



The Whimsical Wolf's Alphas: M/M/M Shifter Mpreg Romance

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Category: LGBT+

Description: I need to protect my daughter. If that means mating a stranger... or two, so be it.

When I lost my mate, leaving me a single father, my heart broke into a thousand pieces. The only thing keeping me going was our beautiful daughter, Thia I vowed to do whatever it took to keep her safe and give her the life she deserves. And I have. But now the fluffle alpha has decided my mourning period is over and it's time to mate another.

Alpha bunnies have one job...to sire more bunnies, after all. Now that I no longer have a mate, my fluffle alpha has decided I need to "help" the unmated omegas have more children. Unless I find myself a mate in the next month, I'll be forced to follow my fluffle alpha's orders. The Male-Order Mates app is my last hope to find an omega I want and not one forced upon me.

When an omega wolf shows interest in me, I grab my daughter and take the first train out. Life with this wolf has to be better than what awaits me at the fluffle.

Spoiler alert: I'm not the only one waiting for my wolf at the train station. There's also a smexy panther and my bunny is calling him mate. Now what?

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Sparkling tutu swirling around her, the fairy princess fluttered and spun, waving her wand to bring happiness to the sad and magic to the mundane. Her curls were fluffy and untamed, unlike when her omega father, my beloved mate was here to take care of them. I reminded myself that she shouldn't have to miss out on anything, even ringlets, because he was gone.

"Come here, Thia." I held out my arms and she spun into them and then away again, her giggles holding so much innocent joy, it was hard to believe she was the same little girl who woke up sobbing for her daddy. During the day, she seemed to put it aside, playing with her friends in the fluffle and being her sweet, charming self, but at night... Everyone said she was too little to remember, but everyone did not have to cuddle her and stroke her bedraggled curls while she begged me to make him come back.

It took every bit of willpower and self-control I had not to break down and join her in a flood of tears. Her daddy never would have left us of his own free will. I'd known he was my mate when we were just kids, waiting to grow up enough to make it real. And when we finally mated, we'd made vows to one another to always be there no matter what happened. Unfortunately, those young rabbits couldn't predict the future, and so I found myself alone, raising the beautiful girl who reminded me of her father's happy spirit so much.

"Papa, I want to go outside and play." She waved her wand at me as if it would help her to get her way.

"It's going to be dark soon, so only for a few minutes."

“Oh, Papa. Thank you.” Thia did her little girl version of a pirouette and darted for the door as if I might change my mind.

“As soon as the sun sets, you be right in,” I called after her.

She was perfectly safe here on our lands, even after dark, with so many members of the fluffle all around, but I would still go out and call her back before the shadows completely took over.

Once Thia disappeared, the brightness of the late afternoon went with her. If not for our daughter, I didn’t know how I’d have managed to go on. Everything in our home reminded me of him, his love for both of us reflected in the choices he’d made. The soft couch with its subtle pattern, the table and chairs set right where morning light would cast its warm glow. Everything. And while once, those things had brought joy, now, they merely reminded me of a considerate and loving omega who would no longer be cooking my meals, no longer lie beside me in our bed.

When he carried our young, he’d been even more home-loving. I had video, but I didn’t dare to continue to dwell on our life together. Partly because Thia needed me to move forward. She needed a father who showed her the way to accept what couldn’t be changed. Her daddy was not coming back through no fault of his own. He would have walked through fire to raise this child. To keep her safe and give her the life she deserved.

And since I could not do what we both wanted and bring him back to us, I had to do the next best thing and devote myself totally to raising our daughter. No matter how hard it was. He’d expect no less.

The last light of the sun filtered through the shades on the western-facing windows, and I forced myself to stand and head for the door. Time to put my own unhappiness aside again. Would this ever stop? Would I ever be able to wake up smiling in the

morning? It seemed unlikely. But I did trust that this flaring pain every time I thought of him would at least ease to some extent. I had the honor of being the one who survived to watch our daughter grow up. And I would never take that for granted.

Throwing my shoulders back, I stepped outside and looked around for my daughter.

“If you’re looking for Thia, she’s over there with the alpha’s daughters.” Arnold, my friend who’d known me since birth, approached and came to stand next to me. “But I don’t know if you want to go there.”

A sinking feeling took residence in my chest at the words. “And why is that?” I asked, even though I knew. I’d seen it coming. Rarely had someone been allowed as much time before being taken in hand and given their orders.

“I think you’re aware that it’s been a while and he’s been waiting for you to come to him.”

“That won’t happen.” My tone was so flat, but it expressed how I felt. “It’s too soon.”

“Friend, it’s not just for the good of the fluffle. Our alphas are always mated, and having you drift around in a funk is hard on everyone.”

“Zeus.” Oops. He was done waiting for me to come to him. “We have allowed you an extended mourning period in respect for your long and happy mating. But now that’s over. It’s time for you to begin anew.”

Could he really think it was that simple? That just because a specified number of days or weeks or months had passed, I could leave my mate behind and accept another into my and Thia’s life?

“Zeus?”

“Yes, alpha?”

“I am waiting for you to agree so I can check this off my list.”

My life, my future and that of my daughter, an item on his list. He was a good alpha, putting the fluffle first, but for the first time, I was not inclined to go along with his orders.

“Come to my office tomorrow morning,” he said. “I’m going to round up my daughters, and I’ll send yours in your direction.”

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“Can someone please explain this shit to me?” I shouted into the warehouse of employees. My company’s offices resided in an old phone book factory. We ran a tight ship, for the most part, with the exception being everyone’s personal workspace. I looked out from my standing desk and saw everyone’s attention drawn to me immediately.

“Rip?” James came over in some kind of sprint/walk, his eyes wide. He stood shoulder to shoulder with me and scanned my screen. “Why are you yelling? You never raise your voice.”

I didn’t.

Guess I couldn’t say that any longer.

“Look at this. My plans being sold on the big-chain-warehouse-online-marketplace thing as a DIY fantasy escape? Look at it, James. It’s right next to plans for a chicken coop and a damned treehouse. There are five-gallon buckets as you scroll, for the love of the gods.”

My assistant stepped back. “Ripley, you signed off on this. You wanted to make your plans and ideas available online for everyday people to turn their yards into oases. I watched you agree to this.”

I reached up and slammed my laptop shut. “I know,” I said, scrubbing my hand down my face. “I know. It just looks so...generic now. Maybe it’s just me. Maybe I need a break.”

“A break? I can cut some of your meetings and maybe have you come in late tomorrow afternoon?” He took out his tablet from where he had it nested in his armpit. “Yeah, I can scramble around a few things.”

“Your hands are clean,” I mentioned, ticking my chin toward him. Taking in the place once more, I realized all of us were in pants and slacks and shirts that belonged on the cover of a golf magazine or an HR poster for casual Fridays.

“My hands are clean. But it sounds like you have a problem with my hands being clean.” He snickered a bit but, once his eyes met mine, that smirk was gone.

“Remember the beginning, James?” I asked and closed my eyes. I could almost feel the blaring sun on my skin, the dirt clogged underneath my fingernails, and the soreness of a hard day’s work. Now I had meetings and headaches from staring at a screen too long and the feeling that the walls of this warehouse were caving in on me by the second.

“Of course I do. We started cutting yards when we were kids. It was me and you until I quit to go to college.”

He had. I’d encouraged it. Now he was my assistant because he had the know-how and gave me no-bullshit advice on my projects.

“Remember our first real job?”

My best friend and assistant snorted. “You mean Grandma Betty’s house? Oh my gods, the number of angels she requested was insane. But we did it and we did a good job.” James called my grandmother Grandma since he never had one. She took him in as her own.

I missed her and her crazy angels.

“How did it come to this?” I asked and waved my hand around.

“What’s going on with you, Rip? This is what you built.”

I shook my head. The wheels in my head were turning, clicking and clanking, my thoughts falling into place. “I think it’s time for a change, James. A big one. I can’t remember the last time I had my hands in the soil or hell, the last time I even broke a sweat. I’m wearing these gray wool pants for the love of all. I’m not me anymore.”

James sighed and put his tablet down. “How about a vacation. A long one. A leave of absence. Go to Japan. The Netherlands, Sweden, India. Somewhere to give you back your inspiration.”

I shook my head. My decision had already been made. Sometimes in life, you simply wake up and know a radical shift is exactly the cure.

“James, I need more than a vacation, though I appreciate the thought.” I let out a long sigh. “I’m going home, actually.” I stared at my laptop, gauging whether or not to bring it along. I opted to bring it, in case I changed my mind but did so with a bit of attitude. When I started this company, I had been excited and proud of myself. Now, the desk, the computer, even this warehouse felt like nooses, always around my neck, always tugging me in a direction I didn’t want to go any longer.

I needed to be outside again.

Not selling my designs online with immediate inbox delivery.

“You’re scaring me, Ripley.”

I nodded. “If we’re not changing, we’re not living, James,” I replied and walked out of the office. I got several stares, but something inside me realized it might be the last

time they would see me. And the last time I might see this warehouse.

The more I thought it over, the deeper the conviction burrowed.

I would give over the reins to James and get back to the dirt and after that, tackle the other gnawing issue in my life—finding a mate. My panther cried out for someone to belong to. Wolves didn't like to exist alone, but I hadn't had time to look for a mate. Hell, I'd only been on a handful of dates.

I had work to do now that I'd left my job. First call when I got home would be to my lawyer and my accountant.

This was the best decision I'd ever made.

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Growing up, I imagined being in my mid-twenties, mated, living in a glorious pack, and having a passel of pups. I wasn't even sure where I got the notion that I wanted to be part of a pack or what I thought a "glorious" pack would be, but I'd kept that dream for years. I'd tell people how I was going to be a house mate with pups running everywhere. Basically my plan was to be the equivalent of a 1950s housewife but with fur. It was kind of messed up, thinking about it. I blame it on all the storybooks I used to devour.

As I got older, I wised up and grew out of that phase. I realized that was not what life was about. Sure, it would be great to find a mate and settle down to raise a family. And I might even want to do the house-mate thing, but I wanted choices—not to be stuck in a role because all other options had passed me by.

I was more than just some omega who'd grow pups, do dishes, and bake cookies. I was smart, kind, creative, and hardworking. I could be anything I put my mind to as long as I didn't shut all the doors before I decided which ones I wanted to walk through.

That desire to be more than my childhood fantasy got me through college and earning my business degree. I scraped and saved every penny I could in the hopes of one day starting my own business. I wasn't cut out to be in a cubicle all day every day. And if I were being honest, I wasn't so great at being told what to do. But being the boss? I saw a future there.

At the time, I wasn't even sure what that business would be, but I wanted something I could manage on my own, that had the potential to sustain a family if I chose to go that route, and that would make people happy. The last part was nonnegotiable to me.

A lot of the people I went to school with picked things to make the most profit, and some of them were even focused on products that actively harmed people, all with an eye to making money. I might not have been as focused as they were, but I think in a lot of ways, I understood what I wanted more than they ever would because I knew the person I wanted to be.

I'd been out of school for a few years and hadn't really figured out exactly what "it" was that I was going to do. I'd spent all of it working a little bit here and a little bit there at a local bar to save money, as I spent my days doing exactly what I'd hoped to avoid—an office day job. It wasn't ideal, but it worked for me. The nice thing was that drunk people tipped well, and I was able to save a lot over a fairly short period.

But when the time came, and I finally saw where I was meant to be and what I was meant to do, I didn't have enough saved up. So I did what every other entrepreneur-to-be would do: I sold pretty much anything I could, counted all my money, and put the best offer I possibly could on an old motel in the middle of nowhere, sight unseen. It was a big, bold move, and terrifying.

The first day, when I got off the train and the real estate agent drove me there, I was in shock. The person who took the listing pictures had done a great job making the place look even better than its best. The repairs were a lot more intense than I'd expected. But that was okay. Unlike a hotel, where everything was all in one building going straight up, this was spread out, and I could do one room at a time, cleaning it up the best I could. If money got tight, I could check out the Grizzly, the local bar. Maybe they needed a bartender, or even a sub bartender. I wasn't picky which.

I'd cross that bridge when I came to it because right now, looking around the lobby, with paint chips on the floor and a hole in the upper ceiling that just needed a patch from where someone, I think, attempted to do electric work, It was hard to tell. They were definitely the fixing-it-themselves kind of people based on all evidence I'd seen so far.

The thing was, I didn't mind the added work, the deceptive pictures, or even the trash they'd randomly left around the place. It took a total of five-point-three seconds for me to sense that I was home. This was where I was supposed to be. Would I have preferred to have someone by my side? Absolutely, but that didn't take away from my wolf's sense of peace here.

I made a to-do list for this room and created a supply list. It wasn't as bad as it initially looked. A good cleaning and a coat of paint could fix many of the issues. Knowing it was the room people would see first, I added fresh plate covers and a new overhead light. It was going to be great.

My wolf was itching to get out and stretch his legs and grab a bunny or two and, once my list was complete, I decided to let him out for a bit before driving the rather long distance to the store. As great as it was being near the national park and surrounded by gorgeous woods and mountains, having everything far away was going to take some getting used to. I couldn't just "run" to the big-box store to grab a quick item.

I went outside, shucked my clothes, and took my fur. Two seconds later, he was tracking a fox, happier than I'd seen him in years.

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I took back everything I had to say about the alpha being good at his job.

Until now, until he wanted to step into my life and make decisions for me, I had thought he put the needs of his fluffle members first, but how he could make a decision like this?

For me and for Thia.

As he so graciously pointed out in our meeting over coffee and the dry, overbaked carrot muffins his mate insisted on serving to everyone, bunnies have one job. To make more bunnies. “I had hoped you’d pick an omega of your own in a reasonable time, but you did not.”

“I wasn’t ready.” Still wasn’t. “I need a little more time.”

“And you’ve got it.” He beamed at me, picking up his coffee cup. “Thirty days.”

“I-I don’t know that I can. There’s nobody here who is my mate.” If there were, I’d have known, wouldn’t I? “Maybe someone new will come.” Fluffles did tend to have some movement between them. Bunnies could move from one group to another if the alphas agreed. “I promise to keep an eye out.” Although I didn’t see how that could happen in thirty days.

“And this is why I called you in. I appreciate that it is difficult to move on after a successful relationship. And that is why, as your alpha, I have made the selection for you.”

“What? No.”

“Excuse me?” He set his cup down with a clunk. “Are you denying orders given you by your alpha? Is this a rebellion? Did you perhaps want to challenge me?”

Most alphas fought challenges only when they had no options, but ours was always on the lookout for one. I had been so involved in my own little family, I hadn’t really noticed how he operated. If others had been subjected to this, they had not said so. Maybe they were afraid to complain? The alpha had only held his position for about five years, so far. I’d been mated, having a family then grieving for most of that time.

“I don’t want to challenge you.” I swallowed hard, wanting to say so many things that would end up making a real mess of our life.

“Excellent. Then you have a month to get to know Jaime better. Maybe have him move in even sooner.” He nodded, smiling at his own wisdom. “Your daughter needs an omega father in her life.”

Jaime? The single omega in our fluffle who every alpha avoided. He was a cruel man who enjoyed making people feel bad about themselves. Or perhaps that was too kind a way to say it. Omegas were generally submissive, something I didn’t particularly want. My late mate had been my equal, and, if I had to mate again, I would hope for a similar type of person. But the one being presented to me would not only top from the bottom, in a sneaky mean way, I would not allow him within fifty feet of my princess, much less put him in a position to be an “omega father” to her.

But I once again reminded myself not to respond in a way that he would regard as inappropriate. “I’ve taken up enough of your valuable time.” Standing, I gave my head the slightest bow I could get away with—mainly because any respect I’d fooled myself into having for this alpha was dust under my feet—and took a step away. “Thank your mate for his baked goods.”

I didn't say good baked goods. I'd had maybe two bites and even with coffee had a desert-dry mouth.

The alpha didn't reply, which I took as dismissal and headed for the door. Although the alpha house was busy at this time of day, I did not linger to speak with anyone, just moved as quickly as possible out the door and into the forest where I could cry my anger to the trees. And to my late mate who at this moment, I was equally mad at for leaving us. It wasn't his fault—but that didn't matter at all right now. I could see no escape from this. Outright defiance of the alpha would be regarded as a challenge. He'd made that clear, and I could not take the chance of him winning and leaving my daughter fatherless. Not all challenges were to the death, but it was the victor's choice, and with what I'd learned about this man, the risks were too high.

After venting to the squirrels and non-shifter bunnies, I turned back to the fluffle area where all the houses were located. We called it the "hutch." I had left Thia with Arnold's family while I had my meeting, and I'd taken advantage of their kindness long enough.

When I rapped on the door of their thatch-roofed home, Arnold opened it and held a finger to his lips. "All the kits are sleeping," he whispered. "But they should be up soon. Come in the kitchen and have a snack while you wait."

"I don't want to be a bother. Besides, I just had something with the alpha."

"Yeah, I'll bet. If his mate made more of those horrible muffins, you'll need some of my mate's lavender lemonade to wash them down. He also just baked some cookies."

"I don't really have an appetite, but I am thirsty." I followed him into the cozy kitchen and took a seat at their round table. It was big enough for a crowd because my friends were doing their duty to make more bunnies with enthusiasm. But since all their little ones were napping with Thia, it was just us grown-ups here now.

“Sit right down.” Arnold’s mate bustled to the refrigerator and got out a pitcher of his famous lavender lemonade. He filled glasses for us and set a plate of chocolate-chunk pecan cookies on the table. “I’m going to the living room to listen for those little scamps to start to wake up. If I’m alert, I can get the early risers out of there and maybe some will sleep a little longer.”

He was gone before I could reply. “I guess you two have guessed what’s up.”

“Guess? Everyone knows the alpha is making you mate with Jaime. Which you obviously cannot do.”

“Well, that was succinct.” I picked up my glass and took a long, cool drink. “So do you have any suggestions of what to do? Because as you pointed out, I am not mating with Jaime. Not ever. He’s single because he’s a jerk and nobody wants him. The alpha probably sees him as an omega who is not producing kits, and he wants me to be the one to put them in him.” I shuddered at the thought.

Arnold reached out his hand. “Give me your phone.”

I pulled it out of my pocket and passed it over, puzzled. “Why?”

“Because the only way you can avoid this nightmare is to leave, and I’m going to download an app to help you do that.” He typed, read, and typed some more then returned my device. “Here you go.”

“I-what?” I looked at the screen then up at my friend. “Male-Order Mates?”

“Complete your profile. I started it. And see if you get a match. Preferably one far from here where you can start fresh. Maybe the alpha did you a favor—” He held up a hand to still my protests. “Zeus, you’ve been miserable since your mate passed. It’s not good for you or Thia. If you stay here, it will be multiplied by many times. It’s

time for you to move on, both in mind and location.”

I started to argue, to insist he was completely wrong, but then I filled out the form. It asked a lot of questions, and I didn’t figure I’d get it done before the kids woke up, but I wanted to get as much as possible because I needed the moral support of my friend. I ate most of the cookies on the plate, not even noticing until they were gone and the smooth chocolate and toasted pecan had obliterated the dry-muffin taste.

“Done.” I clicked submit and drank another glass of lemonade. We sat quietly for a few minutes. “I guess now we wait. There probably won’t be...what’s that?”

Arnold leaned over the table. “Let me see!”

I turned the phone around. “It’s some kind of a symbol...”

“Brother, you’ve got a match!”

Indeed I did, no more than five minutes after loading my profile. “Yeah.” I brought the phone back to face me. “Let me see what to do...okay.” I clicked on the notification and found an omega wolf looking for a mate to help him run his new motel. He wasn’t looking for a baby maker or power, just someone compatible to work with and see where it went from there. It was far, far away from here.

“It can’t be this easy,” I murmured while clicking to look over the guy’s profile. “Do you think?”

“I believe in Fate.” Arnold cocked his head. “And I hear little voices.”

Naptime was over, and I would have to put off talking to my match until bedtime. But if he was anything like he sounded, he was the answer to my prayers. A gift from Fate? Time would tell.

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My chest no longer constricted every time I woke up. That was new. There was no more alarm on my phone, but I still woke with the sun, a long-term effect of being a sole business owner for a long time.

I slipped into the kitchen at a snail's pace, making coffee and pulling the makings for an extravagant breakfast out of the fridge.

No more popping through the drive-thru or heating up something frozen for this guy.

It should've been a restful time but, in fact, having no schedule had become—a bit jarring.

I would make some decisions today, one way or another.

In my home office, I kept one of those large maps. When I started, I thought it was fun to keep track of all the places I'd traveled and would mark them with Polaroid shots of the project with a thumb tack in the city. I'd been all over. I crossed my arms over my chest, trying to recall a spot I loved the most but came up empty.

Sitting down at my desk, I opened up my laptop and began to search. I intended to make a new start somewhere, a complete new start, so that meant moving. The web search gave me all sorts of options but, each time I clicked on an article, pop-up ads bombarded me. Male-Order Mates? I didn't know what that was, but I'd seen it more times than I could count.

Curious, I finally clicked on the ad, hoping the damned computer would stop showing the service to me.

But once I did, I knew I'd landed on something intriguing, and that was putting it lightly. I leaned back in my chair, looking at all the testimonials from couples and throuples and all kinds of polyamorous relationships.

I'd never really considered more than one mate, but now that the idea had occurred to me, I couldn't shake it.

Next thing I knew, I was signing up. After a lengthy questionnaire and paying the small fee, I stood, intending to make myself a second cup of coffee. Perhaps that would make up my mind about all the things...

No faster did I stand up than an alert popped up on the bottom right of my screen. I gasped and sat back down. There was no way this thing worked that fast—right?

Except clearly, it did.

My match was an omega named Fyn—a wolf shifter, and his picture alone had my panther purring.

Tall with shorter hair. Warm brown eyes. In one of the pictures, he smiled and the sight heated my chest.

I was all about taking plunges this week, so, on a whim, I sent him a message.

His reply was immediate.

He was already matched with someone else. It happened that day. He apologized and commented that my picture was handsome.

I wrote back telling him that it was okay. I was making some big changes in my life, and I thought Fate might be telling me something with the match.

Our conversation that started off light and friendly eventually evolved into me telling him everything about my work, about giving most of my company away to my best friend, and about how I wanted to move across the country.

Fyn's next message made me smile.

He owned a motel. Had recently bought it. If there was one thing he had, it was space for friends.

Staying in a motel room in a new place, with someone I'd met who already had a mate, hadn't been on my agenda but, for some reason, it fit the trajectory of my new life perfectly. His motel was in the Pacific Northwest, one of the places I had been leaning toward.

He said I could stay as long as I wanted and, if I helped him with the landscaping, I could stay for free.

I asked if I could think about it, and his answer was a resounding yes.

I got offline but downloaded the app for my phone. Fyn gave me his contact information, and we texted a bit back and forth while I nursed another cup of coffee.

Even if this omega wasn't a romantic match for me, we were getting along well and my panther approved.

Everyone needed friends, and my only friends of late were at work or work-related.

Things were changing for me, and I was making my life change.

Exactly as I'd hoped for.

After a call with James and another with my attorneys going over the final contracts, my animal was settled. More settled than he'd been in a long time. Fyn was already practically mated to another. I had no business thinking that there could be more, but my panther craved him after seeing some pictures and exchanging a few messages.

Pouring the rest of my coffee into the sink, I leaned on it and pressed the button to call Fyn. He answered on the first ring.

"How soon could I accept that offer?" I asked instead of the usual hello.

Fyn chuckled. The sound punched me in the gut before veining down to my cock where it stirred all kinds of things and none of them friendly. "Of course. I am starting over, too, but room for more? I've got plenty of that."

"I'm getting on a train as soon as I can. And thank you. You just changed my life."

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When I stumbled across an ad for the Male-Order Mates app, I thought it was a joke or some random satirical kind of content. What was this? The 1800s? Who orders up a mate? But then the loneliness started to kick in. It was one thing to be mateless. I'd been that way always. But adding the isolation and lack of friends nearby? It was getting to be too much.

Out of a combination of curiosity and desperation, I looked the app up and saw it was real. Not only was it real, but it had amazing ratings—so amazing, I half wondered if they bought the reviews. But the more I read them, the more I saw real shifters on the other side. People had legit found their fated through their phone with the help of this technology. I figured, why not give it a try? Maybe, eventually, I would meet somebody who might be willing to come here and then I, too, could leave a testimonial for all to see, one that was super sappy and sweet and made everyone cry.

I was a catch on paper, too. I had a place to stay, and, sure, it was the middle of nowhere, but it was shifter paradise. We were able to shift here far more freely than any place I'd ever been or heard of, for that matter. And I didn't need their money to survive. I was doing that on my own. Three wins in my favor.

When I signed up, I set my expectations low. If I got even a pen-pal kind of friend out of it, I was going to call it a victory. Never, in my wildest imagination, had I so much as suspected that filling in the app information would lead me where it had. I had not one but two people connect with me. And, more than that, both of them were people I was potentially interested in.

But, at the end of the day, it was crystal clear who I had to say yes to. While Ripley was great—beyond great, really—Zeus and his daughter needed me. It wasn't just

Zeus needing me; it was the reason why he signed up for the app in the first place that made him my first pick. He was a widower raising a daughter on his own. He needed a place for him and his daughter to be, and that was always going to supersede any feelings I had for Ripley.

The feelings I had for either of them weren't real, not yet. How could they be? We'd barely communicated, aside from a few emails and a little bit of talking and, when I thought about it, that was not much of anything before the decision was made.

Was that how all of these male-order mates worked? Was it all connect, move, hope for the best? Not that it mattered what other people did. This was my life, not theirs.

And now? Now they were both coming. My panther was on his way just to kind of hang out for a while, check out the area, possibly do some landscaping. My bunny? He was traveling with his daughter to start a new life with me. My life was about to change in ways I couldn't begin to imagine. I was both excited and freaking out.

I'd wanted the motel to be cleaned up far better than it was. There were certain areas that were habitable and others that still had a long way to go. But it was getting done, little by little, and they say slow and steady wins the race and all that. When I was small, I used to say, Slow and steady won the train. I wasn't sure where that came from, but it sure was fitting.

I was getting ready for the train, the one that was about to turn everything upside down. They were both coming in today, on the same train—not that there were many that came through town, and even fewer that stopped here at the tiny station. They didn't even start from the same location—it just happened to end up that they boarded along the way.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, indicating it was time to get ready to pick them up. I looked around the room I was currently working on. It was looking worse than when

I started, but that was usually a sign that I was doing it right. I'd have loved to stay and finish it and, on any other occasion, I would have. But I was a future mate and needed to go shower and get ready to pick them up.

Hopefully, Zeus wouldn't be upset about Ripley. I turned him down. It wasn't like I was leading them both on, but I didn't know enough about either to know for sure if it was going to be a problem. I wasn't even sure how I knew that Zeus and his daughter needed me, if I really thought about it. It was just something in my gut that said he did, and I learned a long time ago to always trust my gut.

I'd find out how they got along soon enough; we all would. I had a sneaking suspicion that my life was about to change in ways I hadn't even considered. Please let it be for the better. I hated to think that me bringing them here was unfair to them both.

This rural shifter-rich area wasn't for everyone. Some people lived for their daily chain-coffee-shop java and access to live theater and their gym membership. None of that was here. Sure, there was coffee to be had and, if you wanted a show, just go to the town meetings. As far as gym memberships? If a shifter wanted to work out, they'd find a way. But still, objectively, I could see this place wasn't everyone's cuppa tea.

Please let it be Ripley and Zeus and his beautiful daughter's cuppa tea because everything inside me said they belonged here, too.

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It all happened so fast, leaving our home like thieves in the night. It meant, we couldn't take a lot. I even left our car behind, bequeathing it to Arnold after he drove us to the train station. It wasn't a great vehicle, fine for local transportation, but not so much to cross the country. My friend's suggestion to get as far away as possible was made come true by the fact that Fyn lived in the Pacific Northwest. He'd sent a few pictures of the area where his motel was located, and Thia and I were both very excited to explore our new home.

Once our baggage was loaded in the undercar storage, we boarded and made a new friend in a very friendly conductor who soon was showing us around, making sure Thia knew where the restrooms were, the dining car, the snack bar, the observation dome...everything. It was going to be a long journey for a little girl, especially one whose daddy could not afford a sleeping car. Fortunately, the seats were large enough for a little princess to sleep in, and even I was pretty darn comfortable with the footrests that popped up at the push of a button.

It didn't hurt that the train wasn't too terribly crowded, either. And the conductor kept coming by to make sure Thia was happy and comfortable. He even introduced us to the engineer at one stop, and my daughter had a moment of doubt on whether to be a fairy princess or a "train driver." When the engineer pointed out that his job did not come with a wand, she went back to her original plan. I often wondered what she would be when she grew up. Our stuck-in-the-past fluffle would have had her as much a baby-making machine as an omega. I just hadn't wanted to look at it until now.

Fresh from lunch that included a milkshake, which I might have refused her had I realized how big the sugar bomb was, my princess was twirling around the aisle.

With only a few other occupied seats in the car, I wasn't too worried. We were on a particularly smooth section of track at the moment, and she had to let off steam at some point.

Out of nowhere, we hit a curve and Thia lost her balance and her wand went flying. She dove for it, just as it slid under the seat, tangling herself in the legs of the man sitting there. He jumped up with a start and glared down at my princess. She closed her fist around the wand and slithered back, wide, wary eyes turned up to the man.

I was on my feet just in time for another man to enter from the rear of the car. On our tour, the conductor had explained that the next car back was made up of private roomettes and bedrooms, even a suite or two, but he hadn't taken us back there because only those who'd reserved them were allowed.

I was about to push past the new traveler to get to my girl when he fixed himself in between the grouch and my little one. "Whoa, what is going on here?"

"What do you care?" snarled the grouch. "I don't know why people even bring kids on trains. They're nothing but noise and trouble. And she's not yours, anyway, so mind your own business."

Every bit of me was on alert, ready to throw myself over a seat to get to her, but the new traveler was helping her to her feet. "Come right this way, sweetheart. Is this your daddy?"

"Y-yes." She darted past him and flung herself into my arms.

Our hero turned his attention back on the other man who looked like he had more things to say that would either scare Thia or earn him a true tongue-lashing. I was rooting for the second but couldn't chance the first.

“Thank you for your help,” I said, lifting my daughter into my arms. “We’ll go sit farther away.”

“You should do that,” growled the grouch. “Before I call the conductor and report you for loud and annoying behavior.” He wrinkled his nose and sneered. “You and the little brat.”

As much as I wanted to hit him myself, I couldn’t let this nice man end up thrown off the train for doing so. As he drew his arm back, I caught it and stopped him. “He’s not worth it.”

“No,” said the man my daughter was watching with adoring eyes. “He isn’t.” His arm untensed, and I released it. “I don’t know why they allow people like him on trains. Just to annoy the general populace, I suppose.”

I half expected the grumpy one to lunge at him, but he was only brave enough to pick on small children, and he resumed his seat and stared out the window.

“I can’t thank you enough.” I held out my hand. “We are both grateful. “Right, princess?”

“T’ank you.” Her return to the way she spoke when she was younger told me how the whole encounter had affected her and made me even angrier.

I didn’t bring her all this way just to be retraumatized. I snapped my lips closed, not having intended to say anything about our past to this man who was just passing through, probably on his way to the dining car.

But he just shook my hand and then Thia’s. “Listen, I was just going to get something to eat, but if you don’t mind waiting a minute while I grab a sandwich to go, I have a bedroom suite in the next car, plenty of room for you two to be comfortable. I’ll show

you in and stay here in grumpy land.”

“Oh no, I can’t take your suite.” This was really going above and beyond.

“Really it’s fine. I don’t mind at all, and your daughter doesn’t need to be exposed to such negativity.”

We went back and forth a couple of times before I insisted we all share the room. He disappeared out the front and then returned with his lunch. He’d offered to bring us something, but I told him we’d just eaten. He still carried a bag of warm cookies “to help untraumatize the princess.”

As we were leaving the car, he said, “By the way, my name is Ripley.”

“I’m Zeus.”

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Zeus—what a perfect name for this god of an alpha.

“Sit down, please. Here, little one.” I pulled a tissue from the holder near the seat and offered it to her. Zeus took it instead, and our skin touched. My panther preened in response.

“Thank you, Ripley. She doesn’t do well with yelling. We came from a fluffle where people rarely shouted. She just isn’t used to it.”

“And she shouldn’t have to be.” I nodded, looking at the red-faced beauty who let her father dab at her eyes and cheeks. Her breaths were ragged from the crying, and she gripped her wand like most children would hold a security blanket.

A true princess.

“I have to admit, I don’t like yelling myself. I try very hard not to raise my voice. If your point is worth making, it’s worth saying in any voice,” I mimicked my father.

“That’s true. Thanks again for inviting us here. It’s less noisy.”

“Sure thing. What’s your name?” I asked his daughter, who had curled up on his lap and was looking tired. Mr. Grumpy from the other part of the train deserved a kick in the ass for treating a little lady like that.

“Thia,” she whimpered.

Zeus looked down on her with pride and pulled out a blanket from her backpack and

draped it over her. “It’s short for a very long name,” he chuckled. “Daughter of the Greek god Zeus. The goddess of childbirth. We read about her in one of the pregnancy books and thought Thia was cute.”

“It’s very cute. Fitting for royalty.”

Zeus whispered some sweet things to his babe while I picked up my phone and scrolled for a bit, giving them a bit of privacy, as much as I could, given we were in the same room. Once she fell asleep, which only took a few seconds, he smiled at me.

My panther wanted him. Badly. My animal had gotten out of control lately. Clearly this male was mated, since he had a child, and Fyn was awaiting his mate any day now.

My beast had issues.

Serious ones.

“Where are you headed?” I broke through the silence, needing to know more about this alpha who smelled like orange and vanilla, the most delicious creamsicle in history.

“Washington state. I’ve never been there, have you?”

I nodded. “A few times, actually. Rainy, but the views and the landscape are spectacular. Lots of nature things to do. Trails. Hiking. Camping. Swimming. If you two enjoy that kind of thing.”

Zeus nodded. “She loves swimming and has only seen a few mountains. You headed for the same area?”

“Yes. Moving across the country.”

“I’m going to meet my omega,” he added.

I looked down at Thia, in question.

He shook his head. “Oh no. Her other father died.”

“I’m so sorry.”

He gave me a soft smile. “Thank you. I signed up for one of those matchmaking apps and found someone really fast. I was scared at first. When someone accepts me as a mate, I’m not the only one they are accepting.”

“Anyone would be blessed to have the both of you in their lives.”

“You’re very sweet, Fyn. Have you tried one of those apps? Someone would be lucky to have you as well.”

I laughed, accidentally making Thia stir, but she settled right away.

“Thank you. I have, actually. I met someone online, but they were already taken. I’m still on the app, but I haven’t checked it. Are you excited to meet your mate? Your second mate?”

He beamed. Absolutely beamed. All the while he spoke, he stroked his daughter’s back. There was something so sexy about the way he cared for his young. Him being a good dad made him even hotter in my opinion. He was an alpha, and so was I, but I could look. “I am. He’s amazing. Just bought a motel that he’s going to renovate.”

That’s when it hit me. This was Fyn’s mate. The one who met him before me.

Both of them were lucky as hell.

“That’s incredible. What a fun adventure.”

For some reason, telling Zeus that I was headed to the same exact place felt like blowing out his candle, and that was the last thing I wanted to do. The alpha had been through enough losing his mate and the other father of his child. I would let him have this excitement without interjecting my own.

He would find out soon but, for now, it was right to keep my mouth shut about it.

The train slowed and an announcement over the speakers indicated we were about to end our journey. The big hiss of the brakes woke Thia from her deep sleep, and she rubbed her eyes and tugged on her daddy’s shirt. “Are we there? Are we going to see Fyn?”

Precious girl. She was excited as well to have another parent.

“We are almost there. That sound is the train slowing down. It’s so big, it takes a lot of effort to stop.”

They talked more about train mechanics until the conductor strolled down the aisle, letting us know we were at our stop. I helped Zeus gather his things, and he turned before leaving the room. “Thank you for everything, Ripley. I hope you find your mate.”

I nodded. “I hope you and your family are very happy.”

He left, and my panther lay down inside me.

Felt like my best friend had left the room instead of an acquaintance.

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To say I was nervous when I readied for the train station was the understatement of the year. I was picking up not one, but two alphas and an adorable little girl, and I was bringing them all back to my place. Sure, it was a motel, so everybody would have their own spaces, but still. They were coming to my home.

One person was coming here to be my mate and the other as a guest, which kind of hurt, even though that made no sense. Why should it? We weren't now, nor ever had been together. My feelings on the subject should be neutral. Only they weren't. It felt like a loss that one was coming to "chill" for a bit.

Not that anything could be done about it. This was life, and you played with the cards you were dealt. Right now, those cards had me parking at the train station and going to meet my future mate and my guest—at the same time.

It hadn't been difficult to find Zeus. His daughter was twirling around like the little princess that she was, right there on the platform. When he looked up, I waved at them both. Gods, he was gorgeous, and I knew the exact moment he recognized who I was. A smile bloomed on his face, and I felt completely cherished. I had never fully understood the power of a smile until then.

Zeus tapped his daughter on the shoulder; she stopped and turned to me. I expected to see something similar to her father, a smile, or possibly even a frown—kids were nothing if not honest. What I hadn't anticipated was her running at me full throttle and hugging my leg.

"You're Fyn?" she asked.

“Yeah, how did you know?”

“Daddy told me we were going to see you, that you were going to take us home.”

“Yeah, I am. Do you like that idea?”

“I love it! I can’t wait.”

She was still hugging me tightly when Zeus walked up. I froze, unsure what to do, and found myself whipping out my human manners for Zeus. I stretched out my hand to shake his. Could I get any less shifter?

More than anything, I just wanted a hug and to be able to scent him deeply. A handshake would have to do, as awkward as it was.

“There’s one more person we have to pick up,” I said.

“Oh okay.”

“He was on the train with you. Did you see anybody else come off?”

“Only one person. His name is Ripley.”

My jaw nearly fell right off. He knew Ripley. “Yeah, I felt that... I don’t see him.” I didn’t even know what I was saying, my words getting stuck, my ability to think clearly gone. The scent of this alpha had my brain going wonky, and that was before this new revelation that he knew Ripley.

“Oh, he had to do something at the ticket counter.” At least Zeus didn’t seem to notice.

“Do you mind if we all go together and pick him up? It’s on the way to my car.”

“Sounds good.” He scooped up Thia and told her where we were going, and she giggled and when he put her back down, she twirled and twirled, the giggling still going strong.

There was something unreadable on the alpha’s face. Unlike his daughter, who showed her joy for all to see, he kept his emotions close to the vest. The more I tried to decipher them, the more confusing it got. So, when his daughter grabbed my hand and pulled me toward the inside of the train station and off the platform, I didn’t hesitate to go with her. Not that I believed it would ever be easy to deny her anything.

“Ripley is so nice, and he likes to hide, but let me tell you, I just know things,” she rambled on. I wasn’t sure what she meant by hide, and my best guess was that he’d played hide-and-seek with her a time or two.

“Oh, I see.” I didn’t. “Well, let’s go find him.”

It wasn’t hard. He was standing right at the ticket counter, just like Zeus had said. For a split second, my stomach fell. What if he was leaving already? Not that I should be worried about that. Zeus was here for me. That was enough.

Ripley turned around, and the most genuine, ginormous smile I’d ever seen graced his face.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

“We’re taking you home with us,” Thia said, with a confidence I sure wasn’t feeling.

My cheeks burned. I suppose, in a way, she was being accurate, but there was more to it than that. It wasn’t until we were in the car that I fully understood what was going

on. My wolf was pounding at me from the inside to call them both mates. Not one. Not the other. Both of them.

I didn't say anything about it on the way home, unsure how much to say in front of Thia. She didn't need to be mixed up in all this adult stuff. And, really, I wasn't sure what to say. Hey, nice guy with the sweet kid, remember when I said you could live here with me and start a new life? Maybe we change that to include this random guy? Or did I say to Ripley, Hey, remember when I sort of rejected you on the app—just kidding?

Nothing seemed right. I was going to have to wing it when the time came, and it came quickly. I pulled into the parking lot of the motel. I barely stopped when Thia begged to twirl. Her father agreed and out of the car she went, running then twirling and twirling and twirling.

I looked the alphas in the eye and said, "You're both my mates."

Ripley nodded.

Zeus said, "That's what's happening?" with a hint of a question in his voice. At least neither of them denied it. That was a start, right?

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We were right at the start of our most interesting conversation so far. We were all mates...and...

And a car pulled up behind Fyn's. Could their timing be any worse? "I think you have company."

He glanced back and frowned. "Nobody I know...yet. I've been so busy trying to make sense of the chaos of this place, I haven't had time to make friends in the community."

Two men exited the vehicle and started up the drive toward us. One led the way; the other lagged behind but they didn't look dangerous. Could they be potential customers if only we were ready for them?

"Hi." Fyn started down the drive toward them. "We aren't open yet, but we hope you'll come back when we are."

The lead guy chortled. "I'm not a traveler in need of a bed but someone here to make up for a big oversight we've made. I'm Giorgio, and this is my brother Stefano, and we own the Grizzly."

"Oh, I've seen the place. The local watering hole! I haven't been here long, but I definitely planned to come in for a drink at some point." He waved us forward. At least two of us because a certain princess had already fluttered off to the garden. "This is Ripley and Zeus my...anyway this is Ripley and Zeus."

"We saw you picking them up at the train station. We were in town picking up some

things for our mates. They arrived by train like that, too, not so terribly long ago.” He shared a glance with his brother. “We met them on an app.”

The three of us looked at one another then broke out in grins. “Are we that obvious?” I asked. “The Male-Order Mates app by any chance?”

“There are a remarkable number of happy couples in the area who met one another on the app.”

“And throuples,” put in Stefano who had hardly said a word. It seemed his brother did most of the talking for the two of them.

“That’s right,” Giorgio continued. “And more babies coming along every day. Is that fairy princess I saw darting into the garden one of yours, or is she really magical?”

“Yes, to both,” I told them. “Thia is a real fairy princess and also my daughter. We needed a fresh start, and Fyn was gracious enough to invite us here to help him build up his business. And Ripley is also part of the whole thing. This is beautiful country you have here.”

Giorgio said, “My brother here was a chef in a I-forget-how-many-stars restaurant in the big city before I dragged him here to open our own place. I had a dream, and he helped me fulfill it.”

Stefano shrugged. “It was a good decision and I’m a little ashamed of having been so reluctant.”

“So, then how did you both end up on the app?” Ripley asked.

“That’s kind of a funny story.” Giorgio talking again. “I am very social, if you hadn’t guessed, working the front of the house, but Stefano was back there in the kitchen all

day and night, working his tushy off. And I decided he needed a mate. So I tricked him.”

“And then I tricked him back,” Stefano added with a grin. “And although I don’t recommend dishonesty, in both cases it worked.”

“Everyone has their own story, I guess,” I mused. “So, you’re the chef, Stefano? I guess that means the Grizzly is more than a bar? You serve food?”

“We have the best food for five counties,” bragged his brother. “And we are definitely more than a bar. We have a separate dining room where people who want a more relaxed atmosphere can come and eat, although we serve food and drinks in both areas.”

“Family friendly?” I asked because it would be a long time before I would feel comfortable leaving Thia with strangers to babysit her so we could have a date night.

“You bet. Especially during the day, but into the dinner hours, there are always families there. We are the darlings of the park rangers as well.”

“Park?” Ripley asked. “A big one if there are rangers.”

“Oh yeah! During the late spring, summer, and fall, we get a lot of tourists here, which will be great for you guys. Also, in winter, we can really let our guard down and shift in all those square miles of forest and mountainside. I’m betting Fyn knew it was here.”

Fyn nodded. “It was a selling point, but I didn’t realize at first just how much work there would be. I’m not sure we’ll be open this summer.”

“If you can be, even just a few rooms, I’d go for it,” Giorgio said. “You’ll be booked

all season. There's never enough available space. Heck, add on later if you can. We'll talk you up, and so will the rangers who are just terrific about helping travelers to patronize local businesses."

"Come in and have a meal on us," Stefano urged. "It's good for business but also just for friendships and connections. Your little princess will want kids to play with, and we have the nicest kids anywhere in our area."

"We need to get back to the Grizzly," Giorgio said. "We almost never leave at the same time, but it was just a day when our mates needed stuff and we needed fresh air. So glad we ran into you three. Hope you will come in and see us soon."

We walked them back to their car. "What a coincidence that they saw us and nice that they came by to say hello and invite us to their place." I stretched, tired from all the travel but also feeling great to be here.

"It was," Fyn agreed. "I wanted to stop by at some point, but I didn't realize everything they have to offer. We'll have to get out there and have a meal in the near future."

"Before they forget they offered to treat us," Ripley joked.

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And then it was just us, and the elephant that had stepped into the room before we were interrupted.

“So we are both your mates?” I had to reiterate the fact, mostly because my panther wanted me to. Fyn had been bold in telling us that we were his mates and, despite my hesitation, relief flooded me.

Walking away from him and Zeus wouldn’t have been easy.

“Yes,” Fyn said, blushing and biting on his bottom lip. Adorable. I couldn’t wait to do some nibbling on him myself.

“That’s really good. I was so disappointed when you said you had already made a match and it wasn’t me,” I chuckled, and Zeus did as well.

“I have to say, when I saw you on the train, there was an instant connection. Had no idea that I would come here and we’d share an omega, but I’m not sad about it. Not one bit.”

I took the motel in, noticing a large common area that had been neglected for quite some time. Broken benches and a large forgotten fountain all that had been mostly reclaimed by the earth with her twisting vines and weeds that could grow no matter the soil.

“That’s a fairy queen,” Thia said, tugging on the leg of my jeans.

“What is?” I crouched down to her level. I’d never really been around children much,

but I'd seen parents get down to their level to speak to them. Thia, I'd learned on the train, was a chatterbox, but I needed to know what the princess saw in the garden.

"See that lady?" She took my chin in her hand and moved it a bit. She was talking about the statue of some goddess that was once the pinnacle of the fountain.

"I see that lady. You think she's a fairy queen?"

"She is." Thia rolled her eyes. "How do we bring her to life?"

How indeed? Thia became busy with waving her wand, tapping different blades of grass and telling them to wake up. Princess. Fairies. Wands. Before long, I was caught up in all sorts of ideas, painting the garden into a wonderland in my mind.

"Ripley." Fyn's voice grabbed my attention and dragged it out of my dreaming.

"Yeah?" I asked, standing up and trying to stamp all the ideas firmly out of my head.

"Did we lose you there? We were talking about our picnic." Zeus reached down to pick up Thia once she stopped blessing the plants and had her arms up for his attention.

"Yes. Sorry. It's not you two. It's me. I got caught up in envisioning what that garden could be like. It would certainly invite tourists to come visit. Hell...heck, I mean, it could be an attraction all on its own."

Fyn and Zeus looked to the garden, but their gazes lacked enthusiasm.

"Forgive me," Zeus said. "Are you a landscaper?"

I nodded. "I am. I actually own a landscaping business."

Fyn scoffed. “Don’t let him fool you into thinking this was some kind of grass-cutting side hustle, Zeus. Ripley owns this huge landscaping architecture place. He’s been in every magazine and has planned celebrity home gardens. He’s landscaper famous.”

“I handed over ownership of that company recently but this place is begging for attention.”

“What did you have in mind?” Zeus stepped over so that he could stand shoulder to shoulder with me. Thia put her hand on my shoulder.

“The fountain could be restored, but I was thinking something whimsical and purely fantasy. Maybe a unicorn shooting water from its horn. The benches could be turtles, so people could sit on their backs...” I went on, detailing everything I saw in my head.

“I don’t know if I can afford all that yet,” Fyn confessed. “I have all these renovations on the motel and the cost of getting it up and running.”

“One day,” I said with confidence.

“It’s amazing that you can see all of that. What an imagination.”

“Daddy, I’m hungry.” Thia’s exclamation ended all my daydreaming and brought us back to the present.

The princess desired sustenance.

The weight of our situation weighed on my heart. If Zeus, Fyn, and I were going to embark on this relationship, then that meant we would be a family. Thia would have three dads now and, while that made me happy for the tiny princess, it also made me

nervous. I'd never been a father before, but my panther already saw the little one in Zeus' arms as mine. We would protect her from everything. Take care of her as though she was born from this mating.

"I can just find her something to eat if you two don't want to go on a full picnic. We can do it another day."

Thia's bottom lip sticking out ended me.

"Fyn, do you know somewhere we can picnic? And a store we can stop at for food?"

Fyn nodded and took my hand in his. My panther whirled inside me. "We can stop and I know the perfect place," he said. "There's a small park as well."

"Excellent. Then let's go," Fyn said. He tugged on my hand, but when I didn't immediately move, he chuckled. "Ripley?"

"I'm sorry. When I get wrapped up in a design, it kind of takes over. What if I took over the garden? I'll take care of everything."

Fyn sighed. "It's probably a lot more than you were expecting."

"Why not?" I asked. "We're mates, right? And this is what I do."

Fyn and Zeus nodded. Zeus said as we walked over to the car, "What else needs to be done, Fyn? Tell us everything."

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It was weird because the last thing I wanted to do was talk about the motel, but also at the same time, it was exactly what I wanted to do. Talking about the motel was, in a way, talking about our future. Sure, right now they were talking about immediate needs, like fixing the walls or refinishing the floors—basic stuff. But the motel symbolized more than that—it symbolized a future. A future for us, and a future for Thia. And with that realization in mind, this conversation suddenly became a lot more serious and much less about what my wolf was begging me to do, which was to claim them both.

“There’s not a lot of big things to be done,” I said. “When we first came in the driveway and were facing the hotel, if you looked all the way to the left, that area of the roof needs a patch. We are going to have to go down and replace some plywood before reshingling the area, but it’s not too big.”

“And the rest of it?” Zeus asked.

“I had the complete roof looked at, and the rest of it’s got at least another solid ten years on it. And from what I could tell from being up there, they were spot on. My guess is that part was where they didn’t fully do the repairs before they put new shingles on. So, we’re really looking at a rather old problem, as opposed to a new one.” Which had been a relief for me. If it had been a new one, we were on borrowed time for the rest of the roof. This meant, someone took a shortcut, a bad one.

“Wait...” Zeus interrupted. “You said you were up on the roof?”

“Yeah, I was.” It wasn’t particularly high or steep. The way he made it sound it was a vertical drop eighteen stories up.

“Like, just up there, walking around?”

I nodded.

“Isn’t that dangerous?”

“No more so than when I...” I decided it was best if I didn’t mention any of the things I’d done around here that were less safe than that. Some things were better left unsaid. “It’s fine.”

It was unusual for me to have somebody worrying about me in any real way. Sure, coworkers at the bar would “worry” if I wasn’t ten minutes early, but that was more about themselves than me. This was new and different. It was nice but also a little bit awkward because I didn’t know how to respond. I guess I had time to learn.

“So, is that the big thing time and moneywise?” Zeus asked.

“I suppose, if you frame it that way, the garden is the big thing. There’s so much here but so much that needs to be done as well.” It was a mess but held so much potential.

“Oh, I have ideas,” Ripley said, “so many.” It wasn’t the first time he mentioned it.

And I didn’t doubt that for a second. He spaced out multiple times while we were talking, his eyes on that garden.

I gave the two of them the rundown of all the things that needed to be done both inside and out. At this point, it was all pretty much cosmetic, which was good. Nothing truly scary had showed up as I was working on it, like I originally feared. There were no rat infestations or mold problems to be had. No structural issues that needed to be taken care of. Not even insulation issues. I’d lucked out like that.

And as far as progress went, I had about half the painting done, which left another half, but that was all doable. Some floors needed redoing, some furniture needed replacing, but over all, it was much closer to done than when I got here. It would be much closer still in another month, especially with their help.

I had a feeling living in a place like this meant it would never fully be done. But that was okay. I was here for the long haul.

“I like it here,” Thia announced, suddenly, twirling over. “There’s lots and lots of fairies.”

I thought she’d been referring to the statues and remains of statues that were still around. But instead, she twirled and whirled and talked about different flowers she saw and what kinds of fairies lived with each. Most of the flowers were weeds at this point, but that was in the eye of the beholder. In her eyes, they were beautiful flowers that housed equally beautiful fairies.

There was such magic in childhood. Even though she’d been through so much in her short life, she still looked at everything as sunshine and roses, and I wanted to give her that. Heck, I wanted to see it that way, too.

Maybe, just maybe, the three of us together could give her that childhood, the one where every day is a new adventure and filled with more laughter than tears and lots of hugs and unconditional love. No one could bring her father back or take that hurt from her. But we could sure try to give her the life her father would’ve wanted for her.

We kept talking about the property, and suddenly it hit me just how weird this entire conversation was. Not in general. Of course we’d be talking about the property and what it needed. But it was the things we weren’t talking about that really sideswiped me.

We knew we were mates and accepted it. There was no rejection or second-guessing. We were mates, full stop. But other than that acknowledgment, we were just three men sitting here chatting about paint colors. We hadn't even marked each other yet, or even come close. Part of that was because of Thia. It wasn't something you would chat about in front of children. But also, all of this was so new and I had a feeling that played a part in it, too.

Even so, I was fine with us not jumping right in with fangs and claws. This, what we had and were growing, was right. I felt it. They felt it. And based on everything Thia had shown us, she felt it, too—that we all were family.

All that was left was figuring out how we wanted it to look moving forward.

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Once Thia was tucked in bed in the room that would be hers—well it was hers, but it had a long way to go before it was princess-suitable—we settled on the sofa in the living room of the owner’s unit and let out a collective sigh.

“This is going to be a major endeavor,” I said, looking around at outdated wallpaper and vertical blinds from probably the 1980s. “And I mean just this room. But I can see the potential in it all.”

“I can’t always.” Fyn screwed his face up. “But with three of us to divide and conquer, I really believe we can do it. So, any of you ever taken off wallpaper?”

“I did once when we...when I moved into my house back in the fluffle.” We. They didn’t want to hear about my mate, about the past. Not when we were just discovering one another.

“Don’t do that to yourself.” Ripley, who sat in the middle, took my hand and laced our fingers together. “You had a mate who died. He was half responsible for Thia and, if I’m not mistaken, someone you loved very much.”

“Yes, I did.” My voice sounded very small to me.

“I don’t think it’s a bad thing to have loved greatly.” Fyn reached for my other hand. “I read somewhere that those who had successful matings in the past are most likely to do so in the future. And anyone who loved you, who loved the princess, is very high on my list.”

My eyes blurred with tears at the kindness of these two. Many would be jealous that

someone from the past still had a place in my heart. “I will always love him. But I already feel a bond with the two of you.”

“Of course.” Ripley snuggled against my shoulder and rubbed his cheek on my shirt. “I can see that it would be hard to move forward when you have really loved someone. The fact that you are open to us is amazing.”

“I never would have been if I hadn’t been pressured by our fluffle alpha to mate with someone I disliked.”

“That’s horrible. I’m so glad you didn’t stay there for that.” Fyn squeezed my fingers tight with his words. “But you’re here now. And while my animal is very secure in the fact that you belong with us, you are not here of anything but your own free will. If you wake up tomorrow and decide you want to move on, nobody will try to stop you.”

“Freedom?” I chuckled. “That’s refreshing. Our fluffle was a lot better before the current alpha stepped in. He is far more controlling than any previous, at least in my memory.” I turned toward Ripley to say something but before I could, he cupped my cheek and leaned in. My breath caught when his lips brushed mine and my eyelids fluttered closed. We kissed for a long time, and I floated in the moment, aware of Fyn at my back, his warmth adding to the feeling of safety and pleasure from Ripley’s firm, searching kisses. I hadn’t kissed anyone except my daughter on the forehead or cheek since my mate died, and I’d never even wanted to. Not that my libido had died, but I’d had all my yearnings of all kinds tied up in someone who no longer could have anything to do with them.

Finally, Ripley leaned back and turned me toward Fyn, whose lips were on mine before I really even got a full breath. But breathing was highly overrated. Especially when there was an option to have a kiss from the omega who had captured my attention the moment I set eyes on him. My bunny was purring. It wasn’t something

that had happened often and only when he was at his very most content. Like when Thia was born.

We went back and forth, kissing like teenagers, but our desires were those of full-grown shifter males, and at the rate we were going, things would be getting out of hand and soon. My daughter was sleeping only a dozen yards or so away, and did I want her to walk out here and find her daddy involved in what was sure to be a steamy encounter?

That image was enough for me to untangle myself from the others and push to my feet. “We can’t.”

They looked up at me, eyes glazed, lips swollen, and so were the front of their pants. Yep, cut that off just in time. “What’s wrong?” Ripley asked. His hair was so delectably mussed. “Don’t you want to...”

“Oh, I want to.” I braced myself not to tumble back down among them and let Fate take its course. “But”—I pointed down the hallway—“we need to have discretion in the living room at all times, and before we take this to where we all want it to go, we need to be sure Thia understands and is good with our choice.”

They both looked stricken and sat up, adjusting their clothes and running fingers through their hair. Completely adorable, both of them. “I’m so sorry.” Fyn was on his feet, out of breath, but no longer looking so lost. Was it awful that I loved him looking a little lost about our make-out session. “I’m not used to having a child in the house, but there’s no excuse.”

“I’m sorry, too.” Ripley still sat on the couch, a soft smile on his lips. “But I can’t help but think it’s a good thing that we were driven past using logic. Well, good and bad. Fair rules though. How about nothing but casual kisses anywhere but our bedroom? And nothing at all until Thia knows what is between us and seems okay

with it.”

“Agreed.” Fyn gave a firm nod. “We need to start out on the right foot if we’re going to be a happy family.”

Wow. Family. Amazing how Fate worked. Humans dated for months and years before committing or deciding another person was their person...or so I’d heard. But shifters? When we met, we knew. In most cases. That explained the attraction I’d felt on the train. I did believe I’d had one fated already, but the kindness of giving me not one but two more? Gratitude suffused my every cell.

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I snuck out of bed but not before taking a peek at Zeus and Fyn cuddled up together. Last night had been amazing. We hadn't mated or marked each other, but bonding had occurred nonetheless. After putting on a pair of jeans and grabbing my sketchbook, I made my way to the kitchen for a cup of coffee. I didn't want to wake up my new mates or Zeus' precious little girl, but I had to see the garden as the sun rose in the distance. It would give me the inspiration I needed.

I sipped from the baby-blue coffee cup while watching the rising sun fill the sky with violet and tangerine brushstrokes.

Before long, I had sketched out the entire place and started in on the details, adding notes on the sides when different thoughts sparked.

"What's up, Rip?" Thia's wind-chime voice tinged in my ears.

Rip. Adorable.

"Good morning, princess," I said, taking in her attire. This morning, she had chosen a sparkly violet dress with high-top tennis shoes that had matching glittery shoelaces. She even sported a new wand and two little buns on top of her head.

Zeus and Fyn walked behind her, cups of coffee in their hands.

"Whatcha doin'?" Thia walked over and hung on my leg so she could see my sketchbook.

"I'm drawing the garden—how it will look when we're done with it."

Zeus and Fyn came over but, after our decision the night before to discuss our mating with Thia before proceeding, we refrained from affection. Shame, too, because I wanted to kiss them both silly.

“How can you plan a fairy garden with no tutu?”

A valid question. All three of us chuckled.

Zeus stepped forward and rubbed Thia’s back. “Not everyone wears tutus, little one.”

Thia turned on her father and gave him the stink eye of the century. “Daddy. Everyone should.”

“I’ve got an idea,” I announced, flipping my notebook shut. “How about we do some shopping for the garden and pick up some things that we need for the motel and then we visit the fabric store. I’m afraid I can’t possibly go on planning this garden without a tutu.”

Thia gasped. “Can we stop for breakfast? I need pancakes.”

“Of course. Guys, is that okay with you?” I asked Zeus and Fyn who, I realized, I had put in a precarious position, not asking them before I presented the idea to the princess. This was all a learning curve for me. A big one.

“It’s perfectly fine,” Fyn replied. “I don’t even know where to start with the renovations.”

Zeus picked up Thia. “We should probably start with the lobby. It needs a lot of love and updating. Plus, it’s the first thing the guests will see.”

Fyn nodded. “That’s a great idea. We can pick up paint while we’re out. If that’s

okay?”

I walked over to the omega and winked at him. What I wanted to do was pull him in for a kiss but again, we had company and that company hadn't been asked if this was all okay with her. “It's okay with us, Fyn. Let's go eat and shop.”

After our breakfast at the local diner that consisted of entirely too much sugar and empty carbs, we went to the hardware store. Fyn picked out a lovely buttery yellow to go in the lobby, saying he wanted everything to be happy and inviting in the motel. While we shopped, we snuck some hand-holding in, and Zeus passed his hand down my back while probably no one was looking. I didn't want the sneaking-around phase to last long, but damn, it was fun while it did.

“Let's go to the nursery next. I'm not sure if they will have all the things I need or if I will have to order online. It's fun to shop around though.”

Thia had a fun time at the nursery. Surprisingly, they had a ton of the things on my list, but, first, the garden needed a cleanup and some of the items removed. I did pick up some bulbs and organic fertilizer for prepping the beds but, other than that, things would have to wait until I had a clean canvas.

The unicorn fountain? That, I would need James' help with, a custom job.

“Can we go to the tutu shop now?” Thia asked.

“It's not a tutu shop. It's a shop that sells tulle. Tulle is the fabric that makes the tutu.” Zeus always explained things to her in a loving way.

“Oh. Then let's go to that store.”

We ended up buying enough tulle for the entire NYC ballet company to perform

Swan Lake fifty times, and in all colors—only a minor exaggeration—but what the princess wanted, she got.

By the time the shopping was done and we'd ventured into a few more stores, including a grocery store, we were all ready for a late lunch. Zeus had snacks for Thia that tided her over, but she needed a real meal.

We went back to the motel where Zeus cooked up some simple buttered noodles and garlic bread. We'd had a long but lovely day, and a carb fest was exactly what we needed.

While we ate and discussed the plans for the motel and garden, I noticed Thia glancing between us all.

"What is it?" Zeus asked me.

"I think the little one has something to say."

Fyn had been holding my hand under the table for the last few minutes and he squeezed it, nodding at my assumption.

"What is it?" Zeus asked his daughter who had demolished the plate of noodles, claiming it was the best thing ever. It kind of was.

"I really like my new family."

Not a dry eye in the room.

"Is this okay with you, Thia?" Zeus made sure he had her full attention. "Is it okay if Fyn and Ripley are my mates now? They would become your family, too."

“Of course!” she said. “I like having three daddies.”

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“Hey, Daddy, I have a question.” She bolted in her father’s direction and nearly tackle hugged him to the ground. “I don’t wanna be rude.”

I heard him whisper quietly, bracing himself for rudeness, but none came. And really, I didn’t expect there to be. I found it difficult to believe that she could be rude, even unintentionally—maybe a little blunt, maybe a little too honest, but never rude.

“Is it rude if I ask to see their animals? They aren’t strangers. I know it’s rude to ask strangers if you can see their animals.” I had a feeling there was a story there.

He whispered back to her, and she jumped up and down.

“Good.” She ran right over to where Ripley and I had been working on fixing the small border that made one of the garden boxes. “Can your panther come out and play with me?”

“Oh, absolutely, my little princess. He would love that.”

“How about your wolf?” She turned to me. “Will he come out and play with me?”

“Oh, he’d love it.” I’d been itching to let him out since the three of them got here. Thia wouldn’t be able to shift, of course. She was too young.

The next thing I knew, we were no longer clearing the garden of weeds, but instead were getting undressed in preparation for our first shift together—as a family and as mates. I was every bit as excited as Thia was acting. It was going to be the first time I’d see either of my mates in their animal form, and weren’t they night and day? A

big predatory cat who could take down any of us, and a bunny. A cute, fluffy bunny.

The first person to take their form was me. I couldn't wait to meet their beasts, and I was afraid if either one of them went first, I would spend too much time admiring them in their animal state and not shift myself.

The second my paws hit the ground, Thia ran over and hugged me.

"You're beautiful," she said. I'd been called lots of things about my wolf form—rugged, homely, fierce—but no one had ever called me beautiful. My wolf loved it and pranced around. Silly wolf.

"He is," her father said, kissing her head before taking his own form. He was larger than I thought he'd be but just as adorable. And once he shifted, he didn't even cower from my wolf. His beast recognized that he was mine and I'd do him no harm—ever.

When the panther came out, I'd have given anything to have had my camera. Zeus' bunny hopped right on to Ripley's back. He wasn't playing or being aggressive. He wanted to ride his panther, so he did. In all fairness, I wanted to ride him, too, but a very different way.

It was the first time we'd shifted together, and I wished I hadn't shifted first. I wanted pictures of this adorableness that was my mate. That would have to be another time. We had our entire lives ahead of us, lives we planned to share. I'd get a picture next time.

Instead of running, like I normally did when I first shifted, all three of us explored the garden with Thia's lead. There were quite a few interesting scents, and we were able to look at some things much closer up than I had on two feet. This was a good idea.

As we explored the garden, Thia walked with us, petting us, telling us different things

as if we hadn't already known them or hadn't already discussed them together. But as she narrated the garden to us, I realized it wasn't about her telling us about the garden. This was a game to her, one where she was pretending to be one of the motel owners and giving tours. There was a sweet, innocent vibe about that. And I loved it.

Eventually, as we should have all known was coming, she asked if we could twirl around for her. Ripley did the best, in my eyes. He was beyond graceful on two feet. Her father cheated by hopping around her, which was fun, but not really what she'd asked for. She didn't seem to mind though. She was just happy to have all of us together.

I was, too.

After our very pathetic attempt at dance, the three of us went back to the garden. There was so much promise. For every broken item that was needing to get done, there was something exciting to build together—the three of us.

It was finally time to run a little. We did, but not too far. Always close to the garden. We ran races, all three of us letting Thia beat us, until we saw how fast she really was. There was no need to coddle this child. She knew what she wanted and would find her way to getting it. I had much respect for children like her. Heck, for any people like that.

Thia wasn't spoiled. She just had three adults doting on her every word. She knew exactly what she wanted and even how to get it. It was going to suit her well as she got older.

We ran and ran and ran. And when I thought we couldn't run any more, we ran some more. It was the most fun I'd had in years. Soon enough, Thia was yawning, and it was time to shift back and put her to bed.

Once she fell asleep, I tiptoed out, closing the door behind me...the energy in the room shifted. Suddenly, it was just the three of us, and at least my cock took that as a sign to wake up.

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I hadn't been 100 percent sure how it would go with the three of us shifting together. I mean, you don't usually see bunnies frolicking with panthers and wolves in nature. If any humans had gotten a peek at us, they'd have been very surprised. The video would be all over social media. But...one of the advantages of being out here was that we had privacy in the open lands behind the motel. One day, hopefully, we'd have the place filled to the rafters with guests, and unless they were all shifters, we'd have to be cautious about when and where we ran, but for now? It was heaven.

Thia loved watching us, too, running around my bunny and the big, ferocious-looking wolf and panther, like we were her backup band or something. Although she'd only been around bunny shifters until now, it hadn't taken her long to recognize her royal court. The other animals already adored her and lay down to let her pet and caress them like pets. Everything that happened with these men gave me more confidence that I'd made the right decision in coming here. Their animals were as kind to Thia as their human sides, and they watched over her as if she'd been in their care since she was born. If my late mate was looking down on us, I hoped he was proud of me now that I'd stepped out of the puddle of grief I'd been wallowing in for so long. I never doubted he was proud of Thia. Who wouldn't be? She was smart and funny and sassy and beautiful. And, at the moment, sacked out in her bed, exhausted from all the running around. I was checking on her one more time before we went to bed.

"Is she asleep?" Ripley whispered next to my ear.

"Oh yeah." I leaned in to him. "Chasing wolves and panthers can have that effect on a girl."

"I'm a little tired myself," he murmured. "Fyn says we should turn in early."

“I hope you’re not too tired.” I closed Thia’s door most of the way. One of the things I’d brought with us was her old baby monitor, and we had it set up in there to be sure we wouldn’t miss it if she needed us during the night. No matter what might be going on, she came first. It suddenly occurred to me that she hadn’t awaked crying once since we got here. It hadn’t been very long, but it was still an improvement. One I was grateful for. She had said she liked having three daddies. Maybe it was just the security she needed. Whatever it took to make her happy and feel safe.

But that didn’t mean I was here with these men just for that. Not at all. With Thia safely down for the night, we could go to our room and do what we’d wanted to since we met. Or maybe even while we were still talking online and didn’t know the connection went three ways. Slinging my arm around Ripley’s shoulders, I turned toward the bedroom where we would be sleeping together tonight and into the future.

Fyn was already in the room, sitting on the bed, when we came in. “The princess is asleep?”

“Yes.” I closed the door behind us. The monitor would alert us if she woke up. “Where does everyone like to sleep?”

“Under you.” Fyn stood and came to wrap his arms around my waist. “But not asleep.” I bent and captured his lips with mine. He pulled on the hem of my shirt and lifted it over my head. Cheeky omega. I took his off, and then we both removed Ripley’s. This led to a quick removing of everyone’s clothes down to bare skin. We’d seen one another naked while shifting, but that had been very fast, and now, by the light of the bedside lamp, we had a much better view and chance to not only see but touch, which we did. I’d never been with more than one person and hadn’t been sure how it would work, but once we began, any worries were gone. Fyn backed up to the bed and held out his arms, and somehow we both went into them. It was beautiful and astonishing and the draw to mate and mark both of them was so strong, it was dizzying. In our fluffle, the alphas marked omegas and nothing more, but that would

not be how it was here.

My alpha and omega were kissing, and I held back for a moment just taking in the sight. I wanted them both, another entirely new experience to me. And I knew what we would do, how we could mate one another all at once. I whispered to the two of them what I had in mind and from the light in both their eyes, I knew they were on board. I took my place over Fyn, drawing his slick onto my fingers and transferring it to my own body.

I had never had anyone inside me, except my mouth of course, and I was a little scared, but also, as I found my way to Fyn's hungry hole, I felt Ripley preparing me with his fingers, thankfully using the copious slick of our omega to prepare me before he prodded me and then with a thrust was inside me, and I was inside Fyn...and we were all joined to one another.

Everything stopped for a moment before we began to move again and things moved fast. We moved fast, driving into our omega and into me and I reached down and grasped Fyn's cock, the pre-cum making it slippery, easy to jerk hard and quick because if Ripley was anything like me, he was close. And then his cum was filling me, and that set me off, and Fyn was spurting onto my belly. My knot swelled, but thank all the gods Ripley's did not because I was going to be very sore in morning, no matter how great it felt now. Then we were biting, sinking teeth into one another, somehow in contortions that shouldn't have been possible.

When my knot shrank, we all fell to the bed in a heap. Mated, marked, but the night was young.

And I wanted these men again and again.

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My panther woke me up with his loud whirring. He stretched out inside me, satisfied to the core, content as I'd ever known him.

We had our mates.

Never in a million years did I think I would have two mates but, as my eyes fluttered open, revealing I had been right, I knew Fate had a plan. We not only had each other now, but we had an insta-family with Thia.

I snuck out of the trap we had Fyn snared in and tiptoed into the shower. We'd mated several times in the night and then once again right before dawn. Sweat clung to my skin, but I'd never felt so good.

As the hot water rushed over me, I thought of how my life had turned. Last week, I'd been lost, needing a change but afraid to take the leap into the unknown and now, I was here—with my mates.

I got out of the shower to see Zeus and Fyn still asleep. On my way to the kitchen, I peeked in on Thia to find her knocked out with her mouth open, clutching some of the tulle we'd bought, to her chest.

Cutest little princess there ever was.

Coffee was the first order of the day and after that, my mates would need a hearty breakfast to renew them. Not only that, but we had a big day of work planned, and today was day one of many. The sooner this place began to make revenue, the better.

I wanted this place to be successful for Fyn, but now, for all of us.

And I hoped that my addition of a fantasy garden would attract all the customers.

I pulled out the griddle I'd found while rummaging around the day before, along with the makings for French toast with fried apples. I wasn't sure what they liked to eat, but French toast seemed to be a neutral choice.

I'd flipped the last piece when Zeus and Fyn came out, hair still ruffled, their eyes hooded from a lack of sleep that I wasn't sorry I'd been a part of.

"Morning, you two," I said. Fyn wasted no time in coming over and capturing my mouth for a long kiss that had me wanting him way more than the meal I'd cooked. Zeus and I did the same, but his kiss included a squeeze of my ass which I chuckled at.

They both had me in a choke hold.

"You made breakfast, mate?" Fyn asked, going over to the table.

"Of course. Judging by the activities we had together, I figured you both would be starving."

Zeus laughed, rubbing his belly. "And you were right. I need to check in on Thia."

"I did already. Hope that's okay. She was out cold and hoarding a bundle of tulle like it was a stuffed animal."

Zeus smiled and sighed. "It's more than okay, Ripley. It's actually nice. I've been parenting her for so long on my own. I feel like I can breathe again, knowing you two are backing me up."

We sat together and were enjoying our breakfast when a sleepyhead princess came in, trailing tulle. “Hey!” She stomped. “No one woke me up for breakfast.”

Fyn opened his arms for her, and she didn’t hesitate going to him and sitting in his lap. “We saved some for you. Ripley made all of this for us.”

“You did?” She squinted, suspicious.

“I did. You do like French toast, don’t you?” I asked, tickling her feet a bit.

“Is there syrup?” she asked even though the honey and syrup were both right there in front of her.

“What kind of breakfast chef do you think I am? Of course there is. You want two pieces or seventeen?”

I put a few on her plate while she giggled. “Seventeen? That’s too many.”

We relaxed while Thia ate her food and the three of us discussed where we would start. Fyn had bought this motel but as his alphas, there was no way in hell either of us would let him do this alone. We were together now, and we would work as a team.

A team with a princess for a coach. Hopefully, she would work her magic because this place needed a lot of love.

I looked around the table, feeling my panther completely at ease and satisfied for the first time in a long time. He had craved a mate for a while, but I hadn’t been ready. I was still running my business and completely invested day and night in running it.

Thank the gods, my craving met up with his right at the same time.

I'd only known Fyn and Zeus for a couple of days, but they were mine.

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I couldn't believe this was my life. It wasn't but a few months ago I was feeling overwhelmed by everything that had to be done. And worse than that, feeling like I was all alone and that I would stay all alone. And now? Now I had not one but two fabulous mates and an adorable little one in my life who never ceased to make me smile. The motel was pretty close to done, with only some single rooms that needed doing. Everything was falling into place. Either that, or I was about to wake up from the best dream of my life.

I'd been going too hard, too fast, for too long. It was starting to catch up with me. Lately I just could not stay awake past seven, and waking up in the morning was rough. If the middle of the day I was filled with buckets of energy, I wouldn't be as concerned. But the middle of the day was dragging, too. It was getting to be rough, each task taking longer than the last.

After breakfast, I headed to the room I was currently working on. One of the fun things about the motel had been that the rooms all had their own personality. This one was no exception, and its personality officially sucked. It was one of the least fun rooms to fix up in the entire place. In hind sight, I should've done it first instead of waiting so far into the project when both my energy and enthusiasm were slowing down.

Someone at some point looked at a sample book and thought it would be a great idea to put wallpaper in this room. What they didn't do was research how to do it well. Whatever glue they used had to have had, like, a fifty-two-bazillion-year warranty because that stuff was staying on. This wasn't my first room taking off paper in my lifetime, but it was by far the worst.

There were chemicals I could've used to help, but I didn't want to breathe all that in. It wasn't good for my wolf, and it wouldn't have been good for Thia. So instead, I had an old-fashioned steamer and a putty knife, and I went inch by inch up the wall and then down the wall, removing it all. It was tedious at best.

It was slow going—so slow I might see my next two birthdays before it was done. Fine, it wasn't that bad, but it sure felt like it. Gods, I was getting to the point of frustration and was barely a quarter of the way done.

I looked at my watch for the third time; it was only 10:30, but I needed to call it lunchtime. I wasn't even hungry. I just needed to sit down for a little bit, to not be reaching up over my head, steaming off wallpaper, wallpaper that had never been in style. I had to wonder what the theme of the room had been. I'd seen something pretty similar in pattern in some old *Twilight Zone* back when I was a kid. I only remembered it because it was one of my favorite episodes. I wasn't absolutely sure it was the same, though, because the episode was black and white, and this was full-on color. And by color, I mean burnt oranges and browns. It was like a 1970s couch spit up on the walls.

“When I come back, you need to be sure to just fall off the walls, okay?”

I padded my way into the kitchen and plopped into a chair, trying to think what to have for lunch—when it was finally lunchtime for real. I was not what anybody would call the best cook, although I could bake some pretty good cookies. Lunch though? That was where I shined. Sandwiches for the win.

A hand on my shoulder startled me, and my eyes snapped open.

“You fell asleep, love. Why don't you just go to bed?” It was Ripley. He was just too sweet.

But also, when did I fall asleep?

“No, no, no. I gotta get back to work. It’s my responsibility. What time is it?” I was so disoriented.

“Noon and nope, that’s the kind of talk we’re not having in here. It is not your responsibility. It’s our responsibility. Go take a nap and get the rest your body obviously needs. You were so tired you fell asleep in the worst chair ever.”

He wasn’t wrong.

I walked into his arms and accepted his hug, and he scented me once, twice, three times. “Hmm,” he said.

Zeus came in. “I was just checking to see what time people were having lunch. Thia asked if it was almost time.”

“Just the person I want to see,” Ripley mumbled.

“Oh, did you need help with something?”

“Guys, I’ll let you two talk and take a shower to wake up. I know the wallpaper removal kicked my butt, but I feel more energetic now.” Sort of, kind of.

They ignored me. Ripley indicated that Zeus should scent me, which he did. It was weird having one person asking another to smell me, but these were my mates, so maybe it was normal-ish?

Ripley looked at Zeus. “Is that what I think it is?”

“Yep.” He pressed his forehead against mine. “Pretty sure you’re tired not because

you're overdoing it but because you're growing a baby."

"What? Really?"

"Yeah." Ripley took both my hands in his. "I scented it to be sure. We're going to be dads."

"Oh." I wasn't sure how to respond. "That's good, right?"

We hadn't discussed having children, but this felt like amazing news. Best news ever, even.

"It is." Zeus hugged me, and Ripley hugged me from the other side, making me the center filling of a mate sandwich. "The best news ever."

"We're going to be dads." Ripley kissed my cheek.

We were going to be dads. Wow. Just wow.

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Thia's birthday was going to be the occasion of the year. There was still a lot to do, but our princess had begged to have a party in the "fairy garden." That led to a wild week of preparations, of finishing planting beds and stringing thousands of fairy lights all around the edges and overhead. The cake came from a wonderful bakery in town that we'd learned made donuts only once a week, and our little family had lined up with just about everyone else in town to get our share a few times. It was pink and sparkly and topped with a fairy princess.

A kids' party wasn't much fun without other kids, but since we'd met Giorgio and Stefano, they'd introduced us to some of the other parents and their children, and Thia was so excited to share her fairy garden with them all. No amount of explanation that there was still a lot to do could take the edge off her excitement, and as we were finishing the setup, I could almost see the fairies, too.

As Ripley worked to renovate the gardens, Thia was his constant shadow, and as a result, we had as many weeds as flowers because we couldn't pull out the flowers the fairies loved. Fortunately, the fairies were drawn to the native plants in many cases, and with what we added and what remained, a curious harmony resulted.

Tables and chairs were set around the patio at the center of the garden, and our guests would be dining on a menu designed by the guest of honor. Fyn and I were the cooks, and we had stayed up most of the previous night creating "fairy sandwiches" for Thia and her friends. They had really interesting fillings like cream cheese and strawberry preserves. Whipped cream and blueberries. Almond butter and bananas.

She also had a fruit tray with a dip and a chocolate fountain.

As to the adults, we'd cheated and had it catered by the Grizzly. Still sandwiches but ones more likely to be popular with panther and wolf shifters as well as the large number of bears. Assorted meats and cheeses on fresh-baked rolls, four kinds of salads, and several other items. I lost track as Stefano made suggestion after suggestion and we agreed to it all. With all the hard work we'd been doing, our friend's cooking was very welcome. By the time we finished for the day, we didn't have the energy to do much fancy cooking. And while we had gotten takeout from the Grizzly, we'd never managed to go there for a nice date night.

We no longer had the excuse we didn't know anyone who would watch our girl, but we were just working too hard with the hopes of getting the place open soon.

"I think we're ready," Fyn said, resting his hand on his sexy baby bump. "I hope she'll love it."

"How could she not?" I slipped an arm around his waist. "It's all sparkles, and the garden is beautiful, isn't it?"

"Ripley keeps saying there's so much more to do, but it's already one of the prettiest gardens I've ever seen."

"I think so, too."

Just then, cars began to arrive and the guests spilled out of them. Indeed, there were a lot of forest rangers in the mix, most of them bears, and all sorts of other shifters as well. This town had embraced us, and I sometimes felt as if I couldn't even remember a time before I lived here. Of course, I had some very good years to look back on, and the picture of my late mate in Thia's room was a reminder of one more daddy who'd loved her. I told her stories about him when she asked, usually goofy tales of the trouble we got into when we were young. More often than not, one or both of my mates came in and listened. They truly were interested in hearing, and I loved hearing

about their pasts as well.

That's how family is. A happy family.

And Thia was so excited about the coming baby. She confided to me once that she thought when her omega daddy died, she'd never have any brothers or sisters and that made her even sadder. She was so little to have had such heavy thoughts.

But you'd never know it now as she twirled with her friends who all came in fairy-themed outfits, boys and girls each in their own representation of the theme. That store must have sold out of tulle, although some of the kids had kind of a superhero version. They were all adorable.

"Where do you want this?" Stefano and his brother and their mates were carrying huge trays and bowls, and we sent them to the buffet table set up for the purpose.

Thia fluttered up just then. "Daddies, where are the wands?" We'd bought one for each child as party favors, and I ran into the house to get the box, which hopefully was the only thing we'd forgotten. Then we had a busy time where she was passing them out to her friends prior to beginning the games.

Four hours later, we were waving the last car away and looking at the mess that remained to be cleaned up. "No way," Fyn groaned. "Can we just put away the food to avoid attracting the wrong kind of bears and then go to sleep?"

With Thia over my shoulder, already out, I laughed softly. "Ripley and I have got this, mate. You take our baby to bed, and I'll tuck Thia in and then come out and deal."

"I should protest," he said, "but how about I just take Thia?" He held out his arms and I passed her over. "She was a real princess, wasn't she? I saw her cheating at a

game so a friend would win a prize instead of her.”

“She’s going to be the best big sister.”

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“It’s okay if it doesn’t work. It’s still beautiful, Rip.” Fyn’s voice calmed me as I had grown more and more frustrated with the task at hand. I’d set up everything with the fountain meticulously, as I completed every job, but when I’d turned it on, nothing happened. No water came from the horn. No beautiful, calming sounds of trickling water.

Just nothing.

“It’s not, omega,” I replied but quickly schooled my tone, which had come out harsher than necessary. “This is the main attraction of this garden, and if it doesn’t work...” I let out a long breath. “Thia will be disappointed.”

My sweet and very pregnant omega rubbed my back a bit as I worked but soon began searching for the problem. I was sure it was something simple as a disconnected tube or a leak somewhere, but damn it all if I could find it. “No one would be upset with you, Rip. We’ve all been working so hard. There is no way I would’ve gotten all of this done without my mates.”

I looked up at him and stared in awe. Not only had we gotten all of this done, but he had been pregnant through most of it. As if carrying our babe inside of him wasn’t a full-time job on its own. He hadn’t complained once. Both Zeus and I took turns making sure he had some long baths and even longer massages at night to offset all the hard work, but once we opened the next day, things would be easier on him. Not easy. But easier.

“I know. But I would be upset with myself.”

He nodded but continued to look for the problem. Half an hour passed, and I almost tore my hair out, when Fyn gasped. "I think I found it, Ripley. Look at this."

Sure enough, when I walked over to see what he spoke of, I saw a kink in the tubing. Enough to make the entire thing fail. "You are amazing and wonderful, and I love you, and you just saved my life!" I yelled, wrapping my arms around my mate.

He laughed and hugged me back. "Because I found a kink in the tubing? Damn. You're easy to please."

I kissed the life out of him while rubbing his belly a bit. "No, you are that incredible."

Zeus and Thia came running out of the motel where they had been setting up some things for the opening, with wide eyes. "What happened?" Zeus called out. "Is everything okay?"

He must've heard me yelling. "Yeah," I answered, wrapping my arm around Fyn's shoulder and pulling him tight. "You two are just in time for the reveal." I sent up a wish to whatever god happened to be listening that this would work. I wanted it to work for all of us.

Thia clapped, and I held the remote for the fountain after turning the water back on. With the kink now fixed, this garden should be ready. Of course, it would be more romantic in the night, with all the twinkle lights and solar glow balls I'd set up but, for now, this would be enough to make our little princess happy.

Making my mates happy was what I lived for now. How things had changed.

"You ready, Thia?" I asked.

Again, she clapped and bounced on her toes. "I'm ready!"

I pressed the button and turned it on. I heard the pump running and even the water flowing. Any minute now. Any. Minute. Now.

“There it is,” I said. The water dripped from the horn of the white unicorn at first. I’d ordered the statue with glittery pastel rainbow hair. Of course, the colors would fade with time, but we would retouch as necessary. For now, it sparkled and shimmered in the light of the afternoon sun, and what was once a trickle from the point of the horn was now a full stream.

“Whoa!” Thia said. “Daddy, pick me up. I want to see it at the top.”

Zeus chuckled and picked her up. I explained all the parts of the fountain and how we had to take care of it. I’d learned that from my alpha mate. He took care to explain everything to Thia, even if she might not quite understand. He never spoke to her in baby tones. It showed in her expressions and her level of communication.

“Have I told you lately how good a father you are?” Fyn said to Zeus, reading my mind.

“You have. The truth is, we all are. I couldn’t have asked for two better mates to raise my daughter with.”

We stood around the fountain for a few minutes, but there were things to do. “My part is done, omega mine.” I turned to Fyn. “Tell me what else I can help you with.”

He reached up and kissed my lips quickly. “I have a list. We can tackle it all together.”

While we made our way toward the motel, I looked back and realized that garden was my best piece yet. Truly the projects that we did with love were the greatest, and it showed in that fairy wonderland. I’d already shared some pics online, but tonight, I’d

take more, once the lights were on.

Also, I wanted to bring my mates back to the garden tonight. I'd inscribed something on the bottom of one of the benches—the date we were all brought together—actually, the date we all marked each other and solidified our new family.

It might be cheesy, but I wanted something to commemorate the night.

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It was officially opening day of the motel. All the hard work had finally paid off. We were doing this.

The rooms were half booked. That was intentional on my part. I wanted to be sure that the people who came the first month or so got the best experience possible, and going straight to fully packed didn't sound like the way to do that. We were still trying to figure out how things would run once people were here. We knew the tasks that had to be done each day, and we were even able to divide out who would do which ones. But until we actually had people here, knowing how long all of that would take was all in the hypothetical.

Thia was dressed in her favorite tutu and crown. She was also wearing bunny ears and holding a wand nearly as long as her torso. I wasn't even sure where Ripley had found it, but she adored it. It made noise when she swished it and lit up if she swished just the right way. According to her, it was the perfect wand.

"I'm ready to greet them with fairy dust."

"And by fairy dust, you mean?" If she was going to say glitter, I was going to have to break her heart. Most people, once their ages reached double digits, tended to see glitter as a nuisance. I didn't understand it. I was one of the few over twenty who saw how wonderful glitter was. But it wasn't only me that we had to worry about, it was our guests. And if they were covered in glitter, our reviews weren't going to be covered in great words, that was for sure.

"No. It's pretend fairy dust." She shook her head at me like I should've known better.

“Oh, in that case, carry on.”

Car wheels crunched in the driveway and we could hear the rumbling sounds of an unfamiliar engine. Someone had arrived.

Thia ran to the door. “They’re here! They’re here! They’re here!” She jumped up and down.

I don’t know who she thought they were, if it was any one of our guests in particular or just a random person she was excited to hear from, but she was right. Somebody had pulled in, and they were getting out of their car. It was a single person, and he carried a little overnight bag with him and a small suitcase.

Thia opened the door wide. “Welcome to our motel.” She pretended to throw fairy dust on him. “Now you’ll be able to see the fairies.”

“Excellent.” He squatted down. “Can I tell you a secret?”

She nodded enthusiastically.

“I always wanted to see the fairies.”

She squeed the way that only she did, a mix of enthusiasm and joy.

He stood up and came in. “Hi, my name is Lachlan. I’m here to check in for the week.”

“Oh, very well.” Lachlan was some kind of a big cat, but I wasn’t exactly sure which. I wasn’t the best at scenting what animals people were, but he for sure wasn’t a panther like my mate. Maybe a cougar or mountain lion, or I didn’t even know, but for sure a cat. “Welcome. Let me get you all checked in.”

During the small talk, as we did all of the paperwork and ran the credit card, I learned that he was in town looking at getting a job. I wasn't exactly sure what job that could be, since there weren't really that many around, but I wished him well and told him that he was welcome to come to any of our firepit nights or into the lobby for coffee in the morning. And that we would gladly arrange for him to have food delivered or a small fridge if he needed one. And by delivered, I meant we'd get it.

He thanked us and went on his way, and then another car pulled in, and another. Zeus came out to help people to their rooms, Thia continued to welcome everyone with the ability to see the fae, and Ripley stayed outside.

He was in the garden, being set up for people to hang out if they wanted to. He also had local touristy kinds of information for anyone who was interested in that.

Check-in went smoothly, incredibly smoothly. Even the internet played nice enough for our credit cards to go through the first time. All of our hard work had paid off.

"We're done here for the night." I grabbed the walkie-talkie, which should signal if someone came in the office door looking for us...in theory. It hadn't been tested yet, the right batteries just getting there this morning. "What do you say? You bring me out back and show me some of the fae?"

"Okay." Thia didn't sound too sure of that, and it was when I reached the gardens that I saw why. It wasn't just Ripley that was in the garden. It was a bunch of our friends from the town, including our friends from the Grizzly. He hadn't been setting up for guests at all, or at least not fully.

"Surprise!" they all yelled.

I looked around. They were throwing me a party. A party celebrating the first day of my motel-owning dream coming true. There was cake and sodas and places to sit set

up. But more importantly than all of that, there were our friends from the Grizzly. They were all here to celebrate our special day.

“Thank you.” Tears clouded my eyes. “When I came here, it was for a job, but it’s become so much more. This place and all of you in here, you’ve become my family.”

Maybe this was that “glorious pack” I used to dream of after all.

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With the motel up and running, we were busy in a whole new way we hadn't quite anticipated. Before, we worked hard, but it was on our own timing. The motel guests were real people who had needs that they expected their hosts to fulfill. Like fresh towels and someone to check them in, for example.

We were busy getting ready for the arrival of the baby, too, and that meant appointments and shopping and getting a nursery ready for this new little person who we were all awaiting with such joy and anticipation.

But nobody was more excited than big sister Thia.

"I have to listen to the baby," she said, multiple times a day. Then would press her ear to Fyn's belly and get the pregnancy news. "They're fine but they want more ice cream," meaning, Fyn should eat some. "And they want me to have some, too."

I wasn't actually sure if she heard the baby, but shifter children often had abilities that adults didn't, but I still wasn't giving her ice cream as often as she thought the baby felt she should have it. She and her sibling were going to be ganging up on us, it seemed.

But it was still adorable.

We'd hired some housekeeping help and a part-time front desk clerk, making it possible for us to get away for a bit of time here and there, and we were all excited to have a date planned for after our midwife appointment.

"Okay, Thia, you all ready to go over to Sadie's?" Stefano and Pilan's daughter was

her new best friend. “Got your backpack?” We were sending along some new crayons and a couple of fairy coloring books. Snacks were pointless when she was going to Stefano’s house where not only would they be delicious but healthful.

“I have it, Daddy.” She ran down the drive to hop in the car and into her seat. “Sadie has a new fairy doll to show me.” Our little leader had her friend sharing her favorite things. “I get to stay for dinner?”

“Yes, we’ll pick you up after we have dinner out.”

“It’s a date.” She gave a wise nod. “Sadie says her daddies go on dates, too.”

We were going on what was essentially our first date, which we all found funny, and after dropping off our daughter, we visited the midwife for a regular checkup.

It was always interesting to get the input of the midwife, although she couldn’t tell us what kind of animal our baby might be. With three such different fathers, the babe could be a panther, a bunny, or a wolf, and we’d spent many nights talking about what this one might be. Thia, of course, would be a bunny since both her dads were, but this baby?

“The baby is growing well,” the midwife said, feeling all around Fyn’s belly. “Pretty large, I’d say.”

“Then probably a panther or wolf.” I couldn’t be disappointed. Whatever they were, we’d be happy to welcome them into our family.

“Not necessarily. I’ve seen plenty of smaller animal shifter babes as big or bigger than larger types. You’re going to have to wait and see when your child is old enough to shift, most likely.”

“I guess that’s something to look forward to,” Ripley put in. “But of course the most important thing is that the baby is healthy.”

“Looks good to me. Do you have any questions I can answer for you?”

We did have a few, mostly about diet and exercise and whether his getting up to pee six or eight times a night was normal. The midwife assured us that everything was great, that frequent trips to the restroom were very much in the norm, and suggested that while drinking lots of water was important, maybe stop a little earlier in the evening in the hopes of a trip or two less.

After scheduling our next appointment, we were free to go on our big date to the Grizzly. The dining room was nice, rustic, and this evening, there were mostly couples and only a couple of children. That still made me wonder if I shouldn’t have brought Thia, but my mates caught onto my train of thought and held my hands, reminding me that this was a romantic night of just my mates and me. We ordered mocktails because if Fyn wasn’t drinking, neither were the rest of us and lingered over rib eyes and garlic mashed potatoes before ending the meal with slabs of the best chocolate cake I’d ever had.

Not a bad first date for three dads-to-be.

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“Rip, there’s someone pulling into the driveway,” Fyn said but tipped his head back as I continued rubbing his feet without a care for who was in the driveway. If they were a guest, they would come in for a room, otherwise, I was busy soothing my omega’s swollen feet. And his moans were driving me to madness.

“We’ve got to start putting your feet up at night,” I said, pressing my thumbs against the swelling around his ankles and along his shins. “More bananas. At least, that’s what I read. The potassium helps with the swelling.”

He snickered, covering his mouth.

“What’s tickled you?” I asked, reaching to pat his hip.

His face reddened. Whatever our omega was thinking about, it must’ve been good. “You said I needed more bananas and my feet up at night. I think that’s exactly the cure.”

This adorable omega.

“The hormones have made his sense of humor evolve into one of a frat boy.” Zeus came in, sighing.

“I can’t help it. I’m giggly and horny. Must be all the hormones.” Fyn tried to sit up, but I shook my head. He relaxed again, putting his head back.

“Neither one of us are complaining, omega,” I said. I hit a particular part of his foot, right in the middle of the bottom. His scent permeated the air, filling the lobby with

the scent of apples and cinnamon.

“Thia is down for a nap if you two want to...” Zeus’ notion was cut off by someone coming in the front door. The bell above it jingled. Fyn’s idea since sometimes he was in the back and got caught up in his own thoughts.

“James?” I said, putting my omega’s feet down and standing.

“Well, now I know why you’ve been a little less communicative. You’ve been keeping secrets, my friend.”

I laughed and rounded the check-in desk and hugged my best friend to my chest. “I have not been keeping secrets. I have been writing you an email once a month.”

He reeled back, cocking his head and bunching his eyebrows. “Oh. My personal email? Damn. I really should check that one more often. Now, I will for sure.”

I’d been there before. Personal life came after work life, but not for me—not anymore. “Let me introduce you to my mates. This is Fyn. And this is Zeus. And Zeus has a daughter named Thia, but she’s napping right now. We also have a little one on the way.”

James shook hands with both of them, making his own introduction.

“Wait. Why are you here?” I asked. “I was so excited to see you that I forgot to ask.”

James chuckled. “I saw your order come through for the...special product and wanted to deliver it myself. I knew if you were ordering that particular item, then you must be designing something special.”

I embraced him again. “You have it?” I asked.

“Of course,” James answered. He looked over at my mates. “I’ll go get it while you three talk. It looks like you have some explaining to do.”

I whirled around to face my mates. “I wanted to surprise you both. I made a special order for something for the garden, but we can’t plant it yet.”

Fyn’s eyebrows rose as Zeus put his arm around him. “What is it? And why can’t we plant it?”

I wrung my hands, hoping they would like the idea. “It’s a white dogwood tree. I ordered it from a nursery. I know the owner personally. But it’s little. Probably unimpressive right now. Here. I can show you what it will look like once it’s grown.”

After pulling out my phone, I googled the white dogwood and went on a spiel, telling my mates how beautiful it would look once the tree grew. We would put some pink lighting underneath it to make it glow. Perhaps some night tours to bring in extra money.

When they said nothing, I deflated completely.

“I think James is waiting for you,” Fyn said, looking over my shoulder. For the first time, I couldn’t decipher my omega’s expression.

“Come with me?” I asked both of them and, thankfully, they followed.

James handed over the tree. To others, it probably looked like any other sapling, but it held a promise to me. “Here you go. I have to get back but, like I said, I wanted to deliver this one myself. It was good to see you, and I’ll make sure to read my emails. Good luck to all of you.”

James left the parking lot, and I stood there, holding the tree, hoping my mates didn’t

think I was a fool.

“Why aren’t we planting it yet?” Zeus asked.

I swallowed. “I wanted to keep it in the planter until our baby is born. I thought I could plant it on that day and they could grow together.” They said nothing. “It’s okay. I can just plant it now. This was stupid.”

“Ripley,” Fyn said, my whole name a benediction on his lips. “Come here, please, alpha.”

I took a few steps toward him and put the tree on the floor beside us. “Yes?”

“This idea. This tree. This is really special and one of the most beautiful gestures.” His eyes filled with tears before they spilled over.

“Yeah?” I asked, breathing a sigh of relief.

“You’re amazing, Ripley,” Zeus added, coming over to wrap us both in a hug. “This garden started in your mind the day we met, and now we will always look at this tree and remember this day and these times. Even when we’re old and gray.”

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“I don’t think it’s gonna fit,” I said, feeling bad.

Thia was so excited for me to wear the new tutu that she and I had picked out from an Etsy shop. It would have fit had it come three months ago when we ordered it, but there had been a delay, and now it was iffy at best. I wanted to wear it, too. It was made of a glittery tulle I didn’t even know could possibly exist, and it was absolutely fairy-prince-esque.

Thia had a matching one and looked absolutely adorable. Me, I was less adorable. Looking at me, people had to think I was a few decades past my due date. I was the size of a house—or nine. My feet were so swollen, all I could wear were flip-flops two sizes too big, I had pimples for the first time in over a decade, and I had ankles as huge as my calves. There was nothing that could be objectively looked at as adorable by anyone other than my mates, who were very biased. If you asked them, I looked more gorgeous by the day. I appreciated their love and support, but believing that? As much as I wanted to, I couldn’t. The proof was in the mirror.

“It’s a special one, I’ll show you. Daddy asked her to switch the style when this one didn’t come in on time.” I hadn’t known that.

She turned the skirt around to show me where there was actually a string instead of elastic. When I untied it and pulled it open as far as it could go, it was big enough to get on—not necessarily up and over my belly, but if I went top-down, I could get it on and tie it securely.

“How do I look?” I asked, spinning around as best I could, given how off my center of balance was.

“You look like a fairy!” She swished her wand in my direction. “Maybe you are a fairy?”

“Then I guess we’d better go look for my friends.” I had promised her we would go fairy hunting today. Although “hunting” was a strong word for it. We were just going to see if we could meet one, but she insisted that saying “going fairy meeting” didn’t sound very fancy at all.

And it didn’t, but did you need fancy to have a search day? Not so much.

And, objectively speaking, it wasn’t fair, but neither were my flip-flops that were two sizes too big.

She grabbed my hand and brought me out back to where she was sure some fairies were living. Zeus was already out there with Ripley, and the two of them were working on building an outdoor grill. We discovered very quickly that the garden was the favorite place for everybody, from friends visiting to motel guests. And while we’d had a grill in place before this, it had been one we bought from the store and pieced together. It was fine but not really big enough for our needs now that the motel was starting to thrive.

And really, making one from scratch was good for both the alphas—it gave them time piecing together a puzzle which they both loved, while making something that was going to put smiles on the hearts and faces of many.

“How’s it coming?” I asked.

“Awful,” Zeus replied, “I still haven’t seen a fairy yet.”

I laughed, loving both of them, but I especially loved the way he knew just how to make Thia smile.

“Then we will fix it now.”

And she did. She dragged us all over the garden looking up down and all around for a fairy. We never did find one, but we found something far more fun.

“Look.” I pointed to the “abandoned” fairy village that Zeus, Riley and I made for just this occasion.

“Whoa!” She ran right to it. “Fairies really live here!”

She squatted down, and looked at the village one house at a time. We had a school, a few mushroom homes, and a library. The excitement flowing off of her made every single paint stroke and glued pine cone piece glued worth it.

“This was such a good idea.” I leaned in to Riley’s side. “You are so clever.”

”You were the one who thought about adding the library.” He kissed my cheek.

“I think picking us was the best idea idea of all.” Zeus placed his hand on my belly.

“You were a pretty good idea, too.” He spoke directly to my bump.

Thia came running over. “What was that?”

“A fairy?” I guessed, unsure what she was specifically talking about.

“There’s a fairy in your belly with my baby? That’s why it moved.” It was cute how she loved the baby so much already.

I hadn’t been aware of the baby kicking right then, but it was a pretty constant occurrence lately. I was far more likely to notice if they stopped.

"No, sweet girl." Riley ducked down to be eye level with her. "There's only a baby in there."

"And they make your belly do that?"

I nodded.

"I bet they are a fairy shifter." And she flitted away.

"Look at me, the father of Fae." I rested my head on Zeus' shoulder. "But I guess I always consider our daughter a fairy princess."

"She really is," Riley agreed.

Zeus stayed silent and when I looked to see his face, his eyes were glistened with tears.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Nothing." Zeus blinked back some tears. "It's just, you both called her our daughter and...thank you for loving her so completely. I love you both so much."

"I love my family so much." Riley kissed my belly.

And now it was my turn to cry happy tears.

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Thia loved her “abandoned” fairy village, and we were sitting around after putting her to bed, talking about other ideas to delight her, when Fyn grabbed his belly and gasped. “I think—” A puddle formed under his feet. “No, I know the baby is on the way. I’d better get some towels and clean this up.”

“Whoa.” I grasped his arm and held him in place. “The daddy in labor is not going to be doing work. That’s Delivery 101. Is this the first pain you’ve felt?”

“Well, I’m not sure. I’ve been having those false labor pains for a couple of weeks, and it did seem stronger earlier today.”

Ripley was on his feet. “I’ll call the midwife and find out what to do.” He darted off, phone in hand, although we already knew what to do.

“Come on, mate.” I stood and reached out to help him to his feet. “Let’s go find your labor clothes.” He’d picked out a comfortable outfit weeks ago just for the purpose. “And I’ll change the sheets and get the bed ready.”

Our wolf was determined to have a home birth, and the midwife had no issue with that since everything had been textbook in his pregnancy. But as I put on the special sheets and made the other arrangements as instructed, I was really starting to have doubts. If we wanted, we could just jump in the car and head right to the hospital.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Fyn said, patting me on the shoulder. “But it’s home for me and for our baby.”

“We all agreed it was your decision,” I said, “but I wouldn’t hate having all that

equipment and specialists on hand in an emergency. Not that there will be one,” I hurried to reassure him. “It’s just my silly worry-worting.”

“Is the midwife coming soon?” he asked, hopping up to sit on the side of the bed, eyes squeezing tightly closed. “Ouch.”

“Mate, how often are you having these?” I was starting to get a feeling the baby would be here sooner rather than later.

“I’m not sure exactly. But pretty often.”

“Oh my goodness. You’re going to have this baby now, aren’t you?”

He chewed on his lip. “I think so. I kind of want to push.”

With no experience in how wolves gave birth and only having been present at one before, I was anything but an expert, but if he wanted to push, that meant... “Ripley!”

Our panther darted into the room, still holding his phone but looking about as scared as I felt. “The midwife is at another birth, but she’ll be here as soon as she can. She says first births take a while, so we should be okay.”

The moan from the bed clued him in to what I already had figured out. “Sorry, Ripley, but we’re going to be delivering this babe ourselves.”

“We are what? No. Remember we agreed that Fyn could have the baby at home with the midwife here to make sure it all went smoothly.” He said it so reasonably, as if his words, his reminder could change the facts. “Right?”

“Wrong.” I pushed him away from the bed and lowered my voice. “He is ready to push.”

“No. That’s not how it works. It takes a long time with first babies and he just had his first pain.”

“No he didn’t. He thought he was having Braxton Hicks, but looks like at least for today, they were the real thing.”

“Can I panic a little?” His gaze darted to where our omega lay on the bed, his tummy so big, it made the rest of him look so vulnerable. “Wait, never mind. No panicking. But can I hope the midwife gets here sooner?”

“Hope away while you wash up. I’ll go check on our omega.”

I no sooner reached his side than the strongest pain yet doubled him up. “I have to push!”

“Umm, I guess if you have to you have to.” I hesitated. “Any chance you don’t have to?”

“No, not unless you want me to keep this baby inside me forever. They want out.” He scooted down the bed, knees wide. “And if I am going to push, someone had better be there to catch.”

Ripley came back in then, and I went to wash up and check on the midwife’s timing. When I returned, they both looked at me. “The midwife is still at the other birth. She said she could try to find a fill-in but it might take a while. We don’t have a while.”

“So what did you tell her?” Ripley asked.

“To come when she can and make sure we did everything right.”

I moved between Fyn’s spread knees. “All right, baby, we’re ready for you!”

Fyn only had to push a few times before a very slippery little boy was in my hands. I stood frozen for a moment before remembering the instructions we'd received and what to do in this case. We did our best, but were grateful when the midwife arrived to check our work. And once she did, we were able to climb into bed on either side of our omega and admire the baby wrapped in a warm blanket in his arms. We watched while he made his first attempts at chest feeding, and we had our turns cuddling him.

“Where is Thia?” Fyn asked. “She needs to come meet her brother.”

“Still sleeping—”

But the clatter of little shoes outside our bedroom door belied me. “Where is my baby?” She rushed into the room and, once she spotted him on the bed, climbed up to join us. “Hi, Percy.”

Apparently, he'd also told her his name.

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“Why not?” Thia exclaimed with a stomp. “I have one. All the daddies have one. Percy needs one.”

“He does.” Sometimes with Thia, it was better to agree to her premise but redirect her to something else. “But the tutu is going to scratch at Daddy Fyn’s chest, and that will hurt him.”

She spun around, showing me her newest purple, glittery tutu. “It doesn’t hurt me. See?” She even made a charade of rubbing her skin against the fabric. “No scratching.”

Fyn laughed but wasn’t helping. He and Zeus were letting me fight this battle alone. “How about this?” I asked, picking her up and putting her in my lap. “After Percy is done drinking milk, we can change him and put a tutu over his little onesie so that it doesn’t scratch his skin. Because babies’ skin is a lot softer than ours.”

“A pink one?” she asked.

“Whatever color you’d like. You’re the big sister and queen over all the tutus in the land.”

She snorted. “That’s silly. I’ll be back.”

I scrubbed my hands over my face. Somehow I’d won that argument, but then again, had I? Didn’t matter as long as we had two happy children. Kindness over rightness was always the way to go.

“Are you tired?” Fyn asked, switching our Percy from one side of his chest to the other.

“Am I tired?” I asked, going over to hold Fyn’s cup, letting him sip on some water. Chest feeding made him so thirsty, he swore he could drink a gallon of water in one sitting. I’d seen him attempt the feat several times. “You grew this babe in your belly, and now you’re feeding him from your body and have been for four months. You’re asking if I’m tired?”

He took my hand in his as my other smoothed our baby’s dark-brown hair across his forehead. “You’re allowed to be,” he said. Always the understanding omega. “The nights have been rough, but thank goodness he’s sleeping through now. Aren’t you, sweet boy?” Percy’s gaze met Fyn’s, making my heart want to leap right out of my chest with love.

When our babe was done feeding, I changed him and put him in the cradle by the bed for a nap. Thia hadn’t returned with the tutu. Probably distracted by something in her playroom.

“Walk with me?” Zeus said after Fyn lay down beside the baby. We insisted on Percy’s naptime being Fyn’s naptime as well, and he didn’t protest one single second.

“Of course,” I said. We checked on Thia before strolling out to the garden and sitting on a bench.

“You looked like you could use some air. Sometimes your panther gets antsy.”

I gasped and turned to him. He had his hair up in a bun all the time now and, as the weather turned warmer, he’d decided to shave the back and the sides off. The almost-Viking look suited him. Fyn thought so, too. “I didn’t realize you could feel him.”

He nodded. “It was strange at first, but my bunny wasn’t scared of him.”

“I hope not. My cat would never hurt any of you. We love both of you too much.”

We sat together, enjoying the stillness. A lot of people came to the motel for our garden. There were hashtags on social media, highlighting the visits and photos. We’d even made an account for both the motel and the garden.

A gardening magazine had sent us a request to come and take pictures—our garden would be the main feature in an article on hidden gems.

Our lives had flourished in so many ways since meeting each other. I hadn’t realized how hollow I’d felt before, always trying to fill myself up with hard work and business and driving myself into the ground.

“What are you thinking?” Zeus asked, holding my hand. We’d sat there so long that Fyn and our babies emerged from the office, looking for us. We embraced all of them as though we hadn’t seen them in years instead of hours ago.

“I was thinking that I couldn’t have asked for anything more than us.”

Fyn sighed and sat on the bench between us, our babe in his arms, watching Thia bless every part of the garden with her wand. “I love us.”