like a truck, slamming me back into old memories.

Edgar’s voice.

Edgar’s insults.

The way he’d always criticize me, telling me how much I ate, commenting on my weight, making me feel self-conscious about something that should’ve been so simple.

Suddenly, my throat tightens, my stomach churning.

I duck my head, embarrassed, trying to shove the memories away. They don’t belong here.

Not inside my brain.

Not now. Not ever.

I close my eyes for a brief moment and will the past to release its stranglehold on me. Usually, I can do that with no problem, and no one is the wiser.

But Horace?

He notices immediately.

His chair scrapes against the floor as he moves closer, the heat of his body suddenly there, anchoring me.

His fingers are on my chin, tilting my face toward him, forcing my eyes to meet his.

“I can feel your thoughts, Carina,” he murmurs, voice serious, searching. “And they’re heavy.”

His brows furrow, his expression pained.

“I know it’s my fault, and I don’t know what I said wrong, but if you tell me,” he says, his voice deep and rumbling.

His thumb brushes my jaw in the softest touch imaginable before he adds, “I’ll fix it.”

I swallow, shaking my head. “No. It’s nothing.”

“Don’t do that.” His voice is gentle but firm.

“Talk to me, Sweetheart.”

And for some reason, I want to.

So I do.

I clear my throat and shrug, trying to sound casual.

“It’s just, well, my ex used to comment on how much I ate. All the time.” I exhale sharply, looking away. “He had a lot to say about my weight.”

Silence.

Thick, heavy silence.

Then a deep, guttural, animalistic growl vibrates from Horace's chest.

I should be startled.

I should be concerned.

But instead?

My entire body reacts in a very different way.

I know if I went to the ladies' room right now, yeah, my panties would be totally soaked.

Horace's jaw tightens, his chest rising and falling, his eyes dark and dangerous.

"What's his name?" he asks, voice deadly calm.

I shake my head. "It doesn't matter."

He huffs a breath, shaking his head. "We'll agree to disagree."

He leans in, eyes locked on mine, voice dropping to a gravelly whisper:

"But let's set the record straight, Carina."

"You don't have to do that. I'm sorry, Horace, for bringing my baggage into this and ruining dinner?—"

"Hey, you didn't ruin anything. You couldn't if you tried. Not with me."

He grips the back of my chair, caging me in.

“Now, I’m telling you up front, I’m not a smooth talker, but Carina, believe me when I say you are a fucking knockout.”

His gaze drags over me, slow and deliberate.

“There is not one thing wrong with your body. Not. One. Damn. Thing. You’re so hot, Sweetheart. So damn pretty.”

He smirks and shakes his head like looking at me is doing things to him and I feel my entire body clench at his words.

“And if anyone has a problem with that?”

His voice drops even lower.

“They can talk to me— if they have the balls.”

A loud ha escapes my lips, and heat floods my cheeks— and my panties .

Oh, I am in so much trouble.

His finger on my chin turns into his entire hand. He touches my face, his eyes darken and then, he’s cupping my neck and dragging me close to him.

“I didn’t plan for our first kiss to be in front of an audience,” he whispers, his nose nuzzling mine.

I have no response. I can hardly breathe, I am so turned on.

Horace is so close now, and he really is going to kiss me if the intent glittering in his dark orbs means anything.

“Come here,” he growls and then his lips claim mine—and I am a goner.

Swoon. Mega swoon.

Chapter 14

Horace

She is the one.

Not in the maybe sense. Not in the wow, I really like her sense.

No. Carina is it .

My fated mate.

I guess that time I saw her in the pizzeria I was either too stunned or my senses dulled by the fragrant aroma in the air to pick up on it.

But one sniff of her delectable scent tonight and there is no question.

She is mine.

The only woman in the entire universe—make that multiverse—who is meant to be mine.

My heart is pounding, slamming against my ribs like the heavy tattoo of a stadium drum line, relentless and deafening.

My Bear is restless—pawing at the ground in the metaphysical realm, pacing like a caged animal, waiting, demanding that I do something, that I claim her the way

nature intended.

But I can't just do that.

Not yet.

Because she doesn't know.

Doesn't know what I am.

Doesn't know that my soul recognized her before my brain did, before logic had a say, before reason could talk me out of it.

And fuck , I don't even care.

Because right now?

She laughs—light, melodic, perfect —at some offhand comment I barely remember making.

And I am so damn thrilled that I'm the one responsible for it, I don't even care if I wasn't trying to be funny.

Because she is.

She's so sweet. So good. So kind.

She's honest in a way most people pretend to be.

And I love everything about her—even though I know it is way too soon for that word to be lurking in my thoughts like a hungry, er , Bear.

But it's there, anyway.

It's there, and it's real, and it's only growing stronger.

Uncle Uzzi is a certified genius.

Without even trying, the old Witch matchmaker extraordinaire somehow found my fated mate.

Well.

Technically, we found her together—when we had lunch at Pizza Girls the first time I met the old man.

But who's counting?

That was his idea, wasn't it?

To have lunch? To discuss our business?

Yeah. No doubt about it.

The man is awesome.

But not as awesome as her.

Not as breathtaking.

Not as utterly, mind-wreckingly, earth-shatteringly perfect as Carina.

We've spent the last two hours plowing through every single course they brought out.

Everything from succulent, garlic-rubbed lamb to juicy, spice-crusted sausage, to the showstopper itself—picanha, smoky and glistening with sea salt.

And finally—ten minutes ago—another round of what I deemed to be her favorite food tonight. Cinnamon-dusted grilled pineapple.

A ridiculous, sticky-sweet, impossibly perfect ending to a meal that somehow felt like a date and a war and a revelation all at once.

The waiter approaches, and I barely acknowledge him, handing over my black credit card with a flick of my wrist.

Yes. That one.

The one that says money is no object.

The one that says I could buy this entire restaurant if I wanted to, but tonight, the only thing I care about is the woman sitting across from me.

And now—now I'm left with one burning question.

How the hell do I ask her back to my place without scaring her off?

Because I don't just want to take her home.

I want her to never leave.

“Oh, can I Venmo you for my half?” she asks, and I grin.

“No,” I reply automatically.

“No?”

“Nope. I told you, it’s my pleasure, Sweetheart.”

She shakes her head, but gives in.

Good girl.

Fuck. I can picture calling her that while she’s naked on my bed and spread out before me like a veritable feast for my senses.

If there is one woman who could capture all my attention, I know it’s her.

Already I’m hard and eager beneath my slacks, but I won’t push her into anything too fast.

I can scent her interest, and I know she wants me, too.

Thank the Fates.

But she is a normal, and I have to be careful, cautious, tender.

She holds all the cards here.

“Did you drive?” I ask, and I fucking hope not, because I really want her to come home with me.

“No, I took an Uber,” she says, and crinkles her nose.

A growl rolls through my chest before I can stop it.

It surprises even me— low, primal, possessive as hell.

Carina blinks, glancing up at me, but I don't even try to hide it.

Because I'm mad.

Because the thought of her getting into a car with a stranger— some random Uber driver —doesn't sit right.

Not even a little bit.

She shouldn't do that.

She shouldn't have to trust some faceless stranger when she could— should —trust me .

People can be creepy, the world is full of predators, and she's too good, too sweet, too trusting—and I want her to be safe.

I want to be the one who makes sure she gets where she needs to go.

I want to be the one who's there, who protects her, who keeps her close.

I clench my jaw as she reaches for her phone, muttering, "In fact, I should probably order one now?—"

No.

Absolutely not.

Before I even think about it, my hand drops over hers, palm covering her fingers,

holding her in place.

Warm.

Soft.

Mine.

Her breath hitches, and I don't miss the way her pulse jumps beneath her skin.

I swallow down the animal urge to press my mouth to it, to feel it against my tongue, to mark her as mine in the way that feels so natural, so inevitable.

Instead, I keep my voice low, smooth, laced with something dangerous and tempting all at once.

“I was hoping you'd come back to my place for dessert.”

Her lips part slightly, surprise flickering across her face—but not in a bad way.

More like intrigued .

More like interested .

She blinks once, twice. Then she bites her lower lip.

And now—now I'm dripping all over my boxers like a horny fucking cub.

Shit.

I exhale sharply, trying— failing —to rein myself in as she watches me like she

knows exactly what she's doing.

Then, with a slow, teasing smile, she murmurs, "Well, you just said the magic word, Mister."

My chest tightens, my fingers flex, my Bear damn near loses his mind.

I arch a brow, my voice rougher than I intend.

"Yeah?"

She leans in, her hand still beneath mine, her body warm and close, and grins.

"Yeah."

I want to beat my chest and crow like the cocky motherfucker I feel like right then.

Carina is gonna come home with me.

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Chapter 15

Carina

I barely make it into Horace's bathroom before I'm whipping out my phone like some kind of giddy, lovestruck teenager.

I text my sisters the moment my butt hits the counter.

Me:

Guys, it's him!

MJ:

Who?

I take a deep breath, fingers flying across the screen.

Me:

Horace.

My date. It's with Horace!

And we went to a restaurant. It was divine! And now I am back at his place. OMG!

I know I'm being insane, but I can't help it.

I need them to know where I am just in case Horace the Hottie turns out to be Horace the Serial Unaliver.

He won't , but you know. Better safe than Dateline.

Please don't get all murderly with me.

My phone beeps. Dina has entered the chat.

Dina:

Okay, let's all calm down.

Carina, do you have condoms?

My mouth drops open in horror.

Me:

What?! I am NOT talking about that with my baby sister!

MJ:

OMG, why? You're the one who taught us about them. Remember the banana?

Dina:

Yeah! Remember we named him Bonzo? That was fun.

Oh, and the BJ lessons!

I choke on my own spit.

Me:

WHAT?! I NEVER GAVE YOU—OMG! MJ!

MJ:

What? It's better to know what you're doing.

Oh, absolutely not.

I slam my phone down on the counter, my face burning, my life flashing before my eyes.

Okay. That's it.

I need to leave this chat.

And more importantly?

I need to leave this bathroom before Horace starts thinking my dinner is actively trying to kill me.

Me:

I am going now. You two just sit there and think about what you've done!

Dina:

Fine. But we won't wait up for you.

MJ:

Go get some big D, sis! Ride that man like a runaway subway!

I click end and vow to never open that chat again.

Oh my gah .

I am going to kill them both.

I wash my hands and do a quick check in the mirror, smoothing a stray wisp of hair back into place. My lipstick has officially disappeared—probably somewhere between the first glass of wine and the last bite of beef—but I don't mind.

I never wear much makeup anyway.

My cheeks have that telltale pink flush, whether from the wine or from the way he looked at me over dinner, I'm not sure. Either way, my skin is glowing, so I'll take the win.

Dinner was delicious, but it was a lot .

I press a cautious hand to my stomach.

Yep. Food baby confirmed.

I exhale and smooth the front of my dress.

Thankfully, the material is ruched around my waist is a modern miracle, and any

evidence of overindulgence is safely camouflaged.

Thank you, fashion gods.

Taking a final breath, I step out of the hallway and into the open living room—and immediately stop in my tracks.

“Oh my gah.”

The entire far wall is made of glass, stretching from floor to ceiling, framing the cityscape in all its twinkling, cinematic glory.

“Hey,” Horace greets me. His voice is warm and hushed.

“Pretty incredible view,” I say in response, because yeah, I am that amazing at conversation.

I turn to find him watching me, hands tucked casually into his pockets, that familiar half-smile playing on his lips.

His shirt is loosened now, top button undone, and something about that small shift makes my stomach do a little flip—completely unrelated to the food baby.

“Yeah,” he agrees, exhaling softly. “It really is.”

But he’s looking at me . And somehow, I don’t think we’re talking about the view anymore.

This part of Newark has undergone some major transformations, thanks to the Beautify New Jersey Project —and the results? Amazing.

It's a bustling hub of modern city living, where high-rise apartments— like this one —have trendy cafés, coffee shops, and even pizzerias in their lobbies.

The streets are tree-lined, and the lights are bright enough to offer a feeling of safety in a city that is known for its past high crime rates.

“It is, uh, really great,” I say, and Horace's heated gaze rakes over me from my head to my toes.

“Is it?” he asks.

“Oh yeah. I always liked the city. All that gleaming glass and steel. It's like something out of a fantasy. Crazy, right? The things humans can make,” I say, and I know I am speaking nonsense.

He nods and holds something out to me. I walk and take the proffered cup and sip.

“Espresso? With Sambuca?”

“Anisette. Is that alright?”

I nod again and take another sip of the delicious coffee laced with licorice-flavored liquor.

“It's delicious.”

“Carina, there is something I've been meaning to say?—”

“Actually, if you don't mind,” I tell him, going for broke, “I think I'd like to talk later.”

“Later?”

“Yeah, after.”

“After what?” he asks, and his face is adorable scrunched up like he really doesn’t know.

“After this,” I tell him as I take hold of his collar and pull him down so I can seal my lips to his.

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Chapter 16

Horace

She's kissing me.

The woman of my dreams.

The object of my complete and total affection is rocking my world with the absolute best kiss of my life.

And suddenly, I realize I am standing there like a buffoon.

Move, my Bear commands.

So, I do.

I swallow her moan as I crush her to me. Her soft, plush body molds to mine and fuck, she is so damn sexy.

"You feel so good, Carina. So soft," I murmur, kissing her earlobe and her neck.

Her hands are busy, and I move to accommodate her as she unbuttons my shirt and tugs the material out of my pants.

Fuck me.

“Is this too fast?” I ask, hating that I am even giving her an out.

“Not for me. You?”

“Not at all, Sweetheart. I’ve wanted you since the first time I laid eyes on you.”

Her pupils are blown as she looks up at me. Then she bites her bottom lip and nudges me until I feel the couch hit the back of my legs.

I sit, and she’s there, climbing onto my lap. And holy fuck, I think I could die a happy man right about now.

My hands reach for her plump ass, and I squeeze as she grinds her hot pussy against my hard as steel cock.

“So fucking sexy,” I say as I tug her close and drive my tongue into her mouth.

She flexes her hips, rocking that perfect, ripe cunt against my cock, and I swear I go cross-eyed.

I have her dress rucked up to her waist now and the feel of her is so good. So perfect. But it isn’t enough.

I need to see her. All of her.

My Bear agrees, as he paws at the ground inside the metaphysical plane where he waits.

I am looking for a way to get the damn thing open, but I’m so turned on I can hardly think.

“Sweetheart, how partial are you to this dress?” I ask, growling when she licks my neck and nibbles my ear.

“What?” she whimpers against my skin before sitting up to look at me with that lust-drunk expression on her gorgeous face.

“Fuck. I’ll buy you another one,” I tell her, and grip the material in my hands.

My chest is rumbling nonstop as I tear the dress from her hot as fuck body. And beneath it?

Fuck me.

Beneath it, my sweet Carina is incomparable.

Lush curves enveloped in scraps of silk and lace. Her breasts are so full, they spill over the delicate cups of her bra and leave my mouth watering.

I reach for the front clasp and fumble with it at first. Then it clicks open, and she is bare to me.

“Fucking perfect,” I growl and suck one plump bud into my mouth.

“Oh my,” she moans, clutching my shoulders and arching her back.

I pay attention to her every response, and my need for her grows by leaps and bounds.

Cupping her tits, I squeeze and mold, licking from one to the other. Her natural fragrance increases with her arousal, and I am so there for it. For her.

Sweet basil and sunshine .

I switch our positions so her fine ass is seated on the couch as I slide to the floor.

The fact she's practically naked and I'm still wearing most of my clothes isn't lost on me.

I take off my shirt, noting the ways her eyes widen as she takes me in.

I'm a big man. A Shifter. Mostly, we are all pretty fit. But I'm a Bear, so I am thick and don't have all those clever little cuts and definition other Shifters have.

Carina doesn't seem to mind. Her gaze is rapt and her tiny hands reach for me. But I am on a mission of my own.

"Lay back. Scoot your hips forward. Good girl," I rumble.

I am licking my lips as I tug her panties down. Then I press my hands against her knees, opening her legs wide.

Fuck.

She smells so good.

Looks even better.

Her pussy is topped with neatly trimmed brown curls, and I am glad she isn't bare.

My woman looks like a woman. I know instinctually that I will never get enough of her.

"Mine," I growl, eyes on her as I lean forward and lick her from her glistening slit to that needy little bundle of nerves that seems hard and ripe, just begging for my

attention.

“Oh fuck! Horace,” she moans, and opens her mouth.

Encouraged by her reaction. I do it again. I lick into her, using my prehensile lips to curve around her clit. I tug and rub and drink her down.

My Carina is all sweetness and fire.

She tastes like mine .

It's all I can do not to come in my pants as I make a feast of her.

As it is, my cock is leaking precum all over the place. I flex my hips against the couch, trying to relieve some of the pressure.

I am dying to get inside of her, but I am not stopping.

Not for anything.

Not until I taste her orgasm on my lips.

Mine. Mine. MINE.

“You taste so good, Carina, Are you gonna be my good girl and come on my tongue?” I ask, shoving two fingers inside her tight little slit.

“Horace,” she gasps my name, and my Bear is rumbling with excitement.

I curve my fingers, searching for that special spot deep inside her.

I know when I hit it because she almost flies off the couch, but I have my other hand on her hip, keeping her right where I need her.

I fuck her on my hand, using the flat of my tongue to lave at her bud. Eating her like this is like a dream come true.

My woman tastes like the perfect combination of sin and heaven. I can't get enough.

"Oh my god! I'm c-coming," she yells and arches, pressing her sweet pussy into my face.

Driven by need, I push down my pants and fit my dick to her entrance.

"Can I have you, Sweetheart? If the answer is no, tell me now," I say, and my voice is rough with my animal.

Please don't tell me no.

But she deserves a choice, so I am going to give her one.

"I haven't been with anyone in almost two years. But if you want me to, I mean, shit, I actually don't have any condoms," I admit and falter, but she keeps her eyes on me and runs her hands up my arms and onto my shoulders.

"I'm clean and I'm on birth control. It's been a—a while. But if you want me, you can have me, Horace. You can have me any way at all," she says, and pulls me down to her.

"Oh, I want you, Carina. So fucking much," I growl and slam my hips forward, driving into her with more force than I meant to.

But this woman is made for me. She doesn't shudder or push at me.

No. She wraps herself around me. Pulls me closer. Opens those thick fucking legs that drive me wild even wider.

And she takes it.

She takes me.

All of me.

And I know I am in love with her before I bottom out.

I catch her cries with my mouth, then I move. And it's like nothing I ever felt.

Being inside Carina is the single best experience of my life. She cries and pants, the sexiest little sounds. And I love knowing that I am the one drawing them out of her.

My position is awkward. I am still on my knees, and she is hanging off the couch.

I grab her hips and drag her completely off, so she is basically sitting on my dick, which is fucking perfect.

"I'm too heavy," she says, eyes wide.

I growl and narrow my eyes, flexing my hips. Then I stroke against her clit and all worry leaves her face, replaced by something else. Something needy and primal.

Carina moans and allows herself to fall more heavily onto me, and fuck, the flood of her arousal coats the tops of my thighs.

“So wet for me, aren’t you, Sweetheart?” I groan as I grab her ass, pumping her up and down on my cock.

“Yes. Feels so full. So good,” she says, and just like that my dick gets even harder.

“That’s it. Come for me,” I growl as her pussy tightens, squeezing me so good.

Her eyes meet mine. Beautiful, velvet orbs that are so trusting, so damn sweet as she opens herself up and gives me everything.

She is so gorgeous as she comes undone.

Carina’s pleasure is contagious. I chase mine while she is still in the throes of hers, and it is better than anything.

Before I know what I’m even doing, I have her wrapped in my arms and my fangs are embedded in her flesh.

I should be panicking, but I’m not. Because this feels so right.

Claiming her as my mate is what I was born to do. But I didn’t tell her. And I have to.

“Oh, wow. That was so good,” she whispers, and I can sense her shyness returning.

Her hands press against my shoulders, but I can’t speak yet. I just grunt and squeeze her tighter.

She thinks she’s too heavy, but she isn’t.

She’s just right. Soft in all the ways that make me crave her, strong in the ways that matter, and completely unaware that she’s been mine since the moment I first saw

her.

I'm built to protect and cherish her. To worship her with my body and covet the perfection of hers. Every single curve, every inch of her, was made for me. She just doesn't see it yet.

Now, I just have to convince her of that fact.

Oh, and there's the small matter of my secret.

Probably should have told her already.

Definitely should have told her before she said I could have her.

Before I touched her, kissed her, let her skin warm beneath my hands like she was meant to be mine forever. But she is.

Mine. All mine.

Before I get into that. Before I tell her about the claws and fur and fated mates—I'm going to make her see stars for the rest of the night.

Then, when she's breathless and wrecked and finally starting to believe she's everything, I'll explain it all to her.

That I'm hers.

That I've always been hers.

That I turn into a nine-foot-tall Bear when my mood is right.

And that she is my one true and fated mate.

If nothing else, I have Uncle Uzzi's app to prove it.

I just can't fuck this up.

Chapter 17

Carina

After Horace rocks my world, he proves he's superhuman by scooping me up— all hundred and ninety-seven pounds of me —like I weigh nothing and carrying me into his luxury shower.

It should be illegal to look this good, to be this effortlessly powerful. Especially after doing the things he just did to me.

But no, there he is, broad shoulders flexing, muscles taut as he holds me against his chest like I'm the most precious thing he's ever touched.

It's stupid to feel shy with him after what we just did.

But I am.

I mean, I do.

Feel shy, that is.

“Come here,” he murmurs, voice thick with something I can't quite name.

Possessiveness? Affection?

Something that makes my stomach flip in a way I know better than to trust.

I'm grateful the only lights he's turned on are the dim ambient ones, the glow soft and golden, making this whole thing feel more like a dream than reality. Maybe it is.

Maybe I'll wake up and realize I imagined the best sex of my life with the most ridiculously attractive man I've ever met.

His fingers brush over my skin, rough with calluses.

Which is weird, because he's a programmer.

I imagined he'd have smooth hands, the kind that spend more time dancing over keyboards than anything else.

But these hands? They feel like they've done more than just type.

They feel like they were made to touch me.

It's too soon to be this turned on again. I should be exhausted. I should be blissed out and drifting into a coma-level sleep.

But when I glance up at him, his dark eyes are molten heat, his lips parted, his entire body wound tight with restraint.

"You feel good too, Sweetheart," he murmurs, moaning into my mouth as he kisses me, and I freeze for a second.

Wait. Did I say that out loud?

His arms tighten around me, pulling me flush against him, and I have to admit—I don't hate how big he is. How solid. How he makes me feel small, even though I never am.

I'm curvy.

Which is just the polite way of saying I'm fat.

But that is the blunt truth of it.

I take up a lot of space. I know my body.

I know what people think when they see it.

But Horace? He looks at me like I'm a feast laid out just for him.

Like he's starving and I'm the only thing in the world that can satisfy him.

He makes me feel—well, that's just it. He makes me feel .

Cherished.

Protected.

Wanted.

I know I shouldn't get attached. This is just a night. A stolen moment. But something about the way he's looking at me makes me feel like it's more.

And that? That's dangerous.

His kisses grow desperate, searching as he backs me into the glass, steam curling around us, heat rising in more ways than one.

“Want you sprawled out in bed this time, Sweetheart,” he growls, lips tracing fire

along my jaw. “But I think I have to taste you again before I get you there.”

Then he drops to his knees, and I stop thinking altogether.

He nudges my knees open, lifts one leg, and drapes it across his shoulder. I have to hold on to something, and my searching hands grasp at his head, finding purchase in his short dark hair.

“Just look at you. Soft and pink. So pretty, Sweetheart, tell me this pussy is mine. It is, isn’t it? This here is all for me.”

I nod. The unmistakable note of possession has moisture flooding to my core.

Biting my lip to keep from screaming, I moan as he laps at my slit.

“So good, Baby. Gonna drink you all up. Gonna fuck you with my mouth till you’re squirting all over me.”

“I never,” I whimper, but whatever I was going to say doesn’t matter.

Horace is good at this.

Really fucking good.

His mouth is nimble. I don’t know if it’s that talented tongue he keeps shoving into me. Or the way his lips seem to curl and tug at my clit just right. But half a minute into this, and I am humping his face with no shame whatsoever.

“That’s it. Fuck my face. Show me how good I make you feel,” he growls, then shoves two fingers into my pussy and sucks on my clit. Hard.

Stars explode behind my eyes, and then I—well, then I squirt.

A lot.

And he laps it up.

Every last drop.

I am so weak I can't stand without his support by the time he stops. He tilts his head, grinning at me from his position on the floor, and I know without a doubt I am so screwed.

Literally and metaphorically.

Shit. I'm in love with him.

Chapter 18

Horace

After spending the whole night wrapped up in my mate, I wake to an empty bed.

Panic grips me instantly, a sharp, visceral thing that has my Bear raking claws through my insides.

“Carina?” My voice is hoarse, rough from sleep.

From last night, really.

From the way I whispered her name like a prayer against her skin while I claimed her.

Silence.

My pulse thunders, my instincts screaming find her .

My entire body primed to hunt her down if I have to.

The bond between us is fresh, but already, I know—I can't exist without her.

Before I lose my mind, I finally catch her scent and follow it, stalking through the penthouse until I find her in the kitchen.

The sight of her roots me to the floor.

She's standing at the island, her back to me, humming softly to the music playing from the built-in tablet.

The sleek screen extends from a metal arm, tilted just so, but she isn't looking at it.

She's focused on the stovetop, moving with an easy, natural grace as she hums softly and prepares breakfast.

My mate. In my kitchen.

Is there anything better?

She looks so perfect in it. So effortlessly right.

That realization slams into me like a wrecking ball to the chest.

She belongs here.

Not just for a night, not just as some fleeting moment of passion, but permanently. In my space. In my life.

In my heart.

The memory of my father and his agonizing heartbreak at the hands of the human woman who ultimately rejected his claim fills me for one moment.

But no. That will not be me.

I just know it.

Carina is not like the cold woman who bore me.

She is a sweet, gentle soul.

Strong. Courageous.

Everything I need.

Everything I want and more.

The rich, comforting aroma of coffee swirls through the air, mingling with the mouthwatering scent of eggs, toast, and something sweet— maybe pancakes.

But none of it holds a candle to her.

The subtle difference in her scent, altered by my mating bite, is a brand imprinted on my soul.

She smells like mine now.

Like us .

Like something more intoxicating than anything nature could have conjured up on its own.

I take a step closer, barely breathing.

My chest is tight, my Bear prowling just beneath my skin, restless with the need to pull her into my arms and keep her there.

She steals the air from my lungs, and I don't even want it back.

“Hey,” she says, smiling as she leans up on tiptoe to kiss my lips.

“Did I wake you? I was trying to be quiet.”

“Not at all. I missed you in bed,” I say and nuzzle her neck, wrapping my arms around her from behind.

So soft. So warm.

She has one of my shirts on, and the hem brushes against her thighs as she moves.

She’s so tiny compared to me.

Cute as fuck.

“I like you in my clothes,” I tell her, and she giggles.

“I had no choice. Someone ripped my dress,” she says and flips the pancakes over.

“Sorry about that,” I murmur, letting her go reluctantly so she doesn’t get burned while she cooks.

I could never let her get hurt.

My Bear chuffs his agreement.

I pull two dishes down from the cabinet and pour our coffee while Carina fills our plates with pancakes, eggs, and bacon.

The smell alone is enough to make my stomach tighten with hunger, and as if on cue, it growls loud enough to make her laugh.

“Guess we worked up an appetite,” she teases, cheeks turning a delightful shade of pink as she flicks me a glance over her shoulder.

I smirk, enjoying the way her blush deepens. “Guess so.”

We settle in at the island, eating together like we’ve done it a million times before.

It all feels so natural.

Comfortable.

Like being with her last night. The way she fit me. The way my body instinctively pulls toward her even now.

Mine.

She talks about the pizzeria and her sisters, her voice alive with warmth and laughter as she describes the sheer chaos of family dinners—the shouting over who gets the last slice, the lovingly brutal way her sisters tease each other, the way her sister MJ always manages to make way too much food and then insists she box leftovers and brings it to the nearby shelter, like they do with their daily leftovers from the pizzeria.

She tells me about their book club, and I’m intrigued to learn it’s not the high-brow literary kind I expected, but a full-blown paranormal romance appreciation society.

“Wait,” I interrupt, trying not to sound too amused. “You and your sisters read about things like Dragons, Werewolves?” I ask and yes, I am fishing for info.

She laughs, taking a sip of coffee. “Oh yeah. Werewolves, Vampires, all kinds of Shifters. Even a Kraken one time. Our group chat is basically just unhinged discussions about book boyfriends with fangs, claws, or wings.”

Interesting.

Mental note: Find out which books she likes best and prove to her that reality is way better than fiction.

She moves on, telling me more about the pizzeria, about the elderly customers who try to bribe her for extra garlic knots. Sometimes they offer with actual cash.

But more often with guilt-tripping stories about their grandkids or conveniently “forgetting” to count how many she’s already put in their bag.

Some shamelessly tell her she could use a sugar daddy investor to help her with her business.

I try not to get jealous. I really do.

But this busload of people from a local retirement community comes for an early lunch every second Thursday.

A busload. Of older men. Flirting with her. Every two weeks.

Probably flashing their sweet old-person smiles while charming her into giving them extra knots, like some kind of Garlic Knot Mafia.

Second mental note: Be at the pizzeria on Thursday mornings. Every Thursday morning.

For purely business reasons, of course.

Of course, she doesn’t just want to talk at me while we eat. Carina expects conversation.

In turn, I tell her more about my company, and she listens—really listens, not just politely nodding along.

But then she pauses, eyes narrowing slightly as she sets down her fork.

“I cannot believe you signed up for a corporate account and didn’t even tell me,” she says.

There’s no bite to her words. No real anger.

Just mild exasperation and surprise.

I can tell because I’d know if she was mad.

I’d scent it in the air between us, thick and undeniable.

I sip my coffee, amused. “I can’t believe you didn’t know. The company is my name , after all. Vanderbilt Systems. Horace Vanderbilt. ”

She huffs, stabbing at a piece of pancake. “I thought it must be a coincidence since you ran from the pizzeria like your pants were on fire.”

Her words are teasing, but I see it—the flicker of something deeper beneath them. A wound she tried to hide from me.

My chest tightens, and before she can retreat behind walls I never want between us, I reach for her hand, closing my fingers around hers. With a gentle tug, I urge her up from her seat, and when she’s close enough, I pull her into my lap.

She lets out a little gasp, startled but not resisting, her hands resting on my shoulders for balance.

Her legs straddle me, her weight settling over me in a way that feels right—so impossibly right that my Bear rumbles with approval inside me.

But I have to focus. Because what I'm about to say could change everything.

“Carina, I have to tell you something important,” I say, my voice steady even though my heart is hammering. “Something you might not understand at first?—”

Her eyes widen. “Oh my God. Are you married?”

“What? No!”

“Involved? Do you have a girlfriend?” she demands, her tone sharp as she presses her palms against my chest, pushing.

I don't let her go. I can't.

“Nothing like that. I swear!” I say quickly, my grip firm but gentle.

“Please, Sweetheart, just listen.”

She stops shoving at me, but her body is still tense, her muscles locking up like she's bracing for impact.

Like she's already preparing for something awful.

I hate that she feels that way.

“Okay,” she finally says, tilting her chin up, determination flickering in her warm brown eyes. “Just spill it then.”

I swallow hard. I owe her this. I owe her everything.

“Last night was the best night of my life,” I begin. “But you should know—I knew it would be.”

She tilts her head, brow furrowing slightly. “You knew that if we had sex, it would be mind-blowing?”

My lips twitch, and I chuckle. “Yes. But only because I knew you were made for me the second I met you.”

She blinks. “The day you ran away?”

I sigh, giving her a pointed look. “Are you gonna keep interrupting me?”

She bites her lower lip—hell, she has no idea what that does to me—and nods, eyes twinkling. “Probably.”

I shake my head, amused despite the weight of what I’m about to tell her.

She wraps her arms around my neck, leaning in close, and God, I don’t deserve this woman, but she’s mine anyway.

Mine. Mine. MINE.

“Well, interrupt if you want, but it’s the truth,” I say, brushing my fingers up and down her spine, grounding myself in her warmth. “I knew right from the start you were the only woman for me. Because you see, Carina, destiny, magic, soulmates—those things are all real.”

She leans back a little, giving me a skeptical look. “What are you, some kind of

hippie?” she jokes, sitting up straighter on my lap.

But beneath her teasing, I feel her confusion.

The way her body tenses just slightly, as if she’s trying to make sense of what I’m saying but can’t quite fit it into the reality she knows.

I cup her face in my hands, stroking my thumbs over her cheeks. I need her to hear me.

Really hear me.

“No,” I say softly, steadying myself for the words that will change everything.

“I’m not a hippie, Sweetheart. I’m a Bear Shifter. And you are my fated mate.”

Chapter 19

Carina

My heart is hammering inside my chest, so loud I can barely hear anything else.

The feel of Horace's big, warm body beneath me is clouding my senses.

Or maybe it's doing the opposite.

Maybe it's grounding me.

But I don't want that, either.

I don't want him to feel like safety when my entire world has just been flipped upside down.

I shove against his chest, and this time, he lets me go. His hands drop away, and to my surprise the loss of his touch is like an unsettling shock to my nervous system.

But I force myself to ignore it.

I scramble off of him, stepping back like distance will make this make sense.

"Are you making fun of me?" My voice comes out uneven, thick with something raw I don't want to name.

Horace's brows snap together, his expression one of pure frustration. "No! Why would you even think that?"

But he can't be serious.

Not about any of it.

But most especially not about that.

About being a Shifter.

The jerk.

He simply can't be what he's saying he is.

I turn on my heel, grabbing my phone off the counter with shaking fingers. My thumb flies across the screen as I type out a frantic text message to my sister.

Me:

Come get me. Bring clothes. Shoes. My car. I need to leave.

"Carina, please. Just listen?"

"Listen?" I whip around, my breath coming too fast.

"To you what? You telling me you turn into a Bear! That we're supposed to be together because we have some magical connection or something?"

"Yes! That is exactly what I'm saying!" He takes a step forward, and I instinctively back up.

I don't want to hear this. I can't hear this.

My hands are trembling as I storm into his bedroom, the overwhelming scent of him filling the space, wrapping around me like a snare I can't escape from.

"What are you doing?" Horace asks, watching me with an unreadable expression.

He scratches his head in a way that should be illegal.

Why does he have to look so damn adorable while ruining everything?

I yank open his drawers, shoving things aside, suddenly furious.

At him.

At myself.

At the fact that he is so damn cute and such an ass at the same time.

"I'm trying to find something to put on," I snap, not even looking at him.

"Slow down," he says, his voice low and soothing, like he's trying to calm me.

"Please, just let me explain."

"No," I bite out, slamming a drawer shut. "I am not listening to you make a joke out of what I thought was a really nice night."

I found a pair of his boxer briefs and I tug them on since I wasn't wearing anything beneath his t-shirt.

They are not enough to go out in, but I feel somewhat decent.

I turn to face him, eyes burning as my throat tightens.

“I’m sorry if women are a dime a dozen to men like you,” I continue, voice shaking, “but I don’t do one-night stands. And goddamn it, I thought you were special!”

And because life loves to humiliate me, I start crying.

Tears well up, spilling over before I can stop them, hot and unwelcome.

I wipe at my face furiously, but it’s too late—he’s already seen.

“Carina, please don’t cry,” he says, stepping toward me.

“Stay away from me!” I shout, raw and tired and just done.

A knock sounds at the front door, and I shove past him, desperate for an escape.

It has to be my sister.

Horace growls.

A low, animalistic sound that raises the hairs on the back of my neck.

Then he moves, stepping in front of me like a damn wall, his broad back blocking my view of the door.

“Oh my God, move!” I snap, exasperated. “It’s my sister?—”

But it’s not.

A voice drifts in, smooth and amused.

“Am I interrupting something?”

I freeze.

Horace tenses. His muscles are coiling like a spring about to snap.

I peek around his enormous body, annoyed that he’s still in boxer briefs, his entire ridiculous physique on display like some kind of carved-from-stone god.

Meanwhile, he keeps tucking me behind him.

Like I need protection.

Like whatever’s on the other side of that door isn’t friendly.

And suddenly, I have a very, very bad feeling. But I look anyway, expecting the boogeyman.

The person standing in the doorway is not some terrifying supernatural threat.

No.

Instead, it’s an amiable-looking older man with a head of neatly groomed white hair and facial hair to match. His sapphire-blue eyes sparkle with mischief as he takes in Horace’s near-nakedness and my clearly disheveled appearance.

Oh my god. Kill me now.

“Darlings, I feel I may have arrived at the nick of time,” the man announces, his voice rich and warm, like whiskey and old books.

Horace stiffens in front of me, unmoving. A behemoth of a roadblock.

I poke him. Hard.

Right in the middle of his very solid back.

He grunts but doesn't budge.

"Oh my God, let him in!" I huff, exasperated.

Finally, Horace steps aside—reluctantly, I might add—to allow the man inside, but as soon as the door clicks shut, he whirls on me.

Before I can even ask what the hell he's doing, he snatches his coat from the rack and drapes it over my shoulders.

I blink up at him, stunned. "What are you doing?" I hiss.

"Do not mind him, dear," the older man—Uncle Uzzi?—interjects smoothly. "His beast won't settle until he is satisfied that you are properly covered, especially in front of an unmated male."

I gape at him. "Beast? Unmated male? Oh, no. Please do not tell me you're actually going along with this jerk's idiotic lies!"

I stomp my foot.

Yes, I am that mature.

Uncle Uzzi sighs, giving Horace a pointed look. "You fool! Are you telling me, Horace Vanderbilt, that you did not explain things to Miss Coppola before you bit

her?”

I watch in amazement as blue sparks flicker across his palm—and zap Horace right on his perfect ass.

“Ouch!” Horace yelps, jerking upright.

My jaw drops.

“W-what was that?” I croak, trying to process whatever the hell I just saw.

“Oh, that?” Uzzi waves a hand, unconcerned. “Nothing to worry about, dear. Hopefully, I zapped a little sense into this Neanderthal.”

“You zapped him.”

“That’s right.” He smooths his coat, looking entirely unbothered. “Now, I was originally here to discuss Horace’s progress on my Date to Mate app?”

I blink. What?

“—but I think you two need my help a bit more than that.” He clasps his hands together. “So, what exactly has he told you?”

Horace groans, rubbing a hand down his face. “Uncle Uzzi, I was just about to explain everything when you rang the bell.”

Uzzi narrows his eyes. “You mean you were going to tell her about Shifters and fated mates after you already claimed her with your bite?”

Horace winces.

“This is not how it works, Horace. You know better!” Uzzi scolds.

“I know.” Horace exhales heavily, his gaze flicking to me, pleading. “I messed up. But, Uncle Uzzi, please—she’s the one. My fated mate. My Bear knows it. I know it.”

He turns to me, stepping closer. “Carina, I swear to you, everything I’m saying is true.”

Uzzi tilts his head. “Perhaps if you show her?”

“Wait, what?—”

But before I can finish that sentence, Horace hooks his thumbs into his waistband and pulls down his underwear.

And fuck.

I stare.

Like an absolute pervert.

Because holy hell .

Horace Vanderbilt’s body is better than any of the romance books I’ve read.

He’s a living, breathing sculpture, all muscle and heat and sheer masculinity, and the worst part?

He knows it. He must know it.

The jerk.

“You gotta stop looking at me like that, Sweetheart,” he rumbles, voice dropping dangerously low. “Or the Bear won’t come out.”

I snap my gaze away, cheeks burning. “Oh my God.”

The sound of bones snapping and fabric tearing has me turning back—just in time to see the man I spent the night with begin to change.

And my brain short-circuits.

Because it’s not just a shift.

It’s a transformation. And it looks hard. Painful.

The man I know disappears, and in his place stands something massive, dark, and covered in thick fur.

A motherhumping Grizzly Bear.

A real, actual, living, breathing Bear.

I am face to face with a gigantic, broad-shouldered, terrifyingly powerful beast.

The penthouse door is still open.

And just when I think I can’t handle one more thing, my sister Dina walks in.

Horace lets out a low, disgruntled roar.

Dina screams.

“CARINA? HOLY HELL, IT’S A BEAR!”

And because I am just that amazing,

I pass out.

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Chapter 20

Horace

Pushing myself to shift from human to Bear and back again in less than a minute is a fuck-ton more difficult than I can explain.

It's like trying to force a tidal wave into a teacup— painful, disorienting, unnatural—but I do it anyway.

Because I have to.

Because there is no way in hell I'm letting Carina hit the floor.

I see it the moment her eyes roll backward, the instant her knees start to buckle.

She's going down.

And she's going down hard.

Fuck.

A low growl rumbles in my chest— Grrrr —a primal, panicked sound I can't suppress.

Fear claws at me, trying to distract me, trying to slow me down, but I push through it.

I ignore the screaming female who just joined us.

I ignore Uncle Uzzi's calm, soothing words.

I ignore everything except for her.

My mate.

I push through the pain, through the impossible strain of forcing my body back into human form faster than it should be able to go.

My bones snap, shift, reform.

My fur recedes.

And just as my hands become hands again, I catch her.

She lands against me, soft and warm and utterly unconscious, and my entire body locks down, wrapping around her protectively.

Everything else fades away.

I don't give a single damn about the shouting, the chaos, or the fact that my own head is spinning from shifting so fast.

All that matters is Carina.

I cradle her against me, tucking her closer to my chest as I stride toward the bedroom. Her scent fills my lungs—sweet basil, warm sunshine.

It is intoxicating, uniquely her—and it soothes something deep inside me.

I set her down gently, so gently, as if she might break.

Then, reality hits me like a freight train.

I'm still naked.

Shit.

Grumbling to myself, I yank a pair of sweats from the dresser and shove them on. I don't think it's a good idea to be naked when she wakes up.

I mean, on one hand, yeah—of course I want to be naked with my mate when she wakes up. That would be ideal.

But on the other hand, the last thing I want is to put her in an uncomfortable or compromising position.

She's already overwhelmed. Already teetering on the edge of freaking the fuck out.

So.

No nudity.

Not until she's ready.

And judging by the absolute shitshow I've created with this whole situation?

Who the hell knows when that will be?

Fuck. My. Life.

* * *

It's been about forty-five minutes, and Carina is still out cold.

Forty-five minutes.

I've counted every single one.

I'm sitting on the edge of the bed, fingers twitching, my Bear restless inside me, clawing at my insides with anxiety.

Every second she stays unconscious feels like another step closer to disaster.

"Explain to me what happened one more time," Carina's other sister, MJ, says, crossing her arms over her chest.

She's standing next to Dina—short for Geraldine. And MJ, apparently, is short for Marianne Jeanne.

Which, in any other situation, might be useful information. But right now? Right now, it's just one more thing buzzing around in my overloaded brain.

To make shit worse, Doug is here, too.

Fucking nosy-ass Wolf.

The bastard has a nose for trouble, although right now it is busted up something awful.

Looks like one of the people on that reality show that depicts botched plastic surgeries.

He will probably be fine in a day or so, but right now that shit is ugly.

And as usual, his timing is impeccable.

Fucking Doug.

Sure enough, he showed up not ten minutes after everything went down, acting like he was invited to this absolute shitshow of a morning.

Now my penthouse— my den —is filled with way too many damn people.

And I only want one of them here.

Carina.

How the hell did things go so wrong so fast?

Uncle Uzzi— bless his ancient, devious, matchmaking soul —takes the lead on explaining everything.

His magical dating service.

The shift from traditional matchmaking to a new supernatural dating app.

And, of course, the entire supernatural secret, which he firmly states must remain just that— a secret .

There's a lot of gasping. A lot of "oh my Gods," and "you've gotta be kidding me," and "this is some Twilight-level bullshit," thrown around.

Dina's eyes are wide as saucers as she looks back and forth between Uzzi and me.

“So you’re a Shifter,” she says, pointing at me.

Then she turns to Uzzi. “And you’re a Witch?”

Uncle Uzzi sighs dramatically, smoothing his pristine white beard. “Technically, dear, I prefer the term Magical Matchmaking Consultant, but yes, that would be accurate.”

I grunt, rubbing my hand over my face.

Dina and MJ resemble Carina, their dark eyes sparking with the same kind of intelligence and fire that makes my mate so irresistible. And my Bear?

My Bear already sees them as family.

But they are not her.

No one compares to the beauty of my mate.

My mate.

I swallow hard. Will she agree to that?

Will she forgive me? Accept my claim?

Or will she wake up, tell me I’m out of my damn mind, and walk out of my life forever?

The thought twists like a blade in my chest.

I’ve seen what a broken mate bond can do.

My father had the unfortunate experience of claiming a human mate—my mother—before explaining what he was. She'd been religious, and while she agreed to have me, she didn't stick around for the rest of it.

I watched my father carry that devastation for the rest of his life.

It broke him.

Slowly.

Painfully.

Until it killed him.

And now, the ball is in Carina's court.

All I can do is wait.

Wait.

And pray like hell that I don't end up like my father.

“So, you're saying this big guy is a fuzzy wuzzy Bear?” MJ asks, and I raise my eyebrows.

“Easy with the fuzzy wuzzy shit,” I growl.

“Well, technically, she's right,” Dina corrects me, and I snort.

Yep. They're definitely like sisters already.

“But you won’t hurt her, right? I mean she’s had bad boyfriends,” MJ says, and clearly she is ready to stick up for Carina.

I want to maim all her exes too, so I understand, and I admire that she wants to protect my Sweetheart from me.

Even if it isn’t necessary.

“I will never hurt her. She is my fated mate. Bear would cut me up if I even thought about it, which I won’t. I can’t. All I want is to make her happy. I love her,” I say, and hold my hands up helplessly.

Both women nod their heads, accepting my claim just like that. And it calms something inside of me.

“So, you see, darlings,” Uzzi continues, his voice smooth as silk as he explains fated mates, “this is a magnificent gift from the multiverse.”

I barely hear him.

Somewhere on the periphery of my consciousness, his words blend into the background of my worry.

“How you holding up?”

Doug’s voice snaps me out of my spiral.

I glance up to see him standing there, holding a short glass of something brown.

I take it from him without a word and pour it down the hatch.

Immediately, I regret it.

The burn hits the back of my throat like a goddamn inferno.

“What the fuck is that?” I cough, trying not to let my eyes water.

Doug grins, the smug bastard. “Oh, it’s a little something called Habanero Mango Bite. A Pack mate of mine owns a distillery down in Maccon City.”

“Shit, it’s hot as fuck.”

Doug laughs, clapping me on the back. “Yeah, this batch is for Shifters with enhanced taste buds. That’ll wake you up in the morning, am I right?”

I glare at him, my throat still on fire.

Asshole.

Naturally, I take the second shot he hands me. But I have yet to drink it when I hear movement behind me.

“Can I have some of that?” a soft voice asks, and I turn to see her standing there.

Mate.

Chapter 21

Carina

The first thing I notice when I step into the living room is my sisters.

Dina and MJ are both standing like watchdogs, their eyes locked on me the second I appear.

I know I look like absolute hell—still wrapped in Horace’s oversized coat, wearing borrowed boxers and a T-shirt that isn’t mine.

My hair is a tangled mess, my skin is still warm from sleep, and I haven’t even had the chance to shower yet.

But none of that matters right now.

I have bigger things to deal with.

“Carina,” Dina says, her voice soft but wary.

MJ places a hand on her shoulder, as if warning her to tread lightly.

That’s when I notice the third man in the room.

I kind of recognize him— vaguely —from the pizzeria.

But his face is wrecked.

A massive white bandage covers most of his nose, and the bruises around his eyes look like someone clocked him hard enough to break something.

Ouch . That must have hurt.

I glance at Uncle Uzzi, who is already watching me carefully.

That old man sees things. More than he lets on. I can tell just by the glint in his sapphire-blue eyes.

But he's not the one I need to talk to.

It's the other one.

Horace .

He's sitting there, watching me in that way that makes my heart trip over itself, like it's forgotten how to beat properly.

A plain white T-shirt, like the one I am wearing, stretches across his broad chest, and his forest-green sweatpants make him look ridiculously comfortable for someone who just turned into a damn Grizzly Bear an hour ago.

His dark hair is a mess. Like he's been running his fingers through it, restless.

And those eyes— deep, almost black, locked onto mine —burn with something I can't quite name.

I walk closer. It's like I am drawn to him.

Like he is holding a secret piece of me and the only way I am going to feel whole again is if I get closer.

So I do.

I don't say anything.

I just reach out, pluck the glass from his big, warm hands, and take a sip.

The heat hits my throat immediately— sharp, fiery, like swallowing liquid sunshine with a vengeance.

I cough, wincing as the burn spreads through my chest, and my eyes immediately start watering.

“Wow. That is really intense,” I rasp, blinking back tears.

Horace's lips twitch, like he's fighting a smirk.

“Yeah,” the bruised guy— Doug? —chimes in. “Shit. Let me get you guys some water.”

“I'll get it,” Dina cuts in at the same time, standing abruptly.

They both freeze, staring at each other in a weird, unspoken standoff.

Then, Dina moves first, disappearing into the kitchen.

She's back seconds later with a glass of water and a small tote bag.

Her eyes flick to mine, then to Horace, then back to me again.

Oh no.

I know that look.

That is the “I’m about to make up an excuse to leave you two alone” look.

Dina, don’t you dare —I almost say it. Then I realize she has a point. I need to talk to him alone.

“Um, here,” she says, shoving the bag and glass at me like she’s handing off a live grenade. “We brought you some clean clothes. But no rush on when you’re coming home.”

Then, with zero subtlety, she glances at the nearest window and goes, “Wow, look at that. It’s getting late!”

It’s eleven-thirty in the morning.

MJ tilts her head, frowning. “What?”

Dina grabs her sleeve, yanking her up.

“Late for the pizzeria.”

“But the manager we hired is there?” MJ says it like it’s a question.

“Yeah. But you know we got that delivery coming. MJ and I are gonna head downstairs.”

MJ blinks clearly confused. “We do?”

“Yeah. Let’s go.” Dina nods enthusiastically, then turns to Doug. “You too, um, Doug. We have something to show you.”

Doug squints at her. “We do?” he mimics MJ.

Dina flicks her head to the side—the universal sibling look for “play along, you idiot.”

But Doug?

Doug is clearly slow on the uptake.

He just stares at her, his battered face blank, like he’s trying to process a different language.

Dina exhales sharply. Then, through gritted teeth, she enunciates, “Come. To. The. Pizzeria. We. Will. Feed. You. Now.”

Doug brightens immediately.

“Oh, free pizza? Sure, I can do that.”

I bite my lip, barely containing my smile.

Dina is ridiculous.

But I appreciate it.

I need to talk to Horace.

And I’d rather do it without an audience.

But we are not alone yet.

There is one person who apparently still has something to say.

I lick my lips, my heartbeat pounding too loud, too fast, and wait for Uncle Uzzi to speak.

His sharp, perceptive gaze settles on me, assessing in that way that makes me feel like he can see things I haven't even figured out yet.

If Shifters are real, then maybe what I overheard about this man is real, too. He's a Witch. One with real magic.

And if I am not mistaken, that little dating app he created has led me to my fated mate.

Oh my gah. I have a fated mate. I'm not going to be alone.

Because, let's face it, that is the worst thing I can think of.

Never knowing true love.

Having to grow old alone.

The white-haired Witch interrupts my spiraling thoughts.

"Carina," he begins, his voice gentle but firm, "are you okay with me leaving you here with Horace?"

The room feels too quiet.

I squirm, feeling put on the spot.

Horace stiffens beside me, his fingers twitching against his knee. His entire massive frame coiled tight like he's preparing for a blow he can't stop.

Uncle Uzzi continues, his expression unreadable.

"If you do not want to stay—either here right now, or in this mating at all—you only have to say the word. Seeing as how Horace forgot to explain what he was before he claimed you, you have every right to walk away."

Horace makes a low sound, something half-growl, half-pained exhale, but he doesn't speak.

He's waiting.

For me to walk away.

Uzzi's sapphire eyes hold mine, steady and unwavering.

"I swear," he says, his voice thick with something ancient and powerful, "I will do everything in my considerable power to help you if that is what you choose."

I believe him.

I let his words sink in, weighing them carefully, turning them over in my mind.

And the truth?

The truth hits me like a freight train.

I don't want to leave.

Not this penthouse.

Not Horace.

Not now.

Not ever.

And is that crazy?

Have I completely lost my damn mind?

Because logically, I should be freaking out.

I should be running for the nearest exit, screaming at the absurdity of all of this.

Instead?

Instead, I feel safe.

Like I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be.

And that thought terrifies me more than anything else.

"Carina?" Uzzi's gaze is unwavering.

"Thank you for everything, Uncle Uzzi," I begin, and I can almost feel Horace's despair and it hurts.

A lot.

I move closer to him, and as I place my hand on his shoulder, I continue speaking to the older man, “but I am right where I want to be.”

Horace’s exhale is audible.

Kind of like a gasp.

His brown-black gaze is on me, and I swear, he is trembling with emotion.

And so am I.

“Very well. Until we met again.” Uzzi offers a slight bow in my direction before pinning Horace with his sapphire stare. “Talk to her this time, dear boy. Talk first.”

“Yes, Uncle Uzzi,” Horace replies, but his gaze never leaves my face.

I hear the door close with an audible click.

Chapter 22

Carina

Then Horace stands, and I instinctively take a step back, my body reacting before my brain can catch up.

Only, I should have known better than that.

He is right there.

His big, warm hands find my waist in an instant, steadying me before I can so much as sway.

A shiver runs down my spine, not from fear, but from the sheer electricity that ignites under my skin whenever he touches me.

“Did you mean that, Carina?”

His voice is low, almost reverent, like he’s afraid of the answer.

I nod, no hesitation. “Yes.”

There’s no point in pretending.

We both know exactly what he’s talking about.

The tension between us is thick, humming with a current of unspoken things.

Horace exhales sharply, his fingers tightening just a fraction against my waist. “I am so sorry I jumped the gun. I should have explained first?—”

“Maybe,” I say, cutting him off gently as I press my hand to his chest, right over the frantic thunder of his heartbeat, “you can explain now?”

He nods, swallowing hard, and covers my hand with his own.

The moment he does, a deep rumbling vibration rolls through his chest—low, primal, unmistakably other.

I freeze, eyes widening in awe.

“Is-is that your Bear?” I whisper, feeling that magical, animalistic sound reverberate through my palm.

“Yes,” Horace says, his voice hoarse. “He wants to be near you, too.”

Something in my chest melts at that.

I smile, unable to hold it back, my heart stammering in my ribs.

“Okay,” I murmur. “Let’s talk.”

I lead him to the large three-cushion sofa near the window, pointing to the spot where I want him to sit. He obeys immediately, watching me with dark, hungry eyes as I lower myself beside him, turning to face him fully.

I shift, suddenly aware of the weight of his jacket still draped over my shoulders.

“Oh, um, I’m warm. Is it okay?” I ask, already sliding it off.

Horace’s eyes flick to my movement, and his cheeks darken, his jaw clenching.

“Shit,” he mutters, running a large, calloused hand through his already-mussed hair.
“Yes, I’m sorry. Uh, my Bear, that is, he didn’t like having you undressed in front of so many people.”

My lips part in delight.

“So your Bear is possessive of me?” I ask, my inner book-lover swooning.

Holy cow.

Book-girl fantasies, unlocked.

My pulse kicks up, pounding so hard I’m surprised he can’t hear it.

Horace exhales heavily, eyes burning into mine. “Um, yeah. Well, not just my Bear.”

His fingers flex, like he’s physically restraining himself from touching me.

“Me,” he says, voice thick with raw emotion. “I need you so damn much, Carina.”

My breath catches.

“Because the Fates said so?” I ask softly, searching his expression.

His face hardens, and he shakes his head. Vehemently.

“No.” His voice is fierce, cutting through the air like steel. “I mean, Shifter lore is a

lot like—like Plato’s *The Symposium* !”

“Plato?”

“Yeah, do you know it?”

“Actually, I read parts of that in college,” I say.

“Well, remember the part where he believed that when two parted souls meet, they know instantly that they belong together?” Horace asks, and I nod.

“That part is real, Carina. But the Fates don’t control us. We still have free will.”

My lips part slightly. “So, you think we are what? Like soulmates?”

“Yes.” He doesn’t hesitate. “Our love is written in the stars. You are it for me. I know it might take you a minute to feel that way, too, but I believe in us. We are meant to be together. But that doesn’t mean we don’t have choices.”

He leans in closer, his presence overwhelming, his warmth all-consuming.

“The Fates can only put us on the path,” he murmurs, “it’s up to us to lead the way.”

My chest tightens, a lump forming in my throat.

“But what if you find someone else or decide we don’t work?—”

“Sweetheart, you are the only one for me. I swear to you, that will never happen.”

“Are you sure?” I ask, and fuck, I feel so vulnerable.

“I am a thousand percent sure. I don’t want anyone else. I never will. What about you? What do you choose?”

Horace asks, and I swear, I see his Bear pacing in the glitter of his impossibly dark gaze.

“So, you are saying we really do have a choice?” I whisper. “To leave if we want. Or,” I pause and suck in a breath, “to stay.”

Horace nods. And his entire body tenses.

His knuckles whiten where he grips his own thighs, his muscles locking like he’s physically bracing himself for what I might say next.

“My Bear has already claimed you as mine,” he admits, his voice hoarse. “And without you, it’s true, I’d likely lose control. But to answer your earlier question?—”

His dark eyes burn into mine, filled with devotion, longing, and something terrifyingly deep.

“I am very possessive of you, Sweetheart,” he murmurs. “But not for any other reason than I am completely in love with you.”

A sharp, involuntary gasp leaves my lips.

His jaw tightens, his hands clenching into fists like he’s desperately waiting for my response.

Fated or not, his love is real.

And it wrecks me.

“I love you,” he says hoarsely, his breath hitching. “You’re my whole heart, Carina, and I will always choose you.”

I can hardly breathe.

The picture he makes sitting there, coiled tight, his entire body on edge, waiting for me to say something— anything.

Like he might shatter if I don’t.

It touches me.

And I don’t want him to break.

I just want him.

“I choose you, too,” I whisper.

Horace gasps.

Like the air has been knocked from his lungs.

Then, before I can blink, his arms are around me, pulling me close, and I go willingly.

Willfully.

Tears slip down my cheeks, but I don’t care.

All I care about is him.

This is too fast.

All of it.

But the fact is, I love him.

And that's the only truth that matters.

"I love you too, Sweetheart," he growls, his voice raw, desperate, and full of need.

Then his mouth crashes onto mine, claiming me completely, irrevocably, as if I am the only thing in the world he will ever need.

Chapter 23

Horace

Mine. She's mine.

My lips claim Carina's in a kiss that leaves me lightheaded.

But I won't fall. I can't. My arms are wrapped around precious cargo, and I will do anything, be anything I need to be, to keep her safe and sound.

And with me. Always with me.

"need you, Horace," she whispers, and it makes me ache.

My cock is so hard, I could pound nails with it. But I'd much rather sink into my mate's tight, wet heat.

The fact she is just as hungry for me is just icing.

"Easy, mate. I got you," I tell her, and I do.

I lift her off the floor and carry her to my bed—scratch that. It's our bed now.

Or, it will be, as soon as I convince her to move in.

I like the sound of that, and my chest rumbles with my Bear's approval.

Next, I peel the borrowed t-shirt and boxers she has on, stopping to stare at all her pale, smooth softness on display.

She lets me look for a few seconds, then she is moving. My mate is nothing if not demanding and fierce in her passion, and fuck, I love every minute of it.

“Too many clothes,” she says, and grabs the hem of my shirt, pushing it up.

She’s so tiny she can’t quite reach, and I grin and finish the job, undressing quickly and joining her on the mattress.

I want to lick her from head to toe.

I want to swallow her sweet nectar right from the source.

Everything about her turns me on.

“I don’t know where to start,” I tell her.

I kneel between her splayed legs and smooth my hands over her shoulders and chest.

Pausing to cup and weigh her soft, ripe breasts, I moan at how good they feel in my palms. Her nipples get hard, their peaks bite into my skin.

Seeing how my touch affects her makes my cock even harder.

Next, I rub her sweet belly, and I’m careful not to tickle her.

I memorize the precise spot where her waist indents, then flare as I get to her rounded hips and fantastic ass. Then it’s down her legs to her shins and back up again.

Fuck, I love the way her skin gets so soft on her inner thighs.

Every inch of her is sublime. Every hill and valley, perfection.

I want to consume her. To stamp myself all over her.

I want to claim her. Again.

Fact is, I am ravenous for this woman.

Head over fucking heels for her.

And it is the best I have ever felt in my entire life.

“Start here,” she says, and tugs me closer.

Then her lips are on mine, and I can’t think anymore. Running on instinct now, and following her cues, I chase my mate’s pleasure as I worship her with my body.

“Please, Horace,” she begs, and I growl as I lick the spot where I already marked her.

“What do you need, Mate?” I ask, sliding my hand to her throat and tilting her head up so she has to look at me.

Her pupils are blown, and she is panting with need.

So fucking sexy.

So mine.

“I need you inside me. Please,” she says, and I am so there.

I flex my hips, and it's like my dick is a homing device programmed to find her g-spot. I push in and out. In and out.

Finding my rhythm, exploring her body. And I know when I slide against her internal bundle of nerves just right because my woman doesn't just come for me—she detonates.

The symphony of our bodies slapping together is drowned out by the keening moan that slips from her lips, and I can't help myself. I pound into her, reveling in the tight squeeze of her pussy around my shaft.

Then I come, painting her womb with my seed, marking her with my scent.

Carina's mouth is wide, and she nods, turning her head, giving me more than I would ever ask of her.

And I strike.

I bite her again.

Claiming her as mine.

Her pussy clenches. She is in the throes of another orgasm spurred on by my bite, and fuck me, I am still coming.

Everything about this, about her, is magical, intense and so damn perfect, I don't ever want it to end.

She is the best damn thing in my life, and I know without a doubt I am never leaving her.

She is mine, and I am hers.

“Mate,” I say the moment our bodies stop twitching.

Carina is still trying to catch her breath, and I don’t blame her. I am having a hard time myself.

After several moments, I slide out of her sweet body, missing her warmth immediately.

“Stay here,” I tell her, and I get a washcloth from the bathroom and clean her up best as I can.

Then I slide into bed next to her and gather her in my arms.

“You’re shivering, are you cold?”

“No. That was,” she says and exhales.

“Yeah. It was,” I reply, knowing exactly what she means.

Mate, my Bear chuffs and Carina gasps and lifts her head.

“Was that?” she asks, and I grin and nod.

“You heard him? That’s amazing.”

“What does it mean?”

“It means you really are meant for me. See, only the truest of mates form a bond that quickly,” I say and once again I am humbled by this amazing woman.

I nuzzle her cheek, dropping soft, nibbling kisses on her skin everywhere I can reach.

“Will I always hear him?” she asks.

“Probably. Our matebond will only get stronger as time goes on. Don’t you feel it?”

She nods and I swear even my Bear is smiling.

“I do. I feel it.”

Carina looks at me and bites her lip, then she moves, sitting up.

“What is it, Sweetheart?” I ask, and tuck her hair behind her ear.

“Well, you got to explore me earlier,” she says, and her brown eyes are full of mischief, “I think it’s my turn now.”

She runs her small hands down my chest and stomach, pausing when she finds what she is looking for.

I suck in a breath as she cups my balls with one hand and strokes my cock with the other.

Holy fuck.

This woman is going to kill me.

Chapter 24

Carina

Sex has never been something I considered myself particularly good at.

It's always been fine—enjoyable, even—but never something I felt fully comfortable with.

But with Horace?

With him, it just comes naturally.

There's no hesitation, no second-guessing, no awkward fumbling or worrying about whether I look a certain way or if I'm doing it right.

With Horace, I just feel.

And God, I can't get enough of him.

His strength.

His gentleness.

The way his body moves over mine, around mine, with mine, like we were made to fit together.

And he is beautiful.

I know that's not something we usually say about men, but he is.

Horace has this natural grace, a quiet but undeniable confidence that comes from being both a brilliant man and a Bear Shifter—two halves of him that are so different, yet so perfectly balanced.

And I love his mind.

I love the way he listens. Really listens.

When we talk, he doesn't just nod along or wait for his turn to speak. He engages, asks questions, pushes me to explain my thoughts. He's curious by nature, and he makes me feel like what I say matters.

Of course, I like to think that his curiosity is also personal—that he wants to learn more about me just as much as I do about him.

And this part?

The physical part?

Horace is really, really good at that.

Like ridiculously good.

The way he touches me—like I'm precious, like I'm his, like I'm the only thing that exists in his world when we're together—it's enough to leave me breathless.

And I want to be good at it, too.

For him.

Because something tells me we've only just begun. So— after he makes me come for like the tenth time today —I decided I want to take a turn.

I want to bring him pleasure.

With my mouth.

And my hands.

The idea of sucking his cock turns me on so much, my pussy floods with arousal.

He's staring at me with those dark bedroom eyes, and his chest is rumbling with that sexy growl that makes me wild for him. I dip my head and lick the drop of precum coating his tip, and fuck, he tastes good.

Better than anything.

"If you're gonna do that, Sweetheart, then I want my mouth on you, too," he says, and he's pulling me on top of him.

"What? How?" I gasp.

I was already facing the other way, so when he sits me on his chest, my ass is pretty much in his face.

I moan as my pussy comes into contact with his skin. Fuck. he is so hot. He feels so good.

But I am not relinquishing my prize yet, and I stroke his shaft, conjuring a hiss from

his sexy mouth.

“Just slide back. Gimme what’s mine,” he growls and nudges my legs open as he slides my body into position.

“Oh fuck,” I moan as his tongue finds me.

I’ve never done this before and at first, I feel a little unbalanced. A little shocked, maybe.

But Horace’s mouth feels like heaven, and I want him filling mine even more now.

“You taste so goddamn good,” he growls, and his lips are doing amazing things to me while he pushes his fingers into my sheath.

I know I am going to come any second now. But I want him there too. So I lean forward, and I suck him into my mouth.

He’s curving his fingers, brushing my G-spot, and holy shit, I know when I come, I’m going to explode.

He makes this all so easy.

Makes me feel so good and loved.

He isn’t rushing. Just keeps licking me and fucking me with his hand.

I find my rhythm, rocking my pussy on his face while I try to take as much of him into my mouth as I can fit.

It’s decadent.

Dirty.

And I fucking love it.

He's not small.

Horace's cock is deliciously masculine. Long, thick, and veiny.

He pulls on me, his thick hands leaving my cunt to pull me upright.

Then I lose my prize, but at this point I am so far gone, I can't help it.

I do as he silently commands, and I sit up.

On. His. Face.

Those magical lips of his are doing unspeakable things to me, and his tongue fills my core. And there it is. I can feel it building until suddenly it snaps and I am coming so hard, I feel a rush of liquid between my legs.

"Fuck, Sweetheart. You are so sexy. Squirting all over me like that," Horace growls, and he is moving again.

Flipping our positions so I am on the bed, face down, and he is behind me.

The second his dick fills me I moan at how good it feels. How right.

He strokes into me, whispering dirty things about how I taste, tangy and sweet, and how hot and wet I feel squeezing his cock.

"This pussy was made for me. It's mine. Gonna fuck you so good, Honey. Make you

squirt like that every fucking day,” he says, ramming into me, and I am so close.

I always thought multiple orgasms were a myth, but I am happy to report they are real. And apparently, they are mine.

“Horace! I’m coming!” I yell, and he growls, the sound fierce and so damn sexy.

Then he comes. And it makes my orgasm last longer.

I swear, I see stars.

“Goddamn. I think I’m dead,” he whispers a few minutes, or millennia , later.

“You better not be. I’m addicted to you now,” I say, and I’m grinning.

“Yeah?”

“Oh yeah. You can’t die. I’m gonna need some more of whatever this was,” I say.

“Is that so?”

“Yep. Damn straight. You’re not getting rid of me, Bear Boy. I suggest vitamins and plenty of fresh veggies.”

I am only half-joking.

“I love you,” Horace says, his voice steady, certain, like he’s just spoken an unshakable truth into existence.

And I smile—because I believe him.

Because I love him, too.

“Are you hungry?” I ask a little while later, shifting slightly, but I’m still curled up against his chest.

Horace tilts his head, studying me. “Are you?”

“I mean, yeah. I did burn some serious calories,” I tease, biting my lip.

His dark eyes smolder, a lazy grin spreading across his ridiculously handsome face.

“I can see what I’ve got in the kitchen,” he offers, but then frowns, like he already knows there’s not much there.

I shake my head. “Nah, we’ll order in.”

* * *

Twenty Minutes Later.

I’m sitting in the living room, curled up with my big, sexy mate, devouring the best ham, ricotta, and mozzarella calzone of my life when I catch Horace staring at me.

Like, really staring.

Like he’s trying to memorize me.

I pause, swallowing my last bite. “What?”

He doesn’t answer right away. Instead, he just keeps watching me, his expression softening, as if he can’t quite believe I’m here.

“Did I tell you, you’re perfect?” he finally says.

I snort, shaking my head. “I am not perfect. No one is.”

Horace just shrugs, completely unbothered. “Agree to disagree. You are perfect for me, Sweetheart.”

Something in my chest tightens, warmth spreading through my entire body at his words.

“Well, that’s different,” I murmur, suddenly feeling shy under his intense gaze.

He doesn’t stop looking at me. Doesn’t blink, doesn’t waver.

I swear to God, this man is going to melt me into a puddle.

“You know,” he adds, reaching for his sixth slice of the meat lover’s pizza he ordered, “having a mate with her own pizzeria is definitely a perk.”

I gasp, clutching my chest in mock betrayal. “Wow! Men really are all the same.”

Horace raises a brow, amused. “How’s that?”

“You only love me for my pie,” I accuse, pointing at his offending pizza slice.

He chuckles, shaking his head. “Hell yeah, I do.”

I narrow my eyes at him, pretending to be offended.

Then he leans in, his expression turning serious, his voice dropping to a low, rumbling growl as he slides one hand between my legs, petting my pussy, which is

already warm and wet for him

“I love your pie, Sweetheart. But then, I love everything about you.”

My heart stutters, my entire chest swelling with emotion.

This man.

This growly, gorgeous, utterly devoted man.

I never thought a dating app could lead to true love, but I was wrong.

And I couldn't be happier about it.

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:47 am

“Well? What do you think?” I ask, waiting for Uncle Uzzi’s reaction.

“Order up!” Carina calls from behind the counter, motioning to a customer.

Yes, I am working, but I am also aware of my mate in the periphery of my vision.

I am always aware of her.

She’s my whole life.

My Sweetheart.

My Bear chuffs inside of me. My beastly side is just as enamored. She has his fealty, and it means the world.

My woman is protected. Loved. And so damn precious to me.

We’re inside Pizza Girls , of course. It’s where Uzzi and I always have our meetings about work. His Date to Mate app is really taking off and I’m stoked to be part of it.

The pizzeria is blowing up, and I couldn’t be prouder.

Not that I’ll ever say that out loud too often—Carina already refuses to let me do anything remotely financial to help. Apparently, being mated to a grizzly-sized businessman doesn’t mean she’s suddenly cool with me throwing money at her problems.

Not that she has any problems. Because she's a damn powerhouse.

Still, I've found other ways to make myself useful—sneaky, indirect ways that won't trigger her "I can do this myself" speech.

Like referring her pizzeria to a few Shifter-run businesses I know.

Okay, maybe more than a few.

Her list of corporate accounts has quadrupled, and she has no idea why.

I mean, she suspects, but she hasn't called me out on it yet. And I, for one, am keeping my mouth shut because, honestly?

It's adorable watching her try to figure out how a dozen suddenly pizza-obsessed companies just happened to find her all at once.

Taking care of her isn't even a question.

It's instinct.

It's need.

It's the bare minimum for a mate as incredible as her.

And as for the business?

I'll help where she lets me, which is mostly by eating an absurd amount of pizza and making sure she actually sleeps instead of trying to do it all herself.

Now that she's finally agreed to move in with me, Carina's been able to take the early

shift, which means her sisters get more time to focus on school instead of burning themselves out at the shop.

It's a win-win.

For all three sisters.

And for me.

It means I get to wake up to my mate every single morning and let me tell you—there is no better way to start the day than with my Sweetheart. My beautiful Carina.

It's everything I ever wanted and more.

Her happiness.

The way our lives fit together so seamlessly.

The balance she brings to me and my beast.

I plan to ask her to marry me soon—and I need her to feel secure enough in the pizzeria that she feels good about leaving when I ask her to run away with me for a while.

Because when I put that ring on her finger, I want to take her on a proper honeymoon.

And by proper , I mean extended.

Like, “let's disappear for a month and eat our way through Italy” extended.

Or “spend three weeks on a secluded beach where I can worship her in peace”

extended.

Or maybe even “accidentally get lost in the Scottish Highlands so I can convince her to let me buy her a castle” extended.

I want to show my mate the world.

Because that’s what she gave me the moment she said yes.

“The updates are remarkable. Matches in real time, look at that!” Uncle Uzzi says, marveling at the app and interrupting my train of thought.

I smile because I am really pleased he likes what I’ve done.

“Speaking of updates, what do you think about endorsements for the app?” I ask.

“Endorsements?”

“Yeah. From happy clients, in fact,” I clear my throat and show him the mock-up I already made, “it would look like this.”

“Let’s see that,” Uzzi says and takes my phone. His grin widens as he reads the review I left for his app.

I never thought I would find someone who truly completed me—someone who saw me for exactly who and what I am and accepted me without hesitation. But I found her now, and I know without a doubt—she is my fated mate. The one I was always meant to find.

Uncle Uzzi’s Date to Mate isn’t just a dating app—it’s a path to destiny. It led me straight to the love of my life, the one person who was created just for me. The

connection was instant, undeniable, and deeper than anything I could have imagined.

If you believe in fate—if you believe that your true mate is out there waiting—then trust the process. Give Date to Mate a try. Because when the multiverse aligns, when the Fates weave your threads together, you’ll know.

I found mine, and I am never letting go.

Maybe it’s time for you to find yours.

-One Happy Bear

“Thank you very much, Horace. I am so pleased my app helped you find your true fated mate in Carina,” the cunning old Witch says, his sapphire eyes twinkling with pure satisfaction as he grins.

I know he means it—and for once, I don’t mind giving him credit.

I nod in appreciation. “You and me both.”

And just like that—as if summoned by my very thoughts—Carina joins us, her presence like a soft, grounding force that settles every restless part of me.

“What did I miss?” she asks, her voice light, teasing, as I tug her onto my lap, making her yelp slightly before giggling as she settles against me.

“Just showing Uncle Uzzi my review of his app,” I tell her, my lips already searching for the smooth curve of her neck.

I press a lazy kiss to her warm skin, then another on her bare shoulder, inhaling the familiar, sweet basil scent that undoes me every time.

She laughs softly, but I feel the way she melts into me, her body relaxing, her fingers unconsciously curling over my forearm where I have her wrapped snugly against my chest.

I can't stop touching her.

And I never want to.

She completes me in ways I never even knew I needed.

I'm lucky. So damn lucky.

And I will spend the rest of my life showing her just how grateful I am to have her.

To love her.

To cherish her.

To make sure she never questions just how wanted she is.

She's kind and good—so much more than I could ever deserve.

My Sweetheart.

I close my eyes for a brief moment, just breathing her in, feeling the steady thump-thump of her heartbeat against me.

Yeah. I'm one lucky Bear.

And I know it.

“You know, I think you’re onto something here.”

Uzzi’s voice cuts through my reverie, and I blink back to the moment, reluctantly pulling my attention from the woman in my arms.

The old Witch taps his chin thoughtfully, already looking far too pleased with himself.

“Yes, let’s have a place that showcases reviews! A section dedicated to testimonials of true fated mates. Brilliant!”

Carina grins, her brown eyes dancing with amusement.

“Excellent idea,” she says, shooting me a playful wink before slipping off my lap and heading back toward the counter.

I watch her go, unable to look away.

The way she moves, the way she effortlessly commands a room, the way her laugh wraps around my heart like a vise.

I’m completely gone for this woman.

“You look lovesick, my dear boy,” Uzzi chuckles, clearly entertained.

I huff, shaking my head, but I don’t even bother denying it.

Because he’s right.

I am lovesick.

And I never want to be cured.

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.

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:47 am

Uncle Uzzi

* * *

Season's Greetings my darlings!

I know, I know, it seems like the wrong holiday to use that phrase, but trust me, it's not.

After all, as a descendant of the Goddess of Love herself, and considering I am celebrating my eleventy-first — that is my 111th birthday, just like one of my favorite Hobbits used to say — I believe it is fitting. Quite fitting, indeed.

Saint Valentine was such a curious fellow, wasn't he? His story is shrouded in legend, but I think we can all agree that he is the patron saint of love and lovers.

Marrying couples in secret when such a thing was banned under a terrible Roman Emperor, he was martyred for his cause, and from his cell sent the first official Valentine letter to the daughter of his jailer, whom he was believed to have cured.

Now, isn't that something? Yes, yes. I agree.

Now, to commemorate this Valentine's Day, I am traveling to Maverick Point, using the limousine service of one of my favorite honorary nephews. Today, my driver is Carter, a Lion from the Blue Valley Pride.

This isn't his story. But my magic is tingling, and I think Carter's time is coming

soon.

Meanwhile, let's drop in on one of my favorite striped couples, Elissa and Hunter Maverick! You see, I've been working with some of the best tech minds out there to develop a new app to allow me to find more fated mates across the multiverse, and I would love their input since really, they were the inspiration behind this entire project.

Shall we, then?

Let's go!

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:47 am

Elissa

Woke up this morning with my husband's face between my thighs and I'm not gonna lie, it's my favorite way to wake up.

His hunger for me has only grown after twelve years of marriage and five cubs. Sometimes, the intensity of our feelings for one another is so great, I need a moment to just absorb it all.

"Mom! Look what Melly did!" Celia, the youngest of our oldest set of twins comes shouting into the living room that is the center of the Pride House.

"What did I tell you about inside voices, baby girl?" I tell her, my face frowning in a mock glare.

It's about all I can rile up, happy as I am.

Hunter is apprising the members of his Honor Guard on today's events and our most special guest, and I am seeing to all the food.

This Valentine's Day luncheon is a special celebration of one of the most awesome holidays ever.

I mean, who doesn't love love ?

"Sorry, Mom, but Melly put pink glitter all over my valentine for Uncle Uzzi and I wanted blue!" She pouts adorable, her teal-colored eyes so like her father's.

Melly is the bold one, with Celia being the decidedly more bashful of our oldest set of twins. But whatever she lacks in brashness, she sure doesn't lack for sass.

"I see, and that was wrong of her to be careless with the glitter. I'll talk to her, but do you think Uncle Uzzi will mind either way?"

"No. He's the best," she replies and sighs.

The sounds of the other children, my own and some of the Pride cubs, wreaking havoc in the arts and crafts room reaches our ears and Celia frowns.

"I better see what's going on. The boys have been teasing the girls all morning," she says with the same inflection in her tone every boy mama has used on the daily.

"Thank you, Celia. I love you," I tell her and smile when she comes in for a quick snuggle before rushing off to help the younger ones.

Crisis averted.

"Was that my Celia? Something happen?" A deep, husky growl fills the air, and

I sigh as my mate comes to nuzzle me from behind, paying close attention to that special place on my neck that he marked as his all those years ago.

"Nothing she can't handle. You know, I think she's going to be a great leader someday," I say and Hunter hums deep in his chest before turning me around to face him.

"We have time before our guest of honor arrives, mate. Want to go upstairs with me?"

“Yes,” I say before he even finishes, and I giggle as he picks me up and throws me over his shoulder before jogging up the stairs to our private suite of rooms.

He’s still strong as a Tiger. My handsome lover with his shaved head and bulging muscles. My body has changed. I’ve gained some weight after the cubs, but Hunter doesn’t seem to mind.

I love the way I look through his eyes. Now that I am a Shifter time has been kind. But still, all my added softness doesn’t seem to alter his love for me or dampen his need.

“I need you all the time, mate,” he whispers, and his large hands rest on my waist.

I giggle as he starts to untie the simple wrap dress I have on, and I wait for him to notice the new teddy I am wearing thanks to Kisses by Kylie’s lingerie for plus-size women.

Having a best friend who designed pretty panties for big girls is one of the bonuses of being Nari of the Maverick Pride. I have more friends than I can count, and the Pride House is filled with love and happiness.

Sure, we have our share of problems, but it’s nothing we can’t solve together. The Pride is a great big family, and I am honored to be a part of it.

But having Hunter as my mate is the single most important thing in my life. Without him I wouldn’t be the Nari. I wouldn’t be a mother.

As he drops to his knees and kisses my center with his big arms wrapped around my waist, I sigh and lean back, knowing he has me.

“Hunter,” I whimper as he licks into my pussy, spreading my slick folds with his

purrfectly rough tongue.

I want more than his mouth. I want that fantastic cock I know he has waiting behind his thick jeans.

“Please,” I beg, proud of my need for him, and not afraid to voice it.

“Come for me, mate. Come and I’ll fill you good,” he promises, curving his fingers and stroking my G-spot just right.

And I do. I come.

Then he’s lifting me against the wall, bracing the back of my head, and I hear his zipper sliding down right before he fills me.

“Fuck. You feel perfect, mate. Always so goddamn perfect,” he growls, then he moves, and neither of us can speak.

Hunter is so big and thick, his cock feels perfect as he fucks me hard and with serious intent. It doesn’t take long. That’s how well he knows my body.

He whispers praises, tells me how much he loves me, and I shatter.

My pussy convulses, tightening around his dick, and with a mighty roar my mate comes inside me.

“Love you, my Nari.”

“I love you, too.”

I smile as he fixes my dress, cleaning me with a soft cloth before tucking himself

back inside his jeans.

We embrace one more time before the doorbell rings and I grin.

We have a party to get to.

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:47 am

Hunter

Uncle Uzzi arrives just in time for us to sing a hearty ‘Happy Birthday’ to the older Witch whose magical matchmaking services are responsible for so much happiness amongst my Pride.

I smile as he takes it all in with a single tear glistening in his electric blue gaze, and I know without a doubt this man is a blessing to all supernatural kind.

“Oh, thank you, my darlings. Thank you. You know I have a special place in my heart for all of you pussies,” he teases us adults.

The little ones have already scattered, playing with the gifts Uncle Uzzi has brought them. He always does, and they simply adore him which is why he is now sitting there with a pile of Valentines just for him.

“Do you like the Valentines, Uncle Uzzi? I meant mine to be all blue, but well, some pink got on it,” Celia, my serious cub, states.

“You know, Celia, sometimes things do not go as planned, but it is those happy accidents that are often the most beautiful. This one is my favorite,” he whispers the last and my girl looks so proud of herself, my heart squeezes.

I stand there another minute while guests mill about eating the wonderful food my mate has prepared and chatting amongst themselves.

“Ah, Hunter, don’t lurk about. Come, my boy, sit,” Uncle Uzzi says and pats the seat

beside him.

“Happy birthday,” I say and grin as I sit down.

“You know, that is a wonderful girl you have. All your cubs are grand, though she is a special one. I can tell,” he says, and I see his magic glowing about him.

“None of that for at least twenty years,” I mock growl.

“Ha! Of course not, dear boy. So, how are things with Elissa?”

“She is perfect, Uncle Uzzi, as you well know,” I say.

“I always thought she would be. Perfect for you, and the Pride, that is.”

“And you were right. I wish there was a way I could repay you,” I tell him honestly.

“Actually, that is something I wanted to talk to you about,” Uncle Uzzi says and turns toward me.

“See, I’m about to launch a brand new dating app to help supernaturals find their fated mates,” he says, and I admit, I am curious.

“A dating app? But how can I help? I am already happily mated,” I state the obvious.

“Yes, dear boy, I know. I was wondering if maybe you would endorse my services? Spread the word?”

“I can do that,” I say and nod.

“Wunderbar! Excellent. Now, is it time for some of that chocolate cherry cake your

wife has hidden in the kitchen?” he asks, and I toss my head back and laugh.

Leave it to Uzzi to know where the goodies are.

“Elissa, my love,” I say, scenting my mate as she joins us, “Uncle Uzzi is wondering if the cake is ready?”

“How do you know I made you a cake?” she asks with a sly smile.

“Did you?” Uncle Uzzi counters.

“Of course! Okay, fine, I will get it,” she says and giggles.

But I can’t let her do it alone, so I help her and when we come out with the giant triple tier sheet cake, I smile proudly at my wife.

She seemed to already know about the app thing, because on top of the cake is a smaller one shaped like a cell phone. On it is a pink screen with some kind of hearts and wings drawn onto it and the words ‘Date to Mate’.

“You knew about the app?” I ask.

“Of course, I did. I keep telling you, I know everything,” she says and winks at me, and I do not doubt her for a second.

My mate is amazing.

Uzzi is brimming with emotion as he blows out his candles, and the amount of love in this room for the old Witch is tangible.

I look around at all the mates he brought together.

My sister, Jessica, and my Beta, Brayden, are among them.

Gretchen and Reg, Elissa's best friend and her personal guard.

Mikey, our healer, and Kylie, maker of the sexiest panties my wife owns.

Pamela and Javier.

Lance and Annalia.

Hank, Uncle Uzzi's former driver, and Annabeth, a Lioness from a neighboring Pride.

Plus, her sister, Antonetta and one of my Honor Guard, Pierce.

Megan Sudak, one of our own she-Tigers, and Cole Mingan, a Dire Wolf from a nearby Pack.

So many happy couples and their young are here to celebrate Valentine's Day and to wish this man well.

"Toast!"

"Toast!"

"Yes, let's have a toast from the birthday boy!"

"Thank you. Thank you all so much for celebrating my birthday with me," Uncle Uzzi says, raising his hands and smiling kindly at the crowd.

"You know, every time I help bring fated mates together, it fills a special place inside

my heart. All of you are inscribed right her,” he says and taps his chest, “All of you are written on the pages of the book that is my life. I carry you with me, always. And I can’t wait for the next chapter to begin.”

Inside me, my Tiger chuffs and I wrap my arm around my wife’s waist. I am the man I am today because once upon a time an old Witch brought me the love of my life, my fated mate, and I owe everything to him.

So, when I say I am going to endorse his new app, trust me, I am.

What are you waiting for? Go on and get ready for Date to Mate !

* * *

Uncle Uzz’s Date to Mate

Date to Mate is a brand new Magical Matchmaking App conjured by Uncle Uzzi, the magical matchmaking Witch himself.

These bite-sized tales offer everything you want in a shifter romance featuring growly Shifters in search of their fated mates. But not all of these grumpy men are willing, that is, not until they meet the perfect curvy women of their dreams. Then it’s claiming bites and true love everlasting with a couple of hiccups, of course.

But we all know the course to true love never runs smoothly, but these tiny tales are just the thing to prove HEAs really do exist!

Take a look at the Series:

Sweet Heart for the Bear

Good Luck Charm for the Wolf

Curvy Nanny for the Cougar

Just a Friend for the Lion

Plus Size Plan for the Tiger

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:47 am

H arbor House. About twenty years ago...

Nova beckoned me and Sybil to her side. She showed me the piece of paper, and I felt my magic and my Wolf tremble. This was important. She ran inside to where Davian and Erryn waited for us, and Sybil and I followed, our hands clasped together.

“It’s gotta be a secret for a while, but what do you think?” she asked, blue eyes wide and bright.

She turned the paper around, and everyone fell silent. Sketched out with unerring perfection were Davian and Erryn at the center of the image, with me, Sybil, and Nova behind them. Behind all of us were our animals. A Badger Mountain Lion Hybrid for Erryn, a Wolf for me, a Snow Fox for Nova, and an awesome River Dragon for Sybil. Swirling lines surrounded us to represent Davian’s magic.

Beneath the drawing, in perfect script, were the words Witch Shifter Clan .

“Wow, Nova!” I exclaimed.

“That’s amazing! But why am I so short?” Sybil asked.

“You are short, though.” Nova frowned.

“Nova,” Davian said in a hushed whisper, and walked to take the paper from her.

“This is beautiful.”

“You think so?”

“Yes, I do. We’ll get it framed and hang it up in our training room, so no one accidentally sees it, okay?” he asked.

Nova nodded.

“Erryn? What do you think?”

“I think it is perfect,” Davian’s new mate said.

I liked Erryn. In fact, I had named her. She felt big to me, important. Wolf liked her, so I did too.

Witch Shifter Clan.

That was what Nova had named us, and something about it made my insides warm and my Wolf howl with joy. This was a good thing. I just knew it. And someday it would be everything. My Wolf growled softly inside of me, and though I had yet to meet her, it made me smile that she agreed with the sentiment. The Witch Shifter Clan was important.

I slept that night in the same room as my sisters, with Davian and Erryn in the bedroom they shared, and for the first time my magic and my Wolf were content. It would not always be that way. My animal and my powers often fought on another.

Harbor House was the first place we ever belonged, and I knew it was one of those special places I’d read about in one of the many books lining the shelves in the reading room Mama Anne had set up for us when we were kids.

It would always be the place I came back to. Mama Anne built Harbor House for supernatural runaways and delinquents. Those of us who were unloved and unwanted. But it was so much more than a soft spot to land. It was home. My first home. Just as much as Davian, Erryn, Nova, and Sybil were my home.

I would leave there someday. That was inevitable. But Harbor House would stay with me. The place, the memories, that feeling of belonging. They would always be special to me. Just like the drawing Nova did of us.

Witch Shifter Clan .

That was our name. It was where I belonged. And someday everything would fall into place. I didn't know what that meant, but my child's heart felt it with the absolute surety only an innocent could claim. I had things to do yet. Adventures to go on and experiences to have. But home would always be there waiting. Just like Mama Anne said.

Harbor House would always be my home.