



Lion's Crossing (Love Sync Mates Season Two)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Small town omegas shouldn't travel to the big city on their own. Or so my parents tell me. But that doesn't stop me from taking the train to Saramto for a week's vacation.

Ever since I became an adult, my parents have urged me to find a good alpha to settle down with and tried many times to set me up with one. But there aren't any "good alphas" in Shifter Crossing. So, I live in a tiny apartment on my own and clean at the local high school to pay for my expenses. When my vacation time comes, I take the train to the metropolis of Saramto to visit museums I've only heard about, eat foods not available in a small town, and see what it's like to live in a big city.

My holidays are quickly derailed when the train breaks down on the way, leaving all the passengers stranded for hours. That's just the beginning of the ruination of my meticulously planned vacation. If not for a kind (and very famous) alpha who comes to my rescue, I doubt I would survive my first night in the big city. But I wonder if his good will comes with a cost, and will it be too much for me to repay?

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Knox

I couldn't sleep. Spent the last hour tossing and turning in my single bed. When my eyes refused to stay closed any longer, I stared at the stained popcorn ceiling. Maybe I should have cleaned at the high school the day before and come home exhausted. But I would have had less time to pack. If only I could stop the thoughts of everything I wanted to do on my trip to Saramto from churning over and over in my head.

I'd never been on vacation on my own. My parents were dead set against it. They didn't believe an omega should travel anywhere without an alpha to accompany them. They hated the fact that I hitched a ride to and from work every day with my cousin who also worked as a custodian at the high school in the next town over. And that I even worked. To them, an omega was supposed to mate with an alpha as soon as they were of age and have multiple babies. But I refused to conform to the traditional ways. I'd seen so many of my former classmates get mated right out of high school. And they were miserable. Sure, my parents had a good relationship, but that didn't mean I would. Plus, there weren't any single alphas in my small town who I could stand to be around.

But I wasn't going to the metropolis called Saramto to find an alpha who was suitable. I simply wanted to see the city for myself. And get far away from work. To exist away from the confines of the super-small town I lived in. Even if only for a week.

Tossing off my light blanket, I sat up before reaching for my glasses. I'd packed my contacts in my suitcase but planned to wear my glasses when on the train. It was best

to have them with me anyway. Just in case. I visited the bathroom to relieve myself then headed into my kitchenette to get the coffee ready. Not knowing how my stomach would react to traveling, I decided not to have breakfast. I was fine when I knew where I was going, but not so much when someone drove me to a new place. And going to Saramto was completely new for me. Once I reached the city, I would check into my hotel room then head to the first restaurant on my itinerary. Everything from my arrival to my departure was planned. Even though I refused to heed my parents' warning about omegas on their own, I wasn't going to wander around all willy-nilly. I had all my routes planned for each day and wouldn't be out anywhere after dark. I was independent, not naive.

Once dressed, I triple-checked my bag and headed out the door, locking my apartment behind me. It was the only apartment in the town, two floors of eight apartments each, and mostly occupied by single alphas, and omegas with kids whose alphas had ditched them. The townspeople loved to gather at the local diner and gossip about all of us who lived in the building, or ask my parents when I was ever going to get mated. Then my parents would amplify their insistence on finding me an alpha. Living in that building proved a mate wasn't what I wanted at all. No, thank you!

With my bag over my shoulder, and the handle of my suitcase in my grip, I started walking down to the station. I didn't have a car or even drive, but in Shifter Crossing, nothing was far away. The entire town consisted of only twelve blocks off two main roads.

I groaned as my phone rang. I'd avoided passing my parents' house on the way to the station, taking the next block instead, yet they couldn't help but call me.

"Hello?" I knew what they would say before my omega dad spoke.

"Knox, you really shouldn't go there alone. Why don't you postpone your trip and we

can find an alpha to accompany you.”

I didn’t know if he was more concerned for my safety or for his own reputation when the town learned I’d gone to the big city on my own. “Dad, this is my only time off, and I’ll be fine. I will keep my locator on and won’t go out after dark. I won’t accept rides from alphas and will stick to main streets when I’m not in my hotel room.”

He sighed over the phone. “I don’t like this one bit, but you have never been an omega to follow social rules.”

“I love you, too, Dad.” I hung up, not wanting to argue, knowing it would only get worse from there.

It was no surprise that the platform was empty when I arrived. No one left Shifter Crossing very often. There were towns nearby where we did our grocery shopping, filled vehicles with gas, and picked up other supplies, but other than working, no one went much farther away. The train didn’t stop in those towns. We were conveniently in the middle of the direct route between the cities of Merryville and Torago on the way to Saramto. On weekends, some people from the surrounding towns took the train into the city, but not today.

While waiting, I scrolled through my itinerary on my phone, ensuring each place I wanted to visit was still open and hadn’t suddenly closed. I didn’t need to get to a museum that was shut down for renovations or that had ceased business years ago, but the website hadn’t been updated to reflect that.

Suddenly, I heard footsteps approaching. I dreaded turning around, expecting my father to be there in another attempt to convince me to stay. Instead, it was a younger alpha, one closer to my age. I could tell by the brief scent I caught of him. He had plenty of luggage of his own and wore dark shades, a plain black ball cap, and had the collar of his shirt raised, as if to conceal his identity. I rolled my eyes. In Shifter

Crossing, everyone knew everyone. And if they didn't know you, they would find out your identity quickly. He must have been from a nearby town, as I didn't recognize him, but I didn't see a car in the parking lot. Maybe someone had dropped him off.

It wasn't much longer before the train arrived, only four passenger coaches behind the engine. Small compared to the one that passed through on weekends.

"This way please," the coach attendant called. He guided us to the third coach. "Space is limited, so please take the first empty seat."

The alpha waited for me to board, and after I heaved my suitcase up the steps and placed it into the luggage corral, I looked for an empty seat. The coach was quite full, and I saw someone ahead move to sit beside someone else, meaning, I could have a seat to myself. Then I remembered the alpha behind me. I would have to sit with him. It was not ideal for an omega to be trapped in a seat like that, but I had no choice. There were no other empty seats. I got as comfortable as I could, and surprisingly I had enough room that my knees weren't jammed into the seat in front of me. Nothing like what my mated friends had told me flying in an airplane was like.

When the alpha took the seat beside me, I didn't feel squished, even though he wasn't little by any means. But if I needed out, I would have to ask him to move. There was not enough room for me to get around him.

The train started rolling out of the station as I got comfortable, and the attendant came around to collect our tickets.

Beside me, the alpha plugged in his earbuds, closed his eyes, and leaned back in his seat. At least he didn't try to make small talk with me. I hated when the alphas at work tried that. They would joke about their latest omega conquest then talk to me all friendly-like as if I didn't know what they wanted and hadn't heard their previous conversation.

I leaned back and stared out the window, watching the scenery of places I'd never been pass by. It wouldn't be long before I reached Saramto and could get started on visiting all the sites on my list.

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Linc

I hugged my dad then my father as I made my way through the foyer. “You’re sure you don’t need me to stay longer? I can if I need to.” Though I was anxious to get back to working in my own recording studio, I felt guilty leaving my parents on their own again.

“No.” My omega dad pointed past me toward the front door. “You’ve helped us out so much, but I know you need to get back to the city. There are many people counting on you.”

“But you’re more important.” I leaned down to kiss his cheek.

My father cupped my arm. “Listen, Linc, we really appreciate you coming to help take care of me after my hip replacement so that your dad and sister could still run the store. But I’m back up on my feet now. Plus, we’re all starting to get on each other’s nerves. We all need to get back to our regular routine. You included.”

I had less of a routine than my parents, but producing anything with the limited recording equipment I’d brought with me to stay with them in Shifter Crossing wasn’t the same as creating and manipulating music in my studio. There was only so much I could do without building a whole new room in their house. “I just want to be sure—”

My father tapped me on the shoulder. “Your sister’s here. We’ll be fine.”

I said goodbye to my parents once again before lugging my belongings out the door

and loading them into my sister's car. The train station wasn't far away, but I had a lot of luggage, so she'd agreed to drive me the few blocks over.

"Thank you again for helping out." Kayla rested her hand on mine. "I couldn't have supported our father and maintained my hours in the store when dad wasn't there. It would have been too much for the three of us, but I know you left a lot behind to come here for so long."

I nodded. "It wasn't a problem. And let me know if you need me back or need anything else."

She squeezed my cheek. "You're just the best baby brother. Hopefully your ride home is uneventful. Shoot me a text when you get home."

"I will." After collecting all my luggage, I stopped to put on my hat and sunglasses and raised my collar before heading to the platform. I didn't make my presence in Shifter Crossing public knowledge, as I didn't want fans traveling to the super-small town to see me. So, I stayed out of the store and focused on my father's recovery instead. The trip home would be tricky though. I didn't know who would recognize me on the train.

Only one other person stood on the platform, waiting for the train. An omega based on his scent. I braced for him to race toward me and ask for a selfie with me, but when he glanced in my direction, he didn't seem to recognize me at all. Strange, since he looked to be around my age, though I refused to complain about not having fans maul me. Maybe my popularity from being in the boy band FNL had finally worn off. I could only hope, as I much preferred to be producing music rather than performing songs on stage.

A chat request came in on my phone. The head of production at Adan Records. I accepted the request as I tucked myself into the tiny alcove at the station.

“Hey, Linc, I heard you’re coming back today. You think we can set up a meeting for later today to go over the music for ONE’s debut album?”

“Sure.” It would be easier for me to drop most of my recording stuff off at my studio than to lug it all the way home and back. “The trip is supposed to take about three hours, and then I’ll need another hour to decompress, so how about four?”

“Sounds good. See you then.” The production head hung up as I brought up my notes on the upcoming omega group I would be working with. Over the past month, I’d reviewed the memos sent to me about their style and what types of music they enjoyed. I’d made a couple demos for them to listen to, but I would be able to do even more once I returned to my studio.

The train arrived only minutes after I hung up. The much calmer life I’d lived in Shifter Crossing was about to end, as I readied to return to the metropolis, Saramto, where my life did not pass by based on a clock but by what needed to be done.

I let the omega on the platform board first.

It was the polite thing to do—and my parents would slap me if I didn’t.

Plus, I had a lot more baggage to bring on with me.

Once I’d situated it in the luggage hold just inside the car, I glanced inside to search for a seat.

I would have preferred business class over economy simply to have a seat to myself, but the line through my hometown didn’t offer the more expensive option.

And the car was surprisingly full for a weekday.

I looked up and down the aisle, hoping no one recognized me as I tried to find a place to sit.

There was only one left.

Right beside the omega who boarded with me.

He had the window seat, which meant I was left with the aisle.

Better than being boxed in by a fan who wouldn't leave me alone.

I'd been there before on an airplane.

I put my bag in the hold above our seats then sat down.

The seat was surprisingly roomy, and I didn't accidentally bump the omega beside me.

Though I wouldn't have minded if he sat a little closer with his delicious scent of vanilla and raspberries.

I expected omegas on their own to wear a scent blocker, as I did out in public, but he must have foregone the safeguard.

Or maybe it was something only city omegas used.

The last thing I wanted was to upset someone from my hometown by getting too close or making them uncomfortable.

Especially an omega.

I might not have been in the spotlight as much, but I still had a career influenced by public opinion.

Once the attendant collected our tickets, I popped in my earbuds, leaned back in my seat, and closed my eyes, trying to ignore the omega's scent.

I listened to the covers released by some of the members of the group I would be working with, plus their own playlists to review their sound and tastes, focusing on my job.

Just like when I was in FNL, I found artists preferred to sing, release, and perform songs they would listen to themselves.

I wanted to help make them a huge success, so I planned to focus much of my time and attention on them over the next few months.

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Knox

Two hours had passed since I boarded the train. We'd picked up more passengers in Torago. They must have boarded another coach since ours was full. Our next major stop was Saramto, my destination. The alpha beside me still hadn't said a word, only typing into his phone on occasion at the beginning of our trip, but he hadn't for a while. It was as if he remained engrossed in whatever he listened to, or he didn't want anyone to disturb him. Maybe he'd fallen asleep.

But I had to pee. My morning coffee was ready to come out, and I needed to leave my seat and use the facilities. Only I had to get past the alpha first. He didn't seem mean from our brief interaction when boarding, yet I worried I may trigger that side of him if I bothered him in his focused state or worse, woke him up.

I raised my hand from the armrest, unsure if I should touch his arm or his leg to get his attention. As the train rocked on the track, I ended up leaning to the left and toward him, touching his arm before I had a chance to pull my hand back.

His body shook as if startled, and he removed his sunglasses and turned to me, the bridge of his nose wrinkled, and his eyes narrowed. "Everything okay?"

"Um..." I couldn't tell if I'd upset him, but I really needed to go. "I need to get past you. I need to use the bathroom."

"Oh." He nodded then stood, allowing me to pass. "There you go."

"Thank you." He nodded again with a faint smile, and that's when familiarity hit me.

I knew him somehow, but I couldn't remember where from. Was it from the high school? Was he one of the alphas that hung around, gawking at the almost- legal omegas who attended, ready to fill their heads with false promises of being their mate then dumping them when they got pregnant? There weren't any alphas I knew from the area that I hadn't seen at work, around town, or when out with my cousin. Maybe I'd gone to school with him, but he'd changed a lot in looks since then. On my way down the aisle, I wracked my brain trying to recall how I knew him. Nothing came to mind. Not on the way there, while using the washroom, or on my way back.

As I returned, still struggling with my memory, the train swayed back and forth, much more aggressively than before. I held onto the backs of the seats as I stumbled down the aisle to keep my balance. Then the train began to slow, the brakes screeching as they gripped the wheels. By the time I reached my seat, the train had stopped.

The alpha got up immediately, as if he'd watched for me to return.

"Do you know why we've stopped?" I asked as I passed by him.

He shook his head. "It just happened, so your guess is as good as mine."

A saying I often heard from my parents. Yep, he definitely had grown up in or around Shifter Crossing.

"Hopefully it's nothing serious." My vacation timeline depended on being on time or even early for everything.

He nodded. "Yes, hopefully."

With his short answers, the alpha still didn't seem like he was in the mood to talk, and since we weren't moving, I decided to pull my own earbuds out of my bag.

“Attention passengers,” the voice came over the coach’s static-filled PA system. “There has been a brief delay in our travels, and we are working quickly to get on our way again.”

That didn’t tell us much. It could have meant there was a problem with one of the passengers, or there was an engine malfunction. Either way, I hoped to be moving again soon. I was supposed to arrive ahead of the check-in time at my hotel, but with the delay, I would likely arrive right on time.

The alpha beside me began typing furiously on his phone, so I leaned back and pressed play on my music streaming app. I had my playlist on shuffle, so I didn’t know which song would play first. “Fated For Forever” was the first random song I heard, sung by the pop group FNL about how when an alpha finds their fated mate, they will love them forever. The group had since disbanded, but I still enjoyed the music they had released. I wasn’t a huge fan of theirs, didn’t know all their names or anything, but appreciated their sound. A short clip of the group played on the app, showing the group dancing to the music. And that’s when I realized the identity of the alpha sitting beside me. He was a former member of FNL.

I froze for a moment, hoping he hadn’t looked over to see what music I listened to on my phone. I didn’t want him to think I was some crazed fan who would be all over him because of his celebrity status. Leaning into the corner of my seat, away from the alpha, I switched to a new song then brought up my search engine. Looking up FNL, I tried to find a list of the members to figure out which one sat beside me. After checking out a few fan pages, I learned his name was Linc, he was a lion shifter, and he lived in Shifter Crossing before heading to Saramto to become a pop star. And after leaving FNL, he’d become a music producer for Adan Records.

It all made sense why he hid his identity. I would have, too, if I rode on a train with all these people. Most wouldn’t care about his identity, but one fan pushing the boundaries of what was acceptable behavior would be enough to ruin the ride. And I

didn't want to witness that, either.

I made a mental note to only talk to him about being from Shifter Crossing. That was, if he decided to talk to me. Because, so far, he seemed engrossed in his phone. Even though we weren't moving, I returned to looking out the window and listening to my music. It wasn't as if I could do anything else.

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Linc

An hour. A whole hour passed, and the train hadn't moved. There was no update on when we would be on our way again, no talk of transferring us to buses for the rest of the trip, and the attendants had disappeared completely. The passengers, including myself, became restless, unable to stay in their seats, and voices grew louder with irritation. I considered going to the washroom, but the lineup kept me in my seat. It wasn't as if I could leave the coach to relieve myself. I had to hold it or find a bottle and a corner to discreetly take a piss. And the scent of my omega neighbor kept getting stronger, making him that much harder to ignore.

Chewing on my bottom lip, I turned toward the omega and considered starting a conversation with him. I didn't want to come off as a complete snob, if by chance, he did know who I was. Yet, he stared out the window. I had no idea what captured his attention, as only a field of corn lay beyond the tracks. Nothing to be that engrossed in, unless he watched something between the rows that I missed.

"Attention passengers," a staticky voice came out of the speaker. "We have diagnosed the issue with the engine, and a repair crew is on their way here. Once they get the issue fixed, we will be on our way again."

A collective groan filled the coach. We'd already waited long enough, only to learn our trip was delayed even more. Pieces of paper were thrown at the speakers while more passengers stood to stretch. Someone leaned their chair all the way back, while the passenger behind him punched the seat that trapped his knees. I suspected if we had to stay in the coach much longer without it moving again, at least one fistfight would break out. Likely more.

I sent a quick text message to the head of production at Adan Records to let him know I was still delayed, before leaning back with a sigh. Maybe I should have driven to my parents' house four months ago to take care of my father. With my car, I would have reached my apartment or gone straight to work by now. Though I hadn't expected the trip home to take so long, believing the train to be better than traveling on the highway. Plus, my car sitting in my parents' driveway would have been a dead giveaway that I'd gone home. I hadn't wanted any fans to know my whereabouts, as that would have made taking care of my father that much harder.

The omega beside me turned away from the window, his scent wafting in front of me the instant he moved. He took out his earbuds and placed them in his bag before wiping his palms across his pants.

"So, are you from Shifter Crossing, or one of the nearby towns?" I had to say something, no longer content with trying to ignore my sweet-smelling neighbor. And that was the most common thing to say when you saw someone new in Shifter Crossing.

"I'm from Shifter Crossing." He folded his hands in his lap yet couldn't keep them still. "Lived there all my life."

Strange since he didn't look the least bit familiar. I thought I'd known everyone who grew up in Shifter Crossing. "So, you know Zambrano's? The convenience store there?"

He nodded. "I go there quite often since I don't have a car."

"Well, my parents own the store." I didn't know what else to say, suddenly fumbling over my words, making conversation while trying not to sound arrogant. "I've been visiting them for the past few months."

“Oh, cool. They’re super nice. So’s your sister.” His hands settled, yet he still hadn’t glanced in my direction. “I mean, assuming Kayla is your sister.”

“Yeah, she is. I’m Linc, by the way. Since we’re from the same hometown and stuck here for a bit longer, at least, I thought we could get to know each other. I thought I knew everyone from school, but I’m sorry, I don’t recognize you.”

“Knox. I’m Knox.” He raised his shoulders up to his ears. “I was homeschooled for many years, but I went to high school at Armstrong Secondary School.”

“So, do you remember Principal Mountain?” Maybe that would help me find common ground. I didn’t have the principal for long, but the man liked to strut around the halls and pop into classes at random moments just to check in on the teachers and students. Not in an authoritarian way but to understand the dynamic. Definitely memorable for anyone who had him.

“No.” Knox shook his head. “He left the year before I started. I had Principal Kang.”

“Ah, so you must be a couple years younger than me. I left for Saramto before Principal Kang got there and finished my courses online.” It had felt like a boarding school for future pop stars. One that I’d wanted to attend. I’d studied in between dance practice, recording, and performances. And often late at night.

“Yeah, but I’ve heard about you.” He quickly tensed, leaning back with his hands in his lap, and staring at the seat in front of him.

“You know who I am?” I was amused by the confession. The omega hadn’t given me anything to worry about the whole time he’d sat beside me. No sneaking a selfie with me, picking at my clothes for stray hair, or glancing over my shoulder to see what I had on my phone. Those were the less conspicuous fans.

“Well, I didn’t at first. Wasn’t even sure if you were from Shifter Crossing.” He raised his phone. “But then I listened to ‘Fated For Forever,’ and when the song clip came up, I realized why you looked familiar.”

“FFF, huh? That’s a B-side track. You a fan?” I meant it as a joke, not expecting Knox to freeze the way he did. His sweet scent disappeared, and I could smell his fear. I touched his arm, trying to calm him. “It’s okay if you were. Are. But it’s a different kind of fan who prefers the B-sides over the title tracks.”

He gulped, sinking into himself. “I mean, I like your music, but I didn’t even know all your names. Just the songs.”

“That means a lot, Knox.” I used his name, hoping he would turn toward me, and he did. “Really. We put a lot of work into writing and producing those songs, so it’s nice when people appreciate that and not just our polished-for-the-spotlight looks.”

He blushed. “Well, I mean...”

I felt my own cheeks warm and decided to change the topic of conversation. “So, what brings you to Saramto? Do you have family there?” I hoped so, since the metropolis was a far different place for omegas than Shifter Crossing.

“No, I’m just on vacation.” He pulled his bag to his lap and held it tight to his chest. “I needed to get away from my custodian job at the high school, and my parents who keep trying to set me up with alphas I don’t want anything to do with.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle. “My parents keep asking when I’m going to settle down, too, but I’m simply too busy to worry about a mate.”

He loosened his grip on his bag. “Right? Their generation seems to think our only purpose in life is to find a mate and have kids. Mine don’t even care for me to find

my fated alpha, or even one who treats me properly, as long as his parents are nice.”

“You shouldn’t have to be with someone like that.” Oh, if Knox were my fated omega, I would definitely treat him properly, and he already said he liked my parents, so that was another plus. I sucked in a quick breath. Why was I even thinking about fated mates?

“Exactly. I’m glad you understand.” His vanilla and raspberry aroma wafted in front of me. While my lion purred deep within me, I glanced around to make sure no other alpha caught his scent.

“But you need to be careful in Saramto. There are a lot of alphas who will try to take advantage of you because you’re not from the metropolis.” Especially if he made it obvious by glancing around in awe and taking lots of pictures.

“I know.” He sighed. “As I told my parents, I have an itinerary. I know exactly where I’m going, the safest route to get there, and I won’t be out of my hotel room after dark.”

“They just want you to be safe.” I did, too, and I barely knew him. I contemplated giving him my number just in case something happened while he was on vacation. Then common sense kicked in. “But I’m sure you’ll have fun. There’s so much more to do and see in the city. I know I was a little overwhelmed when I first moved there.” I did have escorts everywhere I went, even when out for a late-night snack, but I held in that information. I wanted him to be cautious, not terrified.

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Knox

The next hour passed by faster than any of the previous ones since I'd boarded the train. Linc and I continued to talk while surrounded by passengers who grew increasingly impatient. I felt the tension around me, but Linc made me feel safe. Even though we were strangers when we boarded, his presence as an alpha from the same hometown as me, eased my worry about being stuck on the train.

"The hi-rail is here," someone shouted from the other end of the coach. "They're finally going to fix it."

"It's about time." I glanced at the time on my phone. "It's already check-in time at my hotel."

Linc lowered his phone. "Oh, what hotel are you staying at? I should have asked earlier."

"The Vista." I chewed on my bottom lip, sure he had stayed at much nicer hotels around the world. "It seemed nice enough for what I could afford."

Linc sat up, turning toward me. "Oh, the one right next to Natural History of Shifters Museum. And Claude's Diner is right across the street. Both are places that need to be on your itinerary if they aren't already."

"The museum is." I opened the notes app on my phone. "But not the diner. I'll have to add that."

“Claude’s is so good.” He tapped his fingers on his thigh. “And it’s not expensive and posh like some of the other places in the city. Great food with big portions, and very affordable.”

“Thank you.” These tips from Linc made me wish I’d had someone from Saramto to talk to about where to visit when I’d planned the trip. Locals always knew the best places to visit that weren’t on the travel websites.

He rubbed his belly. “All this talk of food is making me hungry.”

“We’re all hungry!” an alpha shouted whose scent wafted from the row behind us.

“Carts!” another passenger shouted. “They’re bringing out carts! It’s about time!”

“Yeah, we’ve been stuck here for hours. The least they could have done was give us food and something to drink!”

Voices echoed the sentiment as a new attendant pushed his loaded cart up the aisle. With the promise of water and food, the cloud of tension in the coach seemed to decrease a bit, as did the overall temperature inside.

Conversation between Linc and I dwindled as we waited for the cart to pass by. “Want anything to eat?” he asked.

While I was hungry, I could not eat right away with my anxiety-induced upset stomach. Until we started moving again, I refused to snack on anything. And the line to the bathroom was still longer than I cared to chance. With the edge of the cart barely visible, I leaned closer to Linc to see what was available for later.

“What do you mean the food costs money?” an alpha shouted from the seat in front of us. “It’s your fault we’re stuck here. The least you can do is give us food to

compensate for the delay.”

“I’m sorry, sir, but—”

The attendant didn’t have time to finish his sentence before chaos broke out all around us. Packaged peanuts, bagels, and other unidentifiable food flew into the air around us while passengers dove over seats to grab it. Bottled water rolled down the aisles, while some were trampled in the turmoil, sending sprays of wetness all over the coach.

I leaned into my seat, trying not to get involved in any of the commotion. Suddenly, Linc reached for me and pulled me onto him. With the movement, my glasses fell off into my lap. I went to reach for them, but another passenger dove headfirst into my seat. The man righted himself, his feet and arms seeming to be everywhere in the process before he left just as quickly as he’d arrived. But Linc wasn’t so fast to let go of me. He held my head against his chest, and I couldn’t help but catch his aroma. His scent blockers must have worn off during the trip because I would have noticed a smell like that earlier. Like maple syrup and brown sugar. The same as the oatmeal I liked to eat. A comfort food. While I’d tried to ignore my hunger, being so close to him aroused an appetite for something else. My deer twitched inside, attentive around an alpha for the first time in my entire life. I didn’t want to move, yearned to stay in his lap forever.

I made the mistake of nuzzling into him, and that’s when he let go of me. He didn’t toss me back into my seat, but gently helped me off his lap and handed me my glasses. “Are you okay?”

I nodded as I put my glasses back on, too scared of what would come out of my mouth if I tried to say anything.

“Sorry for grabbing you like that.” Linc rolled his shoulders. “But I caught his

reflection in the window and didn't want him to land on you."

"Thank you." I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself down from being so close to him. "I...I appreciate it. He would have hurt me."

Linc snorted. "Yes, he would have." After rubbing his hands across his lap, he glanced up and down the aisle. "I have an idea. That is, if I can get to my bags."

I had no clue what he meant, but I worried I'd done something wrong while in his lap with how quickly he seemed to want to leave.

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:53 am

Linc

I had to get away. I needed to leave my seat and move far away from the omega. Having him in my lap and protecting him from the flying passenger had awakened feelings I tried hard to suppress for so long. As a rookie pop star, I'd fallen for too many of the omegas who claimed they loved me. Turned out, they wanted status or fifteen minutes of fame. NDAs usually took care of those people, but I had others who wanted to make me their baby's daddy, promising me they were on blockers until they were tested for them. I was left jaded by all those omegas and the whole process of having to vet a lover before I could be intimate with them. But Knox was different. So different.

I'd talked to him first, and been the one to initiate such close contact, even if it was to protect him. Even when I told him I was famous, he didn't seem impressed by it, instead choosing to talk about where we'd both grown up. My status meant nothing to him. I felt I could finally relax on the train. My lion wanted me to get closer to Knox. He yearned for me to take the omega into the bathroom and make him mine. I didn't need a mate in my life, and he didn't seem interested in one, either. Feelings for an omega would only cause me to lose focus in the studio when I was supposed to produce an album for other artists. Sure, lust and longing were great for the next time I decided to produce my own album, but probably not the message young omegas wanted to get across.

"I'll be right back." I had no idea whether Knox heard me, hadn't even looked at him, but thought it rude if I left without saying anything.

As soon as the aisle cleared, I headed toward the baggage compartment. My dad had

sent me home with all kinds of baked goods and snacks from the store, claiming I didn't eat enough in the big city. The food would be perfect to hand out to those in the coach who didn't get anything to munch on after the cart was raided. The attendant had yanked the empty cart back in the direction he'd come from, but only after losing most of its contents in the madness. I probably should have helped him, but at that time, my only focus had been ensuring Knox's safety. I hadn't even thought about anything else going on around me. Hadn't been able to. My alpha instinct had concentrated solely on protecting the omega beside me. I tried to shake off thoughts of him, but for some reason, he remained stuck in my mind.

Since I'd been the last to board the coach, my bags remained accessible. I found the one my dad had packed for me and brought it back to my seat. With something to focus on, I hoped it would be easier to ignore Knox's scent and my lion's desire for him.

Once I sat down, I took a deep breath. Big mistake. More vanilla and raspberries. My lion chuffed, indicating his frustration with my refusal to woo Knox. If the train didn't start moving, I would be on the entertainment news for having an anxiety attack on board.

I zipped open the bag and tossed some of the pre-packaged food on Knox's lap. "Please, help me hand this stuff out. Try to avoid those who stole food from the cart." Probably a big imposition for an omega in a train with a bunch of alphas, but I preferred to keep the tension inside under control so I didn't have to risk pulling him into my arms again.

Taking the bag with me, I headed to the far end of the coach. I tried to sneak the food to the passengers without others noticing, but someone had to make a special request.

"Excuse me, do you have anything that is sugar-free? I'm on a diet."

“Sorry, I don’t. Just handing out snacks I had in my luggage. I don’t work for the train.” The omega in the seat didn’t seem to need to be on a diet. If they didn’t want a snack, I could care less.

“Aww, aren’t you sweet.” He smiled, showing off his bleached-white teeth as he reached for my hand. “Hey, aren’t you Linc from FNL?”

I pulled back, anxious to move on. “Just a doppelganger. Trying to be nice by handing out food since we’ve all been on board for so long.”

The next few rows, I didn’t stop to chat with anyone, only caught a quick glance to ensure no one bothered Knox as he handed out food and to see if those in my section already had something to eat, then tossed a snack at anyone who didn’t. If they wanted to exchange food, they could switch with their neighbors. I didn’t need anyone to recognize me or message paparazzi that I was on board and handing out junk food. Or some worse accusation to make headlines. The entertainment media often found a way to twist kind acts into something sinister.

When I returned to my seat, Knox was already there, rubbing his hands across his lap.

“What’s wrong?” I hoped no one had hurt him somehow. My lion growled at the thought.

He chewed on the corner of his lip. “I didn’t keep anything for myself. I didn’t think I was hungry, but now I am.” With a sigh, he leaned back in his seat.

My lion calmed, and I opened my bag to reveal the snacks I still had. “Take whatever you want. And make sure you drink, too. Because if anything happens to you, I’ll have to smash open the doors and run you to the nearest hospital myself.”

I froze, not meaning to have said the last part out loud. Knox turned to face the

window, but I still caught the smirk across his lips. Shit, I had no idea what was so different about the omega that made me act like a fool and unable to hold my tongue.

We ate in silence, though Knox's scent only grew stronger. That worried me. I didn't want anyone else to catch a whiff of him. While I refused to act on my lion's urges, I did not want another alpha to approach him.

"Excuse me." Knox tapped my arm. "I need to pee again."

I stood to let him out, and my beast urged me to follow him, to ensure no other alpha messed with him. My lion had other ideas, too, but I refused to acknowledge them. I sat in my seat instead, willing the predator inside me to settle down. The train really needed to be fixed so I could get back to Adan Records and forget all about the omega who caught the attention of my lion.

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Knox

Breathe in. Breathe out.

I gripped the sink wishing my heart would stop racing. I did not expect to be in the bathroom of a train, trying to calm down because my deer wanted to jump back on an alpha's lap and ride him until I couldn't move. My vacation was not about finding an alpha. More like the opposite. It was about me finding myself away from the social pressures of a small town and my parents. Sure, Linc was super nice and not conceited the way I'd expected a pop star to be, but I didn't imagine my deer to suddenly come alive on my trip, let alone at the very beginning.

What would Linc think if I started touching him more as my deer suggested? Would he accept me cuddling closer to him and resting my head on his shoulder? I doubted it. He'd probably think of me as some crazed fan who could no longer hold in my excitement at sitting next to him. I didn't need that since I had no idea how much longer we'd be stuck on the train. Why couldn't it get moving again so I could get to Saramto and forget about him?

What if my deer sensed something about Linc that I didn't? He was attractive and exceedingly kind, but what if my deer perceived a little more? FNL often sang about fated mates. I'd never believed in the possibility, stuck in a small town with only arrogant alphas around. I did not want to be destined to any of them. What if I'd been meant for Linc all along, but we'd never crossed paths before now?

Glancing in the mirror, I shook my head. Just because Linc was the first alpha to be nice to me without expecting something in return, didn't mean we were fated to be

together. He'd been quick to get me out of his lap as soon as the danger had passed. And his maple and brown sugar smell meant nothing. He'd probably sprayed scent blocker on before he'd left, but it had faded after being stuck on the train for so long. I had to rein in my libido and ignore any attraction I felt for Linc before I returned to my seat.

I quickly used the toilet, and as I washed my hands, someone knocked on the door. A bubble of excitement rose up inside me, hoping it was Linc on the other side, coming to ensure I was okay, or to join me in the small space and make me scream his name.

When I opened the door, that bubble popped. Hard. A pregnant omega stood outside the bathroom. I shuffled past him and headed toward my seat. The sight ahead of me made it feel like an invisible force had reached into my chest and ripped my heart out.

Linc sat in my seat. Beside him, a tiny, blond omega smiled and giggled as he ran his hands all over my seatmate. I wanted to vomit, cry, and scream all at the same time. I hadn't been gone that long, and in that time, the pop star had found someone he preferred to sit beside, leaving me on my own. The worst was seeing Linc smile back at my replacement, seeming to enjoy being groped. Typical.

Told you so.

I ignored my deer. Even if Linc had wanted me to throw myself on him, I couldn't. Not when I'd be discarded the moment we reached the city. And why had I thought it a good idea to be mated to a pop star? Then I'd have to see all kinds of fans approach him and read their comments about my mate on social media. I didn't want to be part of that life at all. Yes, I often regretted growing up in a small town, but I did not want to ever be thrust into the spotlight. I never wanted to be famous for any reason.

When I got to my former seat, I reached over the omega to grab my bag. "Excuse me. This belongs to me."

“Oh, you’re back.” Linc’s cheeks reddened.

“Yeah, and I guess I have to find a new seat.” Maybe it would be better sitting far away from the alpha anyway.

The omega giggled before Linc shoved him toward me, wiping his smug look right off.

“No!” Linc slid over into his seat then stood in the aisle. “I’m glad you’re back.”

Didn’t seem too upset I’d left. I kept my thoughts to myself, afraid I would yell or cry, making a fool of myself either way. I shuffled back to sit in my seat and clutched my bag against my chest.

I tried to ignore the other two, but I couldn’t help but cringe when the omega rubbed his hand down Linc’s chest. “Why don’t you give me your number so we can continue our conversation without an audience?”

Linc gently removed the omega’s hand from his body. “It was nice meeting you, but it’s time for you to return to your seat.”

The omega huffed at the dismissal. “Your loss. I could have helped inspire your next album, but I guess you’re just a washed-up star now, not allowed to do anything other than produce anymore.”

Linc didn’t react, only returned to his seat, but I wanted to snap back at the omega and tell him that it takes just as much heart, if not more, to write and produce songs than it does to perform them. I refused to come to his defense or to let the alpha make me have any more feelings for him. The train couldn’t get moving fast enough, and when we finally reached Saramto, he would be out of my life forever.

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:53 am

Linc

I'd never been more thankful to see an omega in my life. When Knox left for the washroom, I breathed a sigh of relief, needing a break from his scent. From him. My lion was determined to make him mine even though I still barely knew him. How could that part of me be so obsessed with someone I'd only met a few hours earlier?

Handing out snacks didn't help. I'd only worried about him more, looking forward to being back in the seat with him. And when he'd left again, part of me longed to follow. Maybe I should have.

"Excuse me."

I glanced up beside me to see if I was the person being addressed. Though I hoped not. I needed a chance to recover on my own.

The omega on the diet stood to my left, once again revealing his fake white smile. "I wanted to thank you again for handing out snacks. That was so kind of you."

I nodded. "You're welcome." Expecting the omega to leave, I returned my attention to my phone.

Instead, he placed his hand on my shoulder and attempted to sit on my lap. With nowhere else to go, I scooted over to Knox's seat, not wanting the omega on me in any way. I crossed my left knee over my right leg to be sure he couldn't get any closer.

“My name is Darren.” He turned in my seat to face me, batting his eyelashes as if that would make up for him invading my space. “I’m a huge fan of FNL, even though you’re not making music together as a group anymore. I’m still following all of you on social media and stream your music faithfully every day. Even the music you produce because I know you make royalties on that, too.”

“Thank you.” He was following too closely for my liking, but I had an image to portray and a reputation to protect no matter how many times fans crossed lines. “That means a lot.”

He reached toward me as if to touch my knee, but I placed my hand there first. As if burned, he pulled his hand into his chest. “I knew that was you. You told me you were a doppelganger of Linc, but I knew it was you.”

“Yes, well, I’m just trying to get to Saramto, like everyone else.” Meaning, I didn’t want to be bothered, but the omega beside me didn’t seem to get the message.

“And you handed out food to everyone.” He placed his hands over his heart. “That’s like the sweetest thing ever. I always knew you were the kindest member of the group.”

At least he hadn’t tried to touch me again. “I know every member of my group would have done the same thing.” Some might even welcome this omega’s attention, but not me. Definitely not on the hot and sticky train we’d been stuck on for hours.

He inched closer. “Do you see the other members often? What about Yash? He was always my favorite.”

I chuckle at the omega’s brashness, flirting with me one moment then asking about one of my closest friends. “We’re all really busy now but do make time to see each other on occasion.” Never mind the fact that we were all in the same group chat

where we talked almost daily, and most of us lived on the same floor of our condo building.

Suddenly, a hand reached forward. “Excuse me. This belongs to me.”

“Oh, you’re back.” I’d thought it was Darren reaching for Knox’s bag at first but was relieved when I realized my neighbor was finally back.

Knox’s nose twitched and his eyes looked glassy. “Yeah, and I guess I have to find a new seat.”

“No!” I nudged Darren out of the seat, hoping he’d get the message and go back to where he came from. “I’m glad you’re back.”

With my attention on Knox, Darren caught me off guard, running his hand down my chest. “Why don’t you give me your number so we can continue our conversation without an audience?”

When would he figure out that I wasn’t interested and never would be? I clutched his wrist, trying not to hurt him. “It was nice meeting you, but it’s time for you to return to your seat.”

Darren huffed then shrugged. “Your loss. I could have helped inspire your next album, but I guess you’re just a washed-up star now, not allowed to do anything other than produce anymore.”

If anyone had brought inspiration, it was Knox. When he’d left, I was glad for the space, but I liked it better with him beside me so no one else could take his place.

Moving into the aisle, I let Knox pass me to get to his seat. His scent was stronger than ever. My heart thudded as I yearned to nuzzle into his neck or hold him close

again just to get a bigger whiff. What on Earth was my lion doing to me?

“I’m sorry.” For some reason, I felt the need to apologize for Darren’s behavior. “He just appeared out of nowhere and cornered me.”

Knox shrugged. “Whatever. You can flirt with whomever you want.”

I immediately tensed then tried to calm my lion urging me to maul Knox with kisses to show him exactly whom I wanted to flirt with. “I don’t flirt with fans,” I mumbled, but if he heard me, he never responded.

Suddenly, the train jerked forward. I put my hands out to my side to brace myself on instinct. That’s when I felt Knox’s touch. His hand on mine. A spark of electricity passed between us. Not a shock but something else. Something more. He immediately pulled away and rubbed his palms across his pants, but I left my hand on the seat, not wanting to forget the feeling of his touch.

The rest of the passengers cheered as the train moved faster and faster, speeding toward Saramto. At the beginning of the journey, I couldn’t wait to arrive home, but after hours getting to know Knox, reaching the metropolis meant leaving him. I wasn’t ready to do that. Not when I was convinced something serendipitous existed between us. I just needed more time to figure out what. But how could I convince him to spend more time with me once we reached our destination? I had less than an hour to figure it out.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. I quickly glanced at it, somehow hoping I held the answer I needed. Instead, it was the head of production asking whether I expected to make it to the company that evening.

Train just started moving again, I replied. Probably not tonight as I need a shower and time away from people.

Okay, see you tomorrow, he replied.

Tomorrow, yes, I had to work on the upcoming album for the new group. In the meantime, I had to figure out how to woo an omega before he was gone from my life forever.

Knox

I nearly shouted with glee when the train started moving. But the last thing I wanted was any more attention. Especially from the alpha beside me. Linc was friendly enough as a seat neighbor, but I needed to stop having any kind of attraction to him. He was a celebrity who could get any omega he wanted, and I was nothing more than a naive small-town omega who had no chance at anything more than a one-night stand with him. If even that. Maybe I'd fooled myself into believing he saw me as more than the person he got stuck sitting beside. So what, he pulled me onto his lap to protect me from the guy who flew over the seat and into mine. That was what any chivalrous alpha should do. I'd just been around the fools in Shifter Crossing for too long, those who had no idea how to treat an omega. Besides, he didn't flirt with fans. He said as much. And I'd admitted to listening to his music, so that ruled me out.

With Linc's attention on his phone, I returned my focus to the scenery outside, as I had during the first part of the ride. Didn't need him to try talking to me again. Or to get close enough for me to smell his delicious scent. But first, I needed to stop thinking about him. I was on vacation, ready to visit Saramto for the first time in my life, and to tour museums and eat foods I'd never tried before. My mind wasn't supposed to be elsewhere.

I reached for my phone then pulled up my itinerary and clicked on a link for the first museum I was supposed to visit. Good thing I checked. The page showing the hours of operation had changed, indicating the museum was no longer open on weekdays but only on weekends. I had to find another destination for my first full day in Saramto. Maybe I would visit the Natural History of Shifters Museum Linc had recommended on my first day instead of right before I left. I checked its hours to

make sure the switch worked before making the change in my itinerary. Maybe I would eat at the diner he told me about as well. I imagined him meeting me for lunch there then shook away the thought. He didn't want anything to do with me. He was only being cordial. Yes, it was a change from what I was used to, but I couldn't confuse his kindness for anything more.

Right before I went to put my phone down, I noticed a new email notification. It was from the hotel I was to stay at. As I read the email, dread filled my body like I'd swallowed burning liquid. My reservation was canceled because I hadn't checked in before their deadline. They took my deposit for the entire week. All that money and no place to stay. I thought the train delay had been bad, but the hotel canceling my reservation for my whole vacation proved much worse. I had to fix it.

Dialing the number of the hotel, I hoped I could simply tell them what happened and get the situation resolved.

"Hello, this is The Vista. How may I help you?"

"Hi, this is Knox Anderson." My hand shook as I spoke. "I had a reservation for the week, starting today, but I just received an email that it's been canceled."

"Yes, you missed the cutoff time for check-in, and the system pulled your reservation."

I gulped as my stomach twisted with worry. "I didn't purposely miss it. The train I'm on broke down. We're finally on our way again, and I should be there within an hour."

"I'm sorry, sir, but there's nothing I can do once the system cancels the reservation. That's out of my control."

My heart pounded, ready to jump out of my chest. “I understand, but can I get a room for when I get there. I don’t care if it’s not the same one.”

“Again, I’m sorry, sir, but I just sent a guest to the last room available. We have no vacancy.”

My head spun. That was my room. My reservation had just been canceled, and there was already someone in it. My vacation had just started, but it was already off to a horrible start.

I hung up without saying goodbye, quickly searching for other hotels in the area. With tears in my eyes, I could barely see the screen of my phone, simply hoping someone had a room for me.

“Stay with me.”

I froze, a new panic filling me. Had I really heard Linc say those words? Or had I imagined his voice, my mind thinking up the impossible?

“I mean it, Knox.” He shifted in his seat to face me. “You can stay in my condo tonight.”

Unsure whether to be relieved for a place to stay or offended for him thinking that I would jump at the chance for one night with a celebrity, I slowly shook my head. “I can’t. It wouldn’t be right.”

“I’m not asking you to sleep with me.” He chuckled as if the idea was preposterous, like he would never consider having sex with me. “I have a spare room. And since we’re both from Shifter Crossing, I thought I was a little less of a stranger.”

I mulled the idea over in my head, unsure what to tell him. I did need somewhere to

stay the night until I found a hotel for the rest of the week. But his offer only made my deer excited with the prospect of spending more time with Linc. False hopes that led to heartbreak weren't a part of the vacation I'd imagined and spent so much time planning. Yet, those plans had already been squashed, twice over. "I..."

"The guest room has its own bathroom, and it's on the other side of the condo from where I sleep. C'mon, Knox, it's getting dark. By the time we reach Saramto, the sun will have set. Not a time to be out on the streets looking for a place to stay, especially as an omega who doesn't live in the city."

As much as I hated to admit it, Linc had valid points. He was the safest person to be with in all Saramto. "Okay. One night. Tomorrow, I will find a hotel for the rest of my stay. And...thank you. I appreciate the offer."

He nodded. "Good." Glancing past me, he looked out the window. "We should be there shortly."

I wanted to be relieved, but I had a bad feeling that my first day of vacation was only a preview of how far from the itinerary my time in Saramto would stray.

Linc

As the train pulled into the station located in the middle of Saramto, I peered over Knox and out the window to see the makeup of the crowd on the platform. I didn't know if the fan who had confronted me earlier would have corralled a group to wait for my arrival. If so, I needed Knox to exit the train before me and meet me somewhere. I wasn't ashamed to be seen with him, only wanted to protect him from the handful of groupies who would see a picture of the two of us together and do everything in their power to find out who he was and look up everything they could about him. Not what he needed while alone on vacation in an unfamiliar city. But I didn't see that type of crowd, only people waiting impatiently for a very late train, some looking like they were ready to board, and others relieved the passenger they'd been waiting for had finally arrived.

Once we stopped, I headed out into the crowded aisle, hoping Knox followed right behind me. I considered holding his hand to help him, but he seemed even more withdrawn after I'd offered him a place to stay. Maybe I should have suggested another hotel, helped him book at my discount price, but I didn't want him to have to pay more than he would have at The Vista after losing his deposit there. Honestly, I wouldn't have a problem if he stayed at my place the entire week, but he'd been adamant about only rooming at my place for one night. My lion urged me to find a way to get him to change his mind, not wanting to lose contact with him. If I was honest with myself, my human side wanted him to stay, too. He was very different from the omegas I was used to meeting, and felt like a piece of home. But with the invisible distance Knox kept between us, I didn't see how convincing him to forgo a hotel was possible.

I sighed as I gathered my luggage before stepping off the train. What about Knox had my lion so obsessed? No omega had garnered such attention from that part of me. I had to get control of myself before I scared the small-town omega any more than I already had.

A few feet onto the platform, I glanced back, expecting him to be right behind me. Instead, I saw him through the window, still on board. At the back of the crowd. I should have held his hand.

When he reached me, I yearned to pull him into me like he was mine. The urge was so strong, I had to turn away.

“Here’s a voucher for your next trip on the Shifter Express.” A man wearing a rail company uniform handed Knox and I each a piece of paper.

I was thankful for the distraction and took the ticket from the station attendant, though I doubted I would ride the train again anytime soon. Especially if the ride was anything like the one I’d just endured.

Yet, one good thing did come out of it. “C’m on. I’m this way.” I gestured my head toward Shifter Towers, the three tallest buildings in the middle of Saramto that held hundreds of businesses from restaurants and recording labels to doctors’ offices and specialized schools. Adan Records, where I worked, took up several floors in the third building, my studio situated on the fifth floor. Yet, I had no desire to go there, only to get Knox safely to my home.

As a chivalrous alpha, I probably should have offered to take Knox’s luggage, but I had my hands full with my own. He didn’t seem to struggle with his.

Knox followed me—I made sure of it—into the second tower, which was the closest. We rode the elevator down to the parking garage where my car waited.

Knox paused after exiting the elevator. “It’s really dark down here. Are you sure it’s safe?”

I nodded, charmed by his naivety. “It’s much safer down here than out on Main Street at night. I would never do anything to harm you. In fact, I would severely hurt anyone who dared to do anything to you.”

Hurrying to catch up to me, Knox grabbed the hem of my shirt with his free hand. “Okay, but where are we going?”

“My car.” I paused to grab my key fob from my messenger bag. “It’s just up ahead.”

His grip on my shirt made my lion happy, excited that Knox had been the one to initiate the contact. It wasn’t holding his hand but close enough. After everything that had happened on the train, beside me was exactly where I wanted him to be. Under me would be even better. Or sitting over my hips while riding my cock.

I groaned as the images played in my head, though I hoped Knox hadn’t heard. I’d promised him I wasn’t taking him home for sex. Though I wouldn’t complain if he offered.

At my car, I opened the passenger door for the omega first before loading all our luggage into the trunk. I needed a moment away from him to calm every part of me. It wasn’t just my lion who wanted to get closer to Knox. If I didn’t gain control of myself before getting into the car, his scent would overwhelm me.

Breathe in. Breathe out. I’m simply being kind to someone who knows my family. Nothing else. I couldn’t let it be anything more than that.

As soon as I got in the car, I opened the windows, desperate to keep his scent from messing with my mind.

I drove through the underground roadway as far as I could until I reached the exit for the street I lived on. Once parked, I hurried around to get the door for Knox, but he had already stepped out. Though I tried to manage it all, he grabbed his spinner case to wheel along himself into the back of the building. The distant omega had returned, yet my lion wasn't put off at all.

"The elevator is over here." Another cramped space with him and this time without a console between us. Only his demeanor. Why did I find it so hard to resist Knox?

On the ride up, I kept my eyes closed and focused on my breathing. A technique our coach from FNL taught us when we started performing in front of an audience of enthusiastic fans. I hadn't expected it to be useful when not on stage, yet it kept me in control.

I breathed a sigh of relief when the elevator door opened on the fourteenth floor. Almost there.

"Hey, Linc. It's good to see you again! Who's this?"

I snarled as I turned the corner to see Cruz, my former bandmate. The smirk on his face agitated my lion, though I knew I should be happy to see him after being away for several months. "This is Knox. He's a friend from home, and after our very delayed ride, his hotel canceled his reservation and he needed a place to stay. That's it." I needed to set him straight right away before he made any assumptions about the omega. Not for my sake but for Knox's.

"Well, it's nice to meet you, Knox. Enjoy your stay in Saramto and enjoy your night with my friend here." He patted my back on his way past before giving me a wink only I could see.

The gesture made me want to question our friendship, but I held my tongue. I would

probably make the same assumptions and do the same thing in his situation.

“C’mom.” I jerked my head toward my place, only a few doors down.

Once inside, I dropped my luggage in the foyer and turned on all the lights in the main part of my space. I’d arranged for someone to clean my condo the day before, so I didn’t have to dust the moment I came back. A good thing since I’d ended up with an unexpected guest. Though I still would have offered him a place to stay regardless of what my home looked like.

“This is all yours?” Knox glanced around at my kitchen, dining room, and living room with wide eyes, like he’d just entered a palace.

I shrugged. “Yeah. It’s a perk of being signed to Adan Records.” Even though I no longer sang with FNL, I still worked for the label and planned to release a solo album sometime in the future. So, I kept the place. Though I would like to have someone to share it with someday. Though not with someone as just a roommate. I’d done that already and didn’t want to live with another messy alpha ever again.

Knox

I knew celebrities lived in nice places, but I hadn't expected Linc's place to be so open and immaculate. Since he had left for a few months to care for his father, he'd probably had someone clean his house on a regular basis while he was away. Or maybe he lived with someone else. He said the guest room was empty, so maybe he had a partner that the media didn't know about. That would work out for the better and shove all my unrequited feelings for him back in their place. Being in his car with him had overwhelmed me with his scent. I was delirious with a new and unfamiliar yearning. When we'd met one of the other members of FNL in the hallway, I'd wanted Linc to tell him that we were going to sleep together.

But Linc had made it clear I was nothing more than someone he knew from the town he grew up in, and that he was only helping me out. Nothing more. He drew that line right away.

I sighed, glancing around. I had to remind myself that I was in Saramto on vacation, not to find a mate, or to even sleep with an alpha. My vacation was about me doing things that I loved on my own.

"Here, I'll show you to the guest room."

After snapping back into the present, I pushed my glasses back up on my nose then followed Linc through his living room to a white door set into the blueish-gray wall. There was a door on each side of the main space with wide white trim surrounding each, and I assumed they led to the bedrooms. When I glanced inside, I gasped in shock at the size of the supposed guest room.

“I hope this is okay. I know it’s not the same as a hotel room, but I wanted to make sure you didn’t experience any more problems during the first day of your vacation.”

I nodded, taking in every inch. It was nicer than the hotel room I would have stayed in by far. The room had a queen bed with an antique headboard and matching dresser and nightstand. Much more classically decorated than the modern kitchen and living room. There was a table and chair in the corner that could be used as a desk, a big-cushioned chair near the window, and even one of those computerized workout bikes. Yet the room didn’t feel crowded at all.

I chewed on my bottom lip, wishing the room was the place I’d booked. Maybe I should have found a way to get him to ask me to stay for the whole week. I turned to Linc. “Thank you. I really appreciate this. I know you didn’t have to, and I’ll stay out of the way of you and your partner while I’m here.” I couldn’t help myself. I had to know, didn’t want to be surprised when someone came out of the other bedroom or into the apartment before I left in the morning.

He furrowed his brows. “Partner? Where did you hear that I had a partner?”

My heart pounded in my chest. Maybe I shouldn’t have said that. “Um, I just assumed with a place this big that you lived with someone else. And since the guest room is empty...” I shrugged, not knowing how else to explain my previous words.

He gave me a big, toothy smile before he shook his head. “I don’t have a partner or a roommate. I live here by myself, and while it’s lonely sometimes, I’m glad to be back in my own space. I’m sure you understand that since you don’t live with your parents, either.”

I nodded. “Sorry about the assumption.” Though part of me rejoiced to learn he didn’t have a partner or a mate. But it didn’t matter since I was only there for one night.

“The bathroom is here.” He opened a door at the far end of the room that was bigger than my own bathroom and kitchen combined. I didn’t know people lived with this much room.

“Thanks again.” The condo only made me realize how different Linc and I were. He was only being nice by offering me a place to stay. I had no chance with him. None at all.

“Well, I’ll give you some time to get settled.” He walked to the doorway. “In a bit, we can decide where to order dinner from. Maybe even watch a movie.”

Dinner and a movie? That sounded too much like a date and sent my deer into a frenzy. Refusing to meet his gaze, I simply nodded and focused on my suitcase. “Thank you.”

Once he left, shutting the door behind him, I collapsed onto the bed. It was soft and hard at the same time, and I didn’t know how that was possible. The bed I had in my apartment was secondhand from an elderly neighbor who had passed. Very basic, though I’d been told by his family that they’d bought the bed for him only a couple years earlier. And he hadn’t died there but in a respite home in Merryville. Regardless, I felt like I floated on a fluffy cloud on Linc’s guest bed. The linens smelled like a crisp, spring day. Though I wondered what Linc’s bed smelled like, if it contained his maple and brown sugar scent. Because I wanted to roll in that and have it around me, have his odor all over me and filling my senses.

I pushed off the bed. I was going too far with my daydreaming about Linc. It would only lead to a huge ache when I left in the morning, never to see him again. Hoping for something that would never come to fruition was dangerous and would only make seeing his family back in Shifter Crossing that much harder when I returned.

Opening my suitcase, I grabbed my pajamas out of it and headed for the shower. I

needed to get under the cold spray and put my deer back in his place.

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Linc

It had taken forever to convince Knox to come out of my guest room and another eternity to get him to stay out to eat and watch a movie with me.

“I’m not hungry,” he’d told me through the door even though I heard his stomach growl. “It’s okay. You don’t need to worry about me.”

I’d ignored his resistance, though I didn’t want to break his trust by opening the door and dragging him out. “Fine. I’m ordering us both Thai food. I hope you like it.”

There’d been a slight moan through the door, but it remained closed.

When the food arrived, I went down to the lobby to retrieve it, saying hello to the door attendant. “Hey, Bert. It’s good to see you! How’s your family been?”

“Oh, you know.” He handed me the take-out bag. “Same old teenage drama. I can’t wait until they grow out of the everything is an emergency stage. I mean, I don’t remember high school being that sensational when I was their age.”

I chuckled, not at all envious. TK—a pop star at Adan Records, and a mentor to me and the rest of the FNL members—often said the same thing about his kids. Though he had Kish to help him through it all, unlike Bert, whose mate had passed away five years ago.

“Well, if Andrew auditions for a spot in the next pop group at Adan, he’d live here and be out of your hair.” Bert’s son had interviewed me for a school project before

I'd returned home and told me that one day he wanted to be part of a pop group like me.

"You might regret that." Bert wagged his finger at me. "You haven't seen his bedroom. Anyway, you'd best be getting back upstairs. I see that you have two dinners there, and you don't want to keep your guest waiting."

I winked at him. "Always perceptive. Have a good night."

On the elevator ride back up, I tried to figure out a way to get Knox out of the room. Would telling him the food had arrived be enough? I'd ordered beef curry Pad Thai for myself and vegetable Pad See Ew for Knox, assuming he was some kind of herbivore shifter from his scent, and that he had a limited flavor palate from living in Shifter Crossing with no international food places in the town or even nearby. I didn't want to give him an invitation to refuse the food right away, or to give him an upset stomach at the beginning of his vacation. It had already started off on the wrong foot. If all else failed, I'd ordered an herbivore appetizer platter with multiple finger foods for him to eat if he didn't like the Pad See Ew. I didn't know what it was about him, but I wanted to make sure his night at my place was the best part of his vacation in Saramto, even if I never saw him again. Though my lion growled at that thought.

After setting the food on my dining room table, I lightly knocked on the door again. "Knox, the food is here. Please come out and eat with me."

I had stepped away when I heard the click of the door handle. Though I didn't turn around, I felt the corners of my lips raise at not having to do any more convincing.

He sat at the table across from me in blue, green, and white plaid pajamas, his hair still damp from his recent shower. His scent had faded some, but I still caught a whiff of it with every movement he made. It seemed like my body was attuned to him.

He opened the lid on the take-out container but didn't touch the food in front of him, only stared at it.

"It's vegetable Pad See Ew. No meat, and not spicy. I hope that's okay."

As he leaned down, I saw his nose twitch as he sniffed the dish. "Smells good." He nodded before reaching for his fork. "Thank you. What do I owe you for it?"

I shook my head, stunned by his question. "Um, nothing. You're a guest at my house. The least I can do is feed you."

He winced, making me feel like I'd said something wrong. "But I'm an imposition on you. You talked about how you enjoy living by yourself."

"I do." I took a deep breath and exhaled heavily. "I do, but I also enjoy company of my choosing. I asked you to come here, Knox. I wouldn't have asked if I thought you were any kind of imposition." His face wrinkled into an expression I didn't understand. "Are you okay? Is there something wrong with your room? Or the food?"

"No." He shook his head. "I'm just not used to alphas being so...nice. You're nothing like the alphas back in Shifter Crossing, and you're a celebrity. I didn't expect..."

I shoved some food in my mouth, trying to formulate a response without downright stating my lion was obsessed with him and wanted him to stay with me forever. "You're nothing like the omegas I'm used to running into. Like that one on the train. You and I only just met, but I feel like I can be myself around you, that my persona doesn't matter to you."

He nodded slowly. "Yeah, I guess. I mean, I figured at the train station that you were trying to hide your identity for some reason. But I just thought you'd pissed off an omega from our town and were trying to get away before they discovered you were

leaving.”

I chuckled. “If I’d stayed in Shifter Crossing, I might be a male like that. Makes me glad I left. Though it would have been nice to have met you earlier.”

He blushed before glancing down at his food as he stirred the noodles, tofu, and vegetables. “Yeah, I guess that would have been nice.”

We ate with very little conversation. With many stolen glances, Knox quickly looked away each time as his cheeks brightened more and more. Eventually, I came to the same conclusion as my lion. I needed to find a way to convince Knox to spend his nights with me. Maybe not yet in my bed but at least in my guest room. I had work, and he had his sightseeing, but I wanted him back at my place every night until the day he had to leave.

“What type of movies do you like?” After we finished our meals and the appetizer platter, I gathered the containers and put them in the sink so I could wash them later then take them back to the restaurant to be recycled.

Knox lifted his shoulders to his ears. “I don’t know. You don’t have to do this. I can go back to the guest room if you want to be by yourself. I’m sure you have lots of other things you’d rather be doing.”

I sighed and shook my head. “Knox, I want to spend time with you. Unless you want to be on your own. Then I understand if you want to go back to your room.”

He chewed on his bottom lip and fiddled with his fingers. “I really appreciate your hospitality. I hope you know that.”

I smiled and tilted my head toward the living room. “Come on. Let’s pick out a movie together.”

Though he sat at the opposite end of the couch from me, I was thankful he didn't choose a spot farther away in one of the chairs.

"Are you one for action? Horror? Romcom? I do love a good romcom every now and again."

He smiled and turned to face me. "You have surprised me so much since I met you. But I'll let you pick. I don't like body horror, but I do enjoy psychological horror. And the other two are great as well. Whatever you want."

On my streaming service, I found the latest thriller that had a romantic element and pressed play. Knox seemed to enjoy it until, about twenty minutes into the movie, he fell asleep. Wanting to watch the whole thing, and enjoy the closeness of the omega, I waited until it had finished to wake Knox. Yet, gentle prodding and me calling his name didn't wake him. I worried about how he would react if I carried him to his bed, but I did it anyway. As I held him in my arms, he wrapped his arms around me and rested his head on my shoulder. I had to take a deep breath to calm my racing heart and stop myself from taking him to my bed. In the guest room, I laid him on the bed then covered him with the quilt folded at the foot of the bed. As I left him, closing the door behind me, I hoped he slept well. I doubted I would, my lion and every other part of me radiating with a new and unfamiliar need. Something much more than simple lust. Maybe it had been a mistake to listen to my lion in the first place. I had no idea what to do next.

Knox

I jolted awake, sure I heard someone in the room with me. As I glanced around, I couldn't see anyone, but a new panic filled me. I had no idea where I was. The space around me wasn't my bedroom and definitely not a hotel room. Squeezing my eyes shut, I tried to recall what had happened the day before. I'd left for Saramto, gotten on the train, and it had broken down. Yes, and Linc had sat beside me. After the hotel had canceled my reservation because I was late, Linc had invited me to stay at his place. Yes, that's where I was. His guest room. I took a few deep breaths, trying to calm my racing heart. Nothing bad happened.

Yet, none of that explained how I'd gotten to the bed. The last thing I remembered, I was on the couch, watching a movie with Linc. Absolutely nothing after that. Had I sleep-walked in there? Or had someone carried me? I wasn't under the covers, but a quilt—the one I believed had been at the foot of the bed—had been draped over me.

My skin tingled at the thought of Linc carrying me in his arms, of being that close to him again. Though part of me wished he'd stayed in the room with me, or even taken me to his bed instead.

I shook away those thoughts. It was time to get up and gather my things before I had to leave. My stay in Linc's guest room was only for one night. I couldn't dwell on what could have been but had to leave and find another place to stay before going sightseeing. My itinerary waited, though it would be changed slightly to account for finding new accommodations. I had no time to waste.

After visiting the bathroom to relieve myself and wash up, I changed into a light-blue

button-down shirt and a pair of khakis before making sure all my belongings were back in my suitcase.

I opened the door and wheeled my case out into the living room. Still a bit groggy, I sniffed the air to see if Linc was up or had made coffee. I needed a caffeine jolt before I got my day started. I didn't see the pop star-turned-producer anywhere, but my deer suddenly alerted me to danger. Over by the sliding doors that led out to a balcony, a burnt-orange-haired lion with a full brown mane paced back and forth. I gasped, and that's when it turned toward me.

I had to run. Either back into the guest room or out into the hall. Yet, my feet refused to move, frozen on the spot with no chance to get them to propel me in any direction. The lion sniffed the air before it licked its lips. Then it charged at me. I closed my eyes and braced for its attack.

Instead of feeling teeth clamp down on me, or the force of the body of a lion as it knocked me over, I felt a tap on my shoulder. "Good morning."

I flicked open my eyes and jumped back, finding Linc directly in front of me. He was naked except for a thin and very short towel he held around his waist.

"Sorry." He stepped back, giving me a better view of his wide, hard chest and thick thighs.

I suddenly wanted to lick him and see if he tasted as good as his scent.

"I haven't shifted in a while, and my lion was getting restless." He stared at his feet as he dug his toes into the carpeted floor. "I'm sorry if I scared you."

Gulping away the last of my fear, I grabbed the handle of my suitcase. "It's okay. You normally don't have anyone else here that you need to worry about. And I'm

leaving now anyway, so you can shift back.”

With his free hand, he reached for my suitcase and ended up grazing his fingers over mine. “Not yet. I mean, I thought we could go for breakfast. My treat. I just need a few minutes to change.”

“But... I don’t want to take any more of your time. You’ve already been a gracious host and bought me dinner.” The more time I spent with Linc, the more I yearned for something that could never be. I needed distance from him to get my mind right again, to focus on my time off instead of him. “I have a tour scheduled at ten that I can’t be late for.” I didn’t, but he didn’t need to know that.

“Oh.” He frowned with a soft sigh. “Well, let me get dressed and I’ll drive you downtown. Maybe I can at least buy you a coffee before your tour.”

“Sure.” I had no idea how I was going to get back to Main Street from his place anyway, so I was grateful for the offer. But seeing him disappointed I’d refused breakfast, played into my longing for him I kept trying to push away.

He came out of his room a few minutes later in a pair of black slacks and a black, cotton T-shirt. Unlike when I traveled with him the day before, he wore a thick gold chain around his neck, multiple gold rings, and two gold studs and a gold hoop in each earlobe. He’d slicked his hair back with some kind of gel or paste and sprayed on a cologne that masked his delicious scent. It all made him look like the celebrity he was and reminded me of the huge gap in our social statuses.

I wheeled my case toward the door, ready to leave him and all my never-going-to-happen fantasies behind.

“Wait.” Linc grabbed my suitcase. “Do you have a place to stay yet?”

I shook my head. “I’m going to find a hotel to stay at first thing. As soon as my tour is over, they should be able to find me an available room. I’m going to start with The Vista and go from there.”

“Will you leave your suitcase in my car?” He tapped his fingers on the sides of his legs. “That way, you don’t have to drag it with you on the tour or pay to store it somewhere. When you do find a place, you can text or call me then come get it. I’ll give you my number.”

My chest tightened with a feeling I didn’t recognize. Why was he being so nice? “I’m sure you’ll be plenty busy today.”

He shrugged as if it wasn’t a big deal, though it was to me. “You can leave it here if you like, and I’ll tell the doorman to let you in and give you the code to my place.”

Whoa, he was willing to give me the code to his apartment? Was that supposed to be a joke? We barely knew each other.

“I...I think leaving it in your car is a better option. Thank you.”

He smiled and shook the key fob for his car. “Okay, let’s get going.”

I glanced into the apartment one more time, taking in all the features I would never see again or ever have in a place of my own, before stepping out the door. I slept well and was glad to not have to scramble to find a place to stay at the last minute, but I needed to get back to the vacation I’d planned, not the one that went off the rails started by a broken-down train.

Linc

“What if Phoenix sings the first part of the chorus and then Carter comes in next?”

I shook my head, snapping myself back to the moment. Again. “Sorry, um. I think we’re getting ahead of ourselves.” My thoughts kept drifting to Knox instead of focusing on the omegas in the room with me who I was supposed to help with their debut album. “Why don’t you each record your own version of the demos I made? You can play with the lyrics and the melody to give it your own flavor. Then we’ll listen to them in a week and decide which voice fits best where.”

“But aren’t we just supposed to divide it up?” Troy glanced at me, concern etched in the furrow of his brows. “Not all of us can sing.”

I held in a chuckle, trying to not downplay his worries. “Yes, I want the rappers to try singing, and the singers to rap. Most fans would have you divide up a song evenly so that every member gets an even number of lines. And we will make sure you all have a significant role in each song, especially those that will be performed live. But your voices are all different and each will add a special style to the songs. I don’t know what your fortes are yet, so I’d like to hear each of you sing all the songs. You might surprise yourselves and each other with what you record. When it comes time to divide the lines, I will give you my opinions, but I’d like you to help with that, too, and get to know each other’s strengths as well.”

“Is that how you did it when you were part of FNL?” Finn asked.

I nodded. “Yep, and later on, it helped us to write songs that highlighted each other’s

voices.”

The omegas glanced at each other then began to tap their fingers on their phones or rocked their knees back and forth. I gathered they were anxious to get started.

“Well, if you have any questions, just email or text me. Angelo will be in the recording booth for you all week.”

They all nodded quickly then stood, some of them wiping the wrinkles out of their pants.

“Thank you, Linc,” Vinny said before darting from my studio office. The rest followed him out, and I was never gladder to get a break from work.

At my parents’ home, I’d been anxious to get back to the studio, but that was before I’d met Knox. Now, I couldn’t get him out of my head. I checked my phone to see if he’d texted. After buying him a coffee and a bagel at NJ Foods in tower one, the first building of Shifter Towers, I’d left him to go to work. I still had his luggage. He needed that back sometime during the day. That was when I would have to say goodbye for good. My chest tightened and my lion snarled at the thought. Maybe I could find a way to ensure all the hotels were booked for the night and he would have to stay at my place again. No, I had to accept Knox wasn’t mine. If Fate wanted us to be together, they would find a way to bring us back into each other’s lives. Otherwise, I had to move on and let him be.

At my computer, I sent the demo files to each of the members of the new group. They called themselves Omegas Naturally Entertain, or ONE for short. At least until fans voted for their permanent name, as well as what the fandom would be called. I remembered those early years with my own group. We had a lot to learn about the industry back then as well as about each other. And while performing as a group wasn’t what all of us wanted to continue doing, we all remained close. Yash and Cruz

still toured around the world as solo singers, and Buan became the lead choreographer for Adan Records. Ren was the only one of us who left Adan, instead, working in one of the other towers as an intern while attending law school. He planned to specialize in entertainment law. The members of ONE seemed enthusiastic about their debut album, but I hoped it was for the love of music and not the desire to be famous. None of us in FNL had realized all the downsides that came with being in the spotlight alongside the perks.

One of them was not knowing whether someone truly liked you for you, or if they avoided you because they had no desire to be known by an entire fandom.

I wondered if Knox felt that way with me. He'd been anxious to leave that morning, even more so when we were in the concourse of tower one, with the multitude of people around us. I knew he had a tour appointment, but his unease felt different somehow. That didn't stop my lion, or any other part of me, from yearning to be in his presence again. After FNL split, I still dedicated so much time to my work. It wasn't until the previous night, after I'd carried Knox to the guest bed, that I'd considered settling down, maybe having a family one day. My parents and sister had asked if I'd thought about it, but I told them they were all talking nonsense, that I had many things still to do before I entertained such an idea. But Knox had made me reexamine my life. I believed I could find a work/family balance if I had the right mate. My lion kept urging me toward Knox. Though how did I get him to ever want to see me again?

I slumped into my chair and sighed. I wasn't going to find any kind of balance if I let Knox invade my brain any longer. I had work to do. Not only was I producing ONE's debut album, but I wanted to start working on my own, give a listen to the songs that had been sent specifically for me. I had a while yet before my release was scheduled, but thinking about it would keep my mind occupied on something other than a certain omega.

I played the first song, an acoustic demo, about an alpha meeting their fated mate for the first time and not knowing how to convince the omega that they'd be good together. It did not help at all.

My phone chimed with a new message. Normally, I had my notifications on silent while working, but I'd turned them on to wait for Knox to let me know he was ready to collect his luggage. He'd finally texted me. But the message was not what I'd expected.

Can I call you?

Yes, I texted back.

As I waited, I worried about what he wanted. Had something happened to him? Or had he met someone that needed my voice to confirm that Knox knew me and had spent the night at my place. I never considered Knox to be like that, but others had surprised me in the past.

When my phone rang, I answered right away. "Hello?"

"Linc," he whispered. "It's me, Knox. I need your help."

"What is it? Where are you?" Something didn't feel right.

"I'm at the Natural History of Shifters Museum you told me about." He whimpered before speaking again. "I've locked myself in the bathroom."

It was then I heard banging in the background, and someone shouting.

"Why? What's going on?"

“I have a problem.” He sniffled. “And there are two alphas outside who want to help me with my problem, but I don’t want them to. I don’t know who else to call.”

Fear clenched my chest first. Then anger. And something even stronger. Possessiveness. Knox was mine. He’d gone into heat. At least, I assumed that to be his problem. And he’d called me. Wanted me to help him. My lion growled from deep inside. “I’ll be right there. Don’t let anyone in.”

I quickly shut down my computer, grabbed my messenger bag, then rushed out of my office toward the elevator.

“Hey, Linc! You’re here!” Buan walked toward me from his office down the hall.

I nodded. “Yeah, got home last night.”

“And already grinding stuff out. Look at you go. How’s your dad?”

“Good.” I clenched my fists, not wanting to participate in small talk while Knox needed me. “Walking on his own now, so he told me to get back to work.”

“Well, I’m glad you’ve returned.” Standing next to me, Buan patted my back. “What are you working on now?”

The elevator dinged just then and the doors opened. I struggled with the need to be polite and the pull to get to Knox as fast as possible. With my hand holding open the doors, I stepped into the car. “ONE’s debut. I’m producing it.”

Buan stepped inside with me. “Cool. You going down to get coffee? ’Cause the stuff in the machine is foul lately.”

“No.” I pressed the button to the first floor for Buan then the one for the parking

garage. “A friend of mine has an emergency, and I’m going to help him out. I shouldn’t be long.” That was, if I could control myself around an omega in heat whom I already had an attraction to.

Buan smirked. “Oh, is this the friend who Cruz saw you with last night? He said he was cute.”

I snarled and he immediately put his hands out in front of himself. “Whoa. No need to be so overprotective. I was just asking.”

“Sorry.” I shuffled back into the corner of the elevator. “It’s just... there’s something about him. I don’t know why, but I can’t stand the idea of having to say goodbye to him.”

Buan chuckled. “We always used to sing about finding our fated mates. Maybe you actually did.”

Fated? I didn’t know about that, but I wouldn’t say no to the idea of mating with Knox.

The elevator reached the first floor, and Buan stepped off. “Well, good luck with whatever it is you two are. Come see me in my office when you can. I need some songs for a dance showcase, and I know you can make them or find them for me.”

I nodded. “Sure.” A reminder that I had work to do, couldn’t spend the rest of the day taking care of an omega in heat. I needed to pick him up and take him back to my place before demanding he lock himself in my guest room. I couldn’t take advantage of his condition just to fulfill a need I didn’t yet understand.

Knox

“Come out, little omega. I’m going to help you real good.”

I cowered in the back corner of the bathroom stall, hoping the lock on the door and stall held until Linc arrived. I hadn’t wanted to call him, considered every other option, but I either waited for the pop star I barely knew, or let the alpha outside the door take me. There’d been two of them at one point, but I thought I’d heard them fist fighting only a few moments earlier. I guessed the one had left. I hoped so. The museum guard hadn’t helped me at all. Only told me I shouldn’t have gone outdoors in heat if I didn’t want alphas after me.

The thing was, I hadn’t even known I was in heat. If I was, why hadn’t Linc noticed earlier in the day? We’d been in his car and several elevators together. If anyone had noticed my heat, it should have been him. Invisible vises clenched at my chest. I thought we’d had a connection. One I’d tried to ignore, but he’d obviously felt some amicability since he’d offered to give me the code to his place. Why hadn’t he smelled it first? Why hadn’t he stopped the elevator in his building or Shifter Towers and had his way with me?

My cock stiffened at the thought, and I moaned.

The alpha banged on the door again. “I can hear you in there. Let me in and I’ll make you moan even louder.”

Maybe I was in heat, since I never would have behaved in such a manner of my own volition. I was on blockers. I wasn’t supposed to experience them.

A sudden roar shook everything around me. Voices shouted at each other, and I thought I heard someone hit the wall. Then nothing. Absolute silence. It felt almost deafening as I waited for a sign it was safe for me to leave the bathroom.

Then I heard a light knock on the door. “Knox? It’s Linc. You can come out now.”

I climbed off the toilet and unlocked the stall as fast as I could. Though at the main door, I paused. “It’s really you? How do I know?” I didn’t have the experience to grasp what a desperate alpha would say to get me to open the door.

“We’re both from Shifter Crossing, and you stayed at my place last night after our train was late and The Vista canceled your reservation. You had Pad See Ew and I had Curry Pad Thai. Then we watched a movie and you fell asleep. Please open the door so I can take you back to my place.”

“Back to your place?” Did he want to fuck me the same as the other two alphas I’d encountered earlier? While the thought of him helping me through my heat made my body tingle and my heart race, I didn’t want him to think he held any ownership over me since I’d called him.

“Yes. You shouldn’t be out in public while you’re in heat. I could smell you the instant I stepped inside the building.” He sighed and it sounded like he leaned against the wall beside the door. “I want you to stay at my place while I go back to work.”

Disappointment clenched my gut. He hadn’t even offered to help me through it. Maybe I’d imagined our connection all along, my approaching heat the only thing telling me otherwise.

I huffed out at breath then unlocked the door, slowly opening it to ensure no one else waited out there with Linc.

The instant I stepped out, he wrapped a blanket around me. “It’s a pheromone blocker. While I would fight off any alpha for you, I don’t want to leave you unprotected while I do.”

Had he really said he would fight for me, or had I imagined it? I couldn’t tell, my need for release increasing in his presence.

He held the blanket around me as he guided me outside to his car, glaring at any alpha who dared glance in my direction.

Once inside his vehicle, he rolled down all the windows and squealed the tires as he U-turned. He didn’t speak to me as he sped down Main Street toward his place, not bothering to take the underground roads.

Not until we were in the elevator of his building. “Did you know your heat was coming?”

I shook my head, guilt gnawing through the lust. “I’m on blockers. At least... Wait, what’s the date?”

“It’s October fifteenth.” He leaned back into the opposite corner as if trying to put as much space as possible between us.

“The fifteenth.” I paused for a moment, thinking back to when I’d received my last blocker. “Shit, I was supposed to get my injection today. I completely forgot with the planning of my vacation. I didn’t know I could go into heat that fast.”

The elevator door opened on the fourteenth floor, and Linc steered me out in front of him. “Have you ever been in heat before? Do you know how long yours lasts?”

“No.” As he entered his code, I leaned against the wall, suddenly overtaken by a hot

flash and the extreme desire to be fucked. “I, oh shit.”

His face paled and he winced. “Are you okay?”

“No.” I moaned as I stepped toward him, ready to fling off the blanket and rub myself against him. “I need you. Just a quick release. Can you please help me?”

His eyes darkened and he released a low growl. “I...I can’t. It wouldn’t be right.”

“Please.” I dropped the blanket and took a step toward him.

He jumped back. “Knox, stop it. I like you, but I refuse to take advantage of you in this condition.” He picked up the blanket from the floor and wrapped it around me again before guiding me inside. “Stay here while I’m gone. Take a shower or a bath, or whatever you need to do. And I’ll see if I can find another omega in the building who is free to come and help you through this.”

“I don’t need an omega.” I glanced down at his cock, seeing his erection held tight in his pants. “I need you.”

Turning his head away from me, he gulped. “You’re making this difficult, but I know it’s not right like this. I’ll be back later.” He pulled the door closed behind him and left me to deal with my uncontrollable desire on my own.

Yet, I was in his place. His scent was all over everything. And I could use his belongings to help me release. It wouldn’t be the same as him fucking me through my heat, but it would be the closest I could get until he returned.

Linc

Leaving Knox at my place while he was in heat was the hardest thing I'd ever done. Almost every part of me yearned to stay and help him through the experience, and his begging me to give him one release before I left didn't help. I couldn't ignore the tiny part of me that objected. A part reminding me Knox wasn't in his right mind, that taking him in his desperation would only feel icky afterward and mean nothing in terms of developing an actual relationship with the omega. With a lot of restraint and cursing myself, I managed to walk away and head back to Adan Records.

When I arrived at work for the second time that day, I phoned Ash, the first omega pop star contracted at Adan Records, to see if he could check in on Knox during the day. He lived in the same building and knew more about heats than I ever would. Mostly, I needed him to ensure Knox hadn't left to find some other alpha to help him, but also to give Knox some pointers in getting through his heat safely.

Coming home that evening, I didn't know what to expect. Ash said he'd been down to visit Knox, and that he'd given the omega tools to help himself through the heat. Yet, that was as cryptic as telling me Knox was fine.

I entered the code into my place and found Ash sneaking away from the guest room. He startled when he realized I was there.

"Oh, Linc. Shit, I didn't know you were home already."

"Sorry." I set down my messenger bag on the bench and hung my key fob on the hook in the foyer. "I didn't know you were still here."

He shook his head. "I just came down to check on Knox again. He's sleeping right now, but I don't know for how long."

"How's he doing?" Guilt consumed me all day for leaving him, yet I would feel the same about not being at work when I'd just returned from four months off. "I mean, is there anything I can do to help him? Besides, you know..."

Ash chuckled. "Jun and I find it hard to believe you've resisted him this long. Especially considering how many omegas you've helped through heats in your past."

Glancing at the floor, I shuffled my feet. "He's different. He's from my hometown, and I can't do anything to hurt him."

"I can tell." Ash patted my shoulder. "I gave him some sex toys to help him find pleasure and encouraged him to take a cool bath. That seems to have helped, but, as I said, I don't know for how long. Though, I must tell you, he really wanted you, had the pillow from your bed just to have your scent near him. Usually, an uncommitted omega in the peak of their heat will find the nearest alpha willing to help him. Yet, he kept asking when you were coming home."

"But, I..." I ran my hand through my hair. "I don't know if I can. How would it look to my parents and his if they ever found out? He's not a fan that I can get to sign an NDA."

Ash shrugged. "Think of it as helping a friend. I mean, you obviously trust him if you left him here by himself."

"I guess, but..." I didn't know what held me back, especially since I really liked Knox. "I think I'm scared. What if I do this and he hates me for it, or never wants to see me again?"

A grin spread across Ash's face. "Okay, he's not just someone from your hometown but someone much more. You think he's your fated mate?"

I gulped. "I don't know. Maybe. My lion is obsessed with him and wants to go in that room right now and fuck him and mark him."

With a chuckle, Ash shook his head. "Yeah, I don't think he'll hate you. Maybe don't mark him while in this state, but I think he'd appreciate your help. I bought condoms for you. They're on the counter. Wait to see what he's like when he wakes up. If he calls for you, give it a go. In his position, I would appreciate a good fucking from you."

"Ash!" I couldn't believe the words out of his mouth.

"What?" Ash shrugged. "I said in his position. You know I have my own alpha who helps me through my heats very well. Remember the whole thing that happened when I was on tour?"

My cheeks warmed. Yes, I remembered hearing about the scandal of Ash going into heat in a room full of alphas from other sources, but I'd never talked to him about it.

Ash darted around me toward the door. "Help him. It will be okay." Then he left, leaving me in my condo with an omega in heat, and I had no idea how long Knox's dilemma would last.

I considered peeking into the guest room to check on him, but my grumbling stomach led me to the kitchen. I hadn't eaten since that morning, too busy trying to keep my mind occupied with work instead of the omega at my place. And if I didn't eat, I wouldn't have the energy to help him, if I decided to go ahead with that undertaking. Having not been home for four months and then giving away most of the food my dad sent home to the other passengers on the train, I didn't have much on hand. I

considered ordering out again, but I didn't know if the food would arrive before Knox woke.

Searching through my cupboards, I found some cup ramen. Not what my trainer would recommend, but I wasn't heading back to the gym yet. I could easily work it off and have a protein shake after helping Knox if the evening went that way.

After peeling the lid off the cardboard cup, I added the required amount of water, stirred in the spices, then placed it in the microwave. I worried the sound might wake up my guest, but I didn't hear him rouse at all. Not until I put the empty container in the recycler.

The toilet flushed in the guest bathroom. Then I heard him flop onto the bed, a loud moan following. "I ache all over. And nothing helps. I need an alpha to fuck this feeling out of me."

My cock stiffened with his words. I had no idea if he knew I'd come home and said that for me, or if he was simply desperate for relief. Though I knew I couldn't listen to his discomfort all night and not do anything to alleviate his pain. I either had to leave again or assist him.

Grabbing the condoms Ash had left, I headed toward the guest room. I knocked on the door and listened for a response.

"I appreciate your help, Ash, but you're not an alpha. I need an alpha."

I twisted the handle of the door and peeked inside, seeing his naked form sprawled out on the bed. He was semi-erect, and his skin was dewy with sweat, even with the temperature much cooler in the guest room compared to the rest of my condo. "It's me. I'm home now. How are you doing?"

He groaned as he turned to face me, not embarrassed by his nudity in the least. Definitely not in the same mindset as the omega I'd met on the train. "I've been better. I'm sorry about your pillow." He lifted it from the far side of him then cuddled it into his chest. "But your scent gave me a little comfort today."

"Can I..." I took a step into the room. "Can I help you at all?"

He rubbed his hand between his legs then encircled his cock, spreading slick all over his shaft. "The only thing that can help me now is to be fucked hard and well. Do you think you could do that for me?"

I nodded my head as my lion tried to leap out of me to pounce on him. All doubts had left, as I knew I had to do everything in my power to help my guest. I'd invited him into my home, kept his luggage hostage so he couldn't leave, and dragged him back here to protect him from other alphas, while an alpha was exactly what he needed. That left me as the one who needed to take care of him. As his host, and the only alpha on the premises, it was my duty to do so. He'd asked, so I had to attend to his needs.

Knox

My pulse spiked as Linc walked into the room. Imagining him there as I'd ground against his pillow or stroked myself to release had brought only a little relief, though not enough to tame my overactive libido. I never knew desire for someone could be so painful, with my persistent erection and dangerous craving for someone I barely knew. But my deer didn't want anyone else. Ash had even offered to find me a trustworthy alpha if Linc wouldn't help, but the thought of anyone else made me want to vomit.

I held my cock firm in my hand as he undressed, draping his clothes over the exercise equipment in the corner. My nerves buzzed with anticipation taking in his naked form, his wide, firm chest, thick thighs, and heavy cock. My entrance throbbed as I yearned to feel him deep inside me. "Linc, please."

He met my desperate gaze, staring down on me with a sudden dominant energy. "Be patient, omega. Let me take you in first."

I shivered at the sexy rumble of his voice, and my nipples pebbled. The anticipation of waiting for him to take me proved so much worse. My body simmered under his scrutiny. "I don't know how much more I can take."

The corner of his mouth rose in a brief grin. "Let me see you get off. I want to see you climax before I am the one giving you the release."

I groaned, squeezing my cock tight. "But it would feel so much better if you just fucked this out of me. I've been suffering all day."

Coming to the side of the bed, he lowered to his knees and brushed the sweaty hair off my forehead. “I promise I will. But I want you to finish what you’ve already started before I’m the one to bring you pleasure.”

He kissed my temple then wrapped his hand around mine, increasing the pressure around my shaft. My hips bucked under the increased grip strength. I rocked up into our hands, anxious to feel more of Linc. All of him. My groin stirred with the oncoming release, and my thighs tightened right before I squirted across our intertwined fingers.

“You were absolutely gorgeous right there.” With his thumb and forefinger on my chin, Linc turned my head before capturing my lips in his. His whiskered jaw brushed across my skin as he leaned closer and deepened our kiss. Then, in an instant, he pulled away. “Let’s get you cleaned up before I join you.”

With wet wipes he pulled out of the nightstand, Linc washed off our hands and my cock before leaving to toss the cloths away. He returned, stroking his thick cock.

I spread open my legs, anxious for his full penetration. Tearing into an unopened box of condoms, he ripped open one of the packages and rolled the thin barrier over his shaft. In desperation, I hadn’t thought about protection, but I was glad he remembered, and the gesture made me even more sure he was the only alpha I needed to get me through my heat.

From the foot of the bed, he crawled over me, his weight sinking me deeper into the mattress. I reached up and rubbed my palms across his lightly haired hard chest. I longed to pull him down on me, but I worried he’d leave if I rushed him. Instead, I ran the tips of my fingers up and down his sides as his engorged cock bobbed over mine.

No alpha had ever made me feel so vulnerable, yet I couldn’t imagine being in such a

position with anyone else. “Please help me.”

After a ragged breath, Linc captured my mouth with his lush lips, plying and probing. I opened to him as he lowered his body between my spread thighs. He reached deep inside with his warm tongue, exploring my mouth with gentle strokes. As our tongues mated, I held him tight against me, the fire inside raging on. I craved more, yearned to feel all of him. His mouth left mine, allowing me a much-needed breath of air, as he kissed down my jaw and along my neck. I bowed my back, my mouth open wide as jolts of desperation raced through me. “Please,” I cried, my ache for him seeming bottomless.

“Mmm.” He nuzzled into my neck with a low growl. “I want to explore your body more, but I’ll wait until another time. When you’re a little less impatient.”

His eyes twinkled as he winked at me, but it was the promise of more that caused a strange fluttering in my pelvis. One that had my deer elated.

Linc sat back on his knees and ran his fingers around my fleshy, slick-covered ring. “Are you okay if I go right in?”

I nodded with enthusiasm. “I’ve used toys before. Big ones.” Under normal circumstances, I likely would have cringed with embarrassment after sharing such a detail, but my intense need took away any filter or inhibitions. At least with Linc.

Hovering over me again, he lined his abundant tip with my hole then pushed his way inside. I fumbled to grip his arms with the generous invasion. “You okay?” Linc asked.

I released the breath I’d been holding. “Yes. Fuck you feel so good.”

He slowly pulled out then pushed back in with a torturously slow stroke. “As do

you.”

Gripping the firm globes of his ass, I held him inside me for as long as I could, reveling in his fullness and the foreign bond I felt with the connection. But he pulled back a heartbeat later, a fiery hunger in his golden eyes.

With long, hard strokes, he fucked deep into me, my muscles squeezing him tight. Between staggered kisses, we breathed in each other as we found a languid rhythm. Just us united in a dance of pleasure. Yet, it wasn't long before the intensity of my impending release buzzed in my head and rolled in my lower belly. I squeezed Linc's forearms and pushed up into him, my body so alive with competing sensations.

Linc growled into my ear before he pushed up onto his strong arms, rocking inside me faster and more frantic. Then all at once, my mind numbed, and a wave of blissful agony washed over me. Linc pulled out and quickly removed the condom. With a great roar, he let go, spilling his seed across my chest. And though my heat still lingered deep below the surface, the climax he'd given me granted the most relief I'd felt all day.

He cleaned me off without a word then curled onto the bed behind me, pulling me into his chest. “Sleep for now,” he whispered.

I did, though his promise of more kept my need for him lingering on the edge of my dreams.

Linc

Reluctantly, I peeled myself away from Knox's sleeping form. I had no idea what day it was, or even the time, only knowing the sun was already up and shining in the window. The omega's heat had lasted longer than I expected, and I needed something to eat if I was going to help him through his next craving. After using the washroom, I trudged into the kitchen, deciding to make breakfast. I hadn't had time to go grocery shopping on my own, so I'd ordered all the necessities online and had them delivered. Finding time to work in between satisfying Knox had been tough. I was thankful the members of ONE kept busy practicing and recording their own versions of the demos I'd sent them.

Opening the fridge, I pulled out some eggs and a package of bacon. I needed protein for my tired muscles. After starting a few slices of bacon in the frying pan, I stirred together an omelet. Once I had them going, I glanced in the refrigerator again to contemplate what to make for Knox. I still had a lot of fruit, so I used a variety to make him a salad then prepared some oatmeal. At some point when I'd been fucking him, he'd told me that maple and brown sugar was his favorite, so I'd ordered that flavor for him.

When I had everything ready, I loaded the food onto plates then set them on the dining room table. We'd spent enough time in the guest room, and I wanted Knox to leave the bed for more than just a bathroom break. Besides, the next time I took him, I wanted it to be in my bed.

Throughout the blur of his heat, I'd been tempted many times to mark him, to claim Knox as my mate so no others would get to pleasure him as I had over the course of

the hazy days that had passed. But I'd held in that urge, wanting him to be fully aware and give consent. Marking someone wasn't an event I took lightly. Sure, I knew of some celebrity alphas who had several mates all over the world, depending on what city they visited. But I didn't want to be an alpha like that. Plus, my lion had made it more and more clear that Knox was special. That when his heat passed, I couldn't just let him leave. I had to find a way to make him stay. Like we were intended to be together. Yet, the idea of fated mates scared me. I didn't know if I was ready to settle down with a family. I'd barely had time to settle into my position as one of the lead producers at Adan Records since returning to Saramto. I had so many other things to occupy my time besides a mate and a family. Not that I wanted to be with anyone else, but both of those things required a large time commitment. I didn't know if I could pledge myself to that at such a time in my life. Not yet.

With a sigh, I walked over to the door and knocked. I still had a bit of time left with Knox, so I would enjoy things with him as they came.

"I'll be out in a minute," Knox replied, sounding anxious and aware instead of the sultry and heat-inebriated omega I'd spent the last few days with.

I tiptoed away from the door, my stomach twisting with the feeling that something had somehow changed. He hadn't begged me to get in there and fuck him, hadn't even asked me to come in.

Sitting at the table, I waited for Knox to come out. Had his heat ended? What did that mean for us?

Though I'd been hungry before, the sight of the food repulsed me. I didn't want to eat, only to pull Knox into my arms and hold him there forever.

Shit, where had such thoughts come from? Other than physically, Knox and I still barely knew each other. I needed to get a grip.

In a flurry, Knox rushed out of the guest bedroom, trailing his suitcase behind him. “My train leaves in an hour. I need to go.”

Fuck! My lion thrashed around inside me, itching to get me to shift so he could pounce on Knox, drag him to my room, and keep him there.

I simply sat at the table, trying to process his words and that so much time had passed. “It’s Friday already?”

He nodded like a bobblehead. “Yep. I’m sorry I took up all your time. It wasn’t the vacation I’d planned, but I’ve got to go.”

I gestured toward the food I’d prepared for him. “Eat a little before you leave. I’ll drive you to the station.” Vices clenched my heart, but I didn’t know what else to say to him.

“You’ve already done so much for me.” He chewed on his bottom lip and stuffed his hands into his pockets, maintaining the distance between us. “I appreciate all of it, but I can’t ask for more from you. I’ve disrupted your life enough.”

Resisting the urge to slam my fist on the table, I stood up instead. “Knox, I insist on driving you. Everything I did for and with you, I did because I wanted to. Please let me see you onto the train, at least. All I wanted to do was keep you safe while you were in Saramto.”

With a tear trailing down his cheek, he gave me a quick nod. “Okay.” He turned away to wipe his cheek. “But I can’t eat right now. My stomach isn’t...”

I took the food over to the counter. “I’ll put it in a couple containers for you, then. You can eat it when you’re hungry.”

Another curt nod before he headed for the door.

Shit, had I done something wrong? Had I hurt him somehow? I'd only tried to help the entire time he'd stayed at my place, let him tell me what he wanted and when. Had I misheard him at some point?

With the containers in my hand, I headed for the foyer and grabbed my key fob before holding the door open for him. It was time to send him on his way, no matter how much my lion objected. Because Knox wasn't mine. I doubted he ever would be.

Knox

“You can go to work now.” I gripped the handle of my suitcase and stared down at the wet asphalt of the platform. It had been sunny when we left, but dark clouds had quickly rolled in and it had started to rain. Linc stood with me under the covered waiting area, but I couldn’t impose on him anymore. I’d already taken too much from him. “I’m good from here. Thanks again for everything you did for me while I was here.” I couldn’t look at Linc for fear I would start crying. Crying about my ruined vacation, crying out of embarrassment at having to ask a near stranger to look after me, and crying because after everything we’d been through together over the past week, Linc hadn’t asked me to stay. Everything the alpha had done for me was simply out of kindness, not because he felt a deeper connection as I thought I had. But maybe I’d been mistaken. Maybe I simply wasn’t used to an alpha showing any sort of compassion to me at all.

I dug my toe into the ground, trying to figure out why he hadn’t left. “Oh, sorry. How much do I owe you?” I should have guessed. None of his kindheartedness came for free. “For the use of your guestroom, all the food, and for...you know.”

I jumped back when he gave a low growl, his eyes hard as he shook his head. “I don’t want your money. I thought...” He threw his hands up in the air. “Fine. I’ll go. I hope you have a safe trip back home. You have my number if you need me.”

I winced as he spun on his heels and headed into the rain. What happened that placed the wedge between us? I didn’t remember much from the haze of my heat, but I did recall him holding me in his arms, his gentle kisses, and his whispered words of comfort. Had that all been an act so he could fuck me through it all?

Then I remembered his reluctance to the idea of helping me through my heat, how he'd dropped everything to save me at the museum before that, and even the offer of letting me stay at his place for one night after my reservation was canceled. He didn't have to do any of it. Yet, he did. Before he knew I was in heat.

I glanced in his direction, considering going after him to apologize, to ask him to stay with me until the train arrived. But he was already out of sight. My deer urged me to text him to come back, but I hesitated. What good would that do? I was heading back home anyway. Back to Shifter Crossing. I didn't live in Saramto. Proved that I couldn't handle staying in the metropolis on my own. I didn't belong in a big city. Yet, Linc had lived there for all his adult life. He'd returned only to help his dad then headed back to the metropolis. Our lives were very different. Even if there was the connection I'd thought we had, nothing would work between us.

I swallowed the lump in my throat as I heard the horn from the approaching train. It was time for me to go back to the life I knew, the one where my parents kept trying to set me up with a dickhead alpha, and I kept saying no. I would work at the high school as long as I could, and maybe start to collect figurines. Lions. Just to remember the time I'd left the small town and traveled on my own.

The train wasn't as full as it had been on the way to Saramto. I had a seat to myself and spent the entire ride staring out the window being pelted with rain, while I streamed music. I had to skip the FNL songs on my playlist, because listening to them caused my heart to ache.

Nothing happened on the trip home. No breakdowns. No bodies flying over the seat to cause an alpha to pull me into his arms.

When I stepped off the train at the station in my hometown, the skies had cleared, yet I felt empty. Sure, I hadn't eaten all day, but my stomach hadn't been in any condition to consume the food Linc had sent with me. Yet the hollowness felt much

deeper, like I'd left a good part of myself back in the metropolis.

I sighed as I grabbed my luggage and began the walk to my apartment. No point in dwelling on things that were never meant to be.

When I reached my place, I opened the door with my key. No fancy entry codes in Shifter Crossing. Though I had nothing worth stealing anyway.

I hadn't worn most of my clothing, having spent most of the week naked in Linc's guest bed, so I didn't have to wash my laundry right away. Plus, I still had a couple days before I had to return to work. After placing the oatmeal and fruit from Linc in my fridge, I flopped onto my bed.

I considered calling my parents to let them know I was back, but I didn't want to tell them I'd spent my entire time away getting fucked by a lion shifter who hadn't bothered to claim me or even asked me to be his mate. Plus, they didn't need to know I even went into heat, or they'd parade me around town, hoping some young alpha would sniff me out and take pity on me. My parents would figure out I'd returned soon enough. They knew my itinerary and would have heard the train come into town.

I also contemplated texting Linc to tell him I'd arrived home. Yet, what did I say? Home now, thanks again. Or Just letting you know I'm back in Shifter Crossing. It all sounded stupid in my head. Besides, would he even care? I was out of his life now and I doubted I'd ever see him back in this town. When he'd been here the last time, no one had even mentioned spotting him around.

I closed the messaging app and tossed my phone to the side of my bed. Sure, I'd had a fling with a former pop star, but I could never mention it to anyone. Especially anyone here in Shifter Crossing, where his family lived. I had to move on and forget all about him.

Linc

Burying myself in work seemed the only answer to get over Knox leaving and never contacting me again. I thought he'd at least let me know when he'd arrived back home. I didn't even warrant a quick text to say so after providing him a place to stay, helping him through his heat, and making sure he made it on time to catch his train back to Shifter Crossing. Had I misread everything about our time together? Sure, I would have loved for the omegas of my past to leave without a single shred of evidence that we'd been together, but Knox was different. At least, that was what my lion believed.

A month had passed by quickly since that week with him. I thought working on the album for ONE would help me forget him, yet every time the words omega , fated , or love came up in any of the songs, a deep ache formed in my chest. I pushed through it all while cultivating each track, and with most of the initial recording finished, the group was off doing photoshoots and learning choreography for their eventual performances, leaving me more time in my thoughts. Not where I wanted to be. I tried to listen to the demos for my own album again, but they only made the anguish grow.

Maybe I should have texted him that night. Just to be sure. It wouldn't have been that hard and would have put my mind at ease. But I'd been too stubborn, and now it was too late. What would I say to him?

I'd asked my parents how the town was, hoping in a roundabout way that they'd tell me if something had happened to Knox since I last saw him. Yet, they'd told me the town was as boring as ever, which they liked.

I didn't want to come right out and ask them about Knox, knowing they would start on me about finding an omega and settling down. Not a speech I wanted to hear again. I'd heard it enough when I'd been there helping my father after his surgery.

My lion seemed content for the first time with the idea of settling down. Yet the only omega I'd even consider devoting my life to had left me without a word.

Wait, was I really ready to commit to Knox? I ran my palm over my face, sure I wasn't thinking clearly. Maybe I needed more sleep.

I grabbed my phone to unmute it and noticed a message waiting for me. For a brief moment, I hoped it was from Knox. Then I noticed the sender: my sister. Worry clenched my gut. Had something happened to our parents?

I called her right away without listening to the message.

"Hello?" she answered.

"Kayla, is everything okay?" If I had to, I was ready to drive to Shifter Crossing immediately.

She chuckled then sighed. "You didn't listen to my message, did you?"

I swallowed down my shame. "No. I wanted to talk to you anyway."

"Oh? What about?" She sounded like she didn't believe me.

Maybe it wasn't the truth, but since I had her on the phone, I decided to ease my mind. But not right away. "Tell me why you called first."

"I was just wondering if you're going to be here for the holidays this year. You

weren't sure when you left, and I thought you might have a better idea if you are coming home now."

"I...uh, I still don't know yet." Though, going back to my hometown would be a good excuse to see Knox again. "But probably. At least for a couple days."

"Okay, well try and figure it out for sure so I can plan what day we're going to have our big dinner. And especially if you're bringing someone home with you."

"Kayla." She was as bad as my parents, though none of them knew the only omega I wanted saw them more than me.

"Just sayin'." I heard the allusion in her voice. "Anyway, what did you want?"

I swallowed the lump of pride and nervousness trying to keep me from talking. "I...I saw an omega here in Saramto not too long ago. I'm pretty sure he's from our hometown. I think his name is Knox?"

"Knox? Oh, yeah, I know him." An awkward silence passed between us before she spoke again. "What do you mean when you say you saw him in Saramto?"

I didn't know how much to tell Kayla, but I couldn't lie, either. "We rode the train to Saramto together. The day it got stuck on the tracks."

"Oh, yeah, the one still mentioned on the news. A lot of the passengers are suing for compensation. You never did. I don't think Knox did either." She tapped her fingers on something hard, and I didn't know if she was at work or at home. "Why are you asking about him all of the sudden anyway?"

"He just popped into my mind, and I thought I'd ask about him, what he's up to."

“You asking about an omega feels weird to me. Especially one from here. I actually saw him the other day. He was in to get a pregnancy test. Which is weird because I’ve never seen or even heard about him being with an alpha. Seems to make a point of avoiding them.”

“A pregnancy test?” My heart skipped a beat then started racing in my chest.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Linc. Were you interested in him?”

“It’s not like that.” My hand shook, so I put my phone down and turned it on to the speakerphone. “He... I...”

“Linc, what’s going on? What aren’t you saying?”

“I might be the father. He stayed at my place. The hotel canceled his reservation. He went into heat.” The words tumbled out, and I didn’t have the ability to stop them. “We used protection. But there was one broken condom. I thought I pulled out in time, but maybe I didn’t.”

“Oh, Linc.” My sister sighed on the other end. “You know what you have to do, right?”

I nodded even though she couldn’t see me. “I’ll see you soon. And whatever you do, don’t tell our parents.” My lion rejoiced while the rest of me filled with panic. What if he wasn’t pregnant and I went and made a fool of myself? What if the test was for another omega? And worst of all, what if he was pregnant but didn’t want to see me?

Knox

“Thank goodness for the weekend! You wanna go to the sugar shack tonight?” Levi asked as he drove back to Shifter Crossing after we’d finished our day at the high school. “Tristan’s going to be there. He texted me today that he hoped I brought you along.”

“No, I’m exhausted.” Especially lately. And queasy. Mostly in the mornings. Besides, I didn’t like Tristan. He only wanted an omega to clean his house, make his meals, and to fuck whenever he wanted. His last boyfriend, Stephan, told me the alpha wouldn’t let him talk to his own family, and made him report every time he left the house, which he was only allowed to do to get groceries. Not the kind of forever mate I wanted. Not even anyone I wanted to talk to.

“C’mon, Knox. You can’t stay single forever.”

I scoffed at my cousin’s words. “This coming from you who is, last time I checked, still single.”

He clicked his tongue and purposely swerved the car to show his annoyance. “You know I’m dating Fred. We’ve been together for over a year.”

“Fred who cheated on you two months into your relationship.” Typical for most guys in and around Shifter Crossing.

“Yeah, but he’s changed since then. Everything is good now.”

I doubted that, considering the number of times Levi had called me, wanting me to go with him to hunt the alpha down when he didn't come home after a night out. "And yet he still hasn't claimed you. That sounds real good." More like he was stringing my cousin along—as long as he could without committing.

Levi pulled up to the curb in front of my apartment and slammed on the brakes. "At least I have someone to come home to, and don't spend my nights all alone. He takes care of me, Knox. And in more ways than one, if you know what I mean."

I knew exactly what he meant, and it still didn't make me want to settle for any of the guys in Shifter Crossing. I would rather spend the rest of my life alone than be with someone who had no respect for me. Without responding, I got out of the car. It was a conversation we had all the time, and I knew my cousin would apologize in a day or two when Fred hurt him again.

After setting my keys and lunch bag on the tiny kitchen counter, I stared at the box on the kitchen table that had once been a two-seater table at a local diner. The box made my stomach roll more than it had been all day.

Two days earlier, I'd gone into Zambrano's to buy a pregnancy test. I didn't want to go to the drug store in the next town over, because then I would have to explain to whomever drove me why I needed to go. No one knew about what had happened between me and Linc in Saramto. I hadn't even told anyone that I'd seen him. So, it had been especially awkward buying the test from his sister.

Still I hadn't opened it. I was too scared of the results. If I wasn't pregnant, yes, I would be relieved. It was my deer that dreaded that outcome, still yearning for some kind of connection to Linc even though I hadn't seen or talked to him since the day I left and told him I was fine on my own. But maybe I wasn't. Not if the result showed I was pregnant. First, there would be talk. Lots of talk. About the identity of the father, and then my reputation for getting pregnant without being claimed by an

alpha. My parents would try to get any and every single alpha to take pity on me and claim me before I gave birth.

My head spun as I continued to stare at the box. What was I going to do? I needed to know, but not knowing seemed safer either way. Meant I didn't have to make any life-altering decisions right away.

My phone rang, startling me out of the endless array of thoughts. I glanced at the caller ID. My parents. Though I knew what they wanted, I answered anyway. "Hello."

"Knox, glad you're home. Dinner's made, and we want you to come over."

I sighed, knowing that even if I argued, my dad would send my father over to pick me up. Besides, I didn't have anything made or even thawed out for supper. "Fine, but if there's an alpha there, you need to send him home. I'm not interested."

"Knox, just come over," my dad demanded. "You don't get to tell me who I should invite to dinner. You should just be thankful for the food."

I grimaced, my guess about the reason for the dinner confirmed. At least it would take my mind off the test I needed to take, for a couple hours. "Fine, I'll be there soon."

With my coat and shoes still on, I grabbed my keys and headed to my parents' place. It was only a couple blocks away, and as I approached the house, I glanced at their driveway for an extra vehicle, something to indicate the identity of the alpha they wanted to set me up with. But I didn't see any. Not even a car or truck parked along the street. That meant, it had to be an alpha who lived close by, those options even worse.

Or maybe I'd simply overreacted, and my parents just wanted to have dinner with me. Somehow, I doubted that, but still secretly hoped for that to be the case.

I walked in through the side door, never having used the front one. Even our friends, family, and the mail-courier knew not to use the front door. Maybe it was a small-town thing. Yet, the scent that permeated through the house was not from a small town. And it wasn't dinner. There was a predator inside somewhere, an alpha I already knew who wasn't my father.

My deer leaped with excitement, urging me to go up the few steps into the kitchen to see him again. Another part of me considered leaving. No one had heard my arrival yet, so I still had a chance. Though curiosity won out, and I trudged up to the back of the house, wondering why Linc would be at my parents' house.

Linc

“What are you doing here?”

The accusation in Knox’s words hurt. I knew my presence was a surprise to him, but I thought he’d be more excited to see me. “I...I wanted to see you again.”

“Wait.” Mr. Anderson’s brows furrowed as he glanced between me and Knox. “You two already know each other?”

“Yes.” I glanced at the floor with my hands behind my back. I may have lied to Knox’s parents about not knowing their son after my sister called them to arrange the dinner meeting of her single alpha brother with their single omega son. “We met on the train when he went to Saramto.”

“Oh!” Knox’s dad brought out a basket of fresh-baked buns and placed them on the already-set table. “That’s the one that broke down. I’m sure you had plenty of time to get to know each other. Why didn’t either one of you tell us?”

I twirled my thumbs, trying to think of something to say without telling them everything that happened between us, and how intimately we already knew each other.

“I didn’t have his contact information,” Knox lied as his cheeks reddened. “I didn’t think I would ever see him again.”

“Well, he’s here.” Knox’s dad nudged him closer to me. “And you need to be kind to

our guest. He's an unmated alpha, and you can't stay single for the rest of your life."

My heart broke for Knox, from his dad's words to seeing the anguish on his face. "I'm only here if Knox wants me to be. I can leave if he'd rather not have me around. I just thought—"

"Sit." Mr. Anderson gestured to the chair at the far end of the table. "While I don't want my son settling for just anyone, I believe you are a good candidate for a mate for him. Your parents are well-known and liked in this town, and you have a good paying job that you would be able to support Knox and any future children you may have together. I don't like that you live so far away, but it's something I'd be willing to sacrifice to ensure my son has a good mate. Knox always complains that there are no decent alphas around here, but I think you are the exception. I think my son needs to give you a chance. Especially since you came calling for him."

While I appreciated the man's words of support, I didn't want Knox to feel forced into anything. He stared down at the floor while getting lectured by his father, and when he glanced up at me, I mouthed, "I'm sorry."

He shook his head, his eyes brimming with tears. "Why me?"

My mind reeled with all the whys, but none of the reasons could be said in front of his parents. "I never stopped thinking about you."

He took a stifled breath before he nodded and took a seat at the side of the table.

After a blessing to the Earth for the food, Mr. Anderson served a full bowl of vegetable and bean-filled chili to each of us. The buns were passed around, and Knox's parents set out to query me on my work and my intentions with their son.

I couldn't lie. I wanted Knox to know that I was fully committed if he wanted to be

with me. I didn't care if he was pregnant or not, but I refused to let him raise a child without support. "I felt a connection with your son from the moment I met him. If he is willing, only if he is willing, I would like to be his mate. As soon as possible."

Knox gasped as he glanced up at me, a tear trailing down his cheek.

His dad clapped his hands across the table from him. "Oh, I'm so happy. My son is finally going to be mated."

Knox pushed away from the table and ran out of the room. I was offended for a moment, and then I remembered what my sister had told me about the early stages of pregnancy.

I stood at the same time as Knox's dad.

"I'm sorry for the rudeness of my son. Sometimes he forgets his place."

I waved my hand in front of me. "It's okay. I'm not offended. But, I would like to go talk to him, if I could."

Mr. Anderson gestured in the direction his son had run.

I found Knox in the main floor bathroom, the door slightly ajar. I knocked. "Can I come in?"

Kneeling in front of the toilet, he glanced up at me. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be." I made my way inside the small space and glanced around for a cloth. When I found one, I wet it then kneeled in front of him to wipe his neck and face. "Are you okay? Is there anything I can get you?"

He shook his head. "I'm just not feeling well. Could be a stomach bug."

"You sure?" I brushed some strands of hair from his forehead. "There's no other reason?"

He sighed. "Your sister told you, didn't she?"

I nodded.

Closing the toilet lid, Knox rose and sat on it. "I haven't taken the test yet. I don't know for sure. But I don't want you to feel obligated to be with me if I am. I can figure out a way to raise the child on my own."

"Knox." With my fingers under his chin, I tipped his head up to look at me. "I am here for you either way. I was serious when I said I can't stop thinking about you."

He chewed his bottom lip as he let out a shaky breath. "Give me a minute. I need to clean up."

With a nod, I left the bathroom and waited outside. I didn't want to go back to face his parents without him.

When Knox came out, I held my arms open for him, and he shuffled into me, leaning against my chest. I held him close, enjoying the big whiff of vanilla and raspberries, a scent I would never get tired of.

"You're sure?" He nudged his glasses as he glanced up at me, his eyes revealing all his hopes and fears.

I leaned closer and kissed the top of his head. "Absolutely. It hurt when you told me to leave you at the train station. I've wanted to call you ever since, but I didn't know

what to say. When my sister told me about the pregnancy test, I knew I had to come see you no matter how we left things. I couldn't let you think you were on your own."

"But that doesn't mean we need to be mated." He pulled away and stared at the floor. "I really don't want you to feel obligated. I know you have all your fans and your career."

"Oh, Knox." I held him close again. "If only you could hear my lion right now. He's insisting that you're my fated mate, and that I can't let you go again."

He glanced up at me, his eyes wide. "Fated? You really think so?"

I nodded. "Do you not feel it?"

He shrugged. "I feel something. I don't know what it is exactly, because usually I just feel repulsed by all the alphas around here."

I chuckled. "I guess I understand that. So, will you give me a chance?"

He smiled for the first time since he'd arrived at his parents. "Yes. But can you take me home? I'm still not feeling great, and I really should take that test. So we know for sure."

"I can do that." I held out my hand, hoping he would take it before we walked back into the dining room. "Though I still want to mark you no matter what the test says."

Grasping my hand, he nudged my side. "You do, do you? How soon?"

I grinned. "Tonight, if you're up for it."

We held hands as we walked into the dining room, and I heard Knox's dad squeal.

“I’m going to take your son home. He’s not feeling well, and I think he needs some rest.”

“Oh no.” Knox’s dad came rushing to his side and placed a hand on his forehead. “Are you okay? If you want to go upstairs to your old room, I’ll take care of you.”

Mr. Anderson stood and gently pulled his mate back. “Let him be. I think Linc can take care of him. It will be good for the both of them.” He winked at me then nodded.

I don’t know how much he knew or had heard, but he seemed to understand more than his mate.

After stepping out into the cool air, I reached for Knox’s hand and walked him to his apartment, anxious to be alone with him again.

Knox

Walking back to my apartment, my heart raced as anxiousness replaced the queasy feeling in my stomach. I still didn't understand what exactly Linc wanted with me. Though the fact he'd come to Shifter Crossing to see me gave me a twinge of hope. When I'd left Saramto, I hadn't expected anything from him, envisioned him moving on with one of his many fans or someone else attracted to his fame. But he said something about us being fated mates. At least, I think he did. The dinner at my parents had felt like some kind of dream or maybe a fantasy. Yet, Linc still walked beside me, holding my hand.

He was going to be inside my apartment. My apartment. A shock of worry filled my veins. He liked things clean. Yet, I had no idea how I'd left things at my place. Sure, I cleaned the high school for a living, but I didn't put as much effort into keeping my own place tidy. I tried to recall if there were dishes in the sink or clothes strewn across furniture. I wasn't extremely messy. You could see my floor, that much I knew. But with no one ever coming over, I didn't always put things in what would be a proper place, but in a convenient location instead.

"I'm sorry," I said when we reached my front door. "My place isn't as nice as yours." I hoped that covered any possible mess as well as the run-down look of the only place in town I could afford.

He rested his hand on my back as I opened the bolt lock. "I'm with you, and that's all that matters to me right now."

I tried not to shiver with the deep and low tone of his whispered words. I wasn't used

to such attention from an alpha. Getting asked to make out or suck someone's dick didn't give the same rush of desire. Yes, Linc and I had been very intimate before, but I'd been in heat, and didn't remember much from those few days with him.

After removing my shoes, I hung our coats up in my tiny, but mostly empty, closet then took a step into the living space, which tripled as my kitchen, dining room, and living room. Linc caught my hips from behind and twirled me around to face him. He held my waist and stared down at me, smiling as though he wanted to eat me. I didn't know whether to be flattered or terrified.

I quickly glanced away and caught sight of the pregnancy test box on my kitchen table. "I..." Moving my arm in between us, I pointed over at it. "I should take the test. Just to be sure. So you know."

He shook his head. "I don't care what the result says. I want you to be mine, regardless. I mean it, Knox. I want you to be my mate. Can you feel what I feel? That connection?"

I sucked on my lips to keep them from quivering. I didn't want to cry, but my chest was so heavy with all my hopes and fears bubbling to the surface. If I admitted how I felt about him to myself, I left my heart open to getting broken, and I dreaded that more than trying to raise a child on my own.

Cupping my face, he used his thumbs to wipe tears from my cheeks. "Talk to me, Knox. Tell me what you're feeling."

"Scared," I blurted out before I could stop myself. I sniffled then shook my head, worried I would push him away when that was the last thing I wanted to do.

Instead, he pulled me into his chest and held me tight against him. "I get it," he whispered into my hair. "I am, too. I understand it's so much different for you."

I sobbed against his chest. “I feel it, too. That connection. But what if you...”

Letting go of me, he wiped my tears again then held my shoulders while looking in my eyes. “I’m not going anywhere. Not without you, anyway. I want you by my side. I want you to be my mate, my inspiration for my romantic songs, my forever love. I want you, Knox. And only you. Will you let me claim you? Tonight? I don’t want to wait.”

I nodded, my deer urging me to leap into his arms and let him fuck me until I couldn’t see. “But, are you sure?”

He smiled softly. “I’ve never been surer about anything than I am about you.”

“My bedroom is this way.” Leaving the test on the table, I sauntered into my room, a sudden burst of confidence filling me. I didn’t know how long it would last, so I let it control all my actions.

Inside my bedroom, I stripped off all my clothes and waited for Linc to do the same. We’d seen each other naked many times already. That much I remembered. Especially when I woke up cuddled into his firm body near the end of my heat. Within his arms, he’d made me feel like more than just someone he fucked through their heat, and I longed to recapture that intimate feeling.

As he removed his clothing piece by piece, I scrambled onto the bed, only a single compared to the queen-sized one in his guest room, but that didn’t deter him from crawling over me and capturing my lips with his. His scorching kiss made my toes curl and my pelvis flutter with anticipation.

I bucked up toward him and tried to pull him closer to me.

He chuckled into my mouth. “Suddenly anxious, are we?”

“Mm-hmm,” I moaned as my mind whirled with need. I wasn’t in heat and hadn’t expected to be so uninhibited with him, but I couldn’t deny the desire I felt when alone with Linc. I wanted him. I wanted to be claimed by him and be his mate for the rest of my life.

He reached between my legs, running his finger around my slick hole. With a confident smile, he shook his head. “Faster than I expected, my omega.”

My heart fluttered at his words, and I sucked in a deep breath. “Take me, my alpha.”

He licked his lips then held his hard cock against my entrance. After pushing slowly inside me, he gave a satisfied grunt. I held his arms, staring into his hungry eyes as he rocked in and out. My body simmered as he drew moans of pleasure from deep within me.

He was gentle with his long, slow strokes, building a connection of trust and yearning. But it wasn’t long before my fire of passion became desperate. I writhed in flames, craving completion.

“Will you let me claim you?” he asked in a deep, gravelly voice, his fangs already elongated.

“Yes.” I nodded, my body consumed by the intense yearning for his mark.

He pulled out then sat on the bed and pulled me onto his lap. I sank onto his engorged cock, splaying my palms on his chest. With his hands on my hips, he guided me up and down over him, the sensation of bliss more powerful in the new position. I rocked over him with a primal energy, desperate for release.

As the coil of fury in my groin became unbearable, Linc sank his teeth into me. The shock wave left me reeling, feeling like I was falling and flying at the same time. I

screamed at the torturous pleasure of the new connection, of our hearts and bodies joining as one. It was nothing like I expected, but so much more. I reveled in the euphoria and the comfort of our union, one that could never be broken.

Linc

“This is nice.” Yash raised his bottle of beer before taking a swig. “Almost makes me want to leave the city to buy a house way out here.”

I chuckled. With the amount of time the singer spent on tour and in the studio, I doubted he would want to live outside of Saramto.

“Are you moving all of your equipment here when it’s finished?” Ren asked.

I shook my head. “Not everything. I’m going to have to buy some new equipment for my studio here. There are some things I need at Adan for when I’m there.”

After claiming Knox, I convinced my omega to come live with me at my condo in Saramto. It hadn’t been hard since he hated his job at the high school, and apparently loved being with me. He’d worked as a hygiene technician at the medical clinic in tower one for a little bit, not satisfied with spending the day simply taking care of himself and our forming baby. When it became too much for his body, and he began to miss having family around, we decided to move closer to Shifter Crossing. Both our parents loved the idea, and we found a place with enough room for us, plus an extra space I could convert into a studio so I didn’t have to commute to Saramto as often. My studio wasn’t done yet, but with ONE’s debut album set to release in less than a week, I had a chance to move, get my studio set up, and take some time off to spend with Knox and our new baby, who was due the same day as ONE’s release.

“So, are you ready to be a dad?” Buan asked. “You’re the first one of us mated, and the first to have a kid. That we know of, at least.”

While all my former boy bandmates chuckled, I tried to swallow away the panic that had been building inside of me as we neared Knox's due date. "Is anyone ever ready?" I worried from one moment to the next whether we had all the necessary gear to take care of our baby, whether I would be a good enough father to support both our child and Knox, and if my mate was really okay when he told me over and over that he was fine and to stop asking. Everyone I knew with young children had their babies when I wasn't around, so I had no clue what to do. Luckily, both our parents promised to help as much as we wanted them to, claiming there would be moments where we would want to be by ourselves. Though sure they were right, I doubted that time would occur in the first few days after our child arrived.

We headed upstairs to where the rest of our guests chatted and enjoyed giving Knox advice on giving birth and raising a child. All stuff we'd heard before, especially from our parents and my sister. It was nice to have everyone over for our housewarming party slash baby shower. I hadn't expected so many of my fellow artists from Adan Records to show up, especially with us being so far from Saramto, yet, even artists such as TK and his model husband, Kish, had been thrilled to help us celebrate.

"When did you say Knox was due?" Ash took a piece of shrimp from the plate in his hand and sucked it out of its tail before swallowing it down.

"Not for another week." The date was ingrained in my brain regardless of how many times others told me that the first born is usually never on time but often late.

"Hmm," Kish said beside him. "I don't think he's going to last that long."

"Me neither." Ash tilted his head as he stared at my mate. "You see the way he's holding his belly there? I would bet he's having false contractions."

Kish nodded. "Do you have your hospital bag ready?"

“Knox wanted a home birth.” Something he and his dad had argued about for so long, but we’d found a good birthing coach who lived nearby to assist us when the time came.

“Oh, that’s nice.” Kish eyed my mate before taking a bite of his carrot stick. “Then you’d best have your coach on notice and make sure anything you need for that is ready. He’s going to go soon.”

Glancing over at Knox among friends and family, I noticed how pale he’d become. At that moment, I wanted everyone to leave. Maybe the party had been too much, regardless of his insistence that he wanted to have it before he gave birth. Perhaps we’d cut it closer than we’d intended.

Somehow, our guests seemed to leave on their own over the next hour. Maybe Kish and Ash encouraged them to leave, or they saw the same deterioration of Knox’s social battery. He laid on the couch as the last of our guests left, only our parents still at our house, helping to clean up.

When the doorbell rang, I expected someone to have forgotten something, but it was Derek, Knox’s birthing coach. “Your sister said to come. Thinks that Knox has been having contractions all day but didn’t want to tell anyone.”

Exactly what Kish and Ash had said. I led Derek inside and helped to bring in his gear then I held Knox’s hand as the coach checked to see if my mate was indeed in labor.

Derek gave a confident nod. “It’s time. I’ll get the tub set up and then we’ll proceed as you find it most comfortable, Knox. But you’ve come a long way on your own already.”

Three hours later, after more screaming and cursing from our fathers than I heard

from Knox, my mate gave birth to a little boy. Our little boy. I had a family. One that I hadn't expected when I'd boarded that train to Saramto ten months earlier. Yet, every day, I thanked the Fates for bringing us together.

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Knox

“Okay, it’s my turn.” Linc scratched the top of my head between my ears before lifting up our son, Toby, into his arms.

Toby had just turned six months old, and we decided to hire a photographer Linc had worked with in his FNL days to take family pictures.

It hadn’t been hard to find a nearby wooded area as the perfect backdrop for the photo shoot, and after we had pictures taken together in our human forms, we wanted pictures in our shifted forms with our son.

Though not with both of us shifted at the same time.

We feared something could happen to Toby in the instant it took us to shift, so we posed one at a time.

I returned to my human body after spending fifteen minutes laying in the grass in my deer form.

Linc was anxious to sit for his session with our son as much as I was anxious for mine to end.

As a deer, I couldn’t hold Toby, didn’t have the ability to take care of a child in the same ways.

After taking Toby from Linc, I removed his bunny costume, changed our son, then

put him into his lion cub suit.

We didn't yet know what animal form he would take, but the bunny and lion outfits had been absolutely adorable at the store, so I couldn't resist buying them for the session.

When my mate shifted into his lion, I gasped.

I rarely saw him in that form, and it always caught me by surprise how big he was.

In the handful of times we'd shifted together, he still had a couple inches over my deer.

With his large mane, he seemed so majestic.

He was the gentlest predator I'd ever met, never doing anything more to my deer than rubbing the scent glands in his cheeks over me or pinning me to the ground so he could lick me with his rough tongue.

But nothing like that since we'd become parents.

We didn't have much time alone where we didn't just grab dinner and enjoy a couple of hours or an entire night without being interrupted while eating and sleeping.

Spending time in our shifted forms wasn't a priority.

Linc had to go into Saramto a couple times a month, but he worked from home most days and helped me out in between his work and when I really needed a break.

For the times my mate was away from home, I'd gotten my driver's license.

I didn't drive much, usually only to the grocery store, or to our parents' houses, but I

had my license, so Linc didn't worry so much when he had to leave.

He sold his sports car for a family friendly SUV, and I had a little hatchback, which was the perfect size for just me and Toby.

With Linc laying on his belly and his head turned to the side to face the camera, I placed Toby beside him.

At one point, Toby started to lean to the right, so I rushed in and caught him before he fell over.

The cutest pictures with Linc were taken with my mate on his back with his paws in the air, and Toby laying on his belly.

Once Tabatha was satisfied she had enough photos, we thanked her, said goodbye, and made sure she got back to the main road without getting stuck in the mud.

Then we returned to the photo shoot spot for a picnic lunch.

While it was still too cool to go without a jacket, the sun shined down on us and helped to push a few more trees toward sprouting new leaves.

Spring wasn't far away, along with the possibility of another baby.

Linc and I had already talked about another child, but both agreed to play it by ear.

I wasn't on blockers, but since I was breastfeeding, I didn't know if I would go into heat right away.

Either way, we wanted to have our children while we were still young enough to run around with them.

Being lucky enough to have both of our parents nearby definitely helped.

Made me glad we'd left Saramto.

Though there were some conveniences of living in the big city that I did miss.

That didn't mean we'd never move back.

We lived where we needed to be for now.

In the future, when our kids were older, they might beg to leave small-town living behind for the experience of living in a metropolis.

Both Linc and I would understand, as we'd been just as anxious to leave.

But regardless of whether we lived in a small town or a big city, home would always be with my family.

The family I'd found because of one ill-fated train ride at the beginning of my fortuitous vacation.

I really lucked out, even if I didn't think so at the time.

I found my happy ending with the man I'd thought strange when I'd first seen him simply because he tried to keep his identity a secret.