



Brewing for My Mate: M/M Shifter Mpreg Romance

Author: Lorelei M. Hart

Category: LGBT+

Description: I started the Oliver Creek Brew five years ago before Oliver Creek went from sleepy and dying to a bustling, trendy town. I wait daily for my omega to walk right in and order a coffee. Perhaps I've been reading too many romance novels. I long for him, whoever he is.

Everyone loves coffee and pastries, and I even offer a selection of superior loose-leaf teas. I've almost given up on meeting my fated when a handyman traveling through town offers to help with my disaster of a plumbing issue. Problem is, he's a wandering spirit and mine loves to stay right here at home.

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“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 bobcat 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.

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“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.”

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I had to stop rushing to see who came in. People were going to notice and wonder if I was quite balanced. They wouldn't want to come in anymore. And I needed this business. I had invested my life's savings, and I could not afford to damage my reputation because of a pipe dream.

Settling on a stool at the back counter, I filled the small plastic-free bags with loose-leaf teas and placed twenty of them in the small paper bags printed with our logo. We were in theory a coffeehouse, but our teas were also well-known. A source of organic, high-quality leaves had fallen into my lap, and our customers loved them.

The bell rang again, and I fought the instinct to go and look again. My mate was not out there. He hadn't been the past several thousand times I'd looked, and there was no reason to think that had changed. I had a nice business here with delicious coffees and teas and a part-time baker who made delicious pastries for my patrons to enjoy. If we kept going the way we were, I'd either need him to work full-time or get a second person in there.

Gratitude for what I had should be my watchword instead of acting as if the only reason I opened this place was to make a location for my mate to find me.

Go look.

Not this time.

It had been nothing but wishful thinking. And even if I never met my mate, if Fate didn't assign one to me, I had a better life than many. The teas I was currently bagging were fragrant and delicate. I had assumed I wouldn't have to carry more than

a few ordinary bags here for the odd customer who accompanied a regular. But more and more often, we'd had requests for the beverage, and I realized we were letting our patrons down with a poor-quality product? We had always bought the best beans and now were even roasting them in house. But I was handing out teas made from the bits of leaves swept up and stuffed into plastic-laced bags?

This led to a deep dive into the tea industry and even a virtual trip to a tea plantation. While I could not be considered an expert, I knew those who were and was able to make decisions that added quality tea to our offerings.

Even then, I thought it might not be a big seller and ordered conservatively, but my doubts were soon proven to be false, and not only were we brewing pots for customers, but we were selling the tea both loose and in little plastic-free bags. It was a fine sideline for us, and one that gave me a whole new interest.

The bell rang again.

Of course it did. We had customers coming in and going out all day, and Glen would call me if he needed help. I filled a few more bags, but my attention was on the voices beyond the doorway. A woman ordered a cappuccino with an extra shot and spent a few minutes chatting with Glen about her favorite roast and how she hoped we'd have lemon scones again soon. A chime announced her leaving, a quick repeat the entry of someone else. Still holding my ground, I filled more bags while a man asked for directions to a residential address that his GPS was insisting was right where he stood.

Sometimes small towns had more of a problem with GPS, or at least ours did. It was a rare week when someone didn't land in our shop by mistake. Generally, they left with a coffee or a pastry. Maybe a pound of freshly ground beans. The scents were seductive. And sometimes we ended up with a customer who stopped each time they passed through town.

The bell rang again, and I congratulated myself on having stopped that ridiculous behavior of peeking out, expecting to see my mate. My bear, on the other hand, was having fits.

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With all the praise Angelle had given Oliver Creek, my decision for the next place to roam was easy.

I pulled over on the side of the road where a whimsical sign had a welcoming message burned into the wood, along with flowers and vines.

Welcome to Oliver Creek. We hope you find what you've been looking for.

"Huh," I said, processing the greeting. "Am I looking for something?" I pulled back onto the road, even more eager to see this town everyone raved about both in person and online.

I parked my car near a cute park with a large metal sculpture in the middle. There weren't many cars on the street, which wasn't surprising, given I only saw two four-way stops and no stoplights. There were, however, an abundance of food trucks and people walking, some hand in hand, others chatting, most smiling.

Grabbing my wallet and keys, I got out and decided to walk around the place. It was early. The morning sun graced the sky with its golden hues. Shops opened the doors to their business. Several bells tinged as owners unlocked the doors and flipped the closed signs to open. If Norman Rockwell had been a modern-day artist, he would've surely had Oliver Creek as his inspiration.

A few puffs of smoke caught my attention from a truck with the words Dragon's Breath painted across the side. So many smells filled my senses all at the same time. My bobcat, of course, focused on the scents of smoked meat coming from Dragon's Breath, but I had other intentions.

The bold, caramelized nutty smell of freshly ground and brewed coffee hung in the air, along with pastries and muffins, if I wasn't mistaken. My bobcat could save his cravings for later. I doubted the smoked meat he craved was even ready to be served.

"Excuse me," I asked a man who looked pleased as punch to have a fresh baguette in his hand. "Where is the coffee shop?" No point in asking if there was one. My senses hadn't steered me wrong, not once.

"One block that way." He pointed. "Oliver Creek Brew."

"Thank you."

"You're new here?" he asked, clutching the loaf of bread close to his chest. I kept my chuckle to myself. This town must've had a great bakery as well.

"I am." I reached out to him. "My name is Pike."

He nodded. "Andrew. It's nice to meet you." The male was an omega with pale-blue eyes and a killer smile.

"You as well."

"I've got to get back home, but welcome to Oliver Creek. Hope I'll see you around."

I nodded my goodbye, not explaining that he probably wouldn't see me around. Oliver Creek was nice and all, but only meeting my alpha might anchor me to one spot, and a part of me feared that not even my mate would be able to keep me grounded.

Perhaps that was because I hadn't found him yet.

I wanted it to be everything a mating should be. The fluttering heart. The longing to never leave each other's sides.

But I'd seen my fill of couples who didn't make it. Mates. Fated Mates, even. Fated mates were supposed to be together forever, but I was a realist.

Expecting nothing was probably the way to go. Tell that to my overly eager bobcat.

I took the directions Andrew had given me and found my way to the Oliver Creek Brew. There were several little round tables out front, along with daisies and plants outside. The place had large windows with fresh, modern signage. Inside, there was a small line of customers. The floors were spotless. A case in the front held fresh pastries and baked goods.

I waited my turn in the line and while I did, paid attention to the people. Everyone said hello to each other, and even the baristas were chipper and smiling.

This place might've been too good to be true.

"Good morning. What can I brew for you?" the young man behind the counter asked.

I chuckled and looked at the menu. "I'm a pretty boring guy. What do you recommend?"

"Iced or frozen?"

"Hot?" I responded.

"I think I have the right one for you. Name for the order?"

"Pike..." I trailed off, smelling something new, a scent that overpowered everything

else in the place.

Mate. Coffee. Chocolate. Caramel. Mate.

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My poor bear. His disappointment every time our mate was not in the shop shook us both, and it was even more important for him that I break the habit of stalking the customers.

Mate.

No. Our mate is not there.

Mate.

In the past, I would have caved and given him what he wanted, but this time I did not cave. Instead, I stood up and put away the tea things. I'd packaged enough for now, and those could go out front to restock later.

But there was always something to do in our shop, and I'd never felt I was too good to do any job. We had been busy for the early rush, and while we did of course use to-go cups or fill travel mugs for our commuters, one of my first decisions in having a coffeehouse was to use real glassware and crockery. It held the dual purpose of being good for the environment and an opportunity to offer our customers a nicer experience. Personally I never drank out of plastic or steel or paper if something better was available.

And with our new tea sideline, I'd been having a great time picking out cups and saucers. The first customers we served in one of the mismatched not-quite antiques almost lost their minds. An elderly couple who had moved here to retire, they waxed rhapsodic about the tea shop they used to frequent in the city, and how they'd missed it. Glen fussed about the special care we had to take with the china, having to hand-

wash them and how many were likely to break, but I'd found them in thrift stores, mostly, in nearby towns or online marketplaces, and tracking them down was a new hobby.

Also, only one had broken so far.

But the dishes that needed attending to at this point were mostly the more traditional glasses and restaurant crockery cups, thick white mugs like something from a 1940s movie. Unlike the teacups, they were not as old as they appeared, and they were nearly unbreakable. Matching plates for baked goods were equally as tough. Of course, we had various vessels for fancy drinks, but our "cup of joe," just plain beautifully roasted and brewed, had garnered us a reputation far outside the city limits of Oliver Creek.

My business was something to be proud of.

Even if I never saw my mate come through that front door and walk up to the counter. The bell rang again, likely the customer who came in last leaving, and I relaxed a little, stacking cups and glasses and plates in the trays for the automatic dishwasher I'd been told I had to install when I opened. Opening the place had cost far more than I ever dreamed it would, and that requirement was the thing that almost stopped me. Somehow I'd missed that requirement when pulling permits and studying the things I needed. Opening on schedule was critical as well because I had been paying rent for four months while getting everything ready—and another month without income was not an option.

Through dumb luck, I learned about someone closing a Chinese restaurant in a nearby town who was also selling all their fixtures. Fingers crossed, I went and made an offer on the behemoth because I had no other choice. As I walked around it, I had strong doubts about the purchase, but what choice did I have? It was a low bid since it was "as is" and not even guaranteed to be in working order.

I'd been annoyed at not only the expense but making room for it, but it had more than paid for itself in saved time and not having to worry about whether the dishes were really clean. A few teacups were no big deal, but we went through a whole lot of the other things in a day.

Until the moment it wasn't. That moment came after the bell rang again and my bear more than doubled his insistence that we go see. So much so that as I turned after loading the final tray and hitting the start button, I didn't even notice at first when the hose broke loose. Not until it was spraying the whole back room with steaming water.

I jumped back, cursing.

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“What is it?” I asked but already saw the water spraying everywhere from somewhere in the back. Loud curses come from the same direction.

I rounded the counter and followed the barista to the back, thinking perhaps I could help whatever situation the freaked-out person was in. I nearly slipped and fell to my death on the water flooding the floor as I took in the scene. A male, an alpha if I’d ever smelled one, flailed around. Water dripped from every flat surface and even from the ceiling where it had splashed.

It took me two seconds to see the problem. The dishwasher’s main hose had detached and was flapping this way and that, spraying the place down. I took small steps toward the dishwasher, remaining as calm as possible. Once I reached the hose, I grabbed it tightly and kinked it, stopping the spraying. “You.” I pointed to the barista. I hadn’t read his name tag and, from this angle couldn’t read it if I wanted to. “Reach under here and turn the large silver knob to shut off the water.”

While the barista scrambled to do what I asked, I eyed the alpha. He wore a button-down shirt with his name embossed above the pocket. Maxwell. He was as drenched as the rest of the kitchen. I almost laughed out loud at his downturned mouth and those eyebrows dipped deeply above brown, beckoning eyes.

Gorgeous and brooding were the first words that came to mind.

“Done!” the barista shouted, getting up from the floor. I gently let the hose unbend, little by little so the water flowed into the sink.

“Excellent. Thank you. I’ll just...” I unscrewed the hose clamp with my fingernail

and turned to Maxwell.

His eyes roamed my form. I shuddered, wondering what was going on in that beautiful head of his. “Maxwell, is it?” I asked and got a nod. “Do you have a”—I looked at the hose clamp once again to make sure—“flat screwdriver?”

“Oh. Yes, of course.” He darted through another doorway and came back shortly, jutting the screwdriver at me.

I took it, disregarding the pull he had on me. Dismissing the itch underneath my skin to reach out and make sure we touched in the exchange. “Thank you.”

I quickly replaced the clamp and attached the hose onto the top of the industrial dishwasher. After making sure everything was tight, I turned the water on myself since the barista had disappeared in answer to a ringing bell up front.

“There,” I said, nodding as the machine got back to its work and stopped its fussing.

“Thank you,” Maxwell said, letting out a long sigh. “I don’t know what I would’ve done without you. I’m not much of a plumber as you can see.”

“It’s no problem, really.” I looked around. “Can I help you clean this up?”

He waved it off as though it were a spilled coffee and not a sloshing mess and, even worse, a safety hazard for him and his employees. “No. But, I’d better get to it.”

“I’m good with a mop,” I said, winking at him and then wanted to crawl into a hole for being so forward. I wasn’t like that, but my bobcat approved of my action.

“We’ll do it together,” he conceded.

A few minutes later, we had the place as dry as possible, and Maxwell set up a fan to make sure everything left over dried in time. He even put a safety sign up, although the water remained in the kitchen area. Smart man.

“I’m Maxwell, but you already know that.” The bear of an alpha blushed. Gods, that only made him sexier in my eyes. A bit shy. Huh. I hadn’t realized that did it for me, but it so did. “How much do I owe you?”

“Oh. For that? Nothing at all. I’m Pike. It’s nice to meet you. Oh, my coffee.” I laughed. In the ordeal of fixing the dishwasher and helping out, uninvited, I might add, I’d forgotten about the jolt of caffeine that had probably gone cold a while ago. “I ordered one right before the ordeal.”

“What did you order? I’ll get you a fresh one. And a muffin? A pastry? What else would you like?” Maxwell hopped to work, going to the barista and asking a question, probably what my former order had been. He looked up, eyebrows raised, waiting on my choice. He was handsome, this tall, dark, and chocolate-smelling alpha.

“Your choice. Pick your favorite,” I replied and made my way to a table, avoiding the growing line and customers waiting on their orders.

As I waited, I took in the people of the town. They were all gracious and thankful, none of them tapping their toes in impatience or snarkily telling the barista their name.

Something about this town made time slow to a calm wave.

“I chose this almond pastry and the cherry cream-cheese one.”

Maxwell placed the two pastries in front of me, along with a flat white, or what I

assumed was a flat white, and one of the same for himself. He sat across from me and smiled. “Tell me about yourself, Pike.”

The worst question of them all, in my opinion.

“About me?” I repeated. “There’s nothing much to tell.”

Maxwell’s gaze dropped to the table, and I felt a rush of distress in my chest. I had disappointed the alpha and, gods, I didn’t want to do that again.

My bobcat snarled inside me, demanding I correct the action. “I’m sorry,” I blurted. “I travel a lot doing this and that. A jack of all trades, if you will.”

The alpha across from me perked up. “Is that right? It must be exciting to travel.”

“It can be,” I admitted, but my bobcat was content for the first time I could remember. He wanted to make a den and settle down with a mate. With this alpha, who was our mate.

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I didn't know what I would have done if not for this traveling omega my bear was calling mate. Although I was feeling a little less intelligent than I liked to give myself credit for. Turn off the water! Of course, that was what someone did when there was any kind of water leak. Although I did not know there was an actual shut-off valve on the machine, but I did know where the main one was for the shop, and it had been no more than a dozen steps away just outside the back door. Under ordinary circumstances, I liked to think I would have remembered that helpful information and run for the valve right away. But with my bear's radical arguing from inside me, his insistence that we stop messing about with chores and go meet our mate—I never thought of the shut-off.

My bear had been right this time, and I should have recognized the difference between his behavior previously and just now. Oh, he wanted me to look every time, but not as strongly as at this last ring of the bell. And once he got a glimpse of Pike...well, he was ready to mate with him and settle down immediately.

But so far, all I'd managed to do was get most of the mess cleaned up, with the omega's kind help. What were the odds of a handyman coming along just when I needed him? Surely better than the fact that person would be my mate. I took him in, guessing he was about five or six years younger than me and wore worn jeans and a T-shirt that clung to muscular arms.

We lingered over coffee and pastry and talked for a bit while things were slow and Glen could handle the customer flow on his own. Pike was animated and adorable, and I couldn't look away from his face. "So, this dishwasher is the holy grail. How much did you say you paid for it?"

“A few hundred dollars.”

“Wow. That owner did not know what he had. I’ve fixed a few professional models and this one was made before the manufacturer decided to cut corners and opened their factory overseas. This one is well over twenty years old. Did you know that?” As he launched into a description of the differences in appliances he had known and loved or hated, I realized I could listen to him talk all day long.

“No. This is my first foray into the restaurant industry, and I probably got incredibly lucky not only to get this dishwasher at all. Not to mention managing to open the shop and live the dream.”

“What did you do before this?”

I chuckled. “Whatever it took to save up for what I wanted. I have a business degree, and after graduation, I went into finance. Turned out, I had a gift for helping others invest, so I was able to not only work in the field but build my own portfolio until I was able to return to Oliver Creek and do what I preferred.”

“Stocks. I’ve never understood those at all,” he said. “You must be very smart.”

“Not necessarily. I think it’s one of those things you either find interesting or not. I did have to liquidate for the opening, but since then, I’ve been able to reinvest and start the rebuilding of my nest egg. As much as I love my work, this industry is not stable. Of course, neither is the stock market, but while I invested for fast gain before to meet this goal, now I am going another route. Saving for the future.”

He shook his head, a lock of hair falling forward over his forehead. “Smart.”

“It’s nice of you to say so. But I’m the one who stood back there while water sprayed everywhere until you came in and had Glen turn it off.” I took a sip of my coffee.

“Not smart in the least.”

“It’s easy to be rattled by things like that.” He was so sweet, trying to make me feel better about myself. “If you want, while I’m still in town, I can come by and check it out, maybe see if it needs anything like hoses replaced. The one I reattached looked fine though.”

“Really? That would very helpful. I need to pay you for that though. You can’t just save every shop owner from himself.”

“You’re not every shop owner.” His eyes glowed, but I tried not to make too much of it. He was my mate, but he didn’t have to be if he didn’t want to. He was younger, incredibly hot, and obviously fit. I had the body of a shifter, but I hadn’t done anything to add to that, and as a bear, I was probably more bulky than most.

“How long are you going to be in town, by the way?” I cleared my throat. “I mean, I don’t want to make you change your plans just to go over my dishwasher.”

“I haven’t decided yet, but I don’t have anywhere to be in a hurry.” His cup was empty and only crumbs remained on his plate.

“That’s right, you travel, you said.”

“Mm-hmm.” He pushed back his chair. “I should go.”

Panicked, I reached for his hand. “Listen, where are you staying?”

“I don’t know yet. I camp out a lot. Is there a hostel here?”

“Stay with me.” The words tumbled out of my mouth before I could consider how it sounded. “I mean...at my home. I have plenty of room and I owe you for saving me.”

“I couldn’t. It’s too much for what little I did.”

“You’re also going to go over the whole dishwasher. My guest room is very comfortable...”

“Okay, but I won’t take pay for that either. Deal?”

We shook on it. A handshake had never before sent electricity up my arm.

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Somehow I found myself sitting outside the Dragon's Breath, sharing a brisket sandwich with Maxwell. We'd drifted from the coffee shop a block over to the smokehouse food truck where the alpha and omega pair served us with smiles and delicious food.

"Where else have you been?" Maxwell asked.

"One morning, I got up in San Diego and decided to walk the Pacific Coast Highway. It ignited something..." I let my voice hush. I hadn't spoken this openly to anyone in a long time—maybe ever. I had told Maxwell about some of my travels, trying to skim the details, leaving some things tucked away in my heart. But even then, I had revealed more than I wanted to.

A part of living the life that I chose was taking the bad with the good. There were honest and dishonest people all over the world. Honorable and dishonorable. Trustworthy and liars. Sometimes, a person could tell one from the other right away, and sometimes, even seasoned travelers like me could not.

I'd learned to give out snippets of myself, tiny truths that only skimmed the surface of who I was. There had been no one to share more with—until Maxwell.

"Ignited what?" He reached over and touched my hand again. My bobcat sensed nothing despicable about the bear sitting across from me, but my human side remained wary.

I shrugged. "Not wanting to work a regular job, I guess." We both laughed. "I felt there was something else calling to me."

Gods, was that something else the man, the bear in this town. Was Maxwell what my soul had searched for all this time? Had Fate sent me on a long journey to end up here, with my mate? My alpha?

Still, even if Maxwell was mine, trust didn't come easy for me.

"Where were you before Oliver Creek?" he asked, polishing off his sandwich and moving on to the sweet potato fries. He didn't alternate between them. Interesting.

"In Jones, doing some gardening and other work for a woman named Angelle. She has a grandson here in Oliver Creek. Aster?"

Maxwell nodded. "Of course. He's a healer. He and Quinn are expecting baby number two? Perhaps three? I don't know them well, but the healer is well thought of in town. Very patient and kind."

"That's good to know," I answered. Heat crept up my neck and ears as Maxwell searched me for more, but I wasn't ready to give him more.

My animal, on the other hand, was ready to give this alpha everything. And I meant everything.

Maxwell's phone vibrated. It had several times while we talked but he ignored all of them. This time, after a dramatic groan, he answered the call. I distracted myself with the sights and sounds around me. There was plenty more of Oliver Creek to explore. Even a bird sanctuary and a vineyard—both of which offered tours.

The truth was, I needed some space from Maxwell. A chance to breathe since being around him made it hard to take a deep inhale. A chance to think clearly, when for the last few hours, all I'd done was hang on his every word and forgot my plan never to make ties, never to stay in one place.

“I have to get back to the coffee shop. Turns out, they need the boss around sometimes.”

I let out a laugh. “Imagine that. I’m going to explore the town a bit more. But I’ll come around in the evening? What time does the coffee shop close?”

“Six. I...are you sure? I could ask the others to close up for me.” Maxwell stood as I did. He gathered up the trash and tossed it into the trash can. My bobcat trembled with the nervousness coming from the alpha.

“Maxwell, look at me, alpha.” The last word slipped from my mouth. I hadn’t meant to say it, but it didn’t upset my cat either. “I’ll roam around. It’s what I do best. At six, I’ll be at your shop, accepting your offer to stay at your place, okay?”

I hoped my words soothed him as his presence did to me.

My soul felt like it had been in turmoil for ages and now, I’d found the balm.

Still, I needed some time to myself to get my head straight. Maxwell deserved that.

“Okay, Pike. Have a good time.”

I went to the bird sanctuary and took the long tour. The number of birds there blew my mind. There were species I had never heard of before. They took such good care of it that I was moved to make a small donation at the office. The vineyard didn’t have any tours since they were between seasons, but there was plenty to be seen in Oliver Creek. Diners and a new art museum. Even a new place next to the town hall with a history of the town.

My feet were tired, and the day turned into dusk. I checked my watch and grinned. It was finally almost six. The tour of Oliver Creek I’d given myself was a great way to

spend the day, but I found my thoughts meandering back to Maxwell.

My bobcat called him his mate—our mate.

I walked into the coffee shop to find most of the lights turned off and Maxwell wiping down a counter.

He said, “Can I...” He smiled and my heart and energy were instantly renewed.
“Pike. Did you have a good day?”

“I did.”

“Ready to go home?” he asked. “I mean, to my house?”

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A day had never been longer. We were busy enough, but I kept wondering where Pike was and what he was doing. Oliver Creek had become a real mecca for visitors, especially foodies, and the bell rang constantly, the bell that used to have me rushing forward every time. I spent most of the day in front anyway, but the whole time my mind was on Pike. Had I been wrong to let him go instead of taking the rest of the day off and shutting the shop down?

My bear thought I should have done that, but my bear wasn't very practical about things like paying the mortgage and the suppliers. He didn't care if we paid for electricity or water or natural gas. As far as he was concerned, all we needed for happiness was our mate and a cozy place to den up with him. A cave would be great.

I'd known from day one that my mate would come here. Toward the end, I'd nearly lost faith, but turned out, he did show up and in fact rescued me from a near disaster. Just the kind of romantic "cute meet" they put in movies, although as the alpha I would have preferred to fill the heroic role.

I made coffee and wiped tables and rang up sales, grateful for the flow of customers who made it possible for me to pay the bills and keep the lights on, but my mind was elsewhere. Was Pike window-shopping? We'd had a big lunch, but was he getting hungry? Did he feel like he had to stay away until six or be underfoot? I should have made it clear he could come back anytime and just chill.

Finally, Glen left and I was doing the last bit of cleanup. I kept looking up at the clock over the espresso machine. The hands crept toward six when I could finally lock the door. It had been a good ten minutes since our last customer, but I still wouldn't shut down early. I could see how having a mate could make that attractive.

Until now, I'd been a virtual workaholic, a necessity while getting a business going, but it was definitely time to reassess.

The bell chimed, and I spoke before looking up. "Can I..." And then I saw his face, and my heart rate sped up. "Pike. Did you have a good day?"

"I did."

"Ready to go home?" I asked. "I mean, to my house?"

"Why don't I check out the dishwasher first. While you're closed and it's quiet?"

"Aren't you tired?" My bear did not like the idea of our omega overdoing it. He wanted to take him home and feed him dinner, tuck him in bed, and join him there. "You've done enough for one day."

"I have just been wandering around enjoying your fine town, and of course I spent a few minutes wrangling that hose."

"And a while mopping."

"True. But I'm not tired, and I only need maybe a half hour to do what I need to. That way, if any parts should be replaced, you'll be able to order them online right away."

"There's a plumbing store in—"

He raised one brow in the ultimate skeptical look.

"I am not going to find parts for this in a store, am I?"

"No. But I know some sites we can check for after-market parts, and worst-case

scenario, the manufacturer actually has replacement parts for most of their older models, just at a premium price.”

“You are clearly the smarter of us because I would have assumed the manufacturer had long since stopped serving these models and that if they did, they’d be my best source.”

Pike went out to his truck and came back with a toolbox, which he carried into the kitchen area. “If you have something to do, you don’t need to sit and watch me.”

“Oh, it’s no trouble.” Quite the opposite. I planted my butt on a stool at the prep counter. “Let me know if I can help.”

He had that skeptical stare down pat. No words needed.

“Okay, just watching, then.”

And well worth the price of a ticket because this omega made crawling around a dishwasher look like a dance. Well, maybe that was excessive, but the bending, reaching, stretching...poetry in motion. At least to me.

“Well that’s it.” He turned to face me, dusting his hands together. “You all right?”

I blinked. “Yeah, I was just spacing out a little, I guess. Nice to sit and relax.”

“I’ll bet. Well here’s the news. Nothing is broken or about to break, but some hoses and other parts should be replaced. I’ll make you a list and give you the site info for ordering, okay?”

“I guess you’ll have to stick around until they come,” I joked—not really kidding. “Ready to head for home?”

“Sure am.”

“Then let’s go.” I turned off the last of the lights.

“I’m on the street. You?”

“In back. Would you like to follow me home or maybe just leave your vehicle in our lot overnight?” I really wanted him in my car, sitting close to me.

“If you don’t mind, I’d rather follow you. Everything I own is in the truck.” He shrugged. “I feel better if it’s close to me.”

“Of course.” I opened the front door for him and said, “Wait in your truck and I will be right around. On second thought, give me your phone?”

He had my number already, but I input my address. “Just in case we get separated.” At nearly seven o’clock in Oliver Creek, there was not the kind of traffic that would let that happen, but I wasn’t taking chances. “See you there.”

I locked the front, went out the back, and locked that door then hopped in my car and drove around the front. As I’d predicted, we did not get separated, and Pike followed me up my driveway, coming to a stop behind me.

He hopped to the ground. “Nice place.”

I looked past him at my house, wondering what it looked like to a guy who was on the road all the time. Homey, I hoped. “It came on the market at a good time. Not too big, not too small. Just enough to make me feel comfortable.”

We went inside, and I gave him the tour, showing him the ground-floor living room, kitchen, dining room, and powder room.. On some level, I’d imagined we’d fall into

one another's arms and into bed, but despite our comfortable talking, having moved inside my home, Pike went quiet, looking around and nodding as I told him where to find things. Finally I took him upstairs to the guest room and left him to settle in while I got dinner started.

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Every intention I had of keeping my head on straight flew out the window coming into Maxwell's house. His home felt like home to me. Not his home but my home as well—our home.

Every fabric and room was saturated with his scent.

Even when I showered, though I used my own soap and shampoo, the alpha imprinted on my senses. I knew I would be staying in the guest room, but the roasted coffee scent of him penetrated even this room and bathroom.

All this time, I had indulged my craving to see the world but standing there, with my alpha just on the other side of the door, all I wanted to do was stay with him.

Stay with my alpha.

I blew out a long breath and opened the door.

“How are you with a salad?” he asked, smiling over his shoulder.

“I’m actually an excellent sous chef. What smells so good?” I asked, realizing the double entendre.

“Garlic steak bites and some baked sweet potatoes. If I knew I’d be having company, I would’ve planned a better meal. I hope you like beef.”

“I haven’t met a predator shifter who doesn’t.” I made myself at home, finding the bowls, cutting board, and knife with no trouble. I made a simple salad of lettuce and

shaved Brussels sprouts, along with some odds and ends from Max's refrigerator. Though he had bottled salad dressing, I made a vinaigrette. Okay, a part of me wanted to impress the alpha.

A big part.

"That looks great. Let's eat."

I couldn't remember the last time I'd shared three meals in a row with someone—in fact, I didn't think I ever had before.

Maxwell's home reminded me of one of those social media posts where you have to choose one place to spend a year in. The living areas were tidy and clean but didn't have that cold, hospital-like quality that made me think of a hotel. The sofas worn but taken care of. Throws along the back of the sofa called to me. I could easily see myself tucking into Maxwell's side, him holding me close with one of those blankets draped over me while we watched a movie or read books.

"Is something wrong?" Max's voice broke me out of my fantasizing. "I can make something else."

"No. I'm sorry. Caught up in my thoughts, that's all."

He nodded. "You do that a good bit," he commented. He was sincere, not judging me criticizing, simply stating. And he was right. I did that.

Usually I thought about the next place I would visit but now, my thoughts centered about the possibility of staying put—something I'd never considered before.

"I do."

More than once, our feet and thighs touched under the table. We ate, ignoring the elephant in the room, that we were mates. If I could feel it, then so could the alpha.

I wanted him to do something about it. Push me up against the counter and claim my lips with his. Take me on this table. Give me a reason to stay. To be here with him.

“How about dessert?” he asked and winked.

Had he read my thoughts?

“What do you have?” I asked as my lips rose in a smile.

He chuckled. The sound shot straight into my gut and dissolved somewhere in my pelvis. Meeting my mate, well, I didn’t expect it to go like this.

Couldn’t have planned it better myself.

“Help me put all of this away and we’ll see what we can come up with. Okay, omega?”

I tipped my head back, undone by the way he called me that word. “Sure.”

We worked around each other, putting up the minute quantity of leftovers in no time. I crossed my arms over my chest, watching Maxwell’s every move. He was broad and thick, but his steps were graceful yet calculated.

An alpha in all definitions of the word.

“I’ve got ice cream,” he said, opening the freezer. “Cherry cheesecake flavor.”

“Sounds great.”

He walked over to me, container in hand. Deep-brown eyes nailed me. I gripped the counter behind me, hoping, praying he would ditch the ice cream and choose me for dessert instead. He put the frozen treat on the counter and leaned in, so close his breath tickled the rim of my ear. One arm braced on the counter while the other moved above my head. Gods, was he going to do that book thing where the alpha braced his hand on the wall and kissed the omega into a stupor?

“Getting the bowls,” he whispered, his groin pressing into mine.

Max put the bowls on the counter and then reached into the drawer beside me. “Now the spoons.”

At this rate, I would be melted before the ice cream. I shook with need.

“Ah, omega, tell me what you need?” His warm hand cupped my cheek. “Is there something else you want for dessert? Something you need?”

I burned with desire for this man. None of it made sense. We had only met this morning and yet, I couldn’t, for the life of me, come up with any cohesive thought other than wanting his kiss—his touch. “Kiss me, alpha. Forget the rest and kiss me.”

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Ice cream would wait. Until after the kiss that curled my toes. His lips were smooth under mine, parting to welcome my exploration. Waiting for him for so long, I'd wondered what it would be like, how he would taste and smell, and I knew now that my fantasies were nowhere near the reality. His scent most closely compared to freshly sawn wood and cut grass. His taste sweet and spicy.

If we ate it now, it would melt before either of us could lift a spoon to our mouth. When Pike's cheerful demeanor dissipated on arrival, I decided to back off and let him be. No matter that my bear was planning our den, whether this omega chose to stay with us was entirely up to him, and we would not go so low as to make someone under our roof feel unsafe. Or coerced. I went downstairs to pull dinner together. It was fortunate I always made enough for two or three meals so I wouldn't have to cook every day after work. But it was a pretty ordinary dinner until the omega made his salad. I tended to lettuce and tomato, maybe cucumber, but the Brussels sprouts he found at the back of the fridge were a genius add, and he even made his own dressing.

I took a lot of pride in my baking, but as to the more savory aspects of food, I had to admit I lacked imagination. His ability to fill in those gaps felt like one more gift of Fate.

If he wanted us.

But during dinner, the tension between us grew thicker and more intense. My bear's presence was so close to the surface, I thought he might try to break out and be noticed. He wanted our mate to see what a big, strong alpha bear he was.

But I pushed him back down, promised him that when the time was right, we'd take him out to an appropriate place where our animals could get to know one another. If he'd fought me, I didn't think I'd have been able to stop him from making an appearance in the dining room. But, as I pointed out, We don't want him to think we don't have good control.

"Did I show you my room?" I asked, knowing I had not.

"No, I don't think you did." He cocked his head, giving me a winsome smile. "I'd love to see it."

My bear's roar rang in my ears as I scooped the bobcat shifter into my arms and marched toward the staircase. "Then I was remiss. I hope you like handmade quilts."

"They're my favorite thing," he murmured against my throat.

"Then you're in for a treat. My omega dad is a competition quilter," I teased.

"So you must have blue ribbons everywhere."

"You haven't seen the quilts."

I used my hip to swing the door open and carried him to the bed. The guest room bedding was store bought, but with Pops so excited to gift me his work, I didn't see any way to avoid putting them on my bed. And who ever saw them, but me?

Until today.

"Oh my." Pike sat up and looked around him. "This is...really something."

"Pops is somewhat color blind, and he doesn't let anyone help him choose."

“I bet they are nice and warm,” he said, stroking the top quilt. “And they’re very soft. But didn’t you say he was a competition quilter?”

“I didn’t say he won.”

“They’re already growing on me. The colors are a little unusual, but I can’t imagine a nicer way to spend a cold winter’s night than bundled under them with someone special.” He lifted his gaze to meet mine.

“I wouldn’t know. I’ve never brought anyone in here on a cold winter’s night or any other kind.” Not that I was a virgin, but once I moved back here and began the wait for my mate, I had no interest in anyone else.

“Really?”

“No.” I drew a deep breath, not sure how much I could say without sounding a little off, but then I knew I needed to. “When I returned here to open my business and bought and remodeled this house, I did it with a surety inside me that this was where I would meet my mate. I didn’t want any more one-night stands or relationships of convenience.”

“And you think I’m that person?” His breathing was fast. “Maybe your mate.”

If he was using “maybe,” that would have to be enough for now. I knew he was truly my mate, but it was up to him to come to that same conclusion in his own time. “Yes. And I want nothing more than to make love to you right now.”

“That’s what I want too.” He kicked off his shoes and socks, pulled his shirt over his head, and reached for his waistband. I stopped his hands.

“Let me, please.”

He moved his hands aside, and I replaced them with mine, opening the buttons one by one and urging him to lift his hips so I could get his pants past them. His boxers moved right along with them, and his cock sprang out stiff and hard and pointed at me.

Standing, I undressed myself as quickly as possible and lay down on the bed, gathering him into my arms. I kissed him again, trailing my lips from his, down his chest and belly to his cock. I was so hard, and I wanted inside him, but he deserved all the pleasure.

And the best way I knew how to do that was to close my lips around his hardness and suck him, lick him, and nibble. His scent and taste overwhelmed my senses, his pre-cum salty and tantalizing.

Pike buried his hands in my hair and held my head close to his body, his hips rocking, urging me closer. “So good, alpha, please don’t stop.”

I sucked him deeper, taking the tip into my throat and swallowing around it, afraid if I didn’t bring him quickly, I’d come right in the sheets. I’d never felt this way about anyone before, but since he was my mate, that made sense.

Then, he snarled, a very catlike sound, and poured his cum into my mouth. It overflowed my lips, copious and heady in flavor.

He was still shuddering when I rose up and positioned my cock at his hole. “You’re so slick, omega.”

“Take me, alpha. I need you inside me.”

There would be no marking tonight. No matter how much I wanted that, I couldn’t do it until I knew we’d be together long-term because once that happened it would be

heart-rending to part.

But even holding back that much, I'd never felt such homecoming as I found as I filled him with my cock, his slick coating me, his muscles ripping around me. I began to move, in and out, as slowly as I could. He cried out and begged me to go faster, and I was glad to comply, riding him, climbing higher and higher until I could no longer hold back and spilled into his warm, willing body.

It took no time for me to realize that holding back from marking was not going to save me from pain when he left. But I shoved that thought aside and enfolded him in my arms, my knot swelling along with my heart.

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I rolled over in a comfortable bed and, for a few seconds, forgot where I was. Hotels and motels didn't have plush mattresses, well, not the accommodations I could afford. And I certainly wasn't in my truck.

Where...oh.

The sun now shone on my face. I opened my eyes but pouted seeing that Maxwell was gone. I didn't hear him either. My body was deliciously sore in all the right places. I stretched, taking inventory as the memories from the night before flooded my mind. Maxwell had been so tender and sweet. He paid attention to my cues and the eye contact. Gods, seeing him above me, those brown eyes boring into my soul while he stroked inside me—it was more than sex.

Better than any sex I'd ever had, and it had been quite a while for me.

The entire long journey I'd promised myself to stay away from the temptation of having random sex with random people or any sex with any people for that matter. It didn't sound like a good time to me, and my bobcat craved something real—something deep and meaningful—aka, mating, not fucking.

My wait had been well rewarded and yet, the twinge of regret soured it all. I ignored it the best I could.

“Max?” I called out even though I couldn't hear any clues that he was still here. His scent lingered in the air around me and clung to my skin. No answer.

While last night had been a fantasy come true, we hadn't marked each other, and

there was no mention of it either.

I sat on the side of his huge bed, legs dangling, when reality came crashing down on top of me. We had mated. I'd given myself to him in ways I promised myself I wouldn't. I was on a journey to explore this world and myself in the process, not to settle down with the first alpha who looked my way.

I gripped the garish but cozy quilt that now hung mostly off the bed.

I'd ruined the plan.

"He's not just any alpha," I whispered to myself as I slipped from the bed and made my way to the bathroom. His en suite was bigger than the guest bath, obviously, but as I turned on the water, I saw two showerheads and a bench seat on either side. Maxwell had mentioned he had this house remodeled. Gods, he'd planned this bedroom and bathroom with a mate in mind. Not a mate like me, whose skin already tingled with the desire to move on, but a mate who would set up a den and make his house their home.

My bobcat snarled loudly in my head, scratching at the invisible barrier between us, begging me to fix my human thoughts to his.

Mate. Ours. Den. Mating. Cubs. Bear is mine.

Could I do this? Live here with my alpha? Set down roots? Make plans. Have a home—stay in one place?

I didn't have the answer to those questions yet.

After a long shower, I got dressed and finally decided to at least stay the day. Maxwell deserved someone to stick around for a bit.

Maybe a few days.

A week, tops.

Wearing jeans and a white T-shirt, I padded barefoot into the kitchen and looked around, hoping that Max had appeared while I showered. No such luck.

But there was a note on the table. My heart fluttered seeing his name signed at the bottom with a heart. Holding the note down was a tiny vase with one daisy inside it. Plucked from his garden.

Whenever you are ready, come to the coffee shop and have some breakfast with me. I had to duck out early to open the shop.

P.S. Last night was perfect.

The postscript squeezed my heart. I would have to handle Maxwell gently. Make my way from Oliver Creek in a way that didn't shatter his heart. He deserved better than someone who left without the proper goodbyes.

He deserved the world.

My stomach growled, letting me know that coffee and a pastry wouldn't quite cover my hunger. I put on some shoes and found the diner where I ordered two large breakfast sandwiches and pancakes, since I didn't know what he liked, and brought them into the coffee shop. His eyes widened when I came in and, though I had steeled myself from getting too deep with Maxwell, I found myself winking and kissing him on the cheek before bringing the food to the back.

This would be the hardest thing I'd ever done in my life.

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Leaving him in bed was one of the hardest things I'd ever done. He lay there so warm and relaxed, his head on the pillow where mine usually lay. He was on my side of the bed too, and I couldn't help but love that. But my line of work started early. By the time the commuters stopped in on their way to offices in the city, I needed to have fresh pastries, rich dark coffee, exquisite tea, and all the extras that made us worth stopping for—even if we didn't have a drive-thru.

I didn't want to wake him. We'd had a rather late night, and one that left me with some sore muscles. Pike, so far as I knew, had nowhere he had to be, and it gave me pleasure to imagine him there still taking his rest between my sheets.

But that didn't mean I didn't miss him. Or take up a habit I thought had ended when Pike walked in the door. The bell chimed every few seconds at our busiest time, and after darting to the front a dozen times, I gave up on whatever projects I had in the back, putting them off until later, and moved to the front to help with customers. Glen was good, but it still took the time it took to pull a shot.

Was he waking up now? Showering in the stall I had specially built for the day my mate came through the door and we'd be sharing the luxurious water flow. Everything he owned was either with him in my house or outside in his truck, and he had no nine-to-five job waiting for him to report. By nine o'clock or so, I was starting to wonder if I should call him. But then I remembered that not everyone woke up before the sun and determined to wait another hour or so before I called.

I tried not to think about the fact that he was a wanderer who made no commitments to me at all. We had a great night together, and maybe that was all he wanted?

Mate.

But it's up to him if he wants to accept that.

We should have marked him. My bear was a firm believer in mates. Not so much about choice to refuse that, apparently.

We couldn't—

The bell chimed, and I didn't need to look up from the milk I was steaming to know who was there. "Good morning, omega."

"Alpha. I know you invited me for breakfast, but I thought we might want something more substantial than a pastry." He gave me a wink and a kiss on the cheek before carrying the bag he held toward the back. His jeans cupped his luscious ass cheeks, and I wasn't the only alpha who noticed. The others were subject to my glare.

"Glen, I'm taking ten." We were between early morning commuters and those who came in on their breaks, so he should be all right.

"Take twenty," the sassy barista quipped. "I'll just be out here pulling shots and telling people you are not to be disturbed."

I started to reply then decided I didn't want to be disturbed. Instead, I followed Pike into the back room where he was unpacking a bag holding enough breakfast for four people. "Wow. You stopped at the diner."

"And I wasn't sure what you'd want, so I brought some choices."

"Usually I just have coffee, but suddenly I'm starving." I pulled up a couple of stools to the prep table and took a seat. "This was very thoughtful of you."

“Not at all. You provided dinner last night.”

“And you made that salad.”

He grinned. “Just chopping up some veggies. Mixing a few things to make a dressing.”

Glen came back with coffees for us and disappeared again, leaving with a couple of pancakes as a reward. Then we dug in, eating as if we had gotten a lot of exercise during the night. Which we had, I thought smugly.

“I need to eat at the diner more often,” I said, leaning back and letting out a sigh. “Or maybe not. My pants are tight at the waist after one breakfast.”

“You’re a big guy, but not in the least overweight,” he said. “And I can say that for sure because I had the full view last night.”

I tried not to preen, but I loved that he felt that way about my body.

Wait until he sees mine.

Soon, I promised my bear. As long as he stays.

I wanted to tell him to work here, move into my home, and never leave my sight, an idea my bear found quite perfect, but we couldn’t hold him hostage. Even if it was just for a short time, would he stay? Making some memories to carry me through?

He was such a bright light in the place, I could so easily see him working here. The customers would love him, and once he’d been in town for a bit and had a chance to meet the other business owners, he could be a handyman if that’s what he’d prefer. Or stay here, working side by side with me. But wouldn’t it be pushy to suggest that?

Glen and I had things in hand here for the most part, but we were getting busier, and I'd already planned to hire someone in a while.

The years of watching for my omega to come through the door, the half-life I'd been living... Would I be able to go back to that? I was up for anything he wanted to do, although I really hoped he wouldn't want us both to drive off into the sunset because I didn't have the skills he did that made his wandering life possible. Gathering my courage, I balled up the paper my sandwich had been wrapped in. "So, what happens now?"

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“What happens now?” Maxwell’s question punched me right in the gut. I don’t want to break this alpha’s heart. I don’t.

His eyes beg me for something I don’t think I have inside. He wants me to stay. He wants a life with me.

Gods, I should never have slept with him and yet, as the night before continued to pop into my memory, I didn’t ever want to forget. Maxwell holding me and taking me over and over will remain the best memory of all my time traveling—of all my time on this earth.

“Max,” I started, making sure to eye the coffee in front of me instead of him. If I looked up at him while saying this, I might not make it through. “I don’t really stay in one place for long.” The words were strange and sour on my tongue, not to mention my bobcat was pissed off and trying to scratch at my throat in a sad attempt at stopping me from saying what I needed to.

“I know,” he answered. “I knew who you were before we...before we mated.”

His despair poured over me through the bond we now had. People could say what they wanted to, but bonds were formed when two people gave their bodies to each other. Whether we would believe it or not. My animal had bonded with Maxwell’s bear the night before and perhaps before that.

“But I’m not leaving today, okay?” I tried to console him, no matter how pitiful my attempt. “I’ll stay around for a bit this time.”

His smile didn't reach his eyes. "That's good. We'll make the most of it."

I nodded. "We will. You're getting a bit busy, and I have to find some kind of work around here. Meet up for dinner? I can cook as well."

Maxwell stood along with me and placed a lingering kiss on my temple and ran his hand down the length of my arm. "We'll cook together, okay? Have you tried the winery? I don't know if they are in their busy season, but they might need some work done. Also, Paedon, the owner of the diner, was looking for an electrician, if you have any experience."

I nodded, not loving the alpha's faraway tone but knowing that I was the cause of it. Me and my wandering soul.

Gods, Maxwell deserved more.

I made my way through the town, following empty leads. Paedon had already hired someone for his electrical work. Macsen and Jett were not in the picking season, and the other winery jobs were out of my skill set. I didn't know a damned thing about making or storing wine.

A little bit of me wanted to find a job—something that would give me a reason to extend my stay. Gods, who was I kidding? Not myself. Certainly not my animal.

The reason to stay was right across the street in the Oliver Creek Brew.

Maxwell was my mate, whether I admitted it or not.

And something else had occurred to me. The country and the world, all of its sights and attractions, would always be there.

Fate, on the other hand, might not give me a second chance to find my true mate.

“You’re Pike, right?” An older man sat down next to me.

“I am. And you are?” I jutted my hand out to shake his, but he fisted his fabric grocery bag handles even tighter. No handshake. Okay.

“My name is Bernard. Everyone calls me Bernie, but I hate that name.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Bernard.” The bench we sat on was on the other side of the street from the coffee shop. My alpha was right inside. Serving coffee. Making people happy.

All while, I made him sad and broke his heart, even though it was the last thing I wanted.

Last night had shaken up what I thought of as a rock-solid plan for the foreseeable future. Continue traveling. See new things. Meet new people. Avoid what I’d conjured up in my head as a boring, hollow, pale life.

“Heard you were looking for some temp work,” Bernard said after a long pause.

“I am. You know of anything?”

Bernard tipped his chin up and pouted his lips. I assumed he was thinking about it or was about to propose a job when he then said, “Nope.”

Okay, then.

“Where do you work?” I asked the man who had pulled an apple from his bag and started to snack on it.

“At the Oliver Creek News. It’s less of a newspaper now and more about uploading stories to the internet. I miss the days of a physical newspaper, but the times have changed.” A bit of longing laced his tone.

“I used to be a paper boy. My first job, in fact.”

Bernard turned to me. “Is that right? If we still had those, I would hire you.”

“Appreciate that.”

My gaze had been drawn to the coffee shop where Max cleaned tables, taking care to wipe down the undersides and the chairs. I found myself enjoying the scene. Taking in my alpha. The alpha.

A sinking feeling gripped my chest. If I moved on, when I moved on, Maxwell would find someone else. An omega would take notice of his work ethic. The way he spoke kindly to his staff. How he looked at me brought me to the verge of orgasm.

He wouldn’t hesitate to make them a home. Have a family. Live the dream I’d so far thought was a nightmare.

“He’s yours?” Bernard asked.

“I think so.”

The older man chuckled. “Either he is or he isn’t. Trust me, Pike, life doesn’t give second chances, no matter how much we might or might not deserve them.” He stood and tipped his hat at me. “Have a good day. I’ll keep watch for some jobs.”

“Thank you.”

His words fueled my walk across the street but, once I was inside, I noticed the change in the atmosphere. I moved to the side when Glen, the barista who had first served me, ran out of the place with his jacket in one hand and his phone in the other.

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“What happened?” I rushed to the front when I heard him curse, something very unusual for him. Snark yes, swearing, no. He said his dads always taught him that it was lazy to curse when there were so many other words that would do a better job. “Glen?”

“I’m so sorry, boss.” Glen was talking to me but staring at his phone. “He...I...I have to go.”

“Go where? Did you need to leave early?”

“I need to go home, to my family, my pack. My alpha dad was in an accident and he...” A sob shook his shoulders. “They don’t know if he’s going to make it.”

Glen’s family were lumberjacks, and an accident in that line of work could mean any number of horrors up to and including death. I wanted to ask more questions, but getting him home was much more important.

“We need to get you on the first flight out.”

“No, I can drive.”

“Of course you can, but the sooner you get there, the sooner you can help out.” He was, above all, a helpful guy, and I hoped that would make him do it my way. The idea of him driving over a thousand miles while waiting for updates that might not be good news terrified me. I had my phone out already. “If you leave now and run home to pack a bag, we can get you on a direct flight. An airport car will pick you up in forty-five minutes, so you’d better get going.”

“Wait, I haven’t paid for anything. Don’t you need my card, or can I pay at the airport?” He was too pale and I was glad I ordered the car. He only lived a few streets over, so no driving to get home.

“It’s all paid for, and the boarding pass and car info have been sent to your email. Now go.” I got his jacket from the hook in the back room and shoved it in his arms. “And let me know how things are going when you get there.”

“I’ll pay you when I get back. I’m so sorry to leave you in the lurch like this. It’s busy and—”

“You will not pay me back. This is a bonus for all your hard work. Come back when you can, and know that I will appreciate you all the more.” I gave him a little push toward the door. “Now, go, and if you need anything or if your dads do, you call me right away.”

“You’ve already done too much.”

“Promise me you’ll call and not do without something you or your family need.” They weren’t broke at all, but in emergencies, things came up.

“Okay. I promise. Be back soon as I can.” And he was out the door.

Two seconds later, Pike came in. “Hey, what’s wrong with Glen? Did you fire him?”

“No, he’s a great employee. But a family emergency came up. He’s going to be away for a while.”

“Nothing too serious, I hope.”

“His family is in the timber industry and there was an accident, one of his dads, and

sounds pretty serious.” Human resources among shifters were different than humans. More a sharing is caring than a privacy situation, often.

“Oh no. Poor guy. Can I do anything to help? Drive him somewhere?”

“It’s all taken care of. He’ll be flying out in a few hours. But that is really nice of you to ask.”

“Wow. You never know when something like that is going to hit you. Makes a person appreciate when things are going well.”

“You’re right there. He’s a whiz as a barista and always willing to help with anything else that comes up. Also great with the customers and good company for me.”

“His coffee is delicious.” Pike shook his head slowly. “This must really be putting you in a bind. Do you have anyone else to take his place?”

“He’s it. I’ll put an ad in the local online newspaper, but it’s not going to be easy to get someone who knows what they’re doing. By the time they learn, I imagine Glen will be back.”

“Yeah, I can see that.”

“I’m not sure what else to do.” We had to stop talking long enough for me to make a couple of ices lattes for a pair of ladies who also wanted to know where Glen was. He had quite a fan club. I just told them he was away but would be back.

Once they left, three city workers stopped in for iced tea and some of our double-chocolate cookies to get them through the rest of the day, then an office worker who needed six different drinks for a meeting. They were one after another and while I could handle the orders, it would take up all my time and leave nothing for all the

other tasks I had to do. My brain was running a mile a minute, trying to think of an alternative.

“Anyway, Pike, I... What are you doing?”

“Bussing.” He filled one of the dish bins and set it aside to wipe down the table and chairs. “What did it look like?”

“Like bussing. Thanks.”

“It’s okay. I was just standing here, and you were running your ursine socks off.”

I chuckled at the image of a bear in socks. “I’m going to have to get used to it and hope Glen’s father heals quickly and he can get back here before I need to darn them, those socks I mean.”

He laughed politely at my bad joke. “There has to be a better way.”

“Well, I need a barista. I don’t suppose you’ve ever done that?”

“I’ve done everything.”

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Maxwell's excitement made me giddy. I'd be staying in Oliver Creek longer than expected because I wanted to help him. Training someone from scratch wouldn't be easy and would take time that Maxwell didn't have to spare in his busy shop.

He took such care in his business. Anyone could tell it was a labor of love.

More time with him would be a bonus, even if it threatened my will to keep moving along. But I could do it. How many places had I left before without a single thought.

We've never left our mate.

My bobcat had been fairly quiet, but happy. He'd almost purred when we lay in our mate's arms after making love. He was showing a different side now.

It's for the best.

His yowl rang in my ears.

"We should remain professional at work," Maxwell said when we got into his house. I had stopped in the living room, wondering how all of this would work. Would I sleep in the guest room? Would we still flirt? Have sex?

Maxwell had read my mind.

"And here?" I asked.

"Here?" he growled. He grabbed me by the hips and pushed me against the front

door. I wrapped my leg around his waist and I grabbed the hair at the back of his neck. “Here, you are mine. Here, you can do whatever you want to me and, with your permission, I will do some very nice things to you.”

“Please, alpha.”

My stomach chose that moment to interrupt us with a rumble.

“Have you eaten since breakfast?” he asked, pushing his hardness against me. “You have to take care of yourself, omega.”

How I wished he would’ve said omega mine. There was nothing I wanted more, no matter how hard my brain fought against that idea.

“No. I was busy.”

He leaned forward and kissed me until I whimpered, needing more. So much more.

“Come on, then. Want to help me cook?”

I nodded. Max’s kiss had left me breathless. On the outside, he seemed like a nice, polite person, not stepping out of line or ever being rude. And then, there was this Maxwell. The one he was at home. He was demanding and commanding, not in a disrespectful way but just the way my animal and I liked it.

Instead of a labor-intensive meal, we ended up making omelets with the leftover steak bites from the night before. On the way home, we’d picked up a warm baguette from the PBJ place, along with some freshly squeezed orange juice from the smoothie truck. This town was indeed a foodie paradise, and the local discount made it affordable.

We fed each other bites during the meal and once it was time for dessert, this time a quick peach cobbler, Max pulled me into his lap and insisted I take bites from him instead of feeding myself.

By the time the meal was done, I throbbed for him. Ached. Pulsed. I swore if he didn't touch me soon, I would explode right there on the spot.

"Hmm, you smell needy, omega. Tell me exactly what you need."

"First of all, to shower," I answered. "After walking around town all day, I probably don't smell the best."

With another growl, Max ran his nose up and down the side of my neck, inhaling. "You smell better than dessert to me, but I suppose I will comply. Come on."

He picked me up, cradling me to his chest. "Max, you can't carry me all the time."

"I can and I will. I don't know how much time we have together, omega. Let me have my fun."

Who could say no to that? Not me.

We stood in front of his shower, and I watched while he turned on the hot water. "I need to get my clothes," I said.

"No, you don't," he responded, winking.

"Okay."

Under the spray, the alpha washed me from head to toe, even shampooing my hair and massaging my scalp. I turned around and did the same for him. By the time the

soap was rinsed clean, we were both panting.

Maxwell moved to sit on the shower bench and crooked a finger, beckoning me closer. On shaking knees, I walked over and stood in front of him, my cock sticking out between us. He licked his lips, and I dragged in a raspy breath. One side of his mouth rose in a smile. “Tell me what you need, Pike. I want to give my omega what he wants.”

“Please,” I begged, not able to form the words.

“Please what? Please suck your cock until you shoot cum into the back of my throat?” My hardness bobbed, nodding its answer and mine. “It would be my pleasure.”

I bucked as he took me into his mouth, head to base. He lifted my knee and put my foot on the bench beside him, spreading my thighs farther apart as I grabbed the back of his head, needing more of me inside his hot, wet mouth.

“Max,” I whined.

He dug his fingers into my ass as I slammed my cock deeper into his throat. I looked down, watching his mouth devour me, and let out a loud roar, coming down his throat.

Pulling off of me with a pop, he swiped at his mouth. “You are gorgeous when you come, Pike. I need to be inside you. Here or the bed?”

“Here,” I laughed. “My legs aren’t currently working.”

“Always fantasized about having someone in the shower. You’re making all my dreams come true.” He stood and moved to stand behind me. “Are you slick for me,

omega?”

“Yes, alpha.”

He tested the theory, running his fingers up my slit from balls to back. “Gods, you are. Grab those handles.”

I reached for two handles that I hadn’t noticed before and held on tight when he slammed himself inside me and in only a few strokes called out my name while he came over and over again.

“Now we have to clean up again.”

By the end of the night, we were holding each other. We had one lamp on in the bedroom and, in this light, Max looked like a dark-haired angel. He stroked my hair and whispered sweet things.

“Tell me more about you, Pike. I want to know anything you are willing to share.”

He must’ve seen my hesitation.

“Baby, please,” he begged. “We shared our bodies—just give me a piece of you to hold onto.”

He was right. No matter what the future held for us, I could give him my all tonight.

“Let me tell you about traveling through Alaska.”

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It was so fun spending all day every day with Pike at work and then coming home to a whole different kind of fun. He has the coffee skills and the people skills, so it was just a matter of learning the Oliver Creek Brew-specific drinks and how we did things in general.

“So three pumps of chocolate, two of caramel for the turtle latte?” He had a cheat sheet but was trying to memorize everything. He’d picked that habit up when bartending in Seattle for a couple of months, and it made perfect sense to me. So, I was helping him practice.

“And for the topping?”

“Espresso whipped cream and a sprinkle of chopped, roasted pecans.” He finished the drink with a flourish. “Want to grade me?”

“All right.” I took the cup and examined the beverage. It was a brand-new item and wasn’t even on the official menu yet. “Looks good.” I sniffed. “Love the combination of scents.”

He was bouncing on his toes. “Taste?”

I sipped, feeling my lips turn up in a smile.

“Do you like it?”

Before I thought about it, I set the cup down and pulled him in for a big hug. “You’ve totally got this. That was the last one you needed to master.”

“You are the best teacher, alpha. I think you can guess that I like learning new things, and I did have some barista training but it was nothing like you gave me.”

I stepped back and picked up the cup again. “Go put this one on the chalk board as a special. Our customers are going to love it.”

Pike also had a gift for working with the chalk. Glen was good, but my omega was a true artist. As I watched, he drew a turtle with a latte on his back in one of our to-go cups. The turtle was heading down a road into the sunset.

“I think we need to celebrate your success,” I told him. “How about we let the animals out after work.”

“Great idea. My bobcat really needs to stretch, and it’s time they got to meet.”

“Exactly. I know just the place too.”

The rest of the day, Pike tried to tease me into telling him where we were going to go, but I held firm. He was the most adorable wheedler, and though he’d been so many places, a new one was just the thing to get him excited. In fact, when he was on his lunch break, I caught him on his phone looking at the surrounding area.

“Hey, you’re not trying to cheat, are you?”

“This isn’t even a bet. How can I be cheating. Did you say it was a park?”

“Nice try.”

I’d noticed that the more fun we were having, the more our customers enjoyed visiting us. Some people who had only been coming in once or twice a week were now closer to daily. Nothing against Glen because the customers loved him too, but

word had gotten out that we were a couple, and our romance drew people who liked that sort of thing. None of them knew that we could end at any point. It was also something I didn't want to think too much about.

But when we finished closing and headed out back to my car, Pike clung to my arm. "Come on, you can tell me now, right? We're going to be there in a few minutes."

"How do you know? We might be going hours away."

"Are we?"

"In the car, omega." I opened the door and helped him in. "Soon enough, we'll be there."

We drove out of town and past the vineyard. There were so many beautiful fields and forests out here, but I had a location in mind that I thought both our animals would enjoy. It was in the foothills that lay in front of the nearby mountain range, and we arrived there in about twenty minutes.

"Here we are." I went around and opened his door. "I've never run into anyone out here, so we can undress right at the car. Trailhead is just over there."

"Wow, it's beautiful." Pike lifted his nose and took in a deep breath. "Pine trees smell so amazing." He stood and began to disrobe, pausing only when he reached his boxers and I still had not moved. "Alpha?"

"Yes." I pulled my shirt over my head, my heart beating hard and my bear ready to tear through my clothes to take his fur. Aware of motion next to me, I turned to find that my omega had already shifted into the most adorable bobcat of all time. I wanted to take the time, to pet him and get to know him, but my bear was already past that point, and I dropped my pants and let him have his way.

There was a whole other kind of joy in being free to run in our fur, and the area I chose had a good trail up the side of the hill to an overlook above the lake where we could sprawl and just moon bathe.

Pike's cat was lithe and quick and graceful, making me wonder why he'd want old lumbering me until I saw the admiration in his golden eyes. We ran for hours, pleased to find that although our bodies were quite different, our speed was similar. At the overlook, we rested and watched the moon's reflection move across the lake. It was a different kind of intimacy from that shared by our human sides but every bit as valid and moving, and my bear's pleasure in our mate spread through all of me.

In the car on the way home, Pike rested his head on my shoulder and sighed. "That was one of the most beautiful places I've been. All those acres of pine forest surrounding the water, so dark and mysterious. What are you going to do to top that, alpha?"

I whispered a few ideas that had his cheeks bright red and my cock stiff and ready for him.

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“Your usual, Bernard?” I asked the older man who’d walked in at the same time every day since he and I had our chat on the bench. The day Glen rushed out of here with his emergency and I decided for the first time in a long time, to stay in one place—for a while.

According to Maxwell, Bernard had never graced the coffee shop with his presence before my talk with him.

That had been a month ago.

“Yes. Please, Pike.” He sat at his regular table, and I brought his coffee over in one of our old-style cups. He said if he’d known we served in real cups, he’d have come in long ago.

“Here you go. Anything newsworthy?” I asked. Sometimes, Bernard would give me the scoop. Oliver Creek headlines that no one else had seen yet. For someone so quiet, he sure was full of stories.

“I’ve got someone coming in to meet me. But you didn’t hear anything about a new food truck in town from me. It’s going to be...spicy for sure.”

I laughed and went back to the counter, cleaning up before the rush at seven thirty.

Maxwell walked up behind me and patted my ass before restocking the cups and sleeves. “You’re quiet this morning,” he said, giving me that sultry look over his shoulder. While we had decided to keep things professional here at work, we continued to ride that line. We touched each other in passing. Whispered naughty

things we would like to do later.

“I’m tired. Not sure why. I went to bed early last night.”

Maxwell put the cups aside and came to stand next to me. “I shouldn’t have woken you so early this morning,” he said, touching the tips of his fingers to mine.

I chuckled. “I thought I was the one who woke you up.”

Maxwell and I had been on a honeymoon that lasted longer than any in history, and I never wanted it to end.

He had me thinking things I had no business thinking. Like staying here. Being his omega not just in name but as his partner in this life. I was at odds with myself every second of every day.

My bobcat was less than pleased when my thoughts drifted to leaving, getting back on the road.

I’d even considered asking Maxwell if he would come with me, but he had this wonderful life here. His beautiful house. His thriving business. He was happy here.

I had no right to ask him to leave all of this behind.

“Do you need to go home for the day? Maybe after the rush? I have a cot at the house, in storage. I kept it from my old camping days. I could bring it and set it up in the office for you. Or are you hungry? Name whatever you want, and I’ll go...”

“Hey,” I said, putting my hand on his shoulder. “I’m okay. Just a little tired. And I know this great place that serves a killer double espresso.”

“Let me,” Max said, reaching for the tiny espresso cups. I sat down in the back, taking inventory of myself and the time I’d been here. Overthinking all of this had never plagued me like it did during my time with Maxwell in Oliver Creek.

“One of the new chocolate croissants for the sexiest omega in town,” he said, putting a plate in front of me.

“Thank you.” I lifted the croissant to my mouth, intending to take a bite but, when I did, I noticed something off. “Hey, we made this today?” I asked, sniffing the other sides, turning it this way and that, thinking that somehow I was mistaken. The baker he’d hired made the best pastries. Maxwell made some of them, but this new one was made by Dylan.

“I did. Is something wrong with it?” Maxwell took the croissant from the plate where I’d dropped it and instead of smelling, popped it into his mouth. “It’s delicious. Are you...” He put the back of his hand to my forehead. “You aren’t feverish.”

“Weird. I’m sure it’s great.” I sipped on the coffee instead and even noticed that my favorite double espresso had a more bitter taste than I remembered, even from the day before.

“And the coffee? It’s the same?” I stared at the alpha, going through things in my head. I usually had a cast-iron stomach, especially after eating such a variety of dishes while traveling, but, lately, things were hit or miss.

“It’s the same, omega.” He stood over me, now feeling the back of my neck. What he expected to feel from that, I didn’t know, but his touch soothed me somewhat, even though my stomach still revolted.

“I don’t know what’s going on, then,” I said. Maxwell looked more concerned than I felt. He remained tender and kind, ever loving even though the thought of me leaving

at a moment's notice loomed over our relationship. "Go on back to work, alpha." I rarely called him that in the shop, but this time it applied since he was so worried. "I'll be okay."

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My mate was looking paler than I liked, but he insisted he was fine. He had some other odd symptoms too, like suddenly turning off his favorite coffees and treats. He still continued to drink coffee, but he was avoiding the syrups and other flavors, basically anything sweetened. I couldn't be too upset that he was cutting sugar out of his life. Too much of a good thing could after all be unhealthful, but the sudden change seemed odd.

The more concerned I grew, the more insistence that it wasn't a big deal, maybe a bit of a tummy bug. But if so, it should be clearing up, and I saw no signs of that. I had already decided to give him one more day, when I walked into the back room for more mugs and found Pike coming out of the employee restroom looking at least 50 percent worse than he'd looked that morning.

"I'm taking you to the clinic."

"No, you're not." He wiped a shaky hand across his lips. "I'm fine. It's just a bug."

"First of all, shifters rarely ever get bugs," I told him authoritatively. "Second, it's hanging on too long, and even if it is a flu or other virus, we need to get you some kind of treatment."

We were well into this discussion when the bells above the door rang, and we were interrupted by Pike's friend Bernard.

"Good morning, gentleman. Have I walked in on something?" He took a seat at his favorite table, hands crossed in front of him. "I hope it's not something that went wrong with the brew?"

“Not at all.” Pike bustled to serve him while I continued to observe my omega. Although he was trying to act as if he felt okay, he did not. His color was bad and he had shadows under his eyes that could not be accounted for by late-night gymnastics. Oh, we still continued to have an active sex life—in fact, that was the only time he seemed himself. I just made sure we got to bed early so there was enough time for lovemaking and sleep.

My omega set the cup of coffee in front of Bernard and went to get him one of our newest cookies, a honey crisp inspired by my bear’s love of the sweet gooey stuff. When he returned, the older gentleman took a bite and smiled. After he chewed and swallowed, he sipped his coffee and sighed. “You certainly do have the best goodies, but maybe you should consider a ginger version.”

“That would be good,” I said, resting my elbow on the counter. “But what made you think of it?”

“Well, a lot of omegas like those ginger chew candies, claim they help with the symptoms.”

“The symptoms?” Another customer came in, and Pike went to help them, but I joined Bernard at his table. “You mean the stomach bug?”

He cocked his head, studying me as if I were completely dense. “No. Does he have a bug as well?”

Confusion filled my brain. What was this old man going on about? “As well as what?”

“Why, I remember when my omega was carrying our first son. He couldn’t keep down water until he found the ginger candies. Those and saltine crackers made all the difference, got him through the first trimester.”

“Oh.” Now I understood what he was trying to say. “You think he’s...no! Just an upset stomach, but ginger is good for that too.”

“Maxwell, I want you to take your blinders off and think. He looks like something the cat—and not his cat—dragged in. He has been sick to his stomach, and I saw his expression when he took a sip of a mocha. Tastes changing?”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean...it couldn’t, could it?” My heart pounded in my ears. “Do you really think so?”

“I think you should run down to the corner and buy a test, and I’m not leaving until you officially get the good news.” He waved me toward the door. “Go! I’m so excited for you two, and I want to be able to say I was there when you got the good news.”

With my omega still distracted, I took the oldster’s advice. At worst, we’d be ruling out one possible cause of Pike’s discomfort. Because we had to do something about it, and if he wasn’t pregnant, we really did need to see a healer soon.

When I came back in the door, Bernard was still sitting there, and my omega was just handing a cup to another older man who’d come in. He sat at the table next to Bernard’s and they exchanged a few comments about this and that. I couldn’t really hear them, and I was pretty much focused on my omega.

I grabbed him by the hand and tugged him into the back room. “Here.” I handed him the plain brown paper bag. “Go in the bathroom and pee on this and let me know the result.”

“What?” He held up the bag. “You want me to pee on a bag?”

“Bernard thinks you’re pregnant, so I bought a test.”

He reeled back. “You and Bernard have been discussing whether I’m pregnant? You never thought to come to me and just ask?”

“You’re right. Even if it was someone else who suggested it, I should have given you the respect you deserve and asked you.”

“Well?” He perched one hand on his hip.

“Omega, do you think you might be pregnant?”

Instead of answering, he turned and flounced into the restroom. Three minutes later, he came out a whole new shade of pale. He held up the stick and I couldn’t help cheering. Until I remembered that we did not have a permanent understanding.

Then I turned pale too.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:18 am

“What are you thinking about?” Maxwell asked on our walk to the healer. We held hands, taking our time. Before I could answer, he pulled us into the park and sat down. He cupped my face in his hands and leaned down to kiss my lips slowly. He had been extra loving since our talk the other day. “Tell me again.”

I rolled my eyes and laughed. “Which part?”

Honestly, I couldn’t blame Maxwell for needing reassurance about me or our relationship and I’d decided that night, after our talk, as I slept in his arms with his babe in my belly, I would never deny him any amount of words telling him that I was staying. I was his, and we were going nowhere without our alpha and daddy. He growled a bit, making my cock stir.

“You know what.” I sighed. My bear’s growls did things to me. “I love you and I’m never leaving your side, Maxwell. Now, come on, before we’re late.”

“Hmm, do we have to? It’s our only day off. We can stay in bed and I can make us some French toast...”

I pouted out my bottom lip. “Don’t you want to hear our little one’s heartbeat?”

Max cocked his head to the side. “They can hear it already?”

I nodded. “That’s what Quinn said when I made the appointment. He said I was far enough along for us to hear it.”

My alpha sighed. “Listen to the cub and then all the breakfast. You haven’t been

eating enough to grow a bear inside you.”

He took my hand once again, and we headed up the main road toward the clinic. There was only one in Oliver Creek, but I knew from the reviews that omegas and alphas and anyone else around came to Oliver Creek for their patient care. There was nowhere else I wanted to go for our prenatal care or even our entire family’s care after reading everything about him, not to mention Angelle’s glowing recommendation.

She’d already sent us a congratulations card with a baby gift and promised to crochet a blanket for our little one.

Inside the clinic, we sat on a love seat to wait while Quinn’s mate Aster got us signed in and took all the pertinent information. Even though it was early, the place was busy. “This way, you two.”

Aster led us to the back room while a small family came in and took our place right away. The room with the ultrasound machine was painted a pale green and had an array of healthy green plants along with soothing music filtering through the speakers above us.

“Are you nervous?” Maxwell asked even though he didn’t have to. As my mate and a bear in general, he could scent my anxiety, and I could certainly smell his.

“Yes. But I’m just excited to see if they are healthy. I want our family to be well.”

“They will be. Don’t you worry.” He squeezed my shoulders and placed a kiss on my temple. “We’re going to do everything we can to make sure you are both as well as can be.”

Gods, I couldn’t have asked for a more loving alpha. I’d never planned for him, but

he was more than my wildest dreams could ever make up.

A knock at the door startled us both and made us laugh. We really were new parents. New mates. New everything.

“Sorry to make you both jump. I’m Quinn. And you must be Pike.” He slipped his soft hand into mine, instantly making me feel calm and at home. The reviews were right. Quinn put us both at ease.

“Let’s sit down and talk a bit. Do you know the date of conception?”

The questions went on for a few minutes and, once they were done, it was time for the heartbeat check. Quinn came to stand beside me on the exam table and looked up at Maxwell. “Max, I’m going to touch your omega, but I promise you it’s only clinical, and I’m trying to do so to care for your young. Everyone clear on that?”

His words spilled out with such a level tone. Clearly this healer had met with some grumpy alphas.

“Yes. Of course,” Max answered and took my hand in his.

Quinn explained everything he did, getting a short nod from the both of us before proceeding. “I’m looking for the little one...” A speedy, whooshing sound filled the room. “There we are.”

Max took a few steps from the table. “Is that? It’s so fast.”

Quinn nodded. “Your cub has a good, strong heartbeat. Wee ones always have a speedier heartbeat than ours. Quinn pushed a few buttons on the screen. “I’ve emailed you a recording so you can listen anytime you want. Now, you can sit up, Pike. Max? Do you want to clean up your male?”

That snapped Max's attention back to me. I think hearing the heartbeat had shocked my alpha. He had stared into oblivion since the whooshing started. "Yes. Me. Yes."

Max helped me clean up, and I pulled down my shirt.

"Sit back down. Let's go over some things." We took a seat and waited for Quinn to continue. "Your weight is good. Baby's heartbeat sounds fantastic. I've emailed you some instructions for diet, and you can pick up some prenats right in the front. Aster will have them in your new parent pack, but you will have to purchase them after today. There is one thing in particular I would like to discuss with the both of you, considering your unique situation."

"Unique situation?" I asked.

"Yes," Quinn said, chuckling. "You both work and own a coffee shop and as your care provider, I'm going to ask that you cut out the caffeine as much as you can."

I didn't know why but the notion made me stand up. "I...are you serious?"

Maxwell and Quinn tried to cover their laughs and failed miserably. "No double espressos for you," my mate said.

Sitting down, I blew out a breath. "I can do it. For the baby. What else?"

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:18 am

The months flew by with all the things every other pregnant couple did. We shopped for baby clothes and furniture, went to healer appointments, bought books and watched videos about what we could expect to happen, and generally enjoyed the whole time.

Pike's morning sickness eased right on schedule, at the end of his first trimester, and his belly expanded to a big round bump that I loved to lay my head on and talk to the baby. One day, while I was doing just that, my omega stroked my hair and said, "Can you take me to the overlook again? Quinn said I shouldn't shift after this week, but I'd love to go up and see the lake one final time."

"Are you up for it?" The hike was not terribly strenuous, but Pike was not the most athletic pregnant omega. He preferred to lie around after work and cuddle on the sofa. "We could go somewhere easier?"

His lip thrust out in that adorable pout he wore when I tried to stop him from doing what he wanted. "I can do it. My cat wants to see the lake again. And it's going to be forever after that before we can go again."

"All right." I didn't want to thwart what would make him happy. "I'm in. Let's take a picnic and go on Monday." Since Glen had come back recently, his father having surprised everyone by not only surviving but fully recovering, we'd also taken on another part-time barista, and my mate and I had started taking off on Mondays and Tuesdays. A full weekend of sorts where we could do baby prep or run errands or generally relax. We'd spent most of those days on the aforementioned sofa, reading, snacking, and watching movies. I loved those days when it was just us, but if my omega wanted to try something a little more athletic, I was up for it. My bear was

more than up for it. He was ecstatic, and I hoped that meant he knew that everything would be all right.

The evening was cooler than last time, but the sky every bit as beautiful overhead, and as we shifted and started up the trail, I was very glad to be here. Maybe we needed to get away more, even after the baby came. My business was successful enough to give us that free time.

Pike was remarkably graceful as he padded along, his paws light on the earth. I followed, letting him set the pace. He was not as energetic as last time we were here, which I would have expected, but as long as he seemed all right, I wasn't going to try to slow him down. This would be the last time his cat was out for a while, and he'd want to enjoy it.

The trail wound higher and higher, until finally we found ourselves at that magical overlook. The full moon's enchantment was always special to shifters, and as we arrived at the spot, I shifted back to two-legged, followed by my mate. We hadn't seen a living soul the whole time, and no other cars were parked at the trailhead, so I felt comfortable gathering him to me and kissing him. I eased him down to the ground onto a patch of soft grass and drove inside him, craving the connection. On his part, he thrashed his head from side to side and offered growls of encouragement.

An urgency compelled me to close my fist around his cock, jerking him in rhythm with my fucking, craving us both to come before I completed something that had been put off long enough. He was tight, as always, and I had to adjust my angle to get balls deep, but as his cum splashed onto my chest, and mine filled him, I bent and sank my fangs into the side of his neck, marking him. Finally. Completing something that I'd wanted forever. He palmed my head, holding me there and panting, shivering and whimpering in reaction. My knot swelled, connecting us in another way.

I held him close until my knot subsided then kissed him again and stood, bringing

him up with me to stand and look down at the full moon's reflection on the dark waters of the lake. A cool breeze came up too soon, and we had to shift back into our fur and head back for the car. "I'm so glad you suggested this, omega," I told him when we were in our skins, dressed, and headed back for the house. "Would you like to take a babymoon before they come?"

"I'd like that very much."

"Then that's what we will do."

I knew just the place where we could go and spend a few days just being us before us became three. My omega was so grateful for the little things, but I wanted him to have everything, all his dreams. He loved travel, so even though we were tied down by the business and soon by our family, I would make sure to find ways to incorporate travel into our life together.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:18 am

Maxwell must've asked me ten thousand times if I was sure I didn't want to stay another night. I didn't, and I thought I was more surprised than he was by a smidge.

"Oliver Creek," he said as we passed the welcome sign. I remembered getting out of the truck and noticing how lovely the sign was. If I knew what awaited me in this bustling little town, I would've kept on going—speeding toward what Fate had in mind for me.

"I'm never moving," I said, laughing. Never thought I'd hear myself say those words.

"We can if you like, but not without us." Maxwell reached across the car and splayed his large hand over my belly. It was so big—practically its own entity.

"I can't wait to bring our little one on all kinds of trips. Hiking and camping and everywhere," I said, letting my hand wave in and out of the wind as we drove to our home.

"It's going to be an adventure, that much is for sure. I hope you enjoyed the weekend. I wanted to get you out before the two of us are three."

"The falls were incredible. And that little wagon-house we stayed in—just perfect, alpha. Thank you again. I hope you had a good time as well."

He chuckled. "I think we know I had a good time."

We had lots of good times in the secluded area. My pregnancy hormones had kicked up my sexual appetite to an all-time high and my alpha made sure that each spike was

satisfied.

“Did you want to stop by the shop? Make sure everything is fine? I know you do.”

Maxwell kept on top of everything for the Oliver Creek Brew. He was such a hard worker and made sure we and our business were taken care of. We’d decided that after our young was born, I would only work part-time. I wanted to be present for all the first things.

We got home shortly after seeing that the shop was fine and Glen was closing up again. Once the bags were brought in, I collapsed onto the couch. Everything made me tired lately and even driving home after a short trip was included.

“Give me those feet,” Maxwell said, sitting on the couch.

“All you do is take care of me lately,” I whined.

“Turns out, that’s all I want to do lately. It’s a win-win.” He took my feet in his lap but it was short-lived.

“Wait, I have to pee again.” I stood up with his help but as soon as I did, I heard a splash on our wood floors. “Please tell me I didn’t just pee my pants. It’s the only pregnancy symptom I’ve avoided.”

“Okay, omega mine. Listen to me. That wasn’t pee. Your water just broke.”

I began to shake inside until he put his hand on my shoulder. “I’m here. Let’s breathe. Think slow. Just like Quinn and Aster taught us.”

Quinn and Aster also taught birthing classes and Max had insisted we take them.

“We can do this,” I repeated. “I can do this.”

“Yes. Let me help you into the shower and I’m calling Quinn. Deep breaths. I love you.”

“I love you too.” I forced a smile. “Let’s have a baby.”

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:18 am

Surely it couldn't be this fast or this easy? Quinn was on the way, since my omega's birthing plan involved home birth. I'd been very worried about that, but every checkup showed no issues, and our healer gave us the go-ahead. He'd warned that if there were any issues at all, we'd have to be transferred to the clinic immediately, but he anticipated none.

"Most shifters have smooth labors," he said. "And if they don't, there are usually warning signs."

Of which there were none.

Which made the fact that I was shaking to my core an overreaction. Pike's pains were a few minutes apart, and he was walking around, hoping to bring baby sooner. Throughout his pregnancy, he'd been a rock star with self-care. Eating well, giving up those double espressos he loved, and getting exercise. We hadn't done any scans beyond the heartbeat because there were no obvious problems and Quinn did not insist on them. Many shifters did not do them.

By the time our healer arrived, Pike had retreated to the bed to rest between pains. They were coming so fast, those resting moments were negligible, and I was very stressed.

"Hello, Daddies," he said, entering the bedroom. "I let myself in. I hope that was all right?"

"Of course." I turned from Pike to greet him. "I think it's going to be very soon."

“Well, let’s check on that, shall we?” Quinn gently nudged me aside. “Just give us a little space here to see...oh yes. You’re right. There’s a little head well into the birth canal and you are all ready, Pike. So I need you to lie back and relax for a minute. Next contraction, it will be time to push.”

To push. I’d known he was close, but pushing meant our child would be here any minute. I moved up to take Pike’s hand, ready to lend support.

“No.”

I looked down at my omega. “No?”

“I’m not ready to be a father. We’re going to have to wait for a while. Maybe another month.” I studied his face, looking for signs of joking, but he seemed to be fully serious.

“Mate?” I stroked the back of his hand with my thumb. “I don’t think it works that way.”

“But I have so much more to learn. Books I haven’t gotten to yet. No, the baby will just have to stay there until I’m more qualified.”

Shocked and confused, I met Quinn’s gaze, but he seemed unfazed. “Pike?” he said, “The fact that you feel that way just means you’re going to be a terrific daddy. The ones who think they know everything are the problems. You will be learning every day how to do this job. Both of you will. Now, the contraction is coming. Push.”

“No, I...ahhhh.” His fingers bit into my hand, but I didn’t care. “I can’t stop them. They want to be born.”

“Yes,” I soothed, taking a page from Quinn’s book. “The baby wants to come out and

meet us. Don't you want to meet them?"

"But what if I'm awful at it? What if they regret choosing me?"

"Oh, omega, that's never going to happen. You're going to be the best daddy ever, and I will do my best to keep up with you. You've already read so many books, seen all the videos, and you're ready."

"You'd both better be," Quinn said. "Because here they come."

Pike screamed, bore down, and on the third push, our baby slid into the healer's waiting hands. Our son. Anders. The name we'd picked for a boy. He was bright red and angry at being thrust into the cold world, and I feared he knew about my lack of parenting skills. Never did I think my mate would be anything less than an amazing father, but I doubted I would be as good as him. When Quinn handed me the wrapped-up bundle, I mentally apologized for all the mistakes I was sure I'd make.

But when I looked down into that beautiful red little face who already had the features of his handsome bobcat daddy, I was in love. I might make those mistakes, but it wouldn't be for lack of trying to do better. He had chosen us, and who was I to criticize our son's choices.

He'd make many, and we'd support them, guiding him through babyhood and childhood and all that meant. Sure, I was scared but also so excited to see who this little being would become. Who our son would become.

"Welcome, Anders," I whispered. "Your daddy and I love you so much." I carried him to the head of the bed and laid him on Pike's chest. "Here he is." I wasn't sure which of them I was saying that to. Only that I adored both of them more than I'd known was possible. My mate and my son.

“I love you.” That covered everything.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:18 am

Glen had come back just in time to resume his job. I was able to take Pike on one small road trip that ended in an unexpected and incredible way.

We got Anders only hours after arriving home.

Pike sprawled on our bed, taking a nap while Anders did. He protested at first, wanting to watch our little one sleep and put his finger under his nose every few seconds to test his breathing but, after a talk from me and Quinn, he decided napping was for the best.

My omega astonished me day by day. I'd been concerned when he decided to stay with me, thinking that one day he would resent the choice and me in the process, but once my mate decided something, there was no telling him otherwise.

He never mentioned missing traveling or wanting to leave—only talked about adventures we would take together or with our little family.

I still had a few weeks left on paternity leave so while my mate and my son rested, this alpha went to work on dishes, and laundry. Our little one went through more laundry than this whole town combined, I would bet.

I breathed out a sigh of relief as I shut the dishwasher and sat down with a cup of coffee. Poor Pike. He wanted coffee so badly after giving birth until Quinn informed him that caffeine crossed through his milk. He could have some but not a lot.

Pike decided right then and there that he wouldn't touch it until our little one was weaned. He took our family's health to heart, and I loved him for it.

I'd taken my first sip when a knock at the door startled me. I stopped, cup in my hand, wondering who it could be and how much they valued their lives considering we had a sleeping infant.

If they woke up either my babe or my omega, it had better be a life-threatening emergency.

"Hello?" I whispered, opening the door as quietly as possible.

No one was there. Instead, a gorgeous bouquet of flowers had been placed on a table near the entrance along with a teddy bear. I reached for the bouquet and took the envelope from the stick in the middle.

"Who could this be from?" I asked myself.

Inside the card was a cute hedgehog on a pale blue card.

Congratulations Maxwell and Pike. Anders, welcome to Oliver Creek.

With blessings, Sweet Nothings Flowers

I knew my trips to town had been limited after Anders, but when did Oliver Creek get a flower shop?

"What is it?" Pike asked from behind me. As I turned with the arrangement in hand, he gasped. "You got those for me?"

"I wish I could say yes but the card said from the flower shop," I answered, inspecting the flowers to try to find more clues.

"Since when does Oliver Creek have a flower shop?"

My thoughts exactly.

“I don’t know. We’ll have to go visit soon. Or maybe it’s in the next town over. I’m not sure. I thought you were taking a nap. Did I wake you?”

“No,” he said, grabbing my hand. “I wanted some time alone with you.”

“It’s too early,” I growled. Of course, I wanted my mate. I always would but he was still healing from the birth and that took precedence over our lusty needs.

“Not that. I mean, yes, I want that, but let’s sit on the couch and watch a movie. I want you to hold me. That’s all. I feel like a vending machine lately.”

I chuckled. “A milk vending machine?”

Pike sighed and lifted onto his toes to kiss me. “Yes.”

“Well, that’s no good. Let your alpha remind you that you’re so much more.”