



WITH
WINTER
FOX

FOX HAVEN 4

FEL FERN KARA KITT

His Winter Fox

Fox Haven 4

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Blurb

Nick wanted to spend the miserable holidays alone, but fate had other plans.

Nick Scott hates the holidays, especially since they remind him of his ex-boyfriend and his ex-best friend tangled in his bedsheets. All Nick wants is solitude, but when his lead alpha drags him to the pack Christmas planning meeting, he has no choice. When Nick meets Matt, his plans are dashed to pieces. Matt is wonderfully thoughtful and kind, and Nick can't ignore the sparks between them, but is he ready to love again?

Matt hides his real self under a strained smile, and only Nick seems to be able to see the real him. The rude alpha claims that going down this path is a mistake, but giving up isn't part of Matt's dictionary. Besides, there's a shadow from Matt's past waiting to wreck everything he's built. Can Nick be the mate Matt needs this Christmas?

“His Winter Fox” is a holiday m/m shifter romance novella that features a reluctant grump and his cheerful Christmas-loving mate. It is the fourth book in the Fox Haven series.

Chapter 1

Nick

I growled, hearing the damn alarm on my phone. I was all groggy and disoriented, trying to find that annoying thing.

Usually, I stashed it under my pillow, but this morning, it had gone rogue and ended up who-knows-where.

After some colorful cursing, I finally spotted it lurking under the bed.

I snatched the phone and fumbled to turn the alarm off, only to realize I had no reason to be up so early.

It was my day off and I didn't have to drag myself to the workshop. I sighed, wishing I'd turned the darn alarm off the night before.

With the irritation fading, I debated whether I should just fall back into bed and go back to sleep. Too bad I was now wide-awake.

I glanced out the window, my breath misting up the glass. When I'd made the move to Fox Haven, it had been a different world.

It was summer then, and the town had looked like something out of a postcard, all green and vibrant.

But now, it was winter, and a blanket of snow had transformed the landscape. Everything was quiet, white, and cold.

Apartment hunting had been a real nightmare when I first arrived here. Small town, limited options.

It was just my luck that I stumbled into Owen's territory.

Owen, the lead alpha of my new pack, had offered me one of the unused cabins the pack owned to rent.

It had been a lifesaver, and I couldn't be more grateful for his hospitality.

As I watched the snow-covered ground and the trees heavy with their frozen burden, it reminded me of why I hated this time of year the most.

This time last year, it was a different kind of cold that had pierced my heart.

I remembered the shock and pain of finding Gary, my fiancé, in bed with my ex-best friend, Ben.

Gary and I had been together for three amazing years, and it felt like the perfect time to finally tie the knot.

I was excited beyond words, and I wanted to make the proposal unforgettable.

So, I did the one thing that meant the world to me: I begged my alpha father for the ring he had used to propose to my omega dad.

I had hoped the ring would bring the same kind of happiness to Gary and me.

With the ring carefully tucked away, I decided to make the evening even more special.

I bought a bottle of the finest champagne I could find, planning to pop it when I asked the most important question of my life.

I couldn't wait to see the look on Gary's face, the joy in his eyes when I asked him to spend the rest of our lives together.

My heart was pounding as I made my way to his apartment.

But when I opened the door, the world came crashing down around me. There he was, the love of my life, in bed with my ex-best friend, Ben.

My entire universe crumbled in that moment and the betrayal still stung. I pushed those awful memories away.

Suddenly feeling trapped in the cabin, the walls closing in on me, I decided that a morning run in the woods as my fox form was the perfect escape.

The need for the freedom and solitude that the forest provided was irresistible.

I washed my face in the cabin's small bathroom, the cold water refreshing against my skin.

I couldn't wait any longer. I had to get out of there. I left the cabin, the door closing with a soft click behind me.

I undressed quickly, leaving my boxers and shirt in a neat pile by the porch, and took a deep breath.

Shifting was always a bit of a rush.

My body transformed. Fur covered my chest and shoulders. I shrank. Bones broke and organs moved.

The world around me changed. I set off into the woods.

At first, this place had felt like a maze, but now, after so many runs, I knew every twist and turn, every hidden nook and corner.

A part of me was still reluctant to call Fox Haven home.

I was more like the outsider, everyone else tolerated but barely knew and I was fine with that. I didn't come here to make friends.

My paws padded softly against the forest floor, and I went deeper into the woods, the sense of familiarity calming me.

Soon enough, I forgot about Gary and Ben.

As I approached a familiar loop in the trail, my animal senses caught a glimpse of another fox shifter in the distance.

I perked up ears up in surprise. In the pack, there were only two fox shifters with white fur.

One was Cal, a pack enforcer, and an alpha. The other one was Matt, an omega who had recently transferred from another

pack, just like me.

I slowed down, my sharp eyes focused on the other white fox. Judging by his smaller size, it was definitely Matt.

I watched Matt as he curiously approached each fir tree in the clearing. What did I know about Matt? Very little.

Matt worked at the pack clinic. He was always friendly and cheerful to our pack mates.

Unlike me, he was sociable and made it a point to attend every town and pack gathering.

But I'd never been a people person, and after the whole mess with Gary and Ben, I'd become even more of a grump.

So, I kept my distance, content to observe from afar.

As Matt stopped by each tree, staring at them for a moment, I was tempted to ask him what he was doing.

It was a strange sight, and it piqued my interest, but something held me back. It's none of my business, I reminded myself.

Besides, there was something about Matt's cheerfulness that always seemed a little fabricated to me.

He was hiding something. Not that I didn't have my own share of secrets. Everyone had them.

I growled softly, realizing that I'd never be the social fox of the pack. It wasn't in my nature, and Gary's betrayal had made me even more withdrawn.

With a shake of my head, I decided to leave Matt to his tree inspection and made my way back to my cabin.

Sometimes, it was just better to stick to what I knew and leave others to their business.

* * *

Returning to my porch, I couldn't help but notice the open door to my cabin. Every fur in my body stood up.

My first instinct was worry that an intruder had broken in. Back in my old pack, we'd always been vigilant about locking our doors.

But this was Fox Haven, a different world, and fox shifters around the pack compound rarely bothered with such precautions.

Everyone trusted everyone. It was just that kind of town.

With a sigh, I reminded myself that this wasn't my old pack, and things were different here.

It was more likely that I had an unexpected visitor, perhaps another member of the pack.

Shifting back into my human form, I swiftly donned my shirt and boxers and decided to check who it was.

The delicious scent of freshly brewed coffee pulled me into the kitchen.

As I followed the aroma, it mixed with another familiar smell, and I couldn't help but ask, "Owen, what brings you here?"

I was not happy to see him. Owen, the lead alpha of the pack, was casually pouring coffee into two mugs.

He handed one over to me and I grudgingly accepted.

It wasn't the first time Owen had dropped by for a chat, and it wasn't like he was giving me special treatment.

He was just a more down-to-earth and hands-on kind of alpha compared to the leader I'd known in my old pack.

I found a seat at the kitchen table, wondering what he wanted.

I was always a bit on edge around Owen, but I had to admit that his friendly approach was a refreshing change from the standoffishness of my previous pack leader.

As I sipped my coffee, Owen asked, "Have you eaten breakfast, Nick?"

I replied with a curt, "No."

My mood wasn't exactly sunny this morning. I wondered if he checked the contents of my fridge and cabinets.

If he did, he'd find nothing. I made a mental note to head to town and buy some groceries.

Undeterred by my single-word answer, Owen asked, "We missed you at the last pack meeting. Everything okay?"

The truth was, I hadn't attended the meeting last week because I'd received some unwelcome news – an invitation to Gary and Ben's wedding in the mail.

Why they would send me that, I had no clue. I had made it clear to them both that I wanted no part of their lives.

Still, gripping the invitation card felt like a punch in the gut.

Eventually, I'd decided not to make an appearance at the pack meeting.

I would be in a foul mood and no good to anyone in that state.

Most of my pack mates had given up on me. Owen, though, was trying to get me to open up, to be more sociable.

I owed him a lot, and I inwardly, I knew couldn't keep shutting people out.

So, with a sigh, I admitted, "I was busy, but I won't miss any more meetings."

Owen gave me a reassuring nod. "Good. Finish your coffee, and then we can leave together," he said.

I frowned, trying to process Owen's unexpected invitation.

"Leave together? What? Where are we going?"

I was planning to spend my day off indoors, wrapped up in a cozy blanket, and lazing around.

Maybe if I had enough energy left, I'd run to the grocery store. I was in that kind of mood.

"For the Christmas party planning session, of course," Owen said, like it was obvious.

I couldn't help but groan. I did remember receiving a reminder in my email from the pack administrator a few days ago.

All pack members were encouraged to attend, and 'encouraged' had been rather heavily highlighted.

How was I going to tell Owen that I wasn't exactly a fan of the Christmas holidays?

I didn't even have the heart to admit that I wanted no part in the festivities.

With a deep sigh, I continued to stare at my half-empty coffee cup while Owen set his own mug down.

He looked expectantly at me, and I had a sinking feeling that he wasn't going anywhere until I complied.

Owen was the only person who knew why I had transferred from my old pack to the Fox Haven pack.

Never once did he bring up Gary and Ben but he could've had.

Grunting softly under my breath, I finally relented and finished my coffee. There was really no getting out of this torture.

Then, I finally grabbed my coat, my earlier plans of a lazy day off now forgotten.

"Oh," Owen added as I met him by the front door. He looked me up and down. "You should probably put on some pants as well. It's freezing outside."

I glanced down and realized I was still in my sleeping shirt and boxers. With a sigh, I made my way back to my room to put on some jeans.

I didn't bother with anything else. It wasn't like anyone would be looking at me.

Unlike someone like Matt, some of my pack members had been put off by my attitude since day one.

It looked like I was in for a long day of Christmas party planning, whether I liked it or not.

Fine, I would just have to sit through this dreadful meeting.

Owen probably expected everyone to pitch in. I would volunteer for the more solitary jobs and that would be the end of it.

Hopefully, the planning wouldn't drag on too long and I could still enjoy the rest of my day off, uninterrupted.

Chapter 2

Matt

“Remember to write down your names and add them to the basket before we go on break, everyone!” Marcie, the pack administrator, reminded the town hall attendees before reading out the agenda for today’s meeting.

The town hall was more crowded than usual, so we had to bring in extra chairs.

Attendance was highly encouraged, which practically meant you had to be there or face Marcie’s wrath.

At first glance, she appeared to be one of the sweetest old ladies you could ever meet. That was, until you crossed her.

She didn’t get mad; instead, she’d give you a polite smile while casting the coldest stare your way.

Then, she’d assign you annoying, menial tasks around town, which she never seemed to run out of.

For instance, the last time someone made her angry, they had to clear all the rotting pumpkins around Fox Haven after Halloween.

And there were a lot, since this town went all out on decorations during the holidays.

Some might think it was Owen and his enforcers who kept the pack in check, but secretly, I believed it was Marcie.

She was my idol.

I turned to the entrance and spotted Nick, which made my heart skip a beat. He walked in with Owen.

Nick seemed to have his eye on a chair at the back of the hall and was about to walk past the small table at the entrance when Owen placed a hand on his shoulder and pulled him back.

Owen then pointed at the notepad and pen and then basket for the Christmas Secret Santa ballot.

Owen gave Nick's shoulder a little squeeze, and I could see Nick's resolve crumbling.

He gave the now-occupied chair one last longing look before quickly writing down his name on the paper and dropping it into the basket.

Owen patted him on the back and gestured for him to take a seat.

Then Owen went to the front of the hall, his usual spot during these meetings.

"Why are you smiling? What are you looking at?" Cliff asked, turning to where I was gazing, but there was nothing to see there anymore.

Was I really smiling? I gave a small cough.

"It's nothing, just amazed to see everyone here."

"Are you going to tell me who 'everyone' is?" Cliff asked, wiggling his eyebrows suggestively.

"I don't know what or who you mean," I said, looking ahead with my eyes fixed on the large screen in front of us, crossing my arms. "And shh, Owen's staring. The meeting's about to start."

How the heck did Cliff notice? I swear that guy just had a sense for these things.

I talked to Nick maybe a total of two times during my time here. Both times were while I was working at the clinic.

The first time was when Nick came in for a check-up. The second time was when he had an injury from cleaning his rain gutters.

There was heavy rain one afternoon, and he had to clean them out to prevent clogging. And then he fell from his ladder.

It was a small sprain. The healer gave him a talking-to, telling him to be more careful next time.

Okay, so yes, he was telling all of this to the healer, and I was just there, minding my own business at the time, entering some patient's details on the computer, ten feet away from the conversation.

We barely even talked or interacted in any way. No eye contact.

No accidental brush of our fingers or any other possible romantic situation.

But there was just something unexplainable about him that made my heart flutter every time I see him.

So how did Cliff know that there was someone in the pack who I can't stop thinking about when even I didn't know why I can't seem to get them out of my head?

This wasn't good at all. I needed to make sure I kept my distance from the pack.

Acquaintances only. No friends.

Be friendly but forgettable.

That's what I told myself when I first moved here. I barely talked to anyone in the pack.

Although I was part of the event planning committee, roped into it by Cliff, I didn't really talk much or spend time outside of the meetings with other pack members.

In fact, the only person I was close to was Cliff.

Actually, even Cliff didn't really know why I joined this pack.

When he asked for what seemed like the umpteenth time, I vaguely mentioned it had something to do with my old pack alpha.

And I'd like to keep it that way.

The fewer people who knew about me and why I was here, the better. That way, *he* wouldn't be able to find me.

"Forget about Owen. Marcie's giving us the glare," Cliff whispered, jerking me from my thoughts.

I felt him shudder, and I couldn't help but smile. There was no use thinking about the past.

I was here now, and in the months that I've been in Fox Haven, nothing had ever happened.

Whatever I had been doing so far, it was working. Everything was fine. I just had to keep doing what I was doing.

Vrrrr. Vrrrr. Vrrr.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. I took it out and glanced at the screen. Speak of the devil.

It was an unknown number, but I knew exactly who it was.

When I first started getting these calls during the first few weeks since I left my old pack, I'd feel a deep sense of fear.

My heart would race, and I'd be paralyzed by it.

I couldn't even get out of my apartment at first, as if the walls provided a barrier against an unknown but ever-present threat.

But when I figured out I'd be safer in the pack lands, I wouldn't even leave the clinic, insisting I wanted to do another shift.

Cliff thought I was some kind of workaholic, but I said I just needed the money.

At first, I wanted to answer it, tell him to stop calling, to just leave me alone and accept it.

But I couldn't. Because, if I answered, what if he figured out where I was? What if he managed to find me?

Yet, weeks turned into months, and I realized that nothing came out of these random calls.

Like the jerk he was, he was just doing this to annoy me.

Now, I would just let it ring. It usually stopped after the seventh or eighth ring, and then they'd give up.

Cliff lightly elbowed me, gesturing to Marcie, who was staring at me like she wanted to break my phone in half.

She was talking about the town newsletter finally going online soon, but I couldn't really concentrate on the details.

I was too distracted keeping count.

Vrrr. Six. Vrrr. Seven.

A missed call notification finally flashed on my screen, and I breathed out a sigh of relief.

These calls still unnerved me, but it was only for those few seconds until he hung up.

It didn't ruin my day anymore. I didn't need to hide in my apartment or in the clinic anymore.

No one was tracking my phone. I was safe.

I swiped at the icon beside the number to block it. This was useless, I knew that.

The bastard would still call in a few days with a different number.

But I still did it. It was my little moment of rebellion, and I always felt satisfied every time I did it.

Let him buy another burner phone or however he managed to use a different number every time. Eventually, he'd run out, right?

The meeting continued, and different people came up to the podium to discuss the town's plans for the holidays.

It ran a little longer than expected as the various planning committees tried to recruit volunteers for their different projects.

I mentally prepared myself to do the same when it was Cliff's and my turn. We were part of the outdoor decoration planning committee.

Finally, we took a little break, but not before the Secret Santa basket was passed around.

Cliff grabbed a folded piece of paper from the basket before handing it to me, and I did the same before passing it on.

“Let’s get something to eat. I’m starving,” Cliff said, standing up from his seat.

I nodded and stuffed the little piece of paper in my pocket, my mind preoccupied with how to get volunteers later.

Since we were the last committee to go up and talk, I was worried that there’d be fewer volunteers available.

I needed to figure out how to make our project more exciting so people would sign up.

I followed Cliff to the next room where there were some light refreshments prepared.

Cliff grabbed two cans of soda and handed one to me.

“So, who did you get?” Cliff asked.

“Huh? Oh,” I said, realizing he was asking about the name I had gotten for the Secret Santa. “I haven’t looked at it yet. Plus, isn’t it supposed to be a secret?”

“I guess, but let me know if you want to buy the gifts together, okay? Ah, hold on, I’ll be right back,” Cliff said, looking behind me.

I turned and saw that he was going up to his brothers.

Curious about whose name I had gotten, I reached into my pocket for the piece of paper.

It was crumpled into a small ball. I was pretty sure I didn’t do this.

The person who wrote their name must’ve just thrown it into the basket like it was a piece of litter.

I smoothed it out, being careful not to tear the delicate paper, and had to read the word scrawled on it a few times.

Nite? No. *Nilk?* I squinted, putting the small piece of paper closer to my face. *Nick.*

Nick?

The guy's handwriting may be worse than a healer's, but those four letters seemed to fill me with warmth, making me forget my worries about my presentation later on and, most importantly, the unfortunate call I had earlier.

Maybe I will take up Cliff's offer to go shopping because I had no clue what to get Nick.

I didn't know anything about him, other than the fact that he had problems with his rain gutters.

I could get him new gloves for cleaning or a gutter scooper.

He fell from his ladder. Did he need a new one? But that would be a pain to wrap, and ladders were expensive, right?

Also, I was pretty sure there was a recommended budget for this Secret Santa thing.

Before I got too ahead of myself, I felt a bump behind me, bringing me back from my thoughts.

"Oh, sorry," I said automatically, suddenly aware I was still by the food table and could be blocking someone.

I was just planning to move aside when I heard a grunt and turned around.

My breath hitched when I saw who was standing behind me.

"Oh, hi Nick," I said.

Crap, did he see me looking at his name on the paper? I quickly stuffed the paper I was holding back into my pocket.

But based on the look on his face, it seemed like he hadn't, or if he did, it didn't interest him.

Actually, it looked like he didn't seem interested in being here at all.

"Matt, right? From the clinic?" Nick asked. I was shocked.

He remembered my name?

A small part of me almost wanted to do cartwheels. Almost. Because after I nodded, he said nothing else.

It would've been fine if he grabbed something from the table quickly and left, but he continued to stand beside me and

glance in my direction from time to time.

Did he want to ask me something? Or maybe the man was just hungry and couldn't decide what to eat.

I was starting to feel a little awkward, and since I didn't really have anyone else to talk to, I took a deep breath and decided to strike up a conversation.

"You should try some of the finger foods. They're good," I said.

Nick raised a brow and tilted his head to the side, looking curiously at the finger foods in front of us.

His gaze seemed to zone in on the platter in front of him.

"This?" He pointed at the finger sandwiches stacked like a pyramid.

I nodded.

"The bread's green. How can something with green bread taste good?" He said with a frown.

"Well, I made them, so I know it's good," I said, furrowing my brow in annoyance.

There was loud chatter around us, but the awkward silence between us was deafening.

The bread, which I made with my own hands, was green to match the pinkish ham filling inside.

Green and red, hello?

It was the perfect Christmas-themed finger sandwiches.

But I didn't tell him any of that. It was fun seeing him squirm.

Also, I didn't trust myself to add anything else that might make him leave. Because when else could I talk to him again?

I wanted to know a little more about him, figure out what to get him for the Secret Santa.

Because I might really get him a ladder if I can't think of anything else.

Yes, this was just for Secret Santa and nothing more.

Now that I got a closer look at him, he was clearly someone who took care of himself.

He had a well-built physique. Solid chest, firm arms.

Which meant that he worked out regularly. Maybe I should get him something related to exercise, like a gym towel.

I heard a small cough, jolting me from my thoughts, and felt my cheeks reddening. I must've been staring at his chest for too long.

“Any plans for the holidays?” I asked quickly, hiding my embarrassment.

I took a sip of my drink to cool myself down.

“No,” he answered curtly.

“What about visiting family?” I asked.

Nick shrugged, leaving me unsure about what that meant.

Nick let out a frustrated sigh.

“I’m not really a fan of...this,” he said, his eyes sweeping around the room.

I wasn’t sure whether he was referring to the people, Christmas, or the festivities, but based on the look he had on, it seemed like it was all three, and more.

Before I could say anything, he asked, “do you know what time this is over?”

People around us were now looking at us.

Nick’s voice was low, almost a whisper, but with everyone else having a good time, his annoyed tone seemed to catch their attention.

My earlier amusement was fading slowly.

I didn’t know whether I wanted to drag him out of his shell and hear his story, because there had to be a reason for him to be like this, or throw my soda at him for being such a grinch.

Honestly, it wasn’t like Christmas was my favorite holiday, and neither was I particularly close to the pack.

But a lot of people worked hard to help out with the festivities, and he didn't have to be so obvious with his dislike of being there.

"I think there's just one final speaker left, then it's over," I said, giving a polite smile.

Thankfully, people started walking back into the other room.

It was time for my presentation.

Cliff rejoined me, and we walked up to the podium to show what we had planned for the outdoor decorations.

I couldn't help but scan the room and look for Nick's face.

When I caught his eye, he had a complex look on his face—surprised? Embarrassed? A mix of both?

Whatever it was, I gave a little satisfied smirk.

"We just need one more volunteer to help us restore some of the older decorations," Cliff finally said, ending our little presentation.

I pretended to look around the room, searching for volunteers.

I could see some people making eye contact who seemed genuinely interested in helping out. But I already knew who to pick.

Sure, I could choose to be a nice person. The man clearly hated the season, but I couldn't help it.

There was just something about him that made me want to push his buttons, to get back at him.

I mean, for one thing, making sure that bread had the perfect shade of green was hard work.

So I pulled a 'Marcie'.

"It's okay. Someone already came up to me earlier," I explained with a mischievous glint in my eye.

I locked my gaze onto my chosen volunteer, a playful grin spreading across my face.

"Nick, thank you so much for volunteering," I said.

Chapter 3

Nick

I couldn't help but grit my teeth as I stood in the cluttered corner of the workshop, eyeing the heap of wooden planks that now mocked me.

Matt had somehow managed to volunteer me for this task - repairing a wooden sleigh and making it all pretty again for the annual pack Christmas party.

I picked up a chisel, trying to suppress my frustration.

The vintage sleigh had seen better days, and it was going to take some serious elbow grease to bring it back to its former glory.

Didn't Matt have anything else better to do than assign his pack mates duties they had no interest in doing?

The chisel met the wood with a resounding thud, and I began the painstaking process of removing the damaged sections.

As I worked, I couldn't help but grumble under my breath, "Thanks, Matt. This was exactly what I needed."

As I worked on repairing the wooden sleigh, my mind began to wander.

I couldn't help but think that maybe this extra labor was exactly what I needed to keep my mind off the past.

I had moved to Fox Haven to start fresh and had taken up work as a carpenter because I'd always been good with my hands.

Wood always had this calming effect on me. The rhythmic sound of chisel against wood was almost therapeutic.

The scent of freshly cut timber transported me to a place of peace and contentment.

My initial annoyance with Matt had begun to subside. I knew he wasn't the type to have a malicious bone in his body.

In fact, he had probably volunteered me with the best of intentions.

Maybe he thought that by giving me a new project I would feel more like a part of the pack. And in a way, he was right.

A part of me did want to give back to Owen and the pack for giving me a home when I didn't have one.

I thought of Matt again, gazing at different fir trees in his fox form. How I accidentally insulted the finger food he bought for the meeting.

That interaction could've gone better. I'd never been good with people. Seeing Matt in person and talking to him threw me off a little.

I wanted so badly to ask him what he was doing in the woods but instead, I came off as a jerk who wanted to anywhere but that meeting.

Heck, I couldn't even remember how the rest of the conversation went.

Sure, I was initially irritated he saddled me with his unwanted task but...the truth was, part of me was interested in knowing him better.

Not as a romantic prospect of course. My inner fox woke inside my skin, clearly interested in that route, but I quickly dissuaded him of that notion.

I wasn't ready for that, but perhaps Matt and I could start as friends?

I shook my head in annoyance. I was a thirty-seven-year-old man for crying out loud and I still had trouble making friends.

Even holding a decent conversation was a massive undertaking for me.

“Pathetic,” I mumbled under my breath.

The creak of the workshop door broke my concentration, letting in a chilly gust of air that sent shivers down my spine.

A figure, bundled in layers of thick clothing, appeared in the doorway. I’d recognize that silhouette anywhere. Matt.

Since the last meeting, for some strange reason, I could pick out Matt’s scent from a mile away.

It was like my senses had locked onto it, even though I couldn’t explain why.

My fox seemed to be particularly attuned to Matt’s presence, too.

Matt stepped into the workshop, his eyes briefly scanning the cluttered space before landing on me.

He flashed a somewhat uncertain smile, as if he wasn’t entirely sure how I’d react.

In his gloved hands, he held two takeout mugs filled with steaming coffee. I couldn’t help but feel a mix of gratitude and embarrassment.

Matt knew I was a mean grump, but here he was, braving the cold and my awkwardness to hand me coffee.

“Hey, Nick,” he greeted. “Hard at work, I see.”

I set my tools down, accepting the coffee he offered. The warmth from the cup spread through my fingers, chasing away the workshop’s chill.

“Thanks,” I said, meaning it.

Matt took a step closer and my inner fox didn’t mind that at all.

“I figured you could use a break,” he said softly.

I watched as he shifted on his feet, a hint of shyness crossing his features.

It was endearing, and I couldn't help but wonder what had brought him to the workshop.

I took a sip of the coffee, savoring the rich flavor, and then I asked, "How did you know where to find me?"

A faint blush crept onto Matt's cheeks, and he let out a nervous laugh.

"Owen told me," he admitted. "He mentioned you were here, and I couldn't resist checking on you."

Lady luck must be on my side, I thought to myself.

There I was, pondering how to approach Matt, perhaps even muster the courage to apologize, and he magically appeared at the workshop door, coffee in hand.

Matt had taken the first step, extending an olive branch or maybe just a simple gesture of friendship.

If I wanted to know Matt better, it was time to put in some effort of my own. My inner fox thoroughly approved of that option.

I mustered a small, appreciative smile.

"Thanks, that's sweet of you," I managed to say, though the words felt a little awkward coming from me.

Even Matt appeared slightly surprised by my response.

"So you could be nice after all," Matt joked.

I couldn't help but respond a little defensively, my pride pricked.

"I can if I try," I answered.

We sipped our coffee contentedly for a few moments, the tension between us slowly dissipating.

The warmth of the coffee and Matt's presence made the awkwardness easier to bear.

Finally, I decided to bring up something that had been on my mind since I saw him in the woods.

"I saw you before the meeting, in the forest, looking at the trees," I pointed out.

Matt genuinely seemed taken by surprise, his brow furrowing as he looked at me.

“Nicolas Scott, don’t tell me you were stalking me.”

I scoffed, raising an eyebrow. “Of course not, I was just going for a run when I spotted you,” I replied.

Matt’s expression softened, and he looked away for a moment.

“You didn’t growl or anything. I wouldn’t have minded the extra company,” Matt pointed out.

It was as if he didn’t want me to hear his last words, maybe he even conveniently forgotten that we were both shifters.

But I didn’t miss the loneliness that tinged his voice, and it tugged at something inside me.

I took another sip of my coffee, keeping my gaze on Matt.

“You still haven’t answered my question,” I pointed out.

There was something beneath his initial response, something he wasn’t telling me, and my curiosity got the better of me.

Matt hesitated for a moment, as if contemplating whether or not to share more with me.

Finally, he sighed and admitted, “Oh, I was tasked with looking for the perfect Christmas tree for the pack house.”

I nodded. That made sense. Matt always seemed involved in pack events or maybe Marcie just managed to rope him into these kinds of things.

“Do you really like volunteering for these jobs?” I asked.

He bristled slightly, his tone defensive as he responded, “Of course, I do.”

I couldn’t help but notice that his answer didn’t quite match the uncertainty in his eyes.

It was clear there was more to the story, something he wasn’t ready to share. I decided not to push further for now.

It wasn’t like we were close and the last thing I wanted to do was drive him away.

As Matt and I continued to chat, we began to become comfortable with each other.

Just when I thought we were settling into a nice rhythm, his expression shifted. It was as if he'd suddenly remembered something he'd rather not discuss.

"Oh, I nearly forgot," Matt said with a wince, his voice hesitant. "The committee wanted some alterations to the initial sleigh design."

The special moment between us turned sour in an instant.

I couldn't help but remember how Gary, my ex, would always butter me up first, showering me with compliments and kindness before announcing that he wanted something from me.

With Gary, it was typically something materialistic.

"Don't you dare compare Matt to Gary," I silently scolded myself.

I might not have known Matt very well yet, but he was Gary's exact opposite.

He was warm and kind, whereas Gary had been cold and callous. It was unfair to let past experiences color the present.

I decided to give Matt the benefit of the doubt, hoping that he was merely the bearer of bad news.

He wasn't trying to manipulate me in any way.

I didn't need to get my hackles raised. Boy, had I gotten paranoid after my last relationship. I should definitely learn to fix that.

"I loved what you've done with the old sleigh so far," Matt said, admiration clear in his voice.

A genuine smile spread across my face, and I felt a sense of pride in my craftsmanship.

"Thank you," I replied, touched by his compliment.

Gary never complimented me or my work. In fact, he had been ashamed I made a living with my hands.

“I’m excited to see it come back to life,” I added.

“Can you tell me more about it?” he asked.

Matt’s interest seemed genuine and I realized I didn’t mind sharing more with him.

I took a moment to collect my thoughts, and then I began to explain my process of restoring the sleigh.

Matt didn’t look bored one bit. In fact, it was the exact opposite.

“Alright, tell me about the alterations the committee wants to make,” I finally said.

Matt pulled out his phone and showed me a gaudy illustration of how the committee wanted the sleigh to look.

I couldn’t help but be taken aback by the garish design. My immediate reaction was a blunt and almost instinctive “no.”

The illustration clashed with the classic and elegant design I had envisioned for the sleigh.

Matt sighed, but he didn’t give up. He attempted to explain the committee’s perspective, saying, “The sleigh needs to look right, to mesh with the other decorations.”

I understood the need for cohesion, but it was hard for me to imagine restoring this sleigh only to turn it into something ugly.

Matt should understand that I planned on putting my heart and soul into this project, and I couldn’t simply abandon my vision.

I took a deep breath, trying to reel in my annoyance.

“I appreciate the committee’s input, but I’ve put a lot of thought into the design of the sleigh. I believe it should have a more classic and timeless look, something that reflects the spirit of the season without being too extravagant.”

At least that was what I wanted to say. Instead, what actually came out of my mouth was, “No. If you guys want to turn this sleigh into some kind of Frankenstein creation, be my bloody guest. I want no part in it.”

I should've have used the word "bloody" and I shouldn't have sounded that curt. At least not with Matt.

Apart from Owen, he was the one pack mate I discovered I didn't mind talking to. Hurt flashed across Matt's expression.

He bit on his lower lip and suddenly looked so lost and vulnerable that I all wanted to do was bring him close to my chest.

I would simply hug him and then apologize.

Unfortunately, while I was overanalysing the situation, Matt turned on his heel and walked out of the garage without another word.

Inconsiderate fool, my inner fox whispered. I couldn't disagree with him. I needed to fix this, I thought desperately.

Chapter 4

Matt

“We could always ask someone else to help with the sleigh if Nick doesn’t want to do it,” Cliff suggested.

Cliff took off his jacket, placed his backpack on the floor, settling into the swivel chair next to me.

My shift at the pack clinic had just ended, and it was now Cliff’s turn to take over.

“I guess,” I replied slowly, logging out of the computer and packing my bag in preparation to leave.

Cliff tapped his chin, deep in thought. “Oh! What about Cal?” he suggested.

Cal was another member of the pack. He had a carpentry business, which made him an obvious choice for helping with the sleigh restoration.

However, I didn’t know him well enough to ask for a last-minute favor.

Everyone who had been assigned a role in the Christmas preparations already had their tasks, and this sleigh restoration wasn’t something I could just ask someone to do at the last minute.

It would all depend on how my talk with Nick would turn out later.

Yesterday, I walked out of Nick’s workshop immediately after he got upset about the changes I had requested for the sleigh.

While what I initially showed him was an intentionally exaggerated, ridiculous design, created as a mock-up, I was planning to show him the actual design that the committee had in mind right after.

I didn't even know why I created that fake mock-up. But when we started talking and he began to open up, I suddenly wanted to show it to him.

I thought maybe we could share a laugh over it. I didn't expect him to react so angrily.

In fact, how could I know? I barely knew anything about him.

I also didn't expect him to message me out of the blue last night, apologize, and ask to meet him for coffee this morning after my shift.

That surprised me even more than his outburst.

"Actually, I think Owen has Cal doing something else. But, it won't hurt to ask, right?" Cliff wondered, looking up at the ceiling thoughtfully. "It's funny, though. If Nick didn't want to do it, why did he volunteer to help in the first place?"

"Haha, yeah," I replied nervously, my voice tinged with unease.

That was all I could say. Ever since the pack meeting at the town hall the other day, I had a gnawing sensation in my stomach.

It was as if I had a nagging feeling deep down that volunteering Nick for this sleigh task might have been a mistake.

And what happened yesterday was like a splash of cold water.

Coupled with his attitude during the pack meeting, it was obvious that he wasn't a fan of this season or of people.

I knew he said he wanted to apologize in person, but I also knew I was the one at fault here.

I shouldn't have forced him to do something he didn't want to do.

Sure, this started off as a joke. I was annoyed at him and wanted to see what would break that icy mask of his.

But I also thought it would be a chance to get to know each other better.

In all the months I had spent here in Fox Haven, I had never felt the desire to connect with anyone.

The risk of opening up to someone had never seemed worth it, and I had always kept my distance.

But, for some unexplainable reason, Nick seemed to be worth the risk. However, I knew that this wasn't the right way to do it.

No. Today, I needed to meet Nick, clear things up, and give him an out.

Make sure he didn't feel pressured or uncomfortable in any way.

To make things right and hopefully get another chance to start anew.

* * *

I entered the coffee shop that Nick mentioned and was immediately greeted by a blast of Christmas music playing on the speakers.

The staff were wearing Santa hats, and the windows were adorned with paste-on snowflakes and garlands.

I knew this coffee shop. It was one of those places that started decorating for the Christmas season the day after Thanksgiving.

I looked up at the sign above the cashier and then checked my phone to confirm whether this was indeed the place he wanted to meet.

This was another unexpected surprise.

I had half-expected him to suggest meeting in some bar or diner with minimal decorations, frequented by people who just

wanted their coffee, beer, or food and nothing more.

Not in some fancy hipster café where people came to hang out for the ambiance.

Certainly not a café that appeared to be deliberately styled to resemble Santa's workshop cafeteria.

I looked around, half-expecting not to see him, when someone waved at me from the corner of my eye.

Nick was sitting in a quiet corner at the back of the shop.

As I walked toward his table, I noticed there were less decorations on the walls here.

Most of the decorations were near the front, and the music was much softer in the back.

This setting was more in line with what I had expected from Nick.

I gave him a small smile and sat down across from him.

"Coffee?" Nick asked, and I nodded.

He raised his cup and gestured to a waitress, requesting two more cups.

I unwrapped my scarf and removed my jacket slowly, feeling unsure of what to say or how to even begin.

If Nick had worn an angry or annoyed expression, I could've easily said what I wanted and told him that he was free from his Christmas chores.

But he didn't. He seemed like a completely different person from yesterday or any other day I had seen him before.

Nick instead had a warm smile on his face that lit up his hazel eyes, which made me feel like I was enveloped in warm caramel.

It made my heart race. It made my inner fox intrigued, and it sniffed around curiously.

The waitress came by and placed two cups of coffee in front of us, each accompanied by small sugar cookies with red and green sprinkles.

I immediately grabbed one and started nibbling on it nervously, still unsure of what I wanted to say.

Earlier, I had been determined to give him an out; I had set my mind on it.

But now, seeing him like this, relaxed and smiling, made me even more eager to get to know him.

Even my fox was telling me not to let this opportunity go to waste, that it didn't want to lose him, that it would be a mistake to do so.

Yet, another part of me felt it wouldn't be fair to make him continue helping me just for my own curiosity.

That would be selfish.

More importantly, I wanted to rid myself of this lingering feeling of guilt that I had.

I wanted to apologize for involving him in the pack's Christmas preparations.

I wanted to give him the option to decide whether he still wanted to work together.

Yes, that was the right choice.

"Listen," Nick began, breaking the silence.

His words prompted me to say what I needed.

Without waiting for him to continue, I blurted out what I wanted to say first, before I changed my mind.

"I'm sorry for dragging you into this, Nick. You don't have to do it if you don't want to."

"I'm sorry about yesterday. I shouldn't have yelled at you—huh?" Nick furrowed his brows, processing my words.

Before he could respond, I continued, "I could come up with an excuse, tell them you had a family emergency or something. Or I could just tell them the truth, that it was all a misunderstanding, and I'll take care of it instead."

Nick looked at me with a curious expression on his face.

I glanced down and absentmindedly picked up my second cookie, slowly picking off the sprinkles one by one as I continued to ramble, “I could talk to Marcie and see if I can find someone else. I think she likes me. I believe she’d give me some extra time.”

Nick gently grasped my wrist, preventing me from picking off more sprinkles.

“Let’s get some things straight here,” he said, meeting my gaze. “One, if I didn’t want to do it, I would’ve said so. You didn’t force me into anything. And two, Marcie doesn’t like anyone that much. I don’t want to be held responsible for you doing something ridiculous, like making sure all the Christmas lights along Main Street are hanging at the same length.”

I chuckled, a mixture of relief and amusement. “Hah.”

Nick responded with a genuine smile that seemed to warm me up in my core.

I realized he was still holding my wrist and, feeling my cheeks flush, I gently pulled my hand away.

The spot where he had touched still felt strangely electric, like a brand. I rubbed at it quickly, all while sensing Nick’s gaze upon me.

Nervously, I quickly pushed the sprinkles I had picked off my cookie to the edge of the table, catching them on a tissue.

“I also wanted to apologize for how I’ve been acting,” Nick admitted.

“Oh? You mean that scowl isn’t how you normally looked?” I asked playfully, sensing that Nick had something important on his mind.

My usual reaction was to use humor to ease tension, but I immediately regretted it when I noticed the hint of bitterness that touched the corner of Nick’s mouth.

Nick sighed. “If you hadn’t noticed, I’m not a fan of this season,” he admitted. “Found out my partner was cheating on me during this time of year.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I responded, biting my inner cheek, feeling guilty for teasing him and making light of his discomfort with the holiday season.

“It’s okay. I’m working through it. And this project helps keep my mind off things,” he explained.

I hesitated before asking nervously, “So, um, you really don’t mind working on the sleigh?”

“Not at all, but I do have some conditions” Nick said, leaning forward.

He was so close I could smell him. He smelled like clean soap, pine and some light floral scent.

My fox started sniffing around excitedly again.

Calm down, damn it.

It was these small tables. Why did he have to choose to sit in such a small table in a cozy corner of the cafe.

How could people talk properly and focus in these tiny spaces.?

Now my mind wandered, contemplating mundane things like what type of laundry detergent he used and whether that smell was from his clothes or from him.

I couldn’t help but wonder about the type of soap he used and other... shower-related details.

Vrrr. Vrrr.

My phone vibrated on the table, pulling me back from my thoughts.

It was another call from an unknown number, and even though my phone was on silent, the vibration somehow sounded much louder than usual.

Typically, I let the call ring until it stopped, but this time, I noticed Nick’s gaze darting towards my screen.

Instead of my usual habit, I immediately rejected the call.

“I’ll call them back,” I said, trying to maintain the flow of our conversation. “You were saying?”

Nick leaned back on his seat. It was like the phone call broke some sort of spell and we were back to talking business again.

“Right,” Nick began. “Since I ‘volunteered’ for this, I think I should have some say in the sleigh design.”

“Okay,” I replied. “Just so you know, that mock-up I showed you earlier was a fake.”

I reached for my tablet in my bag, showing him the actual design the committee wanted.

While it still didn’t align perfectly with Nick’s vision, it wasn’t too far off, and he was open to working with it.

We collaborated on refining the design, with Nick offering his input.

I explained that I would have to present it to the committee for approval, but I was confident they would agree.

Cliff and I were the only two members of the outdoor decorations committee anyway. So I told Nick we could begin working on the new design later this afternoon.

My phone buzzed multiple times throughout our conversation, which was unusual.

It was the first time in months that I hadn’t allowed it to just keep ringing, and I hadn’t blocked the number yet.

After the fifth call rejection, Nick sensed something was amiss and finally asked, “Aren’t you going to answer that? It seems important.”

I shrugged off his concern, replying with a strained smile.

“It’s fine,” I said, trying to conceal my nervousness and fear, hoping Nick wouldn’t catch on.

Despite my efforts to downplay his concern, an unsettling feeling of unease remained.

Chapter 5

Matt

“That’ll be \$8.50 for two cappuccinos,” the cashier said, entering my coffee order into the machine.

For the past couple of days, I’d finish work, drop by the same coffee shop, purchase two cups of coffee, and visit Nick at his workshop to watch him work for a while before heading home to sleep.

Today was no different. The only change was that my wallet was almost empty, save for a lone \$5 bill.

“Uh, what about just black coffee? How much would that be?” I asked, feeling a warmth rising up to my neck.

“\$3.50,” she replied, raising a brow.

I quickly did some mental calculations, realizing my cash was barely enough to cover the two black coffees and a small tip.

Before I could change my order, she pointedly glanced at my wallet, eyeing my credit card. “We do accept cards, you know.”

“Just two black coffees, to go, please,” I said firmly.

She shrugged her shoulders and updated my order.

I felt my cheeks reddened as I moved to the other end of the counter to collect my coffees.

I pushed down this feeling of embarrassment. I was used to this already. It wasn’t the first time this happened.

Ever since I left my old pack, I had done everything possible to ensure I wouldn’t be found, and that included avoiding the

use of any credit cards.

I really didn't know whether they could trace me by finding a digital trail.

Maybe I watched too many police procedural shows, but I couldn't be too careful.

I mean, they managed to find out my new phone number within a few days of me changing it.

I had tried changing it a couple of times afterward, but when I realized they always seemed to find out my new number, I stopped bothering.

However, not using my credit card? I wasn't sure.

Maybe it really was working. They hadn't found me yet, so maybe it did help. At least that's what I kept telling myself.

So, I was determined to continue doing it, no matter how many embarrassing situations I found myself in where I couldn't pay for what I wanted.

It seemed like a small price to pay for freedom from that crazy, possessive jerk. I was free to live my life here, in Fox Haven.

That's right.

I lived here now, and I should start truly living here, not just going to and from my apartment and work, but hanging out with my friends, meeting new people. Especially certain new people.

Suddenly remembering my usual request, I added a last-minute change to the barista, "Oh, could you put it in a regular cup, please? Not the Christmas one. Thanks."

After getting my coffee order, I made my way to the workshop.

Upon my arrival, I found Nick engrossed in the selection of different paint swatches, wearing a deep frown.

"A darker, richer green would be better," he muttered without bothering to look up.

I couldn't help but smile. How did he even know I was here?

The door was already open when I entered, and he had his usual rock music playing loudly on his laptop.

“I hope you don’t mind black,” I said while holding up the coffee cups, “the, uh, milk machine was broken, and I didn’t want to wait.”

“Black’s fine. Thanks,” he replied, reaching for a cup.

Leaning his hip on the table, he took a sip of his coffee, his gaze fixed on me.

I noticed he had been doing that more often lately, and I couldn’t help but look away every time.

“If you want to change the color, you’ll have to take it up with Marcie yourself. I’ve run out of favors with her,” I said, putting on a serious expression.

“Well, if you don’t see me here tomorrow, you’ll know what happened,” Nick responded in a solemn tone.

“Nah, she’ll make you finish the sleigh first, and then you’ll mysteriously disappear the next day,” I countered.

Nick gave a low chuckle, the sound resonating through the workshop.

It was the first time I had heard him laugh like that, and the unexpected warmth it brought to the room felt like a sunbeam piercing through thick clouds on a gloomy day.

My heart skipped a beat. I felt like I found a new side of Nick that he had kept hidden behind his serious and reserved demeanor.

An unfamiliar sensation washed over me and I couldn’t help but grin in response.

My phone vibrated interrupting the moment. I quickly rejected the call, blocking the number.

These calls had been increasing recently. Ever since I rejected the call the other day at the coffeeshop.

What worried me more was that I received calls from different unknown numbers on the same day. That was unusual.

Yesterday, three different numbers had called me, making me increasingly nervous.

I contemplated getting a new number, but I knew that jerk would find out sooner or later.

I wasn't sure what to do about this but for now, I turned off my phone, trying to hide my unease.

I looked up and saw Nick staring at me.

Nick had been watching me closely and seemed like he couldn't ignore my actions any longer.

Nick put down his cup beside him and folded his arms. "I have to ask, are you in some kind of trouble?" he inquired.

"No," I replied immediately.

"Who are you avoiding?" He asked, frowning.

I was stunned for a moment, that the conversation suddenly shifted to my personal life. I wasn't sure how to explain it.

Not because we barely knew each other. But because it was him. It was Nick asking me.

I pursed my lips, hesitating. But the serious look in his eyes told me he wouldn't let this go.

I sighed.

"It's an... ex of mine," I said, looking down, not really wanting to say more.

Nick raised an eyebrow, taking a step closer, "Just an ex?"

"Yeah," I whispered, the word barely escaping my lips.

Nick's voice softened, a mere breath away, as he asked, "Nothing more?"

Our faces drew nearer, and I could feel the warmth of his breath on my skin.

"No," I replied, the word barely more than a murmur.

As our lips finally met, it was a soft and slow. His lips moved gently against mine, teasing and coaxing a response.

Nick's hand cupped my cheek, thumb lightly brushing my skin, sending shivers down my spine.

His other hand found its place on my waist, pulling me in even closer, until our bodies pressed against each other.

As the kiss deepened, the world around us faded away, leaving only the two of us in that moment.

In that instance, my mind was filled with questions— whether I should have shared the whole truth with Nick, or if turning off my phone had been the right decision.

But none of it mattered. I couldn't think at all because this was the kind of kiss that enveloped everything, making everything else fade away.

Chapter 6

Nick

“See you tomorrow, Nick,” called Garrett, one of my co-workers at the shop.

I grunted out a reply, headed for my truck and started the engine. The drive back home seemed to stretch on, the familiar road feeling longer than usual.

My usual Friday night routine involved picking up discounted hamburgers and sausages at the local grocery store, grabbing a six-pack of beer, and then heading right home to fire the grill.

The solitude suited me just fine.

But this Friday night was different. I didn't know what in the world possessed me to ask Matt out tonight.

Well, I told him to help him find his perfect Christmas tree. The truth was, I had something else special planned.

I stole a quick look at my wristwatch as I navigated the winding roads.

Matt agreed to meet me outside my cabin but I had some preparations to make. I was already running late.

A mixture of anxiety and excitement hummed in my veins. Would someone consider this a date?

Was I even ready to start dating again?

Probably not, but after our multiple coffee sessions, I knew right away that if I let Matt slip right through my fingers, I'd lose my chance forever.

After Gary and Ben's betrayal, I stopped believing in fated my mates.

He's right in front of you, my inner fox whispered whenever Matt was around.

I wondered if Matt sensed it as well. Pointing it out or asking him directly seemed embarrassing.

Besides, Matt and I were still getting to know each other.

Still, I couldn't help but wonder if tonight would change anything between us. Did I want things to change?

As I pulled up to my cabin, I spotted Matt standing on the porch, shivering in the cold night air.

I parked the truck and approached him, concerned.

"Have you been waiting long?" I asked, my breath visible in the chilly evening air.

Matt, with his hands tucked into his coat pockets, gave a small shrug. "Not too long. Just a few minutes."

I gestured toward the door. "Come on inside. You must be freezing out here," I said.

He followed me into the cabin, and I led him to the living room, inviting him to take a seat on the well-worn sofa.

"Make yourself at home. I'll just grab a few things," I said, disappearing into the adjacent kitchen.

In the kitchen, I found my picnic basket and opened the fridge to retrieve the food I had prepared earlier that morning.

I had wanted to make tonight special. I placed the sandwiches and salads carefully in the picnic basket, making sure everything was arranged just right.

The door suddenly swung open. Startled, I looked over to see Matt standing in the doorway.

"Nick, sorry to barge in on you, but can I get a glass of water?"

Matt's request came out hastily, his eyes widening as he took in the sight of me with the picnic basket.

“What—” Matt couldn’t seem to finish his sentence.

Matt’s gaze shifted from the basket and back to me. He paused, a faint blush coloring his cheeks as he chuckled awkwardly.

Matt must have finally put two-and-two together.

I couldn’t help but smile, setting the picnic basket down. Matt looked adorable when he was embarrassed.

“Of course, let me get you some water,” I said, trying to keep my voice steady as I moved to the kitchen.

I grabbed a glass and filled it with water for Matt. As I handed the glass to him, Matt raised an eyebrow and gave me a playful look.

My inner fox woke inside me, alert and excited.

“I thought we were going to find the perfect Christmas tree,” he said.

I cleared my throat, trying to sound confident and casual. “Yes, we are, but I figured we could have some dinner as well.”

Matt regarded me for a moment, a contemplative expression on his face. Then, he cut to the chase. “Nick, is this a date?”

His direct question caught me off guard, and I felt my heart race a little.

I met his gaze, the moment hanging in the air. Finally, I took a breath and replied, “Yes, Matt. It’s a date.”

“Oh, you should’ve mentioned that earlier. I could have dressed in something nicer,” Matt exclaimed, glancing down at his casual sweater and jeans.

I chuckled, finding his reaction cute. “You look perfect,” I assured him, smiling.

A slight blush crept onto Matt’s cheeks. Pink looked good on him, I thought.

“Shall we go?” I asked, eager to get the date started. “I know the perfect spot.”

With a nod from Matt, we both headed outside. I made a point to open the truck door for him. Matt thanked me and gracefully slid inside.

I drove us to the spot I had picked. After parking the car, we got off. I grabbed the picnic basket and blanket from the back seat.

Matt walked around the clearing, eyes wide.

“I’d never been in this area of the Fox Haven woods before. There are so many fir trees,” he whispered.

I couldn’t help but smile, glad that I had chosen the perfect location.

The woods around us were serene, and the scent of the fir trees filled the air.

After placing the blanket and picnic basket down, we both sat on the forest floor, our shoulders brushing against one another.

It felt intimate and comfortable. Then again, I always felt comfortable around Matt.

“It’s not much,” I admitted as I opened the picnic basket. “Just some cold sandwiches, salads, and cut fruit.”

Matt’s eyes held appreciation as he inspected our dinner.

“This is wonderful, Nick. No one’s ever done anything like this for me before,” he said.

His words warmed my heart, but a twinge of curiosity crept in. “No one?” I asked.

My suddenly went to the frequent calls Matt received, which he always waved off as his ex trying to contact him.

It made me wonder whether his past relationship was more entangled than he let on, and whether his ex had trouble letting go of him.

Matt would tell you when he’s ready, I reminded myself.

“So,” I said, after wolfing down a sandwich. “Tell me about your day?”

Chapter 7

Nick

“This tree?” I asked Matt in my most serious voice as I stood beside the tall fir he had chosen. “You’re certain?”

Matt, standing beside the tree, nodded with absolute conviction. “Absolutely.”

I couldn’t help but be bemused by the way he suddenly whipped out his phone and started recording as I began to cut the tree.

The whirring sound of the chainsaw filled the forest, and I couldn’t help but grin, even as I worked, knowing that Matt was capturing the moment.

After finishing the task, we stowed the tree in the back of my truck. As I turned to Matt, I noticed the chill in the air.

“It’s getting cold,” I said, concerned.

The last thing I wanted was for Matt to freeze.

I opened the truck door, offering him a warm escape from the cold.

But as he climbed inside, I couldn’t help but notice a hint of disappointment on his face, and it made me wonder what was running through his mind.

I drove him back to his apartment, the silence in the truck palpable. But parting ways was the last thing on my mind.

As I pulled up in front of Matt’s apartment building, a voice in my head reminded me that it was okay to take things slow.

Matt had recently gone through a breakup, and I still wasn't completely over Gary and Ben's betrayal.

Matt and I needed time to heal and adjust. The evening had been a step in the right direction, but we couldn't just blindly rush this.

At least that was what I kept reminding myself each time I looked at Matt.

I kept picturing him, naked and disheveled in my bed, crooking a finger at me. I tried pushing the distracting images away.

We climbed out of the truck, and turned our attention to the task at hand.

Matt and I discovered that the tree we had chosen wouldn't fit in the building's elevator, which meant we had to haul it up several flights of stairs.

Once we reached Matt's floor, I noticed a change in his expression. He wore a guilty look on his face, as if a thought had just struck him.

I furrowed my brow. "What is it?" I asked.

Matt hesitated for a moment. "We should've just left this at the pack house," he said.

I considered his words and then sighed, realizing that he was right.

Dragging the tree up six flights of stairs had been unnecessary. Still, I didn't mind it one bit if it meant spending more time with Matt.

"Don't worry about it," I reassured him. "I'll drop off the tree at the pack house before heading back home. It's not a big deal."

A look of relief washed over Matt's face. "I'm sorry for making you drag the tree up all those stairs," he said.

I leaned in closer to him, our faces only inches apart, and I let my actions speak for me.

“If you’re really sorry,” I said softly, leaving the words hanging, and I sealed my mouth over his.

Matt gripped my shoulders, responding with equal passion.

I groaned after he pulled away, awake my pants felt a little tighter. Matt looked down, blushed a little.

“I should go,” I blurted.

If Matt invited me inside his apartment, I knew I would say yes in a heartbeat.

This is just a first date, I reminded myself. There would be plenty more. The last thing I wanted to do was rush Matt.

“Have a good evening, Nick,” Matt whispered, his voice carrying a hint of longing.

“Good night, Matt. See you tomorrow,” I replied a little reluctantly.

With a final glance at him, I turned and began the descent with the tree.

I hauled it back to ground level and carefully loaded it into the back of my truck.

The drive back to the pack house was quiet, but my thoughts were far from still.

There was a lingering unease that gnawed at me, but I couldn’t identify what exactly what it was.

My inner fox even chided me, reminding me I was moving too slow.

Perhaps I should have lingered a little longer, maybe accepted an invitation for a drink or two if Matt had extended it.

I had one more stop to make before heading home.

After leaving the tree on the porch of the pack house with a note, I headed back to my truck.

I was just about to get behind the wheel when my cell phone vibrated in my jeans pocket. I glanced at the screen and saw Matt’s name flashing.

I couldn't help but smile. "Matt? Missed me already?" I teased.

But Matt's response was far from lighthearted.

"Nick, I—" His voice trembled with genuine fear, and my heart skipped a beat as I snapped into focus.

"Matt? Did something happen?" I asked.

"I'm not sure," Matt replied, his fear palpable. "But I think someone's in my apartment."

The words sent a chill down my spine. "Where are you now?" I demanded, my mind racing.

"I locked myself in my bedroom," Matt said, his voice shaking. "Hurry, Nick."

Without a second thought, I replied, "I'm on my way."

I rushed back to the truck and sped toward Matt's apartment, my heart pounding in my chest.

Every second that passed felt like an eternity, and a flood of questions raced through my mind.

Did someone break into Matt's apartment, just a random thief?

Then, I thought of all those unanswered calls that Matt had brushed off.

Was something more sinister at work here?

Finally, I arrived at his apartment building, the tension in my chest building with each passing moment.

I decided to take the elevator, knowing it would be faster.

As I ascended the floors, I couldn't help but wonder how Matt would be able to open the door if he was holed up in his room.

The sense of urgency grew with each passing second, and I couldn't shake the feeling that something was terribly wrong.

A chill ran down my spine when I reached his floor and noticed that Matt's front door was wide open.

Without a second thought, I raced into the apartment, adrenaline coursing through my veins, ready to confront the

intruder and protect Matt at all costs.

I had no weapon on me but my inner fox was ready to explode out of my skin any second.

Matt's apartment wasn't large, and I quickly checked every nook and cranny.

My heart pounded as I approached his bedroom door, my knuckles tight against the wood. I knocked urgently.

"Matt? It's Nick," I called out.

Finally, Matt unlocked the door. There were tears in his eyes and that stirred something primal inside me.

Whoever broke into Matt's apartment would pay.

"You're safe. No one is in here but us," I reassured Matt.

Without hesitation, I wrapped my arms around him, pulling him close in a tight, protective embrace.

I stroked his back soothingly, and that seemed to calm him down.

Matt clung to me, his tears wetting my shirt as he buried his face against my shoulder.

"Hush," I whispered. "It's okay now. You're safe, and I'm here. I've got you."

"I'm sorry," Matt blurted.

"For what?" I asked, finally releasing him from my embrace.

"For overreacting," Matt admitted. "Maybe I was just being paranoid and imagined an intruder entering my apartment."

I offered him a reassuring smile.

"Let's sit down," I suggested.

We settled onto the two-seater sofa, and I couldn't help but notice how close we were and how wonderful Matt smelled.

Now's not the time to think about that, my fox chided me. I focused on the immediate problem at hand.

I reached out and gently took Matt's hand in mine.

“Matt,” I began, “you weren’t being too paranoid. Your sense of smell might be a little off right now, and that’s entirely understandable. But I have to tell you, there is a third scent in your apartment.”

Matt paled at my words.

I continued, “I noticed it when I arrived. It’s faint, but it’s there. What’s going on? What aren’t you telling me? Does it have to do with the calls you were ignoring?”

Matt took a deep breath, and I could sense he was steeling himself for what he was about to say.

He finally spoke.” The calls I keep ignoring, they’re from my ex-fiancé.”

I was taken aback, shocked into silence. Anger welled up within me, but I knew I needed to set it aside for the moment.

I had to hear Matt’s side of the story first.

“Your fiancé?” I managed to ask.

“My former pack is a bit traditional, you see. My lead alpha arranged my betrothal to his son, Richard. I hardly knew Richard, and I didn’t want to be stuck with a complete stranger my entire life,” he said.

I processed his words. “Is that why you transferred to Fox Haven?” I asked.

Matt nodded. “I wanted to tell you earlier, Nick, but I was afraid that if you knew about my complicated past, you would stop seeing me,” he said.

I reached out and took his hand, offering a reassuring squeeze.

“Matt,” I said softly, “I’m glad you shared this with me. Your past doesn’t change how I feel about you. It only makes me want you even more.”

“So let me get this straight,” I said, “both your former lead alpha and Richard want you back?”

Matt shook his head, a small, resigned smile playing on his lips.

“Just Richard. His dad considered me a lost cause and believed there are plenty of other fish in the ocean,” he said.

“That makes things easier,” I said, relieved that it was just one persistent alpha I had to deal with.

Matt looked at me rather hopefully. “Nick, does this mean... you still want me?” Matt asked.

I couldn't help but smile at his question. I reached for him, our lips meeting in a tender and sweet kiss.

“Of course, Matt,” I assured him. “We're mates. Can't you sense it?”

“I can,” Matt whispered. He hesitated for a moment, then shyly asked me. “Would you stay the night?”

“Of course,” I told him.

To reassure both Matt and myself, I double-checked all the doors and windows in his apartment.

The intruder's scent was contained in the living room, which I found interesting.

I knocked on Matt's bedroom door.

He had just emerged from the bathroom, dressed in a shirt and boxers, looking somewhat embarrassed by his appearance.

I asked Matt if he could recognise the scent in the room. Matt, looking just as puzzled as I was, shook his head.

“I don't recognize it at all,” he admitted. “It wasn't Richard or any of my former pack mates.”

“Hmm. If that's the case, I think your apartment is secured,” I assured him, not wanting him to worry any further.

“Thank you, Nick,” Matt replied. “I know it's selfish of me, asking you to spend the night here.”

I gave him a reassuring smile. “I don't have anywhere I need to go, Matt. I'll stay with you,” I told him.

“Why don't you have my bed, and I'll sleep on the couch?” Matt asked.

“No, I have a much better idea. Why don’t we share the bed? It’s big enough for the both of us,” I suggested.

Matt colored a little and I wondered if I was too bold, but then Matt quickly recovered.

“Sounds good,” he said.

To my surprise, Matt made the first move. He walked up to me, tugged the collar of my jacket and kissed me on the mouth.

The taste and heat of him washed down my throat.

“You’re wearing too many clothes,” he said after pulling away.

“Then I have to change that,” I said.

Matt stepped away as I peeled off my jacket, shirt, jeans and underwear. Matt undressed in a hurry as well.

Finally, we both stood nude in front of each other. Hunger stirred inside me at the gorgeous sight of him.

I closed in on Matt, kissing him senseless. We fell on the bed, with me straddling Matt.

I left a trail of burning kisses down his mouth, neck, his chest.

Matt groaned as I slipped my fingers around his cock and gave it a squeeze.

“Matt, tell me I’m moving too fast and I’ll back away,” I told him before I lost all sense of control.

“You’re not,” Matt whispered.

“Good.” That was all I was capable of saying.

I reached for my jeans, grabbed the condom from my wallet. Matt had pulled out a tube of lube from the nightstand and handed it to me.

After prepping him for entry, I slid the condom on. Then I entered him, slow and easy.

Matt’s breathing deepened as I finally entered him, balls deep. Then I started with slow and easy strokes.

Matt begged me to go faster and deeper. I complied. With each stroke, I felt like a part of my soul, my inner fox, drifted out to touch his.

“Nick,” he whispered.

Hearing my name on his lips sounded like sweet music to my ears.

I pumped in and out of him a few times before he came, screaming out my name.

After several thrusts, I climaxed, groaning as I slanted my mouth over his.

Then I collapsed next to him, tugging Matt close to me for an embrace.

“Nick, make me yours,” he whispered.

I knew exactly what he wanted and what I wanted as well. Without hesitation, I bit Matt on the side of his neck.

Initially, I told myself I could wait and go slow but after someone broke into Matt’s apartment, waiting no longer seemed prudent.

Matt turned in my arms. I relaxed my hold on him so he could in turn, leave a smaller mark near my left collar bone.

The mating bond sprung to life between us, forming silvery threads that bound his life force with mine. It was done. Only death could tear us apart now.

Chapter 8

Richard

“You what? Broke into Matt’s apartment?” Richard’s voice carried a mix of disbelief and frustration as he confronted Percy, the private investigator he had hired to spy on Matt.

As he listened to Percy’s explanation, Richard’s regret for involving the investigator was growing by the moment.

“I didn’t mean to break into his apartment,” Percy said defensively. “All I wanted was to get some photos, and I didn’t anticipate him being home so early. He was out on a date, after all.”

The mention of a date sent a surge of anger through Richard.

He seethed silently, feeling humiliated and enraged that Matt seemed to be going about his life happily, while Richard’s own reputation within the pack was in tatters thanks to Matt’s departure.

Among the pack, having Richard as a mate was supposed to be a major score.

He was the next in line to be the lead alpha, and many pack members, young and old, saw him as a role model. But things had taken an unexpected turn.

Now? Richard had turned into the pack’s laughing stock, a running joke.

It seemed he couldn’t even handle his mate-to-be, and that raised questions about his ability to lead the pack.

“Are you even sure it was Matt you saw?” Richard questioned Percy skeptically, not caring Percy heard the doubt in his voice.

The private investigator looked affronted.

“Of course, it was him. Look at this,” Percy said, reaching for his cellphone and pulling up a screenshot he’d taken of an online newsletter.

He zoomed in on a group photo, and Richard leaned in to get a closer look. The image was slightly blurry, but there was no denying that it was Matt in the photograph.

Richard’s eyes followed as he read the words beneath the image, which only triggered his rage again.

“Fox Haven Christmas Planning Committee,” he muttered to himself.

He remembered that Fox Haven was a remote area with a small pack living there. The realization only ramped up his growing frustration.

“It seems I underestimated you,” he admitted.

Percy, with a hint of smugness, inquired, “So, you’ll still pay me?”

Richard nodded. “Yes, I’ll pay you. You did what I hired you to do.”

After settling his payment with Percy, Richard joined his father and the members of the pack council for dinner. He purposefully chose a seat next to his father.

“Have you looked through the recent emails Bridget sent you?” the lead alpha asked, turning his attention to his son.

Richard sighed, his face turning slightly red with embarrassment.

“No, I haven’t,” he admitted, having been preoccupied with recent events.

As he listened to his father, he couldn’t help but overhear a conversation nearby. Two senior pack members were gossiping about his love life.

“I heard the lead alpha had to hire a matchmaker to find Richard a mate after his last fiancé ran out on him,” one of the old-timers mentioned with a sly, knowing smile.

Richard clenched his jaw, the comments stinging his pride. He felt the urge to confront the old fox and put him in his place, but he knew that resorting to violence wouldn't solve anything.

In fact, it would only further tarnish his already fragile reputation. With a deep breath, he forced himself to focus on his dinner and tried to ignore the whispers around him.

“Look, Father, I don't want Bridget to find me a new mate,” Richard said.

His father raised an eyebrow. “Oh?” he inquired.

Richard rushed to explain himself before his father's temper flared.

“I hired a PI to locate Matt,” he said quickly, hoping to get the words out before his father could react negatively. “He's in—”

His father, however, didn't let him finish. His voice turned hard and commanding as he interrupted, “I don't care, Richard. I've told you many times that Matt is a lost cause. Forget him. There's nothing special about him anyway.”

His father was right. Matt was ordinary.

He wasn't even that good-looking, and when his father had first announced their betrothal, Richard had assumed that Matt would be someone he could easily control, perhaps even order around.

He never anticipated that Matt would have the courage to leave the pack and seek a new life elsewhere.

Frustration bubbled up within Richard, and he gritted his teeth, determined to stand his ground.

“This is a matter of personal honor,” he insisted.

His father scoffed at his words, unimpressed. “All that honor disappeared when you couldn't even convince your mate-to-be to stay.”

But Richard was unwavering.

He squared his shoulders and declared, "I'll get him back, even if I have to travel to Fox Haven on my own."

His father gripped his hand hard. "Richard, you're not going anywhere. Our pack barely won the last territorial war with another fox pack. We can't afford to pick a fight with a new enemy because of your pride."

Realizing that he wouldn't be able to convince his father at that moment, Richard reluctantly gave in.

"Promise me, son," his father urged.

With a sullen nod, Richard replied, "I promise."

But deep down, he wasn't giving up on the idea of hunting down Matt. Far from it.

Once his father was preoccupied with other matters and his attention was diverted, Richard planned to make his move.

He was determined to slip away unnoticed, travel to Fox Haven on his own, and find his wayward mate-to-be.

He would bring Matt back home, no matter what it took.

Chapter 9

Matt

“You’re working on Christmas and New Year?” Cliff asked, surprised, while looking at our shift schedule for the next two weeks.

“Uh, yeah,” I replied, not wanting to say more.

I didn’t want to tell him how I didn’t feel safe at my apartment anymore, fearing it might have been broken into by my crazy ex-fiancé.

I didn’t want to tell him that I felt safer here in the clinic, at the pack compound.

Nor did I want to admit that I probably wouldn’t have plans to celebrate the season anyway.

My mate, Nick, wasn’t a fan of the holiday season. Although we’d probably still do something together, I knew he wouldn’t mind if I took an extra shift or two in the next couple of weeks.

Or, well, eight for that matter.

Cliff turned to me and gave me a look. I couldn’t quite figure out how he managed it, but it was a mixture of gratefulness, pity, and guilt all rolled into one.

It was the same look the other two clinic receptionists in the previous shift gave me when they found out I didn’t mind taking more shifts over the next two weeks.

Opening then closing his mouth, as if wanting to say something more, Cliff glanced at the shift schedule in his

hands again. He was probably trying to see if he could take a shift or two.

I saved him the trouble and patted him on the shoulder, echoing the same thing I told the other receptionists earlier.

“It’s fine. I don’t have plans. And I don’t mind the extra cash.”

Cliff suddenly looked up, puzzled. “Wait, you don’t have plans? Why didn’t you say so? You can come over to my place!”

Ah damn it.

I forgot this was Cliff I was talking to. He wasn’t just another work acquaintance, but an actual friend who looks out for me.

I should have expected him to offer to spend Christmas with his family if I said I didn’t have anything planned for the holidays.

How do I get out of this? I had to think fast.

I looked at him, and he was already holding a pencil, muttering to himself about how to move around the shifts to free up some time for me so I could spend Christmas with him and his family.

He looked like a coach trying to run different plays in a football game, circling and drawing arrows on the shift schedule.

To be honest, I was touched. In fact, if things were different—like, say, if I didn’t have to constantly look over my shoulder for my psycho ex—I would say yes.

I would even proudly tell him I’d be bringing a date with me.

But, no. Things weren’t like that.

I was still getting those weird calls. I still had to be careful not to use my credit cards.

And now, I had to call my landlord to get him to change the lock in my place because my apartment was broken into the other night.

So thinking about what to do during the holiday season was the last thing on my mind right now.

To be honest, if Nick weren't here to help me through this, I wouldn't know what to do.

I couldn't wait to see him again later. He promised to help me figure out what to do next over dinner.

For now, we both agreed that the safest place for me would be in the pack compound.

Before Cliff could draw any more circles and arrows, I put a hand over the sheet and told him the first thing that came to mind. "I already told Doctor Daniels. Plus, the schedule is all set. I don't mind it. Really."

Cliff pursed his lips and eventually nodded. "I'll try to come by or something."

"I'd like that," I said, giving him a genuine smile.

"But you're still going to the Christmas party, right? Marcie would flip if anyone from the committee skipped out on it," Cliff said in a low whisper, as if Marcie could overhear us talking about her all the way from the pack house where her office was.

"Are you nuts? Of course, I'm going to be there. I don't have a death wish," I said, waving a hand dismissively.

"Good," Cliff said, breathing a sigh of relief. "Have you gotten a gift for your Secret Santa yet?"

I froze. With everything that has been happening so far, I completely forgot about buying a gift for Nick.

As if he could tell from the look on my face, Cliff patted my hand. "It's okay, me too. Let's go shopping tomorrow. No backing out, okay?"

* * *

Of all the places to rethink my life choices, I didn't expect standing in front of a shopping mall would be it.

It was basically down to two options—die trying to get a gift in this crowd or face the wrath of Marcie at the pack Christmas party in a few days.

Let's face it; if I can't get a gift today, I wouldn't be able to show my face at that Christmas party. And as part of the planning committee, I *had* to be there.

I took another peek beyond the glass doors, the entrance to the mall.

It still looked the same as when I last looked half an hour ago. It was practically a hive of activity in there.

It was the last weekend before Christmas, and the mall was filled with people trying to get a good deal or idiots like me who forgot to get their gifts until the last minute.

I clicked my tongue in frustration.

No guts, no glory, Matt. Focus on the goal.

And today's goal was—get a Christmas present for your Secret Santa. Your mate.

I repeated it a few more times in my head to psych myself up, pulled my scarf tighter, clenched my fists, and finally decided to head in.

Immediately upon entering the mall, someone behind me bumped me hard on my shoulder, another hit my leg with the bags they were carrying, and I felt something heavy roll over my feet.

When I turned to look at what it was, it was a lady pushing a stroller. I almost apologized until I saw that the stroller was piled with shopping bags. There was no kid in sight.

I closed my eyes and tried counting to ten, but before I could even reach the second number, someone else pushed me to the side.

Screw this.

Gritting my teeth, I looked around and decided to head into the least packed store I could find nearby and enter it for refuge and wait for Cliff there.

It was a hardware store. Although it wasn't as empty as I thought it would be, at least I wouldn't collide with another person every two seconds.

I rubbed my shoulders, sore from bumping into more people on the short walk from the entrance to the hardware store, before sending a quick text to Cliff to meet me here instead of the mall entrance.

I decided to walk around first and remembered that I thought about getting Nick new gloves or even a ladder for his gift.

But that was before I got to know him. That was before he became my mate.

My mate.

It felt odd to say or even think it.

But what was even weirder was just how right it felt. I have never felt so sure in my life.

I wasn't even this sure when I was deciding to run away from my old pack.

But, why did getting a gift for Nick seem like the hardest thing in the world right now?

A part of me wanted to get him the perfect gift. But would it even matter?

He wasn't a fan of the holiday season, and something like that wouldn't just go away overnight.

So, what would you get someone who hates Christmas and by extension, Christmas parties, and said person was forced to go to such a party?

As I rubbed the back of my neck, I suddenly felt the hairs on the back of my neck standing, as if someone was watching me.

I turned around and saw Cliff behind me, a shocked look on his face, with his hand raised as if he was about to tap my shoulder.

“Whoa, how did you know? I guess I can't sneak up on you, huh?”

I smiled and tried to look behind him. Whatever it was I felt or sensed, I knew it wasn't Cliff.

I looked around again, but I couldn't sense that same feeling anymore. Was I getting paranoid?

Then again, I haven't been getting as many calls as I used to ever since my apartment got broken into.

I wanted to think that maybe it was a good sign, that maybe it'll get down to just one call a day again, then eventually he'll give up.

Cliff pulled me by my elbow, bringing me back from my thoughts, and started dragging me around the store.

He was talking. Something about the pack party, and I suddenly felt bad for not listening to him, being wrapped up in my own problems instead.

"Sorry?" I asked, hoping he couldn't tell I haven't heard what he'd been talking about for the past few minutes.

"Who'd you get for the Secret Santa? Maybe I can help you decide what to get." Cliff looked around, appraising the store, and added, "we could even get something here. It's crazy outside."

I hesitated for a moment, contemplating whether to share this information with Cliff.

After all, all he'd know is Nick's name, and I wasn't planning on telling him more than necessary.

"Oh, I got that new guy. Nick something," I said, trying to sound nonchalant.

Cliff scrunched his face, thinking hard. "I don't really know anything about him. He seems like he mostly keeps to himself. You guys didn't seem to get along well at the meeting."

"Well..." I started to say, but Cliff suddenly pulled me to a different part of the store.

We finally stopped at the back of the store at what looked like the discount corner. Bright red discount signs hung from the ceiling and walls, and there was a definite air of neglect.

It looked like where unwanted items that haven't sold for months, or even years, were dumped.

"Why are we here?" I asked, raising a brow.

"It's the perfect place to get something for someone like Nick," Cliff said.

I surveyed the scene with a raised brow, my skepticism growing.

Surprisingly, the shelves were practically barren, with only a handful of items scattered haphazardly.

It looked like better-looking or decent ones were already picked off, leaving behind a collection of products with dented or dirty packaging.

"Okay, we didn't get along that time, but I don't actually hate the guy. And I don't want him to hate me," I said, picking up an autobiography of some TV personality that was marked down at 90% off.

"I mean, it's just a random gift to someone you barely know. That means a cup, calendar, or picture frame in the gift-giving world. There are plenty of those here! And, they're all within the suggested budget." Cliff added the last part with a flourish, spreading his arms like some game show host, asking me to pick my desired prize.

I really, *really* didn't want Nick to hate me, I repeated to myself.

I picked up a mug covered with protruding lips using my thumb and forefinger, holding it at arm's length as if it were radioactive.

I glanced at him, trying to emphasize my point.

Cliff rolled his eyes and bent down to reach the lower shelf, going through a few boxes, as if looking for something.

He ended up holding two decent-looking boxes, and by decent, I meant there only seemed to be one dented corner on each box.

Cliff turned each of them around, further scrutinizing them.

Then, as if they seemed to pass some sort of test or criteria that only he seemed to know, he finally handed them to me.

“Choose one.”

They were two distinct mugs, each equally gaudy, adorned with a ridiculous pun on the front.

One of the mugs had ‘Espresso Yourself’ printed on it. I tilted my head to the side, shooting him an exasperated look.

“What? Nick doesn’t seem like a picture frame kind of guy. You can only use a calendar for a year. Plus, he just moved here. Maybe he needs a mug,” Cliff explained.

I didn’t know whether it was because I was tired or because my shoulder hurt from first being pushed around earlier, then dragged around, but everything Cliff said made sense.

In the end, I decided to pick the one that was priced higher, so if Nick asked, I could at least say it wasn’t the cheapest mug in the store.

Although he wouldn’t need to know it was only 15 cents more.

On the drive home, I realized that whatever I gave him at the pack party wouldn’t matter, and I could just give him the real gift at home. Though, I still have no clue what to actually get him.

My phone buzzed, interrupting my thoughts. It was a call from Nick telling me he’s coming by to pick me up for dinner soon.

I realized that it was the first time in a long time my heart didn’t stop when I heard my phone buzzing.

The whole time I had been living in Fox Haven, I thought of it as a temporary place, a hideout until I moved on to the next pack or town and had to do it all over again.

But I never realized it had transformed into my home.

Amongst friends, a fulfilling life, and my mate, I recognized that I was no longer on the run.

The lingering issue with Richard persisted, but his calls were dwindling. He was like an annoying pest and I just needed to wait until it went away.

He seemed increasingly harmless, and he didn't appear to be actively pursuing me.

I saw it as a promising sign to move forward and live my life.

I was tired of hiding and decided it was time to embrace the present, to live here and now.

Chapter 10

Matt

Once I reached my apartment, I stopped by my mailbox to grab my new keys. The landlord told me he had left them there.

Thank goodness they managed to change the locks while I was out today.

I was surprised that they got the handyman to change it so quickly.

Although I was sure my promise of a good tip and some gift cards for the restaurant of their choice helped speed things up.

I walked up the stairs, my mind still pondering about the gift. Should I get a different one?

But I thought better of it—no way was I going back to the mall.

I finally reached my door, took a peek inside the paper bag again before entering, and couldn't help but make a face when I saw the mug.

The first order of business was to hide the damn thing.

Nick said he would be here shortly, and I definitely did not want him to see this so soon.

I made up my mind, deciding to say it was a joke gift instead. The element of surprise was all I had going for me when I give this to him.

At least we could get a good laugh out of it.

Now that I think about it, maybe I should have gotten the other one as well. We could have a cute pair of ugly matching mugs.

I made a mental note to go back to the store tomorrow. Or maybe on Monday.

The mall would definitely be more packed on a weekend. And there was no rush. I wasn't too worried about anyone else getting that other mug.

That thing was hideous, I thought with a smile. It was perfect.

I unlocked the door and reached for the wall to flick on the light. As I took off my scarf and began removing my jacket, a prickling sensation crept up the back of my neck, as if someone's gaze bore into me.

Startled, I turned around, only to find Richard casually leaning on the kitchen island.

“Did you really think changing your locks would stop me from getting in?”

I glared at him, not uttering a word. Calmly shifting my body sideways, I placed my shopping bag on a small table by the door, making sure he wouldn't catch me putting my hand in my pocket.

Trying to picture my phone screen in my mind, I ran my fingertips across the screen, hoping to press the call button and reach Nick without Richard noticing.

It should be possible since he was the last person I had dialed.

It's not like I never thought about what I would do if Richard ever found me.

I had plans, made certain preparations months ago for every possible scenario I could think of.

I had an emergency bag ready, packed in case I needed to leave immediately.

I hid inconspicuous 'tools' around the apartment in case I ever needed to defend myself—a metal rod by the umbrella stand, a baseball bat by the living room.

Things hiding in plain sight.

But all those plans went down the drain when my place was broken into. Everything was messed up and not in its usual place. I didn't know what to do.

The phone in my pocket became a lifeline, hoping I could make a call to Nick and convey that I needed him here, now.

All I needed to do was keep talking. Make sure Nick could hear our voices when he answers the call.

"No, but it's worth a shot," I said, forcing calmness into my tone.

I tried to walk closer, tempted to go to the kitchen. Maybe I could grab something from there that could help me.

But each step closer to Richard felt like navigating a minefield.

Richard immediately moved from the counter he was leaning on, as if sensing my intention.

Ah.

Maybe that's why he chose to wait there. To block my path.

I guess he wasn't a complete idiot after all.

"Heh, all these futile attempts to avoid me. Aren't you tired of all this?" Richard sneered.

I clenched my fists, reminding myself to stay composed, to keep my cool.

"How did you even find me?" I questioned, my voice steady, though my heart raced.

Richard extracted a piece of paper, unfolding it to reveal the front page of a newsletter. I squinted my eyes, not wanting to come any closer to him.

'Fox Haven Herald' read the words at the top of the page, and I froze. It was the town's newsletter.

The triumphant smile on Richard's face mirrored the betrayal in the photograph. My face, among the Christmas planning committee members, exposed.

I cursed myself. I couldn't believe how careless I was. But now was not the time to dwell on my mistakes.

"Come back with me now while I'm still asking you nicely," Richard said, making his way toward me.

I took a step back, my gaze not leaving his and saw his eyes glowing amber. I knew he was barely holding himself back.

I took a quick glance at the door.

"Don't even think about it," Richard warned.

Panicking, I whipped out my phone, and my heart dropped. I didn't manage to call Nick earlier. But I quickly swiped my fingers, dialing Nick's number.

From the side, I heard steps quickly walking towards me, and Richard lunged for my phone.

"Leave me alone!" I yelled, dodging his grasp. A quick glance at my phone screen confirmed that Nick had answered.

"Nick, he's here!" I managed to shout. Richard seized my arm, hurling the phone against the wall.

Chapter II

Nick

N ICK

I was in my cabin, eyeing the three gifts I randomly bought for Matt for the gift exchange. Then I let out a heavy sigh.

Dang it, I was no good at this. My cellphone suddenly rang.

Startled, I picked it up. Seeing Matt's name flashing across the screen, I couldn't help but smile.

"Leave me alone," Matt was saying.

It took me a second to realize he had directed those words to someone else.

Panic surged through me, but I forced myself to calm down.

"Matt, what's happening?" I desperately asked.

"Nick, he's here," Matt managed to say before the call was abruptly cut off. The chilling silence that followed left me in a state of shock.

My mind raced as I realized who "he" was – Richard, the alpha Matt had been running from.

My mate was in danger, and I couldn't waste another second. I needed to get to Matt's place.

My heart pounded like a drum as I jumped into my truck and sped toward Matt's apartment.

Panic gnawed at my insides, and I tried calling Matt again, but there was still no answer.

Scared that Richard would have seriously hurt Matt, I pushed the pedal, not caring I was driving past the speed limit.

The drive felt like an eternity, but finally, I arrived at Matt's apartment building.

I dashed inside, sweating profusely, my footsteps echoing in the empty hallway.

To my dismay, I saw a sign by the elevator that read, "Out of Service." It seemed that luck wasn't on my side.

Without hesitation, I rushed to the stairwell.

The memory of the previous break-in at Matt's apartment haunted my thoughts as I raced up the stairs.

I couldn't help but replay the unsettling scene in my head, and this time, I had no doubt that the intruder wouldn't simply run away.

Panting and anxious, I reached Matt's floor. My heart sank as I spotted his apartment door wide open, a chilling sight that sent a shiver down my spine.

I cautiously approached, not wanting Richard to detect my presence. I could hear raised voices from within the apartment.

"How dare you mate someone else?" A familiar voice filled with anger and bitterness demanded. "I'm not good enough for you, is that it?"

Finally, I entered Matt's place. I spotted a dark-haired and muscular alpha cornering Matt in the living room.

So this was Richard.

I didn't miss the way Richard's eyes fixed on the mate mark on Matt's neck.

"Richard, I'm warning you one last time. Leave before this turns nasty," Matt said.

His voice faltered a little, but at that moment, I was so proud of him for standing up for himself.

“Or what? Is your mate going to arrive and kick me out?” Richard taunted.

I couldn't stand idly by any longer. I neared the two of them.

“That's right,” I said firmly.

Hearing my voice, Richard spun around, his gaze narrowing as he took me in.

The other alpha silently assessed me. He was probably wondering if he could take me on.

“If you know what's good for you, turn around and walk away. Matt's not worth fighting for. Let me warn you now, I've been trained in martial arts since I was a child,” Richard said.

I scoffed, refusing to back down. His words didn't intimidate me at all.

“I decide if Matt's worth fighting for,” I said. “And he is. He's the best thing that ever happened to me.”

Matt's face flushed at my words. Right there and then, he looked adorable and I wanted to kiss him.

Then I remembered I still had to deal with one problem.

Richard seized my momentary distraction. Growling, he lunged at me with an aggressive growl.

His claws were partially shifted, telling me he intended to hurt me for real.

At the last moment, I sidestepped Richard's lunge, narrowly avoiding his outstretched claws.

He snarled at me in frustration. Relentless, Richard came at me again. I countered his attack with a precise strike, aiming for his exposed throat.

Richard dodged, and I ended up hitting his shoulder instead.

He wasn't all talk after all. We circled one another, each of us seeking an opening.

“Nick, watch out!” Matt yelled.

Richard lunged at me again. We clashed and sparred. Our surroundings blurred, and time seemed to slow.

Finally, I saw an opening, a chance for a lucky strike.

With a well-aimed punch to Richard's head, he stumbled and went down with a groan.

I didn't let up, not until I was sure that he posed no further threat to Matt. I struck him again and again until Richard was unconscious.

The fight was over. Breathing heavily, I glanced at Matt.

Matt approached me. I pulled him into a warm, protective embrace.

Holding him close, I wanted to reassure him that he was safe now.

"You okay?" I asked him.

"I am now," he said. Matt hugged me fiercely back, and I couldn't help but notice his heartbeat echoed the rhythm of my own.

After a moment, I reluctantly released Matt from our embrace. I glanced at Richard's unconscious form.

"What are we going to do with him? Should I call Owen?" I asked, unsure of the best course of action.

Matt looked contemplative.

"I'll call my former lead alpha," Matt said. He continued, "and ask him to send someone to pick his son up."

I raised an eyebrow. "Are you sure about this?" I asked.

It was probably for the best. The last thing we needed was some sort of unnecessary tension between our packs.

Matt gently placed a hand on my cheek. "You won this fight," he said. "Richard has been humiliated enough. It's the right thing to do."

With that, Matt dialed the number to his former lead alpha.

It didn't take long before someone from Matt's former pack appeared on his doorstep, a representative sent by the lead alpha to handle the situation.

I hovered closely by Matt's side, protective instincts still in full force, as Matt engaged in a terse conversation with his former pack mate.

"The lead alpha wants to assure you that nothing like this would ever happen again," the emissary stated.

"Make sure it doesn't. Next time, I won't go easy on him," I said.

The fox shifter sent me a curt nod and finally left Matt's apartment. He carefully carried the still unconscious Richard away with him.

As the door closed behind them, a sense of relief washed over me. I turned to face Matt. Cupping his cheek, I gave him a slow and tender kiss.

The familiar taste and heat of him washed down my throat. Matt kissed me back, and it occurred to me that today, I nearly lost him.

It would never happen again, I reminded myself.

"Now that's finally over," I said to Matt. "What do you say about dinner?"

"My treat," Matt said.

Chapter 12

Nick

The annual pack Christmas party wasn't exactly my idea of a good time. The pack house was bustling with activity.

It was crowded and noisy.

However, I promised Matt I would make an appearance.

Besides, seeing Matt happy and laughing with Cliff, was worth the price of admission.

After picking up a plate of food from the buffet, I found a quiet corner of the room.

Nestled beside the beautifully restored sleigh that had occupied my workshop for some time, I couldn't help but smile to myself.

I recalled the time Matt had made a surprise visit to my workshop, carrying two cups of coffee.

If Matt didn't make the first move, I would probably still be lonely and bitter during this holiday.

"Grumpy old Nick is actually smiling? What a rare sight," Owen remarked, joining me in my quiet corner.

Owen wore an ugly reindeer sweater, and I couldn't help but grin at the sight. Word had it that Ian, his mate, had knitted it for him.

"I thought I would have to drag you out of the house," Owen added.

I glanced around the room and spotted Matt talking to Marcie.

“I’m here for Matt,” I said.

Following our confrontation with Richard, rumors had quickly spread throughout the pack.

Practically everyone was now aware that Matt and I were mated, and I didn’t mind one bit.

I wanted every fox shifter in the pack to know that Matt was exclusively mine.

“Who knew Matt was the secret ingredient that would finally bring you out of your gloomy shell?” Owen teased.

“Oh, he’s more than that,” I said “Matt’s my everything.”

Owen’s expression grew serious, and I could tell he had something important to share.

“Boris, Richard’s father, and Matt’s former lead alpha, finally contacted me,” he said, causing me to tense up.

“What did he say?” I asked.

“He assured me that Richard entered our territory on his own accord, and he wants no ill will between our packs,” Owen explained.

Owen went on, “Richard will be kept under lock and key for a while, so he won’t be troubling Matt and you again.”

“That’s a relief,” I said. “Because if he did show his face again, there wouldn’t be another chance for him.”

I was determined to protect what was mine, and I knew I wouldn’t hesitate to do so if the need arose.

Owen gave my shoulder a reassuring squeeze. “I know.”

Marcie soon came around and told Owen he was needed for the gift exchange, and he excused himself.

Matt soon joined me, his cheeks flushed with excitement.

“You should try this pie, Nick. It’s amazing.”

He picked up a piece and hesitated for a moment before gently feeding it to me.

“You’re right. It’s sweet, just like you,” I said.

Matt's face reddened. "Nick, are you drunk?" Matt demanded.

I chuckled, shaking my head.

"Not at all," I assured him. "I'm just happy to be here with you."

With Matt by my side, everything felt perfect.

The gift exchange was about to kick off, and it turned out that Matt and I had drawn each other's names.

I couldn't help but grin at the coincidence.

Looking at my gift, I realized it was wrapped in a hurry, covered in a layer of newspaper. On the other hand, Matt's gift was beautifully wrapped with fancy paper and a shiny silver bow.

I felt a pang of regret, wishing I had put more effort into presentation.

However, when I glanced at Matt, he met my gaze with a big smile. He didn't seem bothered by my haphazard wrapping at all.

That was so like him.

"Open it," Matt suggested with a mischievous grin.

I did as he said and was genuinely surprised to find a mug inside.

Matt's expression mirrored my surprise when he uncovered his own gift – another mug.

We couldn't help but burst into laughter.

"Well, I guess these mugs will fit right in with our kitchen," I said, trying to sound nonchalant.

Matt, however, didn't let my comment slide. He raised an eyebrow.

"Our kitchen?" he asked.

"Check inside your mug," I suggested.

Matt did as I asked, and his fingers wrapped around a key, a copy to my cabin. He stared at it for a moment,

uncomprehending.

“Nick, is this...?” Matt’s voice wavered as he looked at me.

I met his gaze with a warm smile. I reached out, gently placing my hand on his.

“The key to my cabin? Yes, it is,” I confirmed. “Matt, we’re already mates, and we’ve been through a lot. Wouldn’t it be more convenient if we moved in together?”

In the background, someone – Cliff, it seemed – gasped, and his mate, Declan, quickly hushed him.

Matt didn’t say anything for a few moments, and I wondered if I had asked this question too soon. Perhaps I should’ve waited until after New Year?

“Matt, give the poor guy an answer,” Owen yelled from somewhere in the room.

“Yeah, he’s practically sweating,” Marcie yelled, and there were a few good-humored laughs.

Matt’s gaze remained locked onto mine, and all my worries evaporated.

“Nick, I... I’d love that,” he admitted. He cleared his throat. “I’d love to move in with you.”

Cheers erupted from our excited pack mates. I didn’t even have the heart to tell them to mind their own business.

As the cheers and applause continued, the party and everyone else in the room seemed to fade into the background.

My focus was solely on Matt, and it felt like the two of us were the only people in the world.

I tugged him close until our bodies, then our lips, touched. Matt grasped my shoulders, and right there and then, I kissed him under the mistletoe.

I took my time, not caring about our hooting pack mates. When I pulled away, I noticed Matt’s cheeks were rosy.

“Nick, who knew you were such an exhibitionist?” Matt asked me.

I chuckled. "I want everyone to know you're mine."

"I love you, Nick," Matt whispered.

"Love you, too."

I couldn't wait to begin this new chapter of our lives together.

Chapter 13

Matt

One Year Later

Nick rummaged through the bags I had just placed on the kitchen counter and made a *tsk* sound, as if searching for something specific.

“If you’re looking for the sliced cheese, I think it’s in the other ba— oh, you found it never mind,” I said, spotting the packet of sliced cheddar in front of him.

But Nick still had his hands in one of the bags.

I was in the middle of taking off my coat and paused when I noticed he moved on to the next bag, digging through it, like he did the first one.

It was as if he was trying, but failing terribly, to find some lost treasure.

When he went on to the third bag, which he had already looked through at least twice, I frowned and crossed my arms.

He was so focused that he didn’t even notice I had been staring at him for the past few minutes.

“What exactly are you looking for?” I finally asked.

“I thought you were getting fruitcake?” Nick replied, still rummaging through the bags on the kitchen counter.

“Oh! Here.” I handed him the small bag I was holding.

Nick grabbed it excitedly and lifted the small fruitcake, no bigger than his palm, and frowned.

“This is it?” he asked, disappointed.

“Well, yeah. It’s just for me anyway. I can’t finish the whole cake if I got the bigger one,” I explained, continuing to remove my scarf and gloves.

“But uh... don’t they have an offer now since it’s so close to Christmas?” he asked, his voice unusually high.

When I didn’t answer and continued to look at him with a raised brow, he added, “I think they have an offer now. Buy one, get one free or something, right?”

What was going on here? I don’t remember him liking fruitcake.

During last year’s Christmas party, he barely gave it a second glance when someone handed him a slice.

I narrowed my eyes suspiciously at him and quickly grabbed it from his hand when I noticed he was peeling off the plastic wrapped around it.

I looked at him, puzzled. “But you don’t like fruitcake,” I stated.

Nick hesitated, his gaze shifting to the small cake in my hands. “Well, maybe I’ve acquired a taste for it.”

I chuckled, finding his sudden change amusing. “Since when?”

He shrugged, a faint smile playing on his lips. “Since now, I guess.”

I hummed, not saying anything more.

As we continued unpacking the groceries, I couldn’t shake the feeling that there was more to Nick’s newfound appreciation for fruitcake.

There was a subtle shift in the air, a change in his demeanor that hinted at something deeper. I decided to press a little further.

“You seem different about Christmas this year,” I remarked, carefully choosing my words. “Last year, you were—”

Nick’s expression tightened, a fleeting shadow crossing his eyes. “Last year was different.”

I nodded, sensing the unspoken weight of his past. “Yeah, I get it. But what’s changed?”

He sighed, leaning against the kitchen counter. “I guess I realized I don’t want my past ruining the good things in my present.”

A warmth spread through me, realizing that Nick was letting go of the ghosts of his Christmas past.

I smiled, feeling a renewed sense of connection between us. “So, you’re warming up to the holiday spirit, huh?”

He smirked, a mischievous glint in his eyes. “Don’t push it. I still hate Christmas parties and all that... socializing.”

I laughed, imagining Nick awkwardly navigating through a sea of festive gatherings. He looked uncomfortable enough at last year’s Christmas party.

”Fair enough. But how about spending it just the two of us this year? No parties, just good food and each other’s company.”

Nick’s gaze softened, and he nodded. “I can get on board with that.”

As we finished putting away the groceries, I turned toward him, a playful glint in my eyes.

“You know, I might just share this with you,” I said, holding up the small fruitcake. “Since you’re a newfound fruitcake enthusiast and all.”

Nick rolled his eyes but couldn’t hide the hint of a smile. “Only if you promise not to tell anyone.”

I stepped closer, closing the gap between us, and placed a gentle hand on his cheek.

“Our little secret,” I whispered, feeling the warmth of his skin beneath my touch.

He leaned into my hand, his eyes locked on mine. “I like the sound of that.”

In that moment, the kitchen felt like our own intimate world, and I couldn’t help but wrap my arms around him.

Nick responded, his arms encircling my waist, pulling me even closer.

It was a silent reassurance, a promise of new beginnings and shared moments, far from the ghosts of the past.

THE END

Want more? Turn the page to read a preview of Enchanted by You, James and Ollie's story.

A Preview of Enchanted by You

JAMES

“Honestly, I wasn’t even sure I would like moving to the boondocks. Back in the city, everything was open all the time, you know?” Reggie, pardon me, Reginald Grass was saying.

I took a sip of my beer and found it empty. No surprise there. All I’d done so far for the past hour was listen to Reginald.

He seemed to like hearing the sound of his own voice. As I looked for a nearby waiter, my gaze found a lone figure sitting at a corner table.

Ollie looked miserable. He sat slumped in his chair, staring at a basket of wings and fries. He already had two beers, it seemed.

Even wearing a paper bib and with a splash of sauce on his left cheek, Ollie looked... amazing, even dressed in a simple dark blue sweater and jeans.

Some of his dark-brown curls had fallen across his face without him noticing, and I wished I was sitting right next to him so I could push them aside.

That way, I’d see his eyes. Ollie had amazing eyes.

They were the lightest shade of green, like the new leaves in the early days of spring.

I also liked the curve of his brow and the generous shape of his mouth. How often had I imagined kissing those lips while we had a conversation?

Ollie owned a tacky souvenir front, but every paranormal resident knew that was just a front. Ollie ran Fox Haven's only magic shop.

It was thanks to his magical know-how that Declan and Cliff were alive today.

I knew only a few things about Ollie, tidbits he let slip during the years we'd known each other.

I knew Ollie was estranged from his mage family but he didn't seem to care about that much.

Most mages were arrogant and thought they were better than most supernaturals but Ollie wasn't like that.

He was warm and thoughtful. Those inquisitive green eyes could see right through a person.

Sometimes, I wondered what he saw when he looked at me.

My heart did a little flop as I watched him pick at one of his wings. Then he looked across the crowded bar, and for a moment, our gazes met.

I lifted my hand, and he gave me one of those small, rare smiles that never failed to kick-start my heart.

Ollie waved back, saw Reginald, then returned his attention to his wings. How I envied those wings in that moment.

I had the sudden urge to excuse myself from my own table and come over. Reginald probably wouldn't even realize I was gone.

Maybe I could tell him I need to use the men's room. Reginald gave my arm an impatient tap.

"Are you listening, James? I mean, if you weren't so hot, I would've made an excuse to leave fifteen minutes ago," Reginald was saying.

"So what, you were only attracted to my looks?" I asked.

"Of course not, silly. Pay attention," Reginald snapped.

Oh boy. I told myself I would sit through one date for Declan and Cliff's sakes, but I suspected there wouldn't be a date

number two.

What was Owen, my lead alpha thinking, allowing Reginald in the pack? It was obvious Reginald didn't like small-town living.

Maybe he was a stray. Owen had a soft spot for strays who were kicked out of their packs for some other reason or another.

"I'm bored," Reginald said.

I looked over at Ollie's table again, but he was already gone. I sighed. Opportunity lost. My inner fox grew irritated.

What was I doing, going on blind dates when who I clearly wanted was just close by?

It wasn't like I hadn't debated long and hard about asking Ollie out.

In the end, I always decided it was better we stay friends because I treasured what we had.

What if we dated and things didn't work out? I'd lose his precious friendship in the process, but if I didn't seize this opportunity, I might also regret it in the future.

I wasn't getting any younger, and what if some other paranormal or human caught Ollie's attention?

"I heard there's a magic store in town. Take me there; I want to see it," Reginald was saying.

"Sure," I said absentmindedly, fishing out a couple of bills from my wallet to pay for our meal.

My thoughts were centered only on one person: Ollie.

I would be able to see and speak to him after all. Tonight wasn't such a loss.

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