



Wrong Number, Right Lion (Dial M For Mates)

Author: *Colbie Dunbar, Lorelei M. Hart*

Category: LGBT+

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

When my favorite tree is hit by lightning and falls on my house, I remove it from my favorite list. Now my roof is leaking and there aren't enough buckets and bowls to catch all the water. I call my cousin's handyman, and leave a message. Please let them work weekends.

When an alpha shows up at my door saying I phoned them, I'm confused. They don't know my cousin and aren't even a handyman. When they show me their phone, I discover my mistake: I misdialed.

He offers to stay, to help me with the job at hand. If the house was the only job I wanted from him.

Total Pages (Source): 24

1

ARLO

The looming black clouds confirmed what the weather app had told me. A huge storm was approaching.

My house was an older one, not sitting inches from neighbors on either side and not built on a flood plain or close to a river. It didn't have a basement, and the attic served as my office and mini gym. So, I was confident it wouldn't flood, though the garden might get waterlogged.

Racing outside before the huge raindrops drenched me, I removed a hose, watering can, and tools and locked them in the shed. If the wind speed was as the app predicted, I didn't want a rake hurled through my window.

"You be safe now." I waved and blew a kiss to my favorite tree, a silver maple. She was my favorite tree because one side of the leaves were silver, and when the wind blew, the green on one side and the silver fluctuated, giving a variegated appearance.

I'd read this type of tree was more prone to being felled by high winds, but my silver maple had withstood plenty of storms.

"I'm counting on you to be here after the storm passes." After giving the tree a thumbs-up, I traipsed over the soggy ground and went inside.

I was supposed to meet with a client this afternoon but messaged him saying we'd do

it online.

There were bottles of water in the kitchen, and I had canned goods in the pantry if the power went out, along with candles, a flashlight, and batteries.

“All set.”

The house, like the tree earlier, didn’t respond.

With a coffee in hand, I climbed the stairs to my office and started work, figuring I’d get as much done as possible before the storm hit. I enjoyed the dark sky being lit up by jagged lightning and the rain pounding on the deck. Not so much the cleaning up the yard after the rain had gone elsewhere. That’d be a pain, as I pictured the squishy mud and the ruined flowers and shrubs, the same ones I’d planted and tended from seedlings.

But the rumbling outside the attic window distracted me as the clouds blocked most of the light. My phone was beeping with warnings from the National Weather Service telling people twenty minutes from me to prepare to evacuate.

That got my attention, and with the phone in hand, I tramped down the stairs to the living room with its huge picture window. A previous owner had installed the huge window, a decision I agreed with because it let in more light and I could enjoy the view over the woods.

But now maybe knocking down the part of the wall facing the coming storm and replacing it with glass didn’t seem like a great idea.

It’ll be fine , I told myself. Not that I had any idea if it would be.

Cracking the porch door, I embraced the air crackling with the distinct scent of ozone.

But the wind got hold of the door and slammed it, almost catching my hand. The noise reverberated around the room, ringing in my ears, and scared me a tad because the storm was stronger than I'd anticipated.

The wind gusted the branches of the trees, and the picture window was pelted with rain. The outdoors blurred beyond the glass as flurries of wind hurled sticks, stones, and leaves around, and the only sound was the thrumming of the rain and debris hitting the large window.

I shivered. Not only because the temperature dropped but because I was alone. Not just by myself in the house but because I wasn't cheek to jowl with my neighbors. I'd never wanted to live in a modern house that was identical to thousands of others, but right now it sounded pretty damned good.

Slinging a throw from the sofa over my shoulders, I tried to read a book but couldn't concentrate. The images on the weather app of the storm overhead were both fascinating and horrifying. The swirling angry mass of colors was addicting, and I couldn't look away.

Or, that was, until a loud groan radiated from somewhere outside. With my face pressed against the glass, I squinted into the morass of water, mud, and broken branches.

I chewed on a nail, hoping whatever it was stayed put. But the creaking intensified, and I covered my ears while my heart threatened to beat so fast it'd break free of my chest.

Oh shit! Not my tree. I flung myself backward behind the sofa as a dark image crashed onto the roof. Cowering on the floor, I examined my face and arms. All intact. The house was still standing and hadn't collapsed into a pulpy mess.

But a splotch of water hit my face. I didn't want to look up, but I was an adult, and there was no one to hold my hand. While I couldn't see daylight, there was a leak. Just a drip drip drip , so it could have been worse. I grabbed a large mixing bowl and placed it under the leak.

Miraculously, the picture window was intact. Hurrah! The universe was looking out for me.

But a stream of water was pouring onto the wooden floor in the kitchen, so maybe fate had decided to challenge me. Retrieving a bucket from the laundry, I placed it to catch the water. Right, I could do this. Tomorrow I'd call a handyman and have them fix the roof.

Except there was another leak and another, and I tore around with buckets and bowls, emptying water, and once I'd completed one round, I started again. The storm was easing or passing elsewhere, and in my frantic racing around, I glimpsed my tree, my beautiful tree, the ground beneath it shredded as its roots were ripped from the muddy earth.

Tears mingled with raindrops that were sneakily finding new crevices in the roof. I loved that tree and now it was no more. I'd have to get a cutting and shove it in a pot with soil, hoping I could transplant it at a later date. That way I was creating new life rather than grieving over my fallen favorite.

But I put aside my sad thoughts because I was being inundated with leaks. Though many of the roads in the city and surrounding countryside were impassable, my cousin's handyman lived close by. I'd never met the guy, but my cousin, Stephen, recommended him, saying he'd come rain, hail, or shine. There was no shine outside, and I hadn't seen hail, but rain we had.

The guy wasn't answering his phone, but I left a message with my device tucked

under my chin and pelted around the house emptying containers of rainwater. Not having been to his house, he might have been dealing with his own roof, but thinking selfishly, I hoped not. I needed his help, and I'd pay anything to have the leaks fixed.

It occurred to me as I dashed around that I might have to get a new roof. Please, no. That'd be expensive, but I suspected if the damage couldn't be repaired, it'd just be a section of the roof.

I kept checking my phone, hoping the guy would return my call. Maybe he didn't work weekends or perhaps he was volunteering and helping people evacuate their flooded homes.

With the rain easing so it was just a drizzle, I ventured onto the porch. Perhaps not the smartest thing to do because one end was badly damaged. I waved to the tree, lying forlornly over part of the porch and roof. It'd been so majestic, and now I sensed it sighing as it took its last breath.

"No, I'm going to keep you alive." I grabbed a knife from the kitchen and gingerly trod over the wooden floorboards. I searched for a new shoot, and when I found it, I cut it off and cradled it to my chest.

"You're okay. I'll look after you and you'll grow big and strong." I'd have to get it in a pot, but the yard was waterlogged, so I'd wait.

I hugged the cutting as you would a baby, hoping it would grow and I could plant it where its parent once stood.

A car turned off the road and parked outside the gate. It was a pickup which suggested it could be the handyman. Wow! That was amazing service. The guy couldn't have been as busy as I'd assumed. Or maybe as my cousin was such a good customer, he'd put me above other people calling for help.

Avoiding the porch stairs, I went out the back door and squelched through the sticky mud that stuck to my shoes like glue. I was still holding the silver maple cutting but didn't want to put it down. After I'd shown the handyman the damage, I'd get some potting mixture from the shed and plant it in a pot.

But as I peered at the man getting out of the car, I noted his tawny hair and shaggy matching beard. He didn't look as if he was equipped to fix my roof, but then how was a handyman supposed to appear?

This one looked delicious!

KALEN

Nobody at the college loved sheltering in place when a storm came through. I mean, you were stuck inside, away from the windows, unable to leave until it was over. What was there to like about it? At least if I was with one of my classes, I could continue the lesson or even get ahead. But that was not today.

Of course, with my luck, it was the last day before break when shelter-in-place decided to rear its ugly head. Not only that, I was in a department meeting—a department meeting that I had been dreading and with good reason. The new dean was there with plans to make our jobs exponentially more difficult.

In their infinite wisdom, they created a master plan that included getting rid of the lower-level math class because it was one where “students at our school should already be well-versed in these topics.”

In theory, they were right. If you had the credits to qualify for admittance and test scores to back it up, you should know the information. Except, for a plethora of reasons, they weren’t “well-versed” in them, which was why we had them.

Sure, the courses didn’t count toward most of the majors, but for kids who hadn’t taken math for a couple of years or non-trads who came back to school after decades in the workforce, they were essential components of their math instruction. The curriculum focused on the building blocks they needed for success in every other mathematics course we offered. And now that the all-clear was in place, the dean

knew full well. I'd just finished spending over two hours explaining it to them, over and over again, as the lights flickered outside and the winds raged on.

Now we were finally free, and my head was pounding, my stomach growling, and all my lion wanted to do was run. Run and run and run. Fine, he also wanted to hunt himself down a little snack, but mostly he needed out of this skin.

Unlike most lions I grew up with, who loved to lie in the sun and sleep outdoors, just chilling, mine thought he was a freakin' track star. He would run anywhere and everywhere—but not today. Just the drive home showed me there were enough trees and powerlines down in this city that it would be better not to go tearing through the woods until all the limbs that were going to fall, fell. And really, for all we knew, another round of the storm was gonna whip around.

I drove to my place on the outskirts of town and went straight inside, needing to get out of my work clothes and into a pair of sweats and a T-shirt. Operation "Be a Slug" was about to begin.

This semester had already been far more stressful than most, with the new dean trying to make the college more in line with some of the larger universities he'd really wanted to be working at. He was such a pain in the ass. My colleagues and I spent ridiculous amounts of time trying to prove to him that we didn't need to make massive changes all at once.

I wasn't opposed to change as a rule. Heck, I'd been known to push a little too hard for it on multiple occasions over the years. But this was too much—too much of the wrong things. I'm sure, deep down, the dean had some really great ideas. Problem was, he hadn't shown us any yet. He was hyperfixated on consolidating classes and increasing class sizes, and those things just didn't work. Not for the kind of school environment we had.

Maybe in the big top-five schools he aspired us to be? Maybe? But I doubted it even worked there. College students were not robots. They needed a personalized experience that ginormous classes would never give them.

In any case, I was frustrated, and this time away was going to do me well.

I had a steak waiting for me to cook up and enjoy. Only, when I went to the fridge, I was met with my door hanging open, and everything inside was warm.

“What did I do?” I banged my head on the fridge door. I’d lived on my own for a long time and not once had I ever left the door open.

I pushed it closed, and it popped back open. Further investigation showed there was a box in the way.

“Okay. New plan.” Or at least there would be when I finally figured one out. For now I needed to get rid of the unsafe food.

I grabbed a garbage sack, throwing away anything that needed to be tossed for safety reasons. My pitcher of water was fine. The ketchup was fine. But all the dairy? Pretty much shot. Leftovers? Suspect. Thinking back, the last time I’d been in the fridge was last night, and 24-plus hours was far too long to trust the contents.

At least the whole thing wasn’t broken, and the freezer food was fine. Once it was cleaned out, I made sure the door was shut properly, grabbed my keys, and took my trash to the bin outside before heading to the grocery store—which was surprisingly empty.

I didn’t have time to restock the fridge fully. I mean, I had the time, but I didn’t have the energy. So I grabbed a steak and some things to make sides, and planned to check out when I saw a magazine advertising a new movie I’d been wanting to see. It was

only in theaters, but reminded me that I planned to be a slug all vacation, and coming back here in the morning was the antithesis of that goal.

Over an hour and far too many dollars later, I was pulling up to my place with a trunk full of groceries. My lion was not impressed, but he was going to need to chill. Soon enough, he'd get his steak. Fingers crossed it would cut his craving for the run.

My plan for the night was to fill my belly and have a movie marathon. Or maybe a TV show marathon. I hadn't decided. It didn't matter which. When the TV was going on, my brain was off. And I was going to leave it that way until I had to go back to work.

I reached to grab my phone—only to notice I had left it inside. I hoped. If I left it at the store I was going to need to go out again. Ugh.

Somehow I carried the groceries in with only one trip. I started the steak in a frying pan, not wanting to deal with the grill after what I was sure was going to be a disaster out back, and while it was doing its thing, I put the groceries away. It already smelled absolutely delicious. I probably should've gotten two.

Groceries away and steak flipped, I went to find my phone, which I found sitting on my bed. It was low on charge, but at least it wasn't still at the store. So there was that. As I went to put it on the charger, I noticed a new voicemail notification.

“That's weird. No one leaves messages anymore.” At least no one I communicated with. My coworkers were big into emails, and my friends and family were texting-only peeps.

It wasn't a number I recognized. I assumed it was some sort of tele-marketer or phishing scam, but it was local. Just in case, I listened to it. The first time, I couldn't believe my ears. Some guy needed help. A tree had fallen on his house, and it was

raining inside.

That wasn't unusual. I was sure many people in town had a similar situation happening. It was my lion's reaction that surprised me. He was front and center, all of his attention on the man on the phone.

I listened to it again, and my heart hurt. He was overwhelmed, to say the least. And what was worse? He called me instead of whatever contractor he thought he had the number for.

And here I was, being salty about a department meeting that went long, while this poor guy had his entire house severely damaged by the same storm that had kept me at work.

I looked at the time and decided it was too late to call tonight. Normally I didn't even bother with wrong numbers, assuming they would figure it out soon enough. With this guy? I felt the need to at least call him.

"In the morning, I'll call you back." But even as I said it, I felt yucky about it. But the reality was, I was a math professor, not a contractor. What good could I do?

My lion disagreed with me on every level and pushed on me hard. Pushing so hard that it got real close to the point where I wasn't sure I'd be able to keep him back if I kept ignoring it.

What is your problem?

Help.

No. I don't know how to help him.

Just calling him will help him. He pushed again, and this time, my hands started to morph into my paws.

“Fuck.”

Fine. I’ll go and help him. But you better behave, because I can’t have you pushing like this.

I’d never in my life worried that I wouldn’t be able to control my beast—until right now.

Now, I wasn’t so sure.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:21 am

3

ARLO

What was the guy's name?

On the piece of paper my cousin had given me, I'd listed him as "Handyman." What was I thinking? Either I hadn't remembered the name or my cousin hadn't mentioned it. Maybe he didn't know his name either, which was silly.

Hmmm, I wondered how far we'd get without me mentioning his name? It'd be easy, I figured. No one conducted a conversation with me and added "Arlo" at the beginning and end of each sentence. I could do this.

I slogged through the mud. Ewww. There was a smell after teeming rain, even if technically there hadn't been flooding. A deep dirty stink that smelled of churned-up earth and whatever had been caught up with the swirling water. I hated to think what I'd discover when the ground dried up.

"Hi." I held out my hand. "Arlo, I'm Stephen's cousin."

A scent pushed away the watery smell and invaded my nostrils. Was it the guy? Odd that a handyman would arrive at a job site laden with cologne, but I wasn't one, so what did I know? Perhaps that was his schtick for keeping the stench away.

But it gave me seconds to appreciate this tall drink of water, from the freckles scattered across his nose and cheeks, to the tawny almost rusty color of his beard and

hair, to what I imagined was a chiseled chest under his shirt and jacket.

I'd expected a smile or a nod at least and an outstretched hand, mirroring my own. But the color bleached from his cheeks, and he clutched at his belly. Was he going to be sick? I instinctively took a step back, not wanting to be covered in puke.

But he recovered and arranged his face in a smile. "That's—" He cleared his throat. "That's nice." His voice was an octave lower.

Huh? Was he jerking me around with the first sentence out of his mouth, and did his swoon-worthy looks mask an immature personality? Damn! I'd save my energy and just enjoy his good looks.

"Kalen's the name, and sorry, but I don't know any Stephen, though I'm very pleased to meet his cousin."

What a mouthful. My mind scrambled to interpret what he'd said. It zoomed past his name and that he'd never met my cousin and instead concentrated on the compliment he paid me. Maybe my first impression hadn't been wrong.

But it was kinda urgent he fixed my roof, so I put aside how sexy he was and those adorable freckles.

"Sorry, what? But you're here." That didn't get us any closer to him looking at the damage and giving me a quote.

"I am. You called, and I came."

At least we'd established that I'd called him and he wasn't some random guy turning up for whatever reason.

“Thank you. I need help.”

His gaze lowered from my face to my midsection and to my crotch. What kind of handyman was he? If it had been any other random dude, I would have told him I’d made a mistake and I already had a guy inside inspecting the damage.

But Kalen didn’t give off bad creepy-dude vibes. Hoping I wasn’t making the worst mistake of my life, I opened the gate, and he sloshed in.

“Ummm, so did my cousin’s handyman call you to help me out?”

“No, as I said, you phoned me.” He took out his phone and showed me the call history. That was my number, and he replayed the message. Definitely my voice.

I’d misdialed. Getting out my phone, I checked the number, and there was a one-digit difference. How lucky was I, making a mistake and getting Kalen as my reward?

“So, are you a handyman?” Please say yes because I want you to hang around .

He held up his hands. “I’m handy. Used to help my dad out growing up.” He peered up at the tree.

When the tree fell, I was upset it had damaged the house and sad the tree was no more. But perhaps this was the flip side to that. Meeting Kalen brightened my mood.

“I’m surprised you made it here.” I was trying to make conversation, hoping he wouldn’t leave, saying he had better things to do.

He shrugged. “I don’t live far, and you sounded desperate.”

Oh, I was. Desperate to get to know him more.

“Mmmm. There are puddles in my main room, and my favorite tree was responsible.”

He studied the tree lying at an angle and draped over part of my roof. “Condolences. I love silver maples.”

We had something in common other than me lusting over the guy.

“Yeah, me too.”

Kalen jerked his head toward my belly. “But looks as though you have a little one in the making.”

For a second my brain couldn’t comprehend what he was saying. A little one sounded like a baby. But I was cradling the cutting against me. “Hope so.”

“As it grows, you can tell the little one the story of their parent and how grand they were.”

Tears filled my eyes, and I glanced at the house while blinking them away. “I like that. Will need to remember it.”

Kalen had said he was good with his hands, and an image popped up in my head of his fingers sliding along my shaft. Had the temperature suddenly risen? There was still a stiff breeze, and it wasn’t the only thing that was stiff. Thank gods I was wearing a jacket and an oversized shirt.

But he hadn’t told me he would fix the roof.

“Can you do something about this?” I waved my free hand toward the house.

“I’m sure I can.”

How weird was it that the wrong number I'd dialed had not only brought this gorgeous man into my life—or my garden—but he also had the skill to do the repair work. Or so he said. He could be a conman and charge me an exorbitant fee for doing little. My bank balance would be deleted and my heart crushed. But I decided to take a chance.

Maybe a foolhardy one, but I sensed Kalen was a good guy.

“Repaired many roofs, have you?” I had to at least find out if he had clamored on top of a house. Helping out his dad could mean he hefted bags of cement or unloaded steel beams.

“I have, and I understand the physics of it all.” Okay, that was more than I did. I'd flunked physics. “Can't have you living in a house that's not watertight.”

We agreed we'd need to call a tree-removal company to remove the silver maple, and again I got emotional thinking of saying goodbye to my favorite tree. But it had to be done. Kalen couldn't assess the damage until the tree was out of the way. I'd arrange to keep some of it to burn in the fireplace. Being warm and toasty would be my tree's last goodbye.

“They'll be busy with the damage the storm caused.”

But Kalen had a friend, and he took his phone from his back pocket. “Don't dial the wrong number,” I quipped.

He caught my eye, and there was a flicker of movement. “I'll try not to, but if it works out like yours did, I'll chance it.”

He turned away as the person on the other end answered while I tried to interpret whether what he'd said referred to meeting me or that he needed a job, or that I was

in need and he had the skills to help out.

If the tree people couldn't come today, I might have to move out. But that would create more water damage, as I wouldn't be here to empty buckets. The water level would be rising in the containers in the minutes Kalen and I had been talking, so I'd have to get back to the house soon.

"They're on their way."

Was this magic? That the company happened to be free on what might be their busiest day of the year. I sniffed the air, but other than the scent of crushed leaves and bark intermingling with Karen's scent and the whiff of mud, I didn't detect anything unusual. But how would I know what magic smelled like?

"That's amazing. Thanks." He relayed the estimate, though they couldn't give me a definite figure until they arrived.

Now what? Did I offer him a cold drink while we waited?

"Got any potting mixture in that shed?"

Kalen wanting to do gardening in this weather was a little surprising, and my brain couldn't form an answer. "Ummm, yeah. Did you want to borrow some?"

"Nah, not for me but that little guy you're holding."

"Oh, the cutting. Good thinking."

We skirted the tree, and I patted the trunk, told the tree they could rest now and the little shoot would make him proud. I lifted the cutting so its leaves brushed against his parent, saying a final goodbye.

Gulping back more tears, I got a pot from the shed and we emptied soil into it. After putting the cutting into the soil, I gave it a little water.

“Here’s to new life,” Kalen said.

KALEN

The wind was still intense as I pulled up to the house and climbed outside. It was wreaking havoc on my beast because all the smells were just flowing by, too quick to separate them before they were gone and a new batch was there. The neighborhood was filled with a lot of felled trees, the fresh wood the predominant undertone.

It was going to take a lot to clean up this neighborhood, that was for sure. Most of what I could see were tree branches, but when I faced the house I was heading to, it was clear that this was not just a branch. It was a tree—a beautiful tree at that.

I walked up the steps to the front gate, and there stood a sexy omega. But more than that—my mate.

My beast scented him instantly, proclaiming mine, mine, mine over and over again in my head.

Yes, he's ours.

I half wondered if my lion had sensed it earlier, simply by listening to his voice. Was that why he pushed so hard for me to follow up? It would explain the erratic behavior of my beast, that was for sure.

My mate introduced himself, and I did the same. We even had some small talk, but my mind wasn't fully present. I was too busy in my head trying to figure out what to

do next.

The sexy human was my mate. Of that I was confident. But honestly, I didn't know how to make any of this work. If he was a lion, or even a squirrel, or a chipmunk, or a woodpecker—whatever animals lived around here that liked trees—I'd have just said, "You're mine."

He would have said, "You're mine back," and we'd be starting our life together already. Or we'd at least be naked by now.

Instead, I was standing there in sweatpants with a semi-hard-on, unsure what to do and trying my hardest not to push too fast.

But as confused as I was on how to go from stranger at the door to telling him we were mates, one thing was for sure—I had to help him. This disaster was huge and had to be dealt with ASAP. The problem being, of course, that every other house that had a tree on it needed help too. There would be a wait, and time wasn't something he had. Every rainfall until the tree was removed was going to increase the damage.

The entire situation was bad. There was a lot of water damage, roof damage, outdoor damage. A ton was going to need to be done.

I wasn't an expert by any means, but growing up in the pride, I had helped with a lot of things—a lot of repairs, a lot of renovations. Sure, there was always someone telling me what to do, but I had paid attention. And now that I knew this was my mate, I felt like it had to be me.

He deserved a mate who would take care of him.

And part of that meant getting his house back in order. I started with calling in a favor to get the tree removed. It was outside my skill set and needed to be done before

anything else. I could help, but I didn't have the supplies to do it myself.

"How much is this going to be again?"

He kept asking about costs, and I didn't really have an answer for him. Obviously, I was only going to charge him for supplies—maybe not even those. But that didn't seem to work for him, and it made sense. There were a lot of scammers out there. You didn't just want to give carte blanche to someone when it came to your finances.

"We're gonna have to figure things out after your insurance company comes and looks at everything," I told him. "They'll do a better job seeing if there's anything deeper than what we do, right?"

"But that's not answering what it's going to cost. If they say they'll give me \$500, I can't handle that."

"Please, let's not worry about money. It'll all work out." I'd make sure of it. "This was an act of God, and everything about that tree was healthy. I need to go outside now and look at the tree from that angle."

He nodded, and then his hand just came out—almost as if he was going to take mine. But then he snatched it right back and said, "Follow me."

Maybe I was reading too much into that moment, but it felt like he was sensing it too—that he knew I was his and he was mine. Or maybe that was wishful thinking.

Whatever the case, going outside was a good idea because in here, his scent just wrapped around me, called to me, and had me wanting to do things that really needed to wait.

He needed help, not to be hit on. And that's how he would see it.

I needed to call home, talk to one of my brothers, ask them what to do, because I had always assumed that if and when I found my mate, they too would be a shifter. And I was woefully unprepared.

“We need to get this tree down first, and once the guys are done with that, I’ll be able to tarp it and stop the influx of rain.”

I would’ve offered to do this part myself if the tree had been smaller. But it wasn’t and removing the maple was tricky at best. It wouldn’t take much to increase the damage, and then there was the whole safety aspect.

“Yeah, I need to get the tree down and tarps up, first and foremost.” He was talking more to himself than to me.

He shoved his hands into his front pockets, biting his bottom lip. Gods, I wanted to be the one doing that to his lip... and more. How could he be so freaking adorable in such a time as this?

“I’ve done trees before,” I told him. “And this one is more than I can handle, but if they want, I can help. We’ll know soon enough.”

“And how much is this going to be?”

I put my hand on his shoulder. “Listen, I know you don’t know me at all, and I deserve zero of your trust, but please, in this—trust me. It will all work out. I know these guys, and they will wait for the insurance to pay out.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I’m sure.” I took out my phone. “We really should take as many pictures as possible for your claim. Did you already call it in?”

He shook his head.

“How about you do that, while I get as many pictures out here as I can manage? I’ll let you know when the guys get here.”

The wind kicked up a tick, and water from the leaves fell into our faces.

“Ugh.” I shook my head.

“That’s my cue.” He jogged around the house to make the call, and I started my picture documentation.

A few minutes later, the guys showed up. George, the owner of the crew, was a beaver shifter I had as a student my first year at the college. He told me time and again that he owed me one for getting math to make sense for him, and I was calling it in.

“Whoa, this is pretty bad.” George grabbed the back of his neck.

“Yeah, and I really need to tarp the roof pretty much now.” I didn’t want to be a dick and rush him, but also... it was a rush job for a reason.

“We’ve got you, and you’ll get the family discount for sure.”

“Family, like third cousin twice removed or like your grandfather?” I asked, and he burst out laughing.

“You pay my crew’s hours and we call it even.” That was so much better than I dared hope.

“Excellent. This is my mate’s house, and he’s very worried about money.”

“Mate’s house? Not your house?”

“Yeah, long story short... I met him tonight because of the tree... and he’s human, so...”

“He doesn’t know.”

“Exactly.”

A hand settled on my shoulder, and when I turned around, it was one of the crew. “Crew and I can’t take money from something that gave you your mate. We’re not monsters.” He pointed to his mating mark. “I met mine at the zoo. I know, the irony.”

I already liked these guys, and for sure they were getting paid.

“We’ll be back at dawn with the heavier equipment. Want us to take pictures as we go?” George was sent here by the goddess. There was no other explanation.

“Absolutely.”

My mate came out a minute later to let me know he filed the claim and to meet the crew. Just like he had with me, he pestered them for a figure, but unlike with me, George caved quickly.

“Insurance should cover it all, but I owe this guy a favor, so at most, it will be \$500.”

My mate snapped his attention to me. “Don’t waste your favors on me. You don’t even know me.”

“Maybe not, but I know you need this favor more than I do right now. My place isn’t raining inside.”

George interrupted with some details, and I was grateful. It had been on the tip of my tongue to call him mate, and it wasn't time for that. Soon, though. Very soon, because now that my lion had met him, he wasn't going to sit back and watch me play the human wooing game without a fight. He wanted to meet our mate and now. I didn't blame him. I might not know our omega well, but what I did know of him was pretty fantastic.

5

ARLO

“For you.”

Kalen handed me a take-out coffee.

“Thanks.” He’d discovered I enjoyed a cappuccino and starting yesterday had brought me one on his way here.

I took a sip. It was so good. Thick froth on the top that was like a dessert. Who didn’t love a sweet for breakfast? And beneath the sweetness was strong coffee that got me ready to face the day.

“You like your coffee strong and black.” Kalen drank Americano, and he’d thrown it back as though it was a thimbleful of espresso.

He raised his cup to mine, and we clinked them. “To a good day—no, a great one.”

“I just baked apple cinnamon muffins. They pair well with coffee.”

He glanced at me, his plump kissable lips parted slightly, and I strained to see his tongue poking through. The same tongue that would make me scream if it got close to my nipple, belly button, or hole.

Oops! Maybe I shouldn’t have invited Kalen for something to eat because slick was

streaming out of my hole. I'd need a change of clothes.

"Then you should have one. Or maybe two."

His words pierced the vision of his mouth on me. "Oh, I intend to." My mind rewound what I'd said. "But I was offering you some."

"You enjoy cooking?"

"Enjoy might be too strong a word, but I had apples that needed to be used up."

"I'd love to taste something you made with your two hands."

I gripped the porch railing as my knees buckled. Every word out of his mouth, no matter how innocent, I interpreted with a slice of lust and shiver of desire.

"I hope they don't disappoint." It'd be awkward if they were dry and crumbly.

"Never." His eyes grew dark, and he licked around his mouth. If he was trying to kill me, he was more than halfway there.

I brought a plate of muffins onto the stairs, and we sat chatting and eating. The muffins got Kalen's seal of approval, and I decided I'd bake something every morning.

"The garden looks so empty without my tree." There was a gaping hole where my baby had stood, one I hadn't filled in. I'd been putting it off, thinking once I did, all traces along with my memories would be erased. But life was full of gains and losses, hellos and goodbyes. Nothing could take away my memories, and I had tons of pics of the garden with my tree in it.

“But you can plant a pretty shrub there or put a bench. It’s the perfect location to drink coffee in the early mornings.”

Maybe he was right.

With the broken shingles removed and a tarp over the roof, Kalen had been fixing the damaged sections. Instead of working in the attic, I’d been in a small room off the living area in case he needed to ask me something. That was what I told myself.

But it’d been distracting having him bounding up and down the ladder, and from the corner of my eye, I’d been observing his physique, his hands as they gripped the rungs, the floppy hat perched on his head and a blob of sunscreen on his nose.

Since he’d started the repairs, I’d been working at night to make up for what I hadn’t done during the day. Spending hours staring at my handyman instead of the computer screen didn’t pay the bills. Who knew?

“Arlo?”

My body was on high alert at my name on Kalen’s lips. More than once since we’d met, his lips had been on mine and my cock swelled, but only in my dreams. I fanned my face, hoping the hot-pink blush would fade before Kalen and I came face to face.

“Coming!” I dashed onto the porch. My handyman had pushed his hat back and was scratching his scalp. His shirt was dotted with sweat and he had one foot on the porch stair, emphasizing the muscles in his thigh.

“I need to come in and examine the ceiling in the kitchen.”

“Sure. You don’t need to ask permission.” But I was glad he did.

Kalen removed his boots and padded inside at my heels. His presence behind me sent goosebumps marching over my skin and flaunting their spiky tips. I shivered.

“Are you cold?” he asked. He’d been outside in the sun, which after days of rain was making up for lost shiny time and blazing down, soaking up any remaining puddles and hardening what had been mud.

“The room I’m working in doesn’t get much sun,” I fibbed.

“Shame you don’t make use of the attic. Seems like a perfect place for a home office.”

My office had been spared any damage thanks to the design of the house.

“It is, but I like to change things up. I get bored being in the same location. There’s always something new to see.” Like a handsome handyman flexing his muscles.

“Mmmm. The same old same old breeds boredom. I get it.”

He peered at the ceiling as I made my way to the sink. “How’s Princess?”

“Doing well.” As the mature tree had been female—I’d discovered the tree’s red flowers indicated it was female after I moved in—so Kalen had named the cutting. She needed a mixture of sun and shade at this stage, so I moved the pot a couple of times a day.

“Glad to hear our baby is okay. Look after her because we want her to grow big and strong.”

“I will.”

He tramped outside, and I leaned over the sink and tossed water on my face. Whenever I was near Kalen an inferno ignited in my belly and sweat slid down my spine. Jealousy stabbed at me as I wondered if he affected other omegas in the same way.

I returned to my makeshift office, determined to get to work and not pay attention to Kalen. He hadn't given me a reasonable explanation of why, when a random guy called asking for help, he upped and offered it. It was his summer vacation, and he should have been at the beach or hiking or partying with friends. Not sweltering under the summer sun.

The phone buzzed. Stephen.

"How did you fare during the storm?" He didn't bother with greetings but jumped straight into the conversation.

"Hmmm, shame you didn't call me after it had passed." Stephen and I were the same age, and we often teased and riled one another up.

"I was busy with, you know... flooding."

I told him about my roof and how my favorite tree was now firewood.

"What?" I held the phone away from my ear as he screeched. "Why didn't you come here? There's always a bed or sofa free."

I explained the structure of the house was intact.

"Did you get hold of Mackie?"

Oh, that was the handyman's name. "Mackie. No. I..."

“Why not? Don’t tell me you’re living with huge holes in your roof.”

“You’ll never believe what happened.” I related my mistake and how Kalen had turned up and he was great. “We’re parents!”

“What? He put his dick in you and you’re already pregnant? My head hurts.”

I explained about Princess.

“You’re a freaking jerk,” he scoffed. He ranted about Kalen not having the proper credentials and he could have ripped me off. “And what if he steals your valuables?”

Other than a computer and a phone, I didn’t have many because I’d sunk all my savings into a mortgage.

“Is he hot?”

“I’m not going to answer that.”

A slap resounded through the phone. I knew Stephan well enough to know what that was. He’d whacked his forehead.

“He is. You can’t hire someone based on a hotness scale.”

“I don’t know about that.” I’d had crappy building work done by professional companies, so taking a chance on Kalen didn’t seem to be a big risk.

“I guess you’ll have to learn what happens when you hire someone off the street with no references.”

I was certain Kalen had plenty of those, though they might not be from house owners.

Again tiny slivers of jealousy threaded and burned through my veins. I clenched my mug of tea, the warmth seeping into my hands as I closed my eyes until the green-headed monster slithered away.

After Stephen left, I concentrated on work, my fingers flying over the keyboard as I pushed Kalen out of my head. After downing mugs of tea and more tea, I traipsed back and forth to the bathroom, determined not to look at what Kalen was doing.

He didn't have to come inside to pee because there was a toilet in the shed, as it had once been a sort of in-law apartment. It was too ramshackle to house a guest, but the bathroom was in working order. And Kalen disappeared during his lunch hour.

Was he visiting a significant other and enjoying a quickie?

Maybe it would be better if I took my computer and worked at a coffee shop, because Kalen, like a virus—a very nice one with amber eyes and a sexy body—had invaded my mind.

This obsession with Kalen had to stop!

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:21 am

6

KALEN

I walked around the house one last time to make sure that everything looked even in the roof work I just finished. It came together remarkably quickly, and I feared that somewhere along the way I let the shingles go crooked or wavy. It was the same task over and over and over again, which meant that success should be easy, but also that I could space out and mess up horribly.

Thankfully, it was not the second. I had to admit, it looked pretty good. That summer spent with my dad redoing pride roofs had really paid off. I hadn't realized exactly how much I'd picked up because I had just been the one who did what my dad said, as he said it—never anything past it. Hammer this nail, carry this shingle, etc., etc.

I needed to call him and thank him for the skill. I also needed to tell him about finding my mate, but not until I figured out things with Arlo. Right now we were in a holding pattern, and it was my fault. I didn't want to make him uncomfortable... ever, but for sure not when I still had a lot to finish up. That would put him in a bad spot, and he already had enough stressors with the storm damage.

"Looking good." The roof was officially done. I would run the hose over it to make sure I didn't have anything askew, but I felt confident in my work.

Most of the clean-up was done. The leftover shingles were in the shed, and the old ones were already in the dumpster I rented, as was the old plywood I replaced. All that was left was making sure the nails were gone.

I went to my trunk to grab the pole magnet I borrowed from a neighbor, and went into the backyard to sweep for nails or other bits of metal that might be there. The last thing my mate needed was to walk outside barefoot and end up with a nail in his foot. And as careful as I planned to be, there were going to be some nails even after I swept. They were tricky like that.

I broke the yard into imaginary sections and methodically swept each one multiple times. Just with that, I'd collected far more than I wished had existed. I tossed them in the dumpster, and then went back and started again. Until I could do all of the areas and not get a single nail, I was going to keep going.

My lion wanted to go and run, not do this—until I reminded him that this was for our mate's safety. And suddenly, he was all in. I had to admit, he was being pretty patient with my snail's pace. At this point, I wasn't sure if it was me who was going slow or if my mate wasn't feeling it.

I'd planned to tell him multiple times, but when the time finally arrived, I second-guessed myself. Every. Single. Time.

Tomorrow, I was going to move on to working inside the house, and I'd have more opportunities. Or so I kept telling myself. He worked from home, so I'd probably see him just as much as I did with the roof repair, which was nowhere near enough.

It was time to make a plan and follow through, no matter what. We'd never move forward if I never started the conversation. It wasn't like a human would say, "Hey, I'm sensing a lion here... are we mates or something?" That would be nice, though.

A car pulled into the driveway, parking across the sidewalk because the dumpster was in the way. I didn't recognize him. It wasn't any of the tree crew, that was for sure. But when they saw me, their face morphed.

They were pissed, and I wasn't sure at what.

Did they think my pull magnet was a weapon? It didn't look like one to me, but I was also the one holding it.

"Hey, man, be careful. I'm grabbing the nails. Don't want one of them coming through your shoe," I called out preemptively so he had no reason to be scared.

Scared? He wasn't.

Angry? Very much so.

He marched straight up to me, finger pointing at me, nearly hitting my chest. "How dare you."

What was he so mad about? All I was doing was fixing a roof... unless...

"Excuse me?" Maybe it was a mistaken identity. I didn't know who he might think I was, but—yikes, if that were the case.

"I said, how dare you!" He took another step forward, my personal space now depleted. "Taking advantage of Arlo like this!"

Take advantage? How the heck did he get to that conclusion?

"I don't know who you think I am, but I assure you, I haven't taken advantage of him." What the eff was going on? He came barrelling in here and practically had flames coming out of his ears.

I inhaled deeply—yep, definitely human. Crap. I couldn't even let my lion closer to show I wasn't to be messed around with. I needed to deal with this like an average

person with no animal inside.

“Listen, you must have the wrong person. I’m the handyman.”

“Yeah? And did you give him an estimate?”

And it was finally starting to make sense. He, like Arlo, was worried about the final number. In hindsight, I should’ve made up a figure. But I didn’t and now this guy was up my ass. But also, why was he so invested?

“No, we’re waiting for the insurance company to let us know what they will pay out.” That sounded reasonable, right? I wouldn’t take the money, of course. Arlo should keep it for any upgrades he might need in the future. But it was a way to push the entire conversation back a bit.

“Likely story.” He folded his arms. “If you think you can just come in here, do work, and then put a lien on this house so that you get it, you’ve got another thing coming. No one is going to mess with my Arlo.”

Not Arlo. My Arlo.

Mine.

Yes, ours. Behave. Not that I wanted to.

“Listen, dude, I promise you, I am not here to con him. He called. I came. I’m working. Done.” I figured the fewer details the better, but the way he was glaring at me, maybe I miscalculated that.

“Yeah, okay.” He scowled. “So riddle me this, if you’re not here to con him, then why exactly are you here?”

Because he's my mate, the one fate put on this planet just for me. Because my job is to make his life better, to take care of him, to be there when things went wrong.

"Because he called and needed the help."

Why was this so confusing to him? I had done nothing to indicate I was here to steal from him in any capacity, and still?—

Ours. My lion growled, and it nearly escaped my chest. Shit. My lion was saying that—he thought—he thought that Arlo and this guy were together.

Fuck. This was worst-case scenario playing out in real time. Arlo had someone in his life, someone that wasn't me, someone that was protective enough that they hadn't even sensed the danger they were in by poking a lion, someone who was... human.

"Listen, I am not trying to get between you two. I promise. I'm just helping him. He needed the help."

Before any conversation could go further, the man stomped off into the house.

What I wanted to do was follow him and fight for Arlo, but I couldn't. If that was who Arlo wanted to be with, then that was that. He didn't need someone coming into his life and adding drama. He had enough stressors with the house situation.

But knowing this was the right thing to do and that I was giving my mate what he needed didn't make my heart hurt any less.

It didn't make my lion any calmer.

It didn't make any of this any better.

I took a few cleansing breaths and then went back to work, picking up nails—this time, counting each one as I did so as a distraction. Because if I allowed myself to, my mind would wander into that house where I imagined the two of them kissing, telling each other sweet nothings or—or more.

And I was not okay with that.

But I'd have to be.

Because if I was going to be a good mate, I had to be one in the way Arlo needed me to be—which might mean giving him up before he was ever truly mine.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:21 am

7

ARLO

Stephen was an asshat!

Not all the time, but today he'd taken on the role of the Number One Asshat of all possible asshats! If I was being generous, I guessed he was trying to protect me, but he was going about it in the wrong way. What the right way would be, I wasn't sure.

He could have parked outside the gate and glowered at Kalen or eaten his lunch with me while keeping an eye on my sexy handyman.

Instead, he lit into the guy, and Kalen had every right to down tools and piss off. If I'd been him, that was what I would have done.

I was also annoyed at myself for cowering in the house when I should have told Stephen to shut up. But every second that passed when I wanted to butt in, I stayed where I was, needing to hear Kalen's reply. If Stephen was an asshat, I was a junior one for not putting my cousin in his place and defending Kalen.

Now after eavesdropping on their conversation, I discovered Kalen didn't give a damn about me. I guessed he just got off on doing good deeds for strangers in need.

Since the day of the storm when he answered my call, I'd looked forward to every morning when he arrived, coffee in hand, and I'd have a yummy treat waiting. Now I wouldn't be able to look the guy in the face. I'd been a fool.

Ahhh!

And Kalen thought Stephen and I were together and in a relationship. I loved my cousin, but yikes!

Stephen stomped into the house as Kalen got back to work.

“What the fuck?” I had muffins left over from breakfast, but he wasn’t getting any.

“That’s how you thank me!” He slammed onto a chair, and it groaned under the sudden weight.

“Thank you?” I shouted, but on realizing my loud voice would be heard outside, I lowered my voice. “Why would I thank you when you’ve berated a nice guy, one who is fixing my roof? If he takes off, leaving the job half done, you’re getting up there and finishing it.”

“Don’t I get a coffee or something?”

Way to change the subject, but I needed more caffeine, so I added water to the coffee machine. I had my back to Stephen, partly because I was fussing with the coffee and partly because I was too angry to look at him, and I was keeping my gaze on Kalen, hoping he didn’t drop tools.

My cousin peered at the dark liquid in the mug when I passed it to him. “It looks strong.” He got up and took milk from the fridge.

“Be thankful I didn’t poison it.” I sipped mine and ewww, it was strong, but I refused to admit that to Stephen. I’d have to suffer and drink the lot.

“If you wanted a date, you could have used an app.”

I kicked him under the table. “Keep your voice down. And did I say anything about dating the guy?” I did, but I wasn’t telling Stephen what was in my heart.

“I know you.” He made a face as he sipped the coffee.

That was the problem with family and good friends. They were aware of your history and flung it in your face when appropriate.

“Not as well as you think,” I snarked.

His hand clasping the mug froze halfway to his mouth. “No! You slept with the dude already? Messy.” He put the cup down and poured in more milk. “This needs sugar.”

“You know where it’s kept.” I should have tipped my coffee and his down the sink and made more, but I was peeved and upset, not only at him but also at Kalen. The poor guy had done nothing wrong, but I was irrationally angry at him for not liking me, and so I punished myself by drinking coffee that tasted like motor oil? Ugh, make it make sense.

“And no, I haven’t slept with him or seen him naked. We haven’t kissed. We have a professional relationship.”

“Right.” Stephen rolled his eyes. “I saw you checking him out through the window.”

“Just doing my job as a project manager.”

“He’s conning you.” Stephen got up and took my mug and his and tossed the coffee into the sink. “Also you can’t make coffee for shit. I’m buying you a new machine, one with those pod thingies.”

“They’re terrible for the environment, which you would know if you read anything

but comics and gaming instructions!”

Stephen grunted, but the coffee he made was ten times better than mine.

“Why do you think he’s a conman?” I leaned back in the chair and clicked my fingers. “Come on, where’s the evidence?”

“I told you on the phone. Who answers a wrong number and instead of saying that and ending the call, they do what the person on the other end asks them to? That’s messed up.”

“I left a message. You’d have known that if you listened. And it’s called kindness and compassion for your fellow man, woman, and child.”

Stephen leaned forward. “Cut the crap.” He waved his hand back and forth between us. “Stop the blustering and tell me the truth.”

Damn! “Kalen is a nice guy, a good guy, I can sense it. He’s helping me out and seems to be doing a good job.”

“Seems to be is the important word in that sentence.”

I knew deep down Kalen was one of the good ones. How lucky I’d been to get hold of him and not some ass who charged me ten times the going rate.

“Tell me, Arlo, what are you going to do when he says he can’t pay his rent, or he’s behind on his mortgage?”

“Stop it.” I glanced out the window, not to look for Kalen but to blink away my tears. “Do you want to know how I feel about him?” I pounded a fist against my chest. “In here, I feel a connection.”

“Pfft!” Stephen didn’t believe in love at first sight. Lust? For sure. “I have a connection with the mechanic who fixes my truck. He does the work, and I pay him.”

I’d never experienced the pull between me and Kalen previously. From his hair with a reddish tint, to the matching beard and his cologne that drew me in, I wanted to wrap myself and roll around in everything Kalen.

“You need a checklist like you have on the computer. Pros and cons of falling for a stranger.”

Love, if that was what this was—and it was too early to use the L word—couldn’t be weighed based on checking off points on a list. Emotions didn’t always make sense, you couldn’t categorize them. They just were!

“That’s too clinical, so no!”

Stephen fiddled with his mug. “Have you told him about this so-called connection?”

“No, I already said that.” Did I? I thought so.

“And what indication has he given that he’s into you and you’re not his mark? I guarantee he’s biding his time. You might go on a date and then wham!” Stephen slammed a fist on his palm. “He asks for money.”

“He brings me coffee every morning.”

My cousin’s head fell back. “That’s because what you make is shit. The guy is buttering you up.”

That conjured up an image of Kalen rubbing butter all over my naked body. Oh yes, I’d be up for that. Sweat dotted my upper lip, and Stephen stuck a finger down his

throat and gagged.

“Stop that.”

“What?” I placed what I hoped was an innocent expression on my face. “Not doing anything.”

“I tell you what. Ask him.”

If he wanted to cover me with butter and lick it off? Or slip and slide into me? I yanked at my T-shirt ‘cause it was getting hot in here.

“Ask him what his intentions are?”

Stephen sounded like an early-twentieth-century father quizzing his son or daughter about a guy they’d been talking to or flirting with.

“I will not.” Kalen would definitely run if I queried whether he wanted to put his dick in me.

“Not about sex.” My cousin slapped a palm on his brow. “Ask why he’s doing this and why he accepted the job.” His eyes opened wide. “I dare you.”

“No. A thousand times no.”

Stephen washed up his mug and leaned against the sink. “What are you afraid of?”

That he’d leave and I’d never see him again.

“I’m going, but I suggest you consider what I’ve said.” He picked up his keys and left, the door banging behind me. He strode past Kalen without acknowledging him

and drove off.

Thank gods he'd gone 'cause he was annoying me. I wandered into my makeshift office but sat staring at the blank computer screen. Hours passed and I buried myself in my work, but a question continued popping up in my head. What if I did ask Kalen, and did I want to know the answer?

I crept into the kitchen because some of the floorboards squeaked, and I peeked out the window. Kalen was headed this way, and I squatted on the floor, hoping he hadn't seen me.

"Arlo, are you here?"

KALEN

I wasn't sad to see the man leave. Not in the slightest. And he might not know that I was a shifter or what a shifter even was, but he must've sensed I was a threat on some level because he didn't come anywhere near me. He came across as the type of guy who would go out of his way to get me riled up again.

He did slam the house door and the car door and glared at me as he backed out, so it was safe to say he still wasn't a fan of mine. Same, buddy. Same. I did, however, prefer his temper fit to another confrontation, and it was safer for him. It was getting harder and harder to keep my lion from at least showing through my eyes, if not through my claws or my scent. If he'd come over to be a dick again, I'd have had to leave or risk him seeing things he shouldn't as a human.

I'd made two complete rounds looking for nails without getting a single nail before calling it done. I'd keep the magnet pole in the car and try again tomorrow, just to be safe. But I was feeling pretty good about the cleanup.

After securing it in the trunk, I went back into the house to let Arlo know that I was leaving for the day. I wasn't sure how bad things had or had not gotten with his boyfriend, but from the way he was staring at the door as I walked in, I suspected it was for sure not sunshine and roses. But also... I couldn't quite read his face. Was he scared, disappointed, tired?

"Hey, I just wanted to let you know the roof is done. If you wanted to come out and

see it.” I slapped on my happy face, acting as if I hadn’t even met his boyfriend.

“I trust you.” He very much didn’t sound like he did.

“Okay, I can send you pictures.” Trust me or not, he’d need those for the insurance company.

“It’s fine.” Which never, ever, ever, in the history of ever, meant it was fine. Not a single time.

“And I did the best I could with the nails. I don’t think there are any left, but maybe just be a little cautious until I check it a few more times. If you’re going out barefoot.”

He didn’t meet my eyes the entire time, instead looking at the spot right above me.

“It’s a muddy mess. I won’t be out there without shoes.”

Something was definitely wrong. What did that man say to him? Now I wished he had come over to me so my lion could scare him.

“Hey,” I took a couple of steps closer, and when he didn’t move, I decided it was safe to cross over the rest of the way to him. “Is everything okay? For real? You just seem... off.”

He closed his eyes and took a few breaths before answering me. “Why did you help me?”

Yep, this was 100% that guy’s fault. Whatever he had said had Arlo doubting my sincerity. Crap.

“Because you called me. And you needed help.” It was the truth. Sure, he was my mate, but I couldn’t think of a scenario where I wouldn’t have stepped up. Not with a message like he left.

“That’s what I thought. I don’t understand.” He cracked his eyes open. This time I could read them... fear. But not fear of me or the beast he might be sensing within me. No. This was fear of my answer, and I didn’t quite understand the question.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean... it’s not because... because you’re interested in me?”

Oh. Did that mean he felt it too? Please let it be that he felt it too. But also, it could be that liking him was a bad thing and admitting it would get me kicked out. Given he had a boyfriend, I opted not to answer the question, but instead let him know my intentions as much as I hated them.

“Listen, I promise you, I’m not trying to intrude on your relationship.” As much as I wished it didn’t exist.

“My relationship?” He tilted his head to the side.

“Yeah, he already told me to back off. Not in those words, but yeah.”

“You mean my cousin? Cousin Stephen?” Arlo grabbed the back of his neck. “He was just here, I heard you arguing.”

“Oh. I guess I did mean your cousin.” I wish he hadn’t heard us fighting but was thrilled to discover he was family.

“He’s always so protective, like I’m a little baby lamb surrounded by lions and he is

the only one who can save me.”

Only one lion, and while I may want to eat him, he was in absolutely no danger from my beast. That hit a little close.

“I’m gonna ask again. Are you helping me because you’re interested... in me?” He rubbed the back of his head with the heel of his hand. “Maybe answer it this time.”

I hesitated. He was right. My mate deserved a real answer.

“I’d have helped you regardless, but yes... I like you.”

He let out a long breath. “Good, because I like you too and not just because you are fixing my house.”

“Just to clarify, when I said I liked you, I mean that I’m interested... that I’d like to see... maybe...”

I brushed some hair out of his face before realizing I hadn’t cleaned my hands. Whoops. I pulled it right back.

“Same. I like you too and want to see where it goes.” Knowing full well I already had visions of the two of us growing old together.

“I thought... I thought a lot of things,” I confessed, “but one of them was that you were already taken. And I’m not that kind of alpha. I’d never step on anyone’s toes or try and get with their omega.”

“No problem with that here. I don’t have an alpha. I do have a cousin, though.”

“I’m kind of okay with a cousin who doesn’t like me.” He’d either grow to like me or

not. He was being protective, so my guess was that with time he might not want me dead?

“Don’t take it personally.” He rolled his eyes. “Stephen is Stephen. But he means well, and he cares for me. And honestly? Not having a contract in place with absolute money values? That is a red flag.”

“Okay, fair. But I wasn’t meaning it to be. I just didn’t want to have you stress over it.” Which worked out not at all.

“Which made me stress more.” I loved that his timidity from when I walked in had fallen away and he was sharing more freely.

“Also fair. But how about this? I honestly think the insurance is going to pay far more money than I need. So let’s not worry about it.”

“And if they don’t?” Great. He was still worried.

“I’ll fight for you until they do.”

“Okay.” He didn’t sound enthused by the idea, but the reality was, with me doing most of the labor, they were going to pay out plenty.

“So now what?” He shoved his hands into his front pockets.

“I was thinking maybe we could go on a date?” Less thinking about it and more that it popped into my head. People were still big into dates. At least that’s how it was on the television. Most of my experience with humans was at the college, and college kids were not a decent sample set for how most humans acted.

“I’d like that.”

“Excellent. When did you want to go? This is my break, so I’m pretty open.” The storm couldn’t have come at a more perfect time in that respect.

“I’m free tonight.”

My lion puffed up.

Mine.

Ours.

Mine.

Ours .

My beast took his desire to see us sooner rather than later as a good sign. He wouldn’t have been so quick to offer tonight if he weren’t really interested, right? I was going with that.

“I can do tonight.” Even if I hadn’t been, I’d have made sure to remedy that. “I do need to go home and shower because—if you haven’t noticed—I’m pretty gross.”

“You could never be gross.” He looked me up and down. “You do need a shower. Or two.”

“I’m not that—” I glanced down at my hands. “Yeah, I am that bad. How about I go home, shower and change, and then we go on our date?”

“I’d like that.”

Normally, I dawdled when it came to leaving, not ready to be away from him. But

this time, after a quick chat about the date, I left without hesitation. Because the sooner I got back to my place, took a shower, and came back, the sooner I could start exploring a real relationship with my mate—one that we were taking at his pace—which, as it turned out, wasn't as slow as I feared it might be.

Go, fate, go.

9

ARLO

Is it time ? I asked myself for the hundredth time.

It wasn't, but it was another minute closer to when Kalen would collect me than when I'd last looked.

He'd told me he'd prepare food but to wear shoes suitable for walking. That could be anything. Wandering along the riverbank and stopping at a bar for cocktails before eating our picnic waterside. Or maybe it was some indoor experience. I hoped it wasn't a gym. I hated when people left the machines with sweat dribbling over the metal and didn't wipe them down. Gross!

After checking myself out in the mirror and admiring how my butt looked in the tight black tracksuit pants, I stood with my nose pressed against the window until headlights swept over the porch.

Grabbing my keys and phone, I slammed the door and raced toward the gate, the car's lights shining in my face. I leaped in and grinned at my date.

"Hi." Too soon to kiss? Probably.

"Hi, yourself." He grinned and backed onto the road.

"Are you going to tell me where we're headed or do I have to wait? The suspense is

killing me.”

“Can’t have that.” He took his eyes off the road and shot me a glance. “You’ll see when we get there, but I hope you like stars.”

Stars? As in celebrities? I’d never lined up for autographs at a movie premiere or wanted to be part of a reality show.

“As in famous people?”

He chuckled. “No.” He pointed upward. “The ones twinkling overhead.”

Oh, we were going to the planetarium. “Cool.” I wasn’t sure why I needed hiking gear and comfortable shoes but shrugged off my confusion.

But instead of heading downtown, Kalen drove to the city outskirts and continued away from the built-up area.

Fear fluttered in my belly, and Stephen’s words about Kalen’s motives echoed in my head. No, he was wrong, and I knew Kalen and he didn’t.

“So where are we going?” He pulled into a driveway and in the distance was a large house, lights blazing in the windows.

“My friend lives here, and he’s given me permission to take you up his mountain.”

I froze. His mountain? Was that a sex thing? I gripped the seatbelt, my palms oozing sweat. Kalen didn’t take the road toward the house but veered to the right and parked at the bottom of what appeared to be a steep slope. It didn’t look much like a mountain. A big hill perhaps.

“Ready?” He grabbed a picnic basket from the back seat plus a blanket.

“It’s kinda dark.” This wasn’t a national or state park with paths lined with lights. There were dark blobs and shadows, and the only light was provided by the house.

Kalen put the basket in one hand and flipped the blanket over his shoulder. He offered me his other hand. “I’ve got you.”

His warm palm gave me comfort, but unless his eyesight was heaps better than mine, I was worried we’d topple off the hillside.

Kalen strode along a path I could barely see, but he was too fast for me. I took four steps to his two, but he slowed his pace without me saying anything. Stephen had been so wrong about him because my date sensed what I was experiencing and adjusted his expectations.

He stopped and pointed to small twinkling lights bobbing up and down. “Fireflies. Something good is coming.”

I gripped his hand. “Is it ahead of us?” I glanced over my shoulder. “Or behind?”

He faced me, and after putting the basket down, he placed a finger under my chin. “Catching sight of fireflies means something wonderful is going to happen.”

“Oh.” My heart slowed.

“Many cultures have legends about them, all positive.”

We stood watching the flickering lights until the fireflies vanished into the darkness.

“Come on. I promised you stars and that’s what you’re getting.”

The path sloped upward. Not that I could see it well, but my eyes were adjusting to the lack of light. But after a while, my thighs were screaming as we trudged upward.

Kalen was amazing, pulling me away from a rock on the path and holding up a branch so it didn't whack me in the face.

"How can you see so well? Do you eat a lot of carrots?"

I couldn't make out his expression, but he made an "ugh" sound. No carrots for him.

"Excellent eyesight is a family trait."

Were there exercises you could do to improve your eyesight? Because he didn't falter or hesitate as we walked. And he was fit. He carried the basket and yet I was the one panting, and my legs would never forgive me.

As I was beginning to think of this date more as torture than getting to know one another, we reached the top. Spread out in the distance were the city lights, but Kalen twisted me around to face the other direction. The inky-black sky loomed overhead, but it was pin-pricked with tiny lights, some bright and others so faint I could only just make them out.

My date spread out the blanket on the grass, and we sat. If I hadn't been on a first date, I would have collapsed and groaned at how sore my body was, but Kalen pointed out the stars, planets, and constellations, and I was fascinated, both by what he was telling me and his voice.

"Did you study astronomy?" His knowledge seemed to go beyond a hobby.

"No. Again, my ancestors handed down knowledge about the stars and how they guided them." He offered me a soda. I sipped mine, enjoying the silence. I wasn't a

fan of the dark, but with Kalen at my side, it didn't seem quite so scary.

"It's beautiful up here." I lay back, and Kalen flopped down too.

"Ummm. I have a thing for heights. I enjoy looking down on the earth and surveying everything."

My tummy rumbled, reminding me I hadn't eaten since lunch.

"I'm a terrible host." He sat up and brought out the food. So much food. Not that I could make out most of it. "We have sausage rolls, fruit, nuts, salami, cheese, bread, crackers, and some sweet treats."

I groped over the blanket to grab something, but Kalen offered to feed me.

"A grape?"

"Please."

He popped it in between my lips, and I savored the sweetness combined with a sharp tang that exploded in my mouth.

"Yum." While it was a little off, not being able to see what I was eating, we turned it into a game.

"Guess." Kalen waved something under my nose.

"Salami." It was peppery and spicy, almost making me sneeze, and while I couldn't describe it, I caught a fatty aroma.

"Open wide."

I could get used to this.

Kalen prepared me a plate of food after asking what I wanted. There was a gentle breeze blowing that rustled the leaves. If I'd been by myself, I would have hunkered down, thinking a wild animal was approaching. But my date wasn't bothered; instead he said it reminded him of a silver maple.

We finished the meal with more grapes, but Kalen tossed nuts into the air and caught them in his mouth. How was that possible?

"I want your secret."

There was a sharp intake of breath. "My what?"

"You can see in the dark. Your family must have supercharged genes."

He laughed, and the sound was similar to a hug. Silly, but it enveloped me.

"My mind went to jeans with a J, and I pictured my pants running off by themselves with me racing after them yelling, 'Come back!'"

I giggled at the image, and our laughter mingled and joined the leaves rustling. "I'm so glad I came. Thank you."

Warm breath billowed over my cheek. He was closer than before, so close I could see his white teeth glowing in the dark.

"Me too. And thank you for enduring the climb. I forget how steep it is."

"No problem." My teeth were chattering but not from the cold. I'd been desperate for Kalen to plant his lips on mine, and now that it might be happening, my heart sped up

as it had on our walk.

“May I kiss you?”

He was such a gentleman. He could have pulled his dick out and I would have responded by showing him my bare ass.

“You may.”

His lips were as soft as I imagined when he placed them gently on mine, and his hand caressed my back. He tasted of sugar and spice, just as in the nursery rhymes, thanks to our picnic food.

He pecked my lips and then nibbled the lower one. He tugged it, and I gasped, before running his tongue around my mouth, applying soft pressure.

“Mmmm.” I parted my lips, wanting to capture his tongue. The tip of his flicked mine. My breath hitched, and our tongues probed one another, lightly at first and then with more force.

My cock stood at attention and heat threaded through my veins as our tongues danced and played. Kalen’s tongue swirled over mine, making tiny circles, and I groaned into his mouth.

I longed for more, but he pulled away and kissed the end of my nose.

Tempted as I was to ask him to get naked, I told him instead that I hoped there were more kisses in my future.

He placed his mouth on my ear. “There will be.”

10

KALEN

Leaving Arlo after our date hurt. And not just, oh, I wish I could stay or oh, I really wanted to hold him longer kind of hurt. It physically hurt. Each step I took toward my car felt like my insides were being yanked.

I'd never experienced anything like that before or heard of it happening to anyone I knew. It was as if our bond was already forming, even though we had yet to mate, and because it wasn't fully intact, it was being ripped apart. Would it be gone in the morning or possibly when I drove away? Maybe, but what if it wasn't?

I mean, there was the obvious: complete the mating. Once he was marked and the bond was fully in place, it wouldn't hurt anymore. At least not in this way. But going from a first date with a sweet kiss all the way to mated was a huge-ass leap, especially for a human who would have all of this be completely new and foreign to him.

What I needed to do was put on my big-boy pants and talk to him, tell him how I felt, tell him who I was, and then see where the cards fell. But also... that was too risky. Throwing all of that at a human all at once? There was a very real possibility it would terrify him, and I'd never see him again.

Did I believe my mate would be one of those guys? No. Of course not. Still... there was always a chance he might be, and I was too chickenshit to take the chance.

Look at me, big tough alpha lion who could take on anyone in their birth pride knowing full well I'd come out of it victorious, running scared because of my feelings. Whatever. I didn't care. Arlo was everything I wanted in a mate, and if that meant I was vulnerable, so be it.

The two of us had so much fun on our date. Just being with him, spending time, knowing that we were both there because we liked each other and were hoping for more... it was everything. And I left knowing that he felt our mating bond too. He hadn't said it with those words, but he showed it time and again.

This mating bond between us that was pulling at me? It was pulling at him as well. Please don't let that mean he was in pain too, all because I was going home.

I shot him a text letting him know I had a great time and got into the car where I'd drive home to an empty place where I would replay the evening over and over again, trying to see if there was anything I could have done better.

I drove home, the pain lessening, or possibly it was me getting used to it, along the way. In any case, I was thankful to the goddess that it hadn't gotten worse instead. I had no idea what I'd have done if it had.

What I really needed to do was talk to my brother. If nothing else, he'd listen to me. But even if he didn't, he'd be a distraction, and that wouldn't be the worst thing right now.

I tapped on my phone and brought it to my ear as I walked up to my door. Please be home. Please be home.

My brother, Bryant, wasn't one to stick around the house. He spent more time in his lion than I ever did. From the time we were very young, I kind of envied his connection with his beast. Even before he had his first shift, the two of them had

figured out their roles in each other's lives. I didn't even meet mine until my first shift.

The two of them could just live like besties. Always had. From his first shift, my brother could simply be in nature in his fur with no power struggle, no worry that his lion might not give him his skin back.

The same wasn't true for me. In those early years, it was rough. My lion was strong. Tough. Stubborn. An all around pain in the ass.

He was so forceful he could force a partial shift, which I learned the first time I told him we weren't going for a run until after I finished my homework. I'd never seen anything like that before, and it freaked me out. My lanky, pimply-faced teen self sporting claws bolted straight to my father. I half expected him to say I was going to become a permanent lion.

It was known to happen. Not often. Not in any generation I knew. But in the history books of our pride—we saw it.

To my surprise, he looked at me and said, "Your beast is strong. You need to be stronger."

It was over many years that I was finally able to gain confidence in my ability to keep him in control. It took him seeing that no matter what it was, I'd give him what he needed. And now he felt the same about our mate, even if it manifested itself by him being a pushy jerk again.

Only at least this time, I understood why. And I couldn't really blame him. My human side wasn't doing much better with control.

I was about to give up on the fourth ring—which, if my brother was around, it never

got to—when it clicked on.

“What?” Great. My brother was in a mood.

“Oh, nice talk to you too, Brother,” I muttered, pushing open the door and walking inside.

“Well, I figured someone’s dead if you’re calling.”

I called my brother all the time. Or maybe not all the time, but I called. Stinks... Thinking back, it had been a while. Had I been a sucky brother? Probably.

“I was going to argue, but you’re right. I don’t call enough. But I kinda need you today. So can you maybe hold off on the big-brother lecture and catch up on it next time?”

“There will be a lecture at the time and place of my choosing.” His tone had lightened.

“Deal.”

“What’s going on?”

I plopped onto the couch and put him on speaker. I wasn’t sure how to start. “So... the good news is, I found my mate.”

“That’s not good news. That’s amazing news! Congratulations! Tell me all about him.”

“Well... see, that’s where the not-so-good news comes in.” It wasn’t really bad news. More complicating factors.

“Shit. Has he mated already?” And my brother jumped right to the worst-case scenario.

“No, but... he has a cousin.” Why did I say that? Because I was nervous. If my brother were closer, I’d have gotten in the car to have this conversation there.

“I’m not following.”

“Never mind.” I grabbed a throw pillow and hugged it to me. “But no, he doesn’t know about shifters. He doesn’t know I’m his mate. And he’s 100% human.”

“Well, that’s all fixable.” He didn’t seem fazed by any of this.

“You can fix him from being human?”

“No, all your worries are fixable. If he’s your mate, he’s the only one on this planet for you, and you’re the only one on this planet for him. So it’s a given. It’s gonna work out.”

I wasn’t sure I believed that, but I wanted to. “I mean... when he learns about shifters, it’ll be an adjustment. But let’s face it, your lion is pretty darn cute.”

“When I can control him.”

“Really? You’re gonna let one incident as a teen define your life and your relationship with your lion?”

It was one incident back then, but that didn’t mean it was the only time I’d struggled then. And now...

“Yeah, about that.” I rubbed my face. “So... the worst of the things I had to talk to

you about? My lion partially shifted again. Just my hands.”

“And why did he do this?” Not a hint of judgment. Best brother ever.

“Because I wasn’t claiming our mate.”

Bryant let out an exasperated sigh. “Why do you complicate your life? Seriously. What you need to do is tell him who you are, show him who you are, and live happily ever after.” Because of course it was as easy as that... or rather the opposite of that. “Maybe you’ll have a couple of cubs. Maybe not. But yeah—live happily ever after. That’s your job.”

Talk about jumping the gun.

“That’s hardly my job. I teach math.”

“I know. It’s so boring. And let’s be honest, it’s embarrassing. People are like, ‘Hey, what does your brother do? Is he in welding too?’ And I’m like, ‘Nah, he counts all day.’”

“You know I don’t count all day.”

He started to cackle. Of course he was teasing.

“Yeah, and you know I’m not embarrassed by you. It’s pretty cool, man. My brother’s a professor.”

“Did you just decide to be a dick today and then have a change of mind?”

He chuckled. “Can we get back to the first part of the conversation? Where you haven’t called in a while?”

“Mostly because of a storm.” I told him the entire story, and he offered to come and help if we needed him.

“I’m so happy for you. I can’t wait to meet him. And I just know everything’s gonna work out.”

If only I could be as assured as my brother.

11

ARLO

“Going somewhere?”

Kalen had just arrived, his tool belt on his sexy hips making me consider calling in sick. He eyed my dark slacks and pink shirt with a tie slung loosely around my neck and a jacket flung over one shoulder.

“It’s an office day.” I did a 360 with my arms outstretched and added a butt wiggle, hoping he’d comment. “Do I pass?”

He quirked a brow, and his lips parted. The tip of his tongue poked between them. “You look good enough to eat.”

Damn! Slick coated my ass. Did I have to change my pants? Nah, I had a spare set of clothes at the office.

“Wish I could stay, but there are muffins in a tin on the kitchen table.”

Today he was working inside, so he had free rein in the house. Stephen’s words echoed in my head, but they were worthless because I trusted Kalen.

Now that we’d exchanged pleasantries, there was nothing else to do other than wave goodbye, but we’d been on a date and shared a kiss, so did we air kiss? Hug?

I shuffled awkwardly and shifted my backpack from one shoulder to the other. But Kalen took the initiative and pecked me on the cheek. I would have preferred he'd shoved his tongue down my throat, but that would have resulted in me dashing back into the house and changing before I left. No way could I sit in a puddle of slick until I reached the office.

"Bye." I hummed as I drove to work, my mind already on returning home to Kalen.

My phone dinged as I walked into the office. A pic of Kalen with Princess. She was doing well, and I crossed my fingers I could transplant her when she'd sprouted roots.

More pics arrived at intervals of one hour showing the progression of his repairs. He was adorable, and it was just as hard concentrating on work in the office as at home. But I'd been called in because the big boss was in town for a few days, so I was attending meeting after meeting.

I wasn't sure about meeting statistics regarding how useful they were, but today's were a bust. The boss could have conducted them online and saved his time and the company's money.

There was a dinner scheduled for tomorrow that I had to attend, but after being held hostage in the office until six, I escaped, hoping Kalen hadn't left.

"Please let him be there," I chanted as I drummed my knuckles on the steering wheel. I screeched around the last corner, burning some rubber, and hoped my elderly neighbor, Mr. Jenkins, who lived in a huge house on a sprawling piece of land, wouldn't see me. He'd stuff a note in my letterbox telling me to drive more carefully.

But the gate was open and Kalen's pickup was in the yard, parked off to the side, allowing me to drive in. I'd texted when I was in the parking garage, and he was in the habit of opening the gate for me.

“Come and see what I did today.” He grinned and beckoned me into the house.

“Wow!” The ceiling was pristine, and he’d be painting it tomorrow. He was almost done. There was a sinking feeling in my belly because I’d grown used to seeing him every day. “You’ve done so much.” He needed to slow down, maybe take a sick day.

“Thanks.” He wiped his hands on a rag. “I should wash up.” He headed outside to use the hose.

I ran after him asking him if he needed oil. He gave me a look, and I clarified that I was talking about the paint removal.

My mind worked frantically, thinking of other jobs that needed doing around the house. But a leaking faucet and a squeaky gate wouldn’t keep him here for long.

“I want to reward you for your hard work.”

Again with a look from Kalen. Did he think I was talking about sex?

“Dinner.” I refused to fall to my knees and beg, but my body was humming with feverish energy. If I continued buzzing, I might need to see a doctor.

“That’s kind of you. But you don’t?—”

With a finger on his lips to keep him quiet, I replied, “I know I don’t have to, but I want to.”

Kalen slid a hand over my ass and squeezed it. Desire rippled over my body, and both my hands and feet tingled. “I’d love to, but I’ll help.”

I placed a hand on his chest and giggled. “Did you think you were going to sit on

your butt and watch me cook?”

“Hmmm. Maybe. Isn’t that what you do when I work?”

“What? No? I have my head down, ass up, my fingers tapping at the keyboard.”

“Oh, really. Guess I owe you an apology. I could have sworn you were peeking at me through a window, around a corner, from the shed, and even from the attic.”

Damn. I had been spying on him, and he’d never let on that he’d seen me.

“I’m taking the fifth. Don’t want to incriminate myself.”

He smirked and nodded.

“Do you eat chicken?”

“Sure. I eat a lotta red meat, but I like me some chicken.”

I made a mental note to cook beef for him next time. And despite telling Stephen I wasn’t going to create a pros-and-cons list—and I still wasn’t—I did keep notes on what Kalen liked and his skill set, including his love of the dark and hiking as well as his enhanced eyesight.

“Come on.”

When we got inside, I tied an apron around his hips, making sure to pull it tight as I leaned in close, less than an inch between us.

“Sounds about tight,” he purred as he glanced over his shoulder and planted a soft kiss on my lips.

I washed my hands and Kalen did the same, even though he'd washed his outside. After seasoning the chicken breasts, I boiled water for pasta and turned on the gas burner.

“Chicken or pasta? Which do you want to be responsible for?”

He closed one eye. “Hmmm, I might burn the chicken or cook the pasta too long so it falls apart into a gluggy mess. Decisions, decisions.”

I nudged him. “You do either and you'll be ordering dinner for both of us.”

He chose the pasta, and asked if he could toss a strand against the kitchen tiles to check if they were done.

“No, maybe taste one instead.” Much as I fancied Kalen, I didn't want to clean off sticky pasta residue from the tiles.

With the chicken in the pan and the pasta bubbling away, I grabbed a jar of pesto sauce from the pantry. “Store-bought, sorry.”

“Hey, no criticism from me. Modern life is busy and we do what we can to get by.”

I wanted to do more than get by with Kalen. Falling into his arms and waking up beside him was what I dreamed of.

Kalen drained the pasta as I sliced the chicken. He combined the three ingredients while I made a quick salad. After adding basil leaves from the garden to the main dish, we sat down to eat.

“I could get used to this.” He twirled the pasta on his spoon using the fork and stuffed it in his mouth. “So good and yet so quick and easy to make.”

“That’s my motto. Quick and easy.”

“Does that cover everything in life or just food?” He winked and concentrated on stabbing a piece of tomato from the salad.

He was throwing me a curveball, and I wasn’t sure how to react. “There are some things that are better if they’re given some thought and done ever so slowly.”

A strand of pasta dangled from his mouth, and he sucked it while remnants of pesto lined his lips. I slammed my mouth shut to prevent chicken toppling onto the plate. That pesto needed cleaning up, and it was up to me to get the job done.

Picking up a napkin, I dabbed at his mouth. Would I have preferred to lick it off? Oh yeah, but having shared one kiss, we weren’t there yet.

Kalen clamped a hand on mine, and after removing it from his mouth, he flipped it and kissed my palm. Who needed food when his touch filled and nourished me? Though I’d like to be filled in other ways. I’d been lusting after him for weeks, and now I hoped some of my dreams would become reality.

“Delicious.”

He could have been talking about the food or me. Not sure how to respond, I said, “Dessert?”

“Mmmm.” He kissed along my arm, and goosebumps trailed after him. “I thought this was dessert.” My insides were already warm and gooey, but they melted as he spoke.

“Oh no. There’s a lot more on the menu.” He reached my shoulder, and I was trembling, my body running hot and cold.

“I can’t wait!”

12

KALEN

I didn't want the night to be over. Spending time with him, just the two of us like that, had me not only sensing he was my mate, not only liking him, but also feeling like I was getting to know him. And I liked him.

I liked him a lot.

Even if he hadn't been my mate, even if there had been no attraction, I'd have wanted him to be my friend. And I'm not sure why that took me off guard, but it did.

"Did you want coffee?" he asked as I stood near the door, already having said good-bye a few times.

"I think it's far too late for that. I won't get any sleep."

He grabbed the back of his neck. "Yeah, I know. I don't want coffee either... that's not why I asked."

"Why did you?"

"Because I don't want you to go." He spoke the exact words I'd wanted to hear.

I reached up and brushed my thumb along his cheekbone. "I don't have to go. In fact, I don't want to go."

He leaned into my touch. “Then please don’t go. Stay here with me... all night.”

He stepped up on the stoop to kiss me, and the feeling from our first kiss flooded through me again—the sense of connection and joy and completeness and need all kind of rolled into one.

It didn’t take long before our kiss deepened. His body was flush with mine, his arms wrapped around me, pulling me close. My arms did the same to him. And when we finally broke apart, it was out of necessity—a need to catch our breath but also to move someplace besides his entryway.

Standing in a foyer is not really the ideal place to join for the first time.

“Is that a yes?” Arlo reached for my hand. “To staying, I mean?”

“That’s a yes.”

“Bedroom. Now.” He was getting no arguments from me.

He pulled me toward his room. The alpha in me wanted to scoop him up and carry him there. I refrained, not wanting to take over... not yet, anyway. Once in the bedroom, it would be a different story.

We were barely in the bedroom when his lips were on mine again. Only this time, our hands weren’t just holding each other close—they were reaching for each other’s clothing, trying to get the cloth separating us gone.

Finally peeling Arlo’s clothes off was like taking a full breath. I’d been waiting for his moment and had to remind myself to go slow. You only had one first time with your mate, and I wanted to savor every single second of it—to appreciate his soft skin and wanting eyes. “You okay?”

Arlo smiled at me without breaking eye contact. “So okay.” His hands pressed to my chest and then slowly lowered until he could grab the hem of my shirt and lift it up. “And so horny for you.”

Hearing him comfortable enough to be so blunt reassured me that we weren’t rushing this for him. That was always something on my radar, the difference between shifter dating and human dating still not something I fully understood.

My lion preened at it too, loving that our omega felt our connection as deeply as we did. “Mmm.”

As a human, Arlo didn’t have all the advantages of advanced sight and sound that I had, but he could sense the shift in the air between us. The tension that pulled us together like we were always meant to be. It was palpable and went both ways.

He climbed on the bed, and what a gorgeous sight he was. I couldn’t wait to be inside him, watching him come undone beneath me.

“Lie back.” I slipped out of my pants, joined him on the bed, and kneeled down so I could kiss his left knee. “I want to taste all of you.”

Arlo’s cock bounced off his hip, and a rush of slick dampened the bed beneath him. “Hurry.” It was a plea, one I was more than happy to answer.

Dragging my teeth along his inner thigh, I slipped a single finger around his thigh and found his opening. “All good things take time, omega.”

In my head, I resorted to thinking about work and the changes in the class lineup, which was basically the least sexy thing ever. If I allowed myself to fully immerse in this moment, I’d be coming long before I wanted, that was for sure.

He whimpered as his hips tilted up to give me better access. “But not too much time.” He reached for his cock but quickly released it, already too close to the edge to risk missing my knot inside him. At least that’s what I could make out of his mumbling.

“I can’t wait much longer.” His head fell back onto his pillow.

“Me neither.” I worked in a second finger as my tongue crossed over his balls and then up his shaft. “Almost there.”

As I worked his body loose, I kissed up his chest until I was finally aligned with his face. “You’re sure?”

He nodded and tilted his hips even higher so my cock was pressed right to his hole. “Yes! Just do it already.”

I chuckled and slowly pressed into him as my mouth covered his. What started out as a slow and languid kiss quickly became frantic as Arlo’s hands skated over all the skin he could reach. Holding back to have this last wasn’t going to work for much longer. He had a way of stealing every thought that wasn’t about him

The warmth of his body, his sexy noises, the look of ecstasy on his face encouraged me on as I drove in faster and with erratic movements. I’d never gotten so close to the edge so quickly before, but we had all night.

I kissed along my omega’s jaw and nipped at his earlobe. “You’re close.”

“Too close. I can’t stop it.” His fingernails dug into my biceps as he clung to me. “I don’t want to stop it.”

“Then let go, Arlo.” I pushed in deeper so I was nailing his prostate with each pass. “Show me how good you feel. Let me hear it.”

As soon as he had permission to come, he threw his head back, unknowingly exposing his neck as if inviting me to mark him. And gods, I wanted to, but also, he needed to know everything and make the decision to accept my mark before I ever allowed myself to do that. I refused to mark him otherwise.

It wasn't easy to resist, but I managed, allowing myself to focus on the way his channel tightened around my dick, gripping me like a lifeline and then convulsing in waves that seemed to start in his ass and roll all the way up his spine.

Arlo was shattered beneath me, mumbling my name and other incoherent words as the skin between my belly and his cock became sticky with his release.

“Alpha!” His body shook, and he gasped for air. “I need your knot.”

“Fuck.” I closed my arms around him, drawing his whole body against mine as I came inside him, shooting my seed into him and locking it tight as my knot expanded. “You’re mine, Arlo.”

He hummed in my arms, and all the tension in his body was gone, just a boneless mass of sexy man beneath me as our bodies sealed together as one. “Yes, alpha. Yours. Always yours.”

We laid like that, in silence for a few minutes. My lion was really close, his emotions going from pissed we didn't mark our mate to thrilled to be knotted to him. And Arlo? He looked both boneless and sated.

Fearing I was too heavy, I carefully rolled us onto my side and pulled the blankets over us.

“That was...” His eyes fluttered shut.

“Amazing? Wonderful? Hot?”

“Yes, all those things, but also, it was... never mind, I can’t find the words. Someone made me all sleepy.” He yawned.

“Did you want me to apologize?”

“No. Absolutely not. I want you to do it again after a short power nap.” He snuggled in. “Does that work for you?”

“That more than works.” I kissed his cheek. “And I felt it too... like we made a connection deeper than our bodies doing their thing.”

“Exactly,” he mumbled, his breath warm against my skin. “Like we were finally where we were meant to be.”

Arlo needed to meet my lion soon. I understood where all these feelings were coming from, and they were overwhelming. I couldn’t imagine being side-swiped by them.

“Thank you for asking me to stay.”

Only no answer came, unless you counted his soft snores. My mate was asleep, and I allowed myself to do the same.

13

ARLO

Something warm was resting on my midsection. It wasn't heavy, but it also wasn't a blanket or a quilt. But I liked it. I didn't have an electric blanket, but the amount of heat being produced reminded me of the one I'd had as a kid. It was comforting, and I didn't want to move.

I hadn't set my alarm last night which was unusual when I had to get to the office. My mind trawled through the events of last night. Cooking and eating dinner with Kalen.

And sex!

My eyes snapped open. The heat wasn't from a comforter. Or maybe it was but not of the inanimate kind. It was Kalen. I pressed a finger on his arm. Maybe I could cook an egg on his skin. I stifled a laugh but put the hand to his brow, expecting it to sear my skin. But he didn't have a fever.

He just ran hot.

He did last night too.

There was no time to stay in bed and relive our bedroom antics. The amount of light in the room signaled I had to get up. But I didn't want to wake Kalen. He'd expended more energy than me last night—whew, had he ever—and he didn't have a meeting

to prepare for.

I bounded out of bed, hoping the dip in the mattress would wake him up, but I was disappointed. Leaving the bathroom door ajar, I was certain the shower and me brushing my teeth would have him opening his eyes. No luck there either.

After getting dressed, I made breakfast—enough for both of us—of two omelets, toast, Greek yogurt, and fruit. He'd have to make his own coffee. With everything placed in the fridge, I left a note under the coffee maker.

Kalen was still asleep. He hadn't moved since I snuck out of bed. By now I was getting desperate, needing him to wake up so we could kiss and maybe discuss last night. Was it a one-off or were we starting a relationship? If it was a one-night stand, my heart might shatter, but I tried to stay positive.

Jingling keys by the bed didn't disturb Kalen. I added "deep sleeper" to my mental notes and blew him a kiss before slamming the front door. No movement, no tousled auburn head standing in the doorway saying he wanted to recreate last night again this evening.

The morning dragged on, and I dreaded having to attend the company dinner. Maybe everyone could come down with a stomach bug beforehand and it'd be canceled. But I couldn't wish that on my colleagues or myself. Ewww!

But as I left a meeting and passed a co-worker, Anthony, with his manager, advocating for a company daycare facility, I closed my office door and stood staring at the backed-up traffic on the street below. Like Anthony, I had to be brave and say what I wanted. Or maybe what I'd hoped would happen.

Kalen didn't know what was in my heart, and I couldn't expect him to guess. I had to omega up and tell him.

Tonight. I'd do it tonight. Shit! The damned dinner. Kalen would be long gone when I got home. Sitting at my desk, I tapped a pen on the surface, a habit that used to annoy my colleagues when I sat in a cubicle at the start of my career. I was lost in my thoughts when the phone dinged. Snatching it and hoping it wasn't yet another useless meeting, I grinned as Kalen's name appeared on the screen.

Wanna have lunch? There was a smiley face at the end of the question.

Will your boss allow you to take time out of your day?

Not sure. He's a hardass . He added a peach emoji.

Hard, huh? I happen to know it's soft and oh so squeezable .

Well, I'll have to experiment and get back to you . My skin smoldered at the thought of his hands, lips, or tongue on my butt.

I have lunch at 12 today. Usually it was one, but everything was topsy turvy with the big boss on the premises.

How about I bring the food and we eat in the park across the street?

Sounds good .

We arranged to meet out front of my building. My morning brightened, and I sped through my to-do list, wishing I could speed up time. But only until noon, then I wanted it to slow down.

“Want to eat with us, Arlo?” Anthony asked as we waited for the elevator.

“Raincheck. Meeting a friend.”

Kalen had his back toward me as I tore onto the sidewalk, but he must have sensed me because he turned, arms outstretched, and I walked into them.

“Not a friend,” Anthony mumbled as he strolled past.

“What was that about? Do I need to kick his ass?”

“No.” I took hold of Kalen’s arms and steered him between the traffic. “He’s a good guy. He’s just being silly.”

“Fine, but we could get a ticket for jaywalking.” He yanked me out of the way of an oncoming motorbike. “Do you like living life on the edge?”

I side-eyed him. “You’re making fun of me, right?”

“Never.” He bopped the end of my nose as we chose a bench.

“What delights have you got?” I clapped my hands as he opened two paper bags.

His head twisted toward me. “You talking food or my prowess between the sheets?”

My cheeks burned, and I didn’t know where to look. I squinted at the blue sky, ducks on the pond, and finally my hands. Kalen nudged me, and I shot him a glance.

“You’re so cute when you’re embarrassed.”

I elbowed him in return, and he brought out bagels with smoked salmon and cream cheese. Yum. I took a bite.

“Better than?—”

“Don’t you say sex.” My mouth was full, but I had to cut him off.

“Oh, I wasn’t.”

“Liar!” I brushed my thigh against his and continued eating my bagel.

A dad pushing a baby and toddler in a double stroller walked past. The little girl tossed a toy onto the path, and Kalen caught it. Not only was his eyesight excellent but his reflexes were the fastest I’d seen.

“Did you play a lot of sports as a kid?” He had to have been one of the popular kids.

“I did. And you?”

I cackled, a laugh that was laced with some resentment. “Nope. I was always the last one picked, the clumsy one who couldn’t catch, defend, or score. No one wanted me on their team.” I hadn’t thought of those days in a while, where I’d beg my folks for a note saying I couldn’t play due to an injury.

Kalen put a hand on my lap. “I’m sorry. I’d pick you no matter how many catches you missed.” I placed my hand on his and studied the ducks, bobbing their heads under water.

Taking his paper bag and mine, I made to stand and toss them in the trash. I could have scrunched them up and aimed for the garbage can, but I’d miss and have to get up anyway. Kalen would have excellent aim and could have done it, I supposed.

We were very different, but a relationship wasn’t built on how athletic we were. If that was the case, I’d never find the love of my life. And I suspected I may have found him, and he was sitting beside me.

“I should get back. Thank you for lunch. I owe you ‘cause you’ve done a picnic and a lunch and helped me with dinner.”

“This isn’t a competition, Arlo.”

“Well, I could get used to being waited on.” Was that too obvious? Or not enough? I had to be more brave in saying what was in my heart.

“Good. I hope you do because I’ll be doing a lot more of it.”

I allowed what he’d said to wash over me. He was saying we’d be seeing more of one another, or that was how I interpreted it. But trying to piece together his intentions was making work for myself. I had to ask him directly. But it was hard. I was exposing my heart, and it was scary.

“Don’t misunderstand me, I love that you shower me with goodies. But why?”

Kalen reached out and ruffled my hair. “You sound as though you don’t deserve it. And trust me, you do. I’m lavishing you with attention because I like you. Really like you.”

Oh. My dreams weren’t yet reality, but I could see them in the distance.

“Are you going to say anything or leave me dangling?”

A vision of his long thick cock popped into my head. “Nope. There’ll be no dangling around here.”

“Well?” He raised a brow.

“I like you too!” I’d shouted when that hadn’t been my intention. The ducks quacked

and paddled across the pond away from us.

“Good. Now shoo. I know you have a dinner this evening, so I’ll see you tomorrow with a coffee.”

Was I the luckiest omega ever?

14

KALEN

“You’ve got this.” It was probably the tenth time my brother had said those words to me, and he believed them. But still, it was terrifying knowing that I was on my way to pick up my mate, to show him who I was for the very first time. He saw me as the math professor slash fix-it man who saved the day, and I was all of those things. But I was also a lion.

“And if he doesn’t want me anymore?” I voiced my biggest fear. It would crush me. Now that I had a taste of happiness, how could I ever go back? I couldn’t.

“Then I’ll be right over.” He spoke as if it was as easy as that. It wasn’t.

“You can’t come right over. It’s too far.”

“I’ll find a way,” he promised.

I didn’t doubt he’d come. My brother was pretty great like that.

“But don’t worry—it’s not gonna happen. You’ve got this.” How very much I wanted to believe him.

“Now get off the phone and go see your mate.”

I was planning to meet him at my favorite place to shift, and this time, I wasn’t going

to chicken out like I did last time I considered showing him my mane. Although, to be fair, chicken out might not be accurate. Arlo had been looking delicious on our date, and it was hard to focus on anything other than tasting his lips, running my hands down his back, slamming into him. Yeah, my brain had been in full-on mate mode that day.

But also, I hadn't fully figured out how I was going to present who I was to him. There was no easy way to tell someone you were an animal some of the time and not in the kinky fun way. Although, I could be that for him if he ever asked.

Waiting had been better. At least that was what I kept telling myself.

We met at the lot at the foot of the trail I was taking him on. Asking him to bring his own car had pissed my lion off. He wanted to provide and protect, and for some reason he refused to see that this was protecting Arlo. I never wanted him to feel like he had no way out. If we had taken the same car, he would have either felt trapped, or if he drove, like he had to be in a confined space with my beast. Neither was a great scenario.

Arlo was already there when I pulled in, his face lighting up the second he saw me. I parked beside him, and he ran around to my car door before I even got my seatbelt off and threw his arms around me as I stepped out.

"I've missed you." He nibbled on his bottom lip. "I've missed you a lot."

"I missed you too." I hugged him close. "Ready?" If we didn't leave now, I was going to lose the strength I'd borrowed from my brother. I'd have done anything to have the confidence he currently had that this would all work out and that my lion wasn't going to result in my mate peeing his pants and running away in fear.

"Yeah, ready." He thought the plan was going for a walk—or a hike, as I'd called

it—and then getting dinner before heading back to his place. And I wanted to do all those things. But it was what we did during this time that mattered.

We chatted about our day, a little bit about my job, a little bit about his—normal small talk on the way to the clearing. With each step, I felt more confident that everything would be okay. He was so relaxed and comfortable with me, how could it not be?

But then we arrived, and it was do-or-die time. Then terror flooded me. There was so much riding on this one conversation, this one reveal.

“Listen.” I cupped his cheek. “I have something to show you, and I need you to know you will never be in danger.”

His face went pale, his eyes wide, a slight tremor rolled through his body. I’d already messed this up epically.

“You’re scaring me.” It was but a whisper.

“I know. I know I am. But I don’t know any other way to do this.” Tears threatened to fall from my eyes. My job was to keep my mate safe and feeling loved, and what did I go and do? I had him literally shaking, his fear so palpable.

Unsure how to make it better, I followed my grandfather’s rule: When you are in a hole, stop digging. I’m not sure where he got it from, but he reminded me of it every time I got in trouble growing up and thought I could talk my way out of it.

Instead of trying to explain who I was first, I went to the show-and-tell method and started pulling off my clothes. His eyes went wide. Last time he saw me naked, I could scent his slick—his need. That was absent now. On some level, he understood that he was the prey in this scenario. At least on a biological level.

“That is an interesting way to get me naked.” His attempt to lighten the mood failed, his voice trembling.

I shook my head. “No. I’m not. I promise... I just... please... stay here.”

He opened his mouth as if to speak, but instead, gave one single nod. I toed off my socks and shoes, dropping the rest of my clothes on the ground in a puddle.

“Remember that I am safe, no matter what you see.”

He didn’t respond, his eyes fixated on me.

Our.

Mate.

Fix.

As if I hadn’t been actively working on doing that.

Before I could second-guess myself—or was it fifty-thirding myself—I took my fur. My paws landed on the ground with a thud, Arlo taking a step back.

This was not good. This was very not good.

My first instinct was to shift back, but my beast made it known he was going to fight me on that. If Arlo thought my lion was scary, I couldn’t imagine what he’d think while watching my beast and me in a power struggle.

I conceded to my cat under the condition he allow me to take over. In an attempt to make my massive predatory self look more like a house cat, I laid straight down. The

very last thing I wanted was to make this worse, and having him worry that I was about to pounce and turn him into dinner would do that.

“This can’t be real. This can’t be real,” he kept muttering over and over again, his eyes squeezed tightly closed.

I didn’t move, instead watching him as he attempted to process what he was seeing or currently not seeing as the case might be.

When he opened them again, I was still lying there, watching him, forcing myself to look as passive as I could. He took the sight in for maybe a second and then snapped them closed again.

“It can’t be real. It can’t be real.”

This time, I shifted back, wanting nothing more than to comfort him, reassure him, somehow fix this. In my happy dreams, he would’ve come over to me and snuggled in close, telling me how beautiful I was. This was very much not that.

I pulled on my boxer briefs and jeans, figuring that standing here naked wasn’t going to make things go any better.

“Arlo?”

He opened his eyes, looking behind me as if to make sure the lion wasn’t still there. “You... you were just a lion, right? I wasn’t imagining that?”

“Yes. I was.” He didn’t say more, so I continued. “I’m a shifter.”

“No. That can’t be. That’s not real. That’s only in books.” His words sped out, blending together.

“No, it can be. I promise. I know this is a lot to take in.”

“How... how... Why am I freaked out but not fearing you’ll kill me?” That was at least promising.

“Because you sense I could never harm you. You’re my mate.”

“Whoa.” Three steps back. All that promising I just felt fell away. “You’re telling me that because I had sex with you, now you, like, own me or something?”

I wasn’t sure I could’ve made a bigger mess of this if I tried. I needed one of those watches that turned back time so I could have a redo, one that wouldn’t scare my sweet mate like this.

“No! No, I’m saying this all wrong.” I took a deep breath in an attempt to center myself. “I’m saying that attraction you have for me? That connection? That’s nature’s—rather Fate’s—way of showing us that we’re meant for each other. And the sex was... sex. And it was great. But that’s not mating. There’s more to mating.”

I started babbling, throwing every single fact I thought might help ease Arlo into this at him. Words were pouring out of me, and I wasn’t sure I made even the tiniest bit of sense. But he wasn’t running, and I was calling that a win... for now.

Then, when all my words were depleted, he took one step back.

“Please don’t go.” My voice cracked, my emotions raw.

“Listen. I need to think about this. This is... so... it’s so much.”

He was right, and in that moment I was glad that I had him bring his own car. As much as I didn’t want him to leave, it was good that he had a means to get the time he

needed.

“At least let me walk you back to the car.”

I thought he was going to refuse me, but then, out of his mouth came one word in barely a whisper. “Okay.”

I threw on my shoes, shoved my socks in my pocket, and yanked my shirt over my head. I walked beside him. Neither of us touched. Neither of us talked.

Please don't let this be the end.

15

ARLO

I blinked the tears away while squinting through the windshield. Not wanting to have an accident, I slowed down, allowing cars to pass me, and the ones that couldn't or wouldn't honked their horns.

Screw you. I just discovered the love of my life isn't human. He has an animal inside him, a big scary lion . Hunkering down in the driver's seat, I gripped the wheel tightly, glad I was in a locked car and not nose to snout with a huge cat. One with long sharp canines that could take my head off with a single bite.

I'd read articles about people in a safari park who'd been ordered not to get out of their vehicles or wind down the windows. Those who disregarded the rules met with a tragic end!

An imaginary snap reverberated in my ears, and I gripped my throat, reassuring myself that my head was still attached.

Shifters! Kalen was a shifter.

I thought back to the mental notes I'd made of his qualities and talents. He could see in the dark, had great reflexes and hearing, was a big meat eater, enjoyed being up high and surveying the landscape before him. Even his hair and beard were lion-like in their coloring.

Our lives were so different, we could never be together. If I was married to an alpha and they said they were going for a run, I'd assume they were going jogging, maybe just for exercise or perhaps training for a marathon, perhaps raising money for charity.

But if Kalen headed out for some exercise, he'd be going somewhere isolated, strip off his clothes, and let his lion do whatever he wanted: running and hunting! I choked as an image of the lion's head appeared on the hood of the car. Slamming on the brakes resulted in more angry beeping from drivers in the rear.

I pulled over and rested my head on the wheel, sweat dripping from my hairline and tears blinding me. This wasn't real. I needed to meet Kalen and have him tell me it was all in my imagination. But as I sat in the stationary car, traffic whizzing by, a tawny hair on my pants caught my eye. I picked it up.

It wasn't my color and had to be Kalen's, except his hair was much shorter than this one. I gripped my belly when food threatened to erupt but couldn't keep it down, so I opened the door and stuck my head out.

After emptying my tummy, I slumped in the seat, wishing someone would drive me home. I couldn't ask Stephen because a) he'd say I told you so and b) I couldn't reveal the lion shifter information. If I did, he'd book me a therapist appointment. Not that that was a bad thing. I had a lot of old grievances and learned behavior that I wanted to get rid of or change.

Nope, I was on my own. I gingerly pulled into traffic, and when I arrived home, I locked the gate, got Princess from her secluded spot, and brought her inside for the night. I needed company, and she was all I had.

"You're not going to sprout wings or something, are you?"

She didn't answer, and I suspected she wasn't harboring a secret identity.

Standing under the shower, I made the water hotter than was comfortable 'cause I wanted to feel something other than rage and fear. Kalen being who he was had ruined the vision I'd had of our life. Damn him and the lion who lived inside him.

We'd had sex, shared food and laughter, and he was hiding who he was. Thinking back to his cock, I wondered if the girth was influenced by his animal? Like, did house cat shifters have small cocks? It wasn't as though I could jump online and find out.

Now I turned off the hot water and stood under a freezing waterfall pounding on my head. "No," I screeched. This wasn't my fault. It was his. Why did he agree to fix my roof, why did he answer the stupid call? He and his lion should have been out mauling a deer or something.

I stomped out of the shower, water puddling on the tiles, and flung on a bathrobe. Not caring if I dried myself off, I wrapped a towel around my wet head and collapsed on the mattress, pulling the bedclothes over me. It was safe under there and dark. The doors and windows were locked, Princess was safe in the house for the night, and no lions were allowed in, unless they could unlock a door.

Minutes and hours passed, and I lay awake, thinking Stephen had been right. Not about shifters but that maybe Kalen was conning me. Why was he looking for a human partner when he had his pick of shifters? None of it made sense.

I must have drifted off because nightmares of lions chasing me, hiding and leaping out of unexpected places, filled my head. Screams filled the room when I sat up in bed, bathed in sweat.

When I flipped on the lamp, most of the bedding was twisted around me, while the

rest was on the floor. I made myself hot tea and climbed back into bed.

Running through each of my issues, it hit me. Kalen hadn't lied about who he was. He'd shown me the real Kalen, the human part. He'd kept his secret identity hidden because he wasn't allowed to show me his lion.

Kalen, the guy who walked on two legs, was kind, generous, funny, and loyal. Even if his lion was an asshole, it didn't matter. I wasn't going on dates with his animal or sharing a bed or a meal with him.

I adored Kalen, and when you loved someone, you accepted them, flaws and all—not that his lion was a flaw. Fuck, all those awful thoughts that had flitted through my head since he revealed his other side were nasty, selfish, and self-centered. Maybe even speciesist.

I was an asshole for allowing those ideas to enter my head, and I had to find Kalen and apologize. He might not accept me saying sorry, maybe I'd blown it and we could never be together, but I wanted to let him know I wasn't that guy.

My phone said it was three AM, but I couldn't live with the horrible ideas that were in my head, so I scribbled them on a notepad and scrunched up the paper. Even though it was summer, I started a fire in the fireplace, and when it was blazing, I tossed the paper in and watched it sizzle.

Gone. Those thoughts were no more. No matter Kalen's reaction, I was ridding myself of those ideas.

But I had to tell him and it was now 4 AM. Did lions enjoy hunting in the early hours of the morning? I guessed I'd find out.

When I'd last been in the car, I was upset, thinking my life had been destroyed. But I

was the one who'd almost wrecked our relationship. Maybe I already had.

Not bothering with clothes and still wearing my robe, I got in the car but leaped out again and put Princess in the passenger seat.

"You've been with me since this began, so you should see it out too." If this was the end, I needed company.

I sped through the empty streets, screeching to a halt at red lights and cursing when I sat there, the only car on the road. "There's no one else here." I shook a fist at the traffic lights.

Kalen's house was in darkness when I pulled up outside. Not surprising, as it was early and most people were in bed. But he had excellent hearing thanks to being a shifter, so when I rang the doorbell, he'd come running. He might slam the door in my face, swear at me, say he never wanted to see me again because I couldn't accept him for who he was, and I'd deserve all of it.

"Come on, Princess." I picked up the small pot.

My heart was almost tripping over itself; it was beating so fast as I placed a finger on the doorbell. But I didn't press it, instead hesitating, doubts assailing me as I wondered if I should wait until dawn. Nope, I had to omega up.

The doorbell wasn't a buzz and you're done type. It was a chiming one that reminded me of church bells. Gods, the neighbors could probably hear it.

Nothing. No light footfalls headed toward me. I tried again. The house was quiet.

"Kalen. It's me, Arlo. I need to talk to you."

If he was inside and refusing to come out, I'd have to shout my apology. Maybe I could sneak around to his window and toss pebbles against it. That was sort of romantic. Unless I shattered the glass and he'd have another reason to be pissed at me.

But he either wasn't home, and that brought up the question of where would he be? Had I driven him into the arms of another omega? Or was he done with me and hoping I'd leave.

Tears spilled onto my robe, and I curled up on the porch, my head on the mat and Princess beside me.

What had I done?

KALEN

He was gone. My biggest fear had come to fruition. My mate couldn't handle the truth of who I was. I wasn't sure if it was the fact that I kept the secret or the secret itself that hurt him the most. But whatever the case was, he wasn't in my arms where I desperately wanted him to be.

After Arlo drove away, my lion was uncontrollable. He wanted to run after him. I don't know what he would have done from there. As fast as we were, he couldn't catch a vehicle, and he sure couldn't have stopped it. I tried to reason all of that with him, but he ignored me and started getting more and more insistent on hunting him down.

It took everything I had to keep him from shifting until the car was out of sight, but the moment it was, he did—my clothes in shreds as he bounded toward the clearing. I thought I had more time or I'd have stripped beforehand. I was pretty sure I had some clothes in the trunk, but wouldn't know for sure until we got back. But now? Now I had a pile of rags and a pair of shoes that were no longer shoe-like waiting by my car.

My lion took off running. He ran and ran and ran, without a destination in mind. His entire focus was to go.

Every once in a while, along the way, the predatory side of him would take over and he'd hunt down an animal that was in plain sight. He killed a rabbit, a fox, and a squirrel, but didn't take the time to sit and enjoy eating them—he just left them there.

He was every bit the predator he was born to be.

Arlo didn't understand why our mate left, how our mate couldn't feel the connection, feel safe, feel loved. He didn't understand humanity, not that that was a surprise. He was a lion, not a person. I tried to help him understand, only I didn't fully get it myself. I understood the reasons it might've been, but what was going on deep inside my mate? Yeah, that was a mystery.

My lion being so confused by the ordeal made it difficult to gain control of him again. Every attempt was met with a power struggle, and it was wearing me out. My lion, on the other hand, appeared energized by it. If I kept going the way I had been, I'd have lost what little control I had and my lion would be roaming the streets looking for Arlo. That would not end well.

So I gave up, saving my energy and keeping an eye on our surroundings. If at any point he got too close to humans or started to do something stupid, like attempt to find our mate, then I'd have pushed back. For now, I planned to conserve my energy for when it was needed and let my beast work it out the only way he could.

The harsh reality of it was that if I stayed front and center, I wouldn't have the control I needed when the time came to take back the reins. My beast and I were too similarly matched.

Silly me, I thought he would wear out quickly because his emotions were so strong. How wrong I was.

The moon was high in the sky when we hit a river I didn't even recognize. I had no clue how far we'd run or if we were even in the same county. Heck, we might've crossed state lines.

My lion stopped to take a drink, then looked up at the sky and let out a roar of

distress. It was heartbreaking and dangerous. So very dangerous. We might be king of the jungle, but humans had guns.

Stop it. You'll get us found out. And that would not end well.

Mate.

Ours.

Find.

I know you want to find him, but we can't. We need to give him space. Why couldn't my lion understand that giving him space was our only chance to get him back. And obviously, I wasn't going to give up, but being pushy when he asked me not to be wasn't the way to go about it.

Ours.

I know, I know. But we can't. We just have to remember that fate doesn't make mistakes. It will all work out. If only I could believe I was telling the truth.

Because I was just there with my lion—distraught, unsure, and scared. I did want to go back, drive to my mate. I did want to tell him I loved him, ask him to forgive me, to look past our differences, the biggest one being that I wasn't even human. But I couldn't. That wasn't what he wanted. That wasn't what he needed. He needed time.

I had to be patient.

And being patient sucked.

Oh, it was a fool's errand. I knew it at the time. Forcing him not to respond wasn't

feasible, especially when all of me wanted to find my mate, too.

As no shocker to me, my lion ignored me, instead lapping up a little more water before running again. Only, this time, when he pounced on a rabbit, he took the time to eat it. I was hoping that meant he was slowing down, being worn out, but it could've also just been his way of saying, "I can do what I want." I didn't even know anymore. He wasn't letting me in at all.

We made our way back to the car that way—stopping for prey a few times, eating it, running some more. I wasn't even sure how much time had passed when I was finally able to get him to give me control again. The sun hadn't risen yet, but I had a feeling it was getting close to that time.

Back at the car, I shifted, gathering up my shredded clothes and tossing them in the trunk, where I had a spare set stowed. As a shifter, having extra clothing in random places was always a good idea. In this case, it was a hoodie and sweats. Sadly, I didn't have any shoes—mine weren't good for anything at this point.

I pulled on what I had and went home, completely defeated.

How could I not be?

My mate. My one true love. He wasn't here. He was at his home or maybe somewhere else. I didn't even know. He was scared of me, and heading straight to his cousin's to hide was a very real possibility.

Each mile I drove had my imagination going even more wild than the one before. At one point I had my mate on a plane to Europe. All that fear dissipated when I pulled into the driveway and I saw my mate waiting for me.

At first I wasn't sure he was here, that he was somehow a manifestation of my

imagination. I blinked. He didn't move. I blinked again. The same. And of all things, he was wearing a robe.

I picked up my hand in a small wave, and his shoulders relaxed. He was really here. In record time I was out of my car and in front of him. But then it was my time to freeze. What I wanted to do was take him into my arms and hold him close. But I knew better. He'd left me once, and I didn't want to give him a reason to do so again. All the balls were in his court.

"You changed." He didn't meet my eyes.

"No, I haven't. I've always been me. My li— other side doesn't change the man you know. I'm still me."

He gave a forced chuckle. "No, I mean your clothes. They're different."

My clothes. He meant my clothing. Of course I jumped to the wrong conclusion.

"Yeah, well, I had a hard time keeping my other half inside after... after. The other clothes were kind of ruined."

"Oh." He looked down at the ground. "Because of me."

"No. It was because of me."

I stood there, letting the silence grow between us—not wanting to push, but at the same time, wanting to hold him.

"I..." He was so hesitant. "Can we go in? I have some things to say."

His tone was unreadable. Were they going to be good things? Bad things? I opened

the door, and we went inside. He waited until the door was closed between us to speak.

“I... I feel it. I do,” he said. “I don’t know why I was scared, but I’m not scared anymore. I want you.”

“I want you.” I took his hand and gave it a squeeze.

He exhaled. “No. I mean... I want this. I want you. All of you. For as long as I can possibly see. I’m in.”

I’m in suddenly became my two favorite words.

“I am too, Arlo. I am too.”

“Mate me. Make me yours.”

17

ARLO

Dragging Kalen by his hoodie, I fumbled the bedroom door.

Ahhh, I needed shifter reflexes so I could be cool, calm, and collected. I was anything but.

His eyes were fixed on my face. Oops, no, lower. Much lower. A frisson of excitement tore through my body, not only for the sex we were about to have, but also us mating. A permanent mark on my skin, letting all shifters know we were mates. And I'd do the same to him, though the mark might be so puny, no one but us would be aware of it. And that'd be fine. We'd be bonded, and it didn't matter if the mark wasn't visible to the rest of the world.

I'd swear heat was seeping from my pores as we stumbled into the room. I kicked the door closed, and Kalen raised a brow.

"Princess is out there. She can't witness this."

"Right." He nodded with a sly grin. "Gotta make sure the kids don't see us having sex. Good thinking."

Gods, he was cute, and if he didn't wipe that smirk off his face, I might slam him against the wall and leap onto his dick

“I came prepared.” I shrugged off my robe, marked with dust and a twig from me lying on the porch.

“You arrived in your bathrobe,” he placed his hands on my hips and pulled me to him, my arousal pressing against the ridge in his sweatpants. “So you planned to have your way with me.”

Gripping his hoodie, I brought his face to within a hair’s breadth of mine. “Let’s forget that little interlude with me being a horse’s behind.”

Kalen squeezed my butt before I dived onto the bed, enjoying how I bounced. Spreading my legs, I noted his eyes wandered over my naked body, and goosebumps, like loyal soldiers, trailed along my skin following his gaze.

I grabbed my cock and wrapped my fingers around the shaft, sliding it slowly from the base to the tip. A tiny mewl escaped my lips, and Kalen’s eyes grew darker and his nostrils flared. He stripped so fast as though a film had been accelerated, and the clothing whizzed around the room.

He flopped over my prone body, causing a sharp intake of breath from me, and he paused an inch from me, his chest heaving in unison with mine.

“Nice save.”

He lowered his head and flicked my nipple, sending a blistering heat surging through my veins. I was all tingly, almost as though my fingers and toes had fallen asleep, and he’d hardly touched me yet.

With my mouth shaped in a huge O, my head fell back as Kalen captured my nipple with his teeth. Pleasure and pain battled for dominance, and I teetered between both as though I were walking a tightrope and almost falling off, leaning one way and the

other.

Wanting him to experience the same thrill, I tangled my fingers in his hair and tugged. He gasped, his eyes grew dark, and he tweaked my other nipple. Was this a competition to see who'd let go and come first?

Kalen shuffled lower, sticking a tongue in my belly button. It tickled, as he knew it would, and I giggled.

He lifted his head. "Your laughter brightens up the darkest day."

"Awww." What a sweetheart. I pressed my lips to his hair.

But the sugary-sweet moment vanished, and he growled as he nibbled and licked and nipped over my happy trail. I arched my back, giving myself over to him as his tongue met my cock.

Raising my hips, I shoved my length in his face, and he placed shivery kisses along the shaft. Goosebumps were still doing their Pied Piper routine and following his trail of kisses.

"More, please."

He thrust his tongue into my slit and my body jerked, slapping his chin. He grinned and swallowed the tip, mumbling with my length in his mouth, "Like this?"

"Just like that."

Desire threaded through every sinew, and I was convinced if I looked in the mirror, my skin would be ablaze.

Kalen sucked me, his hands cradling my balls, and I moaned as I fisted the sheets. Spreading my legs wider, I lifted my head and watched him taking me in to the hilt. It was so hot when his fingers crept over my flesh to my hole, slippery with slick. He licked them, and I almost exploded in his mouth.

But he didn't give me a taste. Meanie. Instead, he prodded around my entrance and slipped in two fingers.

"Are you... trying to kill... m-me?"

He let go of my dick, but it was engorged and stood straight up as if it was about to take off, and he licked it as if enjoying an ice cream.

"Not my intention." He rubbed his chin over my cock, coated in saliva. He added another finger to my hole, waves of desire battered me, and I fell back on the mattress, not having the strength to withstand them.

And not wanting to.

My body jerked, sliding over the now rumpled sheets as he finger-fucked me, accompanied by me yelping as heat ramped up in my belly and sweat slid over my sides.

This man, this amazing shifter fate matched me with, was giving me the most pleasurable experience, majestic highs accompanied by slight dips, and I was seesawing between the two, making my head spin.

Kalen nuzzled my cock before licking up one side and down the other. He lapped at the head, took me in his mouth again, and sucked hard and fast. The warmth of his mouth and the saliva melted my insides while his tongue flicked over my cock as he deepthroated me.

Heat, saliva, slick, and sweat combined producing a heady aroma. Sex. It smelled of sex, and as Kalen fucked and licked and sucked, my fingers curled around the bedding. My climax, like a runaway locomotive, was hurtling toward me. I couldn't and wouldn't delay it. I spasmed, and when my mate curled his fingers inside me, I shuddered, calling out his name as my cum spurted into his mouth.

My chest heaved with exertion, and Kalen fell into the mattress and held me as I savored the orgasm afterglow.

The aftereffects of coming made me lethargic—my legs reminded me of cooked spaghetti, floppy and unable to stand on their own. I could have fallen asleep, but I wanted his length buried in me, and if I took a vote, I was certain there'd be two votes for more fucking. Besides, we had to mark one another.

Rolling on my side, I flung a leg over his hip. "That was more than nice, but what should we do now?"

Kalen placed his lips on my ear, and I shivered. "I can think of a few things."

Feeling energized, I flipped him on his back. "Oh yeah? Was one of them me riding you like a bucking bronco in a rodeo?"

His wide eyes told me that was a no. Getting on my knees, I straddled him, moving my butt back and forth so the tip of his cock brushed over my slick-coated butt. He gripped the soft flesh on my hips, trying to yank me onto his dick, but I wasn't finished playing with him. I leaned forward, my length lying against his skin, and wiggled my hips.

But he smacked my ass, a sharp sound that echoed around the bedroom.

Ouch! Ow! But there was also that delicious conundrum of which was dominant:

pleasure or pain?

“Ready to play or—” I shut him up by falling on his cock and air rushed out of his parted lips. “I wasn’t expecting that.”

Swinging my hips from side to side, I gave him a lazy smile. “You don’t know everything about me.” I heaved myself up off and then took all of him again, from the head with precum wobbling on his gorgeous thick pink dick to the base.

“Oh, that’s so damned good.” He filled every inch of me, and there were so many inches of him. I bounced up and down, enjoying the slapping of flesh on flesh and the pleasure rippling through me as his dick entered and filled me.

But I needed to change the pace or I’d come. I squeezed my knees against his side and rose up slowly, leaving just the head remaining. His gaze locked on mine, and I counted the seconds in my head. His breathing sped up, as like me, he was no doubt anticipating me falling on his cock.

And I did. We both gasped, and my head fell back as I wallowed in the delicious feelings that were swirling around me.

Kalen trailed a finger from the base of my throat, around my belly button and to my dick, still hard, and pointing at him. He ignited more heat and a fierce hunger that had me wanting to fuck him hard.

Slamming onto his cock, the soft cheeks of my bottom were cushioned by his flesh while his length lunged into me. Each thrust made it harder to breathe or speak, and what emerged were tiny squeaks and whimpers.

He grabbed my dick and pumped it. Now he was stoking the fire inside me, the one he’d kindled, and it was raging, sending lust coiling around me, making me its

prisoner. And I welcomed it.

But my energy was fading and my head lolled forward. I needed more recovery time to hoist myself up. Instead of non-stop fucking, I wriggled my ass, angling my hips and tilting my pelvis.

Kalen's eyes glowed, and he tugged my cock while with the other hand, he brought me closer, flicking his tongue around my lips and shoving it between them. I snagged it with my teeth, his body jolted, and he hissed.

Pushing myself upright, I lifted myself up and eased down, keeping my eyes on him, enjoying his grunts.

But as anticipation stirred in my belly, I slammed onto him, over and over, his panting and gasps mimicking my own.

"I love you and not just because we're fucking."

"You'd better." I had a burst of energy. Maybe a declaration of love did that. Who knew?

Now I rode him just like that bronco I'd described. There was no more talking. Just fucking and Kalen pumping my cock. Beads of sweat hurled from the tips of my hair across the bed and onto my mate, while more dribbled down my chest.

I was so close, so close and... "Yes! Kalen!" My orgasm had been creeping up, but it took me by surprise and slammed into me. Cum sprayed over my mate as he heaved his hips up, pushing his cock deep inside me, and let go. His yell filled the room, the echo zigzagging around us.

My body was limp, my mind needing a rest, but I had to perform a ritual.

As his knot expanded, I fell forward and wanting to scrap my nails diagonally across his chest. What was that about?

KALEN

I had no idea what I was doing, and my brother was less than zero help. He didn't understand why I wanted to buy a ring for my mate. To him, we were mated, and that was that. Getting engaged and married was redundant in his mind. He tried to be supportive, but as far as giving me advice went, he couldn't be my go-to source.

And I understood exactly where he was coming from. If Arlo hadn't been human, our mating would've been our everything as far as commitments went. But he was human, and I wanted to make this as special for him as I possibly could. And that was why I watched endless reels of proposals, read far too many blogs about how to ask your partner to be your forever, and was going to be the first person in my family to be engaged... ever.

But despite all my research, I was still clueless. I needed to find someone who could bridge the gap between my knowledge and my goal. That person was my co-worker, Madeline. Her late mate had been a rabbit shifter, and he'd made very different choices than I had, not telling her about his animal until they had a child who was about ready to have their first shift. I couldn't imagine doing that to my mate but tried to remind myself it was a very different time, Madeline being over a decade past retirement age.

Madeline was far from hip and young, but she was romantic. Pairing that with being a human who understood about shifters made her my best partner in crime. When I asked her to come with me to the jewelry store and why, she was over the moon.

We went to a local shop where the jeweler and his sons still actually made most of their pieces. In her words, “You don’t want something trendy. You want something that fits his personality.”

I wanted to ask her how I was supposed to know what jewelry fit his personality, but she started to go down memory lane, and I didn’t want to interrupt. Despite his dishonesty to her for so long, Madeline was still madly in love with her late husband.

The jewelry store was very different from what I had imagined. The only ones I’d seen in the past were in the mall. There was something cold about them. I mean, sure, it’s nice to have something sparkly around your neck, but they had an entire case of chains, and I couldn’t tell the difference between them.

As a shifter, I tended not to wear jewelry because it was a pain when I needed to shift—I’d have to take it off first and then have someplace safe to stow it. So maybe that was why I didn’t get it? But either way, this store was nothing like it. The second we walked in, I felt more like I was in an art studio than anything resembling my mall experience. Already, I was happy that I picked Madeline to help. This was the place. I could feel it.

“How may I help you?” We were greeted by a man who looked to be at least my father’s age, probably a bit older.

“I came for an engagement present... a ring.”

He looked back and forth between us. “I see. And what is your style?”

Madeline gasped. “Me? Oh, no, no,” she said, breaking into laughter. “I am no cougar.”

She shook her head and pointed to me. “But this guy—he’s no romantic, so we need

something great for his omega. Something unique, but low profile so it won't get in the way while doing his daily activities."

That wasn't something I had even considered. "My m— Arlo has been doing a lot of gardening, so maybe something that he could keep on for that?"

The man closed his eyes for a few seconds, then opened them with a smile. "I have exactly what you need. Why don't you take a seat?"

He hadn't been wanting to get us in and out, done. The man had taken a moment to really think about it first. Madeline for the win.

He led us to a small desk, offered us tea, and after bringing Madeline a cup, disappeared in the back.

"Is this how it's always done?" I asked. "I mean not at the mall."

Madeline shrugged. "This is a nice place, so probably?"

The jeweler came back ten minutes later with a tray of rings, and I didn't even need to think twice. I knew instantly which one was Arlo's. It was platinum, which wasn't what drew me to it particularly, but along the sides, it had lines—wavy ones that reminded me of my mane. Now I understood what Madeline meant by fitting his personality. This ring might as well have been made for him.

"I like this one." I indicated the ring, and the man took it off the tray and handed it to me. Not only was it gorgeous, but the texture on the band was smooth and even more detailed than I'd originally noticed.

"This was handmade by my son." His pride beamed through. "Excellent choice."

“You sure you don’t want to get him something nicer?” Madeline whispered, making me second-guess myself for a split second. “There are some nice ones with diamonds.”

“If by ‘nicer,’ you mean more expensive,” the jeweler interrupted, “then yes, we absolutely have better options. But I saw the second your friend took that ring in, and there was a recognition there. This is the one. I wouldn’t, in good conscience, sell him anything else—not even this one, which is five times the price.”

“This is the one.” I appreciated his honesty. I took out my card and handed it to him, not even looking at the price. I didn’t care. This was for my mate, and I couldn’t wait to give it to him.

A few minutes later, the transaction was complete and Madeline and I were walking out, me with the ring box in my pocket.

After thanking Madeline and telling her I owed her one, we went our separate ways, with me going home. Only, it wasn’t really home.

Arlo and I were taking turns going back and forth between my house and his, and it wasn’t because we weren’t planning on living together. We just hadn’t made any decisions yet. For me, it was waiting until I had this ring so we could do this the human way. And for him, it was probably because he knew I was the owner, and therefore, when one of us moved, it meant we had to sell the other place.

I didn’t love the arrangement and hoped to remedy that soon.

After a couple impromptu stops, one to grab a plant from the nursery and the other to snag some ingredients to make one of my better dishes, a simple pasta with seafood, I was home. The plan was to cook him dinner, eat together, and then ask him to marry me.

But as soon as I saw him, that plan flew out the window.

That ring was burning a hole in my pocket, and before I even knew what I was doing, I was getting down on one knee and holding out the box.

“Arlo, I... I love you more than all of the fancy poems and sonnets could ever describe. My life is exponentially more complete with you in it, and I want you tied to me in all ways.”

His eyes were glued to the box.

“We’re already mated, and our lives are one, but legally, and in the eyes of our human friends and coworkers, well, I...” I plopped open the box. “Will you?—”

I never got to finish.

Because he bolted.

At first, I worried it was a no—that somehow, I had misjudged all of this.

But then I heard him retching.

My mate was sick.

Or the idea of being married to me made him ill.

And heck—neither was good.

“May I come in?” I didn’t want to embarrass him and some people were weird about puke, but not already being by his side to help him sucked.

“Yes.”

I slowly came in to find him splashing cold water on his face.

“Tell me how to help you.”

“Yes.” He turned to face me. “The answer is yes. Sorry I ruined your romantic proposal with... this.”

He said yes.

“You didn’t ruin a thing. I promise you.”

“Then why don’t I have a ring on my finger.” He held his hand out, and I slipped it on.

He picked up his hand and looked at it intensely. “It reminds me of your lion.”

“I thought so too.”

He ran his thumb along the band. “I really want to kiss you now but... so, raincheck?”

“Absol—”

I was cut off by my mate rushing back to the toilet. It was safe to say he was never going to forget my proposal. That was for sure.

19

ARLO

“What did you eat yesterday?”

Kalen was at my back, kneeling beside me and draping a damp towel around my neck. I sat back on my heels and dabbed my face.

Last night when we went to bed, I thought I’d gone through the worst of it, but this morning, my alarm hadn’t even gone off before I was back in the bathroom.

“Can’t remember. Something bad.”

He helped me up, and after washing my hands, he led me to his bed and I sank into the soft bedding. I closed my eyes, just for a minute, but when I opened them, the sun was low in the sky.

“Hello, sleepyhead.” Kalen offered me a mug of tea, and I struggled to sit up.

The room spun around, and I waved the mug away. “Don’t let me fall.”

“Never.” He sat beside me. “But perhaps I should take you to the doctor. Whatever’s wrong with you is not a tummy bug. Not that I’m familiar with human illnesses, but I’ve witnessed plenty of students sneezing and coughing to recognize the symptoms of various ailments.”

“No, I don’t want to. Just need to curl up in your bed and sleep.”

That was the last thing I recalled until later that night when I woke and Kalen was beside me reading by lamplight. Not the kind of celebrating our engagement in bed I wanted, that was for sure.

“Feeling better?”

I wasn’t. I was groggy, my tummy was yucky, and my mouth was disgusting, as though it were paved with asphalt. Kalen handed me a water bottle, and I guzzled the liquid. He offered to make me a sandwich, but my belly churned at the thought of eating anything.

“Just more water, please, and some crackers.” I had to work tomorrow, but it was from home, so I could stay in my PJs, or Kalen’s PJs ‘cause I’d arrived in a robe and I wasn’t wearing it now.

“Crackers with peanut butter? Cheese?” He must have observed my expression because he followed that with, “Plain crackers coming up.”

I nibbled on one cracker, and my belly didn’t complain, so I finished it and drank more water.

“Arlo, is eating plain crackers something you do when you’re sick?”

It was an odd time to be finding out more about me, but I shook my head. “Never liked them, except when I toddled around the house as a kid leaving a trail of crumbs.”

“So this is unusual?”

“Very.”

Kalen got into bed and put an arm around me. “I watch a lot of movies, and they all feature humans, or shifters pretending to be human.”

I loved my shifter mate, but I was ready to snuggle in for the night, not hear about his hobbies, however interesting they were.

“And in many of them, omegas like to eat crackers at a certain time in their life.”

I didn’t know where this was going, but I needed more sleep.

“Can your story wait until morning, babe.” I patted his hand. “I love hearing about your experiences, but I’m so tired, it’s as though I have a boulder sitting on my chest.”

He kissed my cheek. “I get it. Bear with me.”

Glancing over my shoulder, I wondered if he was going to introduce me to a bear. A lion was enough. “I’m not ready for another shifter in my life. Maybe tomorrow or next week, but I have to get used to your animal first.”

Kalen tugged his ear, a sign I’d come to recognize as him withholding information.

“You have a bear friend and he wants to meet me?”

He grinned. “How did me asking you to wait a little longer become me inviting a bear to the house?”

I shrugged, but despite my lethargy, my brain was buzzing.

“Okay. I’ll spit out. Omegas often eat dry crackers after a tummy upset when they’re not sick but pregnant.”

“Pregnant!” I shot up in bed. “That’s impossible. I can’t be pregnant.”

Kalen’s face fell, and he hugged me tight. “Oh, love. I didn’t know or I wouldn’t have mentioned it. He rested his head on mine. “I’m so sorry.”

I rolled over and studied his face. “What? Why are you apologizing?”

“Because you said you can’t get pregnant.”

“No, I said I can’t be pregnant. We’ve only had sex a few times and...”

Kalen grinned. “A few times. Do you know how long we’ve been seeing one another?” He nudged me. “Besides, that’s every teen’s line when they find out they’re pregnant. ‘We’ve only had sex once’.”

I rolled my eyes. “I understand how it works. But I just... well, I... damn... I’m being just as ridiculous as a teenager.” Except I was with the man I was spending my life with, he had my heart and I cradled his. Having a baby would make us a family.

“I guess I could be. Might want to get to a pharmacy and grab a test.”

“I have a better way.” He grinned.

“Oh yeah? Like what? Dangling a ring over my belly?”

Kalen giggle-snorted. “No, that’s to find out the sex based on what humans call an old wives’ tale.” He put a hand under the covers and brushed his fingers over my midsection. “My lion.”

I drew back, my heart speeding up so loud Kalen with his supersonic hearing must have picked it up. “Do I want to hear this?”

“He’ll sniff your tummy and be able to pick up if you’re pregnant.”

If I wanted to show Kalen that I truly accepted him for who he was, that I wasn’t fearful of his beast, this was the ultimate test. “Okay. It’s just a sniff, nothing more?”

“That’s it.”

“Let’s do it.”

Kalen stripped off his clothes, and I pulled the bedding down to expose my belly. I took deep breaths, trying to tamp down my anxiety. My gaze was on my mate as he shifted, the lion’s fur rippling over his body. His mane was gorgeous, and I thought of the long strand I’d found on my pants.

The beast padded to the side of the bed and placed his snout above me, not touching. He sniffed, and I studied his eyes. They weren’t the eyes of a wild beast but a mingling of his and Kalen’s. But I’d been thinking of the lion as a separate entity from my mate.

I reached out and brushed my fingertips over the mane. He bobbed his head, and the shared moment set my heart at ease. There was nothing to fear because Kalen said his lion adored me as much as he did.

The lion stood back and shifted, and my mate slid into bed beside me.

“I think I know the answer because I saw it in your beast’s eyes.”

Kalen’s look of anticipation accompanied him clutching both my hands. “So, is it

what you were hoping for?”

“It is, and I am.”

“You are.”

“I’m so excited.” How my mood and outlook had changed in minutes. Not once did I consider I might get pregnant so quickly. I’d always thought I had years before I became a dad. But I had a little one inside me, and I was filled with joy. Kalen and I had made a baby.

“How does your lion have the skill of scenting a pregnancy and you don’t?”

My mate shrugged. “We’d have to trail back through shifter history to find that out, and it might not be possible.”

Now that it was confirmed, my nausea eased and I was eager to make plans.

“We have to live together.”

“That’s the norm.”

My place was bigger than Kalen’s, and it had the attic I used as my home office plus three bedrooms. “Are you attached to your house?”

“It doesn’t hold any special memories, so I’d be happy to sell it and move in with you or we buy a place together?”

“Oh gods, we have to tell Princess she’s going to have a sibling. I hope she won’t be jealous.”

Kalen and I shared a laugh.

“Let’s hope she grows tall and our child or children create many happy memories playing beneath her.”

I leaped out of bed. Though my stomach was still upset, I wanted to get started on our new life.

“We should spend tonight in our home so we can commemorate the day we found out we were going to be parents.”

Kalen didn’t look convinced, but he went along with it and packed a bag. We collected Princess from the porch, and I whispered to her she was going to have a baby sister or brother.

“We’re home,” I shouted as my mate drove up to the gate, as we’d collect my car from his place later.

There was so much to do, but the burst of energy I’d experienced faded and I was ready to crawl into bed. Kalen made tea and plain crackers along with fruit for me, sandwiches for him, and we ate in bed.

The next eight or so months would be busy, filled with learning to live together and preparing for a baby. I closed my eyes while considering which bedroom we should turn into a nursery.

“Green or yellow,” I mumbled as my eyes closed.

“Are you asking me my favorite color?”

“No, for the baby’s room. Or maybe a light gray.”

KALEN

Deciding that it was my house that would be sold was a no-brainer. Not only was Arlo's larger, but it was the reason the two of us found each other in the first place. Not to mention the countless hours I'd spent fixing it up. In so many ways it was mine as much as it was his. This wasn't a case of me moving into "his house" so much as me finally moving home.

Getting my house ready to sell—and then actually selling it—those ended up being a far bigger challenge. When I first bought my place, you had to be at the house on the day it was listed to even have a shot at being able to buy it. That wasn't the case anymore. The market wasn't rock bottom, but it wasn't nearly as great for the seller as it had been back then.

At least I had summers off, making the timing perfect. I could deal with all the details while my mate worked. He was doing so well with his pregnancy. The beginning was rough, between the stomach issues and the exhaustion, but as soon as he passed the first trimester, he was filled with energy and felt amazing. If he was still struggling, we'd have waited to sell so I could be there with him, but all indicators were that this was the ideal time to get everything figured out.

Packing up and selling things we didn't need had been a piece of cake. The local social media market page was active, and the second I listed a piece of furniture, someone wanted it. I hadn't been attached to many pieces in my place, most of them picked up at a yard sale or second-hand store at one time or another. And the few I

did love, they were already at the other house. Same with the household goods. No one needed two sets of pots and pans or dishes. Purging proved to be easy, and moving what was left to the new house didn't even require a rental truck.

But actually getting the house ready to hit the market? That was rough. When the realtor came in, she made a running list of items that might be a no-go for buyers, including my pale blue walls and my gray carpet. Apparently white walls and beige floors were all the rage. Give me personality any day. The repairs and upgrades she suggested to light fixtures and faucets and the like, those I agreed with. Thank goodness it was all in my wheelhouse.

I spent countless days and nights fixing up every little thing the realtor said would make a difference. Did I believe that the color of the walls was going to be what made someone buy—or not buy—my house? No. But I also wasn't the expert, so I did it. I did it all.

Finally, it was ready, and it was such a relief.

My realtor scheduled an open house for the first weekend, listing it with the note that bids would be open for a week. She acted like this was a done deal, like everybody was going to want it. At the time I believed her, but I soon realized it was a marketing ploy.

The day of the open house came and went without a single participant. I couldn't blame it all on the house, though. A huge storm came through that morning, and anyone who had been out driving would have been out of their mind. It wasn't quite as bad as the one that brought my mate and me together, but it wasn't far from it. No trees came down, but we still had a house that hadn't sold. She assured it would all work out, but as the days dragged on, I wasn't so sure.

Money-wise, it was fine. We could afford what we were doing. But I wanted to do

more than just afford it. I wanted to be able to fill the nursery with all the beautiful things my mate wanted. I longed not to have this weight on my back, waiting, wondering if something would go wrong—a break-in, a tree falling on it, the market tanking.

And then, just as I was about to give up, I got the call.

We had an offer.

I honestly didn't care how good it was or wasn't—I was ready to be done with the entire process. Thankfully, it was decent, the process went off without a hitch, and now... now it was time to officially say goodbye to the place that had once been home and close.

“Hey, you okay?” Arlo wove his fingers with mine as we walked up to the law office for the final paperwork.

“Yeah. Nothing but fine.” Only it kind of wasn't. I stopped walking, my mate deserving an honest answer. “It's just... I guess... I don't know. Never mind.” I shook my head, pushing the feeling away.

“It's a lot.” He leaned into my side.

“Yeah. I didn't realize how much.” I'd been so sure it was no big deal. And in the long run, it wasn't, but for right now, it sure felt that way.

“It's kind of like with Princess.”

I turned to him, confused.

“I wasn't ready to let the tree go, so I made sure I had a new one.”

I'd thought it ridiculously adorable at the time, but framed like this, I saw how much deeper it ran.

"Can't exactly plant a new house." I let out a long breath, shoring myself up before going inside.

"No, you can't. But I bet if we asked the new owners, they'd let us thin out some of the lilies. We could put them outside the window."

It was amazing how he always knew just the right thing to make me feel better. I wasn't particularly attached to those flowers, but they were a part of home. They greeted me every day when they bloomed, and their greenery was my first indicator of spring each year.

"How did I get such a smart mate?" I kissed his cheek.

"Smart mate? I thought I was your sexy mate." He stuck out his bottom lip in a faux pout

"That too." I settled my hand on his rounded belly. "And even more so now than when I met you."

He rolled his eyes and shook his head—just like he did every time he didn't quite believe how attractive I found him carrying my pup. I'd made it my mission to remind him every chance I got.

The closing was easy. The new couple who bought the house were getting ready to start a family of their own, and they were more than happy to let us take some of the lilies. We were in there less than an hour before walking out with a nice check.

It was nice to have the chunk of change to put in the bank. We'd figure out a better

way to invest what we didn't use, but for the meanwhile, it would work. But the bank was for another time, the new owners allowing us to come right over to grab the plants as they walked through their home for the first time as owners.

"Should we put them here?" We were standing out back, the lilies in a bucket on the ground in front of the garden we'd originally thought of as their new home.

"I think so. Or we could put some out front?" Gardening was not my forte.

"Well, the good thing about lilies is they get overcrowded very quickly. We could put them here, and then next year, we'll probably have some to put out front. Or maybe the year after." That took the pressure off for sure.

We decided on that and spent the afternoon planting them, telling Princess not to worry—she was still our favorite.

"I was thinking..." My mate's words trailed off.

"That's pretty dangerous," I teased.

He smirked. "Har, Har. Hear me out. What if we build an addition in the back off the kitchen? Not really a three-season porch, but one for year-round? We could put a little breakfast table there and a play area for our cub."

Gods, I loved it when he referred to our child as our cub. It reminded me that he truly accepted who I was and who our baby may or may not be.

"I was thinking that, too, only my version had a deck off the back."

"Yeah, that's a great idea." We planted the lillies and discussed a ton of options for how the addition might or might not go.

He took my hand. “But before we start planning this too seriously, I’ve got an even better idea.” Mischief danced in his eyes.

“Oh? And what’s this better idea?”

“Well, the first thing we need to do is go in the house...” He licked his bottom lip.

“And then?”

“And then you need to strip me naked.”

I grinned. “Okay, I like where this is going. And then what?”

He brought his lips to my ear and whispered every single delicious thing he wanted me to do to him. “What do you think?”

I swallowed hard. “What do I think? I think that’s a whole lot better than spending the day out here trying to come up with addition plans, that’s for sure.”

“Me too,” he murmured, tugging me toward the door. “Me too.”

21

ARLO

“We don’t have anything planned for today, do we?”

I was curled up in bed, cocooned by the thick quilt. During the week, I had to front up to the computer and slog into the office once a week. But today was Sunday, and other than going to the bathroom, I was staying put.

“Nope, but there’s not much left of the day.”

What? No, that couldn’t be. It was mid-morning ‘cause I’d checked the phone a few minutes ago. “You’re jerking me around.”

“No, but I can give you a blow job if you want.”

“Maybe later.” I needed more sleep, and when I looked at the time, it was three. In the afternoon. What had I been doing in the intervening five hours? Sleeping, I assumed.

“I thought I’d treat you to something special.”

I adored my mate, and he looked after me, anticipating my needs, giving me foot massages, and buying me “how far the pregnancy had progressed” gifts each week. But he was more of an extrovert than I was. I enjoyed being at home, and though I wasn’t close to the end of my forty weeks, I was exhausted, and bed was where I

wanted to be, with Kalen beside me.

“Can I have a rain check?”

My mate got under the covers and peppered kisses over my belly. “Of course, but you get to stay in bed, and I do all the preparation.”

I liked the sound of that. It was my kind of special. “Yes, please. Can you do it now or do I wait?”

Kalen stuck his head out from under the covers. “It’ll take about thirty minutes, but we can start with fresh orange juice or a hot chocolate.”

“Can I have both?” I was thirsty, having slept the day away, and besides, I was being treated, so I was allowed to crave food.

Kalen slipped under the bedding again and spoke to my bump. “Your daddy wants both. Should we give them to him?”

Our little one kicked. Perfect timing. “The baby says yes.”

“What the baby asks for, the baby gets.”

My mate leaped out of bed and returned in a few minutes with a tray. Freshly squeezed orange juice, a huge mug brimming with hot chocolate topped with marshmallows, and a vase with a rose in it and a napkin.

There was also a note written in his handwriting.

I love you .

He pulled down the blinds and closed the curtains before lighting candles around the room. I hadn't noticed them until now, and he'd entwined fairy lights over the dresser and around the mirror. Flickering light was so romantic as I took alternate sips of my hot and cold drinks.

I couldn't wait to see what else Kalen was doing after he plumped pillows behind my back and dashed out of the room. The door was closed, so I couldn't smell anything cooking, but I hoped it was something yummy.

Before I could finish the juice, food began to arrive. "This is your 'Eat Breakfast or Brunch in the Afternoon' date."

A platter with pancakes, waffles, and French toast was placed on a trolley beside the bed. Around the platter were plates of eggs, hash browns, and bacon. I wanted all of it, and Kalen dished a bit of everything onto a plate, and I tucked in. He sat beside me with half the amount of food I had.

But despite my plate piled high, I side-eyed Kalen's hash browns after I'd demolished mine. "You aren't going to eat all those, are you?"

With his spoon piled high, he fed me his remaining crispy potatoes, saying he'd made them this morning and also prepped the ingredients for the other dishes, which was how he'd been able to make the food so quickly.

"I love an all-day breakfast. Breakfast should be the only meal of the day." I drank the last of my hot chocolate and licked around my mouth.

"Is the short-order cook allowed to kiss the customer and lick off the remaining marshmallow?"

I twisted my head one way and the other while staring upward. "I'll consider it."

After waiting three seconds, I added, “I’ve thought about it and yes.”

Kalen planted his lips on mine, and his tongue slid over my mouth, hoovering up the yumminess. Maybe I was in the mood for a blow job, but there was another slice of French toast on the tray, and it was mine!

After we ate the fruit and I rubbed my belly, hoping our little one was pleased with the feast, Kalen grabbed his tablet and mine, plus some note paper and pens.

“Is this supposed to be a shopping list?” In cooking up a storm, the fridge and pantry were probably bare.

“If you agree, I thought it might be nice to write letters to our baby.” He gave me a look as if waiting for my approval. “But it’s just a suggestion.”

“I love that.” He held up both a tablet and the note paper. “The paper.” I hardly used a pen and paper these days. Everything was digital, but I wanted our child when they were old enough to hold the paper and rub their fingers over the indentations my pen had made, the same pen I’d held.

“But should we keep our letters secret?” I was torn, wanting to share what I’d written with Kalen but also thinking it would be a nice surprise to read it at the same time as our child.

“We don’t have to decide now. Let’s write them and put them away and see how we feel in the coming days and weeks. Our little one won’t be reading them for years.”

My pen hovered over the paper as Kalen scribbled one page, a second, and third.

“What are you writing? An encyclopedia?” I was failing at being a dad and the baby wasn’t here yet.

“Love, it’s not a competition.” He blew me a kiss. “I was thinking about this all day while you were asleep.” He draped an arm over my shoulder and drew me close. “The baby might look at what I wrote and say, ‘That’s it?’”

We shared a laugh, and I put pen to paper.

“And there are no rules. We can add to the letters both before and after the baby is born.”

“Or toss them into the fire and start again.” Thinking like that made it easier to start writing, though Kalen said our child might get a laugh from our rejects.

My little darling,

We haven’t met face to face, but you are part of me, and I know you aren’t a morning person. We’ll have to talk about that after you’re born.

I have so many dreams for you, but the only two that matter are that you are healthy and happy .

You might have a lion inside you, but if so, you won’t meet them for years, but your father and his lion will teach you about shifters and love you as much as I do .

And you already have a sister named Princess. She’s kinda small at the moment, but she’ll grow as you will and she’ll provide shade for you and us.

I love you to the moon, around the sun and the solar system, and back.

Love, hugs, and kisses,

Daddy

“Now what?” We tucked the letters away in the dresser drawer.

“What if we write predictions and put them in a jar?” Kalen pulled an empty coffee jar from the floor.

“Like what?”

He tugged his hair. “Should we guess what color hair the baby will have?”

I wrote I think you’ll have the same color hair like your alpha father and scrunched the paper up before tossing it into the jar.

“You’re not going to show me what you wrote?”

“Nope. I don’t want to influence your prediction.” I thought of what else we could predict. “I know. Will the baby be handy with tools like his alpha dad?”

I wrote mine, and we placed our predictions in the jar.

“Hair or no hair?” he asked.

“You want our child to be bald?”

“When they’re born, love.”

“Oh.” I tried to recall my baby pics, and I had a few tufts of hair but not much.

We continued coming up with ideas that included foods they might like, what time they’d be born, their first word, and if they’d play football.

Kalen put the jar away, and I yawned. “That was tiring and…” I snuggled up to him,

“...thirsty work.” I cradled my belly. “The baby and I are hungry again. Are there any leftover pancakes?”

“There might be.” He headed for the door. “And more hot chocolate?”

“Yes, please.”

When the baby arrived there would be sleepless nights, days when I didn’t have time to shower, and I’d have drool, baby sick, and poop on my clothes.

I’d embrace it all, though if the universe could see to it that the poop stayed in the diaper, that would be great.

KALEN

If it were up to me, Arlo would have stopped working and been on paternity leave already. He still had a month left in his pregnancy, but he was done. He knew it, I knew it—but he was stubborn, insisting he could keep working until the baby came.

But something had changed today. He hadn't said as much, but from the time we woke up, I could feel it. Over breakfast he assured me he was feeling great and excited to see me after work, but it wasn't his health that was off. There was a clinginess to him, one that almost had me calling into work. But if I called into work every time he had a mood swing or a change in his energy, I'd have been out most of the semester

Pregnancy was wild like that. One day he was cuddly and relaxed, the next he was hypersensitive to noise, and the next he would kill a bear with his hands if it meant he could get the brownies baked faster. Of course my favorite was when he was all hard and needy, which during the second trimester had been pretty much nonstop. Who knew pregnancy made you horny?

When I came home from teaching my last class, I could hear him pacing in his office upstairs. At first, I thought he was just getting some exercise. His smartwatch told him it was time to get up, and the midwife had reminded him to take advantage of that notification. But he was walking longer than normal, and I went with my second guess; he was on a call that was driving him bonkers.

I let him know I was home via text and worked on some random household chores. But when two hours passed—two hours of him walking back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, something needed to be done.

Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I sent him a text, asking if he needed anything, not wanting to barge into his workspace. That was a boundary I'd set for us, and most of the time, it didn't bother me. But today, all I wanted to do was go up there and make sure he was okay.

Instead of answering, he came downstairs, waddling adorably.

Not that I ever called it waddling to his face—at least, not anymore. I'd learned that lesson. He didn't see it as the absolutely stinking cute thing that it was. To him it was the same as calling him fat. I never said it again after he confessed that.

My dear sweet omega still didn't know how ridiculously sexy he was with his large belly showing the world that he was keeping our cub safe and sound.

"I think I can be done." He rolled his head, stretching his neck, and then brushed past me into the kitchen.

"Did you want me to cook for you?" I hadn't thought about dinner yet, but we had what we needed to make quite a few quick-to-prepare meals.

"No, we need to pack up sandwiches or something similar." He opened the bread box. "Yeah, sandwiches. To go."

"How come?" I wasn't opposed to leaving, but I was confused.

"Because... because we do."

That wasn't very telling, but I'd learned early in his pregnancy that if his mood was off and there was no apparent reason, it was 1000% hormones and 0% about me. I tried my best to let it roll off my back.

"I can do that for you. Any particular type you want?"

He glared at me. "What do you think I want?"

His cravings changed frequently, but this week, he'd been eating a lot of BLTs, so I went with that.

"Yeah, thanks. That would be great. I gotta pee."

He waddled past me again, and I went to work. By the time he came back, I had an entire meal packed. I wasn't sure where we were going, but they were ready.

"Sorry about being snappy. I didn't realize I had to pee that bad. I feel better now."

"I'm not worried about it." I hugged him as best as I could with his belly in the way and gave him a quick kiss. "So... we're going somewhere?"

"Yeah, we're going somewhere. I was going to say grab a blanket, but I don't know if I can get up off the ground. Maybe bring one of the folding chairs from the garage?"

"Yeah, I can do that. I'll grab a blanket too, in case you get chilly."

I still didn't know where we were going, but I packed up the car with our food, blankets, chairs, and a case of water.

He climbed into the driver's seat, pushing it back as far as it would go so the steering wheel didn't press against his belly.

“I can drive.” And lately I usually did. But for some reason, he wanted to. Either that or he didn’t want me to say no to our destination, as if I could ever say no to him.

“No, I need to.” So into the passenger seat I went.

It didn’t take long before I realized where we were heading—to the place where I first showed him my lion.

I wasn’t sure why, but it didn’t matter. Pregnancy mood swings were what they were, and in the end, they usually turned out kind of fun. That’s how we ended up going to a make-and-take glass class. That’s how we ended up eating at what had become our favorite restaurant. That’s how we ended up turning the nursery into the most adorable theme ever—featuring lions, unicorns, and a beautiful blue sky.

Once he parked, I gathered everything up, glad I had reusable totes in the trunk. There was no way I was letting my mate not only walk down the path but do so carrying anything in his hands. He was already carrying the most precious cargo of all, and that was enough.

He led the way.

Instead of talking about why we were here—or anything about our evening—he rambled on about his day at work, about all the meetings that could have been emails.

“I think you’re right,” he finally said. “I think I need to be done.”

“Excellent.” I didn’t even hide my enthusiasm. He didn’t need work stress on top of getting ready to have our baby.

“Obviously, I can’t quit tomorrow, but I’ll work on making it happen.”

“Sounds great to me.” Beyond great.

“Truth time.” He smirked. “How hard was it for you not to push me to start my leave early?”

“Very. You have a great mate like that.”

He gave me side-eye.

“I’m patient.”

He rolled his eyes as we stepped into the clearing.

“What? I can be patient.” Sort of... usually... with a whole lot of effort.

“Really think about what you just said.” He put a fist on his hip. “How patient are you?”

“Well, I waited a long time to—” I sighed. “Okay, fine, I’m not patient. But I pretend to be.”

“This I know. Now, help me set up the space.”

And by “help me,” he meant he had a plan, and I was going to follow it. We put out blankets, the chair beside it, and the food in the corner.

“Did you want to eat first?” I asked.

“No. There’s something else I need more,” he said. “Strip.”

“Ooh, I like where this is going.”

He playfully smacked my shoulder. “No, not that. I mean, it can be that, but—no. First... I don’t know. All day, I’ve just had this need. I need to cuddle your lion.”

My lion perked up at that.

“Is that a thing? Is that what pregnant lions do? Snuggle time?”

“I’ve never been a pregnant lion before,” I admitted. “But connecting with our mates’ beasts? Yeah, that’s something lions do. All shifters, really.”

“Good.” He nodded. “Now hurry up and get naked and shift. I didn’t bring you any extra clothes, and I don’t think you did either. It’s too cold to walk back naked, and I’m not carrying all of this. So strip.” He was babbling, but also it was as if the weight he was carrying was lifted. If this was what it took to keep my mate happy, I’d keep my lion form 24/7.

“Fair enough.” I took off my clothes, set them on the chair, and shifted into my beast.

Unlike the first time Arlo met him, he came forward without hesitation, rubbing his forehead against mine, then kissing my nose. “I brought a blanket for you.”

I laid down on it, and he joined me. So much for him not knowing if he could get up again. He put his arm around me, his fingers weaving through my fur, telling my beast all about his day until his words slowed, then faded into sleep.

It was a short nap—maybe a half-hour—before his stomach growled, waking him up.

“Well, that’s embarrassing.” He kissed my nose again. “Guess that means we should eat now.”

I took the hint, shifted back, threw my clothes on, and pulled out our sandwiches.

My mate, visibly calmer than he'd been in days, sighed contentedly. "I needed that. Thanks." He reached up and brushed his hand against my cheek.

"Anytime, my love," I murmured. "Anytime."

23

ARLO

We were three weeks away from my due date.

I was on paternity leave and spent most of each day on the sofa watching soap operas or snoring, sometimes both at the same time, though Kalen said I couldn't be asleep and watch TV.

I disagreed.

“Tonight's a full moon.”

The full moon was significant to all shifters, I'd learned, and when possible, he preferred going to a vantage point and having the moonlight bathe his body.

“I'd love to go to my friend's mountain where we had our first date.”

I snorted because he'd be going alone. I'd huffed and puffed more than the wolf in the children's story, and now I was eight and half months' pregnant. Even sitting in the car for long periods was uncomfortable.

“You should go.” I'd be on the couch or in bed waiting for him.

“But I'd like you with me, and the baby.”

Was he seriously suggesting I climb that steep slope? There had to be a miscommunication.

“Babe, I can’t. Waddling to the bathroom and back is all I can manage.”

He slapped a hand on his chest and laughed. “Love, did you think I was going to carry you? No, there’s a road so we can drive up.”

“What?” We could have driven on our first date, and I wouldn’t have been sweaty and freaked at the dark and unable to see an inch in front of my face?

“Oops. Sorry, but that first night I wanted you to experience the mountain with me. Remember the fireflies? And I said something good was coming.”

I was still peeved he hadn’t given me the option to walk or drive, but I had to admit, if we had driven, I couldn’t have appreciated the sights, the sounds, and scents as I sort of did when we hiked up.

“I don’t fancy sitting on the ground, though.”

Kalen took me in his arms. “I’ll take folding chairs and cushions, and we won’t stay long.” He stood behind me and massaged my shoulders.

My mate made hot chocolate and grabbed some snacks, and we left. I was ready to do something different other than staying on the couch. Today I’d been bored and had heaved my belly to one side and the other, not being able to get comfortable. And with little space left in my tummy, the baby was lodged under my ribs. Maybe getting fresh air and looking at the moon, plus drinking yummy chocolate, would help me sleep better tonight.

Kalen drove up the winding road which was on the opposite side of the mountain to

the hiking trail. Maybe it was more of a hill 'cause it didn't take long to reach the top.

"This hill is an imposter, pretending to be a mountain."

"Shh." Kalen put a finger to his lips. "It might get annoyed with us and send a swarm of mosquitoes to nibble our flesh."

Yuck! I hated mosquitoes almost as much as things that hid in the dark.

At the top, my mate set up the chairs and a table and covered my legs with a blanket. Now when the breeze rustled the trees, I thought of Princess and how she'd grow in the coming years and her late mom. A scurrying through the bushes had me imagining a rabbit rushing home to their burrow.

The moon peered at us over the trees, and I sent my mate a quick glance. His eyes were closed, and I scented not just Kalen but his lion. I'd never appreciated the moon until I'd mated, and I sent up a thank-you as the light spilled onto my belly.

A small pain stabbed at me, though it was more like a hug. It wrapped around me, and my back throbbed. I must have squeezed my mate's hand because his eyes snapped open.

"Do you want to leave?"

"No." That was a fib. With my free hand I was hugging a cushion and counting until the pain faded. "I'm fine."

Kalen dropped to his knees in front of me. "I know you well enough, Arlo, to hear the distress in your voice." He stood and held out a hand. "We're going home."

"Ohhhh." I was leaning back in the chair and couldn't see beyond my belly. "Kalen, I

either peed my pants or my water broke.” My mate said something, but a cramp gripped my belly. It felt like someone wringing out washing. Both ends of me were being twisted in different directions.

“Shoot. I’m sorry, love, I should never have suggested we come out tonight.” My mate fumbled for the key fob, but when he clicked it to unlock the car, he dropped it. That was so unlike him. As a shifter, he didn’t trip, stumble, or bungle.

Kalen was my rock. When I lost it, he calmed me. His arms wrapped around my body could chase away fear and anxiety. Now I had to be the grownup.

“My hand, babe. Take it.” His palm was damp, something else that was new. “It’s fine.” It wasn’t. We were on a hill that alleged it was a mountain and I was in labor. But I had to be strong for all three of us. Kalen, me, and the baby. Not the fake mountain. It was on its own.

“We have to drive home and I’ll deliver the baby there as we planned.” But these were the last words I got out. The next sound from my mouth was a screech, then a scream, grunts, and groans and finally a sigh as the contraction faded.

“Nope, change of plans. This baby wants out!”

“But we’re alone here with no modern amenities. I was supposed to give you ice cubes.” My mate would have no hair left if he continued to tug it.

“Silly, we’re not alone. Look up.” Perhaps it was my imagination, but the moon was brighter than before, and I was convinced she was shining for me, for us.

My mate fell to his knees. “How come you’re so smart?” He kissed my hand and helped me undress. After grabbing a blanket from the car—we went on a lot of picnics, so that blanket lived in his vehicle—he lay it on the soft grass and scattered

the cushions around. He placed bottles of water and a towel on one side and helped me undress.

“Oh, here comes another one.” Kalen got behind me and took my hands. I dug my nails into his flesh and squeezed so hard, my shifter mate moaned. He tried to hide it, but it filtered into my mind that was drenched in pain.

My body was splitting in two, and I yelled to my mate to look after the baby if something happened to me. The cramping passed, and I wept. I’d had a handful of contractions, and I wasn’t coping. If this were a movie, I’d be yelling for drugs. Or I’d say I’d changed my mind and I’d come back tomorrow.

Kalen shuffled to my side. “You and I will bring up our baby. You have inner strength which is more powerful than anything I possess.”

I ruffled his tawny hair but another contraction took hold of me. Kalen panted with me, like we’d seen the omegas and their partners do in the birthing videos.

“Picture the baby being pushed with each contraction,” he whispered. “The pain brings our little one closer to us.”

Time blurred along with my vision, but even with my eyes closed, the moonlight danced on my eyelids, creating tiny flashes of light. Kalen, the baby, and I weren’t the only ones here. The moon was looking out for us.

The body of light appeared to be directly overhead when Kalen yelled he could see the baby’s head. I felt like a limp rag, but I had to get our baby out.

“What color’s the hair?”

“I’d say the same as mine.”

I was right.

With the moonbeams helping me and making up for my sapped energy, I groaned and pushed. Our little one's shoulders were out according to Kalen, and soon after, he was holding the baby.

"A boy."

Our son let out a loud cry, taking in his first breath, and I reached out for him as Kalen and I shared a kiss

"Hello." I placed the baby's ear over my heart. "You know this heartbeat." Our little man calmed, and his fingers curled into fists. Kalen put a towel over our son and covered us both in part of the blanket before lying beside us.

"It might not have been what we planned, but giving birth under the moon was a unique experience for a human." Having been enveloped in the moon's embrace, I understood a little better why shifters revered the celestial body. Its power had rippled through me, and our son, and given me the strength to bring him into the world.

"Do we give him a name that honors the moon?" Kalen offered our son his finger and our little one grasped it.

"I think we should."

"Lucian means moonlight."

"Lucian." Whatever the moon had transferred to me would be shared with our son, and he'd carry that with him forever.

EPILOGUE

KALEN

“Is it time, Papa?” Lucian popped into the nursery for the forty-seven billionth time.

I understood why. He was excited. I was too, but that didn’t make his baby sister finish her feeding any faster. Luna liked to savor her meal, unlike Lucian when he was her age. He wanted to eat then go. The second he learned how to crawl, there was no stopping him.

There still wasn’t. He was the fastest runner in school, something he was proud of. He still had a few years until he could join the track team, but I had no doubt that he was going to rule his events. If I were to guess, his lion was going to be like mine in that way.

Arlo had been worried he might not have a beast, that he might take after him like that. No matter how much I reassured him it didn’t matter if Lucian was a shifter or not, that I’d love him just as much either way and I wouldn’t be at all disappointed, I didn’t think he ever fully believed me. You could see the relief on his face when Lucian mentioned his lion at only three. That wasn’t a common age for the communication to begin between beast and human, but not unheard of.

My brother was sure it meant he was going to be an alpha and one day a leader for our pride. I wasn’t sure about the alpha part, his omega father just as fierce as any alpha I’d ever met. But the pride part? Yeah, I doubted that. We’d visited the pride lands fairly often, and while Lucian liked seeing my family and playing with all the

kids there, he loved being home more. I didn't blame him. I did too.

"She'll be done when she's done." The bottle her dad had pumped for her was over half finished, it wasn't going to be terribly long. "And when she is, I promise to come get you."

"Fine." He dragged the word out. "I'm going to wait in the kitchen."

"Don't bother your papa." He was finishing up the cake for the party. "It will take him twice as long if you do."

"I know." He was only five, but going on tween with his sighs and eye-rolling. If I were to guess, he was going to be an early shifter, and I kept an eye out for the signs.

He went in the direction of his room, singing about cake. I couldn't really blame him for being excited. I was too. It was not only his birthday, but it was the day Princess was finally getting her forever home. To celebrate, we had friends and family coming for a party, including my brother who had fully adopted the role of cool uncle.

The last time we had this many people here was for our wedding. It had been small by most people's standards, but the perfect size for us. We had all the people there who loved us most, sharing in our special day. My family didn't understand the whole need for the wedding when they came, but the ceremony tugged at all of their heartstrings, and they left with a new found comprehension of the human union.

"Luna, it's almost time to wow people with your cuteness."

She didn't pay attention, still happily drinking away.

"You don't know this yet, but that tree we're planting today... it's special. If it weren't for the tree she came from, I'd have never met you dad."

“And he’d still be working too much, never fully living.” Arlo stood in the doorway, frosting in his hair and a smile on his face. “The cake is done. It’s not pretty, but it will probably taste good.”

“I’m sure it’s perfect.”

Luna pulled off the bottle and turned to her dad with a huge grin.

“Looks like someone is ready for Daddy time.”

“You mean she needs a diaper?” Arlo teased, already reaching for her.

“Nope. Changed her before she had her yums.”

“You really are the best mate in the world.” He brought her to his chest, and she let out a very loud burp. “Look at that. I don’t even need to burp you.”

I stood up and wiped the bit of frosting from his face. “They should be getting here soon, and you’ll be surprised by this, but Lucian is ready for them.”

“He’s been asking if it’s time since last night.” Arlo kissed the top of Luna’s head. “My cousin should be here in a few minutes. That should help.”

And as if right on cue, the doorbell rang.

“Lucian, wanna?—”

“I got it.” He bolted past the door and down the stairs.

When my mate and I got there, Arlo’s cousin and his wife were there holding a gift box nearly as large as his torso.

“Is that for me?” Lucian was bouncing on the balls of his feet.

“It is. Show me where the presents go?”

They followed Lucian out back while his dad and I took care of the guests that had just pulled up and made sure the last of the food was put on the table in the sun room we’d added.

It was great seeing our family and friends, eating, chatting, catching up on everything. But the sky was starting to turn gray, a storm rolling in.

“Should we plant Princess before the rain so she gets a nice soak?”

“She came into this world via a storm, it only seems right.” Arlo whistled to get everyone’s attention and then called them to the ring of dirt we’d prepared for her forever home.

Princess had grown a ton since that first day, and it wasn’t a one-man job to transplant her. Good thing we had all of our loved ones there to help. We really should’ve planted her a year ago, but my mate hadn’t been ready.

“Princess is my daily reminder of how what I thought was the worst thing to ever happen to me suddenly became the very best. If it weren’t for that storm and my favorite tree deciding to come into my house instead of staying where it belonged, then I never would’ve met the love of my life and had my beautiful family.” His voice cracked, his emotion thick.

I wrapped my arm around his waist. “Who would’ve thought a bad storm and a wrong number could lead to such a beautiful life.”

Lightning cracked in the distance. “And sappy-word time is over. Let’s go inside and have some cake.”

“And singing,” Lucian called behind him as he ran toward the door.

“And cake.” I took Luna from my brother, and we all walked inside, the rain starting just as I reached the steps.

We spent the afternoon inside celebrating the birthday boy with cake and presents, watching the rain nourish our tree, the lilies we planted in a circle around it, and laughing. So very much laughing.

“Thanks for such a beautiful day.” Arlo fell onto the couch beside me when the last of our guests had left and our children were asleep.

“Thank you, Mate, for my beautiful life. I love you with all that I am and all that I will ever be.”

He climbed onto my lap, facing me, his hands on my cheeks. “I love you, alpha mine. Let me show you how much.” He brought his lips to mine and kissed me until all that was left in this world were the two of us and our love.