



GRIFFINS  
*and*  
APPIE PIES

ZOE CHANT

GRIFFINS AND APPLE  
PIES

# SHIFTERS AND SWEETS BOOK THREE

ZOE CHANT

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book stands alone. However, it's the third in the sweet, exciting and heartwarming Shifters and Sweets series. Each book features a new couple, with a completely standalone adventure featuring sweet romance and a big helping of delicious baked goods. If you'd like to read the series in order, they are:

*Unicorns and Honey Cakes* (Sylvie and Gale's book)

*Dragons and Cupcakes* (Kira and Caleb's book)

*Griffins and Apple Pies* (Natasha and Kieran's book)

## CHAPTER 1

*Once upon a time, Natasha Scott thought as she guided her car along the winding mountain road, coming back here would have felt like complete failure.*

What a difference fifteen years made.

When she'd left, Natasha had sworn she'd never come back to Girdwood Springs – she'd honestly felt at the time that there was nothing for her in the tiny mountain town she'd grown up in except boredom and misery. Oh sure, it was fine if you were content to see the same people every day, do the same things, and work in the same small store. But Natasha had always dreamed big – and her dreams just couldn't be contained by Girdwood Springs.

That had been almost half her life ago, though.

She'd applied to a prestigious college in the city, and she'd gotten in. She'd worked her ass off, gone to every networking event she could find, and spent untold hours doing unpaid interning to make a name for herself. Her efforts had definitely paid off: she'd been head-hunted the moment she graduated by a huge marketing and advertising company, without her even having to apply for a job.

And after that, it'd been ten years of climbing the corporate ladder – working long hours hunched over her computer putting together advertising campaigns, staying at her desk until the dawn had begun to lighten the sky through her office window. Attending cocktail events and schmoozing clients until her feet in their strappy heels had ached. Driving

the team she headed hard to do their best work – but driving herself even harder.

She'd liked it, she had to admit. Natasha knew she was good at her job, and her meteoric rise to head of marketing had proved it. She knew what she was doing, and she knew she was good at it.

*Well, I was, anyway.*

She'd never imagined she could get so sick of work she loved – or so *burned out*.

That was really the only word for it, she thought grimly as she carefully steered her car around a sharp bend. Snatching only a couple of hours of sleep per night for years had taken its toll, as had all the stress and the long hours.

She didn't mind a few gray hairs – even at her relatively young age! – but the constant bags under her eyes, the knowledge that living on microwaved meals was doing nothing for her health, and the constant, unending feeling of fatigue... well. That was something else.

But still, she'd pushed on. She hadn't spent ten years building her career just to quit because she was a bit tired! She wasn't about to admit defeat – or, to put it another way, *failure*.

*Because I guess that was what I saw it as.*

Sighing, Natasha shook her head.

She'd been a fool, she now knew. If she'd just taken a little time off when she'd first needed it instead of pushing herself even harder than before, she wouldn't be in this mess now.

Not that it was really a *mess*, she supposed, pursing her lips. Being ordered by her boss to take a break after he'd walked in on her snoring at her desk hadn't really been her finest hour, though, and nor had the fact that she'd apparently sent her boss seventy-three emails, the entirety of which had been some variation of

*jhgkdfghgf doiDf hghghgh?!*

or



*\*hjghhhhj olgkfdghjf;*

or

*bnkdfgd7g7777777777777777777777777777777*

All of them sent with her face while she'd been passed out on her computer keyboard, until finally her boss had come to find out just what the hell was going on in her office.

*That* had been a dressing-down she hadn't really needed, Natasha thought, cringing a little at the memory.

But at the end of it, her boss, Charlson – and he insisted, for some reason, on being called just *Charlson*, like he was Madonna or something – had told her in no uncertain terms that she was taking some time off.

*But I can't just* – she'd started to argue with him, even as her heart had sunk with the knowledge that there was no getting out of this one.

*I don't want to hear it*, Charlson had told her, in his most no-nonsense voice. *Don't make me force the issue by firing you. Imagine if you'd emailed a client all of that rubbish, instead of me.*

Natasha gulped, mortification running through her veins at the mere *thought* of that. Client relationships were delicate, and her firm had spent years and years building its reputation. The idea she could have damaged it by falling asleep with her face on her keyboard was not something she even wanted to think about in too much detail.

But it'd all meant, in the end, that here she was: back in Girdwood Springs after fifteen years away.

And looking out of the window at the beauty of the surroundings, Natasha was honestly having trouble remembering now why she'd ever left.

She shook her head, grimacing.

*No – don't think like that. This is just a temporary thing. A short leave of absence! Just until I can stop writing emails with my face. I'm going back to the city in a month or so. I don't have any plans of dropping my career and moving back*

*here permanently. This is just... a thing. A momentary thing. I just thought it'd be nice to come see how the old stomping ground was doing. With the extra added bonus of there being absolutely no chance of running into a client or anyone I know from work, and having to answer awkward questions about just why exactly I'm on a mandated hiatus.*

Well, the old stomping grounds, as it turned out, were doing *beautifully*.

Back when she'd been a kid, Natasha had thought she'd scream if she had to see another tree – since that was pretty much all there was in Girdwood Springs. Trees and mountains. A few stores scattered along the way. A road.

She'd been so bored as a teenager that she'd spent all her time fantasizing about running away to the bright lights of the big city.

*But now that I'm back...*

Natasha shook her head again. No, no. She wasn't about to turn her back on the career she'd spent ten years building. That was nothing but crazy talk.

*By the time I've been here a month I'll have gotten so bored I'll remember why I wanted to leave in the first place,* she thought, as she drove past what – she guessed – counted as the Girdwood Springs city limits.

It was a battered little sign that didn't even bother to list the population of the town – mainly because it was so low Natasha thought it probably didn't bear mentioning. And there was a tree painted on it.

*Another tree!* Natasha thought cynically. *Just what the town needed! There weren't enough live ones, so they had to paint some more!*

But even as she thought it, Natasha had to admit to feeling just the *smallest* amount of guilt. So Girdwood Springs was boring. So she hadn't really been able to find a way to fulfil her ambitions here. So she might never have come back, if not for this forced break from her job.

But badmouthing it – even if only inside her own head – just felt plain old *mean*. It was just a little mountain town, and it'd never hurt anyone.

*And anyway, if I'm going to stay here for a month, I better start finding something positive about it,* Natasha thought, pursing her lips. She was here for a *break*, after all, not to complain endlessly and then go home even more miserable and stressed out than when she arrived.

*Okay. Putting a positive face on things. Starting now.*

That was what she was good at after all, wasn't it? She worked in marketing – it was her job to make things people initially thought were unpalatable into a dream come true. She could work her magic on her own brain, surely?

The first thing she'd need to do, she decided, was find something good to eat.

Natasha wondered if the food scene had gotten any better here since she was a kid – back when she'd been growing up, there'd been a grand total of the diner (which she and her friends had joked kept itself in business by taking care of the town's rat problem by putting them in the burgers) and the itsy-bitsy supermarket, which had always run out of bread by Sunday afternoon. Also apples. Also most other kinds of products anyone cared to name.

*Maybe things have changed,* Natasha thought as she turned down what passed as the main drag, not really believing it even as she thought it. *Maybe –*

Natasha wasn't sure where she'd been going with that *maybe*, but wherever it had been, she forgot about it completely as her mouth popped open in surprise – or maybe it was to make room for the absolutely massive slice of humble pie she now realized she'd have to eat.

*This is... this is nothing like I remember it.*

And it wasn't.

Where in the past there'd been nothing but boarded-up storefronts and buildings that looked like they were about to

fall to pieces at any moment, there was now... well, there was now *this*.

Natasha had to slow her car to stare, still open-mouthed, out the window.

*Is that a gift shop?!*

And not just a gift shop – a kind of adorable-looking gift shop, with cute hand-made-looking blankets in the window, dried flowers hanging up, and beautifully carved wooden figurines of bears and cougars and other local wildlife on display.

*And there – a garden center?!*

Natasha wouldn't have believed it if someone had told her there was a plant nursery in Girdwood Springs, but that seemed to be the case: a beautiful one, too, with tall green trees outside the main gates, verdant ferns overflowing from their pots, and flowers bursting into color along the sidewalk.

*There's the old diner too... and...*

And it looked *nothing* like what she remembered. It was *clean*, for starters – the windows were washed, the sign wasn't the peeling disaster she'd known from her childhood, when she and her friends had only gone there because there was literally nowhere else for them to go. The trash can outside wasn't overflowing with hot dog – or hot rat, as she'd called them – wrappers, and the canvas awning wasn't falling away in rotten pieces. It looked...

*It looks kind of like a place I'd actually eat at now*, Natasha thought, suddenly all too aware of her stomach rumbling greedily. As much as she wanted to pull over though, her curiosity about what else she'd find kept her foot on the gas pedal, even though the car had slowed to a crawl.

A little farther along the street, and Natasha let out a gasp as she saw a bakery, decked out with sweet little flower garlands on the door and on the wooden chairs and tables arranged beneath its pink and white awning.

*It's cute as a cupcake – and definitely not the kind of thing we had back in my day!*

Natasha would have been shocked if anyone in Girdwood Springs had even *heard* of a cupcake, let alone baked one.

*Not that I'll really have room to eat one, since I think all I'm going to be eating for the next month or so is crow.*

Her wonderment at how much the little town had changed, however, was temporarily pushed out of her head as Natasha suddenly noticed the beautifully done calligraphy sign painted across the bakery's front window: *Sylvie's Bakery and Sweets*.

*Wait – Sylvie? Sylvie Taylor?!*

She remembered Sylvie Taylor – they'd gone to school together. Sylvie had been a couple of years younger than her, so she hadn't known her *well*, but in a small place like Girdwood Springs, you couldn't help but at least be *aware* of all the other kids in town. And Natasha remembered that Sylvie had always liked baking – well, a little kid's version of baking, anyway, like mud cakes down by the river, decorated with leaves and stones, or sand pies in the sandpit.

Sylvie had always said she would be a baker when she grew up, and Natasha had, in their little kid way, believed her – anything had seemed possible when you were five years old! – but she had to admit that in the fifteen years since she'd left town, she'd mostly forgotten all about Sylvie Taylor and her dreams of being a baker, just as she imagined Sylvie Taylor had forgotten all about *her*, and her own dreams of making it big in the city.

*But... well...*

If there was ever a time to re-make an old acquaintance, Natasha supposed that this was it. Plus, maybe she could quiz Sylvie a little about the changes that had been made in Girdwood Springs. Had the town... come into some money? Somehow?

Without another thought, Natasha swung her car into an empty space outside the bakery, cutting the engine.

*That mountain air really is fresh*, she had to admit, taking in a huge lungful as she paused outside the bakery door –

perhaps she hadn't realized just how used she'd gotten to the smoggy city air. Here, everything smelled crisp and clean.

But when she opened the door of the bakery, she was suddenly hit with the wafting aromas of sugar and spice – and, naturally, all things nice.

“Oh my God,” Natasha couldn't help murmuring as she stood in the doorway, transfixed by the sight before her.

Sylvie's bakery wasn't just a bakery – it was a work of art.

Well, that was what it seemed like, anyway: Natasha wasn't sure she could call the rows and rows of delicate pastries, iced confections, and tiny pastel cakes anything *but* art.

And it went without saying that the whole place smelled *amazing*.

Natasha was pretty sure if she could bottle this scent and send it to clients, there'd be a line out the door of this place – but, looking around, she thought it must be doing pretty well on its own. If the incredible cakes, pastries and pies alone weren't enough evidence of that, there was also the wooden tables, each one decorated with a spray of little pink and white flowers, just like the awning outside, and the little basket of 'FREE FOR KIDS!' chocolate chip cookies on a low table in front of the cash register. It all spoke to a thriving and well-beloved local business.

“Sorry about the wait, I had my hands full back there for a moment!” a voice suddenly trilled, a moment before a woman wearing a black apron and cap bustled out from the back room. “Welcome to Sylvie's! If you have any questions, just ask! Or if you'd like a free sample, let me see what I –”

The woman suddenly stopped mid-sentence, tilting her head as she looked at Natasha, as if she was trying to place her in her memories.

Natasha didn't blame her – she would have been doing the same thing, if she didn't already know exactly who she was looking at. She smiled a little – one half of her wanted to

simply tell Sylvie who she was, but the other wanted to see if she could guess.

“You look a little familiar,” Sylvie finally said slowly, raising a finger to her lips. “But don’t tell me, I’ll get it in a minute. Is it... Natalie? No – Natasha! Natasha Scott! I remember you from school!”

Natasha had to laugh – she couldn’t hold back.

“You got it in one! I’d like to say I remembered your name without any help, but...” She gestured at the shopfront, with Sylvie’s name in huge, sweeping letters. “I guess I have to admit I had a little help.”

Sylvie laughed, her smile wide, just the way Natasha remembered it from when they were kids. Sylvie really hadn’t changed that much at all!

“Wow – I don’t think I’ve seen you here in...” Sylvie began, before her forehead scrunched in thought, clearly trying to think far enough back.

“Fifteen years,” Natasha said, shaking her head. It sounded like such a long time now that she said it out loud. “I left when I was nineteen – off to college.”

“I wasn’t too far behind you, I have to admit,” Sylvie said, her mouth quirking in a smile. “I traveled around for a while, did a few apprenticeships with different bakers here and there. Until I felt ready to strike out on my own.”

“But you still came back here?” Natasha said, cocking her head. “It seems like... well, I hope you won’t think I’m being rude, but Girdwood Springs isn’t the place I would have thought you could run a clearly pretty fancy bakery.”

“Oh, but the place has changed a lot now!” Sylvie enthused. “Ever since people started coming up the mountain to go skiing, a lot of things have changed. I know the place used to be nothing special –”

*You can say that again,* Natasha thought to herself.

“— but now that we’re getting more tourists passing through and more custom, the town has really started to thrive.

I always wanted to come back here anyway, but when I heard the mountain had become popular with skiers, I knew it was the right time. So I jumped at the chance!”

Natasha shook her head. The secluded mountainside having been discovered as a great place for family holidays suddenly made all the changes she’d seen around town make a little more sense.

“The diner we used to go to...” she started, only for Sylvie to cut her off with a laugh.

“I know, right? It used to be a total dump! But since Eula took it over she’s really made something of the place. You didn’t see any rats scurrying around the trash cans, right?”

“No, I did not,” Natasha said, joining in Sylvie’s laughter. “Wait – Eula? You mean Mrs. James, who used to do substitute teaching sometimes?”

“Yeah – that’s exactly who I mean. Apparently it was always her dream to run a diner – and remembering how we used to behave in class, I can’t exactly say I blame her for wanting to get out of teaching – so when she heard the old owner was selling up for a song, she went for it. You should *definitely* try the chili dogs. They’re out of this world.”

“I will, if you recommend them,” Natasha said sincerely. “And there’s a garden center now too...?”

“As run by my husband, Gale,” Sylvie said, giving Natasha a quick, slightly shy smile. “You could say he has a bit of a green thumb. I get all my herbs and spices from our garden. I can’t keep a cactus alive, but Gale... well, I guess you could say he has a talent.”

“Oh, you’re married? Congratulations!” Natasha said – and she meant it! But at the same time, she couldn’t ignore the little pang of envy in her heart. She’d never had much time for relationships – she’d been married to her job. The few she’d had had been as disappointing as they had been short-lived.

“Thank you,” Sylvie said, her smile growing wider. “Believe me, it was the last thing I expected – but Gale



happened to come into town and... it was pretty much love at first sight.”

“That’s amazing, truly,” Natasha said, returning Sylvie’s wide smile. “It seems like a lot *has* changed around here, you included!”

Sylvie laughed. “Oh, you haven’t seen the half of it yet! We even have open-air movie nights out here now. Do you remember Kira?”

“Kira Dearborn?” Natasha asked, cocking her head. She did – Kira had been outdoorsy and athletic at school, so not one of the girls Natasha had spent a lot of time with. But she did definitely remember her always winning every sporting event, even against the boys.

Sylvie nodded. “Yeah – well, she became a ranger for the park area, and a few years ago she married a guy who... well, I guess you could call him a movie buff. But together they run movie screenings in the picnic area of the parklands. If you’re in town, you should come. You’re just in time – spring is just starting, so the movie nights will be starting up again in a couple of weeks, once things warm up!” Sylvie cut herself off abruptly, shaking her head. “But listen to me, rattling on, and I haven’t even asked how *you’re* doing! Are you on vacation? What brings you back to Girdwood Springs after all this time?”

Natasha swallowed. In the excitement of seeing – and hearing about – how much Girdwood Springs had changed, she’d forgotten about how reluctant she was to talk about *why* exactly she was taking time off from her job. She’d left the city to avoid running into anyone she knew – only for the first person she spoke to turning out to be someone she’d grown up with.

“I... Uh. Well. I guess you could call it a vacation,” she said, realizing she was really raising more questions than she was answering by phrasing things like that. Certainly, Sylvie was giving her a curious look. “To be honest, it’s a bit of a forced vacation,” Natasha forced herself to say, even as embarrassment welled up within her. But she had always

thought of herself as an honest person – lying just didn't come all that naturally to her. "I got a bit burned out at my job – I work in marketing, by the way – and, well... I thought I'd come see how the old place was doing. I'll only be here for a month, though."

"Well, a month is plenty of time to take a rest and catch up with everyone and see what's changed," Sylvie said with a bright smile, clearly sensing that Natasha was just a *little* uncomfortable and not pressing her too hard for details. "And believe me, everyone'll be glad to see you again. You'll be more than welcome at the movie night – there's some flyers by the door, so make sure you grab one! Oh, and –"

Pausing, Sylvie ducked down behind the counter, opening the glass-fronted cabinet containing all her beautiful little cakes and confections. She selected a few, placing them in a box before wrapping it all up in brown paper.

"Here," she said, pushing the box across the counter to Natasha. "On the house. Consider it a welcome back present."

"Oh, no – I couldn't do that!" Natasha protested, shaking her head. "You have to let me pay for these – they're so beautiful, and it must have taken you *hours* to make them –"

"It did, but believe me, it's a labor of love," Sylvie laughed. "You remember how I always wanted to be a baker? Well, trust me, I'm living the dream."

"Are you really sure?" Natasha asked, still reluctant to take something for free, but also seeing that Sylvie wasn't going to be easily persuaded out of her gift. "I mean, I *do* have the money, I promise –"

"Oh, I'm sure of it!" Sylvie said. "But it's not really about that. And anyway, this is just a sample – I'm pretty sure you'll be back for more once you try these."

"I'm pretty sure you're right," Natasha said warmly, finally reaching out to accept the box from Sylvie's hands. "This place looks – and *smells* – amazing."

"Well, definitely don't be a stranger!" Sylvie said, as Natasha began to turn back toward the door. "And welcome

home!”

*Home.*

The word echoed through her in an odd way as she walked back to her car, the sweet-smelling box of cakes in her hands. Had she ever really thought of Girdwood Springs as *home*?

She'd only ever wanted to get out of here as fast as she could when she'd been young – and now, the place had changed so much she barely recognized it.

As she started her car, Natasha recalled Sylvie's words: *I'm living the dream.*

She'd thought she'd been living *her* dream, back in the city. And it was true: she *did* love her job. But even after only a few days away from it, she realized how tired out she'd been. The long hours and demanding clients had, somewhere along the way, become less of an exhilarating challenge and more just... well, *tiring*.

*But that doesn't mean I want to throw it all away!* Natasha thought firmly as she started her car. She was just in need of a break – that was all. A month out here and she'd be climbing up the walls in boredom. No matter how much the place had changed, and no matter how beautiful the scenery was. And what would she even do out here? She wasn't a baker – and she *definitely* wasn't a park ranger!

Nodding to herself as she began her drive back up to the cabin she'd rented on the mountain, Natasha told herself once again: *It's only a month's vacation. That's all.*

## CHAPTER 2

*All right, Kieran thought grimly as he approached the (tiny-looking) supermarket, are you going to let me buy food, or are we going to have a problem?*

His griffin blinked lazily at him, golden eyes glittering. Then it yawned, and rested its beaked head on its lion's paws, tail flicking gently where it was curled by its side. Kieran wasn't sure what kind of answer *that* was exactly, but at the least it didn't seem like the griffin was about to burst into life right at this very second?

*Then again, who knows what's gotten into it lately...*

Going out in public at the moment was a risk. It didn't matter how docile his griffin seemed one moment. In the next, it could suddenly burst forth in a flurry of wings and feathers and fur, and Kieran would have to hightail it out of wherever he was before he was seen.

So far, he'd been able to stop his unexpected transformations until he'd been somewhere relatively safe – a back alley for example, or behind some dense scrub. But these sudden, uncontrolled shifts were getting harder and harder to contain, and Kieran had known he couldn't stay in his urban, highly populated hometown as long as he couldn't control when or where his griffin was going to insist on taking form. Eventually, someone was going to see him shift – and that'd be a disaster for everyone.

*So I really had no choice but to come back here, I guess. Not that I'm complaining. Well, not about that, anyway. I could*

*definitely complain a lot about the fact my griffin seems to have gone absolutely crazy for absolutely no reason it cares to explain.*

Kieran had good memories of Girdwood Springs, though he hadn't been here since he was a child. His Great Uncle Henry had had a big house up on the mountain, and Kieran and his parents had often gone to visit him for vacations – of course, it had just been fun to get out of the city anyway, but the *real* appeal of the place had been the fact his great uncle had owned a lot of the land surrounding the house, and so it had been possible for him and his parents to shift and fly relatively freely while they were here, as well as pad around the forest, hunting for food and just enjoying the strength and freedom of their griffin forms.

It'd been something Kieran didn't get to do often in the city, and he'd always looked forward to these trips. He hadn't really thought much at the time about what a recluse his great uncle had been – living all alone in such a huge house, seeing no one except him and his parents, as far as Kieran knew.

But he'd just assumed that, unlike a lot of other shifters, who'd embraced urban lifestyles and wanted to mix amongst humans, Henry had simply wanted to live freely as a shifter, and had bought a home and a piece of land that would allow him to do as he pleased without being bothered by people, or having to worry about whether someone might see him shifting, or flying, or just running around in the trees, even if, as griffins, they still had to be more cautious than other shifter types – after all, a bear or a wolf shifter in the woods wouldn't really be thought of as anything remarkable. But a winged, eagle-headed lion... that was a different story.

*And they definitely don't belong in a supermarket either,* Kieran told the griffin as he made his way across the road, heading toward the entrance. He knew it didn't matter *what* he said, though: if the griffin decided it wanted to be in a supermarket, then there really wasn't a lot he could do about it. He could only hope he could suppress his shift for long enough to get out of the dairy aisle.

But still, he also needed food. So he really didn't have much choice.

*If you can just wait another hour or so, then you can shift all you want, I promise,* Kieran told the griffin.

That was why he'd come back here, after all. Great Uncle Henry's house had been the one place Kieran knew of where he'd always been able to shift freely, with no concern about being seen. And since his griffin had decided to start forcing him to shift uncontrollably, it had been the one place where he'd figured he might be safe from prying eyes until his griffin had gotten whatever was upsetting it out of its system, and it went back to behaving normally – in other words, working *with* him, rather than against him.

It had *never* acted like this before, not even when he'd been a child and still learning how to shift. It had always seemed like an ally and a friend – a warm presence sitting within him, a part of his nature that he could call on at will. Now, it seemed more like an enemy that was trying to... well, if not actually *destroy* him, then at least make his life pretty difficult. It didn't seem to care anymore that being seen as a griffin would be disastrous for them both – or at least, very, very awkward.

Now, it seemed to be determined to burst out and show itself to any passerby, and Kieran couldn't, for love nor money, get any answers from it about *why* it was suddenly behaving this way.

And so: he'd come back here, to Girdwood Springs, the remotest place he knew, where he knew he'd be able to shift in relative peace. His parents had inherited Great Uncle Henry's house when he'd passed on, and although they'd always had some vague plans to fix up the enormous, crumbling house and perhaps sell it or perhaps rent it out to holiday makers, they'd never really gotten around to it – though Kieran was used to them being like that. If procrastination had been a sporting event, they could have gone to the Olympics with it.

Kieran could still remember the piles of plywood and board that had been heaped up around their home while his

father got around to completing whatever ‘project’ he’d set his mind to, while his mother, a painter, usually left all her commissions to the last minute and would have to stay up pulling all-nighters once her delivery dates started to loom. It had been a chaotic household to grow up in, and Kieran had to admit that perhaps his own preference for liking things to be neat, tidy and organized stemmed from those days.

But his parents’ slowness to ever get anything done had, at least, worked out for him just this once. It meant they’d never really gotten around to selling or repairing Great Uncle Henry’s house, aside from getting the wiring re-done earlier this year – and so now, here it was, a convenient, isolated bolt hole just when he needed one.

*At least until I sort out what’s going on with my griffin, and why it wants to sabotage my life, Kieran thought, clenching his jaw as he stood outside the supermarket, steeling himself to go inside. I just need a few supplies. And then perhaps I can organize for deliveries – do they do that out here?*

He wasn’t sure such a tiny place would deliver groceries, but if they did, then he knew it’d be safer just to have things dropped off at his uncle’s place rather than having to come into town once or twice a week to stock up. He supposed hunting for his own food in griffin form was also a possibility... but to be honest, Kieran was a bit out of practice at hunting, and he wasn’t sure he should rely on it. Besides which, it’d never been his first choice – he kind of liked deer! They were very cute!

Kieran grabbed a basket, making his way quickly down the aisles. He wanted to be in and out of the supermarket as quickly as he could.

*Okay – bread. That’s always good. Apples. One a day keeps the doctor away, I guess. Bananas? Sure, why not. And granola. Hmm. Meat? Since the wiring and the power generator were repaired I should have electricity, but who knows what kind of state the appliances are in – if there are any there at all?*

Kieran didn't have a lot of time to mull over his choices, but he supposed it was good he really wasn't that much of a fussy eater. As long as he had something in his belly he was satisfied – which was probably just as well, since both his parents had been *spectacularly* awful cooks.

He made his way up and down the aisles, walking briskly, grabbing at anything he happened to see that he thought wasn't too perishable, along with a few more daring items like some steak, eggs, and milk. Hopefully the generator could be gotten up and running, and he'd have some way to keep them cold!

*Okay. Almost done. Maybe I'll just get some canned beans or something like that... oh. Huh.*

Apparently there'd been a run on canned beans or something, because there was only a single, lonely can sitting on the shelf. Ugh, and they were kidney beans, too – his least favorite.

*Oh well, I guess I'll just have to deal with it,* Kieran thought, as he began to reach for them – only to be stopped short by the sight of a hand reaching for the exact same can of beans.

It was a very elegant hand, Kieran couldn't help but notice – its nails were beautifully manicured, and there was a very tasteful emerald ring on one long, slender finger. But that didn't change the fact it was reaching for *his* beans!

*Well, they're not mine, actually,* he thought, as he turned his head to glance at the woman the hand belonged to. *I was just – holy moly! She's gorgeous!*

And she was, too: long black hair swept up in a ponytail, and beautiful, long-lashed eyes, and a cute heart-shaped face. She was a little shorter than him, and though she was dressed down, she had a kind of indefinable elegance to her that took Kieran aback. She looked *high class*, in a way he wasn't really used to – he'd grown up in the world's messiest house, and had usually been sent to his run-down school with whatever had been in the cupboard or fridge that morning in his lunchbox. Sometimes that had been a granola bar and an



apple; other times it had been a piece of suspiciously hard cheese. The point was, he wasn't someone you'd say was *classy*.

He wasn't sure what it was about this woman, but something about the way she held herself told him that she was a *lady*. And even though his mother might not have sent him to school with a proper lunch most days of the week, she *had* always told him that ladies came first.

"Sorry," Kieran said, his hand dropping to his side. "You take them – I don't really need them."

The woman blinked, her long, dark eyelashes fluttering slightly, along with Kieran's heart.

"Oh... are you sure?" Her voice was deep for a woman's, but all the more melodious for it, Kieran thought. "I was just going to buy them on a whim – I don't have any specific plans for them. If you need them, you should definitely have them."

"No, no, not at all!" Kieran held up his hand. "No plans – canned beans are just easy and simple, so I thought I'd grab some in case of some kind of laziness emergency. Definitely not the kind of thing I should really encourage in myself."

She laughed, the sound sending a delicious shiver right down Kieran's back. She *was* beautiful, as he'd noticed right away – but there was just *something* else about her, something warm and attractive and sexy, that he couldn't quite put his finger on. Whatever it was, however, he knew he'd never been more attracted to anyone else before in his life.

"Well, if you're really sure it's not a problem," she said. "I hate to steal beans right out from under someone."

"It's not stealing if I just give them to you," Kieran laughed. "Really, take them. I don't need them. Look at this basket – it's practically bursting as it is."

It was true – it was possible he'd gotten a *little* carried away with his shopping. He really didn't need beans on top of everything else.

"Here." To show he really did mean what he said, Kieran grabbed the beans from the shelf, passing them to her. "Enjoy

your kidney beans, on me.”

A smile curved its way across the woman’s full lips, and she reached out her hand to take them.

“All right, if you insist,” she said. “Than— oh! Ouch! Sorry about that!”

The woman *might* have said something after *sorry about that*, but Kieran had to admit he didn’t have the faintest idea of what it was.

Because in the next moment, the only sound he could hear was his blood rushing in his ears, his heart pounding in his chest, and the sound of his griffin letting out a piercing shriek as it roused itself from its lazy slumber.

*Mine!!*

Sweat broke out across Kieran’s body as he realized what exactly this meant, the knowledge rushing in on him like a tidal wave.

*She’s my mate – this woman. Our fingers touched. And a griffin always knows its mate at first touch.*

Or, perhaps, even at first *sight* – Kieran had been stunned by this woman’s beauty from the first moment he’d seen her, of course, but that hadn’t explained the incredible pull of attraction she’d had on him. He’d seen a lot of beautiful women, after all, but none of them had affected him the way she had. From the first moment he’d laid eyes on her, he’d known there was something special about her, even though he’d only chatted to her for a few seconds about beans. Canned beans, at that.

*We must tell her! Immediately!*

The griffin’s voice thundered through his head, momentarily robbing Kieran of his senses. Its insistence was so strong that for a moment he thought he was going to go into one of his uncontrolled shifts, and turn into a griffin right in the middle of the canned food aisle.

*I can’t – the only thing shifting now would do is terrify her! Not to mention everyone else in the supermarket!*

He fought down the griffin's wild, roaring *need* to show itself to its fated mate, struggling against the strength of its feelings.

*But she is our mate! She will know us!*

Kieran swallowed, closing his eyes, feeling sweat break out anew across his forehead.

*She won't – she's human. We would have sensed it if she was a shifter. If she's human, she won't understand what's happening. We have to get to know her first before we show her anything!*

“Hey – uh, are you okay?”

Kieran's eyes snapped open as he realized that in the midst of his titanic struggle not to let his griffin take form, he'd momentarily forgotten that the woman – his *mate* – was, for the moment at least, still standing next to him in the supermarket.

“I – uh –” he began, shaking his head as he looked down into her wide, concerned eyes. “I just – just remembered I have to be somewhere,” he finished lamely.

*I can't get to know her better while there's a risk I could turn into a griffin at any moment, he thought desperately. But I can't let her go without finding out how I can see her again either. I at least have to find out her name.*

“Oh, right.” The woman looked at him dubiously. “It's just you've gone really pale. Are you sure everything's okay?”

“Oh, absolutely!” Kieran said, and had to fight down the urge to actually give her a thumbs up, as if that would have convinced her of anything. “I really do just have to go, though. But... you wouldn't happen to be a local, would you?”

*Oh, smooth,* he berated himself – but to be honest, he thought he could have said something worse. Considering the circumstances – that he was fighting against an ornery griffin who *still* seemed to think the best way to get its human mate to swoon into his arms was by turning into what she'd probably consider a terrifying monster right in front of her – he thought he'd actually done pretty okay.

“Not really,” the woman said, and Kieran’s heart sank.

*Is she just passing through? Will I not see her again while I’m here?*

“I’m only here for a month. I just... I’m kind of... on vacation.” She paused, and seemed to be weighing up whether to say more. “I grew up here, you see, and I’m just back to see how the place has been getting along without me. Pretty well, as it turns out.”

“Oh, well that’s – amazing! Great, I mean. Really just... great!”

The woman looked a little startled at the enthusiasm and relief with which Kieran seemed to take the news that she’d be sticking around for at least a little while.

*Only a month, though. Is that long enough to convince her she’s my mate, and that we belong together? Even if I can’t stop shifting at random moments?*

Well, Kieran figured, he’d just have to sort out his problem before the month was up. He’d find a way to court her, woo her, make her see how much he’d adore her if she’d let him... and hopefully she wouldn’t mind that he was also a griffin.

*Why would she mind? We are magnificent!* the griffin screeched, puffing out its chest, its tail lashing with indignation at the idea that it could be any sort of liability for Kieran’s dating life.

“I mean,” Kieran said, pushing the griffin aside as best he could, “I’m only here for a little while too. Maybe we’ll run into each other again?”

“Maybe we will.” The woman’s smile was warm. “I’m Natasha, by the way. You didn’t ask, but I’m telling you.”

“Oh, right!” Kieran almost dropped his basket in his eagerness to hold out his hand to shake hers – but then, clumsily, decided against it. Just one little brush of her fingers against his had been enough to almost bring his griffin bounding forth. He couldn’t tell if he’d be able to keep it under control if their whole hands touched. “I’m Kieran – Kieran Goodman. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Likewise,” Natasha said, her smile growing just a little wider – maybe she hadn’t noticed his clumsy fumbling with the basket. “And it’s a pretty small town – I’m pretty sure we’ll run into each other.” She paused, swallowing. “At least I hope so.”

*She can tell we’re mates already, the griffin purred smugly. She wants us. She can feel it. All your fears are ridiculous.*

*Maybe so, but at least let me have a proper conversation with her before you start planning our wedding, Kieran argued.*

The griffin, perhaps annoyed at being second-guessed when it came to matters of instinct, rose up suddenly within him again, and for a moment Kieran was *sure* it was going to force a shift – before it abruptly backed down once more.

Still – he didn’t want to cut it any finer than that. He’d have to say his goodbyes and extricate himself – preferably after having made some solid date to see Natasha again.

“Are you staying in town?” Kieran said, realizing he sounded more than a little... well, wild and desperate, but not really able to do much about it just at the moment.

“A little farther up the mountain,” Natasha said, her warm look giving way to one that was just the *slightest* bit concerned. “And you?”

“In my great uncle’s place – I’m thinking of doing it up. I should mention, he doesn’t live there anymore. He died. Not recently! It was about five years ago now. But his house is empty, and so I’ll be staying in it.”

*Oh my God, I’m babbling. This is terrible. This is possibly the worst thing that’s ever happened to me, Kieran thought, resisting the urge to squeeze his eyes shut. He didn’t remember being this weird and tongue-tied around women before.*

*It’s obviously just Natasha – the one woman I actually need to impress the most.*

“Oh, I’m... sorry?” Natasha sounded a little befuddled, and Kieran couldn’t say he blamed her.

*Look, maybe I just need to get my head on straight and start again.*

“I used to come out here when I was a kid on my summer vacations, but I never lived here,” he said, forcing the words to come out in a coherent order. “Perhaps... perhaps you could show me around? Seeing as you must know your way around, having grown up here.”

“It’s changed a lot since I left,” Natasha said, a little ruefully. She paused, clearly thinking, before she apparently made up her mind. “But... sure. Maybe the day after tomorrow? We could meet at the diner on the main street, if you wanted to grab some lunch beforehand.”

*Oh, she’s direct! I like it!*

Kieran internally thanked his lucky stars that Natasha had done the hard part for him – suggesting they meet for lunch had been his next idea, but he hadn’t been sure how she’d take it, given he hadn’t exactly covered himself in particularly suave glory over the past few minutes.

“I would love that,” he said, a grin spreading helplessly across his face. “Should we say... twelve?”

“Sounds great.” Natasha’s smile was back in place, her dark, beautiful eyes flashing warmly. “I’ll see you then.”

*Our mate! Our mate! Our mate!*

Kieran’s griffin felt as if it was doing loop-the-loops in his chest, soaring and swirling, excitement making every feather in its enormous wings shiver. He watched Natasha as she made her way down the aisle toward the registers, pretending to poke at the canned carrots and asparagus so he could watch her from the corner of his eye – before deciding *what the hell* and throwing a few cans into his basket. His future self would be thanking him if he turned up at his uncle’s place to find the power wasn’t working, for some reason.

As it turned out, he needn’t have worried – the new power generator his parents had had installed during their first flush of enthusiasm for doing up the old place roared to life when he started it up, and each light flashed on with only a minimal

amount of flickering as he walked through the house, flipping each switch in turn.

The house really *was* just as cavernous as he remembered it being when he was a kid – he'd thought maybe it seemed so huge in his memories because he'd been so young at the time, and once he was here he'd find it was more of a regular-sized house. That definitely wasn't the case. The place had dozens of rooms: some were massive, with high ceilings and intricate ceiling moldings and carved wooden detailing, while others were tiny and pokey, clearly meant only for storage, or perhaps as servants' quarters back when this place had been a grand mansion.

Either way, the house was *impressive*, though it was clearly run down. It looked, Kieran guessed, a little like a gothic mansion from one of the stories he'd read in English class: a soaring, pointed roof, porthole windows, and long, creaking corridors. Even after spending an hour walking through it while testing the electrics Kieran wasn't sure he'd seen every room. The house had a weirdly disorienting aspect to it – had he just turned left or right? Had that cabinet been there before? Where was the trap door leading up to the attic? He'd been sure there'd been one when he was a kid, but now, he couldn't see anything at all.

*Well, it's not like I'll need to go up into the attic while I'm here... I don't* think, Kieran told himself, as he made his way back down the main staircase and into the room he'd called the sitting room when he was a kid, but which Great Uncle Henry had always called the *parlor*. Kieran had to admit he still wasn't exactly clear on the difference.

The afternoon light was fading fast – it was still only the very beginning of spring, after all, and the days were still pretty short, the nights dark and cold. Kieran knew it'd be even darker and colder up here on the mountain, but thankfully the linen closet was still full of blankets, just as he remembered it, even if they smelled a little old and he had to shake the dust out of them on the porch.

The bedrooms were completely empty of beds, though – he'd be sleeping on the couch for the duration of his stay, it

seemed. Which was fine with him: he didn't consider himself very fancy or in need of creature comforts.

What he *did* need, he realized, as a huge yawn split his mouth wide open, was a *nap*.

The last week or so, when his griffin had suddenly taken to shifting at will without so much as a by-your-leave, had been stressful, to say the least. And it'd been a long journey up here – he'd been driving since before dawn.

*I'll just have a little lie down*, Kieran thought, arranging the woolen blankets and couch cushions into a comfy bed. One thing he could say for Great Uncle Henry was that he definitely hadn't done things by halves – a huge house required huge furniture, and the couch was more than big enough to fit him, even though Kieran knew he was a pretty tall and broad guy.

*Just a half-hour nap*, he told himself as he lay down, pulling the blankets up over himself. *That's all I need. I'll be fine after that...*



**H**ours later, Kieran was awoken by the sound of an almighty *thud*.

Or... well, *perhaps* that was what had woken him. Or perhaps in fact it had actually been from him clearly having rolled off the couch in his sleep.

Or perhaps the thud *had* been him rolling off the couch in his sleep.

*Or*, he thought, as he lifted his head, *maybe it's because I clearly shifted in my sleep, rolled over, and then made a huge thud as I fell onto the floor*.

Because that was most definitely what had happened.

*Great*, he thought, looking down at the long, furred length of his body, his lion's paws and tail, his eagle's wings folded against his side. *This again*.



Sometimes baby shifters changed forms in their sleep – if they were dreaming of being in their shifter form, it was almost inevitable.

But that was *baby* shifters – as soon as he'd learned how to control his inner animal, Kieran shouldn't have been doing it anymore. But *nothing* about what had been happening over the past week was normal. His shifter animal should *never* have been able to take over his body like this!

*What are you even doing?* he asked the griffin, which was now occupying much more than half of his mind.

*What was that noise?*

The griffin was agitated, ornery. It was clearly on alert, as if lying in wait.

*I don't know. Maybe it was just the house? It's old, after all,* Kieran told the griffin, sighing inwardly. Was hearing a slightly spooky sound in the night what had gotten its hackles up?

*No,* the griffin snapped back, its fury – and fear – rising. *There is... something here.*

*That* got Kieran's attention.

*What do you mean?*

But now that he was no longer half-asleep and slightly disoriented at having been woken up by falling on the floor in griffin form, he could sense it too: something *was* here. Something he couldn't place. Something he didn't understand.

*It's not another shifter,* he thought, turning his head slowly, his eyes scanning the room. But even with the griffin's incredible night vision, he could see nothing. The room was completely empty.

*Maybe it's nothing,* he thought uneasily, even as he didn't really believe it himself. *Maybe it's just stress because of everything that's been going on recently...*

The next moment put paid to *that* idea.

Kieran leapt to his feet – all four of them – as a massive *thudding* sound rang through the room, seeming to echo off every wall. It was louder than should have been possible, as if something *in* the room was making the noise. But still, Kieran could see nothing.

*There's nothing here!* he thought, turning, his head swinging first one way and then the other.

The thuds subsided for a moment, though somehow the memory of them seemed to linger in the air like an echo, even though the silence was thick and blanketing.

*What's going on?!*

The griffin was angry and confused, and its animal instincts were jostling for control of his mind – trying to push his human consciousness aside and take over.

Kieran struggled against it. The griffin's instincts were useful in a lot of situations, that was for sure. But in this one, when it wasn't sure *what* was going on and it was out of its element – in a house, instead of soaring through the skies or bounding over a mountainside – Kieran wasn't sure it was the best idea to let it have free rein.

The griffin rose onto its back feet, letting out a *screech* of anger and defiance.

*I really think you should just let me change back so I can go investigate,* Kieran told it desperately, trying to calm it down. *It's nothing, I promise!*

That seemed to bring the griffin's panic down a notch, but it was still clearly unnerved by the mysterious banging and thudding sounds, and Kieran couldn't really say he blamed it.

*Perhaps it was just the timbers of the house settling,* he thought, glancing around. *Or the plumbing? It's probably not in great shape after all these years...*

One thing was for sure, however: if he wanted to investigate, he was going to have to shift back into his human form, since the griffin was far too bulky to walk around the house comfortably. It could leave this room, with its wide

French doors, and it could definitely climb the huge main staircase. But after that?

*I can't even really open doors in this form.*

But when he tried to change back, his griffin adamantly refused.

*No. There is something here. Our human form is weak. We are strong.*

Kieran couldn't exactly argue with it on that score. True, in his human form he was bigger and stronger than other humans. But it didn't compare to the strength and swiftness of the griffin.

*I can't check things out if you won't let me change back!* Kieran tried, but the griffin was having absolutely none of it.

*We are not staying here. There is something here with us.*

A shiver rolled down Kieran's spine at that – a moment before another series of rolling thuds and bangs broke out, the sounds slamming off the walls before seeming to disappear off down the corridor, almost like running feet.

*What the –* Kieran started to think – but before he could get any further, he found himself suddenly bounding out of the room, the griffin seizing complete control of their shared body and catapulting them across the floor, racing out into the foyer before coming to a skidding halt by the front doors.

*You can't open them!* Kieran mentally yelled at the griffin as soon as he realized what its intentions were – but apparently where there was a will there was a way, and the griffin was *very* determined to get itself out of this house as quickly as possible.

Rearing up on its back legs, it brought its front legs, with their eagle's talons, down on the handles of the front doors, leaving deep gashes in the wood, but also managing to push the handles down. The doors creaked open, and in a single bound the griffin had leapt through them, over the porch and down the front steps, and into the frigid night air.

Luckily, the cold didn't bother Kieran in this form – griffins were hot-blooded creatures, after all. But as he stood, looking back at the house with his tail twitching, all his senses on high alert, he realized it'd be *a lot* of work to get the griffin to go back inside.

*If it ever lets me shift back into my human form*, he thought glumly, as the griffin, quite determined to have its own way, turned its back on the house and began trotting off into the forest.

*It was just some sounds*, Kieran told it. *It's an old house – it's completely normal!*

But the griffin didn't answer him aside from letting out a low, warning growl. Clearly, it disagreed. And right now, it wasn't going to be persuaded otherwise.

*Even if that's true*, it said, glowering, *I cannot sleep with all this noise. We are going elsewhere.*

It was hard to argue with that, Kieran thought. Hopefully, soon the griffin would realize it was making a big deal out of what was hopefully nothing and sheepishly let him have control of his body back. But, sighing, Kieran realized that he'd just have to resign himself to being a passenger in his own head until then.

## CHAPTER 3

*O*kay, Natasha thought as she huffed and puffed her way up the mountain trail, *maybe there is something to be said for fresh air after all.*

Usually, the main form of exercise she got was trotting on the treadmill at her gym while frantically answering emails on her cell phone over lunch. She'd thought she was in pretty good shape, for someone with as demanding a job as she had – so of course she'd thought she'd be able to easily handle a little bit of hiking on the trails through the parklands here. But she was pretty quickly coming to realize that *no*, treadmill-trotting in *no way* prepared her for any of this – but also, to her surprise, she didn't really mind it.

*Exercise* was just something she'd had to do in the past because her personal trainer would yell at her if she didn't – and likewise, she'd really only had a personal trainer to begin with because it had just seemed like the thing to do – but she'd never gotten any particular joy out of it. But now she was starting to wonder if there hadn't been a secret athlete locked away inside of her all this time: it had just been waiting for her to get out of the gym and go run around on a beautiful trail that wound its way between the tallest, most majestic trees Natasha had ever seen in her life.

*Well, you used to see them all the time*, she reminded herself as she started her way up a steep, slightly muddy path that led over some enormous gray boulders, straight past a crystal-clear stream. *But you weren't very enchanted by their majesty then.*

It was true: Natasha had never been one for the outdoors when she'd been a kid. She'd been kind of... bookish, she supposed she'd call it, though she'd hardly been shy. She just hadn't really been interested in sports, or going on camping trips with the other kids in the woods, or really doing anything that took her away from the creature comforts of her home, her bed, her shower, and her bookshelf.

But maybe now that she'd spent the last several years pretty much doing nothing *but* living in comfort, Natasha was beginning to wonder if perhaps there might not be some benefit to *reconnecting with nature* and *touching grass* or whatever the kids were calling it these days.

Even if she *was* getting all sweaty even in the crisp early spring air, and even if she *had* just stepped in the world's largest mud puddle and gotten her socks all wet.

“*Eugh!*”

Okay, maybe scratch that last part – she could do without the soaking wet socks and the weird squelching sounds she now made as she walked. But despite even that, Natasha was a little reluctant to turn around and head back to her B&B down the mountain – the sun had been up for a while already, but it was still cool enough that despite the fact she was sweating like a hog she wasn't uncomfortably warm, and she really *was* enjoying the way the pale gold sunlight filtered through the vibrantly green new leaves that were just beginning to unfurl, and the twittering of the birds as they flew between them.

Everything somehow seemed fresh and new and clean – and, she reluctantly admitted, she herself was included in that. She'd even allowed herself to sleep in a little this morning – *sleep in!* All right, so it had only been until eight o'clock, but for someone who usually rose at six a.m. in order to get to her office by seven-fifteen, that was an absolute luxury.

But to be honest, she hadn't exactly slept well last night – and it wasn't, for once, because she was up answering emails or checking on the status of the projects she was working on, or staying up late so she could be on a Zoom call with international clients in some topsy-turvy timezone.

Natasha felt her lips twitching, threatening to break out into a smile.

No, what she'd been up last night thinking about had been... well, *weird*, but also *exciting*, for reasons she couldn't quite put her finger on.

*I cannot believe I asked some guy out on a date in the middle of a supermarket.*

True, he'd been *cute* – kind of flustered and adorable with a wide smile and a mane of dark blond hair and – from what she could tell, with his jacket covering up most of his torso – *very* nicely built.

But she hadn't come out here to find romance – and to be honest, today she was feeling more than a little guilty about having been so impulsive. She couldn't really explain it to herself – she wasn't usually like that, and the last time she'd asked a guy out on a date, or *been* asked out had been...

*Oh my God, I can't even actually remember*, Natasha thought, feeling just the slightest bit mortified. 'Not for a while' was a pretty safe bet, then.

*But was it really a good idea to do it now?*

She wasn't in town for long – but then, neither, it seemed, was he. She hadn't thought to ask him where he'd come from, but it seemed a bit too much to hope for that they were from the same city. Maybe they weren't even from the same *state*.

*And I don't know how I feel about a long-distance thing... wait, what?!*

They hadn't even gone on a date yet, Natasha thought, shaking her head. Thinking about how she wasn't interested in a long-distance relationship seemed, to put it mildly, getting a little bit ahead of herself. She couldn't be making future plans based on a five-minute conversation over a can of beans!

*God. What a disaster. I don't go on a date for a few months – or whatever – and suddenly I'm thinking these kinds of things. Get a grip!*

But she had to admit... she'd felt a bit of a spark there. Natasha wouldn't call herself the shy and retiring type. If she wanted something, she had the gumption to go and get it, and she didn't like wasting time. There was no point in dancing around things if she knew what her goals were, and so far that philosophy had served her well in life. She'd always achieved everything she'd set out to achieve.

*Well, it doesn't have to be a serious thing,* she told herself, though something in her gave a little bit of a pang at the thought, even though she'd never had a problem with casual flings before. *Just a holiday romance. Maybe that's all he was after too.*

At the least, she supposed, she should have *one* full date with him before planning out their wedding. And who knew – maybe it'd be fun and refreshing. Some things weren't meant to last forever, and when was the last time she'd done something with no strings attached? She deserved a little fun.

*And it's all thanks to Charlson,* Natasha thought, as her foot let out another wet squelch. *Maybe I should fall asleep at my desk and send him cryptic emails more often.*

As little as she wanted to admit it, however, her sock situation was coming to a head. She could feel muddy water seeping into her skin and wrinkling up her toes with every step she took. It was probably time to admit defeat, and head back down the trail – at least to change her socks and shoes.

*Though by the time I get back it'll be lunch time... if it isn't already...*

And as if to punctuate that thought, her stomach let out a sudden, extremely loud gurgling sound.

Natasha had to shake her head at herself – she hadn't been back out in the middle of nowhere for even a full forty-eight hours yet, and she was already somehow beginning to lose track of time... and that was *aside* from the whole 'asking random – but *extremely* hot – men out on dates' thing. Back home, every minute of every day was carefully guarded and kept track of – it had to be, if she wanted to make sure she was staying on top of the mountain of her work commitments.



*At this rate I'm gonna get a little too relaxed,* she thought as she began heading back down the path – but to be honest, Natasha wasn't sure how she felt about that. She'd always said she thrived in high-pressure environments.

*Well, I'm sure I'll get bored in a day or so.*

As nice as the fresh air was, she couldn't exactly spend *all* her time looking at trees. Surely they had to get a bit samey after a while?

*But I didn't notice that little cave last time I walked along this bit of the path!*

It was true – she'd come up behind the collection of boulders and fallen rocks that must have slid down the hillside at some point, but which had fallen in such a way as to create a little hollow against the slope. They'd been there long enough that a little sapling had started growing on the earth that had collected on top of them, and vines had started to cover the sides of the rocks and hang down over the entrance. It looked like a secret little area, private and secluded, like something out of a storybook of enchanted places...

*Uh. But wait,* Natasha thought, just as the – pretty silly – idea formed in her head. *Is that... something sleeping inside it?!*

Natasha stopped in her tracks. The little cave wasn't too far from the path, and despite the hanging vines, she could very definitely see *something* lying down inside the cave. Adrenaline shot through her as she thought that perhaps she might have accidentally stumbled upon the lair of a sleeping mountain lion or – *oh God!* – a bear, but a second glance told her it definitely wasn't either of those. It wasn't nearly big or shaggy enough for a bear, and, she thought, blinking, cougars tended not to wear leather jackets and jeans.

*It's... it's a person, then?*

*That* didn't exactly put her mind at ease – if it was a person, why were they lying out here in the middle of the woods?

*Have I just found a dead body?!*

Horror wound its way through her stomach, but Natasha forced herself to leave the path and creep a little closer to the cave, even as she reached into her pocket for her phone. She knew she shouldn't disturb anything if she really *had* just found a dumped body, but she wanted to be a little more sure of what she was actually seeing before she called the cops. Part of her *really* didn't want to believe it, though why else would there be someone just lying out in the middle of the woods, in a place it was difficult to spot?

*Oh, hey, wait a minute –!*

Shocked recognition fired through Natasha's brain – *it's the guy from the supermarket yesterday! Oh my God!* – at almost exactly the same moment that the body – less dead than she'd assumed – stirred and then sat up.

Natasha stood frozen, her fingers still wrapped around her phone in a death grip, as the guy – *Kieran? Yeah, that was definitely his name!* – groaned, rubbing his hand over his face as if he was still groggy with sleep, before slowly, almost painfully starting to get up.

*He's going to think I'm weird if he sees me just standing here staring at him, like I was watching him sleep,* Natasha had time to think – before, *Wait, I'm not the one sleeping in the woods! How does this make me the weird one?!*

The words had no sooner entered her head, however, when Kieran did in fact look up, see her standing a few feet away from him, and jump up, his eyes wide, his hands held up in front of him.

“Natasha!”

She felt a mad giggle trying to crawl its way up her throat as she looked at him, an absolutely mortified expression on his face, mud and dirt staining the knees of his jeans, leaf litter clinging to the wild blond mane of his hair.

And, Natasha had to admit, completely against her will, he looked kind of *cute* with it.

But cute or not, who just went to sleep in the middle of the woods?!

“Um,” she said, wondering what exactly to say. This wasn’t your average everyday awkward social interaction! “Are you... all right?”

“Yes, yes of course. I’m completely fine! Absolutely great.” Kieran seemed just a *tiny* bit manic in his rush to reassure her that he was, in fact, quite healthy.

*But if that’s the case...*

“You were just, uh, sleeping in that cave there,” Natasha had to point out. In case it might have escaped his notice.

“Uh. Yeah.” Kieran’s mortification was rapidly turning into sheepishness. “I guess I just kind of... dropped off.”

Natasha frowned. “Were you out for a walk or something and just got tired?”

“I guess... I guess so.” Kieran ran his fingers through his hair, dislodging a few of the leaves that were stuck in it. “I was... out for a walk, and I guess I just got tired, and thought that looked like a good place to have a little lie down. I didn’t really mean to sleep for a long time, but I guess I was more tired than I thought.”

Natasha could feel her frown deepening, but... she *guessed* that made sense? It wouldn’t be the first time someone had thought they’d just take a little break and rest their eyes, only to find themselves blinking awake several hours later.

And, she was forced to remind herself, she wasn’t exactly in any position to be throwing stones when it came to falling asleep in inappropriate places.

*Maybe he has a stressful job too, and being out in nature was just so relaxing he just... nodded off watching the wind in the trees?*

That was a theory she thought she could live with. It *was* pretty peaceful out here, after all.

“Ah, this is really embarrassing,” Kieran muttered as he looked down at himself. “I really wasn’t expecting anyone to be using this trail. It seemed pretty quiet.”

“Oh... I just came down here as a spur of the moment thing,” Natasha said. “The park ranger – Kira, if you happened to speak to her, she’s an old acquaintance of mine from my school days – said these trails are all new, after she was able to get some help to explore some of the parkland that hadn’t been properly mapped yet.”

“Oh, I see,” Kieran said, as he brushed the last of the leaves from his hair – somewhere within herself, Natasha had to admit she was kind of sad to see them go. “I’m afraid I didn’t get to talk to the ranger. I just sort of... found my way here, I guess. My great uncle’s house is on some land a little way up the mountain. It must border the parklands.”

*Well, I guess that explains everything, then, Natasha told herself. He was out for a walk, stopped for a rest, and accidentally fell asleep.*

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you,” Kieran said after a moment, before he stepped out of the cave. He still looked *very* embarrassed. “I guess it must have been a bit weird to see someone just lying around in the middle of the forest.”

“Just a bit,” Natasha admitted. “But... well, let’s just say compared to my first thought, I’m happy you were just sleeping!”

Kieran looked at her, a stricken expression crossing his face. “You thought I was dead?”

“Only for a moment!” Natasha felt that weird, hysterical laugh bubbling up inside her again. And besides that, a sudden burst of warmth in her belly – even covered in dirt and moments after having woken up from a little nap in the middle of the forest, Kieran was, if anything, even *hotter* than she remembered him being. Maybe the sleeping-on-the-forest-floor look suited him.

*Or maybe it’s the just-woken-up look... it’s something I wouldn’t mind seeing again...*

Unbidden, the image of Kieran blinking awake, his kind of goofy, kind of charming grin spreading across his face as he became fully conscious, rose in her mind – but *this* time she

wasn't picturing him in a cave in a forest, but rather, on the bed of the B&B she was staying in –

Natasha squashed the thought as quickly as it came. True, she'd been thinking a holiday fling might be nice, but if she didn't stop this fantasy right now she couldn't say her imagination wouldn't get completely away from her, and right now, she actually had to have a conversation with the guy without turning into a stammering, blushing mess.

“A moment when you think you've found a scene out of *CSI: Middle of the Forest* is still probably a moment too long,” Kieran said, shaking his head. “I'm sorry I startled you. I really don't usually just fall asleep in random places. But I guess I've just... had a lot on my mind recently.”

“Oh,” Natasha said, as more and more of the puzzle began to fall into place. “Is it work stress?”

“Not quite.” Kieran grimaced. “I suppose it's more... personal. But definitely being out here will help. Well, I hope, anyway.”

*Well, that certainly sounds very mysterious, Natasha thought, blinking. But it's not exactly like I can just start quizzing him on his personal issues. We only just met. And anyway, I don't want to know about my prospective casual fling's personal problems! I'm just trying to have fun here!*

“I was just heading back to my B&B,” she blurted out. “And then I was going to grab some lunch. I know we agreed to meet up tomorrow, but... maybe you'd like to get something to eat with me now?”

*No point in beating around the bush, after all!*

For a moment, Kieran looked overjoyed, as if all his Christmases had come at once. Natasha had to admit it was kind of flattering – she'd never seen a man's face light up like that at the prospect of spending time with her. But then, Kieran's face fell, and he glanced down at his dirty, muddy clothes.

“I really would love that, but I'm not really fit to be seen at the moment,” he said regretfully. “And... well, I think there's

some stuff I need to do back at the house. It was pretty late when I got there, and I really need to, uh, to check things out by the light of day, I think.” He heaved out a sigh, before glancing at her. “But I could walk with you some of the way along the trail?”

He looked so hopeful that Natasha had to admit she was touched – and more than a little guilty. He seemed to really like her. Was it right for her to just be thinking of him as a bit of fun while she was on vacation?

“Oh, sure, if you have the time,” she said, trying to sound cool – perhaps if she played up the ice princess act a little it might help him to get the picture a little more. “But don’t worry about it if you need to get back home. I don’t want to be any trouble.”

“Oh, it’s no trouble at all,” Kieran said, his smile returning eagerly. “It’s my pleasure. I’d love to walk with you.”

*Well, so much for cooling him off a bit,* Natasha thought, as together they walked back to the trail, her sock squelching all the way. *But... do I really want him to cool off?*

She almost shook her head at herself. Of course she did! She couldn’t play with the guy’s feelings like that! She had to find a way to let him know the score.

“You said you were out here for a month,” Kieran said as they walked, while Natasha was still mulling over how to break it to him that all she was after was a casual thing. “So you’re just on vacation?”

“Uh, something like that,” Natasha murmured. She didn’t really want to spill her guts to this guy – but something seemed to be compelling her, against her will, to keep talking. “I’m taking a bit of a break from work, and I figured this might be a good place to help me get some R&R... and maybe help me remember why I left in the first place.”

“Really?” Kieran looked surprised. “It’s beautiful out here, though – I used to adore coming here when I was a kid, playing in the forest and just running around in nature. It’s

something I always looked forward to. Or did you mean something else?”

“Uh, no, that’s what I meant,” Natasha admitted. “I guess I wasn’t really what you’d call the outdoorsy type.”

*Unlike you, apparently,* she thought, allowing her gaze to linger on the outline of his pectoral muscles, visible beneath his t-shirt and open jacket.

“I always dreamed of escaping,” she continued after a moment. “I guess I just... wanted something more. A bigger challenge. To prove myself. When I was young, everything here seemed really just... small. The same thing every day. But I admit, that was kind of through my cynical teenaged self’s eyes. Looking at it again now... well, it’s changed a lot. Or maybe it just seems that way.”

“You mean you think you see more to appreciate in it now, perhaps?” Kieran asked, cocking his head.

“Maybe,” Natasha admitted, not without a little reluctance. “It *has* changed – or maybe it’s that I have. I guess I achieved everything I wanted to in the city, and now...”

She trailed off, blinking. She hadn’t meant to talk about herself so much, and nor, until she’d said – or half-said – it out loud, had she realized what exactly all the mixed feelings that had been swirling within her chest had meant.

*And now I feel like maybe I want something else out of life. Is that really how I feel?*

“But listen to me, blabbering like this,” she said quickly, with a laugh that sounded strained even to her own ears. “I haven’t really asked you anything about yourself. Or should I leave that for tomorrow?”

Natasha bit her lip as soon as the words were out of her mouth.

*No! Don’t make him think you’re interested in him as a person! It’s a vacation fling!*

But... the truth of the matter was that she *did* want to know more about him. Where did a guy like *this* even come

from? She didn't know men like him – men who were that tall, that broad, with that dazzling a smile and that kind of irresistible magnetism – even really existed in the world.

*If only I'd known he spent his childhood summers here, then maybe I wouldn't have been quite so quick to run off!*

“Me? Oh, there's not a lot to tell, I have to admit,” Kieran said, flashing her another of his wide, dazzling smiles. Natasha almost felt like she had to blink the stars from her eyes – at least until he frowned a little. “Or... well, I suppose there are *some* things to tell. But I guess the main things to know are that I work in horticulture – which sounds fancy, I guess, but it's really mainly just doing maintenance and landscaping at the botanical gardens I work at. Operating machinery, caring for trees, pruning them, making sure the whole area is safe for visitors, as well as creating new garden beds and planting them. Maybe it doesn't sound like a lot, but I really enjoy it.”

“Ah, I *knew* you were the outdoorsy type!” Natasha exclaimed – before remembering that that had been a little bit of internal commentary as she'd checked out his bulging muscles, rather than anything she'd said out loud. “I mean, uh, you just *look* like you'd enjoy the outdoors,” she added, aware that she *really* wasn't making anything better.

“Well, as outdoorsy as I can be, in the middle of the city,” Kieran laughed. “But the park I work at *is* pretty big, and there's always plenty to do in the way of clearing up the garden, planning new beds, and checking for hazards. And it's better than sitting behind a desk... I mean, for *me*, anyway, more power to people who love that kind of thing.”

“No, I understand what you mean,” Natasha said with a light laugh. “To be honest, even though I'm not *completely* desk-bound I still get a little tired of it sometimes. I'm lucky enough I get to go to events, go visit clients, go on buying trips... all that kind of stuff. So there *is* a little variety.”

“You sound like you're a pretty high flier, then,” Kieran said musingly. “Can I see if I can guess what you actually do?”

“Oh, be my guest.” Natasha found herself laughing again, relaxing into the easiness of being in his company. It wasn't



what she'd planned to do, but...

*But can I really help it if he's going to be that cute?*

"Hmm." Kieran looked her over, a considering expression on his face. "Expensive hiking boots. Nicely fitted jacket. Is that scarf mohair? You clearly know what looks good on you, and you like looking good."

"Are you guessing my job or flattering me?" Natasha said, laughing – but to be honest, she could feel just the slightest blush rising in her cheeks, and also, perhaps, her heart fluttering just a bit.

"Can it be both? Though is it really flattery if it's all completely true?" Kieran asked, flashing her another of those dazzling smiles. "I mean... well, I just meant you *do* look good. But I think you already know that – you don't strike me as someone who doesn't know her own worth."

Natasha, almost despite herself, found herself disarmed by his honesty – he didn't say it as if it was a subtle put-down, or as if he was trying to suggest she was arrogant. Kieran just said it as if it was a fact; something that should be obvious to anyone.

"So... I'm going to guess some kind of corporate high flier. Maybe you work in design or something like that? You're well-dressed and put together, so it's something where appearances matter. Maybe it's something with expensive clients, who want to know they're dealing with a professional and don't mind paying for the privilege."

"You're pretty observant, I'll give you that," Natasha laughed. "You're getting warmer, so I'll just tell you: I work in marketing and advertising."

"Ah, my guess was going to be interior design or architecture," Kieran said, joining in her laugh. "You just seem like someone who cares about things looking nice."

"Well, to be honest, I studied design at college – it was my first job at the company I work at now, but then I got promoted. And I guess I just found my way up to where I am now."

She realized she sounded modest about achievements she didn't really feel that modest about – she'd worked *damned hard* to get where she was – but nor did she really feel all that much like boasting to Kieran. In the world she came from it was necessary not to be shy about yourself and your skills, but Kieran wasn't a prospective client or someone who was interviewing her for a job, where she had to puff herself up.

*No, he's...*

Natasha frowned.

*I thought he was going to be a vacation fling. But the more I talk to him...*

The more she talked to him, the more she found herself warming to him – in more ways than one.

He wasn't like the men she'd gone on dates with back in the city. They were either slick corporate types with paychecks to rival her own – which often meant they were insufferable prigs – or they were men who *seemed* not to mind her dedication to her career at first, only to reveal themselves as completely insecure about it after a couple of months, telling her they needed a woman who'd be waiting at home for them with their dinner on the table.

*It's not even as if I mind doing those kinds of things!* Natasha thought. She liked cooking, actually! She wanted romantic candle-lit dinners at home with her special someone! But she just wanted it not to be a *requirement*. Eventually she'd just given up, and thrown herself even more wholeheartedly into her job.

And she couldn't imagine any of those guys just... lying down and falling asleep in a forest. That was way too... *quirky*.

*But quirky could be good?* Natasha thought, glancing up at Kieran through the filter of her eyelashes.

"I think we're pretty much back to civilization," Kieran said as they rounded a bend in the path, and the parking lot came into view.

Natasha couldn't help the sinking feeling of disappointment in her chest. She'd been enjoying their talk, and while they'd been surrounded by the forest it had felt almost as if it might go on forever – as if they'd carved out some little place for themselves, secluded from reality, from the fact that she was only here for a month, and Kieran probably wasn't staying all that long either.

“Oh, I guess we are,” Natasha said, as the sound of cars on the road leading to the parking lot began to find its way to her ears – she wasn't sure she was able to keep the disappointment from her voice, and she also wasn't sure she cared.

She bit her lip, confusion rising within her.

*I know we already organized a date for tomorrow, but we're here now... maybe we could just –*

“I should probably be getting back to where I'm staying, anyway,” Kieran said, a slight grimace crossing his face. “But... I'm really happy we happened to cross paths. Even if it *was* under kind of embarrassing circumstances.”

“Oh, no, don't worry about it,” Natasha said, laughing. “Really – I mean, going to sleep in a peaceful forest doesn't even rank on the embarrassment scale. When I think about it, it actually seems like one of the most sensible things you could do.”

To her surprise, she found she kind of meant what she said, too.

“Um – so you said you were staying with your uncle?” she blurted out in a desperate attempt to keep the conversation going – and probably totally destroying the cool, icy façade she'd been hoping to cultivate. Though it was probably too late to be worrying about that now, anyway.

*Oh, God, didn't he say that he died?* Natasha thought wildly, horrified at how she'd shoved her foot into her mouth.

“Oh, wait, I'm sorry, I remember now –” she began, hoping the conversation could still be salvaged.

“Oh, no, don't worry,” Kieran said. “He lived a good life, doing exactly what he wanted to do. Which was living in a big

house in the middle of the forest. He was a bit of an eccentric that way – but I like to think he lived on his own terms, and he seemed at peace when he went.”

Natasha bit her lip. “I didn’t mean to pry.”

“Don’t worry, you didn’t,” Kieran reassured her. “Like I said, it was a while ago, though of course I do still miss him.”

Natasha was relieved she hadn’t unwittingly dragged up a painful memory, but then Kieran grimaced, and she wondered if perhaps he was only being polite by telling her she hadn’t offended him. But the only thing he said was, “I don’t want to rush off, but I *really* need to be getting back. I left... uh, a ton of things that need doing back there. It’s a pretty run-down old place and if I’m going to stay there, I really need to get on to them.”

“Right. I understand.” Natasha nodded, trying not to let how disappointed she was show on her face. What he said was perfectly reasonable, after all – he had stuff he needed to do, and he couldn’t neglect it for a chance meeting. It wasn’t like he was blowing her off! “So... tomorrow, then?”

The smile that broke out across Kieran’s face was bright and dazzling enough to allay any fears she might have had that he was trying to escape her company.

“Absolutely. I can’t wait. Really, I can’t. I’ll be counting the hours.”

Natasha swallowed heavily, turning away as she walked on up the path, the fluttering in her heart becoming almost unbearable.

*Why he is so... so... so...!*

Behind her, she heard a rustling of leaves and felt a sudden gust of wind, as if it was rushing down the mountain to cool down her heated cheeks. She clutched at her woolen hat, even though it was in no danger of flying off, to give herself an excuse to take a moment to calm down before she spoke again.

Taking a deep breath, she turned back to where Kieran had apparently stopped on the path behind her – only to see absolutely nothing there at all.

*Huh?!*

Natasha blinked, staring at the empty path.

“Where... where did he go?”

She couldn't help murmuring the words out loud, staring around her in open-mouthed surprise. She'd thought he'd have had to go back down the path to follow it to wherever he'd initially come from.

*Well, that's obviously what he did, he just... moved a lot faster than I thought he would,* she thought, frowning. *Maybe he really wasn't kidding about needing to get a lot of stuff done.*

She couldn't help but feel just a *little* bit miffed as she made her way back to her car, getting in and starting the engine. For all that Kieran had seemed genuinely delighted to see her and hadn't been feigning anything about looking forward to seeing her tomorrow, he certainly *had* run off pretty quickly!

*Maybe I'm just grumpy because I'm hungry,* Natasha thought as she guided her car back to the main street – hadn't Sylvie told her that Mrs. James, their former substitute teacher, ran the diner here now?

*Ah – there it is.*

Natasha pulled into a parking space, still trying not to let her bafflement and slight annoyance overwhelm her. Up until he'd disappeared in a seeming puff of smoke – or gust of wind – Kieran had been a perfect gentleman and a lot of fun to be around, after all. And it wasn't as if he'd just *vanished* without a word – he'd told her he had things to do and that he'd better get back to them.

*What were you expecting, a goodbye kiss?* Natasha asked herself as she pushed open the diner door. *Well, maybe not expecting, but I can't say I would have said no either –*

“Is that Natasha Scott? No – don't tell me, of *course* it is. Like ol' Eula would ever forget a face.”

Natasha found a smile spreading across her face at the sound of the voice from behind the counter – and she was mildly surprised to find that Eula James looked hardly any different to how she had back when Natasha had been in high school. Maybe there were a few more smile lines around her eyes, and maybe her dye job was, somehow, even more brassy, but otherwise she remained completely unchanged.

“Mrs. James,” Natasha said, letting her smile fully break free. “You remember me, then?”

“Please, it’s Eula.” The woman waved a hand. “We’re not in English class anymore, and you’re grown now – and looking good. You were always an ambitious one. You worked so hard in class.”

Natasha laughed, a little self-conscious. “Well, I really wanted to get into a good college, and I knew I’d need as much financial aid as I could get.”

“And we were all so proud of you when you went off to get what you wanted,” Eula laughed, her voice low and booming. “So what brings you back here now?”

“Oh, just a short vacation. Just thought I’d come and see how things were in my old stomping grounds.”

“Things’ve changed a little,” Eula said, as she began putting something together behind the counter. “Girdwood Springs is on the map, now.”

Natasha wasn’t sure she’d go quite *that* far, but she smiled and nodded. “Yeah. I can see there’s been some changes, that’s for sure.” She swallowed, a sudden curiosity rising up within her. “Do you get many people coming through here now? Strangers?”

“Oh, yes,” Eula said breezily. “Too many to count these days. For the skiing season especially.”

“Of course.” Natasha nodded. “But... just recently too? It’s just I met someone I hadn’t seen around here before, and he said he used to spend his summers here, so...”

“Can’t say that rings a bell, darlin’,” Eula said, but there was a spark of curiosity in her eyes. “You said he’s staying in

town?”

“No, in a place over the other side of the mountain, on that land next to the parklands,” Natasha said, as Eula finished whatever she was making and began wrapping it. She paused, however, one eyebrow shooting up beneath her curled bangs.

“That old abandoned house? No, darlin’, you must be mistaken. No one goes up there. That place has been empty for a while.” She paused, leaning forward. “Besides which, it’s haunted.”

Natasha stared at Eula for a long moment, as Eula reached over the counter, putting down a wrapped sandwich in front of her.

“There you go, on the house,” Eula said, grinning. “A little welcome back present.”

“Oh – thank you,” Natasha stuttered, reaching out to take it. “That’s – that’s really kind of you. But uh, you said... haunted?”

“That’s right, darlin’.” Eula nodded sagely. “Everyone knows that.”

*Well, I didn’t!* Natasha thought – before thinking, *Probably because there’s no such thing as hauntings!*

“Local teenagers used to use it as some kind of dare – go up and spend a night in the haunted house – until their parents caught wind of it and started forbidding them to go. Not that that ever stopped any of ’em, but none of ’em would ever last a full night up there anyway. They were always running screaming back into town before dawn.” Eula laughed again. “These days everyone keeps their distance!”

“Oh, I see.” Natasha nodded, but she didn’t really *believe* anything Eula was saying – she knew only too well how easily the rumor mill got started in small towns. “Thank you for the sandwich – I really appreciate it. Are you sure I can’t –?”

“Sure’s sure,” Eula said, nodding. “Anyway, one bite of that and you’ll be back. Call it advertising.”

“That’s really generous of you,” Natasha said. “And, uh, thanks for the warning. About the haunted house.”

“You weren’t planning on going up there yourself, were you?” Eula asked, raising her eyebrows skeptically. “Not that you’d have any reason to, I guess.”

“No, no.” Natasha shook her head. *I mean... if that’s the same place Kieran is staying in, then... but no, hauntings aren’t real. It’s just some teenagers with an overactive imagination.* “None at all.”

“All right then, well, you take care of yourself,” Eula said, dismissing her with a wave of one thick hand. “And don’t be a stranger.”

“No, of course not. Thanks again.” Natasha turned away with a wave, but to be honest, her mind wasn’t really on the sandwich, despite her hunger.

No matter how much she tried to tell herself that hauntings weren’t real, she couldn’t put the way Kieran had just disappeared into thin air out of her mind.

*No... it couldn’t be... could it?*

She shook her head.

*You met him over beans! Ghosts don’t go to supermarkets or buy beans!*

But try as she might, the unsettled feeling that *something* wasn’t quite right here wouldn’t leave her – she just had absolutely no idea what it could be.



## CHAPTER 4

*A*ll right. This is going to go fine.

Even as he thought it, however, standing in front of the tarnished mirror in the ever-so-slightly... *rustic* bathroom of his uncle's house, Kieran had to admit he was not exactly filled with confidence.

Yesterday had almost ended in disaster. At first, he'd been overjoyed by the fact that Natasha had just happened to stumble across him – and didn't seem *too* completely put off by the fact she'd found him sleeping in the woods, after his griffin had just randomly decided that some little cave would be a cozy place to bed down for the night. In fact, she'd seemed kind of... happy to see him?

Kieran felt a pleasant buzz of hopefulness surge through him as he ran his fingers through his hair, trying to arrange the unruly mop it had recently become. It grew fast, and he hadn't really thought it was a great idea to go to a barber while his griffin was apparently in such an unstable state. In most situations, getting up and finding a quiet place to hide until it let him resume his human form was, if not convenient, then at least mostly possible. Getting up and running out of the barbershop with the plastic cape still attached and his hair full of shampoo suds and/or half-cut was less easy to achieve, so he'd just left it to grow.

*Hopefully Natasha won't mind. She's so stylish and put together that I feel like a bit of a plain Jane next to her.*

Kieran shook his head, laughing at himself a little.

*That's hardly the thing you should be worried about right now!*

He hoped she didn't think he'd been rude, running off the way he had yesterday after barely saying goodbye to her. But he hadn't exactly had much choice – he'd felt his griffin trying to force its way to the front of his mind, and there was no way he could let Natasha see his griffin form at this stage. Not when he hadn't yet been able to explain... well, literally *anything* to her yet. If he hadn't been able to beat his wings and take off into the skies in the moments before she'd turned around, she would have found herself staring at a mythological beast in the middle of the forest, with the person she *thought* she was getting to know nowhere in sight.

*Regardless of how hard it might be, I have to tell her soon. As in, today,* Kieran thought, feeling his jaw tighten at even the idea of revealing such a thing about himself. He'd never had to think about it before: either the people he knew were shifters themselves and didn't need anything explained to them, or they were people who didn't need to know, so he'd kept the secret to himself.

*She is our mate. She will accept us as we are.*

His griffin let out a little growl from inside him, its golden eyes narrowed to annoyed slits.

*And you can just be quiet. You're not helping anything,* Kieran snapped at it as he turned away from the mirror. It wasn't like he was going to look any different – or any fancier – even if he stood there forever, so he'd just have to hope Natasha didn't mind he was dressed in jeans, a slightly worn button-down shirt, and the battered leather jacket he'd had for so many years he'd forgotten where it even came from. Needless to say, if he'd known he'd be meeting his mate during this trip – and that his mate would be so *refined* – he would have packed for the occasion!

*At least I managed to get a relatively decent night's sleep last night,* he thought as he headed out the front door, locking it behind him, though he really doubted any robbers would be

making their way up here to loot anything from the mostly completely bare rooms.

He *had* found some evidence there'd been *someone* hanging around the house, though – empty candy wrappers and a pair of old sneakers, obviously belonging to a kid judging by the size, and even a couple of cigarette packets, with most of the cigarettes still inside. He'd thrown them all in the trash as part of the general cleaning he'd spent yesterday doing, but it was obvious the house had become a bit of a hangout joint for the local teenagers, and Kieran couldn't really say he blamed them – Natasha *had* said Girdwood Springs didn't have a huge amount of stuff to do. An abandoned house was probably an overwhelmingly tempting place to explore. As long as they hadn't trashed the place, Kieran couldn't really see the harm in it.

And at least he hadn't heard any more of the mysterious clanging and banging that had freaked out his griffin so badly the night before. Whatever it had been, it hadn't come back.

*It probably really was just the house settling*, he told himself as he headed down the drive – he'd left himself plenty of time to walk into town. *It's the start of spring, after all, so it's getting warmer. The wooden beams are probably expanding, shaking off the winter chill.*

Even as he thought it, Kieran wasn't *quite* convinced of the explanation – but then again, what else could it possibly be? *Ghosts?*

Kieran chuckled at himself as he walked. He'd been so freaked out that first night – or rather, his griffin had been – that he'd completely lost his head. He'd spent the night out in the woods for nothing.

*Though if I hadn't done that, I guess I never would have run into Natasha like that...*

It was just lucky, he supposed, that he'd resumed his human form in his sleep before she'd found him there!

*I did not lose my head*, his griffin interjected, growling surlily. *There was something there. You know it. There was a*

*danger.*

*Yes, so you said, Kieran replied. But it was just some weird sounds! We didn't even see anything!*

The griffin let out a long, low snarl, but it lowered its head, seeming to retreat a little. It was clearly *not* happy, however, and when Kieran tried to reach out to it placatingly, it turned its head away, clearly not wanting anything to do with him.

*I don't know why things have gotten like this between us, Kieran tried, feeling a stab of pain in his chest. Aren't we one and the same? Aren't we supposed to be partners?*

But it didn't feel like that anymore. Kieran had always appreciated the presence of his griffin inside him – and he'd loved *being* the griffin, the times when he'd been free to shift and to use the power of its wings and body to do things no normal human would ever be able to experience. He'd always felt blessed to have been born a griffin shifter, even though some would have said that his shifter type made his life harder. He wasn't exactly inconspicuous, in the way a wolf or a cat or a bird shifter could be, so to shift he'd always had to wait until he was sure he'd never be seen by human eyes.

*Is that the problem?* Kieran wondered, shoving his hands in his jeans pockets as he walked, remorse winding through him. *Have I just forgotten how to be a griffin?*

It was possible – after all, when was the last time he'd taken the time to shift and simply allow the griffin to fly free? Now that he thought about it, he realized it must have been *years*. He'd just gotten used to living in a city, and he'd thought working with his hands had been enough to keep the griffin satisfied. But maybe that wasn't true.

*I'm sorry?* he tried to offer, but again, the griffin sulkily ignored him.

At least, until it said, *You treat us as if we were a shameful secret. You won't even show us to our mate.*

Kieran paused at that, frowning. He could see the main street of Girdwood Springs coming into view down the steep, tree-lined hill, and he knew he couldn't really get into a big

discussion with his griffin right now about this. His date with Natasha was in twenty minutes – plenty of time to get to the diner, but not nearly enough to hash things out with an ornery griffin.

*I'm sorry, he told it again, his chest tightening. I really don't mean to do that – it's not what I mean at all when I say we shouldn't shift in front of her. I just mean that we need to give her a bit of time. She's human. She doesn't know –*

*It is not only our mate, the griffin interrupted him. When was the last time I was allowed to fly, before we came here? And we came here only because I forced you to. If I had not, we would still be in the city, still cramped and confined and not living as we should.*

Kieran swallowed, guilt filling his chest. As much as he didn't like it, his griffin *did* have a point. It was an animal – a beast. It needed its freedom. As it was, perhaps living in the city had been like trying to keep a lion in a cage.

*And it's not like I can drive a mini-bulldozer as a griffin... or trim hedges... or prune trees...*

All right. It was *just* possible his griffin had a point, then.

*But can we talk about it later?* he asked, as he passed a sign reading 'Welcome to Girdwood Springs!'. *Right now, I really just need to get to know Natasha a bit more, and see if I can –*

*You always put these things off, the griffin roared, as if it were suddenly furious. Always, I am being asked to wait. Always, I am told my needs aren't important. We are supposed to be partners! Friends! Companions! And yet, I am never treated as an equal!*

Kieran could feel the griffin pushing up against his consciousness, struggling to rise to the surface of his mind.

*Not now, he told it desperately, as it tried to wrest control from him. Please, not now – we're going to see our mate! I really, really can't stand her up for our first date. I need to show her I'm someone worth getting to know before I can –*

But it was clear the griffin wasn't listening – and moreover, it didn't want to. It was having a full-blown mythical creature-sized tantrum, and right now there was nothing Kieran could do to stop it.

*Really, if you just have a bit of patience* – Kieran tried, but that only seemed to enrage the griffin even further.

*We have been patient enough!* it roared, as it finally broke free of Kieran's control and went rampaging through his mind – and his body.

Kieran could feel himself beginning to shift even as he continued to try to first reason, and then *beg* the griffin not to do this. Especially not right now.

*There's no way we can go to the diner in griffin form!*

Not only would Natasha probably run away screaming in terror, Kieran would be lucky if he didn't get local animal control called on him – and, even though it might take a little more of the stuff to work on him, he didn't think he was impervious to tranquilizer darts. *Way* too many shifters had found themselves in sticky situations thanks to those things. True, but most of those had been non-mythical shifters like wolves or bears. And while it had never actually happened to him or anyone he knew, Kieran wasn't keen to find out if griffins could be knocked out just like any other animal.

*At least let me text her to cancel!* he said – though it was already hopeless. He barely had enough time to throw himself into the dense trees beside the road before he fully took on his griffin form, let alone send a text.

*And anyway, I don't even have her number...* Kieran thought as the griffin, taking one or two bounding leaps through the forest, suddenly took to flight, soaring upward into the skies, heading for the mountains that surrounded Girdwood Springs.

*At least it's not taking me into the town itself,* Kieran thought. Clearly the griffin still had *some* sense of self-preservation. Maybe it was just trying to assert its dominance, and didn't really have any plans beyond that.

If it tried to take him to the diner to show itself to Natasha, then Kieran would have to do everything he could to stop it. But given his success rate in getting his griffin under control recently, he didn't like the odds at all.

But that, at least, didn't seem to be on the griffin's mind. Spreading its wings, it soared on the frigid winds that tore between the mountain peaks, celebrating its freedom.

*We have been confined for too long. We can't remain as we have been!*

Kieran gritted his – at the moment not actually extant – teeth, allowing the griffin its moment. Perhaps if he didn't fight against it, it would eventually come to its senses and allow him back into his human form, and he could still make his date with Natasha. Perhaps he'd be a little late, but maybe if he gave her a groveling enough apology and came up with a *really* good excuse, she might even forgive him.

*I'm so sorry I'm late Natasha, but I was kidnapped by the wayward griffin that lives inside my head. Is there anything I can do to make it up to you?*

For now, however, it was clear that the griffin wasn't going to surrender its freedom anytime soon.

Kieran could feel the joy surging through it as it took them higher and higher, into the thin air of the uppermost mountain peaks, until the roads below looked like thin ribbons through the trees, and the town itself nothing but a small series of colorful dots formed by the rooftops.

At any other time, Kieran would have been relishing this – it was why he'd come out here, after all. It was what he'd always *loved* doing as a kid. It was what, he knew, he'd really been missing all these years.

*But your sense of timing sucks! I just want to go see my mate!*

He struggled again against the overwhelming power of the griffin, trying to make it see reason, desperately telling it that this wasn't going to get it what it wanted.

It was only going to achieve the opposite, in fact – Kieran would be surprised if Natasha would give him the time of day after this, and he couldn't say he'd blame her in the slightest. She was a treasure – a gem of a woman, and she deserved to be treated that way. Being late for their first date was unforgivable, and Kieran could feel his heart sinking lower and lower with every passing minute.

*Please, he tried, one last time. Please, can you just fly us back down to the ground, so I can go on my date with Natasha, and I can start paving the way for you to be able to show yourself to her? Is that really so unreasonable?*

It was clear, however, that the griffin wasn't listening to him. And it was equally clear that there was no way he was going to be on time to meet Natasha – and there was absolutely nothing he could do about it.

For the second time in as many days, Kieran resigned himself to being nothing more than a passenger in his own head.



## CHAPTER 5

Sitting alone in the diner, Natasha tapped her fingers in sequence on the tabletop.

*Fifteen minutes late. How soon is too soon to admit he's not coming and leave?*

Pursing her lips, Natasha told herself to be patient. She wasn't at work now – nor was she in the big city. There, it was normal to rush, to understand that people's days were usually packed full and their schedules tight, so wasting their time or being even a few minutes late without explanation was grounds for someone to get up and walk out.

But things ran on different time in small towns – Natasha remembered it well. Things were more... *relaxed*.

*But still – it's a date. Being on time is just basic courtesy!*

Kieran had just seemed so... so *nice* when she'd met him, and then again when she'd bumped into him in the woods yesterday.

Nice – and also *eager* to go on their date. Those dazzling smiles couldn't possibly have been faked... could they?

Natasha hadn't thought so, but now she was beginning to have her doubts. Usually, she prided herself on being able to get someone's measure pretty quickly. But perhaps she'd been wrong about Kieran after all.

*Or perhaps...*

Or perhaps, something had happened to him?

A cold shiver ran down Natasha's spine. If he had a habit of sleeping in the woods, then anything was possible. Could he have gotten mauled by a cougar or a bear? Was he, at this very moment, lying in a hospital bed... or even out there in the middle of the forest, hoping someone would find him? Was he waiting for *her* to find him?!

*Oh my God. Stop letting your imagination run away with you.*

No – the simplest explanation was that he just wasn't coming. Maybe he'd gotten a better offer... or, after seeing her yesterday, he'd just decided he didn't like her as much as he thought he had.

It wasn't like it was so rare. Natasha was used to men telling her she didn't live up to their expectations, or changing their minds about her after a couple of dates after seeming incredibly keen to get to know her at first. This wasn't anything that hadn't happened before. She'd been stood up and ghosted *way* too many times now for this to be a surprise.

*I really, really should have known better.*

Sighing, Natasha tried to push down the disappointment she could feel gathering inside her. Maybe she should have tried harder to keep thinking of Kieran as just a vacation fling, something that didn't mean much to her.

She'd tried – she really had! But Kieran's broad smile – the way he'd seemed so *genuinely* interested in her – the cute mop of blond hair – the way he'd really just seemed like he was looking forward to seeing her again – the way she'd *really* felt like they somehow had a real connection –

*Stop. Stop remembering all the good stuff about him. And of course you didn't have a connection – you barely even know him! And he sleeps in the woods! That's not cute, it's just weird!*

Maybe she'd let a pretty face – and an *unbelievably* hot body, not that she'd had the chance to see it unclothed – turn her head. Maybe Kieran was really just a player, and she'd been played.

Natasha checked her watch again. Twenty-five minutes after their date was scheduled to start, and there was absolutely no sign of Kieran.

*That's it. I'm not going to sit here like some pathetic cliché. I mean, I barely even know the guy! Why am I sitting here like some abandoned woman?!*

With a huff of resolution, Natasha slammed her palms down on the table and stood up. She didn't care if Kieran didn't show up for their date – she hadn't come here to find a boyfriend, she'd come here to rest and relax and have some alone time! The next time she saw him – which, she realized with a slight sinking in her stomach, was almost inevitable given how small Girdwood Springs was – she'd just completely ignore him. She'd show him she didn't care at all that he *also* didn't apparently care!

Going to the counter, she told the young girl working the register that she'd decided to have her order to go, after all. Thankfully, it seemed that Mrs. James – Eula – wasn't working today, otherwise Natasha wasn't sure how she'd deal with her probably well-meaning but nonetheless intrusive questions about whether she'd been waiting for someone, and if so, who.

From the sympathetic look in the young girl's eyes, though, as she brought out Natasha's order – and the way she whispered, “By the way, I slipped you some extra onion rings,” – it was obvious that she'd figured out Natasha had been stood up anyway.

*Ugh. Humiliating*, Natasha thought as she left the diner – she *did* appreciate the extra onion rings, though.

Well, she had a chili dog with everything on it, she had her onion rings and soda – now all she needed was something sweet to wash away the bitter taste of the failed date from her mouth. And luckily, she knew exactly where to go.

“Oh, Natasha!” Sylvie looked up with a smile when Natasha entered her bakery – it smelled just as amazing as it had the other day.

“Nice to see you again – oh, you’ve been to Eula’s?” she said, on spotting the diner bag in Natasha’s hand. “Good choice.”

“Yeah – I figured I’d come pick out my dessert,” Natasha said, trying to inject her voice with as much false cheer as possible. It was harder than she’d thought it’d be, though.

*Why the hell do I care so much?! I mean, yeah, embarrassing, but it’s not like I was invested in this guy... was I?*

But apparently her distress was more obvious than she’d thought, because Sylvie frowned at her, pausing before she asked, tentatively, “Is there anything wrong, Natasha?”

Natasha shook her head, but she could already feel a lump climbing up her throat. Well... perhaps if she couldn’t deny it, she could make a little joke out of it.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” she said breezily, waving a hand. “I just got stood up for a date, if you can believe that. Bizarre, right? I mean, is there so much else to do here that you’d forget you have a date?”

Her laugh sounded *incredibly* forced even to her own ears – and it was patently clear that it wasn’t fooling Sylvie.

“You got stood up?” she asked, raising her eyebrows. “By who – it wasn’t that Jake Summerton, was it? Natasha, he’s been a player since school, you know that. Don’t let it –”

“Oh, no, not him,” Natasha said quickly, shaking her head. To be honest, she barely even remembered Jake Summerton, and she’d definitely never had a crush on him, even though her one memory of him was that almost every other girl in Girdwood Springs definitely had. “It was just... some guy. An out-of-towner who said he was just here staying in some house in the mountains for a vacation.”

“The... the *haunted* house in the mountains?” Sylvie asked, frowning. “That place has been empty since... well, since Henry Holmes died. I *think* that was the guy’s name, anyway. He was so reclusive he became a bit of an urban

legend himself. Do you remember how kids used to dare each other to go up to his front gate?”

“Um. Not really,” Natasha admitted. She’d probably been studying while the cool kids were doing things like that. She’d never really been invited on those kinds of adventures. “But you’re the second person who’s said that house is haunted! I’m beginning to think maybe that guy really *is* just a ghost after all. He definitely ghosted *me*, anyway.”

“Maybe it’s a different place up in the mountains – there are a few of them now,” Sylvie said, as she resolutely pulled off her uniform cap, and then lifted the apron with *Sylvie’s Bakery and Sweets* printed across the front. “Maybe he’s some rich guy who’s rented out one of the chalets that usually only get used during the ski season. Sounds like that kind of bastard.”

“Well, he didn’t *seem* that way to me –” Natasha began to say, before cutting herself off. *He told me he was a horticulturalist... they’re not known for pulling in the big bucks, are they? But maybe that was just part of his devilish lies...* Even as she thought it, however, Natasha’s mind rebelled against the idea. Kieran just hadn’t seemed at all like the sleazy moneymakers she knew in the city. But then, he *also* hadn’t seemed like the kind of guy who’d stand her up, either.

“But maybe you’re right,” she concluded lamely. What else could she do? In the midst of her mild depression, however, she noticed that Sylvie had marched to the door of her shop and flipped the *OPEN* sign to *CLOSED*. “Oh – are you closing? Sorry, I didn’t realize –”

“Nope,” Sylvie said, gesturing to one of the chairs at one of the little tables that lined the wall. “You missed the lunchtime rush, so things usually get a bit quiet around this time. And it sounds like you could use a friendly ear.”

“Oh, Sylvie, no, you don’t have to do that,” Natasha protested. “We haven’t even seen each other in *years*, and I –”

“Hey, I still consider you an old friend,” Sylvie said, shaking her head as, leaning down, she pulled a slice of what

had to be *the* most decadent-looking chocolate cake Natasha had ever seen from the display shelf. “So if you want to talk, I’m here. And if you don’t want to talk but just eat some cake, I’m also here.”

Natasha couldn’t hold back her laugh, as, giving in, she sat herself down at the table, pulling the boxes with her diner order out of the bag. “Well... I *did* get some extra onion rings at the diner. I probably can’t eat them all by myself.”

Twenty minutes later, after what had to be *the* best chili dog and onion rings Natasha had ever tasted – or half of them, anyway – she had to admit, she was feeling *a lot* better.

*Good food and an unexpected friend will do that, I suppose*, she thought, looking fondly at Sylvie from across the table. She really hadn’t expected Sylvie to remember her at all – much less care about her romance problems. *But maybe that’s what people are like here...*

“Still got room for cake?” Sylvie asked, a wicked gleam in her eye.

“Oh boy, I always have room for cake,” Natasha said, returning the grin Sylvie was giving her. “I’m on vacation, so the calories don’t even count, right?”

“Who’s calories? I don’t think I know her,” Sylvie said breezily as she sawed off a hunk of the cake and passed it to Natasha. “Enjoy.”

“Oh my God,” Natasha mumbled, unable to hold back even as she took a mouthful of cake. “Sylvie, this is *incredible*. I always knew you liked to bake, but... oh my God... how do you *do* that? This is the best cake I’ve ever tasted. Are you making them with magic or something?”

“Secret ingredients,” Sylvie said, tapping the side of her nose. “But really, it’s my husband. He’s can grow anything – and I *mean* anything. So the nutmeg, the ginger, the cardamon you taste – all the little things that give the chocolate that extra spice – are from his garden. The cake wouldn’t be what it is without him.”

*Oh, another gardener, Natasha thought, unwillingly thinking of Kieran again. But if he and Sylvie are married, I guess he can actually stick around...*

Giving herself a mental shake, Natasha pushed the idea from her head. She really didn't know what had gotten into her – was she *this* down in the dumps about a guy she barely knew, and had been doing her best to convince herself would only be a fling anyway?

*But that's just it, I couldn't really convince myself of that. I really liked him, dammit! And... there was just something about him that –*

“Oh, speak of the devil,” Sylvie said, wiping the cake crumbs from her hands and standing up, “here's Gale now.”

Natasha turned as Sylvie went to the shop door, opening it. On the other side there stood an unbelievably tall and handsome man, with salt and pepper hair, tanned skin, and unusual silvery eyes.

*Wow, Natasha thought, blinking. Sylvie's done well for herself. Is he someone we knew at school?*

As much as she racked her brain, however, Natasha couldn't remember anyone like him at school – nor anyone called Gale. So, she supposed, he must have been someone from out of town.

“Gale, this is an old friend of mine, Natasha,” Sylvie said, introducing them warmly. “Natasha, this is my husband, Gale.”

“Nice to meet you,” Gale said, flashing a heartbreakingly gorgeous smile. “I hope I'm not interrupting anything – I just thought I'd come over and see how things were going, ask if you needed me to pick anything up.”

“Not just now,” Sylvie said, shaking her head. “We're having a girls' heart-to-heart. So no men allowed, I'm afraid.”

“Ohh, I see,” Gale said, nodding mock-sagely. “Well in that case, I'll see myself out. It was nice to meet you, Natasha, however briefly.”

“You know I’m only joking,” Sylvie said, laughing. “You can stay if you want – I mean, if Natasha doesn’t mind.”

“No, of course not.” Natasha shook her head. She supposed maybe she ought to feel envious of Sylvie’s apparently amazing good fortune in having married such a good-looking – and apparently very considerate – man, especially considering her own current predicament. But she found in the end she could only really feel happy that Sylvie had done so well for herself – her own apparently successful bakery, a good husband, and glowing with obvious contentment.

*Maybe one day I’ll get that way too...* Natasha thought wistfully, as Gale and Sylvie briefly chatted about their mornings, clearly at ease with each other in a way that made Natasha’s chest ache *just* a little. *Sylvie left Girdwood Springs for a time and then came back to set up shop here. Maybe... maybe...*

“But how did you two meet?” Natasha asked, cutting off the thought before it could fully form. “Gale, you’re not from Girdwood Springs?”

“No, I’m not,” Gale said with a warm smile. “I just came here to get away from the city for a while – I used to work as a chef. I didn’t really have any intention of staying, but then I met Sylvie and, well... boom. That was it for me. And I’ve been here ever since.”

“Wow,” Natasha said, blinking. “Sounds like a real whirlwind romance.”

“I guess you could say that,” Sylvie said, her own *ridiculously* happy grin mirroring Gale’s. “But you know... sometimes you just meet someone, and you *know*. There’s no explaining it. You just have to go with it.”

Natasha stifled a sigh. *Yeah, that would have been nice!* she thought – but she knew it was a bitter thought.

“Sylvie was telling me the other day that you run the garden center down the street,” Natasha said, turning her thoughts away from her own still strong disappointment, and



taking sincere pleasure in the happiness of others. “And you used to be a chef? Sounds like you’re a man of many talents.”

Gale laughed. “Well, I don’t know if I’d go *that* far, but definitely I like to garden – it was my first passion, before I got into cooking. So I guess I get the best of both worlds now, what with running the garden center and helping Sylvie out with the bakery. I’ve been incredibly lucky.”

“Well, how about we all sit down and have some more cake, then?” Sylvie said with a laugh. “I feel like I didn’t get to ask you much about how you’ve been doing, Natasha – you’ll have to catch me up on everything!”

Slowly, as they talked and ate the next piece of cake Sylvie brought out from behind the counter – this time some kind of amazingly delicious layered honey cake – Natasha felt the sadness and disappointment of her missed date beginning to melt away from her heart.

She’d never imagined she’d feel so at home again here – or that she’d be welcomed back so warmly.

*It does make me miss the place just a little, she thought, as Sylvie offered them all coffee. And so what if I just got stood up? Kieran’s not the only man in the world! Who needs him? If he’s going to behave like that, then I certainly don’t!*

And yet, even as Natasha laughed at some story or other Sylvie was telling about some people they’d known in school, she couldn’t help but feel a pang in her chest as she remembered the way Kieran’s eyes had sparkled as he smiled at her – that dazzling, *amazing*, heart-warming smile...

*No! No. I didn’t come here to find a boyfriend, Natasha told herself sternly. I won’t fall for that again – I’m not agreeing to another date, not even if he comes to me with the best excuse ever and the world’s most groveling apology. Never, ever again!*

## CHAPTER 6

As soon as his griffin had allowed him to return to his human form – which had been, thankfully, *after* they'd returned to earth, having spent the afternoon soaring through the mountain peaks – Kieran knew he'd have to come up with the best excuse ever and the world's most groveling apology if he ever expected Natasha to speak to him ever again.

*I hope you're happy*, he told his griffin as he walked down the main street of Girdwood Springs. *We'll be lucky if Natasha ever speaks to us again.*

The griffin – perhaps, to its very, very slight credit – seemed a little contrite at having let its temper run away with it.

*We are back now*, it said, a little quietly. *I have returned us to the town.*

*Yeah, four hours late!* Kieran snapped back at it. *You know there's no chance she's still waiting for us, right? At all?*

The griffin seemed to retreat a little in baffled silence at that. Perhaps, Kieran thought, the problem was actually twofold: the griffin clearly feeling that he'd been neglecting it for far too long, *and* the idea of trying to impress the concept of punctuality upon a mythical being.

Maybe it just didn't understand things like *being on time*, and so, when he wasn't able to control its actions, as he hadn't been able to lately, it simply forgot that humans just tended to like it when you were where you said you'd be at the

appointed time. *Especially* when the thing you were supposed to be doing was a *date*.

*Women don't like it when you stand them up, and quite rightly so, he lectured the griffin as he walked. I know she's our mate, but I don't know if humans feel the mated bond in the same way as shifters do. And even if she did, that's absolutely no excuse for being so rude! You have to show your mate just the same amount of respect as anyone else! Fate doesn't matter if you just act like an asshole!*

Whether or not the griffin was listening to him, Kieran couldn't tell. It certainly didn't answer, and its presence within him had shrunk as to be almost undetectable. Maybe it *was* feeling embarrassed about earlier. Griffins tended to be hot-headed, acting first and thinking later. But this was the first time Kieran had experienced it losing its head *quite* as badly as this.

*But maybe it did also have a point...*

He really *had* been neglecting it. He couldn't blame it for feeling that way, and wanting to be let out a little more often than it was. It was a wild, mythical creature, after all. It wasn't meant to sit in a cage, thinking longingly of the skies but never being allowed to soar through them, feeling the wind in its feathers.

*I'm sorry, he tried to offer, inwardly sighing. I know you didn't mean it that way. And I can see why you've been upset.*

No answer. Perhaps the griffin, stung by his words, was sulking. In that case, he'd just have to let it come back in its own time, and maybe they could have a more reasonable conversation.

Walking to the diner, Kieran checked through the front window, hoping against hope that, somehow, Natasha might have still been waiting for him. But of course she wasn't – he was more than four hours late, and she didn't seem like the kind of woman who liked to be kept waiting. Kieran wouldn't have blamed her if she'd walked out after only ten minutes, let alone four hours.

Still, on seeing her nowhere in sight, Kieran felt his heart sink and his shoulders sag. He didn't know where she was staying, nor did he have her number. And even if he *did*, he really didn't know how he'd go about explaining himself, especially via text.

*No, if I want to try to win her back, I have to talk to her in person. Somehow.*

It was possible, he supposed, that someone in town might know where she was staying. If she was from Girdwood Springs originally then she'd have old friends here – she probably would have let them know where she could be found, or if she hadn't they could easily find out for him, or tell him if they'd seen her around.

The thought made his heart seize up in his chest, but Kieran knew it had to be done. What were the other options, after all? Flee town and never see his mate again? And even if she *wasn't* his mate, basic good manners dictated that Kieran try to apologize for his bad behavior.

*But maybe I should try to really make things up to her properly,* he thought, as he made his way back up the street. It was late in the afternoon but before the restaurants started getting busy for dinner, so the streets were pretty empty now, and a lot of the smaller stores had already started closing up for the day.

*Would a little gift be a good idea?* Kieran wondered as he looked in the window of a small knick-knacks shop – but he realized he hadn't gotten as far as finding out what kind of tastes Natasha had, or what kind of small ornament or artwork she might like. Perhaps it would be worse to bring her something she hated than nothing at all.

As he walked up the street, Kieran suddenly caught a whiff of *the* most incredible scent he'd ever experienced – sweet and spicy both, delicate and yet all-enfolding, warm and soft and special... almost like the smell of home...

*Oh, it's a bakery?* Kieran thought, blinking, as he finally spotted the source of the enchanting scent. But it couldn't be *just* a bakery – there was definitely something magical about

it. Kieran could sense it from just one sniff. Whoever had made these cakes and pies couldn't be an ordinary human.

*I should check this out...*

Making his way to the shopfront, Kieran read the swooping font that covered the front window – *Sylvie's Bakery and Sweets* – before taking in another lungful of that delicious smell.

*Definitely the place*, he thought, as he pushed open the door.

Inside, it was even more obvious that whatever was in these baked goods – or whoever had made them – was something more than human. A memory prickled at the back of Kieran's mind, as he tried to place where he knew this specific kind of smell from – until, finally, it hit him.

*A unicorn must have made this food!*

He'd heard – somewhere, sometime – that food grown and tended by unicorns was more flavorful, more *delicious* than anything a normal human, or even another shifter, could produce. But it wasn't just the heavenly scent that told him that: there was an indefinable whiff of *magic* in the air here, and Kieran's griffin senses immediately identified it as *unicorn*.

*But where are they? Are they the baker here?*

As if in answer to his unspoken question, the baker in question bustled out from the back, a cap on her head, an apron tied across her front. But Kieran could tell immediately that she was a normal human. There was no sense of being a shifter about her whatsoever. Kieran felt a little indecisive about what to do next – it was possible, he supposed, that the person she bought supplies from was a unicorn, and this baker simply didn't know it. *But if she does...*

“Welcome to Sylvie's!” the woman said, beaming at him. “Anything I can help you with? Or would you like to try a sample to help you make up your mind?”

“Oh – right,” Kieran stuttered, pulled out of his musings about who and where the mysterious unicorn might be.

“Actually, I guess I *could* use a little help. Though I’m not really sure what to ask about.”

“Sounds serious,” the baker replied. “But I’m happy to answer any questions you might have about ingredients, allergens, flavors...”

“No, it’s less about that as... not being sure what would be the best thing to get for the person I need to get it for. Or if anything I could do would even be any good.” Kieran swallowed as soon as the words were out of his mouth, wishing he could take them back. He didn’t really want to go into too much detail about the problem – for one thing, he knew what an ass he’d seem if he were to say why he was buying it, but he wouldn’t even be able to give the true reason he’d been an ass in the first place!

*Well, unless she already knows about shifters... but even so, how can I explain what’s been going on with me lately?!*

“Well, that *does* sound serious,” the baker said gravely. “But if I can help, I will. Want to tell me a little about your predicament, and I’ll see what I can recommend?”

Kieran sighed. Maybe he could just be a little... vague about the whole thing.

“I need to apologize to someone,” he said. “I really messed up – I had a reason, but it’s not an excuse. I’d like for them to forgive me, of course, but... well, I feel like I definitely need to go a bit above and beyond for this. So any recommendation you can make would be really, really welcome. If you have a cake that reads ‘Sorry, I messed up big time’ in six-foot-high letters, that would probably be ideal.”

The baker laughed. “Well, I can’t say I do. But I definitely have cakes and pies that’ll go a long way toward helping you get your forgiveness. Is it a man or a woman you need to apologize to?”

“A woman.” Kieran swallowed again. Maybe he should just tell the whole truth – or as much of it as he feasibly could. “I missed a date with her, even though I really, really wanted to be there. I was... uh... unavoidably detained, and I just

couldn't make it. But I'd love it if I could get a second chance..."

He trailed off as he realized the baker was now staring at him, wide-eyed and open-mouthed.

*Uh, did I say something wrong? I guess no woman wants to hear about another woman being stood up...*

"It was you!" the baker exclaimed a moment later. "You're the guy who didn't turn up for your date with Natasha!"

Kieran blinked, surprise rippling through him. *How does she know about that?* he wondered – but the answer was obvious. He'd been thinking about it only a few minutes before – Natasha was from here, and clearly the baker was an old friend of hers. When he hadn't shown up for their date, she'd clearly come here to commiserate with her buddy. And Kieran couldn't say he blamed her.

"Uh, yeah," he said, wincing. "But please, believe me when I say it really, really wasn't my choice to do that, and I'll do anything I can now to make it up to her. Or even just to get the chance to try to explain myself – if I can. I came by here to try to find an apology present for her."

"Well, to be honest, she wasn't very happy about it," the baker said, eyeing him skeptically. "You don't really look how I pictured you, though. I was thinking some rich sleazebag who'd rented one of the big chalets near the ski fields. But you don't really look like that type at all."

"No, I promise I'm not," Kieran said, holding his hands up. "Definitely not rich, and I really hope not a sleazebag. And *definitely* not staying in a chalet. I'm staying in my uncle's old place, on the mountain. Did you happen to know Henry Holmes at all?"

The baker's eyes widened. "Wait, the old Holmes place? You really *are* staying there?"

Kieran nodded, wondering why she found that so odd. Perhaps it was simply because it had been abandoned for such a relatively long time that she didn't think it would be habitable anymore.

“Uh, yeah. Just for a little while – my parents started to do it up a bit, so it’s not *too* run down at the moment. It has a generator and running water, at least.” *And a bunch of stuff that goes bump in the night, but that’s not a bother. Except when it is.*

“Okay, okay,” the baker said, holding up her hands. “One thing at a time, I guess. First, before I decide if I’m going to sell you a pie as an apology to my friend, you better tell me why exactly you stood her up in the first place.”

Kieran hesitated. He could hardly say *Because my wayward griffin took over my body and insisted on taking it up into the mountains to have a little fly around, and I was only just able to get myself back under control.* She’d think he was insane.

*But what other reason could possibly be good enough to justify having stood up the most wonderful woman in the world?*

The truth of the matter was, short of having been kidnaped by someone who *wasn’t* also himself in a different form, there really wasn’t any kind of justification for that. Could he claim car troubles? Could he *actually* say he’d really been kidnaped?!

“I’m waiting,” the baker said, raising an eyebrow.

*But... if there’s a chance she knows about unicorns, then maybe...* Kieran thought – and in that moment, he really was desperate enough to risk revealing the existence of shifters to someone who might not know about them, just to secure her help in trying to win Natasha back.

“Uh – well, you see, the thing is –” he began, not exactly sure where the sentence would take him, when he was interrupted by the sound of the back door of the bakery slamming open, followed quickly by the appearance of a tall man by the baker’s side.

“Sylvie?” he said, cocking his head at Kieran and narrowing his eyes as if sizing him up. “Everything all right?”



“Uh... yes? I thought so?” the baker – apparently the Sylvie from the sign out front – said. She glanced up at the man, frowning. “But maybe *you* don’t think so?”

*It’s this man – he’s the unicorn!*

The knowledge washed suddenly over Kieran’s brain. He couldn’t always tell what kind of animal other shifters turned into, but with mythical shifters, they usually had an aura of magic around them – and that magic aura was enough to tell him that this guy was *definitely* a unicorn.

And – perhaps even more importantly – that the baker Sylvie was his mate.

*If they’re mates, then I can be pretty sure she knows all about shifters,* Kieran thought, his knees going weak with relief. *I can just tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.*

“You’re – you’re a unicorn,” he blurted out, his overwhelming relief getting the better of his control over his mouth. “So you’ll understand what I’m saying!”

The man – the *unicorn* – narrowed his eyes a little. “And you’re a griffin – I’ve never sensed you around town before. I was... surprised, I guess. That was why I came running in here. I guess I’m used to only ever sensing Caleb around town. He’s our resident dragon, by the way.”

*A unicorn and a dragon?!* Kieran had to admit he was feeling a little dizzy with the revelation. He hadn’t sensed either of them around – but then, he’d barely spent any time at all actually in Girdwood Springs.

“You have to help me,” he said, leaning forward and gripping the bench. “I accidentally stood my mate up for a date, and I need to find a way to apologize for it. I swear, I didn’t mean for it to happen – it’s my griffin. It’s like I’ve lost all control over it. It just shifts whenever it wants to, and all I can do is wait it out until it decides to let me go back to human form. That was what happened this afternoon, so I couldn’t go meet Natasha at the diner, for obvious reasons. And then –”

“Wait, wait, slow down,” Sylvie said, holding her hands up. “One thing at a time. First of all, Natasha is your *mate*?”

“Yes,” Kieran said miserably. He realized now he’d been babbling *way* too fast, and hadn’t explained himself properly at all. “Only I haven’t had the chance to tell her yet – or even to tell her that I’m a shifter.”

“And... you say your griffin has been going haywire?” the man asked, exchanging a glance with Sylvie. “I can relate to that.”

“You can?” Kieran asked, as hope bloomed in his heart that *someone* might finally know what was going on with him.

“Yeah.” The man nodded. “It happened to me a couple of years ago – not *quite* the same thing, but similar. My unicorn’s powers suddenly started going wild – I couldn’t touch anything made of wood without it bursting into flower. Even doors that hadn’t been trees for decades, painted and varnished... they’d start growing leaves and flowers like they were still in the middle of the woods. I couldn’t do anything about it but just try not to touch anything wooden. Made my life difficult for a while, I can tell you.”

Kieran leaned forward, hoping he wasn’t being *too* intense. “But you eventually found a solution?”

“You could say that.” The man smiled, before looking down at Sylvie, a look of utter adoration in his eyes. “I found my mate.”

Kieran leaned back, swallowing. Disappointment rose within him. “I found my mate too,” he said. “But it doesn’t seem to have made any difference to my griffin.”

“But you said you hadn’t *told* her she was your mate yet,” Sylvie pointed out. “Gale’s unicorn powers didn’t settle down until he’d confessed everything to me. So perhaps that’s what you need to do with Natasha?”

Kieran looked down, sighing. “I guess I already knew that – and believe me, it was my intention to tell her everything as soon as I could, and not just to get my griffin under control... if that’s what really will help it. She has a right to know, of

course, and I wanted to tell her. I just worry I may have blown it.”

“Well, I wouldn’t exactly say she was *happy* when she came to see me this afternoon,” Sylvie said, in what Kieran supposed was the best way to put it diplomatically. “But I know Natasha, and although she puts up a hard front, she’s not heartless. If you went to her with a real apology and told her the truth – *all* the truth – I think she’d at least hear you out.”

Hope sparked in Kieran’s heart. “Do you really think so?”

“Well, let’s just say I think these are some pretty exceptional circumstances, don’t you?” Sylvie said, with a quick wink. “Hey, it’s not every day a guy comes along and tells you he’s a mythical creature and you’re his fated mate, destined to be together for all eternity. I can tell you from experience, that kind of thing can really turn a girl’s head.”

Kieran couldn’t help but join in with the quick laugh she gave, though he still had his misgivings. “Do you think she’s the kind of person who’d... well, who’d *like* finding out they’re a griffin’s fated mate? It seems perfectly normal to me, but to a human...”

“I can’t speak for Natasha, of course,” Sylvie said after a pause. “But I can definitely tell you that in my case, it was the best thing that’s ever happened to me. Well, top three, anyway.”

“Stop, you’ll make my head swell,” Gale laughed, putting his arm around Sylvie’s shoulder. “And from my side – well, I can definitely say no matter how nerve-racking having to explain everything to Sylvie was, it was *definitely* worth it. I don’t even remember feeling scared to do it now. All I remember is the look on Sylvie’s face the first time she saw me shift into a unicorn. That was priceless.”

Kieran had to admit, they both made good points. Yes, telling Natasha what he was – or *showing* her what he was – might be one of the most terrifying things he’d ever contemplated doing.

*But the reward...*

The reward – having Natasha by his side for the rest of their lives – made the risk pale into insignificance. He'd just have to hope she'd accept his explanation as to why he'd been late, and then he could tell her the rest.

“There's just one small problem,” Kieran said. “I don't know where she's staying.”

“Oh, I can tell you that,” Sylvie said breezily. “As long as you promise to take some pie with you, as part of your apology. Oh, and maybe a bouquet of flowers, too. Gale will have just the thing.”

“I sure do. I was just making some deliveries to some of the local restaurants for their displays, but I have a couple of extras,” Gale said, as he began to head out to the back of the bakery again. “Wait here. I'll be back in a moment.”

As he disappeared out the back, Sylvie turned to Kieran, cocking her head. “Oh – I think I got a little distracted with you suddenly announcing you were a griffin, and Natasha's mate,” she said, frowning a little. “But did you say you were staying in the old Holmes mansion? Henry Holmes was some relation of yours?”

“My great uncle,” Kieran said, curiosity stirring within him at Sylvie's dubious expression. “Is there... some kind of problem with that?”

Sylvie pursed her lips a little, opened her mouth, and then closed it again. “No... no. No, it's nothing. Let's just focus on one thing at a time. Like getting you back into Natasha's good graces. Everything else we can deal with later.”

Puzzled, Kieran was about to ask her what she meant, when Gale returned from the back room once again, having apparently gone out to his car to grab one of his extra flower bouquets.

*That's not just a bouquet, that's... that's...* Kieran thought, blinking in amazement.

He didn't have the words to describe it. The bouquet was unlike anything he'd ever seen before, even though he worked full-time with plants and flowers. He'd never seen roses so

red, so full, so brilliant, so delicate. The scent of them filled the air, alongside the gorgeous scent of the spices and sugars of the bakery goods.

“I guess what they say about plants tended by unicorns really is true,” he murmured, as he gratefully took the bouquet from Gale’s hands. “These are... these are *incredible*.”

“It doesn’t seem quite fair, really,” Gale said, with a half-smile. “I have a natural advantage, after all. But if these can help you, then I don’t feel too guilty about having used my unicorn powers to corner the market around here in floral arrangements and garden design.”

“Oh please. As if you had any competition to begin with,” Sylvie laughed. “*No one* was selling plants and flowers in Girdwood Springs before you showed up.”

“I guess you’re right,” Gale said, shaking his head. “But still. I keep getting people asking me what kind of compost I use, what my secret ingredients are. I have to be evasive and tell them it’s a secret family recipe.”

“I really can’t thank you both enough for all of this,” Kieran said, marveling again at the incredible bouquet of roses. “Really. You’ve both been kinder to me than I deserve.”

“Hey, there’s nothing I like more than helping shifters find their mates,” Sylvie said. “Just knowing how happy I am – and how happy Kira is, with her dragon – I can’t help but wish everyone could experience the same. Oh, but, don’t forget –” She ducked down suddenly, retrieving something from the display case next to the counter. When she rose again, Kieran could see it was a small, round apple pie, with a bay leaf settled on the latticed crust. “A little pie can go a long way. But don’t be offended if Natasha doesn’t want to eat it today. She already had quite a bit of cake when she was here earlier!”

*I guess that’s understandable, if she was upset about being stood up,* Kieran thought as he left the bakery, armed with the apple pie, the bouquet of roses, and the address of the B&B Natasha was staying at, scribbled down on a piece of paper by Sylvie.

He was still nervous about what he had to do next, but he had to admit, listening to Gale and Sylvie – and seeing how obviously deliriously happy they were together – gave him heart. Surely, once Natasha understood the truth, they could be at least that happy together too?

*And maybe there's just something about Girdwood Springs that attracts shifters,* Kieran thought as he walked. It seemed a huge coincidence that both a unicorn *and* a dragon had chosen to settle here, not to mention that Kieran's Great Uncle Henry, himself a griffin shifter, had lived here for years and years.

Natasha's B&B wasn't a long walk from the center of town – Girdwood Springs, no matter how much it might have changed since Natasha had lived here in her childhood, still only took about fifteen minutes to walk through, and the B&B stood on the outskirts of town, just before the forest completely took over the mountainside again.

It was a cute little place, Kieran thought as he stood looking at it – the kind of place he would have liked to have stayed at, if he hadn't already had somewhere to stay. A little brick building, with a small, neat garden out the front, and a garage out the back. A paved path that wended its way through the flower beds to the front door.

*Well,* Kieran thought, taking a deep breath, *here goes nothing.*

Before he could have any second thoughts, he marched up the path and knocked on the door, hoping that Natasha would be inside rather than out sightseeing.

But he was in luck – after only a couple of moments, the door cracked open, and Natasha's – incomparably beautiful – face appeared.

And she did *not* look happy to see him.

“Natasha,” Kieran blurted, before she could slam the door closed in his face again. “I'm really sorry – please, if you wouldn't mind giving me just a couple of minutes of your time, I swear I can explain.”

He held his breath, willing himself not to say anything more as Natasha's eyes traveled from his face to the roses in his arms, to the pie box tied up with a little ribbon that Sylvie had very kindly made up for him. He could see her reluctance – but he could also see her thinking things over.

“You stood me up,” she finally said, raising an eyebrow as she turned her gaze back to his face.

“I know,” Kieran rushed in. “And I'm sorry – I really am. But I swear I have a good explanation. It's, uh, a little complicated though. Would it be possible for me to come inside?”

“I don't know about that,” Natasha said a little dubiously, and Kieran had to say he couldn't blame her. Her face was still cold – but then, after a moment, she visibly relented. “But if you like, we can talk in the back garden, and you can give me your explanation.”

Kieran thought that was a fair compromise. Natasha opened the door wider and stepped out, closing it behind her before leading him around the side of the little brick house, and into a surprisingly expansive garden. It was only just now beginning to sprout again after the long, cold winter, but Kieran could tell just by looking that it would be spectacularly beautiful in spring and summer. Whoever had designed it had put a lot of thought and care into it, clearly.

“So,” Natasha said, gesturing to a wrought iron garden seat, next to a matching table. “Take a seat, and tell me what you have to say.”

Again, Kieran hesitated. He knew what he had to do – and yet, how to explain this?

*This would be much easier if she knew about Sylvie and Gale,* he thought, but Sylvie had told him before he'd left the bakery that no one in Girdwood Springs except her, Kira, and Kira's mate Caleb, the dragon, knew about shifters and mates.

“Natasha...” he started, before, gritting his teeth, he decided to just come out with it. “The truth is, Natasha, that I'm not really like a normal human being.”

Natasha's eyebrows shot up and her mouth opened, before she closed it again. Then, she shook her head. "Okay, well, that's at least original. In what way are you different, then? You don't own a watch?"

Kieran swallowed. *Not a great start... but I don't have much choice but to continue.*

"No, that's not it," he said. "I swear, usually I'm very punctual. But what I mean is... I'm actually not really human at all. I'm what they call a shifter – that is, a human who can take on the form of an animal. In my case, a mythical creature."

As he talked, he could see Natasha's expression growing more and more confused, her eyebrows drawing closer and closer together.

*Well, who can really blame her for that?* he thought, as he tried desperately to come up with something more to say.

"I'm not the only one in the world," he hurried on, without stopping to think about what he was saying. "There's a lot of us around – some of us turn into mythical beings, like me, and others turn into regular animals, like cats, dogs, bears, even insects sometimes." He thought for a moment about telling her that she already knew at least one person who could turn into a unicorn, but in the end, he decided against it. He hadn't gotten Gale's permission to reveal that he was a shifter, after all. "You wouldn't know it to see us on the street, but I swear we exist. I know it sounds a little farfetched, but..."

"Uh, more than just a *little*," Natasha interrupted him as he began to run out of steam, shaking her head. "So... instead of telling me you had car trouble, or that you got an emergency phone call, or literally any other even slightly plausible explanation, you're saying the reason you couldn't make our date was because... you're a mythical creature, actually?"

"I know how unbelievable that is," Kieran said, feeling desperate. This wasn't going well *at all*. "But I swear, it's the truth. Would I really say something so ridiculous if I couldn't back it up?"



For a moment, Natasha hesitated, seeming to think over what he'd said. "I guess you make a point there," she said, shaking her head. "And to be honest, I thought I'd heard it all, but this *is* definitely a new one." She looked up at him, her dark eyes piercing. "So, you said you could back it up. I guess you're going to offer to... what was it you said? Shift? In front of me then? Or are you going to say your mythical form is too secret for human eyes, or something like that?"

*She's still not convinced at all, Kieran thought worriedly. But that's okay – I can in fact show her I'm telling the truth.*

"No – no, I can definitely show you my griffin form," he said quickly. "In fact, there's nothing I'd like to do more. Can I put these down on the table?" he asked, gesturing with his chin to the roses and pie, which, he couldn't help but notice, she hadn't asked him to give her.

"Uh, sure," Natasha said, giving him yet another bewildered look. "So, uh, just so we're clear – what you're going to do now is... turn into a, uh, a griffin?"

"Yes." Kieran took a few steps back from the table, wanting to give himself plenty of space. His wingspan was pretty wide, after all, and his griffin form was *a lot* bigger than his human one. "Don't be startled – it's still me in there. No matter what I look like."

"Okay then," Natasha said, her tone turning a little curious. Was it possible she was actually starting to be won over a little? "I'm ready to see it. Go ahead."

Kieran nodded. "Okay. Here goes."

Taking a breath, he reached out to his griffin, calling it forward.

And was met with complete silence.

*Um. Wait. Let me try again.*

He closed his eyes, seeking his griffin where he usually found it, nestled inside his chest, waiting for him to call upon it. But now, when he searched inside himself he found... nothing.

Nothing at all.

*What the hell is happening?!*

Panic lanced through Kieran's chest, not only at suddenly not being able to find his griffin where it had always been inside him – but also because he was *very* aware of Natasha's eyes on him as he stood in the garden, very much *not* turning into a griffin.

“Does it usually take a little while?” Natasha asked, her tone still more curious than annoyed – but Kieran knew that wouldn't last much longer.

He *had* to find his griffin!

*Come on, please*, he begged it, searching frantically within himself. *I'm sorry I was angry before – I'm sorry I was treating you as if you weren't an equal, as if you were something I wanted to keep hidden. I'm trying to reveal you now, and not treat you that way anymore. Won't you come out and show yourself to our mate?*

But there was no answer. Kieran recalled earlier in the day, when the griffin, apparently ashamed of its behavior, had retreated inside him, until he could barely sense it anymore. Since then he'd been too busy trying to figure out how to win over Natasha to have thought much about it. But apparently, it had decided to *really* make itself scarce now.

*After weeks of coming out at the worst possible times, now you've just decided to disappear altogether?!*

Kieran could feel desperation bubbling up inside him – desperation, and hopelessness. If he couldn't get his griffin to appear, then he knew he would have blown it with Natasha forever. He wouldn't blame her for not wanting to see him again, after he'd told her what appeared to be such a stupid, ridiculous lie.

“Okay, I'm not really sure what's going on,” Natasha said after a further few moments of nothing happening. “Are you really going to turn into a griffin?”

“It's... it's not working right now,” Kieran said, *knowing* how ridiculous he sounded even as he said it.

“It’s not working, you say.” Natasha’s voice was as flat as her stare.

“No, it’s not – but I swear, everything I said was completely true,” Kieran said, knowing how desperate he sounded – but he *was* desperate. This had been his one chance to show Natasha what he was – to tell her what *she* was – and he was in the process of blowing it big time, just because his griffin would either appear or refuse to appear whenever it was the worst possible moment for either.

*I can’t believe this*, he thought, raking his fingers through his hair. *This has never happened before – why now? Is my griffin that mad at me that it’d sabotage its own happiness just to ruin mine too?*

“Right. Well. I think I’ve seen enough,” Natasha said tartly. She glanced at the flowers and the box containing the apple pie on the table. “You can take these with you if you like, too.”

“No,” Kieran said miserably. “I brought them for you – please, keep them. At least you’ll get some nice pie and some beautiful flowers out of this. But I promise you, Natasha, I’m *not* lying. I would never lie to you. You’re my –”

He stopped himself just short of saying *mate*. It would be just one more thing she probably wouldn’t believe him about. And right now, he thought he’d be better off just keeping his mouth shut.

“Please, Natasha. Can I try just one more time?” he asked, but even as he said it, he knew it was hopeless. There wasn’t a single stirring of his griffin within him. It definitely wasn’t going to show itself to her. For whatever reason, it had decided that Kieran was on his own.

Natasha bit her lip, looking at least for a moment like she might be thinking things over, but then she shook her head.

“No, I think it’s best if you just go. Look. You really need to just... own up to things if you make a mistake. If you’d just told me your car broke down or even that you just forgot, I might have been willing to give you a second chance. But

coming here and saying... what, that you turn into a magical animal? How exactly did you think that was going to go? Or did you just think I'd believe it when you said it 'isn't working' right now?"

*But it's true!* Kieran felt the howl of protest welling up inside him. But he knew at the moment it'd just make things worse. There was nothing else he could do or say right now to make Natasha believe him – and to be honest, if their places had been reversed, Kieran knew he'd be thinking the exact same things as she was.

"I'll go then," he said, utterly dejected. "And I promise, I won't bother you again. I'm sorry to have caused you all this trouble."

For a moment, a flash of something that could have been remorse flashed across Natasha's face, but then she looked resolutely away. "Thank you for the pie and the flowers, anyway," she mumbled. "If you'd just told the truth, I might have been impressed."

Kieran could only nod. There was no point in arguing further. Everything in him was screaming at him to take Natasha in his arms, to kiss her, to *show* her somehow that they were meant for each other – that she was his and he was hers – but he shoved the urge away, knowing it'd only make things worse.

Ignoring the searing pain in his chest, Kieran made his way back around the side of the house, and out onto the street.

The walk back to Great Uncle Henry's house was nothing more than a vague blur in his mind – the overwhelming ache in his heart made it difficult to concentrate on anything else. It was lucky he knew the way fairly well – he had a good sense of direction – otherwise Kieran wasn't sure that he wouldn't have just ended up wandering aimlessly into the forest, not looking where he was going and getting hopelessly lost in the growing darkness of the early evening.

*Which would have been an easy problem to solve if I had my griffin,* he thought listlessly, as he made his way up the overgrown path that led to the front gate of the house. *Is it*

*gone for good then? Or will it come back at the least convenient time?*

Despite how annoying it had been lately – to put it mildly – Kieran felt a pang of anxiety at the idea that it might never come back.

He didn't think that was the case – right now, it was probably just sulking and trying to punish him. But still, the idea that he might, even temporarily, have lost it sent a terrible shiver down his spine. He was a *shifter*, after all – without his power to shift, what was he?

*It'll come back*, he told himself as he made his way up the front steps and unlocked the front door of the house, toeing off his muddy boots when he got inside. *It has to. And maybe, when it does...*

Maybe then he'd have the chance to show Natasha that he *wasn't* lying, and that everything he'd told her about himself was the truth.

*And that she's my mate. My beautiful, glorious mate.*

But Natasha was only in town for a month – what if his griffin didn't come back before that time was up? Why was it that he now had the *opposite* problem to the one he'd come here to try to fix? And how come –

Kieran's thoughts were suddenly cut off as an incredibly loud *thud* sounded from above him – the same sound that had echoed through the house just the other night. It reverberated through the entryway, loud and insistent, as if someone were hurling breeze blocks down onto the floor from the attic above.

*Not again...* Kieran thought, as even more *crashes* and *bangs* suddenly tore through the air, loud enough that the beams of the house *should* have been shaking with it. But there was no movement – just the sounds, like a herd of elephants stampeding overhead.

“I don't know what's going on, but I really can't tell you how much I am *not* in the mood for this right now!” Kieran bellowed up into the empty house, feeling very foolish even as

he did so – but the anger, frustration and despair that were churning furiously inside him needed *some* outlet, and mystery house sounds seemed as good an outlet as any.

To Kieran’s surprise, the sounds cut out immediately – as if the herd of elephants had simply vanished mid-rampage.

Kieran waited, expecting that they might start up again at any moment – but no. The silence reigned.

Letting out a long sigh, Kieran muttered, “Well, at least that’s one less thing to worry about,” before dragging himself dejectedly into the house.

## CHAPTER 7

*Ugh. Stupid. Stupid, stupid, stupid. Wait, why am I the stupid one?!*

Natasha stomped over the muddy path, the wet dirt squelching beneath her angry tread. *She* wasn't the one who'd stood someone else up for a date, and then, instead of just being honest about it, had concocted some ridiculous lie about being a... a...

*What did he call it again? A shifter?!*

She shook her head, anger shooting through her. She'd barely been able to sleep last night from her agitation about what had happened after she'd – foolishly, as it turned out – allowed Kieran to try to explain himself to her.

If he'd just told the truth, like telling her he'd had car problems or that he'd forgotten the time while he was working on the place he was staying in, or even that he'd gotten his days mixed up and had thought they were supposed to be meeting at some other time, she probably would have given him a second chance, despite her swearing at Sylvie's that she wouldn't.

When he'd turned up at her B&B, though, with his apologetic face and his frankly *amazing* bouquet of flowers and his thoughtful gift of pie, she'd found herself reluctantly melting – for some reason, her heart had told her to at least listen to what he had to say.

Life happened, after all, and she didn't have a heart completely made of stone. He'd seemed so genuinely like he

wanted to apologize that she found herself almost *hoping* he'd have some kind of explanation, no matter how lame, just so she'd have an excuse to forgive him and suggest they could go out for dinner instead.

*But I wasn't expecting... that!*

Why had he made up such a stupid, obvious lie? Just to mess with her?! He had to have known that he wasn't going to be able to turn into a mythical creature right in front of her eyes, so what had been the point in any of it?!

Maybe he was just some weirdo who got his kicks playing pointless practical jokes on people – maybe there'd been some hidden camera somewhere, and he was trying to go viral on social media or something, doing pranks or trying to get attention in order to sell something. Natasha worked in marketing so she was obviously aware of these things, but she had to say she didn't really agree with the 'all publicity is good publicity' maxim – she never advocated for any client to do whatever it took to go viral, no matter how stupid, ridiculous or cruel.

*That must have been what it was*, she thought, shaking her head. She really couldn't think of any other reason why Kieran would have said something like that. Maybe he was hoping she would believe her, so he could put up a video of her to make fun of her for his followers.

*He just really, really didn't seem like the type*, she thought, shaking her head. But she supposed that was the point – if he'd been an obvious prankster right from the beginning, she never would have fallen for him in the first place.

She'd done her best to tell herself that she wasn't *really* interested in him, that this was just going to be a bit of fun on vacation. But Natasha hadn't really been able to stick to that, even as she'd tried to tell herself that was all it was. Damn it, she'd really *liked* him.

No – more than that.

She'd felt *drawn* to him. It had been an almost instant connection – something she'd never felt with anyone else in



the past, where, even if there'd been nothing obviously *wrong* with the guy, there'd just been no spark there at all.

With Kieran, she'd felt that spark, for the first time in her life. It was the first time in *years* she'd felt excited by something that wasn't her job.

But she'd been very, very wrong.

*Ugh. Well. Chalk that one up to experience.*

She'd know better the next time a tall, gorgeous, seemingly adorably goofy guy hit on her over a can of beans in a supermarket. She wouldn't be fooled again!

Despite her knowing now what Kieran really was, and despite her determination that she'd never fall for anything like that ever again, Natasha still couldn't deny to herself that there was a part of her heart that still felt... sore. She didn't really understand it, she had to admit. Obviously, she felt humiliated, but this wasn't quite the same thing. It wasn't just romantic disappointment at having thought she'd found a nice guy, only to discover he wasn't quite what he seemed.

It was a feeling she couldn't explain to herself, as if, somehow, something had gone *wrong*, and she had to do something to fix it – that there was something *unfinished* between them, and now it was going to rub away at her like a stone in her shoe until she dealt with it.

*Maybe I'm just so mad I feel like I need to go give him a piece of my mind, since I didn't do that before he left yesterday,* Natasha thought, dramatically shoving aside a low-hanging branch as she continued on up the mountain trail. *Maybe I just feel like I let him off too lightly, and that's what I left unfinished.*

That seemed likely. She'd never been one to not speak her mind. Maybe she should have really given him a good piece of it before she'd let him go.

*Well, too late now, unless I want to track him down and yell at him in the middle of town,* she thought grumpily. But even as she thought it, she felt her stomach turning over slightly, as if in protest at the thought.

She shoved the feeling aside. She'd come here for rest and relaxation, not to stew over some guy. In any case, he probably wasn't even in town anymore – he'd probably left, now that his prank had either failed or succeeded, depending on what his goal had even been in the first place.

Maybe he'd come out here in the hope of ensnaring people he thought of as backwater yokels – an idea that made her blood boil, even as she privately admitted that *she* hadn't exactly always described Girdwood Springs in the most glowing of terms.

*But that's different! I'm from here! Just because I can complain about this place doesn't mean any old out-of-towner is allowed to!*

Shaking her head, Natasha stomped onwards. She didn't know this part of the trail well at all – carried by her anger, she'd walked quickly beyond anywhere she'd walked before, and she had to admit, this part of the forest looked *a lot* denser than anywhere she'd ever been before.

She knew she should be careful – it was incredibly easy to become disoriented in thick woods. It was a message she'd had drummed into her by her parents when she'd been a child, and with good reason.

But now, it seemed, she'd forgotten all about things like *Pay attention to where you're going* and *Always take note of landmarks and other distinguishing features about the terrain* and other sensible ideas that would assist her in not getting lost, or, at the least, make it easier for her to find her way back if she *did* temporarily lose her way.

Glancing around her, Natasha felt her stomach sink. She was still, technically, on a trail. But it had grown thinner and thinner the farther she walked, and now, looking back the way she'd come, she realized it was barely visible at all beneath the dense undergrowth that had started to spring up now that the weather was getting warmer.

She'd clearly gone beyond the approved hiking trails – and she really didn't have anyone to blame but herself, for getting so carried away with her angry internal monologue.

*Okay. Well, number one thing to do in this situation is not to panic,* she thought, as, cautiously, she turned and headed back the way she'd come. The mud she'd stomped through still held the impressions of her boots in its sticky surface, so she could definitely follow her own footsteps back. She had plenty of water in her bag, and some sandwiches too. Not that she expected that she'd be lost for long enough that she needed to conserve food and water, but she knew it was pretty easy to get dehydrated, even in a short amount of time.

At the moment, however, there didn't seem to be anything to worry about. Her footsteps were obvious on the ground, and the day was sunny but cool.

*I'll be fine,* Natasha thought as she made her way back through the thick, green bracken. *I'll be completely –*

“ARGH!”

Natasha let out an embarrassing squawk as, without warning, her feet shot out from under her, slipping in the mud, sending her sprawling and landing heavily on her hip – which would have been annoying enough by itself, but it didn't stop there. As she landed, a soft, water-logged embankment, hidden by the thick ferns and bracken, suddenly crumbled away beneath her, leaving her to roll down its side, completely unable to stop herself.

*Oh... oh no...*

Natasha grabbed at the bracken stalks as she slid, but in the soft earth, all she succeeded in doing was uprooting them – they didn't even slow her down as she slipped and slid down the muddy slope.

*This is what I get for letting a guy go to my head,* Natasha thought desperately, as finally, she managed to grab hold of a fallen branch that was stuck deep into the earth. Her shoulder wrenched painfully as she desperately held on, her palms burning as they chafed against the rough bark of the branch, but at last her descent came to a halt – and not a moment too soon.

Glancing over her throbbing shoulder, Natasha realized if she hadn't managed to grab on to the branch, she would have shot out over a small ravine – not very deep at all, but filled with some *extremely* unfriendly looking rocks and boulders. If she'd tumbled down there and landed on any one of them, she would have been lucky to escape with anything less than a broken leg.

Natasha gasped for breath as she looked around, searching for some way to haul herself back up the bank. But the only thing in reach to hold on to was the branch she was already holding – everything else had slid away with the mini-avalanche she had caused when she'd gone tumbling down the slippery slope. A few ferns were still barely clinging to the soil, but if she tried to use them to climb up they'd undoubtedly come away and leave her to fall the rest of the way down onto the rocks below.

Nor could she gently let herself down any lower – after the lip of the muddy bank, there was a long drop onto the rocks, with no safe way of climbing down. She was, for the moment, stuck where she was.

*Except that... uh-oh...*

The branch she had managed to grab gave a little jerk, and Natasha realized that, even as deeply as it was buried in the soil, the ground was soft enough that now, with her full weight resting on the branch, it was slowly but surely beginning to slide free. If she didn't find some way out of her predicament, she'd fall onto the rocks no matter what she did.

*Okay. No point in panicking. I just have to dig my fingers into the wet soil, find a toe hold, and then slowly, carefully, climb back up to the trail...*

But that was easier said than done. The earth was so wet and crumbling that it fell away as soon as she tried to dig her fingers into it. There was no way of creating any kind of secure hand or footholds that she could reliably use to climb, not even if she was careful to always make sure she was distributing her weight evenly.

*I really have gotten myself into a situation here*, Natasha thought grimly, as with a small *slurping* sound, the branch slid even farther out of the soil, jerking her bodily, and sending pebbles and bits of dirt rushing past her to fly into the void just below her feet.

But she refused to give up. There *had* to be something she could do. She couldn't twist around to reach her phone in her back pocket and call for help, since any movement would probably just pull the branch all the way free. Nor could she take off her backpack and throw it down onto the rocks, just in case she might somehow be able to land on it and somewhat break her fall.

*There has to be something... I can't believe that –*

But even as she thought that, the soil finally gave up its hold on the thick branch she was clinging to, and Natasha felt herself begin to slide the last of the way down the bank, picking up speed as she went, *way* too fast to stop herself when she finally flew over the edge and went sailing through the air, the rocks lurching sickeningly up at her as she fell, flailing, toward them –

Only to land on something solid, warm, and soft.

*Am... am I dead, then?*

Natasha didn't dare to open her eyes. She *must* have fallen onto the rocks – there was literally nowhere else for her to fall. But, she decided, she must have hit her head when she fell and died instantly, because she *definitely* wasn't lying at the bottom of the ravine now after breaking probably every bone she'd ever heard of, and most likely some she hadn't.

*No... whatever I'm lying on, it's... it's...*

Maybe she *had* died, and now she was in Heaven, lying on a soft fluffy cloud.

Because there was literally *no* other explanation for the softness she felt beneath her cheek and palms, the warmth, the wind rushing through her hair...

Finally gathering up her courage to open her eyes and peek out at what was happening around her, Natasha couldn't say

exactly what she was expecting to see – the Pearly Gates? A choir of angels? – but what she *did* see didn't actually look all that out of place. Just blue sky, trees, an enormous pair of feathered wings on either side of her, spread wide to catch the updrafts of wind –

*Wait... wait... WHAT?!*

Blinking, Natasha shook her head, and forced herself to actually *take in* what was going on around her.

Beneath her palms was soft, golden fur, which became lighter-colored but equally soft feathers beneath her fingertips.

*And, uh, yeah, those are definitely wings...*

Wide, broad wings, their feathers gently ruffling in the wind as she was carried higher and higher above the ground, the canopy of the forest laid out in brilliant greens below her.

Natasha could feel her heart thudding wildly in her chest as she tried to make sense of this situation. But her head was spinning, and no explanation she could come up with made *any* sense whatsoever. When she looked to her left, she could see a broad, golden-furred back and a long tail streaming – a tail that looked *exactly* like a lion's tail, with a little puff of slightly darker fur at the tip.

Turning her head and looking right, she found herself staring at a feathered head – the feathers were a lighter gold where they met the fur that coated the rest of this... this... *whatever it was*, but became white as they continued upward, to the head of what was *very very* definitely an eagle, judging by the large, hooked beak she could *just* see from around the back of the feathered head.

*Okay. So. It's... a lion. With wings. And the head of an eagle. And I'm flying on its back. It swooped down out of the sky and caught me just as I was about to plunge to possible death, and now it's carrying me on its back. Okay.*

Natasha's head spun.

*Now that I think about it, isn't there a name for a kind of creature that's half lion, half eagle?*

Of course there was, she thought, even as she felt like she *might* be going just the tiniest bit crazy.

*They're called griffins. I'm riding on a griffin's back.*

She swallowed.

*A griffin just like the one Kieran told me he turned into.*

Natasha felt a strange kind of hysterical laugh trying to bubble up inside her. Was it possible she'd gone crazy? That the fear of falling onto those rocks had made her start to hallucinate a world where everything had actually worked out wonderfully – a world where Kieran *wasn't* a liar and had in fact told her the whole truth about everything, and was now here to save her from some pretty nasty injuries, at absolute minimum?

*Yeah, that must be it, Natasha thought, as she looked dazedly around her. I've just imagined my ideal world. And now I'm dreaming. I guess I better enjoy it before I wake up and find out what really happened.*

And to be honest... enjoying what was happening wasn't actually all that hard.

Gripping on to the griffin's fur to make herself more secure, Natasha had to admit that soaring through the air, all the world laid out below her, was pretty exhilarating. This was definitely better than her usual dreams, which were usually stress-induced nightmares about missing important deadlines or pissing off important clients. Here, in the crystal-clear air, the white sunshine on her face and the forest below, riding on the back of a griffin, Natasha couldn't imagine ever caring about either of those things ever again.

The sky somehow seemed even more blue, and the mountains around them even more spectacular and beautiful. This early in spring they were still slightly snow-capped, but Natasha had never imagined how they'd look from this angle before.

Even though the air was chill, the warmth of the griffin kept her from feeling it. It was the perfect way to travel, Natasha decided, as the griffin dipped its wings and turned in a

wide circle, slowly and gently so as not to jostle her with any sudden movements, and then gradually began to descend back down toward the forest.

*I guess this is where the dream ends and I wake up,* Natasha thought, as the trees below grew larger and larger. She wasn't sure why she felt that she'd be rudely awakened as soon as they reached the ground, but somehow, it just seemed like the logical thing to think. Up here, she was held safe in a bubble of unreality. Down below, she was probably going to be in urgent need of medical attention.

The griffin at least did seem to know where it was going – it guided them down to an obvious clearing in the canopy, where its massive wings wouldn't get snagged on any tree branches. It drew them in slightly, dropping them through the gap in the trees, and Natasha saw once they got lower that by the clearing there stood a house.

It was old and stately, and clearly in its prime it would have been a magnificent residence. It was old and run-down now, though, the paintwork fading and flaky, some of the beams of the porch and steps obviously sagging, and it was missing quite a few roof tiles. But still, it was beautiful – if someone ever wanted to give it some tender loving care, it could be restored to its former glory.

*It must be – it must be the house Kieran said he was staying in, the one that belonged to his great uncle...*

Natasha swallowed, as she remembered that it was also the house that Eula had told her was haunted. It definitely did *look* like the kind of house that would be haunted – old, stately but worn, with generations' worth of secrets locked up in its nooks and crannies.

*But I don't believe in ghosts,* Natasha told herself as the griffin came in gently to land a few feet from the house. *But then, I guess until about fifteen minutes ago, I didn't believe in shifters either.*

And to be honest, she still wasn't sure she actually did. She wasn't sure at all that this wasn't a dream, and sooner or later



she was going to wake up in a hospital, after having actually slid onto the rocks and hit her head.

*But again, I guess I better just enjoy the dream while it lasts,* she thought, as she slid down off the griffin's back, not without a little reluctance, and not only because the griffin was *warm*.

Once her feet were back on solid ground, Natasha found she wasn't really sure what to do next. She supposed it wasn't every day that someone was rescued by a giant mythical creature, dream or not. What was she supposed to do? What was she supposed to say? And was this griffin *really* actually Kieran? If so, why didn't he turn back into the hot guy she knew?

"Uh," Natasha said, after a few moments of silence. Things were getting a little awkward after all, with the two of them just staring at each other. The griffin's golden eagle eyes definitely had a kind of human intelligence that made her think it'd understand her if she spoke to it. "Thank you for saving me. I was pretty sure that was it for me. I mean, if you actually *did* save me, and this isn't just some kind of weird dream."

The griffin let out a low, urgent crooning sound at that, as if it were trying to reassure her. It shook its massive head, feathers rustling, and extended its wings – as if trying to show her exactly *how* it had rescued her.

"That – that's very impressive," Natasha stuttered out. She got the distinct impression that the griffin was showing off to her – as if trying to show her just how impressive it was. And it *was* pretty magnificent, she had to admit. It was much bigger than she thought a regular lion was, and its wingspan was enormous. In the sunlight that broke through the trees, its wings glistened like gold. It was, in a word, *beautiful*. And clearly, it was strong. It had carried her all this way as if she'd weighed nothing at all.

"I, uh, I definitely owe you one," Natasha continued after a moment. She knew she sounded stupid, but for now, her head was completely empty of thought. But then, what was she *supposed* to be thinking at a time like this?!

“So... are you actually Kieran in there after all,” she said, inspiration finally striking her. “Because if so... I guess I owe you an apology for not believing you. But on the other hand, can you really blame me? Why didn’t you just turn into a griffin yesterday, when you said you would? Or were your powers really not working then?”

The griffin shook itself, letting out another little croon, before clucking a little, as if it were trying to explain something to her. Natasha had never really thought about what a frustrated eagle might sound like before, but now that she heard it, she definitely thought this was it.

*Can he now not turn back or something?* she thought – just as, at last, the griffin began to... to *shift*.

Natasha gasped, her eyes flying wide.

It was like nothing she’d ever seen before – a shimmer ran over the full length of the griffin’s body, before its fur and feathers began to disappear, its body getting smaller, its wings vanishing before her eyes. It all took only a heartbeat or two – and then, Kieran was standing in front of her, looking exactly as he had the day before when he’d come to see her: the same broad shoulders, long, muscular legs, and floppy blond mop of hair.

Right now though, the dazzling smile was missing – instead, he wore an expression of concern.

“Natasha – are you all right?” he asked, frantic worry clear in his voice. He took a couple of steps toward her, arms raised as if he meant to pull her against his chest in a tight embrace, before he suddenly stopped, letting them fall back down to his sides. “I mean – I hope I didn’t scare you. There was no other choice. When I sensed you were in trouble – or rather, my *griffin* sensed it – I didn’t really have any time to do anything else. I just shifted and flew to where you were, and then I saw you –”

Kieran cut himself off, his face going even more pale. It was clear that he was frightened, his eyes roaming over her body, but not in a way that told her he was appreciating her curves – he was clearly looking at her mud-stained leggings

and jacket, which now also had holes torn in them, and checking to see if she had any obvious injuries.

She didn't think she did, aside from a few cuts and scrapes, but that was all thanks to him.

"No, I... you didn't frighten me," Natasha said, shaking her head, and she was mildly surprised to find that it was true. She had to admit, however, that she *did* feel just a little light-headed, her knees wobbling. "I just... I mean, this really isn't a dream though, is it? This is real. You really *are* a griffin."

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, Natasha realized that she was actually starting to believe it.

"No, Natasha, I swear it's not a dream," Kieran said softly. "I was trying to tell you yesterday that this is what I am – but lately, me and my griffin... we haven't really been seeing eye to eye, I guess you could say. Either it takes over my body when I really don't want it to, or else, just when I *do* need it, it refuses to come out." He swallowed, looking at her in a way that was almost pleading. "I really was telling the truth – that was why I missed our date yesterday. My griffin really *did* take over my body, and I didn't think it'd be a great idea to turn up for the date looking, uh, well, like I did a few moments ago."

Natasha shook her head, a small, incredulous laugh bursting from her lips. "Um. No. Maybe not. But I can definitely say I'm glad you showed up looking like you did just now. I was pretty sure I was a goner. I was just too mad to look at where I was going, and, uh..."

She trailed off, embarrassment making her face flush as she remembered just *why* she'd been so mad.

"You were mad about me missing the date, and then, as far as you knew, lying about the reason," Kieran said, his eyes widening. Maybe he could tell by the look on her face that he'd guessed correctly, because he took a few halting steps to her side, and this time, he really *did* put his arms around her – well, Natasha *thought* he was going to do that, but in the end he just rested his hands on her shoulders, gazing into her eyes

with a stricken expression on his face. “Then it was my fault you almost –”

“No! No.” Natasha shook her head. “No, it wasn’t. I wasn’t looking where I was going. You weren’t to blame for that. I should have been keeping my wits about me, no matter what kind of mood I was in.” She took a deep breath, suddenly *very* aware of how close his face was to hers, and just how *warm* his hands felt on her shoulders. “And as it turned out, you were telling the truth all along.”

“But I can see how you would have gotten the idea I was lying,” Kieran said, his eyes still searching her face. “I mean... it does sound pretty ridiculous. And then I couldn’t shift. So it wasn’t like you were being unreasonable in thinking I’d made it all up.”

“Well, whether that’s true or not,” Natasha replied, “I guess I really *do* have proof now that you weren’t lying at all. But you said that you and your griffin, uh, haven’t been getting along recently? But you shifted just now, when you needed to save me.”

Kieran nodded. “Yes. To be honest, that was the first time in weeks I’ve really felt in sync with it – the way I always used to be. It sensed you were in danger, and I told it to do what it needed to do. We were working together again. I guess when it was something important enough, we could come together. I don’t know if things will stay that way, though. Not until I...”

Kieran trailed off, glancing at her. Natasha frowned, intuiting there was something he wasn’t saying – but after telling her that he was a griffin, what else could there possibly be to know about him?

“Not until you what?” she prompted him, curiosity simmering within her. Suddenly, she realized, she wanted to know *everything*. If this really wasn’t a dream, then she had about a million questions she needed answered. Kieran had said there were other people like him in the world – but how many? And where did they live? Were there other griffins? Were there *dragons*?!

Kieran pulled in a deep breath, letting his hands drop from her shoulders – and Natasha found herself missing the contact immediately.

“Maybe we’d better go inside,” Kieran said, after a long moment. “I feel like I have some explaining to do.”

## CHAPTER 8

“Okay, so it’s like... a family thing,” Natasha said, as she sat on the threadbare sofa in the sitting room of the house, a steaming cup of coffee in her hands. “You grandparents were griffins, your parents are griffins, *you’re* a griffin. I think I get it.”

Kieran had insisted on getting her something to eat and drink after everything that had happened – and, sure enough, as soon as the adrenaline had worn off, Natasha had found that she needed it. Her hands had started shaking, her knees wobbling, and Kieran had had to catch her as she made her way up the front stairs of the house.

He still hadn’t forgotten the feel of her body pressed against his as he’d helped her up to the front door – but he pushed the sensation from his mind before he could linger too long on it. Right now, he needed to concentrate, *not* be thinking about just how much he wanted to take Natasha in his arms and show her just how grateful he was that she believed him – and how relieved he was that she was *safe*, here with him in his house.

*We protected our mate*, his griffin crooned, flexing its wings. *We must always protect our mate. She must never leave our side again!*

*Well, it’s nice that you’re saying that now*, Kieran told it, trying to keep the grimace off his face in case Natasha thought he was grimacing at *her*. He didn’t need to cause any more problems. *Why did you make things so difficult?*

The griffin *did* seem a little contrite, he supposed, but he waited to see if it had anything more to say for itself.

*I am... sorry,* it eventually managed to get out, but then, Kieran supposed apologies didn't come naturally to enormous mythical creatures. *I wanted to know if you were serious about your promises. I wanted to keep us here. This place is... our home. The city isn't that for us at all.*

Kieran clenched his fists. *But how was keeping us from Natasha going to convince me of anything?*

*I am sorry for that too,* the griffin said. *I was fearful. Fearful that you wouldn't take our bond with her seriously, just as you haven't taken the bond we share seriously. I have been ignored, told my needs were not important. I needed to know that you would see the bond with our mate as the most important thing in our lives, and never give it up.*

*So... you were intentionally testing me?* Kieran asked it, which was at least an explanation that made some kind of sense. Even if it had nearly blown things between them.

*I hope you can forgive me,* the griffin said after a moment. *But I have been neglected for so long. I did not know how else to bring your attention to the seriousness of the situation. I needed to know you wouldn't simply return to the city and forget.*

Swallowing, Kieran felt guilt pierce through his heart. He understood now – both what the griffin had been doing, and his own role in having made it so unhappy in the first place.

*I'm sorry too,* he told it. *I was wrong, and I have definitely neglected you. I promise it won't happen again. And I promise I understand how important Natasha is.*

*That* was a slight understatement, Kieran thought as he looked at Natasha where she sat on the couch, drinking her coffee and munching on the food he'd brought her. His chest flooded with love at the sight of her, and relief at the fact she was safe.

*Then... you will stay by her side, protect her, never leaving her even for a moment?* the griffin asked him.

That might have been a bit too much to ask, Kieran thought, but he hoped that Natasha *would* let him protect her from now on. Not that she needed it necessarily, but he *would* do everything in his power to always keep her safe from harm – that is, if she accepted him as her mate.

Which he still hadn't actually told her that she *was*.

So far, all he'd said to her was to explain more about shifters, and how he'd come to be one; how the world of shifters worked, and how no, he hadn't been bitten by a were-griffin on a full moon, he'd been born a shifter because his parents – his entire family, in fact – were shifters.

She'd listened to him attentively, her eyes widening at times, but she hadn't interrupted him, and she clearly wanted to learn more.

*But before I say anything else, I really have to tell her the truth about what we are to each other. I have to ask if she'll accept me as her mate.*

He wasn't really sure how to start that conversation, however – until, unexpectedly, Natasha provided him with the answer herself.

“So... you said that your griffin, uh, sensed that I was in trouble, and that was how you were able to fly to me so quickly and rescue me,” she said contemplatively, looking into her coffee mug. “Which, by the way, I really can't thank you enough for. But... is that something you can do with everyone? You just sense when people are in trouble and you come to give them a hand?”

Kieran shook his head, swallowing. Well, he guessed, it was now or never.

“No. I can't sense whenever anyone, anywhere in the world is in trouble and come flying to their rescue,” he said. “Though obviously if I *saw* someone in trouble and they could only be saved by me in griffin form, I'd find a way to do it, even if it meant revealing myself. But *sensing* someone in trouble... no. That was only you.”



Natasha's head shot up, her eyes widening. "Oh?" she said, blinking. "Uh, is there, um, a reason for that?"

Nodding, Kieran leaned forward. He wanted very badly to take Natasha's hand, but he restrained himself. So far she'd taken everything he had to tell her in stride. But who knew how she'd react to finding out she was a griffin's mate?

"Yes, there is. And it might sound a little bit crazy at first, but I promise you, it's true."

Natasha let out a shaky laugh. "Well, okay. But to be honest, I've had enough of doubting your word. So whatever it is, I can tell you now I'll probably believe it."

*Well, Kieran thought, let's hope so. And more than that, let's hope you like it.*

"The truth is, being able to turn into a griffin is only one of the ways I'm different from normal humans," he said. "It's something *all* shifters have, though, no matter what kind of animal we turn into. It's something you grow up hearing about, but I guess I never really gave it that much thought until now." He paused. Natasha was still listening, eyes wide. "But now that it's happened to me, I wonder why I didn't think about it sooner. If I'd known, I definitely would have come looking for you."

"Come looking for me?" Natasha was now looking simply confused – and Kieran realized he was tip-toeing around the subject.

*Simply tell her!* his griffin roared within him, pushing the words up his throat. *She is our mate! She will accept us!*

"All shifters have what we call a fated mate," Kieran blurted, finally getting the words out. "Someone we're meant to be with – the person who was made for us. And we were made for them. As soon as we touch them, we just *know*. We just know that they're the person we were meant to spend the rest of our lives with. And Natasha, that's what you are to me – my mate. The person I was made for. The person I want to be with. Forever."

Natasha's eyes had become as big as saucers as he spoke, and Kieran wasn't sure whether that was a good sign or not. She was silent for a moment after he finally came to the end of his speech – he had no idea whether he'd been able to put it in a way that sounded appealing to her or not – simply staring at him.

“So – so you're saying that – I'm *your* mate. Me?!” she stammered out after a moment.

Kieran nodded. “That's right, Natasha. If you'll have me.”

Natasha stared down at her coffee again. “Uh, wow,” she murmured, after another moment of silence. “Well, I definitely did *not* see that one coming. Is that why you asked me out, after... oh my God, after our hands touched over the can of beans? You could *sense* that I was your mate even then?!”

“That's right,” Kieran said, nodding. “I knew it right at that very moment. But I guess everything since then has kind of been a mess. I feel like we haven't been able to get to know each other very well at all. And I know that's important! I don't expect you to just say yes to me right away, when you don't even know much about me. But... if you're willing... I'd love to spend the month you're in Girdwood Springs getting to know you better. And showing you just how dedicated I am to being the best mate I can possibly be for you.”

Natasha had raised her head as he spoke, and was now regarding him steadily with her large, dark eyes.

“Well,” she said, licking her lips. “I think I already *do* know a lot about you. I know you're kind, funny, and sincere – even if I couldn't see it right away. I know you tried to tell me the truth as soon as you could. I know that I felt a connection to you right away, even though I tried to tell myself I didn't. And I know,” she continued, leaning in suddenly and putting her coffee cup down on the table next to her, “I *know* that I've never been more attracted to anyone before in my life.”

Kieran's heart skipped a beat. *Did she really just say what I think she said?!*

He'd noticed right away that Natasha was direct, and that she said exactly what was on her mind. And now, he realized, slightly dazed, she *acted* on it too – because in the next moment, she pressed her lips to his, her hands coming up to cup his jaw.

The kiss was *far* more searing than it had any right to be – Kieran felt lines of fire racing through his veins as he parted his lips, feeling Natasha's open as if in answer to his. Raising his arms, he slid his hands around her waist, pulling her closer to him on the sofa, as the kiss became deeper, more urgent.

They were moving quickly, but Kieran knew that neither of them wanted to stop – the heat in his belly was kindling quickly, the flame of his desire for her leaping high within him. He'd wanted to do this since the first moment he saw her – his beautiful, perfect mate – but this went beyond anything he ever could have imagined.

*We really are made for each other*, he thought, his head spinning, as together they began to sink back onto the couch, their mouths locked together, pleasure already singing along his every nerve just from having Natasha pressed against him like this –

*CRASH!*

Kieran and Natasha jumped apart, still breathing heavily, as the massive sound tore through the house. It was followed quickly by another series of *crashes* and *thuds*, as if, once again, that herd of elephants had returned and they were now hosting tap-dancing lessons in the attic.

Kieran watched as Natasha's eyes grew wider and wider with alarm the longer the sounds went on – and he imagined his own expression mirrored hers.

“What was that?” Natasha whispered, during a brief pause in the unholy racket.

“Uh. I don't actually know,” Kieran admitted. “I guessed at first that it was the house... settling, or something like that. But I haven't really had the chance to investigate yet, and I'm starting to doubt my guess is correct.”

Another *crash*, another *thud*. The sounds didn't subside at all – if anything, they seemed to be getting *louder*.

Well, until they abruptly stopped altogether.

“Well, whatever it is, it has *terrible* timing,” Natasha said, as she rather sheepishly smoothed down her hair from where it had fallen into complete disarray as Kieran had kissed her. “But... oh my God. Maybe *this* is what Eula meant when she said this place was haunted?”

Kieran blinked. “I'm sorry, what? It's haunted? Someone told you that?”

“Yeah – well, she didn't say much. She just said some teenagers had been using this place to hang out in, since there'd been no one living here for a while.” She shot Kieran an apologetic look. “Sorry, that's probably not something you wanted to hear about somewhere you spent your childhood.”

“No, it's okay,” Kieran reassured her. “I *do* love this place, but it's me and my parents who've been neglecting it. I can't really blame anyone for thinking it'd been totally abandoned. We did always have some plans to come back and restore it, but we never really found the time, and we couldn't do it when Great Uncle Henry was still alive – he always insisted he had his own plans for the place, and he wouldn't budge an inch or let anyone help him, no matter what. So by the time he died, it was already a little worn out.”

Kieran felt a pang in his heart as he spoke. He really *did* love this place, and he had so many wonderful childhood memories of it. Perhaps, this time, he really should just stay here and try to do something with it.

*Well, provided it isn't actually haunted, I suppose...*

“I don't believe in ghosts, though,” Kieran said. “So... this place being haunted is a little hard for me to get behind.”

To his surprise, Natasha burst out laughing. “You don't believe in ghosts? Isn't that a little bit of a strange thing for you to say, considering... well, everything?”

“You kind of have a point there, I guess,” Kieran said, flashing her a grin. “I guess it might seem a bit odd for me to

rule it out as a possibility – I should keep an open mind.”

“Well, whatever it is, we probably *do* need to find out more,” Natasha said, a sudden determined gleam entering her eyes. “Because I do *not* want to be interrupted again!”

Warmth kindled in Kieran’s belly at the words – and at the indomitable way Natasha stood up from the sofa, looking around, her mouth set in a firm line.

“Those sounds came from the attic,” she said, looking up. “I think, anyway. They were so loud they seemed to be coming from everywhere at once. Have you had a look up there yet?”

“No, not yet,” Kieran admitted, joining her in standing up. “There used to be a trapdoor in the upstairs ceiling that led up to there, but now I can’t find it – or my memory of where it is is faulty. But the first night this happened, my griffin kind of took over right away and flew me out of the house – the sounds freaked it out *bad*. And then the next couple of times I was here I didn’t hear it much, so I figured it was some weird, one-off thing. Clearly though, if it’s a ghost, we’re going to have to do something about that.”

“I wonder if the local exterminators deal with ghost infestations,” Natasha wondered as together, they headed for the main stairs that led up to the second floor of the house from the foyer. “Though to be honest, I’d prefer a catch and release strategy. Do you think ghosts are territorial? Would they just come back if we moved them somewhere else?”

Kieran laughed. “Well, who can say? Maybe they’ll be amenable to some kind of time-share arrangement.”

“Let’s hope so,” Natasha said, joining in with his laughter.

It seemed odd to be laughing about the possibility of ghosts, Kieran thought – but then, what else was there to do about a situation like this? And besides which, ever since he’d finally told Natasha the truth – the *whole* truth – he’d felt as if a block of ice that had been sitting in his stomach had suddenly melted, leaving him feeling lighter and warmer than he had in *months*. Perhaps he’d been carrying that strange knot of cold tension around within himself for so long now that he

hadn't even noticed it was there anymore, until, finally, it was gone.

"In my memory, the trapdoor cover used to be here," Kieran said, pointing upward at the ceiling once they'd ascended the stairs. "But clearly, I was wrong."

"Hmm," Natasha said, glancing around, until her eyes fell on the long row of cupboards that lined the wall.

Kieran immediately saw what she was seeing: the cupboards were obviously a later addition to the house, the wood less worn than the wood the floor was made out of, and the way they fit against the wall slightly imperfect. Not to mention, the standard of the carpentry on them also wasn't quite as high as the rest of the house – it was a small difference, but the rest of the house, despite the disrepair, was so well-made that once he'd noticed it, Kieran couldn't help but see all the other small faults in the way the cupboards were constructed. It was still *good* work, but it looked like the work of a very skilled amateur, rather than the master craftsmen who'd clearly worked on the rest of the house.

"Were those always there?" Natasha asked after a moment.

Kieran shook his head – but really, he couldn't remember enough about these details to be sure. "Not from the look of them, but I don't remember if they were here when I was a kid."

Walking over to the closest one, he opened the door. The cupboard smelled musty inside, but it was empty, and there were no shelves or anything else inside that would have made it work as storage. In fact, there was nothing inside it at all – instead of being a cupboard, it looked more like a very, very small room. But there, in the ceiling, was the trapdoor that Kieran had vaguely remembered from his childhood.

"I guess it was here all along, then," he murmured, as he reached up to grab the string to open it. It was frayed and it almost came apart in his hands as he pulled on it, but still, it held, if only just, and the trapdoor came open, the steps leading up to the attic descending as it did, stopping just at the edge of the cupboard, with barely enough room to climb them.

Kieran glanced at Natasha. “Do you really think there’s ghosts up there?”

Pursing her lips a little, Natasha shook her head. “Yesterday I would have said definitely not. But yesterday I would have said you were telling, uh, untruths when you told me you turned into a griffin, and look how that turned out. So let’s just say I’m not ruling anything out right now.”

Just as she finished speaking, another round of unbelievably loud *thuds* echoed through the house. Again, Kieran thought that with the strength of them, the house should have been shaking on its foundations. But no – it was still only the noise, and nothing else.

It was weird. It was *spooky*. It really wasn’t any wonder the local teenagers – and diner owners – had decided this place was haunted.

“Even if it *is* ghosts, I doubt they’re just going to appear in front of us and own up to everything,” Kieran pointed out.

“Well, if we can’t figure it out, at least we can always go back to my B&B,” Natasha said, shooting him a mildly wicked grin. “No ghosts there... well, that I’ve heard anything from, anyway.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Kieran said, as, a little gingerly, he put his foot on the first step of the ladder.

The air in the attic was even mustier than the air inside the cupboard, and spiderwebs hung from the rafters, dust thick on the floor. The space was cavernous, and filled with old furniture and other indistinct shapes covered with dust cloths. Kieran knew it’d be a lot of work to sort through all of this stuff, but right now, he was focused solely on trying to figure out the mystery of the thumping sounds.

He had to admit, he didn’t know the first thing about ghosts, though – would they just appear before him? Or was the ghost actually just the sounds? Maybe it didn’t have any kind of form that he could see with his eyes at all –

*Well, not that it actually is ghosts anyway,* Kieran thought, shaking his head. *I’m sure there must be some completely*

*logical explanation for all of this. And even if there isn't, then it's not like ghosts are just going to appear in front of us and announce that – whoa!*

Kieran's thoughts abruptly cut off as, suddenly, a shimmer of blue cut through the dusty gloom of the attic space, bright enough that he had to lift his hand to cover his eyes. Beside him, he could sense Natasha doing the same – and within him, his griffin was leaning forward curiously, eyes darting, senses on high alert.

It didn't seem *alarmed*, however – nothing like the first night they had been here, when it'd insisted on getting them out of the house just as fast as it could.

*Is – is it dangerous?* he asked it, hoping he could trust its instincts. *Do I need to get Natasha out of here?!*

He almost grabbed Natasha's arm to pull her back down the stairs and carry her to safety without waiting for the griffin's response. If there was even the slightest chance that his mate could be in danger, then Kieran wasn't about to waste valuable seconds trying to figure things out!

*No*, the griffin replied after a moment. *No. Not dangerous. Just...*

*Just what?* Kieran demanded.

*I don't know. I've never sensed something like this before.* The griffin sounded perplexed, and Kieran couldn't say he blamed it. But right now, he wanted to get Natasha out of here – he didn't care how curious his griffin was, it just wasn't worth the risk.

“Come on,” he said quickly, grabbing her arm and tugging her back toward the open trapdoor. “We should get out of here –”

Natasha glanced up at him, eyes wide. “Is it dangerous? What even *is* it?”

“I don't think we should hang around to find out,” Kieran said, as together, they ran back through the attic, stirring up clouds of dust as they went. But they hadn't gone far, and in



only a few seconds Kieran was urging Natasha down the steps – that was, until a desperate voice cut them off in their tracks.

“Wait! Please don’t go! I’ve been waiting for someone to come and find me up here for... for I don’t know how long! Don’t run away – I need your help!”

Kieran paused, his heart thudding.

*Could it be a trap?*

He bit his lip, taking a moment to glance up. His griffin *still* wasn’t reacting the way it had on that first night here – in fact, it really *did* seem more curious than anything. But still, Kieran wasn’t sure he should take any risks where Natasha’s safety was concerned.

*But... it did say it needed our help...*

“Kieran – look.”

Kieran looked down at Natasha where she was half-in, half-out of the trap door, pointing to the far end of the attic. He followed her gesture with his eyes – and saw a figure standing against the far wall.

*Well, I think it’s a figure...*

Whatever it was, it definitely wasn’t human. It was tall and slender, with pale skin that seemed to be emitting some kind of shimmering blue glow. And its hair was blue too – light blue, and falling to its waist. Despite the long hair, Kieran still couldn’t tell if the figure was male or female – its face was soft and androgynous, its expression pleading.

“Who are you?” he asked, surprise and lingering suspicion that this could be a trap making his voice harsher than usual.

What *are you?* he silently added in his head – because whatever this figure was, it definitely wasn’t like any shifter he’d ever heard of. And what was it doing up here in his uncle’s attic?!

“I – I don’t really have a name, the way you do,” the figure stuttered out, raising its hands as if it could sense Kieran’s suspicion and it wanted to show that it was no threat. “But Henry used to call me Sieval.”

Kieran blinked, surprise washing over him. “Wait – Henry? You *knew* my Uncle Henry?”

The figure – Sieval, if that was what it wanted to be called – nodded, the shimmering light from its skin shifting against the wall as it did so.

“Yes – he was my friend. For many years, we spent time together in this house. But he went away. He told me that he was old – for a shifter, what counts as old – and that he didn’t have much time left. And then, he went away.”

Kieran felt a knot in his throat, sadness welling up inside him at the mournful tone of the creature’s voice, despite the fact he *still* didn’t know what it was.

“Yes,” he said, trying to make his voice soft. “He died. Many years ago now – I’m sorry if you didn’t know.”

It seemed strange to be trying to console this mysterious being, but Kieran wasn’t sure what else to do. He could feel Natasha’s fingers gripping onto his arm – and he knew she had to be his first priority, no matter what.

*I can’t let myself be lulled into a false sense of security...*

“No, I knew,” the being said softly, its voice seeming to reverberate with sadness. “I could sense it. But he did say – he did promise me that –”

Sieval cut itself off, and Kieran felt surprise ripple through him as it looked up at him. Its eyes were large and haunting, and he couldn’t help but feel sympathy for it – even if he didn’t really understand *why*.

“Are you a shifter too?”

It was Natasha’s voice that broke him out of his reverie. She was slowly beginning to climb back up out of the trap door to stand beside him, her eyes intent on Sieval.

“No,” Sieval replied after a moment. “I’m a sprite – one of the few left in the world.”

“Wait, wait, a *sprite*?” Kieran said, his surprise growing by the moment. “I didn’t think there were *any* left... well, it’s not that there *aren’t* any, it’s just that they’re so reclusive that no

one ever sees them anymore.” He frowned. “How is it that you’ve come to be in my Uncle Henry’s attic? And was it *you* who was making all that noise?”

Sieval blinked its large, liquid eyes, seeming a little overwhelmed by all the questions – and again, Kieran couldn’t help but feel a little sympathetic for it. But he *did* also want answers.

It seemed completely outlandish to think that a sprite – of all creatures – could have somehow set up home in Great Uncle Henry’s attic, and, moreover, that it seemed to have been *friends* with him. Kieran had had no memory of any such thing ever having happened during his childhood – there had never been any mysterious bangings or thuddings then.

“Perhaps...” Sieval said hesitantly, after a moment, “perhaps it’s best if I start at the beginning.”

## CHAPTER 9

“*I* agree, that would probably be best,” Kieran said, as Natasha glanced up at him from where she stood by his side.

She had to admit – she was impressed by how well she was taking all of this in stride, even if she did say so herself. Maybe everything would catch up with her soon – finding out, after all, that both griffins *and* sprites existed on the same day was probably something that would take time to adjust to. But for now, she simply found herself nodding along with Kieran saying that they should listen to the sprite’s explanation for what it was doing in an attic.

Natasha was sure that *soon* she was going to have a huge freakout about all this... but right now, she was cool with it. It really wasn’t the time to have a weird breakdown – and anyway, she had to admit, she was burning up with curiosity. The huge freakout could wait until she’d found out what exactly was going on around here.

“Should we stay up here, or... can we move down to the sitting room, where there’s less dust?” Kieran asked after a moment. “Uh... where would be the most comfortable place?”

“The sitting room is acceptable,” Sieval said. “But you will have to take my rock with you. I cannot carry it myself, but I also cannot move from here without it.”

“Your... your rock?” Kieran asked, confusion creasing his brow. “What do you mean?”

“All sprites are bonded to an object,” Sieval explained. “Where it goes, we go. But we cannot move it ourselves. We need someone to carry it for us.”

“Oh!” Kieran said, his face clearing. “I remember hearing something like that. Sprites tend to stay in one place, where whatever they’re bonded to is – in the folklore stories, they protect the area where their bonded object is very closely.” He frowned again. “But how did your rock get into my uncle’s attic?”

“If you help me, I’ll tell you everything,” Sieval said. “But first, please help me find my rock. I’m not able to lift anything to go through the boxes to find it.”

Kieran nodded. “All right. It’s somewhere up here, then?”

“Yes,” Sieval said. “In a box somewhere, I think.”

“I’ll help you look,” Natasha said – she had a feeling that if she was doing something with her hands, it’d help delay the inevitable freakout. For now, however, she was surprised at how calm she felt, as she and Kieran began pulling the dust sheets off the piles of boxes, sneezing and coughing as years’ worth of grime went sailing through the air.

Kieran looked across at her as they searched, opening box after box and pulling out all manner of old toys, trinkets, clothes, and various other items.

“Um. You doing okay?” he asked, as she pulled out what seemed to be an endless stream of old Christmas lights from one box. “I imagine this is... well, it must be *a lot*.”

“I think so?” Natasha said, hoping that it was true. “I mean... it *is* a lot, but right now... I don’t know. I think I’m more curious to find out what’s going to happen next than anything else. It’s like I’m reading a storybook, and I really want to get to the next page or something.”

Kieran let out a low laugh as he went through a box of old clothes. “That’s perhaps the best way to think of it for now. I admit, I’m kind of curious myself. Of all the things I thought we’d find up here, I never expected a *sprite*.”

“Would ghosts have been better?” Natasha asked, which prompted a small laugh from him.

“I don’t know, honestly,” he replied after a moment. “At least Sieval seems friendly – who knows what ghosts might have been like?”

As he spoke, he pulled up an old, wooden box from the bottom of the larger cardboard box it had been packed away in, where it had been sitting beneath piles of clothes. Immediately, Sieval shimmered to his side, its eyes wide, its skin glowing with an unearthly blue light.

“My rock,” it breathed, sounding delighted. “You found it! It’s inside here!”

“In here?” Kieran asked, opening the lid of the wooden box. Inside, there was indeed a rock – shiny and black, like obsidian. Aside from its beauty, there didn’t seem to be anything particularly special about it – but, Natasha was coming to appreciate, there was a lot more than met the eye about seemingly ordinary things.

“Yes, yes, that’s it!” Sieval seemed overjoyed, clapping its hands lightly together. “Now that it’s been found, I promise I’ll tell you everything. Please, take me – and my rock – downstairs. We may speak there in more comfort.”

Sieval was right about that, Natasha thought, once the three of them were seated on the sofa chairs in the sitting room. Her nose was running and her eyes itching from all the dust they’d disturbed during their search, but at least the air down here was clearer, and the afternoon sunlight was streaming through the tall windows, unlike the dark stuffiness of the attic.

Kieran had placed the rock in its wooden box on the coffee table in front of them, and Sieval’s eyes kept traveling back to it as it spoke.

“Thank goodness you came up to the attic at last,” it said, once they were all seated. “I was beginning to think I’d never get out of there. I tried so many times to tell people to come up and help me, but no one ever did.”

“Wait... so is that what all the banging and thumping was about then?” Kieran asked, his eyebrows shooting up his forehead. “You were trying to attract someone’s attention to come and help you?”

Sieval nodded. “At first, I tried calling out – but that only seemed to frighten people. There were people who came here, young people, with loud music and smoke-making sticks, but whenever I called out to them, asking them to come and help me, they always ran away. I didn’t understand why. I only asked them for help.”

Natasha couldn’t help but feel her heart clench at the look of deep sadness that crossed Sieval’s face as it recounted the story. Nonetheless, she couldn’t imagine how the teenagers who’d come up here for their secret party must have felt, suddenly hearing unearthly cries for help coming from the attic. No wonder the house had gained a reputation for being haunted!

“But how did you – and your rock – even come to be here in the first place?” Kieran asked, shaking his head. “You clearly knew Uncle Henry, if you knew he’d died. Did he bring you here?”

“Yes,” Sieval said. “But it was an accident. I used to live by a pond, deep in the mountains. That was my home. It was a place Henry had used to come sometimes – he flew deep into the mountains quite often, and I saw him flying over my pond. But one day he landed to drink from the pond – I didn’t mind that. I’m not possessive. But then he started picking up rocks from around the pond, including mine. At first, I didn’t know what to say when he put my rock in his pocket – as you know, we sprites are shy. But then he took my rock back here with him, and of course I had no choice but to come too. Where a sprite’s bonded object goes, it can’t help but follow.”

“Oh,” Kieran said, looking as if Sieval had given him a revelation. “I remember – Uncle Henry loved collecting weird and interesting rocks. It was just one of what my parents called his little eccentricities – and he *was* pretty eccentric, I have to admit. I mean, he lived up here all alone for so many years. He was really reclusive by the time he got old.”

“Yes,” Sieval said. “He said he didn’t want company. But he seemed to like mine.”

“Oh... so he knew you were here then?” Natasha asked, unable to hold back her curiosity any longer. “You were, uh, friends?”

Sieval nodded. “Yes, I suppose that’s the word for it. When it became clear he wasn’t going to take my rock back to the pond on his own, I showed myself to him. But that was only after months of living here with him, staying invisible. And by that time... I suppose you could say I’d grown rather fond of him. He used to make a sound – he had a large thing, and it would make sounds, such lovely sounds –”

“Great Uncle Henry played the cello,” Kieran told Natasha, turning to face her with a slight grimace. “But... not very well, I don’t think. At least, I remember thinking it sounded terrible when I was a kid. But then, he used to wake me up at five a.m. with his playing, and I guess *nothing* sounds very good at five a.m.”

“I liked his sounds,” Sieval said, sounding a little defensive. “But as I said, I had come to be a little fond of him. So after I explained the situation to him, when he said he would take my rock back to the pond... I asked instead if I could stay here with him for a little longer.”

“So he wasn’t such a recluse after all,” Natasha said. “Not if he had you for company.”

“He was a kind man,” Sieval said. “And I was happy to stay with him. He *did* say, however, that he would take me back to my pond before he went away. But then, in the end... perhaps he forgot...”

Kieran shook his head. “No – it wasn’t that.” His voice was soft and sad, and Natasha had the sudden urge to reach out to him. “It’s just that he died quite suddenly – and he wasn’t at home at the time. My parents told me he’d come down the mountain to buy some supplies before he disappeared back home, but he collapsed suddenly and was taken directly to the hospital – we never had the chance to say a proper goodbye to him ourselves. It was sad – my mother especially was really



upset about it. But I had no idea he'd had a sprite for company all this time." Kieran swallowed heavily, his eyes looking wet. "Have you been stuck here ever since then?"

Sieval nodded. "Alas, yes. After Henry was gone, some people came to look through his things, to pack them away... they put my rock in a box, and then took it to the attic. I have been there ever since, unable to move since I must go wherever my rock goes. I had been hoping someone would come into the attic so I could speak with them and explain my situation, but you are the first who ever has."

"It must have been my parents who packed your rock away," Kieran said, shaking his head. "I know they came to do some cleaning up and repairs, before they got distracted by other things. I guess they had no way of knowing one of the rocks in Henry's collection was, uh, bonded to a sprite. I'm very sorry that you've been stuck in the attic for so long because of that. They didn't know, but it still must have been a very hard time for you, not being able to go home."

Sieval nodded. "It has not been pleasant, I'm afraid. I have longed to see my pond again."

"Then... is there any way that *we* could take you back there?" Natasha asked, looking from Sieval to Kieran. "I know it wasn't your parents' fault, Kieran, but if there's any way we could make up for it – as much as it *can* be made up for – then we'd like to do it."

She knew Kieran would feel the same way as she did without having to ask him. Of course he would want to put this right. Sieval needed to go back to where it belonged, after all this time.

"Of course," Kieran said, the moment she finished speaking. "You said that your pond was in a remote part of the mountains, but I'm a griffin shifter, just like my Uncle Henry was. So I can definitely fly you and your rock back home – if you can give me some guidance, I'd be happy to take you. Today, in fact. I only want to put things right after everything you've been through. And to say thank you for keeping Henry company during his final few years. He became such a recluse

and didn't really have much contact with us or the outside world – but it's a comfort to know he *did* have company after all, Sieval. Thank you.”

“You are very welcome,” Sieval said quietly. “I admit, I hadn't considered that a shifter could be good company until I met Henry. But he was a quiet man, except for when he made his sounds. But now I think it's time for me to return to the life I had by my pond.”

“I can help you with that,” Kieran said determinedly. “Natasha, if you wouldn't mind holding on to Sieval's rock, I'll fly us all to your pond right now, before the light goes. Do you think we have time, Sieval?”

“Oh yes, I should think so,” Sieval said – and Natasha could virtually see it radiating with joy, the blue glow of its skin shimmering in the sunlight. “For a griffin, the flight should be short. I remember it was in a glade in a small valley, and there was a large mountain – the largest one – to the north.”

“I think I may know the spot you mean,” Kieran said, his face brightening. “My uncle used to take us there sometimes when we were out flying. If it's the place I'm thinking of, anyway. But if it *is*, then that makes things a lot easier. Looking for a pond in that wilderness would have been like trying to find a needle in a haystack otherwise. But let's hope it's the place.” He paused, shaking his head. “I used to go there all the time as a kid! And I never knew a sprite lived there at all.”

“Well, we *are* quite shy,” Sieval said modestly. “But now that you mention it, I recall that often children would come to play at my pond, many years ago. I usually went into my rock when they were there – but it was very intriguing to watch them. Perhaps one of those children was you.”

“That seems like it'd be pretty likely,” Kieran said, blinking. “Wow.”

He looked a little stunned, and Natasha couldn't say she blamed him. If *she'd* been the one finding out her childhood

playground had been inhabited by an invisible sprite, she'd probably be even *more* surprised than he was now.

*But then, if sprites are as shy as Sieval says, then who's to say some of the places I grew up didn't have sprites living there after all? Seems like there's always been more to Girdwood Springs than meets the eye...*

"Let me go into my rock – you can carry me quite easily then," Sieval said, standing.

As Natasha watched, Sieval shimmered again, and then vanished completely. She looked down at the rock they'd extracted from the box, just in time to see a pale blue flash of light pass over its surface – so she assumed Sieval had, uh, taken up residence inside.

"Umm, just so we're clear," Natasha said as she picked up the rock – which was surprisingly warm – in her palm, "you were saying just now that you want me to ride you out to Sieval's pond?"

"If that would be okay," Kieran said, cocking his head. "You're okay with heights, aren't you?"

"Uh. I guess so." Standing, Natasha followed him out to the entryway, and then out the front door. "I mean... I've never had a problem with them before, but then, I've never flown on a griffin's back before."

"Oh, you did, just before," Kieran said, throwing her a grin. "Don't tell me you've forgotten already!"

Natasha laughed. "No, no, I definitely haven't. I guess I was too busy being shocked at what was happening to think about it much then – *this* time I'll have my full wits about me, so I may have time to think about how far off the ground we are!"

"Maybe so," Kieran said, "but you know I'd never let any harm come to you, Natasha. I wouldn't have suggested it unless I knew it was completely safe."

Somehow, in her heart, Natasha knew he was telling the full truth. And she knew she'd never doubt his word again – now that they'd gotten past the awkward part, she found she

completely believed every word he'd told her. He'd obviously shown her pretty convincing proof of him being a griffin shifter, but she even believed him about them being fated mates, which was something she'd never really contemplated before. And to be honest, she hadn't really thought about *forever*, either!

*But he did say he wanted to spend this month getting to know me better... and honestly, he's a griffin! How many men back in the big city can say that?!*

Well, possibly some of them, Natasha thought, if what Kieran had told her about there being more shifters around than she thought was true.

*But that doesn't matter*, she thought, as she watched Kieran shift once again, turning from the tall, broad, *unbelievably* hot guy she couldn't wait to kiss again into the massive, powerful form of the griffin. *I don't want any of those guys. I only want him. Not bad for something I thought was only going to be a vacation fling!*

Carefully zipping Sieval's rock away in a pocket of her jacket, Natasha climbed aboard Kieran's back when he crouched down on the ground, looking back over his shoulder and crooning encouragingly at her.

His body was warm and his feathers soft as she held on tightly to his back – and then, with one swoop of his massive wings, they were airborne.

Natasha had to hold back a disbelieving laugh as they soared through the air, the chilly currents of the air rushing past her face. She'd been worried that this time, now that she was more aware of her surroundings and the fact that this most certainly was *not* a dream, she'd be terrified of falling – but no. For being several hundred feet off the ground, Natasha felt completely safe where she was on Kieran's back, looking at the world below as it passed beneath them.

The air up here somehow felt crisper and cleaner, the sunlight brighter and clearer. The green of the forests and the blue of the mountains with their snowy white peaks were somehow even more beautiful from up here – it was as if they

were in a private world, made just for them, the only ones who would ever see it.

*And to think, I almost missed out on all of this...*

It seemed ridiculous that it had taken almost sliding to her possible death to get this... but then, she supposed, it wasn't every day a guy told you he'd stood you up for your date because he was a magical creature whose powers were currently not quite in working order. Natasha had a feeling that once everything she'd experienced today caught up with her, she'd have quite a lot of thinking to do... but for now, she'd decided, she was simply going to enjoy the ride and let go in a way she hadn't been able to after years of being, if she was honest, kind of a control freak.

*Hard to think I can control everything in my life when I've just found out sprites and shifters exist... oh, and that I'm apparently the fated mate of a griffin!*

Instead of being terrifying, however, Natasha had to admit the thought was kind of... freeing.

Or maybe that was just because it was hard *not* to feel free when she was riding on a soaring griffin's back.

After a while though, Natasha could feel Kieran beginning to descend, and she knew the exhilarating ride was almost over. Kieran swooped down in a wide circle, the trees looming up below them, but Natasha knew he knew what he was doing, and she didn't experience even a moment of fear as he folded his wings, coming in to land through a small gap in the trees, which Natasha could now see was formed where they were growing around a large pond of clear, still water, fed by a trickling waterfall that tumbled over rocks furred with moss and ferns.

It was a beautiful spot – just the kind of place that a sprite from a fairy tale would live, she thought as she slid down from Kieran's back, her hand resting over the pocket where she'd placed Sieval's rock.

Looking around, Natasha had to admit she was completely enchanted. The sun slanted through the tree branches that

drooped over the limpid pond, the ground dappled with light and shadow. The babble of the water was smooth and peaceful. It was more than beautiful – it was idyllic.

“Wow,” she murmured, as she made her way to the pond. “I have to admit, if I was a sprite, this is definitely the kind of place I’d live.”

“I used to love coming here when I was a kid,” Kieran said, once he’d shifted back into his human form. “Especially on hot days – it always felt so much cooler here, and we could wade or go swimming in the pool. It’s pretty deep out in the middle, and the water is cold. It was amazing after a long, hard flight... or a flight that *seemed* long when I was a kid. Now that I’m grown it doesn’t seem so bad. And I have to admit, I’ve really missed flying. It seems ridiculous I haven’t done it for so long.”

“Oh – and you shifted just fine before,” Natasha said. “Even though you couldn’t earlier. Do you think your powers are working again now?”

Kieran looked thoughtful. “I *think* so,” he said after a moment’s pause. “My griffin certainly seems happier, that’s for sure. Maybe I really *did* just need to confess to you, and to start taking my griffin’s concerns more seriously.”

“Its concerns?” Natasha asked, blinking.

“I’ve been neglecting it,” Kieran said, as he came to stand next to her, looking around at the beauty of the area. “It was right about that. And maybe it was just trying to get my attention by acting out. I can’t say I *enjoyed* what it was doing, but... maybe it had a point. You try to suppress part of your nature and eventually it’s going to start rebelling.”

Natasha thought that made sense. “So... what do you think you’re going to do now?”

“That’s a good question.” Kieran laughed. “But to be honest, I think... well, being back here has awakened a lot of memories in me. And my parents and I have always meant to do up Great Uncle Henry’s house. Maybe... maybe it’s time I started seriously looking at a new direction in life.”

Natasha nodded, chewing his words over in her mind. “A new direction, huh?”

*Is that what I should be thinking about too?*

These last few days had been a revelation for her. And even if she still didn’t fully understand what it meant, she knew being a griffin’s mate *definitely* hadn’t been in the life plan she’d drawn up when she was fifteen years old and had been religiously sticking to ever since.

*But is that such a bad thing?*

Shaking her head, Natasha put the thought from her mind. There would be time for that later. Right now, it was time for Sieval to go home.

“So,” she said, taking its rock from her pocket, “should I just put this down by the pond?”

“I guess so – hopefully this is the right place,” Kieran replied.

Together, they made their way to the edge of the pond, before Natasha leaned down, placing the pitch-black rock down gently at the water’s edge.

“There you go, Sieval,” she murmured, hoping it was a comfy place for it. “You’re home.”

The rock shimmered again, just as it had back at the house – a flash of blue passing over its surface. And then, Sieval was standing beside them, looking around, its enormous eyes wide with joy.

“My pond,” it murmured, voice suffused with happiness. “I never thought I’d see it again.”

A lump rose in Natasha’s throat as she watched Sieval wandering around its pond, a look of wonder and joy on its face.

“My home,” it murmured, bending down to touch the drooping ferns and run the tips of its fingers over the soft moss that covered the rocks by the pond. “I enjoyed my time with Henry, but... this is where I belong. I cannot thank you both enough for finally returning me here.”

“I’m just sorry that it took so long for us to figure out what was happening,” Kieran said ruefully. “It can’t have been nice, being trapped alone in the attic for so long.”

“It matters not,” Sieval said, turning to them with a smile. “A sprite’s lifetime is very long – I still have plenty of time.” It paused, seeming almost to hesitate. “But I admit... during my time with Henry, I came to appreciate company perhaps more than I thought I would. In limited amounts, anyway. Would it be too much to ask that... that occasionally you come to visit me here? Would it be something you might do?”

“Of course.” The words were out of Natasha’s mouth before she could stop them. But as soon as they were, she realized it was a promise she couldn’t really keep – not unless she were to make some big changes in her life.

*Big changes. Bigger than the ones I’ve already made?*

Perhaps these were questions for another time. Right now, she thought, she still had a month of vacation time – and a griffin shifter, who was also her fated mate, to get to know.

“I’d like that too, Sieval,” Kieran said, nodding. “Now that I’m back here, I realize how much I’ve missed it. It’d be a pleasure to come and visit you.”

Happy gratefulness flickered across Sieval’s face. “Then I will thank you for that. And for returning me to where I belong. And now... I’m afraid it has been a while since I experienced sunshine. I feel that I must bask.”

And with that, it shimmered once more, before, Natasha assumed, it returned to its rock in order to bask in the sunlight that filtered through the trees.

“Well. This definitely isn’t where I saw today going when I woke up this morning in a really, really foul mood,” Natasha said, shaking her head. “I don’t know when all of this is going to hit me but... well, I’m going to make the most of it before it does.”

“It’s not bad news though, is it?” Kieran asked, turning to her with concern.



“No, no. It’s just... a lot,” Natasha said, laughing. “And to be honest, I think I’m kind of hungry, too. Maybe I’ll be able to think more clearly on a full stomach.”

“Sounds reasonable.” Kieran flashed her a grin. “Luckily I know a place – I didn’t get to go yesterday, I had to cancel at the last minute. So maybe I should go grab something there. Maybe we could even go together.”

Natasha laughed at the mischievous tone in his voice. “Hey, are you asking me out on a date?”

“Maybe so.” Kieran joined in on her laugh. “I mean, if you’re interested.”

“You know, I just might be,” Natasha replied, raising an eyebrow. “And you know, after that, I think I have some apple pie back at my place that a very generous person gave me – but after a chili dog and fries, I don’t know if I’ll be able to eat it all by myself.”

“You don’t say,” Kieran said softly, raising an eyebrow. “Well, in that case, lead the way.”

## EPILOGUE

## ONE YEAR LATER

“Okay. Well. I think that just about does it, as weird as that feels to say.”

Standing up fully and wiping the sweat from her brow, Natasha stood back to admire their handiwork – the handiwork of the last eleven months, ever since she’d quit her job and decided to stay in Girdwood Springs with Kieran, who had also quit *his* job, so he could stay in town and restore his Great Uncle Henry’s beautiful house to its former glory.

And, Natasha thought, they’d done a pretty amazing job of it, even if she did say so herself.

No more sagging beams or missing roof tiles; no more scuffed tiles or peeling wallpaper. The house had been given a complete makeover, from top to bottom. Repainted to keep its character, while also making it a little fresher and more modern. Bathrooms re-tiled in pink and gold, floral wallpaper in the many, many bedrooms. The floorboards in the sitting room had been polished back to their original dark luster, and thick, luxurious rugs laid down.

The kitchen too had been given a full makeover, and was now fresh as a daisy with blue and white tiles, and cream-colored benchtops. Every week they’d picked fresh flowers from the gardens they’d been cultivating – with help from Gale and his unicorn’s green thumb, of course – and sat them on the massive kitchen table in an old ceramic milk jug. The kitchen had looked like a bombsite for the few months they’d been renovating, so it had been nice to have a little something pretty around the place, to try to remind them that there was light at the end of the tunnel.

*And*, Natasha thought, unable to hold back her smile as she gazed up at the house’s façade, which she’d *just* finished putting the last lick of paint on, *the end of the tunnel is here*.

It had been months and months and *months* of hard work, but Natasha knew it was worth it. The place looked amazing –

and it was a tribute to Kieran's Uncle Henry, too.

"I didn't think I'd ever see the place looking so good again," Kieran said, shaking his head. "It didn't even look this good twenty years ago."

"Well, you certainly had a much better eye for décor than I thought you would," Natasha said, laughing. "I thought that was going to be *my* domain, but every suggestion you made was incredible. I guess being a horticulturalist teaches you more about color and placement than I would have thought."

"Well, what about you?" Kieran asked, turning to her with a raised eyebrow. "Going over building blueprints with me like a pro – so many of the best remodeling ideas were *your* ideas. I couldn't have done it without you. It wouldn't have looked half as good if I didn't have you here to help."

"All right, all right, let's just agree – we're *both* amazing," Natasha laughed, reaching up to pull him into a kiss, her arms wrapped around his neck. Just as it always did, the kiss sent a tingling sensation down her spine, warmth gathering in her belly. Even after a year, she still hadn't got used to the way even the lightest touch from Kieran could make her feel – her body responding to his instantly, goosebumps rising on her skin, her nerves shimmering to life.

*Okay, but we can't get too carried away right now, no matter how pleased we are with ourselves, Natasha reminded herself, reluctantly pulling back. We still have a few more things to get done today... but then, maybe I've learned the value in being a little more spontaneous now.*

That was something she didn't say lightly.

*Moving back to my hometown and doing up an old house with my fated mate had definitely not been on the life plan she had drawn up when she was fifteen. Her life, her career back in the city... she wasn't about to pretend that it had been an easy decision to leave those, after all the time and effort she'd spent building them. But Kieran had never pressured her, never even suggested to her what decision she should make – in fact, he'd told her that he'd be perfectly happy to move to the city with her, and share her life there.*

*Anything would be fine, as long as you're there,* he'd told her as they'd lain in bed together one night, sweaty and satiated, their arms still wrapped around each other. *I'll go anywhere for you.*

Natasha had known he meant it. But the more she thought about it, the more she realized... she needed a new challenge. A new goal. Sure, she'd achieved everything she wanted to in her career – but that was just the point. She'd done it. And now, she wanted to do something new.

So it had been her who'd come up with the idea – why not stay here and do what Kieran and his parents had always planned on doing, and restore Great Uncle Henry's house to what it had once been?

*Or better,* Kieran had said, smiling at her. *Uncle Henry really wasn't much of an interior designer.*

Writing her letter of resignation to Charlson hadn't been easy either – especially when he'd called her to beg her to reconsider, and tell her he was sorry he'd sent her away on leave. But Natasha had had to tell him firmly that her mind was made up, and she was staying where she was.

She'd had to leave out some of the details as to why – she didn't think he'd be very receptive to the idea of *griffins* and *one true mates* and *shifters* – but she *had* made it clear that she definitely wouldn't be staying on after she'd handed over her job to her replacement.

“I hope the guests will like it, after we rushed to get it finished in time for our first bookings,” Kieran said.

The house, after all, wouldn't be just a home to them – it would also be somewhere for the people, more and more of them, who were coming to visit Girdwood Springs every year. A secluded mountain getaway with all the luxuries – situated deep in the woods, but still close enough to walk into town, and a short drive from the mountain's premier skiing spots. It really had been the ideal thing for them to do with the place – and they'd been booked solid as soon as the place was available.

“Hey, there was no rush,” Natasha chided him mildly. “My amazing scheduling skills meant everything went just according to plan... and if it didn’t, I’d built some time in to make sure there’d be no delays in opening.”

“True, true,” Kieran said, laughing. “And I never knew you could use the internet like that – I just thought it was for, I don’t know, emails. The website you made looks amazing – not to mention, you got the word out like crazy. I think we had our first enquiry within an hour of the website going live.”

“Hey, never underestimate the power of a good marketing campaign,” Natasha laughed. “I’m just glad my skills could come in handy. And don’t forget, we have that big photoshoot for *Mountain Living* magazine next week – they’ll be interviewing us too, so make sure you have some interesting answers rehearsed.”

“Yeah, I think I’ll be letting you take the lead on that one.” Kieran smiled. “Unless they have a lot of questions about floorboard polish. I think I spent about seven thousand hours buffing those things.”

“You never know, they might. These things are pretty important, you know.”

Looking around, Natasha had to admit she was proud of the work they’d done – *more* than proud. The house looked resplendent, the gray, green and white color scheme they’d chosen for the exterior looking fresh and new amongst the dark green and brown of the trees that surrounded it, and the garden beds were filled with new flowers, just beginning to bloom in the first of the spring warmth. Gale might have supplied the plants themselves, but it was Kieran who had planned the bed and meticulously placed each plant and shrub, each sapling and fern. And the results spoke for themselves.

*It’s perfect. Absolutely perfect.*

And that wasn’t the only thing that was perfect, Natasha thought.

She’d never imagined she could be so content out here – but then, she supposed, she hadn’t had a *griffin* by her side

back then.

Rising at dawn to ride on Kieran's back had become almost a ritual for them now: at least once a week they'd pack a picnic lunch and go soaring off into the mountains, finding more and more beautiful spots to stop and have their lunch – and sometimes something a little extra, as long as they were *sure* they wouldn't be spotted by any wayward hikers.

But isolated spots weren't the only places they visited. They'd also been sure to go back to visit Sieval at its pond, as often as the sprite wanted them to visit – which wasn't *very* often, given its reclusive nature, but often enough that it had become a part of their lives.

*Who would have thought?* Natasha thought, shaking her head. *I guess there was more to Girdwood Springs than there seemed all along – but still, I never would have imagined sprites could live here!*

Or shifters either – Natasha had decided she was simply going to have to accept their existence, and forego the freakout she'd been worried she'd have. After meeting Gale, Sylvie's unicorn husband, and Caleb, the dragon who was Kira Dearborn's mate, she'd just decided there was nothing to do but go along with things, the way they had apparently decided to.

*What's there to be freaked out about, anyway?* she thought, laughing inwardly. *Kieran's the most amazing person I've ever met in my life. I'm not gonna get all weird just because he can turn into a griffin!*

That, in fact, had actually turned out to be a pretty amazing benefit.

Reaching out, Natasha put her arm around his waist, pulling herself against his side. Right away, she could feel the warmth he never failed to stir in her once again – and this time, she was less inclined to resist it.

“You know,” she said, turning to look up at him. “I really feel like we deserve a little celebration after all this hard work.”

“Oh?” Kieran turned, looking down at her. “A celebration? You mean like a nice meal out? Or a bit of cake?”

“I was thinking of something a little closer to home.” Standing on tip-toes, Natasha leaned up, pressing her lips to his in a kiss – a relatively chaste one, until she couldn’t resist any longer and deepened the kiss, her tongue sweeping into his mouth as his lips eagerly parted beneath hers. “I think, after all, that we have pretty much all we need right here for a kind of amazing celebration.”

“Oh, I see.” Kieran said, nodding, and sounding just *slightly* breathless – much to Natasha’s gratification. “Well, we’ll have to see what we can do about that. And –”

Natasha let out a surprised laugh as, without warning, Kieran swept her up into his arms, carrying her as if she weighed nothing at all – just another benefit to his being a shifter. Holding her bridal-style, he walked up the front steps, carrying her toward the open front door.

“Now that the place is finished, we may as well treat it like it’s our first day here,” Kieran said, as Natasha, still laughing, reached up and wrapped her arms around his neck. “Gotta carry you over the threshold!”

“No doubt about that,” Natasha said, snuggling her head against his chest. “You have to do these things just right.”

And she knew that from now on, that was exactly what everything would be: *just right*.

*After all*, Natasha thought, a happiness like she’d never believed possible welling up in her chest, as Kieran kicked the door closed behind them, *I’m home*.

**T**hank you so much for reading! If you enjoyed this book, you may also enjoy the first two books in the series! They can be found here:

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