



A Home for Tyler

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Category: Romance, M-m Romance, Paranormal

Description: It all started with a pink slip...

Alpha bear shifter Dimitri walked into his annual review expecting a bonus and walked out with a severance package, his entire department being dissolved. His den alpha offers him a position as his Beta and he's tempted, but his bear insists they visit the desert first. It's been years since he visited his cousin and his mate. Road trip it is.

It all started with a broken engagement...

Omega Fox shifter Tyler never wanted to marry his pack Alpha's son. He only agreed because tradition demanded it. When he walks in and sees his fiancé pounding more than nails on his construction job, Tyler calls off the engagement. He draws the line at cheating. Now he is homeless, packless, and scared. But as awful as things are, they are better than going home and taking on the role he never wanted.

Thanks to a chance encounter at Animal and some meddling from Karma, Tyler's life is about to get a whole lot better.

A Home for Tyler is a sweet with knotty heat MM shifter mpreg romance featuring an omega fox shifter cast from his pack, an alpha bear shifter unsure what his next path in life should be, the night at Animals that changes everything, Karma doing what Karma does best, true love, fated mates, a sweet baby, some familiar faces from the Omegas of Animals universe, and a guaranteed HEA. Each book in this series can be read as a standalone. If you like your alphas hawt, your omegas strong, and your mpreg with heart, download A Home for Tyler today

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Chapter One

Dimitri

My den was not pleased when I moved to the city. Fresh out of high school and not nearly as smart as I thought I was, I ignored the advice of those older and wiser than me and plunged into the world of business. I learned not in college but on the job, and after a decade I couldn't say for sure which might have worked better. A bachelor's degree would have cost me four years but might have made it easier to advance within the company.

There was no changing that decision now, anyway. I had no interest in going back to school to get a piece of paper that said I knew what I'd worked so hard to learn. And my large, comfortable office offered proof of my hard work.

Leaving my apartment early in the morning, I took the elevator down and strolled out onto the sidewalk. Morning in this part of the country was often cool and foggy even at the height of summer, but I didn't mind. The coffee cart just outside my building offered a warming cup of rich brew that I could sip as I walked the eight blocks to work.

It had been a hard road to get here, but worth every meal that consisted of ramen or beans and rice to achieve my career goals. Sure, it was a little lonely to spend the long hours day after day, leaving little time for visiting home or even socializing with the few bears I knew in the area. And none for putting myself out there to possibly find my fated mate, but that would happen eventually.

This particular day, I finished my latte and tossed the paper cup in a trash barrel before using the revolving door to enter the office building that was more my home than my apartment was. The lobby seemed unusually crowded, with more people going out than in. Odd at this time of day, but I'd learned never to ask questions if the answer might be upsetting.

The economy had been bad in recent weeks, and some of the firms in the building had been making the hard choices of downsizing their staff sizes. Fortunately, our ownership had put out a memo just the day before stating that we would be staying the course through this temporary situation, urging employees not to look elsewhere because they would not find a more secure working environment.

I'd been concerned, I would admit, before the memo, especially because my hire date had arrived, and I had an appointment with my supervisor this morning. I pushed the button for the elevator and waited while the lights moved slowly as the lift made its downward journey. Also not a good sign because people should be going up and not down. Those poor bastards. Some carried the contents of their desk or cubicle in their arms. Or in a box..

One of the nice things about our firm were the annual bonuses I'd gotten every year I worked for them. I planned to use this year's for a vacation somewhere exotic, depending on how much I got. Might be Tahiti; might be Las Vegas. After consistently positive feedback on my performance, it should be good, but the economy might trim it back a bit.

I was prepared to be gracious, no matter the amount I received. The company had my loyalty, and I'd proven that over and over, when things were going well or badly. I entered the elevator, accompanied by a dozen or so others from the multiple floors above us. Everyone faced forward in true lift manners while I wondered who among them might be going to find out they didn't have a job anymore.

A frisson of unease crept up my spine, likely from sour scent of nerves emanating from some of the others around me. So unfair that decisions made in the stock market and at other highlevels affected average people who showed up every day and did their best in their employment. I wasn't the only shifter in the building, but we were by far in the minority and few humans even realized we were there. Not all believed in shifters and other magical beings at all.

The door opened on my floor, and I exited and started down the hall, only to be stopped by the receptionist, Bonnie. "Dimitri, Mr. Stiph would like you to come right in."

"But my appointment isn't until ten." And I'd never seen my supervisor change a scheduled meeting. "I'll just drop off my things in my office first."

She gave a tiny shake of her head. "I think you'd better go straight there. He's waiting for you."

My workday did not start until nine, and a glance at my watch confirmed I'd arrived fifteen minutes before that, as always. So why would he be waiting. Bonnie's serious face did not encourage any more questions, so I just made a U-turn and headed down the hall to the executive suites, the bounce in my steps quelled. This couldn't just be about my review. Was there something going on in our company?

I was definitely worried, but not for myself. One of my coworkers had been missing more time than he should and another was still on probation. A third was considering not coming back from paternity leave at all. Mr. Stiph, Carl, often confided in me about plans he was working on, treating me as his second in command, although I technically did not hold that position.

"Carl?" I rapped on the office door. "You wanted to see me?"

I expected him to call for me to come in, but instead the door opened, and it didn't take more than one swift glance to know things were going south rapidly. For him, for sure. A cardboard box on his desk brimmed with the items he'd used to make his office homey. The giant pothos plant that had hung down from his top shelf, pictures of his wife and sons, a vase someone made for him. "Dimitri, come and sit a minute. We need to talk."

"Okay." I lifted a stack of manuals off the guest chair and set it on the floor. I felt like I should say something more, ask questions, but what would they be? Did you get fired? Better to sit quietly and create a space of silence he would no doubt fill soon enough. I set my laptop bag on the floor next to the chair and laced my fingers in my lap.

A long moment later, Carl rounded his desk and sat in the high-backed leather chair behind it. He patted the armrest. "I need to figure out how to get this home with me. The one that was here when I took the position gave me a lower back ache."

More quiet.

Looked like we'd be here for a long time if I didn't get things moving. "Carl, are you leaving the company?" It sounded dumb the minute it came out. I could have gone with, What's going on?

But he didn't call me out on it. As soon as he sat down, the businesslike expression he wore most of the time sagged into lines of misery. "I am, you are, our whole department is leaving."

"B-but why?" Images of all the people exiting the building flooded my brain. I hadn't recognized anyone from our department or our company—at least nobody I knew. We had a few hundred people on this floor alone, and the firm occupied three levels. "I don't understand." I was supposed to be getting a glowing review and a bonus

today.

“Not that they shared the details with me, but I managed to drag some information from the home office drone who told me today is our last day. Apparently, we are not immune from the economic issues, after all.”

The whole department. Home office was absorbing us, or at least our workload, likely overburdening the staff there, and not one of us was being kept on. The only good thing was the severance package provided, which would buy me a few months to make decisions.

Also, he had a box for me to use. The presence of the boxes indicated he knew something before he arrived at the office this morning, but I chose not to ask anything else. Maybe he got a call on the way in and stopped by the supermarket. Or perhaps he'd been working on getting us the best deal for a while.

In any case, my boss had been good to me, and he had a lot more years invested than me. I took the box, signed some paperwork indicating that my money had been automatically deposited in my bank account and that my insurance would continue for three months at no cost to me.

As a shifter I generally went to a healer anyway, which was not covered, but I appreciated the effort I had a feeling he'd put in to make these things happen. We shook hands, I went to my office, filled the box, took the elevator down, and exited the lobby with all the others who also would never return.

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I didn't know what I'd be doing long-term, but for now, my bear had been wanting to visit my cousin Warren and all the other relatives who worked at his nightclub, Animals, in the Superstition Mountains. When I got back, I'd have to decide whether to reenter the human work situation somehow or accept the beta post our den alpha had been pushing on me.

Chapter Two

Tyler

I never wanted to be mated to Joseph, the skulk alpha's son. Unfortunately, it wasn't a choice I had a say in. It was one made for me before I even knew the letters of the alphabet, by both of our fathers. In their minds, it would solidify the strength of the skulk, show the other packs that we were a force to be reckoned with in the construction industry.

While the alpha's family owned one of the largest construction companies in the state, my alpha father had mated outside our skulk. With that mating came a connection to one of the most sought-after architecture firms in the country. My omega father's family were historically architects—my great-grandfather, my grandfather, my father, and my brother, all of them talented in the field. Their designs were requested across the globe.

But having the skulk connected to the firm wasn't enough for the alpha. Nope. He needed his family to have the connection directly. In his mind, combining forces was great, but having the companies bound by family? Even better.

Only the things didn't go according to plan. I struggled with math in school and got rejected from every single architectural program and rightfully so. Heck, I came home from college without a degree. Still they held firm that this mating was essential.

If my brother had been an omega, he'd have been the ideal choice, and they'd have dropped me when I first showed signs of not being able draw a straight line with a ruler. But he wasn't and as much as they, wanted our families joined, they wanted an heir more.

Joseph wasn't horrible, but I didn't love him. He wasn't even what I'd consider a friend. I wouldn't say he exactly liked me, either. But there were worse people to be saddled with.

He wasn't violent, he had a job, and was never overtly mean to me. It was the equivalent of the bar being in the basement, but what could I do? Be miserable about it? That wouldn't change anything. This was my responsibility, and, within a month, I was going to follow through. I didn't really have a choice.

I took my home-baked muffins off the cooling rack and put them in a little bakery box I picked up at a party store one day while just wandering around, trying to have something to do. My father had been in one of his bazillion meetings and had dragged me with him. His plan was to help me find the perfect suit for the wedding after he was finished. And we might've if he didn't add three more meetings to his afternoon.

The whole wedding instead of a mating was weird for me. Although, I understood why weren't going to follow the traditional ways of our skulk. Having a full-on wedding, something they could put pictures up for the humans to see, was important.

We left the city with no suit, but the bakery boxes had been the perfect find. They gave me something to do while waiting for my wedding. A job would "only get in the

way of preparations” and “were beneath an omega of my status,” anyway, which was code for, “we don’t want you to back out last minute.”

Baking for my future mate it was.

I was 100 percent into the fake-it-till-you-make-it part of this arrangement. Maybe, if I pretended hard enough that I was happy and that this was what I wanted, then it would eventually become those things.

My fiancé, Joseph, was on-site at a huge project about an hour from us. The construction company was building an elegant hotel, and it was coming along nicely. The owners had companies from all over the country bidding for the job, and it was considered a huge-ass deal we got it. At first I thought it was all about the money, but then I saw the plans. The hotel was designed to be a masterpiece.

I was happy staying at the Holiday Inn with free breakfast. A ten thousand dollar-a-night suite just didn’t make sense to me. But I could see myself wanting to go into the lobby to soak it all in or to attend an event there. It was going to be spectacular.

After leaving a note for my fathers, I got in the car and popped on an audiobook. I listened to the tale of a dragon who ventured into space as I wove through traffic on my mission, my mission to make Joseph smile. I wasn’t under the impression that he liked me or wanted this any more than I did. Of course he didn’t. Who could? But he too understood duty and was sucking it up. At least that was something we had in common.

And if my muffins could make it easier for him, all the better.

Parking was easy, despite all the fencing. Bakery box in hand, I went straight to the office building they had plopped on-site. I planned to go in, leave them, and go home. It wasn’t really the best use of my time, but it would show I was doing my part

without interfering with his job and was a thousand times better than being stuck home.

It was lunch-ish time, and part of me wondered if we might enjoy them together. We hadn't done any dating, so to speak. We had attended family meals together, but that was about it. Most of what I knew about him came from our parents.

I was one step up the entranceway when I heard a moan. Then a gasp. Then "Joseph," on someone's lips that weren't mine. None of it sounded like work.

My heart rate kicked up, my hands holding the box too tightly. This could not be happening. I was just mishearing things. My imagination was getting in the way. That's all it could be.

Only, when I walked in, it was exactly how I suspected it would be.

My future mate stood there, pants down at his ankles, thrusting into an omega. His hand was on the omega's neck, pushing him down on the desk, and the omega made it very clear with his words that he wanted this.

"Fuck you, Joseph!" I dropped the box and ran out. There was no explaining a way out of this. He already had his dick in someone else. What was the point in sticking around.

"I hope you choke on the muffins!" It was hardly my finest moment, shouting as I drove straight home, breaking far more traffic laws than I could ever afford to pay fines on.

I found my father waiting at the front door and from the look of his face, he'd already been told what had happened. I could see that he blamed me.

“The mating is off.” I wasn’t playing games. I was done. We could work through pretty much anything, but I refused to be a side piece in my own mating.

“Ridiculous. The wedding is next month. The invitations have been sent. It has been decided.”

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Fuck that noise.

“I don’t believe you heard me. The wedding, the mating—all of it is off. If you knew what I just saw—”

“I do. Doesn’t matter.” He was so cold. It was clearer than ever. I was nothing more than a bargaining chip for him.”

“His dick was in someone else. It does matter.”

The rage pouring off my father terrified me. I wasn’t sure if it was my language or the fact that I was breaking things off that had him more ragey. It didn’t really matter. He pounded the doorframe.”

“You are mating Joseph. End of story.”

“I will not.” I’d never stood up to him like this before, and it took all my strength not to cower and take it back.

“You have until morning to fix your attitude. If you don’t, believe my words—you’re done. You’re stripped from this skulk. You may take nothing with you—not even your car. You are done.”

Silly me, I thought he’d cool off by morning. That he’d realize there was a middle ground. I didn’t count on it and planned accordingly, but I’d hoped.

But the next morning he was more pissed than before. He dropped me at the bus

station. Handed me fifty dollars thanks to “his mercy and kindness.” And then marked me as rogue.

The only thing I was grateful for was the time I’d had to “fix my attitude,” time when I’d managed to transfer my savings to a new account that he didn’t have access to, sew my ID into the leg of my jeans, and stole my SIM card.

Because I might be homeless and packless and terrified—but I wasn’t going to put myself in a position where I’d have to come crawling back.

Chapter Three

Dimitri

My apartment was nice, considering how little time I spent there. Between long working hours, business dinners, visits to the gym for my human form and occasional weekends in the country to let my bear free, I spent almost no time at home. My furnishings were like new, and I’d never gotten around to hanging anything on the walls. It pretty much looked like a hotel suite, all dressed up with few signs of inhabitation.

How long would I have been able to maintain the lifestyle I had without causing serious harm to my bear? When I let him out in the state park, he sucked in air as if he’d been suffocated, and the thought made me ache. I had to do better for him, which meant that even if I did stay in the human business world it wouldn’t be here in the city.

My lease wasn’t up for a year, but I would look into subletting the place when I got back from the desert. My life lay elsewhere. At the den? In a smaller town? I wasn’t sure, but here was not the answer. Not anymore.

I spent a few days taking care of business and, as I visited the management office to let them know I'd be away for a while, I lucked onto a tenant to sublet my unit for the remainder of my lease.

I hadn't been into the office since I signed my lease, but the same woman sat behind the counter, and if I didn't know better I'd swear she wore the same suit. Eggplant slacks and blazer over a white blouse with one of those deep, fluffy ruffles like I'd seen in pictures of the 1980s. Shoulder pads. Actually it had to be the same outfit. There couldn't be two like that in modern times.

She was speaking to a young man in his early twenties who was definitely dressed for business and in the current decade. Neat slacks, a white button-down shirt open at the collar and running shoes. "I wish we could help you, sir," the management lady said. "But we don't do short-term rentals here."

"My boss is looking for somewhere to rent for a year or so while we are building the new arena. He will be in town about three days a week, and he hates hotels. Everything else I've looked at has been either overpriced for what they offer, unattractively furnished, or not conveniently located. This complex is just blocks away from our location." He shrugged. "Let me leave you a card in case you change your mind or anything comes up."

"Hi, Marie." I entered the conversation. "I am sorry to interrupt, but I was just stopping by to tell you I was going to be away for a while."

"Dimitri, right?" She held up one finger. "As soon as I finish with this gentleman, I'll be right with you."

"We're done." He passed her the card and turned to go.

"No, wait, please? I might be able to help you out. I've just left my position here in

town and am considering taking one in another area.” Den beta, but no need to explain that now. “And I was considering subletting my unit for the rest of the lease.”

“Really?” The young man turned to face me. “How long is that?”

“About a year.”

His smile transformed his face, stress easing. “I’ve been hunting for a week. Can I see the place?”

Marie jumped to her feet. “Wait. You can’t just sublet to anyone you want.”

“I beg your pardon?” I had liked that feature of the lease to start with, so I knew that wasn’t strictly true. “I can sublet according to my contract with you. I presume your boss or the company has good credit?”

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“Of course.” He sounded insulted.

“Then nobody can object if I sublet to you.” I cast a glare at the manager and headed for the door. “Come and see if it’s a good fit for your boss.”

I had to put off my trip for a couple of days to pack up all my personal items and put them in the storage area that came with the apartment, but when I left, I was going to not only not have to worry about the rent but would be making a small profit every month. And I had nowhere to go back to. Only the future ahead of me.

So I drove out of the city and down the highway feeling adventurous and a little nervous. But I was only going to take a break from working, visit my family, and then decide what to do next. I missed den life, spending time with others of my kind, but I also liked the work I did for my former company.

If my department hadn’t been shut down, I’d have likely stayed for the rest of my working career. But that was a done deal, and it was an opportunity for a reset. I had to look at it that way for my sanity’s sake. After telling us that everything was great and we were not in any trouble, they’d turned right around and let us go. And our department wasn’t the only one. I had heard from a coworker and from Bonnie. It seemed we’d just been the first.

But none of that was problem anymore. I was driving south, leaving the foggy climes behind in favor of the Sonoran Desert. I’d never been to Animals, although our den wasn’t very far away. But when I left home, I was underage.

So, I only knew Warren from some family get-togethers and his mate, Karma, not at

all. She was legendary, though, and my cousins all insisted I needed to meet her. It was nice to drive along, stopping where I wanted to, seeing the sights and letting my bear be free whenever he chose. He'd been patient with me while I worked in an office that suffocated him, accepting his rare times of freedom, and did not make any demands.

It was time I changed my life so we both had what we wanted and needed. Past time.

I'm so sorry. As I crossed the border into Arizona, I promised myself and him not to be so selfish again. I had needs, but so did he. And whatever he needed, I'd be listening to make sure I didn't leave him in the background again.

It's all right.

No, it's not, but it will be. Starting today.

The mountains in the distance sometime later were very different from the green or snow-capped peaks we'd left behind. Their reddish slopes were a sign that I was getting close to my cousin's club. Nestled in the Superstition Mountains, the club was at the front of a series of cliff dwellings that our den had occupied over hundreds of years. It had been abandoned for some time, but Warren had made it a refuge for not only bears but other shifters and, since Karma arrived, all sorts of other people.

I couldn't wait to see it.

Chapter Four

Tyler

It was my wedding day. Or at least it was supposed to be.

And here I was, having crossed the country aimlessly, about to walk into the seediest motel I'd ever seen. According to some random post I saw on social media, there was "a reason why they always have a help wanted sign up."

Did they have really a job opening, or was it a joke based on the fact that this place looked like it could be a location shoot of a horror film? I had no idea. But I still had enough money to could pay for a few weeks here, although my funds were getting pretty slim. It was time to settle down, stop the nonstop travel, and try to find a real job.

Any job would be better than a forced mate bond with a cheater.

I got out and thanked the guy who had given me a ride. There had been a time when I never would've believed I'd be taking buses and hitchhiking rides from strangers. But here I was. And still...it was better than being mated to Joseph.

The motel was single story and shaped like an L, with the office sort of slapped on the end like an afterthought. My family would never have designed it that way. I was the architect reject and could see that.

I walked into the front office. It smelled like stale cigarettes and spilled coffee. The walls had a yellowish tinge from years of indoor smoking, and the ceiling light flickered, the old fluorescent tube on its last breath. Sure enough, there was a help wanted sign posted in the window. Next to a little bell sat a sign that read: Don't ring if you don't mean it.

I rang the bell anyway, assuming that needing a room was "meaning it," and waited.

I rang it again, five minutes later.

After the third time, I nearly gave up. But where was I gonna go? It wasn't like

someone was going to pick up a random fox shifter and offer them a beach house and breakfast. They probably wouldn't even risk slowing their car in front of the property. This place looked like it was filled with roaches at best and dead bodies at worst—but at least it was shelter and possibly a job.

Eventually, a man came in, his hair damp, shirt stained and as tired as his face.

“You need a room?” He asked.

I nodded.

“You’re gonna have to wait.” Wasn’t that helpful.

“Okay?” It came out more of a question, and thankfully he took it as one.

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“Guy who owns this place is usually here around dinnertime to collect the money,” he said, dropping an envelope into a battered slot in the wall. “He’ll be here then.”

As quick as he came, he went. I watched him walk down the cracked sidewalk in front of the doors and disappear into one of the units.

My fox was itching to get out, to run around. Between the scents in this place and the fact that I’d been stuck in my skin for so long, he was ready to bust out. I decided to explore the property while I waited for the owner. Maybe there was a place to let my fur out.

It wasn’t a bad spot for a shifter. There were little patches of scrub behind the building, just enough cover to shift if I needed to. I’d need to be careful about being seen, but if I timed things right, it could work.

But the building itself was on its last legs—peeling paint, warped wood, busted lights. I scented far too many rodents, too. Some I didn’t even recognize. But they all had that distinct musk that came from things with long tails—things my fox loved to eat, and I hated to have anywhere near where I slept.

As the dinner hour approached, I went back inside. And waited.

And waited.

And waited.

Eventually, a beat-up old sportscar car pulled up. Out came a guy, probably in his

forties, wearing a stretched-out tank top, fake gold chains, and a permanent scowl.

“Great,” I muttered under my breath.

He stormed right into the office.

“What do you want?” he asked.

“I need a room.” Approaching him about a job when he was so argh felt like shitty timing.

“It’s cash only. How long you staying?”

I pulled my wallet out and counted what I had. It looked like I could only afford one night until I hit up an atm.

“Just a night. Then I’ll have to get more cash.”

“Room eight will work.” He stepped behind the counter. “Don’t want any trouble here. Keep to yourself. Don’t expect any fancy treatment—no cleaning or shit. I need help,” he said, nodding at the help wanted sign.

He paused, looked me up and down. “Until then, be glad you got a roof.”

“You—how much you pay?” Not that I cared at this point. A job was a job, and it sounded like anything I might do was a ton more than was currently being done.

That stopped him.

“You get your room and twenty bucks a day cash.”

It wasn't even minimum wage—not even close. And still, I found myself accepting the offer. Just like that, I became the new manager-slash-housekeeper-slash-maintenance-man of the Desert End Motel.

It was fine. Or at least not my worst option. That honor went to what I had waiting for me back home. Only it wasn't home anymore. I had the tell-tale mark on my shoulder to prove it.

The job wouldn't afford me a lot of savings, but it was going to give me time to regroup.

In my first month, I was always busy, which prevented me from getting too down on my situation. Some of the rooms hadn't been cleaned in—I couldn't even guess how long. One by one, I cleaned them from top to bottom. Walls, floors, sheets, air units. You name it, I made sure it was white glove ready.

Most of the people were long-term residents. Ex-husbands who needed a place to stay. A couple of folks trying to save up for first and last month's rent on a nicer place. Then there was Bob. I didn't know Bob's story. He spent most of his days sitting outside, smoking, grumbling about "The Man." Other than that, he shared nothing.

I didn't mind the job. It was hard, but when I was done with a task, I felt accomplished. Doing minor repairs, making the place actually habitable—that felt good. Real. Useful.

The only problem was that I worked every day, all day. That was the expectation. The owner didn't want to come down and deal with any of the "bullshit," so I made sure he didn't have to.

It was a place to stay. And I kept going and would continue to as long as I could.

I tried planning shifts out back. Times when I could let my fox out. But it never happened. There was always someone around—usually Bob. And Bob was pretty much guaranteed to be human. It was hard to tell for sure with all that cigarette smoke, but I didn't scent any beasts. It wasn't like I couldn't exactly say, "Hey, Bob, can I get in close and past the Marlboro fog to see if I can catch your scent? Just want to know if you've got fur or feathers?"

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That wouldn't have gone over well.

I was taking the trash out when I ran into the man from number six, who I'd met the first day. His name was Gary, and he was here trying to save money, hoping to eventually get to California to live with a relative. Some relative he still hadn't found yet, but he knew was somewhere on the coast.

I didn't have the heart to tell him California was a whole lot bigger than just wandering a beach looking for someone familiar. He'd figure that out soon enough.

He, too, was a shifter. Only his beast was an eagle and had feathers, not fur. I'd never met an eagle before.

It was impossible not to notice he went out every weekend. And when he came back, he smelled like booze and other shifters. More than once, he even brought one of them home with him.

Finally, I braved it and asked him where he was going when he went out.

He just said, "Animals," like I was supposed to know what that was.

"Where?"

"It's a nightclub." He added, "For people like us."

"Should I check it out? Is it all people like us? Is it expensive" gods, I was a man of a thousand questions.

“Probably worth a check. It’s mostly people like us and, if you stick with well drinks, it’s not bad.” Gary looked me up and down. “Why? You looking to shift?”

“How’d you know?”

“Your eyes,” he said simply. “Honestly, I don’t know how you made it this long.”

I hadn’t, not really. I’d shifted a few times in my room, but that wasn’t enough for my fox. He wanted to hunt.

“Bob tends to always be around.”

“Good old Bob,” he chuckled.

Sounded like a trip to Animals was in my future.

Chapter Five

Dimitri

Animals was everything I’d heard and more. Warren and Karma welcomed me and set me up in an apartment in the housing behind the club. They insisted I should stay as long as I liked, but of course I couldn’t stay forever.

Karma’s response to that was, “Then stay as long as you like.”

What was there to say to that but, “Thank you.”

“When you get up in the morning, just head on into the kitchen and tell the cooks that you’re Warren’s cousin, and they will make sure you get something to eat.”

“There is always something for staff and their families to eat,” Warren added, putting his arm around Karma’s waist. “Hungry now?”

“No, I ate at a place that had all sorts of deli meats and cheeses? Charcuterie I think it was called. Or something like that.”

“Oh we know them. It was good, wasn’t it?” Karma left her mate for long enough to give me a big, warm hug. “I can’t believe this is the first time you’re visiting us.” She spoke low, in my ear. “Warren is so excited. He’s going to want to show you all around.”

“I heard that, Karma.” Her mate, my cousin chuckled, though, taking now offense. “Of course I want to show him around. When he was a kid, he was one of my favorite little cousins, always following the big kids around and trying to growl like a bear.”

Karma returned to his side and gave him a stern look. “Don’t embarrass him. He’s not a kid anymore.”

“Get some rest, cousin.” Warren guided Karma toward the door, the two walking in step, bumping hips. They were the happiest couple I’d ever met, and it made me wonder if Fate would ever have a mate for me, too. Not everyone got one, and through the past ten years, while working my way up in a company that said goodbye to me without a second thought, I’d put off the thought of mating. He’d be there, my omega, when the time was right, I’d told myself.

But, watching the door close behind the pair, I asked myself if it was a matter of waiting for the right time or if, maybe it just wasn’t in the cards for me. I stripped down to my boxers, turned off the bedside lamp, and crawled under the duvet, only just noticing what lay right above my head.

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Although the dwellings were buried deep in the mountain's stone, a skylight at the top of a long tube allowed the starlight to show. I didn't know how that worked, only that it did. And I fell asleep while the constellations wheeled above me, reminding me that all my worries were infinitesimal in comparison to the vastness of the universe surrounding our small planet.

My dreams, instead of being filled with tension on work-related matters, were of sailing through the velvet depths of space. Passing stars in all colors, novas and supernovas, and so many things I had no names for, but only the ability to appreciate their magnificence.

I'd have said I loved my work, thrived on the wheeling and dealing, on helping my company to grow and succeed, but as I rode a rocket to somewhere, a voice came from nowhere and everywhere. "It's time. You're not one of them. You can be yourself now, in all that means."

I woke rested and feeling as if I'd shed a weight that my shoulder never should have borne. Sure, I'd enjoyed the ride while I worked at my job, but in fact, I'd let it absorb me in an unhealthy way. Time to relax and enjoy myself with my family and others at Animals. I kicked off the duvet and got my shower things. The bathroom attached to my room was gorgeous, walls carved from the natural stone and one of those with a drain in the floor so the whole room was, technically, the shower.

Having slept in, the skylight was casting a ray of sunshine on my pillow when I returned to the room to get dressed and go find the kitchen before it was too late for breakfast. Although Karma had said there was always something available, I didn't want to put the chef through any extra work if they were already starting lunch prep.

“Cousin Dimitri!” Karma was seated at a table in the kitchen, along with several other people, when I arrived. “I was just about to go do some shopping. I’m glad I didn’t miss you. Here, take my seat.” She stood up and carried a mug to the industrial dishwasher. “Try the waffles. They’re very good.”

I tried the waffles. One of the cooks brought them over to me, and my mouth watered. They were crisp on the outside and fluffy inside, topped with a mountain of fresh strawberries and peach slices and whipped cream. The maple syrup was warm, the bacon crisp, and the coffee rich and strong, and it made the coffee I’d thought was so great in the city look pretty pathetic.

The people at my table were employees who lived in the housing. They filled me in on what it was like to work for my cousins and assured me the food was always this good. After breakfast I walked around the inside of the club, taking in how big it was and what it looked like in daytime. There were people sweeping and cleaning others working on the lighting, and someone was setting up some kind of equipment in the DJ booth. I didn’t know what I’d thought about nightclubs, but probably that they were a lot less busy during the day.

Warren and Karma had told me to make myself at home, but they were busy people, and I didn’t see either of them again until after sunset when we met for dinner in the kitchen. The chefs were getting ready for the evening, but they had a staff meal all set up, which I’d been invited to join, consisting of a choice of a pasta made with burst cherry tomatoes or burgers topped with avocado and bacon and cheese along with a cake that was made in honor of someone’s birthday. Chocolate. So. Good.

But my ease that had lasted all day after my dream was fading, replaced by a growing restlessness that Warren noticed when we were finishing up eating. “Why don’t we go in and have a beer and you can see the club all lit up. I heard you had the self-guided tour earlier, but I think you’ll be amazed at the difference between then and now.”

I was about to say yes, when Karma laid a hand on her mate's arm. "Warren, maybe Dimitri would like to shift first. I think we forgot to tell him where to go to do that here."

Warren tapped his forehead. "We didn't. Just so you know, it is fine to shift in the club, so long as you don't get out of hand."

"I'd never—"

"I'm sure, but most people prefer to go out back. The employee parking lot, where we had you leave your car has a trail leading down to the desert floor. It's really a magical place to run. My bear loves it."

"You don't mind if I go?" They were so kind, it seemed a little rude to take off on my own when Warren would be busy and Karma didn't shift, and was also busy.

"Not at all." Warren pointed to the back door, where I'd entered the kitchen. "Go, and when you've had a chance to blow off steam, come and find one of us. The club can be a little overwhelming on your own some nights."

The cliff at the end of the parking lot was high above the desert, but while I stood there, deciding what to do or how to do it a dragon shifter arrived a few feet away, stripped and left their clothes on a bench before launching into the sky. My bear growled, demanding to be free, and I hurried to undress before he ruined my clothing. I wanted to get down there and run in the moon and starlight. My bear could already feel the sand under his paws. He emerged, huge and magnificent, and loped down the path.

Chapter Six

Tyler

When Gary offered me a ride to Animals one afternoon while I was taking out the trash, I was hesitant to accept. I hadn't gotten permission for a day off, and, as much as this job sucked, it was the only one I had and it was also my housing. I could hardly afford to lose it.

Gary reminded me that only one person had checked in since I'd been here. And he was right. Everybody else was a permanent resident, and most nights were quiet. As far as people needing me went, I could probably put out the sign on the bell that basically told people to bog off. I could ignore it the way the owner did, and most likely not have anyone notice. But still...

"Come on, you need to let that fur out," Gary insisted.

Why did Gary have to be right? My fox was suffering from all my life choices.

"Fine, but if I get caught, I'm blaming you." I wouldn't. No need to get him in my mess. But it was fun to tease him.

"Go ahead. Blame away." He dangled his keys. "Let's go."

It took the promise of buying him a beer to get Gary to agree to give me a half hour to shower and change. I'd been working on one of the units that had been vacant for a long time and was disgusting.

Animals was closer than I'd thought it was. The parking lot was pretty full, and it made me happy I'd be surrounded by shifters again. As much as I was happy to not be mated to Joseph, it was hard not being around other shifters.

"You said I can shift here?" I asked. The last thing I wanted to do was to go to shifter spaces and break a rule so I can never return.

“Yeah. Just go around back. It’s fabulous—one of my favorite places to fly.”

Sounded perfect, even if the experience would be different because my feet stayed on the ground.

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My fox was getting antsy. He knew he was about to hunt and wanted out. I didn't blame him. It hadn't been fair to him these past couple months...shifting inside a shitty motel room, being stuck on buses for hours at a shot, not hunting at all...none of that was conducive to the good life he'd once adored.

Surprisingly, not once has he pushed me to return home. It was like he knew we didn't belong there, that something better was waiting for us out here. Who knew? Maybe we'd find it in the desert? Maybe a truck driver would pull into the motel needing a space for the night, we'd fall madly in love, and drive off into the sunset. Or maybe a random walk-in guest would need a few hours' rest and turn out to be my true mate. When he left the next morning, my suitcase would be in his cab—only I didn't own a suitcase, just a backpack, and even that wasn't full. But that would be okay because my mystery mate would be wealthy and want to spoil me.

“What's on your mind?” Gary asked as he parked. “You've got a silly grin on your face.”

“I was just...letting my mind wander into what-ifs.” It was a game I'd become well acquainted with since leaving.

“Ah—because you heard that a lot of people find their mates here?”

“Wait, what?” I blinked. “What are you talking about? I obviously missed part of this conversation.”

Gary laughed. “I said your mind was wandering because you probably heard the rumors. This place is a fun hangout slash matchmaking spot.”

“Hadh’t heard that. I’d been imagining driving away from the motel with some random rich stranger who was my perfect match,” I admitted.

“Is that what you’re looking for—rich?”

“Nah. The daydream before was a truck driver. I just...want to find my mate.”

“Don’t we all, honey?” He unclicked his seat belt. “Let me know if you need a ride home, or if you find another one.” He winked. “And I’ll make sure to tell you if I leave before you. And don’t worry about the beer... I don’t think I’ve ever paid for a drink here.” Another wink.

“Sounds like a plan.”

We weren’t exactly friends, but Gary was the closest thing I had to one right now. I appreciated that he’d brought me and that he was letting me do my own thing.

I popped the car door open, and my fox went wild.

Shift, shift, shift!

“Just hold on,” I muttered.

He wasn’t holding on.

I jogged, then broke into a run until I reached a bench piled with clothes which told me that this was the place. Not that it mattered because my fox was coming out regardless. I shucked my clothes, barely managing to get them off before my fox took over completely. He wasn’t tolerating any more dawdling.

The shift was so quick it was painful, but I could feel the instant relief in my beast

followed but an sense of extreme urgency. This wasn't like him, but then again I didn't normally keep him cooped up the way I had been.

He tore off running, running with intensity. At first I thought he was hunting, but then he shared the scent with me, the one that had set him off. Our mate is here. From the smell, he was a bear.

We ran and ran. My fox stopped, nose in the air, inhaled deeply, then circled with his nose close to the ground. When he picked up the trail again, he bolted, his feet barely hitting the ground before leaping forward again. We might not have wings like Gary, but we were flying across the dessert ground.

My heart pounded, and I stayed as close to the surface as I could without interfering with my fox's mission. I needed to find him, and my beast would assure we did.

I still couldn't believe it. My mate was here...at Animals, a place I'd only recently heard of. But also, this was a nightclub. Just because my mate was here now didn't mean he'd be here in five minutes. I daren't not think about it, but he could also be gone, a customer passing through on their way to a far off land.

Please let him be here. Please let us not be too late.

And then we saw him in the distance.

He wasn't far, and he must've seen us, too...his big form sprinting toward us until we met in the middle. He shifted first, his large naked form all muscular...tall...glorious standing in front of me. He looked at me as if I were the most precious thing in the world.

I took my skin next. The first thing out of my mouth was a single word, "Mine."

He gave a nod. “Mate.”

Not long ago I’d nearly mated someone I didn’t even like, and now Fate had sent me this beautiful alpha with caring eyes, a sweet smile, and a body that checked all my boxes. Past me had done right by leaving. I might’ve given up what I thought was everything at the time, but really I was heading out to find my everything...to find my bear mate.

“Mate.”

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Chapter Seven

Dimitri

I met the fox as I was returning from my visit to the desert floor. Compared to all the runs I'd made outside the city, this one was so much better. Even though I'd been going to a state park, it had been difficult to avoid humans out for a walk or, worse, poachers who wanted a bearskin for their hearth. My bear didn't care, particularly, figuring he could take anyone who confronted him, but I worried. And it took some of the pleasure away from our runs.

Out here, in the desert, I felt better, as if I could see danger coming more easily, be prepared if I needed to. Many others from Animals were also down here. It was just so unlikely that a penguin would be out here unless it was a shifter. And many of the birds above me were not of the nighttime variety.

But when I met the fox, my bear faded into the background so I could take my skin and speak with this beautiful male. His fox was stunning but so was his two-legged form, and my bear was insisting he was our mate.

Could he be right? He'd never said it before. First time for everything, but who was going to tell the fox?

I grabbed his hands and we sat down right where we met and faced one another. "I'm Dimitri, and I'm very glad to meet you."

"Tyler," he said, offering me a shy smile. "And this is my first time at Animals."

“Mine, too.” I took him in, the moonlight highlighting the sparkle in his eyes. “My cousin owns the place, and I came to visit.” I didn’t want to let go of his hands, to let go of any of him. Things had changed in a split second. How could I mourn losing a job when I’d found my mate?

“I hadn’t ever heard of Animals, but someone back at the motel where I work told me about it and it sounded like such a great place, I had to come and check it out.”

I stroked the back of his hands with my thumbs, sitting cross-legged in front of each other on the ground as if it were the most natural thing ever. Maybe it was. “I spent the day here, but I haven’t had a chance to see how it looks at night. It’s kind of like it’s sleeping during the day.”

“That must have been really interesting to see. Behind the scenes.”

“Yes, but how did it look when you got here? Had the live band started? They’ve got quite a DJ booth too.

“Honestly? I never made it inside. When I got here, I was overwhelmed with the need to shift. It was extraordinary. Gary, he’s the guy from the motel who told me about Animals gave me a ride and I just took off and ran. He told me where to shift, along the way, and here I am.”

“I’m glad you are.”

“If you’d like, we can go inside. Maybe even get a look at the club with the lights on?” I stood up, drawing him with me, not letting go of his hands. “Let’s go get our clothes.”

We got back up to the top of the path and found out things, got dressed. It wasn’t until we reached the inside of the kitchen and saw a wall clock that I realized we’d

been talking for much longer than I thought. It felt like seconds.

“Oh my gods, I need to get back home. I start work at six in the morning. Gary might not be ready to leave, though.”

“I’ll take you home.” We entered through the side door which a bouncer had told me was where guests went in and out if they were going to go to the trail. “Let’s find your friend. I want to thank him for bringing you.”

Gary was sitting at a high-top table with a cougar shifter who gave us the side-eye when we approached. But when Tyler explained that I was giving him a ride, the cougar smiled big. I had a feeling Gary was not going home tonight at all.

And since we were inside we took the time to wander around and absorb everything. Indeed at night it was different. What had been mere light bulbs during the day had become multi-colored displays that brought everything to life. A vampire band—and I never thought I’d be saying those words together—performed on the stage while shifters and people of all kinds danced. There were some animals about, but not as many as I’d expected when I learned that shifting was allowed inside. A sign informed attendees that there was no flying on brooms, and I wondered if something had happened to make the sign necessary. With all the lighting and sound and other equipment above, I could see that it could cause damage if someone was not careful with their broom.

Still, Tyler and I both thought it was funny.

A sense of humor was a good thing in a mate. Especially a shared one.

After seeing the sights, we headed back outside to the employee parking lot where I had left my car, and I opened the door for Tyler and helped him in.

On the way back to the motel, we talked some more, and it was like catching up with an old friend. If by friend you meant mate. I was hungry to know everything about Tyler, his growing up in the skulk, his family, and how he'd ended up here.

“I didn't agree with the mate my father had picked out for me.”

When he said that, I nearly drove off the road. “Picked out? Does your father think he's Fate? Why did he think you should marry this person?”

“Business reasons,” he said. “And I was willing to try, for the good of the skulk, until...until I caught my betrothed cheating on me.”

My anger grew, but I needed to be careful while driving. I was carrying precious cargo, so while my mate went on to explain about how he had been thrown out with fifty dollars, I counted in my head. Our family was huge and spread out, and we supported one another. Many of our relatives worked for Animals or the other clubs connected to it, and nobody was ever turned away if they were in need.

I decided right then that unless my mate expressed a real desire to reconnect with his family, we'd spend our time with mine. The bear hugs alone made it worth it.

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And then we pulled up outside the motel, and I sucked in a breath. My bear, who had few opinions on accommodations generally, bellowed inside me. He did not want out mate in this place with its peeling paint and a smell I could only describe as old textiles and urine. It was gross. I knew he had a reason to be here, and I didn't even have a job so I could carry him off into the sunset, but I would figure something out.

His room was clean, at least, and smelled of bleach. "I'm trying to make things nicer," he said. "At least as far as I can with not real maintenance budget. But there are people who live here long term who can't afford anything more, so I try to do what I can."

My heart ached for my mate living and working here, and, according to what he'd said in the car, working a lot of hours yet doing it out of kindness for these people.

I was proud of him.

Chapter Eight

Dimitri

Tyler stopped by the office for a minute while I waited outside taking in the sights of the motel where my Fated lived and worked. Everything about it was run down and needed repairs as soon as possible. The paint around the windows was cracked and a couple of the panes were broken. One of the doors had a hole in it that looked a lot like a boot had kicked it once or twice. Signs of violence and neglect that made me sick to my stomach. This shouldn't be my mate's life. He deserved to live in comfort and safety, and I prayed that he would accept me and allow me to make that happen. I

didn't have a whole lot of prospects at this point, but I had been a hard worker my entire life and didn't plan to change that now. Especially since I had a mate to think of now.

But for the moment, he lived here. Fact. I leaned against the car until he came outside again then followed him to one of the doors. At least it wasn't the one with the hole and the windows seemed intact. One thing I noticed, about the property was the lack of garbage blowing around and the neatly trimmed bushes. Had to be my mate. No way the owner who allowed broken windows to remain that way cared to do anything like pick up empty cans and papers.

"It's not very much," he said apologetically. "But it's home for now.

"It's fine," I lied, flicking the switch by the door. Nothing happened

"Oh, that doesn't work. Hang on." He clicked the button the bottom of the lamp beside the bed and that blessedly did turn on. "Make yourself comfortable."

Nothing about this place implied comfort in any way, but I didn't comment on that, either. My mate was doing the best he could, and I respected that. "Thanks." I sat on the foot of the bed. "You have been doing a lot of work outside, too?"

"Oh yes. Nobody wants to stop at a place with garbage all over, and I trimmed the bushes some. It wouldn't look too bad if there were some nice native plantings."

It would look pretty bad, but that didn't matter. My mate was not going to live here or work here one minute longer than necessary. As soon as I figured out how I could support him, I'd ask him to leave. It would be up to him, of course, but it seemed like a no brainer. "It would be better for sure."

He went into the bathroom and then came out and I went in to freshen up. Any

thoughts of taking a shower together would have to be dismissed for the moment. It was clean enough, but two shifters, especially when one was a bear, would need a shoehorn to get in there at the same time.

When I emerged, he was standing in the middle of the room, and I walked right up to him and held out my arms.

“It seems a shame to waste all the ambiance,” he said before reaching to turn out the light. “That’s better.”

It really was except that I couldn’t see him well. The single working light in the parking lot did not offer much of a glow into the room, but when we kissed, my eyes closed anyway, and as his lips parted under mine, he grew languid in my arms.

We parted long enough to undress, clothing going every which way, before we fell back onto the bed, kissing and licking and touching anywhere we could reach. I felt as if I’d waited forever to feel my omega under me, his cock brushing mine, both rock hard. I closed my fist around both, squeezing them together.

Tyler groaned, bucking his hips. “More, alpha. I need you inside me. I want you so much.”

I stroked a few more times before releasing our cocks and replacing my hand with his on his dick. “You show me what you like while I make sure you’re ready for me.”

“I am!”

Without replying, I glided two fingers under his balls and back to find his hole so slick, even his tight muscles allowed me to penetrate. “Yes you are, omega. You’re so slick, I’m going to be balls deep on the second thrust.”

“Please, he gasped, stopping what his hand was doing as he focused on what I was doing.

“Keep touching yourself, omega. I’m watching.”

“Oh!” His strokes sped up. “Like this, alpha. I like it fast.”

“Would you like it fast when my cock is inside you?” I fitted the tip to his hole, keeping it poised within the ring of muscles. “Or slow?”

“I-I don’t know.”

“Let’s find out. Don’t stop jerking yourself or I’ll stop fucking you, deal?”

“I won’t stop.” And then he did, not realizing until I paused, halfway into his needy hole. “I mean I won’t do it again.” He sped up, squeezing from bottom to top and rubbing his palm over the tip.

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Lucky he did because I couldn't wait much longer. I thrust inside the rest of the way, my balls resting against him while I held still.

He shivered but bounced his fist up and down, cum spurting out just as I started to move, slowly at first.

"No. Fast." He'd made his decision then. And one I approved of.

I braced myself on my hands on either side of him and went to work, driving all the way in then pulling nearly out, doing it again and again, faster each time, while he reached for my shoulders, one of his hands sticky with cum. Somehow that was even more of a turn on. I rode my omega in and out, filling his hole, feeling my balls tighten in warning just before cum traveled the length of my cock and filled my omega, my knot swelled. And I lowered my head to bite the side of his throat.

The coppery taste of blood filled my mouth as I made the mark my omega would wear for the rest of his life. The curve of my teeth marking him as mine. In this seedy motel or in a suite in Paris, our mating was sacred and forever.

Swallowing the blood, I moved my lips to his, kissing him while my knot bound us together. Symbolic of the mating we'd just embraced.

Fate gave us to one another, but we'd shown our acceptance in our lovemaking on this night. It would always be the best one of my life.

I fell asleep for a little while with my omega spooned against the front of me, waking to make love two more times in the darkness of night, reiterating the bond we'd

formed. Tyler was my mate. Now and for always. I would do my best to be worthy of what Fate had arranged and Tyler had agreed to accepting my mark.

Chapter Nine

Tyler

Last night had been the best night of my life. Full. Stop. But when my eyes cracked open this morning, as I slapped at my phone to turn the alarm off, the magic was broken. I had to work. There was an exterminator coming at the butt crack of dawn.

And while I didn't know what the future held, as far as where I was going to live or what was happening with Dimetri and I, I couldn't let the people who lived here deal with the rodents and bugs that would invade this place if we missed the appointment. As it was, I'd discovered my fair share of both while working here. The guy should probably come at least twice a month, if not weekly, but given how little my boss actually cared about this place, I considered once a month a win.

I slid out of bed and headed to the bathroom for a quick shower. And when I came back out, I tripped, nearly falling all the way to the floor over my mate's shoes. We hadn't been exactly careful about where our clothing went the night before. We had other things on our minds. I picked them up to set them on the floor beside the, and that was when I saw them up close for the first time.

These weren't the kind of shoes a person got at a discount store. They cost more than a room here for an entire week. That didn't make them the luxury items of the century or anything. This place was pretty cheap. But it was embarrassing. What must he have thought of me when he came here last night? It would've been better had we gone to a real hotel, but was nothing I could really do about that. I had to be here dark and early, and hotels cost a lot of money.

I threw on some clothes, set a bowl with a packet of instant oatmeal next to the hot pot, and gave my sleeping mate half awake. What I wanted to do was bend down and kiss him, but he didn't need to be up now. Let him sleep. Goodness knew he'd earned it.

Not even Bob was out when I reached the office. It was too flipping early. The exterminator pulled in before I walked inside. He was a nice enough guy and far too chipper for this time of the morning. I showed them where I suspected the mice had been coming in to the one unit. Unlike him, I wasn't human and was able to scent their gross little paths, giving me a very large advantage.

"Oh, that's a good eye. I'll fill that in with some steel wool when I'm done. Keep 'em from coming back."

I left him to his job and got to mine, starting in the office, making sure there were no messages or anything missed from the night before. The last thing I needed was people coming back saying I ignored their requests.

There were none, which was good. There was, however, more paperwork than anyone should ever have to deal with. Yay, end-of -month duties.

It was my first time doing it, and my boss's instructions were not what you'd call complete. He said, "Here, make sure all this is done." I spread everything out and started filling in blanks then erasing other blanks and filling them in correctly.

My eyes were going blurry from it when the door opened. I scented him before I saw him.

It was my mate.

"Morning." I walked around the desk to meet him, and in his arms were two bags of

what smelled like delicious goodness. I gave him a kiss, my fox coming up to greet him, my eyes not mine for a few seconds.

“Can you take a break?”

“Probably should. I’m trying to do paperwork I don’t understand.” I’d be surprised if it wasn’t a hot mess.

“Ooh, that doesn’t sound fun.”

“Trust me, it’s not.”

“Well, I brought breakfast.” He held up two bags. “Where should we eat?”

My room had a bed and a dresser. That was that. The office wasn’t any better—one chair, the desk currently filled with papers.

“Let’s go out back. We can have a picnic.” That was my nice way of saying, There’s no place to eat. Let’s go eat on the ground. But he agreed, and we found a nice spot, a little bit of shade from the building.

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“I wasn’t sure what you would like, so I brought random food.” He was literally the sweetest.

The first container he opened held an omelet with toast and potatoes. The second contained a big stack of pancakes. The third held a bowl of yogurt with granola and fruit. The fourth was filled to the top with strawberry French toast. The fifth included scrambled eggs and sausage. There was enough food for most of the residents. All of them if you only included the ones up before noon.

“Did you buy out an entire diner?” It was sweet and adorable and so kind—but also completely unnecessary.

“No, I went back to Animals and made it for you.”

I hadn’t been expecting that.

“You made it for me at Animals? They just let you do that?”

“I mean, it’s my cousin’s place. What are they gonna do, tell me to get out?”

“I can’t believe you did all this for me.” I hugged him tight, afraid I was gonna wake up. Admittedly, this place was pretty shitty, but everything between Dimitri and I had more than I could’ve ever hoped for. Waking up to discover it was a dream felt like a very real possibility.

“I did see my cousin, though, and his mate. I talked to them, and they said they have jobs and an apartment for us if we want to stay.”

“Were you not planning on staying?” I hadn’t considered that he might be here for a short time.

He half-shrugged. “Eat.”

I opted for the omelet and picked up the piece of toast, took a bite, “Eating. Don’t think I forgot that I asked you a question.”

He shook his head, eyes closed, obviously amused.

“Fine. I don’t know. I don’t know what I was planning on doing, where I was planning to go, or any of that. My bear was on a mission—one he didn’t quite make clear to me.”

“Is he still on the mission?” And what did that even really mean?

“He was looking for our mate. I didn’t realize it at the time, but there’s no other explanation. He’s calm now. He’s no longer wanting us to...to leave.”

He. Was. Looking. For. Me.

“So, guess what I’m saying is, I don’t really know what I want to do, but I know I want to do it with you. And I know that I do not like you living here.”

“I don’t hate the place,” I confessed. How could I? It brought me to him. “But also, it’s not ideal.”

Just then a blood-curdling scream from Bob came through his window.

“I gotta go.”

I raced around to his front door, banged on it, told him I was coming in, because I assumed he was, you know, dying—but when I opened the door, it wasn't that. It was that water was spurting everywhere out of his faucet, or what remained of the faucet.

So much for having a nice breakfast with my mate.

Duty called.

Chapter Ten

Dimitri

I needed to feed my mate. And there was nothing in this place worthy of passing his sweet, kiss-swollen lips. So, I'd driven back to Animals to find something better. Watching my Tyler eat made me stand up a little straighter and thrust out my chest. It was the least I could do as a provider, but I vowed I would do better and soon. I had some money in the bank, savings and my severance, but they would not last forever, and I would need to do something more long-term soon. I still didn't think going back to a big-city job was the answer. Not good for either of our animals, but I needed another solution before I could offer him the support he would need.

And now he couldn't even eat breakfast because he had to go find out what was going on that had a tenant screaming. Why hadn't he jumped at the opportunity to move to Animals? They were offering us everything we needed to get started on our own. Jobs, a place to live, three meals a day.

Never having to be responsible for anyone but myself before, I had to think differently about the life I'd been trying to figure out. With the apartment sublet, my expenses were way down, so I'd thought I had some time to consider.

But I wanted to make a home for my omega. Wanted him out of the fleabag he was

living in before it broke him. And Animals could at least give us what we needed while we decided if we wanted to be elsewhere or doing other things.

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Tyler came back looking a little the worse for wear, but he had taken the time to wash his hands and face. He plopped down next to me and picked up the omelet box. “That’s dealt with.”

“Anything bad?”

“No, just the first calamity of the day. Bob’s faucet malfunctioned. I turned the water off under the sink and will order a replacement online right now.” He tapped at his phone screen then set it down. “Can I have that omelet again?”

“All right.” I passed him his breakfast and leaned back on my elbows while he ate. Between us we managed to eat most of what I’d made. “I could have asked for the cooks to give me food they’d made, but I wanted to cook for you myself.”

I collected the to-go boxes the chefs at Animals had provided me and stuffed them in the trash. “So, what’s next?”

“The plan?” He tilted his head, adorably puzzled. “Well, I don’t know what you’re going to do but I have a sewer line to clear and some electrical work to do. Among other things.”

“Are you qualified, I mean, no offense or implication that you don’t have skills, but those things sound dangerous.”

“I do have some skills, and I watch a lot of YouTube videos.”

“Omega...”

“It’s my job, but I’m careful.”

“All right, then. Lead on, omega. I also have some skills. Sort of.” The primary skill I planned to use was making sure he didn’t do anything likely to electrocute him. “What do we do first?”

He pulled out his phone, a new but cheap model, and brought up a list. “Plugged toilet in number seven.”

I followed him behind the check-in desk where he retrieved a tool box and a ballcap. Donning the hat, he headed outside and down the row of rooms until we reached the one with the broken faucet. He rapped on the door and called, “Mr. Anders? It’s Tyler here to fix your faucet.” and when nobody answered, he unlocked it. “This is one of our resident tenants, but he’s not usually home during the day. Still, we always knock. No telling what we might walk in on if we didn’t.”

“Doesn’t sound appealing at all.”

My mate seemed to know what he was doing, but I hovered outside the bathroom, insisting he tell me if I could help with anything.

“I’ve got this.” He used a closet auger to unclog the toilet and held up the end when it came back. “Can you believe this?”

“A towel? How was there a towel in the toilet?”

“It happens at least once a week around here. I don’t know how or why, but I just have to deal with it. Part of the job.”

Not much of a job, if anyone asked me, but nobody had. “Well, let me get rid of it for you at least.” I carried the towel out and came back in to find Tyler working on an

electrical outlet. He had me go out and turn off the breaker then used a tester before unscrewing the switch. While he was calm and seemed like he knew just what he was doing. But my fingers twitched, wanting to provide unwanted and probably unneeded help.

We went from task to another, me helping out as much as possible and wishing I could do more. I didn't want to push the Animals idea, but he was working twenty-four/seven from what I was seeing. For very little money.

As dinnertime approached I decided to go back to Animals and make some dinner to share with my mate. I wasn't able to cook it myself, this time, because the kitchen was too busy to have an amateur underfoot. But my mate was going to be in for a treat with the selections they sent with me, so I was sure he wouldn't mind. Plus, he'd been telling me all day that I should relax because it was his job; I should just sit and be company for him.

Before I left the club I considered seeking out Karma. I'd only been here a couple of days and had begun to understand why everyone sought her out for just about everything. She couldn't cross the main floor without being stopped two or three times for advice on topics work related or otherwise. And when she ate in the kitchen, she was the center of attention. The employees and their families flocked to her like butterflies to a colorful flower.

And they always left her side looking happy and relaxed.

I could use a little of that, but I didn't want to use her.

"I thought you were with your mate." While I'd been deciding whether to approach her, she'd found me instead. "Everything all right? Are you taking him all that food?" She gestured to the four big containers I held."

“Yes, I probably should pay for it.”

“Didn’t we tell you the kitchen was open for our people and their families? You should probably go back and get more.”

I laughed, her generosity and kindness lifting my mood instantly. She was supposedly a human, in fact the reason humans were allowed to come here was because she and a friend or two had snuck in years ago. Warren had taken one look at her and Fate and his bear told him he’d found his mate. “This is plenty. There’s even dessert.”

“Oh good. I think we had those giant cookies that Robert makes. Did you get some of those?”

“And pie and cobbler. I really did take a lot.”

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“Good. Until you learn what your mate likes best, you have to offer him a selection.” She giggled, like the sound of bells. “And if he’s like me, a selection will be what he likes best.”

“Are you talking about sweets?” Warren arrived, as he so often did when Karma was present. My cousin was more than smitten with his beautiful, kind mate. “Because Karma is the reason we offer so many of them.”

“And they do very well, Warren.” She offered him a stern stare that turned into another giggle. “I was just going to ask your cousin when he and his mate will be moving in and starting work.”

Warren hugged her close to his side. “I’ll ask. When?”

“He doesn’t seem to want to, which I can’t understand because everything at that motel is awful. We are mated now.”

“Congratulations,” Karma said, echoed by her mate.

“Thank you. So, why didn’t he just grab his backpack and hop in the car, wiping the dust of that place off his shoes?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know, but maybe be a little patient and everything will work out.”

I expected something more precise like a magical phrase that would change Tyler’s mind, but Karma couldn’t always fix everything, I supposed.”

Warren walked me out to the car, parked just outside the kitchen door, and rested a hand on my shoulder, stopping me from getting in. “Just one thing, Cousin. Don’t assume what Karma said was a platitude. She doesn’t do those. And she’s always right.” He grinned. “Sometimes it drives me just a little nuts, but she is. Now, go feed your mate.”

Chapter Eleven

Tyler

Today had been intense on the work front, but it had also been one of the best days since my arrival. Having my mate by my side for most of the time had been wonderful. We hadn’t made any decisions as to what was coming next, but that had been because of me. He offered a suggestion, a solution really, and I ignored it. Not intentionally, at first. That had been the water’s fault. But there had been plenty of opportunities to bring it up again later, and I didn’t.

And before I knew it, our time together was over. I was sad when he had to leave, but I understood. I wasn’t the only person in his life. He had his cousin and mate. Abandoning them because he found me...yeah no. They were important to him and, by default, to me.

The timing was for the best, anyway. I had to get the paperwork done, and that was not a two-man job. There was no way I’d be able to keep everything straight with my sexy mate in the room.

Every time I thought I finally figure it out, I found a mistake, and one led to another and another. When my boss came in later that night, it was a hot ass mess. Not only was it not done, it was completely fucked up.

“I need the papers,” he barked at me as he gathered the cash from the drop box.

That was the only time I saw him, really, was when he needed the money, which was good, because he wasn't what you'd call a pleasant person to be around on the best of days.

"It was not as simple to do as I hoped it would be, and, honestly, between the exterminator and some plumbing issues and a thousand other things, I just didn't have the time to fix it. I'm sorry. If I can get it to you in the morning—"

He cut me off with a growl—fucking growl.

If he was a lion or a wolf or bear, maybe I might have excused it, but he was a human. It wasn't his beast shining through. It was his assholedom, and I wasn't there for it.

"This is because you left last night."

That caught me off guard. I thought I'd been pretty tricky about it, but apparently he knew I left the note out and called it good.

"Before you deny it, I know you went out. My brother told me." Brother? Who the fuck was his brother, and why was he here?

"Who?" Talking back wasn't the best choice, but it came across that way and I flinched.

"Bob."

Well that explain why Bob was...Bob. He wasn't a renter, he was the owner's brother and possibly one of the owners. I wasn't positive how that all worked, and it didn't matter.

“From now on, you can’t leave the motel. It gets in the way of you doing your job.”

“You want me to stay here twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week?” I had to be misunderstanding.

“No, of course not. You can go to the grocery store and post office, but this going out at night? Yeah, that has to end.”

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“I’m sorry, sir.” Which wasn’t the same as agreeing, but it was as close as I could come at the moment. What else was there to say on that one? Nothing, really. It was apologize or get fired.

He took the paperwork from me, grumbling something about maybe next month I’d get it right, and then left. Good riddance. I went back to my room because I was put a fork in me done. The night had been stressful enough before all of that. My mate was at Animals, the paperwork was a disaster, and I was exhausted. It wasn’t a good mix.

I wasn’t past the door when I was already resolved to leave.

My mate’s cousin had offered me a job, sight unseen. There was no reason why I shouldn’t take it, sight unseen.

I grabbed my clothes and shoved them in my backpack. That was pretty much all I had, aside from the few toiletries and the hot pot.

I hadn’t even zipped my pack up when I called Dimitri. My plan was to have a nice conversation about accepting his cousin’s offer and asking him to put me up.

Instead, I broke down into tears, sobbing through the story about my asshole boss. “I should have just accepted the offer when you gave it.”

I sniffle-snorted. How disgusting.

“But I-I don’t know. That’s a lie, I do know. I was worried, maybe you weren’t even wanting the job either.” And having him take it for me when he didn’t want it wasn’t

the kind of mate I aspired to be.

“I’m already halfway to you,” His voice cut through my sobs. “And I honestly am not understanding half the words you’re saying, but I know you’re in distress, so put me on speakerphone and then just listen to my voice while I get to you.”

I did as he said, and we didn’t talk about any of the situation for the rest of his trip. I didn’t talk at all.

Instead, I listened as he told me about the first week his beast was in the city and how his bear adjusted to all the concrete and the lack of space. It was filled with silly anecdotes of growls at the coffee shop and cravings for salmon. And he finally had me smiling when he described the events that led him to shifting in his bathroom.

There were no real points to his stories other than to distract me from the asshole who was my boss, and it distracted me enough that when he came through the door, I was no longer crying. Although there was no hiding I had been. My eyes were bloodshot, my face tearstained.

He squatted, his arms open, and I collapsed into them, letting him hold me, letting him tell me we were okay.

“Let’s get you out of here.” He kissed the top of my head.

“Yeah. Okay.”

He took my backpack and my hot pot to the car while I went to drop off my keys at the office, put up the note about ringing the bell, and leave a separate note for my boss, with two words. I quit.

It was far from the most professional thing I had ever done, but then again, the way

he treated me was far from professional.

I still couldn't be mad at having taken the job. This motel led me to Gary, which led me to Animals, which led me to my mate. I'd be forever grateful to this rundown motel, my asshole boss, and even to Bob. But I didn't belong here anymore, if I ever truly did. Time to move on.

I belonged with Dimitri, and maybe at Animals...that part I wasn't sure of, but as long as we were together, location didn't matter.

He was my mate.

He was my home.

He was my everything.

Chapter Twelve

Dimitri

When Karma told me to be patient, I had anticipated a lot longer than a few minutes, but, as my cousin said, she was right. And I was grateful it hadn't taken that long, but I wondered if even she had realized how soon things would work out.

My bear had some excellent suggestions about how we could make it clear to Tyler's former boss that people, especially our mate, shouldn't be treated badly. But, as Karma pointed out when we arrived back at Animals, the other version of karma had a way of seeing to assholes like him. It was an indication of how angry it made her to hear about the situation that she even used that word. Warren looked surprised before bursting into laughter and enfolding her in a big hug.

“Let it go, little cousin. You heard what my mate said, and, as you’re learning, she’s always right.”

Once their hug ended, several minutes later, Karma seemed her cheerful self again, bustling off to get someone to prepare a larger living space for my mate and I. Although neither of us had much with us, we settled into a one bedroom apartment toward the back of the dwelling area with a big bed covered with colorful quilts and even a little kitchen area with a mini fridge, two-burner stove, and microwave oven. She assured us that was not a hint that we should be cooking. We could eat in the big kitchen, grab food to bring back or, if the mood struck, cook for ourselves. The chefs would allow us to shop among the pantry and fridge items as long as we told them what we took.

It was a fair drive to any kind of grocery store, so we appreciated our local options. And our home, which was already cozy, but a trip to the outlet stores where the charcuterie place was allowed us to personalize our space. We were on ourhoneymoon and spent most of our time off work just the two of us. Snuggling in bed, eating meals we did not cook but did fetch, and running free in the desert together. Our animals were as in love as we were, and we let them out at least once a day before or after work.

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The apartment had doorways my bear could fit through, too, and the bed would hold my weight if our beasts wanted to curl up together for a nap. How had I ever thought I'd had a good day before now?

Two weeks passed, quickly, while I helped out in the office and Tyler did a different job. Paperwork was not his thing. Karma had some big charity event she was organizing and very happy to have me pitch in on the day-to-day office things. We worked eight hours and not a moment more, quite an improvement from my previous long hours and Tyler's endless days and nights.

I was implementing a new system of vendor documentation when my mate came into the office. Pushing my desk chair back, I patted my thighs. "Good timing, mate. I'm ready for a break. Let's make out."

"Umm...mate?" He entered and stepped to the side. "I'm not alone."

No, he certainly was not. My den alpha filled the doorway, his shoulders brushing the frame on either side of him. Warren was a big bear, one of the biggest I'd ever met, but Bruno? He was imposing at the very least.

"Good afternoon, alpha." I stood, as one does when one's alpha enters the room, and came around the desk to greet him. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

He took in my workspace, a very nice office with a big window overlooking the valley and more of the Superstitions that surrounded us. "Is this what you want to do with your time? Sit indoors and write things down?"

I let his question go by because what answer could I possibly have that wouldn't start an argument? "You've met my mate, alpha?"

"Not formally." I hadn't forgotten how he loved to stand on ceremony.

"Then I would like to introduce Tyler, my mate. Tyler, this is Bruno, our clan alpha."

A brief frown brought his brows together before his forehead smoothed and Tyler held out a hand. "Very pleased to meet you, alpha. My mate has told me many stories about your den and what a wonderful childhood he had there."

"Makes you wonder why he was in such a hurry to leave," Bruno growled, but he was gracious enough to take Tyler's hand, holding it a moment while he looked him up and down, assessing. "Maybe you can convince him to come home. Warren's little club is amusing, if you don't mind being surrounded by miles of rocks and sand, but our den is in the forest, where bears belong."

"Alpha," I growled before managing so smooth my tone. "What brings you here? Visiting Warren and Karma?" Highly unlikely, especially since he'd already broached the topic.

"Den business in Phoenix." He didn't elaborate, but why would he? In my current situation, I was lucky he considered me den at all. Many shifters were declared rogue when they lived outside their grouping. "And one more attempt to get you to consider your responsibilities to your den before I offer your position to another."

When I left, the primary beta spot had still been held by an older bear. A very kind person who always had candy in his pocket for cubs and time to help out anyone who needed him. He'd taught me to catch salmon in my claws and how to bake bread. Neither of which I had done in a long time. "Kendall?"

“Kendall wants to retire. He’s been waiting for you to return, but he is getting past the age where he wants the job. He is tired and wants to take a trip to Alaska to visit his mate’s kind and do some fishing. It’s your turn.”

Ooh turn on the guilt.

“Alpha, I—”

He held up a hand, imperious to a fault and shutting down whatever I’d been about to say. “Don’t answer now. If you do accept my offer, it’s a lifetime commitment, until you’re as old Kendall. Your mate has something to say about this choice. There are no other foxes in our den, at least at this point, and that may be an issue for him...”

Tyler’s lips parted, but I gave him a quick head shake. We needed to take our time and discuss what it would mean both to me and to him if we did this.

“My mate comes first.” I glanced back at the desk with its paperwork. Den beta would also have some of that, but not all day, not even every day. There would be a lot more time outside and dealing with people’s issues. I didn’t know if a fox skulk operated the same or if he’d been in a position to have that knowledge before he left.

“Of course.” He turned to Tyler and shook his hand again. “Very glad to have met you, fox. Our Dimitri was indeed blessed by Fate and the Goddess.”

“Thank you, alpha. You’re too kind.” Tyler lowered his head, baring his neck and making my heart beat faster. He would be such a good fit in the den, if we chose to go there.

“I’ll be about my business, then. Let me know your decision as soon as possible. For Kendall’s sake if nothing else.”

“Alpha, is he well, our beta?”

“Yes, just tired.”

“I’ll speak to you soon.” Watching him leave, for the first time I seriously considered what it would mean to be the beta. After I lost my job, it was just one option that I hadn’t given much thought to, but now, as a mated bear, I had to consider my future family and Tyler. Where would be the best place for them?

“I really did have a great time in the forest growing up,” I said.

“Your alpha is nice.” Tyler came into my embrace. “Do you want to go home?”

How long since it had been home? “I don’t know.” And before I could ask Tyler to make the move, I needed to be sure what my own thoughts on the matter were.

Chapter Thirteen

Tyler

Life at animals was such a dream. This wasn't a pack, not in any true sense. That didn't matter. There was this feeling of home and connection between all of the other residents and staff members that embodied pack life—at least good pack life, not the political garbage our skulk had turned into.

Every night, I fell asleep in my mate's arms, and every morning he was the first person I saw. And in the middle? We worked in the same space, his scent never far from me, his hugs only a walk away.

Our apartment was beautiful, nothing like what you'd expect if someone mentioned staff housing at a nightclub. It was shockingly quiet. Muffled by the rock of the mountain, we couldn't hear a single thing from the business side of the property. Not the music, the cars outside, the lines of chattering, laughing people waiting to come in. We were at Animals, but not. And nothing could beat the location. It didn't matter that I didn't have a car, because all I had to do was walk through a couple of corridors and boom, there I was. At work. At a restaurant or where I could pick up ingredients to make a meal for my mate in our little home.

And the land it was built on—the acreage became my fox's playground. Even in my skulk, I'd never felt as safe taking my fur as I did here. Running with my bear had become one of my favorite pastimes, but shifting with my coworkers and their families wasn't far behind.

But, as wonderful as everything was, I couldn't help but wonder if maybe Dimitri had turned down the offer to be his birth den's beta too soon. Well, he hadn't yet, but he was leaning in that direction. He was doing great at his job here. That wasn't up for debate. I couldn't say he was thriving in his position, though. Quality and performance? Of course. Work satisfaction? I didn't think so.

He loved the people and was amazing at what he did, but deep inside I got a nagging feeling that it wasn't giving him what he needed professionally.

I understood his immediate no when offered the job. He wanted to protect me. He didn't say it in so many words, but he was concerned about me being marked as rogue. He didn't need to say the words. His eyes flickered to my shoulder the second the offer came in, and every subsequent time we discussed it.

Nothing about the alpha suggested he was going to be a jerk about it. I doubted that his den mates would either. Even so, it was understandable that he would protect me because, in his shoes, I would do the same exact thing, which was why I was going to have a talk with him.

"We should at least check out the den and see if maybe it might it was a good choice for us." I practiced my words as I put the last of the dishes I was drying away before wandering to the kitchen of Animals.

We had our own full kitchen in the apartment, of course. But I was on a mission. Rumor had it, scones were being made today, and, for some reason, scones sounded like the most perfect food in the world, which was good because I hadn't really been hungry the past couple of days. Or, if I was hungry, I'd take a couple bites and my stomach would be like, nah pass. My fox didn't even hunt us down a snack. At first he'd been so into what the desert could provide.

I smelled the scones before I even pushed through the door. The kitchen was empty,

with one notable exception, Karma. Karma was holding a plate of scones in one hand and a mug of coffee in the other.

“Scones are my weakness,” I said

“Yeah, apparently they’re my weakness, given I already have two in my belly and am taking these with me.” She wasn’t fooling me; those were for her mate. She spoiled him as much as he spoiled her. They were ridiculously adorable.

“And there’s choices...or all of the above.” She indicated the platters of scones spread out on one of the stainless steel tables. Yes, platters.

I approached and checked out the baked goods. There were maple ones, cranberry ones, and ones that I suspected might be savory, either that or mint. They had little flecks of green in them. I didn’t care which, because I was all about the maple. I snatched one, taking a big bite and making yummy sounds around it, not even caring my boss could hear.

It was so good and exactly what my stomach wanted.

“You spoil us, Karma.”

“I do, that is true, but this wasn’t me. This was the baking masterpiece of Goldie. She made each of her mates favorites’.”

Goldie was one of the bartenders, and she had three bears of her own because, of course, she did.

“She likes to use our kitchen because she can bake them all at once instead of spending all day in theirs. And as a reward, we get scones.” Karma snatched another for her plate.

“It’s an excellent reward.” I took another bite.

Karma stepped closer. “Have you told Dimetri yet?”

I looked up at her, unsure what she meant. “About the scones? He’s the one who told me.”

“Not about the scones...about the baby.”

“The what?”

She looked at my stomach. “Oh, you haven’t told yourself yet. Well, when you do, let him know too.” She took a bite of her third scone, winked and walked over to one of the chefs.

Pregnant?

Could I really be pregnant?

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Wouldn't I know?

Wouldn't there be signs?

I grabbed a scone for my mate and went in search of him. He was easy to find, his scent strong and nearby. Thrusting the confection at him probably wasn't the best way to begin the conversation, but there I was doing exactly that. As he took his first bite, I ripped the bandage off.

"Karma thinks I'm pregnant."

He dropped the scone, his face beaming, "You're pregnant." He wrapped his arms around me, hugging me tight as he twirled around.

"I said, Karma, thinks." Which wasn't the same as me being pregnant.

Dimitri kissed the top of my head and set me gently on the ground. "If she thinks you are, it means you are. But, if you don't believe her, let's go find out for sure."

He took my hand and led me out of Animals with a quick, "We have things to do," over his shoulder at Karma who was standing near the door like a spectator. He had us in the car and to the pharmacy in record time, insisting I take the test right there in the drugstore bathroom.

Karma being Karma, she was right, the line turning from one to two before I even set the test down to wait the full three minutes. I snapped a picture of it, sent it to my mate, and tossed the stick in the trash. I ran out to discover him right by the doorway,

teary eyed.

“You okay?” I thought he was happy about this. Maybe I misread him.

“I’m better than. This is wonderful.”

I sagged into his arms.

“Aren’t you okay?” he whispered close to my ear.

“So very much.” He kissed me, kissed me deep enough that we had a couple people coughing for us to get our room. Oops.

It wasn’t till we got back to the car that I blurted out what I’d needed to say even before I found out about our baby. “We should go see if your den is a good match for us.”

I said it like one word, and Dimitri turned the car off and pivoted to face me.

“Say again? Slowly, this time, so I can digest it all.” He settled his hand on my knee.

“I don’t know if we should or shouldn’t be in your den, or if our life should be in Animals or even someplace else altogether, but I do know that part of you will always second guess your decision if you don’t at least check it out.” I ran out of air at the end of the long sentence and grabbed his hand.

“My life is with you.”

“Exactly, and that means it’s with me no matter the location. If we’re here, it’s me. If we’re in the city, it’s with me. If we’re at Animals. It’s with me, if we decide to take our animal forms and live in a cave, guess what? It’s with me.”

He didn't say anything for a half a minute and when he did, I only loved him more. "But what if you being marked as rogue is an issue?"

"Then we don't go or, if we are already there, we leave. It's easy as that. But don't we owe it to each other to at least look."

The palm of his other hand settled on my cheek. "If we do this, we both have to agree. In the end, don't say yes, because you think it's what I want."

"I'll agree to that condition under two conditions. The first is that you don't say no because you think it's what I want you to say. And two, you kiss me now. Do we have an agreement?"

He answered with his lips on mine.

Chapter Fourteen

Dimitri

Finally, we had made the big decision. Animals was wonderful, and I'd have gladly stayed there forever, but our alpha had really made it clear that they needed someone in the beta position for the good of the den. Kendall deserved to retire, and as much as I loved the others who might get the position, they were either unsuitable for various reasons or already had busy lives it would be unfair to interrupt.

I sent a text to Alpha Bruno, asking how soon he needed me.

Lucky Karma and Warren were family and my cousin had grown up in a den and knew how these things worked. I also suspected he'd heard from Bruno because when I went in to speak to him, he told me that I didn't need to give notice. "They need you back home, Cousin. I can't say I'm not sorry to lose you, but I hope you'll

consider this your second home and visit as often as possible.”

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Karma, who just happened to be sitting in the office with her mate, was kind enough to get a little teary eyed at our leaving, but like a sun shower, she smiled through it. “I hear it’s beautiful there. Warren, we need to go up to the Pacific Northwest one day so you can show me where you used to roam.”

One thing led to another, I called Tyler to come to the office, and my faint dread at telling them we were leaving turned into a celebration of all things positive in the future. Karma sent for sparkling cider and little frosted cakes that the pastry chef had just coincidentally baked that morning, and we toasted multiple times and ate until every crumb of the delicious pastries was just a memory.

We would be leaving the next day with our minimal possessions, headed from the midsummer desert heat to the coolforests of my childhood home. Funny how hard I’d tried not to live there, had so many plans and ideas that had completely changed direction when the company I worked for decided to downsize.

I wondered if all of it had been part of Fate’s plan from the start. Certainly, if anything had been different, I’d never have met my mate. Just lived in my fancy apartment, one more drone in the company that never truly appreciated me.

Karma, Warren, and a bunch of Animals staff waved goodbye as we traveled down the long drive toward the highway. Even with the AC on, the car was warm, but it would soon be plenty cool. “How do you feel about ancient trees and a lot of rain year round?” I asked.

“It’s a little late to address that now.” He poked my side and took a deep drink from the water bottle that had become his constant companion since the pregnancy test

came back positive. And actually before. In the desert, you drink all the time. “But it sounds perfect.

We drove part of the distance the first day then stopped to visit the Grand Canyon, letting our animals frolic in the pine forest not too far away and sleeping in our fur beside a stream. I would have loved to hike to the bottom of the canyon, but with a pregnant omega, I chose instead to treat us to the Skywalk. We strolled its curved length while talking about coming one day with out little one to camp at the bottom. So many plans were different now. And better.

The next morning, we pointed the car northwest and drove until we came to a nice resort where we spent another night in our skins, dining in the beautiful restaurant and lounging by the pool. Bruno probably would have preferred we drive like the wind straight to the den, but I considered this our honeymoon, and I wasn’t going to give that up even for my old mentor Kendall.

Tyler loved every new landscape we entered, so we stopped here and there to take little hikes and in the end it took us five days to arrive. Worth it, even when Bruno growled at me. But not at my mate. He took one look at him and flashed a rare grin. “This is the perfect place to raise a family, Tyler. We hope you’ll be very happy here with us.

The job came with a nice house. Not Kendall’s because I had made it very clear that I would not be taking the beta’s home. Bruno pointed out he hadn’t mentioned it, but I knew what tradition dictated. Bruno led us to a brand new house, cedar boards still golden, multiple windows gleaming.

Tyler ran inside and I could hear his sounds of delight from where I stood on the porch with the alpha. “When did you build this?”

“When Karma said you’d be along eventually.” He smiled again. “About a year ago.”

“How did she—” But why ask? Where Karma was concerned there were no answers. “Do you really think she’s human?”

“That and something more. If Warren knows, he’s not talking. Like the house?”

“My mate does, and that’s what matters. Thank you, alpha, for your patience and your faith in me. I will do my very best to make sure you never regret it.”

“The job was always yours. Go on in and check things out.” He slapped me on the back. “Welcome home. The beta ceremony is tonight.

When I entered the house, Tyler ran up and grabbed my hand. “Come and see. It’s all furnished and has pots and pans and dishes and even the pantry is stocked. Your den really must love you.”

More like respected the position, but I’d do my best to earn their good feelings. They’d also probably been aware of my disinterest in returning, so I might have some work to do on that front. But my mate was thrilled with our home, not huge but two stories and a loft. One bedroom empty. It would be the nursery.

When the sun set, the whole den came to escort us to the gathering area where a fire blazed. I stood in front of them and took my oath to put the den first before all others, to care for every member like family, and to do this job until it could be passed on to another many years in the future.

Like Kendall, I would stand firm and never desert the position. Second only to the alpha, I would be a representative of our den when facing others and be responsible for many things. I was tattooed with our den’s symbol on my left shoulder blade. The alpha’s was on the right. And though it stung, I stood straight and firm, my mate at my side.

The pack shifted and ran then, and my bear, who had enjoyed the desert, surged with joy at being in his beloved forest. Once again I was reminded of how I'd kept him from things he loved, but he roared and brushed those feelings aside. He wasn't big on the past or future, gifted with living in the moment.

I could learn a lot from him, and it was time I listened better to his wisdom.

When Tyler's steps flagged, he waved me on, turning back toward home, accompanied by several of the omegas. I hesitated but then realized he needed this. They were showing their care for their beta omega. They would be his friends and companions, and he would listen to their worries and be a link between me and those omegas who were not comfortable coming to an alpha with their problems.

He'd be great at it. At Animals, in our short time there, he'd already become a fixture among the omegas who gravitated toward him.

We'd only been here a few hours, and while we'd talked about looking things over and deciding, we'd leapt right in with both feet and four paws each. Into our new life. Our new world. Our joy.

This was where our cub would grow up and make friends. Finally, those of us still running turned back toward the fire for the feast. It was a reconnecting with old companions and meeting some new ones.

It was home.

Chapter Fifteen

Tyler

The sun was shining, and a beautiful breeze flowed through our open windows. It was

a perfect day to go for a run with my mate. I grabbed the tote bag I'd put our picnic in and walked to the alpha house where he was finishing up his workday.

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Dimitri had adjusted to his new position seamlessly. Not only did he enjoy what he was doing, the den loved him. The alpha did too. He was even taking over large portions of the office busywork that the alpha didn't enjoy—although I suspected it was less that he didn't enjoy it and more that my mate was really good at it.

I waved to Martha, an older bear who was cutting some flowers in her front yard. “Going to see that alpha of yours?” she giggled.

“Yes, ma'am. Brought him dinner and everything.”

She giggled again and went back to her flowers.

The first time I met her, I thought maybe I was making her uncomfortable, and that's why she would giggle like a cub. But no, that was just her way. She had a lot of joy, that overflowed.

I turned down the path leading to the center of den lands and passed a few kids who were playing a game—something similar to jacks, but with both stones and sticks. I still hadn't learned the rules to that, but I planned to.

They asked me if I wanted to play, and I turned them down, letting them know I had to be at the alpha house but promising I'd come by soon. When I asked if they could teach me the game, they beamed as if I'd just told them Christmas was tomorrow.

A few more people crossed paths with me as I strolled toward my destination. The day was so beautiful, it would've been shocking if they hadn't. I had an interaction with each of them, I thought back to when I lived with my own family. It had been so

different, but not in a good way. I could walk for half an hour and pass just as many people, but have maybe one give me a nod. It wasn't like this...where people openly cared about one another.

Both Dimitri and the alpha were sitting in the rockers on the front porch when I arrived, drinking what looked to be lemonade.

"I see you've been working hard today." I'd never be able to be so relaxed talking to the alpha where I grew up. But here, respect wasn't in the form of complete obedience. It was in the form of actual respect.

"Well, someone told me cookies were coming, so I figured I might as well be out here when they came."

I reached in the bag and pulled out the small box I'd set aside for him. "Snickerdoodles." I held them out for him.

"They're my favorite." He snatched the box from me and had it open before I realized they were gone. "You two, go have fun. I'll take over the perimeter run tonight." He took a huge bite of one.

"Are you sure, alpha?" Dimitri asked.

"I don't mind."

Dimitri came to my side.

"I got cookies. Go. I'll need to run these off, anyway." He would not. My mate might be the sexiest bear on these lands, but there was no denying our alpha was fit.

I was happy my mate didn't need to rush through dinner. The two of us had done

some of the perimeter runs in the beginning together, and I loved it. It was a way for me to get to know the den and the den lands and to have visibility among the people who resided here.

But now that I was further along in my pregnancy, shifting was uncomfortable. Soon it would be impossible. My guess was the impossible would come up at the same time paternity clothes became necessary—and right now, I was fighting that time pretty hard, using the elastic-on-the-button trick to keep my jeans on. It wouldn't be long until I caved.

We walked out to the riverbank and laid out the blanket.

“Should we eat first or run?” he asked.

I was already kicking my shoes off. I wanted to get every last run in I could before I was no longer able to.

“Run it is.” He smiled, holding in a chuckle, mostly.

I took my beast first, working hard to disguise the discomfort I felt as he tore through me, not wanting my mate to feel it. And then I shamelessly watched as he finished taking off his clothes and called forth his bear. He towered over me. If two people saw us together, humans, at least, they'd have assumed he was about to devour me. And he often did devour me, but not in the way they'd have feared, and not in this form.

Dimitri fell to all fours, and I jumped on his back. He lumbered through the woods as I took advantage of my role as passenger prince. We would actually run-run later, but this had become our favorite thing—exploring the woods together like this.

We ended our trip at the boulder where we often came to sit and talk and share some

quiet moments. Now was when the fun would begin.

I jumped off, looked at him, waited for his nod, and bolted. He counted—five, maybe ten—before coming after me, chasing me all through the woods in a game of cat and mouse that was far more fun.

More often than not, he let me win, but I never knew when the competitive side of him would take over, which meant I had to be on my toes and fast—through bushes, around trees, up others, jumping into the next.

But today he reached me, pouncing on me, gentle as could be. The picnic was in sight. I'd been so close and, yet, victory was out of my reach. I didn't mind. This meant I was physically close to my mate, and I never turned that down.

I shifted first, and he second, both of us there on the ground, naked, our bodies pressed together.

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“I thought I had you.” I pushed up and kissed him.

“You almost did, but I think—don’t take this the wrong way—I think maybe shifting is over for you.” He cringed.

“Because?” I don’t know why I asked. I knew. He saw my pain.

“Because I have eyes and saw your shift.”

I conceded. He was right. I was glad that we’d had this time together.

“No more. Not until after our cub is here,” I promised.

Dimitri kissed me and, this time, the kissing deepened until it was only him and I together.

Chapter Sixteen

Tyler

“Dimitri, come here.” I’d made the mistake of getting on the floor to separate out all the baby clothes. In my mind, it gave me a large work space and would be perfect. It was far from perfect.

Our little one received a ton of clothes during my baby shower, and I wanted them sorted and washed before they arrived. I picked up a shirt with a fox and bear embroidered on it and held it close. I’d never expected to have a baby shower. I’d

never even been to one, but not only was the entire den there, but Karma and her mate made a surprise appearance.

It had been a surprise party—one I hadn't seen coming. Looking back, there had been signs, but at the time, I'd been shocked. Baby showers weren't a thing in my old den. In fact, until my own shower, I thought they were only for humans. I'd been wrong

They had gone all out...a huge cake, games that were fun, lots of laughs, and, of course, presents. But none of that mattered as much as the feeling of being fully accepted. Not a single time since we moved here did I feel like I was less than. Not for being a fox. Not for being kicked out of my own den.

To them I was the beta's mate and a den member.

Dimitri came running into the bedroom where I sat. "What's wrong? Are you in labor?"

"I'm thirty-four weeks. If I'm in labor, we've got bigger problems." The midwife said I'd probably go long since I was a smaller beast than my mate. Not sure how that was fair.

"Okay, so what do you need?" He looked at the piles where were mostly sorted.

"I-I can't get up." It was so embarrassing, doubly so because I knew better.

Being on the floor shouldn't incapacitate me. And if it was this bad now, what was it going to be in another few weeks?

"Why'd you get on the floor, silly?" He came up behind me, put his arms under my armpits, and physically lifted me up and onto my feet.

In the past, he'd come at me from the front when I needed help. Because, as embarrassing as this was, it wasn't the first time. And the last time he assisted me, I fell forward—my balance off thanks to my ginormous belly.

I turned around and hugged him as best I could, my hands reaching behind him but nowhere near enough to get the embrace I was longing for. "Thank you. You deserve a cookie."

He stepped back and looked me in the eye. "Or...a date night?"

"Date night? Don't you have to work?"

"Nope." He kissed my cheek. "No perimeter runs for me until after the baby arrives."

That was the one thing I didn't love about his position...the perimeter runs. It was fine in the beginning, when I could tag along, but now that I was too big to shift and very hormonal, having him gone for those stretches of time sucked.

When the alpha offered him to take on some more office work in exchange for being home at night, I was thrilled that he jumped at it.

"I thought that didn't start until next week."

"That was the plan, but Bruno had some paperwork that needed doing—and if he asks, I never said this, but he's as good at it as you are."

No wonder they needed my mate so badly. I shouldn't be allowed near anything made of paper except for recycling and if the alpha was the same, yikes.

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“Where should we go?” We hadn’t been on a date night in a long time.

Date nights weren’t something that I had witnessed growing up in my den. Mates were just mates. There was nothing romantic to it. But here...here, there seemed to be a strong understanding that mates coming first included spending quality time together—both on and off den lands.

“It’s a surprise.”

He gathered up the clothing piles I’d made and set them on the bed for me to finish sorting. He’d offered to help me multiple times, but, for some reason, in my mind, this had to be done by me. It was ridiculous. They were just clothes. It didn’t matter if they were in the right pile before heading to the washing machine. But there was no arguing with rationality when it came to my big old pregnant brain, because...hormones.

We drove into town, stopping first at my favorite shop for a caprese sandwich. That was one consistency throughout my entire pregnancy—a baguette with fresh mozzarella. What came with that changed. Sometimes it was basil and oil. Sometimes it was mayonnaise and tomatoes. Sometimes it was ham and not deli ham. No, that would be too easy. It had to be a big hunk of ham, still warm from the oven.

The cheese and the bread were the consistent part of my diet. And probably why my belly reached the doorway before I did.

“This is perfect.” I snatched one of his chips, mine long gone, and popped it into my mouth.

“And it’s only beginning.”

He was so excited that I became excited, even though my body was getting close to the go-to-bed-or-fall-asleep-standing-up time of day.

Our next stop was a store that had a huge grand opening sign above it. It was named Zoe’s, which gave nothing away. And it wasn’t until we walked inside that I realized we were in a baby store, or at least a young children’s store. Clothes, toys, furniture, you name it, they had it. Best of all, it wasn’t the same old baby items we saw in the box store. These were unique, high quality, and, in many cases, handmade.

We were greeted at the door by an old man with a huge smile and a booklet in his hand.

“Coupons,” he announced proudly as he held it out for us. “And there’s cookies in the back.”

Coupons and cookies. What more could a pregnant fox ask for?

I thanked him and leaned in to my mate. “What are we here for? Specifically.”

I had to ask because the odds were good that I was going to find a lot I was interested in, and if I was focusing just on the items we were there for I had a better chance of sticking within budget.

He took out his phone and opened an email, showing it to me. It was an extremely generous gift card for Zoe’s and it was signed, All your friends at Animals.

“We have a gift certificate?”

“Yep. It’s from the crew at Animals. Just came today. In exchange, they want to have

lots and lots of pictures.”

“We can do that.” They already got daily bump updates.

We hadn’t been back for a few months, pregnancy and a new job sucking up a lot of our time, but we still talked to people randomly and were part of an active group text. I normally hated group texts but was grateful for this one.

It wasn’t difficult to find items that would be perfect for the baby: a bassinet that converted into a crib for our room, a few adorable outfits, and, my favorite, handmade stuffies including a fox and a bear.

“Safe to say, our little one’s going to be spoiled.” I hugged the bear close.

“I’m thinking that’s just how it should be.” My mate tapped the nose of the bear.

This kind of spoiling was something I’d never had. My existence always there to further my family’s objectives. I’d never let that be the case for our little one. That not only deserved better, Dimitri and I were going to make sure they had it.

Because that’s what loving parents did.

Chapter Seventeen

Dimitri

The nursery was not complete, but since the baby would be sleeping in our room for some time, I wasn’t worried about that. Because my mate wasn’t.

“I’d rather wait until we meet our baby to decide on things like a color scheme or theme,” he said for at least the dozenth time, not that I was arguing about that. But

some of the other omegas were apparently giving him a bit of a hard time. They didn't understand.

“I take it you’ve been getting advice again.” His status as my omega apparently didn’t extend past “experienced” parents telling my mate how things should be done. “Want me to talk to them? Or their alphas?”

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“No, I’ve got this. It’s just a little frustrating.” It said a lot about his self-image that his confidence wasn’t getting shattered by it all.

“Understood.” I kissed him, stroking his cheek. “But you tell me if you need backup.”

“I will, Dimitri.” He sighed. “And we’ll have it done soon enough because if I get any bigger I’ll explode and that will be its own color scheme.”

I shuddered a little but had to laugh. It wasn’t the worst image he’d presented me with lately. As he grew more uncomfortable, his imaginations was swelling right along with his belly. The midwife wasn’t worried, but I hated him not feeling his best. “Hungry, omega?”

“No. I don’t have any room in me for food. It’s all baby in there.”

“You have to eat something,” I urged. He’d been eating well until the day before and, as far as I knew, he hadn’t had more than a few bites of anything since. “Keep up your strength.”

He waved a hand in the air. “If my back would stop hurting, maybe I’d have an appetite.”

Something rang in that. “How long has it been bad?” Considering he hadn’t held back from sharing his symptoms before now, it couldn’t have been long.

“Two days? But it was kind of dull until this morning. Now, it just hurts so much. I wonder if I could take something for it?” He moved right and left, stretching or trying

to. “This is the worst.”

“Tyler, didn’t the midwife tell us that sometimes labor presents as back pain?”

He froze, eyes widening. “I forgot that. Dimitri, do you think I’m in labor?”

“I think you need to sit down.” I guided him to the one chair high enough and firm enough that he could still get out of it on his own. “And I’m going for the midwife. We will get her opinion.”

“I want to come.” He moved to stand, but I pressed him back down.

“No, you might be about to give birth, and I don’t want that to happen on the lawn in front of the alpha house or somewhere. Your birth plan is for having the baby right here in our bed, yes?”

He nodded. “You really think this is it?”

“Let’s find out.”

I strolled casually to the front door, so as not to alarm my mate, but once I hit the porch, I ran full-out to Melinda’s house. The midwife worked from home and had an exam room at the back, but most bears chose a home birth, so she rarely had a patient there for more than a short appointment. At the moment, she was sitting in the white rocking chair on her front porch, needlepointing something and sipping lemonade.

As I pounded up her steps, she set her glass and canvas aside and stood up. “Something tells me I’m done relaxing for the afternoon.”

I sucked in a breath, trying to get enough air to tell her what was going on. “Mate. Pain. Back. Baby.”

Melinda nodded. “If I am understanding you, Tyler is having back pains and you want to see if the baby is about to arrive?”

“Yes.” I held onto the porch railing, still out of breath. “Come?”

“Go back to your mate and help him get undressed and into bed. You have the birth plan right? Telling you how to get everything ready?”

“So, the baby is coming?”

“I didn’t say that, but it sounds like it. Remember when you were here the other day, I told you he was close. Go and I’ll be five minutes behind you, all right?”

When I hesitated, not that I doubted her, but I didn’t want to arrive without her and disappoint my mate, she laughed. “Okay, hang on.” Opening the door, she reached inside and picked up her bag. “I’m with you. While we go, you can give me details.”

I told her everything I knew, which wasn’t much, but when we entered our home, Tyler was no longer seated. He was standing next to the chair, a puddle around his feet.

“Looks like it’s go time.” Melinda led the way up the stairs. “How many do you want?”

“How many what?” If it weren’t for the seriousness of the situation, my mate’s expression would have been comical.

“Babies, but I was joking. I haven’t heard more than one heartbeat the whole time so unless you have a very sneaky hiding behind their sibling, it’s only one.”

Tyler had been unknowingly laboring for nearly two days, so once his water broke,

things began to happen quickly. We got him undressed and settled just in time for him to start pushing.

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I held his hand and told him how wonderful he was and how we'd be a family of three in just a little while. The view out our window showed a wintery landscape, bare deciduous trees among the evergreens that made up the backbone of our ancient forest. My mate fixed on the view while I counted his breaths and urged him to relax in the brief seconds between pushes. And within an hour of my fetching Melinda, she cried, "One more good one and you'll be dads."

"I can't." Tyler panted, shaking his head.

His acknowledged labor had been short but those two days of back pain had worn him down and I kicked myself for not catching it sooner. Then Melinda caught my eye. Message received. "Of course you can push one more time, omega. You're not giving up now."

"It hurts too much. They'll just have to stay in there."

"Omega, what if it's a bear? Think of how big they'll be in six months, a year... You sure you want to raise our baby inside you forever?"

He laughed then, at the preposterousness of my comment. "You're evil. Big baby just like their daddy. You'll have to carry them from the time they're six months old because they'll be bigger than me."

And so it was with laughter from all three of us that our child slid from my mate's body and into the waiting hands of our midwife. I hoped that was a sign they'd have more joy than sadness in their life.

In his life.

Fortunately for our state of readiness nobody extra was hiding inside my mate. His huge belly was the result of a foxshifter carrying a bear cub. Anyone could tell that from looking at our chubby, stocky little son.

“I want to call him Sasha,” Tyler said.

“Sounds like a great name to me.”

“And his room theme is cartoon bears.” My mate sighed. “That will be perfect.”

Epilogue

Tyler

“Next time we fly.” I was leaning over the car seat, holding a paci for Sasha. He was good and done with the whole traveling thing. I was too, but I was happy for the destination.

We did test runs with him in the car before even contemplating the trip. Driving around town, an hour here or an hour there, and he did great. He did great on this trip, too—the first day. But today he was struggling. Not to the point where we had to pull over, only to where daddy-guilt was hitting me hard.

“Agreed,” Dimitri said from the front seat. “At least we are almost there. Just about to pass your old motel.”

It hadn’t actually been mine, but it was where I was living and working when we met. Now it was under new ownership. I wasn’t sure what had happened behind the scenes, but when Karma and Warren said they would take care of it, they meant

business. The old owner and his brother were gone—that much I knew because they hit the news, something about embezzlement and fraud.

“Hey, it looks like it’s being cleaned up,” I said when it came into view. As much work as I had put into it, it was never obvious from the outside, but now? Now it looked much better.

“We’re still not staying there,” Dimitri grumbled from the front seat. He’d never been impressed that his mate had been living like that. I was hard pressed to be upset about my time there, not when it led me to him.

Sasha was just about asleep when we pulled into Animals. If I played my cards right, I’d be able to get my carrier on and settle him inside it without too much trouble. At least, that was my plan—one thwarted in the best possible way when Karma met us in the parking lot, snatched him up, and held him close.

“Look at you. Not a fuss. Not a peep.” She giggled, looking down at him. “We’ve been waiting for you.” She looked over her shoulder. “You two also.” And walked inside.

If anyone else had done that to our son, I’d probably be upset. No, not probably. I would be. Very. You don’t just randomly take people’s babies. But with Karma, it was the best—the absolute best.

“We’re staying in our old apartment?” I clarified as I pulled out the huge baby bag from the back.

“Yeah.” Dimitri grabbed our suitcase and our smaller baby bag.

Once inside, we saw Karma showing Sasha off to everyone and took it as a sign to dump our bags. It felt kind of good to be back. It wasn’t home. I saw now that it

never could've been, but it was family and always would be that.

Dimitri brushed a thumb across my cheek as we moved through the corridor. "You okay?"

"Just...remembering." I leaned in to his touch.

We dropped everything off, repacked the small diaper bag, and went to join the others.

"I don't think we were missed." I linked my hand with my mate's hand took in the scene before us. Everyone focused on Sasha, who loved every minute of it.

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“We’ll be missed when they need something from the diaper bag,” he teased. And he was right. Everyone wanted to hold the baby until they needed a new diaper.

We walked over to them, and there were hugs aplenty. It was nice catching up with everyone, being able to see what their families were up to, hearing about different events that had taken place at the club, people’s plans for the future—all the normal things we generally talked about in our group chat, but somehow were more real because we were together.

Unbeknownst to us at the time, Karma and Warren had closed the club down for the night for a “special event.” That special event being all of us eating together without any distractions from customers.

And what made it even more special was that it was a potluck, which meant we had amazing cookies, Goldie’s scones, charcuterie, along with enchiladas, pasta bakes, and salads.

The vibe—exactly perfect.

And even though Sasha wasn’t the only little one there, he never had to be worried about being put down. There were plenty of arms waiting.

When the night was over, and the three of us walked back to our old apartment, a calm came over me, one that said that we’d made the right choice—not only working here for the time we did, but also moving.

Which was weird to think about because we were happy here. We had family here.

And this would always be a place to come back to, a place to visit, a place to recharge. But the den? That would always be our home.

I fed Sasha then, while I hopped in the shower, Dimitri changed him and put him down in the crib that had magically appeared in our old apartment.

“Room for one more?” He stood in the doorway.

I was just about to get out, but that wasn’t going to stop me from accepting his offer.

“Absolutely. Sasha is asleep already?”

Dimitri climbed in beside me, and I stepped out of the way so he could be fully under the water.

“He fell asleep while I was putting on his pajamas. The little man had a very full day.”

I reached up and massaged his scalp under the steamy water, readying him for the shampoo.

“We all did.” I pressed a kiss to his mating mark, the one that shouted to the world that he was mine. On our first night together, he’d marked me, but later, I returned the favor. Tradition be damned. Apparently, in some matings, everyone got a mark, and I liked that.

“If you keep doing that, I’m not going to be getting any cleaner. You won’t either.”

“And what if I told you that was my plan?” It hadn’t been, but it sure was now.

“What would you say then?”

“I wouldn’t be able to speak, I’d be too busy kissing you. Why? Was it your plan?”

I answered him in the way he promised to answer me, with a kiss that led to another and another.

It was hard to believe that not much over a year ago, I nearly mated someone for business gains. Standing my ground and walking away from everything I'd ever known had been the best decision I ever made.

Now I had a mate I loved and who loved me back just as deeply, a beautiful son, a den that accepted me, a family at Animals, and a lifetime of these kisses.

Nothing could be better than that. Nothing.