



# Blooming for His Omega: M/M Shifter Mpreg Romance (Omegas of Oliver Creek Book 10)

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** I never dreamed of being a florist. That's such a stereotype for omegas. Lots of alphas thought omegas could only do jobs that were not too physical, some even thinking we should quit and become stay-at-home dads the moment we mated and gave birth. My former alpha had been one of those and when my uncle died and left me this business in the booming small town of Oliver Creek, he laughed and said it would be a nice little thing for me to do until he "put a hoglet in me." That comment was the final straw that ended things between me and someone who thought I should be grateful he chose me. I un-chose him.

Now I live in Oliver Creek, running the business my uncle put his heart and soul into. And I don't need anyone putting any hoglets in me. Alphas are highly overrated pushy people. Including the bear who runs the charcuterie place next door. If he thinks he can win me over with delicious salami and cheese, he's wrong. I'll be his friend, but no more than that. It's me against the world...me and the hoglet I've just realized my ex managed to get started before I dumped him. He can never find out..

**Total Pages (Source):** 26

## Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:10 am*

“Oh.” An alpha, a lion, if I wasn’t mistaken, walked into the shop only minutes before dusk. “Things have changed around here.” Perhaps I should’ve said he sprinted into my florist shop. That would’ve been the better description. His face was a bit red and his eyes widened as though he’d fallen into a tunnel instead of a quaint shop.

“Good afternoon. Can I help you find something?” I asked.

“Got a bouquet that says I’m sorry I was a bit insensitive?” At least he was sorry. Not once in my years mated to Derek had he ever apologized. He danced around regret a bit but never straight out took fault for anything.

I left the safety of my counter and walked over to him, laughing. “A bit or a lot?”

He sighed and hung his head. “The biggest sorry you’ve got.”

We both chuckled. “Lucky for you, it’s peony season. I’ve got some stunning purple aviv flowers in the back. I could make up a bouquet quickly.”

He nodded. “Yes, please. My omega loves anything purple. Would it be okay if I ran over to the charcuterie shop while you do that?”

I nodded. “Of course. Zion has some perfect treats already made up in his cases. Pick up some of the chocolate-covered, cheesecake-stuffed strawberries. Trust me.”

A smile rose on the lion’s face as joy settled in my heart. At moments like these, I knew my purpose. Fate surely had plans for our lives, and most of the time we never

saw them coming. “Thank you.”

He rushed out, and I sprinted to the back. I trimmed the bottoms of the green stems, taking care to be gentle, then coupled the beautiful plum-colored blooms with silver roses and deep-blue delphiniums with some baby’s breath to make the colors pop. I wrapped them carefully in brown paper and tied the whole thing with twine. After all, the peonies spoke for themselves. No need for embellishments with such a stunning display of nature’s bounty.

I brought the bundle out and added a card with the name of my shop. Bloom. My uncle had been a lover of all things simple. A simple name for a small shop, but it was no wonder he was so happy here. I’d once thought a life in the city with a demanding schedule was the thing I wanted, but once my uncle died, leaving me this place, something clicked inside me.

At first, I scoffed at the idea. A florist. Huh. Typical career for an omega. Nothing too physical. Not demanding. I would be able to work that job while pregnant with a hoglet. That’s what my ex said. He saw omegas as helpless things, all in pursuit of a mate or getting knocked up. No need for an education because they would be home raising children. No need for their own money because they would be provided for.

He said running the flower shop would be a nice little thing for me to keep busy while we waited for a hoglet.

After that, he expected me to sell the business and spend all my time in service to him and a dozen children or more.

My uncle had made this place from nothing, back when Oliver Creek was a tiny town no one had heard of. There was no mortgage on the place, which included a big studio apartment above it. He had no debt and lived a comfortable life. In addition to Bloom and the living space, he named me as the beneficiary of his substantial life

insurance policies.

Nothing little about what my uncle accomplished in his life. He never met his omega and, so, never had children, but he was loved in this town, and I visited him often as a child. He'd taught me all about this business, and I looked forward to working here every summer.

He never liked Derek.

I should've listened to him.

The bell above my door rang as I straightened some of the pre-made bouquets. I preferred to make the arrangement from scratch for deliveries, but I kept some things ready for those who came in for a rose or two or a larger bouquet and might not want to wait or make a lot of decisions. One alpha in particular, Amir, came in like clockwork on the first of the month to pick up a small spray of flowers for his omega's grave. He had mated another but still kept his former mate's grave clean and loved.

The alpha who'd gone wrong somehow arrived at the counter. "I got the strawberries and a small board. Thanks for the recommendation. Are these for me?"

"They are. I hope your omega loves them."

He nodded. "While I try my hardest to be the best for him, sometimes I can be a bit overprotective. We're expecting in a little over two months."

I lit up inside. Arrangements for new baby arrivals were my favorites. I usually coupled a free bouquet with a teddy bear and delivered them myself. I'd made the decision not to have a baby because of Derek and his attitude, but I happily congratulated others, hoping they got some joy from their flowers.

I scribbled a note on the calendar to listen for when their birth happened. “Congratulations,” I said. I rang him up, and he left with a new pep in his step. I was sure his omega would forgive him. He seemed like a lovely mate, and after all, we all made mistakes.

After he left, I took a seat on the barstool behind the counter and sighed. My back hurt lately, a dull ache that only my heating pad took away when I lay in bed at night. I had a few hours left until we closed for the night but my energy already waned.

Sometimes it was lonely to go home alone every night, but the truth was, I was no lonelier now than I had been when Derek and I were together. Sometimes lying next to him was like being in bed with a ghost.

My hedgehog longed for an alpha, but alphas only wanted me to give them hoglets and be their servant.

Not this omega.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:10 am*

A shaft of sunlight pierced the front shop window as I worked on the big charcuterie trays ordered for a mating ceremony later in the day. Many shifters considered mating a private act and, certainly the lovemaking part was, although I had heard of a few who did their marking in public. But many modern people adopted a modified wedding scenario where the couple or trio or however many were mating pronounced their devotion in front of family and friends then had a big party.

I liked the idea of privacy, but when the day came, when I mated my true mate, should Fate be so kind, I would do whatever my omega's heart desired. As an alpha, it would be my responsibility to protect and care for my omega and any children we might have. And if my fated desired a giant party where we exchanged vows or rings or threw rice at one another or whatever humans did, so be it.

But, for today, it was another couple's celebration I prepared for. I didn't know them well, since they were new in town, but I was grateful for the business. Most shifters were pretty meat oriented, but they'd asked me to do a tray for some vegans, or perhaps I should call their giraffe shifter guests herbivores. It wasn't my usual, but a visit to the farmer's market yesterday had yielded some really beautiful heirloom tomatoes, cucumbers, summer squash...so many varieties called out to me, I'd overbought for the event. My bear had been right there with me, and I realized I'd been eating way too much protein and missing out on the fruits and vegetables of summer. Maybe if I added a bit more to my menu, I'd have them handy to snack on as I was doing with some of the leftovers from this order. After wrapping each tray in double layers of plastic, I slid them into the cooler to wait to be picked up.

Looking at what I had remaining, it was enough to do a little plate for my neighbor next door. The shopkeeper had passed on the business to his nephew in his will, and

instead of selling it like most young people might have done, he'd come in and made it his own.

“Anyone here?”

I pushed aside the bead curtain between front and back and poked my head out. “Yes, ma'am. How can I help you?” The curtain was a holdback from the previous business, a hippie boutique filled with tie-dye, incense, and candles in all shapes and sizes. I'd spent weeks getting rid of the lingering scents, but the clattering beads tickled me for some reason. The customer was looking in my display case, tapping a finger on her lip.

“My mate is bringing home her boss and their mate and a few coworkers for cocktails tonight, and I need something to serve along with martinis.” She shook her head. “I don't even know if anyone likes martinis, but she's been bingeing a streamed series that...”

“I get it.” It wasn't my first event like that. “May I suggest you have the martinis but also another option or two, either beer and wine or maybe gin and tonic?”

“Would it be authentic?”

“If you are hosting a cocktail party, I would think you could decide what drinks to serve.” I considered what I had in stock. “And maybe have one mocktail as well?”

“I never considered that. I assumed if someone didn't want a martini, they could have a soft drink.”

“Definitely an option, but wouldn't it be more special to have a fancy drink for the non-tippler as well?” There were so many reasons a person might not choose to drink, and in my opinion, having a nice drink in a fancy glass might keep the nosy from

asking questions. Or it just might make them feel more part of things. “There are some very fancy mocktail lounges springing up in the cities, you know?”

Her eyes sparkled. “That’s fantastic. I do not like the taste of alcohol, myself. Maybe a daiquiri would be good? I could offer it both ways?”

“Such a great idea! Now. Maybe we can set up a board with perfect treats to go with each drink?”

She’d come in here trying to be a good sport and make the party her mate wanted without even taking her own preference not to have a hard drink into account, but together, we’d managed to come up with a plan for an even better party where everyone could have a good time. Including the omega female who was in charge of making it all happen. As an alpha, I hoped I would be more aware of what my omega would prefer and also would want to help with projects rather than making all the decisions and leaving the execution to them.

I didn’t know what their relationship was like, so I probably shouldn’t judge. I could only make my own decisions—in the event Fate granted my mate to me.

“Do you have some flowers for the buffet table?” I never missed the opportunity to send a little business next door.

After figuring out what would be tasty with the martini, the daiquiris, and the gin and tonic she also decided to keep on the menu, I sent my customer, Camila, on her way to buy the other things she needed with a promise to have the order ready on her return. Just giving me enough time to prepare a board for my neighbor. He never remembered to eat.



## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:10 am*

Dusting was the worst. The absolute worst. But, since we had a good variety of gift items, along with flowers and cards, it had to be done. My shop was right off the main road and every time someone came in to shop around, the dust of the town came in with them.

Dusting was such an issue that it had been part of my written instructions from my uncle when the lawyers handed over the keys to his business and home. He'd even completed what he called death cleaning. A little different than the Swedish version I'd read about where the person does it themselves, he had the place professionally cleaned from top to bottom, including removing all his clothes and personal items so that the apartment was ready to move in.

I missed him every time I walked into my apartment, but somehow he'd known this place was my destiny.

As I sat at the computer and placed orders, movement outside the window grabbed my attention. I let out a small groan seeing Zion making his way from his shop to mine. The alpha was so kind. He always brought over snacks and new items for me to try, but I had an underlying feeling that he wanted more than to check on me in a friendly way. He wanted me to sample more than his salami.

He was a shy one at first. Only saying hello and bringing me tiny cutting boards with all kinds of cheese cubes, meat slices, and decadent honey and jams. But after a bit, he would lean against the counter, asking about my day.

His eyes held the gaze of an alpha, slowly but surely moving to ask me to do more than to taste his treats. He wanted me to be his treat.

“Good afternoon,” he said in that husky voice of his as he came in. The scent of meat, cheese, fruit, and some kind of jam hit my nose and instantly, I realized how strong my hunger was.

“Hello, Zion,” I said, feeling incredibly ungrateful. “You don’t have to keep doing this.” I didn’t want him to get the idea that by accepting all his sweet gifts, I was okay with allowing anything more to happen.

He smiled as though coming in here and delving into his inventory for a friend was a good thing. A friend? Yes. Friends and friends only.

“I had a big order this morning, and these are the leftovers. I didn’t want them to go to waste.” He ignored my comment. “Have you eaten today at all, Cicek?”

His question struck me. “Oh, wow. I haven’t. I had coffee this morning. Does that count?”

He laid a white box with a clear plastic window on top in front of me. “No, it most certainly doesn’t count. Go on. I’m trying out this new box for people who stop in for a quick lunch.”

I opened the box, running my finger underneath the sticker with his logo. “Go on,” I found myself teasing. “Pitch the box to me.”

“What?” He chuckled.

“Come on. This is your newest creation. Pretend I’m a customer coming in to get something, and I can’t decide.”

Zion was a handsome alpha, not my usual type, but sexy and alluring in his own way. He had boy-next-door looks. Tousled brown hair. Fluffy around the middle, dad bod.

A killer smile. Blue eyes that made me want to gaze into them for hours at a time. He wasn't prideful or arrogant.

He was persistent as the moon though.

"I'm bad at this," he admitted with a half smile.

I nodded. He sure was shy and I found it incredibly attractive. He didn't puff his chest out or tell me how good he was at anything or everything. He was humble and modest. And in this shyness, there was a charm I found myself trying hard to resist.

"At least tell me what everything is."

His half smile turned into a full one. "Chicken salad with grapes and pecans. Deviled eggs with a sprinkle of paprika. Whole grain crackers. Slices of muenster and gouda. Salami. Peppered, roasted turkey. Hot honey and two marzipan-stuffed dark-chocolate hearts. And a selection of raw veggies with dip. A new thing for me."

By the time he was done, my mouth was watering—and only mostly for the food. The way he talked about food made me tingle all over. He took care and made almost everything in house. What he didn't make himself, he ordered from particularly curated places, some in town and some not. He always bought the best quality items.

"And this." He brought out a small bottle of sparkling apple juice and a cup.

"You thought of everything."

He watched me as I dug into the food. As predicted, everything was divine, and in only a short span, I had finished the entire box.

"I can bring you more?" he asked, his warm gaze boring into me, warming my chest

and all my other parts.

No. We could never be anything more than friends. It had to be this way. I wouldn't ever live under the weight of an alpha's expectations again.

"No, Zion. It's too much. I feel awful for taking this all the time."

He grunted, and a low rumble came from his chest. His bear, no doubt. "It's really no trouble. I enjoy it. Usually people leave with my food and eat in their homes or at their work. Seeing someone enjoy my labors brings me happiness."

My hedgehog purred a bit at the notion of bringing this big, brawny bear some joy. The animal within me was enamored with the bear inside Zion. I knew it. But, this time, I overrode his desires.

"I bet some flowers would brighten up your shop. The customers might enjoy them. Here." I walked over to the refrigerated glass case and brought out my happiest bouquet of daisies and yellow and coral roses. I reached for a vase, but he stopped me with a hand up.

"I have one, Cicek. You already gave me a vase."

I nodded, handing over the flowers. Our hands brushed, causing a shiver to spill over my body and into my veins. If I was another omega, I would admit how much this alpha appealed to me—how I could see myself mated to him.

But I was not that omega. And I would never be.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:10 am*

I carried the bouquet to my shop, grabbed the vase holding the tropical blooms Cicek had given me the week before, and carried both into the back room to switch out the old for the new. No matter how often I protested that he did not need to offer me anything in return for the food I brought him, he always had a reason. Oh, these were about to wilt, or those had been ordered and paid for and not picked up. Perhaps a vendor had given him some extras for no particular reason. And though all those things might be true, I believed he felt like he needed to give me something in return for what I brought to him.

A small part of me wanted to hope he just wanted to give me something, but his reserved demeanor did not suggest an interest in me beyond that of a friendly neighbor. It would be easier to ignore him if he didn't smell so amazing, a floral/herbal note unlike anything in his shop or any garden I'd ever visited. When he first arrived, I'd thought it was something in there, but on a couple of occasions when I'd watched the till for him for a little bit, I'd noticed the strangest thing. When Cicek left the premises, so did the scent. It was 100 percent him, and the most enticing thing I'd ever had the pleasure to breathe in.

Although I protested that he did not need to give me the flowers, I really liked them, and this was a particularly lovely bunch of daisies and roses, a happy bouquet. I dumped out the old arrangement in the waste basket and rinsed out the vase. I trimmed the stems and settled the new flowers in fresh water then carried it to the front counter.

I set to work putting the boards together for Camila who was due back before long. Because of the nature of her event, charcuterie's informality did not seem completely appropriate, but I had some very pretty nearly black boards and laid out the meats and

cheeses and everything else in more formal fashion. I was very pleased with the results and hoped my customer and her wife would be as well.

The bell above the door rang, and I glanced up from setting the small bowl of almonds in place. “Oh, Camila, just in time. I only need to wrap these up, but would you like a peek first?”

“Yes, please.” She approached the counter and stopped in front of the vase. “How pretty.” She buried her nose in a lush bloom. “Oh, and the roses smell so nice. A lot of times when I’ve bought them, they have no smell at all.”

“These are from Bloom, next door. The place I told you about?”

She clapped a hand over her mouth. “I was going to stop by there, wasn’t I?”

I showed her the boards and asked if there was anything else she’d like to add, but her squee told me I’d hit the right notes for her event. “All right. Let me wrap these. I just need a couple of minutes.”

She reached up and stroked one of the rose petals. “I think while you do that, I’ll pop next door and get some flowers. If that’s all right?”

“More than.”

Camila left, and I carried the boards over to the mounted industrial roll of wrap and pulled out a long swath. It would not only keep everything from drying out but keep it in place until Camila served it all to her mate’s coworkers. And her boss. It really did feel like a sitcom from the 1960s. If the wife failed in her cocktail party planning, her spouse might lose their job!

Hopefully that would not be the case.

I set the wrapped boards in the white cardboard boxes.

“I’m back.” She beamed. “He’s putting together something for me, so as soon as I get these loaded in the car, I’ll head back and grab it. Would you believe I’m starting to get excited? And I have you to thank.”

“I hope you’ll tell your friends and recommend the shop to them.”

“Absolutely.” She took the boxes and headed for the door. “I’ll be posting on social media and tag the shop.”

She struck me as the type who would have a strong influence there, and while I had a steady stream of business, I could always use more.

After Camila left, my dessert case caught my eye. Maybe my neighbor would like a little dessert. He had a sweet tooth for sure, and I had some things he’d enjoyed in the past. What could it hurt to just take them over?

Feed our mate.

My bear was insistent it was just that simple. Feed him and he’d be ours. I wish I was as sure.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:10 am*

Zion, despite my protests, brought me over some lemon bars and a slice of cherry cheesecake not long after leaving. He claimed with glee that he'd put the flower arrangement on the counter right by the checkout point, and already people were complimenting it.

He hesitated in promoting his own delicious goods but he gave me glowing reviews, and a significant portion of my sales were from word of mouth. From Zion's mouth specifically.

I told myself I wouldn't touch the lemon bars or the cheesecake. Instead, I tucked them into my personal fridge in the back and was tempted to throw a lock on the damned thing. I'd been eating so much lately but every time that big teddy bear of a man came in, I gobbled everything up as though I hadn't eaten in a week.

A customer came in and started looking through the cases. "Something I can help you find?" I asked. Learning what occasions brought people in always entertained me. Some came for apologies, like the lion before, and others had a monthly appointment. I loved to see their faces as they picked out just the right bouquet and had me add balloons for a birthday or a particular flower that their loved one desired.

Baby Showers. Weddings. Mating ceremonies and even funerals. I took care in every custom order.

"Have anything to brighten my grandmother's day? I'm traveling to see her in the next town over."

"You're Quinn, right? The healer?" I walked over and knew exactly the right choice.



After all, what grandmother didn't like pink roses?

"I am. I haven't seen you before. You're Cicek."

I jutted out my hand to shake his already outstretched one. "I am. Nice to officially meet you. I, um, haven't been sick or pregnant."

He chuckled. "I'm glad you're not sick," he answered, and I noticed he said nothing about the pregnancy. Like others, I assumed he thought all omegas should be in some stages of childbearing. "So, what do you think?"

I reached into the cooler and pulled out my Pretty in Pink bouquet. Magenta and light-pink roses. Champagne tulips and a bit of greenery for show. The vase was crystal and had a large satin rose-pink ribbon around it because I could. "This seems to be a hit with most grandmas," I said, handing it over.

"She will love this. Thank you. She is infatuated with her garden and all kinds of flowers."

Quinn also picked up a bejeweled chain for glasses and a card while he was there, and I threw in a lovely bag to make it all perfect for his visit. The extra touches made the difference and brought customers back. My uncle had taught me well.

By the time Quinn and a few other customers had left, the cheesecake was practically screaming my name. I snuck into the back and grabbed it along with a fork and sat at the computer, ending the workday as I tended to lately—by keeping watch on my ex.

He said he would never let me go without a fight, and I left in a way that would make most people a bit upset. He left for work one day and, while he was gone, I turned off the internet, so he couldn't see me on his cameras and packed everything and left, taking only the essentials.

Derek knew that my uncle's shop was in Oliver Creek, and there was only one florist in town. Me.

I wasn't hard to find.

I created a fake online profile to stalk him, watching his moves, making sure he wasn't traveling or making any posts about me. Derek had never been a physically abusive man, but some of his tactics were. In the beginning, I thought the keeping tabs on my whereabouts was protective and caring. Until he began to manipulate my every move. He started to complain about my friends, saying they were bad influences on me and he didn't want me to be in trouble. He didn't take me out anymore, claiming I had gained weight or he didn't feel well. Before long, I was trapped in a mating where my every move was watched. I even suspected my phone wasn't safe to use.

As soon as I left the city, I threw it into a dumpster outside a big-box store, hoping he'd find it there.

I scanned his profile, finding that he was in clubs and living it up as a single alpha but then a day later making posts about being so lonely and not understanding what he did to lose his mate.

He knew exactly what he had done to lose me. What a crock of shit.

I was closing up for the night when I saw Zion doing the same. Our shops held almost the same hours, and he lived above his store as I did mine.

Some nights, I longed to invite him over for a movie or just to talk, but I thought he might get the wrong idea. A man as sweet and loving as Zion deserved someone to give themselves to him fully. He would make a wonderful father, and a family was not on my agenda.

I turned the sign to closed and locked the door. Oliver Creek had the lowest crime rate in the state, so even if I didn't lock up, nothing would be touched, but why take a chance.

Now, to stop myself from flirting with the cute bear next door. That held far too much risk for us both.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:10 am*

One customer after another came in throughout the afternoon, and it was one of my best days so far. I finally got a break shortly before closing, and I had the urge to check and see if Camila had posted anything. It might be a little early yet, and it certainly was too soon for even a great blast to affect business, but still. And would she also give Cicek some publicity?

I was probably getting overexcited. One person saying they enjoyed my food was great, but what difference would it make in the long run? Camila was very nice, but she probably had a small group of friends who would even see her post. I needed to up my social media game instead of counting on the random customers to do it for me.

I pulled up a stool behind the counter and grabbed Camila's order form to remind myself of her last name. Sometimes being old-fashioned like this paid off. Many people did not use their full names on social media, or used a variation—even low-tech me knew that, but if I couldn't find it, she had said she'd tag me...

"Excuse me, do you have any salami?" The customer who walked in asked the question that irritated me most. But...the fact was...

"We have a variety of meats and cheeses, including several that qualify as salami. What did you have in mind?"

And so ensued a ten-minute discussion that, as always when it began with the salami question, ended up with the sale of a quarter pound of my least expensive version and a couple of slices of cheese.

“I don’t know why you don’t sell sandwiches,” he called over his shoulder on the way out.

Why didn’t I?

I wasn’t much of a baker beyond a few dessert specialties, but Tanner and Godric made excellent rolls, and they had a sideline selling breads and some of their other products to their fellow businesspeople. Maybe they would be willing to make a special version for me? Inspired, I picked up the phone and called Tanner on his cell phone. He was not in the shop as often as before he met his mate who was allergic to, I believed, all things nuts. But they had other irons in the fire together as well.

“Zion, it’s been an age! When are you coming over to dinner? Ava misses her uncle.” I was not her uncle, but without any cubs of my own, I was grateful to spend time with the children of friends and had become a popular babysitter.

“Anytime you invite me, I’ll be available. But I called about something business related.”

“Oh yeah? Timing is perfect because I needed to ask you for contact information for one of your suppliers.”

He was interested in some of the sheep’s milk cheese I’d been buying from a local shepherd, and I was more than happy to help him out with this. The guy was pretty reclusive, but I’d gotten to know him over the years, and he made incredible cheese and yogurt as well. After I shared this information with Tanner, I almost hung up when he asked, “What did you need from us?”

“I need to sell sandwiches...but I don’t want to be in competition with you guys.” Because why would they bake me bread if I did that?

“I’d never think you would. Unless you’re suddenly in the nut butter business.”

“All animal proteins here. I know you sell bread to various other vendors, but I was wondering if we could come up with a roll that’s a little different and just for me?”

“I love that idea!” Tanner’s voice grew muffled for a moment then he returned. “Godric says maybe you would want a couple of kinds like a whole grain and a white...but we go with a distinctive shape that nobody else would have?”

“Two kinds...I don’t know how many sandwiches I’ll be selling at first, since nobody thinks of me for that.”

“Hang on. Godric wants to talk to you.”

“Hey, Zion.”

“Hey.”

“The reason I suggested those types of bread is because they are our most popular, and we make a ton of dough a day.”

I was starting to understand. “So...you would just have to shape and bake as many as I need?”

“Exactly. Not a lot of extra work for our bakers, and we wouldn’t have to charge you a custom fee.”

I argued that point, but lost. They were great neighbors and friends, and I’d make sure to get them and their little one some treats to make up for their inconvenience. I hung up just in time to close up for the day. It had been a good one, I thought, vowing not to resent the salami question anymore because you never knew what ideas might

spring even from a five-dollar sale. In fact, if that particular customer came again, he'd get a free sandwich from me for the idea.

With everything clean and tidy and the floors swept and mopped, I grabbed my keys, ready to climb the stairs and collapse, but the sight of my next-door neighbor locking his door inspired both me and my bear. Maybe he'd be willing to go for a run? We'd never done that together, and I wasn't sure if he even knew many spots to do it. His uncle hadn't been much of a runner in his declining years, and Cicek had kept close to the old man when he came to stay, he'd mentioned.

I would ask him to go for a run tonight. A friendly shifted run. Nothing more.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:10 am*

Friends.

Friends go on runs and find each other after a hard day. They shift together. Treat each other to yummy desserts and watch out when the other hasn't eaten or looks a bit down.

Friends.

Even I didn't believe it.

When the sweet alpha looked over with those big blue eyes, there was no way I could've said no to his offer. My hedgehog wiggled and squirmed at the chance to run with Zion as his bear.

Friends. That was all I could give him.

"Where?" I asked. I could run anywhere, but a bear was much larger. While there weren't many humans in Oliver Creek, the once-small town had more tourists and visitors of late, and a lot of them were human. We didn't want to become infamous for animal sightings.

"The woods are a bit out of town. We could walk, or I could drive us there. Whatever you prefer."

I thought it over. Being trapped in his truck with his scent overpowering me wasn't the best way to keep my word to myself. Then again, I was exhausted and, though my hedgehog wanted to run, a long walk in addition seemed daunting. "Would you mind



driving?”

He chuckled, and the sound shot right through me, making direct contact with my cock. I was in trouble with this one. “I wouldn’t have offered if I minded, Cicek. Meet me back here in about five minutes?”

“Sounds good.”

We both changed into shorts and T-shirts easy to put on and off before and after the run. Along the way, we let the windows down, letting the cool night air refresh us on the drive. I watched the scenery as we passed through town slowly.

“Enjoying the ride?” Zion asked.

“I am. Never took myself for a taking-a-drive kind of person but on a night like this, it’s perfect.”

He smiled. “Wait until the fall. One of my favorite things to do is to take a long night drive when the cool weather rolls in.”

I nodded, hearing that tone. Gods, this was leading him on. Driving out here with him. Running with his bear. Taking food and gifts from him. I was giving him hope where that well had long run dry.

“Sounds lovely.”

We arrived at a piece of land with vast trees and as I got out of the truck and tuned into my shifter senses, I found that no one was around. No scents of humans—and only the lingering smells of shifters who had long gone.

I took off my shirt and readied for the shift. My other half was ready to go, not only

to get some exercise but to see Zion in his bear form. But Zion wasn't moving. Hadn't even taken off his shoes.

"You aren't shifting?" I asked, confused. I thought that was the purpose in coming here.

"I am. I...thought I would wait until you shifted first."

My nose picked up some fear. Not fear of me, but it made the air a tad tangy. I could taste it in my mouth. "Is something wrong?" I asked and stepped toward him. He watched my every move, and I couldn't help but notice how his eyes dipped to my exposed torso and then lower. I really shouldn't love his eyes on me as much as I did.

Zion didn't belong to me.

"I'm..." He shrugged and made a gesture toward his body. "I'm probably not like other alphas you've seen."

This adorable man. He wasn't all abs and pecs like some alphas. He clearly didn't spend the hours in the gym Derek had, though I'd suspected for a long time that only a fraction of that time was actually spent on muscle building or even being at the gym.

Zion was different and, yet, it took nothing away from his sexiness. He had a dad bod. He wouldn't be the kind to try and limit his carbs or only make desserts on cheat day. I bet he gave incredible hugs and kept an omega warm at night. To think that anyone on this planet had made him feel like less than one of the most attractive men I'd ever met was a crime.

Now to tell him that without giving him the wrong idea.

“Zion, trust me when I say that there’s nothing wrong with your body. You are sweet and kind and so giving and loving. And I bet you would be amazing to cuddle up with.”

Yeah, that wasn’t the thing to say. In fact, hearing those words come out of my mouth made the truth more evident. I wanted to snuggle up with him. I wanted to be in his arms on a cold night. I wanted to lie next to that big ol’ teddy bear and snack and watch movies and talk until the wee hours.

He smiled softly. “Thank you.”

Though I’d encouraged him, I went ahead and took off my shorts and shifted, giving him a bit of privacy. After all, this was a friendly run.

My hedgehog vibrated with the power shift once his bear was out. Any bear would’ve been big compared to my little animal, but Zion was huge. I gave chase, wondering if he would leave me in the dirt—bears are much faster than hedgehogs, after all. Even the shifter variety. But he matched me, staying just out of reach. We barreled through the woods for hours and after a while, he stopped and lay down, encouraging me with his nose and several huffs of hot air to get onto his back.

The real fun began at that point.

He moved so gracefully for such a majestic animal, and I never felt unsafe. Weaving through trees and under branches, he made sure that his back was steady so I didn’t fall or lose my own balance.

This alpha cared for others so well.

It was a shame he had no one to care for him in the same way. Someone to shower him with all the love he poured into everyone else. Someone to fill his cup.

Once we shifted back, we dressed, and got in the car. We stopped along the way for a snack and had a really nice time, parting at the side-by-side staircases to our apartments.

When I reached my door and was pulling my keys out of my pocket, I realized that somewhere along the way, my animal had bonded to Zion. He did it without warning and certainly without my permission.

This couldn't continue.

I was stringing this man along with promises of friendship and probably stopping him from pursuing other omegas. Any omega would be lucky as hell to have Zion as an alpha.

They would be treated like a king.

I decided that night to stop accepting gifts from the hot neighbor alpha and put an end to this charade.

It wasn't fair to him.

And the more I let myself give in to these moments, the more I wanted him.

Being around this beautiful man crumbled my resolve to stay away from any alpha. No matter how much I wanted him.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:10 am*

I had been concerned about how we might run together as a bear and a hedgehog, but despite the fact that he was smaller, he was in great shape, and I only slowed my steps a bit so he could keep up. But it was even better when I was able to give him a ride home. My bear loved it. He showed off, running through the forest with all the grace a big bear could possibly summon.

I drove us home, coming down from all the excitement of the day and ready to unwind. “Are you hungry at all? Want to stop for a bite?”

“Is anything open this late?”

“If not, we can scrounge something from my shop, but I have been hearing there’s a food truck at the rest stop out here along the highway, and it might be tacos.”

His tummy’s rumble answered the question for him.

The rest stop was another couple of miles out of town, so I hoped our trip would not be wasted. But I couldn’t see any time spent with Cicek in that way. “What did you think of the area? Great for shifting, right?”

“Tourists don’t go there?”

“I suppose they might, but it’s pretty well off the beaten track, and it’s not mentioned in any of the brochures or websites they are likely to find. So far, I’ve never run into anyone but a shifter.”

He sighed. “I didn’t realize how badly my hedgehog needed out. We appreciate your

kindness, as always.”

Is that what he thought it was? He might not want more from me, but at the very least, I hoped he would see me as a friend. “It was our pleasure. I’ve been so busy, it’s been too long for my bear as well.” The lights of the truck stop came into view, and I crossed my fingers that the vendor would be there. Not that I’d mind having to go to the shop to eat, but it was fun being out here together under the moonlight.

Don’t make more of it than it is, Zion. This is not a date.

But whatever it was, sitting at the concrete picnic table surrounded by a surprising number of other diners made for a nice end to the evening.

“How long has this truck been out here?” Cicek bit into his fifth one, his eyes half closed in an expression that made my mind go in an entirely different direction. “And why haven’t I heard of it before?”

I loved that he enjoyed my food, but I couldn’t lie and say it didn’t please me to hunt down more treats, and I’d gladly drag him out here any day to see the look on his face. “I don’t know any of those answers, but I will try to find out.”

He ate another bite of taco and sighed. “I’m going to have to stop soon or I’ll explode.”

“We can come back anytime you like.” My bear was rumbling with pleasure. “No need to explode tonight.” And why did everything sound naughty tonight?

We wandered back to the car in easy silence and returned to our shops where we parted ways and headed up to our apartments. My bear was being very pushy about wanting to accompany him to his door and preferably inside, but until and unless this omega shared the slightest interest in taking this beyond friendship, we would not be

making a move. He'd been through some stuff, although he hadn't told me all the details, but it was clear he planned on staying single for the foreseeable future.

Mate.

Not unless he wants to be.

None of this stopped me from lying in bed and reliving the whole experience, dreaming of running with him again or taking him for a meal somewhere. Although, I didn't think I'd be able to top the taco experience in sheer enjoyment. In my dreams, we spent more time together, our conversation going on and on through the hours of rest. When I woke, I was startled to be alone. But the omega was just next door, and it violated no friendship rules to continue on as we were. Maybe in time, things would change, but I was in this for the long haul, and it would be whatever Cicek wanted it to be.

With that in mind, I climbed out of bed and showered, planning what I might prepare for my neighbor to eat. Or maybe the thing to do today was just to say hi, visit, be casual. I rehearsed casual while shampooing my hair and brushing my teeth. Over coffee and toast, I revised my casual and thought maybe I would pick up some rolls from PBJ. They wouldn't be my new shape yet, but I could try out some sandwich ideas and see what my neighbor thought of them.

But when I arrived at his shop, the door was locked and the closed sign was still in the window.

What was going on?

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:10 am*

My stomach had been a rumbling, gurgling mess since the instant I woke up and sat on the edge of my bed wondering what in the hell was happening to me. I only made it an hour before sprinting to the bathroom and throwing up. Actually, it was only heaving since I had nothing that morning, not even coffee. Nothing since the tacos the night before, but since I'd felt fine during the night, and they'd been incredible, no way did they cause it.

I rejected the thought of a virus or other stomach bug with the admission this had been coming for some time. A few weeks of queasiness along with a lack of energy and achiness had been a lead-in. Therefore, I couldn't blame it on the restless sleep.

I always went in an hour or so before opening to arrange things and tidy up a bit but, today, there was nothing I could do but tumble into bed, fully clothed, pull the covers up, and close my eyes.

My phone rang sometime later, pulling me from a deathlike sleep. "Hello?" I grunted. My body seemed to be glued to the bed by sweat.

"Cicek, are you okay?" Zion's voice smoothed over my rough edges. I curled into the fetal position, giving myself some comfort by dreaming he was next to me, holding me.

"My stomach is a mess, and I think I have a fever. I'm so tired. I had to give up and come back to bed."

A rumble came from him. "There's no one to run the shop for you?"



“No. Plus, if this is contagious, I don’t want to get anyone sick.”

“I’ll be there soon,” he said with finality.

I shouldn’t. I promised myself I would take no more gifts or good will from him. Still, I muttered, “Okay.”

It wasn’t until I pushed the red button on the phone, ending the call, that I realized what I’d agreed to. My eyes were already closing while my stomach reminded me of its power over my whole day. Even my skin ached. He was going to be here soon? What for? So he could successfully contract the plague? No reason for two people to be down.

I put the phone under the pillow and shut my eyes, but rest didn’t come.

Less than thirty minutes later, there was a knock at the door. “Cicek, it’s me. Open up.”

“I’m sick. Don’t come in,” I yelled and then groaned. Even that made me feel awful.

“Bears don’t get sick. I’m here to help. Cicek, please. I’m so concerned.” He was a worrier bear. Part of his charm. He cared so damned much.

I knew he wouldn’t go away until I let him in, so I crawled out of bed and opened the door. “Bears do get sick,” I answered. Zion had a bag hung on his arm, and he was holding a pot with some potholders. The smell of chicken and vegetables hit my nose, and I expected a revolt from my stomach but instead, I groaned with delight. “That smells amazing.”

He chuckled. “It’s a cheater soup since I used a rotisserie chicken, but it will do the job.”

I opened the door wider. Once he put everything down, he reached for my keys. “My brother offered to run the shop for you today. You have a lot of inventory, and there was already someone waiting outside. I’m going to run these keys down to him.”

“He doesn’t...” I began to protest.

Zion took my hand in his, and the skin-to-skin contact shut me up instantly. “I won’t take no for an answer. He will sell everything and keep the shop open. He has your number in case he has questions, and that way you won’t lose money or business. Be right back.”

When he came back, I still stood in place, shocked. Not in all the years I was with Derek had I been taken care of like Zion had in only a few minutes.

“Shop is open. I think a shower will make you feel better, don’t you?”

I looked down at my clothes sticking to my body and my skin covered with the sheen of sweat.

“I stink, right?”

He chuckled and shook his head. “I don’t think you could ever stink, but some fresh clothes would help you.”

Caring and serving others was in this alpha’s blood. He just knew how.

I hesitated and he said, “I’ll fix you a bowl of soup while you get cleaned up.”

“Okay.” Halfway through the shower, I realized I hadn’t brought in anything to change into, but when I stepped out, a pair of boxers and a T-shirt lay on the counter next to the sink.

The man thought of everything. I hadn't even heard the door open. And I would bet that despite my glass shower door, he hadn't peeked at my naked body. Zion was honorable in ways I'd never experienced. He was one of a kind.

When I came out of the bathroom, I found that my windows were open, flooding the place with fresh air. The sheets had been replaced with clean ones, and even my pillows were fluffed.

"Feel better?"

I nodded. "Yes. Thank you. The soup smells amazing."

He walked over, and my tummy fluttered. He made my entire body come to life. Putting a hand on my forehead, he mumbled about me not having a fever and asked me to sit down. He served me soup and plain crackers along with water with a hydration mix in it. Despite my previous nausea, I ate it all up and asked if there was more.

That's when I realized I had only been sick in the mornings, really.

Morning.

Sickness.

No way.

"I think I need to rest again," I said. The weight of my thoughts had suddenly made me feel like lead.

Zion helped me to bed and tucked me in.

“I’ll be back and bring you some dinner after I close my shop for the day. Call me if you need anything and I mean anything. Promise?” His sweet breath washed over me while I stared into those beckoning eyes.

“I promise.”

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:10 am*

This couldn't be happening. No. The one thing I'd feared most was Derek putting one of his hoglets inside me.

After Zion left the first time, the thought occurred to me, and I kind of blew it off, but as the day drew on, I knew there was a chance, a good chance, that I might be pregnant.

I pulled open the calendar on my phone and tried to remember the last time I'd slept with Derek. He had been sexually demanding, often giving me the silent treatment for not wanting to have sex every day or sometimes twice a day if he was in the mood. He would wake me up at all hours of the night to satisfy his needs, no matter how tired I was.

I had quickly learned that doing as he wanted was faster and more painless than refusing his advances.

Looking back, I despised that part of myself, the one who gave him what he wanted, betraying myself in the process.

It would be a while before I could forgive myself.

I lay in bed the rest of the day, snacking on the crackers Zion had brought me, knowing that while it was possible I had a stomach flu, it was in addition to the little one growing in my stomach and all the symptoms that came with pregnancy.

If there was ever a sliver of a chance for Zion and I to be together, despite my own steel walls set against it, this would seal the deal. Alphas didn't want an omega

carrying another alpha's baby. They wanted to put a babe of their own inside him.

I harped on the subject all afternoon and by the time early evening came, I'd decided it was time to face the music. I'd gotten up to talk myself into walking to the drugstore when a knock sounded at my door.

"Come in." I already scented the loving bear on the other side of the door. He'd seen me at my worst. No use in hiding now.

Zion came in, wearing the same clothes from this morning. He had my keys in his hands and hung them on the hook by the door where I kept them. He paid attention to details like that.

"Better?" he asked, coming over and putting his palm against my forehead. I knew he was checking for fever, but I relished in the feeling of his skin against mine.

"A bit. Thank you. I didn't get a call today," I mentioned. "Malek must've done well."

He nodded. "He's good like that and he said it was almost too easy selling all of your beautiful arrangements. No problem at all."

I sighed. "Thank you for taking care of that for me. You...your friendship means the world."

He blushed. All I wanted was to cup his reddened cheeks and place my lips against his. There was never a point in entertaining such thoughts before but now, even if I did, he would never want me like this. "Anything for you, Cicek. I thought you might want something more substantial for dinner so I made a simple chicken and broccoli with orzo."

“It smells really good. Thank you.”

I sat at the table, looking at the plates Zion had so lovingly prepared and let out a long sigh.

“What’s that about?” he said, covering his hand with mine. There was more care in that small gesture than I’d ever received in any of my relationships. And here I was, about to reveal the one thing, other than myself, that would stop us from being together.

“I might be pregnant. It might be a stomach bug but this low, dull nausea has been going on for some time. And I’ve been so tired.” By the time I was done, tears flowed down my face.

“I thought you might be pregnant. Your scent change, but I didn’t bring it up. I thought it was best to let you come to your own conclusions. It wasn’t my place. I hope you’re not angry with me.”

I shook my head. “I could never be angry with you, Zion.”

He blushed again; this time it reached his ears. Adorable. “I love hearing my name on your lips, Cicek.”

Okay, that was not friendly. Time to end this before he got hurt because if this sweet man’s heart was broken because of me, I would never forgive myself.

“What am I supposed to do?” I choked out the words around a sob.

He rubbed his thumb over the back of my hand. There was no judgment in his eyes. Only his constant love. “Here’s what we’ll do. Let’s put one foot in front of the other. I’ll go down to the drugstore and buy a pregnancy test. When I come back you can

take it, and then you take one more step. One thing at a time.”

I scoffed. “Just like that.”

Nodding, he put his hand on my cheek and, gods forgive me, I leaned into it and let his touch soothe the most singed parts of myself. He was the balm to all my wounds. “Just like that, omega. I’ll be back in a few minutes. I promise.”

“Let me give you some money,” I said.

“Stop that. Ten minutes tops.”

He was out the door before I could say any more. My stomach buzzed with nervousness. I closed my eyes and counted my breaths, a calming technique I’d taught myself for the times when Derek got angry. Anger was Derek’s friend. Right up there with manipulation.

I fought against the catastrophizing as best I could, waiting for my bear to come back. The bear. Not my bear. My friend. Maybe my best friend.

Zion came back in the door quickly, holding up a bag. “I got two just in case. I’ll go back to my apartment but you call me if you need anything. In fact, I might come over later. I don’t...”

“Stay with me, please,” I begged in a small voice. “Please, Zion. I don’t want to be alone for this.”

He stepped all the way into my apartment and shut the door behind him. I held my breath as he walked over and pressed a kiss to my temple. “Then you won’t be alone. I’m here as long as you want me here, omega.”



*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:10 am*

I hadn't scented a change in the omega because there hadn't been one. Oh, it might have intensified, that floral essence, but wasn't different per se because he'd been pregnant when he arrived to take over the shop. But while I waited for Cicek to come out of the bathroom, I recognized that he had always scented pregnant. It wasn't the same as when I'd been around couples where the omega was pregnant. This was very specifically him. And he was probably darn close to showing.

He'd been so vulnerable, carrying that bag into the bathroom, and I wanted to help him in every way I could, but this part he had to do himself. I didn't know a lot about his former alpha, mostly just that he didn't want to discuss him, which had been fine with me. But I hoped he would feel comfortable enough to talk now because that male was the baby's biological father and would have to be at least informed if not involved. My bear already wanted to take care of his mate and our cub, but we had no right to step in unless we were asked.

Sure, he'd wanted us to stay while he took the test, but I could not allow that to make me think he meant more. He needed a friend, and I would be that friend. Whatever he needed.

"I'll be right out," he said, and the door creaked open. I had something to help with that...but maybe not tonight. Cicek appeared in the doorway, a stick in each hand. "I peed on them both."

"That's good, omega. How much time do we have to wait?"

"A few minutes, but you'll have to look. I can't."

“All right.” I pulled some paper towels from the roll in the kitchen area and folded them then set them on the coffee table. “Put them down here.”

“Okay.” He reached over and set them on the toweling. “Now I’m closing my eyes.”

“Maybe sit down first?” His eyes were already firmly closed, so it wouldn’t be first, but I assisted him onto the couch. “What are you hoping to see?” I had a pretty good idea...

“I can’t be pregnant.” He sank into the cushions, crossing his arms across his chest.

I didn’t understand what he was talking about. A baby equaled a blessing and even though it wasn’t mine, I was happy for my friend. That was, if it came back positive, but between his scent and my bear’s assertions inside me, there was no question.

Still, we’d wait for the sticks.

“How much longer?” he asked.

“I didn’t notice what time you brought them out, did you?”

“Yes.” He groaned. “But I’ve forgotten.”

“It’s okay, we needed three minutes, right? Gonna say we’re pretty close to that time, now. I’ll give it one more minute then check.”

“Please tell me they’re negative.” He flung his head back. “I don’t want to have his hoglet.”

Ah. The ex. This was why he was so negative about the baby and probably about having another alpha. “I’ll tell you the truth, okay?”

“I’d prefer you lie if it’s not the answer I want.”

“Omega, it’s time.”

His eyes popped open. “I have to look.”

“How about we check them together?”

“Deal.” Poor guy. It was one thing for a couple to plan for a baby or even for a single, but when there was a parent out of the picture, it was bound to lead to difficulties. He bent over the sticks, as did I, and then we looked at each other. “What should we be seeing?”

“I’ve never done this before,” I pointed out. “Let’s get the inserts.”

Of course, when we consulted them, they confirmed what I expected. But I let him say it first. “They’re both positive.” His face had such strain, I reached out for him. I couldn’t do anything else. He ducked away. “I left him because I didn’t want him to have control over my life. All he wanted to was to ‘put hoglets in me,’ and I didn’t want to be a stay-at-home omega with him ‘putting’ babies in me every year. I don’t want him in my life in any way, shape, or form, but this baby gives him the right to step right on in and try to run me again.

“I don’t want him around my child. He’ll be the worst possible influence, but he knows where I am, and if he shows up and sees me pregnant, he’ll...oh my gods. What did I do?”

“You didn’t do anything but be in a relationship that resulted in a pregnancy,” I soothed, reaching for him again, but he shrugged my hand away.

“I should have left long before this happened. I’m not a child. I know what causes

pregnancy. He didn't want to use protection, and I went along with it. Even when I was sure I did not want a family with him.

“When I got here, I thought I was free, but I am not free at all. He can show up and want equal time with our child, try to make me come back to him. He'll try to prove that I'm an incompetent parent. He'll get full custody.” His hands flattened on his belly. “He's never taking my baby away from me. I will raise them alone, and he can never, ever find out. Maybe I'll sell the shop and go as far as I can. Canada? Mexico? England? Anywhere he won't be able to find us.” His voice rose higher and higher until it broke and he flung himself on the bed. “What have I done?” Shoulders shaking with sobs, he moaned it again and again, and, finally, he allowed me to hold him while he cried.

He'd be glad for the baby when he calmed down, and we'd figure out the ex thing later. But, for now, I just patted his back and told him it would be okay.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:10 am*

I clung to Zion's shoulders as he reached one arm underneath my legs and another around my torso and picked me up, propping my weight against his chest. Though Zion was adorably fluffy, his strength didn't surprise me. I'd watched him once in a while, helping vendors and suppliers carry inventory into the back of his shop, not even breaking a sweat.

"I'm sorry," I muttered when the aftershocks from sobbing ceased.

"There is no reason for you to be sorry, Cicek. I don't know who hurt you so badly but my bear wants to put my claws through him. No alpha should make his omega feel like he's some kind of baby-making factory because a person, an omega, a mate, is so much more than that one facet."

He put me down on the sofa and sat next to me, reaching for the box of tissues. Instead of handing them to me, he wiped away my tears himself and then pulled me into his lap, wrapping me up in his delicious scent and arms that wound perfectly around my form.

"You always say the right things. You make me feel like I matter."

His body stiffened. Moving a bit, he stroked his hand down my cheek. "Cicek, you do matter. You are everything to me."

Those blue eyes bored into me, dissolving all my shields. My lips parted, needing to tell him to let me go, but that was the last thing I or my hedgehog wanted.

"Cicek, can I kiss you?"

I didn't answer. Instead, I lifted myself up and with my hand on the back of his head, brought his lips to mine. A moan poured from his mouth and into the kiss. This was what I had been missing. This connection. His large hands grasped my waist and repositioned me so that my legs straddled his hips and brought me closer, face-to-face with this gorgeous alpha.

"I've waited for this," he whispered before taking control of the kiss, guiding my mouth to a position where it felt as though our mouths had melded into a position for the most amount of connection. His tongue moved in long strokes, and each time, my hips bucked as though he were fucking me instead of kissing me. Zion grabbed my hips and tucked my groin closer to his.

I threaded my fingers into his thick brown hair and reveled in the silkiness of it. I'd longed to get my fingers in his hair, my hands on those strong shoulders. I'd fantasized about his round ass and his hard cock driving into me over and over both in my sleep and while I was awake.

Zion broke the kiss and moved his mouth to my neck. I leaned my head back, giving him better access while a moan of pleasure escaped my mouth. I was on fire for this man like I'd never been before. My cock bobbed as he nipped at my ear. Derek had never paid attention to the parts of me that were more sensitive than others and up until now, I hadn't known my ears were one of those places.

The thought of Derek threw ice over me and I started to scramble, moving off of Zion's lap and across the room where I had to brace myself against the wall for balance.

"Cicek?" Zion said, breathing heavily. The evidence of his need punched against the front of his jeans and gods, it felt good to know he needed me.

Selfish, selfish, hedgehog, making this beautiful bear need me when I knew I would

never give in.

My lips felt used in the best way possible and they tingled from the kiss. My entire body buzzed with need for him, while my mind fought against it.

“I can’t do this, Zion. I can’t.” I clenched my shirt in my hands, needing something to hold onto, other than my resolve.

“Can’t do what?” he asked, hurt lacing his tone. This was exactly what I didn’t want to do, hurt this precious alpha. Fuck, what had I done?

“I can’t do this,” I repeated, motioning between us. “I can’t be the omega you want. Having innumerable children and being trapped in a transactional relationship. Under someone’s control. Abandoning myself for everyone else only to be forgotten in return. That won’t be me.”

Zion stood. The hurt on his face drove a stake right into my chest. His eyes shone with unshed tears and when he took a step toward me, I had to take one back or else I would run and throw myself back into his warm arms again. “We’re not all like your other alpha,” he said softly. “I am nothing like that controlling asshole, Cicek. I thought I had proven that to you.”

The lack of anger almost did me in. I had rejected him and yet, he stood, calm and soft as ever, speaking to me gently. There wasn’t a harsh or jagged bone in this alpha’s body. I should’ve known he wouldn’t scold or be mean to me.

“I...I won’t take that chance.” I dared not speak his name. If I did, my sliver of control over myself would surely be shredded. “You’ve been very kind to me today and I appreciate your concern but please leave.”

“Cicek,” he started, but I had no intention of letting him finish.

“Please, Zion.” Tears fell the second his name came from my mouth.

“Okay.” Zion whispered the words and without another look at me, opened the door and left. Once the lock clicked, I crumpled to the floor in a heap of anguish. Gods, he was my alpha. He was mine and I’d cut him right to the core.

I curled into myself, trying to hold on to the warmth he’d given to me, letting his scent soothe me.

It was all I could ever have of him.



*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:10 am*

Despite being kicked out of Cicek's house, I couldn't just leave him to face his future alone. It was imperative that he know he had support, moral, physical, financial—anything he needed that I could provide. No strings attached. The previous night, he'd insisted I leave and just about accused me of being as bad as his ex, as any other alpha, but I didn't take it to heart. Well, I did...and sleep was long in coming, but this morning, I recognized that nobody could be held to anything they said under such severe stress.

What would I do in his position? As an alpha, I wouldn't be pregnant, but I hoped I had enough empathy to imagine myself in someone else's position. His former alpha had to have been completely horrible to have him so upset, and so adamant that he would insist on living alone and raising his child without help. His tirade was light on details but heavy on emotion, and my bear was ready to go find this alpha and end him.

Cicek was a strong, independent omega, and most of what I'd picked up about his former relationship and living situation had been in bits and pieces, tiny clues in conversation. Until last night when he spilled more in his frustration and protectiveness over the babe in his belly.

He had said more than once in the past that he didn't plan to mate again or have children, so this was not planned—at least by him. Yet, he was already trying to find the best path both for him and the baby.

I'd have to work hard to keep my bear, who wanted his mate, at bay, but he would have to accept the place in Cicek's life he might grant us. Supportive friend, if nothing changed. He'd need someone in that position, no matter how difficult it

might be not to press for more. As I thought these things over, I measured out oatmeal and added whole milk to the pot. Then I made a quick cup of coffee in the single cup maker and settled down for the few minutes it would take for the porridge to cook. I loved steel-cut best, but they took a good half hour, and this morning, I did not want to take the time.

When the oatmeal was thickened, I spooned it into a bowl and added topping. The very best part of eating hot cereal. At this time of year, the farmer's market was loaded with sweet, ripe fruit and I had overbought on my last trip. No worries, though, I piled raspberries, blueberries, strawberries, and a sliced peach on my cereal and drizzled local amber honey over the whole thing before digging in. I had a lot to do today, and fuel was imperative. I used my breakfast eating time to do a little research as well.

As I scraped up the last bite, I wondered if the omega liked this sort of breakfast. It might be a little heavy if his stomach was still off, but I could ask. For this morning, I had a different list, though, and with time ticking away, I needed to get to the grocery store if I wanted to open my shop on time.

Phone in hand, I marched up and down the aisles, pushing my cart, which was rapidly filling. On shifter social media, I had fallen down the rabbit hole of what omegas liked or needed early in pregnancy. Obviously, different animals varied in some cases, and I didn't run across any hedgehogs specifically, but certain items appeared over and over, so those were the ones on my list.

Ginger ale and some ginger chews went into the cart first, apparently a magical ingredient for any tummy issues in general. Then I went to the dairy aisle and bought cottage cheese and yogurt, easy to digest and high in protein. Saltines and Club crackers. High in carbs and low in fat was also a theme with rice mentioned, so I bought some of the microwavable envelopes that took only ninety seconds. Nothing too spicy, just plain rice and some made with chicken broth. Pasta also came the same

way, easy to prepare and easy on the tummy.

Everyone talked about not getting dehydrated, so I bought some flavored waters and juices that might appeal. It didn't take long before my cart was piled high, and I hesitated, considered putting things back so I didn't overwhelm Cicek, but ended up adding a small watermelon and some cucumbers, both high in water and refreshing, instead.

With the bags piled in the back of the car, I drove home and parked in my space behind the shop. Again, I considered whether I'd overdone, and while I acknowledged I had...I also decided I didn't care. He would have what he needed to stay healthy, and my bear heartily approved. Gathering the bags in my arms, I cut down the alley and came around to the front door of Bloom.

The store was open, but I saw no sign of anyone. I proceeded toward the counter, juggling all the bags. Might be best to just leave it all there, anyway, after last night. No pressure that way. He'd probably be just as glad not to have to see me. I headed for the door.

"Zion, wait."

I turned back to see Cicek emerging from the back room. "Hi. I was just dropping off a few things for you."

He gaped at the overflowing paper bags. "Half the grocery store?"

"I know. My bear and I were overenthusiastic. I hope you're not offended."

"Offended? Perhaps you should be because I was so rude last night. You're nothing but wonderful and supportive, and I was incredibly ungrateful."

“No, omega.” I cleared my throat around the emotions gathering there. “No apology necessary. I’m here for you no matter what. As friends only, if that is your wish.”

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:10 am*

Thinking was an overrated activity, if you asked me. I'd done nothing else the rest of the day but think. What was. What could've been. What could be. And everything in between.

The ruminations only led to more options—more decisions to make.

First and foremost, I had to think about whether or not to contact Derek and tell him that I was expecting. Contacting Derek was on my priority list—right under sticking a screwdriver into my knee. The thought of having him anywhere near this babe inside my belly, well, I could hand this babe over to a stranger and they would be better off.

I held back tears, picturing a sweet child's life under the care of that monster.

No. I wouldn't subject my worst enemy to that fate.

But legally, Derek had a right to know. If I had to, I would take the baby and leave here. Sell the shop and my building, everything my uncle had left for me, and bring the baby to a place where Derek could never find him. I didn't need any child support from him.

And then, there was Zion.

He was my mate. I knew that down deep, but there were so many obstacles—mostly in this mind of mine.

What if I was too much for the sweet bear? What if I tainted him with my negativity and second-guessing and not only eventually drove him away but caused him to turn

from his kind, giving nature.

He would be too nice to leave me and would have given me more and more chances until his kindness faded to bitterness and his love shattered.

There was no end to any of these dilemmas that ended well for me, or for Zion.

I paced the floor of my apartment, wondering what in the hell I was going to do.

I had to tell Derek. Not doing so could cost me custody if he chose to take the matter to court. And it wouldn't be a human court but a panel of alphas just like him who would absolutely take his side.

Heeding Zion's lesson, I would deal with the consequences of that decision as they came. If he wanted custody...I would fight it.

One thing at a time.

I wrung my hands. Rubbed my fists into my ever-tightening chest. Took breaths. Counted those breaths. Got on my knees. Back on my feet. Back on my knees.

Nothing helped.

Nothing.

My hedgehog begged for my attention. He wanted to go to Zion. Let him soothe us. Tell us everything was going to be okay. Not only for me but for the babe growing inside me. He needed a safe place to get bigger and form his little mind. I'd heard and read that babies in the womb could feel the stress and turmoil of their fathers, and I'd be damned if the scars from Derek passed on to my child.

I ceased overthinking and did what my hedgehog demanded. In only pajama pants, I barreled down my stairs and then up the stairs next door and soon found myself at Zion's door with my hand raised to knock.

I had no right coming here this late at night, begging for his touch after all I'd done to refuse him.

I'd led him on and turned him off.

Drew him in and pushed him away.

I didn't deserve Zion, but I knocked anyway, holding my breath for the bear to answer.

"Cicek," he breathed as he answered the door.

"Zion. I'm sorry. You were sleeping."

His hair was tousled in the sexiest way, and he also wore nothing but a pair of pajama pants, his slung low on the hips. "I was tossing and turning. Thinking of getting up and having a snack. Is something wrong? You? The baby?"

I shrugged, feeling stupid for coming here. The man was trying to sleep and, again, I was burdening him with my troubles.

Yes, he was my mate, but we were not mated. And I had decided not to take on another alpha.

I shouldn't be leaning on him as much as I was.

"I'm fine. Just couldn't sleep. Thinking too much. Sorry I bothered you."

I began to walk away, but he put his hand on my elbow and tugged. “You aren’t bothering me, omega. Come on in. The night air is chilly.”

It was the first time I’d been inside his apartment. Much like mine, the layout was a studio, but his was homier than mine. Pictures on the walls and I smelled the remnants of meat, vegetables, and freshly baked cake.

Didn’t know he baked as well, but the fact didn’t come as a surprise. Zion had talents in the kitchen and beyond.

I would bet he had all kinds of talents.

He offered me to sit on his love seat. It was covered with a soft fabric and had plushy pillows. I sank into its comfort, surrounded by the scent of Zion.

“Tell me what has you all riled up.” He pressed his thumb under my eyes. I knew they were puffy from crying. He moved to hold my hands. Even this simple touch unraveled all the knots inside me. I couldn’t imagine the sheer joy and ecstasy it would be for him to mate me, take me as his own.

I never would have that.

“I need to tell Derek about the baby.” I gasped, realizing it was the first time I’d told Zion my ex’s name. My secrets and desires tumbled from my mouth when I was around him.

He nodded. “That’s probably the right thing to do.”

“One step at a time, right? I don’t know what he will do or how he will want to be in this child’s life, one way or another, but I will have to deal with it in time.”



He chuckled. “That’s right.” Pausing, he squeezed my hands. “You’re not...are you trying to have a relationship with Derek again?”

My heart sank. I should’ve explained that better. “No. I won’t be under his thumb ever again, but I can’t have him finding out. There are so many things on my mind and so many unknowns.”

“Like what?” he whispered, scooting forward. I smelled my own arousal in the air mingled with his scent. He could have pointed out that I had decided to tell him already...but he did not. Which made my actions more understandable. Or at least so I told myself.

“Like what I’m supposed to do about you.”

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:10 am*

I had no excuse for what happened next. Cicek showed up at my door in his striped cotton pajama pants, no shirt, feet bare, and sex appeal whirling around him. I invited him in and tried to make him comfortable. He'd been through so much lately, leaving a bad relationship and his whole life to move here and make a new one. What if he hadn't had Bloom to come to? He'd have been pregnant and living who knew where. I couldn't stand the thought.

But protectiveness did not need to cross the line; I could have sat down and listened, without winding up in my bed naked and kissing the omega I yearned for. Unlike next door, my unit was not a studio, so I'd had a living room we could have stayed in and talked. I'd always heard that once you met your mate, everything would be perfect. Sure, free will came into play, but why would someone not want their fated?

By definition, a fated or mate would be the perfect person, with every trait their mate could need or want to have an amazing life. There would be zero reason not to jump into a relationship with them with both feet and a beaming smile. And, maybe that was the case for some, but in real life, by the time a fated came along, both of the people involved would have a bunch of life behind them. They might have dabbled with other relationships and been hurt, had a rough childhood, or a hard time succeeding with work, could be just about anything that years on the planet brought out.

In my case, I'd had a pretty smooth road, going to college to study business, taking some classes in culinary arts, working for others in the food industry, and starting my business. Sure, there had been bumps in the road because of life. I'd dated but never considered anyone I'd met my mate, so it was never going to be more than casual. Some jobs were better than others, friends came and went... But the moment Cicek

arrived to take over his late uncle's business, I knew he was my mate. I had a date that night, in fact, and canceled it right away.

My mate may or may not accept me, but now that we had connected, there would never be anyone else.

Cicek had a rough previous relationship who he referred to as a mate, and I wasn't sure I believed there could be two true mates for a person, but I never doubted that this omega was mine. And I'd held out, tried not to push things...kept them on a level where he was comfortable. Frankly, I'd rather be a friend to my mate and see him every day than have him disappear out of my life because I couldn't accept his preference not to have another alpha.

All these were the reasons not to climb into bed with him and kiss every inch of his body. Reasons not to allow him to slide down and take his cock in my mouth and lick and suck and nibble at it until he arched his hips and screamed my name. He fisted the covers, white-knuckled, but I didn't let up. Not now. He vibrated between my lips, his taste salty and sweet, a precursor to the cum I was going to swallow down.

Looking up his body, I saw that his belly wasn't quite flat; he was showing a bump that was even more of a turn-on. His head was thrown back, but I could see his lips moving in a repeat of "More, more. Don't stop."

Like I would.

Reaching down, I found his balls and cupped them, dandled them in my palm in a gentle massage. He tensed, released the covers, and fisted my hair instead. The sting of his tugging went right to my cock. And then went rigid. He was coming, filling my mouth and throat with thick silkiness. I kept swallowing until he relaxed under me, his muscles limp.

Rising, I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand and felt his hole with the other. Slickness greeted my touch. “So much slick, omega.” Fitting the head of my cock to his hole, I thrust forward and shuddered as his body welcomed me. Tight, so hot, already trying to milk me dry.

But it wasn’t going to happen that fast. I wanted this first time to last. I’d waited forever to get here, and I had no guarantee it would ever happen again. Which was why I ignored my bear’s demand to mark him. That would come later, when he was in a mind space to make that decision. But what he was offering now was more than I ever expected, and when I was all the way in, I stopped. Waiting. Gathering myself. My self-control stretched thin.

“Please, alpha, I need...need...”

“Yes, omega, I know.” I moved then, slowly at first, trying to hold back, but soon that was not a possibility. Letting my body take over, I drove in and pulled back, feeling every inch of his tightness on every inch of me. All too fast, my balls pulled tight and I poured into his body, the milking real now. And then my knot swelled, binding us together for a time. The moment for marking, and my bear was inside fighting for it, but no. That would be a taking of control, everything he did not want. So I just pulled him tight against me and rolled to the side, kissing his throat instead of biting.

When my knot shrank, we stayed together and never rolled apart the whole night.

It was enough for now.

And more than I had any right to expect.

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Raising my arms above my head, I stretched, immediately noticing a few things. Zion's sheets were softer than mine. My legs swished against them while I took inventory of all my achy places.

A wave of nausea hit me, making me groan. Being nauseated was the worst. I was hungry, but my stomach had been protesting against anything other than crackers and Zion's homemade food for the last couple of days.

Longer than a few days, but before, I'd simply not eat until Zion brought me something.

"Crackers are on the nightstand. I got up earlier and put them there with your water."

His voice stirred a million emotions within me. But things had definitely changed after last night. We hadn't had sex. We had made love.

Everything I knew to be true about Zion, he showed me last night.

He had been caring and attentive. He asked me questions and paid solid attention to my answers. He touched me where I craved his touch. He kissed me in a way that made me warm inside and out. Every second with him felt like I was loved.

And while those feelings of love had been pushed to the forefront, it did nothing to make the other ones waiver.

"How? I'm usually a light sleeper," I answered, opening my eyes to both the sun and the sweet bear next to me. Our pajama pants had been discarded on the floor along

with our boxers.

“Well, you weren’t this morning. I even mixed up a banana bread and put it in the oven.”

I rolled over right into his hold. He kissed my lips gently, and then the kiss became more heated. I loved the feel of his body next to mine. We fit together perfectly.

“Did you happen to make coffee?” I asked and tried to pull away as peskier thoughts wiggled their way to the front and center of my mind.

“Omega.” His voice deepened. “I made coffee, but why are you pulling away? And don’t tell me it’s for the coffee. Talk to me, little hedgehog.”

I sighed and lay against his bare chest. He growled down deep. Not a growl of anger but one of contentment. My animal felt the peace and happiness through his bond with Zion’s bear. “I’m afraid.”

“Of what?” he asked, stroking my back with one hand and threading his fingers through mine with the other. He was a touchy-feely alpha, and I didn’t know how much I craved that touch until him.

“That all of this will change. That once we are marked and committed, your real self will come out. That’s what he did. Derek. He was so nice in the beginning and then all of that changed.”

Zion huffed out a breath through his nose. “Was he nice, really, in hindsight?”

I sat up and turned to face him. “What do you mean?” Gods, he was beautiful in this morning light. There was nowhere else I wanted to wake up but right here next to him. If I could only get over myself.

“Think about the things he did to make you happy in the beginning of your relationship. Looking back, does anything seem off?”

I peered out his window. He kept them open at night, letting the sweet Oliver Creek air in. The town always smelled like home to me. More now than ever, after last night.

“I’ll have to think about that,” I replied.

“While you think about that, I’m making you breakfast and coffee. My home is yours. Shower. Bathroom. Whatever you need.”

He raised up only to pin me down and rain kisses all over my face and neck before getting out of bed to stretch. I nearly caught fire at the sight of him stretching his arms over his head as his back was turned to me. The man was incredibly beautiful.

“Keep that up, and we won’t get anything done today,” he chuckled, throwing on a pair of shorts and making his way to the kitchen.

I showered quickly and found a new toothbrush in its packaging on the side of the counter. I came out, and Zion was standing there, holding up one of his button-down shirts for me. It swallowed my form but if given the chance, I would never take it off.

He insisted I sit down and then served me a breakfast spread fit for a king, accompanied by a very small cup of coffee.

I hadn’t forgotten his request that I think about Derek in the beginning.

“Everything was over the top in the beginning,” I said after practically fainting over how good the banana bread was. It even had some white chocolate chips and crushed macadamia nuts in it. Zion was showing off with this one.

The alpha nodded. “Tell me about it.”

I sighed. This probably wasn’t the morning after he wanted, but I was still so messed up from what Derek had done to me. The healing would have to be a part of this relationship, this mating, if it were to continue. Even though I found myself falling completely for Zion, I still was on the fence. “He took me on extravagant trips. Romantic vacations. We had only been together a matter of months before he told me that he thought I was his soul mate and that I was the one. He showered me with gifts. Big ones. Expensive watches. New clothes. You name it. And then, once we slept together, it all changed.”

Zion nodded. I knew this had to be hard for him to hear. “During this grandiose time, were there signs of change to come?”

He was giving me so many things to think about. And while I had certainly analyzed most of the facets of the relationship, clearly there were still some things to get through.

“Yes,” I answered. “Critiquing what I ate. Criticizing everything and then calling it trying to look out for me or protect me. He questioned every interaction on my social media until I shut them all down. Sometimes, his eyes would go black and I was afraid of displeasing him. There are so many.”

“Do you see any of those things in me, omega?” He placed another piece of bacon on my plate. My stomach was not protesting at all, and I was sure it was because of Zion and his calming presence.

“No,” I replied. “You’re nothing like him.”

“But...” he prompted.



“I’m still worried.”

He nodded. “Then I’ll have to prove myself to you. Time will tell you that I’m here and not trying to change or control you. You can be your own person with me. Work in your shop or be a stay-at-home dad if it pleases you. Have more babies or not. You are free with me, Cicek.”

I glanced at the clock above his door. “Free but late,” I giggled. “I have to run and get dressed.”

He tipped his chin to the bed where a pile of clothes was stacked. “I slipped next door and grabbed you a change. I hope it was all right.”

“More than all right.” The man thought of everything.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:10 am*

We'd crossed a line, that first night together, and it was one we could not back up from, even if we wanted to. And I did not want to for sure. I only hoped my omega felt the same. Every time we got close to one another, the clothes were going flying, so I thought it would be nice to plan an evening out, maybe a nice meal in a restaurant where our clothes were not going anywhere and we could discuss some things and clear the way forward.

If he wanted that.

He sure seemed like he did, but I needed it in so many words. Free will rather than the power of fated mating and animal attraction taking over. Since our first night together, Cicek seemed to be doing much better stomach wise, but he was still overtired, and I hoped I could convince him to let my brother Scott help out more often in the shop.

I made a small board with cheese and crackers and some purple grapes and sliced apple and headed next door. I found Cicek sitting behind the counter, taking a break, which I was glad of but made me even more concerned. The omega was a hard worker, always doing something around the place, sweeping and dusting if there was nothing else to do. To find him seated, with his hands folded in his lap and his eyes closed was unusual to say the least.

“Cicek?”

“What? Oh.” He lifted his head, eyes opening wide. “Hi, alpha. Sorry, I guess I got a little tired. How are you?”

“I’m good, but I think you need a real nap. I’m calling Scott.”

“You don’t need to do that.” He stood up and stretched out his back. “I’m fine now.”

“No argument, omega. I want you rested when we go on our date tonight.”

He brightened. “A date? To the taco truck?”

I pulled out my phone and texted Scott who replied that he was available and would be right over. “Good, he’s on the way. Now...while I will take you to the taco truck anytime you like, I want our date to be special. Like the steak house two towns over?”

“That would be fun. I’m done arguing. I’m actually too tired anyway.”

“Too tired to go out to dinner?”

“I won’t be after my nap.”

I kissed him swiftly on the lips. “That’s what I like to hear.”

The restaurant was everything Godric told me. He and Tanner rarely went out because of his allergies, but the place was so careful, it was on their date-night list. They always asked him to call ahead for a reservation so they could be sure to make even the table safe for them. Talk about a trust factor. But, in addition, they gave the food five stars. I had also called for a reservation and told the host who answered the call that I’d been referred by Tanner and Godric, and he immediately asked if we had any allergies. I wasn’t sure if they asked everyone or if it was because of the referral, but either way, I was able to answer in the negative. Cicek had mentioned not having any when the PBJ owners’ names came up in conversation, so I had that information.

Our table was tucked away in a corner, very romantic, and they brought out bread and butter right away, along with a little silver dish of carrot and celery sticks and a few radish roses. Very old-school steak house.

We made casual conversation through the meal, holding hands and kissing between bites. But once our shared cherry cheesecake arrived along with tiny cups of coffee, we had settled into the best conversations. Somehow, we never got around to talking about anything serious, but it didn't matter. The food was great, but the company was so much better. And I had the perfect way to bring up what I needed him to know and what I needed to know myself. We just had to stay dressed long enough to talk it out. When we got back to the shops, I took his hand and led him up the stairs to my place. "Close your eyes." I opened the door and went into the bedroom to get something from my closet. "Scott had this in his storage, but I asked him for it. Open your eyes."

"Oh my goodness. It's a rocking horse." He fell to his knees beside it, stroking the smooth wood. "Is it an antique?"

"It's been in our family for generations."

"And you want me to have it when we're not even mated yet?"

"Omega, you're the only mate I will ever have, so if you don't want me, your child should have it. No pressure though."

He looked up at me, his eyes sparkling with mirth. "You are such a funny bear. How could I ever resist you." He moved to stand and I scooped him into my arms. "Mark me tonight?"

"It would be my pleasure." I carried him into the bedroom and set him down on the floor by the bed. Stroking a strand of hair back, I caressed the place I would mark him in just a little while. "And yours."

We'd made love a number of times already, but anticipation made this extra special, and I feared my omega could hear my heart thudding. But if so, he didn't say anything, and when we were both naked, I had him lie on his side while I lay behind him, my cock already at his slick hole. I stroked him off while I drove into him again and again, the angle extra tight and so good. It was indeed my pleasure and judging from Cicek's groans, his also. Getting close, I fisted him tighter and gave short jerks, bringing his creamy cum splashing onto the sheets just as I poured my load into him. My knot swelled, and I bent to sink my teeth into the side of his neck. Mated and marked.

He loved me, and I loved him.

He was my mate.

My alpha.

We'd decided the night before to bite the bullet and take a trip to tell Derek. Zion hadn't insisted he go with me. I asked him to come along, knowing I would need the moral support and his nearness to help me. Plus, now that we were officially mated, it seemed appropriate.

We took my car, but I handed the keys to Zion, letting him drive. His brother would watch my shop again while Zion's friend who filled in for him would take care of things at the charcuterie shop.

As soon as we passed the Thanks for Visiting Oliver Creek and Please Come Again sign, my stomach clenched with nervousness. I hadn't planned on seeing Derek again for the rest of my life, but Fate had other plans for me. Zion told me that morning that he thought Fate wanted me to have some closure so I could fully move on.

My alpha wasn't just care and coziness—he was the rock I needed, full of wisdom and patience.

“Have you thought about names for the baby?” he asked, taking my hand in his. Zion had keen instincts and knew my shifts in mood. He paid attention, and I only hoped I could reciprocate his love. I mean, I loved him, but I was scared. Derek hadn't deserved me, but I had a long way to go before I would feel like I deserved Zion.

“No. Have you?” I asked, knowing the answer.

He blushed. “Maybe.”

“Go on.”

Along the drive, we talked about names for the baby. He had some excellent ideas, both unique and cute. We pulled over at another food truck along the highway, and he bought me lunch, an enormous Philly cheesesteak sandwich and sweet potato fries. Every once in a while, he would move his hand to my belly and rub a circle or two on it as if to make sure the baby was included in his affections.

He would be an amazing father and, even though I pushed away the idea, my hedgehog wanted hoglets that were biologically Zion's. He wanted a big family and hadn't hidden the fact but also said that it was my body and my choice as to how many more we would have, if any, after this one was born.

My nerves had actually calmed until the GPS announced we had arrived at our destination. I hadn't even been paying attention. Good thing my mate insisted on putting it on GPS, his reasoning being that I might fall asleep during the trip.

“Here we are,” he said and looked up at the tall, modern home I once shared with a monster. He took off his seat belt and turned to me. “You can do this.” He waited for my confirmation that I heard him. “Do you want me to come with you?”

I nodded as everything inside my body tensed and knotted. “Yes.”

“Let's get this damned thing over with.”

He came over and opened the door for me and let me out, and we crossed the street. He held my hand as we walked up the stairs and knocked on the door for me.

I barely held in a gasp when another omega opened the door. He had already moved on and, if I wasn't mistaken, the otherwise-gaunt omega had a bit of a belly. "Can I help you?" the wolf asked.

"I came to speak to Derek," I said.

"Derek, company." My ex came to the door and with a sneer, looked me up and down. "What are you doing here?" He turned his attention to Zion. "And who the fuck is this?"

I gathered all my bravery. "I came to tell you that I'm carrying your baby." There. Truth was out. I deflated a bit, speaking it out loud.

"Is that right? And what? You think I want anything to do with it? You came here for money or something?" He leaned over and kissed the other man's head. "As you can see, I've moved on and we are expecting our first baby already. He's six months along."

Six months. Further along than me. As I suspected, his gym time was less about weight lifting and more about other forms of exercise. Hell, he probably didn't even have a gym membership.

"I didn't come for your money," I answered. "I thought it was right to let you know about your baby."

He huffed out a laugh and whispered something in the other omega's ear. The man disappeared into the back of the house. No doubt Derek would give his version of the facts later.

Lies. All the man did was tell lies. Whatever means necessary to keep up his facade of perfection.



“I’ll ask again. Who is this?” Derek tried to stand up straighter, but he had nothing on Zion’s height.

“My name is Zion. I’m Cicek’s fated mate.”

Derek laughed. “Fated. Fucking stupid notion if you ask me. If all you wanted was to come here and announce your big news, then you can leave.”

“Formally renounce your claim as the father of this child so that we never have to have contact with you again,” Zion demanded. A shiver rolled down my spine, hearing this side of him. He was an alpha, after all, and a bear like his would end Derek’s little hedgehog in an instant. One bite would be the last this world saw of the asshole.

Derek’s eyes widened, but then he rolled his shoulders and sighed. “You two are a pair, that’s for sure. Fine. I, Derek Mathers, hedgehog shifter and alpha, renounce any rights, responsibilities, and claims on the child conceived with Cicek, hedgehog shifter and former omega of mine. I want nothing to do with the baby and will never contact any of you three in the future. Happy now?”

“Very,” Zion said and grabbed my hand.

The door slammed behind us as we walked back across the street. “Shit!” I exclaimed. “We should’ve got it in writing.”

“Don’t have to,” Zion answered, opening my door and crouching next to me. He held up his phone. “I recorded the entire thing.” Unlike human rules, shifters did not need to ask permission to record for it to be valid in a shifter hearing, should one ever happen.

I grabbed his face and pulled him in for a kiss. Today and the rocking horse and

everything else he did. He taught me what mating was supposed to be.

An exchange in love.

Loving, caring, supporting, always being there for each other.

Filling the other one up, not tearing them down.

“I have something else to tell you, and I’m worried about what you will think,” he said.

“Let’s get out of here and then tell me.”

Whatever Zion had done had come from his heart. He had healed me in so many ways. He might not ever realize how he’d mended me, but he had. His love had changed me forever.

“I put an offer on a house. There’s not a lot of houses in Oliver Creek that come up for sale, and I had to act quickly. My brother called me to tell me. I had planned on showing it to you after all this was over. If you don’t like it, we can always rent it out or resell it.”

I sighed and looked over at him. He was driving but kept glancing over to gauge my reaction. My alpha’s generosity didn’t come in flashy gifts or expensive things. It came in the form of food and concern and buying things that would build our future.

How in the world could I be anything but grateful.

“I can’t wait to see it.”

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:10 am*

There was more to be said before we could move forward with our life together, but since we left Derek's place, something had changed in this omega. He had been tied up in the connection with his former alpha and feared any other would want to control him as well, but I hoped I'd put those concerns to rest.

"How are you doing, omega?" I asked as we drove down the highway toward Oliver Creek. "You okay?"

"Yes." He sounded surprised. "I am very fine. Amazing, isn't it? I was so worried about seeing Derek and what he might say or do. I mean, he put this baby in me, and it was the one thing he said he really wanted from me. Hoglets. Dozens of them. But when I show up and tell him this baby is his, he isn't interested anymore."

"Interesting, huh? I gather from the fact the omega is closer to delivery than you that he'd been fooling around while you were still together?"

"Must have been. Shouldn't that bother me at least a little?"

I shrugged, changing to the fast lane. "I don't think there's a 'should' about emotions. You feel what you feel, but I am interested to hear what happened that a person as sensitive and caring as you are not bothered. You must have been pushed far."

"Would you mind if we drove past the house you put the offer on? I need to see something happy before I delve into the biggest mistake of my life."

"Absolutely." I hated hearing the sadness in his voice. "And I don't think you need to think of your time with Derek that way. It sounds as if you learned what you wanted

and what you didn't, even if it did take you a little bit of time to realize what you wanted was me."

He snorted. "That's true."

"And in all seriousness, that baby inside you is the good part of that time. Especially since he has given up his rights. I can't wait to be a daddy, did you know that?"

He nodded. "You're going to be so good at it. I only hope I don't totally screw up."

"You are going to rock it."

A buzz came from Cicek's pocket, and he pulled out his phone and groaned. "We have to go by the healer's instead of the house. He had a cancellation and asked if we could come a day early."

"Sure." I flipped on my signal to change lanes. "That will be a happy thing, too. We get to hear the baby's heart, don't we?"

He brightened. "That's right." He patted his bump. "You hear that, baby? We're going to listen to you, so get ready to thump your best."

I chuckled, partly at his cuteness but also because he'd gone from sad to cheerful so quickly. "Quinn might even be willing to do an ultrasound if we ask nicely."

"Do you think so?" He typed into his phone then looked up and beamed at me. "He said yes. Let's go see our baby."

"Our baby sounds very nice."

"Oh, they're a gem. Always kicking their daddy, and I swear they have gas."

We arrived a few minutes later and were ushered into the exam room right away. “Thank you guys for coming today. My mate wants to spend the day together tomorrow, and after the cancellation today, we were able to squeeze everyone in either today or day after tomorrow.”

“No worries.” I helped my mate up onto the table, the familiar crinkle of paper the same as any healer’s office I’d ever been to. “And Cicek said you are going to do an ultrasound?”

“Sure. He has reported no problems, but we know our daddies love to get a peek at their little ones. Did you want to know the sex?”

We looked at each other then back at the healer. “I think we want to be surprised,” my mate said. “If that’s all right.”

“Of course. Now lie back and push up your shirt.”

He obeyed and, while I watched, the healer squeezed some gel onto my omega’s stomach. “Not too cold, right? The warmer has been acting up.”

“No, it’s fine.” He smiled up at me. “Ready to see them?”

I took his hand and lifted it to my lips to kiss. “I’ve waited for this all my life.”

As we watched in silence, Quinn moved the device over his belly then smiled. “Here they are.” He pointed out various features, omitting information we didn’t want yet. Or maybe we did want it, but we had decided to wait, to be surprised. “Looks like everything is as it should be for this hoglet.”

A hedgehog. For just a moment, I’d forgotten that this baby couldn’t be a bear, but I didn’t care. The tiny thing moved around inside my omega, growing every day until it

was ready to join us in the big world.

“Quinn, I have a question.”

“Sure.” He set down the device and flicked off the screen. “What did you want to know?”

“Everything I’m reading says I have to limit coffee to one tiny one a day. Even as a shifter?”

“I’d prefer you had none, but one won’t hurt. Like everything else, moderation.”

“One is less than moderation,” he growled, accepting the wet wipes to clean off his stomach. “Next thing you’ll be saying is not to put any sugar in it.”

“Well, now that you mention it, sugar isn’t the best fuel for baby.”

“You’re lucky I love you,” my omega said to his stomach. “So much.”

And I loved them both more than I’d ever dreamed I could love anyone. “How about shifting, Quinn? Is it okay if he does that?”

“A hedgehog? Sure. As long as he feels up to it, go for it. They’re among the lucky ones.”

“It’s something!” Cicek gave me a small smile. “Can we go now? Out where you took me the first time?”

“Of course, omega.” I pressed a kiss to his forehead.

“And then tacos.” At the truck conveniently close to the area we went to run. Sneaky

omega.

## Page 20

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:10 am*

The only thing cuter than our little gray cottage with the yellow door and yellow shutters was my alpha.

He wouldn't let me lift a thing over a few pounds and got up early and moved a bunch of stuff with his brother before I woke up.

I slept like the dead now. Every noise and movement didn't wake me up anymore. I didn't have to exert myself, paying attention to every chagrin or face, each change in tone or word from Zion. I was no longer in a bear trap, waiting for it to snap and trap me.

Being with Zion taught me how to relax.

I was safe with him. I could be myself.

I could breathe again.

And only the gods knew how long I'd been holding my breath before him.

After I woke up, I drove over to our new home to see what, if anything, Zion would let me help with. Probably placing pillows or something fluffy like that.

"Hello?" I called out, walking into the house. I already had plans for the landscaping in the front yard. It would be a shame for a florist not to have a flourishing garden.

"We're in here," Zion called out. I walked down the hallway and into the master bedroom and gasped. Our bed had been put together. Everything was in place down



to the area rugs. My mate and his brother Scott had been busy.

“Whoa! What time did you two get up? Three?” I laughed.

“Something like that,” Scott said. “Speaking of, I’m starving. I’m gonna run to get us all some breakfast and two and a third coffees.” Scott liked to pick on me about not being able to drink more than one tiny coffee a day while I was expecting.

“Shut up. What can I do?” I asked after Scott left.

“It’s all done. This was the last big thing.”

I turned around and walked into the living room. We had an open floor plan, so I could see everything from this angle. The buttercream couches we’d ordered were in. Rugs were spread where they should be. Art hung on the walls. Books were on the shelves. Pots and pans hung from the rack above the island.

“We can officially move in?” I asked. I would’ve bounced on my toes, but my belly had grown so much, that proved a test in my balancing skills.

“I was hoping we could spend the night tonight,” he said. “Once we move the last little things out, we can put both of our apartments up for rent. That will bring in enough income to cover the mortgage payment with a bit extra to pay it off earlier.”

I felt myself smiling. I did that a lot around Zion. “You have this all planned out, don’t you?” I asked.

He nodded. “I do. We do.”

Zion and I had weekly budget meetings. He insisted that I keep a separate checking and savings account for myself in addition to our joint ones, even though I knew he

would never be Derek, controlling every cent I spent and made.

I walked over and laid my head on his chest. “Are you cooking me dinner here tonight?”

He chuckled and wrapped those big arms around me. “Yes. Of course. And I have some more plans...”

That tone made my heart flutter. “And what are those?”

“Making love to you on every flat surface of our home.”

“Come on. We haven’t even had breakfast yet,” Scott said, coming into the doorway at the exact moment those words came out of Zion’s mouth.

“Shut up,” he told his brother. They had a loving and yet playful relationship. But Scott was kind to me and took me into the fold of their family. He didn’t have an omega yet, but he was always searching. Maybe a little overzealously if his reputation around town held true.

We spent the day moving the little things over. The coffeepot for Zion. Some cups and a few clothing items. Toiletries. Zion hired someone to clean the apartments so we wouldn’t have to, and soon they would go up for rent.

That night, I came home from checking on the shop to find a candlelit dinner on the table. Roasted chicken and vegetables. Baked potatoes. And I smelled apple pie.

I sighed and took off my shoes. My ankles hadn’t swollen yet, but Zion checked them all the time anyway. “It smells amazing,” I said.

Zion came in from the hallway. “You smell amazing.” He peppered my neck with

kisses and grazed his teeth along my earlobe. “And you’re the most beautiful omega I’ve ever seen.”

My once-shy Zion had become bolder now that we were mated.

I snorted. “I’m huge and peeing all the time. I’m sure that’s so sexy for you.”

He pulled back abruptly. “I clearly haven’t done my job if you don’t think you’re the sexiest man alive right now.”

My stomach growled and we laughed. “Let’s eat and then show me,” I suggested.

“That I can do.”

We ate in a hurry. I rubbed my feet up and down his legs while we ate, knowing it drove him crazy.

“By the time I get inside you, I’ll be ready to blow,” he growled, getting up from the table. We hadn’t finished eating but I couldn’t wait any longer. And clearly, neither could he.

We stripped on the way to the bedroom. Zion picked me up with his hands on my waist and hoisted me onto the bed. “Get inside me already,” I begged.

“No. I’m taking care of my omega first.”

He enveloped the length of me all at once. I cried out his name and jerked off the bed. His firm hands pinned my legs down as he bobbed up and down on my cock, fucking me with his mouth. All the anticipation that day had built up and in seconds, my balls tightened, and I shot cum into his throat with a long moan of ecstasy.

“On your knees, omega mine.”

On all fours had become a favorite position since my belly had gotten so big. I did as he said and crawled farther on the bed and got on my hands and knees, swaying my ass a bit, begging him to get inside me.

He teased me with the head of his cock at my entrance, testing my slick. “Alpha, please,” I whined and with a chuckle, he slowly pushed himself inside me. The sensation so strong and intense that I nearly came a second time before he was all the way sheathed.

He rocked his hips, pumping inside me until only a few minutes later, he came hard, growling out my name loud enough for the neighbors to hear. After that, we lay together.

“Alpha,” I said.

“What is it, Cicek?” he teased, playfully slapping my ass.

“I’m ready for apple pie now.”

He laughed heartily, throwing his head back. “And I thought I was the one who had an insatiable appetite.”

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:10 am*

The rest of the house had been ready before we moved in, but we'd kept the nursery to take care of when we were settled. And, unfortunately, that meant it kept getting pushed off since we were both so busy at work and tended to spend our free time in more enjoyable pursuits. But as my omega grew larger, a sense of urgency overtook him. He bustled around the house whenever we were home, cleaning, picking at unseen dust specks, and reorganizing drawers. Quinn called it nesting and said it was very common among pregnant omegas coming close to their due date.

It was a real change, since he'd been exhausted for quite some time, but no sign of that showed now. "Alpha, I need you to get down some fresh sheets so we can change the bed."

We'd changed it the day before, and nothing was going to get changed unless I could focus all that energy and soon. Walking down the hallway, the open door to the nursery caught my attention. There were bags of clothes and boxes holding furniture we needed to get out and put together. The zero-fume paint and things needed to apply it stood in a corner.

"Hey, omega. Come here," I called. "I found something we need to take care of."

He came huffing down the hallway, a duster and cleaning cloth in one hand and a bottle of the homemade vinegar cleaner we had switched to in the other. "What is it? Something is dirty?"

I stepped out of the doorway and waved inside. "Something is incomplete. We have an entire nursery here in kit form, and a baby due soon."

Cicek paled. “How did we let this get away from us? We have to get started right now, or the baby will be sleeping on the floor.”

To be fair, that would never happen. Even if we didn’t already have the bassinet set up in our bedroom where the baby would sleep for some time, we were not about to leave our child on the floor. But since my point was trying to distract my omega from silly tasks that did not need doing and refocus him on what we did need to do, I did not point that out.

I followed him into the nursery and we organized how we wanted to get things done. Together, we prepped the walls and I did the painting. It only took one coat for the pastel yellow to cover the ugly off-white likely in every house in the area. And then I lured my omega into the bedroom for a little nap and cuddle while it dried.

After dinner that night, he was anxious to get started again, so we returned and picked up the next part of the job—assembling the furniture. For a fee, the store would have done this task, but when we bought it a few months before, we’d asked one another questions like, How hard could it be? Half an hour into working on the crib, I understood the smirk on the sales clerk’s face when we declined the service. But I eventually had it completed, and Cicek checked every bit of it for sturdiness and pronounced it acceptable.

My omega was not able to get down on the floor and help, instead working on folding all the clothing and blankets and little adorable things preparatory to placing them in the dresser as I got each drawer put together. We had selected a light wood that looked very nice against the yellow walls, I thought, once I had finished with the last of the furnishings. At least the glider hadn’t had to be put together. I had managed to bruise myself no fewer than five times in the process of assembling all the rest, however, and I was ready to relax.

“Would you like to come and have a treat, omega?” He had been all about a bedtime

snack lately. “I baked some cookies this afternoon, and you can dunk them in milk.” Some people were horrified by dunkers, but that was because they had never seen my adorable omega dipping a cookie into a tall, cold glass of milk then eating it, beaming the whole time. He looked more like a happy little boy than a man about to give birth to a child of his own.

“I’m not sure.”

“You’re not?” This scared me more than anything else that had been going on lately.

“Do you feel all right?”

“Yes.” His cheeks colored, and he could not meet my eye. “But I ate them.”

“All of them?” A full batch?

“While you were working on the changing table, I went for a drink of water and spotted the tray on the sink. Are you mad?”

“No of course not. But it is a lot of sugar for you in one sitting.”

“You’re right, alpha. But I can still have a glass of milk, can’t I?”

“Why don’t you have a nice relaxing shower, and I’ll go down for the milk and see what else I can scrounge.”

He hugged me as closely as his currently round shape allowed. “You aren’t mad at me, are you?”

“Never. But I won’t bake more cookies unless you promise to show more care in how many you gobble.”

Of course he agreed and then went to the bathroom for his shower.

I finished up a few things in the nursery then went to the kitchen for his snack. I returned with a tray, holding his milk as well as some woven wheat crackers and sharp cheddar only to find my omega asleep in bed, the covers down at his hips and his bump swelling toward the ceiling. He needed rest more than food, it seemed. Still full of cookies, the scamp.



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*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:10 am*

I hadn't spoken to Zion all day. He was testing out some new recipes and offerings for the boxes in the store, plus, he had three huge orders for boards that were going to be picked up today. Of course, he had recommended my shop for the flowers for the wedding reception and so, the last week had been a big one for me as well. My flowers had been picked up already, and I was exhausted from head to toe.

Zion texted me pictures of different things he'd come up with during the day and sent Scott over with tester items but, even though we spent all our time together we could, I missed my big teddy bear.

I closed up shop and walked over, noticing that the line went out of the shop and down the sidewalk.

What in the world was happening? I went into the shop after being blocked by some people in line. I had to explain that I was mated to the owner, and that was the only reason they let me through.

"Scott?" I asked Zion's brother as I made it behind the counter. "How can I help?"

Scott put me to work after Zion grumbled a good bit about me being on my feet and explained that Camila, an influencer who had come in weeks ago, had posted her experience on Instagram and tagged Zion's shop in the post. He'd thought she was just an ordinary customer and had been shocked to realize her reach. She'd tagged mine as well, but people wanted cheese and meat before roses. I didn't blame them one bit.

I made box after box, according to the instructions in the binder Zion kept for

everything in the store, laminated and categorized by facets of the business. I was currently making the sweets and treats box. It had brownie bites, cake pops, and a sampling of all the treats offered by his shop.

Scott was working on the carnivore, a meat-and-cheese-only box.

Zion was calling out names for readied orders while his two part-time workers were staying overtime to help with checking out.

The line finally died down after a few hours, and now I knew why I hadn't heard from my mate all day.

He'd been up to his eyeballs in business.

"Holy shit," Scott said, putting his hands on his hips after Zion closed the door and flipped the sign.

"That was crazy," I said. "Holy shit is right."

"No." He looked at the floor in front of me. "Holy shit, Cicek. I think your water just broke."

I gazed at the floor sideways, since my belly disrupted the view, and a small puddle of clear liquid surrounded my feet. I had felt something down there, but our babe was active so I never knew.

Huh.

Zion moved into action. "Come on. To the healer with you. The baby is coming. Scott, can you go to the house and get the bags?" He had already mopped the floor and had me in his arms before everything registered.

I was about to have a baby. Our baby.

Once we arrived at the healer's office, Quinn met us out front, since it was late, and helped us to the birthing room. I was already having contractions minutes apart and could feel the revolution happening in my body. "Quinn, I think it's time. This baby is coming now."

"Right now?" Zion asked and came over to hold my hand.

"Right now," Quinn confirmed after a quick exam.

"I thought it took longer. His water only broke an hour ago. Not even," Zion said, his tone even, but my hedgehog felt his nervousness through the bond.

"First labors are often fast, especially with an active omega. I've never delivered a hedgehog babe. A first for all of us." He'd seemed so knowledgeable about us...must have been from reading.

Quinn had me position myself in a crouch, which I had decided was best for me. Zion rubbed my back. "They have crowned, Cicek. Time to push."

I bore down with all my might, now eager to get the babe out of me. This pain was excruciating. There was a ring of fire that took over my back entrance before I screamed out once.

"There we are. You did incredible, Cicek. One push and done. All kinds of firsts tonight." Quinn held my babe up, cleaning him up as best he could and assessing him quickly, head to toe. "Looks perfect. Ten toes and fingers. Already breathing well."

"He's not crying," Zion said.

“A quiet one, I suppose,” Quinn replied. “He’s breathing well.”

“He?” I asked. I honestly hadn’t looked. I was more interested in his formation and if he was healthy.

“Yes.” Quinn smiled, handing the baby to me. “A son. Congratulations, you two.”

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He was a rosy baby, flushed for all his quiet, and ready to latch on when the healer suggested that Cicek give it a try. They made such a beautiful picture together, I could have sat and watched them all day.

“He’s a very sweet baby.” Quinn had cleaned up and returned to join me across the room from my mate. “Do you have a name for him?”

I faced him. “No, we—”

“Merrick.”

We both turned toward the bed. “Merrick?” asked Quinn. “Wasn’t that your uncle’s name?”

“Yes. He was the one who set all this in motion by leaving me the shop. Had he not, I would have still left Derek, but I would have landed in an entirely different place. And maybe never found my fated mate here in Oliver Creek.”

“You did come and help your uncle, right?”

“Yes, but it has been a while, and I never met Zion before. His shop wasn’t open.”

“Then it truly is kismet. Zion was lonely, even if he never said so to anyone, and he kept to himself mostly. He could be convinced to come to birthday parties or things like that, especially where children were involved.”

“I was doing fine,” I protested. “Waiting for my fated mate who finally showed up.” I

went over and sat on the side of the bed.

“Want to hold him?” Quinn asked.

“Very much.” I held out my arms, ready to support his little head. There was an advantage in having friends with so many kids in the area. “You think we should name him after your uncle” It’s a big name for such a little guy.”

Cicek laughed. “He won’t be little forever, and I’ll be happy if he has my uncle’s attributes. Do you like the name?”

I nodded. “I like that it was your uncle’s name. He was a good man, and that is what I want for him.”

“Then it’s perfect, alpha.”

“If you three are ready, you can leave anytime.” Quinn had left and come back again.

“The baby checks out for everything I watch for at this stage.”

“What do you say, omega?”

He turned to put his feet on the floor and stood up slowly. “Whew, that’s a tough job.”

“Why don’t you just stay sitting until we have everything ready? You can hold the baby.”

His lips moved as if in protest, but then he sat right back down. “All right.”

A few minutes later, I’d gathered everything and put out a pair of shorts and a T-shirt for Cicek then took the baby and dressed him while my omega got ready to go home.

We'd come here a family of two but were leaving a threesome. I knew from my friends that there were lots of sleepless nights ahead, but it would be worth it. Our son was here. Derek was a fool, but his foolishness made our life so much simpler. I was not going to write him a thank-you note though. He didn't deserve it.

“Ready, alpha.”

“Me too, omega. I'm so grateful to you for our family.” I kissed the baby's forehead and then Cicek's lips. “It's time to go home.”

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:10 am*

I froze after hearing a knock at the door. While our babe had been almost silent after birth, he had made up for it since. He was chatty for an infant, always cooing and gurgling. Zion and he had great conversations.

“If that knock woke up Merrick, there’s gonna be trouble,” I said, gritting my teeth. Merrick’s nap was the only time I really got to rest. I’d chosen to chest feed and, while Zion did all the housework and cooking and most of the diaper changes, I was still exhausted.

Zion walked over to the door and opened it. There was no one there. Instead, there were arrangements of flowers. Baskets of all kinds of food from every place in town. Baby gifts. Handmade blankets and everything in between.

“What in the world?” I said, helping Zion get everything inside. The smells were incredible. Smoked meats. Jars of nut butters and jellies. Frozen smoothie packs. Fresh baked bread. Pastries from the diner and flowers that didn’t come from my shop. At least, I didn’t make the arrangements.

“There’s a card,” Zion said after we piled everything on the table.

“What does it say?” I asked, wrapping my arms around him.

“Congratulations, Cicek and Zion, on the birth of Merrick. From all those you have sent flowers to after our births, this is the least we can do to repay you. Biggest of blessings from your neighbors in Oliver Creek.”

By the time he was done, there were tears running down both of our faces.



Oliver Creek had been instantly accepting of me, and Zion loved it here too. My uncle had been wise beyond his time leaving me the shop and placing me right next to the bear of my dreams.

Maybe he knew all along that Zion was my fated.

I would always be grateful for those summers with him and the future he'd left to me.

"I sent them flowers because it was the kind thing to do," I said. "Not to get anything in return."

Zion nodded and embraced me while I continued to weep. "Accept it, omega. We are loved in this community. And our son has an amazing place to grow up."

I nodded. "That much is for sure. And guess what? You are loved by me."

"And I'm going to love you forever, Cicek."

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:10 am*

“I am spending entirely too much time with you, my dear.” I caressed the smoothness of my new love’s side. “People are going to say we’re an item.” I’d waited years for this moment, and now all I had to do was try not to screw things up. It would be a heartbreaking loss.

“You really are way into that new coffee roaster, aren’t you?” Glen, my single employee, barista extraordinaire, stood in the doorway between the front of the coffeehouse and the back. “I mean, I know you love it, but maybe try to take things slow or you know, just hold hands.”

“Funny.” I stepped back from my new acquisition with all the dials and buttons and ugh. “She’s a classic, you know. Not like all those new ones that you can operate from your phone.”

“Do they really work like that?” He seemed skeptical.

“Probably. I mean, I don’t know.” I walked around the roaster, examining it as if it could tell me what to do. “But I wanted this one.”

“The new ones come with things like manuals,” he pointed out. Why I ever hired this snarky kid...oh yeah. He came on time most days, didn’t mind doing any job around the place, and made great coffee. Also, he kept me from taking myself too seriously.

“Who needs instructions,” I intoned.

“You do.” Pulling out his phone, he tapped some keys and gave a nod. “Yep, turns out, this one had a manual too, and some nice person made a TikTok and a YouTube

video. I sent a link to your email. For the YouTube. You can follow a link, right, boss?”

“Yeah.” If he wasn’t such a lifesaver, I’d have had something to say about his disrespect. “Thanks.”

“Mmm-hmm. I’m going back up front and wipe down the tables.”

“Good idea. I think I’ll go in the office and check out that video.” Unlike my barista, I preferred to watch videos on my laptop because of the larger screen. On the phone, I’d have needed my readers.

“Holler if you need help.” He disappeared before I could insist I would not need any help. It was pretty much a lie anyway. I probably would. “I’ll watch the vid too, when I get a minute.”

Really good idea, but his ego was big enough already. He didn’t need me to add to it.

I left the door open between the back kitchen, roastery area, and the office, preferring to be able to hear if things got busy. One of Glen’s few faults besides snark was thinking he could handle everything without help, and a few times, that had gotten him into trouble with customers. He was good, but not perfect.

Not quite as inept with technology as my helper implied, I brought up my email and clicked on the link he’d sent. A glance at the channel showed the guy who owned the manual had several old roasters, although he was more of a hobbyist than a professional. Still, his videos looked interesting, so I subscribed. At this point, I’d lost the vid I wanted and couldn’t remember what it was called. JavaJoker had hundreds of them, and I panicked before remembering I had the link and could simply backtrack and click on it again.

Maybe Glen was right about my Neanderthal tech skills.

I managed to get the video going and was watching the nice man make the behemoth roaster that took up most of one corner of my small kitchen look easy to operate. He even had an available download of the manual if I wanted it. I did. About three quarters of the way through, when I could almost smell the roasting beans, the sound of the bell over the front door cut through my concentration.

Every time it did, I tensed in reaction. I'd like to say the reason I believed my mate would walk in the door was because a wise woman or fortune teller or heck, even a fortune cookie told me he would. But this belief was not bestowed on me by anyone. I believed from the day I walked into this storefront and envisioned the coffeehouse it would become. Something about the cozy space, even when it was just walls and an expanse of faded carpet, held magic, and my bear was just as convinced. Like that baseball movie, if I opened a coffeehouse, they would come. Okay, not a perfect analogy.

I was often in the front of the house, but if not, that belief had me darting to the doorway to see who was there and if it was him. Or her. In the past, I'd had relationships with males and females, although none serious. And I'd stopped dating when I set up my business because it was so unfulfilling. At this point, it was a waiting game. One of the few friends I'd told about it thought it might be more a wish than a promise. But I had faith in Fate.

Also, if my cat believed, it wasn't just me on my own.

Once again, the bell tolled, so I stood up and went to see if this time would be it. My mate. My other half arrived from somewhere far away to complete my half-life. The visitor was looking at a shelf of travel mugs, facing away from me. I held my breath.

And then he turned and approached the counter where he ordered a latte.

My cat rumbled in disappointment.

Again.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:10 am*

“I do love the sight of a man with a fine ass bending over my garden,” Angelle said with a cackle. I shook my head and laughed along with her. She’d pretended to sip tea all morning, but my bobcat picked up another scent. Lavender tea, yes, but gin filled most of her cup. By the time the sun peaked in the sky, she was making all kinds of inappropriate comments and had settled herself under an umbrella at the table on the deck.

I had been in Jones a few days, which was usually my limit. Angelle paid well, and the jobs were easy for me. Not that I minded hard work. I loved working with my hands. Being busy. “Is that right?” I egged the older woman on while I finished picking up the leaves and other weeds I’d plucked from her perfect rose garden. Most people picked one or two colors for their rose beds, but Angelle had one of each color she could find and was meticulous about their care, even though she could no longer bend down to tend them herself.

“It’s absolutely right. My grandson Aster would go weak in the knees for you.”

“I thought you said he’s mated and they have a child,” I responded, throwing everything into her compost bin and turning it a few times, making sure the material mixed in with the rest. I turned around, hands on hips, assessing the yard. Over the last few days, I’d fixed up her yard and even tended to a few jobs inside. Her leaking kitchen faucet. The air vent that made too much of a whooshing sound. The rattle at the back of her refrigerator. All simple things, but Angelle was a shifter like me, so those little sounds became nuisances with our enhanced hearing.

“They do. He and Quinn are so happy. But anyone can look.”

I snorted and slipped the garden gloves Angelle insisted I wear, from my hands. “Once you’ve found your true mate, there’s no looking. At least, from what I’ve heard. My fathers never looked at another male. I know that for a fact. They were over the moon for each other.”

Angelle snorted. “My mate wasn’t my fated. I loved him the best I knew how, but I never did meet the one meant for me. Sometimes I wonder if I did and I didn’t know because I was wrapped up in Joseph and our children. Maybe he passed me at the grocery store or in some other chance moment.”

I turned to see her running her finger over the rim of the teacup, trying to turn back the hands of time, if only in her mind, scouring the bits for a flash of where Fate pushed but she hadn’t pick up the sign. “There’s no point in regret, Angelle.” I’d called her Mrs. Bennett the first day, but after we got along so splendidly, she insisted on being called by her first name. Said it made her feel young again.

“Yes, that’s true. Aren’t you going to give up on this life of travel and try to find your mate, Pike?”

I sighed. No matter how many places I roamed, the question remained. Honestly, I didn’t know the answer. If I managed to find my mate one day, I would consider making roots, but that hadn’t happened to me. “I’m not even sure where I will go next. Today is my last day here with you. Everything on your list is complete.”

Angelle sighed. She was lonely since her mate had passed a few years ago. They may not have been fated, but they were companions. “Stay with me for lunch. I’ve already got it in the Crock-Pot.”

“If you insist.” I chuckled. I’d been all over the country since deciding the nine-to-five life wasn’t for me. I wanted to see the country I lived in. Meet all the people I could.

And yes, a small part of that was about finding my mate.

At least, that's what I told myself.

"Where does your grandson live? Does he visit you often?" I helped my new friend serve up some chicken and dumplings and brought both plates back to the table outside where she preferred to eat.

"Aster and Quinn live in Oliver Creek. Quaint little town about a half hour from here. Well, perhaps I shouldn't use the phrase little town. It's more like an up-and-coming small city but, according to my grandson, it still feels like a small town. Charming and quiet but bustling with new food trucks and restaurants and businesses."

"It just so happens that food is one of my favorite things." I laughed.

"Name one person who doesn't love food," she giggled, taking a sip from her glass. She must've hit a wall with her gin because her lemonade was only lemons, sugar, and water this time.

"I can't." I scanned her backyard for anything I may have missed. I would move on after lunch. Leaving a place always tugged at my heart, but the excitement at seeing somewhere new overpowered the sadness.

"You did well. My garden hasn't look this put together in a long time. I hire people from time to time, but it's hit or miss."

"Thank you."

This was the part that sucked. Saying goodbye—especially to those who were kind like Angelle. There were so many people in this country and world, sometimes it surprised me that there were still lonely souls.



“Leave the plates in the sink for me, Pike. And keep my number in your fancy phone. There’s an envelope on the table—your payment. I’m not good at long goodbyes. So, how about I’ll see you later?”

I nodded. “See you later, Angelle. It’s been a pleasure.”