



Wrong Number, Right Unicorn (Dial M For Mates #3)

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Category: LGBT+

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

When I bought my house, I promised my grandfather that I would always have a landline. He might be gone, but the phone remains, just where it always was. When it rings in the middle of the night, I jump out of bed to answer it. The last time this happened, the news on the other end wasn't good. At least now it's either a scammer or a wrong number. No bad news comes from that, right?

Before I can say, "Hello," the person on the other end starts telling me, through sobbing tears, that they need me down at the station with bail money for Grams. I try to tell him I'm not who he thinks he is, only to have the line go dead.

I could go back to bed. Nothing's stopping me, but also... Grams is going to be in that cell for a long time if someone doesn't let the man on the other end of the phone know he got the wrong number. It has nothing to do with the way his voice had my beast perking up. Nope. Nothing at all.

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Chapter 1

Davien

I'm hungry! my unicorn complained.

And I'm tired and ready for bed. You ate earlier. Go to sleep and I'll let you shift in the morning .

My unicorn headbutted my insides. He didn't like being made to wait. When I was in my human form and he was inside me, him poking his horn into me was similar to gas. A niggle here, an ache there, a burp.

Not taking any notice, I sing-songed as I got in the shower. My beast loved warm rain trickling over his flanks but wasn't a fan of man-made showers. He huffed and curled up, grumbling that I never let him have any fun.

I ignored him. Unicorns—or my unicorn—expected to play all day, eat berries and flowers, and allow the sun to shine on them as they shimmered and the world would admire them. And if he went outside in the evening, he'd allow the moon to bathe him in silvery light.

And my beast liked—even expected—to be admired. It was the way of unicorns. They were put on this earth to be beautiful. Or so he told me.

Unlike wolves, bears, and foxes, my beast was a vegetarian. He'd never killed another animal, so our relationship was different to my carnivore shifter friends.

While I brushed my teeth, I studied the scattered gray hairs at my temple. Grandpa told me he'd sighted his first gray hair on his thirtieth birthday, and it'd been the same for me. I twisted one way and the other, imagining myself wandering into a club and all heads turning toward me. People would whisper behind their hands, trying to identify the distinguished guy with salt-and-pepper hair.

Ah ha! You're not much different from me!

Thanks to my unicorn, my vision crumbled and I was back in my bathroom. My beast and I were very different. He lived to preen and be adored, whereas I imagined myself being the center of attention. In reality, I was an introvert. Not that that was a bad thing. But having a beast who yearned for the limelight when I preferred to stay in the shadows and enjoy my own company resulted in an internal tug-of-war.

I pulled down the comforter and took a running jump onto the bed. It was a habit I'd developed as a kid. I was brought up by my grandfather, and each night we'd both stand at the doorway of my room. He'd say, "Ready, set, go," and I'd fling myself on the mattress, often doing a somersault, and either my head or butt would bang on the headboard.

Grandpa was gone now, and while I didn't leap onto the bed with the same energy I had as a kid, I kept up the tradition. Something else I'd never gotten rid of was the landline in my house. There was one phone in the living room and an extension beside my bed.

When I'd saved enough to get a mortgage, Gramps had made me promise I'd always have a landline. He didn't trust mobile phones and had refused to use one, even though I bought him a device.

The last time the phone attached to the landline had rung, it was Grandpa's neighbor, babbling about him being taken away in an ambulance. I'd raced to the hospital in my

PJs and made it in time to say goodbye. I liked to think he'd waited for me before he died.

No one had ever phoned me on that line again. But I couldn't get rid of the phones themselves or cancel the line. If I couldn't sleep, I'd pick up the phone and imagine I could hear Grandpa from wherever he was, telling me not to worry, he was happy.

I pulled the comforter up to my chin and grabbed a book from the nightstand. But it'd been a long day and my eyes kept closing, so I read the same paragraph three times.

A loud trilling, reminding me of a siren, had me shrieking and sitting up in bed. The lamp was still on, but it was the phone that was demanding my attention. Gods, no. Not more bad news. I should have disconnected the line, torn it from the wall, and then I wouldn't hear what someone was trying to say. Whatever it was would then pass over me and go on to someone else.

Answer it . My unicorn's version of bad news was not being allowed to take his skin, so he wasn't fearful of what the person on the other end had to say.

"It could be a wrong number," I said out loud to convince myself. If I didn't answer it, the person might give up, check the number was correct, and call the correct one.

Answer it. The noise is disturbing my sleep .

Oh well then, if it's an inconvenience for you, I'll do exactly as you command .

My clammy hand slid over the receiver as I grabbed it from the cradle, making me fumble with it.

"Hello."

“Oh, thank gods you’re awake.”

“Ummm, yes... I am.”

“I need you to...” A sob interrupted what he was saying.

Oh no. Crying, sobbing... that wasn’t good. This was a bad luck phone, and I was going to smash it against the wall as soon as this guy ended the call.

“You have to... it’s Grams.”

Was that grams as in a metric measurement, a person, or was it a muddled word that sounded like “it’s grams.” I couldn’t fathom what that word would be, though.

“She’s been arrested.”

Grams was a person, and she was in a spot of trouble. She was alive, so that was a plus and my heart rate slowed, thinking I didn’t have to help arrange a funeral.

“I don’t have enough money for bail. Can you bring \$500 to Stanmore Police Station? I’ll be here.”

“Hi, I’m?—”

He cut me off, telling me to hurry as he didn’t want Grams in a cell with murderers and drug dealers. “Though knowing Grams, after ten minutes with her, those criminals would be begging the police to put them in another cell.”

Grams was quite a character, and I kinda longed to know more about her. She and my unicorn might get along well. I wondered why she’d been arrested. The bail wasn’t huge. Caught in an illegal gambling den? My imagination was running away with me.

“I’m not?—”

“I don’t need to hear it. Yes, this isn’t the first time. But you know Grams.”

I was beginning to.

“We’ll talk to her once we get her out. This can’t keep happening.”

“No, it can’t.” I’d given up trying to tell him I wasn’t who he thought I was. I was intrigued with his Grams, but my beast was telling me I had to pay attention to the man’s voice.

Can’t you hear that?

Hear what? Other than the guy not pausing for breath, what was I supposed to hear?

Him, his voice. There’s a tingling, like bells or a stream skipping over stone s.

I rolled my eyes. Unicorns were always prone to exaggeration.

You have to get down there. Grams will be fine in jail, but you have to meet this guy. If you don’t, I’ll go . He mumbled about getting to the police station without being seen.

But if I was heading down there, I should at least know the guy’s name. Or Grams’s name. I couldn’t stroll up to the sergeant’s desk and say I was there to pay Grams’s bail. But how many older ladies would they have arrested tonight? Who knew?

“Okay, I’ll be there as soon as I can. But I’ll need to stop off and get cash.”

“What? But you always pride yourself on having cash.” His voice got higher,

“Having cash in your pocket is like a safety net. You never know when you’re going to need it is what you told me.”

“Ummm, yeah, I spent a lot this weekend.”

He sighed. “You and Grams are so alike.”

Maybe I was right and she had been gambling.

“Okay. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

He hung up. I couldn’t go back to bed and go back on my word. I wasn’t who he expected me to be, but I’d told him I was coming with the money.

Grams might not be as tough as he was portraying. Maybe he was putting on a brave front and she was a little old lady cowering in the corner of a prison cell.

I dragged some clothes over my PJs, got my wallet and phone, and skedaddled out the door.

Hurry , my unicorn urged. If I didn’t, he might take his skin and gallop through the streets. Grams might not be the only one causing a stir if that happened.

I wiped sleep from my eyes as I reversed out of the driveway. Perhaps I’d make a new friend and we’d laugh about tonight while sharing a beer.

Not a friend , my unicorn insisted.

That made me a little uneasy. Was I walking into a trap?

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Chapter 2

Errol

I grabbed my keys and bolted toward my car.

It had been a long-ass day and I'd just gotten home from work a few minutes earlier. I was kicking myself for deciding that today was the day to play catch-up and to get all of the odds and ends finished up without the disruption of coworkers. I wouldn't have stayed if I had realized Grams was going to need me. She'd been needing me a lot lately; something was kind of off with her. I couldn't place just what, but it was getting progressively worse.

I thought about calling my parents, but they had long since retired to Arizona. Frankly, I suspected Grams was the reason they left when they did. My dad wanted his retirement to be all leisure and would get frustrated when she asked for any kind of help. My dad was kind of a dick.

Grams left not one, not two, but three messages on my landline answering machine, each one escalating in urgency. When I bought the house from my folks, I kept the landline going because, well, it was my childhood number, and it felt like too big of an end of an era to disconnect it, and it was easy to just add my name and take my parents off.

But now, I saw that phone was much more valuable than just nostalgia, because Grams would use it from time to time. It was the number she remembered—not that she had dementia, but sometimes, she was just off. I tried to get her to talk to the

doctor about it, but she insisted she was fine. She was always fine and, quote, “not a fucking child.” My Grams had taken to cursing at her 65th birthday and never looked back.

My parents used to be mortified when she cursed around me, even as an adult, but that was always just Grams. It wasn't like I'd never heard those words.

The first message she left today just mentioned needing to go to the pharmacy, and that was fine. I didn't mind driving her. The second one said I needed to quit ignoring her because it was important. Again, not typically my grandmother, but okay. The third was where it got weird and disconcerting. “It's an emergency!” She shouted it loud and clear, over and over and over again until the time limit was up.

I thought to call her first but realized it was best to just hightail it over there. I barely made it into the driveway, the end of my car sticking over the sidewalk, but I didn't care. If they wanted to give me a ticket for that, they could. I needed to get inside.

My heart was racing as I sprinted to the door, and when I got in, what was Grams doing? Sitting in her recliner, watching Matlock for the 47,000,000,000th time—and that estimate might've been on the low side.

“Grams, you okay?” She hadn't been when she called but nothing appeared out of the ordinary.

“Hello, dear. How are you? Did you come for some tea?”

“No, Grams, you called me.”

“I did? Yeah, I probably did. You want some tea?”

This caught me off guard because, even though she hadn't quite been herself lately,

this was the opposite of her screaming on the answering machine.

“You know what? I would like some tea.” It would give me an excuse to stay and figure out what was going on with her. I had a feeling I was either going to need to move in with her or help her find an assisted living facility soon, and it broke my heart. She very much wouldn’t do well there, but this erratic behavior was getting progressively more intense, and there might not be another way. “Let me go make us some.”

I went into the kitchen, turned on the kettle, and grabbed the box of her favorite tea. When I opened it, it was empty. I turned around to see Grams in the doorway.

“That’s why you come when I call you the first time.” She had her fist on her hip.

“Are you kidding me, Grams? This is your emergency?” Gods. This day was getting progressively worse.

“It’s Matlock time—I don’t have tea. How can this be considered anything but?”

I didn’t argue with her that Matlock was on all day long, every day, because she had a streaming service where she just picked it.

“Okay, Grams, I’ll go out and get you tea.”

“Nope, I’m coming with you, and on the way there, you can apologize to me for ignoring me.”

I pulled my phone out of my pocket. “Is this the phone you called, Grams?”

She squinted and leaned forward. “You know I don’t like that newfangled stuff.”

“And you know what the problem with calling me at the house is?

“You never answer your phone?”

Which, fair, but no. “Grams, it’s because I’m not always home. I was at work.”

“Oh, sweetie.” And just like that, her tone completely changed.

She walked over and hugged me. “You work too hard. You’re like your father in that.” She ruffled my hair. “You need to stop, or you’re gonna be miserable. You’ll never find someone to settle down with and have a family. You want a family, right?”

“Yes, Grams.” If I thought I wouldn’t get caught, I’d have rolled my eyes.

She was pinging all over the place, her mood just bouncing and bouncing, unsure where to land. I was going to need to push a little harder to get her to talk to a doctor about this. Had she not been a lifelong non-drinker, I’d have sworn she was drinking half the time.

“Let me go get you tea.”

“I’m coming with you.”

“Fine, let’s go get tea.” It was late, and it was easy enough for me to do it, but leaving her when she was like this seemed like a worse idea than bringing her with me.

I walked her out, making sure she locked her door, something she was getting pretty bad at lately, and we got in the car.

“Let’s go to the big box store, and we can get you some groceries too.”

I didn't have to look much beyond the counter to see that she was running low. It was an empty bread bag, an empty milk jug, and two tuna cans that were empty and rinsed. She said she liked to keep her recycling on the counter so that she knew what she needed to buy again. It was a choice but one that didn't hurt anyone, so I never argued with her. And it did help me because on days I came over, I made sure to replenish her stock without having to play the game of getting her to give me a list.

"No, they have the wrong tea." She buckled her belt.

"What do you mean, they have the wrong tea?" She didn't buy any particularly fancy variety; it was just tea, the kind you probably got at most diners. And if one was on sale, that was the way she went.

"Yeah, the wrong kind." Which explained nothing. "Let's go to the 24." That was what she called her favorite pharmacy—24. In theory, it was open 24 hours, but given that it was closed on Mondays and Tuesdays, that wasn't really accurate.

"Okay, let's go."

There was always somebody at the pharmacy, it being one of the only places open late if you needed a prescription. We went inside, and she handed me a basket and said, "Carry this." So I did.

Then she started telling me all about her day, as if this hadn't been the weirdest night ever. She put things in the basket here and there, and then went to the food aisle where she found her tea and plopped it in. I didn't have the heart to tell her that she was probably paying triple the amount because it was the same exact tea everywhere had.

As we rounded the next corner, she ran straight into the security guard, nearly toppling him over.

“I thought you weren’t coming back here.” He straightened up. There was a story there, one I wasn’t familiar with.

She looked up at him and tilted her head. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Well, last time you were here, you yelled at me and told me you were never coming in here again because you thought I was?—”

She shook her head. “No, no, I don’t think so.”

And that’s when everything went yikes. She grabbed the basket from me, threw it at him, and ran out the door. Only she grandma-ran , so it wasn’t much more than a walk, and he followed behind her.

When I turned around, I saw the poor security guard was holding his nose. Apparently, she did get a good throw in. I hustled straight to the car, intending to get her inside of it before going back to apologize for what happened and beg him not to trespass her. Before I was able to unlock it, a police car pulled into the driveway. Their lights weren’t on. From what I could tell it was simply bad timing.

Great, just what we needed.

Of all the times for them to come here.

“Come on, Grams, let’s hurry up and get you inside.” So I could fix this mess.

“Why? Are you saying I can’t handle myself?”

Fantastic. I was making it worse.

“No. Of course not. I just figured that since?—”

She cut me off, screaming, “This is what I think about cops!”

And then I had to watch helplessly as she turned around and pulled her pants down.

“Are you mooning the officer?”

Fuck. She was.

Hours later, I was calling around trying to get enough money to bail her out and being told by multiple people that this wasn’t her first time here and that she needed help, not enabling. I’d had no idea about the other arrests. Things were so much worse than I realized.

Please let me wake up from this nightmare and quick.

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Chapter 3

Davien

Turned out, Stanmore Police Station was busy this evening. Maybe Grams had a lot of friends and they'd all been arrested.

I had to park a block away, and my beast fumed that he couldn't let me perform the boring human stuff and that I should allow him to prance into the building and whisk Grams away.

Doesn't work like that, which you know .

I can dream , he shot back.

That would be a sight, though. My beast galloping under the moonlight and Grams on his back, waving as cars skidded to a halt and avoided my unicorn.

Standing and waiting my turn at the front desk, I surveyed the room, heaving with people who were exhausted, some were crying, others were taking a nap, and a few were shouting in an effort to be heard. When I made it to the head of the line, the guy directed me to the booking area.

And that was just as crowded. And while people were jostling and my beast complained about humans not bathing, one guy was arguing with a uniformed cop.

“Your grandmother needs to be in a home. She ends up here at least three times a

week. This is not an assisted living community.”

“No. If I put her in one of those places, she’ll be dead in three months.”

The cop whose scent announced him as a bear shifter, muttered under his breath that it was probably true. “Another resident would probably slip something into her tea.”

Yikes. I hoped Grams was just high-spirited and acting differently to what society expected of someone in their later years. Surely no one would bump off an elderly lady.

This had to be the guy who phoned me. Unless there was a team of grannies waiting to be bailed out.

“Hi. I’m Davien.”

“Hey, buddy, we’re having a private conversation,” the guy snapped.

Not so private that the whole room couldn’t hear. People were straining to listen to the pair. Might be the most fun they’d had all night. But his words evaporated in the stale air as the grandson’s scent wafted around me. No, it couldn’t be. What were the odds?

Nothing odd, my unicorn noted. You know who he is.

“Sit down and wait your turn.”

Now the cop was pissed at me. Gods, if this were anyone else, I might have marched out and left them to it. Except I wouldn’t have left Grams languishing in a jail cell and her grandson’s scent was calling to me, begging me to stay close.

“You called me.” I folded my arms and stood my ground.

“Called as in—” The guy raised one brow, a feat I’d never managed to pull off.

“Phoned,” I finished his sentence. “About Grams.”

“Grams?” the cop and the grandson said in unison.

I waved my wallet at him, wishing I could have paid Grams’s bail with a QR code and kept my distance from the cop and dragged the grandson and Grams away from the room heaving with people.

“But I?—”

This was taking way too long. “Wrong number, I guess.”

The grandson told the cop he’d be right back, and taking my arm, he pulled me through the throng and outside onto the sidewalk. Sirens blared, and people who’d been arrested were manhandled inside.

“You’re not Julian.”

I sighed. That was obvious. The guy was under a lot of stress with his grandmother, but I’d become bogged down in this dilemma. On the flip side, I relished being near him, no matter where we were. I’d stay in that dank booking area forever if I had to.

“Nope. Davien.”

“Damn. Grams said she gave me Julian’s number.”

Grams might have been a little preoccupied having been arrested. Or perhaps she

wanted to be locked up and deliberately given her grandson the wrong number.

I held up my phone, side-stepping him asking me what my number was. That should speed up the process.

He took out his phone and showed me the dialed number. Inwardly I was screaming, wanting to fast-forward to handing over the money and get to the “I love you” part of the conversation.

“Yep, you dialed me.”

I pulled out five one-hundred-dollar bills. Now that we’d reached the money part of the discussion, I expected our interaction was at an end and we could take Grams home and talk. Or do other things.

“I can’t take that.” He pushed my hand away, his face screwed up in distaste.

Dear gods, this was like walking through syrup.

How do you know? My unicorn was very literal.

Never mind .

I counted to ten. We’d been so close, and now our discussion might morph into an argument. I couldn’t let our first night end with us shouting at one another.

“Let’s backtrack for a minute. You called Julian.”

“No. I thought I did.”

This guy would get along well with my unicorn.

I look forward to it .

“Fine. Your intention was to call Julian, but you phoned me instead.”

“Correct.”

Good, we were on the same page.

“And you begged Julian for bail money?”

“No, I asked you.”

He was so like my beast. Ahhh!

I like him .

“You wanted Julian to bail Grams out.” He opened his mouth, and I raced on before he could say a word. “You asked me instead of Julian for five hundred bucks.”

“Yes. But I don’t know you and can’t accept the money. Five hundred dollars is a lot.”

On that we were in agreement.

“Do you have the five hundred dollars?” I asked.

The guy’s face flushed, and I regretted being such a hardass, but I had to make him see sense.

“No, I... sorry.” He studied his nails.

“Grams needs the money and I’ve got it, so let me bail her out.”

“Who does that? Posts bail for a complete stranger? You’re not a loan shark, are you?”

“Nope. Just a guy at the end of a wrong number.”

He nibbled his nail. “Okay, but I’ll pay you back at the end of the month.”

I hated that he didn’t have any spare cash. No emergency fund for when the car broke down, or he needed an X-ray, or bail money for his grandmother.

“I heard what the cop was saying. Do you need any help?” I placed the money in his hand and curled his finger over it.

“You’ve done enough. No, it’s fine. I can deal with her.”

I pictured him bundling his grandma into the trunk of his car and taking her to a deserted cabin in the woods.

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely. I’ve been down this road many times.”

I couldn’t barge into his relationship with Grams more than I already had, so I let it go. My mind zipped ahead decades, and I saw myself in Grams’s place. There might not be anyone advocating for me as this guy was for her. But my life choices had little to do with what was happening here.

“I’ve got your number, so I’ll text you when I have the cash.” He grabbed both my hands, his skin soft and warm. “I promise.”

“Nah, that was a landline.”

His eyes widened. “Wow! It’s rare to see anyone with a landline, except, you know...”

“Old people?”

He caught my eye, and we burst into laughter. I explained why I had one, and his eyes misted up.

“That’s sweet. I hope your grandfather is sitting beside the goddess, telling her ‘That’s my grandson.’”

Now it was my turn to get teary-eyed. That was the sweetest thing anyone had ever said to me.

“I don’t even know your name.” Taking out my phone, I had my finger poised above New Contact.

“Errol.”

“Nice to meet you, Errol.”

“Sorry, what was your name again?” He jerked his head toward the doorway. “There was so much going on in there, I didn’t catch it.”

“Davien.”

He repeated it, letting the vowels and consonants slide over his tongue. “Davien.”

We shook hands before exchanging phone numbers. I was eager to get a glimpse of

Grams, but that was kinda yucky, like she was a lab specimen or a zoo animal.

I was tempted to ask if he needed a ride or money for food, but he might be insulted, and I bit back my questions.

“I promise I won’t forget to pay you back.”

I had a good feeling about Errol and was certain he’d do his best. Following him inside, we discovered the cop Errol had been arguing with was dealing with a man whose dog had bitten his neighbor. The owner insisted it was justified, as the guy had pitched a stone at his pet.

I was on the dog’s side.

Errol and I said our goodbyes, and I weaved through the crowd and into the cool night air.

You can’t leave .

I have his number. He’s too stressed right now to hear about you or meet you . I’d give it a few days.

My beast wanted to know where Grams was.

Behind bars .

A zoo . He shuddered, having seen a documentary on how some zoos treated their animals.

She’ll be out soon .

An hour later when I fell into bed, I'd expected to sleep straight away, but my mind was full, wondering how Grams was and where Errol had taken her.

And then my thoughts drifted to Errol himself.

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Chapter 4

Errol

Ideally, I wouldn't have taken the money. I'd have had my own. It was \$500—not a huge amount, but for me right now, it was more than I had. My savings had been wiped out when my roof sprung a leak, and I hadn't been able to replenish it yet. Honestly, my house was a money pit, and more days than not, I regretted taking it off my parents' hands. Sure, it was filled with memories, but so were my old school photo albums.

I don't know why Grams gave me that number, if it was one that Julian used to have, or maybe it was the wrong area code. He was technically my uncle, but it was in name only. He rarely came around when I was kid, and recently not at all. Come to think of it, I wasn't sure why she picked him to call in the first place.

Things were just getting so rough with her, I didn't know much of anything. Leaving her in a cell wasn't an option. She wasn't going to quote, "learn a lesson," like one of the cops suggested. If anything, she was going to get herself in more trouble. Grams always had a rebellious side. That was hardly new.

I went back inside, filled out an enormous amount of paperwork, paid the money, and then waited... and waited... and waited. I wasn't sure if this was the normal process or if they were just fed up with me and this whole fiasco.

But then the officer I talked to came out with someone I didn't recognize—someone in plain clothes, who introduced themselves as a social worker—that's when I knew

what was happening. They were stalling in order to get me help.

Fuck. That was the last thing I needed. At least for now. There might come a time when I needed the help, and when it did, I'd seek it out. For now, I just needed to get her home and process the entire situation.

"I just wanted to give you some information on some resources for your grandmother. She doesn't seem quite of sound mind." She chose her words carefully. It wasn't her fault she was dragged into this, and her intentions seemed to be in the right place. I still wished she wasn't here.

"I think she's just tired," I said, though I didn't really believe that was the reason. Something was going on, but that wasn't it.

"There are also some resources for you." She tapped her finger on the folder she was holding, and I assumed those were some of said resources. "Are your parents around?"

"No, they're out of state," I said, pinching the bridge of my nose. I was not ready for any of this. At least I'd finished all my work last night, so when I had to call in, it was fine. I'd have the day to figure things out.

"If I say thank you and take this information and promise to follow up, can I take her home now?"

"Yes," she held out the folder, "but really do those things."

I agreed that I would, and fifteen minutes later, I was walking Grams out to the car. She kept wanting to talk, and I kept telling her to wait, saying it was "Car Talk"—something she'd used with my dad, and he'd used with me. I was always allowed to vent about anything I wanted, as soon as we got into the car. If a teacher

was being awful, he wanted to hear it... once I got to the car, and now I was using it on my grandmother. What a weird circle life was turning out to be.

“We still didn’t get the tea,” was the first thing she said when I got in and buckled. Not an apology for mooning the cop or a thank-you for bailing her out. No. She wanted tea.

“No, we didn’t. And I don’t know if you’re aware of this, but the pharmacy... they don’t want you back.” And I didn’t blame them.

“Why? Just because I threw a little basket?”

I counted to five before responding.

“It wasn’t little, Grams. It was full. And other things happened there too.” I wasn’t even sure all what and was very confident that I didn’t want to.

“People don’t have a sense of humor anymore,” Grams grumbled. “Can we get the tea? I do need it to go with Matlock.”

We stopped at the big box store on the way and grabbed some groceries for her as well. Normally, I’d have offered to pay, but I had just borrowed bail money and paying that back was top priority.

Once home, I put her purchases away and told her to grab a shower and put on her housecoat. For her, a housecoat signaled she wasn’t going anywhere, and I needed her to stay put and rest.

We really needed to have a discussion about why she mooned the officer. It was one thing with the security guard—they apparently had a past of some sort, so I could sort of piece together why she might think that was acceptable. It wasn’t, but Grams

logic—yeah, I could see that. But there was no way, absolutely none, that the cop did anything to her. Who just goes and moons someone, especially someone with the ability to arrest you?

She agreed and padded into the bathroom while I put things away and made her some toast and tea. My hope was that she would have a light breakfast and then take a nap. She'd been up all night, and that wasn't good for her—for either of us.

When she came back into the kitchen, she opened a drawer and grabbed a few bottles. The thing was full of pill bottles—tons and tons of them. I knew she'd had a change in her medications lately, having driven her to pick some up, but she had a whole-ass pharmacy in there.

“When did you move those over there?” I asked, seeing that the junk drawer was no longer junk.

“It got to be too much for that little holder you gave me.”

I'd given her a little lazy Susan that held quite a few bottles. It had been perfect because it made it easier for her to find the things she needed. Not any longer. When I got closer to the drawer to get a better look, I was in shock. She had a lot more prescriptions than before.

“Grams, why do you have all these?”

She picked them up one at a time and explained what they were, or at least which doctor gave them to her. I got lost only partway through and was amazed she was able to keep track of them all.

I tried to encourage her to consider a nap, but she insisted, “I'm feeling better now than I was. I'll sleep when I'm dead.” She took a handful of pills and grabbed her tea

and toast.

She might've been feeling better, but she sure wasn't acting better. And it wasn't even that she was acting poorly, not like last night. She just wasn't herself, and that worried me... too much.

“How about I get you a pill holder so you can at least organize them by the day and not have to do this every day?” I'd seen on TV that they even individually packed medications by the day for patients. I was going to need to look into that as well.

“Okay,” she said. At least she was amenable to that.

I counted the bottles one more time as I put them away for her. I took one pill a day during allergy season and it felt like a lot. This was... there were no words.

We sat at the table as she ate her toast. She told me to hurry along to work—well, school, until I reminded her I had a job now. I lied and said I already had the day off. She didn't need to know that I was calling in sick for her. And then, instead of going to bed like I suggested, she went and watched Matlock. Only thankfully, watching didn't really happen, and she fell asleep in her recliner. She needed the sleep, and I needed some time to think—Think about how to help her. Think about whether I needed to be moving in here. Think about how I was going to get the money back to not-Julian.

And after that, I needed to get some rest myself.

I took out my phone and typed: Thanks . I went to hit send, backed it out, and just stared at the blank screen. There was so much more than thanks. Davien was so willing to help, so kind. And, yeah, he was hot. But it wasn't about that. It was... I didn't know. I couldn't put my finger on it.

Eventually, I thanked him and promised I'd pay him back, hitting send before I could change my mind. I wasn't sure when that would be, and I felt guilty about that. But there was nothing I could do about that, at least not today.

At least Grams seemed to be less erratic. So that was something.

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Chapter 5

Davien

I woke up late, thanks to the sleepless hours when all I could think of was Errol and Grams.

Stumbling into the kitchen, I made coffee, my eyes cracked open a little. Nothing made sense until I'd downed that first rush of caffeine.

I rested my head on a cupboard, waiting for the machine as it made noises like it was in pain. With a hot mug of coffee in my hand, I gulped that first mouthful. Nothing was as good as that, not the second or third gulp and not another cup or a brew at a coffee shop.

My taste buds reacted and my brain engaged, and I opened the back door and sat on the deck overlooking the back garden.

But though my right hand held the mug, my left which usually had my phone was empty. I wasn't expecting work calls, having finished a big project two days ago, and I had the week off.

Decisions, decisions. Did I stay where I was and enjoy the birdsong or did I wander into the bedroom and get the phone?

It was unlikely Errol had the money, so he couldn't have messaged. My departmental colleagues, like me, had a few days off, close friends knew better than to call just

after I'd finished a project. I had no family to speak of, unless I counted distant cousins.

You have me .

I do . And thank gods for my beast. He got me through some tough times.

With the mug drained of coffee, I peered inside, considering whether it was too soon to make another.

Yes, unless we go for a run .

Too much caffeine affected my beast, and he needed to gallop it off. But that had to be planned, as humans wouldn't look the other way at a unicorn gallivanting around town.

We can go this afternoon.

I had to drive a ways outside the city. Not only did we have to avoid people but also wild animals. Wolves and bears might attack my beast, though he was speedy and could probably outrun them. But I didn't want to test that theory because of what had happened on my first ever shift.

Don't think about that , my beast insisted.

As I picked up the phone, a bird I didn't recognize landed on the windowsill. Birds fascinated my beast. They shared a love of sweet things, so they were often in the same place, nibbling fruit from a tree or bush.

It wasn't until I was making breakfast, a treat that I never had time for on a workday, that I looked at the phone. There were a couple of messages on the display but one

stood out.

Errol!

A jolt of what felt like electricity rocked my body. The message was a little weird because Errol had repeated what he'd said last night, that he promised to pay me back. It was a little disappointing, not because he didn't have the money. Gods, it was less than twelve hours since I'd handed over the cash, so unless Julian had coughed up the money, Errol didn't have it.

And I didn't want him to borrow money just to pay me.

I was downhearted. A guy I'd just met texted saying he'd pay me the money he owed. I should be pleased he was so appreciative of what I'd done and eager to repay the debt.

But he wasn't just a stranger who owed me money. He was my mate, and I'd vowed to give him time before flipping his world on its head.

I need to run, and you have to clear your mind .

My unicorn never quite grasped the importance of money to people. He had all he needed; a safe space inside me and plenty of opportunities to take his skin. I almost wished we could change places and I could live a life of leisure and send my beast to the office.

Okay, a run it is .

But during the drive, I pondered Errol's response. We'd spoken a few hours earlier, so why did he feel the need to message me? I tried putting myself in his position. Sure, I would have been frantic, counting the days until I could pay back the money.

And he had Grams to contend with.

Maybe... just maybe he sensed our connection.

I parked the car where I always did near orchards owned by a shifter family. They designated trees and a bunch of flowers especially planted for my beast, and I paid them a monthly fee. My unicorn wished he could roam around the forest, but I worried about prey. That first shift haunted me.

There was enough space for him to run after he'd eaten, as the rows of trees were far enough apart, but it wasn't the same as drinking from a stream or clamoring up a rugged hillside and enjoying the view.

View? Bah!

Okay, you don't care about the scenery. Got it .

Waving to the workers who were picking cherries closest to where I'd parked, I made my way to the farthest corner of the orchard and disrobed. Bunches of cherries were weighing down the branches, and in the next row, there were ripe mulberries. After I'd taken my skin, my lips would be stained purple.

Yum!

Giving my beast his horn and hooves, I let my mind wander, and it went straight to Errol, his grandmother, and whether I should reply to his text. If so, what should I say?

Okay was kinda bland and might come off as rude.

I know you will was a little presumptuous and could sound threatening.

Thanks was too offhand.

Ahhh! Mobile phones, rather than being a convenience, just added to the confusion of life.

I blocked out the squishy noises of my beast chomping on cherries and mulberries. There were some peaches that had ripened according to the orchard website, but my beast wasn't a fan.

Two hours passed because my unicorn wasn't a fast eater, preferring to relish his food. When he was done, he raced up and down the rows, the trees proving cover from any humans who were near the orchard.

This was the second day in a row my beast had shifted, but when I was in the middle of a project, I worked and slept, so I owed him plenty of hooves-and-horn time.

Can we do that again tomorrow?

The cherries were at their peak, and the bears would be hankering to break down the huge fence surrounding the orchard. The cherries would be gone soon, and my beast would be forced to eat other fruit and wild berries, that were not so wild. The orchard owner cultivated them for me and other herbivorous beasts.

I'll try .

A shower was the first thing I did on returning from a shift, but I made it a quick one. My unicorn may have eaten, but I was starving, so while the pasta was cooking, I wrote out messages to Errol and deleted each one.

I should ask about his grandmother, but I had to acknowledge his message first.

Thanks. I'm not worried about the money. How is Grams? I studied what I'd typed and wavered about whether to send it. Gods, when I was at work, I responded to tens of messages and rarely gave as much thought to my responses as I did to this one.

Before I could third, fourth, or fifth-guess myself, I hit send. Shit, the pasta had boiled over. Ewww. Now I had to clean up the mess. It gave me something to do for five minutes instead of thinking about the message.

The phone was quiet as I ate dinner, turned on the dishwasher, and sat down to watch TV with tea and cookies. But just as I was about to find out who the bad guy was, the phone beeped.

Grams is doing well. There's not much wrong with her other than being bored. She was in a bit of a mood. But thanks for asking .

I responded with Great!

What else could I say? Grams being in a mood and bored didn't correspond to what the cop was yelling at Errol last night. I suspected Errol was covering for Grams and she needed looking after, something he couldn't give her if he were short of both money and time. Working didn't allow anyone to be a full-time caregiver.

So he either couldn't work and that was why he couldn't come up with the bail money, or he left his grandmother alone for nine hours or more, and she wandered away, causing chaos.

What a dilemma. I might be way off base and Grams was acting like a petulant child who wanted attention.

Instinct told me that wasn't it, and I counted the days until the end of the month when Errol said he'd pay me back. I almost told him to forget it and consider it a gift, but

his reaction last night suggested he'd be offended. And on a selfish note, that would be the end of our communication, and I didn't want that.

Besides, I had to meet Grams, the infamous grandmother whose life was entwined with Errol's, and get some alone time with my mate-to-be.

Damn, my tea was cold, and the program had finished and I didn't find out who did it.

Errol and his Grams were occupying my every thought.

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Chapter 6

Errol

Things are doing better.

I was able to go back to my house, with Grams assuring me she had just been in a bit of a mood, which I wasn't sure I believed. It was the same thing I told the social worker, and I'd been lying to her. Maybe Grams was lying to me? Nothing indicated I had to be at her house, and she wanted me not to hover, so at least for now, I was going to choose to believe her.

When I drove her to her doctor later that week, I did tell them that she had been acting not quite herself. It hadn't been her normal doctor, but they seemed nice enough and like they were listening. They said it was probably a missed medication, and that made sense given how she had been organizing them. The fancy pill box I bought her should take care of that, I hoped.

Only time would tell, but for now, being back home was great. I got to sleep in my own bed, listen to my own music, and talk freely with Davien without worrying that I was being rude to Grams and without her listening and commenting, which was a bad habit of hers that she always had.

My communication with my knight in shining armor had started with texts. He always seemed so concerned about Grams, like he really wanted to know. I appreciated that. He had no reason to have a vested interest in her. Heck, he still hadn't met her. But no conversation ended before he inquired about her.

He asked about me, too, of course. Davien was fun, sometimes funny, and had a lot of empathy for people he didn't even really know. So many green flags. I liked him... a lot. Texting turned into phone calls, and they became the highlight of my day. It was funny to think about because people didn't really talk on the phone much anymore, at least not the people I associated with. And here we were, our first contact via landlines, of all things, and now we were chatting on the phone like teens in the 80's.

There was something about hearing his voice that made me feel like everything was okay. I couldn't quite pinpoint what it was that made it such a balm. It was rich, but so were many other people's. There was a quality about it that was simply Davien, and I loved it.

I got home from work, threw my frozen dinner in the microwave, and called him.

Earlier that day I was talking to Frank at work and telling him I met someone, and he'd asked me, "Oh, wow, where'd you meet?" I told him I called the wrong number, which was true. I left off the part where the wrong number happened as I was trying to get my absentee uncle to send my money for Grams, but that was fine. Frank didn't need to know that level of detail. He kept asking questions, loving the tea, and I filled him in on how Davien made me feel and the things we talked about.

"Ah, you got a unicorn there. You need to keep him."

I laughed. Frank had always been the dreamer of the office. He was sure there was the perfect person out there for everyone and that we'd find the one, fall in love, and live happily ever after. Easy peasy. I didn't argue that if it was so easy peasy, why was he single.

Davien picked up on the first ring.

“Hey, you just getting home?” His voice washed over me.

“Yeah, is it too early to call?” His schedule wasn’t the same as mine, and I tried not to bug him while he was working. Usually, I’d text to ask if it was a good time to talk, but today I needed to hear his voice and skipped that step.

“Nope, just taking care of folding towels. So really, you saved me from boredom.”

“So, see, you saved me, I saved you, we’re all good.”

“You know, I wish you wouldn’t always be thinking about the money. Trust me, when I’m talking to you, I’m not.”

He was wrong. I didn’t always think about the money when I was imagining him. Not that I was going to tell him what I usually did think about, which was him using his tongue on me doing unspeakably dirty things. It was a little too soon for that—or maybe it would always be too soon for that. Maybe he was just a nice guy helping me out, being a friend, waiting for his money.

I didn’t think so. It felt like we had a connection, a real one, one I wanted to take further. I’d been wrong before when it came to matters of the heart, though. I’d just have to wait and see.

What I would’ve loved to do was arrange some big, fancy date for us where we could go out, and I could wine and dine him—where I could woo him like in the days of old, if the days of old permitted the omegas to take the lead, that was. After dinner, he could take me home and make me come undone, calling out his name as he filled me with his knot. It was a great dream, but far from reality. The best I could offer him was hot dogs at the park. I really wasn’t going to be able to take him on a decent date for quite a while, and I hated that.

“Errol, you got quiet there.” His voice cut through my wanderings.

“Yeah, sorry about that. Do you need to go?”

“No, no, I wasn’t—no, it’s fine.” Great. He thought I was too distracted by life to focus on him. What a way to get an alpha’s attention. “Okay, but it sounded like you were in the middle of something.”

“Actually...” I could do this. “I was thinking about something I wanted to ask you.”

“Ask away.”

What was the worst he could do? Turn me down? It would suck, but it wouldn’t be the end of the world or anything. It was time to shoot my shot.

“I was thinking... I know it’s probably weird given, you know, I have no money and am an omega, and how we met...” I was hardly making a strong case, “but I wanted to ask you on a date.”

“That doesn’t sound weird at all. It sounds like a fabulous idea, and I’d be honored.”

“Are you sure?” What kind of a question was that?

“Yeah, I’d love to go out with you.”

I’d love it too.

We made dinner plans, and my landline started ringing while we were talking.

“Can you hold on a second?” The only people who ever used it anymore were salespeople and Grams. Salespeople could pound salt, but if it was Grams, I wanted

to be sure not to miss it.

“Sure.”

I set the phone down, hit mute, and answered the other call. It was Grams, like I suspected. She had set off the fire alarm again and was asking about wire cutters. Those two things should not go together in the same sentence. She was off again. At least her voice was hinting that she was. It was hard to tell based on what little she said, but I was going to err on the side of caution. That was for sure.

“Hey, Grams, I was thinking maybe I could come and stay for a few days.” If I acted like it was for me, she’d definitely be more amenable to me coming back. She really had an aversion to being treated like, quote, “a child.” “There’s an issue with my plumbing, and I need to wait till it’s fixed,” I lied.

“Sure, dear.” She went on to tell me about the new pillows she got for the guest room and then described the one she bought a few years ago. I’d made the right call.

I hung up the phone with her and grabbed mine, embarrassed to realize I hadn’t, in fact, hit mute.

“Sorry about that. Looks like I’m going to be spending a few days with Grams.”

“I heard. Plumbing, huh?”

I told him why I made the choices I did, including the lie about the plumbing.

“If we need to reschedule, that’s fine.”

“No, we don’t need to reschedule, but I’ll send you her address, and maybe we can eat at the diner. It’s pretty close to her house, and they make really really good pie.”

“Sounds like a plan. See you soon.”

I packed my bag, making sure to bring my great-ass jeans for my date. We wouldn't be able to stay out long, and the food would be hardly woo-worthy, but it was a date with the man I was crushing on hard. Patiently waiting was going to be rough, that was for sure.

Bag in hand, I headed over to my new temporary home.

Grams was happy I was there and she wasn't great, but she was holding her own. We fell into a pretty good routine, and more often than not she was coherent, especially in the morning. Maybe I hadn't been far off when I said it was sleep deprivation to the social worker. I needed to suggest asking about a sleep study for her when the time felt right.

Finally, after what felt like forever, it was date night. Grams insisted Davien come in like a proper gentleman, and the two of them hit it off right away. She made him promise to have me back by ten—the curfew I had the summer I lived with her when my parents decided to do a month-long cruise. Some things never changed.

“Ready for our date?” I reached for his hand, and instead of taking it, he pulled me in for a hug.

“Now I am.” He stepped back, took my hand, and off to the diner for meatloaf specials and amazing conversation it was.

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Chapter 7

Davien

Errol asked for the check.

This was awkward. I hated doing the dance of who should pay because one person often got offended and the process went on and on with both people saying, “No, it’s my treat.”

If I’d been thinking ahead, I would have fibbed and said I was going to use the restroom earlier and paid.

“That’s kind of you but?—”

“Hey, I might not have a spare five hundred lying around, but I can pay for a meal at the local diner.”

“Thank you. That was kind of you. I had fun.”

“Me too.”

I’d kept quiet about Grams since meeting her, but both I and my beast sensed something wrong. Her scent was off, and not because she hadn’t bathed or changed her clothes. This was deep-seated... a health issue... but I wasn’t a medical professional, so what could I say? Other than “I’m not human, and I can smell when someone is ill,” I couldn’t think of a way to broach the subject.

Engaging Errol in conversation about his grandmother might give me hints as to what was happening, but he clammed up when I mentioned her.

We stood outside the diner, both of us with our hands in our pockets, shuffling our feet. More awkwardness.

Why were first dates so weird?

“Do you have to go straight home, or would you like to come back to Grams’s place? She loves company.”

“Absolutely.”

We fell into step, not talking, just pacing along the sidewalk in a comforting silence. I hoped Errol was experiencing it the same way.

“This is a nice neighborhood. Has Grams lived here long?”

“Since she was married in her early twenties.”

She must’ve had neighbors that could look out for her, but Errol couldn’t expect people living next door to act as caretakers. It was fortunate that Errol worked as a trainer at a nearby gym. He was freelance, so he made his own hours, and with Grams being poorly, his hours had been reduced.

When Errol opened the door, a voice singing off-key greeted us. I recognized the song. It was from an old movie, one my grandfather had loved because he watched it as a teen with his folks.

Following Errol, we walked into the kitchen. Grams was clutching a raw chicken by its wings and dancing around the table.

Is that hygienic? my unicorn asked.

Forget the chicken .

“Grams, what are you doing?”

She stopped and stared at Errol, her expression one of confusion.

“Darling, are you quite well?” She put a hand to his brow. “No fever.”

“Grams, what?—?”

“Isn’t it obvious? I’m cooking.”

Gods, this was worse than I imagined.

“Have you eaten?” Errol put an arm around her and attempted to pry the chicken away.

“No, silly.” She jerked her chin at the chicken. “I’m cooking dinner.” She drew in a deep breath. “Can’t you smell it? Roast chicken with all the trimmings is your favorite.”

Errol flashed me a glance that I interpreted as “I’m sorry.”

“Roast chicken is my favorite too,” I told her.

“Good. As long as you’re both not starving, dinner will be ready in ninety minutes.”

“Grams,” Errol protested. “We just ate.”

The older woman patted her grandson's tummy. "But you're a growing boy. You need energy for your football game on Saturday."

Errol's eyes filled with tears, and I jumped into the conversation. "That sounds amazing. Can I help you with anything? Peel the potatoes, perhaps?"

Grams patted my arm. "Thank you, dear, but you and Errol go and finish your homework." She tried shooing us out of the kitchen, but I needed to make sure she washed her hands.

Rubbing soap on my hands, I stuck them under the running water and sang, "This is the way we wash our hands, wash our hands..."

Grams squeed. "I always sing that to Errol because he gets so dirty playing in the sandbox."

With everyone's hands washed, I grabbed paper towels and patted the chicken, making sure to toss the towels in the garbage and wash my hands again. I turned on the electric oven to a high heat and crossed my fingers it would kill any bacteria. My folks used to rinse raw chicken in vinegar, but I'd since learned that safety experts agreed that was a no-no.

Errol didn't move as he stared at his grandmother and the chicken that I'd placed on a wooden chopping board. I steered him into the living room.

"Let her be. If it gets dropped on the floor, we'll think of something to divert her attention and trash it."

Luckily, the stovetop and oven were electric, 'cause if they were gas, I would have insisted Errol disconnect it. "And if the food is raw, we can shuffle it around on our plate and pretend to eat. If it's cooked, you can have the leftovers tomorrow."

“She might cut herself.” He peered around the corner with me at his side. Grams had already peeled and chopped the potatoes, so she’d bypassed that catastrophe.

“We can keep an eye on her from here.”

Errol slumped into an armchair, and I sat beside him on the couch. There was a lot of banging and clanging from the kitchen, but Grams was getting an old battered oven dish out of a cupboard.

“I bet she’s made this meal hundreds of times.”

He nodded, his head turned toward his grandmother.

“I hope you’re hungry.” There was a pause as the over door slammed. “Does your little friend like green beans?”

It’d been a while since anyone had called me that—if ever—but I stood in the doorway and said I did. Again, I offered to help, but Grams said Errol and I could wash up.

That might take a while because the sink was rapidly filling with dirty dishes.

“Grams, how about I wash as we go and Errol can dry.” There was no dishwasher, but if she agreed, it would get us both in the room with her.

“All right.” Grams was busy preparing seasoning for the chicken, and for a moment, she gasped before running into what might have been a bedroom.

“Quick, let’s season the bird.” There was a bowl of limes on the table and a bulb of garlic on the countertop. I shoved them inside the bird and seasoned the skin.

Popping it in the oven, I filled a pot with water to parboil the potatoes. They'd cook quicker in the oven later, rather than putting them in raw.

"Now, where was I?" Grams flapped her hands and glanced around the kitchen.

"You're so organized, Grams." Errol kissed her. The chicken's cooking and so are the potatoes. Why don't you sit for a while, take a load off your feet, and we'll keep an eye on the food."

"Thank you, darling."

Errol got Grams squared away watching TV, and he and I prepped the green beans.

"What are you doing?" He giggled as I put the lid on the saucepan with the potatoes and shook it and my butt around the room.

"It roughens the edges of the potatoes, so when we roast them, the edges will brown and be nice and crispy."

Errol bopped around after me, and we laughed before we got the potatoes in the oven. I wondered if he got much of a chance to laugh these days.

The chicken was resting, the potatoes almost done, and the beans had been stir-fried with garlic when Grams walked in.

"I don't know how you do it, Grams. The dinner smells amazing."

"I can make this meal with my eyes closed." She inspected the chicken, and I hoped it met her approval.

"Why don't you sit?" Errol pulled out a chair at the table that he'd laid with rolls,

plates, cutlery, napkins, and a vase of flowers he'd picked from the garden.

"Cooking is hungry work." Grams pulled apart a roll and stuffed half in her mouth.

I served up the food, and we sat down with her. I hoped she wouldn't notice our portions were very small.

"This is delicious. I surprise myself sometimes." Grams tucked into her meal.

I ate more than I thought I would, but we had a lively conversation about the neighbor's dog that kept digging a hole under the fence and coming into Grams's garden.

And after we'd eaten, Grams took out old photo albums and pointed out Errol at Halloween, looking as cute as a button in a little devil's costume, his first day of school, blowing out birthday candles, with his dog who lived to eighteen, and his college graduation day. Grams was in all the pics with him. She'd been a huge part of his life.

Grams yawned, and Errol suggested she get ready for bed. I washed up, and Errol stored all the leftovers in the fridge.

"Thank you so much. The meal was amazing. You can come and cook for us any time."

I might take him up on the offer.

"But then I'd owe you more than just money." He avoided my gaze, and Grams called out, saying she couldn't find her toothbrush.

"That damned dog must have stolen it."

I grabbed my phone, ready to say I was leaving, but Errol said he'd walk me out. Me avoiding a disaster in the kitchen wasn't something that needed a payback.

Though if he wanted to, I could think of a few things he could do.

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Chapter 8

Davien

“I’ll be back soon to say good night, Grams.” Errol closed the bedroom door and followed me outside.

The temperature had dropped, and there was a bite to the air, which was nice, as it had been hot during the day.

I dithered over what to say to Errol about Grams. She was a sweetheart, one who loved life. Maybe a tad eccentric, but there was nothing wrong with that. Much better than being bland and boring.

But she needed help.

Errol and I had met in an unusual way, and I shouldn’t be butting into his home life. But if I didn’t, who would? Maybe people were flocking to assist him, but what I’d witnessed at the police station suggested otherwise.

“Hey, can I talk to you for a minute?”

His head shot up, and his eyes were wary. He was thinking we were a one-date-and-done couple. That was what I saw in his expression.

“Look, I know you were thrown into my life by that phone call.” He brushed his fingers through his hair. “Though it was more I yanked you into my world by

phoning the wrong number, but?—”

I silenced him with a finger to his lips. But as we stood, studying one another, not saying anything, I was struck by the thought that maybe he’d been going to tell me to back off. Hmmm. But he hadn’t flung my hand away or stomped off yelling, so there was that.

“Does Grams take meds?”

Errol rolled his eyes. “She has a pharmacy in the kitchen drawer, more than she had even a month ago.”

It was a heavy load for a young guy to carry, but she had looked after him growing up, and now it was his turn.

“Were they all prescribed by the same doctor?”

He sighed. “No, some were, but others were from the ER at the nearest hospital, and Grams took herself to another doctor one day.” He’d given that doctor his grandmother’s history the next day, but her meds were a hodgepodge of different physicians prescribing drugs for different ailments.

Bingo. I was sure that some of the meds were contraindicated.

“When you have time, maybe make a list of everything she’s been prescribed and take that to your doctor.”

“Errol, time for your bedtime story.” Grams’s voice echoed onto the street.

“Be right there.” His shoulders sagged, the exhaustion evident in his body and face.

I made a decision, maybe the wrong one, but I was being bold. What was that famous quote? Fortune favors the bold. Yeah, that was me.

“I don’t have to go just yet. Maybe once Grams is asleep, we can watch TV.”

He grinned, his eyes crinkling adorably.

We traipsed back inside, and I made tea and found some store-bought cookies while Errol tended to his grandmother.

“She’s asleep.” He tiptoed out and closed the door, before sinking onto the couch beside me.

“You sure this is okay?” Maybe I should have left and let him go to bed.

“Nah, it’s fine. Too early to sleep.” He munched on a cookie, and the crumbs spilled over his chest.

“Can’t take you anywhere.” I brushed them into my hand and sat there, holding them, not wanting to get up and go into the kitchen. Errol took my hand and upended the crumbs onto the glass-topped coffee table.

“I’ll trash them later.”

He didn’t let go of me, and I worried my palm was sweaty. But if it was, Errol didn’t say anything.

“Wanna watch TV?” he asked.

I would have preferred a kiss, but we were together and still holding hands, so maybe that was enough for now.

He turned on the TV and scrolled through the programs until we both agreed on a horror movie. Why not scare ourselves shitless after our first date, first home-cooked meal, and hopefully, first kiss.

Errol's hand was clasped in mine, but when something scary happened on screen, he'd squeeze my fingers and yelp. I asked if he wanted to change the channel, but he insisted he liked horror.

During the commercial break, he said he questioned Grams about the number she gave him—my number—and she told him it was a number from her memory.

I was intrigued, wondering who had that landline number before me. But whoever it was, I thanked them for leading me to Errol because it was a sign. Convinced he would be in my life, I hung on tight and put my arm around him when he covered his eyes with his hands.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

Errol had his hands over his eyes, but he splayed his fingers so he could see the screen. “Seems less creepy somehow.”

I handed him a cushion so he could hide behind it, but he tossed it aside, saying he didn't know what was going on.

“Isn't that the point?”

“No, I love being scared.” He waited until the ads came on and said, “You don't seem bothered by the blood and gore and guys popping out from behind the curtains.”

I was, but not at fake-ass movies. I was worried I'd be alone for the rest of my life. Besides, when you've witnessed a wolf shifter fighting to the death, with a fox shifter

or a bear shifter ripping out another shifter's throat, interactions with humans paled in comparison.

"Of course I am, but my fears have more to do with people I care about being hurt." I shook my fist at the TV. "Not actors reciting lines."

"Roller coasters?"

My unicorn wasn't a fan of heights, but I couldn't say that. "Never been on one."

Errol responded that our next date would be at an amusement park. I had to get out of that unless we sat on the carousel. Whatever, I'd figure it out beforehand or pretend I was sick.

Errol muted the TV. "I'm going to ask rapid-fire questions. No thinking or pondering, just answers."

Is he going to ask about me? My unicorn couldn't fathom that line of questioning.

No, this is a combination of something fun and informative .

"Ready?"

I nodded.

"Favorite color?"

"Pink."

Yay! My unicorn was silver and pink.

“Pineapple on pizza?”

Was this a trick question? No matter how I answered, would Errol be horrified?

“I get that it’s not traditional, but I love me some pineapple with melted cheese and pepperoni on a thick crust.”

“Me too.”

Glad we agreed, or our relationship might have been over before it began.

“Favorite dessert?”

This was less controversial than the previous question but harder. How to choose which overly sweet concoction was my favorite?

“A soft gooey in the center brownie.” Now I wanted one so bad, and I stuffed a cookie between my lips. Nice as it was, it couldn’t compare to a fresh-baked brownie.

“Grams makes a mean brownie.” He tapped his head. “The recipe is in here. She refuses to share it with anyone.”

“Maybe if we act as kitchen assistants, she’ll allow us to help while she bakes her famous brownies.” I had no intention of stealing Grams’s recipe, but if she was cooking, she needed a bodyguard.

“Sounds good.”

“My turn.” Errol had the deets on my favorite color, pizza, dessert and that I hated heights—or my unicorn did. “What’s your comfort food?”

“Fried rice,” he answered without hesitation. He clarified, saying there’d been a Chinese restaurant close by when he was a kid, and he got their recipe. “The family that owned it were amazing cooks, but the simplest dish was the one I adored.”

“I love fried rice too.” Maybe he could share the recipe and we could make it together. I pictured a lifetime of us in the kitchen, giving one another a taste of whatever we were cooking.

“Are you a morning person or night?”

“Morning, but lately, I’ve had to be a twenty-four-hour person.”

Poor Errol. If he and Grams were in agreement, I could give him a break. He could stay at my place, and I’d sleep on the sofa here. My unicorn would sense if anything was wrong with Grams and wake me.

“I might be able to help you out with that.”

He smirked, and his cheeks colored a delicious shade of pink. “That sounds like fun. Tell me more.”

Relaxing for him? Yes. Fun? Nope. We’d be in two different places, so no fun to be had.

“I can think of something that’s much more fun than sleeping apart.” I rested my brow on his.

“Sleeping together?” he squeaked.

“Eventually.” Not tonight sadly. I tucked strands of hair behind his ear and trailed a finger over his jaw and around his lips. But Errol wasn’t a fan of my slowly, slowly

approach and he slammed his mouth on mine.

I was bombarded with a multitude of sensations; the sweetness of chocolate chips, the intoxicating scent that drew me to him in the police station, his cologne, his soft lips, and his panting as she stuck his tongue in my mouth.

I lost myself in my feelings, never wanting to find a way out.

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Chapter 9

Errol

This morning, before I took Grams to the doctor, I grabbed all of her pill bottles and put them in my backpack. When Davien suggested I make a list of them, I thought that was a great plan—until I started actually writing them down. I realized some of them were overlapping with similar names or the same names but different doses. Making heads and tails of them was nearly impossible. Some were listed as name brands, some not, and the dosing—it was everything from multiple times a day to half pills. It just got too confusing. So instead, I decided to take them all.

It was a good thing I did because when I went into the exam room with Grams—much to her chagrin—I took them all out and put them on the counter for when the doctor came in. He'd been her doctor for a long time, but his scheduling wasn't the best. She hadn't actually seen him in two months. His colleagues were great, but they weren't the same as someone who was familiar with you. And when you mixed that with specialists and ER visits, there were many, many people contributing to Grams's healthcare. Too many, if you asked me.

“Evelyn, do I even want to know why all those pill bottles are on my counter?” the doctor asked. It had been a long time since I heard someone call her that. The nurses used her last name, and I stuck with Grams. And at the police station, she was fully named every single time, including her last name.

Grams let out a sigh. “My grandson thinks you need to look at them. He doesn't trust me or the doctors.”

“That’s not what I said, Grams. I said that your primary doctor should know all of the things you’re taking, and this was the easiest way to make that happen.”

“Same difference.” She rolled her eyes. Sometimes, she was like a kid, but this side of her was the side I loved—the little sassiness that was just her. It wasn’t new, if anything it was a glimpse of the real her, the one I missed.

I’d started to notice that things got worse after lunch, and at first, I chalked it up to her being tired. But ever since Davien suggested that prescriptions might be an issue, I wondered if it was her lunchtime pills, and I told her doctor that, along with a little about what was going on. My Grams was not impressed, but the doctor Evelyned her a few times with some serious side-eye, and she gave up fighting it.

“There’s a lot more here than on your chart, Evelyn,” the doctor said.

She shrugged.

He took out his phone, typed on the screen, put it back in his pocket, and then went to work looking at all the pill bottles. Less than a minute later, the nurse came in.

“You needed me?” That’s what he was doing with the phone.

“Yes, I could use some help documenting these while I examine Evelyn.” She took out her iPad and started typing away.

As the doctor listened to Grams’s heart and breathing, he asked her questions about her digestion, vision, and all the usual doctor things. Then he said, “Okay, I need you guys to stay right here while I go look at the list. Be right back.”

About twenty minutes later, he came back in with a big printout and started to explain how some of the medicines were unnecessary, some were causing issues with others

and doing more harm than good, and some were dosed poorly. More than that, one of them had a side effect of confusion, which was probably exacerbated by another one that caused memory loss. Basically, it was a huge-ass mess. I was so glad I brought them all.

By the time we left, he had whittled her down to only three prescriptions. Upon my request, he kept the other bottles for recycling or whatever they did with unused medicine. She could not only go back to her lazy susan, but things were going to be looking better. Not right away, but soon.

I felt great knowing that we were in a good practice, one that cared and took the time needed to help their patients. It was even better knowing that Grams was going to be okay. He said it would take probably a week for everything to even out, and that she had to come back in two days to check her vitals and touch base.

“Was I really that bad?” she asked as she handed me a mug of tea a few days later.

“On and off.” I wasn’t going to lie to her, not about this. “When Davien was here, you thought I was in high school. You even gave me a ten pm curfew on my first date with him.”

“Huh? I don’t remember that.” She sat down at the table where her lunch was waiting.

“You don’t remember me being in high school?” I attempted to lighten the mood. This couldn’t be easy for her to hear.

“No, I don’t remember saying that to your young man or anything about the curfew.”

“It’s no big deal.” At the time it was. Now that we knew what was causing her issues and she was already on the upswing, it mattered a whole lot less.

“He’s really into you.” She smiled over the rim of her mug.

“I hope so. I’m really into him.” Just thinking about him made me smile. It wasn’t even about him helping me figure out what was wrong with Grams, even though that was amazing. It was Davien—who he was and how he made me feel.

“And how do you know him again?”

I told her the story of Julian and the wrong number and the bail. “Oh, sorry about that. Sorry about all of this. I’ll get you the money.”

“Nah, they’ll give it back when you go to court.” My hope was that now that we knew why she had done what she did, they might ignore the whole fine thing. Only time would tell.

I knew enough to understand there were going to be a few glitches in her getting back to normal, and that she wasn’t really all better just yet, but the changes were already night and day.

She decided to go out and work in the garden after she ate, and I decided to make a cake for Davien as a thank-you. He’d made a huge difference for Grams. Sure, the doctors would probably have figured it out eventually—I’d already been worried about the medication and had planned to ask about them—but the longer she was on them, the worse it would’ve gotten, and I shuddered thinking about all the dangers she could’ve faced before her meds were fixed.

And that was all Davien. We were definitely in a situation where she was going to be okay now. That was twice he’d bailed me out for her. Cake it was.

I grabbed Grams’s recipe book—the one with all her favorite recipes, either cut out from magazines or handwritten by her or someone else—and found her famous three-

egg cake. It wasn't a very fancy name, but the cake was always delicious. How hard could it be?

Well, pretty hard, as it turned out. The cake came out lopsided, with a big bubble on top that exploded, leaving a crater. It stuck to the pan and looked absolutely horrible, which gave me the brilliant idea that I could fix it with frosting. Of course, that would be easy. I'd seen it on television shows all the time—they just boop, boop, boop, and it was beautiful. Only, I did that, and it somehow made the cake look worse.

But the layers stayed stacked the way they were supposed to, and the recipe was solid, so in theory, it would taste good. Whatever the case was, it was the thought that counted, right?

I got it ready to bring with me and went out to find Grams, who was talking to the garden.

“Grams, it's time to go inside. Looks like it might rain.”

“I was just telling Mr. Gnome that.” She pointed to the garden statue in front of her.

“And did he tell you anything back, Grams?”

“Oh, Errol, don't you know he's just a statue?” She stood up and brushed her hands on her thighs. “I know I've been a little off lately, and honestly, I don't feel quite myself still, but even I know statues don't talk.”

We walked inside, and she took one look at the cake. “You were baking?”

“Yep, three-egg cake.”

“I see. And that cake is for Davien?”

“Yes.”

“Well, that’s good. He’s spent enough time with you that he might not notice how ugly it is.” Sadly, she had a point.

“Thanks, Grams.”

“Anytime, dear. Now go find your man.”

“He’s not mine, Grams.” Even if I wished that he was.

“Not yet, no. But he will be.”

Please let Grams be right.

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Chapter 10

Davien

After checking my phone for the hundredth time and not seeing any messages from Errol, I muted it, frustrated at not hearing from him.

Not that he should have messaged me. His life was full of work and Grams, with little room for anything else, whereas I was single. No family I was close to and no elderly grandma to take care of.

I was dozing on the couch, clicking through TV channels, when the doorbell rang. I'd ordered food earlier, so this wasn't a food delivery, and my friends always phoned before turning up at my door.

Hope flickered inside me.

Errol? my unicorn asked hopefully.

Maybe .

Not bothering to peek through the spyhole, I flung open the door. Errol had his back to me, and he jumped at the swish of the door as it opened. The thing he was holding launched into the air, but my shifter reflexes helped me catch it.

"Gods, you scared me, and what was that?" He pointed at what I had in my hands.

“Looks like a cake.” I gave it to him, but his hands were trembling, so I held him and the confection. “Yours, I believe.”

We stayed as we were, both clasping each other and the tin.

“No. You with your fanciness.” He jerked his chin at what we were holding. “Did you go to a class to sharpen your reflexes?”

Did those exist? How did I explain my extraordinary ability?

“Ummm, I play a lot of video games. That helps. And I juggle.”

Do not . My unicorn called me on my fib.

“Oh, wow! Maybe I should try that. My reflexes are shit.”

I ushered him inside, him holding the cake tin.

“This is a nice place you have.” He peered through the window at the back garden. “Perfect for a dog or kids.”

He gasped, horror etched on his face. “Not that I’m hinting about the future or our future.” He lowered his voice. “Or anything.”

I gave him what I hoped was a reassuring grin. “Now what’s in here?” I tapped the tin.

He made a face. “It was supposed to be a cake, but it wasn’t the prettiest, and after the almost fall on your doorstep, it’s probably crumbs.”

“Crumbs are great with ice cream.”

He removed the lid and we studied the cake. It was intact—sort of—but lopsided, with a dip in the middle that a pool of icing couldn't hide.

“Yum.”

Errol giggle-snorted. “Liar. It's awful.”

“Might taste okay.”

I grabbed a knife and plates and put on a pot of coffee. I took a bite. The icing was lemony, so it was a thumbs-up from me, and the cake wasn't quite cooked in the middle, reminding me of a chewy brownie center.

“It fails in the looks department, but I give the taste a nine out of ten.”

“Whew.” He pretend-wiped his brow. “Maybe not such a huge fail.” He stuffed half a slice in his mouth, and the icing, which was runny, slid over his chin before I stopped it, licking it up and making my way to his lips.

“Again, yum.”

But Errol pulled away and held up a hand. “Before we go any further, I have a question.”

Possible questions flooded my mind. Are you a virgin? Have you been tested? Top or bottom?

“How did you know?”

He'd need to give me more information. My beast told me he was referring to him being my mate, but I kinda doubted that, especially as humans weren't aware of

shifters and mates.

“About Grams and the mix-up with her meds?” He explained he’d made a list and checked the internet himself before presenting the information to her doctor. The guy was horrified at what she’d been prescribed at the three ERs she’d visited.

“Lucky guess. Besides, as well as having super-speedy reflexes, my sense of smell sometimes picks up something off with her.”

Humans were aware of that ability in animals and there were stories of cats in assisted living facilities comforting people who were about to die. But I wasn’t mentioning that to Errol.

“That’s amazing.”

I stroked his cheek, and he kissed my fingers, but I kissed a trail from his jaw over his throat and along his arm. I paused and examined the tattoo on his inner arm. Bells were ringing in my head and lights flashed on and off, blindsiding me. I blinked them away and rubbed my fingers over the tattoo.

Is that me?

It’s a pretty good likeness .

“Why’d you get this? It’s beautiful. And it’s pink and silver. Pink is my favorite color.”

“I love unicorns. They’re close to my heart.”

That was more true for me than Errol because my beast was nestled beside that organ.

“When I was little, Grams used to make up tales about unicorns in her garden. Said she saw them every morning before she made coffee. And Frank, from work... never mind.”

My beast shook me, and I swayed. He insisted I find out more about Grams’s ability. But I let Errol explain at his own speed rather than me pestering him with questions.

“She told me I’d find a unicorn, one to call my own.”

I was speechless. Had we been foretold?

“I was sad because when I got older, my friends laughed, saying unicorns weren’t real.” He sniffed, and his eyes filled with tears.

Wrapping my arms around him, his chest pressed against me, and our hearts thumped in tandem.

“When I turned eighteen, I got this tattoo so I would have a unicorn with me until I took my last breath.”

My mind was racing as I rested my chin on Errol’s head. Grams gave him my number and she had seen unicorns, telling him a unicorn would be his constant companion. He wasn’t just my fated. Had the goddess chosen him personally? There was no way to prove it. I didn’t have a hotline to the goddess.

Errol pulled away, leaving a damp patch on my shirt. He wiped his tear-stained cheeks with the back of his hand.

“I should go.” He sniffed.

Of course, he had to get back to Grams. “What if I said I wanted you to stay?”

He raised his hand. "I vote for that." He added that tonight was his night off and a neighbor was staying with his grandmother.

I had a better idea than us being in the living room surrounded by globs of icing and a broken cake. Taking his hand, I drew him into the bedroom.

"Wait." I raced back and grabbed the cake; pairing it with sexy times was the perfect combination.

"Is this a thing? Eating in the bedroom instead of the kitchen or living room?"

He grinned, and I kissed the smile away until he was moaning, saying into his mouth, "There will be eating, I guarantee it."

Errol pulled me onto the bed, and we bounced on the mattress before I sat astride him and yanked off his T-shirt. I circled his nipple, and he gasped as it hardened. It was so ready for my tongue and teeth, and I licked it, teasing it until I grazed the hard point with my teeth.

He frantically grabbed my shirt, pulling it apart, tearing the fabric, and two buttons flew off.

"Hope this isn't your favorite shirt." He pulled me closer and clamped his teeth on my nipple. I yelped. The combination of pleasure and pain should be bottled and sold.

I wriggled my ass on his cock, still covered in too many layers of fabric, and I shimmied lower so I was sitting on his ankles. He couldn't escape while I undid the button on his pants and lowered the zipper.

He lifted his hips, and I slid his clothing over his hips as his hard cock bounded out from his briefs. I stroked the tip, and he arched his back, panting and urging me to

continue.

“We’re going slow, Errol.” We had a lifetime, though he might not know that yet.

“I don’t want slow,” he protested and grabbed my crotch.

It was too late to do my big reveal. Not about showing him my length, that was happening. But telling him about my beast—again, not the one in my pants. Hoping I hadn’t got the big life events in the wrong order, I licked the tip of his dick, and he fell back moaning, lifting his hips up and offering me his cock.

I peppered kisses over the shaft as Errol dragged his nails over my scalp, producing more of the pleasure-and-pain combination.

Wrapping my fingers around the base, I pumped his cock while swallowing the head.

“That is so good. More, please.”

I tugged his length harder while the head was in my mouth, and I teased him by sticking the tip into his slit. I shoved my other hand under his butt, making my way to his slick hole. Easing a finger in, I fucked him while pumping and sucking his cock.

Errol whimpered as my finger slid in and out of his hole. But I didn’t want him coming like this, not for our first time. I needed to be inside him.

“Get your clothes off,” he begged. “I want your cock. Show it to me.”

Kissing his length and lapping up pre-cum, I removed my fingers, while keeping his legs prisoner.

“Is this what you want?”

Chapter 11

Errol

“I want everything.”

He slammed his lips to mine, and I allowed myself to get lost in them.

When I brought over the cake, I was hoping for a smile. Never in my wildest dreams did I think it would lead to me being naked on his bed, my body burning with anticipation. Part of me was terrified that I was going to wake up to discover this was nothing but a dream... a very erotic dream.

Davien's eyes roved over my body, dark with desire. This was it, I was finally going to be able to experience the wonder that was Davien. My heart raced, my slick pooled, and my dick hardened even more. We were really doing this.

"You're so fucking perfect," Davien murmured, trailing his fingers down my neck, sending a shiver through me. I was already turned on more than I'd ever been, on the cusp of an orgasm, and we hadn't even done much of anything.

"So are you." There was so much more to say than that, but this wasn't a time for talking. We were here to communicate with our bodies, to experience each other in a new way, to fuck our brains out.

His body was perfection—lean muscle, golden skin, a thick cock ready for me. Yet there was something almost otherworldly about him that I couldn't quite place. I

pushed the thought aside. This was time to focus on Davien and nothing and nobody else.

Davien leaned down, his lips brushing mine. "I want to savor every inch of you."

"Please!" I'd already felt a preview of what those lips could do, and I wanted to discover all of their magical powers.

As he kissed a path down my neck, I ran my fingers through his hair, needing to be touching him.

My body arched into his touch, craving more. The air felt charged between us, our desire palpable. I'd never experienced anything like this before. I hadn't even known it was possible.

"Davien," I gasped. "I need you."

He lifted his head, eyes shining with an intensity that made me shiver. "Patience, my little baker. We have all night."

I couldn't shake the feeling that tonight was going to change everything. If only I knew just how right I was.

Davien's tongue swirled around my tip before plunging down to the base of my shaft. Fingers massaged my inner thighs as his hot, wet mouth engulfed me. I gasped and arched off the sheets, hands fisting in his hair. He sucked as he pulled back up my cock. Gods, that felt amazing.

Davien continued to bob up and down my cock, swallowing as he reached my base and humming as he pulled back up. My balls tightened, and I was about to explode just as he pulled up and off of me.

“Not yet, little baker. I have more to explore.”

His tongue dipped lower, circling my tight ring of muscle. As he laved and probed my most sensitive area, his hand wrapped around my cock, jerking it slowly. I didn't know where to focus, all of it so fucking good.

"Davien, please..." I begged with no shame. I knew what I wanted— needed —and Davien was here to provide it.

But he pulled back and reminded me I needed to be patient.

I sucked at patience.

He began the delicious torment again, building me up higher each time before denying my release. He was doing this on purpose, and I had no idea if I loved it or if I hated it. Probably a combination of both. Over and over he brought me so freaking close.

"I need you," I begged desperately. "I can't take any more."

Davien's smoldering gaze met mine, and he crawled up my body, nibbling and sucking a trail across my abs and chest. When he reached my left nipple, he flicked the bud with his tongue before sealing his lips around it.

His fingers delved between my cheeks, so slick for him. One long digit breached my entrance as his teeth grazed my nipple. It was official. He was going to kill me. Gods, I loved it.

He worked me open, adding a second finger, then a third. Thrusting deep to brush that spot that made my dick twitch in the best of ways. I was so close... so very, very close.

He withdrew his fingers and crawled up to capture my mouth in a searing kiss. I devoured him ravenously, drunk on lust and need. With a growl, I flipped us over, pinning his wrists above his head. I usually wasn't so forward, but with him, I didn't feel embarrassed or like I needed to play the role of perfect omega. No. With Davien, I could just be me.

"My turn now."

I worshiped his body, paying attention to every line, every curve, to every muscle and inch of golden skin. When I reached his thick cock, I lapped at the tip, savoring the salty tang of his pre-cum. I took him into my mouth. It took a few tries to get him fully in, his girth barely fitting inside me. I sucked him deep, loving his groans of pleasure.

Davien bucked his hips, grinding against my face. "Errol, I'm going to?—"

With a triumphant smirk, I released him with a pop. "Patience, alpha. Not yet. It's my turn to be in control."

I straddled his hips, pressing my slickened entrance against his throbbing cock. Slowly, I lowered myself down, impaling myself on his length. His girth stretched me deliciously, burning and ecstasy all at once. It was as if he was made for me.

"Fuck, you feel... so... tight..." he panted.

Slowly at first, I bounced up and down his length. My climax was so close, just within reach, but I wanted to make this good for him. I thought about everything I could do to prevent this from being over too soon. Up and down I went, watching his face as he enjoyed every second of it.

"Davien, I need... I'm going to..." I lost the ability to form sentences.

He knew what I needed, thrusting upward as I rode him harder, faster. His hand found my cock, stroking in time with my now erratic rhythm.

"I can't... much longer..."

"Me neither," he panted. "Come for me, omega."

I slammed into him one final time, and my cum shot out, coating his chest and hands. He followed right behind me, crying out my name as he filled me with his come, his knot swelling inside me, locking us together.

That was when something I didn't understand came over me. One minute I was coming harder than I ever had, and the very next one, my teeth were biting into Davien's shoulder. Not a sweet nibble either. No, I broke skin. There was blood. And fuck me if I wasn't happy about it.

His arms wrapped around me, holding me close. I closed my eyes, savoring the moment, waiting for the guilt to hit me, but it didn't. If anything, I was glad that I'd done it, and that was a whole level of messed up I didn't understand.

As we came down from our respective highs, I caught a glimpse of his wound. It wasn't pretty, and a wave of embarrassment washed over me. "I'm sorry," I mumbled, cheeks flaming. "I don't know what came over me."

Davien wrapped an arm around me, pulling me closer. "It's more than okay, Errol. I assure you." His voice was laced with satisfaction and a hint of amusement. "I loved every minute of what we just did... especially when you bit me."

I didn't know how that could be true, but I sensed only honesty from him, and relief flooded through me. We somehow managed to maneuver the covers over our still-connected bodies.

“That was...” I rubbed my cheek against his skin.

“It so was.” He kissed my shoulder, the one that mirrored the one I’d bitten of his, and for a split second, I was sad... no, disappointed that he hadn’t bitten me too.

“Sleep, my little baker.” He kissed the spot again. “You’re going to need your energy. I have plans for us.”

I wanted to ask what those plans were and to maybe add a few of my own to the list, but I was spent. Soon, I found myself drifting off to sleep before his knot even released.

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Chapter 12

Davien

The bed was empty when I opened my eyes, and I groused to my beast that he should have woken me up when Errol left.

He's still here and making breakfast , my unicorn huffed. Bacon. Ewww!

I apologize . Now that he mentioned it, I focused on the delicious aroma wafting into the bedroom. My beast was vegetarian, but I wasn't, and he had a hard time whenever I consumed meat. And bacon was especially pungent.

Errol stood in the doorway, dressed only in an apron. Did I own an apron? I didn't recall buying one. This was a Christmas-themed one, and it must have been from a Secret Santa giveaway at the office. One I'd never used and shoved in a drawer.

Shame it was covering up his bits, though.

"Your coffee is served."

He placed a mug on the nightstand, and when I attempted to flip the apron out of the way, he stepped back.

"Hey, no harassing the chef." He winked and accompanied it with a wide grin. "Until after we eat." He giggled, a sound that tickled my heart. "Eat the food, not other things." His cheeks were such a beautiful shade of pink I wanted to squeeze them, but

he was too far away.

“You’re not joining me?” I patted the mattress.

“In a minute.” He headed out. “Just gotta cook the eggs and I’m done.”

I sipped the coffee, and this morning, that first mouthful was extra special. A night spent between the sheets with my mate. Nothing could be better than that.

You’re not mated yet, my beast sighed. Once I’d marked Errol, my unicorn would get off my ass.

I’m not on your butt. Ewww! I’m close to your heart and you know that .

We’d both be happier once I’d drawn blood and scratched or bitten Errol. But first, I had to show him who I really was.

Me! Me! Me!

I’d never revealed my unicorn to anyone, except to others of my kind. And unlike wolves or bears, unicorns were rare, and even other shifters were wary of unicorns, the so-called mythical beast.

Goody, we get to visit the orchard .

Mmmm . I’d suggest to Errol we go fruit-picking and make a pie for him and Grams.

“Ta-da.” Errol arrived, still with the apron wrapped around his narrow hips, holding a tray aloft. He played it in front of me before turning around and wriggling his naked butt.

If he hadn't spent the time making me breakfast, I'd have put it aside and ravaged his very cute ass.

There was a plate of bacon, another with two eggs, and a third with a pile of toast, plus two glasses of orange juice.

"I'll pay you to make breakfast every morning." I was more of a coffee and bite of toast before running out the door guy.

His smile faded, and his expression changed to one of confusion. I backtracked, wondering how he'd misunderstood my statement.

"You want to employ me?"

"It was a joke because this is amazing." I extended my hand and pulled him to the side of the bed. "But what I'd really like is to wake up beside you every morning. The breakfast, as nice as it is, pales compared to you in my bed."

"Oh." His face brightened. "We can dream, but it's not possible."

I nodded. "Grams." Unless Errol invited me to live with him and his grandmother, there'd be few opportunities for us to sleep in the same bed.

"But we have this morning, so climb in, and let's tuck into this feast."

He offered me a piece of bacon, and I bit it, the delicious salty flavor flooding my mouth. We made egg-and-bacon sandwiches with the toast and fed one another, making sure to kiss after each bite.

"I have a surprise for you." I dabbed his mouth with a napkin.

Errol lifted the covers. “Even after last night, I’m still amazed at how big you are.”

He was stroking my ego, and I was up for that—and so was my cock. But before we could continue our relationship, he had to know the real me. Otherwise, what we had was a lie.

“I was thinking of something a little different.”

“Little doesn’t describe your length.” He munched on another piece of toast.

If he didn’t stop, we’d never make it out of bed.

I grabbed his hand. “How would you like to visit one of my favorite places? And no, not your hole, though that is number one on my favorites list.”

“Okay.” He swirled the juice around in the glass. “Where?”

“It’s an orchard outside of town, but it could be on another planet. It’s so different from the city. Peaceful and full of the aroma of ripening fruit.”

He quirked a brow. “Okay. Not what I expected, but I’m eager to learn more about you, you fruit-loving fiend.”

He bopped my nose as his phone rang. “Grams,” he noted before he answered. There were a lot of “Yes,” and “No,” and “Have you looked in the cupboard by the fridge?” responses before he ended with, “I’m coming home now.”

He didn’t have to tell me our plans had been upended.

“The neighbor had to babysit his grandson, so I’m on duty.” Grams had mislaid something and our one-on-one time was at an end.

“Sorry about your orchard. Raincheck?”

“Absolutely.”

“Or you could come home with me?” He bit his bottom lip and tilted his head, something he did when he was uncertain.

“I’d love to.”

We hustled to clean up, shower, and get to Grams. Though Errol said she wasn’t as confused now that the doctor had regulated her meds, I worried we might find her on the roof or dancing in the street. Though there was nothing wrong with the latter if the traffic had been diverted.

Errol raced in ahead of me while I parked the car, and when I got inside, he was in the kitchen with Grams.

“Ta-da!” she yelled and extended both hands toward a perfectly formed chocolate cake with icing spread evenly over the top and dribbling down the sides.

“I fibbed. There’s no emergency. My apologies. But I saw that sorry-ass cake my grandson took with him yesterday, and I had to show you we are a proper cake-making family. No soggy middles for us.”

Errol hugged her, and I gave her a high-five.

Not only was I admiring the cake, but Grams’s confusion and memory lapses appeared to have disappeared now that she was properly medicated. Not only was that pretty freaking great for her, but that would remove a lot of the pressure on Errol.

“Shall we?” Grams handed Errol a knife.

He sent me a glance, and I nodded. We'd just had a big breakfast, but there was always room for cake. Besides, we couldn't disappoint Grams.

"Coffee?" she asked.

"Sure," Errol and I said in unison. I had caffeine surging through my veins, but there was no such thing as too much coffee.

Liar .

My beast was right. Too much caffeine made him jumpy too.

We're never getting to the orchard , are we? My beast was disappointed, but pleased we were spending more time with my mate.

Another day, perhaps .

"What shall we toast to?" Grams asked as he poured our coffee. "You and my grandson finding one another?"

Errol and I shared a glance. "It's early days, Grams." He mouthed to me, "She loves playing matchmaker."

I squeezed his knee and raised my mug. "To us. All of us."

"To all of us," Grams and Errol echoed.

Grams made a mean cup of coffee, and the cake was scrumptious. I refused to compare it with Errol's lopsided version. They were both yummy in their own way.

Errol took a big bite and moaned. "So good, Grams." He had a dollop of icing in the

corner of his mouth, and he licked it. My body reacted, leaving little space in my jeans.

“You remind me of someone, Davien.” Grams licked her fingers.

I wondered if Grams hadn’t just seen unicorns in the garden but had witnessed the human shifting. But I couldn’t try to get to the truth until Errol had met my beast.

“It’s so good to be me.” Grams wrapped her hand around the coffee mug. “Everything is clearer instead of fuzzy around the edges.”

Errol patted her hand. “You have Davien to thank for that. He was the one who suggested looking at the meds you were taking.”

Grams raised her mug again. “Seems we have much to celebrate.” She busied herself putting the rest of the cake away. “Do you have any plans for the weekend? You should be out having fun.”

“Davien wants to take me to an orchard.”

Grams’s brows shot up.

“Not today,” I clarified. “We have time.”

“An orchard? Interesting. I had a friend who loved visiting the orchards outside town.” She caught my eye. Was she sending me a message?

Or did she just love fresh fruit?

Chapter 13

Errol

Things were going wonderfully with Davien. My grandma was doing better than she had in years. Work was great. Everything in my life was fabulous except one thing; I was tired—so very, very tired.

The constant back-and-forth between Davien's house, my house, and Grams's house was getting to be a lot. I felt like I was either in the car or at work pretty much the entire day, leaving not as much time as I wanted with the people I loved.

Not that I loved Davien—except I did. Except I couldn't, because it was too soon. Right? True love took time to foster and all that. But also, I felt for him something I'd never felt for anyone else.

It was complicated, just like the stupid social media labels so many people put up. Only I doubted they used it for feeling ridiculously happy, having constant butterflies in their middle, and a sense of joy unlike any they'd ever felt before. And if they did? It was officially the best relationship status in existence.

Everything felt right with Davien, like we were meant to be. We got along so well. We had fun when we were together, both in and out of the bedroom. We could talk for hours, and he was not only understanding of why I felt the responsibility to take care of my grandma, but also wanted to be part of it. And wow, did the two of them ever get along. Sometimes, I thought they had a secret code only they understood. It was great to see.

In reality, I shouldn't complain about anything. I was living my best life. I had a sexy boyfriend, and my Grams's health was a thousand times better—she hadn't even mooned anybody in weeks. Not that mooning should be the bar.

I stopped home after work to catch a quick shower and throw on some date clothes. Neither of us had work in the morning, so I tossed a set of clean clothes into a bag and was on my way. The sky was getting darker by the second, and the first big drops of rain splashed on my windshield just as I buckled my belt. I flicked the radio and found the local station. According to the DJ, an unexpected storm had arrived.

Great.

The plan had been for us to go to the orchard. Davien had been trying to take me there for a while, but something always seemed to get in our way. I felt bad because I had shared a meaningful part of my life with him through Grams, and in return, he was trying to share something meaningful with me, but it just wasn't happening. This time it was Mother Nature who decided to thwart our fun.

I pulled out of my driveway, crossing my fingers that it would pass quickly. Instead, it got worse and worse. The rain hit the windshield so hard that it could easily be mistaken for hail. Less than halfway there, I had my wipers on full blast and was going under the speed limit. Had I been going anywhere else, I'd have turned around and gone home, but this was Davien. He was worth the white knuckles this weather was giving me.

Lightning cracked in the distance as I pulled into his driveway. As bad as this was, according to my very scientific "one Mississippis," the storm was still a couple of miles away which meant it was going to get worse before it got better. I didn't care. I was exactly where I wanted to be.

I grabbed my umbrella from the seat beside me, but I wasn't sure if I should run for it

or take the time to open it. I ended up running for it. My hair was dripping wet by the time I reached his front door. I wasn't sure it would've been better the other way.

"You look like a drowned rat," he said, pulling me in for a hug, not caring that I was soaking wet and that he was now just as wet.

"Yeah, I thought maybe it would be better than trying to open my umbrella first with the wind going the way it is."

We stepped further in and he shut the door. The pounding of the water on the roof echoed through the room. This one was a doozie.

"You were probably right." He gave me a far-too-quick kiss. "Come in. I think we need to make some alternative plans for the evening, huh?"

I chuckled. "You don't want to go to the orchard?"

It was the night of the full moon, not that we'd be able to see it with the clouds and lightning. A picnic under the moonlight had sounded wonderful when we planned it. Mother Nature disagreed. Even if the rain stopped now, the ground was going to be a muddy mess. "So what were you thinking instead?"

If he didn't have anything, I sure had ideas... lots and lots of ideas, and none of them involved clothing.

"We could have an indoor picnic slash movie night." And then there was Davien's idea which also sounded fun. A very different kind of fun, but fun.

"Oh, I like the sound of that."

He asked me to stay put and ran and grabbed a towel for me, along with his

sweatshirt and a pair of his pajama pants. I liked wearing his clothes, especially his sweatshirts. They felt like a hug from him and always smelled so freaking good. I wasn't sure what it was about Davien that had him smelling so fantastic. I used his soap and shampoo when I stayed over, and I never smelled that good.

It didn't take long for us to move the couch out of the way and spread a blanket on the floor. This was going to be a true indoor picnic. He'd already made the food—the storm had caught even the weather people by surprise, a sudden shift in direction, and he didn't know we'd have to shift gears until it was done. I was glad because everything looked freaking delicious.

We set up the food and flicked through the streaming services to find something to watch. If all went well, we wouldn't lose the internet or power. If we did, I was pretty sure we could find something else to occupy our time—something a whole lot sexier than the horror movies we were currently browsing. Maybe losing power was the best option.

"I'm not feeling any of these," he said.

"Are you set on horror?" I'd suggested horror randomly. I wasn't close to married to the idea.

"No, we could do rom-com or dystopia." He flicked back to the main menu. "Any ideas?"

"Yeah... there was a movie I used to watch as a kid. I think it was called Legend."

"Legend?"

"Yeah. It might sound silly, but I used to watch it with my Grams. There was a unicorn in it, and Tom Cruise. I liked it." I only half remembered the plot. I was there

for the unicorn.

“We could watch that.” He didn’t sound too enthusiastic.

“Are you sure? I don’t mind picking out something else if you don’t like it.”

“Yeah, I’m sure. I’m just trying to pinpoint if I’ve seen it before.”

After ten minutes of searching, we discovered it wasn’t available on any of the streaming services, so we ended up watching *The Princess Bride* instead. Because, honestly, it’s always a good time to watch *The Princess Bride*.

The lightning was now close enough that the boom from the thunder hit at the same time the room lit up, but we didn’t care. We were inside, snuggled together, eating crustless sandwiches cut into triangles and fruit salad. He’d really taken the time to make the picnic fancy.

We watched the movie, the food long gone, and then somewhere along the line, watching the movie became acting out the movie. Both of us had seen it way too many times. At first it was just saying the words, but then it turned into full-on acting, both of us bouncing around the room taking on different characters.

We laughed and laughed. It was a carefree kind of fun I hadn’t had in years. When the movie was over, we found another one that we both knew and did the same.

“This is the best picnic I have ever had,” I said, kissing his cheek and settling my head on his shoulder as the credits rolled. “You outdid yourself. I’m not sure you’ll ever be able to plan a date as fabulous as this one.”

“I don’t know if it’s possible, but I fully intend to try.”

I smiled, feeling completely content in the moment. “I know you’ll succeed. Every day I spend with you is better than the day before, even if we only share a cup of coffee.”

“I can think of something more fun to share.”

“Oh?” I turned to face him. “What is that, Davien?”

“My bed.”

He didn’t have to offer twice.

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Chapter 14

Davien

“Guess what today is?”

I opened my eyes to find Errol leaning over me and grinning.

“Too early to be awake on a weekend day?”

He nudged me. “No silly. It’s fruit day.”

Yippee! My unicorn was excited.

Now that Grams was able to stay by herself overnight, Errol and I spent more evenings together. I’d been planning on taking him to the orchard for a while, and today was the day.

About time . My beast wasn’t a happy camper, because while we had shifted during that time, it had been rushed, after work or when we grabbed an hour at lunch. But with the drive there and back to the office, he couldn’t graze and wander the rows of trees. Instead, it was a snatch-and-grab and back into my skin.

“Great. Can I go back to sleep or are we getting up early this morning?”

Errol answered by yanking the covers off and tapping his watch. “The early bird gets the worm.”

I made a face, hoping there were no worms in the fruit because my beast would freak.

“I’m guessing there’s no breakfast in bed today.”

“Toast and coffee. One’s made, the other isn’t,” Errol shouted over his shoulder as he left the room.

I trudged into the bathroom, inwardly excited Errol would meet my unicorn but wishing I could have slept in. Work had been a beast this week.

There is no other beast in your life but me!

You’re right.

As I drove through the city streets, Errol was bouncing in his seat beside me . “I’m so excited to be in a place where you’re so happy, plus we get to pick yummy fruit and make pies later.”

Hmm, I suspected once he’d caught a glimpse of my unicorn, the fruit picking, eating, and baking might be forgotten.

“This is lovely.” He had the door open before I’d stopped the car, and he twirled around, arms outstretched. My unicorn was pleased he loved the place because it was special for us.

Maybe I could go outside the orchard with both you and Errol watching me , he suggested.

My shifter friends said I was a fuddy daddy not allowing my unicorn to frolic in nature because I was scared some wild animal would attack him. They might be right, but it was our life, my life, not theirs.

Taking Errol's hand, we strolled through the rows of trees to the more secluded area where my beast fed.

Errol did a 360. "This area is different from the rest of the orchard. There are many varieties of fruit here, rather than a row of one and then another." He leaned over and sniffed a flower. "And there are flowers here."

He picked up on that. Good.

"That's part of what I want to show you."

I pulled my shirt off my head, but my mate ignored me and grabbed a fistful of cherries. Ruby-red juice ran over his chin as he sucked the flesh and spat out the seeds. With his stained mouth, he looked as I did after my unicorn had eaten.

"These are delicious." He held out fruit in his palm, but I was anxious to get on with the reveal.

"Why have you taken your shirt off?" He shaded his eyes. "Did you bring sunscreen?"

"Nah." I wriggled out of my jeans.

Errol closed one eye. "Here? Someone might see." He unzipped his pants.

"No. Not sex."

"Then what? Sunbathing? We could have done that in your garden."

"I'm going to show you a part of myself you've never seen."

He tapped his lips. “Pretty sure I’ve licked, touched, grazed, fondled, been in, or been penetrated by all of you.”

How wrong he was.

“Sit.” If he stood, he might keel over. This wasn’t as if I was showing him my cock for the first time. His brain would refuse to believe my beast was real. It might be easier for other mammal shifters because they had wild counterparts. Unicorns were... unique.

I am!

Tossing my clothes on the grass, I stood before my mate.

“I’m not like you.”

He eyed my cock. “Mmmm, you’re bigger, and I love every inch of you.’

“Hold that thought.”

Flashes of silver and pink slithered over my skin, and the horn protruded from my head. Errol sat unmoving, not even blinking, his nails embedded in the dirt. A tail sprouted from my rear end, and my beast took over so I was no longer in human form.

I wasn’t sure what I’d expected from Errol but definitely not him frozen. But my beast wasn’t concerned, insisting on grabbing the last remaining cherries from the trees.

We had to shift back because Errol might need medical attention, but as I tried to wrench my human self away from my beast, my mate said in a monotone, “Grams

was right.”

He rubbed his tattoo and studied it. “He’s identical.” Pushing himself off the grass, he added, “The universe knew from the time we were born that we were meant for each other.”

That had my beast pause, and he stopped eating and nudged our mate.

“And Grams played a part.” He stood beside us and raised a hand. “May I stroke you?”

My beast bobbed his head.

“All my life, I fantasized about meeting a unicorn, knowing they weren’t real, but you just made my dream come true.”

Can we go outside the fence? my unicorn begged. There are some berries out there I can scent .

I gulped, almost taking back my skin. But the area outside the orchard fence wasn’t a forbidding forest with yelps and howls and large beasts’ shadows looming under the trees. I could do this maybe.

I can do it , my beast replied. This is on me .

New beginnings for both of us, huh? I hoped I hadn’t made a terrible mistake as my beast made a flying leap over the fence, and Errol unlatched the gate and followed us.

Yum. The best berries I’ve ever tasted .

Errol stood beside us, not speaking, his shoulder brushing over my unicorn’s flank.

When my beast was done, we returned to the orchard and I took my skin.

My mate hugged me as I struggled with my briefs. “What are you?”

We sat on the grass, and I explained shifter history.

“I’m so excited that out of all the people on earth, I get to be one of the few who has met a unicorn.”

“One of the very few,” I assured him. “While today was special because you met my beast, we passed another milestone.” I explained to him all about mates and shifters. It was a lot to take in. He asked some questions, but mostly listened. I’d been so worried about this conversation and it ended up working out so beautifully.

“Ready to go?” The bugs were starting to get annoying.

“No, we can’t go back empty-handed.” Errol grabbed the baskets he’d brought from the car.

We filled them, in between kisses and fondling, and as we put everything in the car, Errol asked, “Do we tell Grams?”

I suspected she had an inkling, but while she didn’t have heart disease, she was elderly and I didn’t want to shock her.

“Let’s wait and celebrate you knowing who I have inside me.”

While shifters didn’t reveal their beasts to humans, unless they were mates or they stumbled upon one another accidentally, I didn’t think Grams would announce to the world she had a shifter grandson-in-law. Unless she mixed up her meds again.

Humans wouldn't believe Grams and hopefully any shifters who witnessed her big announcement would look kindly on her, as she was elderly.

"Celebrate how? You're dressed." He lunged for my crotch.

"At my place."

"Fine," he huffed, reminding me once again of my unicorn.

On the drive home, Errol wasn't content to wait for our celebration. He leaned over, unzipped my pants and brought out my cock.

"Someone will see us," I hissed, as we were on the outskirts of the city.

"So? What are they going to do?" He tugged my dick, and the car swerved as I almost lost control.

Errol let go of my length. "Your super-speedy reflexes aren't because you play video games. I've never seen you play or juggle."

I explained it was a shifter ability, just as catching minor ailments seemed to be.

"Wow! Will I develop that skill, being a shifter's mate?"

"Sorry, they're not transferable."

"Damn." His hand made its way back to my length. "Oh no, the fruit!"

A quick check in the rear vision mirror told me the baskets were secure.

"We can't have sex 'cause we have to take these to Grams."

Double damn! “But what if we made jam instead of giving her the fruit for pies. Or could make the pies too and present both to her.” Choose the one where we didn’t have to spend hours in Grams’s kitchen.

“We could. But I did tell her we were going to the orchard you’d been wanting to show me since forever.”

Ahhh, she understood. I was sure she did.

“Something tells me she’ll be more than happy with jam and pies.” The fruit wouldn’t spoil between now and tomorrow.

“Now where were we?” Errol shoved a hand in his pants, and when he brought it out, it glistened with slick. He slathered it on my cock before stroking and pumping it.

“Maybe we can pull over somewhere.” I wasn’t going to make it all the way home.

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Chapter 15

Errol

After passing a police car, we decided waiting until we got home was a better choice. We didn't need three arrests in the family. One was plenty.

We ended up going to my house for no other reason than it was closest. The two of us didn't even pretend to have any chill, bolting from the car straight into the house.

I kicked the bedroom door shut behind us. My heart raced and slick pooled as I turned to face Davien, his eyes smoldering with a desire that mirrored my own. How was this sexy alpha mine?

"Sit." I pointed to the bed.

Davien licked his lips and then did as I said. His gaze raked over me hungrily. "You're so fucking hot."

"That's my line." I kissed him, and before it got too deep, pulled back. "All in due time, Alpha. All in due time."

I smiled, my fingers trailing to the top button of my shirt.

Slowly, I began to unbutton my shirt. I was going for sexy but probably looked silly. Not that you could tell by looking at Davien. He watched me as if I were the sexiest man on this planet. I shrugged the fabric off my shoulders and let it flutter to the

floor.

Davien's breath hitched. "Gods, look at you," he groaned, pressing his hand into the bulge in his pants.

I ran my hands down my torso, loving the way his eyes followed every movement. I toyed with my belt buckle, my confidence bolstered by the desire pouring off of him. I might not have been a skilled stripper, but I was doing okay.

"Please." Davien's plea wrapped around me.

I slid the leather through the loops with agonizing slowness. If he kept looking at me like that, my slow tease was going to be replaced with tearing my clothes off. I eased my pants down my hips.

"You're killing me, Errol."

I turned, giving him a view of my ass as I stepped out of my pants. His sharp intake of breath sent a thrill through me.

"Like what you see?" I teased.

"You have no idea." Only I did, and I freaking loved it.

I faced him again, hooking my thumbs in the waistband of my boxer briefs. Davien leaned forward, his eyes dark with lust. I slowly inched the fabric down, my cock springing free, already thick and heavy for him.

"You're perfect."

I stood before him, naked and ready for the next step in my plan.

“Your turn,” I purred, gesturing for him to stand.

Davien stood, his shirt already lying crumpled on the floor. He’d managed to get it off before I’d even clicked the door shut. He must’ve been tearing at it from the time we walked through the door. I loved that he desired me so completely.

He undid his pants, revealing black briefs that hugged his already hard length. I ached to touch him, but I forced myself to wait just a little bit longer

I stepped closer, running a fingertip along his collarbone and over the mate mark I’d given him before I even knew what it was.

“You like that?”

“Gods, yes,” he hissed.

“I want one too.” I kissed his mark. “A matching pair.”

“Are you sure? It’s not a decision to make lightly.”

“More than anything. Make me yours today, alpha. In all ways.” My fingers dipped lower, brushing against the heat of his erection. I wanted to consume him, to feel every inch of him against me. “Alpha, please?”

“Anything for you. Anything.”

I slid my hand inside his boxers, wrapping my fingers around him. He moaned, his hips bucking into my touch. I pushed the fabric of his underwear down his thighs, taking my time, savoring the anticipation.

His cock sprang free, thick and hard, bouncing against his abs. I circled the head with

my tongue, savoring his salty scent. He tasted divine—musky and masculine, like a tasty delight made just for me.

And from what I'd learned today, he was.

“Errol.” It was more of a moan than a word.

I continued my homage to his cock, licking and sucking, exploring every inch of him. His length was hot and hard in my mouth. I wanted him so badly, but I wasn't done teasing him yet. He loved a good edging, and I did too, but I wasn't going to make it long. Not today.

I stood, and our eyes met. The hunger in his gaze was almost as strong as my own.

“I want you.” I nipped at his bottom lip. “No. I need you.”

“I need you too, omega mine. More than my next breath.”

I climbed onto the bed and settled onto my hands and knees, my ass in the air, my legs spread wide enough for him to see how slick I was for him.

“Make me come, alpha.”

He didn't hesitate. His mouth found my entrance, warm and wet, and I arched my back in pleasure. His tongue lapped at the sensitive bundle of nerves, bringing me to the brink of orgasm.

“Davien, please,” I panted, my hands fisting the sheets. I deserved his teasing, but gods, what I would do to have his cock in me already.

To my surprise, he chuckled and said, “I thought you'd never ask.” He settled in

behind me, lined himself up with my needy hole, then he entered me in one slow, deliberate thrust.

Davien entered me with a forceful thrust, my body yielding to him completely. I gasped at the exquisite fullness, gripping the sheets as he began to move.

“You feel amazing,” he growled, his fingers digging into my hips.

The pace was relentless, each thrust driving me wild with pleasure. I pushed back against him, wanting more, needing more. I met him thrust for thrust, his hands holding my hips but allowing me the freedom to move. There were days when I liked him controlling my motions, today was not one of them. I loved how in tune he was to my body, how he instinctively knew what I needed and gave it to me.

“Please, Davien.” I wasn’t even sure what I was begging for, but I didn’t need to be. Not with Davien.

He obliged as if I had given him specific instructions, doing exactly what I didn’t realize I was asking for, pounding into me with abandon. The headboard slammed against the wall in a steady rhythm, and if I were in an apartment, I’d have cared. Now? Now it could make all the noise it wanted. I had more important things to worry about... those things being everything Davien.

I was lost in the sensation, reduced to nothing but desperate moans and pleas for more.

Suddenly, Davien’s hand reached around to grasp my length. I cried out at the dual stimulation as he stroked in time with his thrusts—it was too much, while at the same time not quite being enough.

I yearned for it to last, but my body couldn’t keep my orgasm at bay. It was too good,

too much, too everything. A few seconds later, it rushed through me, waves of ecstasy crashing over me as I came harder than I'd ever come before. Davien groaned as he pounded into me, chasing his own release.

Just as the aftershocks began to subside, Davien cried out my name. His knot grew inside me, holding us together. For a split second, disappointment washed over me. He didn't do it. He hadn't marked me as his.

But then his chest covered my back and his teeth grazed my skin before they sank into my shoulder. It didn't hurt like I thought it would. There was a sting, followed by a feeling of completeness unlike any I'd ever experienced before.

"Mine," he growled against my skin. "Mate."

"Mate."

We collapsed onto our sides, still joined by his knot. Davien pulled the blanket over us, cocooning us in its warmth. His arms wrapped around me possessively, and I fucking loved it.

"Mate." I had a feeling I was going to be hearing that a lot.

I laced my fingers through his.

"And you're mine," I whispered back. "My Davien. My mate. My unicorn."

Chapter 16

Davien

“Road trip!” I said out loud without offering Errol an explanation.

“Huh?”

“I have to pitch a new project to a company in Green River.” It was a day’s drive or a two-hour flight. My boss had reminded me of certain people who lived between here and there. Damn, he had a good memory.

“For how long?” My mate’s eyes watered, and he ran a finger over his bottom lip.

“A week.” I was hoping Errol could come with me, but he’d have to take time off. And while Grams was doing okay, he’d need to arrange for someone to check in on her. I couldn’t expect him to organize everything and leave with me in two days.

“I’ll miss you.” He rested his head on my chest. My mate liked listening to my heart ever since he learned about my beast. He said my heart pitter-pattered rather than thumped and that was because my unicorn was wrapped around it.

“Me too, but we’ll talk morning and night.” Seven days wasn’t long. It was one day less than eight but a day longer than six. I’d be counting the hours till we were together again.

“Why are you driving and not flying?”

Ahhh, he'd picked up on that. I sighed because I should have told him this before we mated, though introducing him to my unicorn was the biggie, and we'd been there and done that.

"I'm going to stop off along the way." I could have driven straight through, but it seemed like the time was right for a face-to-face.

Errol's brow crinkled, and I kissed the wrinkly lines. "And do what?"

"I have family who live deep in the woods."

Not just any family; my folks. But we lived very different shifter lifestyles. They kept their beasts safe by keeping away from people, but their unicorns were free to wander the woods. I was a city-dweller, and until the day I'd revealed my beast to my mate, my unicorn had never been outside the orchard fence.

Our different perspective on how to live with a so-called mythical beast had caused friction in the past, and our communication had dwindled to phone calls on holidays and birthdays.

Errol pulled away and his eyes searched mine. "I thought you didn't have any family. Isn't that what you told me?"

Had I said that? Pretty sure I'd kept it vague. But whatever... I hadn't been honest with my mate because I was avoiding any conflict with my parents. I'd chickened out, and now I needed to alpha up.

I sat Errol down and summarized what had happened between me and my parents. Before I was born, my parents were planning on traveling the world and doing volunteer work. After I arrived, they handed me over to my grandfather, saying they'd be gone a while. A while turned into years, with them popping in occasionally

and telling Gramps what a great job he was doing.

Until, I was close to my first shift, and my folks came back. But the day I met my unicorn was when a wolf lunged for me as we were in the woods near the house. My parents chased the wolf, but that experience terrified me and I retreated to my grandfather's.

I explained to Errol that I hoped to repair some of the damage and open up communication.

“Seeing you with Grams and how you care for her made me realize life is short and we should keep our loved ones close.”

“I’m coming.”

I pursed my lips, trying not to laugh, but my mate caught on to what was in my head and he slapped my arm.

“Not here, not now, and not in my pants. Keep your mind on your folks and how you hid them from me.”

“Yes, sir.”

I apologized for being an ass, and Errol asked if there were any other secrets he should know about.

“Nope, that’s it.”

I was overwhelmed with guilt, while I should have confided in him when we first met, he was worried about Grams, and once her meds were administered properly, it never seemed like the right time. That was a poor excuse, and I had to be mindful that

my mate was my partner in life and was deserving of my trust.

Errol had taken so much time off his job as a freelance personal trainer over the months Grams wasn't herself—which was why he didn't have the five hundred for her bail—I worried he wouldn't be able to pay his bills if he came with me.

But we were mates, and I offered to make up any shortfall.

“It's okay. I've been working a crazy schedule, covering for two colleagues, so I'm sure they'll take my clients for a week.”

My beast was also excited because he'd get to frolic with my parents' beasts.

I do enjoy frolicking .

Two days later and the car was packed, we had food for the trip, and Grams's neighbor was primed to check in on her twice a day.

“This is exciting.” Errol was already foraging in the snack basket and we hadn't reached the city outskirts.

My folks were vegetarian, and I'd arranged to be there for lunch. They had a huge garden, something I was envious of, even though I had space at my place to grow vegetables.

“Will they be weirded out that I'm human?” My mate gasped and put a hand to his chest. “You have told them about me, haven't you?”

I deserved that, having not confessed about my family.

“This is like a fairy tale.” Errol pressed his face to the window as I drove along the

winding track lined with trees to my parents' home.

My dads appeared from their cottage before I'd turned off the engine. They held hands and waited near the gate. I thought of how loving Errol was with Grams, and once again, I was overwhelmed with guilt at our estranged relationship. It wasn't their fault I took fright at the wolf incident.

It was up to me to break down the barrier that existed between us. Smiling and waving, I hugged them both, and taking Errol's hand, I introduced them.

My mate didn't hold back. He flung himself into their arms, saying how happy he was to meet them and was hoping they'd show him around the garden.

"We'd love to." Joel, my omega dad, looked at me as Errol clasped him in a bear hug.

Aran, my alpha father, added that it was a shame the visit would be so short, as we were only staying overnight.

I opened my mouth to say we could visit again, but Errol butted in with, "Oh don't worry. We can visit at Christmas, and I'll bring my grandmother if that's okay."

My parents shared a glance. "More than okay," they both replied.

Errol strolled into the house with my omega dad, chatting about Grams, how we met, and gushing over my childhood home.

"I like him," my alpha dad whispered. "And his grandmother..."

"There might be a connection." I reviewed what Errol had told me, his tattoo, and Grams's recollections.

Father patted my arm. “It was more than fate. The goddess oversaw this personally.”

That was what I’d guessed, and I hoped I lived up to her expectations. If I got on better with my folks, I might rise in her estimation.

When we walked in, Errol was placing serving dishes on the table. My folks had gone all out and cooked a huge feast. We sat down, and everyone passed around the food before we tucked in.

“Thank you for being so welcoming to Errol and me.” I thought of all the lost years, but I hadn’t been lacking love. Gramps saw to that.

“You’re our son.” Father patted my hand.

“Davien tells me your unicorns roam freely in the forest,” Errol blurted out.

The way he said it sounded as though my parents’ beasts were out there now while we sat inside eating lunch.

Dad sent me a “Does he know?” look.

“Errol has met my unicorn. He understands the process.”

“Ahhh,” Dad replied.

“I thought we might take our hoofs and horns after lunch, as long as that’s okay with you, Errol. I don’t want you to feel left out,” Dad suggested.

“I can’t wait to see the three of you standing proud and tall.”

I bit my lip and inspected my food because that was how my mate described my

cock.

While I was happy to rest after the drive and our big lunch, my folks said their beasts were eager to shift because it had been years since they'd seen my unicorn.

"That's so sad." Errol blinked away tears.

"I'm aiming to fix that." I reached out to Dad and Father, and they each took a hand.

"You'll do great, my darling." Errol enveloped me in his arms. "The woods aren't scary, and you'll have your folks with you."

Perhaps my fear was irrational. It wasn't as if terrifying wild creatures lurked behind every bush and tree. Or did they? And the one and only time I'd shifted with my folks was that day.

"I wish I could take a pic, but don't worry, I know I can't." Errol averted his eyes as my parents got naked. As a human, he was weirded out by nudity, apart from when he and I got our clothes off.

"Can I look?" my mate yelled.

My beast pawed the ground, and Errol turned around. "Oh my gods. One of you is silver and the other pink."

That explained how my beast was both of those colors.

"Have fun." My mate leaned on the fence and waved.

My parents' beasts were on either side of mine, and we cantered into the woods until the trail narrowed, and my unicorn charged ahead. He was galloping up a hill, the

wind whipping his mane, as his hooves threw up clods of dirt.

But I was sweating and my human heart was hammering against my chest until we reached the top. We stood together surveying the countryside and the house with Errol in the garden. Freedom felt pretty good from this vantage point.

Maybe views aren't so bad after all.

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Chapter 17

Errol

My mate and I had sort of done things backwards. I wouldn't change it for the world. We went on the journey we needed, but also, I was well aware that it wasn't your typical dating.

We started with me borrowing money, something people did only after knowing each other for years unless they were a banker or a loan shark. We went straight from there to meeting Grams, my closest family. Had Grams not mooned the officer, we'd probably have never met—or maybe we would've, given that he was my true mate, but I didn't know it at the time. He did, but I was obviously human.

Then I mated him out of instinct. It was only later that I discovered the truth of who he was—that he was a unicorn and we were put on this earth specifically for each other.

In the time since I first accidentally called him, we had mated, I met his family, he met mine, and we did all the things a couple would—except we missed a step along the way; saying I love you.

Sure, we'd said things like “my love” or “I love you” in the throes of passion, usually with expletives after somebody did something particularly arousing, but we'd never had the true “I love yous,” the ones that said, “You're my person.”

Maybe it was the human in me, but I wanted that, and I wanted it to be special. Yes,

we were mated forever, and yes, we loved each other very much—none of that was in question. But I wanted that moment, the one we remembered for always and forever. And because I was me, I decided to create it for myself.

I went to the farmers' market and grabbed pretty much everything that looked good. Tonight wasn't just about me, and it wasn't just about Davien—it was also about his unicorn. To honor his beast, I decided to make a very nice vegetarian dinner. I didn't know exactly what I was going to make, but I knew it needed a lot of vegetables. When I got home, that's exactly what I had—lots of vegetables and no plan.

I opened my laptop and pulled up a website where you could input what food you had in the house, and it would suggest meals. I entered everything I had, along with some pantry staples, and it suggested a kind of vegetable stew. I wasn't sure it sounded particularly amazing, but it was missing a lot of things I normally ate, so I figured that was why it would be good. Better with beef in it, but what could you do?

I spent the afternoon preparing it, and I had to admit, it smelled pretty yum.

When Davien arrived, he brought flowers with him. It was sweet. He liked to do that. To surprise me with spontaneous gifts. At first I felt bad. He had money to spend on things like that and I didn't. But now? Now I saw how much it meant to him, and I allowed myself to just enjoy the gesture.

"I saw these and thought of you." He kissed my cheek.

"You did?" I smelled them—they didn't have much aroma, but then I noticed the little pick in it with a unicorn on it. "You did think of me!" I gave him a quick kiss and let him into the kitchen, where I put the flowers in water.

"What smells good?" he asked, hesitating before saying "good," which worried me a little.

“I went to the farmers’ market today. I wanted to make a special meal for us, one that even your unicorn would enjoy.”

He lifted the lid of the pot. “He’ll definitely enjoy this.”

Davien helped me set the table, and I served us bowls of stew with some crusty bread I had also found at the market. I took one spoonful and realized his initial praise of it being good was a lie. It was bland. Blander than bland.

“Is it me, or does this have no flavor?”

“No, it’s good,” he said. He was still lying. It very much was not. Edible, sure. But nowhere near good.

At the time, I thought it was odd that there weren’t any spices in it, but I figured it had to do with the vegetables or something. I didn’t know—I just went with it. I was now facing the errors of my ways, and I started to cry, of all things.

“Oh honey, don’t cry,” he said, getting up to pull me into a hug.

“I wanted to make this special, make this meal good for you and your beast. I just wanted tonight to be perfect.” And was failing at every corner.

“Of course, it’s perfect. You did this for me, for us. Look at all the work you did.”

“But I wanted it to be good,” I said, my voice wobbling, emotions so close to the surface. What was wrong with me? “Actual good, not mate-being-kind good.

He tipped my head up so I was looking at him. “You know, I don’t love you for your cooking. I love you for everything else.”

He meant it to be kind and sweet, but it only made me cry harder. I'd worked so hard to create the perfect time for us to tell each other about our love and here he was telling me for the first time as tears ran down my face and I was sucking snot.

"Honey, tell me what's wrong."

I hated that I had him worrying so.

I told him about my plan, how I wanted to make a special memory where we shared our love for each other for the first time. I braced myself for him to tell me I was being overdramatic or that it didn't matter, belittling it in some way. Apparently, I had some baggage from past relationships I hadn't dealt with.

But he didn't do any of that.

Instead, he said, "Let's go get dressed up. I'll put on a shirt and tie, and we'll head to that steak place you've been talking about."

"But—"

"No buts. We're going to have an amazing dinner as the best-looking couple there, and then we're going to tell each other we love each other for the very first time in some big, romantic way. One we'll remember forever and tell our grandbabies about."

Grandbabies. I loved the sound of that.

"You must think I'm so silly, sitting here crying over something like this." Because I sure did.

"No, I don't. I think you're romantic, and I think you love me." He kissed my lips.

“And I think you put too much pressure on yourself to make today ideal, forgetting the fact that every day with you is a perfect day. It doesn’t matter what we do or what happens—I’ve always got you in my corner.”

We did get dressed up and go to the steakhouse. I was surprised he managed to get us a reservation, the place was pretty packed. But he had, and the two of us ordered steak, ate looking out the window and the river flowing by and each other, and had a great time.

We had the most amazingly delicious meal I’d ever eaten and was complete with romantic gestures of love as dessert came. It was everything I wanted, only to discover it wasn’t what mattered. Sure, it was nice to have a date night with great food and company and to express your love for one another. But at the end of the day, when I looked back at this night, it wasn’t going to be for the things I had planned. It wasn’t going to be for the first “I love yous” or the fancy date. It wasn’t going to be how amazing he looked in his shirt and tie.

It was going to be about the way my mate accepted me—my humanness—and made sure I had what I needed. It was how I realized, in that moment, that I didn’t just love him... he was my world.

And I was his.

Fate had really known what they were doing when they decided we were mates.

“I love you,” I squeezed his hand as we reached the car. I love you so much that I sometimes wonder if this is all a dream.”

“It’s not, Errol. But if it were, I’d never want to wake up.” He reached behind me to open the car door. “Let me get you home and naked.”

“I have a better idea.”

“Better than making love to my mate?”

“I didn’t say we weren’t doing that. I thought a change of venue might be nice.”

He looked at me quizzically.

“Let’s go to the orchard. I want to spend some time with my unicorn, and then you can make me come so hard, they hear me calling your name three counties away.”

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Chapter 18

Davien

“Hey, sleepyhead. You’re going to be late.’

Errol’s first client at the gym was at six AM. Some mornings it was at five, as people wanted to get a jump on the day. I couldn’t imagine hauling ass to pump and jump so early.

Usually, he was bounding around, exhibiting more unicorn behavior than I did.

“Don’t wanna. Tell them I’m sick.”

“Are you?” I felt his brow, but it was cool.

He rolled over, his eyes still closed. “No, just tired.” He sighed. “But I can’t get a raincheck for canceling, and I can’t afford it.”

He heaved himself out of bed and got dressed when I reminded him he’d forgotten something.

“I’ll shower when I get there and after the session.” Grabbing his gym bag, he blew me a kiss and left.

One of us was always in the car, driving to and from the other’s place. I could eliminate the to-ing and fro-ing by selling my house and buying a home together.

Somewhere close to Grams's.

But finding time was a problem. I was working on a new project at work and staying in the office late. Errol leaving early gave me the opportunity to go into work before anyone else arrived and catch up on emails.

That left little time for us to be together, let alone to make huge life decisions.

"Hey, Errol, I'm home!" I yelled as I dumped my computer bag near the door and toed off my shoes.

My mate was usually in the kitchen or slouching on the sofa but tonight he was in bed, and not dozing on top of the covers. He was in bed, the quilt pulled up to his chin, the room in darkness.

I knelt beside the bed and kissed him, not wanting to wake him up. But he stirred.

"Davien?" He didn't have my shifter sight, so I turned on a lamp.

"Long day?"

"Oh yeah." He yawned and drew me in for another kiss. "I don't start until seven tomorrow, so yippee!"

He sat up, saying he hadn't eaten, so I ordered in and we ate our dinner in bed.

"What do you think about us looking for a place that's close to Grams and not far from your work?"

"Sounds great, but homes in the streets near her place come on the market rarely."

While I'd be buying the house, using the money from the sale of my current home, it would be our place.

"You're exhausted, so even if we can't find anything, how about we move in with Grams while we find something?" My mate would suffer burnout if we didn't make some changes in our lives.

Errol licked ketchup off his lips. "You'd do that?"

"Why not?" Not everyone would move in with their mate's grandmother, but life got in the way and presented solutions, and it was up to us to grab hold of them.

I pulled up a realty site that was based in the area where Grams lived and scrolled through the listings. We wanted something that was live-in ready. If it needed a lick of paint or the garden was a mess, we could do that ourselves, but neither of us had the energy to renovate a kitchen or bathroom.

I shuddered at the cost and the disruption to our lives if we chose that option.

"This is a similar era to Grams's place." The price was within my budget, based on what I thought I'd get for my current house.

But as we flicked through the pics, we both said, "Oh no!" It was dark, dusty, and needed a heap of work to bring it into the twenty-first century.

"It used to have an outdoor toilet when it was built, just like Grams's did."

I pointed out when I was a kid, we also had to traipse outside to use the toilet, and Errol's face registered horror.

"Don't worry." I gave his hand a squeeze. "There will only be indoor plumbing in

your future, unless we go camping, and then you'd be behind a bush."

"Let's skip camping and stay with your folks instead."

"Agreed."

We didn't see anything that "grabbed" us, but we decided to check out a couple of places on Sunday.

"Would Grams consider moving?" If so, we could look even closer to Errol's gym and wouldn't be constrained by searching in an older neighborhood.

"Not happening." He explained there were so many memories tied up in that place. "And besides, I worry that the trauma and stress of leaving the home she's lived in for decades might trigger a health episode."

Errol didn't want to receive a message in the middle of the night saying Grams had been arrested again.

Sunday arrived, and it was hot and sunny. A day we should have spent outdoors, but my mate had a client at the gym, and afterward, we went from open house to open house, peering in cupboards, examining tiles, and trying not to make faces at dark bathrooms with bright purple tiles.

Errol had a water bottle slung over his shoulder, and he'd packed snacks. Lately, he hadn't been hungry in the morning, preferring to eat later and graze during the day.

By mid-afternoon he was pooped, and I suggested we forget the last listing and go home. But he insisted since we were out that we should continue on. He'd eaten the last of his crackers, so I stopped at a convenience store and bought more.

“It doesn’t look promising,” he said as I drove past the house we were going to look at. There were cars parked either side of the street, so the place would be full of people hoping it was “the one.”

“Shall we skip it?” I was ready to zoom home, shower, and order takeout. The house-hunting business was not for the faint-hearted.

Errol was already out the door, but he sagged against the car, and I held him upright. There was no color in his cheeks, and he leaned over the gutter, retching, but brought nothing up.

“That’s it. We’re going home.”

He sipped his water and nibbled on a cracker, saying he was fine.

He wasn’t and neither was the house. We got out of there pretty quick and showered off the day’s dust when we arrived home.

I had to wake my mate up when the food was delivered and he fell asleep again after he ate half his curry.

Humans suffered from so many different ailments, and Errol’s symptoms were so vague, I didn’t do an online search. Sleep, plenty of water, and good food and he should be okay.

The next morning he bounded out of bed as if yesterday never happened. He brought me coffee before heading off to his first client.

He’s fine. I was concerned . My unicorn was worried.

Me too .

Errol was fine, with boundless energy during the week, but when Saturday arrived, he threw up first thing before dragging himself to the gym for a day jam-packed with clients.

I considered asking Grams if my mate had ever suffered similar symptoms but didn't want to worry her. My parents were away for a week hiking and had no phone reception. That was another reason I couldn't live away from the city because the phone was my constant companion.

We'd have to install a landline when we moved so I could keep the same number. The one I had when my grandfather was still alive. And how Errol first got in contact with me. That was the priority, though my mate would say an indoor toilet was top of the list.

With Errol being unwell, I was distracted at work, and whenever my phone beeped, I expected to hear he'd been rushed to hospital.

But my mate's condition improved, and we talked about looking at more houses. Neither of us had the appetite for more dirty tiles and moldy ceilings.

"I suppose living with Grams would be an option. She'd probably like the company, and it's better than what I'm doing now." Errol leaned against the kitchen island while I cooked. He made a face and flapped a hand in the air.

"You don't like chili? Since when?"

"Since just now. The smell is yucky. Did you add different spices?"

I hadn't, and he ate it when it was done, though as I studied his face, he struggled to swallow and he held his nose. No five-star review for me.

We muddled along for another week, with Errol being alternately sick in the mornings or at night, full of energy or exhausted, craving certain foods and disliking his favorites.

Maybe this was a thing with humans who mated shifters. Their bodies adapted and changed. I'd never read anything that said this was a symptom of interspecies mating. We might be the first.

"I think we have to move in with Grams." Errol put down his spoon. "I can't take the long commute anymore."

If she agreed, we could do it tomorrow, and I'd pay a moving company to pack up the house and store the furniture.

"Love, I think there's something seriously wrong with me."

Chapter 19

Errol

Grams had invited us over for dinner, and it was perfect timing because we wanted to talk to her about the idea of us moving in. I knew she would agree and probably love the idea. We just hadn't gotten around to discussing it yet.

There were a lot of logistics to figure out once we made the decision official. Davien and I had two places full of items, and while we wouldn't need them all at Grams's, we would once we found our permanent home. I was pretty sure my house would sell without too much trouble, but that still had to be done.

My parents were probably not going to be thrilled with the idea—they sold it to me in the first place because they “couldn't imagine anyone in our home but family.” It worked for me, but also, that wasn't a reason to keep a house.

They never came up here to visit. If they did, I might've asked their opinion first. This place hadn't been home to them in a long time, and if they had an issue with it, that was on them.

I was currently at my place more than at Grams's because she was feeling so much better. And the days I did stay, it was more about being exhausted and not wanting to make the drive home than it was about her needing me. I'd been so tired lately. A week off to just sleep sounded delightful.

Moving in was going to be better for everyone. Not only could I sell my house to get

some money for a down payment when a new house became available, but it was also time to let go of the memories. I didn't need my old phone number anymore, and I guess starting my new life with my mate made me want to let go of the past. My parents hadn't been the best, and I'd always known that. That's probably why I held onto Grams so much.

Davien and I would be able to see each other daily without the stress and wear of commuting. Grams would have us there when she needed help around the house or running errands. As better as she was, she was still getting older and couldn't do as much as she wanted. As far as I could see, this was a win-win-win for all three of us. It would be better when we got our own place nearby, but for now, it was the best option.

When we'd asked her if she needed anything, Grams had told us we could bring dessert. We ended up bringing cookies. I had to admit that they looked nearly bakery good. I was impressed with us. My mate set them down on the counter and hugged Grams.

"And don't worry, they look as good as they taste," he said.

"That might be cause for worry." She lifted up the foil and grabbed one.

I was never going to live down that cake.

She took a huge bite. "Delicious."

I still wasn't feeling the greatest, and seeing the cookie wasn't helping. I slapped on a happy face and averted my eyes. Whatever this stomach bug was, it could leave anytime now. I was so good and done with it. The problem was, every time I thought maybe it was time to go to the doctor, I felt great again.

Stupid bug.

“I made your favorite for dinner.”

“You made lasagna?” I hoped not. Pretty sure my stomach would rebel on anything tomato-based.

“Not your favorite, Errol.” She rolled her eyes. “I made quiche.” Ahh, she meant one of Davien’s favorites. It wasn’t uncommon for her to tease that he was her favorite. I loved how they got along.

Davien loved a good steak, too. It had to be hard for him to live with a beast who didn’t like the same things he did. Grams always made her quiches with broccoli, artichoke, and leeks—not ham or bacon. This was for sure a meal he and his unicorn would agree on.

We sat down to eat, and I got nervous. She already knew we wanted to talk to her about something, and I suspected that was why dinner was done before we even arrived.

Three bites in, I just spit it out. “We want to quit all this commute stuff.”

“Hardly the way to ask,” she said, raising an eyebrow. It shouldn’t have surprised me that she had already pieced things together.

“What I mean is, we were thinking we wanted to live closer to you, but the market... there’s not a lot on the market right now. Nothing, actually.”

“You’re going to sell your house.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yeah, it’s time to let it go.”

“Good. About time,” she said, setting her fork down. “That thing is going to be a money-suck soon. That roof is only the beginning. I don’t know of anything coming on the market soon. You two are just going to have to live here for a while.”

Davien laughed. “You knew why we came over, didn’t you?”

“I figured with the baby coming, you were going to want to save some money and be close to family. That’s how it works.”

“Baby?” Davien looked at me, and I looked to Grams. What was she talking about? If I was having a baby, I’d know it, right?

Grams shot me a knowing look. “Oh, don’t look at me like that,”

“Wait, what are you talking about?” I was so confused as to how this conversation went from moving in to having a baby, but here we were.

“Answer me this... ” She spent the next three minutes listing off a long list of symptoms she’d seen me experience, ones I hadn’t connected the dots on. “That all describes you, right?”

I nodded.

“So what logical conclusion can you draw?” She made a hand gesture over her belly, indicating a baby bump. She thought I was pregnant... already.

“Are you sure?” I whispered.

“Well, the 24-hour pharmacy is open.”

My jaw dropped, and Davien barked out a laugh, Grams joining in. “Just kidding!

Although they agreed to let me back into the pharmacy. I talked to the manager and let them know why I hadn't been myself, and remarkably, they accepted that."

"I'll be right back." Davien got up, kissed the top of my head, told us not to eat all the quiche, and left. I didn't get the sense that he was upset, but he didn't say where he was going, either.

"What do you think that was about?"

Grams shrugged. "I don't know. Alphas are... alphas. He'll be back soon, so might as well eat."

I went to argue, and she cut me off. "Let's be productive and talk about how we're going to rearrange all my belongings so you can fit your stuff instead of biting off worry."

I hadn't been worried, but now I sort of was.

"You're going need one of those pod things to store your stuff for later for sure. Probably not too long. This neighborhood has a lot of older folks, so the odds are good something will open up soon."

She went on, talking about the neighbors and their work, retirement, grandbabies, and health. It was a good distraction. It shouldn't have surprised me when Davien came back holding a bag from the pharmacy.

"Here." He handed me a pregnancy test. "Let's go find out."

I'd already kind of believed she was right, but I didn't want to get too excited. That would only lead to disappointment if it were negative. Davien and I had discussed a future family, and we both wanted one. This wasn't the timing we had been talking

about, but babies were like that. And now that it was a real possibility that I was carrying his baby, I really wanted this.

I peed on the stick and didn't even need to wait the three minutes for the results. It had two lines before I even set it back down on the toilet. I walked out.

"Now comes the wait." Grams was leaning into my mate's side. It was adorable..

"No wait. You were right, Grams." I barely got the words out when I was swept up in a hug between the two of them. Both Davien and Grams were as happy as I was.

I had been so scared it would be negative and hadn't realized how much until the first line appeared.

Davien whispered in my ear, "Love you, mate."

"I love you, too."

We spent the rest of dinner talking about all things baby-related, discussing which rooms we could turn into a nursery. When we reminded Grams that we would be buying a place of our own as soon as something opened up, she said, "Well, that doesn't mean the baby can't have a room here, just like you two do."

It was nice—this feeling of having family, of everyone being excited. The next day, I met with a realty agent to list my house on the market, and the odds were in my favor. I had four offers by the first weekend. We were doing this. We were moving, starting our new lives, and growing a family. Life was good.

Chapter 20

Davien

“Davien!”

Errol’s scream had the hackles rising on my neck as I raced onto the porch.

“What? The baby? Do we need an ambulance? Head to the ER?”

“No.” He held up his phone, but my mind was on babies, contractions, and early delivery and I couldn’t focus. “What?” I blinked, not making sense of the information on the tiny screen.

“There’s a house for sale.”

We’d put the house hunting on the back burner, and while we checked the listings each week, we’d not inspected any lately. It was time-consuming, draining, and always disappointing.

“Okay.”

My mate was past the all-day sickness stage and into the second trimester. He had more energy, and we had sex at least once a day. Maybe he was up for looking at rotting floorboards and damp basements. If that was what he wanted, we’d do it, but if I had a choice, I’d pass.

“Look at it.” He shook the phone in my face.

I studied the image. Was this a joke? Did he want us to buy Grams’s house? And did that suggest she was moving into an assisted living facility? Nope. Errol was bubbling with excitement. That wasn’t it.

“This is Grams’s place but maybe a few years ago ‘cause it needs painting and the hedge is much smaller than it is now.”

“No, silly, it’s the house next door to Grams.”

I took the phone from my mate and swiped through the pics. It was identical to Grams’s home, minus the extended deck she had added before I met her and Errol.

“It’s just been listed, and look at the price. It won’t last long. There’ll be hordes of people wanting to inspect it.”

It was a private listing by the owner, not through a realtor. Errol had an advantage, though, as he knew the neighbors who were downsizing and going to live with their son and his family.

“I’m going to call them now.”

He paced over the porch of my place until someone answered. And I couldn’t fathom how the conversation was progressing as he said, “Yes,” too many times to count, “Maybe,” and “Of course.” I understood, “we’ll drive over right now,” and grabbed my keys.

“This was meant to be,” he said as he pulled the seat belt over his small bump.

There were a lot of “meant to be’s” in our relationship, so what was one more?

The neighbors, Pat and Sandy, were waiting outside the front door when we pulled up. It was a toss-up who was more excited, them or Errol. They pulled my mate into their embrace before hugging me.

“This house is filled with happy memories, and we want the new owners to continue that tradition,” Pat told us.

The layout of the house was familiar, and the backyard was the same size as Grams’s. Sandy was the gardener, so the space was an oasis away from the city lights and sounds.

“What do you think?” Errol pulled me aside. “I think it’s perfect.”

Before I could answer, he hustled me back to the living room and pointed at a small table in the corner. “I agree. Look!”

A landline. I’d be able to transfer the number from my current house.

It was perfect in every way.

A voice on the porch had us hurrying out the front door.

“Are you buying this house?” Grams asked.

Maybe she didn’t want us being helicopter grandkids. She might feel we were smothering her.

“We’re leaning toward it. Do you have an opinion?”

“You can borrow a cup of sugar from me any time, but I warn you, I will complain if you have loud parties.”

I laughed, and Errol hugged Grams.

“I guess that’s settled,” Grams said. “And your kids can go through the gate in the fence.”

Errol had done just that as a child when he played with Pat and Sandy’s children.

The next few weeks were filled with paperwork, contracts, inspections, and meetings with my bank manager. We’d put my house on the market and had two families who were interested. Errol’s had sold quickly, but I’d been hesitant to sell this one, just in case we needed it.

But we were stuck with clearing out decades of stuff I didn’t have the heart to toss out when my grandfather died.

“Look.” Errol held up an old newspaper clipping. “It’s your birth announcement.”

He kept that? It was pinned to a photo of him with my folks holding me as newborn, long before my parents and I became estranged. I vowed that I’d be the best parent I could be and keep my kids close for as long as possible.

“How do I get rid of any of this?” I picked up my first-grade report, pictures I’d drawn, and my grandfather’s commendation from the local neighborhood watch association. It was a life. No, two lives, his and mine.

“How about we take photos and you create a digital album? You can look at it whenever you want but you won’t be encumbered by all the stuff.”

I liked that idea, and I set to work, ordering paperwork into piles and taking photos. But I shed more than one tear as I placed paperwork in the trash.

Having sat on the floor most of the day sorting through memories, I was exhausted, and Errol suggested a break.

“How about we give your unicorn a treat?”

Ice cream , he shouted, making my ears ring. He’d developed an unhealthy desire for the creamy concoction which couldn’t have been good for his teeth.

“Such as?”

“We take him just outside town to the national park. It’d be a first.”

I’d been getting braver, giving my beast more freedom, but only just outside the orchard. We’d never been in the great big outdoors where wild beasts roamed except that one time at my parents’, but I’d had their beasts, who were much bigger than my unicorn, to protect us.

Please, please, please , he begged.

Okay, but the first sign of trouble and we’re back to the orchard .

Errol instructed me to leave everything where it was. “It’s not going anywhere.”

My hands trembled as I gripped the wheel, but my unicorn couldn’t contain his excitement. Even some shifters believed unicorns didn’t belong in the wild but on the pages of picture books or in a mural on a kid’s bedroom wall.

Errol held my hand as I emerged from the car. It was ironic that he as a human, who I’d always regarded as frail, was comforting me, the shifter.

“You’re going to do great.”

I got out a folding chair for my mate and undressed. My unicorn was bouncing around so much my heart skipped a beat. That wasn't good. Maybe we shouldn't shift. But I was looking for any excuse to cancel the outing. Instead, I had to gather my courage and alpha up.

Or unicorn up.

Taking his horn and hooves, my beast galloped through the trees, leaping over a fallen log, swerving around a clump of trees and hurdling a narrow stream. He skidded to a halt on discovering berries, allowing me to corral my thoughts.

The sounds of the forest—trickling water, trees rustling in the wind, rodents squeaking, and small mammals racing through the undergrowth—weren't so scary when I examined them one by one. And the firm earth beneath our hooves, the sweet berries filling my beast's mouth, and the scent of wildflowers—formed a backdrop to my unicorn's and my enjoyment.

This was what he was supposed to do, not be cooped up in a man-made orchard.

When he'd feasted enough, we made our way back to my mate.

"How was it?" he asked as I dressed.

"Magnificent. And my unicorn thanks you."

On the drive home, Errol cradled his belly and asked how I could introduce our child to the big wide world if they were a unicorn shifter.

"I'll lead by example and guide them to trust their instinct."

We entered the house and were confronted with the mess we'd left behind, but after

shifting, I was energized and told my mate to relax while I set a timer and went through each item before putting most of it in the garbage.

“We’re starting a new chapter.” Errol was in bed reading when I crawled in beside him. “Not only us as a couple with a baby on the way and a new home, but you and your unicorn too.”

Being in a different house, one that was ours rather than what I’d inherited, was exciting but tinged with sadness at saying goodbye to the home I’d shared with my grandfather. But I was looking forward, not back.

Except for one thing; the landline.

Transferring the number to the new place was proving to be more difficult than I imagined. But this was non-negotiable.

Someone, not a mate but a stranger in trouble, might call in the middle of the night, needing help, and I wanted to be able to give it to them.

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Chapter 21

Errol

Everything went really quickly after we put an offer on the house. Davien's house sold remarkably fast, and as soon as that closing happened, we were able to close on ours. There were a few things that had to be done before we could move in—painting, a couple of electrical updates, a new sink—nothing too big. And since we both sold our houses and his home had been mortgage-free, we were able to cover all the costs without going into debt.

We were starting life in the perfect way financially, which was amazing because it wasn't too long ago that I was borrowing \$500 to bail my grandmother out. It was hard to believe how different things were in just a few short months. Thank gods for a wrong phone number.

Today, we began moving in. Between me being pregnant and our items in multiple places, we were moving in chunks. First, we emptied the pod and got all the furniture into place—kitchen items and things we hadn't used in months were in boxes in their corresponding rooms. That part was pretty easy since everything had been ready to go.

The hard part came with the things we had at Grams's house. It wasn't a case of moving things out of storage and inside. We needed to decide what to pack from her place, what to leave there, and what to get rid of. From there, we needed to pack, carry them next door, and put her things back in place. She insisted on helping, which actually slowed things down a bit, but that was okay because she was happy. My

mate was happy. I was happy. And honestly, at this stage in my pregnancy, I couldn't really do as much as I wanted, and it was nice to feel like I didn't have to.

We planned to stay at Grams's house again that night because there was no way we were going to get everything unpacked and ready to go in one day. I was glad for that—it took a lot of stress off my shoulders, and after the long day we had, I fell asleep almost instantly.

The next morning when I woke up, I was all alone. My mate wasn't in my bed, and when I wandered through the house, Grams was MIA, too. There was a sticky note on the microwave letting me know that one of them had made me breakfast. It was super sweet and also told me not to rush.

Normally, I would've been like, "Nope, I can do this," and hurried over to the house, but the day before had worn me out. Muscles I didn't know I had hurt, and I could still use another hour of sleep.

I took a shower to help wake me up, ate my French toast, and then waddled over. I wasn't fully in the "waddle stage" of pregnancy yet, but I sure felt like it. My pre-pregnancy pants had stopped fitting already, and as often as I could, I donned my mate's sweatpants and an oversized hoodie that was three sizes larger than I usually wore. When I was at work, I wore paternity clothes, of course, but they flew off the second I got home. If I was going to grow an entire being, I was going to be as comfortable as I could.

"I'm home," I called as I walked through the front door, surprised to see that the living room was already completely put together—lamps, curtains, everything.

"You guys have been busy," I said, but no one answered. "Guess it's hide-and-seek time."

It took me a bit to find them. They were upstairs, putting a handlebar up in the bathroom.

“What’s that for?” It was one of those grab bars, the kind you hold onto when you’re older or have mobility issues. No one here fit that bill, not even Grams.

“Oh, you’re going to thank me,” Grams said. “In another month, maybe two, you’re not going to want to climb over into this tub. It’s extra deep.”

She was right. It was one of many things we loved about the house. The downstairs shower was in a shallow tub. It would be fine for giving our baby a bath and for showering, but it was useless for adults who wanted to soak away a hard day. This one, however, you could sink into it, have the water cover you, and just relax. I was really looking forward to it.

I didn’t argue with her that the bar was not needed, because at the rate I was growing, she might be right.

“Guys, what time did you get up?” They had accomplished so much while I only managed to eat French toast and bathe.

“I take the fifth,” Grams said, which meant it was before dawn.

“You didn’t need to do that, you know. I can help.”

“I don’t need to do anything,” she said, planting her fists on her hips. “I wanted to. Now come see what I did to your bedroom.”

There was no arguing with her, so I took my mate’s hand, and we followed her. Davien and I had purchased new furniture for the bedroom. Even though we each had our own beds before, it just felt better to get something that was ours. The last time I

had been in the room, it felt almost like a hotel room—but not anymore.

“Davien and I got the curtains and bedding up,” she said proudly.

“It looks great. And I love the little nook you’ve made over there.” They had turned an awkward corner that wasn’t quite the right shape for much into a cozy reading nook. I loved it.

“You guys are the best.”

“We know,” Grams said, while Davien kissed the top of my head.

“We still have a lot to do today.” Davien held me closer. “I don’t want you overdoing it.”

“I don’t plan on it.”

“I’ve got this.” Grams took my arm and started to walk toward the door. “I’m taking him shopping, remember?”

Davien might’ve, but I didn’t. Grams was definitely back to her old self, which was such a relief. She would never be the cutesy old lady sitting on her front porch with a cup of tea, waving to people who walked by and talking to the neighborhood cats. That wasn’t who she was. Worked for me. I liked her this way.

The rest of the day included buying everything we needed to have a decent pantry, getting the kitchen set up and ready to go, and emptying boxes.

It was pretty much Grams telling us what to do, and us doing it. By the time we were ready for dinner, we were done. Well, done enough. Our house was ready for us.

Grams had dinner plans—ones she didn't divulge—and Davien and I had our first pizza delivery.

“Is it everything you thought it would be?” Davien asked, wrapping his arms around me, our dinner eaten and cleaned up.

“And more. But there's still stuff to be done.” I reached up and rested my hand on his cheek.

“What do you mean?”

“Well... we haven't christened any of the rooms yet.” I nipped on his bottom lip.

“You do have a point.” He kissed me breathless. I half wondered if it would ever stop feeling like this, so magical. I didn't think it would; he was a unicorn, after all. “Should we start with this one?”

“Well, had this been a few months back, I'd probably say yes, but I'm not so flexible right now.” There was no chance that I wouldn't end up on the floor. “How about we start with the bedroom?”

Without hesitation, Davien bent down and scooped me up. “That works for me.”

“Wait! Put me down! I'm the size of a horse... unicorn... you know what I mean.”

“You, my sweet mate, are the absolute perfect size for growing our baby and I am going to carry you upstairs and do some very naughty things to you.”

And off to the bedroom we went.

Chapter 22

Davien

“I don’t know.” Errol rested his hands on his bump. “They’re nice and all and have great reviews, all five stars, but they’re so bland.”

We’d sat up late last night looking at cribs, and now we were in the baby section of a large department store. I agreed cribs were boring, but they all served a purpose and that was to keep our baby comfortable and safe when they were sleeping.

“We could jazz them up a little with decals.”

Errol made a face. “Nope.”

“Colorful bedding?”

“No.”

“A lick of paint?” We had some left over from when I painted the nursery.

“It’s not the lack of color. They don’t have any personality.”

That stumped me. I closed one eye and studied the cribs. Nah, I didn’t get it. Closed the other one and took a step back. I got nothing. How did a crib get personality?

Errol clapped and the bored sales assistant jumped. “Grams!”

“Has she got a hidden talent I’m not aware of?” She enjoyed knitting and sewing, so maybe a frill here and a tassel there might give the cribs “personality,” but that would pose a danger to our little one.

“She’s a woodworker.”

That was news!

“She made the coffee table in her living room and the bookshelves in her bedroom.”

Grams was full of surprises. “Okay, so what are you thinking?” We’d looked at rattles made by a local craftsperson, but they were expensive. If Grams’s rates were cheaper, we could put in an order for a wooden rattle engraved with a unicorn on the handle. She wouldn’t question why we wanted a unicorn because she’d told him tales about the beasts from childhood.

“She can make a cradle.” He pointed to a white one. “Similar to that, but think of how special it would be if she handcrafted her great-grandchild’s bed.”

Grams had masses of energy, and her hands were always busy making something, but a cradle was a huge undertaking. I worried that it might be too much for her but that she’d say yes, not wanting to disappoint Errol.

“Let’s ask her.” He called and said we’d be at her place in twenty minutes and were bringing cake, but she said she was busy.

Errol stared at the phone. “She hung up on me.”

Grams rarely refused either cake or a visit from Errol. Something was up. Forgetting about the cake, we jumped in the car and almost broke the speed limit getting there.

“Grams!” Errol searched the rooms, but she wasn’t there. “Her purse and phone are here.” He checked the medi-alert app on his phone. “It says she’s here.”

I suspected Grams had removed the bracelet. Either that or she was hiding under the bed.

“If she’s out, she’s wandering around with no way to contact us and no money.”

We’d convinced her to wear the medi-alert bracelet so my mate could track her if she became confused again and wandered off.

Errol rubbed his bump and fisted the other hand. “What if she gets hurt?” Tears streamed over his cheeks, and I told him I’d go looking for her if he phoned the local hospitals.

But as I headed for the front door, the back door opened and Grams walked in.

“You decided to check on me, Grandson, even though I said I was busy.” She folded her arms. “I love you, and I understand you worry about me, but I’m fine.”

“Where were you?” Errol sat his grandmother on the sofa.

“I was working on something, and it’s a surprise.”

My mate’s face brightened. “For the baby?”

“Maybe.”

Grams wasn’t giving much away.

“Can you give us a hint? Is it big or small?” Errol wasn’t giving up.

She shrugged. “That depends.”

“Grams!” My mate wanted answers, and his grandmother wasn’t giving him any.

“Your turn,” my mate said to me and jerked his head toward Grams.

I had a head start because I could smell the sharp almost citrus scent of wood. And there was sawdust on the bottom of Grams’s trousers. Her eyes locked on mine, and the message I got was, “Don’t tell.”

“How about we let Grams keep her secret for a while longer?” But if she was making what I thought she was, we’d need to know before Errol bought a bland and boring version.

Errol poked out his bottom lip. “Don’t want to.”

“When can you spill the deets?” I asked her.

“Deets?” She rolled her eyes. “In two days.”

I helped Errol off the couch and said we’d put off buying any baby-related items until then.

“But two days is so long. I wanna know now!” he cried as we walked from Grams’s place next door to our home.

Tell him what Grams is doing . My beast hated seeing Errol upset, but I didn’t want to spoil the surprise.

“How about we do something fun?”

“Like what?” He hugged a cushion against his big belly.

“We can go to the movies.”

He pointed to his huge bump and swollen ankles. “No can do.”

“I can do. Right here. I’ll make a huge-ass pile of popcorn and hot dogs with your favorite mustard and sauerkraut. How about it?”

“Maybe. Will the hot dogs have salsa?”

“Absolutely.”

“Better get to it while I choose a movie.”

I saluted and raced into the kitchen. The popcorn was easy, as I’d bought a machine. I gave Errol a huge tub of popcorn and juice—soda gave him gas—while I fashioned a hot dog the way he liked it.

“Ta-da. What do you think?” I presented it on a silver platter with a linen napkin. No movie theater provided that service.

“Yum! You’re a hot dog maker extraordinaire.”

We snuggled and munched through a lot of food. Errol fell asleep halfway through the movie, and after I got him into bed, I took out the trash. There was light coming from the shed in Grams’s garden.

I’d never known her to spend much time there, and having never been in the shed, I’d assumed it was for storage. She must’ve been working on Errol’s surprise—at least I hoped so. Easing open the garden gate linking our two places, I crept over the grass

and peeked in the window.

Though I couldn't make out what it was she was working on, it was wood, so I left her to it.

Two days later, my mate was home from a late session at the gym. While he couldn't demonstrate most of the skills at his work, he was still working with valued clients who had been with him for years.

"Grams says she has something to show us." He fumbled with the phone, and it would have smacked on the floor if I hadn't caught it. Shifter reflexes for the win.

"Hurry," he yelled as he tried and failed to put on his shoes. "Ahhh, I don't need shoes since we're just going next door.

I doubted the surprise was going anywhere and neither was Grams, but I got myself out the door and held my mate's hand.

Grams was in the living room, and the coffee table had been moved to make space for the special something in the middle of the room, covered in a large sheet. She instructed us to sit.

"I made this for your first child, and if you have more, they will use it too. Long after I have left this earth, I hope their children and their children's children will make use of it."

Errol sniffed. "If you were hoping to make me cry, you succeeded."

"Sorry, my love." Grams whipped off the sheet, revealing a wooden cradle. At both ends, she'd carved a unicorn, one that was identical to my mate's tattoo.

It looks like me .

You'll be with our baby for all time .

Stop , he pleaded, or I'll cry too .

Errol hugged his grandmother—we both did—and we took pics of Grams and her creation and the three of us.

I lugged the cradle home and placed it in the nursery. “Why do you think she carved a unicorn into the cradle?”

Errol shrugged as he ran his hands over the wood. “She knows I'm obsessed with them. Heck, she was the one who made up stories about unicorns in the garden.”

His head jerked up. “You don't think she saw your... grandfather in her backyard, do you?”

There was no way to answer that.

“It's so beautiful. We'll treasure this present forever.”

It definitely wasn't bland and boring. We stood, our arms around one another, adoring the precious gift Grams had given us.

“I'll be sad when the baby grows out of it.”

“But there might be another baby and another.”

My mate waddled into their bedroom and lay down. “And who will be carrying these babies for nine months?”

“Only if you agree, babe.”

“Let’s get this one out first.”

I couldn’t wait to be a father.

Chapter 23

Errol

I had planned to take my paternity leave starting on my due date if our baby hadn't arrived before then. I was practical like that. My boss told me I could start two weeks earlier, but I kept saying, "No, it'll be fine."

Of course, I had been fooling myself. It wasn't fine. The last two weeks of work had been dreadful. Just getting up and down from my seat was a struggle. And pee breaks? I had about fifty-two million of those every shift. Finally, as my due date was upon us, Davien insisted that I take my leave.

I'd argued with him about it. I didn't want to lose too much time before the baby arrived—I wanted that time with them after they were born. Eight weeks wasn't a lot of time. That led to me breaking down in tears. Not little tears either. I was full-on sobbing. I'd have blamed it on the hormones, and I was sure they didn't help, but the truth was I didn't want our child to have what I had growing up. I wanted to be there and present when they needed me.

It didn't take long for us to realize there was only one solution that would work for all involved: quitting my job. We didn't have a mortgage, and his job was going great, so we could manage financially with no worries. We had already been putting a lot away in savings, so even if we had a sudden expense, we'd be set.

I'd never been so relieved in my life. I was ready—ready for this baby and to start a new life.

Shockingly, my boss was really understanding. He told me to use up my sick days first, then officially file my resignation. He even suggested that I come back for just one day to close things out when I was ready, to guarantee I got all my vesting. One day—I could handle that.

The first week of being home was rough. Not the part about not going to work—that was fine. My job had been about doing something I didn't mind and getting paid for it. It had hardly been a passion career.

All I really did at first was hang out with Grams. That I liked. But physically, I was struggling. My back was killing me. My belly seemed to enter a room three weeks before I did, and I was exhausted. I couldn't see my feet or even my dick. I was wearing house slippers everywhere because I could get my feet in them without any help. I was miserable.

The doctor had offered to induce me, but I didn't want that—I wanted to wait until the baby was ready to come. But after a week of waiting, I was ready. More than. At my next appointment, I pretty much begged the doctor.

“Get this baby out of me,” were my exact words.

He laughed, which was not the correct response. I glared at him, and he quickly apologized, but there was still amusement in his eyes. Was I being hormonal? Probably. Was it objectively funny? Yes. But still... I was not amused.

He made an appointment for me to check in at triage the next day for an induction. The hospital didn't have any slots open until 7 PM, so I went home with Davien to get ready and wait.

But, of course, our baby had other plans. As I was walking around the block with Grams later that evening, my water broke. It felt like my baby and I were playing a

game of chicken, and I lost. It was uncomfortable walking back with wet jeans. They were maternity jeans, but even with the extra room, they still felt awful under the circumstances.

The contractions weren't strong yet. I hadn't even pieced together that they had existed at first. I'd thought the uncomfortable feeling in my stomach was nerves. I was able to take a shower before we left, much to Davien's frustration. He wanted me at the hospital right away, but I assured him that the baby wasn't coming anytime soon—it would be a long process.

Turned out, I was wrong.

When we got to the hospital, the nurse took my vitals, checked me, and said, "Hmm," before walking out.

"Hmm?" I looked at Davien. "That doesn't sound good."

"No, it doesn't, but she didn't sound nervous, though." She'd actually sounded quite chipper.

"It was still weird." Especially the leaving without telling us why.

Grams had wanted to come with us to the hospital, and part of me thought it was a good idea. But then I realized that anyone in the room with me was going to get an earful, and she'd give it right back. That wouldn't be good for either of us. Instead, I promised her we'd call as soon as the baby came and she could be our first visitor.

The nurse came back in with another person who she didn't introduce and said, "We're just making sure your IV and epidural are all set, and the doctor will be in shortly."

Her tone was different than before. It held that overly cheerful customer service voice quality, which only made me more nervous. It was the kind they gave when you called to see if your new brakes were put in and they needed to tell you they found something expensive wrong with your car when they did it—that sickeningly sweet one meant to keep you from getting too upset when the bad news came.

Thankfully, the doctor came in soon after, because I'd been imagining all sorts of scenarios and that wasn't good for anyone.

“It looks like we're having a C-section.” No saying hello or making small talk.

I didn't fully understand his explanation, and he spent most of his time directing the people who were coming in. From that point on, nothing out of anyone's mouth made any sense. I was too busy panicking. Davien held my hand and asked all the right questions—or I assumed they were because everything sounded like a Charlie Brown cartoon when he spoke to his teachers.

Next thing I knew, they were wheeling me into the OR.

Luckily, I was too confused to be scared. A minute after being transferred to the operating table, they started strapping my arms down and doing all the things that came with surgery, half of which I didn't fully grasp. Thank gods they had Davien come in right then, head to toe in surgery scrubs. I needed him.

My mate stood on my right, the anesthesiologist on my left. There was a big curtain up so I couldn't see what anyone was doing. It was weird, I could feel some tugs and pulls, but nothing close to pain. Our daughter's cries filled the room, and for the first time since the nurse walked out, I knew everything would be okay.

They placed her on my chest, and Davien put his hand on her back, since I still didn't have my arms to hold her while the doctors finished. They still had to do a lot of

things before I could be moved into the recovery room, and then eventually, the room where we'd stay until it was time to go home.

The doctor came into my room to check on me shortly after we got there. That was when I learned the reality of what had happened—how the umbilical cord had started to come out first, and how we were on very borrowed time. He'd explained it all before, but this was the first time I actually heard it.

It was probably for the best that I didn't know earlier, because I didn't think I could have handled that kind of fear.

"You did so good, my love," Davien whispered, kissing my forehead. His eyes kept drifting back to our daughter. "How about next time we skip all the scary stuff?"

"Yeah, I'm on board for that," I said. Not that I was thinking about a next time anytime soon.

"We should probably call Grams." Our daughter was asleep in my arms. "She's going to be mad if she finds out we had all this adventure without her."

"No, I'm not," Grams said, walking through the door. I looked at Davien.

"I called her when they were wheeling you into recovery," he admitted. My mate was the best.

"Look at her," Grams gazed at our baby. "She looks just like me. Grams Jr.!"

"I think we're going to find a better name than that, Grams."

"What better name is there than Grams?"

Davien picked up our daughter and put her in Grams's arms.

"I was thinking Evelyn," I said. It had been Davien's idea, and I loved it.

"I was kidding. You don't need to name her after me."

"No, Grams." Davien put his hand on her shoulder and gave it a squeeze. "We've already decided. It's the perfect name for her. If it weren't for you, she wouldn't be here."

"So, you're saying my mooning an officer was a good thing?"

"That's exactly what we're saying." I laughed. "But maybe let's not do it again."

Errol

“Evelyn!” I called up the stairs. “We’re leaving in five minutes!”

The smell of fresh-baked cookies filled the air as I walked into the kitchen. Evelyn was taking them to class in the morning for her birthday treat. It was hard to believe our baby was already in kindergarten. Time really did fly.

Davien stood at the counter, balancing our son, Davies, on his hip while trying to gather the last of the birthday party supplies with the other. On the table in front of him was Evelyn’s present in a brightly colored birthday pack with balloons on the front.

“I’m going to load up the car. I’ll stop on the way and let Grams know we are leaving in a few.”

“Sounds good.”

Today wasn’t just a special day for Evelyn. It was special for all of us. I tried not to look back at the scary part of her birth, the part that reminded me that we so easily could’ve lost her that day, but birthdays were always a reminder. Thank gods, Davies’ delivery was easy peasy. I had an uncomplicated natural birth a week before my due date.

Evelyn came bouncing into the kitchen, her energy as contagious as ever. “Look at me!” She grinned, eyes wide, waiting for our reaction.

We did, and as soon as she saw she had our attention, Evelyn twirled in her dress, the poofiest skirt we could find, layers upon layers of tulle flying out like a fairy around her. There had to be more tulle in that one skirt than the entire fabric store. I was sure of it.

She was beaming. Not just because it was her birthday, but because she had picked the outfit herself. Normally, Evelyn was a jeans-and-mud kind of girl, always running outside to play, coming back with dirt smeared across her face and twigs tangled in her hair, and if I wasn't careful, something alive in her pocket—a worm, a frog, a grasshopper? It was anyone's guess. But for days like today—special occasions—she became a different version of herself, diving headfirst into the world of glitter and sparkle.

Today, she was a birthday fairy princess.

Her silver shoes caught the light as she bounced from foot to foot. Who needed light-up shoes when you could have glittery ones? They were adorable, but I was going to keep them as home shoes. I could only imagine the distraction they'd cause the way they constantly reflected the light back at you.

“I'm so going to meet a fairy today.”

While meeting Davien had taught me that not all mythical creatures were truly mythical, fairies weren't on the list of real creatures. There was no dissuading her, though. She was sure we hadn't been patient enough to meet one, and she was going to be the first. A not-so-small part of me hoped she was right.

“You look amazing, birthday girl—very fairy-esque.” I picked up her birthday present and the diaper bag. Everything else had been loaded in the car already.

We were heading to Davien's favorite place, the orchard, for her family birthday. It wasn't the kind of place you typically dressed up for, but Evelyn was very much like

her namesake in that way. She didn't care about what was expected. She wanted what she wanted, and today she wanted to fairy hunt with her papa in what had become her favorite place, too

I looked in the diaper bag from the counter, making sure to double-check that we had everything: extra clothes for Davies, wipes, bottles, a binky... It was all there. I followed them outside to the car. Evelyn skipped ahead, her tulle skirt bouncing with every step.

Grams was already waiting when we reached the car. She cradled the cake she had made. I was no longer allowed to make cakes for anything but an after-dinner treat. She said the one I made for Davien when we first met proved I couldn't be trusted, especially for special occasions. She wasn't wrong.

"I can't believe it's been five years," she said as I popped the hatch for her. "Five years with two of these Evelyns in the world—what a lucky place."

"Oh, Grams!" Evelyn giggled as she spun, her dress flying high just the way she liked it.

We piled into the car and set off, singing songs the whole way. Davies wasn't a huge fan of long car rides, but if we sang, he was happy enough to be a part of them. So sing we did, every time, and it was fun.

"I wonder if our next one will like music as much as Davies," Davien mused aloud, resting a hand on my already growing belly.

"Hard to say. They might be the silent type... or maybe they'll prefer classical music."

"Or maybe they will like bugs." Evelyn was so ready for another sibling. It was adorable.

Once we arrived at our destination, it didn't take long before our meal was spread out across the blanket. Grams had made her famous chicken salad sandwiches, and Davien had made Evelyn's favorite—mini deviled eggs. There were bags of chips, fresh fruit, and homemade lemonade. We ate slowly, savoring the moment... everyone except Evelyn. She couldn't wait to dive into her presents, and wanted to be done before we even began.

“Can I open them now?”

“Go ahead, birthday girl,” I said with a smile. Cake could wait.

Evelyn tore through the tissue paper, her laughter filling the air. Grams had picked out the miniature fairy garden, and Evelyn made plans for them to build it together next weekend. The look of pure joy on her face when she opened the last box—a unicorn stuffie, one that looked just like Papa. We'd had it custom-made by a unicorn he knew, and it was his spitting image.

We had offered to throw her a big birthday party with all her classmates, but Evelyn had insisted all she wanted was to spend the day with her papa's unicorn. Being a papa's girl, of course he made it happen.

I glanced over at Grams, remembering the first time she had seen him in his shifted form. She initially questioned if her medication was off again, and it took a while for her to accept that what she was seeing was real and not her “imagining” it. We came to find out, she'd always had a way of sensing things others couldn't, a gift she never talked much about. It made sense now, looking back, why some of the things she said during those early days with Davien when she said things that sounded like she knew more than she should have. She probably did, even if she hadn't realized it then.

After cake, Davien got ready to shift. It had become a tradition for them to go on a fairy hunt each birthday, and it was something Evelyn looked forward to.

“Do you think I’ll be able to find one today, Daddy?” Evelyn asked, her eyes wide with hope as she watched Davien.

“I don’t know,” I answered honestly. I wanted to believe she would, but as far as any of us knew, fae weren’t real. But then again, I hadn’t known unicorns were real until I did.

“Maybe when I’m a unicorn. I’m going to be one when I’m big, right?” It wasn’t the first time she asked, and I wished we had the answer she wanted.

“The odds are good,” Davien said gently. “But we can’t promise. And if you aren’t, that means you’re a lot like Daddy, and he’s my favorite human.” That had her smiling.

I understood why we couldn’t tell her that she’d definitely shift. Her grandparents on Davien’s side sensed her beast, but that didn’t mean they’d come out. It was all a waiting game.

It would be a thousand times more soul-crushing to grow up believing you could shift into something magical one day, only to find out you couldn’t when the time arrived. We didn’t want to set her up for disappointment, just in case.

“We’ll know in about ten more years,” Davien added.

“That’s so long, Daddy!”

“I know, but in the meantime, your papa is here, and so is his family. All the unicorns.”

We’d spent time getting to know Davien’s family over the years. Though we didn’t see them as often as Grams, who lived next door, they were a part of our lives. The kids adored them, and the feeling was mutual.

As Davien shifted, Evelyn's eyes lit up. She grabbed her new stuffie and walked over to him, wrapping her arms around his neck with a big hug. They disappeared into the forest together, Evelyn pretending to be a fairy princess, with Davien—now his majestic unicorn—her loyal companion, by her side.

Grams and I sat back, watching as Davies drifted off to sleep in my arms.

"It's all kinds of adorable," I said, my heart swelling with love for my little family. "Seeing them create this tradition."

"It really is," Grams agreed. "I think she's going to shift one day, too."

I smiled softly. "Same."

"Is that okay with you if you're the only one in the family who doesn't?"

"I'm also the only one growing a new baby. Everyone has their superpowers, their own magic."

Yes, everyone really did have their own magic—my family just happened to include a unicorn, or possibly four. Only time would tell, and we had our entire lifetimes to find out.

Sometimes the wrong Santa is the exact one you need.

I didn't volunteer to run the Winter Pines Community Center Christmas Spectacular. I know my limits, but when I miss a meeting thanks to a stupid flat tire, I find myself the proud owner of the position. With the event less than a week away, I have everything in place; the food, the gifts, the decorations, even the music. All that's left is waiting for the big day.

That is until I get the one phone call that threatens to unravel the entire event: Santa

quits and every person I call to replace him is booked. I'm about to give up and order a Santa suit for myself. Hopefully none of the kids will notice I'm not even thirty. But I find a business card for Santa that includes his address at the North Pole. He's probably already booked, but it's worth a call. The kids are counting on me.

Wrong Number, Right Santa is a sweet with knotty heat MM Mpreg Christmas romance set in the world of Dial M for Mates featuring a reindeer shifter looking for a Santa to give out presents, the actual Santa who accidentally (fine with a little help from a nosey elf) gets the call, tree decorating, enough cookies for the North Pole, hot chocolate on a snowy night, Christmas magic, a dog named Max, holiday cheer, true love, fated mates, an adorable baby, and a happy ever after.