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HORN IN MY SIDE

Opposites
always
attract!



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by Alicia Montgomery

Unedited sample

Chapter One

Jasmine Gonzalez took a long, drawn-out breath as she surveyed the daunting task ahead of her. Then again, completing daunting tasks were her specialty.

This particular one, however, required the use of a ladder or for her to be about seven feet tall, neither of which she had right now.

She chomped at her lower lip, staring up at the looming sign atop the large bay window. The letter *T* had come loose and hung upside down, dangling from a single nail at the base, so it currently read “Fantastic ails and Magical Scales Pet Shop.”

It was tempting to leave it be, as there were about a million other things that needed fixing inside the shop—the water horse tank filters had to be replaced soon, the pens were due for a locking spell refresh, the POS system which was probably older than her was long overdue for an upgrade—and on and on.

Normally, she could call on the owner of the shop to make small repairs, like fixing the sign or purchase supplies like ladders, but he had recently passed away. Vrig had been an elderly orc who hired Jasmine as a cashier almost five years ago; she was new in town and had no experience with either magical pets or working in retail. He’d been a kind boss, as

well as her landlord - he'd offered her the tiny apartment over his garage at a rent that was way below market prices and only a ten-minute walk away from the store.

Vrig had taught her everything he knew, from learning how to handle newly hatched basilisks to predicting when the phoenixes were about to regenerate. She'd come to love the work and caring for all the magical creatures at Fantastic Tails, but her favorite part of the job was matching clients with the perfect pet. Vrig had said she was a natural at it, and for the first time in her life, Jasmine had found something she was truly good at. It worked out for Vrig as well, as over time he had given her more duties, and he spent less time at the store, often letting Jasmine open up in the morning and close at the end of the day.

She enjoyed the increased responsibilities and decision-making powers on the business side of the shop. Vrig seemed happy to allow her to take on more responsibilities and even gave her a modest pay bump and promotion from cashier to manager. Though that was more ceremonial, as she was his only employee. Still, she loved her routine at the shop, and her little apartment over Vrig's garage, in this quiet little town. For the first time in a long while, she was content to stay in one place, something she hadn't felt since she and her father left their tiny town in the Philippines to move to the United States when she was twelve.

The last five years working at Fantastic Tails had gone by so quickly, she barely noticed it. Heck, she didn't even think about what was to come next, enjoying her life day to day, never worrying about tomorrow. At least, not until Vrig had died.

He was gone now, and she was still here. Truly, she could have left—should have left—when he passed away, but there was no one else to take care of the store and she just couldn't leave the creatures alone in the shop, not when the authorities were still trying to find Vrig's next of kin to sort out who would inherit his estate. Up until his death, she'd been running the entire operation anyway, so she decided to stay on and figure out what to do, at least until everything was sorted out. As far as she knew, Vrig had never married nor had any

children, and had never spoken about siblings or other relatives, so she couldn't provide the authorities with any information. That had been three weeks ago, and she hadn't heard anything from the administrator appointed by the probate court since.

Jasmine swallowed the lump in her throat. Some days, she still expected him to come walking in, all smiles as he greeted her, usually bringing her a to-go cup from the coffee shop down the street. Despite his appearance—seven feet in height, shaggy white hair, green skin, sharp tusks—Vrig had been a gentle and kind soul, not only to her and the customers, but to the animals in the shop. There were times when she would even forget he was gone. She'd get an idea and would walk over to the back office where he was usually holed up, then stop halfway, remembering she would never see him there, crouched in front of his computer, glasses perched on his face, always ready to help with some repair or answer a question she had about a new creature.

His loss left a huge crater in her chest, but at the same time, it reminded her of what was to come. It was like waiting for the proverbial axe to fall, wondering day in and day out if some long-lost relative of his would come sweeping in, take over the shop and his house, and kick her out of her apartment.

Of course, there was the option of buying the shop and running it. The thought of it had become more and more appealing since Vrig died. However, that would mean being tied down for the next few years or so, not to mention, taking on a loan would be a huge financial commitment. That, of course, would all hinge on Vrig's heirs wanting to sell to her. It wasn't just the business Vrig had owned, but the building and land itself, which was prime property as it was located right in the middle of Main Street. They could shut down the shop and sell everything for an enormous profit and Jasmine would not be able to do a single thing about it.

But there was no use worrying about that, because there were other pressing matters she had to deal with, such as the one right in front of her.

Or rather, *literally* hanging over her head.

If Vrig were here, she wouldn't need a ladder, he was tall enough to fix the sign. Heck, he could use magic to put it to rights.

But he wasn't here, and it was all up to her.

Jasmine drummed her fingers on her arm. She would leave it for now, but she didn't want *another* sternly worded letter from the Dewberry Falls Main Street Business Association. The board was all about keeping the town's commercial hub immaculate and pristine, to attract customers and keep property value high. She could not afford to get on their bad side, not after the last incident that had gotten her a first warning.

It wasn't my fault those mini cockatrice got out of their pens; she grumbled to herself.

And she had chased all three of the escaped jailbirds up and down Main Street and thankfully wrangled them back into the shop before they could seriously harm anyone. Since they were the mini variety of cockatrice, their gaze couldn't kill anyone, but it was enough to leave Alice Vanderpelt in a coma for twelve hours.

No, this definitely had to be fixed now. Martha Goodeheart, who served as chairman of the board, was just *itching* to serve Jasmine with a second warning, and once she received three, she would have to pay a hefty fine.

Hands on her hips, she marched back into the shop as a hoppy sixties tune piping in through the Bluetooth speaker on the counter greeted her.

"One fine day, indeed," she muttered to herself.

Though tempted to turn the speakers off, she knew she couldn't. The creatures in the pet shop seemed to like music, at least that's what Vrig has told her in the beginning.

"Silence drives them crazy," Vrig had said. "They all start lookin' at each other and some of the ornerier ones pick fights. But the music keeps them calm."

And so they had music piping in twenty-four seven. Initially Vrig had boring elevator

music playing, but as she took over more of the store, Jasmine eventually replaced his playlist with her own favorites, particularly those bright, soulful upbeat Motown tunes from the 1950s and 60s.

Digging around her purse, she rooted around until she found the black elastic buried at the bottom, then proceeded to braid her long, black hair into a long rope so it wouldn't get in her way. Then, she grabbed the step stool under the counter. It would only boost her five-foot-nearly-nothing frame about another foot and a half, which would not be enough. As she tapped a finger on her chin, she spied a large cement block from the corner of her eye. Vrig had used them to prop the door open sometimes. After a quick mental calculation—and a small prayer to her ancestor spirits—she picked up the stool and the block, tucked a hammer under her arm, put some nails in her pocket, then headed outside.

You can do this.

She placed the step stool under the sign, then the cement block on top of it.

What doesn't kill me only makes me stronger.

It might fracture limb or two, but thankfully the shop had an excellent employee health plan, and she'd only have to be at the bone-setter's office for an hour. Two, tops.

Placing her right foot on the first step of the stool, she gave it an experimental wiggle. Hoisting herself up, she set her left foot on top of the block, then the other.

Yes!

But now came the hard part. She had to fix the darn sign. At this height, she could maneuver the *T* to its proper position, but she would have to stretch, *really stretch*, her other arm to pull the hammer far back enough to drive the nails in.

Jasmine did not dare look down, even as the stool wobbled. Holding her breath, she proceeded to swing the *T* upwards. It remained upright by some miracle, and she considered leaving it as is, hoping it would hold up at least until she got some help—maybe she could

call her friend Kap to finish the job tonight, as the tree giant was certainly tall enough to fix this without a ladder. She would have contacted him earlier, but he was still surely asleep, being nocturnal and all.

With a determined grunt, she fished out a nail from her pocket and positioned it as high as she could on the painted wooden letter, about halfway up the vertical stem of the T. Pulling the hammer back, she swung it forward to ensure she got enough momentum in—then felt the cement block under her slip.

Jasmine shrieked, bracing herself for the pain when she hit the solid pavement. However, that didn't happen. Her body hit something solid, but it wasn't concrete. Rather, she was pressed up against something rock-hard and warm, and *breathing*.

Uh-oh.

A loud grunt made her wince. Slowly, she lifted her head and gazed up into luminous purple eyes.

Oh, Mother Goddess!

“I ... I ...”

Her entire mouth had gone dry, and she could only stare open-mouthed at the tall, green-skinned stranger holding her in his arms. An orc, she guessed, though there wasn't really much doubt, as the sharp lower tusks peeking from between his lips, the elongated ears were dead giveaways. A mane of shaggy hair as dark as a raven's wing fell over his forehead and between his purple indigo eyes, which stared right back her.

“Do you mind?” His low, gruff voice sent a shiver down the backs of her knees.

“Mind? What?”

His eyes darted down to her hands, which were planted—no, gripping—the prominent pectoral muscles under his shirt. As if she didn't embarrass herself enough, her fingers involuntarily squeezed them.

They're so ... hard.

And she wondered if he was hard everywhere.

Also, was he green all over?

Warmth crept up her neck, just thinking about what his skin was like underneath those—

He cleared his throat.

Oh, Mother—

“Sorry!” She pulled her hands away, then she began to wiggle to free herself of his arms, flailing like a fish caught in a bear’s mouth.

“Yeow!” he shouted as her hand smacked against the side of his head. The arm cradling her legs whipped out from under her and she landed on her feet.

“Oh shi—sorry!” She reached up to check on where she had hit him, but that was a useless gesture, as even on her tiptoes, her hand barely touched his chin. “Are you okay?”

“I’ll live,” he grunted, rubbing at his temples.

“I’m really sorry, I, uh, just panicked. Are you sure you’re alright?” Thankfully she didn’t hit him at the base of his horns, which she had heard were extremely sensitive. “Do you want me to look at it? Do you need a doctor, a healer, or a medicine man?” She couldn’t quite recall what type of healthcare professional orcs went to.

“It’s fine. What in Vorlak’s name were you doing?” He glanced over the step stool, which was now on its side, the cement block broken in two beside it. “Don’t you know how dangerous and foolish that was?”

She flinched but quickly recovered.

Who the heck did he think he was, anyway?

“Well, if you’re *fine*,” she began as she picked up the stool. “Have a good day, then.”

And I’ll see you never.

He snorted. “I came here to see the pet shop.”

She froze midway as she reached for the broken cement block.

He was a customer?

Deciding the cement block was not salvageable, she stood up straight and faced him, craning up to get a good look. About seven feet tall, he blocked most of the sun from her view, his massive shoulders and arms like boulders covered in red and black checked flannel.

“You’re looking for a pet? For yourself or perhaps your offspring?” She cringed inwardly, thinking of how she had groped him.

He could be married. With kids.

But he didn’t seem that old, perhaps a few years older than herself, but certainly mature looking enough to have a rugrat or two running around.

“No.”

She ignored that tiny yelp of victory from her brain—and other parts of her body.

He could still be married.

Besides, he had been rude to her just two seconds ago, calling her foolish.

Silence stretched between them as she waited for him to follow up and tell her why he was there. Was she supposed to read his mind and figure out what he wanted?

Shrugging, she continued. “Well, sir, if you’re not in the market for a pet, perhaps you’re at the wrong place.” She pursed her lips and used them to point up at the sign, where, sadly, the *T* once again swung down from its hinge. “We’re a pet shop, specializing in all creatures scaled, fanged, feathered, furred, and everything in between.”

“I am at the right place, and I don’t want a pet.”

“You don’t? Then why—” An alarming thought popped into her brain. “Sir,” she began, her voice firm, but professional. “I don’t know what kind of place you think this is, but we strictly offer creatures as *pets*. And not for other purposes.”

“I know and—” His dark brows furrowed. “Wait, do you think I want to *eat* them?”

“Or use them in spell casting or experiments.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “You wouldn’t be the first to try.” She’d seen Vrig deal with such nefarious would-be customers, and while she probably couldn’t toss this orc out on his ass, she could scream really loud.

“I’m not here to—” He raked his clawed hands through his messy mane. “I’m Mal.”

“And?” Was she supposed to know who he was by name?

“Of the Urduk Horde.”

Now that sounded familiar. “Urduk ... as in—”

“Vrig’s horde. I’m his nephew.”

A heartbeat passed as she processed the information.

This orc was Vrig’s nephew. His relative.

Heat flooded her cheeks. “I ... I ...” Her tongue refused to follow what her brain wanted her to say.

He let out a huff. “And you’re Jasmine, right? If I promise not to eat any of the creatures, will you let me inside so we can talk?”

Oh, Mother Goddess, she not only fell into his arms and molested him, but also implied he was a savage creature that devoured adorable pets.

If you can hear me, she pleaded to her ancestor spirits, please strike me with a thunderbolt right now and erase my existence from this world.

“Well?”

Unfortunately, she remained earthbound.

Great help you are, ancestors.

“Uh, yeah, okay,” she mumbled, managing to gather her wits. “Please, come inside.”

She led him into the shop, gesturing for him to go first, watching him to gauge his

reaction.

Most people who first entered Fantastic Tails were often taken by surprise by its interior. While the facade looked like any of the other shops on Main Street, the inside had been magically renovated into a space that was four times its size. Half the store was dedicated to the various pet supplies, food, toys, beds, cages, leashes, and the like, as they accounted for most of the store's profits. The other half was where they kept the creatures, two levels of spacious cages, pens, and habitats holding the different pets they had for sale. The lower level had all the landbound and flying creatures, while the second floor was wall-to-wall aquariums filled with all kinds of water and amphibious animals. Vrig had said he built the entire thing himself, including casting some of the spells to expand the space.

It was truly a sight to behold, but the gigantic orc simply glanced around and let out a grunt, seemingly unimpressed.

Jasmine pursed her lips, waiting for any other reaction. When none came, she went to the register, as if the massive counter was a shield protecting her.

“Uhm, Mr. Mal, I'm sorry for what—”

“It's fine,” he said, tone dismissive as he waved a massive hand. “And it's just Mal. I'm here to settle Vrig's affairs.”

And where have you been all this time, she wanted to say, but she bit her lip before the words tumbled out of her mouth. “Oh, I see.”

“I travel a lot,” he began. “Took the administrator a while to get a hold of me.”

“He didn't leave a will or anything. And they said they couldn't find any contact information of relatives in his home or belongings.”

“Vrig didn't have any close relatives, only me. He was my father's older half-brother.”

“Did you know him before he retired?” Before Vrig came to Dewberry Falls to open

the shop, he had been in the Orc division of the Army Corps of Engineers.

“Not really. Met him a few times when I was a kid before my dad died.”

“Uhm, still I’m sorry for your loss.”

He shrugged. “It’s okay.”

“He went peacefully.” Her chest tightened as she recalled the events. “The night before he died, he’d seemed normal, though he mentioned that his arthritis had been acting up, so I told him to go home early. The next day, when he didn’t show up at all, I came over to his house with some soup. He didn’t answer and the locking spell prevented me from going inside, so I called emergency services. The EMTs said he passed away in his sleep the night before.”

“It was his time.”

That’s what many of their neighbors had said when they came to offer their condolences. Still, guilt filled her. If she had checked up on him, maybe she could have done *something*. At the very least, if she had stayed with Vrig that night before, he wouldn’t have died alone.

An awkward silence passed between them before she managed to swallow the lump in her throat. “Do you want anything to drink? I have coffee and tea.”

He shook his head. “No, thank you. I just want to settle things and get going.”

“Of course,” she said through gritted teeth. *Calm down*, she told herself. He didn’t really know his half-uncle, so she couldn’t expect him to grieve at a near-stranger.

“The administrator mentioned you’ve been keeping things running around here while they were looking for me, even though you didn’t have to.”

She gestured to the wall of cages and glass cases. “I can’t exactly just lock up the doors and walk away.”

“I get that,” he said gruffly. “And don’t worry, I don’t plan to further inconvenience

on you. Please don't feel that you have to stay."

She knew this day was coming. Had run the scenarios in her head, about what she would do once Vrig's kin were found, where she would go, her next steps. But to actually have to face it head on now was a punch to the gut.

"Of course," she managed to say, despite all the air leaving her lungs.

"Depending on your employment contract, and the shops' finances, I'm sure I could offer you some kind of severance." He frowned. "How did you manage to stay on without Vrig?"

"What do you mean?"

He glanced around. "Running a place like this has to be a headache for accounting."

"A-accounting?" Wait, was he implying she was doing something underhanded? Cooking the books? "I assure you, everything's in order, accounting-wise," she said, her tone chilly.

"I—what? No, I wasn't implying—" He let out an impatient snort. "I—"

"Vrig promoted me to manager two years ago. Since then, I've been running everything, both in the front and back office." Except for the store's bank accounts and payroll, of course, but thankfully all their suppliers had been paid up until the end of this month, and her salary had hit her bank account just yesterday, which meant Vrig had signed off on it before he passed away. "I assure you; everything is in order when it comes to the shop's finances."

"I'm sure they are."

"Margins are thin, but your uncle said this was more of a side hobby for him, something to do in retirement to stave off the boredom, so he didn't care about money as long as he wasn't completely in the red."

"I didn't mean to imply anything." More awkward silence stretched between them

before he spoke again. “Look, I’m grateful for your help and staying on. But the shop isn’t your problem anymore. Since Vrig didn’t leave a will, this whole thing has been a headache to deal with. I have a meeting at the law office down the street so I can get some help and hopefully we can get all this sorted out sooner than later. They’ll be in touch with you for anything.” With that, he turned and walked toward the door.

Jasmine could only stare at his large, flannel-covered back as he exited the shop, the door closing behind him slowly in an anti-climactic manner.

Here it was, the axe falling, burying straight into her chest.

Numbness took over her, and for a few minutes, she didn’t move. It was only the sound of the chirping baby oozlums demanding their midday meal that knocked her out of her trance. Instinctively, she grabbed the bag of birdseed from under the counter and sauntered over the large cage in the corner.

“Patience,” she cooed as she pulled out the feeder.

The colorful little birds flew backwards in circles as they waited for their meal. As soon as Jasmine drew closer, they slowed their flight and flew toward the front of the cage. She pressed her palm against the bars, and they hovered next to her fingers, warbling a high-pitched tune. Once she replaced the feeder, they dove right in.

With a satisfied sigh, she took a step back and she glanced around at the other creatures around her—the Cerberus pup with its three heads laying on its paws as it snoozed in the corner of its pen, the pair of Fenrir cubs play fighting, the phoenix chirping happily in its cage—and her heart sank further.

Vrig had been selective with his customers, and it truly wasn’t about money for him. He made sure that potential owners had the right temperament and lifestyle for the pet they wanted; after all, these were living creatures and someone who, say, lived in an apartment and worked eighty hours a week would not be able to handle the responsibilities of training a

griffin hatchling or a wily kobold. He refused to sell to anyone who wouldn't be a good owner, and he had a generous return policy for customers who changed their mind, as he'd rather take the loss than risk the poor creatures becoming neglected.

Vrig's nephew didn't mention what he had planned, but he didn't seem interested in anything about the business aside from the books, which meant he would likely close the shop. And if that was his plan, the most logical thing to do would be to sell the remaining creatures to one of those soulless, big box stores who would give them to just anyone who walked through the door.

I can't let that happen.

While she had been undecided all these months, Jasmine knew what she had to do: she had to convince Vrig's nephew—*Mal*, she reminded herself—to sell Fantastic Tails to her.

If she could afford it.

She lived frugally and so she had some savings, but that would not be enough, so she would have to take out a loan. The idea of having to pay back an enormous sum made her break out into a cold sweat, but there was no way she could buy the shop outright.

Jasmine straightened her shoulders. She had to at least try. If she didn't, she would surely regret it. It was another daunting task, but those *were* her specialty.

She didn't know how long Vrig's nephew would be in town, so she had to act fast. Grabbing her phone from the counter, she tapped out a message to Tracy, the manager at the Dewberry Falls Credit Union. She and Tracy went to the same spin class on Thursday nights and often grabbed a late drink together afterwards.

Got a minute? Can I swing by your office?

Grabbing her purse from under the counter, she gave the shop a once-over before marching toward the door, flipping the Open sign to Closed, then activated the alarm system.

As she exited, she spied the stool and broken concrete block outside, reminding her of her unfinished task.

I'll definitely have to ask Kap to come by later. She'd make him a batch of her sinigang soup in exchange.

However, as she picked up the stool, she glanced up at the sign and, to her surprise, the *T* was right side up.

Huh. How did that—

Her phone's ringtone shook her out of her thoughts. Seeing the familiar name flashing on the screen, she picked it up. "Tracy? Hi. Thanks for calling ... yeah, I'm good." She gave the sign one last glance. "Do you have a few minutes? I need to ask you something ..."