



# Fur-Ever Home (Love Sync Mates Season Two)

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** This unlikely alpha and omega pair are crash-landing into love!

Benjamin

I've had it with arrogant alphas who monopolize my time and act like they're the best thing to happen to omegas like me. I do not need some weirdo following me from NYC all the way home to LA. Connor insists we're mates and gives outrageous excuses for his strange behavior. When he loses his pants in an airport bathroom, he claims he accidentally shifted into a wolf!

A string of bad weather and worse luck cloud our cross-country trip, bringing us closer together. Maybe he isn't so bad, after all.

My family is the true test. If my overbearing alpha siblings don't send him packing, he might find his fur-ever home with me.

**Total Pages (Source):** 25

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## BENJAMIN

This was fine, I told myself. It was merely a minor delay between New Haven and LaGuardia. When we saw the weather forecast during our morning break, we left the fiscal planning conference early, before the last networking lunch and keynote speaker. We had plenty of time to make it to the airport before our flights left.

I glanced at my fitness tracker for the time, the third peek in five minutes. We'd been staring at the same set of brake lights from the backseat of our hired car for twice that long. We couldn't see much else in the driving snow.

My colleague Brian Avery, CFO of Barclay Foods, was on a nonstop flight from LaGuardia to LAX. The lucky bastard probably told his assistant to book him a seat in first class, too.

As the manager of finance, I didn't qualify for nonstop or first class. My flight hopped all over the country. First, it dipped down to Atlanta to avoid the storm, then back up to Denver with the hope the huge system building behind it wouldn't be as bad. Finally, I would fly into the Orange County Airport, a half-hour drive from my little two-bedroom bungalow in Laguna Niguel. I might fall into my bed after midnight tonight if I were lucky, but with the time difference and the long layovers, it would feel like I'd been up for two days straight.

To make matters worse, I was supposed to work tomorrow, a Saturday, to offset my travel hours, and I still needed a present for my nephew's birthday party on Sunday.

Jeffrey wanted a specific toy, one in scarce supply and fierce demand since before Christmas. Now, it was the middle of March, and they were still impossible to find.

I'd wanted to check F.A.O. Schwartz, since they had all the coolest toys, but that had been before the snow delay. We'd be lucky to make our flights on time without any detours into the city. Airport gift stores were my last hope, and I'd already harangued the store clerks when I arrived four days ago.

My phone pinged with a text from my omega dad. "How's the weather?"

Another glance at my watch told me his morning alarm had gone off mere moments ago, thanks to the three-hour time difference. He worried about all four of us kids, but I had given him most of his early gray hairs.

Unlike him, I was a stubborn and willful omega, determined to make it on my own in the business world before I settled down, preferably with a beta. The alphas I'd met outside my own family were assholes.

My brothers were mated alphas. My sister was an alpha, too, and her mate was the sweetest beta I'd ever met.

Then there was me. Instead of working at the bank with the rest of my family, I'd chosen to take a job at Barclay Foods. Instead of marrying the first alpha who had proposed, I'd buried myself in my work and rejected all social entanglements.

My family would probably try to set me up with at least three alphas at my nephew's birthday party. I would politely decline, at first. The more insistent they became, the less I cared about decorum.

I sucked in a deep breath and cleared all thoughts of alphas from my mind. I needed to get home and find Jeffrey's birthday present before I could ruminate on imaginary

worst-case scenarios.

To take my mind off the future, I responded to my dad's text. "Weather's awful." I snapped a picture of the whiteout and sent it along.

"No cell phones." Brian glared at me over the top of his tablet, his grey eyes cold in his overly tan face. He looked at least ten years older than he was, thanks to long afternoons at the beach when he was supposed to be at work. From the way the window behind him reflected flashes between videos, I guessed he was catching up on the screen time he'd missed during our morning session.

"The conference is over," I reminded him with a forced grin. I withheld my comments on his double standard. That would only lead to an uncomfortable conversation with Human Resources on Monday morning.

"This is going in my report," he muttered under his breath. His reports went directly to our boss. I could avoid HR another week, at least.

As the CFO of finance, Brian got paid more than I did, but he was not my boss. I was the finance department manager, and we both reported to the CEO, Mr. Danbury. Brian could bitch about whatever he wanted in his report, but he wasn't my boss, and his word didn't matter.

I could fail on my own, thank you very much. It had taken me three weeks to catch up from the last impromptu conference, and here I was, assigned to another one. Mr. Danbury had asked me to network with other manufacturing planners. The only ones interested in me were horny alphas, and my surly refusals made for poor first impressions.

On top of all that, I was falling behind on my duties as assigned once again, thanks to the travel week. I would do my best to complete my most delinquent assignments

tomorrow, but I already worked sixty-hour weeks. When was I supposed to find time to catch up?

My phone buzzed with another text from my dad. "Safe travels!"

At this point, I could only hope.

Finally, we arrived at the airport after another slog through slushy frontage roads to our terminal. We had the same carrier but different flights. When we got out, Brian left me to tip our Keffiyeh-wearing driver and the young Black man who had removed our bags from the trunk.

Just when I thought Brian couldn't be more annoying, he insisted I help him drag his giant checked bag to his gate once we were through security.

"I don't have time to wait for a luggage cart," he said. "My plane leaves in thirty minutes!"

My plane left in forty-five, and fuck this entitled beta for thinking I should carry his gigantic checked bag with enough clothes in it for two weeks. I'd gotten by with a simple carry-on for the week, and did I ask anyone to carry it for me? No, Sir.

Instead of standing up for myself, I extended both bags' handles so they would roll behind me and followed Brian through the airport. A few feet before the entrance to the gate, he swiveled on his heel and tugged his suitcase from my grip. "I'll take it from here."

He slipped the handle of his carry-on, the one he'd insisted was too big to fit on top of the larger bag, through the handle and grabbed them both with his right hand. They fit together perfectly, as I knew they would. Instead of kicking his bag as it rolled past, I silently balled my hands into fists and watched him walk away.

His bag had other ideas. It rocked from side to side on its wheels before tipping over and spilling the contents of the smaller bag. Several people waiting at the gate turned to stare at him while he scooped up his chewing gum, eyeliner, and e-reader before zipping it closed.

He righted the larger suitcase onto its wheels, only to have the same thing happen after two more steps. A group of five young Asian men in matching black suits and eyeliner turned from the front desk, where they'd been talking to the gate agent, to glare at him. They looked like a boy band to me. In his cheap suit and matching makeup, Brian looked like a superfan.

Brian turned back to his bag, and I noticed the flush in his cheeks. That motherfucker had been trying to impress the Asian men. He must have recognized them. I turned toward my gate with a sense of satisfaction at his embarrassment.

I glanced at my tracker for the time. Shit. In less than twenty minutes, I had to make it to the other end of the terminal and onto my plane. I did what anyone would do. I ran.

... right into the bulkiest alpha I'd ever seen.

## Page 2

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CONNOR

"No, I don't want to buy an NFT of the United States constitution," the woman sitting beside me at the bar said.

"How about the USS Constitution? I've got NFTs of that, too!"

"No."

"I recognize that tone," I said. "You don't realize the potential! NFTs are an investment for your future, your kids' futures."

She rolled her eyes, picked up her drink, and moved to the only vacant seat at the bar, three seats from me.

"Better luck next time," Derek said. He had the easier job on this trip, selling cryptocurrency wallets. All we had to do was corner the single alphas and betas and share the benefits of squirreling away hundreds of dollars until they became thousands of dollars. Boom, sale, sign-up, and twenty percent commission for us.

I pulled up a picture of the USS Constitution on my phone. It had a rainbow patina and a beautiful twilight sky in the background. "Maybe I should have led with this," I said. "It's beautiful, don't you think?"

"Maybe you should buy it." He winked.

"Maybe I will." Except I knew the truth. The non-fungible token wasn't worth a penny. It certainly wasn't worth the twenty dollars I'd been asking from that woman.

"That's not even the Constitution." Derek pointed at the hull. "It's the Iowa. Besides, sun's going down over the ocean, so it's on the west coast."

"How do you know? The sun could be rising."

He laughed. "The title of the NFT is literally "'Sunset over the Iowa.'"

I clicked my phone screen off and shoved it back into my fancy black leather fanny pack with a huff.

"You look fucking ridiculous," Derek teased as I zipped the pack shut.

"I told you it would be harder for me to make a sale at the airport. I travel light."

Derek shook his head. "You're a mess. That suit looks like you slept in it. And no tailored cut in the world will help you pull off a fanny pack."

"It's practical!" I grinned as he sipped his Long Island Iced Tea. "Do you know how many omegas I've coaxed into bed with this thing? They love how parental it looks."

He paused mid-sip and choked. A little dribble of tea came out of his nose.

I unzipped my pack, rooted around for the travel tissues I kept in there, and handed him one. "See?"

"Parental," he huffed between bouts of coughing. "You are a hoot, Con. It's too bad—" He cut himself off with a hard swallow and took a long drink from his tall glass.



"Too bad, what?"

He sighed. "You'll find out when we get back to Phoenix, anyway. The boss is downsizing. He said he gave me the crypto assignment because he wanted me to win."

"This was a ... a competition?" I'd been helping Derek with his sales, thinking I was doing it for our employer. Derek was the newest hire on the team, while I'd been working with Hank since the beginning. Hell, adding cryptocurrency to our NFT business had been my idea!

The sinking pit of disappointment in my gut was nothing new. I'd felt the same way when I'd been kicked out of my wolf pack. When I'd sided with an omega over the alpha pack leader, even my blood family disowned me. All for an omega who wanted a year to find his fated mate before being forced to mate with me.

I'd been on my own ever since.

Life had gotten easier since Hank and I met five years ago. First, we'd sold a phone app to a venture capitalist firm, and then we'd used the money to buy NFT software to manufacture our own tokens. Crypto was our big moneymaker, though. On top of our commissions, we were making more money than we spent on things like private jets and European vacations. Hank was a genius with money!

I was just the chump who had trained all our salespeople to do what I do. Being dumped by my friends felt worse than being abandoned by my family. "He swore everything was fine when we left."

"Come on, Connor, it's not so bad. You'll land on your feet, like Hank said."

My eyes stung from the compliment, and I sniffled. Instead of defeat, something

delightful caught my attention. I sniffed again and zipped my fanny pack shut so nothing would spill.

"Gotta run!" I patted Derek's shoulder and hopped from my stool, almost knocking it over in my haste. "I think I smell my fated mate!"

The other shifters in the bar and the outer lounge must have heard my declaration. Applause broke out around me as I made my way to the restaurant's entrance to the airport proper. I gave a slight bow before stepping into the crowd scrambling for their gates. Weather delays always made the airports hectic, and harried folks did not good sales make.

I sniffed again, trying to determine the direction of the scrumptious omega who had captured my full attention and completely distracted me from losing my job.

Well. Almost. Hank's callous behavior still hurt, and hearing about it from Derek the newbie was even worse.

Fuck. I couldn't tell which direction he'd gone. I raised my nose in the air and turned a full circle, hoping my wolf nose would find him.

"Oof." Something hard and person-sized ran right into my back.

"Sorry," I said, "I'm looking for?—"

"You big oaf! Get out of my way!"

I turned around to face the most gorgeous human omega I had ever seen in my entire life. He had olive-toned skin, dark hair, and a smoldering brown-eyed glare as he knocked the handle of his aquamarine rolling bag against my fanny pack. "Move! I'm going to miss my flight!"

"What gate?" I asked.

"Fifty-nine."

The one halfway across the terminal. I grabbed the handle of his bag, but he refused to let it go. We both ended up dragging it behind us as we walked to the nearest moving walkway.

"If I miss my flight because you won't let go of my bag ..."

"How much time do you have?" I asked.

"Twenty minutes."

"That's plenty of time."

I helped him onto the walkway and kept walking. He balked at first, almost falling flat on his face, but then he kept up with me as I weaved through the folks standing still or meandering along like tourists. Nothing against tourists, but I had a mission. I would get my human omega to his plane, and then I would do whatever I could to go along with him. Hell, I'd hitch a ride in the cargo hold if I had to. I was not letting him get away until he knew what he was to me.

When we reached gate fifty-nine, he relaxed a little. "Thank you for helping me ... I don't even know your name."

I held my hand out. "Connor McKeeler, New Money International, the top provider for all your NFT and cryptocurrency needs."

He blinked. "That would be zero." He shoved his hand in mine. "Benjamin Satler, Financial Manager at Barclay Foods. Nice to meet you, Connor."

I kept shaking his hand, hoping his scent imprinted on me from such a small touch.

He cleared his throat. "Connor."

"What?"

"Give me my hand back."

"Oh." I let him go, and he tugged his bag over to the line already boarding the plane. I approached the gate agent's desk. "I need to get on this plane. How do I do that?"

The woman behind the counter stared at me blankly. "What? You can't be in here without a ticket."

"I was flying to Phoenix, but now I want to go to ... wherever this is going."

"Atlanta," she said.

"Cool. I've been there plenty. What can you do for me?"

She shook her head, but she pulled up the available seats on her console. "We've got two seats in First Class. We planned to bump a person from business class, but?—"

"I'll take them both."

"Both?" She stared at me blankly.

"I like to stretch my legs," I said. I stretched my arms over my head and looked as intimidating as I could, which was probably more like a cuddly wolf pup waking from a nap. "And I need to book a connecting flight to LA." I'd driven past the giant Barclay Foods building often enough. It was right by the coast highway between San

Diego and Los Angeles. I hoped my mate worked there, not at some subsidiary. Financial Manager sounded important enough to be on the main campus.

"There's no connecting flight. There's a flight to Denver still open, and one seat on a flight from there to Orange County airport."

"Close enough. I'll take it."

She rolled her eyes and gave me an amount around a full month's salary. I suppressed a grin and handed her my business credit card. Hank could make one final purchase for me, if it meant holding onto my fated mate.

## Page 3

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BENJAMIN

After all the rush, the plane sat on the tarmac for ten minutes while we waited for someone in first class to board. They took their sweet time, too. From my aisle seat, I couldn't see the person who finally boarded over the beta flight attendant as he walked past me.

I almost felt bad for the jerk who had kept us waiting when the beta said, "Sorry, Mr. McKeeler. We couldn't get your bags off the flight to Phoenix. You can pick them up tomorrow at the Orange County airport."

Wait. Someone else was headed to Orange County with me? It wasn't unusual for folks between San Diego and Los Angeles to use the smaller airport, but I had two layovers before then. Why would anyone else have wanted those flights?

Then, the beta flight attendant made his way to me. "Mr. Satler, you've been bumped to first class."

"I'm sorry, what?" I must have misheard.

"Do you need me to grab a bag for you?"

"No." I pulled my carry-on from beneath the seat in front of me. I glanced at the two women in my row, hoping they could explain the strange turn of events. They only smiled back at me, and the one closest to me waved her arms in a shooing motion.

"Maybe it's an admirer," she said.

Fuck, I hoped not. I didn't need an alpha pining for me on top of everything else.

I clutched my bag to my chest and followed the flight attendant to the cushy seat beyond the curtain.

I groaned when I saw him. Connor. The guy who had helped me through the airport. The giant blond alpha with huge blue eyes and a sweet dimpled smile that would make most omegas swoon.

Not this omega. "What are you doing here?" I asked.

"Stalking you." He didn't even try to deny it.

The attendant took my bag from me and tucked it into the overhead bin. I felt naked without it. I tugged at my suit jacket and sank into the empty seat with a sigh.

"Can't you smell it?"

This alpha did not know how to take no for an answer. I could tell from his wide-open eyes and expectant smile.

Well, fuck him. I was full of, "No."

"No?" He frowned. Then he sniffed at his armpits. With a tug, he pulled off his tie, unbuttoned his dress shirt until I could see a tuft of light blond chest hair in the V opening, and then removed his jacket. He draped it over the fanny pack beneath the seat before him.

Then he practically shoved his armpit in my face. "How about now?"

I coughed and tried to move away from him, but I'd already fastened my seatbelt for takeoff.

"Get away from me," I growled.

"But we're ... you really can't smell it?"

From the moment I'd walked through a cloud of flowery fragrance in coach, my sinuses had been acting up. Through my stuffy nose, Connor smelled like an alpha. I didn't know what he wanted me to say, so I focused on what I could see. He had a swipe of mustard across his massive pec. There were a few unidentifiable crumbs near the opening of his breast pocket. And the most offensive thing about him was my first line of attack. "Maybe if you shove your fanny pack in my face, I'll be able to smell it. It sits closer to your balls, after all."

He didn't miss a beat. He leaned over and picked it up. "You think so?" Instead of shoving it in my face, he offered it to me with a shrug.

"No, I don't think so! Why do you even have that thing?"

"It's my carry-on," he said.

Damn. And I thought I traveled light. Granted, I didn't check a bag, and his was on its way to Phoenix.

"Sir, please secure your bag under the seat until the seatbelt sign is turned off." The flight attendant crossed his arms over his chest as he glared at both of us.

"Sniff it," he whispered. As he leaned forward, he shoved it in my face.

It was a nicer bag than I'd first thought. Black leather. Well sewn with a side flap like



a messenger bag. I sniffed, but all I could smell was leather with a hint of alpha.

He frowned when I shrugged and leaned back. The first-class seat felt more like a recliner. I liked it a little too much. I could sleep in a chair like this. I needed it after a rough week of paper-thin hotel walls.

This plane had the best pillows. Nice, squishy, warm pillows.

Warm. Pillows.

I opened my eyes to find a powder-blue cushion with a swirl of yellow in my line of sight. Mustard yellow. Beneath the stain, there was now a darker blue drool spot.

I sat up with a yelp. "Oh my God, I'm so sorry!"

"For what?" Connor blinked at me. "You looked so peaceful." He brushed a strand of hair behind my ear. "Cute."

"I am not cute."

"That look right there? So cute."

My hands ached from the futile effort of bunching them into fists. I couldn't punch an alpha on a plane. I'd end up on the no-fly list.

"Why are you going to Orange County?" I asked instead.

"It was as close to Barclay Foods as I could get." He smirked. "Why, are you also flying to Orange County via Atlanta and Denver?"

"You didn't already know?"

He shook his head. "All flights to LA were full."

"Yeah. I booked late." I sighed and relaxed against my seat, still too close to his gigantic shoulder. How was he so big?

"The seatbelt light went off a while ago," he said. "If you want to get more comfortable."

I didn't like the hopeful glance he gave me. Thanks to my vivid imagination, I pictured him pulling me into his lap the moment I had the seatbelt undone. "I don't."

"Suit yourself." He sighed and leaned his head against the window. His whole body shifted away from me, leaving me feeling ... cold. He'd been so warm, and I'd enjoyed it. I never enjoyed being this close to an alpha. I'd never even slept with an alpha, always too afraid they would follow me home and try to make me their mate for life.

Like this guy. Fuck.

When the seatbelt light flashed on again as we neared Atlanta, the beta flight attendant's voice came through the plane's speakers. "When we reach Atlanta, please check the arrivals and departures board. The storm out west has delayed flights across the country. If your plane hasn't come in yet, there's a good chance it won't leave on time. Please be patient with your gate and airline agents if you need to reschedule flights for tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" I muttered. "I have to work tomorrow to make up for today. This can't be happening."

"You're lucky," Connor said. "We're taking this plane to Denver."

How had I not noticed I was on the same plane from Atlanta to Denver? I pulled up the flight app to confirm. Yes, we would be on this flight to Denver, if it ever left Atlanta.

When the plane landed, I was overwhelmed by allergies. Someone must have reapplied the cologne with hay fever in it. I sneezed into my elbow as the flight attendant pulled my bag from the overhead compartment. I didn't blame him for steering clear of me after that.

"Enjoy our brief stop in Atlanta," he said to Connor with a lilt to his voice. That fucker was flirting.

I did not care. Nope. Not one bit. So why were the hairs standing up at my nape and my hands balled into fists again all by themselves?

I unclenched my fists and smoothed my suit before grabbing my bag handle with both hands and carrying it in front of me like a shield. I nodded to our pilots and exited the plane, not caring if Connor was coming with me or not.

"Where are you taking your bag?" he asked me as we walked through the balmy jet bridge to the terminal.

"To the restroom. And no, you can't come with me."

"I can watch it for you, if you want."

I'd never had an alpha offer to watch my bag before. It was ... sweet.

No. Not sweet. Definitely not sweet.

"I need to pee and grab my winter coat. It'll be faster if I multi-task." I didn't know

why I was telling him all this, but I didn't want him to think I was being a dick for dick's sake. Certainly not for his dick.

He walked with me to the bathroom, and then he leaned against the wall near the doorway. Wow, what a lean.

I hadn't been able to get a good look at him on the plane, and before that I'd been too angry. Now, I breathed in through my mouth, thanks to my plugged nose, and took him in. He was taller than my alpha pops and wider in the shoulders than my alpha brothers. When people said, "built like a brick shithouse," he must have been what they meant.

He had kind blue eyes and a white streak in his blond hair at one temple. The streak could mean he was older than I thought, but his open face and sweet expression made me think he was young. Too young.

"How old are you?" I demanded.

"Thirty."

"Bullshit." I was twenty-nine. There was no way he still looked this sweet and innocent at thirty, even as an alpha. Surely, the world would have beaten him down at least once by now.

"I'll show you my driver's license when we get back on the plane." His professional tone made him sound like a bodyguard, but I could take care of myself.

I rolled my bag into the first available stall and — nope. Not that one. The next one was just as dirty. Finally, the third stall had a wet floor but was clean enough otherwise.

"Here." Connor handed me a wet wipe over the top of the locked door.

After the horrors I'd seen in the other stalls, I snatched it up. "Thanks."

Connor's hand was still hovering above the door when I turned around, the used wipe balled in my hand. "What are you doing?"

"I'll throw it away."

There was no trash bin in the stall, and I didn't want to litter. I handed it over.

Then, I dropped trou and plopped down, so I could pee and sort through my bag simultaneously. My coat took up half the space in my bag, so it was easy enough to yank free. In my haste, I also flung my favorite sweater right into a puddle.

"Ah!"

"Are you all right? Is everything all right?"

Connor sounded farther away but still in the restroom.

"I'm fine." I sighed as I surveyed the mess. "I dropped my shirt in a puddle, that's all."

"Why are you taking off your shirt?"

I laughed. The guy wouldn't leave me alone, but at least he was entertaining. "A different shirt, from my bag."

"I can wash it in the sink for you."

"That'd be great." There was no gap between the floor and the bottom of the door, so

I tossed it over the top.

"Hey, man, nice sweater." I didn't recognize that voice.

"Ben? Someone just stole your sweater."

It was Benjamin, but I wasn't going to argue with Connor when he muttered, "be right back." I heard a clatter, like a dog running on tile, and a scream.

"Take it, take it!" I couldn't tell if that was the same voice as before, but when I exited the stall, I found Connor with my wet sweater tied around his waist. His naked-from-the-waist-down waist.

"Oops," he said.

## Page 4

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CONNOR

"Oops?" Ben frowned and a blush spread across his face as he noticed the high split in my dress shirt. Being big and tall sucked sometimes but getting that reaction out of my fated mate was priceless.

I tugged him, bag and all, into the stall he'd just vacated. "I accidentally shifted," I said. "I'll run to the lost and found to see if they have a pair of pants that isn't ripped to shreds."

"Shifted?" He stared at me like I was crazy.

"I'm a wolf shifter." I did a partial shift, sprouting hair on my chest and neck, pointed wolf ears, and paws tipped with giant claws.

"That's some weird fucking trick," he whispered.

"We're the reason humans have alphas and omegas." I'd met oblivious humans before, and each time it made me wonder what they taught human alphas and omegas in school.

He frowned. "You can go completely furry, like on all fours?"

"Yes, and I just did." I'd had enough warning to unbutton my shirt, but my pants were a total loss, shredded to bits along with my underwear.

"Here." Ben handed me his coat. "Wrap that around your waist. I won't need it until Denver, anyway." He sighed. "I'll rinse my sweater."

I didn't even see the thief coming. Even with my wolf senses, he'd caught me off guard. I was so wrapped up in Ben, I lost my competitive edge.

I swallowed hard, remembering I didn't really have an edge. I didn't even have a pack. I was the worst wolf ever.

"Yes, that's the man." The thief stood at the restroom exit with a short woman in a security guard uniform who looked like she wanted to be anywhere else.

"Go," Ben whispered. "I've got this." He turned to the pair blocking the doorway. "Thank you so much," he gushed to the guard. "You caught the man who tried to steal my sweater."

As much as my wolf wanted to stick around and protect my mate (and his smelly sweater), I had only a half-hour to grab some clothes and return to the plane.

The circular restroom made it easy to run out the opposite way, side-stepping the men coming in. Once in the crowded hallway, I scurried to the nearest information desk and gestured to my missing pants. "Accident, and my clothes are on their way to Arizona without me."

"You can check at each terminal," the service rep said, "but we won't have much that fits you, besides shorts. And this puffer coat. Someone left it here on their way to Mexico."

I hadn't thought to bring a coat. I always ran hotter than a human, but Denver could be cold this time of year. I took it and the two pairs of shorts that looked big enough around the waist, though they were far shorter than the board shorts I liked.



"There's a Wolf Brothers store in terminal E," he said.

The big and tall shifter clothing store would be perfect in a pinch. I was currently in terminal C. It was a ways, but doable. I thanked him and ran.

The next fifteen minutes felt like a comedy of errors as I raced around travelers, hopped over walkway rails, and made a complete spectacle of myself while trying to keep my two-coat skirt in place around my waist. I'd tied the bulky coat in the front to cover my ass, and draped Ben's little coat over the knotted arms like a loincloth to hide my private bits from view. I still got whistles and cat calls, but I no longer needed to stop and sniff them all to see if they were my mate.

I knew where my mate was! In theory. I hoped he wasn't still holding off airport security for something I had done.

I shouldn't have shifted, but that guy had stolen my mate's sweater! Why anyone thought they needed to steal clothes when they could just as easily hit up the lost and found was beyond me. Sometimes shifters, especially youngsters, couldn't control their shifts, so most places who knew about us kept a box of extra clothes.

I added to our box in Phoenix with washed, unused clothes whenever I returned home from a trip. I often packed extra clothing for that purpose. This time, I'd be leaving a few items at Orange County instead. No big deal.

I couldn't stop thinking about how lucky I was. I found my mate! That was huge! As I ran, I wondered what he wanted me to wear.

When I asked the salesperson at Wolf Brothers to show me the pants in my size, they led me to a picked-over table and sighed. "Sorry, Sir. It's brown corduroy pants or the white groom's suit on the display model."

A groom's suit, the perfect way to tell Ben he was my mate! I balked at the price, though. Even with my corporate card, I couldn't afford it.

I made Hank pay for the corduroy pants, instead. They were cargo pants with pockets on top of pockets. I loved pockets. And they were soft. Not soft enough to sleep in, but too soft to be sitting beside my omega on a plane thinking dirty thoughts.

The counter was littered with medium-sized stuffed wolf toys. "How much for one of these?" I asked.

"Free with purchase of," the sales clerk pointed to the sign I'd missed on the counter. The toy would have been free, if I'd just bought the suit.

"Take one." They shrugged. "The last person didn't have kids and said we could give it to charity. No offense, but you look like you could use a little charity right now."

I gave them my best smile. "Want to buy an NFT?"

Their kind and open face turned sour. "No."

"Had to ask for work." I took the toy away before the clerk could shove it in a plastic bag. I avoided them when possible.

Some friendliness returned. "Your job sucks worse than mine."

I held up the wolf and shook it, and they frowned as though they wanted it back. "Thanks. You've been great."

The trip back to Terminal C and onto the plane was much faster now that I wasn't walking against the flow of traffic. When I arrived at my seat, I found someone else in Ben's place.

"Who are you?"

"Mr. McKeeler, a word?" The kind flight attendant who had been with us since New York pulled me into the service area between the cockpit and cabin. "There's been a mix-up with your seat. We'll refund you the cost of the first-class ticket for the rest of your flights. Only the flight from New York had an available seat."

"I bought two," I reminded him.

"You did, but they're both full on this flight, and your flight from Denver to Orange County doesn't even have first class."

I didn't realize the plane would be that small. "So where am I supposed to sit?" I asked.

"There's an aisle seat in coach."

I sighed. I didn't mind coach, but I wanted to be close to my omega. I could still smell him on board, though. That would have to be enough.

He led me to the middle of the plane. "Thank you for understanding."

I still didn't understand, but the aisle seat looked like the best one in the house because I could sit down and take a load off after running through the airport for the last half-hour.

I sank into the seat with a deep sigh, and the woman beside me yanked her arm out from under mine.

"Oh, sorry," I said. "You made a nice armrest. I was supposed to be in first class, but something happened with my ticket."

"I don't care." She turned up the music in her headphones to what had to be an uncomfortable decibel level for her human ears.

I turned toward the aisle and froze. Ben glared at me from the seat directly across. "How did I still get stuck with you?"

"Want your stuff back?" I stood up and untied both coats from around my waist. He held my suit coat and fanny pack over the aisle like they were the most disgusting trash he'd ever seen. I knew that look. I'd seen it often enough from my pack before they'd finally had enough of me and sent me on my own.

We exchanged, and I tucked my suit jacket and fanny pack under the seat with my new bulky coat and wolf toy. The dark gray of the jacket caught my attention. It would clash with my brown corduroys, but that was the least of my worries. Ben was pissed, and at me for some reason.

"Thanks," I said, not sure how we'd gotten so far off track. I thought we were clicking in the restroom, but now ...

"I grabbed it from first class when they kicked me out."

"I really appreciate you letting me borrow your coat?—"

"Where did you get that wolf?" He pointed.

"Wolf Brothers. They didn't have pants that would fit me at the lost and found."

"You weren't kidding? You walked all the way to the lost and found?"

"I did." I'd gone all the way to Terminal E, but that was beside the point.

"You didn't lose that coat," he said. "What makes you think you should claim it?"

"They gave it to me when I asked. It was one of the few things that would fit me. It's not like people really come back for their lost items."

"So, you just raid the lost and found whenever you feel like it?"

"Only when I need to."

Now was not the time to remind him I had been naked before, including no underwear. The shorts beneath these pants were a little tight, but at least I wasn't going commando.

"I contribute to them, too," I said.

He turned his attention to a small reading tablet in his lap, ignoring me.

After we took off, he sniffled a few times. He had a full-on sneezing fit when the flight attendant stopped by our row to ask if we wanted something to drink.

I had some liquid Benadryl in my pack. I poured a few drops into his lemon-lime soda when he wasn't looking. Too easy, since he did everything in his power to avoid looking in my general direction. His drink sat unattended in the cup holder on his tray until he finally drained it in one gulp.

I might have felt a teensy bit bad about it when his head fell back against his seat and he started snoring a few minutes later.

### BENJAMIN

Just when I started to like the ridiculous alpha, he vanished on me. Yes, I'd told him to run from the security guard, but he didn't have to look so damn happy about getting away from me and my stinky sweater. After all Connor's hard work, I almost threw it in the garbage.

I didn't know if I believed his story at all. The thief story, coupled with the unlikely tale about shifting into an animal, all seemed too far-fetched. Nothing like this ever happened to me.

The alleged thief changed his version quickly when the security guard heard my side. I'd avoided the words, "shift," and "wolf," completely, but she sniffed my disgusting sweater and turned on the thief. "If I see you in here again trying to steal omegas' clothes, I will have the police haul you out of here in handcuffs."

She tossed my shirt in the sink and ran cold water over it again. "Someone shifted to save this shirt?" She turned to me. "I'll find you a plastic bag. You're going to want to keep this."

I disagreed, but I followed her to the security kiosk anyway. She put my cashmere sweater in a resealable bag and handed it back to me as though it were precious. "You're so lucky," she said. "I've worked here fifteen years, waiting and hoping my fated mate would fly through the busiest airport in the United States so we can finally meet and be together."

More fated mates talk? Who was this lady? "Good luck," I stammered as I shoved the bagged sweater into my carry-on.

Things proceeded from bad to worse when I reboarded the plane. Someone new occupied my seat and refused to budge.

"This is my seat, ma'am." I barely got the last word out before a sneeze caught me unaware. I ducked behind my elbow and sneezed two more times.

"Oh, dear." The same flight attendant from before took my other elbow and pulled me toward the coach seats. "Your first-class seat was double-booked. I'm so sorry. If you'd stayed on the plane, you might have had a better chance of keeping it, since it's first come, first serve in these situations. Now that she's sitting there, I can't force her to leave. You know how it is."

I did know how it was. As an omega, I was constantly making room for other people, even if it left no room for me. When that alpha got back on the plane, I would ring his neck.

The flight attendant handed me Connor's fanny pack and jacket, which had been under his first-class seat. "Your friend isn't back yet, and his seat's filled, too."

Fuck that fucking fuck. "Fine," I said aloud through clenched teeth. "I'll head back to 23 D."

Why did Connor have to sit across the aisle from me in 23 C? And why did he have to look so goddamn handsome while doing it? I wanted to hate every inch of his bulky body, but something about him turned me on. I imagined him shoving me up against the side of the plane and pinning me in place.

What was wrong with me? Was I having an allergy attack, or had I contracted a

brain-eating virus?

I pulled out my book, intent on ignoring him. I was just getting to the good part when my eyelids drooped closed.

I dreamed I fell asleep in a church. I'd only ever been in a church twice in my life—once for a wedding, and once for a funeral—so that was strange by itself.

What was weirder, someone wiped at my runny nose. In the dream, it was my dad, while pops glared at us both for disturbing the ceremony, whichever it was.

"Dad, stop."

"Hmm ... do I like being called Dad?"

I bolted awake, accidentally punching myself in the nose while trying to push him away.

Him. Connor. Again.

"Why won't you leave me alone?" I shouted. Something sounded off about the way my voice echoed inside the rounded chamber. Then I noticed the empty seats around us.

"We're the last ones on the plane," he confirmed. "I thought you might want to clean up a bit before we disembarked."

Only he would say words like "disembarked."

"You are not my dad," I said.



"Good. I don't think I'm into that."

My face felt hot as I realized what he was saying. Daddy kink was definitely not my thing, but Connor taking care of me was kinda hot.

Not hot. Wrong message sent to my cock. Abort!

I'd missed our entire descent into Denver, thank goodness. I hated flying into Mile High City. The mountains made for a steep dive, and my ears always popped two or three times. This time, my ears didn't hurt at all, but my brain felt muzzy, the way it usually did after I took allergy, cold, or sinus medication.

"How long was I out?"

"Since you drank your complimentary drink." Come to think of it, that was the last thing I remembered. "I slipped you some Benadryl."

I turned my head toward him and studied him for a few seconds. Typical alpha male. He was so pretty, yet so clueless. "You can't just go around giving people drugs without telling them!"

I was shouting again, something I rarely did. I was complacent, quiet, brooding Benjamin. I did not yell at hot almost-strangers on empty airplanes.

"Fuck!" I glanced around us. "How long have we been sitting here? We need to make our connecting flight!"

"No, we don't," he said.

"Excuse me?"

"I already checked the app. It's canceled."

That couldn't be true. I pulled my phone out of my breast pocket and took it off airplane mode, only for it to light up with several notifications at once.

Canceled. Our flight was canceled.

"I need to get home tonight," I whined.

"I thought you might say that. I hired a private jet."

I blinked up at him. "You have a private jet?"

"It's not mine," he hastily corrected. "A friend of a friend, you could say. He's the only person I know who's crazy enough to fly in this weather."

The weather. I'd completely forgotten the storm system in the west. It must have worsened over Denver while we were in the air.

As I gathered my coat and bag, I took another covetous look at Connor's stuffed wolf toy. I wondered if he would sell it to me. My shopping options were dwindling by the minute. I'd already checked all the shopping malls from San Diego to South LA. It would take me a full day to search the rest, and I doubted I would have any luck. The toy my nephew wanted was sold out everywhere.

While it wasn't an interactive robot dog, the wolf toy was cute. I hoped it would tide Jeffrey over until the Wonderdog 3000 I'd bought online months ago finally arrived.

"Are you coming?" Connor asked. "The guy won't wait forever."

Connor wasn't so bad when he wasn't trying to shove a tissue up my nose. I didn't like

taking Benadryl, it was true, but I felt a million times better now that we were off the plane and I was no longer experiencing an allergic reaction to someone's fragrance.

My growling stomach echoed through the vacant sky bridge, even over the sound of my rolling suitcase.

"Want to eat at the deli before we go?" he asked.

"You're the one who said your friend wouldn't wait."

"I'll text him and tell him to meet us. I've never seen him turn down a meal."

Connor's smile was reassuring, but I hated meeting new people, especially when I couldn't fall back on my work title to protect myself from over-assertive alphas.

Connor was the least assertive alpha I'd met, when he wasn't trying to drug me or wipe my damn nose. I ... tolerated him better than most. I was getting used to his presence along this weird journey home from New York. I liked walking behind a big alpha who knew where he was going. He let me drag my own suitcase this time, but he looked back occasionally to make sure I was still following him, like an insecure puppy confirming his owner was holding the leash.

Did he say he turned into a wolf, or had that been part of my weird allergy dream? He gave off Golden Retriever vibes.

At the deli counter, Connor insisted on paying for my sandwich, chips, and bottled water. He got a pack of three gourmet chocolate chip cookies along with his meal, and we sat at a table near the front.

I thought we'd sat here to watch for his friend, but he seemed more interested in watching me. Every time I looked up, he stared back at me with an intense smile. He

hadn't even taken a bite of his sandwich yet.

"You should eat," I said.

"I can eat on the plane." His smile showed even more teeth. He looked like he could have devoured me. Maybe he was a wolf in Golden Retriever clothing, after all.

I was about to ask how the wolf thing worked when a man even larger than Connor stumbled into the deli. Connor hopped up from his seat and gave the big man a hug.

"Hey, Shen. How's it going?"

"Never thought I would see you again," the big man said. "Didn't you get fired?"

"Does everyone know about that?" Connor ducked his head.

"Fired?" I asked. "So, you don't work for a cryptocurrency operation?" That was a relief, honestly. My parents owned a savings and loan headquartered in San Clemente with several branches throughout California. They believed in the power of the almighty dollar, not whatever the fuck cryptocurrency was.

Why did it matter what my parents would think of Connor? It wasn't like they would ever meet him.

"He was waiting to tell me in Phoenix," Connor said. "I need to get Ben," he pointed, and I grimaced at the shortening of my name, "home to Orange County before I can settle up with Hank in Phoenix. Can you get us there?"

"Sure," Shen said. "If it makes you feel any better, I always liked you more. Hank's a dick."

Connor sighed. "Yeah. I tried to ignore it, but he really is."

I clapped my hands. "Okay, let's get Shen some food so we can hit the road, er, air."

Shen grinned. "Where did you find this little firecracker?"

"New York." Connor returned his smiling gaze to me, and I felt like I was under a microscope. "He's my mate."

I frowned. "You keep saying that."

"Mate?" Shen clapped Connor on the back so hard he grimaced. "Congratulations! I think I've got some cigars in the cockpit."

"That's for babies," I said, "not ..." I hoped he didn't mean mate like married. I'd sworn off marriage since I was a child, but that hadn't stopped my parents from inviting random alphas to our family dinner every Sunday.

"Already pregnant, too?" Shen slapped me on the back, and I careened into an empty table, catching myself with both hands. "We'll smoke two cigars!"

Shen stepped up to the counter, and Connor turned to me with an apologetic grin.

"I'll explain once we're in the air," he said.

"Does this have to do with you being a wolf?"

He nodded and handed me a wet wipe. "For your hands. That table doesn't look very clean."

It was covered with crumbs. I thanked him and used the wet wipe on my hands before wiping the table surface free of debris.

Connor tucked the little container of wipes back into his fanny pack before handing the cashier his credit card to cover Shen's meal. Then, we returned to our table and Shen pulled up a chair.

The big guy and I ate in silence while Connor continued to stare at me like I was a pinup model and he was memorizing every detail of my body. I was grateful the table wasn't see-through, but then I wondered if it mattered. If he was a wolf, did he have their senses, too?

Shen scarfed down his sandwich and chips faster than I'd ever seen anyone eat, and I had three alpha siblings. In less than five minutes flat, he'd tossed his wrappers in the trash and stood by the table, waiting for me. I tucked my remaining half-sandwich into the front pouch of my suitcase and followed Shen and Connor out into the airport.

Shen led us outside, and then to what I recognized as short-term parking. "Where are we going?" I asked, already shivering. My coat was meant to withstand California cold snaps, not full-blown winter storms.

"The jet's parked at Centennial. It's about forty minutes away. Sit tight and we'll get you home tonight."

It was already almost midnight and would be morning by the time I got home, but I didn't want to argue semantics with our pilot.

I slipped into the back seat, leaving Connor up front with his friend. The airport had been warm enough, if you didn't walk too close to the windows, but the back seat of Shen's Jeep Cherokee felt like a solid brick of ice beneath me. It felt even colder when I flopped over on my side and tried to sleep.

I couldn't have been asleep for more than five minutes when I woke in Connor's arms.

I blinked up at the brightly lit rounded ceiling of a white metal pole building. I should have panicked. I hated being carried around, but Connor felt so different from other alphas, especially my careless brothers who banged my head into everything when they carried me like this. Connor cradled my head to his broad chest.

Now that I was awake, I wrapped an arm around his neck and pulled myself up.

He laughed when I sniffed behind his ear. "That tickles."

He smelled divine, like salted caramel. I wanted to lick him to see if the smell translated to taste.

Instead, I twisted in his arms, gripping his neck and sliding down the front of his body until I could drop to the floor.

"I would have let you down," he said. "All you had to do was ask."

I rubbed up against him again, feeling the slight bulge all that front-to-front contact had given him. "Next time, ask me if you can pick me up," I huffed. "I don't remember being awake enough to give consent."

"You weren't." He looked chagrined. "I didn't want you to get cold outside, so I brought you with me."

I was going soft for this guy. I wanted to find fault with his logic, but I couldn't. "Thank you. But ask next time."

He nodded. "Anything for you, Ben."

I heard Shen tinkering with something behind me, so I turned to experience the ugliest eyesore I'd ever seen in my life. I didn't know what to expect from a private

jet. This one looked more like a cargo plane, if it was only big enough to carry a few crates of chickens and a life raft.

"How old is this plane?"

"It's an antique!" Shen said.

"That's not the compliment you think it is," I said under my breath. I didn't want to hurt Connor's feelings, but he looked pained anyway. Wolf hearing, I guessed.

Shen only laughed. "It'll be fine. We'll have you up in the air in ten minutes. Just gotta lube the landing gear first. Had to stop her Fred Flintstone style last time."

"Haha." Connor's laugh sounded forced. "He means the airport had to use chocks to slow him down."

"No, I don't. I mean ... Oh. Human. Right. Chocks. Yep."

I didn't know what Shen was trying to hide from me, but he was the worst liar I'd ever met. Even worse than Brian "All the first-class seats were full so we got you a seat in coach instead" Avery. There would be no first class on this flight. No coach, either. I'd be surprised if we weren't sitting on the floor in a pile of feathers.

"Make yourselves at home." Shen motioned to the open cockpit door. "Your little human will have to sit on your lap."

That was the second time he'd called me human, as though he wasn't one.

"Are wolf shifters not human?" I whispered to Connor.

"We're human, yes, but we're shifters," Connor said. "In my old pack, there was a



legend that humans evolved from wolves, but they don't remember how to shift."

"You think I'm a wolf who doesn't shift?" I crossed my arms over my chest and glared up at him.

"I think you're the most delightful human omega I've ever met," he said. "And my wolf thinks you're my fated mate."

I resisted rolling my eyes at him. "I don't believe in fate. I also don't believe in marriage."

His face crumpled like I'd struck him. He turned on his heel and made his way up the ramp to the cockpit.

I followed, instantly remorseful. I didn't want to hurt his feelings, but he deserved the truth.

"You don't understand," I said to his back. "My parents wanted me to go into the family business. They run SoCal Community Bank. They wanted me to marry someone in finance and have tons of babies while my husband took my place at work."

"Your husband will run a bank one day?"

"No. I have three older siblings who will split bank ownership with me." I sighed. "But not if I'm married. Then, my share goes to my alpha husband while I'm stuck home with the kids."

"Not my omega." Connor sank into the copilot's seat and gazed up at me. "I want to be the one at home with the kids."

"What?" I stood in the narrow aisle between the two seats, hands on my hips, glaring down at his intent gaze and cautious smile. "No alpha in the history of my family has ever wanted to be a househusband."

"Well, I do." He pulled me down to sit sideways across his knees. "I've always wanted that. It's one reason why I was kicked out of my pack."

"They kicked you out of your wolf pack?" I slid my arms around his thick neck again and flattened myself to his chest for a quick hug. "I'm sorry."

"It was a long time ago," he said. "I've done all right on my own, but I've been looking for my mate. For you."

I leaned back and slid my hands back to my lap, not wanting to give him the wrong idea. I wasn't mate material.

"I guess it's lucky that I don't have to go back to Phoenix, now. I can go home with you."

Oh, no. He already had the wrong idea.

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:04 am*

6

CONNOR

"Oh, no, no, no." My mate's nostrils flared when he was angry. It was cute. "You haven't heard a word I've said. I'm not mate material."

"But you are. You're my fated mate."

He looked even cuter when his face scrunched around his nose in a frown. "I don't believe in fate, or people who can turn into wolves, or any of this."

"Well, my pants didn't rip themselves," I said.

"Your suit wasn't exactly high quality." He crossed his arms, elbowing me in the ribs.

"Thanks for noticing." I'd been setting aside most of my paychecks for a down payment on a house. Hank kept me on the road so often, I lived in hotels or crashed on friends' couches. Now that I didn't have a job, I had nothing to offer Ben.

That didn't change the fact that I wanted him by my side forever. He was my fated mate. If only I could convince him of that fact, too.

Ben yawned.

"You should get some more sleep," I said. "I'll keep you safe." I tucked him against my chest and held him loosely in my arms.

He sniffed along my neck again, the way he had when he'd first woken up. "You smell so good," he mumbled.

"That's a fated mates thing," I whispered in his ear.

"Too bad I don't believe in fated mates." He snuggled closer against me, and I was in heaven.

I did my best to ignore the bangs and clangs coming from the rear of the plane. Lack of sleep only made me more jumpy, not less. Each loud noise alerted my wolf to protect Ben at all costs.

Ben didn't seem bothered. He probably couldn't hear the commotion with his human hearing.

Finally, Shen climbed into the cockpit and slammed the door. Ben only curled more tightly against me, pulling his knees up to his chest and resting his feet on the side of the plane beside my seat. The cockpit had only one door, thankfully, though Shen glared at him. For a moment, I thought he would scold me about letting Ben put his feet up on his shitty ancient plane interior.

"What are you doing with him, again?" he asked instead.

"He's my mate."

Shen shrugged. "If you say so. Seems a little too fragile for you."

"He's human, but he isn't fragile." I'd already seen him confront a thief, airport security, and me when we got booted back to coach. I hoped our flight to Orange County would go smoothly for my next plan to work. I would get on my knees in the airport and beg him to let me crash on his couch for one night. And then I would find

a way to show him we were fated mates before he made me leave.

I hated takeoffs and landings. They always made me tense. Takeoffs in Shen's plane were the worst because we never knew if the plane would clear the mountains. In the dark, it was even more terrifying. He jerked back the plane controls, and we rose too slowly. The wall of rock got closer. I thought we were going to hit the wall and die, but then we flew through a slightly lighter wall of clouds and continued to climb.

"Woo-hoo!" Shen shouted, easing off his death grip on the controls. "California, here we come!"

We continued to climb, but it wasn't as steep as our departure angle. Confident Shen would take us in the right direction, I nestled my nose behind Ben's ear and tugged him closer, reveling in his sweet scent and the way he clung to me in his sleep.

"Shit, shit."

Shen's grumbling woke me.

"Shit-fuck-shit."

He tapped at a dial on the plane's main console. "Fuck!"

"What's happening?" I whisper-shouted. Ben had just fallen asleep, and I didn't want to wake him.

"We're losing her. I think ..." he trailed off, staring out the window at the quickly approaching mountain.

"You think?"

"... I forgot to refuel." He shifted the wheel, and we narrowly avoided the mountain peak. With my wolf eyes, I could see four more dark peaks closing in fast.

"Harness time?" I asked.

"It's only made for one. You know that."

"I'm not leaving him." I bared my teeth in a snarl.

Shen raised both his hands to soothe me, and the plane took a steep dive, alarming me even more.

"I'm just saying," he said as he leveled us out again, "it might fail, and you both could die."

"But if we stay in this plane ..."

"Yeah, you'll probably die. Harness it is." He gestured for me to hold the controls in place while he got up and rummaged around in the back. He tossed me a tangled mess of leather. "Strap him to you and leave the big strap free."

It took precious seconds for me to stare at the ball of leather in the dark. Finally, I figured out which big strap he meant. There were larger holes for our legs and smaller ones for our arms, with a cross strap to go around our waists. I secured the arm straps and waist strap around both of us but left my legs free in case I needed to shift again.

Fuck. I would probably need to shift again. I hastily removed the straps and peeled off my new pants. I tucked them into Ben's carry-on, where he'd already stowed the rest of my things. I unbuckled my fanny pack and added it to the mix. Dragon landings could be rough, and I didn't want it to tear on the way down.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Shen asked.

"I don't want to ruin them when I shift."

"You'd better not shift in midair. I can't carry a fucking wolf."

I didn't know what he was bitching about. He was a fucking dragon, the biggest shifters of all. In my shifted form, I could carry Ben on my back, no problem.

I couldn't fly in either of my forms, though, which was apparent when Shen told me to grab the control yoke again. The plane hit something hard, bouncing us into the air, and then the nose of the plane dipped too far forward.

"Lost the controls. It's now or never." Shen stomped to the back of the plane and threw open the cargo bay door. He motioned for me to join him.

I secured the waist belt through the handle of Ben's suitcase and nestled it between our legs. It would feel weird as fuck, but Shen's back was too big for us to straddle, anyway. I hoped it would keep us from hurting ourselves.

I hated heights on a good day, but this was another level. We'd even practiced this jump once with Hank manning the plane. I could do this. All I had to do was take about ten steps to the gaping exit.

I felt Ben's body tense against me. "What's happening?"

"We're going skydiving." Shen's smile looked about as friendly as my earlier snarl.

But I can't—what is this?" He asked. "Where are the parachutes?"

"We don't have parachutes," I whispered.

"Big mountain!" Shen pointed. Then, as from a scene of one of my worst nightmares, he turned and jumped out of the plane.

"He's not wearing a parachute! Ohmigod, ohmigod, ohmigod, we're going to die, aren't we?"

I ran the remaining steps, Ben's suitcase banging between my legs, and launched myself off the ramp into the open air.

"You're fucking crazy!" Ben shouted, the long "E" continuing until something roared beneath us.

"What was that?" he whispered.

"Our parachute."

A moment later, I felt Shen take up the slack in the large strap and work it over his head as he flew. I landed hard on my back, on Shen's back.

Ben landed on me, knocking the breath from both of us. He coughed a few times and choked out, "What the fuck is going on?"

"Slight miscalculation in the straps," I said. "I think I put the harness on backward."

Ben raised the back of his head from my chest to look at the dark scales flaring out behind us, ending in Shen's spiked tail.

"Did this thing eat Shen?" he asked.

"This thing is Shen," the creature below us rumbled. "Will you two stop moving back there? I need to concentrate."



Ben started to chant "Ohmigod" again. I did my best to comfort him, but I had a bad feeling this landing would hurt, since my spine was resting on Shen's protective plates.

"Be gentle, big guy," I said.

Shen roared. In agreement, I hoped.

I wrapped my arms around Ben to provide as much comfort as I could while the cold wind rushed past us. It burned my ears. I pulled Ben's hood up the best I could with my teeth, since the harness straps held our arms together. I wished I could better protect him from the icy air. I should have strapped us front to front. I had not been thinking clearly, and besides, it had been easier to adjust the straps with him sitting on my lap.

Even with the frigid air chilling every part of me that wasn't covered by Ben, I was only aware of his body vibrating against mine. I coaxed his arms to move with mine so I could hold him to me with one arm and cling to his suitcase handle with the other.

"Going down," Shen said. We banked steeply to the left, and all the blood rushed to my head as we dove. Then, we landed with a sickening thud. I bounced along Shen's scales and landed again with a crack.

At least one something in my back was broken, and possibly some ribs, too. I whimpered as I patted Ben down. "Are you all right?" I asked.

"I'm fine," he said. "Are you?"

"Need to shift."

I clawed at the buckles holding our arms together, and Ben helped me take them off. Then, he sat up on top of me, crushing my balls into my thigh. I stifled a groan.

We fell to the hard-packed snow a moment later, and my back flared with new pain. It was now or never. I carefully lifted Ben off me, rolled onto my side, and shifted into my white wolf.

I healed faster in this form. After a few seconds, I backed my way out of my shirt and large winter coat. Then, I pulled at the stretchy shorts cramping my tail with my teeth until I was naked.

Free, I rolled onto my back and shimmied from my shoulders to my tail on the snow-packed concrete. Once I was certain I had healed all the broken bones, I flipped to my feet.

Mate. Must play. Must claim.

I stretched my forepaws out before me and lowered my head to Ben, staring into his gorgeous brown eyes. He was so pretty, even with windburned cheeks and snow stuck in his eyebrows. I wagged my tail at him and hopped closer, begging him to play.

"Connor?" He asked. "Is that you?"

I nodded and gave him my best wolfy smile with my tongue lolling out of my mouth. "Woof."

"Car," Shen said.

Ben waved his arms. I thought he was motioning for me to jump into them, so I did, knocking him off his feet, into a pile of unstable snow chunks. I stumbled on the ice

and jumped, landing a few feet from where Ben slid to a stop at the bottom of an embankment.

Shen followed us, shaking his head. "That's one way to get off the road."

"Why did you land on the road?" Ben asked.

"It was the only place clear enough for a dragon my size," he said. "Did you want to bump through the trees on the way down?"

"No." He looked so sad. I hopped back over to him and rubbed my flank along his front, trying to cover him with my scent. I placed my paws on his shoulders and licked from his neck to his forehead.

"You're lucky you smell nice," Ben whispered. He buried his hands in my fur and ran them along my flanks, teasing all my ticklish spots. I wriggled until I had him where I wanted him, with one hand between my shoulder blades where I couldn't scratch, even when rolling on the pavement. His other hand rested on my flank, dangerously close to slipping under and grazing my cock.

"Car's gone," Shen chided. "We need to walk to the nearest town before your boyfriend freezes to death out here."

Ben stood up. Before he could take a step up the embankment, I bounded between his legs, bouncing my hindquarters up so he was fully seated on my back. My ribs still ached a little, but I didn't care. I had my mate where I wanted him. I grabbed his suitcase by the handle and dragged it up the embankment, too.

Ben hopped off my back onto the roadway, almost tripping over one of my shoes. Shen held out my shirt and coat, and I gave him a nod of wolfy thanks before I shifted back into my skin. Once I had hands, I took the clothing from him, finding my

boxers shoved in a coat pocket. I'd lost my socks somewhere, but I couldn't worry about them now. It was time to get my mate to safety for the night. We could regroup in the morning.

### BENJAMIN

Connor was a wolf shifter, and Shen was a freaking dragon! I thought shifters were Hollywood creations made of makeup and CGI, not real flesh-and-blood beings.

Then, Connor shifted back to his human form and ... wow. I'd never seen a sexier alpha in my life. I glanced at Shen again, wondering why he wasn't naked. He had on a pair of shorts I recognized from Connor's lost-and-found loot. Shen didn't have shoes, but the snow around him had melted. He handed Connor his shirts and shorts from the road.

I pulled Connor's corduroy pants from my bag and handed them to him. He snatched them from me so quickly, I didn't have time to avert my eyes before I saw his whole thick package on display. Even limp and in the cold like this, Connor had a sizable cock.

He pulled up his shorts, ending my fantasy.

"Like what you see?"

I met his gaze as he pulled on his pants instead of shrinking away. "It's adequate."

He laughed. "Wait until you feel my knot."

I turned away this time, not sure if I should throw myself in a snowbank to cool my

face or run toward the flashing lights about a half mile down the road. I started walking toward them, not waiting for the others to follow. Shen caught up to me first, and his completely changed appearance caught my eye.

"Where did you find those clothes?" I asked. He wore a business suit much like Connor's before he'd shredded the pants, and a pair of shiny black dress boots.

"Dragons have magic. This glamour's about all I have left after our flight, but it's enough to get a room at that hotel." He pointed to the flashing sign.

"Glamour? You were naked before?"

He shrugged. "It's easier for me to make clothes. That way, I don't have to find new ones every time I shift, unlike your boy."

I didn't have the heart to tell him Connor wasn't my boy. Despite his insistence on being my fated mate, I ... wasn't. I liked him, sure, but we were complete strangers.

I felt Connor's warmth as he came up beside me. He draped his arm over my shoulders, pulling me against him. I almost choked on his bulky parka, but I found my footing and kept marching toward the lights.

"I'll go on ahead," Shen said.

"Book us two rooms." Connor glanced down at me apologetically. "We need to talk."

"No, we don't," I said. "Three rooms."

"I'll book whatever they have," Shen said before speeding away.

"He's fast," I said. "I didn't think dragons would be fast on the ground."

"Most shifters are faster than humans. Stronger, too."

I sighed. My whole life, it had been bad enough alphas were taller, broader, and stronger than I was. Now, shifters were even bigger and badder than the biggest, baddest humans? It was almost too much for my ego to take.

Familiar impotent rage filled me. I hated being small and weak. I spent a lot of time in Barclay Foods's gym, honing my muscles and improving my speed and strength. After meeting Connor, it all seemed completely futile. If Connor wanted, I would have to submit to him. I wouldn't have a choice. I was smaller, weaker, and while I could bite the hell out of him, I probably couldn't do much damage. Meanwhile he had a mouth full of sharp wolf teeth that could cut me to ribbons if I didn't do what he wanted.

I hoped our hotel room had a bathroom. I could lock myself in it until morning.

The hotel was more of a motel setup. The main office sat in the middle of an H banked by two columns. The parking lot on our side of the H was full. Inside, the lobby was empty.

"Our friend was just here," Connor said. "Shen Purefoy?"

"Yep. He grabbed the last room." The young woman hit a switch beneath her desk and the flashing "Vacancy" sign switched to "No Vacancy."

"But he got two rooms, right?" Connor asked.

"We only had one room," she said. "A scout troop is hiking up the mountain tomorrow."

"We can figure this out," I said. "Where's the nearest hotel?"

"With vacancies? Probably Vegas." Her smug tone made me suspicious.

"That's the closest place to stay tonight?" Connor asked.

"There's a bed-and-breakfast on the other side of the dam. They might have a room for you." She shrugged. "I can call over there, if ya like."

"Please," I said. "That would be kind of you."

She nodded and hit a button on her switchboard. After it rang a few times, an angry person picked up. "It's the middle of the night, Sally!"

"Sorry, Burt. I've got two guys here looking for a room. You got one?"

Their conversation became too soft for me to hear it, but Connor frowned.

"Yeah. You coming to get them, or what? They don't have a car." She studied us for a moment. "How did you get here, anyway?"

"Didn't Shen tell you?"

Her eyes widened in surprise. "You mean he was serious about the plane crash? I thought he was full of shi—garbage. Pardon my expression."

"I can't wait to meet our new local celebrities!" Burt said on the other end of the phone. "I'll be there in fifteen."

She ended the call and motioned for us to sit on the two benches in the lobby.

I took the seat closest to the door, and Connor sat right beside me. I hated how much I liked the way his warmth spread through the entire right side of my body. I wanted to



lean against him, but I forced myself not to give in.

As I glanced around the lobby at the deer and elk heads hanging on the wall, the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. I'd seen too many horror movies about small-town lodging situations. This place reminded me of the one with a secret passage behind all the rooms. What if the bed-and-breakfast was even worse?

"If Burt shows up in clown makeup, we're going to camp in the woods," I said.

Connor draped his arm over my shoulder and kissed my temple, making me feel like I was five years old. "I think he'll be in rave gear. Sounded like they were having a sex party at the B&B."

I shivered. That was even worse.

Thankfully, Burt was fully dressed. In drag. As Dolly Parton in a blue turtleneck dress with a high knee slit. I instantly relaxed. Drag Dolly Parton wouldn't murder us in our sleep.

Connor complimented her while I climbed into the backseat of the eighties station wagon. It looked oddly familiar.

"This looks like the National Lampoon's Vacation wagon," Connor said. "Did you see that, Ben? They even have a leash hanging off the rear bumper, and the same luggage in the rack."

"Good eye, young man." Burt practically purred as they climbed into the front seat together.

"I loved that movie when I was a kid," Connor said. "How about you, Ben?"

I swallowed hard, wondering if I should go with the flow or tell the truth. Nobody would ever mistake me for the smartest omega. Before I could come up with an adequate lie, I blurted the answer from my heart. "I hated it. Clark was so mean to his brother. And that poor dog."

Both Connor and Burt hung their heads. "Let's have a moment of silence for Dinky," Burt said. Then they both laughed. Assholes.

"Your boyfriend's very unhappy," Burt said. "It's a good thing you're getting the honeymoon suite tonight."

"The what now?" I asked. If I had hackles like Connor, they would have been raised.

"Only room available," Burt said. "You'll love it. There's a balcony where you can watch the birds at the feeder in the morning."

"We need to catch the first train out of here," I said.

"Where are you headed?" Burt asked.

"LA," Connor and I said at the same time.

"There's no direct train from here to there. You're better off waiting for a bus to Vegas. It'll take you most of the day tomorrow, but it'll get you there." Burt carried on about the various schedule flyers they had in the office. "I can drive you to the station tomorrow, so no need to worry about a car."

"Thank you," Connor said. "We appreciate all this."

The Beaver Dam B&B was an adorable two-story log cabin with a huge second-story balcony that wrapped around the front and sides. If I had to guess from our spot in the

parking lot, it probably wrapped around the back, too.

Inside, the fire was tamped back for the night, but the lobby was so warm, I instantly felt drowsy.

"Huh, I can't find my wallet." Connor patted down every pocket of his cargo pants. "I thought it was here." He slapped his ass, and my mouth watered. Why was that so fucking hot?

"Do you have Shen's number?" I asked. "It might have been in your other shorts."

He blinked, and then his eyes narrowed to slits. "Yes. I'll text him."

I handed Burt my card, instead, and tried not to pass out at the price he gave me. He insisted it was a discount since it was already after midnight, but it was more than I had paid per night in New York.

I was too tired to argue. Everywhere in the building was warm and cozy, including the honeymoon suite. Burt led us to a narrow stairway on the second floor and motioned to what I assumed was the attic. Instead, we found a door to a large loft in the peak of the wooden rafters.

"This is really nice, isn't it?" Connor asked as he set my carry-on on the luggage stand by the door and flipped on the light. The lampshades were pink, giving everything in the room a soft glow.

I swallowed hard, remembering my earlier fear of being overwhelmed by my alpha counterpart. I unzipped my bag, grabbed my toiletry pouch, and locked myself in the bathroom without another word.

"Hey." Connor knocked a moment later. "Are you almost done in there? I have to

pee, and I could really use a shower."

"Out in a minute!"

"We should talk," Connor said. "Could you maybe open the door?"

"I can hear you fine from here," I said.

"Okay." He didn't sound so sure. Cloth whispered against the wall as he slid down to sit on the floor. "You're human, so you probably don't know what it means to be my fated mate."

He was right. I'd heard the term before, but only in fairytales. "What does it mean?"

"You're the reason my pack kicked me out," he said. "The reason I've been looking for home ever since. I wanted to find you, so I wouldn't be alone. You're all I've ever wanted."

I covered my toothbrush with toothpaste. "Do you own omegas in your pack?" I asked.

"Yes." He sighed. "I hated it. They wanted me to take an omega mate when I turned eighteen. I didn't want that. I didn't want to start a family with another wolf just to grow our pack. I wanted someone who understood me."

Wasn't that what I had been looking for, too? I wanted someone who loved me, not my family name or the shares of the bank that came with my hand in marriage.

I finished brushing my teeth and spat in the sink before asking, "What happens now? Do you just take what you want from me because I'm your omega?"

"No! I'm not like that." He tried the door handle again and then knocked when it didn't turn. "Ben, please, let me in?"

"No." The word was louder and harsher than I intended, but I needed to understand. "Explain."

"Consent matters to me. I won't touch you until you want me to. I won't force myself on you. Even if you were in heat and needed someone to help you with it, I would rather you had someone you trust. It doesn't have to be me."

"I've never gone into heat, so I think we're good there." Human omegas usually didn't. I'd always thought the ones who did were lucky. At least they knew when they were fertile. I could be fertile any time, which meant I'd used protection with all my partners, even when I was on top.

"I like to top," I said, since I was thinking about it. "Would you let me?"

"Gods, would I!" His enthusiasm surprised me. Every alpha I'd dated had refused to switch and then dumped me when I refused to sleep with them. My one beta boyfriend had been okay with switching, but then he'd cheated. Which led me to my next question.

"How long would you wait before I said I was ready for sex? Would you be off getting your dick wet elsewhere?"

"No." He chuffed a laugh. "You don't understand. I've been waiting for you. Now that I've found you, I'd wait forever if that's what it takes."

"Waiting, as in you're still a virgin?"

"No ..." He trailed off, and I heard the telltale scraping sound again, of him sliding

back up the wall to his feet. "I can't wait that long to pee, though. I'll go see if they have a public bathroom somewhere."

"No, here." I unlatched the bathroom door and pushed it open.

Connor stared at the tattoos on my chest before gazing at my slicked back hair. He whistled. "Wow."

"You're pretty wow, yourself," I said.

He grinned. "You got to see it all when I shifted back. Want to return the favor?"

I rolled my eyes. "Not tonight. I, we, need sleep."

He wiggle-danced on his toes and planted his hands at his fly. "I need to pee first."

I grabbed my clothes and hygiene kit off the toilet lid and returned to the bedroom, closing the door behind me. A few moments later, I heard water running in the tub. I switched my suit pants for pajama bottoms and hopped into the soft queen bed. Before, I would have sworn I wouldn't have been able to sleep in the same bed with Connor, but he wasn't in bed yet. The longer he took, the more impatient I became.

8

CONNOR

Shit. There was only one bed, and Ben was already in it. I'd wanted to talk to him about the sleeping arrangements, especially after our conversation about consent. I could have shifted and slept on the floor in my wolf form, but I craved stretching out as a human after the day's stressful activity.

"Aren't you ready for bed yet?" Ben sat up and stared at me with a vacant look.

"Are you still asleep?"

He lay down and closed his eyes, patting the bed beside the curve of his ass. "Come on."

"Okay," I said, "but I meant what I said. I won't do anything until you tell me."

"Good," he huffed. "I'm telling you to get in this giant bed and cuddle me so I can sleep."

How could I resist?

Five hours later, I wished I had slept elsewhere. Ben smelled like strawberry shampoo and mint toothpaste. He was tucked so tightly against me that my morning wood slid against his crack with his every move.

He moaned, and I froze. I tried to pull my arm away, but he pulled me against him, leaving no space between his back and my front. He let my arm drop, and my thumb brushed his pert nipple.

"Fuck, yes." He bucked against me, and I groaned. My cock was so hard and ready to blow after the night's half-remembered erotic dreams.

He clenched his cheeks, squeezing my cock just right. "Oh, Connor."

I dropped my forehead to his shoulder and hung on, gripping him tight as I made a mess in my shorts. I hadn't come so hard since I was a teenager.

"Connor?" Ben's voice was much clearer now, and a little alarmed. "What's ... what are we doing?"

"I'm so sorry!" The words came out as a jumble as I rolled toward the open side of the bed to hide my burgeoning knot. Forgetting the peaked ceiling, I knocked my head against the rafter when I tried to sit up. Whining, I rolled the rest of the way off the bed and crawled to the bathroom on all fours.

It was my turn to lock myself inside while I assessed the damage. This was my only pair of shorts, thanks to that thief, Shen. He'd taken my other pair, and I was pretty sure he lifted my wallet from my pants before abandoning us at the motel.

I should have known better. Any friend of Hank's was probably a swindler just like Hank. Well, it served him right. The only money I had on me was from our business account, and I'd almost emptied it with the first-class tickets.

He could probably get that money back from the airline because our last flight had been canceled. I sighed. Even when I tried to screw Hank over, I couldn't win.



Then I remembered the plane Shen had crashed due to his negligence. In the moment, it had been scary as fuck, but now, looking back, Shen would have to explain to Hank how he'd forgotten to refuel. Knowing Shen, he wouldn't mention it.

I stripped out of my soiled shorts. Thankfully, they had an inner lining like a pair of swim trunks, but I'd still left a big turquoise wet spot on the light blue fabric. I tossed them in the sink with some cold water and let them sit for a minute while I took care of the rest of my business. My knot had flagged from the pain of hitting my head, but my cock was still half-hard from being so close to Ben. I willed my eagerness away. I wanted him, yes, but I could wait.

Afterward, I washed my hands in the bathtub. Then, I wrung the shorts out and left them to air dry on the shower curtain rod. I grabbed my damp towel from the night before and wrapped it around my waist.

I caught a glimpse of my bruised forehead in the mirror. No broken skin, but I'd have a dark spot at my hairline unless I shifted to get rid of it.

I couldn't risk that. In my wolf form, I would be too tempted to break down the bathroom door and jump all over Ben. My wolf wanted to scent mark him, to rub my jaws and fur all over him until he smelled like mine. Then, I wanted to bite him while I shoved my knot inside him, claiming him in every way possible.

Nope. Couldn't think about that right now. I could deal with a minor bruise for a day.

I walked out of the bathroom and into Ben, who stood at the door with his hand hovering near the door handle. His hand brushed against my towel and he pulled back. "What happened?"

"Wardrobe malfunction?" I tried to shrug it off, but his gaze was a tractor beam pulling me in.

"Oh no! Did I ... I didn't mean ... I was grinding against you. I'm so sorry."

I felt bad for him as I watched the emotions flicker across his face with each realization.

"Best orgasm I've had in a while," I whispered.

"Don't say that! That's even worse!"

"Why?" I asked. "Is it really so terrible that I enjoyed you rubbing against my morning wood? It happens."

"Next time, I want us both to enjoy it." He inhaled, his eyes wide and a little dilated.

"I mean ... not that there's going to be a next time."

I couldn't watch his conflicted emotions anymore. I gently turned him sideways so I could fit through the doorway and grabbed my phone off the dresser.

Ben closed and locked the bathroom door, leaving me alone. Loneliness seeped into my chest.

I had my phone, my lifeline to the outside world. I sank onto the foot of the bed and typed a message to Shen.

"You'd better leave my wallet at the motel front desk in the next ten minutes. I'll pick it up before we leave."

Then, I dashed a quick text to Hank. "Shen crashed the jet in Utah. Forgot to refuel in Denver."

"New phone who dis?" Shen responded. Then, he texted a picture of my completely

destroyed wallet floating in a toilet bowl. The wallet was a cheap leather bifold, but the pictures of NFTs inside had been some of my favorite artwork around the world.

"Fuck you, man," I responded.

"Hank said I should have let you die."

Ouch. So much for my found family.

"What the fuck did I ever do to you?" I texted Hank. No response. No surprise.

I heard the sink faucet, and then the blow dryer. I didn't take Ben for the type. His hair was a little shorter than mine and cut so it would fall perfectly around his face, no matter how bad the wind was blowing.

But what did I know about haircare? My hair was always in a state of disarray, from the way I ran my fingers through it with every setback. Yesterday had been full of setbacks.

I couldn't think that way, though. I'd met my fated mate.

The bathroom door opened, and my shorts flew out, hitting me in the chest. They were warm and dry, like they'd just come from the clothes dryer.

"You're welcome," Ben said. "How I'm supposed to get clean with your spunk all over the sink is beyond me."

I probably wasn't supposed to hear that last part. Wolf hearing was fabulous. So amazing, I thought I could hear Shen typing as the three dots rolled across my text screen while I waited for his next insult.

"Connor?" Ben called from the bathroom a few minutes later. The door was still open a crack, but I couldn't see him.

"Yes?"

"Could you come here, please?"

When he asked so politely, how could I resist?

I dropped my phone and tapped the door open. He rushed me, climbing up my bare torso and wrapping his toned legs around my towel-clad waist.

"Good," he mumbled against my lips. "I was hoping you hadn't put your shorts on yet."

He kissed me, all soft lips and velvet tongue. He tightened his grip on my shoulders as he claimed my mouth. I gripped his ass, holding him to me as I rubbed my thickening cock in the crook of his groin. He felt so good against me, exactly where I wanted him. I knew I should question the complete reversal from the night before, but I didn't want it to end.

He groaned and slid back to his feet. "You taste so good."

"You say that like it's a bad thing."

He shook his head. "Not a bad thing. I'm irritated because we don't have much time before the bus leaves."

Right. We needed to take the bus to Vegas and then catch a flight to Orange County, or wherever my omega's home was.

"I shower in the morning," he whispered. "This morning, I thought I could shower with you. Maybe we could rub one out together."

Even though my whole body trembled with anticipation, my voice remained calm. "Whatever you want, my omega."

He leaned against my chest and sucked my nipple into his mouth. He departed with a gentle kiss on my sensitive, puckered bud. "I love how your body reacts to me."

He yanked the towel from my waist and looked me over with a hungry gaze my wolf recognized.

"Like what you see?"

He smirked. "I could be on board with fated mates, if this is what fate brings me."

He stripped out of his shorts, and it was my turn to stare. My mate was stunning. Dark tattoos wrapped over his shoulder and continued down his torso. He was built like a swimmer, but his tailored suit, and even his loose sleep shirt, had hidden his chiseled shoulders and abs.

I reached for him but stopped short. "May I touch you?"

He nodded and stepped closer, resting his hands on my hips while I explored him with my palms.

"You're gorgeous." I couldn't get enough of his soft skin beneath my callouses. He had thicker muscles than most omegas, and he didn't miss leg days. I wanted to explore every line and crease.

I massaged his chest, flicking his nipples with my thumbs, and he whimpered.

"Shower, or I'm going to come on the bathroom floor."

I got the water ready for us while he grabbed toiletries from his bag. I helped him under the spray first, since I'd already taken a shower the night before. He wasted no time shampooing his hair and rinsing it, but when it was time to wash his body, he shoved himself into my space and wrapped his soapy hand around my cock.

"Your cock is so big," he said. "Thicker than any I've taken. Do you want to knot me, alpha?"

I couldn't remember how to form words, so I nodded.

"Later," he mumbled. "After I find my nephew a birthday present so I can show my face at his birthday party."

He stroked my cock again, and stars sparked behind my eyelids. I was going to lose control again too soon.

I forced my eyes open and grabbed the bar of hotel soap from the ledge. I lathered my hand while Ben continued to stroke me.

His hand slowed when I wrapped my fingers around his cock and gave it an experimental tug. His cock was almost as long as mine. I swiped my thumb over his pink tip, gathering the drip of precome and slathering it around the mushroom head of his cut cock.

"That feels wonderful." He leaned against me so the tips of our cocks brushed against each other as we stroked.

"Can I try something?" I asked.

"Mm-hmm."

I pried his fingers from my cock and took us both in hand. I snaked my other arm around his waist to hold him in place and give him leverage to thrust against me as I stroked.

He moaned against my chest as we both neared our release. I flicked my thumb over his tip again and he froze against me, his cock pulsing in my grip. The slide of my cock through his release brought me back to the edge. Two more strokes, and I added my cum to the mess between us.

Ben whimpered against my chest and closed his hands around my growing knot. "Now I'm a mess."

"I'll clean you up," I said, wiping my still-soapy hand across his chest.

"My hole is dripping," he whispered. "And your knot ..."

"I'll be fine after a few minutes," I said. "What do you usually do about your slick?"

He sighed. "I don't. It's never been like this."

"I can take care of it for you," I said. "After I clean us both up."

I soaped and rinsed us off twice. Then, I dropped to my knees before Ben in the shower.

"What are you doing?"

"Taking care of you. Turn around."

His face flushed a pretty pink, but he did as I asked. His ass was just as luscious as it had looked last night in bed. I squeezed his cheeks before pulling them apart and staring at his tight pucker. His crack and the back of his balls shone with slick. I drew my fingers over his balls, his taint, and across his hole, making him hiss.

He turned to frown at me, and I stuck my fingers in my mouth, taking my first taste of him. His slick was sweet, like nectar. I followed the path of my fingers with my tongue next, and he squirmed. I gripped his firm cheeks and speared my tongue into his hole, gathering his slick at the source. His musky scent mixed with the heavenly flavor to become my new obsession. I would never get enough of Ben's slick, nor the needy sounds he made while I worked my fingers inside his tight hole to tap his prostate.

"Nungh—not gonna last!"

I kept working my fingers as I turned him back around. I glanced at the drip of precome on his tip and then gazed up at him. "May I?"

He glanced down at me and his entire body flushed from the tips of his ears to his belly button. "Yes, please."

I licked the drop of precome, appreciating the salty taste before taking him to the back of my throat.

"Fuck, Connor, I'm gonna ..."

I pulled him closer and relaxed my throat to take him even deeper. I felt his dick twitch in my mouth as he came down my throat. His knees gave out. I held him up and milked his cock with broad strokes of my tongue until he laughed and shoved my shoulders.



"That's enough," he said.

I eased off his cock and gave the tip a little kiss. "I'll never get enough. You taste so good."

The water had run cold while we played. Ben turned it off and soaped us up. Afterward, we rinsed off in record time. I doubted we saved a single minute by taking a shower together, but afterward, I felt like I'd made progress with my mate.

### BENJAMIN

I should have been the one on my knees in the shower. The scent of Connor's release had filled the small bathroom, even after he'd rinsed his shorts. Drying them out hadn't made the smell go away, either. It lingered in the air.

I'd never been particularly fond of cum, but Connor's was different. Everything about Connor was unique. He should have been another annoying alpha, except he didn't frustrate me as much as they usually did. He was sweet, kind, and wowzah, did he know how to use that tongue. I couldn't stop fantasizing about what he could do with his knot. I'd seen it pop when he came, but he ignored it afterward. It didn't make sense to me after all the horror stories I'd heard in school, where alphas tried to shove their knots in omegas' hole after blowjobs. The excuse was always, "It hurt!" and they ended up hurting their omegas instead.

"Does your knot hurt?" I asked.

The offending anatomy had long since been tucked away inside Connor's shorts and pants, but he glanced down at the slight bulge before meeting my gaze. "No. It's annoying sometimes, but it doesn't hurt."

"All those stories in high school?—"

"Alphas who didn't want pushback when they suggested sex instead of a blowjob." Connor shrugged. "At least, that's the locker-room talk I heard."

"It made me want to leave them the fuck alone," I said. "I've never had sex with an alpha."

"Well, I call what we did in the shower sex."

My face burned. He was right, of course. I'd never done more than kiss an alpha because I didn't want to be knotted. Now, it was all I could think about.

"I avoided sex with omegas, too," he said. "Omegas are scared of us, but betas like to play."

My face burned even hotter. "Yes, they do." I'd never had one eat my ass the way Connor did, though. He knew what he was doing with his fingers, and his tongue seemed to defy logic.

"You're not bad, for an alpha."

"As far as omega mates go, you're the best." He grinned. "You're also my only omega mate ..."

"Good." The word was more forceful than I'd meant it to be. I couldn't explain it. Connor was mine. I didn't want him thinking about other omegas, and I'd damn well better be his only mate for life.

Where had that thought come from?

I needed to get out of the pheromone-filled suite before I tackled Connor to the bed and rode his cock until it was time to leave. I'd never find a present for my nephew that way.

"Want to look for a Wonderdog 3000 with me?"

"Isn't that the furry robot dog?"

I nodded. "My nephew has been begging for one since last Christmas."

"We can look, but I'm pretty sure they're all sold out from here to Vancouver."

"I don't care. I'll be the worst uncle ever if I can't find this toy." My nephew was a bratty little punk, but I didn't want to be a bad uncle. I would find him the Wonderdog 3000 or something just as awesome.

"You can't be the worst uncle ever because I am." Connor hung his head and his shoulders slumped forward. As much as I wanted to know the story, it wasn't my place to ask. We'd just met, and while he'd given me two mind-blowing orgasms, I wasn't ready to share generational trauma with him.

He retrieved his fanny pack from my suitcase but left his suit coat and the toy wolf with me, promising he would buy a souvenir in the B&B's gift shop and use their plastic bag as his luggage. I hated that idea, so I bought him a small carry-on like mine while he was busy looking at sea turtle figurines. The rainbow designs were gorgeous, I had to agree, but the plain hard-shelled suitcase was far more practical, even if his puffy coat would take up half the space inside.

I handed him the suitcase while he was still studying the intricate detail on the turtle shells, and he frowned. "What's this?"

"A gift."

He shook his head. "I can't accept this."

"A loan then?" I asked. "When you get home to Phoenix, you can send it back to me."

He looked even more hurt than he had before.

I leaned in and kissed his cheek. "Please, just use the suitcase. I don't want your little dog to get smushed in the overhead bin or stepped on beneath a seat."

"For Wolfy, then." He nodded and a hint of his former grin returned. "I'll do it."

"Thank you."

"You two are so cute," Burt said as he sauntered into the gift shop in plain clothes and no makeup, sending the young girl working the register scurrying for the front desk. "How did you sleep?"

Connor and I glanced at each other, and he grinned. For a moment, I worried he would spill our sexcapades, but he cleared his throat and motioned for me to share.

"Comfortable bed. Can't complain," I stammered.

"Good! I'm so glad!" Burt pointed to the figurines. "They're lovely, aren't they?"

"Yes!" Connor's smile returned full force. "How much?"

"Twenty dollars."

"Oh." He patted the turtle made of black stone and said, "Maybe next time."

"Here," I grabbed it off the shelf before Connor could stop me and handed it to Burt. "We'll take this one."

"Good choice. Black tourmaline is a stone of protection."

"Wish it would have protected you from Shen's grabby hands," I whispered.

"Now it will!" He perked up again, shaking Burt's hand across the counter. "This is great!"

"Do you have a toy store in town?" I asked.

"Not here, but you might find something at the bus station. I can drive you whenever you're ready."

"That's so sweet," Connor said. "We'll be sure to give you a good review."

Burt's eyes sparkled at that. "Thank you. That would be wonderful."

I wouldn't be writing them a rave review, not with the price gouging in the middle of the night during a snowstorm.

"You write hotel reviews?" I asked Connor.

"Yes! They're fun!"

"Fun?"

"It's mostly for my own benefit. I travel a lot, so it's nice to remember which hotel had the bedbugs and which one gave complimentary chocolates on their pillows."

"Oh, my goddess!" Burt fanned his face. "I forgot to give you your gift basket last night! I'm so sorry!"

"See?" Connor whispered when Burt returned with a basket filled with wine, cured meats, cheese spread, and crackers.

Then, he offered to make us omelets for our complimentary breakfast. I couldn't argue. It was one of the lightest, fluffiest omelets I'd ever eaten.

"You knew he would do that?" I asked when we were safely tucked inside the bus station, waving to Burt as he drove away.

"I didn't know, but that happens sometimes."

"This was not complementary with the room." I pointed to the card and read aloud, "To Don from Doug. Happy Anniversary."

"Maybe they couldn't make it because of the weather."

He had a point. We had gotten free breakfast and lunch out of the deal, so I couldn't be too upset.

"I think I can sell the wine and get some cash to pay you back," Connor said. He grabbed my shoulder and turned me toward yet another souvenir shop. "I'll join you in a minute."

Sure, I probably should have questioned his confidence when swindling people out of their hard-earned cash, but I was more interested in the toy sitting on the top shelf in the display case. I couldn't see anything through the cracked cellophane window. It was too high up.

Inside the store, it was obvious the box was badly damaged and probably empty. Still, I had to try. "Is that a Wonderdog 3000?" I asked the clerk.

"It's the store display." Even though I was the only one in the small store, she rolled her eyes like this was the fifth time she'd been asked about the Wonderdog today. "Not for sale."

"Do you have other toys?"

She pointed toward the far-left corner furthest from the counter, and I wandered that direction, past Utah license plates with people's names on them and postcards of various mountain and National Park destinations.

I frowned at the generic toy selection. They had a few stuffed animals, but nothing as nice as Wolfy. They had a handful of travel board games, but not much else. The games, and everything else in the shop, had jacked-up prices, even higher than Burt's. I saw the same carved rock turtles for fifteen dollars more than I'd paid for Connor's.

Disappointed, I headed back to the station proper. I almost ran right into Connor, who was coming to find me.

"Hey! I can pay you back for the suitcase, and I think I have enough for two tickets to Vegas."

"All for a bottle of wine?" I asked.

"I sold both bottles and that little container of caviar." He Frowned at me. "You didn't want it, did you? I can repay you for that, too."

"You don't need to pay me back," I said. "We're in this together."

He flashed another of his bright smiles before it dimmed again. "You don't mean that because we're mates."

"I mean that because we crash-landed here on a dragon, and now we need to get home. Well. My home."

He turned away with a sigh. Seeing him with his bag reminded me of mine. The one I



didn't have with me.

"Fuck! Where did I leave my bag?"

"It's right here." He pointed beneath the bench he'd sat on. "I've got you." He hesitated like he wanted to say more, omega maybe, or mate, but stopped short.

From what I could tell, Connor was a happy-go-lucky guy. I hated being the reason he second-guessed himself. When he swaggered and smiled, I liked him best.

I liked him. There was no denying it. He was skilled with his tongue, whether he was rimming me or selling wine and caviar to tourists, but it was more than that. I'd never felt this at ease around another person, let alone an alpha. If this was what it meant to be fated mates, I needed to know everything.

Connor left the bags with me while he bought our bus tickets. I pulled out my phone for a search. After a few duds and one dating site, I finally stumbled on a shifter site camouflaged as monster trivia. "Which type of monster fucker are you?" the headline read.

I blinked a few times to make sure my eyes weren't playing tricks on me after so little sleep. Image after image of animals popped up, along with some of legend. Five different kinds of dragon. The Loch Ness Monster. A unicorn. I tapped the image of a wolf, and the screen filled with a wall of text broken up only by different images. One was the spitting image of Connor.

"The Moonlight Pack have traditional views about alpha/omega pairings. They do not believe in fated mates, instead bonding the strongest alphas with the most docile omegas to continue their bloodlines."

Well, fuck that. I was not a docile omega, and I was beginning to see why Connor left

his pack.

I touched the back button to see if other wolf packs operated differently. The Broadleaf pack were mostly gray with some brown mixed in. They almost looked like coyotes to me. A link at the bottom caught my eye. "See Fated Mates ."

Okay, I was game. I clicked the link.

"Fated mates are destined to be together. Often, one or both feel a pull toward their mate and away from other partners long before they meet."

Huh. I'd never really wanted to be with an alpha before Connor, but that didn't mean ... I kept reading. "Shifters and other monsters often recognize their mate from their scent. Humans take more time to develop the mate bond, but often these pairings are between humans and non-humans to ensure biological diversity."

Ew. Biology was the last thing I wanted to think about. I was just getting used to the fact I liked Connor. I did not plan on making babies with him anytime soon.

Still, this website existed, and the iffy title "MonsterLovers.com" didn't detract from the valuable information I'd gained. Now, I had to decide if I trusted fate, and Connor, or if fate was just another way for life to screw me over.

10

CONNOR

As the alpha in this relationship, my job was to provide for my omega. At least, that was what my pack leaders taught me. I'd been away from my pack for twelve years, but that amount of time wasn't enough to rewire my brain.

I should have taken a more active role in packing my bag and preparing to leave. Ben had packed up our room and divided our suitcases with quick efficiency while I lazed on the bed, still too blissed out from the fabulous sex.

What an alpha thing to do. I was the worst.

I'd channeled my inner angst to sell the two bottles of wine and the tin of caviar. I'd lied to the human couple celebrating their fifth anniversary, saying that my mate had rejected me. I showed them the card and said I was Doug. I'd been aiming for enough for one bus ticket, but they gave me money for two and then some. All I had to do was think how sad I would be if Ben actually rejected me, and that was enough to flood my eyes with tears.

Believing in fate was a lot to ask a human who didn't know about shifters and thought fated mates only existed in romance novels. He had every right to leave me at the Orange County airport and never look back.

This morning gave me hope, though. He'd initiated showering together, and he'd participated in our round of mutual orgasms.

The talk we'd had about alphas was a little disturbing—what did humans teach their omegas about sex? I also had no room to talk, since my pack had raised me to use my omega whenever I wanted because it was my right, even if they weren't my fated mate. Especially if they weren't my fated mate. Just thinking about it grossed me out.

I wasn't that kind of alpha. I wanted a mate with his own autonomy, who wasn't afraid to talk back to me or tell me no.

Ben excelled at saying no. I chuckled, remembering how adamant he was about not being able to smell me. In response, my wolf wanted to roll over on his back and show Ben his belly.

Playing with him in the snow had been the best, though. I hoped we got to play more once we arrived in California. Not in the snow, but maybe on a sandy beach. I couldn't wait to see Ben in a pair of swim trunks, flip-flops, and nothing else.

The ocean was probably a little too cold yet, but this summer ...

There I went, getting too far ahead of myself again. If Ben wanted us to part at Orange County Airport and go our separate ways, I would respect that. It would hurt like hell, but I wouldn't force myself on him. I'd already spent the better part of a day with my fated mate. That was more than some folks got in their whole lives.

I paid for the two bus tickets and returned to the bench where I'd left Ben and our bags. I couldn't tell if his phone had offended him or if he had resting angry face.

As I sat down, a gaggle of elderly folks wandered through the double doors. A bus had dropped them off before heading to the gas station across the street. Thanks to my enhanced sight, I could see the string of numbers on the back.

"That's our bus," I told Ben. "I'm going to wait outside."

"I'll come with you."

I stopped short of arguing with him about the cold. He was an adult. If he wanted to stand in the freezing cold with his human temperature and unprotected skin, that was his right. As his mate, I would let him do whatever he wanted.

He'd tied his coat around his waist when we first entered the station. He missed the armhole twice while trying to put it back on before I held the coat open for him.

"Thanks," he mumbled.

Outside, a line of trees blocked the wind from the main doors. I tugged on my coat to seem more human, but it was warm enough I didn't zip it up.

After what seemed like forever, the bus driver finally returned to the parking lot and wrenched the door open. Ben and I boarded the bus, handing her our tickets.

"Shit," Ben whispered. "I should have been checking for flights." He asked the driver, "What time will we get to Vegas?"

"Around one thirty."

Ben thanked her and headed for an aisle seat in the middle of the bus.

"May I sit here?" I pointed at the window seat beside him.

He blinked up at me. "I was saving it for you."

"Thank you." I chuckled as I wiggled past him and sank down into the unexpectedly comfortable seat. "You know, if you wanted me to know this was my seat, it would have been a good idea to tell me so."

He nodded. "I'm sorry. I got distracted by a website and now I'm even further behind." He pulled up another website on his phone and sighed. "The flights are all full. We wouldn't be able to fly from Las Vegas to Orange County until tomorrow."

"We?"

He frowned. "Did you change your mind? I can look at flights to Phoenix, if you'd rather?—"

"No! Please. I have to see you reach your home. It's imperative."

He grinned. "Only you would say things like that."

He hopped from his seat and had a quick conversation with the bus driver before returning to talk to me.

"I asked about taking the train from Vegas to LA, but our driver recommended the bus, instead. It'll take longer, but it's better for our budget."

I hated that he had to worry about money. He'd stopped talking about going to the office when we reached his home, but I could tell the thought of missing work weighed heavily on him.

Once all passengers had boarded, the bus's air brakes let out a hiss, and we rolled from the parking lot onto the open highway. I waited until everyone settled before breaking out the crackers, meat, and cheese spread.

"You should eat," I said.

He frowned at me. "So should you."

Instead of agreeing, I shoved a cheese-laden cracker in his open mouth. He took it as a challenge to shove a giant summer sausage my direction. Fortunately for both of us, the sausage was pre-sliced, so he only ended up grabbing two pieces of it.

"Mmm," I said. "I love sausage!"

He rolled his eyes at me, but his cheeks darkened a shade as he loaded another cracker with all the fixings.

It could have been our big breakfast, but we only ate half of the snacks. I tucked the rest away for later.

The bus was louder than I remembered from my early days of traveling from town to town, looking for any job I could find while also sniffing for my fated mate. It felt weird to be back on a bus. At least this time, I was with my mate.

Ben was right. The bus was slower than flying, but it would get us to Orange County before midnight.

Or so we thought. The rumbling noise up front grew louder, and the front of the bus filled with smoke.

"This sucks," Ben said. "At this rate, I won't have a chance to go home and shower before my nephew's party. I'll roll up in a ride share like something the cat dragged in."

The bus had smoked to a stop on the side of the road not far from a Native American outpost.

"How long before we have a replacement?" I asked the driver when she opened the emergency exit window to let us out.

"We're about forty minutes from Vegas," she said.

Ben heaved a sigh and leaned his body against mine. If he were pack, he would be trying to assert dominance over me. I would have growled at anyone else, but I took this as a good sign from my fated mate. I wrapped my arm around his waist to comfort him and tucked him away from the brisk wind.

"Want to walk to the outpost?" I asked. "They might have a Wonderdog 3000."

"I doubt it," he huffed.

He took a step in that direction, pulling me along with him by lacing our fingers together at his waist. Awkward didn't begin to describe how hard it was for me to walk behind him like that, but I wasn't pulling my hand away for anything.

After I stepped on the back of his heel for the third time, he turned to face me with a grin, grabbing my hand in both of his and switching sides. My chest felt warm and light as we walked together to the outpost, our linked hands swinging between us.

The building was a relic from the early nineteenth century. It had probably started as a fur trading business, which made my skin crawl.

My pack told horror stories of wolves being trapped and hunted for their fur, only to watch us shift back to our human forms when we were dead. Now packless, I avoided shifting in open rural areas if I could help it. After the plane crash last night, I'd felt safe. No one in their right mind would attack a wolf with a dragon around. Either they'd run screaming, or they'd want the big lizard head mounted on their wall instead of mine.

Speaking of the annoying dragon, I pulled out my phone and texted Shen while Ben looked around. "You back in Phoenix yet?"



Nothing. Not that I'd expected him to respond.

Ben frowned at the turquoise jewelry on the table. "Are these authentic?"

The kid behind the counter nodded. He wore rustic deerskin clothes and had brown hair and eyes, but his skin was as white as mine.

Ben picked up a trinket and showed me the back of it, the frown never leaving his face. The barcode sticker on the back read, "Made in China."

Ben carefully placed the item back on the table and backed toward the door. "Thanks."

Another group from the bus was on their way to the outpost, so I held the door for them. Ben frowned at me, like the small act of kindness offended him.

"What?" I asked as we walked back to the bus, our hands laced together again.

"Everything about this makes me angry," he said. "Shen stealing your wallet. Riding the bus, and then it broke down. Rip-off outpost. Not getting home tonight like I'd wanted."

"Hey." I tugged on our linked fingers, pulling him to me for a hug. "It'll be all right. We'll get you home in time for your party. Who knows, along the way, we might find a Wonderdog 3000." The toys were also made in China, but I didn't want to anger him all over again.

"We won't," he said. "I've had an alert on my phone for the last six months, waiting. It's only notified me twice when stores had them in stock, and both times, they sold out before I could get there."

"I'm sorry." I dropped a kiss on top of his head. It felt so right to hold him against me like this. "Let's go back to the bus and see if we can help."

"That's what you do, isn't it?" His words sounded like an accusation. I stepped back so I could see his face. He grinned up at me, and I relaxed. He was teasing. "You're a helper. You make everything better."

"I try." I wanted to brighten my mate's day, though arriving home in time for Sunday dinner looked less and less likely by the moment.

With the bus driver's direction, we removed all luggage from the bus's storage compartment, and then we helped her stash them in the new bus when it arrived. The replacement reminded me of a school bus with the seat designs, and it was decidedly smaller than the first. Ben and I had to share a seat, which meant he was practically sitting in my lap. No harm, there, but the more he squirmed to get comfortable, the more my cock took notice.

I tried not to read over his shoulder as he sent text messages to his parents and the family group chat. I pulled up a game on my phone, hoping to focus on something other than Ben, but he distracted me with every gentle touch and the occasional kiss to my cheek.

It was the best/worst bus ride I'd ever taken.

### BENJAMIN

Why was Connor so perfect? He was supposed to be my fated mate and all, but that couldn't be the full answer. I felt like I was back in school, staring at a blank essay test.

He was gorgeous in that carefree way some alphas had. Perfect without even trying. Stranger still, he didn't act like he was god's gift to omegas, unlike every alpha and even a few betas I knew. He was casual and carefree, and my consent mattered to him.

I found myself initiating touches and kisses with him, something I had never done. Every time, he rewarded me with the sweetest sounds, or when he'd eaten my ass ... gods. I was still squirming in my seat just thinking about it.

That was the problem. I had too damn much time to think on this bus. I needed a distraction beyond my family's initial distress. My statements about meeting a kind alpha made them think the opposite, that my phone was being monitored by my big alpha captor. After reassuring them I had not been kidnapped, I apologized to my nephew via a text to my brother.

"[laughing emoji] I can't even tell you what he said," my brother texted.

I tucked my phone back into my carry-on and turned to Connor. "Do you want kids?"

"What? No! I mean, maybe, someday?"

"I think I know what you mean." I relaxed against him so my cheek rubbed his shirt on the opposite side of the mustard stain. "I never wanted kids, either, but now that I've met you, I think I could change my mind."

I clapped my hand to my mouth and sat up straight again, trying to put some distance between us. "I mean ..."

"Meeting you has changed my mind about kids," he said. "Though your family chat made me reconsider. How old is your nephew?"

"He'll be nine tomorrow."

"Alpha?" he asked.

"How could you tell?" I rolled my eyes, more at my brother and his husband than at my mate.

Mate. Fuck. I really thought of him as my mate.

"I always thought humans had better rules about alpha dominance and omega subservience than shifter packs do."

"Maybe other families, but ours has always been more traditional." I sighed.

"Backwards, you mean." He nudged me in the side.

I snorted. "Yeah, maybe. Your pack was the same way?"

"Worse. I told you, they wanted me to bond an omega mate I didn't know. It was my

job to breed him until we had a full litter of pups, and then our pack elders would teach them their roles in our pack all over again."

"You refused the bond?"

He nodded. "I wanted something more."

"Like what?" I pried, resting my head against his chest again.

"I knew I wanted an omega who thought for himself, not one confined by pack law and his station. The omega they wanted me to bond was sweet and complacent, and it felt so wrong."

Ha. Sweet and complacent did not describe me, even when I tried to be those things to keep peace with my family.

"I wanted a self-made man, someone who didn't let his role as an omega stop him from climbing a corporate ladder, or running his own company, or whatever he desired."

"I'm not exactly at the top of the corporate ladder," I reminded him.

"You refused to work at your family's bank, and you're a manager." I'd briefly mentioned my past to him, and he'd remembered that. No alpha had paid such close attention to me before, nor cared what I said. When he kissed the hair on top of my head, I loved him a little more.

Wait. What? I did not love him! We just fucking met!

He kissed my head, and I liked him more. That was all. Liked. Liked-liked. Gah, I was back in middle school.

I fell asleep somewhere in the middle of nowhere and woke to a hellscape. Freezing rain pelted the bus windows. The rattling sound woke me from a nightmare where I was giving birth to Connor's baby, but instead of a wolf or a human, it was a person-sized rattlesnake.

I didn't even wait. I pulled up the shifter website I'd been looking at earlier and scrolled to see if there were rattlesnake shifters.

"You've been researching shifters?" Connor's voice was froggy, either from sleep or lack of use. "You even found a legit site."

I hadn't questioned the source. "There are bogus sites?"

"There's a ton of monster romance fiction out there. You could have stumbled onto an author's website, or a fan fiction wiki. They're out there."

"I'm glad I have you to verify, then." I snuggled against his chest, and something hard poked my hip.

"Sorry," he whispered. "I'm a little excited when you're this close to me."

I glanced up and forgot whatever platitude was on my tongue. My brain short-circuited and all I could think was how much I wanted him, too. I swallowed before I started drooling.

The bus driver's intercom buzzed to life, startling me from my surreal reaction. "Those of you hoping to continue on this route to San Bernardino, we will not be leaving Las Vegas until this storm lets up. There's been a rockslide on our usual route through Cajon Pass."

"Something tells me we'll be stuck in Vegas overnight," Connor said.

I had to agree. This time, being stuck with Connor wasn't an inconvenience. Despite the shitty weather, I was looking forward to it.

When we finally arrived in Las Vegas, we once again helped the driver with our luggage. The attendants were nowhere to be seen in the downpour. Once we had all bags unpacked and accounted for, Connor and I made our way to the terminal to wait for a shuttle.

"Whichever shuttle arrives first," I said under my breath, "we're staying there tonight."

I was pleasantly surprised when it wasn't a hotel I recognized. I only hoped it wasn't on the strip. I wanted a quiet night in.

The Bear Den Inn and Suites shuttle was about the size of our second bus, but it wasn't as crowded. We were the only ones to board. We sat near the front, Connor on one side of the aisle with his new suitcase on the seat, and me on the other with mine tucked between my legs.

I'd been dazzled by the lights in New York City, but the Las Vegas strip was brighter by far. After what seemed like miles with all the stoplights, we turned onto a much quieter, though still bright, side street. Soon after, the shuttle pulled up to a beautiful lodge with a log cabin motif much like last night's B&B.

The beta behind the desk took one look at me and shook his head. "You'll have to find another place to stay. We don't allow single omegas. This is a family place."

"Excuse me?"

"He's my fated mate," Connor said at the same time. "We haven't found the right time to ... bond ... yet, but we need somewhere to stay the night, out of the storm."

The beta frowned at me again. "He doesn't smell like your fated mate. He smells human and vulnerable, and we're having a moon party tonight."

I held my tongue and made a mental note to look up moon parties on my new favorite website when we got to the room. If we got a room.

"I'll mark him tonight," Connor said.

Another mental note to research marks. Was it as simple as leaving a hickey on my neck, or was a hot iron involved? That was called branding, right? Not marking?

My pulse spiked the longer we stood before the desk. Finally, the beta sighed. "The hotel's rather empty tonight, thanks to the weather. The casino's in our main lodge. I'll see if we have a room in the tower instead, if you promise to stay there, together, until it's time for you to check out."

"Do you have room service?" Connor asked.

He nodded.

"Deal."

After a few tense moments where I worried the beta would change his mind, he created two room keys for us and directed us to the hallway that led to elevators up to the second-floor skywalk. From there, we were to cross to the tower, and our room was on the tenth floor.

I called my dad and pops to let them know I'd made it to Vegas, but this was as far as I would get tonight. While I did that, Connor called room service and ordered hamburgers and fries for us.



"Who's that in the background?" Pops asked.

"Um ... Connor?"

He glanced up at me as he hung up the room phone. "Yeah?"

"Who's Connor?"

"He's ... a friend," I said. We hadn't talked about marking, bonding, or whatever else the desk clerk had said, and I didn't want to push.

"Is this the same alpha he hated yesterday?" my omega dad asked.

"I didn't hate him," I said, rolling my eyes for Connor's benefit.

He leaned back against the headboard, and I glanced around the room for the first time since dropping my carry-on onto the luggage rack by the TV stand. We had only one bed in our room. Again. It was a king, at least, not the cozy queen we'd shared last night, but still, one bed.

Couldn't be helped, I supposed. Connor had said he would mark me tonight, whatever that meant. We had to keep up appearances, so the beta didn't kick us out in the rain. Maybe it was the pheromones I'd read about, but part of me wanted to wear Connor's mark. I'd met plenty of alphas, and he was the first who made me feel comfortable around him.

My brain insisted it was too soon for something so permanent, and I trusted my brain. Still, part of me wanted to listen to my heart.

After reassuring my parents I would keep them posted on our progress, I ended the call and flopped down face first on the bed beside Connor. "Ugh. Why are parents?"

"I wouldn't know," he said. "Mine haven't given a shit about me in twelve years."

"Sorry," I mumbled into the comforter, and then thought better of it. How many people had fucked on this comforter? I'd read somewhere that hotels washed the sheets after every guest, but the comforters got washed only when they looked dirty. This one smelled a few guests past filthy. I flipped onto my back and scooted up the bed until I sat beside Connor.

I took his hand in mine. "Do I need to look up what marking and bonding mean to shifters, or will you explain it to me?"

His breath hitched. "I said I'd mark you so we'd get the room. I saw how nervous you were on the strip, and I didn't want to look for another hotel. Forget I said it. I wouldn't trust myself to explain it in a way that's neutral, anyway."

My gut instinct was to distrust his word after he'd lied to the desk clerk, but then he kept talking, and what he said ... Connor paid attention. He got me, and I'd barely had to explain my anxiety.

He was also quick on his feet. He'd lied to the clerk without hesitation, all while compiling the data and forming an accurate opinion of me. He was fucking perfect. It took my entire willpower not to roll over, straddle him, and kiss him senseless.

Instead, I grabbed my phone from where it lay between us and pulled up the website I'd used earlier.

"A mate bond forms between fated mates when they have unprotected sex for the first time," I read aloud. "The alpha knots the omega and attempts to breed with him. While the knot is forming, the alpha also bites the omega's neck or shoulder, called a mark, usually in an obvious place that can be displayed for all other alphas to see the omega is bonded to another. In some packs, the omega also marks the alpha to

discourage unmated omegas from attempting to mate with their chosen. Most shifters mate with a single partner for life, while other monsters may have polyamorous groupings or partnerships they may choose to end at any time."

"That's a lot," I whispered. "Unprotected sex sounds like a really bad idea right now. I've always worried I would be extra fertile. My married siblings always joke about how they or their partners got knocked up the first time they had sex, and that's probably going to be me."

Connor patted my leg. "I understand."

His voice was soft, but I still detected a hint of sadness.

"I want you to meet my family, first," I explained, "and see what you're getting into. Then we can talk about mating."

His throat bobbed when he swallowed. "You want me to meet your family?"

I nodded. "My parents promised not to harass you too much, but the others can be a handful. And my nephew will probably hate you, but he hates everyone, including me. I'll be his least favorite uncle if I miss his party tomorrow."

"Have you talked to him?"

I laughed. "My brother texted me an hour ago to ask if I had the Wonderdog yet. I don't need to talk to him to know what will happen when I show up without one."

He sighed and pulled me into his lap. "I'm sorry. That sucks."

I couldn't think about my family anymore, not when I felt Connor's hard cock nudging me through our clothes.

"There are other things we can do tonight that don't involve getting pregnant," I said.

12

CONNOR

Ben kissed me hard and leaned against my chest. His tongue teased between my lips and then invaded when I gave him room. He wrapped his arms around my neck and held me still while he plundered my mouth with his tongue.

I groaned, and he pulled back. "You can't just say things like that and then kiss me like that," I said. "I'll come too soon."

His laugh sounded downright wicked, and he kissed me again. "I've heard stamina only improves with practice."

"I hope so." I kissed him this time, cupping his cheeks. "Lots and lots of practice."

"You didn't exactly answer me about being a virgin," he whispered against my lips after another tiny kiss.

I tried to get some distance between us and only managed to knock my head against the padded leather headboard. "My best friend growing up was a beta. We fooled around a lot, and he was my first everything. Since then, it's been mostly betas and the occasional alpha when I'm desperate to be topped."

"You weren't joking about being vers?"

"Why would I joke about that?"

With wide eyes and mouth working a mile a minute, he spoke in squeaks and squawks, none of which made sense.

"You're my mate," I said. "I want to be honest with you. Always."

He frowned. "I don't know what being mates means yet. I read it, but it still seems surreal." He sat back on his heels and pulled on the hem of his shirt. "I can tell you I want to be your mate, and I'll do my best to tell you the truth, too."

"And right now, you want to fuck me?"

His lips curved into the sweetest smile I'd ever seen. "Definitely. Let me get a condom."

I slid down the bed, repositioning him as I went so his legs were between my spread ones.

"We don't need a condom," I said once we were settled. "Shifters don't get human diseases, and I can't get pregnant."

He kissed me again, stealing my breath as he claimed me more thoroughly than any mating mark could.

"I need you naked, Connor."

He sat up to unbutton his shirt, and I did the same. Then, he hopped off the bed, displaying his backside to me as he shucked off his pants and underwear all at once. He stayed bent over to remove his socks, and I forgot what I was doing.

"Connor," he chided when he stood. "Pants. Off. Now."

This was really happening. Ben followed my every move as I unhooked the button of my corduroy pants, unzipped the zipper over my rock-solid cock, and tried to slide my pants and briefs down my hips at the same time, like he did. My cock got stuck in my waistband, and then it slapped my belly with a hard thwack.

Instead of laughing, Ben still looked like he was the wolf in this relationship, and he wanted to eat me up.

"It's been a while," I whispered. "Go easy on me?"

"I'm going to take my time," Ben promised, kneeling on the bed to help me kick off the rest of my clothes. He positioned himself between my legs and stroked his cock while he stared down at me. "You're so gorgeous."

I grinned up at him. "No, you are."

He stroked his cock again, and his other hand snaked behind him, returning with slick-covered fingers. "Will this be all right?"

"Better than," I said. I hoped the words made sense to him, because they seemed like nonsense in my brain mush. My mate wanted to paint me with his slick, and then his cum, and I was here for it.

His slick had cooled a little by the time he made it to my puckered hole. When he smeared it around my rim, I instantly relaxed.

"More." I sounded needy, but I didn't care. I needed him inside me.

"I've got you, baby."

Ben's eyes widened at the term of endearment, but I loved it. "Yes. I'm your baby,

your cum slut, whatever you need tonight."

"Baby," he repeated. "I think we'll stick with that, for now."

Did it seem odd for a man several inches shorter than me to call me baby? Not at all, especially since he was my mate.

He eased a finger inside, and I squirmed, trying to take in more than he was giving me.

"Need more," I whispered.

"I don't want to hurt you. You're the one who said to go slow."

"I was wrong," I whined.

He laughed and inserted another finger. The stretch burned a little, but then it turned to pleasure when his fingers ghosted over my prostate.

We repeated the same pattern again when he inserted a third finger, a little burn at first but then immense pleasure when he curled all three fingers. I almost launched off the bed.

"Please, please, please," I blubbered.

His fingers vanished, leaving me open and aching. He swiped them along his crack and returned to coat his cock with a generous dose of slick.

"Gonna make it good for you, babe," he said.

I'd never been anyone's baby, babe, anything before. I wasn't too proud to admit I



loved it. Whatever Ben wanted to call me, I wanted him to keep going.

"Please," I whined as he lined up with my entrance.

"I've got you." He leaned over me, using gravity to aid him as he sank into me. He tucked his knees under my ass and shoved a pillow under my back with an apologetic grin. "Sorry. It's been a while since I've done this."

"Same," was the only word I could muster. In my head, I was still begging him to fill me up already. I helped as best I could, pulling my knees up and to the sides to give him better access to my ass.

He took my invitation, stretching his legs out behind him and sinking the rest of the way inside me. He pinned my cock between us, which felt so good when he pulled back.

"Ready for me to move?"

"Yes!"

He laughed and snapped his hips. "Like that?"

"Again. More. Harder."

Ben's gaze morphed from trepidation to bliss in a few strokes. "You feel amazing, baby. So tight on my cock."

I canted my hips to meet each thrust and closed my eyes to enjoy the glide of his cock in and out of me. Artificial lubricants had nothing on my mate's slick. It felt so good inside me.

He lifted on one elbow, changing the angle. I dropped my hands from his shoulders to his hips, pulling him tight against me. His cock hit my prostate just right, sending chills through my entire body.

I loved the sound of our bodies slapping together and the delicious smell of sex and slick as Ben neared his release. When he took my cock in hand, I saw stars behind my eyelids.

"Not gonna last, babe," he said. "Need you to come with me."

"F-u-u-ck." His words brought me to the edge, along with the glide of his thumb over the head of my cock as he nailed my prostate.

The stars were back behind my eyelids as pleasure roared through me, and hot cum jetted between us.

Ben's hip movements stuttered, and then he froze above me with a grunt.

My eyes were a little misty when I opened them. I cupped the back of his head and pulled him down for a kiss. He flopped on top of me, trapping my cock and expanding knot between us.

He chuffed a laugh. "Your knot tickles, baby."

"You wouldn't say that if it was inside you."

He groaned. "Is it weird that I want it now? I've dreaded having sex with an alpha all my life because they would want to knot me, but yours ..."

He rolled off me, onto his side, and grasped the thickening girth near the base. His gaze was full of fire. "Do you have any alpha condoms in your fanny pack? If not, I

can grab some at the lodge."

"We promised to stay here tonight," I reminded him.

He flopped onto his back with a sigh.

"We should sleep, anyway," I said. "It's been a long couple of days."

"When we get home," Ben promised, "I want this," he wrapped his fingers around my knot again, giving it a stroke, "inside me."

"Anything you want."

He rolled back toward me, resting his head on my shoulder and draping his leg over my cock, pinning it once more. "You mean that."

I couldn't really remember what I'd said, so I grunted in agreement.

"You'd do anything for me, even go back to Phoenix?"

"If that's what you wanted," I said. "I don't want to go. I would probably end up moving to California to be closer to you, but I wouldn't stalk you or anything. I'd just hope I came across your scent now and then."

"That's depressing." His breath ghosted across my chest when he laughed. "I don't want you to go back to Phoenix, either. I was thinking of setting you up in a hotel in Laguna Niguel while we get everything sorted between us."

"That sounds wonderful." It wasn't living with Ben, but it was the next best thing. I had permission to stay in his orbit. That was good enough for me.

13

BENJAMIN

Before I fell asleep, I checked flights to Orange County again. None were available. We had years to wait if we wanted to take the bullet train, so it would be back on the bus for us. There was one leaving at six, so I set my alarm for four to give us time to shower, dress, and eat.

When my alarm blared, I regretted my life decisions. Sane people didn't wake that early, not even to be somewhat on time to a family gathering.

Not wanting to be alone in my misery, I shoved Connor's shoulder. "Wake up, sleepyhead."

"Huh, what?" He rolled out of bed, both hands up, eyes wide and unseeing for a moment until he blinked. "Ben?"

"It's Benjamin," I said automatically.

"Oh." He sank onto the bed, crestfallen.

My face burned. I'd called Connor "baby" several times last night, and he hadn't minded. "But I'm beginning to like it when you call me Ben," I admitted. "Just not Benji. Never Benji."

He frowned at me. "Benji's a dog's name. I would never call you that."

"Thank you." I cleared my throat. "What about you? I know you liked being called 'baby,' but do you have a nickname or anything?"

He grinned. "I'd appreciate it if you don't shorten my name to Con. It makes me feel like a criminal."

I could understand that.

"When I played with my pack's pups as a wolf," he continued, "they called me Connie. I kinda liked it."

"Connie," I said, trying it out on my tongue. "But only as a wolf, right? Seems weird to call you that now."

"Yeah." He stood and stretched, showing off every line of his muscular form. His gait hitched when he stepped toward the bathroom, and he grinned back at me. "I'm going to feel you all day."

"That's the hottest thing anyone's ever said to me."

I followed him to the bathroom and into the shower, where we repeated what I hoped would become our morning routine if everything continued to go well. Connor and I didn't know much about each other yet, but damn. He gave the best blowjobs.

Our lackluster room service breakfast arrived fifteen minutes later than they said it would. We sat at the two-seater bistro table in the corner with a spread of undercooked bacon, lukewarm eggs, and soggy toast.

Connor more than made up for it with his easy conversation. He'd been all over the world selling cryptocurrency, of all things. My family talked about blockchain like it was one of the four horsemen of the apocalypse, but Connor saw it as just another

form of money.

"It's not real, though," I said during a lull in conversation.

"Unless it's backed with gold, no money is real." Connor shrugged.

I started to argue about the FDIC and insurance, but Connor held up his hand and bit his bottom lip. "It doesn't matter, anyway. My crypto wallet days are over. It was fun while it lasted."

I felt like an ass for making him sad, so I changed the subject. "Is there anywhere you want to go in Vegas before our bus leaves at six?" It was the city that never slept, after all.

He gave me a soft smile and scooped both of my hands from the tabletop, holding them with his. "Wherever you are."

My heart melted. I couldn't believe I was already falling for this sweet-talking alpha. Me. The guy who hated alphas on principle.

Connor didn't feel like an alpha to me. He felt like ... mine.

On the bus, I couldn't believe how easily we fell into the same rhythm of conversation. I turned my body as far as the seatbelt would allow to watch Connor speak, and he regaled me with tales of Europe, the Middle East, and one bad night in Russia.

My dad texted in the middle of the Russia tale, probably responding to my text with my bus's arrival time and offering to catch a ride share to the party so he didn't have to pick us up.

Instead of continuing with his story, Connor gestured to my phone. "Something important?"

"If it is, there's nothing I can do about it. I'm on a bus for the next seven hours."

"True." He laughed and continued telling me about two streetwalkers, a pimp, and what he thought was a hostel but was a brothel.

Once we finished laughing at what must have been a terrifying experience, Connor nudged me again. "What did your dad say?"

I read the text and chuffed a laugh. "He's begging to pick us up, so he doesn't have to suffer through the party without us."

"Why? What's wrong with the party?"

"It's a kid's birthday party," I said. "My niblings are bad enough, but there will be other kids, too. If they're friends with Jeffrey, they're probably brats."

"Tell me about him, about all of them. I want to know the tea before I meet them."

In the past, I'd always avoided talking about my family with dates. Nine times out of ten, we'd been set up by some well-meaning family member, anyway, so they already knew part of the story. Connor was a blank slate, so I filled him in on my silver-spooned nephew, his quiet little brother, and Alex's sweet baby twins. Once I'd tackled the kids, I moved on to their parents, my sister and wife expecting their first child, and finally my parents.

The more I talked, the more interested Connor seemed. He laughed in all the right places and asked thought-provoking questions about aspects of my brothers' personalities that annoyed the shit out of me but seemed commonplace to him. He

gave me a different perspective, one I both appreciated and kinda dreaded. I needed to have heart-to-heart conversations with my alpha brothers to clear the air, but it wouldn't be easy.

"Your family sounds really cool," Connor said once I'd exhausted my aunts, uncles, and grandparents.

"They're a lot," I said.

"Sounds like they care about you." Connor's wistful tone made me want to wrap him in a hug and hunt down whoever hurt him.

"They will love you." I grinned at him while my brain caught up to the words. My family would love Connor. They would meet him this afternoon, and I was not going to freak out about introducing an alpha I liked to my family.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"If they say anything out of line, come get me and I'll knock some sense into them. Unless it's my nephew. He can do no wrong in their eyes."

"Little alphas need to be disciplined," Connor said. "I might be able to help."

"If it's something that involves you shredding another pair of pants, you might want to wait until we pick up your luggage."

His gaze held pure sunshine as he leaned his head against the seat and stared at me. "I can't wait to meet him and the rest of your family."

The thought of introducing them excited me, too. It felt wrong, but so right.



### CONNOR

We stopped for gas and a bathroom break in Barstow around ten. We had another three hours to go. Instead of being bored, or worse, frustrated with me, Ben seemed to like having me around, especially when I introduced myself to an aggressive alpha as his boyfriend.

"Sorry," I whispered as the alpha walked past us, off the bus, and out into the parking lot. The only sign of the previous night's storms was the wet pavement.

"For what? I hate pushy alphas." Ben sighed and leaned closer in his seat, which was still too far away. "I get so tired of it all. Look at us. I can't take my eyes off you. We've been talking the entire time we've been on this bus. Why would anyone think I'm available after seeing us together?"

I blinked at him a couple of times while my mind tried to register his words. "Wait. Does that mean we're boyfriends?"

"I practically asked you to move in with me." He sank into his seat with his coat hunched up around his shoulders. "I think we're dating, or mating, or whatever you call it."

I laughed at that. "We are not mating right this moment, or this would be a very different bus ride." I reached for his hand.

"When we're bonded, mated, whatever, will people leave me alone?" he asked. "I'm tired of alphas hitting on me."

"Shifters will know you're my mate." I rubbed my thumb over his knuckles in an attempt to soothe him. "Humans aren't as perceptive, but I can scare them away."

"You scared that guy away," he teased. "I'll be right back."

"Want me to come with you?" I asked. The alpha was still lurking in the parking lot.

"Do you mind staying with our bags this time?" he asked. "I don't want to take them with us."

"Not a problem."

I remembered the poor ruined sweater he still had in a zipped plastic bag inside his suitcase. Once I found another job, I would buy him sweaters just like it, one in every color.

I would buy him one of everything, simply because he was my mate. Not only that, but he wanted to be my boyfriend!

We had a long way to go before we would know and trust each other, but we'd made a lot of progress. Ben still hated alphas, but he was starting to like me. Well enough to be my boyfriend, anyway.

I was still nervous about meeting his family. They all sounded wonderful, and he was so proud of them, even if he acted as though he could do without them. His parents and alpha brothers seemed more protective than overbearing. His sister sounded like an absolute delight. She made naughty confections in her bakery. Penis-shaped cookies, vulva-shaped pies, and cupcakes filled with baby batter. I'd spent the

morning giggling nonstop as Ben shared story after story. I felt like I knew his family better than my own, which wasn't saying much. I hadn't seen my family since I turned eighteen.

Thankfully, Ben hadn't asked about them.

The wail of sirens made me cringe. I glanced around to make sure our bus wasn't smoking this time. Two intersections beyond the corner station, flashing lights crossed a closed street. Behind that, a green car with a giant green top hat tied to the roof announced it was the Barstow St. Patrick's Day parade.

People filed back onto the bus, and the alpha who had tried to steal Ben from me stood beside the driver's seat. He hunched over our omega driver with a menacing glare.

"Is everything all right here?" Ben asked from behind the alpha.

"Yes. Just taking out the trash." The driver stood up. I couldn't place his scent, but his size marked him as a shifter. The human alpha didn't stand a chance.

"What? Me? I'm not?—"

"You're the alpha who refused to stow his bags, right?"

The man nodded.

"Could you all pass this gentleman's bags to the front, please?"

When the army duffle and backpack got to me, I stood and carried them to the driver.

"Thanks." The omega gave me a head nod and took the bags. "Any alpha that tries to

intimidate me can take the next bus."

"Intimidate you?" Ben asked from behind him.

"He wanted me to leave without all my passengers."

I grabbed the alpha's shoulder and turned him toward the door, shoving him down the steps. Ben backed up and gave us space. With my second shove, the alpha stumbled onto the pavement. As much as I would have liked to let him fall, my hold kept him from dropping face first to the wet pavement.

Ben wasn't even the last person to return. Two women emerged from the gas station, each carrying a giant bag of popcorn and a fountain drink.

The driver handed the alpha his bags and stood between him and the door, allowing Ben and the two women to board.

I nodded for the driver, keeping a firm grip on the alpha's shoulder. He returned to the driver's seat. Then, it was my turn. I let go with a shove, not enough to knock the alpha over but enough to force him a step back. I hopped onto the bus and the driver shut the door in his face.

"My hero," Ben joked as he let me back into my window seat. He took a deep breath and let it out, and then another. "I've been thinking."

My heart pounded against my rib cage. Whenever someone thought about me, it usually ended badly.

"I have a spare bedroom."

Not where I thought this was going. I relaxed my death grip on the sides of my seat

and took a breath.

"Instead of getting a hotel room tonight, I'd like you to stay at my place."

I made him repeat it, to be sure I heard what he said over the rush of blood in my ears and the roar of the bus as we rolled out of the parking lot.

"I'd love that," I said. "What made you change your mind?"

He shook his head. "I know that guy is no reason to change my mind. He barely did anything to me."

"He wanted the bus to leave without you and the others. I'd say that's a dick move."

"True, but ... before I met you, I thought all alphas were like that. You're not." He stuck his bottom lip out in a pout. "I almost wish you were. You're destroying my worldview."

I chuckled and caressed his cheek. He leaned into the touch, toward me, and I captured his bottom lip between my teeth for a quick nibble before letting him go. "I will happily continue to dismantle all your alpha stereotypes for as long as you'll have me."

He opened his mouth to say something else, but the bus stopped a block from the gas station, jarring us against our seatbelts.

"Bit of a delay, folks," the bus driver said. "I can try to find a way around, or we can pull into this parking lot so you can watch the St. Patrick's parade."

"How long can a parade last?" Ben asked.

"Let's watch," shouted the two women who had been last to board.

"Yeah," some of the others said, while the couple across the aisle from us clapped and cheered.

"Our connecting bus will wait on us," the driver said. "Last chance for anyone who needs to get home on time."

Ben glanced at me and grinned. Then, he pulled out his phone and texted his parents.

"Going to be late. St. Patrick's Day parade."

When the bus eased to a stop in the parking lot and the driver turned off the engine, Ben unbuckled his seatbelt. He plopped down in my lap and kissed my cheek. "My nephew hates St. Patrick's Day because it's his birthday."

"I would love to have my birthday on a holiday," I said.

"When is it?"

"July 15. I've taken a few vacations around Independence Day, but it's not the same as having a holiday on your birthday."

"My dad's birthday is Christmas Eve," Ben said. "He would probably disagree with you, though he's never really complained. Not the way Jeffrey does."

I couldn't wait to meet Jeffrey, to see if he really was as annoying as Ben thought, or if Ben's alpha stereotypes skewed his opinion.

The parade ended a half-hour later, and the police removed the barricade soon after, making our delay only forty minutes. I missed Ben when he buckled back into his

seat, but my whole body tingled when he slipped his fingers between mine in the space between our seats and tugged my hand into his lap.

"What?" He asked when I frowned at him. "I like holding my boyfriend's hand."

Once again, I was blown away by that simple fact. My human fated mate wanted to be my boyfriend. The lightness in my chest only grew the more I thought about it.

15

BENJAMIN

We made up time on the road, which meant my dad waited less than a half-hour for us to pull into the bus terminal at Macarthur Campus. I'd told him via text messages I would be bringing an alpha home with me, but this was a first.

If Dad was surprised to see Connor, he didn't show it. Instead, he treated Connor like he was one of the family, offering him the front seat and a piece of gum for the ride back to Laguna Niguel.

"Dad, we need to stop at the airport for Connor's bags." I'd forgotten to mention that part in my texts.

"Oh, thank goodness. I was going to beg you to stop for food or ice cream on the way. This party." He rolled his eyes. "Everything that could go wrong has gone wrong, thanks to the weather, the holiday, and everything else."

I stayed in the car with my dad while Connor ran inside to get his bags. The blustery wind gusts shook the car. While we waited, Dad told me all about Jeffrey's temper tantrum before a captive audience of nine-year-olds. My brother Jake was pissed because their parents had dropped them off and left them.

"Jake thought the party would be a networking opportunity while the kids played. I had to remind him. We dropped you kids off at parties all the time when you were kids."



"Except me," I said. "I hated those things."

"You went to a few omega sleepovers," he said. "Remember when Casper Fuente fell out of that tree and broke his arm?"

Poor Casper. "That was my fault," I said. "How was I supposed to know he didn't know how to hang upside down?"

"What?" My dad turned to look at me, his eyes wide. "That's the first I've heard of this. You told him to hang upside down?"

I nodded. "I thought you knew."

He laughed. "No wonder his parents wanted us to pay his medical bills. Insurance ended up covering it." He wiped figurative sweat from his brow and shook his head. "You never told us that."

Maybe my nephew wasn't the only brat in the family.

Connor returned with his bag and a huge grin on his face. "I can pay for ice cream, if you're still interested. I had a twenty tucked in my spare pants pocket."

"That sounds like a plan," Dad said.

Southern California was nicer than Las Vegas this time of year, but it was still too chilly, not to mention windy, to sit outside at the walk-up ice cream stand. We sat in the car, instead, and Connor saved the day with his wet wipes when our cones started to drip.

"You're ready for anything," Dad quipped as he wiped his hands and face. Both he and Connor finished their cones before I did. Connor spent half of the drive to my

brother's house holding a napkin beneath my dripping cone while I leaned forward over the center console. The whole time, my dad laughed at me in the rear-view mirror.

"It's wonderful to meet you, Connor," Dad said as we pulled up to my brother's house.

"Why does that sound like goodbye?" Connor's shoulders slumped.

"If this party doesn't scare you away from our family, nothing will," Dad said. At the door, he pulled Connor in for a side hug and grabbed me with his other arm. Together, we rang the doorbell.

Jake's husband Matt answered the door for us. "Finally! Jake's been worried sick."

Jake didn't give two shits about me most of the time, so that was strange.

"Did you get it?" My brother asked as we walked into the living room.

"Get ..." Shit. Jeffrey's present. The Wonderdog 3000 I'd forgotten all about. I bet I could have found one in Vegas, if I'd hit up the high-end shopping on the strip, but it had completely slipped my mind.

"Right." Connor slipped out from under my dad's arm. "Your present for Jeffrey is still in my bag. Let me go grab it."

Well, here it came. My whole family was about to make fun of me for giving my nephew a toy my boyfriend had gotten for free with the purchase of a pair of pants.

"Who was that dashing alpha?" Matt asked. "Benjamin, have you been holding out on us?"

"He's my boyfriend," I stammered.

"They just met this weekend," Dad shared while I tried not to melt into a puddle of anxiety.

"This weekend!" Jake and Matt shared a secret smile.

"When you know, you know," Matt whispered.

"Come on, fam!" Jake called. "Everyone get in here to meet Benjamin's new boyfriend!"

"Where's my present?" Jeffrey demanded as he blindsided me with a hug.

"Connor—"

"Hey!" Connor pulled the alpha brat from my side and held out his hand. "Jeff?"

My nephew frowned up at him but shook his hand with a nod.

"Hi Jeff. This is Wolfy." Connor shoved the stuffed animal in Jeff's face. "He'd love to be your friend."

"What is this?" Jeffrey asked. "Where's my Wonderdog 3000? Uncle Benjamin, you promised!"

"I said I would do my best." My voice was unheard as Jeffrey wailed loud enough to drown out the animated movie playing on the television.

"No! You said you would get it for me! You're the worst uncle ever!"

I accepted the title with my head bowed. Tears blurred my vision. I wanted to be anywhere but here, before my entire family, shrinking in on myself.

"That's no way to treat Wolfy," Connor said. He snatched the stuffed animal back from my nephew and tucked it beneath his chin with both arms wrapped around it. "I'll have you know, Benjamin searched high and low for your Wonderdog 3000. They've been sold out for almost a year now, but he checked at the airport, at the bed-and-breakfast, even at a roadside stand. We hit up game stores and checked souvenir kiosks, all looking for your dog."

"So?" Jeffrey was having none of it. "He promised!"

"Promises mean nothing when they're coerced," Connor said. "He told me how you got him to promise. He wanted to be your favorite uncle, and you played him against your alpha uncle and auntie."

I frowned at Connor. How was this helping?

"We survived a plane crash! The least you could do is show some appreciation for this little guy!" Connor hugged the stuffed toy tight, and the nose lit up.

"I'm Wolfy, the Wolf Brothers Wonderdog 3000!"

Connor was so surprised by the noise, he tossed the wolf at me. I grabbed Wolfy by the front paw, and he howled. "Hellooooo! I'm delighted to meet you! We're going to have so much fun!"

I screamed and tossed the possessed toy on the couch, where it continued to talk.

"Oh, sweet!" One of Jeffrey's guests stepped closer to the couch and beckoned the other kids to join her. "This one's even more rare! Where did you get this, mister?"

"Wolf Brothers?" Connor said it like a question.

"That's not a real Wonderdog 3000," Jeffrey said. "That's crap!"

"If you don't want Wolfy, I'll take him," the little girl said. "Is that okay, mister?"

"You will NOT!" Jeffrey grabbed Wolfy by the same paw I'd touched, and he started talking again.

The little girl took a step back with both arms raised and an eyeroll that would rival my omega dad's. She'd had it with my nephew's shit.

"This is my gift." Jeffrey turned his stink eye on me again. "I suppose I forgive you, Uncle Benjamin."

Jake grabbed the toy and handed it to Matt, who flipped a switch on its back, making its light-up eyes go dark.

"That's not how you thank your uncle for the wonderful, impossible, present he brought you," Jake said.

"Wolfy's going to take a time-out up here." Matt placed the toy on the top shelf of their corner bookcase. "And so are you, Jeffrey. Let's go to your room."

"I'm nine! I don't take time-outs!"

"You do when you act like you're five," Jake called down the hallway after them. "I'm so sorry you had to see that." Jake shook Connor's hand. "Nice to meet you."

"Hey, misters." The little girl pointed to the television, where the movie that had been playing now rolled credits over a forest scene. "What are we supposed to do now?"

Jeffrey said the clown canceled, and it's too windy for the bouncy castle."

"Those storms really messed up our plans." Jake rubbed the back of his neck.

"Do you have board games?" Connor asked.

"We have video games, but that got old fast with this many kids," Jake said.

Connor took a step toward the little girl and kneeled so he was at eye-level. "Do you like dogs?"

"I love dogs. Why do you think I wanted Wolfy?"

He laughed. "I suppose that was a silly question. Give me a few minutes, and we'll play a game." He turned to my brother. "Where's your restroom?"

"I'm allergic to dogs," a little boy said.

"This dog is hypoallergenic," Connor promised.

"Dog?" Jake mouthed at me. I shrugged and led Connor to the first-floor bathroom off the kitchen.

CONNOR

"Holy shit!" I exclaimed once Ben had shut us both inside the tiny bathroom. "Wolfy's a Wonderdog 3000!"

If I'd have known that, I could have saved Ben all that time searching. I was lucky the clerk at Wolf Brothers had taken pity on me.

Now, I needed to strip down so I could become Connie the Friendly Wolf. I raised my hands to unbutton my shirt, but Ben knocked them aside to grab me in a tight hug.

"You're the best boyfriend," he said. "The best alpha. The best everything. Thank you so much."

I hugged him back, rubbing large circles on the back of his t-shirt. "Nobody deserves to be ridiculed like that by their own family. Especially not by a nine-year-old boy." I kissed the top of his head. "The rest of your family is cool, though. Your dad's awesome." His blood relatives had his same olive skin and dark hair, so it was easy to tell them from their spouses.

"My pops is around here somewhere, along with Josie and Alex." He pulled back, and I missed his warmth. "They're probably hiding from the kids."

"Do you want to hide from them?" I asked. Hide and Seek wasn't my favorite game, but I would do whatever Ben wanted.

He shook his head. "Not if Connie's going to make an appearance!"

I grinned. "There's a fun game I used to play with my kin. These kids should like it, too." I explained it to Ben while I unbuttoned my shirt, but he didn't hear me. He was too busy staring.

"Ben."

He had to look a long way up from my pants zipper. "Yeah?"

"I need your help."

He stepped back into my personal space and shoved my hands away. With a tug, he had my pants and shorts down around my ankles.

I shifted before he could reach for my cock. He groaned and grabbed his own through his pants. "Unfair."

I pranced out of my pile of clothes, still wearing my socks. My wolf hated socks. I sat down on the bathmat and pulled them off my hind paws with my teeth. Yuck.

I gave a low bark to tell Ben I was ready, and he opened the door for me. I charged through the house to the living room. I circled the couch, rounding up the children to come play.

The patio door was open, so I led them through it into the backyard, if one could call it that. It was mostly patio stones, river rock flowerbeds, and succulents. The river rocks were slippery, but that only added to my comedy routine. I made the little girl who liked dogs laugh several times with my antics before Ben joined us on the patio. He'd been busy ushering the other kids outside.



"We're going to play duck, duck, goose," he said, "but when I say goose, you're running from Connie, not from me."

What? Those had not been the rules. The game was called duck hunt, and I was the hunting wolf. Instead of goose, Ben was supposed to say "shoot."

Oh, shoot. That was a bad game to teach a bunch of human children, no matter how fun my wolf thought it was. Duck, duck, goose made a lot more sense. I barked to let him know I approved, and then it was on.

The first kid Ben "goosed" was the little girl who stood up to Jeffrey. One of the other kids squealed her name, Brandi, when she got up, and I bounded after her.

Brandi was fast, but Ben had remembered the one rule difference. Since he wasn't the one chasing, he immediately sat in Brandi's spot, so she had no choice but to keep running once she got all the way around. She almost made it twice around before I grew tired of running and nosed her in the back.

She turned toward me, laughing, and wrapped her arms around my neck. "You're slow for such a big dog," she teased.

"Woof."

"Looks like it's my turn," she said. "The running is the fun part, anyway. I like this game better."

"Woof!" I agreed.

We played until every guest had a turn around the circle. Some of the children weren't as fast, and one limped, but they all enjoyed running from me like their lives depended on it. I didn't smell fear on them, either. These human children were brave.

When I caught up to the last child and nosed him in the back, Ben stood, ending the game. "That was fun! Let's thank Connie!"

The children hopped up from their circle and rushed me with hugs, pets, and scratches behind the ears. I rolled over on my back, and Brandi tickled my ribs while the other kids gave me belly rubs.

"It's time for cake and ice cream!" someone I didn't recognize said. He stood at the patio door, ushering the children inside.

"You two looked like you were having fun," the man said when Ben and I reached the door.

"It was fun," Ben said.

"Where did your boyfriend go? I want to meet him."

"Um ..." Ben glanced at me.

I bounded toward the fence gate, which would lead us back to the front of the house. "Woof."

"Right. He went to get his luggage from the car. He wanted to take a shower and change before dinner."

I was definitely looking forward to changing into some clean clothes, but a shower? That would be heaven.

"I'll introduce you then, Pops!" Ben called over his shoulder before helping me with the gate. The bad thing about my wolf form was no opposable thumbs.

Ben didn't have the keys to the trunk of his parents' car, though, so I waited while he ran back inside to grab them. Then, he hauled my giant suitcase from the trunk and lugged it up the two steps to the front stoop like it was nothing. My wolf pranced, proud to have such a strong omega. I followed him down the hall and into the bathroom.

I shifted back once the door was closed. "Are you sure it's okay for me to shower?"

"After the weekend we've had, we're both showering," he said.

"What if the kids need to use the bathroom?"

"This house has nine bathrooms. They can do without this one for fifteen minutes."

"If you think you're getting a repeat of this morning in your brother's house?—"

"No!" Ben swatted my arm. "Not at all what I was thinking, you perv!"

"Damn," I teased. "I was totally going to eat your ass if you wanted me to."

Ben moaned. "Don't tempt me."

We kept our shower under ten minutes. Then, we snagged slices of cake and scoops of ice cream and ate with the children before their parents picked them up at four.

Ben's nephew finally reappeared at the door to say goodbye to his guests. From the way the kids acted, it was hard to tell if they would remain friends after watching his meltdown.

Ben's brother Jake had supplied us with folding chairs in the living room while we waited for everyone to clear out. Before she left, Brandi stopped by my chair and

studied my eyes. "You look awfully familiar."

I leaned forward and cocked my head the way I would as a wolf.

She sucked in a breath and pointed, but I brought my finger to my lips. "Our secret," I said.

"I'm not supposed to keep secrets for strangers," she whispered.

"You don't have to keep it a secret, then." I grinned. Either she would tell her parents the moment she was in the car, or she would forget all about me. Either way, shifters had been part of human media since the wolf man and the shaggy dog. Unless they knew about shifters, they would assume she'd watched a movie or had a vivid imagination.

"It was real, though?" she asked. "Not a trick?"

"No trick."

The huge smile she flashed me before running off to her parents' sedan was totally worth it.

Once the party guests were gone, Ben introduced me to his pops, brother Alex, and his wife Shelly and their beta twins, and his sister Josie and her wife Audrey. All his siblings were alphas, even his sister. Audrey was pregnant with their first baby. The only other omega in the family was Jeff's little brother, Jonah, who wasn't out of diapers yet. He sat quietly on Matt's lap and watched us with owl eyes.

"What do you do for a living, Connor?" Ben's pops had insisted I sit beside him at the dinner table while we waited for Jake to finish grilling our steaks outside.

This was the moment I dreaded. Instead of leading with crypto, something I knew he would hate, I changed tactics. "I'm between jobs right now, but I'm looking for something in finance, like Ben."

The alpha's gaze turned wary. If he were a wolf, his hackles would have raised. "Finance?"

"Well, I'm more interested in investments than banking," I said.

"What's wrong with banking?" The other conversations around the table hushed and Ben's family turned as one to look at me. All except Jeff, who was still pouting and staring down at his hands.

"N-nothing's wrong with banking," I said. "Money markets are more my thing."

"Don't tell me you're into blockchain," Pops said.

"Not anymore," I said, glad it was the truth. I thought about sharing my experience with digital art, but decided against that, too.

Ben tugged my hand from my lap and squeezed it between his before slipping his fingers through mine. "Connor's the kindest person I know, and he could sell ice to an Inuit. I'm sure he'll find something to do here in Orange County."

"Where are you from?" Matt asked, starting a more comfortable round of questions.

When we were ready to leave, Ben's pops handed me a business card. "I know you said you had no interest in banking, but you might change your mind."

I blinked. I thought he'd hated the way I'd answered his questions. "Thank you. I'll think about it."

I didn't have to think too hard. Ben hated how much the bank controlled his family's lives already. I wouldn't add to that, even if it meant starting my own company from scratch.

### BENJAMIN

The ride home in the back seat of my dad and pop's sedan was glorious torture, the same as our earlier shower had been. I wanted to rub my face on Connor's chest and bask in his wonderful scent. Once I'd satisfied that desire, I planned to kiss him until we were both dripping sweat and precome.

These were not the best thoughts to have while avoiding PDA in my parents' car. Pops offered to help us with our bags, but the two carry-ons were no problem for me, especially now that Connor's was practically empty. They even stacked together so I could pull them with one handle.

I gave Pops a quick peck on the cheek. "I'll call you tomorrow after work."

Work. Fuck. I still had reports to write and spreadsheets to finish and analyze.

Not tonight. I had Connor all to myself, and I planned to make the most of it.

He easily deduced the small room with the single bed and desk was the spare room. I dragged him past it, one hand on his rolling suitcase. It was the same way he'd hauled mine through the airport to my gate in New York.

That seemed like a lifetime ago. I'd learned so much since then, about Connor, shifters, and fated mates. I didn't want to wait another moment to show him what he meant to me.

In the bedroom, I let go of his bag handle in front of the closet's accordion doors. I propped our carry-ons against the wall and cupped his face, pulling him down for a kiss.

"We fit together so well," I moaned against his mouth as I tugged at his t-shirt hem.

He took the hint and removed the shirt. "It's fate."

"It's something." My cock was already straining against my jeans' zipper.

I kept trying to speed things up, but Connor took his time kissing and nibbling my ear, throat, and along my collar bone to my shoulder before reversing course and nibbling up the other side. By the time he finished, I was a gibbering mess of want, begging him to fuck me already.

"Condoms?" he asked.

"No. I mean, I have a box, but I don't want to use them."

Connor took a step back, his throat bobbing as he swallowed. "What are you saying?"

"I'm all in on fated mates, baby." Nobody was more surprised than I was to hear me say that. "I want all of it. All of you."

He cleared his throat twice before he could speak. "It's been one weekend. I don't think we're ready for bite marks and bonding. And what if you get pregnant?"

Before, the "P" word would have been a splash of ice water over my head, but now, it only made me more frantic for it. If I didn't know better, I would think I was going into heat.



"I'm ready," I said. "I've never wanted a baby before, but now I do. That must mean something, right?"

"I don't have a job yet," Connor said. "What if I can't support you and the baby?"

"I hate my job," I admitted, "but it pays well, and I've got some money in the bank." I laughed. "I might also have some shares in that bank, but still."

My weak joke at my family's expense made him grin.

"I've never wanted anything more than I want you right now," I continued. "That has to mean something."

Connor nuzzled along my neck again, making the hairs at my nape and on both arms stand up. "It means everything," he said, "because I feel the same way about you."

Our clothes came off in a heap after that. I kept my briefs on for the moment because I didn't want to leak slick all over my bedroom floor.

Time stood still as I ogled my mate from his sun-kissed hair and beautiful blue eyes to his broad shoulders and trim hips. I'd gotten a few glimpses of his gorgeous cock already, but knowing it was about to fill me up made it even more eye-catching. I tugged him closer to me with both hands wrapped around it, teasing his velvety skin with my fingertips only.

"I want to taste you," I said, "since you've gotten to taste me."

He groaned as I fell to my knees. I ignored his cock, choosing instead to suck one furred ball into my mouth and then the other. He tasted so good, all salt and musk. I licked the hairless path between his balls from his taint to the base of his cock.

"Gods, Ben, please."

I continued the line with the tip of my tongue, up his veiny cock to the uncut foreskin. I'd never been with anyone uncut before. I traced the skin with my tongue, and Connor gave another encouraging moan. He tried to thrust into my mouth when I docked my tongue between his flesh and the flap of skin.

Once I'd had my fill of teasing him, I hollowed my cheeks and sucked him down. It had been a while since I'd deep throat anyone. I gagged and my eyes watered, but I kept going.

"Are you okay? Don't hurt yourself!"

I looked up at Connor and released all but his cock head, once again sweeping my tongue around it. He raised his head toward the ceiling and made a sound like a wolf howl, though nowhere near as loud or as sharp.

I took that as a sign of success and kept going, gliding his cock along my tongue. I banged it against my uvula before angling him down my throat again.

"Fuck, Ben, I'm not going to last."

I pulled all the way off this time and gave the leaking slit at the tip one final lick. "I want your knot."

He groaned and tugged me to my feet before shucking my briefs off. I stepped out of them and he licked a bead of precome from my cock before standing up and crushing our lips together.

I stumbled backward onto the bed and he was everywhere around me, his body pressing me into the mattress.

"My turn," he said before plundering my mouth with his tongue.

Once again, he took his time. If he wore lipstick, every inch of my skin would have been covered with it as he feathered kisses along my body. He stopped to pinch my nipples lightly between his teeth and continued his downward trek, his hands pinning me in place to keep me from squirming. His kisses became firmer and more hurried, the closer he came to my cock.

When he sucked my balls into his mouth, I grabbed my pillow from above my head and held it over my face so I could scream into it. I was already so close, and I didn't want to scare Connor with the noises I made.

He tugged the pillow away from me a moment later and used it to prop up my lower back. Then, he lifted my knees to my chest and smirked. "You taste so good."

He sank onto my cock with his whole mouth, sucking me down. His eyes crinkled at the corners the way they did when he smiled, and I couldn't look away.

He popped off me with a grin and cupped my thighs in his meaty palms, tugging them further apart. The move usually made me feel open and vulnerable, but with Connor, I felt complete trust. He'd already taken great care of me on our cross-country trip, and he would treat me with the same care in bed.

He leaned in and blew on my hole, making me clench and shiver with anticipation. Then, he leaned closer, gliding his warm tongue along my crease, licking up the excess slick. He shifted to the other side to do the same. The third lick went right up the middle, over my hole. My whole body tensed and my cock bounced against my abs, splashing precome from my groin to my ribs. I didn't mind it. I was already too far gone to the sensations of Connor's tongue spearing my ass, dipping inside me and beginning to loosen me up.

When he had dissolved me into a boneless, quivering mass, he pulled back on his haunches and wiped the excess slick from his face with two of his fingers. Then, he slid them inside me. I wriggled on the pillow, trying to take more of him. He stopped me with his other hand at my hip and added another finger to continue to stretch me open.

I needed more. I was already so close. Tears hovered in the corners of my eyes. "Please."

He curled his fingers into my prostate and my cock jumped again, spraying more precome everywhere and making us both laugh. Connor's gaze turned serious. He circled his fingers again, gathering more slick, and then he pulled them out.

I watched his every move as he coated his thick cock with my slick and scooted forward on his knees, positioning himself at my entrance. "You ready?"

I wanted to shout something clever, like, "Get in me," but all that came out was a squeaky, "Yes!"

Connor hooked one of my knees over his elbow and placed my opposite heel on his shoulder. Then, he leaned forward, spreading my legs wide while his cock slid inside me. I'd never been opened like that before. His huge cock still burned, but the pleasure followed close behind, making me weep for real.

Instead of the punishing pace I'd expected from an alpha, Connor took his time, pulling almost all the way out before sliding back into me slowly. His cock dragged against my prostate, igniting sparks at the base of my spine. He readjusted my legs so he could lean over me, trapping my cock between my body and his washboard abs. He was my first partner with any abs to speak of. The friction on my leaking cock was glorious.

He leaned down to seal our mouths together in a slow, sensuous kiss that set every nerve ending in my body to buzzing. I whimpered into his mouth as the need built to a crescendo unlike any I'd experienced.

Connor broke the kiss with a harsh pant and reached between us, tugging on my cock with his thick fingers. I came hard, my vision going white around the edges while Connor prolonged my orgasm with gentle nibbles and licks along my throat.

He grunted and froze above me, and I swore I could feel his seed spreading inside me, filling my channel and making me whole.

That sensation spread. Connor's knot stretched me so well, pushing my slick into overdrive. It once again dripped down my crack and onto the comforter we hadn't bothered to pull off the bed.

"Your knot is huge!" I rocked myself against him, experiencing a pleasure I'd never known. I'd had prostate orgasms before, but not like this. My cock rebounded immediately, and the rocking sensation quickly built to a second orgasm that dribbled out of me without a touch to my cock.

Connor plastered his cheek to the side of my neck as he rutted into me, finding his second release while I was still in the throes of mine.

"Wow," he whispered once we finally caught our breath and his knot shrank enough for him to pull out. "That was better than I'd ever imagined."

I wanted to tease him, but I agreed. All sex I'd had before was merely the practice before the big game.

"Is it like that every time?" I asked.

His adorable smirk was back. "Dunno. Wanna find out?"

Fuck yes, I did. But first, "We should probably rinse off and get some sleep." I had to work tomorrow, after all, and it was already well past eleven.

"I know how I'm waking you up tomorrow," he said.

The morning sex, nothing more than frotting until we both came all over Connor's abs, was just as good.

When I got home from work, I discovered Connor had done all my laundry. Somehow, he'd saved the shirt I'd ruined in the airport bathroom. Then, he'd gone grocery shopping at the corner market and baked cookies for an after-work snack.

The sex afterward was fantastic. Having a stay-at-home alpha to take care of me was better than anything I'd imagined.

18

CONNOR

I'd been working my ass off since I was eighteen. Surely, I had some employable skills. Ben doctored my resume to list my areas of expertise instead of my work history, but it seemed shady, especially when interviewers asked about my former employers before they launched into their questions. They were always interested in the start-up Hank and I had sold, but when I told them about cryptocurrency and NFTs, their optimism waned.

"You've said enough," one business owner told me, tapping her legal pad with her pen. "Stop wasting our time."

March became April, and then a month had passed with no success. Ben's pops even offered to help during the Sunday dinner that marked one month since I'd moved to Laguna Niguel.

"It's my work history," I confessed.

"Take me through it." He patted the chair beside him after the rest of his children and grandchildren had gone outside to enjoy the beautiful afternoon.

I didn't even get to the crypto wallets. He recognized the name of our start-up. Their bank used the software I created for their employee wellness program.

"Do you still know the code for it?" Pops asked. "Our lead developer broke a feature

two months ago, and it's still broken."

"Know the code?" I grinned. "I could write it in my sleep. I bet I know what he broke. The dashboard is no longer communicating with the third-party apps for step tracking and nutrition."

Pops nodded. "Good guess. You're hired."

"For this project, right? Not a ... not full time?"

"Why not?"

"I never learned how to code," I admitted. "I created Wellness Dashboard for fun."

"You'll learn on the job." Pops clapped me on the shoulder. "When I tell my team you created the app, they'll want to teach you everything they know. You wouldn't believe how much they raved about the simplicity when we first started using it."

I'd been called "simple" plenty of times, mostly by Hank. It always sounded like a bad word. When Pops said my designs were simple and elegant, I puffed up at the praise.

"Meet me at the office tomorrow at eight." His smirk reminded me of Ben's. "We'll have you coding our customer-facing website in no time."

On the ride home, Ben squeezed my thigh, nudging me out of my thoughts.

"Pops said you're starting at the bank tomorrow."

As much as I wanted a job, I was still leery of working for Ben's parents. "I am. I'm sorry."



"Sorry? Why?" He rarely looked away from the road while driving, but he flashed me an angry glare before jerking his eyes back to the road at the sound of a horn. We were in bumper-to-bumper traffic, but Ben was a cautious driver, leaving three car-lengths between us and the SUV ahead.

"I know you don't want me to work there," I said.

"I never said that." He chuffed a laugh. "I don't want a job at the bank, but this sounds perfect for you. Even if you hate it, you'll have a better resume after six months and can try again."

"I ... can." Jobs had always left me. I'd never left them. Seasons ended, businesses closed, start-ups sold, and now Hank had fired me. I didn't know if I could quit a job after six months, but I would do anything to make Ben happy.

The next morning, Ben dropped me off at the head office for SoCal Community Bank on his way to Barclay Foods. Pops, or James as he told me to call him at work, met me in the lobby and ushered me through a gorgeous glass office building. Even the elevator was glass, so we could watch the people chatting or ambling through the lobby below.

Instead of leading me into his office, James motioned me toward a conference room. He introduced me to his lead developer, Kurt, and the rest of the team. Kurt's reception was frosty, but the other techs welcomed me. Anne, a tall woman with short graying red hair and glasses offered me her desk and console to, "see what you can do." I had the application interface fixed within the first fifteen minutes, and I caught a code error in another application she showed me before our hour was up.

By lunch, James had fired Kurt and moved me into his office. I was stunned. I didn't know what to say when he offered to take me shopping for some office decor after lunch.

"This feels a lot like nepotism," I said when we sat down to lunch at a restaurant a few blocks away. We'd walked, enjoying the hazy sunshine and warm but not yet blazing temperatures.

"I don't care," James said. "You're already well on your way to becoming my favorite son-in-law. I've never seen Ben so enamored with anyone. All I want is for my children to be happy, and if he won't work here ..."

"I will." I nodded. "I get it, but I don't have any credentials."

"Nobody on the development floor has questioned your ability." Our server interrupted with glasses of water and menus, and then James leaned over the table. "Kurt was one ass-smack away from a sexual harassment lawsuit, and he's a shitty developer. I'd much rather have a reliable family man on my staff, if you know what I mean."

My face felt hot. "I'm not ... Ben's not ..."

"Son, you don't need to put a ring on my boy's finger or knock him up to be part of this family." His kind smile reminded me so much of Ben's. "From what I've heard, you could use all the family you can get."

I blinked back hot tears and managed to choke out, "Thank you."

I felt better about the office decor when James led me back to the building after lunch. We raided a supply closet not far from my new digs. They had everything I would need, from copier paper to sticky notes.

Next, he led me to a storeroom on the first floor filled with framed artwork and decorative lamps. "Make it your own," he said.

I was immediately drawn to a painting of a rocky cave mouth. Before it, a mother wolf watched three playing pups.

"This one," I said.

"Benjamin and the others don't know this, but we have wolf shifters in our family tree."

I didn't know how to respond to that, so I picked up the painting and placed it on an empty rolling cart.

"If Connie were to make a reappearance at another family dinner," he said, "I wouldn't be opposed."

I could do nothing but stare at him, though I managed to keep my jaw clamped shut.

"Benjamin's a horrible liar," James said. "When I started asking him about the well-trained dog who disappeared without a trace, he shut down."

I nodded. "He does that when he doesn't know what to say."

"He does it a lot less now than before he met you." James patted my shoulder. "You're good for him. I think you'll be good for the bank, too."

With that, he led me back upstairs to my office. He offered to call maintenance to put up the painting, but there was already a nail in the wall for the hideous surrealist art Kurt had left hanging. I swapped the two paintings out, and James placed the other face-down on the cart.

"I don't want to have to look at it when I take it back to the storeroom." He chuckled.

"I don't blame you. I almost turned down the office for that alone."

James laughed with me, and it didn't feel forced. It also didn't feel like he was laughing at me, unlike Hank. My former business partner had been a condescending prick sometimes, and to everyone, including me.

"I've only developed the one app," I said as James turned to leave. "What if that's all I've got in me?"

James motioned for me to follow him, and we walked down the well-lit hallway, back toward the bank of cubicles for my team. "How about you sit with Anne the rest of the afternoon to see what we do. I'm not asking you to reinvent the wheel, but if you see something you think you could improve, go for it. Tomorrow, I'll have you sit with Luca to look at our customer-facing software. And the day after that, I'll have you and Malik review some of our home-brewed systems. Kurt developed a program for productivity tracking that's been all the rage." We'd made it back to Anne's desk, where she overheard his sarcastic comment.

"By that, he means it makes steam come out our ears every time we have to use it," she said. "I hear congratulations are in order." She held out her hand, and I shook it. "Welcome, boss."

I laughed. "Connor's fine. I've never been anyone's boss."

It had been a long time since anyone had called me son, too, but the memory of my lunch conversation with James played on a loop in my head during the slow parts of Anne's demonstration.

Son. I liked the sound of that.

### BENJAMIN

Instead of an office, my Manager of Finance title gave me a large cubicle at the end of the aisle facing the CFO's glass-framed wooden door. The door remained closed more often than not. Today, Brian hadn't bothered to show up at all. He was working from home, Mr. Barclay said, before leaving for yet another business conference this evening.

My assistant Sid stopped by my desk around ten with a printout. He was a nervous omega who liked to wring his hands, which often led to crumpled paperwork. "Here's your itinerary for tomorrow."

I blinked up at him. "What?"

"Mr. Barclay wants you to attend the conference with Brian, and it starts tomorrow. You're flying out at eight tonight."

"The hell I am." The words died in my throat as a wave of nausea hit me. This was my third round with a mystery illness this week. I did not have time for an annoying stomach bug while dealing with a ridiculous last-minute trip.

I brushed past Sid and sprinted toward the bathroom. I only got as far as the end of my aisle before I leaned over and puked on the carpet in front of Brian's office door.

"Oh, shit," Sid said. "Are you all right?"

I wanted to wipe my mouth on my sleeve, but the thought made me gag again. Nope. Needed tissues or paper towels.

"Does it look like I'm all right?" I asked as I stalked back to my desk and my box of tissues. Connor's wet wipes would have been wonderful right now.

Connor. All I really wanted was to go home and be with Connor. He would take care of my upset tummy and tell me everything would be okay.

"I'll get the janitor up here." Sid dashed away, taking my itinerary with him.

Once I'd cleaned up, I dashed a terse email to Mr. Danbury.

"I am not going to Chicago on four hours' notice. If you want to keep an eye on Brian so badly, go yourself."

I considered deleting the last sentence, but another wave of nausea bent me over my trash can, stealing my one last fuck about my job. I couldn't do this anymore. I loved working with numbers, but the office politics were too much for me. I needed to find a small business, or a handful of entrepreneurs who needed an accountant.

As soon as I could sit up again, I sent the email. I had written two lines of my resignation letter by the time Sid returned with the janitor.

When I saw her harried expression, guilt washed over me. "I'm so sorry for the mess. Well, two messes." I toed my trash can into the aisle. She tossed it into the open garbage bag on her cart, plastic bin and all.

"I'm so sorry," I said again. "Can I help you clean it up?"

She was a lanky brown-skinned woman with broad shoulders and a bit of a hunch.

The way her corded arms hung at her sides reminded me of werewolves, and I wondered if she was a shifter.

Not that Connor looked anything like that ... that was probably a wolf shifter stereotype. I felt like a complete asshole for even thinking it, which made me want to help her even more.

She leaned in and sniffed my hair. Then, she shook her head. "Not in your condition. Have you been drinking ginger water, or keeping some saltines in your desk drawer?"

I blinked up at her. "If I'm that sick, maybe I should have stayed home."

"You're not sick, pup. You're pregnant."

Pup? So maybe she was a wolf shifter ... It wasn't a stereotype if it was true.

"Pregnant?" My brain finally caught up to the second word of interest.

"Yup." She pointed to her collar. "You're unmarked, though. If your mate's a good one, he'll mark you to keep the sickness and cravings at bay."

That was all the information I needed to type out the rest of my resignation email. "I'm pregnant. I quit."

I left all my office belongings except my little rubber plant and framed family photo. I wouldn't miss the strange conglomeration of team-building propaganda and motivational sayings I'd accumulated over the years.

In the parking lot, I started to second guess my decision. "Okay, so, not every pregnant omega quits their job," I muttered.

I could hear it now. Pops would tell me how disappointed he was that I couldn't have stuck it out for my pregnancy so my paternity leave would have been paid. On the other hand, my dad would gush and tell me that's exactly what he had done when he'd found out he was pregnant with my oldest brother. And then Pops would say, "See? You knew better than to do what your dad did."

The mental turmoil caused yet another bout of nausea. I got sick in the bushes beside my car. Finally, I made it behind the wheel, once more cleaned up with tissues from the box in my passenger seat.

I should have gone home, but I needed to see Connor right away. I had to know I'd made the right decision.

He and Pops were in a meeting on the top floor. I felt guilty for avoiding my brothers, but my stomach was starting to feel queasy again. I grabbed a lemon-lime soda from the vending machine outside the conference room while I waited. The cool beverage seemed to calm everything down.

Fifteen minutes later, the door opened and my beautiful alpha walked out. Sunlight lit him up from behind, burning the image of a halo and wings into my vision for a split second before he stepped forward and became Connor again.

Pops followed him out and clapped him on the back. "Nice work, Connor."

"Thank you, James."

It was weird to hear Connor call Pops anything but Pops, but it was good to see them on equal footing. Pops liked Connor, that much was easy to see, but it was more than that. He seemed genuinely pleased by whatever Connor had presented in their meeting, beyond familial indulgence because Connor was my boyfriend.



I'd always worried Pops would treat me like his omega son if we worked together. What I appreciated at home, I would hate in the office. With his parenting style, I assumed Pops was a micromanaging boss, but Connor gushed about how hands-off he'd been. It didn't make sense until I saw how different Pops, James, was here at work.

Pops was the first to see me, or smell me. "Benjamin? What are you doing here?"

"I need to talk to Connor."

"Hey, Ben." Connor's smile was pure sunlight as he stepped toward me.

I placed my soda can on the table beside me and hopped from my seat. I rushed him, eager to wrap my arms around his chest and squeeze him as tightly as I could.

He smoothed my hair and cupped the back of my head. "Let's get you cleaned up in the bathroom over here, and we'll talk, okay?"

"Is it really that bad?" I asked.

"You smell like you've thrown up at least three times today. Is your tummy still upset?"

I didn't even care when he spoke to me like I was a child. I cuddled against him, though I was careful not to wipe my face on his shirt.

In the bathroom, he wetted a paper towel and dabbed at my mouth and cheeks while I scrubbed my hands in the sink. I loved the way he took care of me. It was the same way Pops had looked after me as a child, but I'd hated it then.

"Feel better?" Connor asked.

"Depends. Do I smell better?"

"You smell ..." He inhaled deeply and looked alarmed.

"I thought so." He had the same sense of smell the shifter janitor had. He knew. Worse, he didn't want me to be pregnant. This was all too soon.

"Oh my goddess, Ben!" Connor picked me up and knocked the breath from my lungs. Then, he twirled me around until I thought I would be sick again, all the while chanting, "You're pregnant!"

"Put me down!" I tapped at his beefy arms until he relaxed his hold, and I slid back to the floor.

"We're going to have a baby!"

I nodded. "We are."

"Did you tell your boss?"

"I quit."

Connor blinked at me like he didn't know what the word meant.

"He wanted me to fly to Chicago tonight for that worthless conference Brian is attending. I refused to go, and then I got sick at work. This fabulous janitor lady told me I was pregnant, so I ... quit."

Pops barged into the bathroom and pulled me from Connor's arms. "That's how the best omegas in our families do it!" His hug wasn't quite as hard as Connor's, but I still gasped for air when he let me go.

"Would you all stop that? I need to breathe for two!" I bent over my knees, and another wave of nausea sent me into the nearest stall.

Afterward, Connor helped me clean up again, and then he escorted me to his office with Pops on our heels. I'd never been to Connor's office before. Even though I had much to discuss with him and Pops, I took a moment to gush over it. "This is really nice! I love the wolf painting behind your desk, and the view! What a great view!" It mostly looked out onto scrub brush beyond the parking lot, the freeway in the near distance, and the mountain range beyond, but at least we could see the mountains through the haze today.

"Thank you." Connor tried to hide his blush with a quick head nod, but I noticed. He'd told me he didn't think he deserved this job or the office, but Pops couldn't stop raving about his performance at our family dinners.

Pops pulled us into another hug once he closed the door behind us. "I'm so proud of both of you."

"You're not mad?" I asked.

"Why would I be mad?"

"I quit my job, just like Dad did."

"That job was a placeholder. You've always been destined to work here."

I growled in frustration. "But I don't want to work here."

"You didn't want anything handed to you," Pops said, "and that's fair. We would have started you at the head of the foreign finance department, and that might have been too much at first, but you would have grown into the position."

I blinked at him. This was the first I'd heard of the job he'd planned to give me. I'd interned with Barclay Foods the summer of my senior year of college and already had a job lined up before I graduated. I'd worked my way up from accounting desk clerk to Finance Manager. Now, something like Foreign Finance Manager sounded like a lateral move, but "Foreign Finance would still be a handout."

"It would be a well-deserved position for the son I put through school," Pops countered. "A son who's been doing similar work for the last five years without a promotion."

What he didn't say spoke louder to me. We both knew the reason I hadn't been promoted. Mr. Danbury was still holding out hope that Brian Avery would become the CFO the company needed, all because Brian Avery had married Ginny Danbury, Mr. Danbury's only child.

"I - I'll think about it," I stammered. "Right now, I'm coming to terms with this life growing inside me."

"Take all the time you need." Pops pulled me to his chest for another bone-crushing hug. "Connor's leaving early today."

"Thanks," I said. The thought of getting behind the wheel again, even after my stomach had settled, sounded like a bad idea.

"Take your laptop," Pops said when Connor's screens went dark. "Work from home the rest of the week. You know what you're doing."

Connor cocked his head like his wolf. Even I knew Pops hated when people worked from home.

"What?" he asked when he noticed both of us staring at him. "I wished I could have

worked from home through your dad's pregnancies, that's all." He winked at Connor.  
"You'll thank me later."

I so did not want to know what that was about ... except the strange tingling in my balls said I probably already knew.

20

CONNOR

Driving Ben's little hatchback was a bit of a hassle, but I didn't mind it. I slid the seat as far back as it would go and adjusted the angle so my head didn't brush the ceiling. For once, I stayed at the speed limit and gently eased between lanes to keep Ben as comfortable as possible.

We stopped at the grocery store on the way back to the condo. I picked up some saltines and ginger tea while Ben grabbed milk and orange juice. While he walked through the junk food aisles, I searched for the pharmacy. The grocery store layout was still a little foreign to me, but I finally found the pregnancy tests.

When I returned to the cart, fully prepared to see it stocked high with cookies and candy, I found it full of fruits and vegetables instead.

"Looking at the rest made me feel queasy," he grumbled as we rolled the cart to the shortest line.

"We're going to need a bigger car," I said when we were back in the parking lot. The groceries filled the hatch and the back seat. Where was a baby supposed to go?

Ben groaned. "Don't tell Pops. He bought Jake and Matt a minivan when they had Jeffrey."

"An SUV would be nice," I said. "Or a truck." I'd never owned my own car. Starting

out, I couldn't afford it. Later, I traveled so much, it didn't make sense to have a car for the few days a month I was home. Since I started working at the bank, either Ben or his family had driven me to and from work.

"We don't need another car," Ben insisted. "I quit my job, remember?"

I also remembered his dad saying he had a job in the foreign finance department, if he wanted it. That meant we'd be commuting to the same place each day. The bank had an excellent daycare on the second floor ...

I was getting ahead of myself. We'd just found out Ben was pregnant. Granted, I knew Ben was pregnant from his scent, but the pregnancy test would confirm it for his human family and friends. Now was the time to share good news, not to make plans.

Ben's condo was more like a row house, but his was on the end. He shared only one wall, part of it the garage, with another property. When we reached the short driveway, he tapped the garage door opener, and we glided inside.

Once we'd carried everything inside, I gave Ben some space to take the pregnancy test. He called for me a few minutes later as I tucked noodle boxes into the pantry. I followed the sound of his voice to the bathroom.

He directed my attention to the little stick with two blue lines. "It's real."

I kissed his temple and pulled him to me. "It's real. We're having a baby."

"It's not too soon?" Ben asked.

"There's no one else I'd rather have a baby with than you."

He blinked up at me in the mirror. "Yeah. I think ...". He turned in my arms and kissed me hard. He tasted of toothpaste and desperation. "I think It's time for you to mark me."

I hadn't been thinking about marking Ben until that moment, but my wolf surged to the surface, sharpening my eyesight. I could almost see our mate bond through his eyes.

"Mark me," Ben whispered again before sealing our lips together for another kiss.

I picked him up and carried him to his bedroom, where I'd stayed since that first night. I wondered if he'd gotten pregnant that night, or one of the many afterward when we'd taken turns pleasuring each other.

My wolf wanted me to hurry, to mark and claim my mate, but I unbuttoned his short-sleeved shirt and lavished attention on the bare skin underneath. I kissed down his torso until I was eye-level with his pants zipper. His cock strained behind the fabric and gave a little twitch when my knees hit the floor.

Gazing up at him, I unzipped his pants and helped him out of them. From here, I could smell his arousal, which only heightened my own.

I tugged off his briefs slowly, leaving them around his knees while I licked and sucked on the head of his cock. Then, I helped him step out of his pile of clothes.

He grabbed a towel from the stand beside his bed. We'd laughed at the hideous wolf pattern on them when we found them on clearance, but then we'd both agreed we wanted them for our sex towels. Slick was messy, and neither of us enjoyed doing laundry every night.

Ben arranged the wolf towel over his pillow and placed it beneath his hips, leaving no



question as to how he wanted me. I kneeled between his legs and he lifted them apart, displaying his slick-covered hole.

"Fuck me, alpha."

I leaned over him for a kiss while I pushed two fingers inside. He whimpered into my mouth before breaking our kiss to pant, "Why the fuck does that feel so good?"

"Better than before?"

"I'm really sensitive." He grinned up at me. "Must be the baby hormones."

I plied my fingers and added a third to stretch him further. He fucked himself on my hand, hips canting and cock slapping his belly with each motion.

"Now, Connor. Please."

His need was serious when he used my name. I circled my fingers again, rubbing his prostate before I removed them.

"Hurry!"

I coated my cock with his slick and slid into him. Instead of pulling out, I lay on top of him, my body covering him as I nibbled at his neck. I held myself up on my elbows and knees, not wanting to crush him but also wanting to be as close as possible. With tiny thrusts, I nudged further into him. I wanted to burrow inside him and live there.

He tugged at my hair, pulling my mouth to his for another heated kiss. He keened into my mouth when I tugged his hips further up. I took that as a good sound, especially when he did it every time I pulled out and then slammed back into him.

"More," Ben pleaded. "Need more."

I didn't want him to come yet. I kissed the spot on his neck where I would place my mark, and he squirmed beneath me.

"Please."

I also didn't want to tease him. My wolf rose to the surface as I approached the peak of pleasure. I reached between us to tug on his cock, and he shouted my name. Cum spurted between us, and Ben's channel squeezed around my base. My knot flared to life, and I came hard. I thought I had gone blind until I realized I was looking at Ben through my wolf's eyes. With my half-shifted snout, I bit down, leaving my mark at the crux of Ben's neck and shoulder.

Ben shouted my name again as he writhed on my knot.

I shifted back and kissed the mark I made. "I've got you," I crooned in his ear.

"What am I supposed to do? Do I bite you back?"

"Yes."

No sooner was the word out of my mouth, and Ben clamped his blunt human teeth on my shoulder, too, breaking the skin. It felt like my wolf's essence was seeping out of me and into him, and a magic unlike any I'd felt twisted around us, binding us together forever.

I let Ben nap while I made dinner. Afterward, he sent a picture of the pregnancy test to his family's group chat. Our phones both lit up immediately with congratulations and requests to take us shopping. Matt gave us the name of his midwife, and Jake sent me a link to a house for sale in their neighborhood.

"If you don't buy it, Pops will," his text said.

Like the hatchback, Ben's starter condo had little room to grow, with two bedrooms, one bathroom, and a one-stall garage. The new house had three bedrooms, two bathrooms, and a decent-sized backyard. It wasn't far from public transit, either, which would be nice.

I showed Ben the listing while he dried the last of our dishes, and he groaned. "I love them but tell them to stop already."

"They only want to help." I knew as soon as the words were out of my mouth, they were the wrong ones to say.

"They've been 'helping' me all my life. Go to this school, Benjamin. Take these courses with these teachers to get the best grades. Apply for these grants, this internship, and join these organizations." His face was almost purple, and he gaped for air. "I don't need their help! We'll get by on our own."

"We will," I agreed, "but it will be easier if we let them help. They love you as much as I do, and they've lived here longer, known you longer."

He looked like he wanted to protest more, but then his face crumpled and he leaned against my shoulder. "You're right."

"If it makes you feel better, you can tell them they have to convince me first."

His warm breath puffed against my chest. "That won't be a problem. You're a pushover."

He wasn't wrong. Still, it gave him a way out. He could blame his family's horrible ideas, like the house and the minivan, on me when the time came.

Except when his dad took him to the dealership to trade in his hatchback, Ben loved the van for its convenient self-opening doors and extra seating. He also loved the house when we walked through it. The laundry appliances had their own little room inside the garage, with a folding table and bench. The main and smallest bedrooms were next to each other, perfect for a nursery, and the third was opposite the kitchen, for when our child wanted more independence.

My favorite part about the house, though, was the eight-foot privacy fence in the backyard. It contained only a stone patio surrounded by a few succulents and a rock garden, but it was a safe place for my wolf.

"It's your fur-ever home," Ben teased once we were back in the van.

The words punched a hole in my chest and squeezed my heart. I turned to him as he snapped his seatbelt into place. "You're my fur-ever home."

His smile was like sunshine peaking from behind a rain cloud. "I am?"

"Remember how my wolf reacted to you after the plane crash? And when we played with the kids?"

"And when you marked me." He quaked with a full-body tremor. "So good."

"You'll always be my home."

When Matt and Jake threw us an impromptu baby shower the day after we moved in, Ben agreed his family wasn't all bad. They'd overheard us talking about going shopping for all the furniture and equipment we needed and pitched in. First, they filled our baby's room with furniture from their garage. Then, they gave us an entire closet's worth of clothes in sizes up to one year.

"We've been waiting to unload this shit, um, stuff on you!" Jake said.

Josie gave Ben a milk pump and a bottle washer. Our little kitchen didn't have much counter space, but Pops said I could trade my coffee machine for the bottle washer once the baby came. "I'll buy you coffee at work!"

Alex and Shelly gave us a stroller, the seat piled high with pregnancy books. Once I had everything put away in the kitchen, I rolled the stroller to the garage, unpacked the books, and took them to our bedroom. We started reading them that night.

I kept a notepad by my bed to jot down all the things we would need. The books surprised me with the level of contradictory information. Each night, I reviewed my list and crossed off items I'd listed earlier.

The book on the bottom of the stack was the most practical. After reading it, I realized I didn't need anything on my list. Ben's family had already supplied us with the essentials, and even some luxuries like the stroller and bottle cleaner.

"We're going to be fine." Ben sounded overtired as he drifted off to sleep. He'd given up reading fifteen minutes before I did.

Still, I worried as I lay in bed staring up at the ceiling. I worried my parenting skills would suck because of my strict upbringing. I'd tried to be the exact opposite of what my pack expected an alpha wolf to be, but what if I reverted to the old ways when raising my children? The silly thought kept me awake long into the night.

### BENJAMIN

Connor was a big ol' tattletale. I loved my alpha, but he was supposed to be on my side. I helped him with two little work projects, and then I got a visit from Pops, carrying a laptop and paperwork for me to sign.

"If you want to work for my bank," he said, "You'll be paid." He didn't say the rest, but I heard it loud and clear in my mind. "And you'll be grateful."

"Thank you," I mumbled. At the bottom of the contract, where it listed my generous salary and benefits elections, it said, "To be renegotiated in six months," with a date that coincided with my return to work after the bank's three-month paternity leave.

"This is too much already," I said. "Why do we need to renegotiate?"

"You'll see," was all Pops said.

My new job was simple enough. I compiled all the bank's vast resource manuals into one source document, and Connor added the information to the bank's applications and websites page by page. Some of the information was customer-facing, and some for customer service, but most of the information detailed the bank's back-end systems. While Connor reviewed the current guidelines, he even found new ways to tweak the processes, and in some cases, rewrite the programs to make the bank run more efficiently.

I loved working with Connor, but I found myself bored with the project. The foreign finance department's processes intrigued me more than the rest because they dealt with money conversion and foreign markets, my fields of study in college.

We finished the department's pages in late August, so I was filled with job apathy when we went to Jake's house for Labor Day. The work talk at family cookouts had always annoyed me, but after a few minutes of venting to my family, I realized how cathartic it was to share with people who understood.

While Connor and Jake discussed an app Connor had developed, I whispered, "I'm so sorry," to Pops. "I used to hate you all for talking about work at our family get-togethers. I was such an asshole."

"We're glad you're with us now." Pops patted my shoulder and steered me toward the cooler filled with bottled water and soft drinks.

I was glad, too. I'd always hated the thought of working at the bank, but now, I wanted to know what more I could do for the family company. Connor and I had plenty of time to finish our project before we both took paternity leave.

"Is that offer in Foreign Finance still available?" I asked Pops.

"Maybe." He winked. "You'll have to ask about it during your six-month review."

When he laughed, he sounded pleased, and not so much that he was laughing at me. I hugged him extra tight before we left for the evening.

We'd walked the three blocks from our home to Jake's. On the walk back, Connor took my hand, not minding that my waddle made my arms swing.

"Jeff was good tonight," Connor said. "Polite. Didn't throw a single tantrum."

"If you keep rewarding him with Connie time, he'll be a changed man by the time he's ten." Jeffrey's guests had told him all about their fabulous time with Connie. He'd even called me up the next weekend to ask if my dog friend could come over to play if he did all his chores for two weeks. The bribe worked, and we visited.

My family got to meet "Connie the dog," too. They all secretly knew about shifters, though none had bothered to share the secret with me. Pops said our family had shifter ancestors. Jake and Alex's best friend in high school had been a cat shifter, and Josie's wife, Audrey, was a badger shifter. I'd been oblivious to all the badger jokes, and I'd skipped out of their wedding reception early, before her side of the family shifted and performed a special dance.

Audrey had given birth to my little niece, Mina, in July, and this was the first family gathering they'd attended since. Tonight was the first time she and Connor had shifted together and played in Jake's backyard until the burgers were ready.

"Did you have fun?" I asked.

"Yes! Audrey is fast and strong. My wolf loved play-fighting with her."

Audrey had explained that badgers often fought larger predators in the wild. I'd worried they would take things too far and attack each other, but Connor reassured me before he shifted.

"We're still people in there, even though we look and sound like animals."

I knew that, I did, but seeing a wolf and a badger playing with my human nibblings was a fantastical sight. I half-expected a musical score to pick up or everyone to burst into a lighthearted song.

I dug my knuckles into my lower back once we were inside the door. My muscles



ached from standing so long.

"Here, love. Let me help." Connor ushered me to the rocking recliner and helped me lift my legs while he shoved a footrest beneath them.

My jaw cracked with a huge yawn. "I should just go to bed."

"Not yet," he said. "I have something I want to show you, but I need a few more minutes in the baby's room. Will you wait for me?"

How could I resist his expectant smile? "Of course I will."

A few minutes later, he returned for me. Instead of letting me waddle through the living room and down the hall, he picked me up bridal-style and carried me. The baby kicked from the shift in position, and I laughed. "Don't worry baby," I whispered toward my belly. "Daddy's got us."

"Daddy?" Connor grinned. "I like the sound of that."

My cheeks burned hot, and I tried to hide my face when he set me down.

"Not like that," he whispered in my ear. "We're going to be parents! We can't think dirty daddy thoughts!"

"You're baby," I reminded him.

"You're blushing because you want me to call you Daddy?" He teased.

"Don't you dare!"

"Papa." He laid a hand over my protruding belly and the baby kicked again. "See?"

They liked that. You're Papa." Connor grabbed me from behind and nibbled my ear. "The next time you're on top, I'm calling you Papa."

"You'll forget by then," I hoped.

My cock tented the front of my loose paternity pants. I adjusted them and then looked around the room.

The sight took my breath away. The room had been an eggshell white, which worked for me, but Connor had transformed the walls with gorgeous decals. The room was now an underwater sea scape with octopi, sharks, and other sea creatures.

"I love it. The baby will love it. Thank you." Tears leaked from the corners of my eyes when I blinked.

"I cannot wait for them to be here." Connor leaned down and kissed my bump. We hadn't wanted to learn the baby's sex yet, so we were using gender-neutral pronouns for them. We had almost three months before we could meet them, but they were very active, especially this time of the evening.

They were still kicking and punching after we'd gotten ready for bed. Connor laughed at the way the bedspread shifted with each judo chop.

"Do you want a belly massage?" Connor asked. "Or a general massage? Maybe a penis massage?"

I laughed at his attempt to get me to smile. I hadn't realized how hard I was clenching my jaw while trying to read.

"A belly massage sounds wonderful." I fitted the bookmark into the book's crease for later and set it on my nightstand. Gingerly, I lowered myself onto my back and rested

my hands at my hips.

"Naked belly rubs are best," Connor said. He pulled the covers off me and helped me remove my pants and sleep shirt. Then, he slid one of our wolf towels beneath me so I wouldn't leak slick all over the bed.

It started as a belly rub, but then Connor's chin brushed my erect cock, and everything changed. He sucked my tip into his mouth and continued to knead my drum-tight skin. He inched lower on my cock, taking more of me in until I could feel his nose against my pubic hair. The wet heat soothed every ache in my body and drew all my attention. I couldn't see him around the curve of my belly, which made it even more erotic.

In no time, he had me on the edge, writhing and begging for more. Instead of giving me his knot, my alpha sank his fingers into me and twisted them mercilessly against my prostate. I came with a hoarse shout, and Connor swallowed me down.

I heard the slapping sound of his hand on his cock while he continued to slurp and lick me. Then, he rose above me on his knees.

"I want to cover your belly with my cum." His blown pupils almost eclipsed his irises. "Please?"

"Mark me, alpha."

He shouted something garbled, but it sounded a lot like "Yes, Papa." My face was on fire as he coated my belly in ropes of white. I liked that a little too much. My cock tried to rebound as his knot stretched wide. Who knew I had a bit of a Daddy, or Papa, kink?

"You're so gorgeous, carrying my pup," Connor said as he brutally jerked his still-

hard cock from knot to tip. "So perfect for me." He lavished praise on me until his words jumbled together. This time, he growled my name when he came. He spurted twice and then his cock dribbled the rest over his hand. A few more strokes, and his knot deflated.

"Stay there," Connor said when I lifted onto my elbow to begin the difficult roll out of bed and waddle to get cleaned up.

"I still have to pee," I whined as he disappeared into the ensuite bathroom.

"In a minute!"

He cleaned me up in no time and then helped me out of bed. With his arm around my waist, it was more like I walked on air.

I felt so much love in that moment, but I held back. I knew I loved him, and everything he did showed he loved me, too, but we hadn't said the words yet. I was beginning to wonder if we ever would.

Once I'd done the rest of my nightly business, Connor walked me back to bed and tucked me in. He even leaned over and kissed my forehead the way my parents had when I was young. He would be such a great dad.

"How's the little kickboxer doing?" he asked.

I hadn't noticed a single kick since Connor came the first time. "I think we put them to sleep."

"We should sleep, too." He crawled into bed and turned off the light before snuggling down along my side with his head pillowed on my shoulder. Sated and warm, I fell asleep within minutes.

### CONNOR

Ben and I had our first real argument the second week of November. I woke during the night to find our bed cold and Ben gone. I found him in the baby's room, building a nest.

Ben was on my last nerve with the nesting. I didn't understand it. Wolves didn't nest. Humans didn't, either. Why was my delightful mate building a huge pile of blankets and throw pillows in the middle of the floor?

"I need to be ready!" His eyes filled with tears when I tried to shuffle him back to bed. It was somewhere between two and three in the morning, but my eyes had been too bleary to sort the numbers on my phone.

"I thought we resolved this before bed."

"You resolved it!" he wailed. "I didn't!"

I tried to hug him to my chest, but he pushed me away.

"Did you lie to me when you said you were all right?" I hated asking, and his hurt expression devastated me, but I had to know.

The last time I saw Hank before leaving for New York, he'd told me everything was fine, too, all while preparing to fire me. Ben and I had talked about this. I'd been

burned too many times by lies, and I needed to trust him, especially about his mental health and the health of our pup.

"I did not lie!" The tears choking his voice made me believe him, and I felt like an asshole for making him cry. "I was fine when we went to bed. And then I wasn't."

"You need a comfortable bed, not a sleepover pile on the floor," I chided. "I love you. I want to take care of you. Come back to bed, and we'll build the nest there."

He swallowed hard, and the tears flowed even harder. "You what?"

"I love you." I'd said it without thinking in the heat of the moment, but I knew it was true. It still seemed too soon, but I wanted to say it. I'd loved Ben from the first moment I smelled him, before I even saw him. "I love you, Papa, and our pup will, too. Come back to bed."

"I love you too!" He hugged me as tight as he could while throwing out his hips to make room for his belly. I loved the way his ass stuck out when he did that. He looked so adorable and strangely sexy.

I held him until he was all cried out. Together, we picked up the bedding and moved it to our room, throwing back the comforter to form our cocoon in the middle of the bed and then pulling it over the top of us once we were inside.

"This is perfect," Ben whispered. "Thank you."

I twined our fingers together and brought them to my lips. I kissed and licked his hand until he giggled. "Stop it!"

"I love you," I said again. "I'm sorry I doubted you."

"My feelings are a mess," he said. "If I'd known how I felt when you asked, I would have told you."

"I know." I propped myself up on an elbow and leaned over to kiss his forehead. "I need to be more patient." I'd assumed the worst of Ben, the one person I trusted above anyone else.

"It's my fault," Ben said. "I didn't want to wake you so soon after you'd fallen asleep."

"You can always wake me up."

I could see his wide grin in the purple glow of the outside streetlight. "You always sound so disappointed, though."

I laughed. My wolf didn't like to be roused from sleep. "I promise I won't bite."

He leaned up and kissed me. "I know. I'll wake you next time."

I sank back to my pillow, and he rolled and squirmed his way into position with his back to my chest. I hugged him to me, so grateful he still wanted to be with me after I'd said the wrong thing.

Granted, it wasn't a huge disagreement, but we'd weathered it together with only a few tears. Even better, Ben loved me back. I'd been afraid to say the words for nothing.

23

BENJAMIN

Of course I went into labor minutes before turkey time on Thanksgiving Day. I was almost a month early by human standards, but my midwife insisted our baby would be early. We were outside, Connie and Audrey playing in animal form, when something warm trickled down my inner pant leg.

Connie bounded over to me, nosing me in the belly.

"I think my water broke."

He shifted right then and there, giving everyone a show, though I doubt they could see much around my bulging midsection when he picked me up and carried me into the house. They probably got a great view of his ass on the way by, though.

"Clothes," I shouted when he tried to carry me out the front door and down the street to our house while stark naked. My brother's backyard was acceptable, but I didn't want the whole neighborhood to see my sexy naked mate.

"Fine," he muttered. We stopped in our usual bathroom on the first floor, where he'd left his clothes. While he dressed, I called my midwife, Magda.

"It's time."

She laughed. "You doubted me, but I said it would be Thanksgiving Day around



noon."

"You were right," I huffed.

"I'll be there in twenty minutes."

That gave us time to walk home and for me to strip down. Connor helped me readjust my nest to give Magda room to work, and then she explained the next steps.

All the rush, and then we waited. Our little one didn't want to join the world just yet. My contractions were too far apart and my womb hadn't opened yet.

The contractions didn't hurt that bad, either. I thought I would get off easy when a sharp pain doubled me over my knees with my head down on the bed. "Oh, shit, what was that?"

Magda spread my legs apart to check again. "That's more like it," she said. "You're dilated now. The real action will begin soon."

"Real action?" I whined as another sharp pain wracked my body. Before, the pain had been centrally located in my midsection, but these I felt all the way from crown to toes. The pain stole my breath.

"Breathe with me," Connor said. "You can do it." He sat beside me, leaning against the headboard while I squatted back on my heels. We held hands and counted together until the contraction passed, but another followed soon after.

"Let me check you again," Magda said.

I leaned forward and spread my legs, and she grunted in approval. "Baby's almost here. Push with the next one."

Pushing sounded like the worst idea ever, but I stayed on my elbows and knees. Connor held my hands and talked me through each push.

"Okay, Daddy, it's almost time."

We'd told Magda that Connor wanted to be called Daddy. He leaned forward, kissed my cheek, and hopped off the bed.

A few more pushes, and I heard our baby's sweet cry for the first time.

"Aw, it's all right, little one," Connor said. "She's a girl!"

Once I finished pushing out the afterbirth, I fell over on my side, exhausted and grateful for the nest wall of pillows at my back. Connor placed our daughter in my arms while he cleaned up the bloody blankets in the middle of the nest. Then, he lay beside me weeping tears of joy.

"She's here!" he said. "She's perfect! What are we going to name her?"

I studied her pinched little face. She was cute as a button, with a rosy complexion, a full head of dark hair, and lanugo halfway down her back.

"Jordan," I said. "Her name is Jordan."

Magda had everything already laid out for her weights, measurements, and inoculations. She whisked Jordan away, but then she returned, helping me roll onto my back in the nest for a short nap while she cleaned me up. I woke with Jordan asleep on my chest, her mouth still attached to my nipple after her first meal.

"Aw, she likes her papa," Connor said. "Fell asleep immediately."

"She will like her daddy soon enough," Magda said. "Such a sweet girl." She patted my shoulder. "You've got this, Papa. I need to get back to my own family."

"Oh no. I'm so sorry we ruined your Thanksgiving!" Tears sprang to my eyes.

"Honey, I knew she was coming today. I hope they paused the football game, though. If I miss even one touchdown, I'm going to be pissed." She leaned down and kissed the back of Jordan's head. "Have a wonderful long life, little wolf."

Connor walked her out, leaving me to stare down at a baby I now knew was something more than human. We'd known it was a possibility, but now that it was reality, I worried I wouldn't be good enough. I was only human. Connor would be the fun dad with whom she could shift and play.

"Whatever you're worrying about," Connor said from the doorway, "don't."

"You told me not to lie to you," I whined. "This is important."

He scrambled onto the bed and lay down facing me, taking my hand between his. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to make light of anything serious. You can talk to me."

"She's a wolf?" I asked for confirmation.

"She is. My wolf can sense her as my pack." He grinned. "It's nice, having one again."

I frowned at him. "How can I measure up? I'll never shift into another form or play with her the same way you can."

Connor's face brightened with his beautiful smile. "You're perfect just the way you

are. You're her omega papa. She already loves you because you carried her, and you're the one who feeds her. She doesn't even know me yet." He laughed as he pulled off his shirt and lay on his back. "Experiment time. Lay her on me."

I was still nervous about moving someone so small and fragile, but together, we shifted Jordan from my chest to his. She stirred immediately and began fussing.

"See? She wants to be with you."

She started rooting around his nipple, still fussing.

"That's only because she's hungry."

"That's not the only reason, and you know it." We carefully lifted our helpless newborn back onto my chest, where she found my nipple and began suckling. Now, her noises were more contented grunts than her earlier worried whimpers.

"Okay, maybe she likes me," I said.

"She loves you," he amended. "She can't help it any more than I can. You're already the best omega in the entire world, and now you'll be the best papa." He said all this in the silliest falsetto baby-talk voice I'd ever heard.

My smile stretched my cheeks so much they ached. "We're both pretty awesome," I said. This time, I believed it.

### CONNOR

We hosted a belated Thanksgiving dinner at our house two weeks later. It seemed only fair after we'd left Jake and Matt's early to have a baby. As far as excuses to leave went, that was the best one possible, but I hated to let my new family down. They were my pack now, and I wanted to give back as much as they'd given to us, if not more.

Jake and Matt were the first to arrive with Jeffrey and Jonah tagging along behind them. Each carried a box.

"Christmas isn't for another few weeks," I reminded them.

"We've all seen that bare toy chest in Jordan's room," Matt said. "We're staging an intervention!"

The box Jake carried looked familiar, but the number on it was different. "What's a Wonderdog 4000?" I asked.

"The newest model," he said, giving me a side hug so we wouldn't crush it between us. "We all appreciated Wolfy so much, we thought we should return the favor. Right, Jeffrey?"

The pouting nine-year-old stared at the stone in the entryway. "Right."

Jake leaned in and whispered, "We got two." He jerked his head toward Jeff. "He's a little sad right now, but he'll be happy come Christmas."

The gift made me almost as teary-eyed as Jeff, but for a different reason. "It'll be years before she's ready for it. It will sit on top of Jordan's bookshelf until then." I turned to Jeff. "Hey, kiddo, want to help me put it up?"

He glanced at me to confirm I was talking to him. I handed him the box and led him to Jordan's room, where I lifted him up.

Jeff set him on the shelf and pushed the box into the corner so it was flush against both walls. "He might get dusty up there. I could come over and clean the shelf for you. You could lift me up, just like this."

I doubted he would retain his enthusiasm for cleaning when he had his own Wonderdog 4000, but I kissed him on top of his head and set him back down with a big smile. "That's a great idea. You could start when you and your brother come stay with us during winter vacation!"

"Oh." Jeffrey reached into his jacket pocket. "I almost forgot. I have something for Jordan, too."

The small cardboard box contained a delicate porcelain angel placing a star atop a Christmas tree. Across the bottom of the tree, the lights spelled out, "Baby's First Christmas." At the base of the tree sat a lolling-tongued husky puppy. With a little imagination, it could have been mistaken for a wolf.

"This is perfect," I said, ruffling his perfect blond bowl-cut. "Let's put it on the tree."

We found more guests in the living room when we returned. I loved Ben's sister Josie, but her wife Audrey and I had become faster friends. Audrey was a badger

shifter, and we played the best animal games. Jeff showed her the ornament and carefully showcased it for Alex and Shelly, who had just arrived with their year-old twins. We all watched as Jeff placed the ornament in the middle of our bare Christmas tree.

Since it wasn't Thanksgiving anymore, we thought it would be fun to decorate with our extended family. The tree was yet another gift from Ben's family, along with ornaments they said were his. Inside the box, we found handmade "atrocities," as Ben called them, and some cute ornaments he'd never seen before.

That didn't stop me from going all out online. I loved Christmas. I'd bought several sets of lights, balls, garland, and crafting materials so we could make our own ornaments after dinner.

Neither of us knew how to cook a turkey, so when Ben's parents arrived with the roaster, already-cooked turkey inside, we set out the rest of the side dishes. We had green bean casserole, stuffing, and a mixed vegetable dish warming in the oven, along with cranberry jelly, cottage cheese, and a raw vegetable tray with three kinds of dip waiting in the refrigerator. We even had apple and pumpkin pie cooling on the counter for dessert.

The meal and company were everything I'd ever wanted from a family gathering. No one made awful jokes to put anyone else down, and no one cried, screamed, or shifted and ran across the table. In my pack, those had been commonplace disturbances at pack dinners.

Afterward, we finished decorating the tree and watched the holiday animated classics. Jeff and Jonah were on their best behavior, though Jonah was young enough that he still watched with delight, while Jeff looked bored out of his mind.

Jordan had been down for a nap during dinner, but Ben passed her around to anyone

who wanted to hold her afterward. I made a show of putting a little wolf decoration on the tree, and she flashed a toothless grin at me from her papa's arms. Everyone said it was gas, but I knew better.

I didn't want the night to end, but it was getting late. We said goodbye to our guests and locked up. Ben tucked Jordan into her crib, turned on the baby monitor, and joined me in bed.

"Happy Thanksgiving," I whispered to him.

He snuggled closer and draped his leg over mine. "Happy everything," he said. "Nine months ago, I didn't think any of this was possible. Hell, I didn't even want this. I thought I was destined to spend the rest of my life avoiding alphas. Family get-togethers like these were a nightmare because Jake, Alex, and Josie always had some friend lined up to meet me."

My wolf's hackles raised at the thought of someone else dating my mate, but he soothed me with a kiss.

"Then I met you, and my life made sense. I love you so much, Connor."

"I love you, too." I said. "You are my perfect mate. I always knew you were out here in the wide world."

He snickered and rolled over, slotting his back against my front. "Who meets their fated mate at an airport, though? No one believes me when I tell them." He couldn't tell them half of it, since I was only human to the folks who worked at the bank, and humans didn't have fated mates.

"I just knew." I nuzzled behind his ear in the way he loved. "That's what I tell them."



It was still too soon after Jordan's birth for more than cuddles, but I loved snuggling with Ben, especially when he wrapped his arms over mine and tugged them closer to his chest. We fit together like pieces of the most glorious puzzle.

Our third piece let out a wail from the other room, and we both jumped. "Rest," I said, kissing Ben's temple. "I've got this."

I warmed up a bottle Ben had pumped, testing the temperature on my wrist as I hurried to Jordan's room. She was so tiny in her crib, but she had an appetite like no other and a voice to match. Again, I was amazed at how easily she fit in the crook of my arm while I provided her midnight snack.

She fell asleep still suckling, which made it easy to put her back in her crib. I eased myself back into bed beside a sleeping Ben and cuddled him close once more.

We fit together so well, Ben, Jordan, and me. We were the perfect puzzle pieces to build my fur-ever home, though I wouldn't have ruled out one or two more.

### EPILOGUE

#### BENJAMIN

Two years later

As the Foreign Finance department head, I sometimes traveled for work. I should have known. It was now my job to attend the same conferences Brian Avery and I had attended together when I worked for Barclay Foods.

Meanwhile, my replacement, Sid, the same young omega I'd trained as my assistant, sat in the chair behind Brian, taking pages of notes and frowning while Brian studied his phone. His earbuds were cordless now, but I could see them in his ears. His phone screen flashed like he was watching the first baseball game of the season.

When the session ended, I approached them, shaking Sid's hand and nodding to Brian. "Who's playing?"

"What?"

"Baseball, right? Padres or Giants?"

"Dodgers at Detroit."

"I bet Mr. Danbury would love to hear about that." I walked away while Brian stuttered a justification for watching a baseball game when he was supposed to be learning about fiscal responsibility.

After the conference, Sid caught up to me at the airport. "Hey! What flight are you on?" he asked. "Mr. Danbury switched my flight with Brian's, so I'm taking the direct one and he has to hop all over hell."

I laughed at that. "Think Danbury will fire him this time?"

Sid shrugged. "He might. The rumor at the office is, Mrs. Avery is none too happy. Brian's always on his phone, like he was today."

Sid and I compared flights. We were on the same one, sitting next to each other in first class. Since we decided we'd have plenty of time to chat on the plane, we went our separate directions.

I grabbed a bottle of water and checked the bookstore for a mystery for Connor. I found the one he wanted and texted him a picture, and then we texted until it was time to board the plane.

"This is super nice," Sid said when I sank into the reclining seat beside him.

I grinned, thinking about the first time I'd flown in style. "My husband bumped me up to first class two years ago, the last conference I attended before I got pregnant."

"Husband?"

I flashed my tungsten carbide ring with delicate rainbow scrollwork along the top and bottom of the band. Connor and I had gotten married the summer after Jordan's arrival. Ours had been a whirlwind relationship, from meeting him in the airport to bringing him home with me to finding out I was pregnant, having a baby, and getting married. It took me almost three hours to tell Sid the story, thanks to his enthusiastic questions.

"You don't want your job back, do you?" He asked me when I explained how I'd

ended up at the conference. "Mr. Danbury still speaks highly of you, and I know you didn't want to work for your family."

"Absolutely not," I said. "I misunderstood what working for my family would mean. Connor helped me see how it was the perfect job for me."

"I'm glad." Sid looked relieved.

"I'll put in a good word with Mr. Danbury for you."

Sid blushed. "What? No. You don't have to do that."

"It's the least I could do. I left you in a bit of a lurch. Did you end up flying to Chicago when I couldn't?"

He sighed and nodded. "Worst trip ever. And I've been doing both my job and Brian's since you left."

Whenever Brian had asked me to do his work, I'd threatened to tell Mr. Danbury he couldn't handle his duties as CFO, and that shut him up. I spent the rest of the flight sharing ways Sid could avoid doing others' work in the future, and he jotted them in his notebook, filling all but the last page.

When we landed, Connor and Jordan waited for me near baggage claim. Jordan wore a lavender dress and her pigtails hung in perfect spirals. She was spotless perfection, while Connor looked like he lost a fight with an alligator in a mud pit.

I pulled them to a bank of empty seats to wait for the luggage carousel to start. "What happened to you?"

"Someone wanted to play in the sandbox at the playground when we got here. Someone had clean clothes for daycare in the back seat, and someone else," he

pointed both thumbs at himself, "did not."

I laughed at his story and then leaned over to where Jordan sat in his lap. "Sandboxes are for after you pick Papa up at the airport."

"We go again?" she asked.

"Oh, no." Connor shook his head. "No, no, no. We go get ice cream."

"Ooh!" She clapped, and the sandbox was forgotten.

"Connor?" Someone I'd seen on the flight but didn't recognize beyond that approached our seats. "Connor McKeeler, is that you? How've you been, buddy?"

I patted my lap, and Jordan climbed over to sit with me.

Connor stood and shook the man's hand. "Derek! How are you, man?"

"I'm good, good. Is this your ... mate?"

"Yeah," he said, dragging me to my feet with Jordan awkwardly hanging from my shoulder. "This is Ben. Ben, this is Derek, the guy who was with me when we met in New York."

"He ran off talking about his fated mate, and that was the last we saw of him!" Derek must have told himself that lie so many times, he thought it was true.

"Hank fired me," Connor reminded him. "It wasn't like I ran away."

"Yeah, man. I'm sorry about that." He reached for Connor's elbow, but my mate jerked away. "Oh. Um. Could we talk ... over there?"

"I already talked to Hank." Connor stood up straighter and flexed his arms at his sides. "The answer is no."

"Oh." Derek looked a little panicked, but he covered it with a lopsided grin. "Well, you look great, man. Good to meet you, Ben." He waved to me and dashed away, quickly disappearing into the crowd around the carousel.

Connor sank back into his seat with a sigh.

"That was strange," I said.

"That explains the weird call I got from Hank earlier. He offered me my old job."

Hearing his name again made me mad. "After all this time?"

Connor shrugged. "He expects a huge boom in crypto over the next few years."

"You said no?" I tried to keep my voice neutral, but I'd always worried this day would come, and that Connor would be tempted to return to his jet-setting ways.

"I said hell no. I like my job. No travel, no hard conversations with strangers. Plus, I get to see you and Peanut every day."

I grinned. I loved seeing him, too. My office and Connor's were on the same floor, and we ate lunch together each day. Usually, that meant grabbing something in the cafeteria and sitting on the benches overlooking the daycare's play area. We could watch Jordan, who Connor had nicknamed Peanut, play with the other kids after their lunch until it was time for their nap. We did so without her knowing we were there, for now. Eventually, she would look up and see us, and then we'd need another pastime for the noon hour.

Jordan was getting squirmy in my arms, and the lights flashed to signify incoming

baggage on the conveyer belt.

"Come on, Peanut." Connor took Jordan from me so I could grab my bag off the line.

Pops had insisted I travel with more than my carry-on this time. "I'm paying for one bag whether you take it or not," he'd said. "Humor me, even if it's empty."

I'd packed an extra set of clothes and left them with the lost-and-found clerk at JFK. The woman at the kiosk cocked her head and looked down her nose at me like she was confused by my human omega scent. I was beginning to recognize shifters by their animal actions, and she'd had the same mannerisms as a raptor.

For the trip home, I'd filled the bag with stuffed animals for Mina and Jordan and building sets for Jeffrey and Jonah. They were going to love them.

The bag was light enough to grab it by the handle, pull it off the conveyer belt, and unleash the extender all in one snap. As soon as the wheels hit the ground, I pushed my way through the folks still waiting. Panic set in, and I walked faster until I reached the fresh air near the exit.

The crowds at baggage claim were the worst part of traveling. I was halfway out of the terminal before Connor caught up with me.

"Ben, hey, slow down!"

I'd almost made it to the doors. I stepped off to the side and let him catch up, gulping the cool air. I had to stop, anyway. I didn't know where he'd parked.

Connor wrapped his arm around me and kissed my temple. "I've got you now. You don't need to run away."

"I wasn't running."

"You don't like crowds." He grinned down at me. "Or airports. Or anything about traveling. I remember."

I already felt better with his arm around me. I relaxed even more when we buckled into our car seats, but I wasn't completely myself until we sat eating ice cream on our back patio table. Jordan couldn't finish her cone, so Connor gobbled the rest before it turned into a dripping mess.

"We missed you," Connor said after we put Jordan to bed. "It was a long week."

"It's good to be home," I said. "I missed you, too." I poked his shin with my toe.

"I've been thinking about what Pops said. Maybe it's time for my assistant manager to take over traveling to conferences."

"That would be great," Connor said, flashing me his brightest smile. Both he and Pops had tried to get me to reconsider this trip, but I'd insisted it was my job, all because Brian would be there. Now, I understood the reason Mr. Danbury sent Brian away as often as possible, and it had nothing to do with his job title.

"I thought about our future while I was out east, too." I reached for Connor's hand across the table, and he placed it in mine. "I think it's time to grow our family."

Heat filled Connor's gaze. "I'm ready when you are."

Pops had been pushing for Connor to take more time off to dote on Jordan. Connor loved his job, but I'd shared his dream with my parents. He wanted to stay home with our growing family, and I would do everything I could to make it happen.

That night, we made slow, sweet love, our bodies rocking together toward ecstasy. We didn't need to rush. If I didn't get pregnant tonight, we could try again and again. We had forever in our fur-ever home.



THE END