



# Wrong Number, Right Dragon: An Mpreg Shifter Romance

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**Category:** LGBT+

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

I never answer my phone, especially not when the caller's number is "private." Today is no exception, only unlike normal, they leave me a message, and for the first time, I'm kicking myself for not answering. The man on the other end is choking up, telling me there's been a terrible accident and his son is in surgery, begging the person they thought they reached to come to the hospital waiting room so he isn't alone.

If I could call the man and tell him about the wrong number, I'd do it in a heartbeat, but I can't. So I do the only thing I can think of. I rush to the hospital. Only when I walk into the emergency department waiting room, my dragon doesn't want me to find the mystery man. He scents our mate, and that becomes his only mission in life.

My beast discovers we're both there for the same man. The one who left me the voicemail is the father of the injured child, and there's no one by his side.

**Total Pages (Source):** 24

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:15 am*

“Yes, the campaign will be ready by the end of the week.”

I was video chatting to a client while my dragon was creating havoc inside my head.

Shift, please!

Soon. Just be patient!

The client, Mr. Hernandez, paused and chuckled.

“Something wrong?” The campaign we’d designed was centered around recycling, and I didn’t see the humor in it.

“You’ve got a battle on your hands.”

Huh? What’s he talking about?My beast calmed and took an interest in what the man was saying.

I had an idea but didn’t say anything.

“Your beast wants to shift?”

What?My dragon did what many dogs do; he went around and around trying to catch his tail. Can he see me?

I doubt it.

“You’ve got the expression shifters get when their beast wants out.”

He didn’t use the word “constipated,” but I was sure that was how I appeared.

“You’re right,” I agreed.

“I’ll let you go.”

We signed off, and I leaned back in my chair, pleased the client was happy with the project and that the workday was done.

My dragon was bored, as he often was, when I was in my office. Lucky for him—and me—I wasn’t a cubicle worker but was my own boss. I ran a small IT firm that did PR and created social media campaigns for sustainable firms. Protecting the environment was something I did without thinking because our planet was in trouble.

Not that I had far to go to my office. I walked out of my bungalow and into the backyard of the acreage I owned and into the converted shipping container that was the office.

I’d chosen this location, outside of town, so we didn’t have to wait to shift until the middle of the night. People in town hadn’t discovered this location, so I had no nearby neighbors. It would happen, which was why I’d planted trees and a hedge around the perimeter of my estate to give my beast some privacy.

My phone was on mute because I hated that damned ringtone—any ringtone—and I refused to answer calls. Clients messaged me and we arranged to chat or they texted or emailed. The staff were used to my idiosyncrasies and did the same. My friends laughed at my quirks, but they never tried to phone, knowing I wouldn’t pick up.

But as I strode into the house and tossed the device on the couch, it vibrated and fell

face down onto the wooden floor. I picked it up, making sure it wasn't broken and shoved it under a sofa cushion, irritated that it had interrupted the silence in my home.

Hurry. My dragon needed to spread his wings and hunt.

Okay. Okay. I opened the sliding glass doors that gave a perfect view of the distant mountains and strode outside. I gave my beast his skin, and my dragon erupted out of me, all scaly wings, fire, smoke, and sharp fangs. He soared upward and circled the house before taking off toward the hills.

His huge wings, lined with veins and green and yellow scales, flapped slowly, scaring birds and animals on the ground below. My beast ignored them, preferring to perch on a cliff and eye his prize far below. He would sit, unmoving, waiting for a deer, and when ready, he would swoop. I imagined the fear his prey experienced when his wingspan created a shadow overhead. The violent flapping of his wings as he swooped toward the ground and the darkness that followed him sinking his teeth into them.

But like most animals and unlike humans, he only took what he needed and he never hunted "for sport."

My dragon crouched on the edge of the mountain, his keen eyes searching the hillside for prey, and when he took off and pounced on a deer, he retreated to a cave he was fond of and ate his catch. Smaller animals were caught and consumed before he was satisfied and we headed home. He glided into the back yard, saying he was ready for a sleep.

I ignored my phone, hoping whoever had phoned earlier didn't call again. A quick shower and dinner and I settled in to read my latest book as the light faded from the sky and the horizon was ringed in orange and pink. Sipping my tea, I lay on the couch

rather than sit, but something was bleating under the cushion.

That damned phone. If it was my friends trying to mess with my head, seeing if I really would pick up, I'd get my dragon to singe their hair. That'd serve them right for teasing me. But it kept vibrating, and I grabbed it, ready to throw it against the wall. I checked the display, wanting to know who the fool was who was toying with a dragon shifter.

But the number was private, and they'd tried three times to get a hold of me, the first being just before I shifted. Maybe some telemarketer who refused to take an unanswered call as a sign they should stop.

I got up to make tea, and the phone beeped again, but this time it was a voice message. I wandered back, expecting to be told I had to buy gold as it was a safe haven in times of trouble or to follow some newfangled diet that would see me living for longer than any human. Newsflash, I wasn't human.

But when I replayed it, a breathless voice stumbled over words before choking out a message.

"Sandy... it's D-Damon. If... you're there, p-please pick up."

He paused, and the rest of the message sounded as though it was being shot out of a machine gun.

"George was playing with his friends and climbing a fence he shouldn't have. He didn't make it over and became impaled on the spike."

He took a breath and whimpered, the sound of which had the blood in my veins turning to ice. My body was so brittle, I expected my dragon would have to unleash his fire to bring me back to a normal temperature.

“He’s in surgery, Sandy, and I’m just sitting here alone waiting to hear if he’s okay.”

Damon sobbed, and I clutched my heart. My dragon wanted to go be with the guy, but I had no idea who he was other than his first name.

But he continued saying he was at the Regis University Hospital, and he pleaded with Sandy to be with him.

I’ll fly there, my beast insisted.

But there’d be a small problem of having no clothes when I arrived. The hospital was in the city. It’d take thirty minutes to get there. I had my phone and keys and was out the door and in the car in under a minute, not bothering to turn off the lights or lock the doors.

I broke the speed limit getting to town but had to slow down when I reached the city limits. If I was stopped for speeding, my dragon might lose it and shift in the car. That would not be pretty, and it’d create chaos with humans who witnessed it.

The hospital parking lot was almost full, and I drove around a few times before finding a spot. At my beast’s urging, I raced to the elevator and pressed the button too many damned times waiting for it to arrive. I finally gave up and took the stairs.

There was a line of people at the information desk, so I checked the directory and found the children’s ward. Or should it be surgical. I wasn’t sure. Once again, I flung myself up the stairs, arriving panting and sweaty before being directed to the correct floor.

I charged up to the nurse’s desk, asking for George, but in my panic, I’d forgotten about privacy laws. The nurse glared at me as I didn’t even know the kid’s family name, which in their eyes, probably made me suspicious.

“Father is Damon?” I tried one last time. “He called me, terrified about his son injuring himself and being in surgery.”

“Usually family members, friends, or colleagues know the person’s family name.” She sniffed as I leaned forward trying to catch a glimpse of the computer. “And if you don’t leave, I’ll call security.”

She stood, one hand on the phone, and I pictured some burly guy hefting me in the elevator and tossing me out the front door. My face would go on a list and I’d be banned from the hospital.

Forget that guy. My dragon was peeking over my shoulder and behind me, sniffing.

Are you kidding me? No way was I taking no for an answer. I’d go downstairs, away from the nurse, and regroup. I had to come up with a plan. Stealing a doctor’s uniform was one option.

There’s someone else here.

There are tons of people on this floor alone. My beast was annoying me with his people watching.

There’s one very special person here in the hospital.

Yes, and we came to find him. I didn’t usually snap at my beast, but he deserved it when a man was in pain.

Our mate is here. I scent him.

What? No, we’re here for Damon. Mate or no mate, we had a duty to ease Damon’s pain. A mate can wait.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:15 am*

“Are you sure there’s not somebody else you want to call?”

The nurse spoke in a whisper. There was no one else in the waiting room, or I’d have assumed it was for privacy. I looked up at her through my blurred vision, her small smile much appreciated. She was asking out of kindness, not judgment, unlike the intake nurse in the ER.

“There’s no one else.” My brother Sandy still hadn’t arrived, and my parents were on vacation in France. There was no way I was going to call them and ruin their trip. Not when they couldn’t do anything from where they were and especially not until I had some solid news on the prognosis. Let them have their trip

She didn’t like that I was here alone. As if I did. I needed someone to distract me from the spiraling in my head that went back and forth between what-ifs and “it’s all my fault.” I couldn’t help but feel that I was responsible for us being here. If only I had said no, then George wouldn’t be in surgery, fighting for his little life.

As I sat in an empty room filled with nothing but decorations meant to calm visitors but only managed to be reminders of the seriousness of the place, I realized I was one of those dads. And still, even so, I ended up here.

Being overly cautious had been put on my shoulders. I was the only parent that George had. The only one he knew, anyway. If I wasn’t the one looking out for him, protecting him, keeping him safe, no one would. Just like if I was the one making the money to put the food on the table, and the one who took the sick days when he had the flu, and the one who got him new socks when his old ones got a hole in them. It was me, just me, and it had been since before he was born.



His sperm donor was not what you would call excited about being a father. The day he found out I was pregnant, he took off, and that was that. He didn't even pretend to be excited. Heck, he didn't even act mad. He thanked me for telling him, and the next day—gone. The note he left said, "I have no plans to be a dad." As if either of us had planned it.

I hadn't heard from him since that day. When the nurse at the hospital told me I didn't need to put anyone on the birth certificate, I left him off. If he were on it, I'd be legally tied to him, and he'd made it abundantly clear that he didn't want that.

His mom knew, though. I reached out to her, wanting to do the right thing. If there was ever a time that he wanted to find his son, he could. I wasn't holding my breath. She hadn't been exactly excited when I told her the news. She'd been just as pissed as he was. My grandfather used to say that if you planted a potato, you get a potato. In this case, they were both potatoes.

George knew that he had a father who wasn't ready to be a father. I didn't tell him all the bad that came with that. I just stated the facts and was done. He didn't deserve to know that he was rejected so harshly before he was born. I'd let him figure it out on his own when he was much older. For now, he looked at it as more of a footnote to his life. If the day changed and he wanted to find his bio dad, I'd help him. But that was a bridge for another day, a bridge I wasn't sure we'd have time to reach only a few short hours ago.

Most days, I did okay with the single-dad thing. I had a good job at the library, we always had food, we always had shelter, he always had a good education. But then there were days like today when I just really messed up. I was beyond messed up. At least my gut took full responsibility, even if my head said it wasn't completely mine.

When he got invited to go to his friend's to play, I did what I always do. I asked the questions, the ones that would keep him safe. Are there any guns on the premises? If

so, how are they stored? How will you prevent the kids from finding them? Is there a pool on the premises? How is it blocked off from the children? How will you keep them protected? Is there a fire pit? And if there is, will it be used? If it is, how will it be protected? I knew the dangers. I asked about them and made my decisions accordingly, much to the annoyance of many parents. They saw it as me mistrusting them, but it was never that. If it were, I wouldn't have taken the time to ask, I'd have declined the offer.

And then today, today one danger I never thought of was there. Their backyard butted up to a construction site, and little kids did what little kids do—they got curious. Only this time, their curiosity had them trying to hop over a fence to go check out the construction zone. I'd have done the same thing as a kid.

George was an amazing climber. He started as a toddler and never stopped. There were days I wondered if mountain climbing was in his future. The other kids didn't manage to scale the fence. It was designed to keep people out and not for recreational adventure. But George managed with ease, except when he climbed over, he lost his balance and fell. Not normally a big deal, but he didn't land on the ground, he landed on rebar, and it went right through him. He literally impaled himself.

Thank gods the mother knew not to take him off the rebar and called straight for help. I wasn't sure I could've done that. I'd have wanted to remove it, even if I'd seen enough television doctor shows to know that was the absolute worst thing you could do.

The EMTs and all the doctors said that if she had done that—done what I would've done—George wouldn't be with us today. She saved his life, and I'd be forever grateful for that.

By the time I arrived at the scene, they were already loading him into the ambulance. As much as I wanted to be there for him the second he got hurt, I was grateful that

she called the people who could help him first. He needed them more than me at that time, just like he needed the doctors more than me now.

Everything since I arrived at the hospital had been a whirlwind, and I was sure I'd missed a lot of what was happening, my adrenaline running so high. Now that he was with the surgeons and everything had slowed down, reality really slammed into me. I wouldn't know anything for sure for a while. I simply had to wait and wait and wait.

The doctors said even today's surgery might not be enough. He might be looking at multiple surgeries or... they stopped short of saying my greatest fear, simply assuring me that they were going to do their best.

"If you need anything, I'll be over here." She pointed through the glass window to the nurses' station.

"I'll be fine," I lied. Nothing about me was fine. "I called my brother Sandy and told him to come and where I was."

I wasn't sure why he didn't answer my call. He was one of the few people I knew who picked up every single time it rang. I assumed he was in some big work thing and couldn't get out, but he'd be here. I knew he'd be here. He had to be. I didn't think I could handle this alone.

"Okay, well, if you need anything, come see me. Seriously, even if it's just a cup of bad coffee you want."

Her empathy shone through bright like the sun. I didn't know how she did her job, coming in every day and saying things like this over and over again. Probably not things just like this, either. Some kids weren't as lucky as mine, if this could be considered lucky.

The doctor said it was “a freak accident the likes he’d never seen,” which didn’t really make me feel any better. When you came to the ER, you wanted to hear, “Oh yeah, well, we’re just fixing them up now and he can go home soon,” not, “We’re looking at a really lengthy surgery and we’re doing the best we can.”

Doing the best we can. I wanted more than that. I wanted them to do it right and to fix him... to make him better. It wasn’t fair to them, but I didn’t give a rat’s ass about fair. I wanted my son running around and having fun, not in a multi-hour surgery.

I took out my work lanyard, and behind my ID was a little piece of paper—my prized possession. George had made it for me when he was two, nearly three. I don’t know why this particular note was one that meant so much to me. Maybe because it was the first time that he “delivered” mail. He’d been so proud. Maybe it was because he drew me in green crayon because my favorite color was green. Or maybe just that it was the first time that he made a person that almost looked like one. But whatever the case, it was my treasure.

I unfolded it and looked down at the picture of me and remembered his eyes as he handed it over. “Don’t worry, George. We’ll do everything we can. You have the best doctors in the state. I promise you.”

If only that meant it was downhill from here. He was going to be in a lot of pain for a long time and that was the best-case scenario. I hated that for him.

I didn’t even get to talk to him after the accident. Not really. He’d already been sedated by the time the doctors let me back in, and they said he could hear me, but I wasn’t sure how true that was. Still, I tried in the short time I had with him.

One last glance and I folded it up the drawing and put it back in my ID holder.

I waited and waited and waited some more.

Some noise caught my attention, but I didn't look up. It wasn't the nurse here for me and that was all I cared about.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:15 am*

My dragon and I rarely fought.

While there were tales of shifters and their beasts who didn't get along, they were rare. I couldn't imagine having an awkward or even a combative relationship with your other half. Not a mate but the animal who was part of you, who lived inside you, who was as much you as the human-facing side.

But now he was insisting on finding our mate, and my duty was to find the man grieving over his son's injury. I'd never trusted the idea of a fated mate, preferring to choose a mate myself, one who viewed the world as I did. Dragon shifters were rare compared to wolves and bears, so while I'd like a dragon mate so we could shift, fly, and hunt together, I expected to find my lifelong partner in our kind's packs or dens.

My beast insisting our mate was here was intriguing, but the hospital was filled with many scents, not all of them pleasurable. I doubted our mate was hiding in a patient's room or in an operating theater. Besides, we were here for Damon. I refused to allow a heartbroken man to wait alone for news of his son.

You forget how we sat in a hospital, much the same as this, and waited for news of our omega father. He was human, and like all of their kind, was frail and prone to sickness and injuries. My dad was in a car accident when I was in college, and my alpha father and I waited while he was in surgery. We held hands, not speaking, and the long hours ticked by, second by agonizingly slow second.

Neither of us ate or drank anything. At times, one of us would get up and stare out the window. I couldn't get my head around how people were going about their everyday activities, having fun, going to the movies, or cooking dinner, when my dad's life

hung in the balance.

It was a turning point for me and made me appreciate life more and never take anything for granted.

When the doctor emerged, removing his cap as they did in every TV show, my father and I grasped hands and I held my breath, telling myself I wouldn't be able to breathe again if the operation had gone badly.

But Dad had pulled through, though the surgeon said he had a long recovery ahead.

I couldn't imagine going through that experience by myself, so I had to find Damon.

Mate. We can find our mate and then Damon.

The reverse. I wished I could mute my beast, but he was intent on following our mate's scent. I walked to the elevator, my eyes flicking left and right, hoping to find where Damon might be waiting. I glanced back at the nurse's desk. The nurse I'd spoken to was eyeing me, making sure I was leaving. But the phone rang and she answered it, and I breathed a little easier.

The elevator dinged, and I raced in, pushed the first floor button, and stepped out. I experienced a twinge of guilt, thinking someone, just like Damon, might be waiting for the elevator on an upper floor. But I'd done what I had to do, hoping when the nurse looked up, she'd think I'd gone.

Instead, I took off in the opposite direction. My beast was pleased and encouraged me to keep doing what I was doing. As well as hunting for Damon, we were also on the trail of our mate.

Damon first, then mate.

My dragon didn't respond. He would never shift without permission, and he couldn't do it here; he was too big. Besides, the hospital was not a place to terrorize sick humans. His constant sniffing reverberating in my ear was pissing me off, and I wished he'd stop.

"Are you looking for someone?" someone said at my shoulder. Damn, I'd been concentrating on finding Damon, I didn't sense anyone coming up behind me.

Why didn't you alert me?

My dragon harrumphed and muttered that I'd told him to be quiet.

"The bathroom?" There were multiple bathrooms on every floor that were clearly signposted, so I didn't expect my excuse to go over well. I turned to face the guy, an orderly judging by his uniform.

He jerked his head in the direction of the nurses' desk. "Back thatta way. Near the elevator." He looked me up and down, but the seconds were ticking away and I hadn't found Damon.

"Thank you." I took off, hoping he'd think I was desperate for the toilet.

You're going the wrong way, my dragon hissed.

It's just a diversion. The elevator dinged, and I went up to the top floor and back to where I was supposed to be, poking my head out to make sure the orderly wasn't lingering and the nurse wasn't on lookout, and I went down the passageway where I'd been earlier.

I found a waiting room and peered through the glass panel.



A man about my age had his head in his hands, his cheeks shiny with tears.

I'm going in, and I don't want to hear a word about our mate.

Fine.

He wasn't fine, he was peeved, but there was no danger he'd shift.

I eased open the door, not wanting to bound in and scare Damon. He didn't look up as I paced over the floor and stood beside me.

"Damon?"

His head jerked up, and he gulped. He got to his feet, worry etched on his face. "Oh gods, please tell me it's good news." He grabbed me, and his eyes searched mine. He was in the depths of despair worrying about his son.

"It's okay." That was probably the wrong thing to say. "I'm not a doctor. Just a friend."

"Oh, do you volunteer here?" He sank onto the hard plastic chair, immediately standing up again as if he didn't know what he should be doing. My heart hurt for him.

"No." I sat beside him and studied his bloodshot eyes and the teardrops on his eyelashes. Gods, what was wrong with me? The man's son was in surgery and I was admiring his eyes.

My dragon attempted to say something, and I shut him off.

"You called me instead of your friend, Sandy."

“Sorry?” There was no recognition in his eyes. Maybe he’d forgotten about the phone call.

“You called Sandy about coming to the hospital to stay with you while you were waiting.”

“Yes?” His brow furrowed. “Is Sandy all right? Please tell me nothing happened to him.”

“No. At least not that I know of.” This was getting complicated, and I hated how I resented the absent Sandy for his friendship with Damon. “You didn’t phone Sandy.” I held up the phone and played his recorded message.

“Why do you have my message?” He narrowed his gaze, and I bit my bottom lip, wondering how I’d gotten this so wrong. I’d come to help him and only made things worse and now he was suspicious of me.

“You wanted to call Sandy but you misdialed.”

He is?—

Please be quiet, I told my dragon.

He took my phone and stared at the wallpaper, showing my back garden. “So Sandy isn’t coming?”

I sensed another flood of tears was coming, so I took his hands and sat him down. “No, but I’m here because I got your message.” Maybe I wasn’t enough. I was a total stranger and Damon needed a friend. “You can call Sandy now if you want.”

“N-N-No,” he stammered. “He’ll be at work by now.” He glanced at me. “And who

are you again?"

"Nicholas."

Mate, mate, my dragon intoned.

I wanted to strangle him for interrupting my conversation with Damon.

Enough with the mate. We might find him later.

There's no need. My dragon paused. He is our mate.

Who?

Damon!

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:15 am*

“Nicolas.”

His name was nothing out of the ordinary. Heck, I knew at least five through work. But as he spoke it, his name wrapped around me, pulling me closer. Without even thinking, I lurched forward and wrapped my arms around him, hugging him tight, tears flowing from my eyes.

Was it appropriate? Absolutely not. But this kind man found me because he knew I needed someone—that I was alone and the help I called for wasn’t coming. He enveloped me in his embrace, holding me close, giving me assurance that everything would be okay. And that he was there.

He owed me nothing, and yet he was giving me exactly what I needed, not just by telling me about my misdial, but with his kind words and affection.

This stranger’s kindness overwhelmed me. I clung to him, sobbing, until I finally pulled myself together. I pushed back and grabbed a tissue from the coffee table. When I blew my nose, there was nothing dainty about it. It sounded more like a honk than anything. But he didn’t look at me as if I was gross or disgusting. Nor did he look at me with pity, not like some of the staff here did, as unintentional as it might’ve been for them.

There was so much empathy in his eyes, and also this aura about him that shouted that he wanted to protect me. I was probably seeing things that weren’t there, but at that moment, that was exactly what I needed—he was exactly what I needed—someone to just be here and comfort me for a little while so I could be the father George needed when I could finally see him. Nicholas gave me that reprieve

and probably didn't even realize it.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"No, don't be sorry. It's got to be really hard for you." He had no idea.

I just nodded, leaning into him, needing his warmth.

"Would it help if you talked about it? Would that make things better?"

I wasn't sure if anything would make it better, but talking about it felt like I had some say in the matter, like I had some control. I didn't, of course, but I was willing to live in the illusion for a few seconds.

That and I wasn't ready for him to leave yet, as selfish as that was. He was a stranger and probably had places to go and people to see.

"George, my son, was invited to a friend's house for a playdate. I didn't realize they were doing construction behind the house or maybe I'd have said no or at the very least given George some clear expectations. I also expected more supervision." That wasn't really fair to the other parent, but at that moment, I wasn't really caring much about being fair. I was processing the day.

"The kids, including George, were curious. They decided to hop the fence to see what was happening. He's such a good climber." And I wished he weren't. "He scaled that fence like nothing, but when he flipped over to the other side, he landed on a piece of rebar, and it went through him."

Nicholas flinched and schooled his face immediately afterward. He'd probably heard it on the message, but now, hearing it from a live person, it was different. It just was.

“The doctor said if it was even half an inch either way, he wouldn’t be with us.” My voice cracked. “The kids he was visiting got their parents, who came out and, thank gods, knew what to do. If they had tried to take him off that metal—this would be a very different conversation.”

Tears welled in my eyes, and he grabbed both my hands, holding them tightly.

“I’m so sorry.”

“No, no, don’t be sorry. They shouldn’t be sorry either, not if I’m being fair.” And I wanted to be. “Things happen. Kids are kids. I’m trying not to beat myself up over it, but I also have to remember that they need to not beat themselves up over it either.” It was hard.

“They were loading George into the ambulance when I got there, and I followed them here. They’re trying to communicate to me as best they can, but I’m not their first priority. Their priority is to make sure he’s okay.” Which it should be, but not understanding what was happening half the time was beyond rough.

“That sounds like a nightmare. I’m glad he’s here and getting the treatment he needs. He’ll be okay.”

“I hope so.” I leaned into his side, my head on his shoulder. This stranger, this angel, I could see him flying here, making sure the single father who accidentally called him was okay.

Only he didn’t look like any angel I’d ever envisioned. If anything, he was a dinosaur or dragon flying through the air to rescue me. It was silly, but that little bit of imagination helped ground me. My dragon man.

“Does his other father know?”

“It’s only me.”

I could’ve sworn he mumbled, “Not any more.” It was probably my imagination.

A minute later or five or twenty—time had so little meaning here—a nurse called my name—not the one who had been so kind to me, but another one—and I pushed myself up.

“Yeah, I’m him.” I waved my arms so she could see me, not that there was anyone else but Nicholas in the room.

I got up, turned back to him. “Thank you. Thank you so much. I’m sorry for all this—the wrong number and the crying and—all of it.”

I jogged over to the nurse. “They’re still in surgery, but the lead surgeon is going to meet you in the consult room for an update. I’ll show you the way.”

Was it good news? Was it bad news? Was it no news? And if he was the lead surgeon, what was he even doing out here? Shouldn’t he be in there with my son? I had so many questions, ones that would go unanswered until I spoke with the doctor.

I nodded and followed her.

When I sat down in the little room, which was really more of a closet than anything else, my heart thumped and thumped, so loudly that I could hear it. I closed my eyes and thought of the man in the waiting room, pretending he was hugging me again. There was peace in his arms. It didn’t make sense, but it was also true. I took comfort from him, even with him in the next room.

A knock on the door was immediately followed by the doctor coming in. He looked tired, so, so tired.

“Hi, I’m Dr. Samson. I was the lead on this case.” Case. It wasn’t a case, it was my son.

I bit my tongue and nodded. I hadn’t met him during the initial chaos, but I had heard the name. He was already getting ready for the surgery when I was being told they were going to wheel George away and I had a second to say goodbye. Not that he heard me, being so sedated.

“Dr. Samson,” I began, but what was I supposed to say? I wanted to say, “Tell me what’s wrong. Tell me everything’s okay.” But the words didn’t form in my mouth.

“I want to start by saying the surgery went amazingly well. They’re closing up now, but all of the major work has been done, and I think we’re looking at a full recovery.” He described the surgery in detail, and with each sentence, I realized how much worse it was than I realized, and I’d thought it was terrifyingly bad. “It’s going to be a long, hard road, but he’s going to make it. He’s strong. I can’t even tell you how lucky he was. Just a tiny bit to the left, and we’d be having a much different conversation.” Just a tiny bit and half an inch were very different and not in a good way.

“It grazed a couple of organs that, if they had been pierced...” He went on to describe them, and I wished he hadn’t. I just wanted to think of my baby being whole again, think of him being fine, not spiral back into all the things that might’ve happened.

“I need to go back in there, but I just wanted you to be up to date. I didn’t want you worrying any longer than you had to.”

“Thank you, Doctor.”

“I promise you, as soon as he is in recovery and you can come see him, we’ll come get you. Then you can be by his side, and you shouldn’t have to leave it again until



you are ready. I know that had to be the hardest part for you.”

I held back tears and gave a single nod. I appreciated this conversation and his care. After I thanked him, he walked out. I stood up and went back toward the waiting area with renewed hope in my heart. My sweet boy was going to be okay.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:15 am*

I was bereft after Damon left, a knot in the pit of my belly making me nauseous.

We'd met minutes earlier and had a confusing conversation. Telephone tennis, Dad called it, when people responded to messages but never spoke to one another.

The door to the consultancy room was solid wood, no glass panel, so I couldn't judge what was happening by everyone's body language. And I couldn't lip read.

You know how to do that? My dragon was intrigued at me having a skill he wasn't aware of.

Not really, but I could try.

My beast urged me to follow Damon, but I explained human rules regarding family only and privacy. I was his family, and privacy meant nothing to a beast that lived inside a man. Nothing was ever really private. He hated when I hiccuped, saying it made him seasick.

He is our mate. That my beast wasn't confused about.

I think so. Never having met a mate, I wasn't sure if my insides doing somersaults, lights flashing in my head, and my body trembling was how I was supposed to experience meeting my mate.

I'd scoffed at the concept of fated mates, but my dragon was in no doubt and neither was my cock. My face burned at the thought of being turned on by Damon when his focus was on his injured son. What the fuck was I thinking?

But that was the point; I wasn't thinking. I was reacting to an instinct that was as old as time.

But you never believed.

Not quite. I thought it wasn't for me, but I was wrong.

Sauntering to the door, I placed my ear against it. The low mumbling of voices was too indistinct for me to make out what they were saying. My beast told me to turn up my shifter hearing until I explained there was nothing wrong with me, with us.

Sure, our hearing was supercharged compared to humans, but there was a limit and I'd reached it.

I paced the floor, flicked through a magazine, and studied smudges on the windows. As long as I had my phone, I could work anywhere, but I couldn't concentrate. I shoved it in my pocket, only to take it out again and watch clips from my favorite comedy show, thinking that would help to pass the time. It'd always worked in the past when I needed to clear my head or had watched a devastating event on the news.

Not this time. I gave up and couldn't raise a smile at the jokes I'd laughed at so often.

The door opened, and Damon appeared. He didn't stride out and give me a high-five. Nor did he jump into my arms. His expression wasn't as downcast as before, but how did I measure his somber expression? Was there a scale from one to ten?

He took a seat, not where he'd been before, but on the other side of the room. Not next to me. Maybe the hospital had sent out a message with my pic saying I was lurking and couldn't be trusted. But I guessed it wasn't that and he was working through his emotions as he wrung his hands and shifted his butt on the chair.

He glanced at me, but his expression didn't change. I could have been anyone. I hesitated because the man needed a friend, no matter what the doctor had said.

I walked over and squatted in front of him. "I'll leave if you prefer, but I'll stay if I can be of help, even if it's to grab coffee, food, and a change of clothes."

He rubbed both eyes with the heel of his hand. "Go over the story again of why you're here."

After relating the events, his cheeks glowed with a rosy pink blush. "I'm so sorry."

I help up a hand. "There is no need to apologize. I'm happy to be here if you need me." I paused, wondering if I should inquire about his son. It was weird not to. The kid might be fighting for his life, but I'd learned about him through the mixed-up phone call.

"How is your son?" Not using his name made it more impersonal and maybe a whole lot less creepy.

"George is okay." He gulped and his eyes filled with tears. He grabbed my hand, and warmth from his grip pulsed into me. "Not fine exactly, but he will be."

"I'm so glad to hear that."

He tilted his head. "What's your name? Maybe you told me but I forgot."

Had I told him?

Yes, my dragon was certain.

"Nicholas."

“Thank you for being here, Nicholas. Most people would have ignored my message.” He explained he was in such a hurry to get to his son, he parked the car in a no parking zone and left the phone in it. “I borrowed someone’s phone in the waiting room but must have dialed the number wrong.”

He did. My beast didn’t always catch the nuances of human conversation.

While he was telling me this, I was still trying to figure out who Sandy was. As Damon was an omega, I guessed Sandy might be his alpha husband or partner. Jealousy clawed at my insides, and I looked ahead to a grim future if my fated mate was bound to another man.

As if sensing the thoughts running through my head, Damon added, “Sandy is my brother.”

Brother! That’s wonderful. My dragon rejoiced.

“If you trust me, I can move your car and get your phone.” Even if he didn’t ask, I’d grab water and a sandwich from the hospital cafeteria. “But I understand if you don’t.”

He looked at me, and I noted his eyes ringed with shadows. “After what I’ve been through, I don’t give a damn about my car.” He shook his head. “Not quite true, as it’d be hard getting to work.” He dangled the keys at me, gave me the vehicle’s general location, and told me the license plate. “Thank you.”

I assured him I wouldn’t be long, but I hoped his car hadn’t been towed. But when I found the vehicle, it wasn’t parked illegally. Its butt was sticking out and the parking attendant was standing beside it, speaking into his walkie-talkie.

“Is this yours?”

“No, a friend’s. His kid was rushed here. Emergency.”

The guy’s stern expression vanished, and his eyes crinkled at the corners. “Sad. We see too much of that here.”

I reversed out and parked within the lines before retrieving the phone that was on the console before taking a peek into the back seat. There’s a booster seat, and while I didn’t have kids, my cousin did, and that seat went everywhere with him when they visited me.

Not an adult or teen. The kid was likely in elementary school in the lower years. I tucked the phone in my pocket, and after scouring the car for anything Damon might need, like a driver’s license, I headed off to get the food.

As I trundled around the cafeteria, collecting drinks, food, and snacks, I thought about Damon calling his brother. Other than George, was Sandy his next of kin?

When the cashier told me what I owed, I fumbled with my phone, having to bring up the QR code twice. She sighed, and her gaze flicked to the customer behind me as if to say, “Sorry, this is probably the first time he’s used a code.”

I move away with two bags of food and drink, sweat once again lining my palms. What if the alpha dad was out of the country? A FIFO, fly-in, fly-out, worker? Or he might’ve been on a business trip.

He could be dead, my beast offered.

Stop! While I wanted Damon for my mate and I’d grieve if he had one already or didn’t want me, I wasn’t going to wish death on this possible mate.

It’s just a word. My dragon didn’t understand how the D word affected people.

When I exited the elevator, the nurse confronted me. I held up the food and the phone and said Damon had asked me to get them. And I added, “George is out of surgery and doing well.”

She glared at me, and I could feel her eyes on me as I headed toward the waiting room. I entered with a flourish, proud of everything I’d bought, but the place was empty, the only reminder of Damon was a hint of his scent as it lingered in the air.

Find him. My dragon wasn’t going to take his scales because he’d destroy this floor, but he was telling me to shout Damon’s name and open every door.

He might have gone to the bathroom. I hoped that was where he’d gone. What if George was transferred to another hospital? I’d only been gone twenty minutes. Nothing major could have happened, I convinced myself.

But I sank onto the chair Damon had occupied and inhaled his unique aroma.

Had I found my fated mate, only to lose him?

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:15 am*

Nicholas's kindness kept on coming. His promise to go get things from the car and move it didn't surprise me—not with the way he had treated me. But I still didn't understand why. I was a stranger... a stranger who called at a time when I was in my greatest need. He didn't need to do any of this and yet he did.

I wasn't sure how I managed to mess up calling my brother. It wasn't like I hadn't called him a thousand times over the years, but maybe it was for the best. He'd be working now, and Sandy wasn't really the best comfort. He tended to, in his words, "truth bomb" you, which could easily have been him mentioning death and funerals. He didn't try to be a dick, it just came naturally to him. If it came from a place of meanness, it would be one thing. He talked first and thought later. It was his way.

Sandy had been the only person I could think to call. He was the only other person in our lives who would drop everything for us besides our mom and dad. The parents of the other children had their own crises to deal with, anyway. Watching what happened to George—that was something that would scar those kids for life. You couldn't unsee that.

I walked up to the nursing station. "Is there a way I could leave a message so that if people call for George, they could get information?" The parents were going to want to know he was okay, and I didn't have the spoons to make a thousand calls and an email felt too impersonal.

She shook her head. "No, they need to call with a code." She grabbed the back of her neck. "So... in theory, yes, but you'd have to do a bunch of other things before that could happen, and the information they would get would be what you wrote for us to read to them."



I closed my eyes. Of course it couldn't be that easy.

"My guess is you just don't want to have to call everybody right now," she guessed.

"I can't."

"Don't worry, honey, people understand. It's not like you're on vacation and you forgot to tell them to pick up your mail. This is serious, and they don't have any expectations of you, and those that do can bug off. The only expectation you should have on yourself right now is being there for your child."

I thanked her, needing to have heard her words, and started to walk back into the waiting area when the nurse who had brought me to the consult room came back. "He's all closed up and they're bringing him into recovery. Usually, we have you wait a while and get patients starting to stir first, but the doctor said he'd like you to come back there."

Listening to someone describe my son as all closed up sent a chill down my spine.

"Oh, okay. Just one second." I went back to the nurse's station, not wanting to have Nicholas come here, find me gone, and think he needed to wait for me. "So, there's the guy that was in there before with me—Nicholas. He went to do something for me. Can you just?—"

She nodded. "I got you. Go be with your boy."

I followed the other nurse down to the recovery room, which was in the basement. It was eerie and somber. There was nothing about it that shouted that everything was sunshine and roses, that was for sure.

"We're starting him here, but as soon as his vitals are stable, we'll move him up to

pediatrics.” Her explanation helped... a lot. “This was the area that had room the quickest, is all.” Then she lowered her voice to a whisper, “It’s mostly old people.”

I braced myself, knowing I was going to see something that would haunt me for the rest of my life. The room was lined with bed after bed, with curtains in between so you couldn’t see who was beside you. And there were beeps, so many beeps. Everybody was on a monitor or monitors, and they each had their own sound.

“He’s the next one.”

A few steps later and I was at George’s bedside. Except it looked nothing like him. He lay there, perfectly still, wires coming out of everywhere, an oxygen mask fully on, not just the nose kind he’d had on earlier. And his skin, it was off. My poor sweet boy.

“Should I be worried about that?” I pointed to the oxygen mask.

She shook her head. “No, you just got here earlier than we usually let people in. That’ll be coming off in a minute and he’ll get the kind he had earlier. He looks really good considering.”

He didn’t look really good to me, but I took her word for it.. Nurses came in and out, writing things down, typing in iPads, turning knobs. There were doctors too, including the surgeon I saw earlier.

“He’s doing great, Dad. He is doing great.”

I wanted to believe him. I did believe him, but also... if this was great, I wanted to know what was better than great, because that was what I wanted for George.

“Is it okay if I hold his hand?”

“Absolutely. Just come around to this side because the other one has the oxygen monitors on it.”

I did as he directed and pulled up the little rolling chair they had there and held my son’s hand. It was cool and lifeless. I’d never wish this experience on anyone... ever.

The doctors and nurses discussed things I didn’t quite understand as they switched out machines and wires. And I didn’t need to understand it all. They were the experts, and it was my job to be Dad.

“We’re going to take him upstairs in five minutes. Just waiting on the transport team. It’ll be much nicer up there,” he assured me.

He left, and for the first time since I arrived at the hospital, I was alone with my son.

“Hey, George.” I scootched in closer. “You’ve been very brave. That had to be so scary for you. But don’t worry, the doctors fixed you all up. Did I tell you about when I was little and my cousin had his tonsils out? I was so jealous because he got a brand-new stuffie shaped like an alligator. I know how you really like stuffed toys, and don’t worry, I’m going to make sure you get a new one, too. Maybe two because this was a longer surgery than tonsils. Seems only fair.”

Looking back, it was silly for me to be jealous over a stuffed toy, but I had been three, so I didn’t understand surgery and all of this.

“It’s going to rain tonight, so you don’t have to worry about watering the garden either. All you need to do is wake up and let me know how you feel. Deal? I love you.”

I kept right on talking, and it quickly turned to random things. Eventually, the transport team came in, three different people to move his bed. Two were moving the

actual bed, one moving the monitors. They brought us upstairs, and I was happy to see George was placed in a step-down unit. I hadn't thought to discuss any of that with the medical team, assuming he was going to be in the PICU. This was a thousand times better. Not as good as being in a general wing, but good.

"It'll take just a second for us to set up. Why don't you go to the station we just passed and get yourself something to drink? You can't afford to get sick, Dad." The lead of the transport team tipped his head toward the door.

I didn't want to leave George, but he was right. I was all George had. He needed me to be the strong one.

"I'll be right back, honey. Okay? Be good." I let go of George's hand.

From the moment I walked out the door, I missed him. I walked as fast as I could without getting into trouble and grabbed one of the Styrofoam cups, filling it with the tiny ice nuggets, and then apple juice. Being the pediatric ward, it was apple juice or water. No coffee here. Or maybe hospitals didn't have coffee, I didn't know. But the trip distracted me slightly, and I needed that right now—a distraction.

Back at the room, I sat down. The lead of the team waited until I arrived and then left. I didn't stay alone with George for long. Nurses and techs came in and out, introducing themselves and putting their contact information on the dry-erase board on the wall. He was going to be well taken care of here. That was for sure.

"How about I tell you that story you like? The one about the prince and the dragon?"

"The dragon?" He was here.

I looked toward the door and standing there was Nicholas, holding the things he got for me. He didn't need to come all the way up. He could have left them with the

nurses. But he did.

“I hope I’m not interrupting.” He had yet to step fully in.

“No, not at all. You didn’t need to come.” But I was so glad he did.

“But I did.”

“Thanks for doing all this for me.” All of it. He couldn’t have any idea how much it meant to me.

“I don’t mind at all. How’s he doing?”

“You can come in and see for yourself. This is George.”

Nicholas looked at George intently.

“They say he’s doing well... better than can be expected. Can I ask you a favor?” I wasn’t sure what had gotten over me, but now that Nicholas was here, I wasn’t ready for him to leave.

“Anything.”

“This is going to sound weird and it’s a huge imposition, but maybe you could sit with me here until he wakes up?” Please say yes. Please say yes.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:15 am*

“Of course.”

My dragon was ready to mate, thinking Damon wanted it to happen now.

That’s why he asked you to stay.

Nope. I’d explain later, but now I needed to be Damon’s friend, even though we’d just met.

Maybe I should remind him he hadn’t called his brother. He would want him here, and Sandy might be pissed thinking a stranger had comforted Damon instead of him. Thinking selfishly, I preferred to be one-on-one with Damon, me inhaling his intoxicating aroma, him telling me about himself, which might include the whereabouts of his mate, George’s alpha father.

“Wow. Thanks.” He peered inside the bag at the food. “I haven’t eaten since this morning and had no appetite while I was in the waiting room.” He pulled out an egg salad sandwich and lifted one slice of bread to study the filling. He sniffed it, and I chuckled, keeping my laughter in check because of George.

“Don’t worry. They’d just made them before I scooped them up.” Gods, if he got sick at the hospital from a sandwich I’d given him while his son was a patient, that would not be a good omen for our relationship. Mayo was often a culprit in food poisoning incidents.

Perhaps I should take it from him. I didn’t want my mate to be throwing up on our first night together.

I rifled around in the bag. “There’s roast beef as well.”

But Damon took a bite of the egg one and a dollop of mayo nestled in the corner of his mouth.

“You have a little something.” I pointed to my mouth. He didn’t bother with the paper napkins I’d stuffed in the bag. Instead, he poked out his tongue and captured it with the tip. Gods, that was hot. I was transfixed, unable to move or even blink. My mouth gaped and a little saliva pooled in the corner.

Damon’s brow furrowed. “Are you okay? Should I call a nurse?” He waved a hand in front of me, and I snapped out of my trance.

I gulped and a pleasant burning sensation kissed my cheeks. “Sorry... I was just... thinking of something.”

He glanced down at his sandwich, the tips of his ears a rosy pink. I pulled out an apple and sank my teeth into it. Damon’s head snapped up at the loud crunch from my teething sinking into the flesh and the sweet juice dribbled over my lips and chin.

A tiny smile graced his lips, and he tapped the bottom one. “Now you have a little something something.”

I dabbed around my mouth with a napkin, and I noted Damon’s gaze fixed on my fingers. My cock took notice, and I placed the bag of food on my lap to hide my hard-on.

George stirred, and Damon leaped to his feet and bent over his son. “Hey, it’s Dad, and I’m right here.” He waved the egg sandwich in front of George’s nose. “I’m eating your favorite.”

His son didn't wake, and Damon stroked his cheek and placed his brow on his son's. It was a tender moment between father and son, and I wondered if I should leave. But Damon sat and regaled me with funny George stories.

"He insists our neighborhood is populated by animals; bears, wolves, foxes, who live inside people."

That got my dragon's attention and mine. He can see us?

I suspect it's his vivid imagination.

"He concocts stories about them and how they change from person to animal."

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up. It was possible George's alpha dad was a shifter who had never told Damon of his true identity. I could ask Damon some roundabout questions, but as I was pondering what to say, George opened his eyes.

"Daddy?" Poor little guy. His voice was overlaid with fear, but Damon took his son's hand and kissed his cheek.

"Hello, my darling. How do you feel?"

George scrunched up his face. "I have a big owie."

Damon brushed hair off George's forehead. "I know. But you're going to get better, and I'm not going anywhere." He took the boy's hand. "The doctors will give you more medicine for your owie, but if you feel pain, you can give it to me."

"Okay." George yawned, and his attention diverted from his dad to me.

"This is my new friend." Damon introduced us.



George grinned. “Hello, dragon. I’m glad you came to visit.” His eyelashes fluttered and closed, and his chest rose up and down slowly as he drifted off to sleep.

“Sorry about that.”

Damon sat beside me, his thigh brushing against my own. “Probably the aftereffects of the anesthetic.”

“It’s fine.” I wasn’t sure that it was, and my dragon was doing a sniff test, saying he couldn’t scent an animal in George.

He may not have one. Some young children talked about their past lives with so much detail that a real person could be identified from their description. But they usually outgrew those observations by age eight. George might’ve been sensitive to shifters, but in a year or two, he would forget we ever existed.

I finished my apple and handed Damon the bag. While I hoped to stay the rest of the night with him, I needed to think how George’s ability to see the real me might affect our relationship—assuming we had one.

“I should shower and change. You have my number if you need anything.”

The frown reappeared on Damon’s brow. “I do?” He pulled the phone out of his pocket. “How? I only met you a few hours ago.”

“You tried to call your brother but got me instead.”

Nope, you got it wrong.

Damn, George seeing the real me befuddled me.

“Sorry, you’re right.” I held up my phone. “Neither of us has each other’s number.”

There was a silence, followed by a longer silence. Someone trundled past the room wheeling a trolley, but no words were said here. There was only George’s gentle breathing. If he didn’t say anything, I’d offer to put my number in his phone.

“I would like it. Please.” He used face recognition to unlock his device. He nibbled his bottom lip. “Is it silly when we just met to think of you as a friend?” A pink spot appeared on each cheek, and I so wanted to pepper kisses over them.

“Not silly at all.” We exchanged numbers, and I hesitated. Did I just wave, shake his hand, or hug?”

Hug. My dragon wasn’t confused.

“Can you do something for me, please?” He looked at me through his long dark lashes that were identical to his son’s.

“Anything.” Perhaps to a human that was a rash offer, but he was my fated mate. I’d lay down my life for him.

“Would you put your arms around me? I need the warmth of another human being.”

Human?

I told my dragon to pipe down because we were getting what he, what we both, wanted.

“Yes.” I enveloped Damon in a big hug, his heart pounding against my own, his unique scent washing over me. I inhaled the fragrance of his shampoo and studied two tiny freckles on his throat. I longed to sink my teeth into his soft flesh or at least

suckle it.

“Thank you.” He pulled away. “May I call you some time when George is home?”

“I’ll look forward to it.” Please let that be genuine and not a fake, “Oh, we must do lunch,” when you had no intention of meeting up. “Don’t forget to phone your brother.”

“I won’t.”

I backed up toward the door, not wanting to take my eyes off him. He took a step toward me but took hold of a sleeping George’s hand as if suddenly remembering why he was here. Damon lifted a hand as a goodbye, and I slipped out the door, feeling as though I’d left a part of me in the room.

Why are we leaving? My dragon wanted to stay and nap on the floor or squeeze in beside George.

We have to let him sit with his feelings.

My beast didn’t understand, and I explained Damon had to want us. To miss me. He grumbled as we made our way to the car, but I said we could shift.

I drove home with the window down, the phone on my lap in case Damon called, while the wind ruffled my hair. I had a mate though he didn’t know it yet. And there was a missing alpha father to consider and George. It wasn’t how I imagined my future, but my folks always said real life was messy, whether you were a human or shifter.

What they didn’t say was how messed up it’d get when a shifter and a human got together and there was a young child in the mix.

I miss our mate. My dragon was ready to take his scales and return to the hospital, but I made him promise he had to stay away.

He has to come to us.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:15 am*

“Do I look fierce?” George had his shirt up and was pointing to his scar. It had healed pretty nicely, but it was always going to be gnarly.

The surgeon was very pleased with his progress. It was going to be tender for a while and he had to be careful when he was playing. George was most upset about the doctor not wanting him to climb for a while. I wasn’t. I’d be happy if they sent me home with bubble wrap.

“Yeah, you looked fierce. Let me see the back too.” Having one scar sucked, but having one on both sides... it had made it difficult for him to sleep at first. And keeping the bandages from getting stuck was also a challenge because he naturally pushed back against it.

George turned around, and I squatted down to get a good look. It wasn’t quite as well healed as the front, the scar more prevalent, but it was well on its way.

“Yep. I was right. You look fierce.” Where he got that notion, I had no idea, but if it made him like his scar over detesting it, I was there for it.

“That’s good, because I think I want to be a dragon,” he announced proudly.

“You do know that’s not how it works.” My mind quickly went back to the day in the hospital when he called Nicholas a dragon. That man kept popping into my mind. What was it about him? “You can’t decide to just become a dragon. It would be cool if you could, though.”

“I can become a dragon, just like Mr. Nicholas does. He was really nice, and he told

me a story about when he was a boy. If he can be a boy and now a dragon, so can I.” How I wished getting all of his dreams were as easy as that.

There were times when I looked down at George and wondered how much of himself he got from his sperm donor. I didn’t remember being imaginative as he was as a small child. But then again, I didn’t have parents who read to me nonstop the way I did with him.

Reading had always been a passion of mine, which was how I ended up working at the library. I’d originally planned to get my advanced degree and become a librarian, but pregnancy happened, and now I get to work in the place of my dreams with the hours that fit best for my family, so really it was for the best.

His father ended up being a dick when he left, but that didn’t mean he didn’t have good qualities. I didn’t date jackasses. At least I tried not to. I wouldn’t have been with him if that were the case. When push came to shove, he just was selfish and not ready for the commitment. It sucked, but what could I do?

I refused to hate the man who gave me George, and I refused to let George see him as anything other than somebody who wasn’t ready to be a dad. He didn’t grow up thinking his dad hated him or was a shit person. Being without him was hard enough.

“I’m pretty sure he didn’t decide to be a dragon.”

Although it was interesting that George called him a dragon. At the time it took me aback, and it still did when I thought about it. I’d had a fleeting vision of him as being akin to a dinosaur or a dragon, too. But unlike my son, I knew it was my imagination and not fire-breathing magic.

“You know how sometimes you tell me that I’m your little koala?”

“That’s because you’re adorable and a good climber, not because you are actually a koala. People don’t really turn into animals.”

“Sure, Dad.” He rolled his eyes. He was too young to be rolling his eyes, yet there he was doing it. The wonderful habit was one he’d picked up from his grandparents—my mother specifically. “But I do look fierce? For realsie?”

“So very fierce. Realsie! ” I squatted down and looked at both the front and the back.

The surgical scars were far longer than the original wound—they needed to open him up wider to do the repairs inside. The drainage tubes were now out, which was a huge step. Things were healing beautifully.

We still hadn’t ventured into the bath tub yet, but the doctor said he could. I was just being extra cautious, still doing sponge baths and the antiseptic cleansers they recommended, along with the scar creams.

“Are you mad, Daddy?”

“No. Absolutely not, my sweet boy. Why would you think that?”

“Your eyes got all squinty like you’re mad or thinking or have a headache.” He made a similar face to the one he was describing. He was such a mini me sometimes. “You make it a lot, really.”

“I do.” And it was never a good look. “I was probably just thinking, honey. What would you like to drink? Milk or water?” I changed the subject, not wanting him to ask me what had occupied my mind.

“I want juice. The hospital always let me have juice.” They did too.

“And at the hospital, they also had a ton of rules and woke you up in the middle of the night. Do you want that too?” They were great with him, but also, hospital stays sucked. It was the way of things.

“No.”

“The dentist says it’s bad for your teeth, but if you want it, I can grab you one, you just need to brush your teeth after.”

“I’ll take milk.” He was not a fan of brushing his teeth. It was the one thing I had to constantly remind him to do.

I poured the juice into his cup, snapped on the lid, and filled mine with water. Then we headed outside. The cat followed us—they’d been doing that a lot since we’d been home. Fluffy FooFoo, named by my son, obviously. But it fit.

The cat wasn’t one to follow us around, but George being hurt had him being a bit more clingy than normal. He wasn’t the only one. I was pretty clingy, too.

We set our cups down on the table and went over to the sandbox where we started to build.

Looking down at the toys he kept in there, it was no wonder he was curious about a construction site. He had diggers and bulldozers and all sorts of things I didn’t even know the name of, but he did. He knew every last one.

“The sand’s really dry today. It’s not sticking, Daddy.”

“Well, why don’t you get up and go see how your garden is doing, and I’ll water the sand so it’ll be ready to play with in a little bit.” Never before I was a father did I think there was a science to making sand usable. But there was.



He agreed and wandered to the garden, and I grabbed the hose and wet everything down using the mist nozzle.

I couldn't help but think of Nicholas when a dragonfly flew by. Dragonflies weren't even dragons, and the man wasn't a dragon either, for that matter. It was getting to the point where everything made me think of him. I'd been wanting to call him from the beginning, but also, I hadn't wanted to impose.

After I put the hose away, I got my phone and decided to go for it. What was wrong with a quick text of thanks?

Thanks again for helping at the hospital. George is doing well, and I am too, and I don't know if the latter would be true if it weren't for you.

I was texting like a boomer, all punctuated and forming paragraphs. I didn't care. I wanted there to be no confusion about what I meant. After that I snapped a picture of George holding up a big weed in victory and sent them both before I could chicken out.

Nicholas had done his good deed, he didn't need to be bothered by me, but still, I wanted to reach out. My heart wanted to reach out to him this whole time, but I didn't want him to feel obligated. Doing a good deed is just that—a good deed. Nothing more. Even if I wanted it to be.

I put my phone back in my pocket and spent the afternoon with George playing outside.

After supper, when he was in bed, I set my phone on the side table to get ready for my shower and realized I had my notifications off. Nicholas had responded.

I'm so glad to hear it. My garden could probably use a few weeds pulled out like that

too.

Wow, don't tell him, he'll take that as a challenge.

I wouldn't mind.

How was your day? We didn't have that kind of relationship. I shouldn't be asking him how his day was or things personal. But I did.

It was good. Had a great meeting at work. What's the name of the cat?

It took me a second to realize he meant Fluffy FooFoo, who had been caught in the frame... barely. I told him, and we talked back and forth about pets and sandboxes.

Then Nicholas did what I hadn't dared hope for. He asked me out. "Would you like to come over? Maybe go somewhere? Like, have a date."

This time, instead of a text, he left it in a little voice message. I listened to it three times before responding in the same way.

"I'd love to. George is actually going to spend some time with my parents this weekend. They've been feeling extra needy after, you know, the accident. Would that work?"

"Perfect."

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:15 am*

Why are your hands shaking?

Of course my dragon had to notice that. Damon was coming here for lunch. I'd given him the option to meet in town, thinking he might be more comfortable in a neutral setting. But he'd chosen my place. I suggested lunch rather than dinner, as humans were wary about the dark.

Not that he was a little kid, worried there were monsters under the bed. But a first date at some guy's place in the countryside at night? I got that to a human that would be a little scary.

I'm nervous. I'd set and reset the table on the deck three times, changing the crockery and napkins and finally the water glasses. Oh gods, my palms were sweaty, and I grabbed a bunch of napkins and wiped them. Now I had to run inside and toss them in the trash and get new napkins. This was hard. No one mentioned this in the Dragon Mating Handbook.

There's a handbook?

No, not really, but I'm thinking of writing one, listing all the pitfalls.

Being a shifter with superb hearing, I picked up the unmistakable rumbling of a car headed this way.

"Showtime," I announced to the four walls. "Smile at him, but not in a crazed, manic way. Don't scrunch your hands into fists. Put one in your pocket. Look nonchalant and definitely not creepy."

I considered leaving Damon a note saying I'd been called away in an environmental emergency and for him to enjoy the food. But I summoned my courage, like a soldier leading his men into battle, and strode out the front door and into the driveway.

The words, "You found the place," were on the tip of my tongue, but that was silly. It was obvious he had. I waved, hoping my hand wasn't flapping in an "I have an emergency" way, and I planted a smile on my face.

My dragon puffed a tiny wisp of smoke into my system in an attempt to calm me down, and I sneezed. Of all the scenarios I'd pictured of the first time Damon met me at home, sniffing and with mucus streaming from my nose wasn't included. Damn.

Instead of welcoming him to my home, I sneezed in his face. Fumbling in my pocket, I grabbed one of the discarded napkins from earlier and wiped my nose.

Damon made a face and leaned away as I sneezed a second time. "Do you have allergies?"

"No," I wheezed. "Just some hot sauce." I held up the hand that wasn't clutching the scrunched up napkins. "On my finger. Very peppery and spicy."

"Okay. I don't know where your finger has been, but my advice would be to not put it there again." He pursed his lips, and I couldn't decide if he was suppressing a grin or a grimace.

I knew exactly where I'd like to put a finger, though not when it was slathered in hot sauce. Beads of sweat broke out on my brow. Sweating and sneezing could be a sign of infection, so if Damon made an excuse and took off, I had my dragon to blame.

Me?

No smoking, I hissed.

I ushered Damon into the house.

“This is a beautiful place you have.” He strolled onto the back desk, not looking at the table but the view. “George would love this.”

Thumbs up from me. If he was thinking long-term, that was a good sign. But I shouldn’t get ahead of myself. Now that I’d wiped my nose, I tried to control my breathing. One long breath in and then out, instead of the abrupt staccato breaths.

“You must bring him next time.” I let that hang in the air. Next time. While I hoped to get to know George, I was glad the boy was with his grandparents this weekend. First, Damon had to reciprocate my feelings—assuming he would, and that wasn’t a given, not yet—and his young son being present would have distracted from that.

“Thank you.” He studied the table. “This is lovely.”

I made light of his comment, flicking my hand as if I set up the table for myself every meal.

“Is that your office?”

I nodded.

“You’re so lucky that your commute is a short stroll from your house. I’m so envious.”

Damon followed me into the kitchen, the candies he’d brought with him in his hand, while I coated the seared chicken in sauce and placed it in the oven along with the garlic bread. The salad was ready, apart from adding the dressing, and the rice was

done and sitting in the rice cooker.

“Can I help?” he asked as he leaned over my shoulder. He was so close and his scent, so tantalizing, I could have ignored the food and eaten him, starting with a nibble on the soft part of his ear, a nuzzle at the base of his throat before my lips slid lower over his chest to his belly button. he might squeal or giggle when I stuck my tongue in it, but I’d continue down his happy trail until... until...

“Nicholas?”

“Yeah?”

“Can I do anything?”

He could. Dropping his pants was one option, stroking my cock was another. But we weren’t there yet. No, correction. I was. I was past “there” and had lapped Damon twice.

Breathe, my beast told me.

“You can by opening that bottle of wine.”

The deck was shaded from the sun, and we sat in the comfortable chairs, sipping our drinks and nibbling on snacks. Our conversation was easy. We chatted about our jobs, he worked at the library, and how he juggled being a dad with the responsibilities of earning an income to put a roof over their heads and food on the table.

The oven dinged, and right on cue, Damon’s belly rumbled. He giggled, and it reminded me of fledglings, when the mother brought food to the nest.

We sat at the table and didn’t speak for a few minutes while we ate. I kept my head

down because Damon was chewing the chicken and the creamy sauce was slathered over his lips. That combined with his eyes rolling back in his head and his oohing and ahing had my cock swelling.

Think food, not fucking, I told myself.

“Something interesting down there?”

I glanced up at his one quirked brow. How could I respond? I was staring at my bulge and wondering how to conceal it when I stood up.

“Should I peek under the table too or is it a secret?”

I took a swig of my wine, giving myself a few seconds to come up with an answer.

“Just enjoying the food and the company.” I forked a piece of chicken and shoved it in my mouth.

Damon took a piece of garlic bread and bit into it, moaning and saying how he liked that I’d used lots of garlic. If we were to get beyond the sort of friends stage and reach the kissing or sex stage, I’d have to have garlic breath too. I rammed one whole piece of bread between my lips and my cheeks bulged. That was a mistake, and I held a napkin to my mouth. Damon must think I have awful table manners.

I swallowed. “Love it. Love me some garlic bread.”

He leaned back and rested his wine glass on his lips. His leg brushed against mine under the table. “Is there dessert?”

I swallowed again. Was he saying what I thought he was? I couldn’t take a chance and offer to put my cock in his hole. That would be rude.

“I made chocolate mousse.”

Damon moaned. If that was his reaction to chocolate, what would he do after great sex? I hoped I’d find out.

“I can’t wait.” The saucy grin he gave accompanied by come-hither eyes had sweat trickling over my spine. As a dragon shifter, I was used to heat but of the flaming and destroying kind, not the dick-in-hole variety.

We both pushed our chairs back and raced into the kitchen. Not bothering with returning to the table, we each grabbed a spoon after I removed the desserts from the fridge. Leaning against the sink, we dipped our spoons into the mousse, side-eying one another as we licked and swallowed.

I was about ready to combust as Damon edged closer to me and his elbow brushed against mine.

“Mmmm, I love me a good dessert.” He stuck out his tongue and licked mousse off the back of his spoon.

Despite being a shifter with super-fast reflexes, I lost my grip and my spoon clattered to the floor, spraying bits of mousse over the floor and Damon’s pants.

“I’m so sorry.” If I was losing my shifter abilities, I was in trouble. I had a beast inside me who needed to fly and hunt. I couldn’t keep him cooped up forever more.

“No problem.” He sent me a look I couldn’t decipher. “I can take them off.”

I wouldn’t say no to that.



*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:15 am*

When I said I could take my pants off, I meant it simply to remove them. I didn't just mean, "Oh, I'll just take my pants off so you can bend me over and make me scream." But once the words were out, they were out, just hanging there in the air, waiting for one of us to say something... anything.

It would've been so much easier if I said them randomly to someone I didn't have any feelings about. But this was Nicholas, and I'd been sporting a semi since I pulled in the driveway. I thought I was doing a good job ignoring it, but apparently not. Because here I was not sad that I had the slip of the tongue.

If I were honest with myself, part of what I felt in the hospital when he comforted me was attraction. Sure, it manifested itself in other things at the time, but all the feelings of safety and security, the wanting to touch him and needing to be touched by him, came rushing back the second I walked into his house and the situations were not even close to the same.

Objectively, so much about this date would normally be red-flag central. Driving up to his house—sure, it was a cute bungalow, but we were really isolated. And then there was his office, which was a shipping container turned into a functioning building. I knew that was the new cool thing in architecture, but I'd never seen one before except in movies. And in movies, if someone had a big container like that on their premises and they were doing something, yikes. Sure, genre mattered, but it was never someone making cookies for the town seniors.

Sometimes it was used as a place to hold prisoners, other times it was an evil science lab, and yet other times it was where they kept the meat—human meat, because of course they were cannibals. Had it been any other first date, I might have peaced out.

But with Nicholas, not once did I have a smidgeon of worry. I just felt like I was home. Like this was where I was meant to be.

When Nicholas suggested the bottle of wine, not for a second did I think to decline like I would on most first, second, even third dates. I never declined because I didn't like wine or because I was afraid I would drink too much. It was a safety thing, I always liked to be able to get out if I had to, and driving after wine was a bad idea, and it wasn't just me I needed to worry about. I had George counting on me.

And that was one precaution I always took, because you never knew when someone might show their true self. But I didn't worry here because I felt deep inside that this was where I belonged and that Nicholas was showing me who he was and how he was going to treat me. And now he was looking at me like he was going to consume me like a snack, and I was here for it.

"Good. I was hoping they weren't a permanent fixture for the evening." He winked at me, and all embarrassment for my comment flitted away.

I leaned over and awkwardly gave him a kiss. He tasted like the wine and mousse and something that was just inexplicably him. I was never this forward. At least, not since I had George. I couldn't be. My first priority was keeping myself safe, protecting our family unit. But with Nicholas, I was safe. Of that I had no doubt.

"I feel like we... maybe we can take this someplace more comfortable?" I mumbled against his lips, not wanting to be separated from his touch, but wanting us to move to someplace more comfortable.

"Are you sure?" He pulled back and watched me as I responded.

"I don't think I've ever been so sure about anything in my life."

Nicholas took my hand and led me to his room. Everything about it felt like him. He wasn't one of those alphas whose place felt like a hotel they were just staying at for a while. His personality was everywhere.

This was home to him. Not a place to stay. Not a display of his successes. It was home.

I started taking my pants off, just like I said I would. He watched me, his lips parted, his tongue darting out. He liked what he saw, and his reaction only fueled my desire. He mirrored my move, taking off his pants. Then one by one we removed the rest of our clothing, each watching the other, enjoying the view. It wasn't a strip tease with a little dance, and yet, somehow it was hotter than the flipping sun. Gods, it was like this man was put on this earth just for me.

And when he removed his last article of clothing, his boxer briefs, I could barely hold back the moan. His member was hard and very, very happy to see me. Not as happy as I was to see it.

I dropped to my knees, needing a taste. I was already harder and slicker than I'd ever been and all we'd done was kiss and see. I could only imagine the pleasure tonight was going to bring.

"You don't have?—"

I cut him off with a dart of the tongue, gathering the drop of precum that had been beckoning me. "I do, though." I looked up at him. "I really do."

He moaned, and I didn't waste any time, wrapping my hand around his length and taking the tip into my mouth for a tiny suck. We were only just getting started. I angled my head so I could watch him watching me and brought him into my mouth again, this time deeper before pulling it back out. Again and again I traveled his

length until he was hitting the back of my throat, and I swallowed this time. His body quivered, his hand coming down on the back of my head.

I thought he was going to guide me, to take over my task at hand, but instead, he pulled me off of him and said in the sexiest voice I'd ever heard, "My turn."

He had me up and on the bed, his tongue playing with my hole as his hand jerked me faster than I'd have thought possible. I bucked my hips, seeking more as he fucked me with his tongue, giving me a preview of what was to come, and boy, was I ready for it.

"I'm going to come," I warned. "I want you inside me when I do."

His tongue darted in and out a couple of times and then he pushed himself up just enough for me to see his face. "Whatever you want, omega mine." Starting at my thighs, he kissed a path up my body, nibbling, sucking, tracing the path until he reached my chest. He teased my nipples until I was squirming beneath him. If his goal was for me not to come until he was inside of me, he was going to fail.

"Need," I cried out.

"Then you shall have." He put a pillow under my hips and lined himself up with my hole. "Gods, you're perfect."

And then, without further ado, he entered me, watching my face as he did. Slowly, slowly, slowly he pushed his way inside, until he was fully seated. I was so full, fuller than I'd ever been, and a feeling of completeness washed over me.

He moved in and out of me, slowly at first, my hips meeting him move for move. We found a rhythm that kept us both right on edge, without giving way to our orgasm. I didn't want it to end, it was too perfect. And I wanted to believe he was feeling the

same.

But then something changed, not in him, but in me. I suddenly needed it faster and harder, it was like my body was taking control. I bucked beneath him, needing to come, but also... that wasn't my only need.

My orgasm slammed through me, his knot filled me, and I pulled him down, my teeth biting his shoulder. And not a sexy nibble. No, I bit him hard, drawing blood, and at no time did anything inside of me tell me to stop. I needed this, and from the way he sighed in contentment, he did too.

I didn't know what came over me as my teeth sank into him. I wasn't kinky like that. I wanted to apologize, tell him it wouldn't happen again, but it felt so right and so needed, like it was supposed to happen. I couldn't bring myself to say the words.

And when he slammed his lips to mine, he kissed me until I forgot my name.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:15 am*

I was torn between letting Damon sleep and waking him up so we could plan the future—even though it was too early for that.

The sliding doors were open, and while I'd opened the blackout curtains, a gentle breeze rustled the translucent ones. It was early, and while Damon had told me he got up at five on weekday mornings to get himself ready before he started breakfast and got George up, I wanted him to stay in bed as long as he wanted. If that was all day, I'd join him and we could snooze in one another's arms, eat, watch TV, or just stare into one another's eyes while pumping our dicks.

Oh, I voted for the last option.

But I was ready for coffee, whether Damon slept or not. I turned music on, making sure it wouldn't disturb him while I bopped around the kitchen naked. That was one of the many advantages in living out here: no close neighbors to peer in your window.

A nutty roasted aroma filled the kitchen, and I wiggled my hips to the music, anticipating my first sip.

“What are you doing?”

I swung around to Damon, naked just like me, his sizable cock dangling between his legs. Coffee and cock first thing in the morning? Yes, please. More cafés should put that on the menu. They'd have customers lining up around the block.

How had I not heard him? Once again I was worried I was losing some of my shifter abilities. There was another consideration that I pushed away because it was too out

there to consider. Not really. Had George and his uncanny ability to see me somehow stolen a part of me?

My dragon wasn't worried and told me it was what humans called love.

"Dancing?" My voice rose as though I wasn't sure myself.

"With no music?"

I burst out laughing with relief. There was nothing wrong with me. Damon couldn't hear the music but to me it was blasting away. "I'm fine." I turned the music up, hoping Damon would join in.

"Good to hear." His gaze dropped to my length, and I boogied over the tiled floor to him. I bopped around him, and he stood, unmoving. Gods, what if he didn't like dancing? How could we mate if he wasn't a dance-around-the-house kinda guy?

But he boogied along with me, swaying his hips and shaking his head while doing arm rolls.

When the music stopped, we flopped onto the kitchen stools and leaned on the island, panting and laughing, praising one another's dance moves.

"George and I often dance at home, especially when one or both of us has had a bad day, and we dance that crap out of our lives."

"Do you want eggs with your boogie?"

"Please."

I anticipated him offering to help and told him no after giving him coffee and

observing him guzzle it down.

He peered over the coffee mug. “You’re not going to cook like that, are you?” he pointed to my cock. “I wouldn’t want anything to happen to it.” He gulped more coffee. “To you, I mean.”

I raced into the bathroom, making sure to wiggle my ass, and wrapped a towel around my hips before starting the breakfast.

“Safer, but the view isn’t as good.” He grinned.

We ate at the kitchen island. Damon interrupted his eating to reply to George who’d sent a pic of him and his grandparents.

But the smile faded from his face as he put the phone down and pushed the food around his plate.

“I can make you something else. Don’t be polite and pretend you like my scrambled eggs.”

He shook his head. “No it’s not that.” He turned the phone around and showed the photo of George, a huge scar on his torso. “Seeing his injury reminded me of the trauma he and I suffered because of the accident.”

I hesitated, not wanting to offer advice when it was none of my business. But if we became a family as I hoped, it would be our business.

“Though to be honest, he’s coping better than I am.”

“Have you considered therapy?” I held my breath, waiting for his reaction.



“Yes, Sandy mentioned it, and I’m not against it. Just haven’t done anything about it.”

I refilled his cup, and he wrapped his hands around it. “And that brings me to another topic.”

The warm blood in my veins turned to ice—almost—and my dragon got busy conjuring up his fire. A sense of foreboding settled over me, and I stiffened, waiting for what was sure to be bad news.

“Don’t get me wrong. The sex last night was amazing.”

I plonked myself on the stool. This was worse than bad. He was breaking up with me before we were an us.

“I feel connected to you, but it’s been such a short time since we met... well, all of yesterday afternoon and last night.”

I bit the side of my mouth to distract myself from what was coming.

Damon stirred what was left of his coffee, the spoon clinking the side of the porcelain mug. “I’m worried that we bonded over George’s trauma. I needed someone and you appeared, like a knight in shining armor. And I clung to you.”

I pushed a hand across the island, but withdrew it before my fingertips connected with his. “I don’t think that was it.”

He lifted his head and our eyes locked on one another. “Forgive me, but you’re not the one who’s been through an ordeal.” He got up and scraped the remains of his breakfast in the trash. “Perhaps we should slow this down.”

“I’ll agree to whatever you wish, even though everything tells me what we have is real.”

“I sense a but coming.”

This wasn’t the time to pull off the towel and wriggle said butt at him. “But...” I stretched it out, hoping it’s lighten the mood and I’d get a grin out of him. It didn’t. “I’d like to show you something first. This is how I know what we feel,” I put a hand over my heart. “is real and not the result of your past.”

Thinking of what his ex-alpha had done could also make Damon reluctant to believe that falling in love at first sight wasn’t just a huge cosmic joke.

“Does it involve us getting naked? ‘Cause while I’d be up for more...” He glanced at his cock. “Or I should say I am up, but I don’t think having sex would solve anything.”

This was going to be awkward. “Ummm, you can get dressed if you’re more comfortable because we’ll be outside.”

“And you?”

I performed a little shoulder shimmy though I was anything but confident he’d understand after seeing my beast. But I had to try. Maybe if I had a kitty inside me or a puppy, it might’ve been easier, but a dragon wasn’t a blink and you miss it kinda animal.

I should hope not. He was a little indignant at being compared to small domestic animals.

“I won’t bother getting dressed.”

There was a shadow of a smile on Damon's lips as he strode into the bedroom and retrieved his clothes. I took his hand and led him onto the deck and into the garden.

"I love what you've done here." He did a 360. "It's like we're in a different world." His rueful expression suggested he might prefer to be removed from his current life. He ran to the end of the garden, to the grassy space surrounded by trees and shrubs.

"Are you going to build something here? This bare patch looks out of place compared to the rest of the space." He inspected the flattened grass, some of it singed. He laughed and suggested it reminded him of a helicopter pad. He peered through the trees. "You don't have one, do you?"

"Gods, no."

"Oh sorry, you're right, they're not good for the environment." He bent down and inspected the burnt grass. "I'm intrigued with what's been happening here."

"That's to do with what I'm going to show you."

"Okaaaay." He plonked himself on the grass, but my dragon protested, saying he couldn't shift with Damon in the way.

"It might be better to stand. You'll see more."

"More what?" His gaze was fixed on my cock. "I can see plenty, don't worry."

I raced into the office and brought out a chair, making sure it was positioned farther back than where Damon was now.

"Please." I extended a hand, and he took it. "It'll be safer."

“Now I’m curious. Are you going to swallow fire or something? Though I’m not sure how that would show us we should be together.” He got out his phone, but I begged him to put it away.

“Oh, it’s super secret squirrel stuff. Right. Got it.”

I walked to the middle of the grass patch. “Remember that no matter what you see, nothing will happen to you.”

“You sound like George when he’s about to perform a magic show.”

Damn. I’d better make this convincing. No way was seeing a dragon in real life anything like a kid trying to make a coin disappear.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:15 am*

When I told Nicholas that I was afraid our bond was just due to George's trauma, he assured me it wasn't that. Sure, Sandy had warned me about this kind of connection. He was kind of a pain in the ass on a good day and saw trouble where there wasn't any. But he was coming at it from a good place. My brother loved me and meant well. He'd felt awful about not being there for me in the hospital, even if there was absolutely no way he could've known.

And to be fair, over the years I had given him reasons to worry. Sandy was there when I went through everything with the sperm donor, so he'd seen firsthand how great my decisions about men were. He couldn't know how different this was. And I'd be lying if I said I wasn't scared.

Deep down, I was worried that Sandy was right and that maybe this was the trauma speaking. But not exploring something because I was concerned felt like a crappy way to live. And I'd have felt bad if I hadn't acknowledged the real possibility with Nicholas and given him the way out if he wanted it.

Thank gods he didn't.

Instead, he stood up, dragging me outside to show me something. This was another one of those cases where I should have been scared and worried, but I wasn't. I was excited in a way I didn't quite fully understand. This felt important... huge, even.

He whipped the towel off, and for a second I thought he was thinking sex was the solution. I couldn't think of sex as being a good solution for anything, but I was willing to give it a try. I hated not touching him, even if it was just a brush of a hand.

“Trust me,” he said, and I did. I trusted him more than he could imagine. He’d already proven to me that he would be there when things got real—too real. It was all the stuff that usually came before that that we had to figure out.

“Now, just remember, nothing will happen to you.” It was the third time he’d said that, and I was really confused until he took three steps, jumped in the air, and suddenly, before me, was a dragon... a freaking, real-life, they-exist dragon.

I had to be dreaming. There was no way this was real. Dragons were imaginary, make believe, fake... except George had called him one. Maybe George’s imagination had infected my mind. That was the only logical explanation for all of this. The only one.

It was a dream.

I might as well enjoy it, right? Odds of getting back to the same dream twice were rare for me, and this one had the potential of being amazing. Even as a dream dragon, I was enveloped in a feeling of safety.

“You’re gorgeous.” I took a step closer. “You know, when I was little, I always dreamed that the books got it wrong. That the dragon wasn’t the one the prince needed saving from; the ‘good guy’ was. The dragon was always there always and forever.”

I looked at Nicholas-turned-dragon standing before me. Could he be mine? Like in my old stories.

“The first time I saw you, I kind of thought you might be a dinosaur or a dragon, as silly as that sounds. Can I touch you?”

The big dragon head nodded, and he lowered it for me. I closed the distance between us and ran my fingers over the scales. I didn’t know why I thought it would be cold,

but it wasn't. "This is officially the best dream ever."

His body froze, and he hopped back, watching my face carefully. Before I could ask or say anything, he shifted back, his eyes serious.

"This isn't a dream," he said. "It's not even close."

"Wait, what?"

"Yeah, this is real... all of it."

"How could it be real? Are you saying that my son really could see your dragon? Why would my son be able to do that and how?"

"Do you know anything about his bio dad's family?"

I didn't know his family at all other than his mom, who I contacted exactly one time. But I did know him. "He was no dragon."

"No, he might not have been, but he might have been part of a lineage of shifters."

"So you're saying everything George said about people who turn into animals is real?" I needed to get back to the lineage thing later. This whole dragon thing was enough for one plate.

"Yeah. They are real. And for whatever reason George can see them."

"What other animals can you turn into? Can you be a unicorn? An aardvark? A whale?"

"I'm just a dragon... a boring old dragon."

I respectfully disagreed on the boring part.

“And really, one animal inside of me is enough. That day when you called me, even over the phone, my beast recognized its mate.”

I blinked up at him, words evading me.

“My dragon recognized you as mine.”

And then I got distracted. Not by his dragon or all I’d just learned, but by the glorious naked form in front of me. My eyes kept wandering down to his member, which was thick and very, very hard.

“Maybe we should get you dressed before finishing this conversation, because right now I want to do many other things with my lips than talk.” How did that make sense?

“Okay.” He wrapped the towel back around his waist and took my hand. “Why don’t we take a walk and I can explain everything?”

“I’d like that.” I gave his hand a squeeze.

Nicholas ran inside to get a change of clothes, then we headed out for a walk. He told me how his dragon recognized me and that he had to get to me. He didn’t fully understand it until he was in the hospital. His human side was focused on finding me because of my voice and the heartbreak and needing to let me know my brother wasn’t coming. But his dragon was all about finding their mate.

And then it turned out we were the same.

“Go back to this mate thing. What does that mean?” He’d said it a few times, and I



only knew it in terms of sex. There had to be more to it than that.

“Mates are like getting married, but way better. It’s a bond for life, and it’s a connection that fate gives us, and no one can take it away.”

“So you’re saying I have to be mated to you?” Which was not the same as me saying I didn’t want to be, and I worried that he might take it that was.

“No, there’s always a choice, but once the bond is complete, then there’s no other for me.” His voice lowered, and there was unspoken hurt in it.

“But you’re saying there is for me?” I wasn’t sure that was true, not based on my emotions, especially examining them through this new lens.

“There already is none for me. I should have said you’re my one, but yeah, you’re free to walk away. I’d understand if this dragon stuff is too much. I’d hate it, but I’d understand.” He meant it too, the sincerity in his words loud and clear.

“And when you said the bond is formed, how does that happen? Isn’t mating like sex?”

“It is, but also, not really. And we have half a bond now.”

I stopped in my tracks.

“You remember yesterday when you felt the need to bite me and you broke my skin and then were all worried and embarrassed and I tried to kiss it out of you?” Kissing became so much more. He’d been successful.

“Yeah. You acted like it was the best thing that ever happened to you. Oh. Oh. Oh. Did I... was that mating?” Yikes. If I mated him without permission... consent

mattered. “I’m sorry.”

“Never ever be sorry. It meant the world to me—it showed me that you feel it too. And you didn’t need permission. I wanted you to do it.”

“You didn’t bite me back.”

“No, I didn’t, because I needed you to know what was happening and for you to make the decision. Trust me, it was hard, probably the hardest thing I’ve ever done.”

He said I didn’t need permission, but he was making sure he got it. There was all kinds of sweetness in that.

“Pretty sure fate did a good job. I keep wanting to feel like something’s wrong, like we shouldn’t be doing this. Trying to see what I’m missing. And even when I try to logically think of reasons, like a trauma bond, it doesn’t matter. Because the truth is I’m drawn to you in a way I’ve never been drawn to anyone. And it’s not just about you being hot or sexy or you even being at the hospital that day.”

I reached up with my free hand and cupped his cheek. “You make me feel safe. You make me feel like I’m home.”

“That’s because if you let me, I’ll be your home. I’ll be your everything. And George, I will treat him as the treasure that he is in whatever capacity you decide you want me to.”

I threw my arms around him and held him tight, trying to process all the things that had just happened. But the only thing that made sense was that this was where I belonged.

And Nicholas was my home.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:15 am*

I'm a little nervous.

I read and reread Damon's text he sent before he and George left home. They were coming here for lunch, but instead of being in the house, my house, which might've been intimidating for the kid, we decided they'd pick me up and we'd continue to a small town to eat.

There weren't as many choices as in the city, but a restaurant in Creekville did the best barbecue I'd ever tasted. We could eat outside, and they had a small enclosed playground for kids. I chuckled thinking of the barbecue place as a restaurant. It was more of a convenience store that sold great food from a door around the side and had a few tables scattered over the laneway.

Me too, I sent back but smacked a hand on my brow because Damon was driving and couldn't read it. What if he asked his son to read the text on the display? Or worse, George unlocked the phone and read the conversation. His most obvious question would be, "Why are you both nervous?"

I supposed it might launch an honest conversation about having George meet me. It might turn out okay, but I should stop imagining worst case scenarios and try to enjoy the day.

After inspecting myself in the mirror. I was dressed casually in jeans and a button-down, but had thrown a blazer over the top because I was thinking ahead. If Damon looked at me a certain way or brushed his hand over mine and I got a boner, I wanted to be able to place the jacket in my lap or over my arm to hide my crotch. Kids George's age tended to blurt out things, and I wanted to avoid, "Why do you have a

bulge in your pants?”

Him seeing my dragon was also a topic I'd prefer to avoid on our first proper meet-up. He'd been woozy from the operation in the hospital and might not bring it up again. But other than steering the conversation away from his accident and to animals and fantasy novels or movies, there wasn't a surefire way of dodging that bullet.

After taking a deep breath and gargling with mouthwash, making sure I was minty fresh, I grabbed keys and phone. I recalled the dilemma when Damon first came here, but this was worse. If George didn't like me, Damon would put his son first, and rightly so. He might get over the heartbreak of us not being together and go on to find love again, but I never would.

Stop. My dragon was tired of me imagining the worst. He was all for showing George my beast, certain he'd be enthralled. What human kid doesn't dream of dragons being real?

I locked the house, not that I needed to but it was a habit from years of living in an urban area, and waited at the gate. They could come into the house after lunch or not, but I wanted to get the meet-and-greet over with first before George ran around the garden, playing hide-and-seek or whatever kids his age played. Maybe video games.

Damon beeped and slowed, and I waved. I got in, and he introduced me to George. Damon hadn't shared his dating history with me after his mate pissed off—and I didn't expect him to if he preferred to keep that to himself.

George greeted me politely and didn't mention the incident at the hospital. With luck it was fuzzy or had been forgotten.

“What's that?” he asked from the back seat.

I held up the present in a brightly colored gift bag. “It’s for you.”

“Me! Can I have it now?”

Damon studied his son in the rearview mirror. “Wait until we get to the restaurant.”

George grumbled, “But why?” and kicked the back of my seat until his dad told him to stop.

“Okay, sorry, Nicholas.”

Damon and I shared a glance. George appeared to be a pretty normal kid. I always wanted to open my presents straight away and hated seeing them under the Christmas tree, tagged with names, my name especially.

My mate pulled into a parking space opposite the store.

“This is the place.”

Damon’s raised brows suggested he wasn’t convinced.

“Goodie, can I have a chocolate bar?”

His dad assured him he would get a treat after lunch.

“How did you find this place?” Damon asked as I took them around the side of the building and a multitude of aromas wafted over us; smoky, sweet, salty, and my eyes watered and a sneeze threatened.

“What’s that smell?” George plugged his nose and coughed.

Damon laughed and took his son's hand. "That's the barbeque."

His son made a face, but we scanned the menu board, and George ordered a pulled pork sandwich while Damon and I planned to share ribs. For the sides we got coleslaw and potato salad, along with lemonade.

We grabbed the only spare table, and George sat on his hands and swung his feet, eyeing the gift bag I'd placed on the spare seat. Damon nodded at his son, and the young boy grinned.

"May I have it now, please, Nicholas?"

I handed him the bag, and he peered inside. "Dad, it's art supplies. Wow! Thank you. How did you know I wanted these?"

He spread everything on the spare seat and was engrossed in the brushes and oil paints while we waited for our food.

"Thank you," Damon mouthed.

I said under my breath, "Have there been any mentions of dragons?"

He shook his head. Not that I wanted to lie to George; his dad had met my beast, but a human child with an active imagination might cause chaos at school when describing how I shifted and my dragon hunted and flamed old trees.

The food arrived, and Damon said he was sorry he'd ever doubted me. "Best barbeque I've ever had."

George nodded, his mouth full, but his eyes kept sliding to the art supplies.

We bought pie to eat at my place, and as soon as we arrived, George brought his gift into the house, but his eyes registered surprise as they widened and his mouth gaped as he looked at the back garden. He asked permission of his dad and me if he could venture out, and he took his gift and dessert, and we didn't hear from him for thirty minutes as we sat on the back deck.

"I'd say your place, or the outside anyway, is a big hit, along with the present." Damon reached out and took my hand. We hadn't made any overt displays of affection, wanting to ease George into the changes that lay ahead.

At one point, he raced back to the house, his lips blue from pie or paint or both, yelling if we could visit here next weekend.

"Better than I'd hoped." Damon sipped coffee, and we sat in silence enjoying the view and George's enthusiasm for the great outdoors.

I had invited the pair to stay the night—I had space, and Damon could sleep in his own room—but he'd decided before they came that a meet-and-greet was the best first step.

"Do we have to go home today?" George strolled back to the house saying he was hungry, and Damon gave him leftovers from lunch.

I stayed quiet, as it wasn't my decision to make.

"We don't have our PJs or toothbrushes," Damon told him.

I nudged him and mouthed, "You can stay."

"Okay," he whispered.

“I have toothbrushes and PJs for your dad.”

“And I have a spare pair of shorts and T-shirt in the car,” George piped up. “Can we stay, Daddy, please? I can paint the garden and the mountains.”

Damon raised his hands in surrender, and he and George helped me get out fresh towels and sheets. We made fried rice with leftovers for dinner and sat up late watching an animated movie that was the young boy’s favorite. Damon fell asleep during the film, and while I watched the screen with George, I relished the family atmosphere with the man I loved and his son.

I hoped the three of us would become a family.

The next morning I got up early and stumbled into the bathroom, but a shout from Damon had me racing into the living room.

“I couldn’t find George.” Damon was standing at the open sliding doors looking adorable in my PJs. “But he’s out there already pretending he’s hunting wild animals.”

That’s what I do,my beast huffed.

And you will after they leave.

Damon and I walked over the wet grass and his hand brushed over mine. He grabbed my fingers, and I studied him. He returned my gaze with a tiny smile, and we continued toward George.

“Morning.”

“Who are you pretending to be?” Damon tried hugging his son, but George snorted



and said, “Not pretending,” while swooping and flapping his hands. “A fire-breathing dragon. They’re real, Daddy.”

He paused and glanced out our clasped hands.

“Are you two going to kiss?”

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:15 am*

It was date night, and I could hardly wait. Being a single dad meant that I couldn't be spontaneous and just go out willy-nilly. I needed to plan, and this time, I was planning the entire day.

I'd made a reservation at the barbecue place closest to me. They'd just won a big award for being the "best barbecue in the state," and while I doubted anything would be as good as the meal Nicholas took me to, I thought it would be fun. Plus it was on the fancier side, if barbeque could be fancy.

Maybe it could be our thing. We could try out different barbecue places and compare them all to the wonderful dinner we had that first time. Sure, after a couple tries, we might be disappointed because none compared to that deliciousness. Or the possibility was there that we'd keep finding better and better barbecue until we became the barbeque experts.

I was excited for our date. It was great that we sometimes got to spend time together, the three of us forming a family bond. But this was going to be great too—just the two of us. There were things that we needed to talk about as far as logistics went as our relationship grew, and that was best without little ears.

After giving myself a once-over in the mirror, I checked the clock on the wall. My brother Sandy was going to be here in an hour to watch George, Nicholas probably fifteen minutes earlier. He, unlike my brother, liked to be early. Or maybe he was like me, and missed me when we were apart and didn't want to miss a single second of our together time.

"Daddy." George came into my bedroom. "What time is Uncle Sandy getting here?"

He promised me he'd be early."

I wished my brother wouldn't do that. I loved him to pieces, but he wasn't the best at being organized. Sandy was also not the best with time. Some might say he stunk at it.

It was me. I was some. His "early" was probably going to be close to just on time, and I hated that for George, but it was better than being late.

"He'll be here, sweetie, don't worry about it. You know how he is... always running late."

He nodded. "My teacher says being tardy is a sign you don't care, but I think it's a sign you are busy." Smart kid.

"Yeah, that sounds like Uncle Sandy, all right. Is there something I can help you with instead?"

"He's going to help me design a cat house for Fluffy FooFoo with the box that we got with the new airfryer."

It had been a present from my mate. He said they were a game changer and it really had been. The box it came in was deceptively huge. Fluffy FooFoo instantly fell in love with it, in the way that cats do.

"Well, I can call him if you want, but you know how he is. He'll be here, though." He always came, just not always on our timeline.

That was good enough for George, who went back into the other room. I glanced at the mirror to make sure I didn't miss anything out of place and thought it was probably best to double-check with my brother. I took out my phone and sent a

message to Sandy who immediately replied: Shit. That was today?

I started to type and decided to hit the call button before I sent the message. We were going to be going back and forth, and that was not helpful for either of us. A call was easier.

“I am so sorry.” He didn’t even bother with a simple hello. “I got called into work and said I’d go. I did check my calendar, though. I wrote it down wrong.” Sometimes my brother was an old man, but I long ago gave up on getting him to use his cell phone for a date book. “Can we switch days out? I can come tomorrow like I had accidentally planned to.”

I had two choices. I could get mad at my brother for being... well, my brother, or I could be flexible. I chose the latter. I assured him everything would be okay and that I hoped he had a good shift. Then I called the restaurant. They didn’t have any reservations for the next day, but that was okay. We’d figure out something else to do.

Change of plans, I typed into my phone. My brother flaked. Want to hang here? I hit send.

Absolutely. He punctuated it with a smiley face. Should I bring pizza and a movie?

I called to George, who came running in. “Uncle Sandy has to work and is coming tomorrow instead of today. Nicholas is coming over to spend the evening with us and wants to know if we should have pizza and a movie today.”

He shook his head. “Can we do pizza and a cat house?”

“Do you want to call him and ask?” I was sure he’d be fine with it, but again, it was going to be a bunch of back and forths, and this was easier.

“Yeah.”

I hit call, put it on speaker, and handed him the phone, which was now ringing.

“Hey, you.”

“It’s George, silly. Don’t dragons know anything?”

George was really into the dragon thing, and I didn’t feel great about him not fully knowing about Nicholas. But also... something he needed to be older for. Every time he made a comment, I let it be. The time would come, hopefully sooner rather than later, when he would be told and shown everything. Today was not that day.

“I know a few things.” Nicholas chuckled. “How are you, George, and what can I do for you?”

“My uncle was going to help me make a cat house with that cardboard box that the air fryer came in. Do you want to do that with me? Uncle Sandy was only doing it to be nice. He won’t mind.”

“Depends. Are we eating pizza?”

“Yeah, we can eat pizza, but no pepperonis. They’re too spicy.”

I agreed with my son on that.

“Got it. No pepperoni. Mushrooms?”

“Okay.” George was so going to be picking them off one at a time.

“Oh, I’ll take that as a no.” Nicholas was so observant. “Can you put your dad back

on? I'll see you soon."

I got on the phone with him and explained everything, including about the house, and he said he'd be over in about an hour with a cheese pizza. And true to his word, he was there in an hour with not only a pizza but a box of boxes and random fasteners he thought would work well on their project.

"Do I want to know why there are so many boxes?" I took the pizza from him, and he came in with a stack of boxes.

George ran up to him and hugged him. "I had a box, silly."

"Yes, but why have a cat house when we could build a cat mansion for Fluffy FooFoo?"

We ate dinner, and the entire time, George was itching to get to the project. The two of them discussed plans for construction domination as they scarfed down their meal, and the second it was done, they were off.

It was fun watching the two of them so deeply involved in a shared activity like this.

I put on music, and the three of us built a monstrosity of a cat condo out of boxes, or a cat mansion. And three of us was a stretch. I shared conversation, danced to silly songs, and handed them things when they needed it. They did all of the building.

We made plans to paint it another day, unsure what kind of paint was best, given that it was for a cat. The boxes were definitely going to be scratched to smithereens, the way cats did. I had a feeling research was going to tell us to leave it plain, which was fine. It wasn't like the cat could read.

Fluffy FooFoo wasn't really sure about any of it, sitting in the original box George

had found for him and watching as piece after piece went together. Not once did he get up, not even to go over to Nicholas, who he adored. I crossed my fingers that once we went to bed, our little fur baby was going to do some exploring.

After it was done, we did end up turning on a movie. I wasn't sure who fell asleep first, but when I woke up, the movie was over and it was time to get everyone to bed.

"George, it's bedtime." He didn't stir, but Nicholas did.

"I'll carry him." He scooped him up and brought him to his room. It wasn't the first time I looked at him and saw a father. I'd never put that on him, but seeing him take it up all on his own... that was everything.

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:15 am*

It'd become a habit for Damon and George to come to my place after school and work on a Friday and leave again early Monday.

Damon had suggested that if they moved in, we should look at schools nearby, though the smaller towns wouldn't offer the specialized art classes that George enjoyed. But I had shifter friends, accomplished artists, all of them. I could call in favors and have them tutor my soon-to-be stepson.

My beast turned up his nose. I hated the words stepson/stepfather as much as he did, but his dad and I weren't mated, we weren't living together, and he considered me his father's boyfriend.

My dragon turned green, hating the word boyfriend more than stepson.

My dream was to adopt George, but bringing that up with Damon was way down my list.

Damon and I were sleeping in the same bed now, and George was fine with that and often joined us for a morning cuddle. He loved being at my place, which I hoped would soon be our place. This morning I woke up early.

I crept out of the bedroom, wanting to bring Damon coffee in bed, but when I walked barefoot into the kitchen, the tiles cool under my feet, a tiny figure was staring at the coffee maker and reading the instructions I kept in the drawer underneath.

"Hey, watcha doing?"



He held out the pamphlet. “I wanted to make you and Daddy coffee but didn’t know how to do it. We have the pod thing at home.”

I kept my expression neutral, because those pods were terrible for the environment. I used a simple French press, fair-trade coffee and composted the coffee grounds.

“How about we do it together?” He nodded and measured the coffee while I boiled the water. “That’s not a lot of water. Dad always fills the kettle.”

I only boiled what we needed, but I wasn’t going to criticize his dad. Instead, I pointed out that I conserved as much electricity as possible and explained I had solar panels on the roof to generate power from the sun.

“Cool. I should tell Daddy about that.”

We made toast, and George chose the jam his dad liked from the three varieties I had. He commented the labels were different from the usual, and I explained I made the jam myself from fruit growing in the garden.

“Wow, you can do that? Can I make jam with you one day?”

“Absolutely.”

George carried the toast into the bedroom, and I brought the coffee on a tray. Damon was stirring when his son yelled, “I made the coffee, and Nicholas has jam from the garden!”

Damon yawned and blinked as I put the tray in front of him. “Did you find the jam on a treasure hunt?”

George giggled and licked some of the jam off his father’s toast.

“Do you want some?” Damon offered him the plate, and he grabbed a piece and slid into the middle of the bed beside his dad. I got on his other side, and we ate breakfast together—as a family.

This is nice. Even my dragon recognized it as something special.

“Can we do this every day?” George stole another piece of toast. Just as well we made plenty.

“Saturday and Sunday mornings but not during the week.”

“Awww.” Damon caught the crumbs with a napkin that George spilled. “But I like it here.”

I munched on toast and followed it with coffee, wishing I could interrupt and add my voice to the move-in vote. That would be two against one.

“It’s too far for you to go to school every day from here.”

George sank down in the bed, his arms folded. “Maybe I don’t want to go to school.”

Damon stroked his son’s hair. “Wouldn’t you miss your friends?”

His son shrugged. “I don’t have many.”

Damon had told me George wasn’t interested in sports, and as art was his great passion, he spent a lot of time alone, not in teams chasing, kicking, or hitting a ball.

We both hugged him, saying we’d work something out.

Maybe I can flame those kids and tell them they should be friends with George or

else?My breast was raging and ready to battle the other children in George's class.

I didn't point out he couldn't talk to them, and after flaming, they'd be in cinders and not much use to anyone.

George asked if he could play in the garden and ran outside.

"We could homeschool or there's a small school in the town where we ate barbeque."

Damon sighed. "I want to live here with you, wake up beside you every morning, and kiss you good night as we lay in one another's arms." He flicked a crumb off the sheet. "But I can't turn my son's life upside down on a whim. Today he wants to move here, tomorrow he might want to go to the moon."

He can do that?My dragon often stared at the moon, wondering what was up there.

We had a situation. On the one hand, Damon was my mate and we wanted to be in one another's lives, not visit every weekend. But there was his work to consider and George's schooling. Plus, living with a third person when they had been jogging along together as a sole-parent family would be an adjustment for everyone.

"Would you feel okay about George attending a smaller school if we can get people to tutor him in whatever his education lacks?"

"Sounds good in theory."

We could visit the school if Damon took a half day off.

"How would you feel about commuting to work?" There were no trains or buses in this area, so he'd be driving every day.

“I can work remotely one day a week when I’m on paperwork duty, and I’m sure I can find a similar job locally. Every town has a library.”

If he could finagle it, we could tick that problem off our list.

“Daddy, Nicholas, I’ve got something to show you.”

We wandered into the garden, and George showed us his latest painting. Instead of the mountains or the garden, he’d painted a dragon, surrounded by fire.

Who’s that? Not me.

He’s never met you, just seen you in his mind.

“Do you like it?” he handed it to me, not his dad.

“Thank you. I love it.”

George looked at his feet and then stared above him, shading his eyes from the sun.

“Could I meet him one day?” he said in a small voice. “I’d like to.”

Now, my beast insisted.

Not yet, I warned, telling him to keep his scales hidden.

“You will.”

Damon squatted in front of his son. “If we moved here, our lives would be very different. You’d go to a small school. There’d be no ordering in for dinner or going out for ice cream at ten in the evening.”

“You eat ice cream late at night on the streets?” It was hard for me to imagine them living that busy urban lifestyle.

Damon side-eyed me. “That’s what you got from my speech?”

“Sorry,” I mouthed.

“I won’t miss those things.” George hugged his father and extended an arm to me. I joined them, our arms wrapped around one another. “But don’t two dads have to get married before you live together? That’s what my friends told me.”

I looked at Damon, and he shrugged. I guess it was over to me.

I sat on the grass, hoping George would sit next to me, but he plonked himself in my lap. My heart melted, and my insides were warm and melty.

“People like me don’t usually marry.”

He looked up at me, sporting a solemn expression. “People who have dragons inside them?”

“Yes, but not everyone has a dragon. There are wolves, bears, foxes, and every animal you can think of.”

George’s mouth formed a huge O. Just as well I hadn’t mentioned unicorns. He might have keeled over.

“Instead of a ceremony and a piece of paper, we mark one another to show the world that we love one another.”

He nodded, his brow furrowed. “Okay.”

I glanced over his head at Damon. “But I suppose we could get married if that would make you and your dad happy.”

Damon didn’t care, as we’d discussed it. But if it was important to George, that was what we’d do.

“I’d like that. Can you get married here in the garden?”

“First I have to ask your dad to marry me?” George stood, and I got down on one knee. “Will you, Damon, marry me, Nicholas?” I extended a hand to George. “So that you, me, and George can be a family?”

Damon sniffed and wiped tears off his cheeks. “I’d love to.”

“Group hug.”

“Nicholas, what do I call you after you and Daddy marry?”

“Whatever you want.” I so wanted him to call me Pop or Papa, but that was his decision.

“Okay. I’ll think about it.”

We wandered back to the house, arm in arm.

“I guess we have a wedding to plan.” Damon kissed my cheek.

“Can I tell Uncle Sandy about Nicholas’s dragon?”

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:15 am*

Today was the day, the one that George had been waiting for. Nicholas and I were getting married. None of us could wait.

I hadn't planned on ever getting married. Not before I had George, and certainly not after. He took top priority, always. And really, I thought that I had my chance and I blew it. Being single was pretty much all I could expect for my life.

Fate disagreed.

Even now that I had Nicholas, I wasn't someone who needed the ring. Nicholas wore my mark, and after today, I was going to wear his. That was all that mattered. At least to me. To the rest of society, they needed more proof. Did I care what they wanted? Of course not. But George was still in school and was already different enough. He didn't need to be extra different by having his dad living with someone not his spouse. And to my son, this marriage meant that Nicholas was his, too.

I understood why society thought that marriages were somehow more real than what Nicholas and I had. Once upon a time, I might have too. They didn't know about matings or that shifters existed. They equated not being married with couples living together. It wasn't the same.

It was a decision we hemmed and hawed about because doing something for optics wasn't how we wanted to live our lives, but also, our job was to protect George. In the end, George was the reason we decided to move forward with an official, very human wedding.

One night at dinner he asked if he could carry our rings at the wedding. It caught me

off guard. I hadn't planned on a wedding at that point, but he apparently had. And when I asked him what he meant, he ran and got a picture he'd drawn of the three of us in the backyard, "Becoming a real family."

That wasn't what it took to be a family, but Nicholas and I both agreed that it was what George thought he needed, and we went ahead with the planning.

I didn't love that he hadn't met Nicholas's dragon yet. It was another thing we were hemming and hawing over. I'd worked really hard over the years to teach him that we didn't keep secrets, and any grown-up who told you to keep a secret was a grown-up you shouldn't trust. Surprises were fine, but not secrets. I hadn't quite figured out how to frame the dragon as a surprise. I'd figure it out. We'd figure it out. But not just yet.

The wedding was going to be small. Beyond small. Tiny.

My parents and brother were here, along with a couple of people from work. Nicholas had about the same number of people there for him, but that was it. And it wasn't just size that we limited, we also limited extravagance.

Our cake wasn't some big, fancy, three-tiered wonder that you saw on television. We bought it from the big box warehouse store. It wasn't even a true wedding cake but simply a sheet cake. It would be delicious, but nothing worth taking a thousand pictures of. It was also interchangeable. Instead of saying "Congratulations on your wedding," it could have easily said "Happy Birthday," "Happy Mother's Day," "Happy Father's Day," or "Happy Fourth of July."

It was generic. But this wasn't about being fancy or showing off. This was about the two of us being in love and wanting to get married.

We'd had it catered from our favorite barbecue place and had everything set up in the



backyard, including borrowing a couple of tents—renting, I guess—from the home store. Everything was perfect. All that was left to do was for us to get married.

“Can I talk to you?” George came over to me, his face very serious. I squatted down.

“Sure, little guy, what’s up?”

“Do you know how you and Nicholas are getting married?”

I nodded.

“I don’t want to call him Nicholas anymore, but I don’t have a name figured out yet.” This wasn’t the first time it had been brought up, but through his eyes, this must’ve felt like a deadline. It wasn’t.

“That’s okay. You don’t need to know everything today or even tomorrow.” I gave him a hug. “No rush.”

“Nope.” He shook his head. “I want to say it at the wedding. I want to make it special.”

“And you being there and carrying our rings will make it special. I promise.”

“I’m going to be the best ring carrier there ever was.” He squared his shoulders. He meant business.

I still hadn’t quite figured out how the ring and shifting thing was going to work. I had a feeling the symbolic piece of jewelry would only be worn on special occasions by my mate, and that was fine. After tonight, I was going to wear his mark, and that was all that mattered.

We talked a couple more minutes while we finished getting ready.

A pair of slacks and a button-down shirt not even tucked in was as fancy as I was gonna get. George wanted a full-on suit, and it was the epitome of adorable.

George and I worked our way outside. Everybody was already there, mingling, drinking with their very “fancy” cans of soda. I mean, we did spring for name-brand, but this was hardly a champagne kind of event. It was perfect.

Nicholas whistled, and everybody turned to his direction. “Looks like we’re doing this.”

I nearly cracked up when we asked George what he thought was important to be at the wedding. He gave us a very specific list, and we made sure every single thing was there. And one of them included not clinking glasses to get attention, because it was “rude” and whistling instead like his PE teacher did.

Challenge accepted and conquered.

Everybody sat down.

We weren’t in rows, just random lawn chairs all over the place. They were all facing the chaplain who was going to do this, but aside from that, there was no organization whatsoever.

George and I walked up to stand by my mate, and the officiant, who was there with a black leather legal binder in his hands, began.

“Are we ready?” he whispered softly for only our ears.

All three of us nodded. George held the rings, not on a fluffy little silly pillow, but in

a little wooden box that he'd painted himself. The officiant announced that they were here for the wedding, and we went through our vows, promising to be always and forever until death do us part. Then it was time for the rings, or as George called it in rehearsal, "go time."

"Will you be exchanging rings today?" the chaplain asked.

I wasn't sure why it was always a question. This was all pre-arranged and practiced, but even then he asked. I chalked it up to tradition. We, of course, answered in the affirmative.

George came around and stood between us, flipping open the box. It wasn't a ring box, the two metal circles sitting on the wood, nothing holding them in place. It was going to take a second to figure out whose was whose since we chose identical bands.

"Here are your rings, Dad. Here are your rings, Other Dad."

No one who was watching us understood the full impact of that one single moment, but Nicholas did. George was saying, with his full chest, that even though he didn't have an official name to call my mate, he had the emotions in his heart. Nicholas was his father. Full stop.

Nicholas's eyes glistened. Our son might not have chosen his name, but he chose the position and place in his life, and that was all that mattered.

He took the rings out of the box and handed them both to Nicholas.

"Thank you."

The vision before me was blurry, my eyes covered in unshed tears of joy, ones I had to blink away as we exchanged our rings.

We were announced as husbands a few minutes later and were told we could kiss. We weren't skipping that opportunity. Our friends and family clapped, and then as our kiss broke, we were greeted with hugs—so many hugs.

It was the most beautiful wedding. It might not have had all of the “must haves” of the season, but it didn't have to. It had true love. I loved every minute of the event, but I was equally happy when everyone went home and George went to sleep. As great as the day had been, it was only half over. At least for my mate and me.

“It's time, my love.” I shut our bedroom door. “Tonight, show the world that I am yours. Mark me.”

“There's nothing I want more, omega mine.”

I'd expected it to hurt or at least feel discomfort, but it didn't. The moment his teeth sank into me, the only thing I felt was a sense of completion, a sense of being loved.

And above all of that, a sense of being home.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:15 am*

“Awww, look at this baby pic of George.” Damon sat on the floor of his son’s room, surrounded by the last remnants of his son’s possessions.

Most everything was packed and ready to go. The movers had packed most rooms, but George and his dad did the young boy’s. They trawled through old toys, games, clothes, and books, and George, having saved what he wanted and tossed or donated the rest, was bored. Damon, on the other hand, was lost in memories of his son’s early years.

There was no hurrying him; these were his treasured items, the cat was staying at the kennel until we had everything moved over, and there was no looming deadline for getting out of here.

“We can take all of them, and you can go through them at home.”

His head snapped up, and he focused his eyes on me. “Home? Our new home. I could, yes. I’m not sure why I’m so emotional.”

Each upheaval in our lives, whether good or bad, gave us pause. People cried happy tears at weddings.

“Let’s take them with us. We have plenty of space.” We’d bought a second shipping container to use as Damon’s office and were considering a third for George’s art studio.

“Thank you.”

I hauled him up into my arms, and he wiped his wet cheeks on my shirt.

“Ready?” I leaned back and looked into his eyes.

“Ready.”

With George’s help, we packed the last few boxes, and the movers placed them in the truck. Damon took George’s hand, and they walked through the empty rooms, pointing out the height chart on the kitchen door frame.

I went outside because this was their time; I didn’t share their memories. When they emerged, George bounded into the car and his car seat.

“Nicholas, can I paint my room?”

“Sure. Today?”

He yawned. “Maybe another day. Moving is tiring.”

“I agree with that.” Damon placed a hand on my thigh and dozed for the thirty-minute drive.

As the boxes were labeled, they were placed in the correct rooms, but when the truck drove off and we surveyed the chaos, we agreed going out for lunch was the perfect antidote to an afternoon and evening of unpacking.

Being surrounded by a lot of stuff was a new experience for me. Not only was I a minimalist, but I gave away or tried to recycle anything I no longer used. Little boys had a lot of stuff, and I made a note to buy that new shipping container. When I peeked in George’s room, the wooden floor was covered in boxes with items spilling out.

Wow! Why do humans need so many of the same things?My dragon was studying George's toys.

I didn't have an answer to that, so I closed the door and the mess vanished.

Damon had fallen asleep on the sofa, exhausted by the move and the unpacking. He was more advanced than George, and what he hadn't unpacked were duplicates of what I had, such as kitchenware and bedding.

"Nicholas, I've been thinking." I'd sunk into an armchair with a book, and George clamored into my lap. "I'd like to paint a dragon on the wall of my room."

"That would look cool."

He snuggled into me. "But there's a problem.'

Paint we could get easily. And we had time. The rest of our lives, though I was hoping it wouldn't take that long.

"I want to paint your dragon, and I haven't seen him."

We'd been waiting until Damon and George moved in before showing the boy my beast. I told him his dad would have to be with him.

"But you're my dad too now, right?" The gleam in eye told me he was trying to get around waiting for Damon to wake up.

"I'd like to be." He jumped off my lap. "But you still have to wait for your other father."

He pushed out his bottom lip, and the hangdog expression had me muffling a smirk.

He was good at this but not good enough.

George sat on the floor beside Damon, his head resting in his hands, and stared. His face an inch from his dad's. My mate didn't stand a chance.

"Oh, Dad, you're awake."

Damon opened one eye. "I am now." George climbed onto the couch and into his father's arms. "What do you want?" He ruffled his son's hair.

"Other Dad says you have to be awake so I can see his dragon."

"Other Dad." Damon's eyes were awash in tears, and his bottom lip trembled. "That's so sweet."

"Mmmm, but can we do it now? Please."

"Sure."

George raced out into the garden, yelling at us to follow but then tore into his room to grab his art supplies.

"Not sure how he can find anything in there," I grumbled.

"That's what doors are for." Damon pecked my lips.

"So I discovered." I returned his kiss.

We walked outside, arm in arm. George had planted himself beside my dragon's "landing pad." Unlike his father's first time, instinct told him to stay clear of my beast.



“I’m ready.”

Damon lay on the grass beside his son and plucked a grass stalk as I undressed.

George couldn’t sit still, saying how excited he was and how fast did my dragon fly and what was his wing span. I didn’t have the answers, but he continued and asked me to burn something, but Damon told him he liked our new house and didn’t want it burnt to a crisp.

But as I undressed and stood in the middle of the flattened earth, I spread out my arms and the young boy went quiet. Arms became wings, covered in the green and yellow scales, and the spikes erupted on his back. My beast leaned over George who was now speechless and nudged him before stepping back and swooping upward.

He circled the house and skimmed over the treetops, before spying an old log on the edge of the woods. If he aimed well, only the log would go up in flames. If not, it would be a big oops, and as an environmentalist, I couldn’t have “started a forest fire” on my resume.

My beast plunged downward, and George raced to the fence, urging his father to hold him up so he could see.

I closed my eyes as my dragon aimed. There was no advantage to having them open, as I couldn’t take over or direct him. But they were jolted open as a stream of fire poured from his mouth. The log erupted in flames as my beast flew over the top, the heat from below tingling his tail.

He landed in the usual spot, and I took my skin and put on my pants.

Instead of being animated and talking a mile a minute, George didn’t say a word.

Is he disappointed? My dragon loved George and was on the verge of dragon-y steamy tears.

I doubt it, but I can't read the boy's thoughts.

Not the boy. Your son, my dragon reminded me.

I stand corrected.

"Are you going to thank Nicholas?" Damon nudged George.

"That was the most amazing thing I've ever seen." He stood in front of me, staring into my eyes and waving. I allowed my beast to come to the forefront of my gaze, and George gasped. "I see him, I see your dragon."

I see him too.

"Would you like a special place in the garden to use as your studio?" I pointed to the two shipping containers. "One just like those?"

"Yes, please." George threw himself into my arms and smothered me with kisses.

We strolled back to the house, me holding our son, but as we entered the house, he jumped down and began sketching my beast.

"That was a success." Damon lounged on the couch, his eyes closing.

I held up the phone. "Our son's studio has been ordered." We'd have to outfit the inside, but I'd done it with my own and was in the process of completing Damon's. My wolf shifter electrician friend would do the electrical work.

With George in his room sketching and Damon asleep, I wandered into the garden, collecting ingredients for a salad. I reflected on how my life had changed since Damon called the wrong number. Turned out, it was the right number after all. Not only did I get a mate but also a son.

“Dad.” George came into the kitchen, and Damon roused himself from the sofa.

“Yes.”

“Other Dad.” George giggled.

“Maybe I need a different name other than Dad?”

“What do you want me to call you?” George slid onto a stool while I washed the lettuce.

“Let’s decide together.” I shredded the lettuce and grabbed three tomatoes.

“Dragon Dad?” he suggested.

“You could.” I hoped he wouldn’t because we’d get questions as to why he called me that, but I could deflect and say because I was very protective of my family, though humans might think I had a fiery temper.

“What if you combined the two?” Damon took a seat beside our son. “And made it Drad.”

“Drad. Drad. I like it. Dad and Drad.”

“Okay. I am a very proud Drad.” I puffed out my chest.

“I love you, Drad, and you too, Dad.”

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:15 am*

Any nerves I'd had about uprooting George vanished. He loved his new home. He loved the land, the bungalow, and he loved his new school. But most of all, he loved not having to go back and forth or having Nicholas go back and forth. He welcomed the feeling of being settled in.

I did too. I hadn't realized how much that had been wearing on me, on us as a whole. Sure, we loved each other and the time we spent together, but it carried with it its own stressors.

George woke us up early this morning. He'd been promised pancakes in fun shapes, and while none of the shapes looked like what they were meant to, Nicholas did a great job at renaming them to something sort of close. The dog giraffe rhino was a bit of a stretch, but George still gobbled it up.

He was thrilled that it was finally Sunday, finally the day we planned to build a new cat condo for Fluffy FooFoo. The cardboard one hadn't been sturdy enough to move with us. Nicholas told him he had a plan and took many, many pictures of it. And today, that plan was coming into fruition.

I'd been worried about how things would be with a cat living with the dragon where he would actually come in contact with the beast. I shouldn't have worried. The two of them were best buds in both forms. It was all kinds of adorable.

Nicholas had found a supply of plastic boards they were going to use to construct the house. He figured it would be light enough that we could move it as needed, but also manageable for George to work with. Wood would not have only been extremely heavy, but it would have meant that Nicholas was doing all the "work" work. And for

some kids, that might have been fine, but not for George. He was in this for the entire experience. He adored trying to figure out how to piece everything together.

They both assured me that they had a plan for how to get it in the house, and I just let them have it.

The truth was, I wasn't feeling very well. For the past couple of days, I'd been under the weather. I'd just started a new library job nearby. It was only a few days a week and already I managed to catch something. I probably caught it from one of the toddlers there. Toddlers and their storytime were full-on germ factories. Cute as they were, they were also pretty gross. I still loved storytime. I was just grumpy about feeling yuck.

I looked out the window, watching my guys. They were so intense but also having a blast. I thought about going out there with a cup of tea but decided to take a nap. I was exhausted.

"Come on, Fluffy FooFoo. When you wake up, maybe you'll have a new house."

I set my tea down and went into my room, climbed into bed. I barely remembered the cat joining me before I fell asleep. My nap turned out to be not a nap at all. Not in the truest sense. It was more like a mini bedtime, hours having passed by while I slumbered.

It was dark when my mate came in to make sure I was okay.

"I didn't want to disturb you, but I was starting to get worried." He sat on the edge of the bed.

"No, don't be worried. I think I caught something from work, is all." At least I hoped that was all. I sat up and stretched. "I guess I needed that. I've been so tired."

“I made spaghetti.”

Normally, it was one of my favorite foods, but today, the thought of tomato sauce just didn’t sit well with me.

“Okay, I’ll be right there.” I went to the bathroom, washed my face, and looked at myself in the mirror. I didn’t look sick, but boy, did I still look exhausted. If I wasn’t better soon, I was gonna have to call a doctor, but it really was probably nothing.

George was finishing setting the table when I walked in. It was his favorite job. Not sure why he thought it was such grand fun, but he did. Probably something about being big. Being helpful and all.

“Looks great.” I sat in the seat I always did.

“Wait till you see the garlic bread I made.” He looked at me, and his jaw dropped open. “Whoa.”

“What do you mean ‘whoa’?” Did I really look that bad?

“Dad, did you maybe turn Daddy into a dragon?”

“What do you mean? Turning Daddy into a dragon?”

“What’s going on?” Nicholas came out of the kitchen.

“Did you turn Daddy into a dragon? I’m not mad. Accidents happen.” George sounded like a little old man.

“That’s not possible.” Nicholas said. “It would be cool if I could. Then you could be a little dragon too.”

“I’d be a unicorn,” George mumbled under his breath. “But Daddy is for sure a dragon. If you didn’t do it, who did?”

Nicholas squatted down in front of him. “What do you mean, George?”

“Look at him. He’s a dragon.”

Nicholas closed his eyes and looked as if he was arguing with himself. The entire time I stood there, not knowing how to make the conversation and situation any better. And when he opened his eyes again, his expression was unreadable.

“Let’s go outside, you and me,” Nicholas said. “Or more like all three of us. I think my dragon needs to see something.”

George walked out as if this was just random normal stuff we did. I, on the other hand, was nervous. My son thought I was a dragon, and given that he had the ability to know these things, it had to mean something, right?

“What’s going on?” I asked my mate when our son was far enough ahead he wouldn’t hear.

“I’ll let you know when I know.” Nicholas took my hand. “Gotta let my dragon out for a minute. Okay?”

I trusted him more than anything. Of course, I was going to follow him, but I was also unsure where this was heading. Nicholas followed George as he led us to where Nicholas liked to shift.

My mate took off his clothes and turned into his dragon. George loved seeing him like this. He was sure one day he could build some sort of harness and ride Drad’s back. He’d even drawn pictures of the prototype. That was so not going to happen,



but I appreciated his ingenuity.

Nicholas stood there, sniffing the air for a second, and then came over to me, sniffing gently before he nuzzled my hand. He did the same to George and then took off into the air. He was magnificent when he was flying. His agility amazed me, and the way the light at dusk reflected off his scales from time to time was a work of wonder. When he came back down, he took his skin and put his clothes back on almost immediately.

“I don’t think spaghetti dinner’s gonna work for making you feel better.”

“Why not?” I mean, I agreed that the sauce sounded absolutely dreadful, but that didn’t sound like what he meant.

“Because spaghetti is not for celebrations. Celebrations require ice cream.”

“Ice cream!” George squeed.

“Ice cream? Am I missing something?” I asked.

Nicholas came over and put his hand on my belly.

“No, you got an extra something in your middle. You’re not sick, my love, and I did not turn you into a dragon. But George is right about there being a dragon.”

I set my hand on his.

“Do you mean Daddy’s dragon?” George figured out the clues long before my brain caught up. “I’m gonna have a dragon brother or sister? Or both! I’d love both.”

“What?” Of course it could be possible. It wasn’t as if we ever did anything to

prevent having another child. We also hadn't planned for one.

Nicholas brought his lips close to my ear. "Are you happy? Because I'm happy. We're going to be fathers... again."

Even in this happy moment, the one where he was going to be a biological father for the first time, he didn't push George aside. I'd seen so many bonus fathers do that, and it broke my heart each and every time. George would never feel that way. Nicholas made sure of that.

His words swirled in my mind. "I'm equally as happy, but maybe let's not do ice cream tonight. Maybe we can just do spaghetti with no sauce. Or crackers?"

"Yeah, let's do noodles. And celebratory crackers," he agreed.

"But I can still have ice cream, right?" George ran over and gave us a group hug. "Because I was the one who noticed, I should for sure get ice cream."

"Yes, big brother, you can still have ice cream. And unless the crackers make me feel a thousand percent better, you can have mine too."

"I'd rather you feel better, Daddy." He started to run toward the house, looking back long enough to tell us to hurry.

And we did.

## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:15 am*

“We should see a shifter midwife.”

Damon rubbed his still-flat belly. He’d lost weight, and his cheekbones were more prominent than before he got pregnant.

George asked non-stop questions about the baby.

“Would they have scales?

“Would they burn the inside of Dad’s tummy?”

“Would they be born inside of an egg?”

“Definitely no eggs.” Damon wagged a finger at his son.

“But dragons lay eggs, Dad.” George pulled out a book with an image showing a dragon sitting on a clutch.

“Remember, sweetheart, I’m not a dragon.”

“I so want a dragon brother or sister. They can take me for rides and we can burn stuff.”

“No burning,” Damon and I said in unison.

I’d explained to George that dragons had to be responsible when they shot out their flames. But the books he read were written by humans, depicting a creature of their

imagination. I had to find reading material written by dragon shifters.

“Why do I need a shifter midwife?” Damon chose an apple from the fruit bowl. “You don’t think something’s wrong, do you?”

“Not at all.” But with a human-and-dragon shifter pairing, I wanted my mate to have at least one check up during the pregnancy. Dragon shifters were not known for following the rules, but rather following their own path. No dragon shifters that I knew ever consulted a midwife. But also no one in my circle of friends had mated a human.

“There’s a well-respected shifter outside of Creekville where we had the barbeque.”

“What about George?”

While we included him in talking about the pregnancy, making sure he understood our love would expand to include the baby and not that we weren’t taking away the affection we gave to him. But a checkup wasn’t the place for a child, firstly, because, gods forbid, what if there was a complication.

“We can do it on a weekday.” Creekville was where his new school was located.

“Okay,” Damon agreed. “Go ahead and make the appointment.”

If our son got up early on a school morning, I rode with him on our bicycles to school. But on the morning we were to see the midwife, the three of us went in the car. He knew we were seeing a midwife, and we said we’d tell him all about it in the afternoon. He was convinced Damon had dragons in his belly and that was why my mate was suffering from indigestion.

Damon gripped my hand as we pulled up in front of a cabin, surrounded by trees.

“Are you sure this is the right place?” He looked around, but there were no other houses within a mile.

I showed him the digital map on my phone.

“Why is my belly all wobbly?”

“Because while you’re already a dad, this is your first baby with a shifter?”

When we reached the door, it opened and a fox shifter greeted us. “Hello, I’m Josie, and you must be Damon and Nicholas.” She ushered us in. “This is exciting. My first shifter/human couple.”

We filled in paperwork, not the reams of answers that modern medical institutions, like what was the name of your first cat. That was a slight exaggeration, but that paperwork always had me scratching my head. Not that I went to the doctor much as a shifter, but in my last job, we had an annual medical, and I had to submit to it. Saying, “I’m a shifter and we rarely get human illnesses” would not have gone down well.

Josie offered us herbal tea, and while she was boiling the water she asked if we’d played the dragon guessing game.

Damon shot me a glance, one brow raised, but I was at a loss. I racked my brain for childhood guessing games specific to our kind but came up blank. If this was pregnancy-related, I was as in the dark as my human mate.

“I’m at a loss, Josie. What is that?”

“My apologies. Some of my clients are immersed in the dragon shifter lifestyle and live in the caves in the mountains during the omega’s pregnancy.” She jerked her

head toward the distant hills. “With no internet or TV, their entertainment options are limited.”

Damon’s deer-in-the-headlights expression had me clutching his hand, and I assured him we would not be adjourning to a cave for the birth.

“They guess how many eggs the omega is carrying.”

The silence in the room was so heavy, it needed propping up. I cleared my throat. Maybe my shifter hearing was affected, because I heard Josie mention eggs.

“Eggs?” Damon snatched his hand away. “You’ll have to fill me in. I hold eggs and do what?” He sent me a “Help me out” look and asked Josie, “Is this like an easter egg hunt?”

Josie’s hand froze as she poured water into the teapot. It was as though her body had turned to ice and she couldn’t move. Water spilled from the pot, and I leaped up and took it from her. She blinked and gasped. Maybe coming here was a mistake and she was suffering from a shifter-related illness.

But when she recovered her voice, she said, “You didn’t tell him?” That was directed at me, and my mate glowered at me and snapped, “You didn’t tell me what, dear?”

Yikes, I was in trouble.

“I’m guessing not.” I put the kettle on the draining board and strolled back to Damon and Josie. I was buying time as my mind worked overtime, going through the possibilities of what I had neglected to tell Damon. Josie said eggs. Eggs. Oh gods, eggs!

Eggs. What’s wrong with you? My dragon wasn’t confused. How else are the babies

going to arrive?

“Eggs! You have eggs!”

“Where?” Damon shouted back.

“How you two ever became pregnant is beyond me,” Josie muttered. “Maybe you need a lecture about the birds, bees, and reptiles.” She pulled up an image on her phone of what I assumed was a dragon shifter cuddling eggs in a pile of pillows. “The eggs you have in your belly and that you will lay.”

Blood drained from Damon’s cheeks, and Josie’s and my shifter reflexes kicked in. We grabbed him as he sagged, and Josie directed me to her examination room where I lay my mate on the table. She checked his pulse and bustled off to make the tea while I held my mate’s hand and stroked his brow.

“I didn’t know, I’m sorry. You’re human, so I didn’t think you were able to carry eggs.”

Damon stirred, and I leaned in close. When his eyes opened, I searched them for what? Fury? Sadness? Fear? Revulsion? Oh gods, not that last one.

“Where am I?” He struggled to sit, but I told him to stay where he was.

“You got dizzy.”

“Because of the baby?” He rubbed his belly. “Is our little one all right?”

How could I tell him Josie wouldn’t hear the heartbeat inside of the egg and that there would be more than one? Even a scan didn’t work with eggs, as the image was blurred. That much I knew.

“Nicholas, tell me.” He gripped my arm, digging his nails into my skin. “What’s wrong?”

“You don’t have a baby nestled in your belly as most humans do.”

“What?” Tears spilled down his cheeks, and I kissed them away. “My baby. My baby.”

Damn, I’d fucked this up. “No, the babies are fine.”

“Babies? I’m carrying twins?”

Josie arrived with the tea, and I sat Damon up, propped up with cushions. “Not twins as such. You have a clutch of eggs.”

“Please repeat that.”

“You mated with a dragon shifter, and dragons lay eggs and so do some of their human mates.”

“Some. But I’m not part of the ‘some’?”

Josie sipped her own tea. “No, I scented your eggs when you walked in. Your babies are dragon shifters. I can examine you but can only estimate how many eggs you have.”

“George is going to freak out when he hears he has multiple dragon brothers or sisters,” Damon deadpanned.

“You’re not upset?” I was trying to gauge how many apologies I had to give and the number of breakfasts in bed I needed to deliver.



“I don’t know how I feel except I love our little ones, whether they arrive inside a shell or kicking and screaming.”

“Me too.”

Tell him about the nest. My beast wanted Damon to be prepared.

He saw that photo.

Tell him!

I gulped and gave my mate my best smile, but he narrowed his eyes. “What now? Out with it?”

“The nesting instinct. Humans experience that.”

“Yes, my friend from work’s husband did. He sat in the nursery arranging and rearranging the baby clothes.”

“Okay.” That was a good introduction. We sipped our tea, and my mate commented on how good it was.

“You will want to lay the eggs in a nest and then sit there with them until they hatch.” I put down my cup, ready to grab Damon’s if he dropped it.

“Just promise me we don’t have to live in a cave.” He shivered.

How could I promise that? When instinct took over, we had no choice.

“That’s a personal decision. Some dragon shifters like the time in the dark, like their ancestors.”

Damon grasped my hand. “Thank gods. I hate rats.”

I love them, but I don’t like caves either. My dragon preferred the comforts of home.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:15 am*

Once I got over the initial nausea and exhaustion, everything was great with my pregnancy. I had energy, and the joy of knowing I was carrying not one but two little dragons had me over the moon.

It also had me as big as one.

People at work were great—they knew I was having twins. I very specifically did not mention that they would be coming in the form of eggs because, well, they wouldn't believe me. Honestly, I still wasn't so sure I believed it either. How could I grow eggs? I wasn't built that way. I was a human with the parts to have live human babies who came out kicking and screaming, not encased in the protection of a hard shell. But until I learned otherwise, egg laying it was, and I embraced it.

Because nesting leave wasn't a thing, I needed to get creative, and with the midwife's help, I managed to figure out a plan. I liked my job a lot and planned to go back part-time after the babies came and needed family leave to be able to do that.

I had already been setting up for my leave of absence from work. It was not unusual for people with twins to have to go on bed rest, and that was going to be my excuse. The midwife agreed it was a good one, and she was going to write a note when the time came. I didn't like lying to them, but also, the truth wasn't something I wanted to share. And was it really lying? I was going to be nest ridden, which was sort of the same. According to everything I learned, leaving that nest wasn't going to be happening. Might as well plan accordingly.

I looked out the window and saw my mate walking out of his office. He'd had to do an overseas phone call on a Saturday, which wasn't his norm. He liked to prioritize

time for his family.

This weekend it would only be the two of us. George was with my parents for the weekend. They'd been missing him, and it was always nice for them to have that time together. And with this pregnancy, frankly, I could use the extra rest. Carrying around this extra weight wasn't the easiest.

I walked out to greet them. "So, mate, I have a problem," I said.

He jogged over to me. "What can I do?"

"Oh, not a serious problem. Sorry. I didn't mean to make it sound like that. I mean my clothes—they're tight. They hurt."

"That's what happens when you're pregnant." He kissed my cheek.

"Yeah, but these are my paternity clothes, and they are only going to get worse."

"So, do you want to ride to town and get the next size up or three?"

I winced at the mention of multiple sizes, but he was probably right. Technically speaking the clothing I had now fit, I just had pregnancy sensory issues and tight was not gonna cut it.

"Yeah, we can do that." I'd been thinking more like computer shopping, but an outing would do me good.

"Let me grab my car keys. While we're there, we should probably pick up the car seat. Maybe we'll be able to see the furniture for the baby. We haven't done any of that yet."

I guess I always thought you waited until you hit viability before you bought those things. An old-school way of thinking, to be sure. But he was right, the eggs were coming. I wasn't going to have the same length of time to get shit done as other people had. Once egg-laying time came, I was going to be home for the long haul.

“Yeah, let's make a day of it. We can start with lunch. I could eat an entire pizza.”

Instead of pizza, we stopped for barbeque at our official favorite restaurant. We'd tried all of them in a pretty wide radius, and the first was absolutely the best. I had chicken, and my mate had beef. Fine, I had them both. But I was eating for three, so it was a good thing, right?

From there, we drove to the closest mall. I wouldn't call it large by any means, but it had everything, including a big box baby store with tons of everything, from furniture to diapers. Cribs and baths and bassinets and car seats. It had it all, and we bought it all... in duplicate. They even gave us a discount on them because... twins.

Other than the big things like that, the store didn't really have what I was looking for. The fashion of the baby world and the fabric they used for the sheets was just—I don't know, not soft enough.

I was on sensory overload being pregnant, so maybe that was it. Still, I didn't want my children to be uncomfortable, especially when they were too young to tell me about it.

Our next stop was the paternity store. I found quite a few things that were comfortable— huge, but lightweight. They fit me like tents and were probably four sizes bigger than they needed to be, but they felt so amazing that I left the store wearing one of them.

While I was there, I asked if they knew any place that had specialty baby items, the

kind you didn't find in the big box stores. They directed us to a new place that had just recently opened up across town. It was owned by a couple who were big into upcycling materials, and they made a lot of it on their own. It sounded ideal to me, and now that I was in comfy clothing, I was in a place to make some decent decisions about it.

I wasn't sure what I expected when I went inside, but it wasn't what we found. The place was filled with clothes, sure. That wasn't unusual. And they'd said that they specialized in upcycling, but I'd assumed they meant there was a rack of two. How wrong I was.

The place was filled with gorgeous clothing, for babies and toddler clothes, but also all the way up to probably kindergarten age and beyond. And all of them were made with repurposed fabrics. Even the onesies had some sort of element of recycling to them. It was difficult not to buy them all. But babies stayed babies for such a short period of time, and it would be a shame for the works of art to be in my closet when some other child could be enjoying them.

We bought quite a few clothing items, and my mate found one he thought George would love. We also grabbed a bunch of toys. It was safe to say that our babies were going to be spoiled. But how could we resist? They had handmade wooden toys and stuffies.

It was near dinnertime when we finished up our shopping. We stopped and grabbed a bite at a little diner. The food was fine. Nothing to write home about, but the storefront next door had all of my attention.

It was a furniture and home goods business, and I was so distracted by it that I barely ate. It was like I had to go there. It was weird because we already had everything we needed for the baby, pretty much. Still, I felt the need to go inside.

We didn't need furniture—we had tons. Two households merged into one would do that. But I kept finding cushion after cushion and comforter after comforter that I liked—no, needed. We ended up buying a few, but even I could see that my choices had nothing to do with what we would use. It was something else. Something I couldn't quite pinpoint.

“That was weird.” I shut the car door.

“No, not weird. You're probably just starting to get the urges for nesting.” My mate dropped the nesting word like it was no big deal.

“Wait, what do you mean? It's too early.” These little ones needed to stay in me longer. the midwife said so. I wasn't supposed to start building my nest yet. I wasn't.

“No, honey. It's not a real nesting pull. Think of them as the Braxton Hicks of nesting. It's not real, but it's practice.”

I took a few deep breaths. That I could handle. “Are you sure?”

“I am. But we can text the midwife to be sure.”

I loved my mate with all that I was, but he was no doctor, and I had never typed so fast. They told me that since I was only able to buy a couple of things and not all of them, that it was definitely not my body getting ready to drop a couple of eggs.

“You're right.” I gave his knee a squeeze. “Thanks for the day.”

When we got home, I said, “Take me to bed.”

“Was today too much for you?” He looked worried and very much didn't need to be.

“Oh, I think you misunderstood me. I meant take me to bed.”

“As you wish, my love. As you wish.”



“Do you want my toys, Dad?”

George ran in and out of the living room carrying armloads of soft toys. He dumped them in a pile in the middle of the floor. We’d pulled the furniture back to clear the space, and George was over-the-moon excited that Damon was going to lay eggs.

My mate was less enthusiastic. Yes, he wanted to meet our children, and yes, he was tired of being pregnant, but squatting and producing eggs was so unfamiliar to him, and being human, he had no one to ask other than Josie. I’d introduced him to some omega dragon friends, but they viewed it as something they’d been expecting all their lives. Their extended dragon family had visited their kin during the nesting period, and everyone brought presents and discussed the color of the eggs while their kids played. It was a community event.

But Damon had nothing in his background that resembled families rallying around the omega and their eggs.

“That would be lovely, sweetheart.”

My mate was pacing the room, and I hoped he didn’t decide to make the nest in his office at the bottom of the garden. Neither his office nor mine had running water, so I’d be shuffling back and forth to the house if he nested there. But as he was laying the eggs, he got to choose.

“What about a beanbag?” George shouted from his room.

Damon clapped his hands. “Perfect. Bring both.”

Our son was working overtime to help his dad while I was the chief cook, cleaner, and laundry worker. Once the nest was built, George was going to provide the entertainment. He'd been lining up films, music, and books we were going to watch, read, or listen to, and it was supposed to be a secret that he'd been practicing magic tricks. I'd have to call a timeout each day or maybe every hour. Damon would be exhausted.

"More toys, George."

I poked my head into the living room. The sofa and armchairs had been divested of their cushions, and every pillow in the house was surrounding the nest. Damon was carrying a pile of duvets which I rescued because my mate couldn't see over the top, and his big belly affected his balance.

"Where do you want these?"

The bean bags were in the middle and circling them were the sofa cushions. On the outer edge were the pillows, and we were placing the duvets, blankets, and toys on top.

"May I test out the nest?" George stood at the edge, one foot in front of the other as if he was waiting for a starter gun and he could take off.

"Let's all three of us get in," Damon suggested.

I helped my mate to sit as our son rolled around and got comfortable.

"Does it get a five-star rating?" I could sleep here, but my mate had the last word.

Damon and George looked at one another. "Needs something more, right?"

“But what, Dad?” George lifted his head. “Dad, you’re the dragon.”

“Not sure I’ll be much help. I was born in a nest of twigs, feathers, moss, leaves, and grass.”

My son and mate shared a glance. They didn’t turn up their noses because we’d discussed how what was acceptable to a dragon shifter might be the opposite for a human. Not only humans, a twig nest might’ve been environmentally friendly, but it would be ouchy.

Damon patted my hand and told me he’d love to see pics of me as an egg, and George said, “Cool.”

My family might not share a dragon’s love of all things nature, but they were respectful.

“What about coats?” I’d been saving my old winter ones, wanting to donate them to a charity, but hadn’t gotten around to it.

Damon’s face lit up. “George and I have some puffy jackets we could use.” He looked at our son who nodded his permission.

We joined in a group hug, and I was pleased I could contribute to the building of our children’s nest. George and I gathered the coats, and Damon arranged them.

“We need photos.” My mate pointed to his phone, and George raced to get it.

Maybe this was a result of me not having any pics of my birth nest. But dragon shifters of my parents’ era weren’t big on taking photos, especially not of their nests.

“Selfie time,” my mate announced. We put on our biggest grins, and he snapped

pictures of us as a family, then individual ones, and lots of the nest itself, and finally his belly. Josie said Damon was carrying at least two eggs but couldn't be more specific.

"What if there's a basketball and a football team in there?" George jumped up and down.

I pictured me leading a flight of dragons across the sky. We'd need a bigger house, car, bigger everything.

"George, can you help me with dinner?"

"Can we eat in the nest?" I loved how excited he was for the eggs' arrival, and while I didn't want to tamp down his enthusiasm, there would be days, possibly weeks, of us eating in the nest to look forward to.

"That's up to your dad. He's the one lugging around a big belly."

"It depends on what's for dinner." Damon swayed from side to side. "I don't want to eat soup in the nest."

"Maybe we can have eggs?" George giggled, but Damon would have none of it. Ever since he'd discovered he had eggs inside him, he had refused to eat any.

"How about a chicken pasta bake?" I held up my phone and showed my family the pic.

"Yum," they both said.

Damon napped in the nest while our son was my little helper, getting a pan and spoon and measuring cups. I chopped and stirred the sauce before frying the chicken and

cooking the pasta. George grated cheese to put on top, and I popped it in the oven. My mate was snoring softly, so we went into the garden to pick vegetables.

“Drad.” My son put a carrot into the basket. “Are babies noisy?”

“They can be. Are you worried you won’t be able to sleep or do your homework?”  
He had a studio he could escape to.

“No, I was thinking of Dad being alone when I was a baby and how hard it must have been.” His little bottom lip wobbled. “I probably cried a lot.”

I dropped the tomatoes I’d collected and brought him in for a hug. “First, you were a baby, and because they can’t speak, they let us know when something is wrong by crying.”

“Oh, I didn’t know that.”

“And secondly, your dad would do it all over again, no matter how many times you cried, spat up, or filled your diaper.”

George made a face, and he put a hand over his mouth. “Do I have to help with diapers?”

I kissed his head. “Nope. That’s on Dad and me.”

He exhaled and grinned.

“But you do have to finish collecting the vegetables and wash them so I can make the salad.”

“Okay, Drad.”

Damon was awake when we walked in, and the dinner was almost ready. We ate in trays in the nest with pillows propped up behind us.

“Can I sleep here tonight?” George asked.

“Sure, as long as you shower and brush your teeth first.”

Our son grumbled that the babies didn’t have to brush their teeth or get clean as he stumbled to the bathroom.

“They don’t have teeth.” Damon looked at me. “Do they?”

“In their dragon forms they do.” Even baby dragons who were visible for a few seconds at hatching had tiny fangs.

I got up to help George in the shower. “You know what Dad and I would like? A painting of the nest with the eggs. Do you know anyone who’s a talented artist?”

“Me.” He sprayed water over me, and we laughed, though my dragon wasn’t so keen on getting wet during a shift.

I wrapped a towel around him and dried him off and sat while he did his teeth.

“I want to teach the babies stuff, but I can’t fly. They’ll go on adventures without me.”

I explained the babies wouldn’t meet their beasts for years, and he had so much to teach them.

“Like what?”

“Like how you’re kind, you love Dad and me, and you’re good at painting and sketching.”

He nodded but pushed out his bottom lip. “But the flying. I don’t have wings.”

“I suspect your siblings will take you for a ride if you ask nicely.”

Poor George, his rapid shallow breaths suggested he might hyperventilate, but instead he raced into the living room where Damon was watching TV.

“Dad says I can fly on a dragon!”

“What?” my mate screeched and turned off the TV. “You’re taking him up there.” He pointed to the ceiling. “No way is that happening.”

“Not me. His brothers or sisters. He’ll be grown up by then.”

Damon flopped back in the nest. “Way to give me a heart attack, Nicholas.”

Oops!

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:15 am*

I took in my nest in all its glory. It was everything that it needed to be and so much more. Not that I had a layout of what a nest should have or anything like that. I came into it knowing that I didn't want to be in a cave and no twigs. That was about it. But this? This felt right.

It was ready for me.

But also, it was a reminder that I was going to be pushing out not one, but two eggs, and I wasn't sure exactly how that was going to go. Getting them inside me had been easy... and fun. But now that they had grown? My belly was the size of a small state, and I had to push them out of me. Just thinking about it had me unlocking new levels of anxiety I didn't know existed.

More than the worry of how to get them out physically, was my worry about a birth plan—egg plan? The plan for the day they came out of me, not the day they were born. Hatched? This entire thing was so confusing.

My parents and brother had hinted about wanting to be there for the birth. That wasn't happening. Even if this was a normal birth, that wasn't what I'd have wanted. But this wasn't a normal birth. I was going to lay eggs, knowledge my family wasn't privy to. I kept putting them off and would eventually play the "midwife doesn't think it's for the best" card if need be. They'd be mad at first, but would melt as soon as they saw our babies' sweet faces and all would be well.

And that led to George. I wasn't sure how much I wanted George to be a part of the actual laying. I knew that plenty of people gave birth to their children in front of their other children. Conceptually, I understood that, but I also wasn't sure how this was



going to go. If it was scary, I didn't want that for George. But also, I didn't want him to be left out.

It had been on my mind for a couple of days now, and I kept circling around the nest, staring at it as if it held the answers. Of course, it didn't. The one who did have answers, possibly, was the midwife. It was time to have that conversation, before George got home from school. I had a feeling we were near the finish line, decision made or not.

I went out to Nicholas's office and peeked inside. He was typing away on the computer, but from what I could tell, he wasn't on a call or Zoom.

"Hey, got a minute?"

He turned around and opened his arms, and I walked, I mean waddled, right into them, hugging him close.

"I need to talk to you."

"Here?"

"No, I think near the nest," I said.

Before I finished my sentence, he was already shutting everything down. I loved how he instantly decided that whatever I had to say was worth more than whatever was going on with work. The alpha knew how to make priorities, I'd give him that.

We went back to the nest and climbed inside together.

"What's going on, my love?" he asked, kissing the top of my head and hugging me.

“I’m just... I don’t know what we should do about George. Should he be there for the clutch laying? If he shouldn’t be, where do we send him? I don’t want it to be like those old movies where the omega is inside with the midwife and everyone else is outside listening to them scream, terrified that each one would be their last.” I knew it was television and not reality, but the visions from the screen kept popping into my head.

“I don’t want that for him. But also, I don’t want to ship him away like the babies are going to take over, you know. There’s just so much...”

“I have a radical idea,” Nicholas said. “And feel free to shut this down. But what if we asked George what he wants?”

“Just like that? Just ask him?”

“Yeah. We can’t really plan out as well as we’d like because we don’t know what day they’re coming. And I don’t think you want your parents here, looking at your eggs. But if you do, that’s a whole other conversation we can have.” And one that would require exposing my mate’s dragon. I loved my parents. I did, but that was a far cry from wanting them to carry a secret this big.

“No, I don’t want that. And you’re right. We’ll talk to him when he gets home.”

A couple of hours later, George walked in to find us both in the nest. The school bus had dropped him off. He had a large plastic portfolio in his hand from his specialty art class that he took once a week.

“I brought home art!” he said proudly. He was very careful to say “art” because he never wanted us to know if it was a drawing or a painting or colored pencil or pastels of some sort. He wanted it to be a surprise.

“We’d love to see it, but we have something to ask you first,” Nicholas said.

“Okay.” He set the portfolio down.

“You’re always so observant, probably why you’re so good at art. You see things in a way that others don’t.” I was getting it all wrong. “Dad and I have a question for you.”

“Okay.”

“Do you want to be here when the eggs come? Or do you want to maybe stay with your grandmothers? Or do you want to think about it?” At least this time I got to the point.

“You mean, do I want to see them come out?” George shook his head. “No. But I want to be here, like in the house, in the room. I want to be with both of you and my siblings.”

“Absolutely,” Nicholas said. “And if you change your mind, we can figure it out.”

It was such a relief having a plan, as non-structured as it was.

When I started to have contractions a few days later, I called the midwife and had her fax over my paperwork to the library. They were super old-school and still actually used fax machines. It was time for my paternity leave to begin, and if I called them, they might hear me contracting and that would be bad... very, very bad. It was way too early for that.

Bed rest and nest rest—kind of the same thing, and I didn’t feel bad about the little fib. Big fib. The fib.

The midwife was there on time for the eggs to come. They weren't as easy to push out as I'd hoped they would be. For some reason, I thought, "Oh, they're coming before the babies would. It's not gonna hurt as bad."

Crap, I was so beyond wrong. It hurt. And it required pushing, pushing, and crying and pushing and screaming. Maybe it was less than a human birthing twins would've been, but it wasn't easy. That was for sure.

George stayed with me but made sure that when it was time to see the eggs actually come out, he was looking toward my face and not where I was delivering. He had been a rock star. Both he and my mate stood by my side the entire time, telling me what a great job I was doing and offering me sips of water. And what I feared would scare my son, he called cool. It worked out exactly as it should.

First one, then the other came. With George, I'd known instantly he was fine as the sound of his crying filled the air. With eggs, there was no such comfort. I had to rely on the midwife's assessment, and she was well pleased.

The midwife stayed long enough to help us clean up and said she really didn't need to be there any longer. Now all that was left was for us to wait. We promised to call if I needed anything and thanked her over and over again.

My clutch was here.

After the midwife left, the three of us crammed into the nest, just watching the eggs.

"I can't wait to meet them," George said, reaching out tentatively. "Is this okay?"

"Yeah, go ahead," Nicholas assured him.

George raised his hand and touched one, then the other. "I'm gonna be the best big

brother ever.”

“Yeah, you are,” Nicholas said. “They’re lucky to have you.”

“I think I’m the lucky one.” George closed his eyes and started to doze. It had been a long day. A long, beautiful day.

“You don’t have to stay out here with me,” I said. “Why don’t you go to bed and be comfortable?”

“No. I’m right where I want to be, with the man I love and my family. I love you.”

“I love you too, Dad.” I pressed my forehead to his. “I love you.”

## Page 23

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:15 am*

George was in the nest, one leg resting on each egg while humming and reading a book.

He insisted his siblings loved music because they wobbled a little when he started, and shimmered. Damon couldn't see the shimmering, but my dragon and I could. It was a faint pink hue.

The nest was so big, my mate and I were lying on the outer portion while our son was in the middle with the eggs.

"I'm so glad he has an attachment to our little ones. I hope they're going to be great friends." Damon flicked through the photos on his phone of George as a baby, the pristine nest before the eggs' arrival and after.

"They already are." We lay in one another's arms while George hummed. "That tune's familiar. What is it?"

"It's from a popular TV show about dragons."

The humming stopped, and I lifted my head to check hatching hadn't begun. I elbowed my mate, and he glanced over his shoulder. "Awww, it's an egg tea party."

This was an almost daily ritual where George grabbed plates and cups from his toy cupboard and offered the eggs imaginary cake and lemonade. He'd converse with the eggs and comment on the cake and whether it was too dry. If it was, he'd give me side-eye. It was so cute. Damon so wanted to capture it on video but didn't, considering it an invasion of privacy, even though it was happening right in front of

us.

There were no disapproving gazes today, so my imaginary cake must have been moist. Phew!

“Time for roll call,” George announced. “Is everyone here?” He cupped his ear. “I don’t hear you.” There was silence from the eggs. “Fine, I’ll call your name. Egg 1?” The first laid egg wobbled slightly. “Egg 2?” There was nothing from the second, and Damon clutched his chest, panic etched on his face.

But after a few seconds that I swore felt like hours, egg 2 moved slightly.

“George?” He paused before answering, “Here.”

“Dad?”

“I’m here.”

“Dad?”

“Present.”

Our son propped up a book open at the first page between the eggs. “I’ll come back later and show you the next page.”

He kissed us both and raced outside, probably headed to his studio. He adored his egg siblings and us, but needed private time too.

“I guess we’re up.” Damon moved between the eggs, and I curled around him. “We should enjoy this peace and quiet because with two babies, there won’t be much downtime.”

And there wouldn't be much sex either, as we'd both be so tired. George was too young to be a babysitter while we got naked in Damon's office.

"Did you ever imagine your life like this? Two children ready to hatch and a human mate and son?" He caressed my cheek.

"Can't say I did, but the universe smiled on me when she had you call the wrong number." Not that I was pleased George had been hurt. Gods, no. But the aftermath was fate.

"Did you feel that?"

"What?" I checked the egg thermometers. They were old analog ones I got in a shifter garage sale. Both were showing normal dragon egg temperature.

"Egg 1 moved slightly." Damon put his ear to the shell as Josie said the babies moved around a lot before hatching.

Do you hear anything? I asked my beast.

Nope.

"Stay with the eggs, I'll rustle up some food." If hatching was happening today, we'd need lunches and dinners. I'd cooked up a storm before Damon laid the eggs and froze most of it, so we were covered. But I got out a container of rice and a curry, making sure we had sandwich fixings, plus cereal, fruit, and yogurt for breakfasts.

"Egg 1 definitely moved. Where's that little fort George made so they won't roll out of the nest?" Our son had been busy in the weeks after the eggs arrived, but he'd given up on the protective fort as they never moved much.



I raced in with another blanket and wrapped it around the base of both eggs before telling our son it might be hatching time.

The three of us sat in a circle around the eggs, not speaking and waiting for any cracking or movement. We pointed or jerked our heads when a small fissure appeared in the shell or the egg wobbled. George made funny faces at each stage. His brows shot up, he opened his mouth in a huge O, and he made a heart sign with his hands.

Damon grabbed one of my hands and did the same with George. I clasped our son's other hand, and the three of us sat, watching our babies.

A huge crack appeared in egg 1, cutting it in two. Thank gods we were holding George's hands because he could barely contain his excitement as he tugged at me. I shook my head. He knew not to touch the eggs, but he was a child. I probably would have done the same at his age.

Something inside the egg shoved the shell apart.

Something? That would be a baby dragon. My beast was on edge because the one glimpse we had of the dragons would be our last for many years.

A green-and-yellow, perfectly formed little dragon lay in the midst of tiny pieces of shell. The dragon took in all three of us peering at them, four if we counted my beast, flicked its tail, and was replaced by a little girl.

"A girl, a girl." In his excitement, George had forgotten the "use inside voices around the eggs" rule.

Damon picked up our daughter and held her close. I kissed her head and swaddled her before returning her to my mate's arms.

George put his face close to egg 2. “Come on, you can do it. Your sister is here. We love her already.”

Damon brought our son in for a hug, and we cooed over the baby.

Not wanting to be left out, egg 2 almost rolled out of the nest. I caught our little one, but it then rolled the other way, and I saved it from smashing again. Putting a leg on either side of egg 2, I sat while it hit one knee and then the other. Back and forth.

I’m getting dizzy.

Me too. But our baby was determined to get out. Maybe the shell was extra hard.

A tiny hole appeared in the shell and a claw poked out.

George gasped. “Is this baby going to stay a dragon?” He giggled. “A dragon in diapers.”

“How would you diaper a dragon?” I couldn’t tell if my mate was being serious or not, but I squeezed his hand, hoping to reassure him.

Very carefully, I imagined.

“Don’t worry. There’ll be no dragons in diapers. We’ll see the baby soon.”

The claw ripped a bigger hole in the shell, and George snuck his face so close, I yanked him back. Being scratched by a dragon’s talon, even a newborn, would be painful.

The hole widened, and a puff of smoke drifted through it.

“Will there be fire?” George grabbed his water bottle and aimed it at the egg.

I removed it from his hands, saying baby dragons didn’t have the ability to use flames. I’d never read that anywhere, but I could put out any fire a newborn could produce.

You hope. My dragon wasn’t confident.

Fear flickered in Damon’s eyes. It was time for this dragon to revert to a baby. Pronto.

A green-and-yellow snout poked through the hole.

“Are they twins?” Damon peered at our little one in the egg and our first-born dragon.

“I said we were having twins.” George jumped up and down.

The shell collapsed and an identical dragon to our first studied us before disappearing. Another girl.

I wrapped her up and placed her in my mate’s arms, along with her sister.

“Do you think I could get into bed?” Damon asked.

The nest had done its job, and with George’s help, we got my mate and the babies settled in our bed. After their first feed, the three fell asleep.

“Drad!” George’s piercing cry sent shivers through me, and my body went cold. But neither Damon nor the babies stirred. “We didn’t take pics of the hatching.

We had forgotten in all the excitement. I tapped my head. “But the memories will live

in here forever.”

“I guess.” George’s dejected expression tugged at my heart.

“But you can do what you do so well.”

“What?”

“Paint your memories. That will make a great present for Dad and your sisters when they’re older.”

He hugged me. “Thanks, Dad.” He tore off to his studio while I made myself a coffee and prepped lunch. Our babies had hatched and were healthy. Damon was bonding with our little ones, and once the food was ready, I’d crawl into bed with my mate and daughters.

You forgot something.

What? Oh, I hadn’t cleaned up the nest. Later, much later.

Their names. You are going to name them, aren’t you?

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:15 am*

“I think we need two cakes,” George said very adamantly. “It’s only fair. I don’t have to share my birthday cake. Why should Ember and Devlin have to share theirs?”

He had a point, but also, we were a family of five, and the two of them had only a handful of teeth. We very much did not need two full cakes.

“We could do cupcakes,” Nicholas suggested, coming in and putting his phone between us. We were planning the babies’ first birthday party. They wouldn’t remember it, but George insisted. I looked down at the phone. My mate had found the most magnificent confections.

“She makes them locally. Her cupcakes are gorgeous. And she has a theme you can order that have all different creatures, including dragons.”

“I like cupcakes. They are baby-sized, too.” George was almost right. These weren’t tiny cakes, but for sure smaller than the full-sized ones he’d just been asking for.

“Should we get all dragons or should we mix it up?” I asked.

“Why not mix it up?” Nicholas replied.

“I think we should mix it up.” George agreed. “I want a unicorn for me.”

“I didn’t know you liked unicorns.” Nicholas clicked add to cart. We’d have to pick them up, but the ordering was completely online from what I could see.

George shrugged. “I don’t know if I like them as much as when I was little... I used

to think I was one,” he said, which caught my attention. He’d never mentioned that to me.

“What do you mean you used to think you were one? Like, in make-believe?” I asked.

“Sort of. I don’t know. I wished that one day I was just going to be a unicorn, and then I learned that didn’t happen... We should get a mermaid too. Uncle Sandy likes mermaid movies.”

And just like that, he changed the subject.

“We should also get the one with the edible glitter on it over here.” He tapped the screen. “I don’t know what that’s supposed to be, but I want that one too,” George said, and just like that, we continued our conversation about the cupcakes.

But his unicorn comments never really left my mind.

Later that night, when George and the babies were asleep, I sat down with Nicholas and asked him point-blank, “When George said he always thought he was a unicorn, could that be a thing?”

“You caught that too,” Nicholas said. “I don’t know. Maybe. Unicorns are different. I’ve never met one in real life, but from what I understand, they sort of blend with society. You know how George can see if there’s another shifter in the room?”

I nodded. I didn’t understand it, but I’d witnessed it firsthand.

“You can’t do that with a unicorn, not even George. They are protected like that. The lore is that the goddess made them invisible like that to protect their horns. I guess we’ll find out when he turns ten.”

“Ten? I thought you said the twins wouldn’t shift until they were older,” I said.

“Dragons, yes. But unicorns, if he is one, might be different,” Nicholas replied.

“So what do we do?”

“Love him. Raise him. Playfully nurture him in the ways of shifters. You know, be his fathers.”

“Same as we do for our twins.” It made sense. “I’m not a unicorn.” And if there was one in the family, no one had ever mentioned it to me. But then again, I hadn’t mentioned my mate being a dragon to them, so I wasn’t sure how valid an argument that was.

“No, you’re not. But maybe, just maybe, his sperm donor gave him more than just his human side.”

It would explain why he panicked. If he thought me being pregnant would mean he needed to mate me, someone he didn’t love, that had to be terrifying. Didn’t make it less of a dick move, but I understood it a tad more.

“Is there any way to know for sure, other than waiting until he’s older?”

“Not really.”

“We wait until he’s ten.”

We decided not to tell him about our conjecture. There was no use getting him excited for nothing. And for all we knew he could be George, the human, like we always thought. But it was good to be prepared, just in case his tenth birthday rolled around and he was suddenly sprouting hooves.

We finalized the order for the cupcakes, ordering far more than we needed.

After tidying up the house, we sank onto the couch to watch a movie until our bedtime. It was a pretty normal evening, especially considering I just found out my son might be more than human.

The birthday party came upon us quickly. It was wonderful. Just like our wedding, it was just immediate friends and family, some people from work, and that was that. It was nice for us all to get together, and the cupcakes were delicious.

Our guests oohed and ahed over the babies, and I was pretty sure the babies didn't get put down a single time, much to their chagrin since they had just started toddling. They got far more birthday presents than any child should ever have, and George even got a few. It was a beautiful day, and one of many birthday parties to come.

Year after year we celebrated our kids' special days. The children grew like weeds. We added a couple more girls—Farah and Starla—making our family complete.

And then it came time for George's tenth birthday. This time, we didn't plan a party. We told George we were going to go on a trip—a special birthday trip—later that summer instead. And we were going to. He'd wanted to go to one of the big amusement parks for a long time, and the kids were finally at the age where there was something for each of them there. He thought it was a great idea. My parents weren't overly impressed by the lack of party, but it wasn't like we could tell them the real reason why—that their grandson might sprout a horn and hooves.

The night before his birthday, we sat down with him and told him that tomorrow might be a big day, or it might not be. No matter what happened, he was no longer the imaginative child who saw the magic in all things. Nope. We got the typical tween eye-roll followed by a comment about how silly we were.

Although, I wasn't sure if he believed it because his eyes sparkled and he practically



skipped back to his room. Please don't let us have gotten him excited for nothing. I couldn't bear to see his heart broken.

The next day, as we all hung out in the backyard enjoying the fresh air, Nicholas set up disc golf and a bubble maker. Everyone was having a blast.

But then George ran up to me saying his clothes were suddenly getting too tight.

Nicholas jumped into dad mode, taking over because I was so far outside my element I didn't even know where to begin. Nicholas led him away from us and told him it was time to take his clothes off. He said a lot more than that, but I couldn't hear the words and spent my time trying to distract the others.

George did as he said and just in time for his beautiful unicorn form to emerge. His beast neighed, trotted around in a huge circle, then came over to me and dropped his head against my shoulder.

"It's nice to meet your unicorn." I leaned my head against his. "You're beautiful."

He did Nicholas's shoulder, and then his siblings all ran up, wanting to pet him. I wasn't sure they fully understood what was going on, but we'd tell them soon enough.

"Want me to shift with you?" Nicholas asked, and George's beast nodded.

My mate called forth his dragon, and the two of them ran around, my mate staying on the ground. He was a much more elegant flier than he was a runner, but he made do. They ran around a while then came back.

Nicholas shifted back first and talked George through his shift back to his human form. The first thing he said was, "Maybe that saddle prototype I designed wasn't for your dragon after all. Maybe it was for me."

George threw on his clothes and started playing with his siblings. There would be much conversation later, but for now, he was just enjoying the fun of the day, basking in the knowledge that he was a unicorn.

I grabbed my mate's hand.

“That was... wow. All of this, and our family is... wow. I'm so glad I called the wrong number that day.” I brought his hand to my lips and gave him a kiss. “I wish there was a way for the reason I called not to have happened, that we just met at a coffee shop, but I will never once regret meeting you. I love you, my dragon.”

“And I love you, mate. I love you.”

Next in the series...

Sometimes the wrong number is the exact one you need.

When I bought my house, I promised my grandfather that I would always have a landline. He might be gone, but the phone remains, just where it always was. When it rings in the middle of the night, I jump out of bed to answer it. The last time this happened, the news on the other end wasn't good. At least now it's either a scammer or a wrong number. No bad news comes from that, right?

Before I can say, “Hello,” the person on the other end starts telling me, through sobbing tears, that they need me down at the station with bail money for Grams. I try to tell him I'm not who he thinks he is, only to have the line go dead.

I could go back to bed. Nothing's stopping me, but also... Grams is going to be in that cell for a long time if someone doesn't let the man on the other end of the phone know he got the wrong number. It has nothing to do with the way his voice had my beast perking up. Nope. Nothing at all.

Wrong Number, Right Unicorn is a sweet with knotty heat MM Mpreg romance featuring a human whose grandmother thinks it is a good idea to moon a policeman when he helped her reach the all-night pharmacy, the unicorn he accidentally calls for help, true love, fated mates, an adorable baby, and a happy ever after.