



Searching for His Omega

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Description: I've been searching for things all my life. That's what raccoons do.

Eventually, my passion for finding the treasures in other people's trash led to me opening the first thrift store in Oliver Creek. People come in for all kinds of things. Some want to enhance their home with coveted vintage items. Others visit out of necessity when things are tough.

I take great care in my shop, making sure things are easy to find and given all the respect they deserve.

That's what scavengers like me do. Some think we rummage through the trash and eat rotten food, but I give new life to things others consider waste.

The one treasure I haven't been able to find? My fated mate. Each time the door opens, I lift my eyes, hoping they will walk in.

One day they might. Miracles happen in Oliver Creek every day.

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Searching for His Omega is the latest in the Omegas of Oliver Creek mpreg series by Lorelei M. Hart. It is a super-sweet with knotty heat mm shifter mpreg romance featuring an omega bear who thought he wouldn't find a mate, and an alpha raccoon who hopes every day that he will, friends from other stories of the Omegas of Oliver Creek, an adorable baby or two, and a guaranteed happily ever after. If you like your mpreg against all odds, your happily ever afters complete with a bundle of joy, and your mpreg with heart, Searching for His Omega is the book for you. While each book in the Omegas of Oliver Creek series is set in the same world, they can each be read as standalones.

Searching for His Omega

M/M Mpreg Shifter Romance

By

Lorelei M. Hart

Chapter One

Rue

People call us trash pandas, claim raccoons spend all their time going through dumpsters and dining on disgusting bits of rotted food and even the sticky, slimy wrappers it comes in. People are not completely wrong.

At least where natural raccoons are concerned. Even in their case it's not because they prefer garbage, but they are resourceful omnivores who are excellent at surviving in many environments. And in urban or even small-town areas, trash cans and dumpsters are the best spots to find food. If someone set out a plate with freshly cooked food for them, they would almost certainly choose that over old moldy burger buns.

They are also fans of koi ponds where fresh fish can be caught with their dexterous hands.

Unfortunately, our woodland neighbors' reputations tended to cling to those of us of the shifter variety and often led to bullying from more admired groups like wolves and bears, big cats.

Fortunately, in my case, I was raised in a "gaze" as a group of raccoons are named,

with a strong and loving family, and the shifters who were our neighbors were more enlightened than many. I didn't know about the trauma others went through until I was a teenager and a visitor told me.

But I did recognize that we were not the wealthiest of shifters, and while we weren't digging in the trash for our meals, we did have to be careful. No wasted food at our home. Clothes worn until they were patched beyond repair. Dollar store shampoo and conditioner. All those sorts of things. We were thrifty.

And, one day, while walking home from my job as a server at a local restaurant in Oliver Creek, where I'd moved to be independent after high school, that word stuck in my head.

Thrifty.

This town had attracted me as it had many others because it was a growing place with lots of opportunities, and I had arrived with my savings from my teenage summer jobs and a dream of one day having a business of my own. But what could it be? Renting a room over someone's garage enabled me to add to my bank account as did getting a meal a day from my job. I had skills at saving money.

So, that day, when the word thrifty was bouncing around inside my skull, just as I passed an empty storefront a block from Main Street, I knew where my future lay. Sure, the town was thriving, but there were so many people working in the service industry who had to watch their pennies. And with a tourist focus, in some areas, the people whose daily work supported the town were underserved.

I'd gone over and over the options, and had almost decided on a laundromat when the revelation came to me. A thrift store. The only real question was why it took me so long to come up with it. As a kid, I'd loved shopping at the local secondhand store. We bought as many items as we could at the place, one more way to save money.

The storefront was a remnant of the time when Oliver Creek had been a dying town. A dusty plate-glass window hid the inside, but there was a sign in the bottom corner with a Realtor's number. For lease.

Could I do it? I wasn't sure. But I pulled out my phone and tapped in the number on the sign. I'd never know until I tried.

Leaving my job at the restaurant was harder than I'd anticipated. Both because I really liked my bosses and because I hadn't been without an official job, a source of income, since I was fourteen. But I couldn't do what I needed to in terms of getting my business ready to open and serve customers dinner at the same time. In order to do this right, it would take all of my concentration. And I'd been preparing for this for such a long time. But spending instead of saving? That truly went against the grain.

Chapter Two

Pascal

I'd been gone so long I barely recognized my home town. "This is Oliver Creek?" I asked even though the rideshare I was in had passed the welcome sign only a few moments before.

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“This is it. Did you want to change your destination?”

The driver had been warm, and the car was comfortable. Both of which I appreciated after a long flight and an even longer time away from home.

“No. I haven’t been home in a long time. Everything seems new.”

“My husband and I have been here a couple of times for the food truck festivals. They happen monthly. Dragon’s Breath Smokehouse, owned by a dragon and his mate, is something else. I dream about their brisket.”

Chuckling, I pressed my nose against the window and noticed all the changes. “The last time I was home, the diner was about to close down, and now...there’s a market even?”

“Looks like it. I heard the diner is owned by a kangaroo shifter of all things. Serves Australian and American classic menus. All this talk of food is making me hungry.”

“Do me a favor and take the long way through town, will ya? I would like to see all the new things.”

“Sure thing.”

Darren, the driver, took a left at the next corner. Some things in Oliver Creek were the same on that first street. The newspaper office was still there, even though the lights were off. I wondered if they even produced a paper anymore. The last time I was here, it was not much more than a two-page newsletter with mostly fluff pieces

on the local residents. And, in a town like ours, the gossip was a bullet train in comparison to the paper.

City hall looked the same but with better landscaping.

But the next turn revealed so much. A new fancy restaurant. Signs directing tourists to the wildlife preserve and the vineyard.

A peanut butter and jelly restaurant?

A smoothie truck?

A bakery?

“No wonder you come here to eat,” I said, chuckling.

“I’m telling you. It’s the best place. You’re lucky to be from here. My husband and I have been watching the real estate market, hoping someone wants to sell, but as soon as one goes up for sale, someone grabs it up.”

Interesting. The businessman in me wondered if building some housing might be a good investment.

“What in the world is that?” I asked as we came to a stop near a store with a grand opening sign in the front window.

“Oh! I’m excited about that one. That’s the Trash Panda. He’s a former server in one of the restaurants who has opened a thrift store. If you’re having a baby, you go in there and he will give you a new baby setup with everything you need. In these times, we all need to help each other. Having babies is an expensive venture.”

“Mmm. Do you have children, Darren?”

I had to admit, I’d wanted children for a long time. But having children required an omega. While everything in my life was black and white, numbers and figures, that part of my life was left to Fate. She would either let me meet my soul mate or she wouldn’t. Clearly, the odds hadn’t been so good thus far.

“I do. Two of them. Two daughters. They are spoiled rotten, I’ll tell ya.”

“What a blessing.”

We drove around the town a bit more, and I absorbed everything I could. The friend I had staying in my house while I was gone had moved out a few days before, so I would have the place all to myself.

I didn’t know if that was a good or bad thing. There was a time when I relished solitude. The silence. The freedom to do as I pleased without answering to anyone. As those years went by, I began to hunger for connection.

Glances across the room.

Smiles and laughs shared over a movie.

Someone to cook for and cook with.

While I was glad to be in my own space, I wasn’t looking forward to the only voice in my home being mine.

My bear wasn’t pleased about it, either. He had needs as well. My alpha animal wanted someone to take care of. Love. Needed someone to lean on and feel safe and secure with while they were in my arms.

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I craved an omega in my life. I would love him with everything I had. Everything I was.

“Here we are.”

I looked at my house. James, my housesitting friend, hadn’t done anything beyond the bare minimum. I didn’t expect him to and didn’t ask, but my home looked so bare. No flowers. No hanging plants. No porch swing or anything else that made it look like someone loved the house.

Even my mailbox was a sterile cream color with stuck-on numbers.

“Thank you.” I paid him on my phone and tipped him handsomely. He hadn’t had to take me around town.

“Thank you,” he said. “Appreciate the tip. Maybe I’ll see you around. My husband and I are here a few weekends a month.”

“I hope so, Darren. Have a great day.”

I retrieved my suitcases and sighed. It was good to be home, but I had work to do.

Chapter Three

Rue

Somehow, we got to the grand opening.

I'd worked so hard for this moment, for my whole life, it seemed, but the reality stole my breath.

Weeks of cleaning, stripping wallpaper, sanding, and refinishing the wide oak boards of the floor. I thought at first, I could do it myself, but a few days in, my omega father called to ask if I had anything for a young cousin to do. And so, Alfred arrived, and while I hadn't wanted to take a salary, he made himself so useful so fast, I owed my dad a big thank-you.

"What do we have left, boss?" he asked, coming in from the back room, wiping his hands on a towel. "The shop looks great!" He had a streak of cream-colored paint on one cheek, the results of the final trim work.

"It does." I turned in a circle, taking in the reclaimed space. It was immaculate. And, save for shelves and racks and a long counter, empty. "Now comes the fun part." I hoped that once we got going, we'd have lots of people dropping things off that they no longer wanted but that still had lots of good use, but I had a line on a shop closing down in the city who had offered me a great deal if I took everything they had left. "Now, you take the new box truck and get our stock."

"I guess they have a lot of good stuff, huh?" Alfred grabbed the keys off the hook behind the counter.

"They did last time I was there, but it's probably kind of picked over now. Here's the check for what we agreed on, and I'll be here when you get back." As I watched Alfred turn onto Main Street, I hoped he'd find enough left to be worth the price. Maybe I shouldn't have been so quick to make the deal. It was such a small amount of money, I hadn't felt like I could argue though.

Now, as I prepared to open the doors on the day of our grand opening, I looked around at the store a bit overwhelmed. Every rack was filled, the shelves piled high,

and the summery window display made me smile every time I looked at it. Turned out, the retiring shop owner in the city hadn't put a whole lot of effort into liquidation once he and I made our deal. When Alfred returned with the box truck piled to the roof, we'd begun the exhilarating job of sorting and pricing. What were we likely to be able to sell? What was too worn and had to be discarded?

In addition to the contents of the truck, we'd had donations. I hadn't made a move to let people know we were open to them—but I hadn't had to. Maybe it was because we were giving a percentage of profits to local charities or because they wanted to help make things available to those who could use it. Or maybe we offered an opportunity to get rid of items they wanted out of their home.

But whatever their reason, the clothes and housewares, etc. we received from the denizens of Oliver Creek were head above what we had bought. Name-brand clothing. Trendy sneakers. Beautiful glassware... Even now, the back room held almost as much as the sales floor, but most of what was in the front came to us from the kind local citizens.

Alfred was outside attaching the rainbow archway over the door, while I set up the station for iced water and tea, along with cookies, on one end of the long counter. I wasn't sure what type of business had occupied the space before—the Realtor had been vague, and nobody in town seemed to remember, but whoever it was had built the counter out of dark, gorgeous wood along an entire wall, and we were still figuring out how to make the best use of it.

He came inside, accompanied by a buzz of sound.

I peeked through the gleaming front window. "A few people out there?" I could see three or four.

"A few?" Alfred's smile lit up his entire face. "Why don't you go outside and see our

little group of eager customers.”

“All right.” I glanced at my watch. “It’s just about time anyway. I hope we have some measure of success.”

“Me too.” He stepped behind the counter, next to the credit card device—I could never remember what they were called, but Alfred had been adamant we needed one despite the fact I figured we’d be mostly cash from small sales. “Good luck, boss.”

“Good luck to us both.” I straightened my shirt and ran my fingers through my hair. “We’re going to need it.”

I stepped outside the door and turned to greet the older gentleman who stood immediately to my left. “Good morning.” I reached to shake his hand. “Welcome to…”

Alfred’s laughter carried from inside, and I took in the line down the block and round the corner of Main Street. “Might be more than a few,” he called.

We had to police the number of people who came in at one time to keep from violating the fire code. And since the chief of the volunteer fire department was one of the customers, we’d have been caught if we cheated.

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Everyone was so kind. I'd thought we'd serve the less financially well off of our neighbors, but I recognized business owners as well, restauranteurs, farmers, the vintners. All sorts of people had shown up for the event, and my instant panic that there wouldn't be enough cookies and tea was quelled when the long counter filled with trays of sandwiches from PB&J, pitchers of smoothies and paper cups, all sorts of baked goods from the bakery and the kitchens of kind locals...and I could only hope nobody tried to claim we were selling wine because we had a whole row of bottles from the tasting room of our local winery. Even barbecue from the food truck.

Our grand opening was a party, a true welcome to the community, and in addition to laughter and feasting, we sold so much, we went from "OMG what will we do with it all" to spending the night restocking from the back and figuring out where we would find more stock. The charity we supported would be very happy with their share.

Of course, every day wouldn't be like this, but from what our customers said as they checked out, we'd filled the need I'd seen, and everyone, rich and poor alike, planned to visit again soon.

Trash Panda was an instant success.

Chapter Four

Pascal

Our high-tech way of exchanging keys for the house was mind-blowing. I picked up the plant pot, currently empty, and there was the key. James and I had a system. It had worked so far but it might be the last time I ever came home to this place. My

soul had been tugged in two directions in the past few months. Part of me wanted to sell everything in Oliver Creek and move on. With my investments and businesses abroad, I spent a lot of time on the road, not even in this country.

But the other half of me held onto this home. More a house than a home, but it anchored me somehow. There was a reason, beyond my understanding, of why I held onto this house. Held onto my residency in this town.

Coming back and seeing all the progress, maybe there was something in store for me here. I would have to explore that scenario more.

Sighing, I went inside and put my suitcase by the front door. Nothing had changed. The surfaces of the tables were bare and freshly dusted. A wall of built-in bookshelves held books I no longer had an interest in. The couch had a dip where James must have liked to sit but, other than that, it looked fresh off the salesroom floor.

The air smelled of cleaning chemicals and the faint scent of my bear shifter friend. He was a bit of a wanderer, so, in between my work-related trips, he often couch-surfed with his friends and traveled around the country, something I hadn't done myself but wanted to. I'd visited a lot of countries but had never been to Glacier National Park. I longed to see the colored rocks beneath the glass of the clear water. Maybe one day.

I changed into jeans and a T-shirt. Oliver Creek was miles more casual than many places I'd been, and it was one thing I was grateful for.

The fridge was empty, so, after a tour of the house, I decided to make a list on my phone and go for groceries. I loved to eat out, but after nothing but restaurant meals for months, all I wanted was some simple home-cooked food.

A new market was within walking distance as was most of the places in Oliver Creek.

That was one thing I loved. The last time I was here, I'd only stayed a few nights, and now, I wondered how I'd missed all the changes.

The entire town was more alive. Buildings and houses were freshly painted with bright colors and whimsical features that made me want to keep walking. It also gave me ideas. If I did choose to keep my home here, I wanted to do something with it. Make it match the cheer and happiness of the others.

On the way to the market, my bear nudged me in the direction of the Trash Panda. Such a cute name, even though it was what humans and many shifters called raccoons. Didn't know if they meant it as a dig or something adorable but, to me, the sign on the front with a raccoon was great for getting customers in. It even had me wondering if there was something for me inside. A treasure I didn't even know I wanted.

As I passed, I slowed at movement inside. But it wasn't the customers sliding hangers along the metal poles or picking up trinkets that caught my attention.

It was the man behind the counter. I stared through the main window as he folded clothes and arranged things in between checking out customers. He smiled and nodded, but, once they were gone, his shoulders relaxed.

Being around people wasn't his first nature.

I noticed his behavior, but what first struck me was how beautiful he was. Longer hair. Deep brown eyes. A slender figure from what I could see from here. My bear urged me on, wanting me to go inside. Meet him. Ask him something. Say something funny to make him smile again.

Anything to have an interaction with him.

I'd never had my bear be so interested in someone before.

Not like this.

The store owner, or I assumed the owner, looked up as though he could hear me thinking about him. As soon as his brown eyes met mine, they widened, and before I could smile or wave, he was gone—ducked behind the counter and nowhere to be seen.

Perhaps I'd scared him.

Maybe he had anxiety or was shy.

Either way, the last thing I wanted to do was to make him more nervous or frightened. I ignored my bear's growls and went to the market.

One day, I would come back and go inside, pretending to shop for something but really wanting to meet the man behind the counter.

And hopefully, next time, not scare the crap out of him.

Chapter Five

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Pascal

After a couple of days of cooking for myself, I'd had enough. Oliver Creek boasted restaurants and food trucks of every kind, and I wanted to try some of them out. First stop on my list was the diner. I chuckled to myself as I approached it. The owner had named it The Lot, which was perfect for a place that served Australian and American diner cuisine. I'd been to Australia several times and was excited to try some favorites and some new things.

No place on earth had coffee like Australia.

I went inside and was seated at the counter since I was alone. Fine by me. I liked to look at the opening between the counter and the menu and watch the cook hard at work.

"What can I get for you?" a young man wearing a shirt with the restaurant's logo and name on it and a folded paper hat atop his head.

"One of the meat pies and..." I slid my gaze over to the American part of the menu. "The blueberry cheesecake pancakes, please."

"Coming right up."

While the waiter put my order in, I picked up a sheet of newsprint from a stack on the counter. With no price in sight, they appeared free for the taking.

I'd been right before. The Oliver Creek newspaper had turned into a newsletter, and I

had one in my hand.

There were postings about new openings. Gossip about certain real estate being grabbed up as well.

But the bottom part of the page zoned me in. A whole article about the Trash Panda.

“Here you go.” I looked up to see the server slide plates across the counter in front of me. “Meat pie and blueberry cheesecake pancakes. Sure I can’t get you a coffee?”

I nodded. “Yes, please. I forgot to order that.”

While he poured the cup, I showed him the article. “Have you heard of this place? The Trash Panda?”

“I haven’t.” The waiter walked away to take another person’s order.

An older gentleman to my left spoke up. “The Trash Panda is the new thrift store in town. Owned by a sweet man named Rue. Have you been there?”

“I haven’t yet but I’m wanting to visit. Have you?”

He nodded, sipping his coffee. “I have. Donated a bunch of stuff too. Things gathering dust in my attic. It’s for a good cause, you know?”

“What cause?” I asked. Maybe he was confused. This was a thrift store. Not a charity auction.

“Rue donates a percentage of his proceeds to the Omegas in Need fund. It’s for postpartum omegas who sometimes don’t get the best care for one reason or the other.”

Postpartum omegas not getting good care was a damned shame. They gave birth. They were the lifeline of our kind. “Rue is the owner you said?”

“That’s what I just said,” the man laughed. “He’s a raccoon shifter. Lovely young man. And he has a program too.”

“Program?”

The older man shifted his weight and nailed me with a stare. “You repeat things, huh? Yes. A program where if there is an omega in need or a couple in need, he gives them everything that the omega and the baby will need once they are born. He even donates money to the clinic so that omegas in need can get their prenatals for free. All around good guy, that Rue. He only moved into town a few months ago, but he sure is making waves. Good waves. This world needs more positive.”

“He sounds like a saint.”

“Sure is.”

“Is he single?” I asked, making the man laugh.

“I’m not trying to date him or mate him at my age. Can you just imagine? I have no idea, but if anyone is interested, they’d better snap him up. He has a heart of gold. Not easy to find these days.”

We talked a few more minutes, exchanging names and general background, before he reminded me to eat before my food got cold.

I tore into my meat pie and pancakes with gusto as Lance went on about what Oliver Creek looked like when he was young. A lifelong resident. Somehow, we hadn’t crossed paths.

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When I was done, I paid for Lance's coffee and pie, and he said he would see me around.

I thought over what he'd said about Rue and the Trash Panda. I didn't know a lot of people who ran a business just to give part of the profit away, so I wanted to meet this man, see if he lived up to the rumors. Omegas in different stages of pregnancy was always a worthy cause.

I probably had some things to donate in my house. Things I no longer used. And if I decided to move and sell the house, I might even give all the things inside to the store. That way, it could all go to good use instead of rotting on the curbside, waiting for the garbage people to pick it up.

On my way back to my house, I stopped by the Trash Panda in hopes of making a cash donation to the charity, but even more to meet the man behind the good acts.

I got there but noticed no one inside. When I pulled the handle, it was locked.

Shoot. I missed it by only a few minutes. I sighed. Meeting Rue would have to wait for another day.

My bear was less than pleased.

Chapter Six

Rue

Most of the time, I made use of Alfred to pick up donations. We hadn't been open long, but we'd fallen into a rhythm together that made the long days enjoyable. I didn't let Alfred come in until eight in the morning, but I was usually sitting in the teeny office off the storeroom, working on bookkeeping and online orders because, yes, that was also a thing.

Alfred had nudged me toward the internet because he insisted that we would be getting in some unique items that could find their homes best in a broader market than Oliver Creek. And of course, he had designed a website where we could feature the thing we had to sell and give a constant live stream from the store. I couldn't even count the number of people who had come in and said they'd watched us and come to town at least in part because of "getting to know us" on the live stream.

Alfred said it made him feel a little like a star.

Alfred was so young. And talented. He'd built the website and handled all the tech aspects of the business from the very start. I didn't know how I'd have made it without him. Through our online presence, he'd even managed to hook up with some experts who could keep us from selling a Picasso as a starving-artists painting if that should ever occur.

On this particular day, we were so busy, we barely had time to eat a quick bite at midafternoon, and by closing time, Alfred was drooping, though he tried to hide it. I locked the door and leaned my back against it. "Who knew running a thrift store would be so exhausting?"

"Not me." My cousin pulled a bag of chips from under the counter and crunched away. "If I'd known, I might have stayed home and worked on my dad's farm."

"You could still do that." I joined him and grabbed a handful of chips. "I can call him now..."

“Don’t you dare,” he gasped, shock twisting his features. “You know I was kidding, right? I’ve always hated having my hands in the dirt.”

“I like gardening, but in moderation,” I commiserated. “I spent a couple of summers at your gaze, and I ended up sunburned, bug-bitten, and achy from head to foot. Don’t worry, I couldn’t survive without your help.”

“Darned right.” He preened, flipping the lock of hair that fell over his forehead back. “And I’m really glad we’re busy. I’d be bored otherwise. Need me for anything else?”

“No.” I’d planned to have him go pick up a donation, but he’d put in more than enough time. “You go home or out and have fun and I’ll finish up here.”

Despite his arguments, I pushed him out the door and turned to face the typical end-of-day mess that occurred no matter how we tried to keep things organized. Nobody was mean or anything, but nobody seemed to know how to fold things or hang them evenly or, in most cases, on the racks they came from.

Making it all nice was just part of the job.

And while a true inventory would be a good idea, we weren’t there yet, so tidying gave us an idea of what had moved and what we needed to add from the back room. So many donations continued to come in that I hadn’t had to look for more lots of clothing, but a small town could only have so many things to get rid of, and they had to run out eventually. I’d been doing some studying on how to source items through various means for the future.

Tonight, the women’s sweaters were in a heap, and I spent five or so minutes refolding them before moving on to the rack of jeans. Then T-shirts. And so on until the shop was ready for a quick mop and restock in the morning.

I stretched out my back and considered whether to stop for dinner on the way home, but then I remembered. I'd received a text from someone who was moving out of town and wondered if we'd mind picking up some donations from the patio of his rental home. Of course, I'd replied we would, but it had escaped my mind for a few very busy days.

No doubt the landlord or new tenant would appreciate having these things removed from the property. He had said something about a few boxes, so I could just pick it up on the way home in my car rather than driving the box truck and having to come back. I checked the text for the address, locked up, and headed out. I'd do the task and head home to have a sandwich. One of my bad habits, but I didn't want to add another stop, about to drop where I stood from exhaustion already.

It was later than I thought when I got to the donor's place, and it was dark. Either there wasn't a new tenant yet, or whoever it was had already gone to bed, so I tiptoed down the driveway and around the back of the house in search of the boxes.

Chapter Seven

Pascal

My bear woke me up out of a dead sleep. He roared inside me, and immediately I jumped out of bed and stood up, ready for the enemy.

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Except there wasn't one.

I was in my bedroom. Alone. My shifter sight meant that even though my room was pitch black, I could see that I was, in fact, alone in here.

"What the..." I intended to curse my bear but instead, I heard a noise from somewhere outside.

It sounded like someone or something rattling around, going through something. Maybe there was an animal in the trash.

Either way, I had to find out.

I pulled on a pair of shorts and walked outside. No weapon needed, since I had the ultimate scary guy right inside me.

I paused outside my back door since that was where the noise was coming from. Pressing my ear to the door, I heard someone outside. Rifling through things. Moving something. What in the hell was going on?

Taking a deep breath, I put my hand on the doorknob and the other on the outside light. I flicked on the light and pushed through the door. "Who are you? What are you doing here?" I shouted at the top of my lungs, trying to be scary enough to ward off whoever was out there.

"Hey!" the person yelled back. Not as loud, of course, but they had at least heard me.

“I said, what are you doing out here? Trying to break in?”

The person came closer. The light I’d intended to show me who the intruder was had actually blinded me since the person was in shadow. “I came here for the donations. What are you even talking about—breaking in? This is Oliver Creek, not New York City. There’s no breaking in. Hell, there isn’t even crime here.”

“Donations? I don’t have any donations. You’re trying to take things and say they’re donations?”

“What?” The person came closer, and I was hit with their almost-blinding scent. Lavender and coconut, some vanilla notes as well. My bear let out a low growl inside me. He was rolling in this man’s scent. “Look. James said he left some boxes here at the back door for me. I was just coming over to retrieve them. I don’t even know who James is. There was a text and I came over. Are you James?”

Huh. This person knew James. I stepped down the few stairs, and my feet landed on cold grass. “James is my friend. He was here when I was out of town.”

“Oh. Well, he texted me and I was just trying to get the boxes. No crime here. Don’t beast out on me, okay?”

“Beast out? I…”

“Look, can I take the boxes or not?”

I looked down at my feet to see two large boxes. On the outside was written in marker: Donations. Damn it. I was the fool here. But why would this person come at night to get these things? Why not during the day?

“You can, but why did you come here so late at night?”

The man lifted his head, and I gasped. It wasn't just some man. It was Rue, the owner of the Trash Panda. I'd been trying to find out about him and his shop and donate, and now here I was, assailing him like he was a criminal.

"Because my store is open all day and my assistant had to get home. Plus...I like the nighttime. Yes or no on the donations. I can give you a tax form for James, if that's what you're wanting." He stuttered over his words. Either I'd scared him that badly, or he really was super shy.

"No. No. Go on and take them. I'm..." Before the apology could come out of my mouth, Rue had picked up both boxes and was on his way, sprinting from my backyard and into the night.

Shit. That didn't go as well as it could have.

I went back inside and locked the door and turned off the light while silently berating myself. That was Rue. The beautiful man I'd seen in the store. The man who smelled like a field of lavender on a tropical island.

And he was an omega. I could scent it on him.

My bear was wild with attraction for him. He wanted this man.

Damn it. Instead of going over there the next day to introduce myself and try to flirt with him, now, I needed to go with some flowers or something sweet and apologize in the hope that he would listen to me.

I stayed up for a few minutes more, wallowing in my humiliation. I'd practically called him a thief and scared the pants off him at the same time.

What a great first impression I'd made.

“Tomorrow, I’ll have to make it okay.” Even if Rue didn’t accept my apology, I would make a large donation to the charity. If he was helping people, which everyone said he was, then that was exactly the kind of place I wanted my money to go.

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James really should've told me about the donations.

Chapter Eight

Rue

What a night. After my encounter with the man who was clearly not James, I carried the two big boxes to my car and stuffed them in the back seat, leaving as quickly as possible. What a grouch. You'd think I was trying to rob the place. Maybe he took the trash-panda idea to heart—had been one of those who'd bullied the little raccoons in school or at the lakes or wherever he encountered them.

I flounced into my house, leaving the boxes in the bar overnight. Some shifters, especially hot alphas, were entirely too full of themselves. What did he think I was doing? Stealing old clothes? The more I thought about it, the angrier I got and the more I wanted to go back there and tell him off. People really had nerve.

Slapping salami on bread, I tried not to remember exactly how hot he was. Or to listen to the happy hum of my raccoon inside me every time the bear shifter's face appeared in my mind's eye. So thrown off by the whole thing, I managed to squirt mustard on my shirt and cursed. It was his fault.

I didn't even want the sandwich anymore, but my stomach's rumbles convinced me to eat it anyway. I'd lost a few pounds since starting on the store, and I didn't need to lose more because of the bear. More things that were his fault.

Knowing I should forget about him, I didn't understand why it was so difficult. I had

run into plenty of jerky alphas in my time, a lot worse than him, and I had no reason to expect I'd ever even see this guy again. He certainly didn't seem like the type to have his own donations or shop at the thrift store.

A quick shower, and I was ready to crawl between the sheets. By the morning, he'd just be an unpleasant memory.

Ours. Mate.

Shut up, Raccoon. I needed to date more, if my animal was willing to latch onto the first alpha who paid attention to us. Negative attention at that.

Mine.

It was going to be a long night.

As it turned out, I was too exhausted to lie awake, and the bear shifter who was not James only managed to inhabit my dreams. Dreams too erotic to recall without my cheeks burning in remembered heat. If he was half the kisser in real life, had half the skill in bed my imagination conjured up, he'd have been mated long ago. Certainly not home in bed alone.

Was he alone?

Shoot. I hadn't thought of that. He might well have been curled in bed with a mate of his own, and I dragged him out to watch me hauling off cardboard boxes of discards. I slumped over a bowl of high-fiber cereal and slurped at a cup of coffee while trying to wake up enough to make my way to the store.

The sun was already rising, and I wouldn't be there as early as usual, but so what? Last night, especially the dream, had told me my life was out of balance, and I needed

to find a way to fix that. My dads had been hinting lately that they wanted to introduce me to someone they thought would make a good mate for me. Not necessarily fated, but if my raccoon was going to start reacting to random alphas as he had last night, it might be time to quit waiting for Mr. Fated and settle down to have some kits with Mr. Not Too Bad.

Alfred beat me to work and had already mopped the floor when I came in carrying one of the boxes of donations. “I was worried when you weren’t here,” he said, rolling the mop bucket toward the back room. “What do you have there?”

“I’m not sure. Could you please go out to my car and grab the other one?” I passed him with my load. “I picked them up last night on the way home.”

“From the side of the road?” His eyes were wide. “That’s what Uncle Fred likes to do.”

“No. Someone requested a pickup. Would you just?” As soon as the words came out, I felt bad. “I’m sorry I snapped at you. I had a rough night.”

“Sure.” He pushed the mop into the storage closet and closed the door. “Right away. Sorry you didn’t sleep well.”

Too well, but I didn’t want to say that. “I’ll start the restock.” And just like that, we were back in our routine, getting ready to open. I’d call my dads after work and get the number of the raccoon alpha they wanted me to meet.

As noon approached, I sent Alfred to the food trucks to get us something “good” for lunch. My good humor restored, I was unpacking a set of china someone had donated when the bell over the door rang. “Be right with you,” I called. “Just let me set these plates down.”

“Don’t hurry on my account.”

I froze, the thin dishes rattling, in danger of crashing to the floor while I tried to steady both them and my voice. Technicolor images from my dream flashed across the screen in my mind, my cheeks flamed, and I carefully set down my burden and counted silently to twenty before turning to face my visitor. “W-well hello. I didn’t expect to see you here.” What was I even saying? No, I hadn’t, but that was not the way to greet a customer or to look half sane.

Before I could correct my display of bad manners, the bear alpha said, “No, I don’t expect you did after the way I behaved last night. I came to apologize.”

“T-to what?”

“Well, you were minding your own business—literally, since it was for your shop—and I accused you of being a criminal. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that. My name is Pascal, by the way, or you can call me that asshole bear if you prefer.”

Despite my embarrassment, I shook my head. “I wouldn’t do that. Why wouldn’t you wonder what a person is doing on your property in the dark?”

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“Confusion on both our parts.” He held out a hand. “Can we start over? It’s Rue, isn’t it?”

When our palms touched, I didn’t know what my name was for a second. Electricity shot up my arm all the way to my shoulder, and my heart rate doubled. My raccoon’s happy dance was not helping.

“Do I have it right? Rue?”

I pulled my hand back and rubbed it against my side, the tingling slowly abating.

“Yes. I’m Rue.”

“And you are the owner of this establishment?”

“Right.”

“Good. Then you’re the one I want to see. I understand you give a portion of earnings to a very worthy cause?”

“Omegas in Need, yes. They do great work.”

“Then, if it’s all right, I’d like to give a monetary donation? I’m sure I have things in the house to give as well, but I haven’t had a chance to go through the closets and the attic yet.”

“Of course.” I pulled an envelope from the stack under the counter. “You can just put it in here, and we set it aside for the organization.” We’d begun doing that when a

number of people added a few extra dollars when they paid for their purchases. Each was placed in the envelope and the name of the giver and any other info if they wanted a tax receipt.

“Perfect.” But instead of taking a ten or twenty from his wallet, he retrieved a folded check and smoothed it on the counter. “Who do I make this out to?”

“The organization. Any money we get for them goes directly to their representative when they stop by.”

“Thanks.”

He filled it out, and I was still expecting that twenty-dollar maximum, but before he tucked it into the envelope, I spotted the zeroes after the two. Not twenty or two hundred... Two thousand dollars.

“Oh my goodness. That will do so much good. Thank you again, Pascal.” Any anger or embarrassment was gone when I thought of the omegas who would receive needed help from his generosity. “Would you like coffee or a cookie?” We’d kept the station up after the grand opening, although it was now a modest plate of store-bought treats and a coffeepot and pitcher of water.

“No, I have to get going.”

“How will we ever thank you for your kindness?”

“You could let me take you to dinner?”

Chapter Nine

Pascal

I couldn't believe it. I was going on a date with the omega of my dreams. Never thought I'd find him in Oliver Creek, but Fate was tricky.

Table for Two, on the outskirts of town, was upscale, the closest to fine dining in our town. Located inside a Victorian home, I thought it was the perfect place to bring Rue. He didn't seem like the fancy type, but I thought he might enjoy it. In the summer, they had outdoor nights where dinner was served picnic style.

I hoped that would meet his expectations.

My bear wanted to impress this omega. He called him ours, but my human side had to make sure.

I would be so lucky if Rue were mine.

Leaving a few minutes earlier, I got in my car and drove over to Rue's home to pick him up. His cottage was a coral, peachy color with bright-blue shutters. Flowers were everywhere. In beds. In hanging pots. The place looked right out of a fairy tale.

Seconds later, I knocked on the door and he answered. "Hello," he said, ducking his head slightly. Sweet omega. So damned shy. I wondered if he would get over that in the bedroom or if I could coax him into being more vocal about what he wanted.

Too soon, Pascal. Too soon.

"Hi, Rue. Are you ready to leave?"

He nodded. "Is this okay? I know Table for Two is fancy but..." He wore a pair of black pants with a pale-blue shirt.

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“It’s perfect. Tonight is different. The restaurant is having one of their outdoor summer nights. So we’ll be having dinnerpicnic style. The trees hung with twinkly lights, and they’re featuring live music. I hope that’s okay.”

His face lit up. Eyes widened. A smile played at his perfectly pouty lips. “That sounds lovely. I didn’t know they did that.”

“They do.”

On the walk over, Rue didn’t say much. He was nervous. My bear could sense it. I wondered if his raccoon had the same feeling of mate about me.

I could only hope.

“I forgot to tell you how cute your house is. You must spend a lot of time on it.”

He shrugged one shoulder. “I try. Sunday is my gardening day.”

We arrived at Table for Two and were shown to the backyard area where we could pick a blanket of our choice. We were served wine from a local vineyard and given a starter of cheese, grapes, and some cured meats.

“This place is great,” Rue said so low it was almost a whisper.

“I’m glad you like it. Tell me about yourself, Rue. What made you start the thrift store?”

He sighed and nibbled at some cheese. Cutest thing on the face of the planet. “My father. My omega father. He was pregnant when my alpha father passed away. It was a car accident. When he had me, he had to do everything alone. He had no resources. He gave birth with only the healer and a nurse in the room. No support. He barely had money to scrape together clothes for me, and it was due to garage sales and thrift stores. Our gaze was thrifty, but we were the worst off most of my childhood. I wanted to help all omegas. I figured this was a way to do both.”

“I’m so sorry for your father. Is he okay now?”

Rue nodded. “He is. He met another alpha. A second mate. Rare but it happened to him. He’s very happy now. He’s the only alpha dad I’ve ever known, so I think of him as my father as well.”

“I love that your work has purpose. Sometimes, I wish mine did.”

He turned those warm eyes on me. “What do you do, Pascal?”

The way he said my name was so innocent and, yet, held promise of something more. “I invest in businesses and manage money really, really well.”

“Well, that’s a good thing. But are you happy?”

No one had ever asked me that question. I’d never asked it of myself either.

“I don’t know anymore. I’m questioning everything lately.”

“Like what?”

We were served burgers and sweet potato fries. All gourmet-looking. House-made brioche buns sprinkled with poppy seeds. Venison burger patty. Sharp cheddar.

“Like if keeping going is worth it, or should I just let the investments grow and find something else that makes me want to wake up in the morning.”

“But you live here in Oliver Creek?”

“I own a house here, but I travel a lot.”

Rue nodded. We laughed as he took a huge bite and had some mustard on the corner of his mouth. I reached out with my napkin and wiped it off. I was gifted with a blush in return. Maybe this could be my life’s pursuit. The happiness of the omega across from me. If that wasn’t purpose, I didn’t know what was.

“Oh. So you’re not here for long?”

I cocked my head, trying to figure this man out. He didn’t say much but, when he did, it told me everything I needed to know. His scent intensified. He wanted me to be around, and I was glad of it.

That’s what I assumed.

“I’m here until I decide to go. But not soon. I promise.”

He nodded. “That’s good.”

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I scooted closer to him and, we listened to music together. He laid his head on my shoulder, and I wrapped my arm around his waist. He let me. Rue even covered his hand with mine.

I'd traveled a hundred places and been on as many, if not more, dates, but all of that was nothing compared to the omega in my arms.

Chapter Ten

Rue

I'd never been so open with anyone I hadn't known for a very long time, but something about the bear shifter made it easy to open up. Hardly anyone knew my alpha dad was my stepdad, but he and my omega father had been together for a long time. The cautious days of thrift I remembered were nothing compared to those first few years when I'd only had one father. At least according to what everyone in the gaze told me. My memories were of warmth and love and the kindness of my omega dad. He'd sheltered me from the worst of it, but the struggle had come close to costing him his health, and I didn't want that for anyone else. Not if I could help it.

Dinner was over all too soon, and before I knew it, we were strolling up the path to my gate. Because Table for Two was so close to my home, we'd walked to dinner, and the walk home was entirely too fast. I didn't want him to leave, and my raccoon was insisting on things like my dream happening immediately if not sooner.

"Thanks for a nice evening," he said, standing outside my door. "I hope you had a good time."

“I did.” I pulled out my key and unlocked the door, wondering if I should invite him in, but I hadn’t turned on the evaporative cooler or opened any windows and the day’s heat was still held inside. I hadn’t noticed when I was getting ready for our date, rushing into the shower and getting dressed. Another busy day had had made it tricky to get home in time without having to explain to Alfred. By the time he came back with our smoked pastrami sandwiches and potato salad, Pascal had already left. I wasn’t ashamed to be dating, but he’d tell his dads, and they’d tell mine, and then they’d want to know all about it, and things would spiral out of control when I didn’t even know what was going on yet.

Mate. My raccoon’s opinion was still fixed, and I was starting to think he might be right. But I didn’t need the whole gaze showing up to find out why I had picked up a bear without even meeting the raccoon my dads had wanted me to meet.

Until I could say with full confidence he was my mate, I didn’t need any of that.

“I was going to ask you in for an iced tea, but it’s really hot in there.”

He glanced at the swing to the left of the door. “If you want to go in and open a few windows, maybe we could sit out here until it’s cool enough for you to go in? That is, if you’re not tired of my company.”

“Oh no!” The words spilled out before I could think to moderate them. “I mean, I’m not tired of you. It’s been a lovely evening. I’ll go get us some iced tea.”

“All right.” Pascal smiled, and I felt it down to my toes, the warmth and humor unlike anyone I’d ever met before. “I’ll wait on the swing.”

In the kitchen, I hurried around getting out glasses and filling them with ice, retrieving the pitcher from the refrigerator, and putting everything on a tray. I didn’t have any cookies or anything, but it seemed to me that we’d had an awful lot to eat

already.

Back outside, I set the tray on the porch railing and filled two glasses, handing one to Pascal before joining him on the swing. “It’s unsweetened. I sometimes forget not everyone drinks it the same as I do. Would you like sugar? I don’t think I have any lemon.”

“It’s perfect, and so are you.” He laid his arm over my shoulders. “It’s just nice to sit here and enjoy the rest of the evening.”

I leaned back, enjoying his arm around me, the cool breeze on my face, and a sense of peace I’d never experienced before. We were quiet for a while, sipping tea, swinging gently, making me dare to wonder what it would be like to spend evenings like this on a regular basis.

But that was silly. Pascal had been kind to me, taken me out to apologize for our misunderstanding and made a very generous donation to Omegas in Need. All of those things were likely to turn any omega’s head—any with a heart at least. But he hadn’t said a thing about thinking I was his mate, or even about having another date.

If I was honest, that was at least a part of why I’d wanted him to stay awhile. To give him a chance to ask. He didn’t seem to be in any kind of hurry to leave; at least there was that.

An owl hooted in a tree across the street, and we both jumped, startled out of our stillness. Then we both burst into laughter, and his arm tightened around me. I looked up, prepared to make a comment on the silly bird, but his laughter died out, and his lips parted, quick breaths escaping.

“Pascal?”

“Omega.” Oh, that word. But before I could do more than register it, his lips hovered above mine. “May I?”

I nodded, and he brushed his lips with mine, teasing them to open. Which of course they did. I lost myself in his warm, woodsy scent and his arms around me. If he wasn’t my mate, Fate was truly cruel.

Chapter Eleven

Pascal

Rue had me questioning everything about my life.

Especially how my life would’ve been different had I not come home for my break.

I had everything I wanted, or thought I had, before him. I was going to travel the planet and surely find an omega who wanted to travel with me. Make deals. Sign papers. Only attend meetings when I had to. Let the money roll in while I lay on a lounge chair in the South of France sipping wine—alone.

But maybe that wasn’t my dream.

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Maybe that was just expected of me. My father had suggested strongly that I go to business school or be a lawyer if I wanted to make something of myself. He hadn't had a lot of money growing up, and he wanted more for me. Didn't want me to suffer as he had.

The person I saw in the mirror? He had everything, but none of it really meant anything. Everything I'd worked for, I would give it up in a second if it meant a life with the man I'd gone out with the night before.

He'd been so sweet and loving. Our first kiss turned my world upside down. We talked about anything and everything and some things in between.

There was a connection between us that I'd never had. The connection of an alpha and his omega. His fated omega.

When I came home, I wanted a vacation away from the business world and the first-class airline seats. Anything staled if you overdid it, and I'd definitely overdone the traveling lately.

I'd made the deal though. The deal of the century had come through, and this morning, I received the email telling me the news. I was set for life. I'd lived out of a suitcase for the last few years, working my ass off, and now, I had enough money in the bank to last the rest of my life. Enough to live well.

It was time I took a longer break.

I walked the square footage of my house and took in things. If I was going to stay

here for a while, and I was, I needed to make this place seem more like a home instead of a rental home.

Rue had the place I wished mine was. Through the window, I had seen his comfortable furnishings lit by soft, welcoming lighting. I wanted that for me and for him. One day, he might stay over here and I wanted him to feel at home.

I wanted to feel at home. And the furniture I had now? It didn't scream pull up a chair and stay awhile. It screamed, don't get too comfortable.

With a list in my hand, I stared at the phone, wondering if it was too early to call him. Not early in the morning but not enough time after our date.

Ugh. These rules. There were no rules when it came to your mate.

The phone rang twice before he answered. "Hello?"

"Rue, good morning."

He chuckled. "Good morning. How'd you sleep?"

Would've been better if it had been next to him. "Well, and you?"

"Very well. The fresh air was good for me and the company."

The blush he was probably sporting... Oh, man, I wanted more of that blush in my life. "I'm so happy you had a good time. I was wondering if you'd like to go out this weekend? I'm not sure what hours the store has."

"I can ask my assistant to cover Saturday if you have something in mind."

“So would you like to? Go out with me again.”

He paused and, for a second, my heart banged against my chest. “Yes. I would like that.”

“That’s great. I’ll pick you up at seven on Saturday morning. I have something special in mind. Bring a change of clothes, just in case. Very casual, okay?”

His store was busy. I heard the customers in the background. “I’ll see you then. You...you can text me later if you like. I stay up late.”

Chuckling, I put my hand to my chest. My omega was quite the shy one. “I’ll remember that. Why don’t you text me when you get home? Let me say good night.”

“Okay. Good night. I mean, bye, Pascal.”

He hung up first, and I was glad for it. Otherwise, I would’ve stayed on with him, listening to his lovely voice forever.

Now, I had some work to do. I needed to fix up my house. My life was a few choices away from everything I didn’t realize I wanted.

I got online and shopped for new furniture. Nothing that implied corporate home away from home but cottagecore and comfortable. A plush couch. A small, round table for the kitchen. Curtains instead of blinds. A few soft rugs. All new blankets and pillows for the sofas and my bed.

I pictured Rue in my bed, his naked form beneath my covers. Sleepy eyes. Raspy voice. Saying good morning as I brought him breakfast in bed.

After ordering a ton of things to be delivered ASAP, I made my way to the hardware

store and picked out my paint scheme. Well, I let the man at the counter select cream wall color with lavender accents. Somehow, he'd fit my omega's scent without even knowing it.

Fate had a hand in everything.

Chapter Twelve

Rue

Alfred was glad to fill in on Saturday. It was our busiest day, but I couldn't think of any better reason to take the time off. In the interest of making my assistant/cousin's day easier, I stayed late Friday and did the mopping and the restocking in addition to the usual nighttime straightening up.

As was only fair, I had decided to clue him in to the fact that I was dating, but I swore him to secrecy for the time being. I believed he'd keep his word. He was a loyal worker and had proved himself a good friend as well, in the time he'd been here. I'd only known him a little beforehand, but it felt as if we had been close for much longer.

He'd also insisted on staying late to help me on the night before his first solo effort, and when my phone chimed, he darted over, trying to get close enough to read my screen. "What did he say?"

"It's private." I held the phone against my chest. "You're being nosey."

"Absolutely. So, what did he say this time?"

I let out a breath and turned the screen toward him. It was innocent enough. Looking forward to our date.

“That’s it? I thought surely you’d be sexting by now.”

I jerked the phone back, trying not to laugh. “You need an alpha of your own. Then you won’t be trying to live vicariously through me.”

“Okay. If you run into someone looking for me, ask if they are my fated mate.”

We bantered back and forth as we finished up the work then parted ways for the evening. As I drove home, I chuckled. Sexting. Was that something anyone really did?

At home, I put a plate of leftover pasta in the microwave and went to shower off the sweat of a hard day’s work. As I soaped up a sponge and rubbed it over my skin, the idea of sexting wouldn’t go away. Truly...was it a real thing?

I wasn’t a virgin, had dated some in the past, but the only sex I’d had, had been in person. Dried off and wearing pajama bottoms, I sat down and ate my dinner, reading the news on my phone.

As I carried my plate to the sink, my phone chimed and I hurried back to grab it. It was an omega alert, a missing person. These happened all too often, but this one was at least fifty miles away, and it was unlikely I would ever encounter him. Still, I looked at the photo closely. Just in case. Omegas in Need had helped find a couple of them through the channels they had established with their clients and supporters. I didn’t know where I’d be going on our date, but I’d keep an eye out for this missing omega.

Curling up in bed, I took my phone off the charger on the night table just in time to see a text come in. Are you up?

Okay, I’d seen that line used in a movie once. It was someone hoping to get lucky.

My cheeks burned at the thought. If this kept up, I'd be blushing nonstop. But maybe he didn't mean anything by it. Could just be my very naughty mind.

One I didn't have before meeting this alpha bear.

Just got into bed. You?

Me too. Had a shower and crawled right in. Shoot, now I wanted to use the what-are-you-wearing line.

But no. What would he think? I'm wearing pajama bottoms.

I'm not.

I had zero idea how to respond to that. My cock, on the other hand, responded by going rigid, and my hand by closing around it.

You don't wear pajamas? Okay, I figured out a response.

No. Omega, are you flirting with me?

Maybe a little. Do you wear anything?

What do you think I wear? Okay, might not be sexting, at least not yet, but flirting? Yeah.

Boxers? Briefs? Jeans?

You're adorable. And you'll have to keep guessing for now. Get some sleep, omega. I'm coming for you first thing.

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Coming for me? Why did everything sound like sex?

Night, alpha.

Night, omega.

There was no way I could go to sleep now without doing something to take the pressure off. And I had some very interesting visuals of Pascal in boxers, briefs, or nothing, to fuel my imagination.

Was he thinking of me, too? I squeezed my shaft and rubbed the head of my cock, imagining that it wasn't my hand but his touching me. That he was rubbing his fingers along my crack, feeling the slick, knowing it was for him...

I would reach for him, too. Would bend down and close my lips over his tip, licking the droplet of precum away before sucking him into my mouth, taking him into my throat and licking, sucking, and moaning.

He would grip my head with his fingertips, fucking my mouth, and I'd let him, love it, and enthusiastically swallow every drop of his cum, showing him how much I wanted him.

My cum poured over my hand and left me shaking and panting. I cleaned up and crawled back into bed, no pajamas this time. As my eyes closed, the chime had me grabbing my phone again.

Go to sleep now, omega.

I am. Now.

Did he know?

Chapter Thirteen

Pascal

I drove up with coffee and pastries from the bakery, no fool of an alpha. If I was making Rue wake up early on his day off, I'd better come with coffee. Not that Rue had ever shown even the slightest hint of fussiness, but coffee was always welcome this early.

"Good morning," I said as he answered the door. His hair was still damp, and he wore a white polo with casual red shorts and running shoes. He had a bag in his hand. His cheeks were flushed.

"Good morning. I woke up late and rushed through the shower."

"You look and smell fantastic to me. Ready to go? I've got coffee and all kinds of carbs in the car."

He giggled. "You know the way to an omega's heart."

"I hope so," I said but then turned, not waiting for his reaction. It was probably a blush that would make me want to do anything but take him out. In fact, it would make me want to keep him indoors for a long time.

We got into the car and talked on the way. He handed me pieces of cinnamon rolls and danishes from his hand. My bear approved of him feeding me. Soon I would feed him.

“Where are we going anyway?” he asked, once I turned off of the long highway.

“It’s a surprise,” I said. “Don’t you like surprises, Rue?”

“Sometimes, but you’ve just turned onto a road that only has a small airport. I’m not so fond of surprises today.”

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to frighten you. I have a plane here. I thought we’d take a flight today. No destination, just enjoy the beautiful day and the clear skies.”

“You rented a plane and a pilot? For a date?”

Well, shit. This wasn’t going as planned. “No. I own a plane. It’s stored here. And I’m the pilot. If you’re scared of flying...”

“No.” He put his hand on my arm, and suddenly the world was right again. I’d do just about anything to have him touch me again. “I’m kind of in shock. You do realize this is a unique date, right?”

I nodded. “I do. If it’s too much, I can bring us somewhere else.”

“No way,” he said, smiling. “I’m looking forward to it. I bet you’re...I bet you’re...” He stammered over the words.

“What? Omega, tell me.”

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Smiling, he leaned his head back against the headrest. “I bet you look really sexy flying an airplane.”

My heart stopped. My bear roared. Not only had my omega kind of called me sexy, but he’d spoken his mind in a way that meant he trusted me with those thoughts in his head.

“I bet you would look equally sexy as my co-pilot. Come on. Let’s go have some fun.”

We checked in with the airport and cleared everything before taking off. Rue watched in awe as I took off flawlessly and got us into the air.

“I can’t believe this! This is incredible. We could fly to a different state for dinner!” The grin on his face made every piloting lesson and licensing fee absolutely worth it. I hadn’t gotten my license for the purpose of flying dates around. I’d initially gotten it to avoid commercial airlines for business trips. But now? I would fly this man around the world if given the chance, just to see his beautiful smiling face.

We pointed out all the sights, and he mentioned how everyone looked like ants from up in the sky.

When we reached altitude, I took his hand in mine. “Are you okay?”

“I am. I’m better than okay. This...I’m impressed, alpha. I really am.”

My chest inflated with pride. I was able to give my omega a new experience. Give

him something to smile about. Have an exciting day off.

We landed and debarked the plane. Rue was a bit shaky on his feet but let me wrap my arm around his waist and keep him balanced. We signed out and watched the workers tow the plane into the hangar. We stood there, side by side, and he sighed.

“What is it?” I asked.

“I’m about to be really blunt. There is something about you that makes me want to tell all my secrets and blurt out everything in my head.”

“Is that a bad thing?” I asked, turning to face him.

The sun was setting in the sky behind him and if I didn’t know better, I would think he was a masterpiece of a painting.

“No. Not a bad thing at all.

“Then what’s on your mind?” I asked, stepping closer to him. I hoped what was in his head was the same thing in mine. We’d had an incredible day. The best way to top it off was with an even more incredible night.

“What would you think of me if I asked you to take me home?”

“I’d think, your house or mine.”

Rue chuckled. He glanced down at my crotch. “That’s a long, hard drive, alpha.”

Damn, hearing him say that did things to me. “There’s a hotel between here and Oliver Creek. It’s nice, and we could stay the night.”

“Is that why you asked me to pack a bag?”

“Yes. No. Maybe?”

“Doesn’t matter. Take me there, alpha. I need you.”

Chapter Fourteen

Rue

The hotel was lovely. The airport route wasn’t one I’d taken often, and I’d never been to the hotel about three miles off the main highway in a little valley overlooking a small jewel of a lake. It was one of those boutique places where the price of a room for the night was probably the same as an average person’s monthly rent.

He’d been a little vague about the extent of his wealth, but we checked in and were whisked right up to the top floor of the hotel in less time than it would normally have taken me to actually get the attention of the desk clerk at one of the roadside motels I’d stayed in before.

Although our reservation had been made only moments before our arrival—as in, in the parking lot—our room was ready and when we entered it, vases of fresh flowers with cards welcoming us by name. I didn’t even know they could do that. And so fast.

I strolled to the window and looked out. “We can take a walk to the lake if you like?”

His heat and scent drifted to me before his arms came around me from behind. “If you want,” he said into my ear. “Or we can stay here in the suite and have a small bite to eat. I can order from room service.” He’d called it a room on check-in, but we had a living room, kitchenette verging on a full-kitchen size, two bedrooms, and at

least two bathrooms. I hadn't taken a tour or anything, but from what I could see, it was the kind of suite I'd book if royalty came to visit.

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“Well, it has been an awfully busy day. I might be a little tired.”

He caught my earlobe between his teeth, tugging gently. “Well, if you’re tired, there’s only one place to be.”

“Where is that?” I asked, turning in his hold. “Tell me, alpha.”

He scooped me up in his arms and carried me to the bed. “Right here.”

I could barely hear him over the banging of my heart and a loud chitter from my raccoon before he subsided deep within me, giving my mate and I privacy for this moment. I sank into the pillows, instantly aware of the comfort money could buy. The mattress had a topper several inches thick; the pillows were down fluffiness such as I’d never experienced. The comforter as well.

I stiffened, feeling out of place. Me, a trash panda reared in one of the poorest gazes anywhere. My shop filled with people’s castoffs, no matter how nice. Was this how my mate lived? Going from one hotel to the next just like this? Would he expect this sort of thing out of our life together—if we had one?

How long before he realized I wasn’t a luxury shifter, but just a thrift store raccoon?

“Where did you go?” Pascal shook me, gently. While I got lost in my head, he’d joined me on the bed and was now leaning over me, studying my face. “Omega, are you all right?”

“I-I yes, no...is it too late to just go home?”

“Of course not, if that’s what you want, but can you tell me what changed? Then I promise we’ll go if you still feel that way.”

I shook my head back and forth, trying to pull the tears back in, but they were streaking down my cheeks, from a trickle to a flood. “I’m not this kind of raccoon. My sheets are low-thread-count mixed fiber, and yours are probably Egyptian cotton and silk. I wasn’t raised to the finer things in life. Even after my second dad came, we didn’t have a lot, not like your family.”

“Like mine?” he chuckled, stroking my hair back and shaking his head. “What gave you the impression I was born with a silver spoon in my mouth?”

“Weren’t you?” Everything about him sang of wealth and polish, of someone who’d been comfortable their whole life.

“No. My fathers did okay, and they were an inspiration to me. Mostly because their families had been very poor, struggle-bus broke most of the time, and both my dads worked their butts off to get to a better situation. And to be able to help their folks out of the shacks they lived in and into nice homes for their old age. When you meet my fathers, even though I’m always trying to give them whatever they want, you’ll see what I mean. They don’t live fancy, and neither do I. Sure, I stay in nice hotels when I travel because if I can’t be at home, I have to have some comforts. But I’ve never had a bed like this, and I won’t.” He kissed the tip of my nose. “Unless that’s what you want? Because I’m a giver like that.”

He said it with such intensity, the cloud of gloom over my head dissipated, replaced by laughter. “And modest,” I reminded him. “You forgot that part.”

“Right.” Pascal dropped onto his back, next to me. “Now, if we’ve established my humble perfection, weren’t you going to make love to me?”

“Alpha, how can I resist you.” I rolled on top of him and straddled his hips, bending to kiss him but then straightened. “Just no marking, yet, okay?”

“All right, omega. Nothing you’re not ready for.”

That was the only thing I wasn’t ready for. With a new understanding between us, the mood lightened and we undressed each other quickly, lots of kissing and stroking and touching of places, learning one another’s bodies before he knelt at the foot of the bed and pulled me lower down. He tested myslick and smiled. “Why, omega, an alpha could feel very welcome here.”

“Just shut up and fuck me, alpha. I want you inside me before I come just from all the foreplay.”

He did as I asked, plunging into me with no further delay, stretching me to the edge of pain before it all melted into pleasure, and I clung to him, my cock in his fist, somehow, so that way too soon, I was spurting onto his belly and chest, groaning his name.

“Omega, I...” He stopped moving, his cum filling my hole before he fell to the side and enfolded me in his arms.

At that point, I couldn’t have told anyone whether we were in a luxury suite or a shack on the river. It wasn’t the thread count of the sheets; it was the alpha who held me close, making me feel happy and complete and secure in his affections. Maybe it had been a mistake to wait to be marked, but I’d made my decision, and I had to hope it was the right one.

Chapter Fifteen

Pascal

I had to step outside as the sun set and take a few long, deep breaths. Tonight was the night. I had to tell Rue everything—put my life in his hands.

While it made me nervous that he would reject me or change his mind, the fact that I'd met my forever mate and was leaving him the choice, well, this was the most scared and happy I'd ever been at the same time.

Everything was ready. I'd spent the majority of the day setting up. I had a roast with vegetables in the oven. I'd bought yeast rolls and a wild berry Gentilly layer cake from the bear's bakery. I managed to find some candles and would light them as soon as we sat down for dinner. This was only the beginning for me—for us.

My intent was to romance him every day from here on out. Not with money but with time and paying attention and with sweet moments.

With a new sense of calm, I ran to my room and showered and got dressed. Rue wanted to walk over to my house and while the alpha in me roared at that, we said yes. Rue loved to walk. I'd found that even though he worked all day, he often loved a nightly walk. He was a night creature through and through.

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When the doorbell rang, I nearly jumped out of my skin. I scanned the room making sure everything was perfect.

Time to make my case to my mate.

“Good evening,” I said, opening the door. There were a dozen red roses on the table waiting for him, but he’d also brought a gift. A simple basket holding a bouquet of wildflowers and a jar of homemade jam. That was my mate. “You didn’t have to bring anything,” I said.

“I was taught early not to go to anyone’s house for any reason with empty hands. It’s a rule of mine.”

Every time I saw my omega, it was as if it were the first time. He wore a polo shirt again, he seemed to like those, but this time with some jeans that fit him like a second skin. How in the world had I gotten so lucky?

“Can I come in?” he asked, blushing.

“Oh!” I chuckled, moving to the side. “Of course. You look incredible, and I was thinking how lucky I was to have you in my life. Come in. Please.”

He lifted up on his toes and pecked my cheek as he came in. He placed the basket on a table. “Something smells good, Pascal. I hope you didn’t go to a lot of trouble.”

“If I did, it was worth it. You are worth it. Are you hungry, or did you want to hang out first?”

He shuffled from one foot to the other. “I think I’d like to talk first.”

We sat on the couch, so near, I could smell the cinnamon toothpaste he used. “There are some things I want to say to you, Rue.”

He nodded and took my hand in his. The world could be crashing down around us but as long as he had my hand, I would be okay.

“When I came here, I was only going to stay awhile. Sell this house. Maybe leave forever. But now that I’ve found you, well, I want to know what you want. Because money and business used to be what I was striving for, but now, the only thing I want to have is your love.”

Tears formed in my mate’s eyes. “You have my love, Pascal. Last night. I wanted us to mark each other. I want nothing else than to be yours, but I knew you were still deciding whether to stay. This is my home now, Pascal. I work here, and I’m doing good things in the community. I had an omega come in just this morning whose mate left him, and he needed my help. The best part was, because of the donations, I had the extra money and supplies to set him and his baby up with everything they’ll need for a while and even resources to get him a stay-at-home job so he can begin making money when he’s ready. I can’t leave Oliver Creek but I want you as my mate. I’m afraid you are going to get bored or restless and want to take up your traveling again. That makes me scared.”

I scooted closer and pulled him onto my lap. “I swear to you, if I leave Oliver Creek again, it won’t be without you. I want to stay here and make a life with you. House. Kids. Whatever you want. I’m here for it. If you decide one day you want to travel, then we have the means to do that. If you’ll have my mark, I want to give it to you tonight but there’s no pressure.”

“I want it,” he breathed out. “I want you and your mark and a life with you always.”

I took his face in my hands and pressed my lips to his. It was more than a kiss. It was a seal of my promise to him. “I want that too. Let’s go eat and enjoy our evening. You’re spending the night, if you didn’t already know.”

He chuckled. “Getting a little alpha on me, Pascal?”

“Something wrong with that?” I asked, helping him up.

“Not at all.”

Chapter Sixteen

Rue

Our lovemaking the first time had been more than magical. And it had been beyond difficult to keep from begging him to mark me, to tilt my head at just the angle to show him I wanted his teeth to rip into my throat and leave a scar that would tell everyone I was his.

But I had held out because if we’d done that, he’d have been forced to pick up the alpha responsibilities that went with being mates. I didn’t want him to stay here just because I wanted to. Or because in a moment of passion, he’d done what came naturally, but he didn’t necessarily understand what was happening.

I’d gladly have made love with him tonight without the commitment, but knowing we’d be mated tonight made it hard to concentrate on his delicious dinner.

“Don’t you like the roast?” Pascal was watching me with concern. “You do eat meat. I’ve seen you eat meat.”

“I do like it.” To prove the point, I forked a piece in my mouth and chewed, making

yummy sounds. “So good.”

“If I didn’t know better, omega, I’d say you were wanting to skip the dinner I went to so much work to make in favor of sating another hunger?”

“It isn’t easy,” I agreed, “but I don’t want to waste all your hard work. Because it is delicious.” At least I thought it was because it was nearly impossible for my brain to register anything with the amped-up scent my alpha was emitting.

“We can always put it away and reheat it afterward.” My alpha had the best ideas. “But you probably should eat a little more because you’re going to need your energy for what I have planned.”

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“I’m so intrigued.” I shoveled a few more bites in, chewing and swallowing before asking, “What do you have planned?”

“It’s a surprise. Eat your veggies, omega.”

With his teasing encouragement, I managed to gobble the contents of my plate, but as gorgeous as the cake was, we’d be having it after. Pushing my plate away, I looked at my alpha’s meal, which was nearly untouched. “Hey, don’t you need your energy?”

“I have all the energy I need, just looking at you.” Pascal stood up and held out a hand. “Let’s go to the bedroom.”

“What about the dishes?” I didn’t want him getting stuck having to clean up alone.

“I’ll wash them in the morning or throw them away. I don’t care at all.”

“You can always buy a set from the shop. We get a remarkable number of nice dish sets there.”

“Maybe I will.” He linked our fingers and tugged me away from the table and into his arms. “But first, we have other things to do.”

His room was nearly dark, but he clicked on a bedside lamp before going about the business of undressing me. And it truly was businesslike but in the sexiest way possible. My mate removed each item of clothing and folded it neatly before laying it on a chair, while I vibrated with anticipation. I protested once, said, “I can just do it,” but he ignored me and went about the slow process. I was so hard, I was afraid my

cock might snap off when he knelt to draw my undershorts down and gently lifted each leg to take them off.

Shorts folded on the chair, he remained on his knees, wrapped his arms around my hips, and took me deep in his throat in one gulp. Then he proved to me that the rumors about alphas not having the skills omegas did for blow jobs were about as true as any other rumors. Or maybe it was just mine. I braced my hands on his shoulders and held on tight while he sucked and licked me into an explosive orgasm then eased me down onto the edge of the bed.

“Want a break?” He kissed me hard then studied my face. “You look a little stunned.”

“No break.” I pulled my knees high, exposing my hole for him. “Deep in my other hole.”

He trailed two fingers through my ass crack and held them up, shiny with slick. “Let’s do this mating thing.”

I couldn’t help laughing, but that cut off when his hard cock prodded at the tight muscle ring. I hadn’t been with many alphas and not for a long time. Which was probably why he groaned, “So tight,” as he sank deep into my body. I clung to my knees, helping him get deeper, wanting every inch of him inside me.

He thrust again and again, deeper than the first time, deeper than I knew it was possible to go and with each new bit he conquered. And then he was balls deep and paused, letting me adjust. But I wasn’t having it. “Alpha, don’t stop, please don’t stop.”

He panted, but his smile said it all and he was driving into me again, rubbing my prostate with each pass.

My second orgasm was my first ever with no direct cock contact, and it preceded his by a fraction of a second. His knot swelled this time, and as we were bound together, he bent and sank his teeth into my throat, marking me his and changing my life forever.

Chapter Seventeen

Pascal

I didn't know whether it was my bear or my internal clock, but one of them woke me up at the crack of dawn. With my eyes still closed, I replayed the events of the night before in my mind. Rue was incredible. He'd opened up to me during our night together. Becoming bolder, telling me what he liked and what he didn't. How he liked to be touched. And when my knot swelled inside him, he cried out my name in the throes of passion.

I never wanted the night to end. But life called. Rue had to be at work this morning and, even though I didn't want him to go, his work was more than a paycheck. It had meaning for him and to the omegas that leaned on him and the community for support.

"I know you're awake, alpha," he whispered next to me. My body was wrapped around his and had been since we'd made love for the third time only hours ago. I would feel bad for exhausting him but I wasn't. Not one bit.

"I am awake, my love. I am. Thinking about last night. Not wanting to face the day without you."

He sighed, snuggling deeper into my embrace. "It's okay. You have me for a very long time."

“That I do. How about a shower and coffee and we have a lazy breakfast?”

Turning around to face me, he ran his finger along my jawline. “Open your eyes.”

I did and was once again struck by his beauty. “You don’t know this about me, but I live for slow mornings. Long showers. Hot coffee. Easy breakfast. Taking my time. It cuts back on my morning anxiety and helps me have a good day.”

“I always have fast mornings. Coffee on the go. Rushing to get things done. I only eat cereal about once a week.”

“Hmm, let’s try it my way and see if you like it.”

“If you’re here, I already know which one I’ll prefer.”

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We shared a long, hot shower and I washed my mate head to toe. While he washed me as well, I couldn't help myself. I pulled him into my arms, and we made love under the warm spray and then had to clean up again.

"I didn't know what kind of coffee you like so I got them all." We stood in front of the coffeepot. I nuzzled his neck and ran my lips over his marking.

"I like medium to dark roast. I don't know how this thing works, Pascal. I use a vintage percolator."

Chuckling, I made the coffee. My mate was old-fashioned, beautiful bliss. He liked things slow and easy. I had a lot to learn from the cute raccoon who now bore my mark.

We poured coffee and had leftover cake for breakfast. Rue sat on my lap all morning. We laughed together. Made plans for the future. Talked about the night before.

Everything. I never wanted to be away from him.

"You really need my help," he said, feeding me another bite of the almond cake bursting with wild berries.

"With what? If you're involved, I'll take it."

"With those flower beds. We need to give this place some color."

I pointed to the back porch area. "I have paint already picked out, but I've been

occupied with a gorgeous omega I met.”

“Really? Gorgeous, huh?”

“Yes. Gorgeous. Beautiful. Stunning. Sexy. Should I go on?”

“No, but you can show me those paint colors. I want to see what you chose.”

After we got dressed, we looked over the paint colors, which he approved of. I told him what they meant to me and that led to almost another session of mating.

“Today, in between working, I’m going to draw up a plan for your flower beds. That porch needs some love as well.”

Watching and listening to him go on about his passions did things to me. I grabbed him up and sat us both on the rocking chair. “I need some love before you go.”

“You are insatiable,” he giggled. “How about dinner at my place tonight?”

“That sounds like a long time from now.”

“I know. I’m going to miss you. I’m afraid you’re going to change your mind.”

“Hey, look at me.” I put my hands on his face. “You’re mine and I’m all yours, omega. Nothing could ever tear you away from me. What time do you eat lunch?”

His eyes widened. “About eleven if it’s not busy.”

“Would it be okay if your mate came by with a sandwich?”

Nodding, he blushed again. “Only if he brings one for my assistant as well.”

“You got it.” I kissed his button nose. “Now, go on before I drag you back to the bedroom.”

Some people walking by giggled at us, making Rue smack me gently on the shoulder. “Uncalled for, sir.”

“Sir? We can try that tonight, if you want.”

More blushing. Yeah, we would definitely try that tonight.

Once he’d left, I went back inside and made plans. I had a mate now. A mate. Me. Someone who never thought they’d settle in one place.

The furniture was coming in. Rue was making plans for the garden. And I had a full day of painting in front of me. I wanted Rue to think of this house as home, to convince him to move in with me.

It had all happened so fast, but I loved the raccoon. My bear was settled. I bore the mark of raccoon teeth.

Life was good.

Chapter Eighteen

Rue

I hadn't been home often lately. At least not alone. Ever since our mating, we spent our nights together either at his place or mine. Pascal was going to have to leave for a day soon to take care of some of his investments. I didn't really understand, but it involved transferring funds so he could better handle things from here. I was going to miss him, but we had a special date planned tonight, and I was very excited about it. When he pulled up outside the shop to pick me up, I ran out with my backpack over one shoulder and hopped in his car. I knew what we were doing but not where.

"Hello, omega." Pascal leaned over and gave me a kiss. "Ready for shifting?" It wasn't our first time, but the others had been where there were others, and this was just us. "I think I've found the perfect place. It's an hour or so away. You good with that?"

"Sure." To tell the truth, my stomach was a little off, but I figured skipping lunch might have factored into it. We'd planned to have dinner later on. "Where are we going?"

"The state park. Someone suggested that there's an area where even shifters rarely go and they said it was perfect for a romantic date."

"That's great. I wonder why I've never heard of it." I settled back in the seat and

closed my eyes, suddenly exhausted. A giant yawn stretched my jaw. “Can’t wait to see it.”

“Omega?” Pascal shook my shoulder. “Are you asleep?”

“What?” I yawned again. “No, of course not. How much longer until we get there?”

“We are there, but you look awfully tired. Maybe we should just go home to bed and try this another day?”

“Oh no. I’ve been looking forward to this trip all week. Just give me a minute. I guess I did fall asleep. I can’t wait to see the area and to play with your bear.”

We undressed and shifted, and Pascal led the way to the trailhead. His bear was much faster than my raccoon, but that never seemed to matter. As we set off down the trail, he kept pace with me, nudging me with his nose and making affectionate rumblings as we went. I felt much better now, and as we explored the forest together, the cool evening breeze ruffled my fur and carried the scents of other animals and plants to my nose. It was refreshing and fun and my raccoon chirped in happiness at spending time with his favorite bear. Any humans who might see us together would find it odd, but we didn’t run into anyone the whole time, and when we got back to the car, we headed for a roadside diner we’d passed on the way here, and I indulged in a double cheeseburger, fries, and a shake.

I definitely felt better. Skipping lunch was a bad habit and had probably been causing my recent stomach upsets. I would have to take better care of myself.

Pascal stayed at my place, but he had to leave very early in the morning for his business, and he kissed me goodbye and left me in bed. It shouldn’t bother me that he’d be fifty miles or so away all day. How silly that the thought made me weepy. And my stomach was off again. The smell of the coffee he’d brewed was making it

worse, and I hurried into the shower to try to clear the scent out of my nose.

After emptying my already empty stomach, I drove to work where Alfred took one look at me and made me sit down. “Rue, what’s wrong? You’ve been a little pale, but now you look bad. Should you have stayed at home?”

“No, I’m okay, really.” I brushed off his concern, but as the day went on, I felt worse, and then, midafternoon, a thought occurred to me. I didn’t think it was likely, but on the off chance, I popped out of the shop and went to the pharmacy then came back and shut myself in the bathroom. No way was it going to be true. I sat on the closed toilet lid and waited, watching the plastic stick carefully for changes. The instructions said to set it down and walk away, but how could I?

This was a very serious matter.

One that could change everything. Pascal and I hadn’t even discussed cubs...or kits. What would he think if it was true? I continued to stare, waiting out the time, and finally, three minutes that felt like three years had passed and I was looking at a plus sign.

I was pregnant and worried. Did he want young?

When I emerged into the front of the shop, Alfred finished up with a customer and then came over to me. “Are you feeling any better?”

“A little, thanks, but I think I’ll go home early if you can manage things here?”

“Of course. Maybe you should visit the healer? Quinn is very good. He might have something to make you feel better.”

“I doubt it, but thanks for the advice.”

“Maybe you just have to let it run its course, whatever it is.” He had that right.

“That’s exactly what I’ll do. I’ll see you tomorrow.” I went home, rehearsing in my head how I was going to tell Pascal the news. I was happy, and I prayed he would be too.

Chapter Nineteen

Pascal

Since our mating, I’d made a habit of going to the Trash Panda a few minutes before it closed to pick up my mate. Sure, he could walk home alone and was perfectly capable of doing that, but I wanted to.

It made me happy.

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The Trash Panda, and Rue, had made a splash on the community of Oliver Creek. Other businesses were now giving portions of their proceeds to good causes. The disabled. The abused. The unhoused. Teens and kids who were shunned from society for one reason or another. My mate had single-handedly started a kindness revolution. A wave of love for our fellow humans and shifters alike.

I couldn't have been prouder of him. He was a miracle.

A few days a week, I helped in the store. There were donations coming in from all over the state, and on social media, he was being called out as a philanthropist and a genius. Now, many thrift stores were associated with charities, but there was something about how he did it that made all the difference. He'd gone viral.

There would always be bad news in this world, but as long as there were people like my Rue, we might all make it out on the other side okay.

"Speaking of the bear," Alfred said as I walked into the store, making the little bell chime.

"Someone talking about me?" I asked. There were a few customers still, and Rue was running a sale on all the furniture since he'd been inundated with pieces and needed to make room for other things. This weekend, whatever didn't sell, he would put outside on the sidewalk and sell it for pennies. It was worth it to free up the square footage. I'd eyed the adjoining empty store and intended to ask Rue about expanding. People were coming to Oliver Creek now, not just for the food but to buy cute items from Rue's store, knowing a share of the proceeds were going to a good cause.

“We were, actually.” Rue came over and hugged me but pulled back quickly.

“What about?”

“Let’s talk after we close.”

I helped out with setting some things into the glass case. Someone from a town over had donated an entire collection of vintage porcelain figures. Three sets. I’d suggested Rue sell them online for more money, as we often did, but he didn’t care about that. He said someone in town or a tourist would snap them up soon.

My mate was usually right.

Alfred and I dusted some things in the cases and while the last of the customers got rung up, I went to the back to fold baby clothes. Rue took some of the profits and bought a washer and dryer for the shop. He made sure everything baby related was washed with sensitive detergent and then folded. If a needy omega or couple, or even a pregnant human came in, they were given a huge box filled with a crib, a mattress, clothes, and other things they might need. Rue liked everything organized, categorized by size and gender. I was in awe of my mate, but he always said it was simply the right thing to do.

I listened while Rue said goodbye to Alfred and locked the door for the day. Through our bond, I could feel his anxiety about something. My mate was worried.

“Hey,” he said, coming in and sitting down next to me. Even though the shop was closed, he never stopped working for this place. The hours on the door were just for the customers, not for him. I sometimes had to put him over my shoulder and make him go home and rest and eat. He was so damned dedicated.

“Hey, yourself. Long day?” I asked.

“The day’s not over.”

I let him decide when he wanted to talk about what was going on in his head. We had forever, so there was no use in rushing him. I’d learned in time that my raccoon did things in his own time.

He put down the onesie he was folding and turned to me. “I have something to tell you.”

“You can tell me anything.”

A breath whooshed out of his mouth. “I have been feeling sick for a few days in a row. I laid off the meat thinking that was it. Sometimes my raccoon likes me to eat more fruits and veggies but it didn’t go away.”

“Do we need to go to the healer?” I asked, ready to take action.

Rue put his hand on my thigh. “Alfred figured it out. I went to the drug store and got a test.”

“What kind of test?”

His cheeks turned a beautiful shade of red. “I’m...I took a pregnancy test today. A few minutes before you walked in, actually.” I sat there, stunned while he fished the test out of his pocket. “We’re having a baby, Pascal.”

“We are? Are you sure? Is one test enough?”

He nodded, and tears began to stream down his face. “One test is enough. Besides, my raccoon is sure, and that’s better than any test. I should’ve listened to him sooner. He said something about a kit the other day, but I thought he just wanted one.”

“Come here,” I said, pulling him in for a long hug. I kissed his head and began to cry as well. Rue was my dream, but this? Beyond my imagination. We were a family, just me and him, but now, we were building a bigger family. I was so happy I could barely manage any words.

“Pascal? I know we haven’t been together very long. I...I’m so happy, but I understand if you’re not.”

“What?” I asked, pulling back. “Rue, you’ve made me happier than I ever thought possible. But this? Having my cub or kit? I’m so damned happy, I’m about to go out on the sidewalk and tell everyone who will listen.”

Rue’s tears doubled. He giggled and put his hands on his still-flat belly. “I’m happy, too. We made this, you and I. I can’t believe I’m going to be a daddy.”

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“The best daddy. You’re going to be incredible.”

“And so are you.” He beamed with joy. “And guess what else? We have everything we need right here.”

“No. This is for people in need. I’ll buy you and our babe anything you want. As long as the two of you are healthy and happy. That’s what matters.”

I convinced my mate to leave the store and let me take him to dinner. He wanted a sandwich from the PBJ place and that was what he got.

That night, I spent the night at his house, with him fast asleep in my arms. I thought about what this meant for us. We couldn’t raise a child with each parent living in a different home. We would have to find a solution for that but tonight, I wanted to hold my family in my arms and let the worries wilt away. Today was a day for celebrating.

Chapter Twenty

Rue

“You’re sure you want to live in my place instead of yours?” I’d asked him this about fifty times, but I didn’t want him to do this just because I loved my home so much. He’d already made great strides in redecorating his own, and it seemed like a kind of slap in the house’s face to move out on it. “It’s so small.”

“I’m not answering this again, omega.” He tapped the tip of my nose with a finger

and grinned at me. “You’ve got such a large lot, we can add on later, but right now, I think you have the coziest cottage in Oliver Creek. Why wouldn’t I want to live in it?”

“Because you’ve been traveling the world and staying in hotel suites with bathrooms bigger than my house.”

“First, that’s an exaggeration, I’ve never stayed anywhere where my bathroom was bigger than your cottage. And second, you are doing such an amazing job on your house. Don’t you want to finish it?”

“I will. And, I think I’ll be renting it out after that. As long as you’re sure you want to keep me around.”

“After you’ve got everything all packed up? I should hope so. You don’t have any bad habit or anything I don’t know about?”

“No. You already know I snore when I’m overtired. And sometimes I drink too much coffee.” He tapped his fingers on his chin. “Other than that, I’m perfect.”

“Okay, then you can stay.”

“Whew! I was afraid you were tired of me.” He continued emptying his dresser drawers into a box.

“No, but I wish you’d let me help. I’m pregnant, not an invalid.”

“And I’m your alpha. You’re carrying our child and that’s enough hard work for anyone. That’s not even mentioning the shop.”

I sank back on his bed. “I’m going to get another assistant trained before we go on

paternity leave.”

“Good.”

“Can’t I even pack up your socks and underwear? Really I feel like dead weight.”

He sat down next to me and gave me a sweet kiss. “You’re not dead weight. But if you want to do something, how about I settle you at the kitchen table and you can wrap the glassware up so it doesn’t break.”

“Deal.”

All day, I negotiated bits and pieces of helping because he was so considerate he was afraid of me doing more than I should. I was a little irritable about it at first, really feeling like I could be doing more. But by lunchtime, I was ready for a nap, and my wonderful alpha tucked me into his bed and kissed me on the forehead.

“When I wake up, I am going to help you some more.” The moving truck would be here the next day, and he needed to get everything done. “So, don’t try to stop me.”

“Never, omega. You’re a big help just being here. Rest up and you’ll be fresh as a daisy.”

My half-closed eyes snapped open. “Fresh as a daisy? My grandmother says that. How old are you again?”

“Just sleep.” He kissed my cheeks then my lips. “Want me to sit with you while you drift off?”

Of course I did. He had a lot to do, but I’d gotten a little clingy as my pregnancy went on, and I told myself I’d really be helpful when I woke up.

Which was at six o'clock, just as a food delivery arrived for our dinner. My mate had finished nearly all the packing without my nagging attempts to help, and the fact he'd never called me out on that was one more reason why I loved him so much.

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We ate our burrito bowls, my current obsession, and then I sat on the sofa while Pascal finished up his packing. There would be plenty to do on the other end when we got to my house, our new home together, but I'd let him tell me what he needed me to do. I had a hard enough time getting out of a chair at this point without assistance.

After a couple of hours, Pascal came to get me for bed. "My last night in my old house," he said. "When I came back to decide whether to stay in Oliver Creek, I never dreamed I'd be moving to a fairy-tale cottage with a raccoon omega with a heart of gold." He stroked my cheek. "You're going to be a very good father."

My heart melted. "So will you, alpha. Our little one, kit or cub, is going to be a very lucky baby." Holding out my hand, I let him help me out of the chair, and together, we went to spend that last night in this home. I intended to show him what I was still capable of and make one more memory here before we left.

Chapter Twenty-One

Pascal

Quinn was one busy healer, but as I found out when I called to make an appointment, he kept slots open for Oliver Creek residents. Our town really was the best in the world. And I'd been all over the world.

"Welcome, Pascal. I'm Atlas. Oh! And, Rue, of course." Rue had walked in behind me. He was famous in this town for his giving and sweet nature. Some of his shyness had worn off, but he was still my quiet raccoon for the most part.

“Hello. Yes. I’m Rue. This is my mate, Pascal.”

“Yes. Here. Fill out these forms, and I’ll see if my mate is ready to take patients.”

We filled out the forms and, when Atlas came back, Quinn was ready for us. Today, Rue would get examined and hopefully we’d get to hear the heartbeat. He was far enough along for that. At least, that was what the internet said.

The place was painted in a hushed baby blue with pictures of landscapes. The windows were partially open, letting in the morning air and making the curtains billow in the wind. Rue and I had discussed him giving birth at home, among his comfortable things, but if he had to give birth here, I didn’t think he would mind one bit.

We were escorted to a room, and Quinn came in. I didn’t miss the way Atlas touched Quinn’s hand before he left. They were cute together.

“Good morning. I had to do some research for you two. I wasn’t familiar with the gestation and birth of raccoons and had to do some digging.”

“I’m sorry,” Rue said, shrugging.

“Please, don’t be. It’s exciting for me, and I’m always happy to do research. I’m kind of nerdy at heart. Anyway, can I get you to put this gown on for me while I go over your questionnaire? I’ll turn around, I promise. If you’re ever uncomfortable with anything, please be vocal about it, and we will stop.”

I helped Rue into the gown, and he sat on the exam table. That and the ultrasound machine were the only medical-looking things in the room. “If you raise your legs, I’m going to make sure everything is good and then we’ll take measurements and see that baby by ultrasound and hear the heartbeat. Sound good?”

Rue nodded but took my hand in his. I expected my alpha bear to rear up at Quinn touching him, especially on his intimate parts, but he knew Quinn was taking care of our omega and our babe. No roaring required. Once the exam was done, Quinn put blue gel on Rue's belly, and the room soon filled with a fast, whooshing sound that made us both gasp. "That's their heartbeat?" Rue asked.

"It is. It seems fast for our ears, but this is a strong-sounding heartbeat. They are good in there. Let's get some pictures. I have to ask, did you want to find out the sex of the baby?"

"We do," Rue said. "I want to be able to have a name ready and get the nursery prepared."

"Excellent. Let's see what we have." Quinn rubbed the wand around Rue's belly and took screenshots of the measurements. "They are a bit small for how far along you are, for a bear, but for a raccoon, we're all good. This doesn't determine what kind of animal he or she will be, but the heartbeat tells me everything I need to know. They are growing well. Now for the good stuff."

Rue squeezed my hand. "Are you sure you want to know?" he asked.

"I am. I can't wait."

Quinn moved the wand, getting the best angle, and then took another screenshot. He lifted his finger to the screen. "See there? That's her genitals. Your baby is a girl."

"A girl," Rue whispered. "We're having a baby girl."

"I'll give you two a minute. Here's some cloths to clean up with, and I'll be right back with the printed pictures."

Quinn left, and I leaned down and wrapped him up in my arms, goop or no goop. We both cried a bit then he pulled back. “Are you happy? If we want a son, we can try again.”

I laughed loud and hard. “Rue, my love, let’s get through this birth before we start planning another one, okay? Unless you’re just eager to get me to bed, in which case, you don’t need another baby as an excuse.”

“We can celebrate when we get home, I suppose. Can we get this goop off me?”

We cleaned him up and, when Quinn came back, he gave us a bottle of prenatal vitamins. He told us how he was recommending the Trash Panda to couples or omegas who needed a bit of a hand with things. He also wanted Rue to advertise in the shop how he would give prenatal exams for free for those who couldn’t afford a healer.

My mate was a miracle, helping spread kindness everywhere.

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“How about a milkshake?” I asked once we left the office and were walking home.

“How did you know? I was just thinking about a cookies and cream frosty milkshake. Not the healthiest, but I want it so badly.”

“Then you shall have it. Anything for you, omega.”

We went home and after drinking the shake, my omega needed a nap which I happily joined him for but not much sleep was had.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Rue

We’d come a long way in a relatively short time. My little home was under construction, with the addition coming along and my mate spending all the time he wasn’t helping at the shop and watching over me like a mother hen supervising the workers. I’d suggested we hire a general contractor, but he’d just laughed and pointed out how much time he had on his hands.

His investments still took some of his time and, of course, he also had his days at the Trash Panda and was considering writing a book. But the expansion of our home was his passion project. He’d been wanting to make his own house as cozy as he considered mine, and bought a lot of furniture and painted it that lovely shade of cream with the lavender trim. Now that it was a short-term rental, he’d decided he had a flair for remodeling and decorating, and I had to agree. When we’d decided to move him into my place, he’d bought about twenty gallons of the cream and five of

the lavender and said he was going to use it at our home. I'd laughed at that, as well as at the furniture, housewares, linens, and everything else in a POD rental parked in the driveway.

"I want to be able to furnish each room as it's completed," he asserted while building the crib for newly finished nursery. "If I have all the stuff right here, there's no delay."

It was a good plan, but one that had us parking our cars on the street.

We were adding a wing almost larger than the cottage it was being added onto, and he went over each and every detail with me, making sure I liked it before bringing it to fruition. I was due anytime, and he was determined to have the new master suite and nursery ready when our daughter was.

Fortunately, he'd brought the glider up first and insisted I sit in it while he did all the work. I had my feet up and a cup of herbal tea at my side. "I just don't see why I can't help at least a little. I feel lazy."

"You're the supervisor, remember?" he said. "I'm counting on you to make sure I put all these pieces together properly. This is my first nursery."

I chuckled. "And you think it's not mine? Seriously, you are doing a fantastic job. You put that crib together in less than an hour."

"And now it's on to the dresser." He got out the box cutter and slid the packaging. I'd also suggested buying the nursery furniture already put together, but he was too excited about doing it himself. If it hadn't been for the fact that the master suite wasn't quite done—I hadn't been in there in a few days, but it had had a ways to go—and he had at least another six or seven hours in here, I might have told him about the pains that were coming closer together.

Unless these were Braxton Hicks contractions, which I doubted, we'd be lucky to have the nursery ready. I'd have to give birth in our old bedroom instead of the new fancy one. I didn't mind, but my mate was so excited about the new one...

A contraction came on, tightening my belly with a streak of pain, and I did my best to control my breathing. The dresser was almost done. Maybe that was enough? But no, he was working on the changing table. Then the toy box, hanging the curtains, making up the crib with the adorable sheets that matched them. Little baby animals of all kinds danced their way over the sheets and curtains. The floor rug was laid down.

One thing after another fell into place while I surreptitiously timed my pains.

When he set the diaper pail in the corner and turned to face me, his smile dropped. "Omega, what's wrong?"

"Is it done? Everything?" I asked, one hand pressed to my stomach as if that would make the pain stop.

"Just about." He set a stuffed bunny on top of the dresser and arranged a set of baby grooming items we'd received as a gift next to it. "That's it."

"It just looks great," I said. "I have something to tell you."

"How long have you been in labor?" Pascal dropped to his knees beside the chair. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"You wanted everything to be done." I struggled to stand up and sank back into the chair. "I guess I need a hand to get to our bedroom."

He hopped up and bent, putting one arm under my knees and the other behind my back. "Arm around my neck, omega."

“You can’t pick me up. I’m big as a house,” I protested, but he scoffed.

“Of course I can. It’s just you, my omega, and a tiny baby.” He moved to open the connecting door to the master bedroom instead of the hallway, shifting me to free up one hand. What was he doing? “As soon as I get you in bed, we’re calling Quinn.”

“Alpha, I know you want the baby born in our new room, but it’s not—”

He swung the door open and I gasped. “It’s not what, omega?”

“When did you finish it?” The room was every bit as cozy as the cottage but bigger, with its own bathroom and a seating area. All the bedding and things we’d ordered were in place.

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“While you were napping the past few days.”

“It’s perfect. You’re perfect.” No sooner had he set me down on the bed than another pain came on. “Alpha, you’d better call, or Quinn is just going to be coming here to see how we did with the delivery.”

It wasn’t as quick as I’d feared. Quinn arrived just in time to catch Aurora as she slid into the world. He didn’t even scold me for waiting, and neither did Pascal, although they probably should have. But everything worked out in the end, and our daughter was born in our bedroom where she’d inhabit the bassinet next to our bed for a few months.

After Quinn left, we cuddled together in bed, watching our perfect daughter chest feed and loving one another as much as anyone ever could.

Epilogue

Pascal

My omega had kicked up a fuss about the fancy hotel I took him to the first time we made love, worried that I wanted luxury in every aspect of my life, but that wasn’t true. Or rather it wasn’t the kind of luxury that I wanted.

For me, waking up with Rue sleeping beside me, our baby’s soft breaths mingling with his was the ultimate luxury. And when she cried, I’d get up and change her diaper before bringing her to the one of us who could give her the rest of what she needed. I didn’t want him to lose any more sleep than necessary.

He'd taken longer off for paternity leave than planned, but Alfred and his other assistant were checking in daily—so maybe he wasn't really off. In fact, we were working on setting up Trash Pandas in other towns like ours, filling a need both for the local people who shopped there and for a charity of the manager's choice. They might not all be profitable, but that didn't matter to me, or to my omega who finally accepted that what was mine was ours and we could use it to best advantage to help others. Even the staffs of the new places would be people who had been overlooked and needed work.

But that was all still on the drawing board for another month or two. My omega and our daughter were my priority, and the future I'd never imagined was laid out before us, a gift of Fate I hadn't done anything to deserve. But grateful?

Oh yes. How I'd ever imagined my life to be full before I met my omega, I'd never understand, but whatever made me realize it wasn't, had led me here. To this moment. To a loving family and a whole bunch of dads about to descend on us for the weekend. Our fathers had all met Aurora, but they hadn't met each other yet.

For the moment, I would enjoy our peaceful life, but I also looked forward to our little one being the superstar she was with all her grandpas.

“Alpha, are you up?”

The phrase I'd used when flirting with him way back at the beginning. “Quinn cleared you, right? For lovemaking?”

“Last week.” He rolled to face me. “Why are you making me wait?”

“I'm not anymore.” I kissed him then propped myself up on an elbow. “And this weekend, when the dads are all here...maybe we'll even get some sleep.”

“A raccoon can dream.” He reached for me, wrapping his arms around my neck. “If

we want to waste our time in bed doing that.”