



A New Bear-ginning

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Description: Mateo and Colton had their life planned out—fate was having none of that.

Mated turtle shifters Mateo and Colton love each other, their small B&B, and pretty much everything about their lives. Only one thing is missing: a baby. They're heartbroken, but their love for each other is strong enough to overcome anything—or so they hope.

Bear shifter Scotty comes to town with nothing but a backpack full of clothing and the feeling he is meant to be there. He quickly finds work at Shore's Home B&B only there's one problem—his bear thinks the sexy owners are his mates—both of them. Scotty refuses to break up a mating pair. Little does he know that he won't break them, he'll make them stronger.

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MATEO

I stared at the box sitting on the counter. I didn't know why I kept doing this to myself. All it did was lead to heartache each and every month.

Why wasn't I the mate Colton deserved? Why? He wanted to settle down and have a family, and we'd managed to do the settling down part fine. The family part? That was another thing.

Month after month, it was heartache. Both his and mine.

Which was why, this time, I wasn't telling him about the test. He didn't need to hold the sorrow. I could do that for him. It was one way I could be strong enough.

At our last appointment, the doctor advised us to, "Stop trying and relax," because that would somehow magically make things work so I'd get pregnant. He cited all sorts of anecdotal bullshit. But that was all it was. He had no answers. None.

Even if he said, "Sorry. It's not going to happen," that would be something. It would gut me, but I could deal with it and move along. But now? Now we faced a long drawn-out torturous journey, and not trying wasn't the solution.

"Okay." I picked up the box. "Here goes."

I ripped it open, took out the stick, and peed on it. I didn't need to read the

instructions. I'd been doing this for more months than I could count and oftentimes repeatedly to check there hadn't been a mistake. I knew which tests showed up in which color, the ones that were digital, and which one would go on sale next. We'd discovered there was a sale rotation of pregnancy tests.

Slipping the cap off the tip, I set it on the counter and shut my eyes tight. Watching wouldn't make the results any different, but it could give me false hope that something was changing when it wasn't. I'd been down that road. It sucked.

"One. Two. Three," I counted slowly. I needed to get to one hundred eighty and then add twenty more because I never timed it right. I hated that I knew exactly how many numbers I needed to recite to reach three minutes. It was 100 percent indicative of how many times I'd done this.

Being hyper focused on the counting did two things. It helped me keep my eyes shut, not needing to look at the countdown on my stopwatch, and it gave me something to focus on that wasn't the result.

I finished counting, turned around to put the shower on then braced myself. The spray would drown out my tears when they came. And my gut said they would come.

I picked up the test, happy it was a digital one and I wouldn't have to play the Do I see a line? game.

"Not pregnant." The words slammed into me. I'd known it was coming. Nothing about my body felt different. I'd wanted it so badly...so badly I...I couldn't breathe.

The test fell from my hand and clattered to the floor, tears sliding over my cheeks.

I couldn't let him hear. Colton didn't need to pick up the pieces again. The pieces of me. He'd been so patient, pushing back his own sorrow and disappointment every

time in order to be the supportive mate I needed. I couldn't ask him to do it again.

The steam from the shower covered the mirror. At least I didn't have to witness my failure reflected back at me. Why was my body so broken...so flawed?

I swatted the shower curtain back and stepped inside. Not bothering to remove my clothes, my body crumpled, and I collapsed onto the floor of the tub.

I needed a good cry. That would make things better—make it so I could face him again with my slapped-on smile and my faux optimism firmly in place.

If only it were summertime, when the B&B was full. Dealing with the guests was more than a full-time job, and we didn't have a moment to sit, much less wallow in self-pity.

But it was winter, and reservations were nonexistent. It was just the two of us in a big old building with the winds roaring outside and not enough repair projects to fill our day.

In another month, we had a film crew booked in. They'd be filming some reality show, so that was something. They would have us running back and forth meeting their requests for extratowels and helping them with directions. I had to hold on until then...next month would be easier.

I sobbed, my shoulders heaving, and I let the hot water mask the sound until the spray turned tepid and then cold. I let it flow over me even as the water stung. It was good to feel something unconnected to my failure as an omega, even if it was painful. My skin numbed as the effect of the freezing water dulled my senses.

And then the water shut off. Only I didn't turn it off.

It was Colton—my mate.

“Oh, sweetie, why didn’t you call me?” He held his hand out, and I grasped it. It was my lifeline. “Why?”

I didn’t respond, instead allowing him to help me up.

He undressed me, wrapped my body in a towel and then brought me into our bedroom and placed me gently on the bed. He climbed in beside me and pulled the covers over us.

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“We need to get you warm, omega mine. You’re shivering. Curl into me. Take my warmth, my strength, my love. Let me soothe you and your turtle. Let me be the alpha you need.” He kissed the back of my head, and I rolled into him and let him pick up the pieces.

Again.

Just like last time and the time before.

It wasn’t fair. None of this was fair to Colton. But I was weak, and I loved him. I’d continue to do this over and over again until it broke us both. It wasn’t right for either of us, but it was all I could do.

Leaving him wasn’t an option. My turtle wouldn’t allow it. And even if he did, I couldn’t bear it.

Something would work out. It had to. We couldn’t keep living like this. We just couldn’t.

But what other choice did we have?

And as if he could see inside my mess of a head, Colton said, “You’re enough, Mateo. You’re more than enough. You’re my love, and my mate. My life is only complete because you’re in it. I love you.”

I stayed silent, afraid of what might come from my mouth, and eventually fell asleep in his arms.

I didn't deserve him, and he surely deserved better than me.

2

COLTON

My body moved in slow motion while I replaced a light bulb on the porch. The blustery wintery weather wasn't helping my mood. I gazed out to sea, the gray expanse of water stretching toward the horizon.

I used to be beyond the horizon, working on a yacht most of the time and only returning to Mateo a few times a year. His friends thought I was an alpha who couldn't commit, and I suspected they urged him not to wait for me. But he did, and, when I was done with that itinerant lifestyle, he welcomed me back with open arms.

And after working on tourist boats for a while, a job where I came home each night, a temporary offer arrived to take care of the Shore's Home B&B. With Lennox, the B&B owner, away so much with his mate and daughter, we bought a share of the B&B and our stay became permanent. We no longer lived in Mateo's cramped cabin on his friend Caspian's land, but we kept it for when we needed an escape.

It was a complete one-eighty from sailing around the world, but I loved it, as I adored Mateo, my now mate. As well as continuing to build the business, we planned on having a family.

All our friends had kids. When we met up for a potluck or a watchalong of Shifter World—our favorite soap opera—there were babies spilling out of baby carriers, strollers, and cribs. The older ones who were crawling or toddling around acted like mini escape artists, copying their dads when they cursed!

I wanted that, and so did Mateo. But each month we tried, it ended in floods of tears

and my omega thinking he wasn't good enough for me. I'd never leave him, not that I could. Nor did I want to. We were bonded for life, but he lived in fear that somehow I'd sever the link between us.

It had been almost a month since I'd found him huddled in the shower, the cold water pelting his fully clothed body. I dreaded him taking another test.

There was a cycle, not only within his body but emotionally. Stage one was straight after taking the test. He would hide under the covers for a day, only getting out of bed to use the bathroom. The next step was him working behind the scenes at the inn, not wanting to interact with the guests. Then he'd gain confidence and say, "Maybe next time I'll get pregnant." That was when he'd revert to the wisecracking, blurting-out-everything-that-came-into-his-head omega I'd fallen in love with.

But as the day drew closer for the next test, he'd withdraw, the weight of that possible negative result squeezing the joy out of him until he'd gasp and grab his chest as if he couldn't breathe.

I shivered as a gust of wind swept in from the coast. I almost welcomed it. It had me experiencing something other than despair. While I wanted a family as much as my mate, trying and continually failing was splintering my heart. Each month, another piece would break off. We were hamsters running on a wheel, unable to get off even though we were going nowhere.

We'd reached a point where we had to stop trying, and that meant giving up on being fathers. Words were easy and cheap, but I had no idea how we would get to a place of acceptance.

"Big storm coming." Mateo braved the wind and joined me on the porch, a blanket wrapped around him. I draped my arm over his shoulders and held him close, his familiar scent, which reminded me of cinnamon, filling my nostrils.

“Better have propane lamps at the ready,” I replied. Candles were much more romantic during a power outage but, in an older wooden building, a candle might be left too close to a curtain or knocked over, and the inn would be an inferno before the fire department could get here.

Snow had been falling since last night, and the grounds of the inn were picture-postcard beautiful. The film crew staying with us had spent time in the garden taking selfies.

Winter was usually our quiet time. A respite from the summers when we worked eighteen-hour days. It was sort of our way of hibernating, resting during the cold months, replenishing and storing our energy for spring.

Our town had been graced with a crew and reality show participants. TV reality shows had audiences lapping them up and demanding more. More series plus more bad behavior from the participants equaled ratings gold. Production companies loved reality TV because the costs were much smaller than producing a drama series or comedy.

The crew was staying with us while the contestants were up the hill with Maude Jenkins at her B&B.

My mind went to the food in our pantry and large freezer. If the storm was so severe, it blocked roads, our guests wouldn't be able to go out and film. People confined inside because of bad weather tended to be irritable, and that led to arguments. Other than playing cards and board games, food was the best way of pacifying them.

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“Can we cope with a group of people kept captive by the weather?” Mateo grumbled.

Oh my love. Mateo was a people person. He entertained our guests with wild tales and legends, sang sea shanties, and even led them on informal tours of the area. Now that we were getting close to test-taking day, he was turning inward and not wanting to interact with the world.

“How about you drive to Caspian’s and take a dip in his pool.” Our dolphin shifter friend who both Mateo and I used to work for had a heated pool. My mate disliked cold water and enjoyed shifting in the warmth. “Maybe call Benjamin and see if he’s free.”

While the whale shifter didn’t mind being in the ocean at any time of the year, and he couldn’t shift in an indoor pool, he was Mateo’s oldest friend, along with Caspian.

“I can manage things here while you’re gone.”

Mateo studied the sky and the snow that was blanketing the trees. “Nah. Think I’ll stay where I am.” He stamped his feet and I steered him inside as the crew’s deputy director came down the stairs, a phone in his hand playing a video.

“My son.” He shoved the device in our faces, and we watched a little boy toddle over carpet and cuddle with the family dog. “Cute, right?”

We both nodded, and I clasped Mateo’s hand. Tension was rippling off him in waves, but the guy was distracted by another crew member asking a question, and I led Mateo to our private suite.

“Need to pee,” he mumbled and slammed the bathroom door. I paced the floor until he came out, tear-stained cheeks a sign of his despair.

“Love, we need to talk.” That sentence should come with a warning. Nothing good ever came after it, but it was too late. I’d said it and couldn’t take it back.

“Not now, Colton, please. Tomorrow maybe, or after the film crew has left.” He huddled in the bed, his hollow cheeks an indication of how much weight he’d lost.

“Of course. No hurry,” I lied. “You take a nap.” I kissed his brow and tucked the covers around him as his eyes closed.

3

SCOTTY

I’d known I had to leave my den since before my first shift. It was inevitable. I didn’t belong there, never had. I wasn’t even technically clan.

When I was two, one of my den mates found me wandering in the woods alone. At least they guessed I was about two. I had no clothes on except for a hat. My new mom, Flora, recognized me as a shifter immediately and called everyone to help her find where I belonged.

They spend days searching endlessly, their scenting not even hinting where I might have come from. It was almost as if I had been plopped in the middle of den land from up above.

Their computer searches didn’t help much either, not that the search engines were as powerful back then. Eventually they gave up, and our Alpha allowed Flora to claim me as her own. She had lost her mate in a fire and longed for a family.

Mama Flora loved me completely and treated me as if I was her cub. But I came into her life well past her child-bearing years, and she too was gone shortly before my first shift.

The den tried, they really did. Different families took me in, one year at a time and, when I was an adult, I was given a job in the kitchen. It was a fine life, one much better than I'd have had starving to death in the woods. But it never felt like mine.

With the new Alpha about to take his place, it felt like the perfect time to leave and find where I did belong.

It would've been the perfect time had it not been winter. My bear might like the cold, but I certainly didn't and, worse than that, no one was hiring. For someone who knew they were eventually going to be leaving their den, I sure was shit prepared for it.

I got off the bus in a little seaside tourist town. I'd meant to go all the way to the port city, thinking there would be some opportunities to make a buck or two unloading ships or I didn't even know. Something. I wasn't picky. But when the bus driver opened the door to let a woman off in this summery destination town, I had the sense I needed to disembark as well.

The bus driver reminded me three times that if I got off, I wouldn't be able to get on the next bus, and that even if I purchased another ticket, it was a week between buses this time of year.

And still...I was determined, and for no reason I could articulate. I needed to be here. Full stop.

I walked around town, looking for help wanted signs. There weren't any. That didn't mean there weren't jobs. In the morning I would go from business to business. At least the ones that were open. A good many of them had See you in spring! signs in

the window.

I scented a lot of humans, but also enough shifters I could hopefully find a store owner who might understand my plight. If I told them. I'd have to play that by ear.

For tonight I needed to find a place to sleep. The weather was turning foul, and wandering the streets hardly sounded like a great idea...or even a mediocre one for that matter.

Being as close to everything human as I was, shifting and sleeping in my fur wasn't an option. I dug in my pocket and pulled out my money. I had enough to get a room for a few days, more if I tapped into my only if you have no choice funds.

Cold.

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Sleep.

Eat.

My bear wasn't asking for much. He wanted me to meet our basic needs. I wasn't even good enough for my beast.

A B&B came into view, the windows lit and smoke billowing from the chimney.

"Off-season should have cheaper rates." I tried to convince myself as I walked toward it, the ground getting slippery beneath my feet. "No one comes to a town like this in the winter."

I was proved wrong the second I opened the door. The front desk had three people waiting, and there was plenty of chatter coming from a side room. My first thought was there was a big function happening, possibly a birthday or a wedding.

But the more I watched, standing in line, the more I saw that they were all guests and were here for some kind of work. They kept talking about production schedules being messed up. I just didn't know the production of what.

It was nice to have the warmth surrounding me. The B&B had a cinnamon-and-pine scent with almost a briny tinge to it. That and all the scents of the humans with their cologne and hair products and cosmetics. But, unlike on the bus, they didn't overwhelm my senses here, the cinnamon and pine like a balm making it all okay.

One after another, the people were dealt with at the front desk. The man helping the

guests had a voice meant to sing. Its soothing quality that could wrap around you. It made sense he had a job in hospitality. People would respond well to it.

Rub.

And so did my bear. He'd never been one to behave. Where the other kids' bears were telling them helpful things as they learned to navigate two beings in one body, mine did things like this.

"May I help you?" the man asked, and I stepped up to the counter.

"I hope so." I sucked in a deep breath trying to covertly scent the air. The cinnamon, it was him. Cinnamon and brine. And the pine was there, too, but not as deep. No the pine wasn't his, but possibly—I looked at his neck and saw the top of a mating mark—of course, the pine was his mate.

No!

My bear hadn't decided to be any more helpful than he was with the whole rub thing.

"I'm looking for a job. I'm good in the kitchen, don't mind cleaning, and am organized."

"We might have something temporary." He swished his mouth from left to right. "What's your name?"

"Scotty." I held out my hand to shake his. I wouldn't have normally done so. He was a shifter. I wasn't sure what kind, but something aquatic. But we were surrounded by humans, and humans were all in on the handshaking thing.

"I'm Colton. Let me make sure these guys are all set and we can go talk with Mateo,

my”—he looked around the room—”my husband about that job.”

4

MATEO

I’d been at the B&B in the busiest of high seasons and managed to glide through it with ease. This was different. There would be no gliding.

The workers were here for just that...work. And somehow that made them more entitled than the snootiest of guests. And not just one of them. All of them.

If only we’d been big enough to house the contestants. They were probably happy as clams with getting the free stay and food. I didn’t see any of them complaining that we brewed our coffee with a drip maker instead of creating craft pour overs of fancy blends. The entire thing was ridiculous.

We were going to be stuck with them for weeks. Weeks. And if the snow kept coming down at its current clip, they were going to be stuck inside for days. The roads might be plowed quickly around here, but their location wasn’t on a city road. The odds of it being cleared right away were slim to none.

And they didn’t come from a place with snow. Their ability to drive in flurries probably didn’t exist, and this was no flurry.

I put the rest of the groceries away. It had been too slippery outside to go to the big store up the highway. Instead we went to the tiny mom and pop place. I didn’t mind that it cost more. Keeping money local was worth that sometimes. But they carried a ton of small items, and that was driving me up the wall. That and being unable to buy huge trays of frozen lasagna and danishes—items that would make our lives easier as we tried to feed everyone.

I'd done the best I could picking things out. Beyond breakfast, Colton and I were far from expert chefs. I went with easy, and if they wanted to be all entitled about it, they could figure out a way to feed their own selves.

It was safe to say I was feeling a bit grumpy.

And by bit, I meant a whole lot.

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Things were not going well with Colton. He loved me unconditionally. I felt that deep in my soul. He was walking on eggshells around me, though. I had him feeling that uncomfortable. I hadn't meant for him to see me like that, all broken. I tried to hide. I just wasn't strong enough. Not anymore. This infertility thing ate away at what fortitude I had left.

"Mateo." Colton called from the door of the pantry. "I brought someone to meet you." Behind him stood a younger man, no more than early twenties, his eyes a brilliant green reminiscent of the sea, his hair all messy and wet, most likely from the snow, his coat still on. His coat was very much not enough for this weather.

"Want to come in or me to go out?" Colton hadn't called me to the front and I had a feeling that meant that this was private to some extent.

"Here is good." They stepped inside the decent-sized room lined with shelves. "This is Scotty. He's looking for a job, and I thought maybe we could give him a temporary one until the crew is gone?" What wasn't he telling me? Colton wasn't one to pressure me like this, not about anything. Not even when I needed the push.

"We do have a lot of people here. What kinds of work are you familiar with?" I asked, thinking it a generic question. Instead of a list of past jobs, he tore out my heart.

"When I was young, I was in charge of the den bathrooms. You know, scrubbing them and such. And, as a teen, I had laundry added on. Not everyone's, just the Alpha family. And after Mama Flora died, I took on kitchen work. So, you see, I know how to do an awful lot of helpful things."

He scented of fur, wet fur, and I couldn't place what kind of bear he was, but I wanted to find that den and give them a what for, my protective side needing to do something for this man. To be working as he did at such a young age. Cleaning the den's bathrooms before he was even a teen. Did he have no childhood?

"Mateo." Colton grabbed my hand and gave it a squeeze. "What do you think? We need to do all those things." And we did, daily. It was wearing us down.

"Yes. Of course. I don't think we'll have full-time work once they leave, but for at least a month we can use the help. You could start as soon as tomorrow."

His face lit up at my words.

"I was wondering, since this is a B&B, if it would be possible for me to get a room as part of my salary. I have money for a little while, if not. I just thought—" His gaze fell to the floor.

"I just booked the last room," Colton said. "But maybe I could call the Red-Tailed Inn?"

"Or, if you don't mind," I put in, "you can stay with us. We have a pull-out couch. It's not amazing or anything, but it's a place."

"Thank you," Colton whispered close to my ear. I knew he'd agree. He wanted to help this man out, too, which was why he brought him here, to the pantry, for a sorta kinda job interview.

"I'll take it, and I'll work really hard. I promise."

"How about you promise me you'll work just hard enough?" I suggested, and he looked at me quizzically.

Colton said, “How about I show you to our apartment and then the three of us can figure out a plan for what to do when all these guests are stuck in the B&B because of the snow.” He was right. It wasn’t an if. It was a when. Tomorrow was going to be a very long day.

5

COLTON

I had to get outside, despite the weather.

“Look after the front desk for me, Mateo?” Normally I would have given my mate a kiss or added the word please, but I was being strangled. Not by a pair of hands, but with a scent.

“Where are you going, Colton? It’s freezing out.”

“Need to check on something,” I muttered, though I suspected the wind carried my voice away. “Be back soon.”

While I wasn’t a jogger, I was pretty fit. Working on a yacht all those years made sure of that. And so I ran. It was a weird time for exercise, but I pushed myself, pounding on the slippery streets until my heart couldn’t take it anymore and there was hardly any breath in my lungs. I skidded to a stop and caught sight of myself in an empty shop window. Snow was sprinkled in my hair, on my brows and my skimpy jacket, and I had a snow beard.

But the exertion had one positive effect. It got me away from the B&B and Scotty’s scent. I’d not reacted to any shifter that waysince the first time I stumbled on Mateo. All the years we’d been apart, neither of us wavered, knowing the other person was the one.

And now we were mated and trying for a family, and damn it we were happy. We were. We are. I'd heard stories of couples drifting apart when one mate wanted children and the other didn't. I didn't understand how that could happen because the mating bond was so strong. And we were both looking forward to becoming dads.

But I couldn't ignore the gaping chasm that was separating us and getting wider while neither of us talked about it.

Now that I'd stopped running, the cold was seeping into my bones, but one of the few places open this time of year was a diner farther down the street. A cup of coffee and piece of pie would warm me up and ready me for the jog home.

Hiding!

That much was true. My turtle was calling me out on my BS. He knew all about hiding away, having a shell which did exactly that.

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I snuck into the diner, which was pretty empty apart from a handful of hardy regulars who met each day for coffee and a chat. Sliding into a booth, I took off my damp jacket and I was still shivering when the waiter took my order. Coffee warmed me up somewhat, and I tucked into apple pie while perusing the menu trying to decide which pie to buy for Mateo. And Scotty. Now that he was sharing our apartment, I should take him a treat, too.

Treat. Wrong word to use when thinking of Scotty. I gulped my coffee, the caffeine flooding my veins and renewing my energy level.

There was a scuffle and mumbling near the entrance as a customer raced in. Shit! I grabbed the menu and hid behind it. Too late. A large hand plucked it away, and it was replaced with a grinning face. Benjamin.

“Hello, stranger.” The whale shifter studied me, all smiles. “Whatcha doing apart from sitting in a puddle of water?” He jerked his head under the table, and, sure enough, there was a puddle.

“Needed to get away from the production crew, and Mateo was craving pie.”

Wrong word. I knew it as soon as it was out of my mouth. His eyes lit up. “Craving? Is he? You didn’t tell me? I’m one of his closest friends. Why didn’t he say anything?” His voice was at shriek level 10 by the time he was done and had run out of breath.

I flapped my hands as heads glanced in our direction. “Inside voice, Benjamin.”

“Sorry.”

“And no, he’s not. We’re not.”

“Oh man I’m sorry.” The waiter brought Benjamin his coffee. “I know it’s been tough.”

The whale shifter and his mate, Randy, now had a baby of their own. We were one of the few couples in our friend group who were childless and not by choice.

“Have you had the talk?” he asked.

“We know about the birds and the bees, if that’s what you’re asking.” That brought a smile to my lips. The first one in a while. And that took my thoughts back to Scotty.

He made a face. “Very funny.” He took a fork and stabbed at my pie, and I slapped his hand away. “Tell me to butt out if you want, but Mateo is a shell of his former self.”

In another time and place, anyone referring to Mateo’s shell would have gotten a laugh. But there was nothing to laugh about in this situation, and Benjamin didn’t know the half of it. I’d run away instead of admitting it to myself and I couldn’t tell my mate. He’d be devastated.

I put my head in my hands.

“And you’re not doing any better. Go home to your mate, Colton. He needs you. You need each other.” He paid both our checks and, as I contemplated the wild weather while holding Mateo’s pie, Benjamin offered me a ride home. “Can’t have you out in this weather.”

Everything was calm as I crept into the B&B. I could hear Scotty at the top of the stairs, regaling one of the production crew with tales of wild storms when he was growing up. Mateo appeared from the direction of the kitchen, and I held up the paper bag. “Pie.”

“Thanks, babe.” He had a squirrely look on his face, which was odd. Normally he would have grabbed the bag, opened it and taken a bite of the treat without saying a word. Scotty’s laughter drifted down from the second floor, and we both peered upward. But the movement had us gazing at one another and then looking away as if we were kids getting caught with our hands in the cookie jar.

I couldn’t do this. Keep a secret from Mateo. We’d always been honest with one another. But this would hurt him, and he was already broken. I pulled him into the kitchen, and the door swung closed behind us.

“I have something to tell you,” I blurted out.

“Me, too.”

“I love you more than anything, and that will never change. We’re bonded for life.”

He nodded, the pie apparently forgotten in his hands. This was so hard. How do you tell the love of your life that you were attracted to someone else while still loving them? There was no rule book.

I went on, “It’s Scotty...”

Mateo squirmed and avoided my gaze. Had something happened while I was gone? Did Scotty fuck up somehow? The last thing I wanted to do was fire him, but perhaps one of our friends could give him a job. That would take him, his bear, and his tantalizing aroma away from me.

But my mate stepped in, not waiting for me to finish. “I’m infatuated with Scotty.” The look of despair on his face had me wanting to hold him close. “I’m so sorry.” A single tear streamed over his cheek.

“Then we have a problem,” I said. Or did we? “Because I feel the same way.”

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SCOTTY

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My job was fantastic. I was able to do a variety of things, chat with humans who led lives I hadn't even thought real. They traveled the world and made cinematic magic. Or at least that's how they packaged it. Maybe it was just one reality show after another. In any case, it sounded like magic.

And the benefits—I was paid to work and also got room and board. There was no other job like this out there, even if it was temporary. I stumbled into the right place, at the perfect time, with the exact skill set they needed.

So, why was I looking in the newspaper for a new job?

Because I was a fool. I had two amazing bosses, both of whom took me in when I needed it most. And what did I turn around and do? I decided to whack off in their shower to the mental image of them fucking.

Fine. Maybe decide was a strong term. It wasn't like I went into the shower—their shower—with the intent of wrapping my hand around myself and envisioning them in there with me—Mateopressed against the wall, Colton pounding into him as Mateo asked me if I liked what I saw. That happened all on its own.

Had it been the first time, I could've brushed it off as being lonely or being intoxicated by their scent or a plethora of other things. But I was a walking hard on. Each of my showers led to more hand time, and, when I slept, it was them I dreamed of.

And it wasn't right. They were a couple. And not just a human dating couple where I could convince myself Fate sent me here to my true mate. No, this was a mated

couple who loved each other deeply. My thoughts and impulses had no place here. The only thing that could result from this was someone getting hurt.

It was me who was going to feel the pain. Not them. They didn't deserve it. I needed to find another job. The newspaper had very few listings. I supposed it was to be expected this time of year, but I'd been optimistic.

But then again, no one puts things in the newspaper any more. The only reason I'd even started there was because a guest left it open on the table.

"Anything good?" Colton asked, startling me. "In the paper, I mean?"

I glanced down at it really quickly to find something, anything to mention. "Someone has some books for sale, and there's a hot cocoa thing at the bakery at the end of the month." There. That sounded like I hadn't been looking for a job and was just getting into the whole local scene.

"That's a lot of fun, the cocoa thing. They have treats and cocoa and a silent auction. You should check it out."

I folded the paper. "I might do that. I don't really know anyone in town."

"You know us," he reminded me.

"Yeah, I know an old mated couple." I was being an ass, but I couldn't help it. It was that or giving them a glimpse of what I felt, and that was off the table. "I'm done with my morning chores. I think I'm going to go for a walk." The roads were better, the storm long gone. With everyone back to work, there was no reason for me to stay here other than I wanted to.

"If you can wait a half an hour, I can come with," he offered.

That wasn't going to help me find a job or keep my dirty thoughts at bay. Not even close.

"Maybe Mateo can, too?" I offered. Because why the fuck not at this point.

"I'll check and see what he's up to. I suggested he take a nap." Which was something he did often. Mateo didn't scent ill. But he was always tired. Maybe it was from working so hard, and, with me here, it could get better.

Only I wasn't going to be here long, was I?

How had I managed to leave one hot mess of a life to walk straight into another? That took talent. Talent I didn't want to possess.

"Sounds good. I'm just going to take a shower and wash off the morning." I stood up, angling my body so he couldn't see my raging hard on. "Half an hour."

I ran up the steps and into their apartment where I was staying and grabbed some clean clothes from my backpack. I really needed to get some more clothes if I was going to get another job. Doing laundry every three days so you weren't wearing dirty stuff was fine when you had a place with a washing machine. I had a feeling, with my budget, the next one wouldn't.

"Scotty?" Mateo's voice called from the bedroom. "Is that you?"

"Yeah." I walked over to the doorway. "I didn't mean to wake you. Colton said you were taking a nap."

"You didn't wake me and, if by nap he meant looking at kittens at the county shelter website, then yes I was." He held up his phone. "They're adorable. I think this place needs a baby...I mean a fur baby."

“Colton was going to see if you wanted to go for a walk with us after my shower. Maybe we should go to the shelter instead?”

His face bloomed into the most stunning smile.

“Maybe.” He looked back at his phone. “She’s adorable.”

“I’ll be out in five,” I promised. If just looking at that kitten made him smile like that, I wanted to get him an entire litter.

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I went into the bathroom, determined to be as quick as I promised. My cock had other ideas and this time, instead of envisioning the mated couple being all kinds of nakedly mischievous, I saw Mateo on his hands and knees, that smile adorning his face only seconds before he brought me into his mouth.

7

MATEO

It was an odd mix of relief and new stress to realize both Colton and I were so drawn to Scotty. It wasn't unheard of to have mated triads, and the longer I analyzed things, the more I thought possibly we were among the lucky ones Fate sent a third to.

There was only one problem with my theory. Scotty didn't seem to return our interest. There were a few times when I wished a glance he gave me held added meaning or that he was showering so much because he needed help with a throbbing cock. But really, there was nothing.

He was a picture-perfect employee and nothing more. Even when we headed for the shelter to look at the kittens, he kept things professional along the way. His questions were all geared to the B&B. Was I looking for a cat for the apartment or the entire building? If it was the latter, what would that look like, and did hair color matter. All kinds of insightful things that had nothing to do with me and everything to do with my work.

“Why are you so deep in thought, love? Still sad they didn't have any kittens left when we got there?”

I shook my head. That wasn't it. In fact, that was a good thing. It meant they all had found their furever homes.

I'd come upstairs to take a shower and ended up sitting on my bed and delving into the land of overthinking. Colton coming up was exactly what I needed.

"Not really," I replied. "Maybe I should consider looking at the older cats more seriously." I fell back on the bed. "That way they can have a good home, too."

"Any one in particular?" He sat beside me.

I curled around him. "No. I was so busy being sad about the kittens... Maybe we can go back tomorrow. Just to look?" I peered up at him, trying not to let him see how much more was on my mind than that.

"We can do anything you'd like." He brushed a lock of hair from my face. "Did you want to talk about the Scotty thing some more?"

We'd left it that we both wanted more with him, but that we needed to not jump into things. Which was fine with me because I was terrified...terrified Scotty would leave us the second he knew. But the truth was that would happen either way, and waiting wasn't going to change the outcome. At the same time, pressuring him, when this was his home, felt crappy, too.

Not that we would mean for it to be a pressure situation, but when your two bosses are saying they want you, that is pressure.

"Yes. No. I don't know." I closed my eyes. "I want to ask him what he thinks but am scared that if I do, he'll tell me and it won't be what I want...what we want."

"Isn't it better to know?"

“Yes. Yes it is better to know.” I sat up. “Maybe after breakfast tomorrow the three of us can talk? I can even get us cinnamon buns and...is that going too far. Like trying too hard?”

He wrapped his arms around me. “No. It’s not trying too hard. It’s you being the strong, wonderful omega you are.”

“I don’t feel strong, and cinnamon buns are hardly symbols of strength.” I put my nose to his neck and inhaled deeply, letting his scent cover me like a balm.

“It shows strength because you’re putting yourself out there. And know this, omega mine, whatever happens, whatever he says, at the end of the day, I still love you with every fiber of who I am.”

“As I will still love you,” I told him.

We just held each other tightly until the bell from downstairs rang, buzzing upstairs in our place. Installing that thing had saved us so much time since we’d bought into this place.

“I’ll get it,” Colton said. “You get ready, and maybe we can go for a walk and get some pancakes.”

“You always did know the way to my heart.” He kissed my cheek and headed downstairs to see what our guests might need before we went for pancakes.

I’d been on floor duty and was a stinky mess, a stinky mess who probably shouldn’t have been hanging on my mate until after I cleaned up. He’d have never said that, though. He took me as I was...always. Even on the days when I was barely able to fake a smile. He loved me.

I headed into the bathroom and took a quick shower thinking about which of the many syrups I would have on my pancakes. Focusing on something simple and non-life-altering was exactly what I needed to get into the right headspace and not focus on all the what ifs.

The steamy water cascading down my body felt amazing and, when I stepped out and wrapped my towel around my waist, I felt a thousand times better. The phone rang, and I rushed out of the bathroom to grab it. People rarely called unless there was a reason.

“Hello,” I answered without looking at the number.

“Hey, this is Astor.” Astor owned the Red-Tailed Inn down the road. He was a friend, but if he was calling instead of texting, it was business.

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“I’m sorry. If you’re looking for a place for a potential guest, we are still booked solid with the film crew.” It was great money, but wow, they were here a long time.

“I wasn’t calling about that this time. I have a possibly awkward question for you.” That didn’t sound promising at all. “You know Scotty.”

“Yeah, he’s been working with us.” And we want him to be more than an employee.

“That’s what he said, and I was wondering...did you guys fire him?” Fire him?

“Why would you think that, Astor?” My heart was thudding a thousand beats a minute.

“He applied for a job and was really unable to articulate why he had to leave. He just said he did.”

The towel fell to the floor. I didn’t even care. All I could think about was Scotty leaving us. “Astor, I gotta go. Call you later.” I hung up, not waiting for his response. I needed to find Colton. We didn’t have time to be slow and patient. If we didn’t act now, we might lose Scotty without him even knowing we wanted him to be ours.

8

COLTON

Damn! I forgot to remind Mateo about the... Whatever had been in my head vanished as I wandered into our apartment and witnessed my mate, phone in hand, dripping

wet and naked. It'd been a while since we'd been intimate merely because we wanted each other. Lately, sex was all about making babies—or trying to and failing.

He was a hot omega, despite his exhaustion and weight loss, and I considered ripping my clothes off and taking him back into the shower. Or just taking him. On the floor or the bed. With his permission, of course.

But while I licked my lips and ran my gaze over his happy trail and down to his long thick cock, Scotty walked into the apartment. All three of us froze and there was a sharp intake of breath from the bear shifter as he witnessed my mate's naked body. Though it was probably Mateo's dick that had him pause because my mate's length was a beautiful sight to behold.

Mateo sent me a pleading look, so I tried to laugh it off. But my laugh sounded similar to a braying donkey and then I said, "Oops, you caught us. We thought we'd enjoy some afternoon dick... I mean delight. Yeah, afternoon delight." Based on my mate glowering at me, that wasn't what he'd been expecting me to say.

From the corner of my eye, I noted the bright pink blush spreading over Scotty's cheeks. Shifters were so used to being naked around one another, I would have expected him to laugh it off and tell us to have fun. Instead the poor guy was doing his best to avoid staring at my mate's impressive length, yet the more flustered he became, the more he kept glancing at Mateo's cock.

The unmistakable aroma of slick filled the air. Mateo's, for sure—that scent was mapped in my brain. This was a different one. And, since the only other omega in the room was Scotty, it had to be his. Poor guy. As well as catching us about to have sex—or so I'd told him—he was now reacting involuntarily to my mate's dick.

But while my brain was witnessing all of what was unfolding in the room, it couldn't process how to get out of the situation. Despite the extreme awkwardness, my cock

was itching to escape my pants, and I envisioned undressing Scotty and admiring his ass, his thighs coated in slick, his cock aroused and ready, and his tight hole. I gulped while telling myself I was a horrible person.

And now Mateo was aroused. He whimpered as he put the phone over his crotch, which didn't hide much.

"I'm s-sorry," Scotty sobbed and then choked out the words, "I have to go." He turned on his heel and fled.

"He's leaving," Mateo yelled.

"I can see that. He just took off down the stairs."

"No." My mate waved the phone above his head. "I mean, Astor phoned saying Scotty has applied for a job at the inn."

Fuck. "Stay there. I'll go after him."

Flinging myself downstairs, I almost tripped as a blast of cold air from the open front door told me Scotty had run outside. And there he was, pacing the snow-covered front garden, muttering to himself, "I can leave right now. I'll pay someone to collect my stuff. Yeah, yeah." His teeth were chattering because, like me, he wasn't dressed for being outside.

"Scotty, come back. It wasn't a big deal. We can talk about it."

"Please, Scotty." Mateo raced out, clad in only a bathrobe. What is he doing? "I'm sorry. Don't leave."

The omega paused and looked directly at me. "But it was big."

Mateo shrugged. “Well, yes, I’m known for my sizable cock.”

I jabbed my mate in the ribs and hissed. “Not what Scotty was referring to.” At least I didn’t think so.

Scotty stopped his pacing and raked a hand through his already tousled hair. “You’re right, Mateo. It was huge, and I...I wanted to get on my knees and swallow it. Lick your dick and suck it until you came in my mouth while Colton was pounding into my hole.” He shoved a hand over his mouth. “I love you guys and have no intention of tearing apart your relationship. That’s why I have to leave and find another job.”

“No!” My voice bounced over the snow as more flakes fluttered to the ground. I lowered my voice and clasped my mate’s ice-coldhand. “We...we want that too. We’ve both been fantasizing about you, and we’ve discussed it. We’re mated, but we both want you.”

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All the color had drained from Scotty's face.

"Come inside before my huge cock turns to ice and breaks," Mateo noted. That sounded like my mate. The one I fell in love with who often spoke before thinking.

I took Scotty's hand and hauled him inside. It was getting late, and most of the guests were in their rooms. We put a sign at the front desk letting everyone know service had finished for the night, and the three of us headed to our apartment.

I sat Scotty and Mateo on the sofa while I cranked up the heat and got blankets for the three of us. When I returned, my mate and Scotty were sitting awkwardly at either end of the couch. I made cocoa, and none of us spoke until we were warm and sipping our hot drinks.

How do we begin? By laying down some ground rules? I cleared my throat, and Mateo nodded, as if encouraging me to speak up. "Scotty, Mateo and I love one another and are bonded for life. That will never change."

The omega nodded. "You communicate without words sometimes, and the looks you give one another when you think no one else is looking show the depth of your love."

Mateo twiddled his thumbs, a sure sign he was getting impatient. "But we're both turned on by you. I want to kiss you and stick my tongue down your throat while you finger my ass. And then maybe Colton can fuck me while you watch and jerk off."

I rubbed a hand over my eyes, not wanting to gaze at Scotty in case Mateo's outpouring was too much. But when I did, Scotty was squirming, and there was a spot

of pink on each cheek. “That’s what I want to do,” he agreed. “I can’t wait to watch you both fuck, and maybe I can stick my tongue in your ass, Colton, while you’re inside Mateo.”

I nodded, unable to form a coherent sentence.

“Or put your cock in my hole,” my mate whispered. “Nothing says an omega can’t be inside another omega or an alpha.”

My mate was doing his best to make me come right here, right now, and I had to get the focus off cocks, holes, and slick. And based on Scotty’s wide eyes, fucking an alpha or omega would be a first for him. “While we don’t know where this is headed, I think it’s not just about sex.”

“Love,” Mateo said.

And Scotty added, “It could be love.”

“That’s right. Love.”

I stood and had Scotty move to the middle of the couch while I got on one side with Mateo on the other.

“What would you like to do, Scotty?” my mate asked, desire pooling in his eyes.

“I’d like to explore if I may.”

9

SCOTTY

I'd been turned down at the inn. I'd been so sure I had the job. Astor sounded like he was ready to let me start right away and then his mate gave me a tour and, all of a sudden, they didn't need anyone. Even their cats liked me. It made no sense.

I came back to the apartment to wallow in self-pity, only to find Mateo naked. Not mostly naked. No. He was buck-ass naked, and his cock called to me like a freaking homing beacon, slick trickling down toward my balls, my cock as hard as a rock.

And then Colton had to mention they were about to have sex, and I wanted to rip my clothing right off, my bear clawing at me to hurry up and let them claim me as their own. Only...I wasn't theirs, and they weren't mine.

Mateo's slick tickling my nose was more than I could bear, and I bolted.

Not once did I think they would even call after me, much less asking me to come back.

Which somehow led to us talking about being a triad.

No. Not a triad. But maybe a triad. It was so much I couldn't focus, my need taking over.

"I'm not a unicorn," I said, needing them to know my feelings would be involved. I'd said as much, we all did. But it felt like it needed repeating.

"No, of course not. You're a bear, and I can't wait to see your beast." Mateo said, his own beast close to the surface.

"Not a real unicorn. I mean, I'm not going to be with you and not have feelings unlike unicorns who usually fuck and move on."

Mateo's hands came up to cup my cheek. "I'm sorry we weren't clear on this. But feelings are already here. When we say love, we don't mean it lightly."

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My eyes were filled with tears of raw beautiful emotion.

“I was scared to believe it,” I admitted. “Scared I was just hearing what I wanted to hear, but I wasn’t. You and Colton, you want me, and not just because it would be fun, but because you do. I—I almost left,” I confessed. “I tried to leave, even had an interview?—”

Colton cut me off with a shh. “We know. Astor called to see if we fired you or what. It was the kick in the ass we needed to act on what we already knew we wanted.”

Mateo leaned in and pressed a small kiss on my lips. “It nearly broke me, thinking you’d be gone. I...this year has been rough, and you were a glimpse of sunlight.”

“I had to leave. I wanted you both so bad, and I didn’t want to get between you.” I leaned my forehead against his. “I didn’t know you felt the same.”

“And now that you do, maybe you can get between us in a funner way? Or on one end.” Colton pressed a kiss to my shoulder blade. “Or maybe we can play around with all the options.”

His hand came under my chin and guided my head back, where his lips met mine. There was nothing tentative about his kiss, and any doubts I might’ve had vanished as he poured all of his desire into it. Our mouths moved together in a dance of lips, teeth, and tongues as Mateo kissed my neck.

When our kiss broke, Mateo took his place, kissing me breathless.

“I think that went okay.” Colton pulled his bottom lip in with his teeth. “Part of me says we need to talk more, but?—”

“But your cock says we can speak with our bodies?” I filled in for him.

Ours.

Mates.

Ours.

My bear had to stop. This was us exploring this for the first time. It wasn't the time to seal ourselves to them. That wasn't something you just did.

I pushed him down. Let him be pissed. We could always go for a run after. Now was the time for us to explore whatever this was with my bosses.

Mates.

Yes, I conceded. Mates.

“You're talking to your bear.” Mateo stood up, his cock at eye level as it peeked through his robe.

I wanted to reach out and lick it. “I am. He says you're ours.”

“That's good because we say you're ours, too.” He held out his hand to help me rise, and I lost all self-control, my tongue darting out and licking the precum from his tip.

“Mmm.” I hadn't meant to make a sound, but it couldn't be helped. He was just too good. “Do you taste as delicious?” I asked Colton.

“That is something we’re going to have to discover, now, aren’t we?” He gave my shoulder a squeeze. “I think we need less clothing and more surface area.”

“The bedroom.” Mateo waved his hands, drawing my attention back to his offer to help me up. This time, I took it, loving the feel of his skin against mine.

“You’re almost naked.” The robe didn’t hide much and he slipped it off. I raked my gaze up and down his body. “Want to help me get your—get Colton naked as well? I bet his cock is hard and ready.”

I wasn’t sure where my confidence came from. I was an omega who sat back and let alphas make the decisions as to how fast things should or shouldn’t go. But right now, I wanted to lead things, at least until everyone was good and naked.

“I want a look-see of you two fucking as you watched me jerk off to the view.” I was past shy.

We were in the bedroom fast, both Mateo and I taking the alpha’s clothing off. We didn’t do a slow reveal. In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if there was a rip or two or possibly a button missing. We didn’t care. Colton needed to be naked with my tongue on his cock.

10

MATEO

There was nothing sexier than seeing Colton’s precum on the tip of Scotty’s tongue. Nothing.

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If I had been worried about Colton's jealousy by bringing another with us, it was long forgotten. "Colton, he's still wearing clothes," I whined. "Fix it?"

I wanted to watch, watch as my mate undressed Scotty.

Mate.

Ours.

My turtle needed to stop. He was getting ahead of us. Did I think he was right? Absolutely. But now wasn't the time for that. Now was the time for watching as our mate prepared a gift for me.

For that was what Scotty was, a gift from Fate. There was no other explanation for how he found us.

"You want me to undress him?" Colton asked.

I bobbed my head up and down. Want wasn't the right word. Need was. I needed to see him, touch him, taste him, to be inside him.

Whoa, where did that come from?

"Let's get you undressed, Scotty," Colton told him. "Our sexy omega is so slick already. Can you imagine how slick he'll be when he sees you without all these pesky clothes?"

Scotty swallowed, his need wafting off of him. If any of us made it without coming too soon, it would be a miracle. We were going to need multiple rounds. There was no way around it, and I was there for it.

Colton peeled Scotty's shirt off. Unlike when we undressed my alpha, this was slow and a new kind of torture. I wanted to see it all, and instead I saw an inch at a time, my mate kissing a path over his skin as he did. When the cloth finally hit the floor, I couldn't help it—my hand was around my cock.

“Someone's starting without us, alpha.” Scotty was watching my hand as it ever so slowly pumped my erection. “Do we have rules against that?”

Rules. Why did that single word sound so damn sexy?

“We have no rules yet. None. If Mateo said he wanted to fuck you, I'd have no choice but to sit back and watch.” He winked, his desire to have that happen palpable.

“But if he was fucking me while you watched, wouldn't your cock be lonely?” The mischief in Scotty's voice had me pumping faster. If they kept this up, I was going to come before his damn jeans were off.

“I suppose I could suck on something to keep from interrupting with updates on my hardness. I wonder what I could put in my mouth.” Colton said, licking his lips.

The groan coming from Scotty was 100 percent bear, his animal loving the sound of that.

“And if you got done sucking early”—Scotty ran a finger down Colton's cheek—“I suppose you could slide your cock into Mateo's ass and we could have a Mateo sandwich.”

I fell back on the bed, no longer allowing my hand near my cock for fear of shooting my load right then and there. “You two are going to make me come.” I scolded, trying to regain my control.

“That’s kinda the point,” Colton said, the sound of a zipper being pulled echoing in the air. “The entire point.”

“There are so many things I want to do.” I pushed myself up, just as Scotty’s jeans hit the floor, exposing his thick cock. Anyone who said omegas were less equipped never saw Scotty’s dick. It was so long, and I needed it inside me. I didn’t even care where.

“It’s a good thing we all live here.” Colton guided him to step out of the jeans. “Speaking of which, we are going to need a bigger bed for about half the things running through my head.” He chuckled. “Now, let’s get Mateo in that fine ass before he explodes on us and falls asleep while we are putting on our show.”

“On the bed, Scotty,” Colton ordered. He didn’t need to ask twice. I helped Colton prop some pillows under Scotty’s hips, elevating him enough to make access easier for me, but also put me in a position where Colton could slide on in when it was time. It was a good thing Colton had the wherewithal to think it allthrough because there was no thinking happening in my head. None.

“Look at that.” Colton pushed Scotty’s legs back, exposing his slick entrance. “You wanna taste, don’t you, mate?”

I nodding, words no longer possible. I wanted to feast on him. Make him come with my mouth.

“Just a taste. No more.” Colton was in charge. Good. I needed him to be. He understood what I wanted; they both did. Now it was time for it to happen.

I settled down on my knees, dipping my head and licking the path of precum that dribbled down to Scotty's crack. "So good." I lapped at his hole, circling it, wanting to use my tongue to show him what I was going to do with my cock, and so I did, breaching it slowly at first and quickly picking up speed, loving every second of it.

"Mate." A hand on my shoulder stopped me, and I looked up in my lust-induced haze to see my sexy mate staring down at me. "If you don't stop, he's going to come before you're inside of him."

"Is it time?" I didn't wait for an answer, getting up and lining myself up with his entrance. Scotty's cock glistened with saliva. "You had a taste, too."

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“And it was delicious.” Colton’s voice was husky with lust.

“Get inside me, omega! I need you.” Scotty broke through my visions of my mate sucking him off.

“Next time, I want to see.” I pushed inside him slowly. “Would you like that, Scotty? Would you like me to watch you get blown by my mate?”

“Yes!” Scotty gasped. I wasn’t sure if it was an answer to my question or an expression of how he felt with me being inside of him. It didn’t matter. All that mattered was this, us being connected.

I’d never fucked an omega. I’d been in my mate’s ass, sure. I wasn’t a complete newbie, but nothing prepared me for the feeling of natural slick almost sucking me inside and muscles holding on so tightly. I slowly started to move in and out of him, the pleasure on his face and in his needy little sounds encouraging me to go faster and harder, and so I did. I might not be able to knot, but I could have him seeing stars.

“Colton!” he called out. “Fuck me using Mateo.”

Hottest. Sentence. Ever.

“I need you both.” I cried out.

Colton climbed onto the bed behind me. “Ready?” he asked.

“For you, always.” I looked over my shoulder, and he kissed me as he slid into my

needy hole, the taste of Scotty on his tongue.

I started to move again, but Colton's hands on my hips stopped me. "Didn't you hear our sexy omega? He wants me to use your body to fuck him. I'm driving."

And drive he did, slamming in and out of me, and me, in turn, slamming in and out of Scotty.

Our omega, he'd said, and he was right. Scotty was ours. There were details to work out, but not that. He. Was. Ours.

Colton pounded into me, my orgasm rushing to the forefront and, just as my cum started to fill up Scotty's ass, my turtle took over for the first time in my life, and I found myself at Scotty's shoulder sinking my teeth into him as his teeth sank into me, his cum shooting between us.

I froze, scared I'd ruined everything, when Colton came, his knot filling me. "He's ours," he cried out.

"Yes," Scotty said, breath bated. "I'm yours. And after I catch my breath, there's some more marking to be done."

We collapsed into a pile of sweaty limbs: sated, mated, and happy.

11

COLTON

My eyes flicked open, and I checked the phone. I had thirty minutes before I had to get up and start the breakfast for our guests. Scotty would help, while Mateo usually got up later. But thirty minutes was plenty of time for some early morning delight.

I rolled over and whispered in Mateo's ear, "You awake?"

"For cock? Anytime." His eyes were still closed.

He knew me so well. My hand slid to his dick and gave it a pump as I nibbled the soft part of his ear. "You're a bad, bad turtle."

"Because I want your dick in my ass?"

"I was thinking of my tongue."

The third person in the bed sat up and whined, "Don't forget about me. My length is hard, and my hole's begging to be filled." He flipped over the covers and licked his lips as he eyed Mateo's hard cock. Scotty hovered over it and then Mateo and I both gasped as he sank onto it, and Mateo's cock filled him.

Now it was my turn to whine, giving my best toddler impression. "But what about me?" Mateo stretched out his hand, took my arousal, and pumped.

In minutes, all three of us had come. This was why we'd had to buy more bedding because our mattress needed a change of sheets and blankets every day. Not that I was complaining.

We lay panting, none of us wanting to be the first to get in the shower. While there'd been plenty of shower sex in the past weeks—and there would be again—the alarm went off, so there would be no showering with my mates this morning.

While I believed that no one could fix another person or another couple's relationship, Scotty coming into our lives and mating with us had filled a gap. And while we still longed for a child, the ever-present need for a baby wasn't uppermost in our mind every day.

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“Today’s the day,” Mateo announced.

He was excited because a new bed was arriving. We all were excited. The current bed would be cleaned, sanded down, and repainted before being donated to a local homeless shelter. But the mattress was a goner. We’d bought a new one, which had been delivered to the shelter yesterday.

We’d spent hours scrolling through online furniture sites and finally chosen the bed that made us happy.

When Scotty made no move to the bathroom, I sat up, resigned to having to get up. “I’ll take a shower first.”

“Okay.” Mateo yawned. My mate or I should say one of my mates. We three were mated and marked, bonded forever. Colton, Mateo and Scotty.

There was a heaviness to his voice, but he’d just been thoroughly fucked. But when I emerged from the bathroom, a towel wrapped around my hips, both my mates were asleep. This was Mateo’s morning routine. He always snatched another hour of sleep, which allowed Scotty and I to knock off work early while Mateo closed up in the evening.

“My dick was so good it sent him into a stupor.” Mateo opened one eye. “You get the breakfasts started, and I’ll unlock the front door.” He glanced at our bear shifter. “Let him stay here a while longer.”

Placing my lips on Scotty’s brow, I whispered, “Sleep as long as you like.”

The B&B was full and, with people ordering their meals at different times, it was midmorning before I looked around and discovered Scotty hadn't made an appearance. Our washing machines were running nonstop, and I needed him to take the rest of the bedding to the local laundry and pick up a load of fresh food from our friend Morgan.

But that wasn't why I was taking the steps two at a time. Scotty didn't stay in bed and shirk his duties. Him staying in our apartment was out of character.

"Colton?" Mateo's voice at the bottom of the stairs held a hint of panic. I didn't answer, but heavy pounding let me know he was right behind me.

He's breathing, was my first thought as I charged into our bedroom. Scotty was huddled under the covers, his eyes closed. The rise and fall of his chest reassured me. But, as Mateo tore into the room, my gaze fell on a bowl beside the bed.

"A barf bowl," Mateo gasped. "Poor baby. He's not well." He felt Scotty's brow. "He doesn't have a fever." My turtle mate kissed our bear mate's head, and he stirred and blinked before fixing his eyes on me.

"What time is it? Did I oversleep?"

"Don't worry about that. You've got an upset tummy. Stay in bed."

Mateo dragged me toward the door and whispered, "At some point he has to get up. Our new bed is arriving and being assembled. And every other bed in the B&B is occupied."

I pointed out we had a sofa, but Mateo fidgeted with a dish towel tucked into his waistband. "He should see a doctor."

Placing both hands on Mateo's shoulders, I comforted him by saying, "It's a minor stomach upset. If he drinks plenty of fluids and rests, he'll be fine tomorrow or the next day." But Mateo's chewing his bottom lip, and his eyes darting to Scotty had me adding, "If he's no better by this evening, we'll take him to the doctor."

He nodded. "He shouldn't be alone."

"He won't be for long. The bed's due to be delivered soon."

We gave Scotty a quick wash, and he brushed his teeth. After putting Scotty in clean pajamas, we got him on the sofa and covered him with a quilt. We bundled the bedding into the hamper, and Mateo stayed with our mate while I went back to work. He sent me ten-minute updates by text.

The guy who did minor repairs for us at the B&B arrived with two friends to dismantle the bed and remove it so the new one could be put in its place. I couldn't leave the front desk. With both my mates off work, I had no time to check on whether the putting together of the new bed by the delivery guys was proceeding as it should.

But when the workers thumped down the stairs, chatting among themselves about their plans for the evening, one handed me a form to sign saying the bed had been delivered and assembled. I wouldn't normally sign something without seeing the finished job, but I was confident Mateo would have messaged me if there was a problem.

"And congratulations," the guy said as he took back the form.

It was unusual to be congratulated on getting a new bed, but it was a milestone for us. "Thanks. We're looking forward to it. It should make for a more comfortable night's sleep."

“Huh?” He scratched his head.

Now it was my turn to be confused. “You’re talking about the bed, right?” Had Mateo let slip that the three of us were mated? It wasn’t a secret among our friends, but we didn’t usually share the details of our relationship with strangers.

“He’s going to have a baby. I recognize the symptoms. My mate’s pregnant with our third, so I’m an old hand at this.” He took one look at my face as I clutched my chest and tried to breathe. “Oops, I ruined the surprise, I’m guessing.” He slapped me on the shoulder. “Sorry about that.”

The front door slammed, but I was already halfway to our apartment. I burst in the door as Mateo was feeding Scotty a cup of broth.

“You’re not sick, Scotty,” I informed him.

“Could have fooled me,” he grumbled.

“And me.” Mateo glared at me as if to say I was an insensitive idiot.

“You’re pregnant!” I announced.

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MATEO

“I can’t wait to meet our baby.” I cupped my pregnant mate’s cheek.

Pregnant. Our mate was pregnant. The midwife wasn’t sure if it was my soldiers or Colton’s that created our little miracle. And really...it didn’t matter. All that mattered was that we finally found each other.

“Are you sure your friend is fine with us borrowing his pool when he’s not there?” Scotty had met Caspian a few times, and they got along well enough. His trepidation surprised me.

“He is. And, really, the other option is swimming in the ocean during a snowstorm. But if you want to, Colton and I don’t mind.” I mean I minded, but it was doable. Shifting back to human though? When the cold bit our skin, that was the worst.

“No. An inside pool is better.” A shiver ran down him.

His belly had already rounded to the most adorable bump. It was all I could do not to

rub it all the time. Scotty indulged me, but I did try to control myself. It wasn't easy.

Colton came in with a pile of towels. "Ready to go?" He was as excited as I was, but also nervous.

Our mate was a bear, all fur and claws and teeth. Us? We were sea turtles all...adorable. That was it. People looked at our beasts and saw cuteness. Which was fine when it was other people. With our mate? It was a bit scary.

"We are. It's the perfect day for a warm swim." I took Scotty's hand in mine. "I hope you like what you see." I hadn't meant to let my insecurities seep out like that, but they did.

"I love you both so much." He squeezed my hand back. "Even if you shifted to a jellyfish, I'd think you were the most glorious of beasts."

"Jellyfish?" Colton tilted his head in confusion. "You know they attack, right? They are not nice creatures."

"You stepped on him," I reminded my alpha. "Of course he stung you. I would, too."

"They're mean." He started toward the door. "And that is that."

We ended up driving to Caspian's. It was close enough we could've walked, and in the summer we would. But it was that snowy/rainy not quite spring but not really winter time of year, and it just wasn't fun.

We owed Caspian for giving us this time to be with our mate. Shifting and revealing one's beast often came before mating, but between the weather and the production crew living at the B&B, it just hadn't worked out for us. I could easily shift into my turtle in our bedroom. It wouldn't be a comfortable place for him to hang out, but

there was room for him, and Scotty would get to meet him.

Scotty's bear, on the other hand...shifting in our room would be silly. And so we waited. But the waiting was finally over.

"This is his pool...like he owns this?" Scotty's eyes widened as we entered the pool room. It was gorgeous; the warmth and the scent of briny air enveloped you like a hug when you stepped inside.

"He does a little better financially than we do," Colton teased. We did well enough, our investment in the B&B a great one for our future. But we were hardly close to Caspian's level of financial security.

And even though Caspian was wealthy to the point I couldn't fathom having a bank account the size of his, you wouldn't know it from meeting him. In fact, I was pretty sure his mate didn't have a clue when they met.

"I see that. And he's cool with fur in the pool?"

"His mate is a wolf, so yeah. Mateo's the one who used to have issues with hair." Colton gave me some side eye and then pulled off his shirt. "This works better if we're all naked."

We took off our clothes, setting them on the chaise lounges with our towels.

"You look so sexy." Colton's gaze was glued to our mate's rounded belly. "We could skip the whole shifting and focus on some other activities...I mean, if you wanted to."

"Or...you could show me your turtle, we can swim, and then, when we get home, we can have a clothing-free evening," Scotty countered. "Who goes first?"

“One of us and then you?” I wanted to be human when I met his bear the first time, but he probably wanted to meet our turtles the same way.

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“Colton, would you show me your turtle?” he asked, and Colton being Colton ran to the pool and jumped in, shifting in midair.

“Showoff.” I rolled my eyes, and Scotty and I both went to the pool’s edge.

“He’s...I had in my mind these tiny little turtles, but look at him. He has to be what? Four feet long?” Scotty knelt down, watching Colton intently.

“He’s alpha. I’m not as long, but I’m just as adorable.”

“I never said he was adorable.” He looked back at me. “Is that what people say?”

I gave a nod.

“No, not adorable. Graceful. Magnificent. Stunning. But not adorable.”

No one had ever described us that way before and even though this was about Colton, it still hit me.

“Let me see your beast.” I watched as Scotty took two steps back and called forth his fur. He stood there slightly taller than I for a few seconds then went on all fours, his head brushing my bare skin.

“Wow.” Words were evading me. Wow would need to do.

He rubbed up against me and then dove into the water and paddled to our mate.

I dove in after him, shifting once I was in the water.

Scotty could swim. I didn't know a great deal about bears, but I had some stereotypes in my head, and one of them was that only polar bears swam this gracefully. How wrong I'd been.

We swam, played, and let our beasts get to know each other for hours. I couldn't remember such a fun day. Not this kind of fun, anyway.

And when it was time to get out and go home, we did exactly as planned, spending the rest of the day in our rooms...naked.

EPILOGUE

SCOTTY

"You should rest," Mateo said for the fifth time. In theory, he was right? I was about to have a baby—our baby—and that took a lot of energy out of you. But he was forgetting something really important: it was leaf peeping weekend.

While it was not an official holiday, it was around here. The tourists dried up for a few weeks as summer turned to fall, but the second a leaf turned red, they were flooding back in for a weekend getaway. In theory, this weekend was predicted to be the pinnacle of the season, and there was no room in town anywhere.

Unlike when I first came and the guests were all there for work, these people were here for the full experience. Mateo had even worked a couple of boat tours earlier this morning to help with the influx of people. For the most part, I was able to do less taxing things such as making hot cider for those who wanted it after a brisk walk

But it was time to turn over all of the rooms and that meant manual labor for all of us.

“I will sleep in tomorrow,” I promised. “I’m not even doing the hard stuff. Colton stripped all the beds and brought down the towels. I’m just loading the machine, switching to the dryer, and folding. It’s no big deal.” And with our new larger capacity machines, it really wasn’t.

“You’re growing a human,” he said sternly.

I wasn’t. Not really. I was growing a shifter, but with guests likely to post their head in and ask a question about the town, we used the word human.

“I am.” I smiled brightly and folded another towel. “And once we get things taken care of here, I’ll relax.” Only the towels were left. The beds made, the bathrooms cleaned, the floors vacuumed. “And you’re folding twice as fast as I am, so we will be done soon.” Gods I hoped that was the truth. My back was killing me, our baby was playing soccer on my bladder, and I hadn’t had a decent night’s sleep in a week.

“Go lie down.” Colton came up behind me and settled his hands on my rounded belly. I hadn’t even heard him enter the room. “I’m done upstairs, and I can finish here.”

“I feel like you two are in on this nap plan together.” I leaned into him. “Is it all a ploy to get me naked?” I was teasing. So very much teasing. Until about a week ago, I couldn’t get enough of them. But things had changed.

The midwife said it was a sign the baby was near. I surely hoped so. I was at the point in this pregnancy where I was out of breath walking up the stairs, I waddled instead of taking normal steps, and my belly went through the doorway way before I did. I was done. Put a fork in me done. Only problem was our little one didn’t want to get out. Nope. They liked it in there very much.

“I don’t think either of us would say no to that.” Mateo winked at me. “But it will

have to wait until after your nap.”

“Fine. I’ll go and be a slug.” And really sex sounded delightful.

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I left my mates and went up to our bedroom, climbed into bed, and fell sound asleep.

I woke, covered with sweat, to the sound of something crashing in the living room area. I shot out of bed as fast as my body would take me and into the room to find Mateo moving the couch. He'd knocked over a lamp in the process, and I had a feeling that was the cause of the noise.

"What are you doing?" I asked him, and he jumped. He mustn't have heard me coming in.

"I don't know. The room's not ready for a baby, though. There are cords and sharp corners and no comfortable place to sit." He didn't even look up at me. He was completely frazzled.

"Mateo. It's fine. Babies don't even roll over for months."

"I've been trying to tell him that." Colton walked in with a pile of comforters and quilts from the storeroom.

"What's with all the blankets?" Had I woken up in an alternate dimension? Or maybe I was still sleeping.

"Mateo asked for them." He set them on the floor where the couch had been and picked up the lamp. "Why are you wet?"

"Me? I was sweating in my sleep." But, come to think of it, I wasn't hot, and not all of me was wet.

“I don’t think that’s it.” Colton rushed to me. “Did your water break?”

“Maybe?” Was it really baby time? If so, why wasn’t I in pain? Lots and lots of pain.

“Mateo, I’ll be back to help you in a bit,” Colton told him. “I’m going to help our mate shower and change the bed.”

Mateo didn’t even look up, his entire focus on rearranging the room.

Peeling off wet clothing was not easy, and I appreciated the help. He ran and changed the bedding as I stood under the warm water. It was there that, for the first time, I felt my belly tighten. It was no big deal. Had I not been focused on paying attention to my body I might not even have noticed.

The second one came as Colton returned. It was enough to notice. Everything I read said they shouldn’t be changing noticeably yet. The books were wrong.

“Let’s get you cleaned up, and maybe we can talk our mate into leaving things be. It’s like he got your nesting instincts.” He sudsed-up my hair, massaging the shampoo into my scalp.

“I wasn’t that bad, and I haven’t done much at all this week.” Last week I was dusting, glass cleaning, meal prepping, all the things. They said nesting came right before the baby, but, in my case, it came early.

“No. You have relaxed this week. Maybe that’s why Mateo took over.”

He washed me and helped me rinse off, wrapping me in soft towels as I climbed out.

“I made the bed. Did you want pj’s or a bathrobe?” He patted the bed for me to sit down.

“Just a robe, I guess. I want to check on Mateo.” Something in my gut told me this was more than just him being excited about the baby and worried about their safety. He made my nesting look like a normal quick tidy.

Shit.

He couldn't...

But maybe...

I pushed myself up and headed into the other room, Colton still searching the closet. Mateo had moved everything and sure enough he had made a nest. He wasn't nesting for me. He was nesting for him.

“Mateo, love?”

He looked up at me, his hairline sweaty and, unlike with me, with real sweat.

“Do you see what's happening here?”

He gave a nod and rushed to me, hugging me the best he could with my belly in the way. “I'm not trying to be like this. This is your baby. I don't know why suddenly I can't help acting like I'm the one about to give birth. It must be all those false hopes or... I'm sorry, my love. Truly I am. This has nothing to do with you or my love for our child.” His tears wet my shoulder.

“Oh no, honey.” I cupped his cheeks and guided his face up to look at me. “This isn't some manifestation or whatever you think this is. You're about to lay an egg. This...the nest thing...bears don't do that. Only sexy turtles about to lay an egg do.”

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My belly squeezed, and I had to bite back a groan. Mateo needed me now. He didn't need me to be bringing the focus back to me.

"No. I haven't had any symptoms."

"You've been tired," I reminded him.

"Because we're busy," he countered.

"Not as busy as you were tired yesterday, and there was the whole not liking clams last week. You love them."

He nodded.

"You said they smelled bad, but they were fine."

He nodded again.

"And today, eggs were gross," I reminded him

"You think I'm going to lay an egg?"

"What?" Colton was a freaking cat today. He kept coming in without me noticing.

"I think this"—I pointed to the full-on nest of pillows and blankets encompassing the space that had once been our couch—"Is in preparation for Mateo's egg."

“But he...he doesn’t even look pregnant.” Which was true, he didn’t, but he had filled out a bunch since we’d gotten together.

“Time to call the midwife,” I said, my teeth clenched. This round was pretty freaking intense.

He got hold of the midwife and by the time they got there, I was screaming loud enough with each contraction that the entire B&B had to be aware it was baby time, and Mateo was naked and pacing, mumbling about how he thought he was just getting fat.

“I can’t tell who is going to deliver first,” Rain, the midwife on call, said. “It’s going to be close.” They looked far more frazzled than I.

“I’m not ready,” Mateo said. “Have him go first.”

Rain broke into laughter. “That is not how this works.”

He was right. It wasn’t. A half hour later, Mateo lay on the pile of blankets beside his bed. And I ended up giving birth beside him, his strength giving me the strength I needed.

He groaned, and I yelled. I screeched, and he moaned. We held one another’s hands as Colton panted and encouraged us. And finally, with the baby’s head out, I pushed our little one into the world as Mateo grunted and Colton yelled, “We have an egg!”

“You have a beautiful baby girl.” Rain placed her on my chest as I lay on the makeshift bed Colton had created for me, my head nestled on the nest beside our egg, my eyes glued to Mateo. She was the most perfect being I’d ever laid my eyes on. The joy inside me was almost overwhelming.”

“We did it,” I said, my eyes tearing up. Mateo had longed for a child for so long and,

as deeply as he loved our little girl from the moment he learned of her existence, I hadn't been able to help sensing a sadness in him for not being able to give that to his mate.

"We did." Colton nestled between us. "We should call her Alora, our dream."

It directly translated to my dream, but he was right. It was perfect.

"Alora," Mateo and I said at the same time.

"You're going to have your hands full," Rain said,

"Not as full as our hearts," Colton said. "Not as full as our hearts."

I didn't think it was possible for my heart to be fuller than it already was, but three weeks later, when our son Lorento hatched, I was proven wrong.

Aspen didn't know you could accidentally become Alpha of a Den, but that's exactly what he just did.

Alpha bear shifter Aspen was ready to begin his new life in the big city. He has a job lined up, a lease signed, and his truck packed. All he has left is to get there. Too bad that's easier said than done, because his truck picked the middle of nowhere to break down—alongside a bear den's land of all places. When Aspen seeks permission to spend the night, he plans to keep his head down and just mind his own business and he does, until he hears the scream that changes everything.

Omega bear shifter Lucian hates his den. No, that isn't fair. It isn't the den he hates as much as the leadership. When the Alpha he had most of his life died, he crossed his fingers the new one would bring their den into this century. He didn't—the new Alpha is not only old-school, but also cruel. When rumors of an alpha bear seeking refuge until his truck is repaired reach him, Lucien forms a plan. If he can convince

the shifter to take him when he leaves, he can escape this horrible life.

Sneaking out to find the new bear sounded like a great idea, until Lucian gets caught. His den Alpha is a strike first kind of guy, and strike he does. Lucien knows better than to scream, as it only makes the punishments worse, but scream he does, the pain too much to hold inside. A flurry of fur and teeth, a dead Alpha, and the scenting of his fated mate leaves the visiting shifter as their new Alpha.

So much for best laid plans.