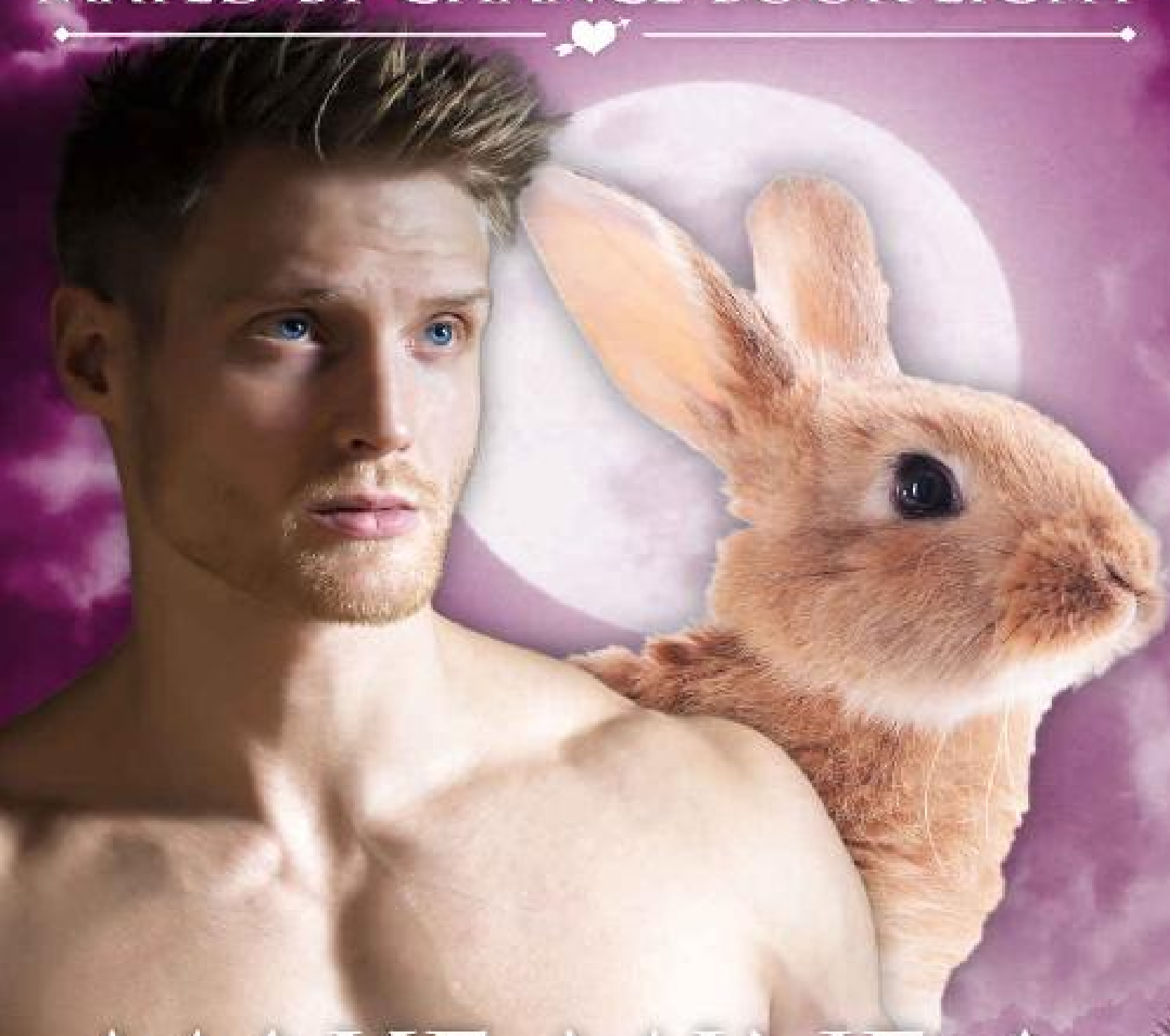


MATED BY CHANCE BOOK EIGHT



MAKE MINE A

BUNNY

HARPER B. COLE • COLBIE DUNBAR

MAKE MINE A BUNNY

M/M MPREG SHIFTER ROMANCE

MATED BY CHANCE

BOOK 8

HARPER B. COLE
COLBIE DUNBAR

SURRENDERED PRESS

CONTENTS

1. Griffin
 2. Logan
 3. Griffin
 4. Logan
 5. Griffin
 6. Logan
 7. Griffin
 8. Logan
 9. Griffin
 10. Logan
 11. Griffin
 12. Logan
 13. Griffin
 14. Logan
 15. Griffin
 16. Logan
- Keep In Touch

Surrendered Press

Make Mine a Bunny

Copyright © 2023 by Harper B. Cole & Colbie Dunbar

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

GRIFFIN

“This is nice. The fresh air. The scenery. Being away from other people.”

I spoke out loud, though there was no one to hear me. Other than my bunny. He didn't respond because he wasn't a fan of the great outdoors. Like his wild cousins, he was constantly alert to danger and preferred to be snuggled, not in a burrow, but in his bunny bed at home, which technically was a dog kennel.

Dog?

A little house, okay? Just for you.

Fine. He closed his eyes, asking me to wake him when we got home.

And when we did arrive, he'd ask to shift and then crawl into his little house with the soft mattress and towels and sleep. Rabbits spent a lot of time sleeping, and when I'd first shifted during adolescence, we argued a lot about how long he'd sleep inside me when I had my skin, and the hours he'd use his bed in the cute little house I'd bought.

But we'd eventually come to an agreement, and I'd give him a few hours each day in his fur so he could sleep.

Unlike other shifters, he wasn't interested in going outside for food. He preferred the nibbles I gave him, including hay, which was a little awkward 'cause I'd prepare it and then shift so he could eat it.

He also didn't enjoy me hiking, but as I explained, we lived in a smallish town and it was surrounded by hills with walking trails. It was perfect because I worked in a bookstore, and the owner, Greg, had his son work Saturday afternoon and Sunday. Lucky me getting a day and a half off.

Once we reach the top of this hill, I'll eat my snack and we'll return home.

Fine. My beast yawned. He said fine a lot when what he meant was, "Really? Can't you hurry up?"

Calling him a beast was a stretch because he was the gentlest creature, and he didn't respond to the word rabbit. I'd made that mistake after our first shift, where he told me he was a bunny because bunnies were soft and cuddly and the word described him perfectly.

But as I trudged up a steep slope, regretting my decision to hike to the top, my head swiveled toward a rustling in the bushes. While I enjoyed hiking, I wasn't fond of the wildlife. Like my bunny, I wasn't a fan of whatever lurked in the shadows.

Hmmm, maybe my beast was right and we should have stayed home. Bit late now. My heart did the thing where it went from plodding slowly as it did every second to breaking the speed limit.

Whatever was in the undergrowth wasn't a squirrel or a rabbit but something much bigger. Sweat bathed my palms, the soles of my feet, and under my arms as the leaves trembled, much like my knees, and the birds resting on high branches above me flapped their wings and fled.

I should have run but the message my brain sent to bolt didn't reach my feet. Instead, I froze and shrieked as two dark eyes glittered in the undergrowth and sent goosebumps sprawling over my skin. I shivered as the blood in my veins turned to ice, despite the warm afternoon.

Run, my bunny begged.

Can't.

There was no weapon of any sort in my backpack, unless I could tempt the beast with sandwiches, a muffin, and an apple. I could throw my water bottle, but that might antagonize the animal further.

Was I supposed to run from a wild animal or play dead? Some bears you did the first and the second was for other types. But this animal didn't scent as a bear. My brain gave up on trying to function and put up an Out of Order sign. But it was the low growl that had my beast freaking, and convinced I couldn't lead us out of danger, he took his fur and ran.

Gods, no. As a human we had a chance of surviving, but as a defenseless creature, no way. Avoiding the path and the woods on one side, he bounded down the side of the hill. The trail had skirted around a couple of houses and that was where he was headed, I guessed. Better to take our chances with humans than a wild beast. But whatever it was that considered us prey, it wasn't giving up.

Paws padded over the ground behind us, and the scent of sweat permeated the air, along with another menacing odor: one of insatiable hunger.

Hurry, I begged, which was ironic as I'd done nothing to get us out of danger. My bunny dipped and curved around rocks, but with the animal gaining on us, we'd never make it to the safety of a house. But as the acrid breath of the wolf—his scent announced his identity—washed over us, my beast scrambled into a hole too narrow for the wolf to enter.

Uncontrollable shaking wracked his body as both he and I were too freaked to communicate. The hole, an old burrow full of loose dirt and dead leaves, had been abandoned long ago, as its stale scent indicated. A faint whiff of squirrel remained. Thank gods it didn't have a live resident, as we wouldn't have been better off with a fox or a squirrel for company.

Stop! my bunny begged me as he huddled under the leaves.

Sorry. My gloomy thoughts weren't helping, just heightened my bunny's already-elevated anxiety. While the wolf wouldn't get into the burrow, he could wait us out, though he wasn't the

patient kinda wolf ‘cause one wolfy paw was shoved into the burrow, his claws a hair’s breadth from my beast’s fur.

My bunny squeaked and crouched at the back of the burrow, the brown crinkly leaves crunching underneath as he trembled.

I tried to think happy thoughts, but that was impossible with a wolf’s rancid breath filling the small space, so my mind went to my favorite books, and I regaled my beast about famous literary love stories. He wasn’t impressed, though he did point out if I’d been mated, we wouldn’t have been hiking.

Not so. If and when I mate, he might play sports professionally. On the other hand, he might be a hermit and live in a cave.

Blech!

Caves weren’t enticing right now or at any time, but at least I got his mind off our predicament. I wondered if I’d find my backpack again, with keys and phone, though that was the least of my worries.

The light outside the burrow faded, but the wolf hadn’t moved. His breathing had slowed after he tore after us, and now he was playing a waiting game. Long after my beast fell asleep, I remained on alert. But as tendrils of a gray dawn stole into the burrow, I picked up a deer scent. Treading lightly on the forest floor, the creature must have sensed the wolf, because it galloped away, crashing through the bushes.

The wolf growled and was gone, taking his intimidating scent with him.

While I wasn’t a hunter, I also wasn’t a fool. It might be a trick and he might be still lurking, and so my bunny and I hunkered down for hours.

Now? I didn’t fancy spending another night in the burrow. I wanted to get home, determined never to hike again. In the days and weeks to come, I might reconsider, but both me and my beast needed to be safe behind four walls and a locked door. Besides, I had to work tomorrow.

After convincing my bunny we should leave, he poked his nose outside and sniffed. The wolf was long gone, and he

hopped outside. The fresh air filling my lungs felt good after the fetid stuffiness of the burrow, but it started to drizzle and bunnies didn't enjoy getting wet.

Ready? Once we're back on the trail, I'll take my skin and race to the car.

But returning to the hiking path proved impossible as my bunny turned one way and the other, unable to get his bearings. He'd been so spooked by the wolf, he couldn't scent the way we'd come.

Maybe head for the houses. If not, I'll do it.

As frightened as my beast was of the forest, he was wary of allowing me to get us out. But we were going around and around in circles, and I feared if we didn't leave the woods, the wolf or one of his pack might return.

The wind carried another scent, that of a fox. We'd escaped one wild beast, but we might not survive if another wanted to make a meal of us.

I'm taking my skin. Seconds passed, and I expected to be naked after that awkward cracking of bones and vanishing fur. Shifting had always been an instant transformation—except now. *What's going on? Are you stopping me?*

My bunny didn't answer, anxiety filling his head and coursing through his veins. He took off, running, bounding, and hopping through the woods until we reached a road. Not a highway but a small narrow one, similar to the ones that crisscrossed the hills.

There might be a house nearby. Do you scent humans?

Yes. No. Shifters.

Even better. Run. They'll help us.

Perhaps once we reached safety, my bunny's anxiety levels would drop and I could take my skin.

LOGAN

“Have a nice day.”

I closed the door behind the customer and flipped the sign, letting everyone know we were closed. The shop hours were nine to five, but my boss opened early or stayed late if customers couldn't make it during regular opening times.

“Another satisfied customer, boss.” The omega who'd just left had bought over \$1000 of baby paraphernalia. That was unusual, but the business was doing well, which was why Harry had hired me.

“Thanks to you, Logan. You sense exactly what the pregnant omegas want.” My boss with the shock of blue hair patted me on the back.

While I loved working with fathers-to-be, Harry had to take some of the credit. He had a knack of sourcing and buying products that were about to become the next big thing in the world of new parents and their offspring.

He was ahead of everyone else in the business, and customers drove half a day or more here to Riverford to grab the goodies. They could have ordered online but many preferred to pick up their order in person, saying they were worried someone might break into the store and steal it.

Did thieves target shops selling baby goods? I doubted it, but I wasn't about to survey any dads-to-be. They were on a mission, and my job was to make their journey as smooth as possible.

Thirty minutes later, as Harry set the alarm and locked up, I told him I was meeting with a realtor in the morning and would be a little late for work.

“I understand why you need your own place, but it’s been so nice having you live with us.”

Us was Harry’s uncle, Mr. Lucas, and his partner, Mrs. Ambrose. They’d recently bought a house in town, preferring to be close to shops and other amenities rather than outside in their sprawling hilltop bungalow.

Not that the house here wasn’t impressive. It was by the river that Riverford was named after, and it had a huge back deck overlooking the water. I had my own bathroom and huge bedroom, and Mr. Lucas and Mrs. Ambrose had welcomed me and treated me as part of the family.

Outsiders might’ve considered it a little odd that I lived with them. Harry, their nephew, was my boss, and yet I referred to the elderly couple as Mr. and Mrs. Mr. Lucas was a quirky old guy whose favorite outfit was a suit, a flower in the buttonhole, and a cane he often twirled. No way could I call him by his given name, whatever it was, and it seemed natural to refer to his partner as Mrs. Ambrose.

But I’d overstayed my welcome, having lived with them since I got the job. Despite Riverford realtors having plenty of rentals on their websites, whenever I inquired about an apartment or a small house, they’d either been taken off the market or had just been snapped up. It was uncanny how unlucky I’d been in my search for a place of my own.

In their desire to ensure I continued living with them, Mr. Lucas had suggested they build a granny flat, or in-law apartment in the backyard. The garden was spacious, but it would take ages to get planning permission, hire builders, and construct the place. I couldn’t impose on the family for however long that would take; maybe a year or more. Besides, Mr. Lucas had a small office in a corner of the garden.

And yet some invisible thread kept pulling me back whenever I considered leaving. My childhood hadn’t been a particularly happy one, being passed from relative to relative after my

parents died. Living with Harry and his aunt and uncle was the first taste of family I'd ever had, and I wanted to stay. But I had to be a grown-up and strike out on my own. Harry was my boss, we couldn't go on sharing a house.

"I don't mean to interrupt your daydreaming, but are you getting in the car?" Harry was already behind the wheel, and I slid into the passenger seat. I'd bought myself a bicycle but usually drove to work with Harry. Nothing in Riverford was very far from anything else, and I couldn't afford a car. Besides, pedaling around town was great exercise.

Harry's phone beeped, but he had it set up so that when he was driving, the phone would read out his messages. It was an audio message, and Mr. Lucas's flustered voice boomed into the car's interior.

"Harry? Harry? Can you hear me? Is this thing working? I hate technology. Give me my wings any day over this damned whatever it is."

Harry glanced at me when his uncle mentioned wings.

"I didn't know Mr. Lucas was a pilot. That's cool." But before Harry could respond, his phone received a second message.

"We have an emergency at, ummm... the glass house. Come quickly."

Harry pressed his foot on the accelerator and tore around the corner. We both jerked forward as he slammed on the brakes. "Can you walk from here, Logan? It's only a block from home."

"Yes. Go. Go. Is Mrs. Ambrose all right?" I imagined paramedics wheeling her out and me grasping her pale hand as I hurtled into the driveway.

"Yes." He took off, the wheels spinning and flicking up gravel.

As I walked to the house, I wondered what the emergency was that had Mr. Lucas so rattled. Harry said he was a retired businessman, and his two homes suggested he'd been very successful. And what was the glass house?

I did a search on the phone, and the first article was about a home just outside of Riverford. It was or had been a regular house until they'd enclosed it in glass. Inside that space, the home and garden enjoyed warm, humid, tropical conditions, even when the weather outside was cold and rainy. Gods, I'd love to see it. Maybe one day Harry could drive me there.

Mrs. Ambrose was in the kitchen when I arrived. She greeted me and asked if I'd like to cook dinner with her, as it was just us two. "Mr. Lucas and Harry are on a rescue mission."

"Rescue?" I conjured up an image of Mr. Lucas in a hard hat, dangling from a rope over a cliff, trying to rescue a hiker who'd fallen over the edge. But he'd said it was at the glass house.

"Don't worry. They'll sort it out." She was like the grandmother I never knew or how I imagined grandmothers to be. We often sat together in the evening and watched her favorite soap opera while Mr. Lucas and Harry were off gallivanting somewhere. The pair were often up to something and were always close-mouthed about it when they returned home.

"I hope no one's hurt."

She was busying herself grabbing things from the fridge, and she mumbled something which sounded like, "Or got eaten." But when she handed me the ingredients, she said, "Me too."

I studied the food as I put it on the kitchen counter. "Noodles?"

"Stir fried, and you're on chopping duty."

I chopped up vegetables like a boss as she heated up a wok. But my mind wasn't on spring onion, garlic, or chili, but the emergency rescue at the glass house.

"Have you ever been to the glass house?" I slammed the flat part of my knife on a garlic clove.

My companion's head pivoted in my direction. "How do you know about that?"

“Ummm...” I’d been going to say Mr. Lucas had mentioned it in his message but thought better of it. “I read an article online, and it’s not far from here.”

“Oh.” My response had reduced the tension that flared when I asked the question. And her reaction piqued my curiosity. What was special about the glass house, and why were Harry and his uncle racing out there?

Mrs. Ambrose tossed my chopped onion in the wok and stirred it. “Harry did that. The glass house.”

“Harry, as in my boss? Your nephew, Harry? The owner of the store where I work? That Harry?”

“Mmmm. Maybe I’ve said too much, but he used to do a lot of other things besides run a store.”

She turned her attention to the cooking while I got out bowls, cutlery, napkins, and water.

“Are we eating in front of the TV?” I asked.

“Yes, while you-know-who is out of the house.”

Mr. Lucas didn’t believe in “TV dinners,” though he participated in them, supposedly to please Mrs. Ambrose. I suspected he secretly enjoyed dinner on a tray, watching soap operas. Even though he said he wasn’t interested, he interrupted constantly, asking about each character, and then threw his hands up at the ridiculous plot.

When dinner was over and the dishwasher on, I kissed my host good night and had a shower. Snuggled under the quilt that Mrs. Ambrose had made, I searched online for more information about the glass house. There was scant information, except for one article where a neighbor swore it had been constructed overnight. Other than that, nothing.

A car drove up the driveway, and I leaped out of bed and peered between a gap in the curtains. Harry was at the wheel but his uncle was in the back seat. Harry got out and took something from the back seat. A large cage, perhaps? I got on tiptoes, trying to make out what it was.

But it was empty. Maybe they were getting a pet. I didn't see Mr. Lucas willing to put up with a dog or cat peeing on the floor or gnawing on his antique furniture.

Mr. Lucas got out. His hair was askew and his jacket was missing buttons. He was always so put together, I wondered if he'd been in a fight. But he was holding something, wrapped in a blanket. They *were* getting a pet because a long white ear poked out from the blanket. So cute. I almost banged on the window, hoping they'd show me the animal, but Harry glanced toward my room. Surely he couldn't see me. I didn't have the light on.

But he motioned to his uncle who covered the pet's ear, and they disappeared around the side of the house.

Curious! It was a mystery and one I was determined to solve.

GRIFFIN

My bunny squeezed through a tiny gap under what seemed to be a wall, but it was reflecting light, and once inside, it was warm and humid. He bounded past shrubs with huge colorful flowers, a couple of palm trees, orchids, and vines. There were other weird-looking trees with stringy bark, but the scent of tropical flowers was underlaid with another, much more enticing.

I'm taking my skin.

Yes.

No! It wasn't that I didn't want to. The air was permeated with both shifter and human scents. Not wanting to take a chance on a human grabbing us and cooking us in a huge pot with onions, mushrooms, wine, and herbs, I had to shift. Now that the danger from the wolf and that pesky fox had passed, I could get us out of here and home.

But no amount of thinking or wishing made a difference, and I remained in bunny form.

Stop! My thinking of yummy ingredients to add to a stew distressed my bunny.

Sorry. I wasn't thinking properly. Because I couldn't shift, something I'd done without thinking since my first shift at age fifteen, I was at a loss.

If we'd been close to home, I could have snuck into my apartment, though getting through the door might have been a

problem. But we were miles from home and in someone's tropical garden.

Trembling, my beast curled up under a bush bearing scented flowers. The wolf couldn't make it through that small space, but I worried whether a fox could. It was small enough for a rat to squeeze in. Besides, there was no indication that either of the wild animals had followed us. Maybe the fox wasn't interested, and the wolf might have felled the deer and had his fill of meat.

I experienced a twinge of guilt that the wolf may have killed the deer because it couldn't get my beast. But it was the deer or us, and it wasn't as though I'd pointed the wolf in the direction of the other animal and said, "Eat him instead."

My mind was on our safety and the wild animals as I avoided the issue of not being able to shift. I couldn't deal with two huge, life-altering problems. One at a time.

I picked up a low buzz some distance away and took it to be voices. Being around humans, many of whom enjoyed rabbit stew, wasn't any less dangerous than having a wolf or fox chasing us. The word rabbit seemed appropriate, as using bunny would have been even more stressful for my beast.

The earth thudded. Footsteps coming toward us. My bunny crept into the crawlspace under the house, hoping whoever was approaching would walk by. But a hand grabbed my beast and pulled him toward the light, even though he struggled to free himself. A face appeared, plastered with a big smile. The mop of blue hair atop his head might have given me pause if I'd met him while hiking, but we were in such a muddle, I didn't care.

"Come here, little one. You're safe."

Don't trust him, I told my beast. Humans were wily creatures, and he might take us inside and put us in a pot. But my bunny freed himself and scampered away until a strong hand grabbed us and put us inside his shirt. My beast nestled against his warm chest, but with the future uncertain, he continued to shake.

But a scent walloped my bunny in the face. Not from this guy but from someone he'd brushed against or spent time with. It almost made me forget my predicament, conjuring up images of warmth, cuddles, and love. I needed to find this other person.

Despite not knowing if we were intended to be the guy's dinner or if he was going to set us free, *his* scent told me he wasn't human. Not a shifter but not human. I scrambled through memories, trying to match the scent to a non-human but couldn't place him. Possibly fae. And even if I had discovered his species, there was no way of knowing if he would eat my beast.

But the intoxicating scent on the blue-haired guy's shirt, *that* guy was no shifter.

Human!

Do you recognize it? I hoped my bunny had picked up who the other person was. I didn't want to be the first to say it in case I was wrong.

Mate!

Yes.

"You're shaking. Whatever made you choose my friend's house, it must have been scary. I'm Harry, and I'm taking you home."

Whose home and were we a guest or the main course? How I wished my bunny could communicate with the guy. But the friend he referred to, the owner of this house, wasn't our mate. If he had been, we'd have been smothered in his scent.

In the darkness of Harry's shirt, it was hard to tell where we were headed, but the rumble of voices faded and were reduced to two; Harry and another man. I caught his scent. He was a shifter. That was good news. Harry called him uncle, and he handed my beast to him. A car started, and the gentle rocking of the vehicle as it trundled over the road almost had me falling asleep.

His uncle didn't have us hidden in his shirt but on his lap so I could see what was happening. Or at least I had a bunny's-eye

view which wasn't much.

He stroked my bunny. "I'm guessing there's a reason you can't shift and you can't tell me what brought this on. I've encountered similar situations in my long life, but there wasn't a common thread as to the reason or how to reverse it."

Great, that suggested he didn't have a remedy or a cure, and we'd have to figure it out by ourselves. This shifter had a touch of our mate's aroma, so I hoped that wherever we were going, our mate would be there.

"Just know you're not alone and we'll look after you."

He was saying all the right things, but we were in a car being driven who knew where, and I had no control over the situation.

"Almost there." That was the uncle, and he introduced himself as Mr. Lucas. "And once we arrive, Harry will find you somewhere safe and warm."

That sounded positive unless the warm place was in the oven.

No. My bunny was convinced blue-haired Harry and his uncle were good people.

Make a dash for it if you think something bad's going to happen.

"We're just going to make a quick stop at the pet store."

What? They were giving us or selling us to a pet store. I knew the place. It wasn't far from the grocery store I frequented.

We have to escape before they put us in a cage. But I was conflicted because if we took off, we might not meet our mate. But they'd told me their names. Riverford wasn't that big. I'd find them again. I had to.

But when the car stopped and a door slammed, the uncle who was cradling us didn't get out. When Harry returned, he put a cage beside us before he got back in and drove off.

My beast and I eyed the cage. It wasn't that big, but it had straw on the floor and dishes for water and food. While I'd prefer to have my skin and be snuggled under the quilt in my

own bed, it was better than the burrow, and my bunny nodded approvingly at the straw.

Compared to being torn apart by a wolf or being part of a stew, it wasn't too bad. Maybe after a night's sleep, I'd be able to shift, though I might end up with bruises after taking my skin in that tiny cage. I couldn't allow my mate to see me in my beast's fur. Or worse, in my human form crouched inside the cage.

The car turned off the road and stopped. My heart was beating so loud, it pounded in my ears. Harry removed the cage, and his uncle wrapped my beast in a blanket before getting out. We were at a house, presumably their place, but the uncle murmured to his nephew something about their guest.

Was that us, me and my beast? The pair looked upward toward a darkened room, and even though I was looking through my beast's eyes, I detected movement behind the curtains. Someone was staring at us. I shivered because our mate's scent was much stronger here.

But we were whisked away to what they called the office which was a separate building in the back garden. The uncle put us in the cage while Harry got water and more food. My beast would happily nibble on the hay, but Harry also brought vegetables which made it a special treat.

"Sleep well, and tomorrow, we'll work out why you can't shift." Mr. Lucas's solemn face pressed against the cage didn't lift my mood. And I couldn't scent my mate in here which was a double whammy.

"Uncle, I've never seen you so disheveled."

"It was while I was waiting for you, Harry. I was frantic. I've never experienced fear like that."

"You'll be fine after a good night's sleep. Just like our guest."

The pair turned off the lights and closed the door. Though my beast and I'd been through a traumatic experience and I just wanted to sleep and forget about the day's events, my beast ate some hay. It calmed him doing something so ordinary without adrenaline coursing through his veins.

While he nibbled, I ran my mind over what had happened from the time my bunny took his fur. Yes, he'd been under stress and terrified for our life as we were stalked, we both were, and that was unusual. The pressures humans experienced at work or in their love life didn't affect a shifter's beast, unless it concerned their mate.

Allowing my mind to wander while my beast was content to eat, I thought back to the person behind the curtains. Why were they hiding instead of waving or coming out to greet us? Where were they now, and why hadn't they come to the office to see what was going on? Was that our mate?

I had so many questions and no answers, and my head hurt trying to work it out.

I'm going to sleep. One advantage of being inside my beast was that he could stay awake and I could snooze. If we both had to be awake or asleep at the same time, I could imagine us arguing like siblings when one refused to turn off the lights at night because they were reading. Quarreling constantly might erode the closeness between a shifter and their beast, and I understood why the universe chose to make us the way it did.

I refused to consider the possibility that I could never take my human form again, and my bunny wouldn't like it either. He enjoyed being able to snooze inside me and not have to make major life decisions. He was neither a wild rabbit nor a domesticated one, and he wasn't suited for living full-time in his fur.

As my eyes closed, a car started up, and I tensed, hoping no one was coming for us. But the vehicle was farther away than Harry and the uncle's house, so I ignored it and allowed sleep to claim me, dreaming of our mate, though his face was always in shadow.

LOGAN

I woke before the sun was up, and my mind immediately went to my hosts, the rabbit, the rescue, and what the heck was going on. Flinging off the bedclothes, I paced the floor. I was obsessed with solving the mystery.

Mr. Lucas and Harry rescued a pet rabbit from someone who wasn't looking after the creature properly. Maybe fisticuffs were involved which resulted in the older man's appearance. They brought the bunny here because they were fostering it and needed to re-home it. End of story.

Except it wasn't. With my curiosity piqued, I got dressed and snuck downstairs. It was so early, even Mrs. Ambrose wasn't up. She and I had often shared a cup of tea before I went for a jog, and I wished she were here now. I'd pester her with questions. She, more than her partner or nephew, would be more likely to spill the deets.

Not because she couldn't keep a secret. She could be tight-lipped when she wanted to be. But the two of us had a relationship unlike mine with Harry, who was also my boss, and Mr. Lucas who was a bit of a mystery.

I liked all three, and they'd welcomed me into their home and their lives, but whereas I liked and admired Harry and his uncle, I'd moved one step closer to Mrs. Ambrose. I adored her, especially our early-morning chats. We had a cozy, comfortable relationship and often shared snippets of our lives and loves.

After unlocking the sliding doors leading onto the deck, I opened them slowly, but they ground over the rails and I almost abandoned my efforts. How dare one of Mr. Lucas's doors make a noise. I pictured him wagging his finger at them and giving them a talking-to. An unexpected giggle burst from my lips, and I snorted. That, combined with the grinding, and I'd probably woken up the entire household.

I waited. Nothing. Waited some more. No footsteps padding overhead, though I still expected Mr. Lucas to appear in his silk robe, glasses perched halfway down his nose. But after a minute, I was satisfied everyone was still in bed. I tiptoed out onto the back deck. The sun was just peeking over the horizon, gracing the sky in a pink blush, but my gaze was on the small home office, nestled among the trees in the corner of the garden.

I'd never been inside, had no reason to. It was Mr. Lucas's space, though I had no idea what he did there. Hobbies? Reading? Watching TV? Poker with his buddies. Much as I liked the family, they didn't socialize with others much. Occasionally they went to their place outside town and put on a big brunch for their neighbors, but in town, they kept to themselves.

The office curtains were closed, and there was no sign of movement. Of course there wouldn't be if the rabbit was the only occupant.

I should go back to bed, I said to myself, knowing I'd be doing the opposite, which was snooping outside Mr. Lucas's office.

Creeping into the house, I headed for the door that led into the garden. Once outside, I remembered I was barefoot, but I didn't give a damn about getting my feet dirty. I snuck over the grass, wet with dew, but when I reached the office, I hesitated. Up until now, I'd done nothing wrong, but if I went inside the office, I was invading Mr. Lucas's privacy. The family would be justified in asking me to move out, my snooping being my undoing.

I couldn't do it, much as I was desperate to uncover the mystery with the rabbit and late-night rescue. No way was I

violating their privacy. But there was a sweet aroma rolling off the shrubs near the office entrance. Gods, what was that? My body tingled as I bent over and shoved my face in the leaves. There were no blossoms or buds, so what was it?

I got on my knees, sniffing at the roots. With my luck, Mr. Lucas would wander onto the deck drinking tea and observe me, butt in the air, my head buried in the dirt, sniffing and snorting, and wondering what the heck I was doing.

There was no indication of the source, so I got up and brushed myself off. After placing my palm on the window—why, I couldn't say—I retraced my steps. Walking into the kitchen, I found myself face to face with Mr. Lucas. I yelped, but he didn't react other than rubbing his chin. He was using his cane this morning, something he often did in the early mornings, though he appeared spritely enough in general.

“Tea?”

“Please.” This was unusual, me sharing an early-morning cup of tea with Mr. Lucas and not Mrs. Ambrose. “Oops, need to wash my hands.”

“Been doing a spot of gardening, I see. Always good to bury your hands in the dirt—and your nose.”

After racing to the bathroom and removing the dirt from my face and hands, I plopped onto one of the stools positioned around the kitchen island and rested my chin on my hands.

“I might need your help later, Logan.” Mr. Lucas had his back to me while he waited for the water to boil.

“Me?” I sat up straight, hoping this was related to the rabbit. The elderly man didn't respond, and I reflected how ridiculous I was for being intrigued about a bunny. But I couldn't shake my curiosity, convinced this was something more than an animal rescue.

Mr. Lucas wasn't a tea bag kinda guy. He warmed the teapot with boiling water before adding three heaped teaspoons of tea leaves. “One for each of us and one for the pot,” he murmured. After adding boiling water, he sat opposite me, and we waited

as the tea steeped. I understood the comfort of a daily ritual and didn't pester him with more questions.

When he finally poured me a cup and offered milk or lemon, I took a sip. "Mmmm, best cup of tea I've ever had."

He didn't respond to the compliment but gazed outside toward his office. "Yes."

I cast my mind back to what I'd asked minutes earlier. "Okay."

"This morning, Harry and I might be able to solve the problem, but if not, I suspect you and you alone will be able to deal with it. If not..." The ominous trailing off of his voice had goosebumps marching over my skin.

"If not?"

But my host was sipping his hot drink.

Harry wandered in, his bright blue hair pristine. I was tempted to ask him what products he used, but he and his uncle shared a glance, and I was flung back into conspiracy-theory territory.

They didn't strike me as people running afoul of the law. Rule-breakers, definitely. I suspected that was how they were so successful in business, even though I wasn't entirely sure how Mr. Lucas had made his money. They'd taken risks and been rewarded, but whatever was going on here wasn't about work or making money.

Despite his well-coiffed hair, Harry was fidgety. He scratched his nose and almost dropped his cup. He spilled the milk and apologized.

And while his uncle was often silent, as if he was puzzling over something, he seemed more distracted than usual. He went to pour himself more tea, even though his cup was full.

"I told Logan."

Harry's hand jerked and hot, milky liquid splattered over his dressing gown. "Everything?" he muttered as he headed upstairs. Mr. Lucas glared at his nephew, and Harry disappeared, followed by a pounding of feet on the stairs.

I drained my cup and put it in the dishwasher, saying I had to get ready for work. As I got a lift with Harry, I couldn't keep him waiting. But this morning I was meeting a realtor. Shoot, I'd forgotten. Maybe the guy could give me a lift to the store after I'd inspected the apartment I was hoping to rent.

"Have you ever considered what your life will be like in five or ten years?"

I had my back to the elderly man, and I froze, wondering why he'd asked this question now when everyone seemed on edge.

"Ummm, not really. I'm just trying to save money and learn as much as I can from Harry, so maybe one day, I can graduate to a managerial position or perhaps have my own store."

"And your love life?"

Yikes, this was getting personal. Was he trying to matchmake me and Harry? "I'd like to have someone to share my life with, but I'm not actively looking. If it happens, great."

He nodded, and I sensed the conversation was over.

Racing up the stairs, I almost bumped into Mrs. Ambrose. She gave me a hug before I entered my room and closed the door. Standing under the hot water and squirting body wash into my hand, I pondered whether I should accept the apartment, even if it was unsuitable. Not that I no longer felt welcome, but I was uneasy, and I couldn't pinpoint what it was that had me feeling that way.

But my mind was drawn back to the scent. Until I discovered what it was, maybe bottle it if possible, I couldn't leave. That was silly. I refused to allow a fragrance to determine my future.

I was waiting at the curb in front of the house when Harry tore out the front door. "Sorry to keep you waiting."

I reminded him of my appointment.

"Oh, right. Let me know if you need a lift to the store later." He opened the driver's door and paused. "Once you get to the store, I have errands to run, so you'll be the boss, probably until closing time."

While I had been working for Harry long enough to be comfortable dealing with customers, this was the first time he'd given me the responsibility of being in charge. I was ecstatic and thanked him. But after he left and the realtor arrived, I couldn't help wondering why today and was it something to do with them solving the problem Mr. Lucas mentioned. Or perhaps it was just a coincidence.

My mind buzzed as the relator pointed out the positive aspects of the apartment. Not that there were many. The place was drab and dank, and there was mold on the bathroom walls. Gods, I couldn't imagine living in that hole and told the guy I'd think about it, to which he replied, "Don't take long. I have a lot of people interested."

I was eager to get to work and to show my boss his faith in me wasn't misplaced. But even more, I was thinking about this evening and whether Harry and his uncle would still need my help.

GRIFFIN

I hadn't slept well. For starters, I rarely, if ever, went a whole night where I didn't have my skin, and now I'd done it two nights in a row. Not that lack of sleep was a problem when the alternative could have been us being eaten by a wolf or a fox, getting lost in the woods, or made into rabbit stew.

But while not being able to shift was taking up all the space in my head, a tiny sliver was worried about my job. I was supposed to work today. Greg, the bookstore owner, would be pissed then worried, and I'd end up out of a job. I'd lose my rental, everything I'd worked toward. My entire life would be snatched away.

Greg was human, so if I ever became me again, I couldn't explain what happened. I'd have to fib, but taking my skin could be weeks or months from now—or never—and he'd have employed a replacement.

Breathe, my beast told me as he eyed the straw.

How can you eat? I regretted what I'd said and apologized. It was what bunnies did. They nibbled. He turned his attention to a carrot but paused his gnawing as someone approached. The men from last night? Mr. Lucas and Harry. They promised we'd be safe and they'd solve our dilemma.

But the door stayed firmly shut, and I glanced up at the small window. The curtain blocked out most of the light, but with the sun behind them, a person was outlined at the window, and my poor bunny huddled in a corner of the cage. Whoever it

was outside pressed his face to the glass, and I almost giggled, imagining features all squishy.

While I couldn't see him clearly or at all, my nose picked up a faint scent, but it was laced with morning breath and overnight sweat. It was him. My mate. He was here. But forgetting my situation, I begged the universe to open the door. I'd developed a craving—not for food, for him—as if I was dying in the desert, desperate for water, and I yearned to be close to him. I clawed at my beast, desperate to get out and take my skin.

I'm here. But he couldn't hear my inner voice. I longed to reach out and place my hand on the glass, his palm on the other side, as I'd seen prisoners do when a beloved family member visited them. I almost couldn't breathe, my desire to know this man taking up all the space inside me. And when he did exactly that with his hand on the glass, I was distraught at not being able to speak to him.

But as quickly as he appeared, he vanished, and my shifter hearing picked up faint footsteps and a door closing. If I'd been in human form, tears would have pricked my eyes, and I was overwhelmed with sadness.

My beast went back to eating, and I reran the incident in my head.

The day dragged on, there were voices and cars starting and driving away. When Mr Lucas appeared, he was with a woman. He introduced her as his mate, Mrs. Ambrose.

“You poor darling. Let me take you into the house.”

She picked up my bunny, and he nestled against her.

Human!

Yes, but she's mated to a shifter, so she knows about our kind.

Inside their home, Mrs. Ambrose wrapped my beast in a blanket on the couch, and she sat beside him, stroking his soft fur. But the room gave off a scent, the same one I caught a whiff of earlier. It was so intoxicating and enticing, it put my worries about the future out of my head.

My bunny became so agitated, he bounded off the sofa.

Mate!

Today, when my life was collapsing in on itself, we'd come, not face to face with our mate, but we scented him. He'd been at the office window and in this house. Gods, how much more was the universe going to put us through before putting us in the same room?

"What is it, sweetheart?" Mrs. Ambrose reached out to my beast, but Mr. Lucas said, "He knows and is looking for him."

I am. Where is he? If our mate was a carpenter or the cable guy, we'd have to hunt him down all over town. Had he been fixing the office or trying to this morning?

Hunt?

It's a human expression. Bunnies didn't hunt, they played and nibbled.

I was distracted by the elderly man pacing the room, his walking stick clacking against the wooden floorboards.

"It wasn't supposed to be like this," he muttered. "Why does everything go so wrong lately? Koalas not where they're supposed to be, bunnies almost being eaten and unable to shift."

"Not everything." Mrs. Ambrose got up and stood in front of her mate. "We met. That wasn't a mistake."

"No, dearest. It was the best moment of my life." They kissed, and it demonstrated how empty my life was, despite having a job I loved and good friends.

Mr. Lucas turned his attention to my bunny. "Harry phoned the bookstore and told a small fib. Said you'd had a minor accident hiking."

That much was true, though I couldn't call almost dying and being stuck inside my beast minor.

"Said you'd be back at work in a day or so."

Gods, please let me be human before then. It was a little cramped inside my beast, and I wanted out. Once I had my

skin, I could track down my mate. I'd borrow one of these couch cushions, permeated with his aroma, and sleep with it, the scent keeping me company until I found him.

A car pulled up. My bunny pricked his ears and sniffed the air, hoping our mate had arrived. Not that we could claim one another. Fear gripped my heart and squeezed it because what if he ignored fate and refused to be mated to an actual rabbit.

Bunny!

Sorry. Calling my beast the R-word was a sign of how distracted I was. *Having a pet instead of a mate was no life.*

Huh?

Gods, I was stepping in it and saying everything wrong. *Didn't mean it.*

Of course a pet could be a companion, but if you were expecting a mate and got an animal, with no hope of ever being kissed, having sex, a family, or being able to share problems, I could see him asking the universe to undo what it had done.

But it was Harry who walked in, carrying a jacket. "I borrowed this when he arrived after the rental inspection."

"Let's hope it works." Mr. Lucas took his mate's place beside us while she sat in an armchair.

Harry placed the jacket on the couch, and my mate's scent captured my heart and head, my whole being. It was much stronger than what lingered on the cushions and the sofa. My bunny crawled on top and rested his nose on the sleeve. He rubbed his chin on it and sniffed every inch.

Harry got on his knees, his face level with my bunny. "Try now."

It wasn't necessary for him to spell it out. He was telling us to shift. He and his uncle must have thought our mate's scent would right the wrong.

My bunny buried his head under the jacket and the world went dark. We were surrounded by scent, his scent. Fur vanished, replaced by skin, my bones recalculated, and I was inwardly

yelling, “Yes, yes. Keep going. We can do this. My eyes were scrunched closed, and I welcomed the familiar pull of a shift.

But it was torn away. I reached out, desperate to grasp it, but we were hurled back into our bunny form, left with my mate’s scent as the only comfort.

“It didn’t work.” Harry removed the jacket and tugged at his glorious blue hair, his eyes awash with tears.

“Close the shop,” Mr. Lucas instructed. Put a sign on the door saying there’s been a family emergency.”

“But, Uncle, I have clients arriving this afternoon. They’ve driven all day and their baby is due soon. They can’t reschedule.”

“I’ll go.” Mrs. Ambrose got up. “I’ve helped out in the store. I’ll take good care of your customers, Harry.”

Harry hugged her, and they left. Was that it? They’d given up on helping me become the me I wanted to be and were intent on making sure their customers were looked after.

Shush.

Perhaps my bunny was more in tune with Mr. Lucas and his nephew than I was, but I was about to have a temper tantrum. Not that anyone could see it or react. I closed my eyes and contemplated life as a bunny. If we could live here it might not be bad. Perhaps Harry would take pity on me and place me in front of the TV. Knowing my luck, it’d be a program I’d already seen.

I was having a pity party and wallowing in sadness.

I didn’t react when a car drove up. Unless Harry arrived with a shifting machine, I was no longer interested in the family’s comings and goings. But as the door opened, a scent swept in and my beast stiffened, his body straining to find the source.

Harry appeared beside another man, but the overwhelming aroma was blurring my vision. I blinked, and a man, my mate, appeared, his face creased into a smile.

“This is the rabbit you rescued. It’s so cute.”

Bunny! Bunny!

He doesn't know. I'll tell him when I take my skin again.

“Actually,” Mr. Lucas began, “we’re hoping *you* can perform a rescue of sorts.”

LOGAN

“A rescue? Me?” The rabbit appeared to have been saved. They must want me to adopt the little guy. I was cool with that, though the family had a lot more space here than I would when I found a place to live. “Okay, sure. I’ll have to google how to look after a rabbit.”

“Bunny,” the uncle and his nephew said in tandem.

I chortled. “Does he not like the term rabbit?”

“No,” they both replied.

“Okaaay.” This was a little weird but no more than me not being able to keep my gaze off the rabbit... the bunny. There was something about his eyes, almost as if they were pleading with me. “I’ll keep you safe, don’t worry.” If rabbits... damn, bunnies... were intelligent and super sensitive, he might be picking up on my confusion.

Mr. Lucas cleared his throat and shared a glance with Harry. “It’s not as simple as that. You need this bunny as much as he needs you.”

Before getting the job at Harry’s store, I had been a little lonely and unfulfilled in my career, but since living with the family and learning heaps under Harry’s guidance, my outlook was more positive. I had read studies that people who had dogs lived longer than those without. Perhaps that extended to all pets, even bunnies, though I couldn’t take one for a walk or jog.

“This bunny is very special, and he’s in a spot of trouble.” Harry’s voice faded into the background, almost as if I was dreaming. My vision was fuzzy around the edges, but the bunny was in sharp focus. It was as though I could see, feel, and almost taste his emotions.

I looked deep into his eyes, the depths of which were dark brown pools of pain, swirling like a whirlpool. The poor creature was a bundle of nerves, his little nose trembling.

“Logan?”

“Yeah.” My feet were frozen. I couldn’t move, even if I wanted to, but I was transfixed by the shivering creature on the sofa. If I didn’t know better, I’d think the bunny’s eyes were awash with tears.

“Uncle, I think it’s working.”

Harry was talking about his job when there was a scared bunny that needed taking care of. I blinked. The creature was bigger than he was a second ago. I rubbed my eyes. His strained expression had me looking for bunny litter or newspaper ‘cause Mr. Lucas wouldn’t like poop on the couch.

“His ears? Are they shrinking?”

“Uncle, look, we did it, or Logan did.” He clapped me on the back and congratulated me.

“Huh?” This had to be a magic trick and I was the butt of the joke. The bunny’s legs... oh gods, his little legs broke, they were all twisty and long and something something. My brain couldn’t conjure up the words. His fur was patchy, revealing bare skin. The little creature was dying while puffing up, as though air were being pumped into him.

Part of me wanted to stagger backward away from whatever was happening because my brain couldn’t piece it together. But my heart was shattering, breaking off piece by jagged piece, imagining what the bunny was going through. I’d read about flesh-eating bacteria, but this wasn’t that.

A strangled scream ripped through the room, lacing the air with pain. The bunny was no longer recognizable as an animal but... oh gods... a man, naked, his skin blotchy and pink, as

though he'd been scratching it, crouched on the sofa, sobbing, "Thank you. Thank you."

"Ahhhh." Now my brain sent a message to my legs and told them to get the fuck out of dodge.

"Logan, it's okay. This is Griffin." Someone was speaking.

"No, no, no." I was babbling, but my thoughts were tripping over one another as I processed what I'd witnessed. Perhaps my eyes were in on the trick and were pretending this was normal, nothing unusual to see here. But there was nothing normal about a cute bunny transforming into a man.

"I gotta go." As I took a step back, I bumped into Harry, and my flailing hands jerked outward as I righted myself. "I need the day off, Harry. Or perhaps the rest of my life."

"This was to be expected, I suppose." Mr. Lucas rubbed his chin.

"No. Nothing about this was predictable. Not by me." The former rabbit—I could no longer think of him as a bunny—sat up, his eyes welling with tears, the same eyes I'd looked into earlier.

"I didn't think I'd ever take my skin again."

He spoke, he had a voice, and he was talking about skin or skinning. My uncle used to hunt rabbits and skinned them. Images of the creatures, minus their skin, hanging in the shed before cooking, dangled in my imagination.

Harry clamped a hand on my shoulder, his grip stronger than I would have imagined, but I shrugged him off and raced out the back door, the same one I'd crept out when searching for the bunny. Gods, no, whatever he was, he wasn't an adorable bunny but something dark and terrifying.

Mr. Lucas shouted to come back, but I was never going in the house again. It'd become a house of horrors. I'd buy new clothes and a suitcase. I had my phone in my back pocket, and I fumbled with it, trying to order a ride share. But to where? A motel on the outskirts of town? Nope, the bus station. I'd get on the first bus, no matter where it was going.

But my trembling fingers kept fucking up, and I phoned the store instead. What the fucking fuck fuck. Mrs. Ambrose answered, and I tried to cut the call, but instead, I sobbed into the phone about rabbits and naked men and needing to flee.

“I heard there was a little upset. Come here and tell me all about it. I’ll order your favorite food, and I promise it’ll all make sense. You trust me, don’t you, Logan?”

Her soothing voice calmed my nerves a tad, but I was a mess. Mucus streamed from my nose, and I found myself on my knees in the back garden, my pants encrusted with dirt, much as I had been earlier this morning.

Mrs. Ambrose was still on the line. “I’ve ordered a ride share. He’ll be at the house in one minute. Go to the curb and wait. Promise me you won’t make any decisions until we’ve spoken.”

“Okay.” I was broken, but I hauled myself up and staggered to the front of the house. How I wanted to be enveloped in Mrs. Ambrose’s arms and for her to make it all better.

She was waiting at the shop door as I got out of the car, and she led me into the back room. She had apple pie, sodas, and bánh mì on the table, and we said little until I’d eaten some of the yummy bread filled with pork and vegetables. When my tummy was full, I gripped the soda, not looking forward to the upcoming discussion.

“Logan, you’ve had a shock, but I was in the same position you were once. Well, not exactly, as we weren’t fated mates, and Mr. Lucas wasn’t naked, hunched on a sofa. His beast is much too big for that.”

Mrs. Ambrose was supposed to be the voice of reason and she was babbling on about beasts, and fate. I refused to allow a naked or not-naked Mr. Lucas to barge into my thoughts.

“Griffin almost lost his life, first to a wolf and then not being able to shift into his human form.”

I tugged my hair and pushed the chair back. It crashed on the floor, and I jumped, my nerves shattered. “I gotta go.”

“No.” Her firm voice had me pause. “You should meet Griffin. He and Mr. Lucas share a quality that you and I don’t.”

Whatever they shared, I wanted no part of.

A car pulled up, and I stiffened. I was in no mood to deal with customers, and I tensed when the front door opened. I fixed my eyes on the door leading to the back room as first Harry, then Mr. Lucas, and finally a third man strode through.

The rabbit guy. Not a bunny I was going to adopt but a rabbit.

He was dressed, his slightly damp hair brushed and slicked back. His skin was no longer splotchy. His eyes found mine, and I looked away, not wanting to meet his gaze. But a force stronger than my own will forced me to stare at him.

Unlike earlier, he had a hesitant smile on his face, his plump lips parted slightly, and damn it, my cock reacted.

“I’m sorry we scared you at the house, but Mr. Lucas explained there was no other way to engage the shift.”

Placing my hands over my ears, I protested, telling everyone to leave me alone and to stop talking about shifting. “You can shift right outta here.”

“It’s all so new to you, but there are people in this world who aren’t human.” Harry indicated himself, Mr. Lucas, and Griffin. “My uncle isn’t human and neither are we.”

“Griffin and I are shifters,” Mr. Lucas explained. “We have an animal inside us, and as you witnessed, Griffin’s beast is a bunny.”

I shook my head, as if to rid my memory of his words. “But why me? Why involve me in whatever circus this is?”

Mr. Lucas stamped his cane on the floor and his nostrils flared. “Circus?”

“You’re my mate, Logan.” Griffin’s tentative voice washed over me, healing my confusion. While I wasn’t certain what he meant, I understood that I was drawn to this guy in a way I’d never been to anyone else, human or otherwise.

But I didn't want to be. I longed for a nice, safe omega whose feet smelled after exercising and who farted in bed. Okay, not the farts. My ordinary, very-much-human omega could fart outside, thank you very much.

Instead I replied, "I think I am." I had to take it back, say it was a mistake, but in my heart, I knew he was right. But what was a mate?

GRIFFIN

Gods, if I'd been nervous the past few days when we were almost eaten by a wolf, stalked by a fox, and I couldn't shift and been in the cage at Mr. Lucas's wondering about my job and apartment, all of that paled in comparison to meeting my human mate.

I took a shower and ate. Being clean and having food in my tummy had never felt so good. Harry had loaned me clothes, as we were much the same size, and I studied myself in his bedroom mirror. I examined my nose, my small non-bunny ears, and ran my fingertips over my skin.

My bunny was fast asleep, thankful to be safe inside me. He'd told me not to wake him up until my mate and I had marked one another, but I suspected he'd be awake soon, giving me advice, cheering and commiserating no matter the outcome.

"My mate is with Logan, and she's calmed him down—a little." Mr. Lucas's furrowed brow suggested a little was perhaps a smidge. "But he needs to see and hear from you."

"Now?" If my fated mate and I had met any other way, the strong connection would have had us not wanting to leave each other's side. But I was fearful we'd ruined any chance of Logan accepting me in his life, and I was scared to face the truth.

But Mr. Lucas and Harry insisted, saying to trust them that Logan and I had to be in the same room.

During the ride over, I sat in the back seat, clenching and unclenching my hands. Sweat lined my palms, and even

though I studied the passing scenery, I didn't see it. Memories of the wolf, combined with us stuck in the burrow and not being able to shift, had my eyes closing, wanting to shut out the images. But they were still there, dancing in my head.

"This is my store." Harry opened the car door, but I sat, gripping my seat belt, until he offered me his hand. "We'll be with you."

The store was empty of customers, and my head twisted one way and the other as I caught his scent. There was no doubt he was my mate, and getting a whiff of him cemented my desire to be with him and claim him.

Harry pushed open the door into the back room. There was no hiding, as Logan was with Mr. Lucas's mate eating lunch. Even after my apology for scaring him, he reacted badly, telling everyone to go away.

Harry and his uncle gave Logan a brief rundown on shifters and their beasts, but his glazed eyes told their own story. He was overwhelmed with sights, sounds, and scents, and he couldn't take in any more information.

Mrs. Ambrose brought me lunch, and though I'd eaten not long ago, I was ready for more food. "We'll wait outside," she said, and she ushered her mate and Harry into the main part of the store.

"May I sit with you?"

"Okay." His tentative voice and how he angled his body away from me signaled he wasn't comfortable with us being alone. But he didn't run screaming out the door, so I considered it a win.

I took a bite of the sandwich and a multitude of flavors flooded my mouth. "This is delicious."

Griffin explained where it originated and that it was called *bánh mì*. I learned something new, but also, we were having a normal conversation, if anything could ever be normal after my recent experience. We discussed food, just as people did countless times a day the world over. Step by step. Did I wish

he'd thrown himself at me, demanding we mate and saying we'd be together forever? Sure, but slowly, slowly.

As we ate, we talked about work, how long he'd been in Riverford, and his favorite coffee shop by the river.

"Snap," I said, and he dropped the rest of his bánh mì on the table. Damn, too loud. "Sorry, I didn't intend to scare you. But it's the coffee shop I go to. I love sitting by the river, drinking coffee and reading."

Logan fiddled with the rest of his food before pushing it away. "What does it feel like? To have a rabbit inside you and then to become a rabbit?"

My bunny woke up at the word rabbit. *Bunny! Bunny!*

I hesitated because before the conversation continued, I had to correct his use of the word rabbit. "Bunny. We prefer the term bunny."

"We?" He glanced over his shoulder, and I rushed in to explain my beast didn't like to be called a rabbit. The word bunny conjured up a cute and cuddly creature, which he was.

"My bunny, or my beast as I sometimes refer to him..." His expression didn't change; there was no wonder or curiosity, just a bland acceptance. Perhaps he was at his limit and he needed to go home and decompress. I'd been told he was living with Mr. Lucas's family which was both good and bad.

He had answers at his fingertips, but he must have been brimming with more questions.

"Why don't we meet tomorrow for a coffee?"

"I can't see Mr. Lucas having a bunny inside him."

Okaaay, he either hadn't heard what I said or he'd ignored it. I didn't think it was for me to reveal the older man's beast. I was a shifter, and it'd still taken me a moment to accept he was a dragon after he told me.

I responded with, "No, he doesn't," and left it at that. My answer satisfied Logan—for the moment—as he nodded and studied the remains of his lunch.

“About tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow?” He repeated my question.

I was the one who'd been traumatized, but my human mate had been too in a different way.

“I was hoping we would meet for coffee.”

“Can I tell you something?”

He'd done it again, veered away in a different direction.

“Of course. Anything.” I had to be patient with him

“I feel a connection to you. But there's something else that's pulling me in a different direction, almost a warning.”

My bunny reacted, thinking Logan hated us, and he told me to mate him.

I can't. It would ruin his life and ours.

“That's okay.” It wasn't, but he wasn't ready to hear that. “I thought meeting for coffee in a place we both like would be good—starting in a neutral environment.

“Start what exactly? What is a mate?” He tugged at his hair, an obvious tell that he was stressed.

Gods, how did I answer that without freaking him out? “It can be a lot of things.” I skirted around the truth. “A friend, a partner, a confidant?”

“A fuck buddy?”

Bunny?

No, he said buddy. Let me handle this, please.

“Never. A mate is like a husband or wife. And yes, there is physical intimacy, but it's accompanied by love.” Had I gone too far, mentioning the L word? I wouldn't have if he hadn't jumped in with a term that suggested there was no affection and it was just putting a cock in a hole.

I held my breath waiting for his reaction. He eventually nodded, saying, “I can see that, I can feel it.” He put up his hands. “But it's too early for us.”

“We’ll take it as fast or slow as you want and do it at your pace.”

“Coffee sounds good. Tomorrow’s my half day. I finish at one.”

“Great. It’s a date.” Wrong word. “Not a *date* date, but a day on the calendar with a corresponding number.” I was babbling, but it got a smile from Logan, his first.

“I get it.” He rubbed a finger along his lower lip. “You know, you’re kinda cute when you’re prattling.”

“Prattling?” I smirked. “You think that’s what I was doing?”

“Absolutely.”

The door opened, and Mr. Lucas strode in without his cane. “Now that we have that settled, can we go home?” Logan didn’t respond. “Unless you feel uncomfortable staying in a house with a shifter.” Mr. Lucas appeared a little vulnerable as his eyes flicked from me to Logan.

“We can put a bed in Uncle’s office if you’d prefer that.” Harry stood in the doorway.

“I’m cooking lamb this evening, and I was hoping you’d help me.” Mrs. Ambrose took her mate’s arm. “Perhaps Griffin would like to join us for dinner.”

“Oh, thank you, but no. I don’t want to intrude. Logan and I are meeting for coffee tomorrow.” With a gentle nudge from me, Logan and I had agreed on meeting up, but Mrs. Ambrose trying to be a matemaker could easily backfire.

My human mate sent me a look I couldn’t interpret before studying his hands. “That might be nice.”

“Thank goodness.” Mr. Lucas sighed. “I need a nap, and Harry, I’m considering getting out of this business. My heart can’t take the ups and downs.”

“Okay, Uncle.” Harry’s tone suggested he’d heard that before.

“I had no idea selling baby paraphernalia was so stressful,” Logan noted. “If you’re thinking of moving on, please consider selling to me.”

“I wasn’t talking about—”

Mrs. Ambrose cut off her mate. “If Harry sells the business, you’ll be at the top of the list of prospective buyers.”

LOGAN

Harry stayed on at the store, while Mrs. Ambrose drove us home, intending to drop Griffin at his apartment on the way. He and I had sat in the back seat, both looking out opposite windows and not at each other.

I was so conflicted. I wanted to ask a million questions, my thoughts tripping over one another, and yet I was tongue-tied. Having Mr. Lucas and Mrs. Ambrose, two older... shifters... no, Mrs. Ambrose wasn't one... in the car, stifled my desire to speak. I rubbed my head, wishing I could wrap myself in my quilt and when I woke up, none of this would have happened.

Except I was curious about Griffin. More than curious. It was almost as though we were two puzzle pieces who fit together, and yet apart, we were just oddly shaped bits of paperboard with an image stuck on top. I longed to scratch myself, as I itched all over, but if I scraped my nails over my skin, I might not be able to stop.

I didn't know how to be anymore. I was Logan, human, Harry's employee, but who *was* Logan? I looked down at myself, similar to people hovering above their body at the point of dying before returning to life.

But every few seconds, I'd shake my head, trying to rid myself of these ridiculous thoughts. I was just an ordinary guy who'd met extraordinary people, and it'd take a while to adjust. No biggie. But even as I thought that, I didn't believe it.

Griffin thanked us for giving him a lift, and Mrs. Ambrose told him dinner was at seven. "Do you need us to pick you up?"

“Please. I didn’t pay attention earlier when we left your place.”

Mrs. Ambrose caught my eye in the rear-view mirror. Everyone was prodding me, and while I did want to get to know Griffin, the guy who had a rabbit inside him, I sensed everyone’s hands on my back, urging me to play along.

But the poor guy had had a terrible couple of days, and I’d say ditto for me too ‘cause the past twenty-four hours were the weirdest of my life. I studied the back of Mr Lucas’s head. He didn’t have a bunny in him, so what was his animal? Maybe if I stayed up all night, I’d see him transform.

First thing I’d do when I got home was lock myself in my room and do an online search for shifters. Either that or sleep. Or maybe shower.

“It’s not far. I’ll walk over and get you.”

Who said that? Fuck, it was me. Mr. Lucas was eyeing me, his puzzled expression probably mimicking my own. Had I blanked out and asked if he had two heads? Were there animals that fit that description? Jellyfish, perhaps. Nah, that didn’t sound right.

Griffin rewarded me with a huge smile. “That’s kind of you. Thanks.”

“No problem.”

He paused, his face lined with worry. “I don’t have my apartment keys.”

“I think you’ll find a spare key under the mat,” Mr. Lucas informed him.

“Okay.” Griffin waved as we drove off, and I looked out the back window to see him standing where we’d left him, staring at the car. I sank down in the seat, wishing I was alone with my thoughts.

“What time do you need my help with meal prep?” We walked into the house, and I was about to make myself scarce.

“Five-ish.”

I took off, and when I closed the door to my room, I took a deep breath, and another, and a third. I didn't feel any different, but breathing in and out reassured me I was human.

Sleep, shower, or research? Shower was the most obvious, I'd often resolved problems while standing under a stream of hot water. Griffin's fingertips had grazed my skin in the car, and I sniffed my arm. There was the faint aroma of chives from my lunch, but there was also a hint of something else. An aroma that befuddled my thoughts and had the hairs on my arms standing at attention. My cock reacted, and I stripped off my clothes.

Part of me wanted to jerk off, picturing Griffin, his ass gleaming with slick, urging me to put my cock in him and make him scream. Gods, I could do that. But the other half of me said no. Our... whatever this was—it was too early to call it a relationship—was too confusing and fragile to have him in my head while cum shot out of my dick.

Instead, I washed myself all over, rinsed off, and I was in and out in two minutes. I huddled in my bed after closing the curtains and did a search for shifters. There was nothing except a mention on mythology sites, and there were scant details, just a paragraph or two.

But the word “werewolf” caught my attention, and I eagle-eyed the door. It was locked but would that keep out a crazed half-man half-beast who wanted to inject his venom and transform me into a killer?

I flipped the covers over my head and stuck my hands between my knees, a tactic I used when I was cold and didn't have enough blankets. *Think rationally*, I told myself. A rabbit... bunny who'd bite me on the full moon didn't seem as scary as a killer wolf.

Backtracking, I reminded myself how kind the family had been, inviting me to stay. Sure, they could have had an ulterior motive, but my heart and my head told me they were genuine.

My reasoning was murky as to how Harry and Mr. Lucas connected with Griffin, but I moved past that. What remained was me and Griffin, a guy with a bunny. Not a pet but as part

of him. I couldn't deny I wanted to see him again, but I was muddled as to what came next.

I must have slept because there was a gentle knocking, and Mrs. Ambrose's voice drifted through the door. "Logan, if you're going to pick up Griffin, you should leave now."

Being half awake, I struggled to work out who Griffin was. And then it hit me. The guy who was a bunny when I met him. Right.

Shit, I was supposed to be helping with dinner. I flung open the door and Mrs. Ambrose jumped. "Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you, and sorry again for not sharing in the cooking. You should have woken me."

She patted my shoulder. "It's been a big day, and besides, I had my mate peeling potatoes and making mint sauce."

I giggled, as Mr. Lucas was not a cook; he had no clue how to chop onions and couldn't boil an egg. But Mrs. Ambrose told him and Harry, if they wanted to eat, they shared the workload. I recalled the older man saying he'd prefer to eat takeout every night. Harry had hinted he and his uncle made and sold cookies years ago, and before that pizza, and I had no doubt Harry did the making.

"Get Griffin." She kissed my cheek, and I was overcome with a wave of guilt for thinking the family were not genuinely loving and kind.

Griffin's apartment was only a couple of blocks away, and I hurried 'cause I didn't want to be late for dinner. But that wasn't the only reason. I was anxious to see him again. If when we met, he was just another nice guy and the threads that he said bound us together were broken, I'd be disappointed. Maybe miserable.

It was odd because I was fighting against being put in a box and labeled as this guy's mate, but also, I kinda wanted it. Fuck, my head was a mess.

Griffin was waiting outside his place, and his face lit up when he saw me. No one had ever reacted to me that way, unless I

counted my parents, and I didn't. That was a different kind of love.

Love? How had that word popped into my head? But it was too late to ponder it because Griffin was walking toward me. He was holding a bunch of flowers and a bottle of wine.

"I'm glad you came." We headed in the direction I'd come from.

"I said I would." But I understood his wariness. If I'd been the bunny guy, I'd have had doubts about me too.

"Does it tickle when your bunny is in you?" I asked.

"No, I don't feel him in there, but I sense his presence. And we communicate."

Not sure how to respond, I said, "That's cool, I guess."

"I'm looking forward to the meal you and Mrs. Ambrose cooked."

"About that," I began. "I fell asleep and didn't help her."

He nodded but didn't comment. Maybe he was judging me for leaving Mrs. Ambrose to do all the work. "You and I can clean up afterward as a thank-you."

The family welcomed us when we arrived and thanked Griffin for the flowers and wine. Harry was home, and the aroma coming from the kitchen had my mouth watering. But as Mrs. Ambrose carved the meat, I said, "Do bunnies eat meat? Aren't they vegetarian?" Had there been meat in Griffin's bánh mì? There was in mine.

"A shifter and their beast don't necessarily eat the same thing," Mr. Lucas noted.

"Yeah," Griffin giggled. "I'm not partial to straw."

GRIFFIN

“That looks so yummy, Mrs. Ambrose.”

Yummy, my bunny echoed. Except he wasn't talking about the succulent roast leg of lamb. He was referring to the guy sitting next to us whose thigh was inches away from my own.

I agreed, but we were with other people, and besides, Logan and I were at the just chatting and learning about one another stage. Maybe tomorrow when we had coffee, we could sit beside one another while his scent surrounded me. But we hadn't really been alone, other than when we walked here and earlier in the back room at the store. Not that we were by ourselves at the shop, with the family hovering outside.

Mr. Lucas's hearing would be as acute as my own, so there were no secrets. While Harry wasn't a shifter, his senses were probably enhanced compared to a human's. It was difficult to get privacy around non-humans.

“Thank you.” The older woman beamed and passed us plates, allowing everyone to serve their own vegetables.

Knives and forks clinked against the porcelain as we ate, interspersed with the occasional, “Pass the gravy,” and, “This is delicious.”

“I think you should take one more day off, Griffin.” Mr. Lucas dabbed his mouth with a napkin. “You deserve another day of rest. Being chased by a man-eating beast is not for the faint-hearted.”

My bunny shrieked, or that was how I interpreted his shrill squeaking. Mr. Lucas was a dear, but reminding me my beast could have been eaten had me putting the knife and fork down and gulping water.

Harry and Mrs. Ambrose glowered at the older man, but he continued, "I've arranged it with your boss."

Harry agreed, saying they'd informed him I'd seen a doctor and she had recommended another day off work.

"But isn't that fibbing?" I wasn't sick, unless the universe considered being lovesick as an illness. "And faking a doctor's certificate could count as fraud and get me fired." I half expected to be arrested and listened for a siren in the distance.

"Fibbing? Fraud?" Mr. Lucas's face turned red, not the soft hue of a blush, but an irritated red that reminded me of fire. Yikes, had I invoked his dragon? Unless his beast was teeny-tiny, the house wasn't big enough to accommodate his wings and scales.

The older man choked on his food, and Harry bashed him on the back until his uncle could breathe again.

"Griffin, I have never told a lie in my long life, and I don't intend to start now."

"I apologize, Mr. Lucas."

Logan jumped in. "I don't think Griffin was implying you weren't honest."

I mouthed, "Thank you," at him.

"It's all right." The older man nodded.

"It's been taken care of, Griffin. Don't worry," Harry assured me. "Everything has been done legally."

Sometimes when shifters' lives intersected with humans, we had to fudge details. But what Mr. Lucas was describing was more like... magic. Was that possible? Harry might have skills that allowed him to create a different reality.

"I don't understand," Logan butted in. "How is that possible?"

I nudged his leg, and he eyeballed me. “But—” Placing my hand on his thigh, I squeezed, and his eyes grew wide and rolled back in his head. His pupils almost disappeared. He moaned and dropped his fork.

“You should have a second helping of lamb, Logan, if that’s how you react to my mate’s cooking.” Mr. Lucas offered him the meat platter.

“Thank you for contacting Greg.” I had to end this avenue of conversation.

“Who’s Greg?” Mr. Lucas asked. He shot his nephew a look, and Harry shrugged.

Damn. I’d done the opposite of what I intended. “My boss?” My voice was almost a whisper.

“Oh,” Harry and his uncle responded in unison.

Their reaction didn’t reassure me they’d done as they said.

“As you cooked, we should clean up.” I spoke to Mrs. Ambrose, but she poo-pooed my suggestion. “My mate and Harry will do that. I’ll make tea. It’s a beautiful evening. You should sit on the deck.” She was a sweetheart, and her matchmaking ways left marks on my back.

With the teapot on a tray and homemade brownies, Logan and I settled on the deck. “That’s odd,” he noted.

“Not really.” I poured the tea into two cups. “They just want us to have some alone time.” Unless he was referring to the medical certificate, which I hoped he wasn’t because I couldn’t give him a satisfactory answer.

“No, I’m not talking about that.” He got up and leaned over the balcony. “The home office.”

No! My beast didn’t want to hear about that place because it was where we’d spent last night in the cage. Though it was preferable to the burrow.

“Mmmm.” I hoped my noncommittal reply would send the message that I wasn’t interested in the topic.

“It’s bigger than I remembered.”

“It’s probably the shadows. In the morning it’ll look the same as it always was.”

“It’s at least four times the size, and there’s a lamp glowing in the window, and there’s a little terrace with chairs and a table. Instead of a single door, there’s a huge sliding one. Look.”

Either Logan was experiencing delayed shock after discovering shifters or... I didn’t have another explanation. “Those prefab places can be erected very quickly.” I bit into the brownie. “This is sensational. Come and take a bite.”

Me moaning over the cake got his attention. “You’ve got a dollop of icing in the corner of your mouth.” I wiped my lips with a paper napkin from the tray. “Still there.” He tapped the corner of his mouth. I licked around my lips, and he sank onto the chair.

“How about now?”

“You got it.” His ragged breathing should have concerned me, but I was secretly pleased, and I thanked the universe for making the brownie stick to my lips.

Logan gulped his tea, and it dribbled over his chin and onto his shirt. For a second I was consumed by guilt, thinking somehow I’d caused him to spill the hot liquid. But I took it back because he ripped his shirt off. Whoa! He must work out because his pecs were well defined. My eyes roved from his chest to his upper arms and his bulging biceps.

Picking up another paper napkin, I fanned myself and took another bite of brownie. Chewing gave me the opportunity to think while being unable to speak.

I stood up and rested my arms on the railing, studying the river at the end of the garden. And as I tried to think of non-sexy things to prevent my dick swelling further, the lights in the garden caught my attention.

Gods, I wished I had another brownie to stifle my surprise, though I probably would have spat it out. The small office where we’d spent the night—was that only last night?—was huge, as in a small house, like a granny flat or in-law apartment.

I should apologize to Logan for assuming he was exaggerating about the office that was now a small home. I'd only been in the back yard when my beast had his fur, so I couldn't say how big the garden was, but even that appeared to have enlarged.

"See what I mean?" Logan stood at my side, and I shivered as goosebumps paraded over my skin. Having him near me, my body reacted again. My cock was hard, my heart pitterpatting, and I clenched my butt, anticipating fingers probing my hole. Gods, he must scent the slick.

"Yes," I squeaked, reminding me of my bunny. "Yes." That wasn't much better, and I cleared my throat so he'd think I had a cold.

"It's huge."

"How can you tell?" I blurted out. I leaned on the railing, my engorged dick pressing on the wooden slats.

Logan gave me an odd look, and his lips parted as if he was about to speak, but he pressed them together, apparently reconsidering. "It's kinda obvious."

Shit. "This is awkward. Maybe it's because of what happened in the past couple of days. I'm not sure." That was a weak-ass excuse. But if I said, "You turn me on," it might have pushed him away. Good thing it was dark and the lights on the deck weren't strong enough for him to see my embarrassment.

He gave me another, "What on earth are you talking about" look and pointed at the office-slash-house. "It's enormous."

"Oh, that thing." Not my thing, my cock, my length which was urging me to unzip my pants and set it free. Nope, it was that damned house.

The tapping of a cane on the wooden floor announced Mr. Lucas's arrival. "Do you like it?"

"It's stunning."

"How did you do it?" Logan asked. I sensed he was going to pester the elderly man with questions.

"It's all Harry's work. He did the glass house where we found Griffin."

“Oh, *that* glass house?” Again, Logan was overloaded with information.

“Why don’t you go and look?” Mr. Lucas suggested. “Harry built it for you.”

“Me?” Logan stabbed a finger to his chest. “Me?”

That stumped Logan, and he said nothing more.

“That’s right. We said we’d love for you to stay, but one room and a bathroom isn’t big enough for—”

“You,” I jumped in, not wanting Mr. Lucas to say “you and your mate.”

Mate! My bunny was tired of us messing around.

LOGAN

For a moment I felt trapped.

The universe had taken charge of my life by introducing me to shifters, telling me my heart belonged to one in particular, and the family I lived with pushing us together while also urging me to live with them permanently.

And now they'd created a new home just for me, perhaps using Santa's elves who had time off during the summer months. Whoever built the place was speedier than humans, reminding me of videos that had been sped up with squeaky voices.

"I-I-I don't need a house." I'd budgeted for a small apartment or a studio. Not that I'd been able to find one.

Mrs. Ambrose dragged Mr. Lucas inside, muttering that he was coming on too strong and him replying, "But that's what I do."

"It's very sweet they made this for you. You're lucky to have a found family." Griffin's wistful voice brought on pangs of guilt. I'd been given a job, room and board, friendship and love, and now a small house to rent, and I was reacting like a toddler having a tantrum.

"I am." I acknowledged him before looking away, studying the small in-law apartment. "It might be beyond my budget, though." The places I'd looked at that I could afford were small, dirty, and dingy, and smelled of boiled cabbage. There was no way I could pay whatever the family was asking. They

could get top dollar for this new house, especially as it had a river view.

“You only pay for utilities,” Mr. Lucas’s booming voice informed me. “Why not spend the night and see what you think?”

“I’d better be going.” Griffin bumped into the small table. The teacups rattled and a spoon fell on the floor.

I experienced an ache of disappointment at him wanting to leave. One minute we’d been chatting, and now he was knocking over furniture and avoiding me in his effort to get away.

“I’ll walk you home.” I didn’t want the night to end, but he was a grown man, and Riverford was safe at night and the streets well lit, but I wanted some him-and-me time.

“No. I’m fine.”

I wondered if he had a car. While the town wasn’t big, unless he had a bicycle or a scooter, walking everywhere, especially in bad weather, wasn’t ideal.

“I’ll have to pick up my car tomorrow. I sort of forgot about it.”

“Where is it?”

“Outside of town, near the woods, where I was hiking when the wolf scented me, us, me and my bunny.” His lip trembled.

I tried to imagine him and his bunny being confronted by a creature that could shake them senseless before tearing them apart. I went into protective mode, wanting to cuddle Griffin and keep him safe.

“I’ll take you there after work tomorrow before we go to the coffee shop.” I reached out to stroke his arm, wanting skin-to-skin contact, but withdrew it. We hardly knew one another, even though he called me his mate.

“You own a car?”

“No, but I have a bicycle.” As soon as I spoke, I regretted it, wishing I could grab those words and stuff them back in my

mouth. "I'm good at pedaling. You could sit on the handlebars." My cheeks flamed, and I wondered if Griffin might decide I was too ridiculous to be his mate and stalk off. That might be enough to break whatever linked us.

Tears filled my eyes at the thought of him leaving, not wanting me. I was overwrought and so emotional, one minute pulling away, the next wanting to be close to him.

"That's sweet, but unless you're a professional cyclist, I doubt you'd make it up the hills. But if you like, I'd gladly sit on your handlebars tonight and you can take me home."

He grinned and pursed his lips together. Did handlebars mean the handles on a bicycle or was he assigning them another meaning? I gulped, thinking of cocks in holes, fingers in mouths, tongues licking puckered entrances, and I broke out in a sweat.

"Great. Cocks... I mean, handlebars are..." I lost my train of thought as I pictured cocks on the front of my bicycle. I shook my head, trying to rid myself of the image. "Yeah," was all I managed. I was surprised I wasn't drooling. That would have cemented the idea in Griffin's head that I was a fool.

"Follow me." Where was my bicycle? Oh right, I hadn't taken it to work, as the realtor had picked me up. Was that really just this morning? I felt as though I'd lived a hundred lives between then and now.

After Griffin wished everyone good night and thanked them for the meal, Harry said I could borrow his car the following afternoon. I put on a clean shirt and pushed the bicycle out onto the road. Standing astride it, my feet planted to the ground and holding the handlebars steady, Griffin mounted. In my mind, I had him mounting something else, which happened to be my dick.

The bike wobbled, and he yelped, but I held it steady and started to pedal. From past experience, the faster we went, the easier it would be to keep us balanced. I careened around a corner, and Griffin squealed. For a guy who'd almost been a wolf's dinner, he scared easily. But what he'd been through

would have had most people in bed, the covers over their head, so he was doing well.

“I have to go fast,” I yelled to make myself heard above the wind that had picked up.

“It’s okay.”

I peered around him, hoping there were no speed bumps. I hadn’t paid attention when I walked the route earlier. If we tumbled off and smashed onto the asphalt and he ended up in hospital, he might not speak to me again.

“Faster.”

“What?”

“Go faster,” he shouted. “I feel so alive.”

“Okay.” I pedaled furiously but wasn’t as fit as I’d thought and was glad he lived close by. When we came to a halt, both still in one piece, he jumped off and rubbed his butt. “That was so much fun. Thanks.”

“It was.” I wasn’t just parroting the words. Him and me together were a great team.

“I finish at five. Pick me up outside the bookstore?”

“Don’t you have the day off?” That was what the awkward conversation was about at the dinner table.

His face registered surprise, and I could almost see him rummaging through his thoughts. “Oh, right. Maybe I should check with Greg and make sure—” He was cut off by his phone beeping.

Even under the streetlight, I could see his knuckles turning white as he gripped the phone.

“Everything all right?”

“Yeah, it’s my boss, the same guy I just mentioned, saying he hoped I was feeling better and he’d see me at work the day after tomorrow.” His eyes swept over me. “You don’t think my phone’s been hacked, do you? I assume this is really Greg.”

Griffin was the shifter, so he was part of what I thought of as the supernatural, and yet he was querying me about all things weird.

“I’m sure it’s fine. Maybe I’ll saunter into the bookstore tomorrow, start a conversation with your boss and ask about you. I’ll let you know what he says.”

“Would you? That’s so kind.”

As Griffin wouldn’t be going to work in the morning, we arranged for me to pick him up when I finished at one, get his car, and then meet at the coffee shop for lunch. Weirdly, I didn’t tell Harry I’d be late again as I was going to the bookstore, because I was certain the family wanted the bunny shifter and me to spend more time together.

Now came the awkward part; saying good night. Despite keeping myself emotionally detached from Griffin during the day, now I was envisioning kisses and cuddles. Tomorrow was a long ways away.

“Would you do something for me?”

“Sure.” If he asked me to give him a butt rub because his ass was hurting from the ride, I’d agree. Maybe that would lead to sex, but only if he wanted it.

“Give me a hug, please.”

I opened my arms, and he fell into them, resting his cheek on my chest while I inhaled his scent. As a human, I’d never thought about anyone’s scent. Body odor, shampoo, perfume, aftershave... they all had a fragrance. But a natural scent was something my nose was now attuned to. Griffin’s reminded me of freshly cut grass, while Mr Lucas’s was more raw and sharp, and spiky.

“I needed that.” His muffled voice against my jacket got my body tingling. He didn’t pull away, and we stood there, arms around each other, and I lost track of time. When he finally let go, I was bereft and almost pulled him back into my embrace.

“See you tomorrow.”

“Mmmm. I’ll let you know what happens at the bookstore.”

I waited until he punched in the code for the main door and let himself in. I didn't know which floor he was on, but lights flickered on the third, and Griffin appeared at the window. I tipped my imaginary hat and pedaled home, wishing he was on the handlebars.

GRIFFIN

I spent the morning in bed after Logan dropped me off the night before.

He'd messaged me just after nine outside the bookstore. He'd bought a couple of books and started a conversation with my boss. Greg apologized for making him wait but said he was understaffed as his employee was sick. When Logan said he hoped the guy wasn't seriously ill, Greg said I'd be back tomorrow.

"And thank gods, because I couldn't manage this place without him."

Logan typed out word for word what Greg had said. It was so sweet, and I was looking forward to going back to work. I loved my job. Being around books, talking about them, recommending them, selling them, and having customers give five stars to ones I'd suggested was the best. I couldn't have asked for a more satisfying career.

As Logan suspected, Harry told him to take off as much time as he needed. I thought Greg was a great boss, but Harry was... well, Harry. I couldn't imagine how he ran a successful business and had time to rescue bunny shifters, create a glass house, and matchmake. Or was that meddling? As a shifter who understood that the universe chose mates fated to be together forever, I shrugged off their meddlesome ways.

But for a human, they had been a little heavy-handed, though I suspected Logan hadn't put two and two together about Mr. Lucas and Harry. And there was no reason to point it out when

I couldn't explain what they did. Fate made the decision, they were just helping us to the finishing line.

I couldn't recall which way the glass house was, but as Logan was driving me to my vehicle, we glimpsed it from a distance.

We collected the car, and I was pleased that it was as I left it, though the keys were in the ignition and my phone was on the front seat. They'd both been in my pack which was somewhere in the woods, and I'd brought my spare set of keys and was using an old phone. I sent up thanks to Mr. Lucas and Harry.

But I paused as I came across wolf poop, or scat, beside the car. I gripped my chest as I imagined the wolf following our scent to the vehicle. Maybe it was just as well I couldn't shift and Harry found my bunny. In my human form, I would have been almost as vulnerable as my beast.

I turned, doing a three sixty, inspecting the wooded slope, the road, and the trees that grew so close together it was dark and gloomy underneath. In the bright sunshine, it didn't appear forbidding, but it'd be a long while before I returned.

"Meet you at the coffee shop." Logan waited until I got in the car and buckled up before he returned to Harry's vehicle.

I was starving not only for food but for my mate. We were getting along better than twenty-four hours ago, but when he hugged me last night, I would have preferred he stayed the night.

Patience, my beast had instructed.

You're not one to talk! Considering how my bunny had been pestering me to mate with Logan, him telling me to be patient was ironic.

The drive to the coffee shop took longer than I remembered, and I couldn't find a place to park. When I finally did and walked to the café, I caught a glimpse of my mate by the window. I paused, studying him as he crossed and uncrossed his ankles, pushed his hair back, and checked his reflection using the back of a spoon. That made me giggle.

People did that in movies where they checked if they had spinach in their teeth. I couldn't imagine you'd see much, but it warmed my heart that he was doing it while waiting for me. I waved, and he dropped the spoon and waved back, a grin from ear to ear.

He was still smiling when I sat opposite him. "I'm famished. I didn't eat breakfast."

"Me neither. I also didn't sleep well," I admitted.

"Same here. I wonder why."

I rolled my eyes. "Mmmm. I wonder."

"I didn't sleep in the new place," he said after we'd both ordered an all-day breakfast.

"Are you not accepting Mr. Lucas's offer to move in?" The waiter brought our coffees, and I sipped mine. It didn't matter whether he did or not, but him saying he didn't sleep there disappointed me.

Together. My beast wasn't sleeping but was bounding way ahead of me like the bunny he was.

Really? You think he was waiting for me? The family of matchmakers had almost hinted as much, but Logan hadn't seemed to make the connection.

"No, I probably will, but last night didn't seem like the right time. I didn't even go in and check it out. Not sure what I'm waiting for." He caught my eye and grinned.

He was so cute, and I shifted my butt as slick streamed from my hole. I hated being caught out by slick, always worried I'd leave a wet patch on the seat.

But as I adjusted my position, my leg brushed against Logan's, and I reacted as if I'd been burned. No, more like a jolt of electricity. What the...? I avoided looking at him and stared out the window at a woman walking her dog. But I couldn't ignore my companion forever.

His cheeks were flushed, and he was white-knuckling a fork. He swallowed. "Maybe we could get our food to-go."

That was all he said. Nothing about us, the future, the in-law apartment, and nothing about sleeping together.

“Okay.” I was wary as to where this was heading. I was hungry, damn it, and wanted to eat.

“I get it. The emotion, the overwhelming intensity and the absolute joy. My heart is full, and it’s because of you, Griffin.”

Whew! That was a lot, and he was right about it being overwhelming, but in a good way.

“Maybe we can eat in my new home.” Logan was patting his brow with a napkin while easing his foot up my leg. He must have taken his shoe off because the sole of his foot was pressed against my thigh.

“Okay.” I was lost for words, but were there any that were right for this situation? If there were a shifter dictionary, perhaps. A knot of anticipation grew in my belly thinking of us eating both food and asses. Sweat trickled down my spine as I told the waiter we’d like the food to-go, and while I was speaking, Logan didn’t take his eyes off me, and his foot crept higher.

“I am hungry.” The waiter brought the bill and our takeouts. “But not just for this.” He tapped the food, and I wondered if he’d caught a whiff of my slick.

“We go back to my new place, we eat, or you nibble on bacon while I eat your ass and suck you off, and when you’re done with the food, I put my cock in you.” His deer-in-the-headlights expression had to be reflecting mine, like a mirror. He gripped the edge of the table. “Or have I made assumptions about...”

“You’re not wrong.” I was panting, already imagining his dick in my ass. “Let’s get out of here.”

We left my car where it was, as we didn’t want to be separated, and Harry’s vehicle had to be returned. I draped a hand over Logan’s thigh and wriggled it to his crotch as he drove, tearing around corners, reminding me of our journey on his bicycle.

The car bounced into the driveway. “Do you think they’ll know we’re here?” He peered in the direction of his room, now his former room.

“Of course. There’s no point trying to be sneaky.” But while Mrs. Ambrose didn’t have shifter hearing, her mate did. I did not want to have sex while Mr. Lucas shouted pointers from the deck.

But as we got out of the car, food in hand, the dragon shifter and his mate emerged and said they were going to have lunch with Harry at the shop. Logan gave them the keys and they left.

“I hope it’s unlocked.”

But he needn’t have worried. There were flowers in a vase at the entryway, and the fridge was stocked. I didn’t get a chance to look around because Griffin pulled me into what was the bedroom.

“I meant what I said. You eat while I ravish you.”

He sounded like a 1940s movie star. “I’m okay with the ravishing but not sure I can consume food at the same time.”

“Try it.” He opened a takeout container and gave me a bacon strip while tearing off a piece of pancake. I lifted my hips as he pulled down my pants and briefs and he licked my dick.

“Geez, give me a warning next time.” I shoved the pancake between my lips while Logan licked along my shaft. If anyone said you couldn’t eat while someone was giving you a blow job, they’d be wrong. The desire for sex and the need for food were intertwined.

I panted and stabbed some scrambled eggs, allowing the silkiness to glide down my throat as Logan licked the tip of my cock. Lust coursed through my veins as he made “Mmmm” sounds while lapping my length like a lollipop. “Delicious.”

“Yummy.” I licked maple syrup from my fingers, one lick as Logan did the same, two licks, and he swallowed my dick. Three licks, and I moaned while he sucked me, his teeth grazing my shaft.

This was the best breakfast I'd ever had.

LOGAN

“Logan, pause for just one minute while I explain something to you.”

I lifted my head, my mouth full of my cock. “Am I not doing this right?” I hoped he understood me, otherwise we’d need a cock-in-mouth interpreter.

“Your... your skills are A-plus,” he panted. “Gods, one more suck, if your teeth graze my shaft one more time or if your tongue laps the tip just a smidge, I’d topple over the edge, but I need to talk to you about something big.”

“There are two very big things here already. Your cock and mine. What’s the third?” I licked pre-cum and slick off my lips and smirked. I needed to be inside him, but he was struggling to speak, and if whatever we were, whatever this was... if it was going to work, we had to listen to one another, even if I did prefer to thrust my cock in his slick hole.

“I’m sorry, it’s lousy timing, I know. But I have to fill you in regarding mating and claiming.”

“I’d prefer to be filling you.” I stroked his cheek, wondering how any of this, me and him, was possible, but thanking the universe for intervening in our lives.

“Me too.” He took my hand. “Mating isn’t like marriage. There’s no divorce. Once we do the deed, it’s forever.”

“Okay.”

“Okay?” Griffin was incredulous at my response. “This is the biggest decision of your life. You don’t want to think about

it?”

“No.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Don’t let your cock do the thinking.” He tapped his head—the one on his shoulders. “Let your head do it.”

“I am. I can’t explain the shift in my thinking. Maybe shift isn’t the best word. But after seeing you vulnerable at the site where you were hiking, I wanted to love and protect you for always. But then when your leg grazed mine, it was as though a veil had been lifted or something clicked in my brain.”

“And?” He quirked a brow.

“I’m all in.” I glanced at his ass, slick shimmering in the sunlight that was streaming in the window, and trailed my fingers over his ass cheek, coating them in slick.

Griffin giggled. “Okay, but once your knot fills me, I mark you, or my bunny teeth appear and break the skin. It might be a tad painful.”

“What would be agonizing would be not being your mate.” That was me being one hundred percent honest.

“You say all the right things.”

“Hope so. Forever and always.” I nudged his legs apart and shuffled between them. “Is the talking part of mating finished?”

He nodded, parting his legs and lifting them, exposing his slick-filled hole. “Only one problem. You’re still dressed.”

How was that possible? This omega, my soon-to-be mate, had done a number on my head. I leaped off the bed, annoyed at the interruption, and got rid of my clothes. Griffin gave my arousal the once-over and his tongue poked between his lips. I didn’t walk to the bed, I swaggered, my ass swaying and my erect cock thwacking my thighs as I progressed.

I put one knee on the bed as Griffin nibbled his lower lip, raising his legs higher and shoving a finger in his hole. He pulled it out, glistening with slick. I grabbed it and sucked, and he moaned, while pinpricks of desire stabbed every inch of my

skin, making it almost impossible to piece my thoughts together.

“Hurry. The past few days have dragged while I longed for your dick in my ass.”

“Wait no more.” I kissed the tips of my fingers, and Griffin giggled. “Do you want to be on your back?”

He didn’t respond but flipped over so he was on all fours and pushed his glorious rounded butt in the air. I ran my tongue along his ass crack, admiring the goosebumps that scurried over his skin. I did that!

I couldn’t resist nibbling his ass cheeks, a bite here, a lick there. I fingered his hole, and he arched his back, begging me to fuck him. Holding my cock with one hand, the other on Griffin’s hip, I prodded his puckered hole and eased in the head.

My plan was to go in slowly, but Griffin had other ideas. He pleaded with me to thrust deep inside him, and not waiting for me, he shoved his butt back, taking me all in.

“Gods, yes,” he yelled.

I couldn’t speak, lust surging through my veins, as heady sensations danced over my skin. With my length buried deep in Griffin’s channel, I wriggled my hips.

“Whatever you’re doing, keep doing it,” he whimpered.

Placing both hands on his hips, I pulled back, my shaft shiny with slick, and thrust back in.

“Harder, faster.”

My throbbing cock powered into him once, twice, before I slowed the pace, almost to a crawl, tantalizingly slow, and he cried that I was teasing him.

“I am,” I managed to get out as I withdrew, inch by inch, until the tip was all that remained, and pounded into him, one quick thrust after another. I leaned over, running my tongue over his spine, my saliva mingling with his sweat. He shivered, but those tiny trembles converted to tremors in the wake of my licking.

“More fucking.” He reached between his legs and circled my hard length. I moaned and closed my eyes, allowing his feathery touches to coax me toward an orgasm. Reaching around, I took hold of his cock and tugged. His grip on my dick loosened and he wobbled, and I rammed my cock into his depths and pumped his length.

“A double whammy,” he whispered as my dick filled his channel.

Passion and a wave of tenderness washed over me for a man I’d met days before, and yet he was my forever, my one and only. As I slammed onto his ass, my body molded perfectly against his, sweat sprayed from his back, and the only sound in the room was flesh slapping on skin.

Griffin’s pleading to go harder and faster stopped, replaced by moans and mewls, and he purred as my hand clasped his dick, pumping in unison with my cock filling his ass. He angled his butt so my cock lunged in deeper. His ragged, shallow breathing and his hands fisting the bedding signaling his orgasm was close.

I rode him hard, and he bucked his hips, accepting what I was giving him, perhaps unaware of what he was giving me: love, pleasure, and acceptance.

Wrapped in a web of lust and love, and with a fire burning in my belly, I held back my climax, wanting Griffin to come, needing to make sure he gained his release before me.

He stiffened and cried out my name as he came, cum shooting over the bed. One more thrust and a second, and my cum surged inside him. With my hands gripping his hips, I wallowed in that glorious afterglow before my knot swelled. Lowering us both to the mattress, we clung to one another until our breathing calmed.

“Now?” My head was fuzzy with post-orgasm euphoria, but I had to bear witness to him marking me, making me his mate. His bunny’s incisors elongated, looking sharper than I realized, and he bent over my chest, the teeth scratching the surface of my skin. Droplets of blood slithered over my skin, pooling in my belly button.

“Me too.” I hadn’t given any thought to marking him, I was human, we didn’t do that. But when he’d finished, I wanted the shifter world to see he was my mate, that we belonged to one another.

My teeth couldn’t compare to a bunny’s, but I grazed his skin, breaking it, and blood seeped from the wound.

“I love you.” He gave me a peck on the lips. “Mmmm. I taste sweat and slick.” I pressed my lips to his, flicking my tongue over them, allowing the taste of him and me to flood my mouth.

We cuddled, dozing on and off, waking and having more sex, more blow jobs. In the middle of the night, I staggered into the kitchen, not knowing what I’d find, but took cheese from the fridge, along with grapes, a jar of olives, crackers, and a bottle of water, and we snacked in bed.

“This is my favorite late-night snack. Cheese, crackers, and olives.” He popped an olive in his mouth. “Number one.”

“I was hoping me and my cock had surpassed that and we now held the number-one spot.”

He snorted, and crumbs flew out of his mouth.

“Tut, tut. Can’t have you messing up this very fine bed.”

“It’s your fault.” He pouted. “You made me laugh.”

“Oh no. Maybe I need a spanking?”

My mate’s mouth gaped. Yeah, my mate. *My* mate. “Now?”

“Doesn’t have to be. We have a lifetime ahead of us.”

“I like the sound of that.” He brushed crumbs off my chest onto the floor. “We’ll have to clean up the mess in the morning. Can you imagine Mr. Lucas’s face if he found crumbs everywhere?”

I nuzzled his throat. “I like Mr. Lucas, but I don’t want to talk about him.” Having the elderly man intrude on my thoughts while I was in bed with my mate would be a huge turn-off.

“Okay, maybe we can snack some more, and I’m not talking about food.”

“Not a snack but a feast.” I pushed him back on the bed and nestled between his legs, my tongue prodding his hole.

“More, please.”

GRIFFIN

“How did we end up here?” Logan lifted the pillow and peered at me.

Not bothering to open my eyes, I rubbed my leg against his. “I think it started with you talking about handlebars and us going to get my car, and that led to talk about bacon and asses. Did I get that right?”

He laughed and rubbed his ass against mine. “Oh, right.” He flopped back on the mattress.

I must have fallen back asleep, and someone interrupted my slumber by shaking my arm. “Go away. Wanna sleep more. Too early.”

“Griffin, it’s eight o’clock. You start work at nine.”

I shot up, only to have the room spin or perhaps it was my head. Maybe both. I flopped back on the mattress, convinced I’d only been asleep a few minutes. Was this another of Mr. Lucas’s tricks? Sleep deprivation? But for what purpose?

“Sorry, I didn’t want to wake you, but you don’t have any clothes here and the bookstore opens in an hour.”

“Oh gods.” I sat up slowly, waiting for my eyes to focus. For a split second, I couldn’t work out where I was. A motel, perhaps? Did Logan and I fall into bed in an Airbnb? A luxury hotel ‘cause wherever it was, it was nicer than any place I’d stayed in.

“Take your shower here. I’ll ask Harry for clothes so you don’t have to go home.”

Harry, right. The blue-haired guy. I'd borrowed his stuff before, a couple of days ago. Images of dark eyes peering at me from the bushes, a chase, burrow, dirt, a house, and Harry, who scented of my mate.

"Logan!"

"Right here." His scent, which saturated the bedding, washed over me as he kneeled at my side.

"It's going to be hard."

He giggle-snorted. "I know. Me too, but we don't have time. While Harry's a very understanding boss, even he'll be peeved if I take more time off."

I nudged him while still avoiding looking at him. "Yeah, but..."

Truth, my bunny insisted.

Let me brush my teeth and shower, and I'll tell him.

"You're right. No time for hard cocks and slick-filled holes." Shoot, I shouldn't have said that. Despite my grogginess and roiling belly, flames licked at my skin. "Help me up." After last night's marathon, my legs were all trembly, and I doubted I could stand.

Once in the shower, I leaned on the tiles, hoping the water streaming over me was enough to wash away sweat, saliva, slick, and cum. But when Logan asked if I was okay, I pumped a handful of body wash and smeared it over my body, hoping that was enough and no bookstore customers would complain about my body odor.

Brand-new toothbrushes courtesy of the family took care of morning breath, and Logan had laid out a set of clothes on the bed.

"Did Harry say anything?" Not that they wouldn't know I'd spent the night. Nothing got past them.

"Didn't see him. These were in the closet here already." The gorgeous walk-in closet I'd noted yesterday. "Ummm, your car's still at the coffee shop but not sure you want another ride on the handlebars so you can pick it up."

I was playing whack-a-mole with my vehicle, never knowing where it was. But the coffee shop was close to work.

Logan ordered a ride share, and he'd go to work after dropping me off. Once I'd upended the bed covers searching for my phone, we headed out, and while being driven to my work, I took Logan's hand.

"I really enjoyed last night," he whispered. "Maybe we could do it again tonight. Or we can just cuddle."

"About that." I faced him. He deserved to have me *looking* right at him and not out the window. He still didn't understand the concept of mating. We were marked, and his name was engraved on my heart.

Poor guy. I didn't choose my words carefully. His face fell, and he loosened his grip on my hand.

"Sure, of course. I just thought..."

I swallowed and winced, as though I was trying to get a jawbreaker candy down my throat. "You're mistaken. I hope to spend tonight in your bed and every night after that." My courage deserted me as the driver was staring at me in the rear-view mirror. Damn, I should have told Logan before we left home.

Home? My bunny was in agreement.

Yes. One night with him and his new place already felt like home, even though it was brand-new. But it already had more than a hint of both Logan's and my scent.

The car pulled up at the bookstore, and Greg was unlocking the door. His face lit up when he saw me. I'd run out of time, and I couldn't drop a bombshell on Logan and take off. But it was either that or leave him wondering about the state of our relationship.

Once out of the car, I tapped on the window and the driver lowered it. "This is such lousy timing, and I'm so sorry. But you're my forever mate, and I love you. This is so sudden, but there's a little something or someone—" I rubbed my brow as words were tumbling round in my head and spilling out in the wrong order "—or someones who are going to join us soon."

Logan glanced behind him. “The family?”

We’d begun to refer to Mr. Lucas and co. as “the family,” and it kinda reminded me of mobsters which was the opposite of what they were. Though, come to think of it, they were secretive, but I had no evidence they bumped people off.

I giggled as I pictured them dressed in 1940s clothing like Bonnie and Clyde. They were the sweetest, kindest people and the farthest thing from mobsters. My thoughts were being tumbled around in a dryer, but I had to tell Logan.

“We had sex last night.” I was stating the obvious here. The driver was human, so I had to be careful how I phrased this. “And I’m like a bunny.” I mouthed the last word, holding a hand up so the driver couldn’t read my lips. “If you know anything about my extended family, you’ll know we’re very fertile.”

The little furrow on his forehead hadn’t gone away, so he was still puzzled as to what I was saying. Not a surprise, as I was explaining it in a roundabout way.

“There’s no need for a test, but we can pick one up if you like. But I’m pregnant.”

Both Logan and the driver gasped.

“We’ll talk at lunch time after I get my car.” Did I have my keys? I patted my front pocket, remembering that these were Harry’s clothes, not mine. But a jingling announced there was something in there, and I pulled out the keys to my car and apartment.

I stepped back, but Logan hadn’t said anything. Blood had drained from his skin, as though someone had bleached it. I stuck my head in the car and kissed him. He managed a smile as I drew away and put a hand on either side of my head, pulling me closer, and kissed me on the lips. He still hadn’t spoken, but a kiss was better than him yelling, “What the fuck, Griffin?” or “Who’s the father?” or “Did you trick me into taking you to bed?”

The car drove away, and he stuck his head out the window and shouted, “We’re going to be dads,” until they rounded a

corner. I skipped into the store, and Greg welcomed me, saying his kid had messed up some of the displays while I was gone. I was almost pleased Sandy, his son, hated working in the store during his summer break because redesigning the window displays and chatting to demanding customers was what I needed to keep my mind off the momentous events of the last few days.

Greg had to remind me it was my lunch hour. I almost said forget it, as the back room was a mess, thanks to Sandy. But the car was five minutes away, so I dashed a couple of blocks to find Logan sitting on the hood, arms crossed. He hadn't seen me yet, and I admired his mop of messy hair, his chiseled jaw, and the bulge at his crotch. His bicycle was leaning on a lamp post beside him.

"Whatcha doing here?" I bounced over the sidewalk and into his arms.

"It's my lunch hour too, so I came to see if you were all right."

"Why wouldn't I be?" I lay my head on his chest, inhaling his unique scent.

"You were feeling lousy this morning."

"True, but I think that was more from lack of sleep." The night before I'd tossed and turned, before that me and my bunny had been in a cage, and the night before in a burrow.

"Oh." He held up a packet of ginger tea and another of ginger candy. "The internet says ginger is good for pregnant omegas if they're suffering morning sickness."

"That's so sweet." I kissed him on the mouth, shoving my tongue between his lips, and he groaned.

"Does that mean we get a do-over tonight? You and me at my place?"

"I guess."

"I said that wrong." He grabbed a bunch of wildflowers from the hood and got on one knee. "Our house. I want you to move in. We're mated." He shuffled his feet. "Two days ago, I couldn't have imagined this, but I can't deny the love that

almost makes me cry. It's so intense. And now there's a baby." He shuffled over the hard sidewalk and kissed my flat belly. "Our baby. We made a baby."

"Don't cry or I will too." Too late, I was already sniffing.

He grinned and stood up. "I give you my heart, my body, and everything I possess, and when you finish work today, I want you to come home."

We'd basically be living with the family, even though we'd have our own place. And it was nicer than anywhere I could afford. But as long as Logan was there, it could have been a shack in the woods. Or even a burrow.

No. No.

Okay, not a burrow, I told my bunny.

"I do. I will."

LOGAN

“It’s beautiful.”

We were in the main house, as we now thought of the place where Mr. Lucas, Mrs. Ambrose, and Harry lived.

Griffin still referred to the three of them as “the family,” and he mimicked a TV mobster’s voice when he said it. Harry and Mrs. Ambrose got the reference when they overheard him say it. Griffin didn’t know they were close by and was flustered and blurted out apologies. But they laughed.

Mr. Lucas didn’t understand, not being a big TV watcher, except when he interrupted his mate’s soap opera watching.

My mate and I were on either side of Harry. He had a tablet and was showing us the nursery he’d designed. Even though I worked at the shop, he’d kept the design a secret, so Griffin and I were seeing it together for the first time.

“I love it, Harry. Thank you so much.” Griffin ran his fingers over the display that included fruit-themed wallpaper on one wall, bookshelves, toys chests, and two cribs with mobiles, because the midwife had examined my mate and said we were expecting twins.

Considering how wild bunnies produced a lot of babies—up to fifteen—I didn’t know how we could afford, let alone house and look after, that many babies. And while my mate’s wild cousins were pregnant for just over a month, thankfully we had more time to adjust to becoming mates and parents, as the midwife told us shifter bunnies carried their babies for four months.

My mate had kinda fibbed to his boss about the pregnancy. Griffin said he was four months and just starting to show when he informed Greg he was expecting. The showing part was true, but we'd only just found out about the pregnancy. And when my mate gave birth, that would equal eight months in Greg's mind. But twins often came early so that shouldn't raise any red flags.

Griffin tapped the screen. "Two armchairs. We'll both be able to sit in the nursery at the same time, each holding a baby." We'd both watched videos and read blogs of the horror stories of having one baby who never slept, but with two, that was multiplied.

Mrs. Ambrose and Harry had both offered to babysit so we could go out for a meal or grab much-needed sleep. We were both apprehensive about coping with two children when we were in a sleep-deprived state.

"You will get through it," Mrs. Ambrose had repeated whenever we mentioned our fears.

"Great. I'll get started on it." Harry suggested we shouldn't stay in the house while the room was being decorated, even though it would be done in two days.

"I think it'll be fine. It's not as though you're knocking down walls and drilling concrete." My mate loved our home, as I did, and when we weren't at work, we spent most of our free time here. There was no way we could afford a home this beautiful and have a view of the river.

"Uncle has offered our other house for two nights. Go and stay there." He dangled the keys in front of us. "Tomorrow's Sunday, and Monday's a public holiday, so neither of you have to work."

Neither my mate nor I had ever heard of the public holiday he mentioned, but he assured us it was a festival that celebrated the founding of Riverford.

"Odd Greg never mentioned it." Griffin checked his phone. "Oh, that's strange. There's a message from him a few days ago, reminding me the shop would be closed Monday."

“Perfect.” Harry handed Griffin the keys. “Enjoy. Consider it your babymoon.” He got up, indicating our meeting was over. “The fridge and pantry are stocked, so you just need clothes. Or not. The place is very private.” He shooed us out the door, saying he had wanted to get started on the nursery today.

As Griffin and I were packing an overnight bag, I said, “Do you think Harry’s going to do all the work himself?”

“Probably best not to ask and be thankful for what he’s giving us.”

Harry insisted that, as we were family and as I was an employee, the nursery and contents were free. “It was in your contract. Maybe you skimmed over that part.”

He was probably right, but whether it had been there when I signed was another matter. As Griffin had said, it was best to be appreciative of everything Harry was gifting us.

Griffin drove, as he said I treated cars as if I were a racecar driver, and he preferred to drive at a sedate speed, especially now that he was pregnant. His belly was still small enough to fit behind the wheel, and I rested my hand on the bump.

Neither of us had ever been to the other house set on a hill outside Riverford, though we’d seen pics. But as my mate followed the directions on the GPS and we climbed a hill, he slammed on the brakes and rested his head on the steering wheel. His ragged shallow breathing had me race around to the driver’s door and kneel in the dirt, one hand on his shoulder, the other on his belly.

“Is it the babies?” I was prepared to drive back to town, heading straight for the hospital.

He shook his head, tears streaming over his cheeks. “You don’t remember.” He jerked his head toward the wooded area.

I cast my mind back. Not that I needed to go very far. We’d only met a month ago, so we had little shared history. We’d ventured outside of town together once, and that was to... oh. My eyes swept over the low-hanging branches, the rustling in the bushes and the gurgling of a nearby stream.

“Griffin, I’m so sorry. Let’s go home. We can stay in a hotel for the night.”

He wiped his cheek with the back of his hand. “No. I’m going to get out.”

I freaked, thinking he was going to shift and retrace the route he took that day. “What? I don’t think that’s a good idea. Your bunny.”

“It’ll be you and me. Yes, my bunny is apprehensive, but he trusts me. Besides, I’ve been reading about wolves, and my understanding is they rarely attack humans.”

My fear was him being in the same place and something... whether it was a rustle, a squawk or a growl would freak out his beast and the same scenario would be re-enacted.

And I was no fan of the woods.

“I have to do this. I can do it by myself, but I prefer that you’re with me.” He straightened his shoulders.

He was being brave and I had to be too. We were mates, and mates stood shoulder to shoulder during the good times and the bad. I hadn’t been able to do it last month when his bunny was chased by the wolf, but I was here now. Would I rather he did this when he wasn’t carrying our twins? Absolutely, but there might never be a “good” time.

“Shall we?” I offered him my arm.

He followed a path that his shifter eyes picked out. It looked the same as everything else, but I trusted him.

“We couldn’t find our way from the burrow to the car that day, but my beast wasn’t thinking clearly, instinct telling him to get to safety, which was how we found the glass house. Our emotions were all over the place, go here, do this, go there, stop, run, no, yes.”

He gripped my hand tightly, and his damp palm told me more than any words.

“Let’s pause. Close your eyes and inhale? What do you smell?” I asked.

“The earth, dead leaves, moss, fragrant wildflowers.”

“Now listen.”

“There’s a brook nearby, and the water’s tinkling over the rocks. Birds are squawking, and there’s a small animal scurrying over the forest floor.” His eyes snapped open. “Maybe that creature is as afraid of us as we were of the wolf.”

“Probably, though your bunny had good reason to be frightened.”

Griffin let go of me and took off through the forest.

“Come back, love. It’s okay.”

“Follow me,” he yelled over his shoulder.

When I caught up with him, he was standing in front of scattered leaves. “This is it. Behind the leaves. The burrow that saved our lives, and a squirrel just ran in there.” He turned around, gazing upward before doing a three sixty.

“Yes, it provided a safe haven for your beast, but it was you, both of you, who were the heroes of the story.”

Griffin leaned his head on my shoulder and cradled his belly while I draped my arm over his shoulder and put a hand over his.

“We should go because we’re scaring the squirrel.” My mate fumbled in his pocket and brought out a bag of nuts and dried fruit, and he dropped some of the nuts in front of the burrow. He carried it everywhere while pregnant, saying if he hadn’t known he was a bunny, he’d have assumed he was a horse.

When we reached the car, he faced me, resting both hands on my chest. “I know you were scared today was going to be a repeat of that other awful day.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but he shushed me.

“But I wasn’t worried because it wasn’t the same. You were with me.”

I held him close, inhaling the now-familiar scent, my lips on his hair as I mumbled, “Always.”

GRIFFIN

I waddled into the kitchen and made tea.

That was all I did; waddle, waddle, waddle. I rubbed my belly and thought of our two little ones growing up in this house. Our foursome, which might not have been possible if not for “the family.” I’d said that to Mr. Lucas more than once, and he always poo-pooed it, saying it was us. All he and Harry did was rescue a frightened animal. Anyone, human or shifter, could have done the same.

There was no point contradicting him, and while we couldn’t repay them, Logan and I started a new tradition. We cooked a meal for everyone once a week. It was a small token in exchange for what they’d given us. Including a new home, we had a ready-made uncle and grandparents. Mrs. Ambrose was already pencilling in the days she’d look after our little ones. But when she informed her mate he’d have to do his share of changing diapers, he said he’d be busy that day, whatever day it was. But his mate insisted, saying the grandbabies needed hands-on grandparents.

I scented Logan approaching, so I got out another teacup. Because I wasn’t drinking coffee, he’d given it up as well, saying just as well I was a bunny shifter. “If I had to give up coffee for nine months, I might have needed caffeine shots to keep my eyes open.”

“One chocolate cake, one chocolate croissant, and one chocolate mousse.” He kissed my brow and told me to sit

while he made the tea. “I see what you’re doing, eating all the chocolate.” He warmed the teapot with boiling water.

“Huh?” I was licking cake frosting off my fingers before dipping a spoon into the mousse. It was pretty obvious I had a craving for all things chocolate.

“Chocolate contains caffeine, so you’re getting your fix without drinking it.”

“Oh, didn’t think of that.” I took a bite of the croissant and closed my eyes as the sweet sugary concoction melted on my tongue and combined with the buttery, flaky pastry. “Mmmm.”

Even though the goodies tasted as amazing as always, my tummy rumbled and cramped a little, as I was hungry. But I’d been nibbling all morning. My beast sighed, longing for hay, as I hadn’t been able to shift in the past seven days now that the birth date was edging closer.

“Ohhhh.”

Logan placed the tea in front of me and grinned. “I love your chocolatey reactions. Mmmm. Yes. Yummy. Gods, yes. So good. Ahhhh.”

I grunted and took a deep breath, picturing the air going into and out of my lungs. “Nooo. This isn’t that.”

Logan leaped up, bumping my teacup with his elbow, and the hot liquid spilled over the table. “Are the babies coming?”

Even though the midwife had examined me and said I was carrying two babies, or kits as baby bunnies were called, my mate was concerned there were more little ones inside me. I’d discovered him measuring the space outside our house, asking Harry if we could extend outward or add another story if we became parents to multiple children.

“I think so. Help me up, please.”

We were convinced the babies would be born in the early hours of the morning because that was what my wild cousins did. But perhaps my little ones understood they were safe from predators and could arrive during the day.

Logan helped me undress and put on a loose robe that could be removed easily. “I’d like to walk.” My body cramped, and I squeezed my mate’s hands. I loved him even more when he didn’t complain because it must have been painful with my shifter strength.

But when the contraction passed, I changed my mind. “No, I want to huddle in bed.” But as I sat on the mattress, I whimpered, “No, babe. Walk. It’s too painful to sit.”

We paced across the floor, but as spacious as our home was, I needed fresh air. Once outside with the breeze and sun on my face, Logan held an umbrella over me while tucking his arm in mine and did his best to keep my mind on something other than the cramps.

“Look, there are ducks on the river. A mama and her babies.”

I studied the duck family, admiring how effortlessly they were gliding over the water, knowing their webbed feet were paddling furiously out of sight.

“She’s a good mama, looking after her little ones.”

While part of me was a bunny, I was thankful our babies didn’t have to contend with human hunters or beasts who viewed us as a meal or sport.

There was no sound from the main house. No one was watching TV or sitting on the deck, and I assumed that was deliberate. But as another contraction wrapped itself around my belly, the silence spread beyond the house. Traffic and people’s noise faded, and there was just the lapping of the water against the bank and the wind whistling between branches.

“It’s time.” In the weeks from me getting pregnant until today, I’d been concerned about the actual birth. Would I know what to do? What if one of our little ones stopped breathing? They were the questions that most omegas probably asked themselves before labor began, both human and shifter.

My bunny had repeatedly told me my body would know what to do, and while he physically couldn’t help, he told the babies, *All will be well.*

And now a calm settled over me. I finally believed those words and hoped Logan had overcome the angst at me possibly producing a passel of children.

“All will be well,” I repeated my beast’s words.

“I think you’re right.”

Instinct told me getting on my hands and knees would be the most comfortable, and my body signaled when it was time to push.

“Owww! It hurts.” I grunted and bore down, picturing my body pushing our little one closer to us. “Owww!”

I peered between my legs, sweat dripping from my forehead onto the towels covering the mattress. Logan was squatting behind me, offering encouragement. Much as I adored him, I almost wished we could change places and he could endure the agony with me urging him on.

No. My bunny was adamant it was an honor to bring our kit into the world.

As he spoke, the curtains fluttered and the sun peeked through the gap and bathed the bed in light. Even though I was in a world of pain, I sent a little thank-you to the universe for helping me grow and birth my babies.

“One more push.” Logan’s voice penetrated the fog surrounding my brain.

Soon, my beast insisted. It was almost as though he and my mate were communicating, their assurances coming in tandem.

“The head, yes. Our little one is almost here,” Logan gushed.

Pushing out the baby’s shoulders was almost easy compared to the head, and for a moment I feared our child had a head two sizes bigger than normal. That was what it felt like as the little kit squeezed out of me.

“It’s a girl.” Logan shuffled to my side, and I slumped onto the mattress. The birth of our second kit wasn’t imminent. Our little one had that in common with our wild relatives.

My mate had wrapped our daughter in a baby blanket, given to us by Mrs. Ambrose. Her little face was scrunched up, and her matted hair was stuck to her scalp. She was the most gorgeous baby, and I fell under her spell and was besotted.

“I didn’t think it was possible to love you more than I did, but I was wrong.” Logan kissed me and our daughter. He made more tea, and hungry as I was, I wasn’t in the mood for food. I was impatient for our second child.

“Should we name her now or wait for her twin?”

“Let’s wait.” Our children would be individuals, and Logan and I had discussed not dressing them the same. Every family made decisions about what was right for them, and ensuring our kids knew they were loved for who they were and not part of a twin package was right for us. But naming them at the same time seemed appropriate because it was a label they would carry forever.

“It’s getting dark.” My mate peered outside. “You were in labor longer than I realized.”

“And I felt every second of it,” I reminded him.

“Gods, I’m sorry, love. I need to think before I talk.”

“It’s okay. I’ll forgive you.”

Our son’s birth was much quicker than our daughter’s. Logan had swaddled our firstborn, and she slept beside me, not waking to welcome her brother.

Logan cooked me scrambled eggs and made toast, my craving for chocolate and the caffeine it contained was satisfied, knowing I could have coffee in the morning. He held our sleeping babies after their first feed and changed their first diapers.

“That was easy.” He zipped up a onesie and then another.

“Just you wait.” I giggled as I described dealing with the poop explosions that were certain to be in his and our babies’ future. “Harlan and Lulu, what do you think? Is Daddy a diapering pro?”

“Maybe I need a medal.” He puffed out his chest.

“Don’t get too cocky!”

LOGAN

Griffin and I sat on the blanket on the grass with the babies between us, kicking their legs and gurgling as they observed the objects dangling from their individual activity gyms.

Our twins were a month old, and the family was celebrating their birth. We'd planned to do it soon after they were born, but even with many spare hands, my mate and I were exhausted. At least once a day, whether in the afternoon or the wee small hours of the night, we'd look at one another and say, "How do people cope when they don't have family nearby?"

We were fortunate that Harlan and Lulu were sleeping for six hours at night now, so one of us would stay up to do the midnight feed—usually me, as I was more of a night owl—and the other would get up at six, feed and change the pair, and they'd go down for another nap.

We juggled, even with Mrs. Ambrose babysitting on Wednesdays. The first day she offered to look after the twins, we'd protested, saying it was too much for her. But she said Mr. Lucas would do his bit. Griffin and I had shared a glance, wondering how much he would contribute. Changing dirty diapers might not be part of his skill set, but he adored our babies.

But she had insisted, and so after we took them into the main house—Harry made sure they had two of everything so there was no need for us to take all their paraphernalia—we crept into our bed, desperate for sleep, but unable to close our eyes,

assuming Mrs. Ambrose would call, saying she couldn't cope. But there wasn't a peep from her or the babies, and we fell asleep and woke late in the afternoon.

When we picked up the twins, the family had dinner waiting.

"How was that possible?" I asked Griffin, and he responded with his usual answer, "Best not to ask."

Harlan complained, bringing me back to the present, and I picked him up and sniffed his butt. All clean.

Mr. Lucas furrowed his brow. "Do all humans smell their baby's diaper? Seems unsanitary."

We all giggled as Harry appeared, dragging a colored box over the grass. "I thought the twins might enjoy a magic show."

The twins weren't aware they had hands, that would happen in a month or so, so I doubted they'd be interested in magic.

"I'd love to see it. Wouldn't you, Logan?" My mate stared at me, his eyes wide, head slightly tilted toward Harry. That was his code for me to agree.

"Absolutely."

Harry did the usual disappearing-coins trick, having a coin appear from behind your ear, scarves turning into a bunch of flowers, and a rope trick where he cut it and it was "magically" restored in one piece.

But as his tricks grew more elaborate and he levitated and then smashed Mr. Lucas's watch, my mate and I looked at one another, our mouths gaping. The magic was becoming more complex, and I had my doubts it was just a sleight of hand.

Griffin nudged me with his foot, and I glanced at the twins. They were still, their gazes fixed on Harry. Maybe it was his blue hair. Human babies didn't distinguish color at this age, but our children might take after my mate and were bunny shifters. When Harlan and Lulu wriggled their noses like bunnies, I was convinced they were giving me a glimpse of their future.

When Harry was done, we clapped, and the babies kicked their little legs.

“I didn’t know you were an amateur magician.” Griffin picked up Lulu and fed her.

“I’m planning on expanding my business and becoming a children’s party provider.”

It seemed like a natural extension of the current business, though he hadn’t mentioned it to me. That wasn’t surprising, as I was still on paternity leave, as was Griffin.

“And that’s going to be my main focus, so I hope you’ll accept the position of store manager when you return to work.” Harry beamed.

I had such little experience, and my first response was to refuse, telling him I wasn’t ready. But as we lived side by side, he’d always be there to bounce ideas off, and he’d be at the end of the phone if I got in a pickle.

Griffin’s brows shot up and his mouth was open wide as if he was about to yell, “Congratulations.” With all eyes on me, I thanked Harry. “I accept.”

Everyone cheered, and my mate gave me a big kiss. I returned it with tongue, and he shoved me away playfully, mouthing, “Later.”

Mrs. Ambrose brought out a cake with candles, and we celebrated until the sun was low, just peeping over the treetops.

“When do you return to work, Griffin?” Mr. Lucas popped a piece of cake in his mouth.

“Not for another month.” Greg and his late husband had done the not-enough-sleep-new-baby routine. They’d been in their late teens when they had Sandy and weren’t prepared for what looking after a newborn entailed. He’d agreed I could bring the twins to work, and I’d start off part-time.

“Is your boss married?” Mr. Lucas asked as he tapped on his phone.

“No, but he’s...” Griffin looked to me and did the head tilt. But I shrugged and mouthed, “What?” I was lost as to what he wanted from me.

“Greg’s happy the way he is, Mr. Lucas.” Sandy’s omega father had passed away when Sandy was very young, and between running the business and bringing up his son, Griffin’s boss had no time to devote to a partner. “He has a long-distance relationship.”

The elderly man screwed up his face and looked at his mate. “It’s where the alpha lives in one place and the omega in another and they see one another occasionally,” she explained.

“That’s not a relationship,” he remarked. “More of a friendship.”

“With benefits,” Harry added.

“I don’t see any benefits,” Mr. Lucas huffed.

I stifled a giggle and made sure not to glance at my mate, as I’d probably burst out laughing, and then I’d have to explain the friends-with-benefits concept.

“Please don’t... ummm, intrude... no, I mean meddle... nope... ahhhh, someone help me,” Griffin begged. He’d confided that Greg was considering ending his relationship, as he and the omega were growing apart, they rarely saw one another, and they had never married. My mate probably didn’t want Mr. Lucas to give the pair any incentive to split, as it had to be their decision and not because of one elderly shifter.

Mr. Lucas’s nostrils flared, and I could almost swear there was a tiny bit of smoke billowing out. Impossible, but if he was very angry and insulted at my mate’s words, perhaps that was a thing shifters did. I’d never witnessed Griffin doing that.

I had to say something to soothe over the ruffled emotions and protect my mate. I squeezed his hand and addressed Mr. Lucas. “You are our found family, and it’s okay for families to disagree, even though they love one another.”

Griffin sniffed and nodded. “I love all three of you. You changed our lives and many others, I’m sure. But Greg doesn’t need to be pushed or helped into making a change.”

My mate’s eyes filled with tears, and I took him in my arms. Mr. Lucas reached out and patted Griffin’s hand. “I would never do anything that caused you pain.”

That was so sweet. “Now you’ve made me cry too.”

After a group hug, we took the babies into our house, bathed and fed them, and just before we put them in their cribs, our phones beeped.

Look up.

We both got the same message. That was it. Two words. I squinted at the ceiling, hoping we didn’t have a leaking pipe.

“Maybe we’re supposed to look at the sky.” Griffin had Lulu, and I was cuddling Harlan.”

“Is it an eclipse?” I didn’t recall reading anything about one, but my brain was frazzled from babies, diapering, poop, and more poop. Even though we were getting more sleep, I had yet to catch up—not that it was possible.

We opened the curtains to discover a full moon. I put an arm over my mate’s shoulder.

“Did I ever tell you that ancient shifters used to say a bunny lived on the moon?”

I leaned back. “I used to think that as a kid.”

“It’s a cute story, and it always gave me comfort, as if that bunny was looking out for me when I was going through hard times.”

“Maybe he is, and maybe he has help from a guy with blue hair and a shifter.” Griffin and I shared a kiss, and we kissed our babies.

“I like that idea.”

“That reminds me. You never told me what kind of shifter Mr. Lucas is. Big or small? Scary or cute and cuddly.” It had slipped my mind, which wasn’t surprising, as my life was so full.

“Ummm, definitely not the latter, but I’ve never seen him take his scales.”

“Scales? Is he a fish or a snake?” I wasn’t fond of reptiles, and if the elderly man was a snake, I’d be checking the outdoor furniture before I sat down in future.

Griffin grinned. “Look up.”

Outlined against the brilliance of the full moon was a huge creature with wings and a long tail. “Holy shit. Is that a...?”

“It is. There are legends about the moon and dragons. I looked it up. This night is perfect. The moon, a rabbit, and a dragon.”

“And they’re all looking after us and our little ones.” We shared a kiss and hugged our babies tight.



Sloths aren't lazy, they're anything but.

Omega sloth shifter, Reed, is a nature photographer. It suits his personality and his sloth because to get the right photo, he often has to stay still for hours—or days—hunkered down in the undergrowth.

Human alpha, Greg, owns a bookstore in the small town of Riverford. He and his late husband found one another, mated and had a child when they were nineteen, and he's just ended a long-distance relationship. He thinks he'll never find another great love.

Reed arrives in Riverford to visit his brother and is waylaid by a guy with blue hair and his uncle near the local bookstore. He meets them again as Harry, the younger of the two, is providing the entertainment at his nephew's birthday party. And it just so happens, Greg lives next door.

Make Mine A Sloth is the ninth book in the M/M mpreg shifter, sweet-with-knotty-heat Mated By Chance series. It features an omega shifter whose attitude to life is 'slow and steady wins the race', a human who believes he's destined to be alone, a

pair of unlikely matchmakers, an adorable baby, and a happy ever after.

Order Now

KEEP IN TOUCH

To keep up to date on her new releases, giveaways, and upcoming projects, sign up for Harper's newsletter [here](#).

Sign up for Colbie's newsletter [here](#) or follow her on Bookbub [here](#)