



Untamed Omega

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Category: Romance, M-m Romance, Paranormal

Description: He never showed up.

My omega, my fated true mate, left me sitting at our favorite deli. Alone with a corned beef sandwich, which I ate before I realized he wasn't just still mad about our little tiff over breakfast but had been taken by a notorious cabal working under the auspices of science. Most humans didn't believe we existed, but these villains knew the truth. And they wanted to find out how shifters and others with gifts they did not share accessed them, so they could have them for themselves.

My omega had not survived their "testing." An omega who escaped saw him die.

My life at the sanctuary keeps me from drowning in grief and self-blame. If I hadn't made a fuss about nothing, we'd have spent the day together instead of his car breaking down on the way to our make-up lunch, leaving him vulnerable and alone. I couldn't make up for what I did, but I could use my healer training to help others who had been in captivity or, like me, lost their mates or family to them. Another escapee was being brought to us, and the video sent by the wolf shifter who picked him up was disturbing. He was bruised and emaciated, and his face held lines of suffering. He looked so much like my omega that for a moment I let myself hope. But it was impossible. He was dead, and I had to accept that.

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Chapter One

Markus

“Anything I can do?” I asked, midafternoon. Locke, our alpha, who demanded we not call him that, was in the food storage closet with a clipboard, his brow furrowed. He’d sighed three times since I came in five seconds before.

“You have enough to do.” He grunted and went back to moving jars of beans and bags of flour around.

“Everyone here is pretty healthy now, and all my morning visits are complete. Let me help you.” I reached for the clipboard, but he moved it away.

“Do you think I’m incapable of handling this?” he asked with one eyebrow raised.

“No, not at all...” The word alpha was right on the tip of my tongue. “I like to keep busy.”

He scribbled some numbers down on the paper then stretched his neck. He hated inventory but when it was his turn, he did so with a minimal amount of grumbling. “Why don’t you rest?” he said. “There are warm chocolate-chip cookies and a fresh pot of coffee in the kitchen. Take a walk. Sit on a bench. Read. Something other than trying to relieve me of this headache.”

“Ah, so you do think this job is a headache. I don’t mind doing it.”

He turned those eyes on me, and I stiffened. Sure, I was an alpha as well, but he wasthealpha around here. His word was law. Our animals followed his grizzly when we ran as a community.

In charge, whether he chose the title or not.

Which was why I caved. “Okay. I’ll go find something to do.” I walked backward with my palms out in surrender.

“Rest. We need you strong and steady. We never know when we might get another survivor in.”

“He gave me that speech this morning.” I turned to see Locke’s mate, Kellan, holding their daughter Elise in his arms. She was growing like a fertilized weed, exhibiting signs her animal was about to emerge. Early, of course, but with all the experiments some went through, nothing could be deemed normal around here. “I was trying to get up and bake muffins.”

“Oh, those were yours? Very good. I loved the pecan-and-brown-sugar streusel on the top.”

Kellan laughed. “No, he made me stay in bed. I think Rob baked them. He doesn’t say a lot, but he makes one hell of a muffin.”

Locke let out a low growl.

Kellan immediately gave him the stink eye. “I was talking about his muffins.”

“Exactly. Muffins sounds like a metaphor for something else. I can’t help it. It’s the alpha in me.”

Kellan and I rolled our eyes. But he looked down at Elise and shook his head. “Daddy is being broody today because he hates inventory. He’s being silly. Markus, you want to join us for a midday snack?”

I nodded. At least it would occupy my mind a bit.

We walked the short distance to the kitchen where I nabbed one of the muffins in question while Kellan grabbed a kitchen-sink cookie and sat down. “Let me make you something to drink? Are you having coffee yet?”

He nodded. “I am. I think Elise is weaning on her own. No sugar. Lots of cream, please.”

I prepared his cup first and then one for myself. Black. Adding things to my coffee felt like a luxury I didn’t deserve. I’d made up all kinds of rules like that for myself. With what happened to my omega, what I let happen, I didn’t deserve the good things in life.

“Markus?” Kellan asked, pulling me from my intrusive thoughts.

“Yes. Sorry. Here you are. I got lost there.”

I placed the cup in front of him and then sat across from him. I’d gotten a piece of cheese out from the fridge and offered it to Elise.

“She loves cheese. Thank you.”

I nodded and sipped on my caffeine.

“Is there something you want to talk about, Markus? You’re there for all of us, but do you have someone to speak to? I would never betray your confidence, but if not me,

someone else?”

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“Is it that obvious?”

Kellan nodded. “It is to me.”

Goddess bless him, I wanted to. I wanted to relieve some of the constant weight on my chest. I told others that speaking things out loud often led to epiphanies and realizations about things. Our inner voice could be the unkindest entity in our lives.

“Another time?” I asked.

“Of course. I’m here any time you need me. Five minutes or five hours, it doesn’t matter to me.”

My face began to heat and my body shook with the anxiety I’d contained within it for so long. I’d tried to forgive myself but I just couldn’t.

“I think I’ll take a walk.”

“Sounds good. See you later.”

I’d gone a few steps when Kellan turned. “Hey, Markus?”

“Yeah?”

“What part of a male is his muffins? You’re the healer.”

Snorting, I shrugged my shoulders. “Ask your mate. I have no clue.”

Chapter Two

Sam

All the lights went out.

In my many months here, I hadn't seen darkness, ever. I had heard rumors that in some sections of the building that wasn't the case, but in our wing, it was humming fluorescents twenty-four seven. At first, it had kept me awake, my nerves zinging in concert, but the body and mind can only survive for so long without rest, and eventually the sound blended into the background and the glare became my new normal.

In addition, the temperature of the cells and labs remained below what anyone could consider comfortable, air-conditioning vents blowing their icy gales through the hallways. Only my natural shifter temperature kept me from freezing, although my beast's fur would have been welcome. Unfortunately, I was unable to shift due to...something. In my food or drink or possibly the IV fluids pumped into my veins. Or the tablets forced down my throat. Something.

The constant unpleasant surroundings, the lack of windows or clocks, made keeping track of days and nights, weeks and months, impossible. The white coats all wore watches, but their long sleeves kept them hidden most of the time, and while strapped down to a table for "tests," I strained to get a glimpse of their wrists, craving the normalcy of knowing the hour.

At first, I didn't know what woke me from my fitful sleep. My eyes still closed, I tried to figure out what had changed. No AC. No poor excuse for a blanket either. It must have fallen off as the temperature rose. Searching for it, I opened my eyes to pitch blackness. And silence. No hum from the lights, no whoosh from the air-conditioning. No electronic sounds from everything else.

But, most surprising, in this apocalyptic change, no voices. There were always guards around here, and techs and scientists and orderlies... Even at times I guessed were late at night, conversations went on. The white coats and their underlings spoke in front of us as if we were deaf or stupid. Or maybe because they knew we'd never be in a position to pass on what we overheard.

That had always scared me.

But not as much as the dark silence coating my skin at this time. If the building had shut down, if nobody was there, what did that mean?

Sitting on the side of the bed, I tried to push down the haze that usually occupied my brain. I needed to think clearly if I was going to understand what was going on and see how it affected me. It had been a long time since hope held any part of my life, and it might be more than I could survive if I let it in now only to learn it was a blown fuse or circuit breaker or a power line or whatever. That might explain the power elements but not the lack of personnel.

I stood and took a tentative step toward the door of my cell. Hope was beginning, despite my efforts. The door had no knob, and it opened electronically, triggered elsewhere. I didn't know where. In some control room, I supposed. It was hard to tell what direction I was going, despite spending almost all my time in this space I had paced for endless hours.

Just never in the dark.

Hands out in front of me, I waited to find the door—or a wall if I somehow went in the wrong direction, but after about fifteen steps, I knew something was wrong. My cell was seven by ten feet. All that pacing confirmed it. I couldn't still be inside my horrible home base. Another three steps, and I planted my palms against a solid surface. The hallway.

My door must have been opened by the outage, and maybe others were as well, but I had no idea what to do now. I might be able to find my way to the labs, but outside? I'd been brought in here unconscious and never seen a sign of an exit.

Despair, my usual state, crept back in, replacing that small flicker of hope. How could I ever find my way out of this place? I slid down to the floor in a pathetic heap.

But then out of nowhere, a hand closed around my arm, and a voice hissed, "Stand up and come with me if you want to be free."

"Who are you?"

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“Doesn’t matter. If you don’t want to come, I’ll get someone else.”

“What do I have to lose?”

“Let’s go. And quietly.”

I pushed myself to my feet and let the male, whoever he was, lead me through the darkness. He didn’t have a flashlight or anything, probably because it would give us away. We didn’t speak any more, and after long minutes of traversing the building, we were outside in a big parking lot. There were a few cars, so someone else was in the building, and as we moved around the edge of the lot, keeping to the shadows, I could see that most of the windows in other wings glowed with light.

What happened to the one we’d left? The stranger guiding me to the gate wore a hoodie pulled close around his face, shadowing his features. He took me out to the highway and pointed in the direction he wanted me to go then melted back into the shadows. I began to run, keeping to the trees and following the road until my poor health and whatever had been done to me sapped the last of my strength and I fell to the ground. This time, the blackness was behind my eyelids.

Chapter Three

Markus

Days later, I was still tangled in knots. It seemed to get worse lately. I’d run my head into the ground until I passed out night after night. That way, I had no time to mull over things that were or things that never would be.

I was on my way for another one of those exercises in strength and speed when Zeph stopped me. “Markus. I’ve been looking for you. Meeting at the big house. Locke asked me to get everyone gathered.”

I looked out at the forest behind our property and sighed. “Yeah, okay?”

“What? Do you have a boyfriend out there? Come on.”

Not a boyfriend, but I had a small obsession with running now. It gave me a sliver of peace. I didn’t know why my bear was so damned unruly but he was.

“I’m coming.”

I followed Zeph to the house where the others had already gathered. Locke was still in his office with the door ajar, and I could hear someone else on the phone or on video chat. He used both.

“What’s this about?”

Rob shrugged. “We know as much as you do, Doc.” Rob had nicknames for everyone. He put up a front with the others as a tough smart-ass but in his sessions, I learned he’d gone through things I wouldn’t wish on my worst enemy.

We waited for Locke to get off the call, which didn’t take long. It wouldn’t have taken a lot for me to listen in and find out what he was talking about, but I focused on the conversation going on around me.

Eavesdropping wasn’t my thing.

“Everyone here?” Locke said, coming out of his office a few moments later. “Yes. Everyone.”

“What’s going on?” Zeph asked.

“That was Reggie on the phone. His pack has picked up a survivor from the recent breakout. They had no problem getting him to shift, but when he did...” Locke trailed off, scrubbing his hand over his face.

“What is it?” I asked. My stomach went sour as I awaited his answer. Shifters who came to us had gone through experiments and torture in the name of science. Some were worse than others but if it upset Locke, it couldn’t have been good.

“He’s in really bad shape. He’s skin and bones. He was bloody and is still deeply bruised. He’s...he’s not doing well. But they are on their way and should arrive in a few hours. We need to make sure everything is ready. I don’t know a lot of details. He might be feral or sick. I’m not sure about his mental state. Markus, you probably will have to treat him for all kinds of things.”

“We’ve got it,” I replied when everyone else stood there, shocked. Didn’t blame them, of course. A hurt shifter wasn’t first on my list, but we didn’t have time to stand around. We had to get ready. We pretty much stayed prepared for these types of situations, but it helped that Locke told us early.

We parted ways. Everyone knew their responsibilities except Kellan, the most recent victim of the humans and their science to arrive. He offered to help, but Locke drew the line. Kellan and Elise would stay in their alpha quarters until we knew the new person was safe to be around.

None of us wanted to see the alpha’s omega hurt.

He’d become a friend to us.

Of course, Kellan refused to obey. He handed Elise over to Rob to keep her safe.

Locke wasn't pleased but as he turned, there was a look of pride about him.

I stopped by the kitchen for some food and water for my patient then hurried to the cottage, AKA the clinic, to prepare for the shifter's arrival. There were many things to ascertain about his health and wellness, but first, we had to make sure he wasn't bleeding internally and that he had no life-threatening wounds. I brought out the IV pole and hung some bags of saline on it, along with some pain medication and another of a medicine that would knock out a rhinoceros if needed. Some came here wild and violent. We didn't blame them, of course. They had every reason in the world not to trust another living soul.

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The bed was freshly made and I had everything ready for open wounds, including a suture kit. Ice packs. Burns. They gave us little detail, so I had a kit for anything that he could have.

My bear hearing picked up a vehicle coming up our long driveway a few minutes later.

That must be Reggie with the person. I tucked a pair of sterile gloves into my back pocket and walked outside.

Goddess, give me the knowledge and patience to help this person with whatever they might need.

Two betas carried in the stretcher. Locke and Kellan hovered outside, and I joined them. There was little enough room to maneuver in the cottage.

Chapter Four

Sam

“He’s right here.” The high-pitched voice came from above me, but I did not recognize it. “Is this the one you wanted?”

“Yes,” a second person replied. “Here’s something for your trouble.”

Peering between half-closed eyelids, I saw the first male accept a handful of money. Had he sold me to the other one? The me who had been kidnapped years—at least I

assumed it had been years—before had learned a hard lesson that day. Trust? Gone forever.

I closed my eyes tightly again, not wanting to see my fate. I'd been so sure the labs were the worst thing that could happen to me, to anyone, but maybe I'd been wrong. What fresh hell was I going toward—having used all of my strength just to get this far?

“Heading out, then.” The crunch of dirt under boots grew faint as the squeaky speaker left. If I'd had any energy left, I'd have tried to escape, but the white coats and their minions kept us, or at least me, on the bare minimum of calories and my only exercise was pacing my cell. I opened my eyes again.

“Come on, omega.” The other man, his voice hearty and strong, grasped my arm. “Time to get you away from here before someone finds us. Can you stand?”

“I-I'm not sure.” What someone was he concerned about? The white coats? “Who are you?”

“A friend. My name is Reggie. I only need you on your feet long enough to get to the truck. It's a couple of hundred yards away. Want me to carry you?”

“No.” I struggled and, with the alpha's help, made it upright. “I can do it.”

“All right.” He didn't argue with me, nor did he release his grip on my arm. “Give it your best shot, but you don't look like you can go far to me. There's no shame in asking for help. You're not our first rescue from the white coats.”

“You're rescuing me?”

He tilted his head, studying me with interest. “Yes. What did you think I was doing?”

“I had no idea,” I answered truthfully. “It wouldn’t be the first time I was trafficked.”

“No trust at all, huh?” He started off through the brush, half towing me along.

“None.” But I let him guide me. What option did I have? My mate would never want me back after all I’d been through. They’d probably written me off as dead or a runaway long ago. And it was my fault. I shouldn’t have taken a ride with a stranger after my car broke down. I’d been warned. “Do you blame me?”

“No.”

I tried to walk at a reasonable pace, but my bare feet were not handling the forest floor very well, and I didn’t even know how I’d gotten where I ended up. Vague memories of waking from my blackouts and stumbling along tickled the back of my mind but didn’t offer a whole lot of real information. “Who are you, anyway?”

“I told you, I’m Reggie. I work with an organization that helps those who escape from the white coats, among others. Shifters are fodder for more than one lab, but this is the biggest one in the area. What’s your name, omega?”

“Sam.” I stepped on a sharp rock and stumbled. “Oh...ouch. Sorry.”

“You have nothing to apologize for, but if you keep on the way you’re going, your feet are going to be hamburger. Let me carry you, please. We need to get to the truck and clear this area, if you don’t want us both captured.”

“All right.” Everything in me wanted to argue, but my feet weren’t the only problem. My legs wobbled, and dizziness darkened the edges of my vision. I couldn’t do it, no matter how much that weird well of pride I didn’t even know I had, argued otherwise. “Thank you.”

The alpha scooped me up without even slowing down. “You’re way too light, Sam. I have some snacks in the car, and we’ll hit a drive-through on the way to sanctuary. A little more meat on those bones wouldn’t be a bad thing.”

“Snacks?” I rested my head on his shoulder and Reggie strode along, long legs eating up the distance. While grateful for his help, I hated feeling so helpless, like a burden. “What kind?”

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His chuckle rumbled against my cheek. “Name your poison. I’ve got three kinds of chips, beef and salmon jerky, candy... A bunch of stuff. And clothes.”

Only now did I realize I wore only the thin boxer shorts I’d been wearing in my cell. I hadn’t had much more than that at any point, part of why the AC was so brutal. And I hadn’t even thought about it. So used to the abuses, for using willpower to keep me going day after day. “Clothes...”

“They might be too big for you, but when we get to the sanctuary, they’ll have more options. You aren’t cold, are you?”

Despite the fact it was nighttime, it was much warmer than my cell. “Not at all, but I’d sure like to have something to cover up how ugly I am.”

He stopped and looked down at me. “You’re not ugly. You’re thin and bruised and show signs of abuse. A few weeks of good care and you’ll feel much better. I’m so sorry this happened to you, Sam, but our healer is the best.” He started off again. “If I ever get the opportunity, I’ll make them pay for what they’ve done to so many.”

When we reached the truck, he helped me into the cab before going around the back and getting a sack. Settling behind the wheel, he passed it to me. “Don’t eat too much, omega. You’ll make yourself sick.”

Which I of course did. We didn’t even get to stop for fast food because after a few strips of jerky and three cookies, Reggie had to pull over and let me empty my stomach. Instead of the burger I dreamed of, he bought me a small smoothie and made me sip it.

Then I slept awhile arriving to find two males waiting to help me onto a stretcher. I wanted to argue, but there was no way I could walk, so why bother. They carried me into a cottage and helped me onto a padded table.

Chapter Five

Markus

“Are you sure you don’t want to stay with Elise?” I asked Kellan then immediately stepped back. His squint made me rethink speaking at all. “Okay. Let’s do this.”

Reggie came out, and he and Locke spoke off to the side. Kellan and I were the first of our sleuth inside.

I barely held in my gasp at the skeleton covered in skin. His face was pale, almost to the point of lucidity with the exception of plum and moss-green bruises in various stages of healing and impact. Besides being starved to the bone, his scent was off. Usually, with humans, that would mean sickness or infection, but on this shifter, well, he was teetering on the cliff between life and death. Not to mention, the blood, caked and dried, that covered a good bit of his body. Or the parts I could see with the borrowed clothes that he wore.

Reggie and his pack at least tried.

I could only pray the Goddess spared his life. My bear wanted to bond with him. Not uncommon, since he wanted to bond with everyone in order to help them, but this was different, on the verge of compulsion.

Interesting.

Kellan approached him first. His eyes were closed, but his heart rate indicated he was

awake. Keeping his eyes open might be too great an effort.

I loathed most of human kind.

Locke's mate rested a hand on his arm. "My name is Kellan. I'm an omega. We're here to help you. I-I was in the labs too."

The man's eyes flew open at Kellan's admission. "Are you going to bring me back?"

"No. Never. You are safe here. We'd like to clean you up and have our healer check you over. I know how scary it can be after what you've been through, but we swear, we are here to help you. If you feel uncomfortable with anything, he will stop."

"Who?" the omega asked. His eyes widened and the air around us grew sharp with his fear kicking up.

I walked over slowly. The last thing he needed was to be frightened. A jump scare could be the end of him.

"I'm the healer here. Can we begin with taking those clothes off so that I can get an idea of your injuries?"

The omega's stare slid from Kellan to me. "Yes," barely left his mouth before he passed out cold. His head lolled to the side.

"Would you like to assist, or would you prefer Locke?" I asked Kellan. Seeing this omega in this state would remind him of what he'd been through. I never wanted to cause anyone more trauma.

"I want to help."

Carefully, we removed the omega's loose shorts. I tried like hell to keep my gaze clinical in nature, but Kellan and I both teared up at the way this person had been abused. Alpha. Omega. Human—because they weren't all evil. Shifter. Demon. No one deserved the abuse this omega had endured. If he made it through, he would be the strongest person I knew.

“Where do you even start?” Kellan asked.

“First, let's wash him and clean the blood off his feet. After that, we can assess. He needs to be hydrated, so as soon as we get him cleaned, I'll put an IV in.”

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“Yes. I...” Kellan’s face turned paler by the second.

“Go on,” I coaxed. “I can handle it.”

Locke chose that moment to walk in. Locke often came off as cold or aloof, but he was intuitive. He reached for Kellan’s hand and drew him away from the table. “Omega mine, come on now. Let’s get out of our healer’s hair so he can help this man.”

Kellan cast me an apologetic look, but I offered him a sympathetic smile and they left without another word. Dipping a soft cloth in warm water and antibacterial soap, I cleaned the omega head to toe. Scars that resembled cuts and burns turned up everywhere, and his feet were damaged badly. He’d likely been barefoot in the facility, and the forest floor and whatever roadways he’d been on hadn’t done them any favors. He needed nutrition and fluids, but he might not be able to hold down solid food. I needed to get a better selection of items in the vehicles that might pick up escapees to help them start to rehydrate. What they liked to snack on during their vigils did not suit someone like this omega. He’d been hurt too badly, half starved. Kellan told me he’d had adequate water in his captivity, but it didn’t seem as if this one had.

My bear roared inside me. He was angry. We were all angry. How dare they. How fucking dare they.

The omega didn’t even flinch as I inserted an IV line into the curve of his inner elbow. I added a small bit of pain medicine. It wouldn’t take much to help him with his lack of weight. When he woke up, we would have to make sure he ate. Otherwise,

a feeding tube might be in order. I didn't want to do that to him, but I had to make him well.

After setting up the IV, I covered him with a warm blanket. In this state, even his animal could do little to keep up his temperature. I added a heating pad for good measure. Then I pulled up a chair beside him and held his hand for the rest of the night.

Chapter Six

Sam

Warmth on my face woke me from a dead sleep. Sunshine crept over the bed where I had fallen asleep. I'd called it a table in my mind, thinking of it as a medical office, but now that I was more focused, I realized it was basically a bed, but the medical equipment on a table along the wall still made me feel uncomfortable.

Reggie, who brought me here, had called it a sanctuary. But I didn't know him or anyone else in this place. Wherever it was. Disorientation had been my life since the day I accepted that ride from a stranger who offered me a bottle of water from his cooler in the back seat. He hadn't even selected the bottle, just told me to help myself. I took two sips and passed out, not waking up until the gates to the lab had closed behind me. Rather, I assumed they had, but the door to my cell certainly had. I never saw the route or what direction we went.

Either every bottle in that cooler held the same drug, or he was playing a game and seeing who Fate wanted to send to torment. But it had to be the former because Fate didn't play games like that. I'd had my own encounter with Fate not long before the tragedy took me away, had been on my way to have a meal with my mate when my car stalled out on the side of the road. In such a hurry to get to him, I'd made a decision that ruined it all.

And I had some blank spots in my memory. Confusion that made it hard to remember details from before I was taken, mostly just emotions like guilt and loss. A scent surrounded me, one that was bringing those emotions to the front of my mind.

But I couldn't place it, and that fact frustrated me beyond my ability to cope. It was important that I remember, but remember what? My captivity was solid in my mind, vivid even, but that was not where I wanted my thoughts to live. I had not been saved so I could dwell on the past.

I felt ready to move forward and hoped to do it without these annoying gaps in memory.

"Well, look who's awake." The healer came into the room and approached my bed. "And I bet you're hungry."

"Starved."

"Then how about some breakfast?"

Chapter Seven

Markus

"Good morning." I entered to find my patient awake. "I brought you some scrambled eggs, lean ham, and toast. A few beautiful ripe berries. It will be easy on your stomach."

"Hello." The omega's voice was ragged. We hadn't actually had a chance to meet last night, and I hadn't asked Reggie for his name. Though I'd given him bag after bag of fluids, the omega still sounded parched.

His Adam's apple bobbed. Most people thought that hunger was a rumble of the stomach, but it really was felt in the back of the throat. "I...bathroom."

Of course. All those fluids. "Yes. I'll help you."

I walked him to the bathroom and supported him while he urinated. While I gave him as much privacy as I could, I had to stay close. He looked like he might topple over any second.

When he was back in bed, I observed his breaths. The beat of his heart. Tested his temperature and blood pressure. All were low but normal for someone with these kinds of injuries and starvation.

"Do you think you can eat?" I asked.

"Yes." I brought the plate over and he went after it with gusto. Poor omega.

"Slowly, okay? I know you're hungry, but we don't want you to have a stomachache."

"I overdid in the truck last night and made myself sick." He nodded. "I can't even remember the last time I had strawberries. I think I forgot what they taste like."

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“I’m so glad. Take your time. Do you mind if I ask you some questions? I’d like to get a proper medical file set up so we can get you on the road to health.”

He barely looked at me. His focus was solely on the food in front of him. “Sure,” he said with a full mouth.

“Let’s start with something simple. What’s your name?”

He swallowed and if I wasn’t mistaken, there was a look of disappointment that his ham slices were gone. “Sam. My name is Sam.”

My bear struck me dead in the chest through the bond we shared.

Mate. Ours. Our omega.

I flinched at his statements. No. Our omega was gone. He’d been kidnapped on the night we were supposed to be celebrating with dinner. His car had broken down and I wasn’t there for him. His alpha, the one who was supposed to care for and love him, keep him safe, wasn’t there to stop the awful humans from taking our mate.

He was gone and there was nothing I could ever do to fix that.

“Is something wrong?” Sam asked.

“No. Of course not. I once knew someone named Sam, that’s all. Had a flood of memories come up.” Every. Single. Day.

“Can you tell me how long ago you were taken?”

Sam sighed. “I’m sorry but I don’t know. At first, I tried to keep track in my mind, but there was no sunlight. No difference between night and day. There was no schedule when...those people would come in. No regular meals to help me. It felt like decades.”

I put my hand on his, and he gasped. Shoot. I knew better. He probably still didn’t trust me. That was okay. “That happens a lot. The days imprisoned can run together. Whatever you can remember would help.”

“Okay.”

“Can you remember what they did to you? Did you hear them speak about any specific things? For example, we have an omega here, and they were trying to put another shifter animal inside of him.”

Sam stopped eating. “That sounds painful.”

“It was, but he’s more than fine now. He was here yesterday. Do you remember?”

The omega squinted and scrunched his nose. “Not really. A bit?”

“He’ll be back around. Do you remember anything?”

Shaking his head, he popped another handful of blueberries in his mouth. “I wasn’t a success. That’s what they said. They would chain me up and strap me to the beds, but I always got out. They beat me and punished me, and there were all those strange meds, but I didn’t really give them the opportunity to do much to me.”

I breathed out a sigh of relief. At least they hadn’t tried to change his animal or add

another one like they had Kellan. A small reprieve. “I see. How is your stomach feeling?”

“Good. I’m still very hungry.”

“I can imagine you are, but I’d like to see how the food settles, if you don’t mind.”

Sam shook his head. “I...thank you and the other people for helping me. I didn’t really get a chance to tell them.”

“That’s okay. We don’t do what we do for the thanks. We do it because it’s the right thing.” I was about to ask about his birth date and medical history before he was taken, but Sam let out a loud yawn. “I am going to let you sleep a bit. We are all here. Not far away. If you call out, someone will come.”

“Thank you. Thank you for everything.”

“You’re welcome.” The word omega hung on the tip of my tongue. “We’ll get you some more food when you wake up.”

Chapter Eight

Sam

I never asked for his name.

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The healer. He was so kind and smelled so good. I almost felt like I'd seen him before. After breakfast, he tucked me in, pulling the warm, soft blanket up around my shoulders and settling back in the chair next to the bed.

I wanted to talk more, but the food seemed to have sent me right back into the exhaustion that had been my regular state for as long as I could remember. My eyelids weighted, they closed, and I fell back to sleep, the comfort of my surroundings lulling me into the first true rest in months or years...however long it had been since I'd been free.

The scent that surrounded me helped me to relax as well, although my brain insisted we could not trust anyone. Ever. These people seemed to be nice to me. They were feeding me well and making me comfortable, but did they have an ulterior motive? The person who kidnapped me seemed nice, too.

Late in the afternoon, I woke up to find that the healer had left. No doubt he had a lot more duties than watching over me, so it shouldn't bother me that he was about doing them. The room I lay in had windows along two walls, so while I didn't have the full sunlight I had when I woke in the morning, it was still bright and cheery. Plumping the pillows behind my head, I settled in to try to make sense of everything that had happened in the last day.

The whole thing with the lights at the labs was very odd. In the craziness of escaping, I hadn't had time to think about it a whole lot, but lying here all by myself, I had to consider how many moving parts there had to be in order for the entire wing to lose power. Especially now that I remembered overhearing the white coats mentioning that there was a backup generator in case of any problems.

And the man who helped me? Had he been responsible for the outage, or was he part of a larger group?

“Hey, I see you’re awake.” The other omega entered, lifting a hand in greeting. “Have a good rest?”

I moved to sit up, but he waved me back. “I have, but I feel like I could sleep another twelve hours. What a slug.”

“You’re not a slug. It took months for me to feel like myself, so don’t be thinking you need to be up and about right away.”

“I’ve been lying here thinking about what happened, and I just don’t understand any of it.”

He sat in the chair where the healer had been and leaned back. “Be more specific.”

“There is a lot, isn’t there, from the moment I was taken until now, but I was trying to take in what happened to me specifically from when I woke up in the dark.”

“I guess you told Alpha Reggie some of it, but I don’t know very much. If you want to go over it with me, maybe I can help you make sense of it? My own experience was a little different, I think. I’ve heard there were a few others who made it out when I did, but I don’t believe that was the case with you.”

I sucked in a breath, ashamed. “I never even considered the possibility. They kept us so isolated from one another that I don’t know how many others were in the wing with me. I hadn’t seen another captive in a very long time.”

“So you woke in the dark? Was that unusual?” He crossed one leg over the other and rested an elbow on his knee. “Because constant light was not one of the tortures I

endured.”

“Completely unusual. And there were no white coats around, not even any of their helpers. Where did they go?” I told him all about how the man found me in the dark and got me outside. “I never saw any other omegas, even then, but wouldn’t it be weird to go to all that trouble just for me?”

He shrugged. “I don’t pretend to understand my escape either. I’m just so grateful that I did get out and meet my alpha. Locke and our baby are worth going through anything to get to. I hope your life from this point is as good.”

We talked awhile longer about our experiences at the labs. I wouldn’t have trust in anyone anytime soon, but it was comforting to speak with someone who had been in the labs and could empathize with my experiences.

After we’d spoken for a while, Kellan stood and stretched. “It’s just about dinnertime. Would you like to come with me to the alpha house for a bite? You’ll get to meet a lot of the group that way.”

“I do want to meet them, but I’m not sure I can manage to walk.” I slapped my knee. “Shine that. I can do it. What’s for dinner?”

Chapter Nine

Markus

There were things a shifter in my position didn’t do. While Locke had never called himself the alpha, he was—like it or not. And since he wasn’t the alpha, I also had no official position.

Someone with no place in a hierarchy shouldn’t be doing what I was about to do.

There was a chance my call wouldn't even be taken. If I were Reggie, I certainly wouldn't.

"Hello." Brewer, a former member who'd joined Reggie's pack, answered on the first ring. Except now I couldn't find my words. "Markus?"

"Yes. It's me. How are you, Brewer?"

He chuckled. "I'm fine. What can I help you with?" Brewer had never been a man to mince words.

"I was wondering if your alpha had time to speak with me."

"Why?" he asked quickly. Locke told us that Brewer was quickly rising in the ranks of Reggie's pack. He was a full-fledged beta now. That said something about how far he'd come. He was once a pompous pain in my ass.

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“The omega who he brought to us. I have questions. I...”

Brewer cleared his throat and I heard footsteps. He must’ve been walking into or out of a room. “Just ask me; I saw him as well. Reggie’s a busy alpha.”

“I know. I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t important. I think this omega is someone I knew before. I need all the information I can get. Anything. The smallest detail might help more than you know. All I’m asking is for five minutes.”

“I just walked into his office. Give me two seconds.” There was a noise over the line, and two seconds turned into fifteen. “Five minutes. That’s it.”

“Thank you.”

More noises indicated the phone was being handed off. “This is Alpha Reggie. Markus?”

“This is Markus, yes. Thank you for speaking with me. I have some questions about the omega who’s in our care now.”

“Go on.”

“Where did you find him? Was he shifted? Was there any indication of where he came from?”

Reggie chuckled. I knew my questions were fired fast, but he had given me five minutes. “We found him on the south end of our lands. He was not shifted. And no,

we have no indication of where he came from, but we're assuming it was from the same mass breakout that Kellan did. Anything else?"

"Yes. Is there...can I have a copy of the security video from that night? I need as much info as possible to treat him."

Reggie made a noise. "I supposed we could do that. Are you sure this is all in the name of healing? Sounds like you have skin in the game."

I let out a sigh. There was no point in hiding it. "I think he could be someone from my past. I really just want to help him. No ill intentions. I promise."

"Then I'll get it sent over. Anything else? This was hardly five minutes, healer."

"Any details you think would help?"

"Hmmm. If I think of anything, I'll have Brewer relay the information. Take care, Markus. I hope you find what you seek."

Reggie hung up, and not only was I relieved that the video would be sent over but doubly so that he didn't tear me up for requesting his time in the first place.

I knew it would take time for the video to be pulled from their system and then sent to me, so I decided to go check on Sam in the meantime. The cottage was part clinic and part myhome, separated by a door. I walked through it, and my heart fell to my toes.

Sam's bed was empty. The IV was removed. I sprinted to the bathroom but he wasn't there either.

Shit! If he'd run while I wasn't watching him, that would add a thousandth layer of why I would never forgive myself. Why some days I hated looking at my own

reflection in the mirror.

I flung open the door that led outside, and my bear caught his scent. He'd gone outside but that could mean anything. It could mean he was with someone, or it could mean he was gone from my life forever.

"Sam!" I called out and received no answer.

Find him, I ordered my bear. If he is our mate, find him.

I only had to tell him once. He took over my senses, and we followed the omega's scent until we reached the alpha house. The smell of roasted pork and potatoes and vegetables reached my nose. Dinnertime. A bunch of people were talking as usual. Our community seemed to be growing by the day. Kellan and Locke had given us all hope that everyone deserved and had a mate. Fate would always make a way, even for those who were broken.

I closed my eyes and focused on the voices. In a hushed tone, barely audible among the rest of them, was my mate. Sam. There was Sam. My bear was happy he was there, among our people. And if he was in there, he was eating. All good things, but it was strange not to be there with him.

The evidence pointed to the fact that maybe this was my mate but, of course, I would need more before I broke the news to him. After everything he'd been through, there was a chance he wouldn't remember me. That he might never remember me. That he wouldn't want me as his mate any longer.

Go to him and we will see. Let him be the judge. Let me help you.

I relented. My bear knew more than I on the matters of mates.

Chapter Ten

Sam

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“Do you eat like this every day?” The table was laden with platters of incredible food. And I didn’t just think it was wonderful because I’d been nearly starved for as long as I could remember. Pork roast, glazed sweet potatoes, bowls of green beans and fresh peas and carrots, baskets of blueberry muffins... And someone came around telling everyone to save room for dessert because a female whose name I didn’t catch had made her chocolate raspberry trifle. Eight bites in, I knew I would not have room for dessert. The healer warned me to take it slow, and my experience after eating snacks in the van held a vivid place in my mind, but it was so hard not to gobble down everything I could get. Because starvation was even more vivid.

My beast beat beneath my skin, demanding more and more and more. He’d felt the effects of our starvation for too long to be satisfied with a few scraps. The banquet before us overwhelmed his deprived state. Shifters had a unique ability to provide for themselves when things got tough, food wise. We could don our fur and move through the landscape, sating ourselves with victuals that might not work for us in human form but could be transformed into nourishment by our beasts. In captivity, I’d been denied even this. There were no plants or small animals for him to eat in the labs.

“Yes,” Kellan replied, and I had to scramble to remember what I’d asked. Oh, of course. About whether this was a normal meal. “Not everyone comes here every night, but all are welcome, and the meals are good and filling.”

Good and filling? Try incredible. I cut my pork into tiny pieces and forced myself to chew slowly in hopes I wouldn’t make myself sick. The others seemed to take it in stride, the mountains of delicious food, and maybe, if I stayed here, I would too, one day. But it was hard to imagine.

Also, why would I stay here? They were getting me on my feet, but it wasn't as if I had anything to contribute to the general good. No particular skills or schooling that might help them with their mission. I was just one more victim of an evil institution. Kellan had stayed—but his mate was here.

“Take your time with that, omega.” The voice of the healer washed over me, his scent overlaying the food, but not in a bad way. “Pork might be a little heavy after your deprivation.”

I looked up to see him taking a seat across from me, nothing but kind concern in his expression. “Hi.” Lifting a piece on my fork, I showed him how tiny I'd cut it up. “I'm eating as slowly as I can.”

“See that you do.” The shifters around the table passed the platters and bowls in his direction, and he scooped healthy servings of everything on the empty plate at his place. “If you can't keep it down, it won't do you any good.”

“I understand.” Placing the bit in my mouth, I chewed it twenty times before swallowing. “I hope it's all right I came here. Kellan invited me.”

“Of course.” He spooned gravy over a mountain of fluffy mashed potatoes. I hadn't seen them because they were at the opposite end of the table, but now I wanted them too. But the healer wouldn't be pleased if I added more to my plate. He'd already warned me to be careful. “Everyone here is welcome. I'm pleased you felt well enough to walk here.”

“I'm better,” I said, spearing a morsel of sweet potato. “And I was afraid of lying around, but Kellan told me to take my time, that his healing wasn't quick.”

“As long as you need.” He added a serving of peas and carrots and then picked up his fork. “This meal has been too long in coming.”

“What do you mean?” I had been lifting my glass, but at the healer’s words, my hand shook and water splashed onto the tablecloth.

“Nothing. It’s just nice to see you at the table enjoying your food.” He loaded his fork with potatoes and vegetables before bringing it to his lips. “How long since you had a good meal—not counting this morning?”

“Oh, I don’t know. My sense of time from there is beyond muddy. But the last meal I remember before I was taken was breakfast at home. We had eggs and pancakes. With blueberry syrup, and then I hurried to do my chores on the land because I was meeting someone for lunch.” The day, one I’d run over in my mind thousands of times while in my lonely cell, came back in vivid detail. “I borrowed my brother’s car and headed for town. I was really excited, but then the vehicle stalled out right in the middle of the road. The car behind me was honking, and I managed to steer off to the shoulder. I went to call my lunch date, but my phone was dead and my brother had no charger. He took terrible care of his car, always had.

“Mine was in the shop, though, for a broken hose, and I had no choice but to use this one.”

“And then?” The healer’s voice carried right along with my story.

I studied my plate, except the images from the day I described overlaid the pork and sweet potatoes. “And then I got out. I was going to walk the rest of the way to town. I’d be late, but my date would understand. He was my...”

I lifted my gaze to him.

“Go on, omega.”

“I wanted to hurry, didn’t want him to leave because I didn’t show up, couldn’t call

and let him know why I wasn't there. A van pulled over and a guy asked if I wanted a ride. I didn't want to be late." My eyes filled with tears. "I was meeting my mate." My bear roared in recognition. "I was meeting... How did I not know until now? I have to go—I'm so sorry."

Pushing back from the table, I stumbled to the door, finding more strength in my panic than I'd have given myself credit for. But I couldn't face him. I'd been so stupid, and it cost me, cost us, everything.

The young, healthy male he'd been ready to spend his life with was gone, replaced by this shell, this wreck, this mess.

Chapter Eleven

Markus

Sam had run. He ran from us. He ran from me.

I thought he was running because he'd figured out who I was.

I followed him out to the back porch and never intended to chase until he looked over his shoulder and then began to run. Terror and something else dwelled in his eyes. When we were mated, before now, I could tell everything about him from any look. I knew his face. Every line. Every contour and dip of his body.

And now, I had no idea what he was thinking, but I had to find out.

I chased him like our lives depended on it because they did. I'd let him get away once, but I never would again unless he said he wanted me out of my life. His rejection would splinter my heart, but at least I would know.

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“Sam!” I called after him. His pace quickened and at the very second I thought I’d caught up, he weaved through the trees and with a loud, ear-piercing growl, shifted into his bear. My knees buckled at the sight and sound of him. It had been so long since I saw my mate in this form. He was even more beautiful than I remembered.

I couldn’t have kept my own bear in check even if I wanted to. He tore out of me, ripping skin and shredding muscles. The transition so fast, pain radiated through my body both bear and human.

Find mate. Chase him. Won’t lose our omega.

At least we were on the same page.

Our lands were vast. I knew each acre of them by heart, especially after all the long walks and runs I’d been taking to get my mind off Sam. Off what I’d done to him. A life I could never recapture.

But I could capture him.

His bear was fast, but my mate was still on the mend. His body was weak. He hadn’t had much to eat.

I let him go for a while, hoping he would cast out some of his fear and anxiety about realizing who I was and that we were here, together, again. We bobbed through brush and jumped over veins of the stream that ran through our lands. Hopped over exposed roots and darted around trees, playing a game with each other. Several times, his bear stopped and faced me, let out a huff of anger, and then took off again. His steam

would run out soon and, when it did, I would be there. Not to force anything on him but to clear the air.

See if there was any chance he would ever be mine again.

Even if he didn't want me, I would still give him the best care I had to offer. I would see him well if it was the last thing I ever did. If he no longer wanted to be my omega, I would still be his alpha in spirit. Care for him. Keep him safe and protected, from the distance he allowed.

Please, stop. I spoke through the whisper of a bond I hope we still shared. You're not well enough for this.

Sam, a few feet in front of me slowed but didn't stop. Had he heard me?

Sam, omega, please. You will hurt yourself. Please.

Sam, the bear, stopped and whirled around to face me. His breaths were labored, and his scent had turned sour. He wasn't well. Goddess, I just wanted him to be well.

Slowly, I walked up to him and my bear nuzzled his nose. Gently.

My omega swiped at my face with his claw. The coppery scent of blood filled my nose, and I stumbled back, realizing what he'd done.

What I'd made him do.

Sam stood before me in human form, thin but with bruises far more faded, yellows and pale greens, than the night before. "I'm so sorry." I felt awful that I'd made him run. He already had such little muscle tone. He needed to be recuperating, not sprinting away from what once was.

My bear protested, but I forced a shift back to two legs. “It’s okay. I was chasing you.”

“It’s not okay. I don’t...violence is never the answer. I’ve seen enough blood spilled. Are you hurt?” He took a few steps in my direction and touched my face.

“The shift healed the scratch, Sam.”

“It’s been so long since I heard anyone say my name, and now everyone is calling me that. Feels like a dream.”

I nodded. My hurting omega. He’d been through hell.

His chest moved with shallow breaths. The air around us crackled with the magic and power of our shifts. Sam had once been a powerful bear. He could’ve outrun me at the worst of times. We would have to get him stronger. Those bastards had to have drugged him or something, otherwise, he’d have shifted and they’d never have taken him.

We might not ever know what happened that day.

But he didn’t deserve it.

But now he was here. In front of me. Tears welled in my eyes, making his form blurry. I couldn’t do anything but stare at him. Did he hate me? Had he forgotten I ever existed? Had they taken some of his memory?

Chapter Twelve

Sam

We faced one another in the woods. Naked of both fur and clothing, it was only fair that our emotions were equally exposed. Or perhaps fair was not the correct term. That implied choice, where none lay. Recognition after so long came with a heavy weight of grief, joy, pain, relief, anger, more pain... And we had so much to say to one another.

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I studied him from head to toe, as hungry for this side of him as my bear had been to meet his beast again. I hadn't realized that he harbored anger, however, the swipe at his face releasing a little of the rage.

My bear adored our mate and his beast, or he had before we were taken. The more time I spent with Markus, the clearer the past came, as if he was helping the fog to dissipate. When I arrived the night before, I didn't even recognize him, and now I couldn't imagine a face more familiar and beloved.

"He blames me," Markus said, touching the faint pink mark remaining from the attack. "He believes we should have protected you. As your alpha, it was my duty. He's right."

"No he's not. You always told me that I wasn't careful enough. My car was in the shop for a minor repair, my brother's broke down, and my phone was dead because I didn't make sure to charge it before leaving the house."

"Sam, I should have picked you up instead of meeting you."

"You can't have forgotten why you didn't? Because my parents did not allow you on our lands?"

"They thought I was too old for you. And didn't come from the right side of the tracks." His dad's were rogue, had left their own sleuth over issues they'd never revealed, but my fathers did not consider the issue of rogue parents suitable for one of their own. "But I could have done something."

“Do you mind if we sit down?” I had used most of the energy I’d gained from the food and the shift. “I need to rest before we go back.”

“Omega.” He guided me over to a fallen log. “I’m still not taking good care of you.”

“No more of that. You haven’t done anything wrong then or now. If I hadn’t delayed our mating, hoping to convince my fathers that it was fated and going to happen no matter what, we would have been living in our own home instead of sneaking around to meet.”

“But I’m the alpha,” he insisted, “and should have been able to make that happen.”

I sat on the log and reached for his hand, drawing him down next to me. “As my alpha, you allowed me to think for myself. You cautioned me about making sure my phone was charged, that I drove a well-maintained car. Mine actually was, thanks to you and your insistence, but things break. My brother’s, well, I should have called you to change our plans when my car was repaired the next day. Or met you at the edge of the lands. I didn’t believe anything bad could ever happen. I really was young.”

He lifted my hand to his lips and brushed them across the back. “You’re really trying to make me feel better.”

“Only because it’s the truth.”

“I’ll give you a little bit of blame, but 90 percent is mine.” That face I hadn’t been able to bring into focus under the influence of whatever drugs they had me on was every bit as handsome. But up close like this, lines of suffering roused my guilt again. Everything about me had been suppressed, memories of the day I was taken about all I could manage to retain. But he’d had no such muffler to protect him.

“I am taking 100 percent of the blame for your pain. Not that I think I’m worth what I can see it’s done to you, but oh, alpha, I’m so sorry.”

He blinked then smiled. “I have a better idea. Let’s give blame where blame is due and lay it in the laps of those who occupy that complex and the asshole who stole you for them. He’s my personal project. I am putting feelers out, and if I ever get a lead on him, my bear will shred him slowly to bits. It’s his idea—smart bear.”

“Only if my bear gets to help.”

“You are the most competitive omega,” he scoffed. “What will I ever do with you?”

I tipped my face up and slid an arm around his neck. “Kiss me?”

Chapter Thirteen

Markus

My chest felt lighter than it had in years. He didn’t think any of it was my fault. He didn’t hate me.

Which meant I no longer had to hate myself.

My lips tingled as his warm ones pressed against mine. Every part of my body relaxed into the motion. He was the water I’d been so thirsty for all this time. The cool wind on a blistering summer day.

Sam pulled back and smiled. My mate smiled at me.

“Life is strange,” he said, shaking his head.

I let out a chuckle. I couldn't help my eyes from glancing down. He wanted me. After everything we'd been through. He was studying me as well. "It is. I can't tell you how sorry I am."

"Stop, Markus." He put his fingers over my lips. I covered them with my fingers and kissed each one.

"I can't. I've blamed myself for so long."

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“Don’t do that. Blame the human scientists who cause pain in the name of furthering research. They are the bad ones. If I remember correctly, you did nothing but love me. I cried for you for days, maybe weeks. I feared you would think I’d abandoned you. That I’d rejected our mating and our bond.”

“How do we ever move forward?” I asked, still in awe of this moment but mostly of my mate. He could be angry. He could be resentful and callous, but here he was, still tenderhearted and loving and sweet, as he always had been. A true warrior survived the battle with his heart intact. My mate was that warrior.

“First, I need to eat,” Sam said, chuckling. “I’m starving.”

“Let’s get you back to the cottage, and I’ll bring you something. You’ve burned a lot of calories trying to get away from me.”

His cheeks reddened. That blush stole my heart long ago. “Maybe I was hoping you still liked to chase me, alpha.”

A growl burst free at hearing him call me alpha. “It’s been a long time since you called me that, Sam.”

“Do something about it, then...alpha.”

This man was going to be the end of me, one way or another. “Oh, Sam. I want to. You have no idea how much I want to.”

“But?” he asked.

“But you are still recovering. You need to eat and rest and get some more fluids in you.”

One of his eyebrows rose.

Now my cheeks burned. “Not that. IV fluids. You always were funny. I’m glad they didn’t take that away from you.”

“They tried. Trust me. They tried. I-I think you’re right.” He wobbled and reached out to me. “I need to rest.”

Before he could collapse, I scooped him up, honeymoon style, and took off. Even though I’d chased him quite a ways, we’d rounded back so that we were close to my cottage. It only took a few minutes to get him back inside and tucked into bed. “Do you want to shower first?” I asked.

“You’ve already put me in bed.” Laughing, he shook his head. “I’ll shower if you join me.” Despite his tone, his eyelids drooped. He always was a feisty one. Always wanting and needing me. I never complained and never would.

“Omega, you’re too tempting for your own good. I’m going to get you something to eat.” I kissed his forehead then straightened.

“No, don’t go. I can eat later. I just need a nap.”

“I’ll be right in the other part of the cottage.”

His hand latched onto my wrist. “Stay with me, Markus. I’ve been alone so long. Tell me about you. What have you been doing while I was there? How did you come here? You’re a healer now?” The longer he spoke, the more his voice drifted off. His eyes were now closed.

“I’m going to replace your IV.” All I got was a nod while I set it up. It would take a while before his body was properly hydrated, much less healed.

I sat in the chair next to his bed, and he turned to face me—eyes still closed. “I might not let you go for a while.”

Chuckling, I wrapped my arm around him and laid my head as close to his chest as I could get. “That’s fine by me.”

Silence settled between us. I had to let my mind catch up with what had occurred in the last few minutes. Life-changing things. Mind-blowing. “Talk to me, mate.”

“I became a healer because I wanted to help others who had been hurt by humans. I knew there was a chance that you had been taken by them. I never thought you left or abandoned me. Not for a second. Your family didn’t want to talk to me, but I finally learned they’d found your brother’s car on the side of the road. I knew you hadn’t gone of your own choice. This was my way of making up for not being there for you. A penance. There was a small part of me that hoped one day you would show up.”

He smiled, but I could hear his heart getting stronger by the second. Perhaps our bond would help heal him. There were worse things than cuts and bruises and aches. There were scars on the inside that only love could cure.

I loved the omega in front of me more than anything in this world.

Once he was deeply asleep, I turned him onto his back and covered him with another warm blanket then stretched out next to him. I needed some sleep myself and, if he woke, I would feel it.

My bear would know.

Chapter Fourteen

Sam

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 7:22 am

I woke from a dream where my mate was making love to me in a big, soft bed with the light of the full moon beaming down on us. It was paradise, everything I'd dreamed of for years, even when I couldn't see his face. But that was no longer an issue. Not only was his face imprinted on my mind, but he was lying right next to me on the bed, and the scent that had teased my nose and reminded me of I knew not what had returned to clear focus.

My mate always smelled good, and that had made finding him even better. As I came fully out of the dreamscape, I snuggled closer to the man himself. Markus and I had waited to make love until we were ready to mate, and he'd held back for me because I hoped to bring my family around to see that we were a couple who belonged together, and the five or so years between us didn't matter at all. We were both adults and Fate had spoken. Fate didn't care about the difference in our backgrounds. She put us together, and it was up to us to accept the gift that was.

If only we'd acted on our love sooner, none of this would have happened. I didn't blame my mate. I was only grateful to have him back. And to remember him. How much trauma and drugs had it taken to make me not recognize him.

But spending any time thinking about that, wondering about it now, was a waste. If I'd learned anything, it was that life did not guarantee anything, and I was not going to let a moment in his company get away from me.

"Markus," I whispered into his ear. "Wake up and mate with me."

"Hmm?" He wrapped an arm around me and pulled me close. "You feel so good."

“Make me feel better.” I was naked still from the shifting, but he had put on a T-shirt and shorts before giving me the IV, probably because naked doctoring was less than professional. But I wanted the clothes off him, now. “Take these things off.” I tugged the shirt. “Please, I want to feel your skin against mine.”

“Omega, I don’t think you’re up to it.” His voice held regret, but I didn’t want any more of that between us.

“I am. Please, we’ve waited years for this moment. We put it off first for practical reasons, and I don’t believe we can risk that again.”

He kissed my cheek. “You don’t think anything is going to come between us, do you?”

“Not if we make love now. Don’t make me beg.”

“Never.” He sat up and stripped off his clothing. I lifted the side of the blanket, and he slipped underneath, his skin warm against mine. “Better?”

“So much better.” I looped my arms around his neck and pulled him in for a kiss. He had always been an incredible kisser and the years had only made him better. I tried not to think of any practice he might have had. If he’d kissed someone else, they’d helped him improve.

“Nobody else, omega. I haven’t kissed anyone since you.”

“Good.” I kissed him back, welcoming his tongue into my mouth. He stroked my chest and groin, finally closing his fist around my cock. “I’m so hard for you.”

“Me too.” He rocked his hips and I took the hint and fisted him as well. “Even when I wasn’t sure you were still on this earth, there’s never been anyone else. How could I

have been with another person after knowing my mate.”

“You thought I was dead.” It wasn’t a question.

But he answered it as if it had been. “I never gave up hope. But I knew the practicalities. You were gone and nobody had any information. I went to your parents but they wouldn’t tell me anything. Your brother said he’d found his car abandoned. I didn’t know what to think. And then when you came here, you looked so different. I wasn’t sure, didn’t dare to hope.”

“And now? Do you have high hopes?”

“For us, I do,” he said. “As long as you don’t want to run away from me.”

“Alpha, if you don’t mate me right this minute, maybe I will.”

With a growl, he rolled on top of me and pushed my legs up to my chest. Two fingers entered my hole, gliding in on the copious slick his nearness brought from me. His fingers retreated, replaced by the tip of his cock, and then he was inside me, the first time ever, and nothing could have prepared me for how good it was. How hard, how deep, and my legs were pinned by his body, my cock scraping his coarse-furred groin with each stroke.

I came almost immediately, my cum spraying on his abdomen while he continued to pound into me, muttering words of love and affection and how he’d never have given up on me entirely, no matter how everyone insisted he should. His words had me hard again, sensitive and vibrating against his body.

“Omega, this is what I dreamed of all those years. I can’t believe you’re real.”

“I am. And I just dreamed about this and you a moment ago. But it’s better. It’s so

good.” I grasped his shoulders and held on while he drove in again and again, stretching me with his cock, making room inside for the cum that poured into me, held inside by the swelling knot.

“Alpha!” I called out, unbelievably coming again in concert with him then dropping back, held firm in his arms, in love, secure, and far closer to trusting than I thought I’d ever be again.

He held me close and sank his teeth into my shoulder, making the mark I’d begged for, marking me as his.

Chapter Fifteen

Markus

I couldn’t believe it. I had my mate again.

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Right in front of me. Or lying next to me as the case was. After we'd made love, I brought him here, to my bed. Having him in the medical bed didn't seem right anymore, not that it had felt right ever.

"Markus," Sam whispered.

"Good morning," I said, rolling over to face him. Somewhere in the night, I'd become the smaller spoon, but Sam hung onto me as though I were his tether to life. "Are you okay?"

He nodded, his face moving up and down against my back. "I am very well but I'm starving."

My eyes flew open. My mate was hungry. He hadn't eaten much the day before, and the last thing he needed was to miss a meal. "Need to feed you."

"Okay, big bad bear. Yes, I need to eat. Can we shower first?"

"Showering together won't get you to breakfast faster," I said, cupping his face.

He looked down. Something was wrong. "I don't think I can hold myself up. You'll have to help me until I'm stronger."

My mate knew how to speak directly to the alpha nature inside me. It was one of the things I most loved about him. He never minced words. He called me out on my bullshit. Told me when I was wrong and where I could improve.

We needed to get to know each other again, but I was happy that part hadn't changed. The core of him was the same as always.

"I can do that. Let's go."

My shower was equipped with a built-in bench. Sam sat there while I washed him head to toe. Our eyes stayed locked through most of it.

"This might hurt a little," I said as I swept the washcloth over his mark.

"I've been through worse."

There was nothing funny about that, but he laughed anyway. "Time to rinse you off. I'm going to stand you up. Lean against me, love."

He gasped. "It's been so long since I heard that. Say it again."

"Love?" I asked, starting to rinse him off. "You have always been my love. I never stopped loving you. Not for a second."

"I never stopped loving you either, Markus. I dreamed of you. Sometimes, I would pretend you were next to me. Lying beside me."

"I wish I had been. I wouldn't have let them hurt you." I finished rinsing him and then helped him out of the shower. I had some clothes for him from my stash. They would swallow him, but it was all I had now. We would have to go into town and get him some things.

Sam and I walked to the main house together, hand in hand. I knew there would be some explaining to do, and I was more than elated to tell my packmates that I'd found my mate again.

When we entered the house, every eye turned on us. “Everyone, you already know Sam. What I didn’t tell you is that he is the mate I lost so long ago. I didn’t know if he remembered or not, so I didn’t bring it up, but he recognized me yesterday and, well, here we are.”

“If Markus was my mate, I’d run for the hills too.” Rob broke the silence. He was such an ass, but at least he’d broken the ice.

Sam laughed. “I was running more from me.”

“Sit down, mate. I’ll get you a plate. I’m sure everyone wants to hear the gossip.”

While we ate, the others came over to talk to my mate. Rob, our resident grump and baker. Kellan, who he already knew, and Elise. Sam said he wanted to hold her, but he didn’t trust the strength of his arms yet. Zeph introduced himself, and so did the others.

That left Locke.

“And you are the alpha, right?” Sam asked. “I’m sorry. I’ve forgotten all the protocols for sleuth life.” The room exploded with laughter. All except Locke and Sam. He reached under the table and grabbed my hand. “Did I say something wrong?”

“Sam, you said absolutely the right thing,” Rob boasted. “Our alpha is not so comfortable with being called what he is.”

Sam’s brow furrowed. Cutest damned thing I’d ever seen. “I don’t understand.”

Locke sighed. “Sam, I’m not the alpha.” That only invited more laughter. “I’m not. I might take the leadership position in some matters, but we are all equal here.”

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“Bullshit,” Rob said.

“Rob...” Locke growled.

“What? I can say anything to you I want to. You’re not the alpha.”

“It’s an unwinnable argument. We’ve given up for the most part.”

Sam nodded. “What can I do to help around here? Nothing in this life is free.”

Something else he used to say.

“For now,” Kellan said, touching his other hand. “Get stronger. Eat plenty. Take care of yourself and rest. Once you feel ready, there are always jobs to do around here.”

“Like inventory.” Locke smiled this time. He really did hate inventory.

“If you’re done eating, I thought I would give you a tour of the lands.”

Rob chuckled. “Thought you did that yesterday.”

“Shut up.” I laughed anyway. Rob really had no boundaries when it came to his big mouth.

“That sounds nice. But I think I already need a nap.”

“You can do that too.”

We only made it to a few places on the lands before Sam let out a loud yawn. I felt his tiredness through our bond. It felt like it solidified by the second.

“Let’s get you to bed,” I said.

“Yes, please, alpha.”

No better words in the world.

Chapter Sixteen

Sam

As the week passed, I was healing; the bruises faded into nonexistence and I grew stronger. Shifting frequently helped, as did sleeping in the arms of my mate. We’d come back together as if no time passed. A tribute to Fate or the Goddess, and I’d never been sure they weren’t one and the same.

“Why are you out of bed?” My mate appeared as if out of nowhere to find me standing on the porch of the cottage. “You’re supposed to be resting.”

“I can’t stay in bed every moment of every day,” I protested. “I’ve already memorized every ripple in the paint on the ceiling and the number of leaves on the tree outside the window.”

“Every leaf?” he asked, skeptical.

“Well, every one visible to someone flat on their back in bed.” I flung myself into the rocking chair someone had left here as an offering to the healer, its creak warning me to be more careful next time. “Everyone here is doing something to help, and I’m supposed to just stay put and be useless.”

“You’re not useless,” he protested. “You’re my mate, and your health means more to me than my own life.” His voice cracked, and he held his arms out.

I stood up and into his embrace. “You’re terrible, do you know that? Taking advantage of the fact that you know I can’t resist you?” I breathed in his scent, soothed by it and by his warmth. “But I can’t stay in bed forever. Surely there’s something I can do around here.” I nuzzled his throat. “Please, alpha.”

“And you know I can’t say no to you.” He kissed the top of my head. “Even when it’s for your own good. I’ll ask Locke if there’s anything you can do without too much exertion.”

“Thank you.”

“Now, let’s go in and have some lunch. If you’re going to insist on spending calories on work, we’ll need to up the ones you are taking in.”

“I’m starving.”

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“No doubt. You barely touched your breakfast this morning.” He led the way through the clinic portion of the cottage and into the back where we made our home. “How are you going to get to a healthy weight this way?”

“You’re trying to stuff me like a roast chicken.” I followed him into our kitchenette and sat down at the small table. “Is that what we’re having?”

“No, I have some chicken soup for you. And egg custard.”

“When I eat at the alpha house, I don’t get invalid food. My teeth are going to think I don’t need them anymore.”

“How about some toast with the soup, and we’ll go up to the house for dinner where you can gobble whatever you feel up to.” His frustration was evident in his tone, but I was so tired of being treated with kid gloves.

“When I was at the lab, they hardly fed me at all, and what they did was really bad. Surely now that I’m here and on the mend, we can just move forward.”

I didn’t even know why I was arguing when I actually loved his soup. And custard? A secret favorite my grandfather used to make for me. But everything irritated me lately. And when he set the bowl of steaming soup in front of me, thick with noodles, pieces of chicken, and carrots and celery, I inhaled the steam and clapped my hand over my mouth.

Racing for the bathroom, I barely made it in time to drop to my knees and empty the few ounces of oatmeal I’d managed to eat for breakfast into the porcelain bowl. I’d

been nauseated all week, but this was the first time I couldn't hold it back. I didn't want my mate to know and think I was getting worse.

With everything I had been put through, all the things injected or forced down in pill form, the IV fluids my captors dripped into my veins, there could be anything wrong with me. Any sort of poison might be causing the exhaustion, the irritability, the nausea.

But I had to fight past it because it would kill Markus if anything happened to me. I'd already decided that if I got worse, I'd leave rather than let him witness me dying.

"Omega." Markus handed me a wet cloth. "How long have you been feeling this way?"

"Just a few days."

"Then why were you asking to do more, if you feel worse?" He helped me stand and walked me toward the bedroom. "How can I help you if you aren't honest with me?"

"I just felt like if I could act normal, maybe I could be normal. I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired. Whatever they did to me"—I swallowed against the lump that filled my throat—"it may be killing me."

"Oh, Sam. I don't think that's the problem." Markus settled me in bed. "When you need to urinate, let me know. I have a stick I need you to pee on."

Realization flowed over me. Not death? "Do you think I'm..."

"Pregnant, Sam." He kissed me, his lips firm against mine. "I believe we're going to have a child."

Chapter Seventeen

Markus

I had to turn around and hold in my smile as Sam's belly bumped against our table filled with glass bottles and droppers, along with all kinds of jars. As his belly grew, he asserted his balance went out the window and that gravity had a personal vendetta against him. "I swear, Markus, if you are laughing..."

He was joking, of course, but that triggered me. "I wasn't laughing until you said that."

"But you were smiling. I know you." He had gained weight. He glowed now. There were still scars on the inside and outside, some he would have forever, but he was healing. Every day he got a little bit better. His eyes shone with a bit more happiness. At night, he spoke to our babe and told them that they would be the most loved baby in the world.

He wasn't wrong.

"Sam, I'm sorry. You're too adorable for your own good. Trying to help out and learn new things while maneuvering a changing body. I'm not making fun of you. I'm happy because you're mine."

"Ugh, stop saying sweet things while I'm aggravated."

"How about we take a break?" I asked. While he was still healing, he was also growing a babe inside him.

"A break would be nice."

We stepped away from the worktable and sat on the couch I'd picked up in town. My mate needed places to rest. Some days were better than others, but as his pregnancy progressed, he would likely become more tired. Eat more. Would need more cuddles and hugs.

All of which I was game for.

Before Sam sat down, he grabbed his pre-made snack box from the lunch bag Rob packed for him every morning. The first time he'd done that, I said nothing. Rob shrugged it off. One day I asked him, and he said it was all he could do to help. He wished he had an omega and if he did, that's how he would want them treated. He was a good guy. His mouth was not so good.

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“How is the tea blend coming along?” I asked. Sam was working on a tea to help with his anxiety and maybe the anxiety of others. It included chamomile, valerian, and lemongrass, but he constantly read about and explored more things to make it better. He was a fast learner and wanted to be of real help to our community.

“I think it’s going well. I gave some to Kellan, and he said it helped him to get to sleep faster. Of course, I won’t be able to try it myself until our little one comes along.”

I reached over to rub circles along his belly. Our little one was kicking on and off but kicked the most when his omega daddy was trying to get some sleep at night. I was thankful Sam had only gotten a touch of food aversion and in the meantime, there were plenty of nourishing things he could eat.

Sometimes, I looked at him and couldn’t believe my luck. Maybe, somewhere along the line, I’d done something to have Fate smile on me once more. I didn’t appreciate the way it happened, but we were stronger for it. Mostly my Sam. He was the strongest person I knew.

“That and the milk tea,” I said.

“Yes, that too. I should be doing more research but I’m tired today.” He leaned over, having finished his snacks.

“We have about an hour before lunch, and you’ve done a lot today. How about you take a nap?”

He groaned. Nap was once his favorite word but, somewhere along the line, he'd equated it with being lazy. "Not a nap."

"Omega mine, you have to keep your strength up for our baby and yourself. Believe it or not, you're still very much healing. I feel so guilty that you got pregnant while you were still getting better."

"You weren't the only one there, Markus. You have a habit of blaming yourself for everything."

"Me?" I laughed. "Never."

"Right." Sam sighed. "I'm actually not going to argue any more. I could really use a nap."

I walked with him to the bed, and it took everything in me not to join him. But I had things to do. We had a new person coming in almost every week. Our supplies had to always be stocked. We were always ready. Locke wanted everyone who came here to be safe and well taken care of. And the last two that did were two of our mates. That made our mission that more important to all of us.

"Stay with me," Sam said, his lovely lip pouted out.

"I have things to do, mate."

"We lost so much time, Markus. Please. I want to spend every moment with you that I can. Just thirty minutes, I promise."

How could I say no? I couldn't.

I climbed into the bed behind him and wrapped him up in my arms. Holding him

here, where he was safe and sound, was the best place in the world. When we found each other again, I thought maybe he would want to leave—to find a new place of our own, but he'd also found a home here and with me.

There wasn't a day that went by that I didn't offer my thanks to the Goddess. Finding my omega again was a blessing I didn't deserve, but I sure as hell would try.

Chapter Eighteen

Sam

Time passed so differently at the sanctuary than it had in the labs. There, I hadn't known what time of day it was or day or the week or even the month. There was no difference between day and night in my world. Those rare glimpses at someone's watch were not enough to help me to establish an internal clock. Even things like meals were not regular enough to count on. And showers? As best I could guess, they were every three or four days.

At the time, I called it neglect, but now I wondered if it hadn't been part of the experimentation to disorient me. It was even crueler than the drugs—or at least so I believed. I might never know what they had put into my body. All I could do was watch for problems and attempt to move forward.

As a result of my confinement, since I arrived at the sanctuary, I'd been a bit obsessive about watching the clock. Seven o'clock, breakfast. Noon, lunch. Six o'clock supertime. Eleven p.m. bed. Markus, bless him, did not argue when I announced that laundry would be Thursday afternoon and sheets would be changed every Wednesday. He seemed to understand how important it was to me to be able to anticipate when things would happen.

At first, I was so rigid about my schedule and upset if anything made it change, but as

my pregnancy progressed and my body changed, so did I.

“Omega,” Markus said, finding me sitting on the sofa reading a book. “It’s noon.” He’d been in a meeting at the alpha house and just returned.

“Is it?” I’d been nibbling honey-roasted nuts while reading all morning and wasn’t the least bit hungry. “Okay.”

“Sam, it’s lunchtime.” He leaned down and looked at me. “Noon.”

“Uh-huh. Are you hungry?”

“No. I left the meeting so I could be here for lunch with you.”

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I set my book down and struggled to my feet. “How many times have you left meetings or changed appointments for my schedule?”

“Oh, it doesn’t matter.” But it mattered so much. I’d fallen into a set of rules to help me regain control of my life. But in the process, I had taken control of my mate’s life. And if he was leaving meetings and scheduling appointments around my issues, then it affected others as well. When I came to sanctuary, I had never intended to do anything like that.

“It does. And it’s over.” I grabbed the bag of nuts and handed them to Markus. “Is the meeting still going on?”

“Yes. There is another survivor on the way, and we were discussing the intel we have.”

He’d let my needs take precedence over this incredibly important matter. Out of love for me, but how selfish had I been? “I want to help. Can we go back to the meeting now? Can I come?”

“You should be resting.”

“Alpha, Kellan helped me when I arrived. He was so sleep-deprived from being a dad, but he didn’t let that stop him from making me feel at home. We know what it’s like where they are coming from. They are so damaged, and they need to have someone who understands.”

I’d been trying to find a place in this sleuth that was just mine, a skill that could be

useful, but so far had been unsuccessful.

“Are you sure? It’s not too much for you? Too upsetting?”

“No. I think it’s time to get out of my head. We have a baby coming, if you haven’t noticed, and they’re going to have to come first. You’ve been so kind to me, putting up with my insistence on all those times for eating and stuff, but it’s time I put my attention to helping others.”

He hugged me tight then took my hand. “So we won’t be having lunch at noon anymore?”

“I wouldn’t go that far. We have to eat sometime. But I believe the baby will have their own ideas about when we eat and sleep and things. It’s time to ease up. Now, can I come to the meeting?”

“Yes.” He kissed me hard. “Since Locke isn’t the alpha, how can he stop you?”

It probably didn’t hurt that I was pregnant, either. I’d noticed that nobody wanted to upset the pregnant omegas. So when I waddled into the meeting room and took a seat, there were some surprised looks, but nobody told me to get out.

Instead, they continued with their discussion, and when they paused long enough, I asked nicely to be included and shared what I already had with my alpha. And when we finished up, I had an official job within the organization. My duties included ensuring that new arrivals had a place to stay after Marcus released them from the clinic and, if they wanted to return to their old groups, I would facilitate that process.

It felt good to be more than just a rapidly growing belly. Sure, there was a baby in there, but until they made an appearance, there was only so much I could do with my time. Helping others was better than marking off the hours of the day.

Chapter Nineteen

Markus

Sam had been working from a sitting position a lot lately. According to his healer, who was me, he had a week or so before he delivered but, then again, shifter pregnancies were wild and often didn't follow the plans. Then again, all we had to gauge from were other shifter births, which weren't well-recorded, and human pregnancy.

I walked over to him and noticed the way he was stretching this way and that but without appearing to receive much relief. "Here, let me rub your back."

"Oh, thank you. It's been giving me trouble since this morning."

That caught my attention. "Since this morning? Low back? Anything else bothering you?"

My omega shook his head. "Not really."

While I rubbed, Sam hissed several times. "I have to get up. This stool is killing me. Nothing is comfortable nowadays."

"I'm so sorry. Your legs have been tight too."

"And swollen feet and this kid of yours keeps jabbing my ribs with his little feet. It's fine sometimes but not at dawn."

I rubbed my hands along the circumference of his belly. "Oh, are you bothering your daddy? That's not nice. You have plenty of time to do that once you're out here."

Sam playfully slapped at my shoulder. “Stop that. He or she is going to be an absolute angel, just like Elise.”

Snorting, I shook my head. “The same Elise who threw a fit last night because Kellan tried to feed her potatoes?” Elise was a meat eater. Meat and nothing else. I knew it was a phase, but Kellan was concerned.

“Yes. That one. A very particular and persistent angel with lungs like a...like something with big lungs.”

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We shared a laugh but, only seconds later, my mate's smile turned into a frown. His eyes grew wide with wonder. "Markus. My water broke."

I looked down and stared. My loud laughter had somehow drowned out the sound of my mate's water breaking. "Sam, I think your backache is labor. Are the pains coming at regular intervals?"

He nodded then doubled over and cried out. I had to try not to. I'd delivered plenty of babies before coming here to the sanctuary, but never my own.

"All right, Sam. We've gone over this. You know what to do."

Another nod. He waddled over to the bathroom and before anything, I knew that he would want to shower. Water breaking wasn't urine, of course, but it often made omegas feel a bit icky. I didn't blame them. "After the shower, where would you like to go?" I kept one hand on his back as he washed himself off.

"To the floor. My bear wants to go to the floor. On all fours. Hey, that rhymes."

"Sort of."

My mate leaned on me as we walked to the bedroom area. I quickly unfolded the thin mattress we'd bought for this occasion and got out the towels and the blankets. On the side was the medical kit, for cutting the umbilical cord.

We were ready for this. No amount of ready could take away the pain Sam was about to endure, but I hoped it would be replaced by awe at our baby.

“Can I examine you?”

Sam snorted. “Of course you can. It’s not like I have anything you haven’t seen before, Markus.”

“I know but this isn’t sex, my love. This is clinical.”

“Thank you for being respectful. Now, tell me if I’m ready to push this baby out.” He positioned himself on hands and knees, and I got behind him to examine him. He was, in fact, dilated and was ready to push this baby out. Omegas bodies were miracles in themselves.

“You’re ready, omega. Let your bear lead you. He knows what to do.”

Sam bore down, shifting back on his hips and pushed. He cried out my name, the goddess’ name, and cursed us both. Normal, of course.

Three more pushes from him and I saw the head. “The baby’s head is at the opening. A few more pushes and we have our cub. Come on, omega. You can do this.”

The next sound out of his mouth was guttural and came straight from his bear. Our baby came out and instantly began to cry. So did my omega. So did I.

“He’s here,” I said, wiping some of the fluids off of him. “We have a son, Sam.”

“We’re a family,” he said.

“Sam, my omega, we always have been.”

Chapter Twenty

Sam

Boredom was no longer a problem. Despite my new position as facilitator with the escapees who'd made their way or were brought to us, I'd still had plenty of time on my hands until the moment my mate placed our son in my arms.

He was such a little thing with a red face and waving arms, and I was instantly madly in love. What I didn't know was that this tiny boy, the one we named Cody and whose nursery was fully decorated and ready to go, who latched on and chest fed like a world champion, did not intend to sleep...ever.

Every time I thought he was down for a while and I'd be able to follow the common wisdom of resting when the baby did, his eyes flew open and he wanted to eat or play or have a new diaper or just generally fuss.

After about a week, not only I but Markus were running on fumes. We were sitting on the sofa with Cody, passing him back and forth like a hot potato. He was adorable and sweet and wide awake.

"We could put him down," I said, "and see if he'll fall asleep."

"We tried that an hour ago," Markus replied, "and he just cried."

"Right." We'd tried everything we could think of, but this child not only didn't sleep, he didn't want to be put down. Some of the other parents said to let him cry, but it broke our hearts to hear him be sad.

But if things didn't change, Cody was going to be an orphan with parents who died from sleep deprivation.

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“Anyone home?” Kellan called from the door between the clinic and our quarters. He was carrying a cloth bag. “Like you new parents get to go anywhere.”

“Nice.” I passed Cody to Markus and stood up. “Did you come to point and laugh?”

“Would I do that?” Kellan tsked. “It wasn’t so long ago that I was in your position. Elise was the sweetest most adorable baby, but sometimes she was so fussy, I nearly tore my hair out. Or Locke’s.”

“You tore out your mate’s hair?” I found the idea shocking yet a little funny.

“No, I said nearly. But what I did do in the end was get a baby wrap. Elise loved it.”

“A wrap? Are those safe?”

He pulled a long strip of fabric woven in rainbow stripes from his bag. “They are if you know what you’re doing. And I have a degree in baby wearing.”

“If he won’t let us put him down, why do you think he’ll be okay wrapped up in that?” I asked, blinking burning eyes. “I think we just need to try to stay awake for the next five years.”

“And then we’ll get a break until he’s a teenager,” Markus murmured. “Then we have to stop sleeping again.”

“That’s right.” I nodded with as much enthusiasm as I could muster. “There’s a nap in there somewhere.”

“Stand up.” Kellan pulled me to my feet. “And I’ll show you how it works.” He reached into the bag and pulled out a lifelike baby doll. “We’ll use little Judy here.”

And so began an hour of practice, first with the toy until I built my confidence enough to try with Cody. I fitted the fussy baby into a fold of cloth and followed our friend’s instructions. I wrapped around and under, creating a hammock-like support for the newborn and his floppy head.

“See?” Kellan stepped back and admired his work. “What do you think?”

Markus walked around me clockwise then counterclockwise. “I think the baby is asleep.”

I wanted to hug Kellan, but I was wearing my son on the front of me and he was out cold. I didn’t dare do anything that might wake him.

Instead, I sat back down on the sofa and watched Kellan pull out another wrap and give lessons to my mate. Their low laughter was musical, and my eyes gradually drifted closed. I was resting while the baby did, as all the experts advised.

From that day forward, we had a strong tool in our baby-raising arsenal. Of course we were able to put him down more and more as he grew, but the intimacy of wearing him in the beautiful wrap never palled. We took turns, and when Markus started seeing patients again, I wrapped Cody and wore him while I worked with the sleuth hierarchy, such as it was, to be prepared for new escapees. And to find a way to shut those white coats down for good.

I might never know who helped me find my way out of the labs, but I owed them hugely. No longer a captive in a cave, an unwilling research subject, I was now a mate and father, a member of a sleuth who helped others as their primary function in life.

Fate smiled on us, and I would always be grateful.

Epilogue

Rob

I am not a people person.

Never have been and never will be. Makes it hard to find a mate. Reared to believe my fated mate would cross my path one day, I had begun to have doubts.

“You don’t have to do this,” Locke said, grabbing the glass coffee carafe of coffee. We needed to get a commercial coffeemaker to accommodate our growing community. I would put it on the list.

“It’s just breakfast. Everyone has to eat.” And I wasn’t good at anything else. Communications for example or helping with new escapees who arrived. I had the bedside manner of a pine needle. I said things without a fancy wrapper or any sugar coating at all.

“We can all help.”

I shrugged. “I enjoy it. Everyone...They all like my food.”

Locke chuckled. “Yeah, you have the omegas wrapped around your finger with those brownies you made. Kellan made me come down here in the middle of the night and grab him one.”

“I try.”

Locke’s hand clapped down on my shoulder. “And I see you. That’s all I’m saying. If

you get tired of cooking, let us know. Don't get burned out. We all work together here."

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I sighed. He was right, but asking for help wasn't in my toolbox. "Okay," I answered, rather than delving any deeper into my own shortcomings. Locke stirred in some creamer and then walked away.

I could've picked on him about the alpha thing but neither of us had taken in enough caffeine for my antics.

The other sleuth members trickled in. Some sleepy, others more alert. Zeph was bright-eyed despite the long hours he spent on the computer, trying to make sure we were safe.

"Damn, Rob, if you keep cooking like this, I'm going to have to run more."

"Good for you," I replied to our tech guy. If we were a proper sleuth, he would be a good beta. He was loyal and trustworthy. "Running is healthful for you and your bear."

Some of the new families entered as well. Locke with Kellan and their daughter Elise and Markus with Sam and baby Cody. Their joy and love for the children lit up the room.

I filled a plate, but instead of joining the others and probably insulting them in one way or another, I ate my meal on the back steps of the alpha house in the sunshine.

Locke and Markus were the luckiest bears here. They'd found their mates and had families.

Despite my cynicism, I still wished mine would come soon.