



Posing for His Omega (Omegas of Oliver Creek #11)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Oliver Creek is a paradise, a town with a large shifter population rapidly becoming a foodie and artists' mecca, but I've lived here my whole life. As an artist, I find the quiet atmosphere of my home and studio a bit outside of town perfect for my work and my peace of mind. I have an upcoming show in the city, but I need one more piece to make it perfect. So I place an ad for a model on the community web page. I had no idea there were any professional models locally, much less the one who walks in my door and turns my world upside down.

I saved for years to buy my shaved ice cart. Modeling let me put away the necessary funds, but it's not the job I want for the rest of my life. When I go to make the final payment and pick up my cart, my account has been emptied by my ex who I'd been foolish enough to have as a signer. So it's not theft, technically. I can sue him, but that will take time. I need some quick money, or they will sell my cart to someone else. And there's not a lot of modeling in the small, charming town of Oliver Creek. Or, rather, there's only one job available, and it's a whole lot less clothed than I've done in the past. It might be easier if my polar bear wasn't chanting Mate from the moment I walk into the studio.

Total Pages (Source): 23

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:06 am

Antoine

Living in Oliver Creek was bliss.

Most of those in my high school class in the then-dying town fled for greener pastures. And, as an artist, I had been encouraged to do so by my instructors in high school, and my university professors had encouraged me to “spread my wings” and move to a big city where I would have access to “essentials” like multiple galleries, other artists, salons... In general, connections. And I did spend those four years studying in one of those cities, and really enjoyed everything in the art scene there.

Yet, I’d still come home every summer and did my best work in the little shed in my fathers’ backyard. Inspiration lay here, in nature, in the people, in the comfort of surroundings that I loved. Despite ignoring the advice of those older and wiser than me, I still managed to achieve a level of success that most of my classmates had not.

Artists rarely survived on their work. Art history was peppered with examples of talented painters, sculptors, and others who not only had to work full-time jobs, often at the lowest levels of society, but whose work remained undiscovered until they were long gone and unable to enjoy their spoils. Rory, my roommate in college, who I considered to be the most talented of our entire cohort, now occupied a position as professor at our own school. He was gradually reaching a broader audience and had confided that he hoped to be able to step away and paint full-time in about five years.

And yet, here I was, in my childhood home that my dads had put on the market when they decided to retire to Key West, and which I had purchased for full price with the earnings from my work. Dad and Pops, when they realized I wanted it, tried to give

me a discount, but there was no way I'd let them lose any of the equity they'd built just to help me out.

Fact was, I could not only afford this place, but I could have bought something much bigger, even in the cities my professors thought I should be living in. I kept my head down and worked hard and tried not to question what the kindness of Fate had bestowed. Or hope for the additional boon of a mate. Nobody could have everything, right?

Now, our "dying" town was blossoming largely due to enterprising restaurateurs that drew tourists and foodies. The food trucks, vineyard, and spectacular organic vegetable growers that populated the farmer's market were drawing not only day trippers but also enough weekenders and vacationers to bolster other businesses.

Which affected me only peripherally. I was glad for the townsfolk, but my art was already committed to galleries in the big cities, and living a short distance out of town ensured the peace I needed to create.

My backyard shed remained my studio...although I was upgrading it to both increase my comfort and keep out the spiders and snakes and other critters who had taken advantage of the splintered wooden walls to come inside and hang out with me. The black widow family had been the final straw. A contractor was currently at work, driving me into the house on a temporary basis. And it had been difficult to finish the works for my next show in the dining room instead of my old friendly spot. I only hoped that my new-and-improved shed would grow on me.

I plopped down at the dining room table and opened my laptop to go over the images for my next gallery show. I had managed to complete the pieces before losing my spider shed, thankfully, and soon I would ship them to the gallery.

One of the disadvantages of living so far from where the showing would be was

having to travel there, but I would only go for opening day and a few meetings then escape back to my construction-marred paradise.

I moved the images around the gallery view, shifting them here and there. Since I would not be present for the installation, the owner would be waiting for my instructions, and I had been working on this for a few days now, never quite feeling like I had it right. Shifting the pictures here and there, I huffed out a frustrated breath before getting up to make a sandwich.

Never having this kind of trouble with the simple organization phase, I couldn't imagine why it was happening now. Was I happy with the individual works? Yes, although I had to watch out for the tendency to overthink, but they were all ready.

I spread butter on two slices of bread and laid the first one on the cast-iron griddle my dad's left behind for me. A mountain of grated cheddar and pepper jack followed then the other piece of bread. I didn't eat grilled cheeses too often, but when I was feeling kerfuffled, this childhood favorite with the cheese upgrades was often my go-to.

Flipping it over, I let the images of my paintings run through my mind. Why was I... Oh hell.

I turned off the gas and slid the sandwich onto a plate then left it behind as I stomped into the dining room to check my notes for this particular project.

How could I have forgotten my initial idea? Not wanting to slow down the rest of the project, to make the trip into the city and rent studio space as I usually did when using a model, I'd put off one painting until later then last then completely pushed it out of my mind. And now... damn, damn, damn .

By putting it off then somehow forgetting entirely, I'd severely limited my options. The agency I patronized when I needed a model booked out months in advance and

even if they had anyone, it wouldn't be someone top tier.

Before I had a complete meltdown, I made a desperate move and placed an ad for someone local. My odds were slim to none...but I could not stage this installation without the centerpiece, and the gallery would blackball me if I canceled at this stage.

Wanted: Experienced Male Model for nude work.

It took about six tries before it didn't look like I was trying to find a sex worker.

And my sandwich was cold and congealed. Not the best day of my life so far.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:06 am

West

I sat at my square repainted table in my kitchen, wondering what the hell I would do now.

Clint had put a pause on my plans. Not the first time, of course. He'd sabotaged my plans plenty of times, but I wanted this more than ever.

I'd worked for it. Saved for it.

So, when the payment on my shaved ice truck bounced, I thought I'd miscalculated. Made a mistake.

I had made a mistake, all right, but it wasn't in the math.

It was in forgetting that my ex was still on my bank account. He'd taken it upon himself to empty it. I had another for incidentals that he had no access to, but 90 percent of my money had been in that one account.

Resting my head in my hands, I shook it, trying to rid myself of this hole I'd dug. Clint sucked for touching money that was mine. Earned by watching every bite that went into my mouth. Checking the mirror daily for changes in my body. Getting DEXA scans to make sure my body fat composition was in check. Putting up with handsy managers and, even worse, photographers.

Starving myself only to come home to a rageful, controlling mate who claimed I was his but refused to mark me.

I would've gladly taken his mark, even though scars and tattoos were frowned upon in the modeling industry.

Sitting up straight, I looked out the window and smiled. The town I'd grown to love was right outside. I was one payment away from being my own boss for the first time. Telling myself when and how hard to work.

Serving shaved ice to kids and adults alike. Making people smile instead of being told to smile by some arrogant ass behind a camera. And if I gained an inch around my waist...there would be nobody to try to make me lose it. Quitting my personal trainer was the best day of my life to date.

And it was likely to stay the best day if I lost my car because of previous bad decisions. Time to find a way to make that payment. Clint wasn't going to win. I was sure this was all a ploy to get me to crawl back to him. To tell him that he was right. I couldn't do this alone. That I needed him. To beg for his help—oh, that was what he loved the most—when I begged.

It had been three years since I left him, and I'd put him almost entirely out of my mind. That was my only excuse for not remembering to take him off the account. He'd never touched any of the money until a week ago. We'd originally put him on the account because we were a couple. According to him, I was his fate.

The one he would spend the rest of his life with.

I wasn't the only one he made those promises to.

The curtains were pulled back, letting the morning sunshine in. I got up and stared out of the window, seeing the families walking along. Couples holding hands. Kids high-fiving as they played soccer and chase in the park across the street from my house.

Oliver Creek was the small town of opportunity. A bustling little city/town, and I knew once I saw an article on it that it was the place for me.

I could do this.

The town news. Yes. Maybe there was a job opportunity there. Someone in this town needed something done.

It might take a while, but I would make it. I had to. I needed to prove Clint wrong and myself right.

Opening my laptop, I clicked on the internet and opened the newest bookmark. Oliver Creek News.

The site was mostly for the people who lived here, but I'd looked at it thousands of times before taking the plunge.

The employment section had very little. I didn't know how to be a barista. No knowledge of wine making or grape picking. Birds weren't really my thing.

Damn it. I didn't qualify for any of these. But wait a damned minute.

Local artist seeks male for nude portrait. Serious inquiries only. Generous compensation provided.

Nude modeling? I'd done several cologne and watch commercials. Some of which only gave me a silk white sheet to drape over the private bits. Nearly nude. Underwear modeling for me had been particularly popular. Calvin Klein and Versace boxers, briefs, and even thongs. I had no problem with my body or anyone seeing it. I got over the shyness after a dozen or so photoshoots. A necessary in my former line of work.

Generous compensation. The ad didn't say how much but, at this point, anything would help.

Anything.

I sent a quick response and was told to come right away. Get to the studio and hope the artist liked what he saw. I wasn't so pompous to think I was every person's cup of tea, and the artist would know what he wanted, but I had to take the chance.

I showered and put on black pants and a white shirt as instructed by an agent when I first started. He was right.

I walked out and toward the studio at the address listed on the site.

Clint wasn't winning this time.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:06 am

Antoine

Pacing, I stopped to check my email every few minutes. How completely unlike me to miss something as important as the centerpiece of my entire showing. With all the other items waiting to go, I had been so full of myself thinking I was way ahead of deadline. I had even begun to work on my next project. Mostly sketches, but I had a couple of canvases started. When I was in college, I had sometimes struggled for ideas, but never here.

But the whole construction thing had totally thrown me off my game, though, and if I didn't get a response to my ad, I was going to have to try something else. I just wasn't sure what. And then, after several hours of pacing and chewing my nails, I saw the email come in.

The person replying didn't give me a lot of information about themselves, just said they were interested in the detail about the job. I would have expected at least an attached head shot or preferably full-body image, but there was nothing.

So I just gave him the address and told him to come in for an interview. Oliver Creek might be foodie's paradise and attracting tourists from all over, but a model looking for a gig? Somehow that seemed unlikely. And I knew that when I placed the ad. It was just a really bad time for me to get to the city, with the construction going on, and then have to accept a second-best model since all the good ones would be booked. I had to try.

My expectations were not high, but if he was at all okay, I could use my imagination to bump up the assets, as it were. Not my favorite way to work, but time allowed not

much more. Damn, I hated having to compromise. Nothing in the Oliver Creek area was far from anything else, but my anxiety made the minutes stretch on. I picked up my brush and tried to do a little work to make time pass faster.

And, as always, the minute brush touched canvas, I sank into the work. This landscape was an attempt to capture the very peak of summer outside my window, and the tans and soft greens and golds were difficult to capture in just the way I wanted. The raps on the door jerked me from the moment, and my initial reaction was irritation. One of the reasons I lived here and not in the city was that I hated being interrupted while working.

Then I remembered why someone was at my door. And I crossed my fingers, sending paint splattering onto the canvas sheet covering the floor. Not the painting. Thank heavens.

Whoever he was, I hoped I'd be able to use him at least as a starting point. And if not, I'd at least be courteous. Lots of people wanted to be models, and some local might think he had a shot with this opportunity. Even if he was a skinny kid with bad skin, I would not make him feel bad about himself. Working with models over the years, I'd heard enough stories from the young men I painted about how easy it was to shatter their confidence. Even if this wasn't a pro, he was still a person presenting himself for approval, and he deserved respect for that.

I opened the door, plastering a welcoming smile onto my face. "Good morning. That was quick." My mouth went dry, my gaze focused on the face that had loomed over the city square on one of my trips to the gallery.

Not just the face.

"Good morning. I'm West. You must be Antoine?" He reached out to shake my hand, but I didn't want to get him all dirty.

“I was painting. Let me wash up. I’m not trying to be rude.” Nor did I want to touch him until I got my mind and body under control. In addition to the face, I’d seen the entire body that went with it. Or at least nearly all of it.

He had worn underwear, but kneeling, body facing forward, and face peeking over his shoulder, the thong had hidden virtually none of the rear view. And an ass I’d drooled a little over and even wondered if I could paint. But when I slipped into the booth where I was having lunch with the agency rep, and mentioned it, their laughter had been enough for me to know that the underwear model was well beyond my budget.

And now...here he was in my house, offering to be painted. Why?

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:07 am

West

I knocked on the door to a house that could fit my house in it three times over. The place was open with lots of windows and inside, and I could already see the man I was looking for.

“Good morning. That was quick.”

Not something you want to hear from an omega, but I knew what he meant. It had only taken me minutes to get here from my house. Oliver Creek was getting bigger by the month but everything was still a nice walk away. The smells enticed me. Coffee. Freshly baked bread. Smoked meats.

If only I could afford such luxuries.

“Good morning. I’m West. You must be Antoine?” I stuck my hand out to shake his but instead of returning the gesture, he put his hands up.

“I was painting. Let me wash up. I’m not trying to be rude.”

While he scampered back inside, I drank him in. Lean but not too thin. He wore no shirt under those faded blue-jean overalls, not that I blamed him. It was the peak of summer, and Oliver Creek didn’t escape the sun’s glaring rays, though this spectacular design had to have AC. Not having it would be a crime. His hair was disheveled, and I found the entire getup adorable.

Shutting the door behind me, I gasped seeing the paintings. They were everywhere.

Leaning against each other on the floor with white canvas laid underneath them. On tables. Poised on chairs. Every inch was covered with what I could only assume was his work.

The omega's talent shone through his art.

He'd captured everything from landscapes to beautiful skies and everything in between Earth and the heavens.

"You're amazing," I breathed, in awe of the genius that surrounded me. Antoine stood at the kitchen sink and turned, smiling at me over his shoulder. "Thank you, West." If I wasn't mistaken, a bit of a blush graced his cheeks.

Beautiful man, he was. I had come here in pursuit of changing his mind about the nude part, but now that I'd seen him and inhaled the sweet cinnamon in his scent, I had other ideas. My bear wanted to show off for this omega. Let him observe my body. Approve of it. Desire it.

Hell, I might strip down right here if he wanted a preview.

"Should we talk about the terms of this agreement?" Antoine said, drying his hands on a clean towel and then throwing it over his shoulder like a seasoned chef instead of a painter.

"Sure. Sounds great."

He gestured for me to sit at a large round table that held a few small paintings, paperwork, and a laptop. "West, I honestly didn't expect anyone to answer. Oliver Creek is a small town, and it takes a certain person to pose nude. Everyone is so self-conscious about their bodies these days and sees all their flaws, but as a painter, I see beauty in them all. Obviously, some more than others." That blush again.

My cock punched against the restraint of my jeans.

“I-I’ve modeled before. Not here and never for a painter but for photography.”

Antoine nodded, scrunching his nose. “Would it be weird if I said I recognized you from one of those campaigns?”

My turn to blush. I looked at my feet, shaking my head. “Which one?”

“Some kind of underwear. Honestly, I couldn’t tell you much about the brand or anything else. Here. It looked like this.” He stretched his legs out and put one hand behind his head mimicking the pose from the ad.

“Ah,” I chuckled. “Black thong. Versace men. That was a magazine ad.”

“Yeah, that was it. The magazine was in a healer’s office, and somewhere else?”

“A billboard?” Another chuckle, trying to hide my trepidation. Didn’t know why I was this nervous. He’d seen me before in nothing more than underwear. Of course, so had a lot of other people. Somehow they didn’t matter at all.

Maybe it was because he was so damned alluring. There was something about Antoine. He carried this I am who I am air about him. Self-assured but not in a cocky way. It was damned sexy.

“I haven’t modeled recently. I might be bad at it. Fair warning.”

“I doubt that seriously, West. Here’s what I’m offering.”

He pushed a piece of paper across the wooden table toward me. The sum Antoine was willing to pay was staggering. No way I would ever have expected this job to pay this

much. Not for a sitting in this small town. It was, in fact, more than I'd gotten for any shoot, including the thong that made me famous—or at least part of me. Clearly he was talented, but from this number and the size of this house, the world knew it and had been purchasing his art. I'd had enough in my account not only to make that last payment but to live on while my business got started. This was not that much but enough. It would make it enough.

For this amount, I would serve him breakfast, lunch, and dinner nude for the next two weeks.

“Where do I sign?” I asked.

“Are you serious?” Antoine sat up straighter. “You’re in? I thought this might not be enough considering...well, considering it’s you.”

“Nah.” I shook my head. I wasn’t that man anymore. I was but I wasn’t. “This is perfect. When did you want me to start?” I tried not to sound overly eager. “Is tomorrow too soon?” he asked.

“Tomorrow is perfect.”

I signed the contract, and we shook hands this time. When our skin touched, something electric flowed between us. Antoine cleared his throat and rubbed at the back of his neck, no longer meeting my gaze.

I had to be back at seven in the morning.

Last payment almost done, and I had met one of the most intriguing omegas of my life.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:07 am

Antoine

I managed to focus enough to get some work done after the alpha left. His appearance had given me some ideas for the painting tomorrow, and I wanted to do some loose sketches. The alpha's polar bear was so close to the surface that even in fully human form, I could sense the shadow over him. Although I never hid the fact I was a shifter, it wasn't something I offered randomly, and few of the humans who attended my gallery showing had a clue. At least I didn't think so.

And my art was not shifter oriented in particular. I loved to showcase the flora and fauna of the Oliver Creek area, but I also included at least one person in each collection. Usually, but not always a shifter. The agency dealt with both and sent the "look" I wanted without taking shifter status into account. But I'd ended up with quite a few and never had the desire to include their other side.

Generally, a shifter could look at another and have a good idea what their animal was, but unless you thought you might have friends in common or came from a very insular group, it didn't really matter.

But my fox was every bit as into this polar bear alpha as I was. Maybe more.

I settled at the dining room table with a pad and charcoal pencil, sketching out what I saw in my mind and getting more absorbed by the moment. It was such an obvious idea to include both that I wondered why I'd never used it before. I could have asked any of the shifters I painted to pose as their beast, and most would have agreed. At least, I couldn't see why they would object.

But I'd have to talk to the alpha before I completed the work. Consent had to come not only from him but from his bear. My fox certainly would be annoyed if I assumed he wanted to be captured in oils.

But the picture coming together under my hand was so compelling, I almost didn't hear the alert on my phone reminding me to meet my friend Roy for dinner. He threatened that if I canceled one more time because I was too involved in my work or on a deadline, he'd come over here and drag me out. We had grown up together, Roy going on to work in city hall, which was a small place where everyone knew everything about everyone. An evening out with him was sure to be an entertaining time where he would share all the local gossip in a way only Roy could. Never mean or even unkind, he managed to amuse without harm, and sometimes that was just the thing I needed to get me out of my head and refreshed.

I tightened my grip on the charcoal, but then let it fall on the table and pushed to my feet. I would only be gone a couple of hours, and when I got home, the drawing would be waiting.

Plus, I hadn't had anything to eat all day, I was pretty sure, and my stomach rumbled. I missed a lot of meals when working.

Roy waited for me outside the venue he'd chosen for our meal. Table for Two. The most romantic restaurant in town, and a little more date night than our usual, but not everyone was there for romance, and their food was fantastic. "You showed!" he marveled when I walked up to him. "Wonder of wonders."

"Ha ha. Like I could chance your coming and dragging me all the way here." I sighed. "What choice did I have?"

He laughed and slapped me on the back, his grizzly lending heft to the smack that had me swaying a little. "Oh, sorry." He steadied me. "Let's get in before they give our

table away or make us sit in the section with the dating couples. I don't need to be reminded that I sleep alone in my cold bed."

"Aren't we the cheerful pair tonight. I know...I'll pick up the check. Will that make you smile?"

"You bet. We civil servants can barely keep body and soul together, you know."

"Don't cry poor to me. I know your civil job is only a small part of your income. Wrong person to try that with. I've known you too long." And his gold mining ancestor was one of the few ever to make enough for his descendants to enjoy ancestral wealth. Roy worked because he liked helping people.

We teased each other and laughed while we ordered drinks and then dinner. He, as always, told me funny stories about the people who visited or worked at city hall, and I finally looked at my phone and groaned. "I have to get going."

"Why? Deadline?"

"Yes, now that you mention it, but mostly I have a model coming to the house in the morning. It's the last piece for this showing." I told him how I'd forgotten the centerpiece of the series and how that had indeed put me in a rush situation.

"How did you find a model here? Did you import him from the city?"

"He lives here. Name is West?" Roy knew just about everyone, so his not knowing a famous model had moved in surprised me.

"Oh, is that the West who is going to be opening a shaved ice business? Is he going to do snowballs—that's the one thing this town needs."

“I don’t think so. He isn’t the type to run a dessert place, I don’t think. Not with that body.”

Roy hooted with laughter. “Keep thinking that. The stories I could tell you about some of those guys that hang out at the health food store...” And so he did, and it was another hour and a delicious dessert and coffee later before we parted.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:07 am

West

That afternoon over a bowl of fifteen bean soup—again—I had some hope.

Until my phone alerted me to an email from the company where I had bought my cart. My time on the payment plan was up. I had to get them the last payment within twenty-four hours or not only would I lose the cart but all the money I'd invested so far.

I couldn't lose it. That cart had become the reason I worked. The reason I saved up. The reason I had some hope of making a life of my own apart from Clint.

My stomach dropped when I realized the timing of everything. Antoine would be paying me plenty to cover the cart payment but, per the contract, wouldn't get it until the job was over. That would be too late.

Damn it. Life kept punching me in the face.

I shook my head. No. I wasn't a victim. Not anymore.

Would Antoine be willing to pay me up front? It wasn't standard, but would he understand my situation? He seemed like a kind person, but I knew more than anyone that business was business.

It would be beyond unprofessional to ask for my payment before the work was done, but I had no choice.

I hated the thought.

Not only because of the professional side of it but because this omega meant something to my polar bear. While sweeping the already clean house, I rehearsed all the ways I would explain to him that I needed the money up front. There was the truth approach. Spill everything out and let the pieces fall where they may.

Honestly, that was the only approach I knew about. I even starred the email on my phone in case he didn't believe me and wanted to see proof.

Maybe he would laugh at me. A shaved ice cart was a simple but, to me, profound dream. An omega like him, clearly doing well for himself. He had an amazing career and a beautiful home.

And here I was, an almost-broke alpha, begging for his money.

Talk about emasculating.

Or maybe I was holding onto too many outdated stereotypes.

By the time midnight rolled around, my house was spotless and my body was spent. My mind, however, had other plans.

I showered and lay in my bed as thoughts played roulette. Catastrophizing in the worst ways possible.

That night, I didn't get one lick of sleep. Not one minute.

I got up and forced down a hot cup of coffee before taking yet another shower—this time to wake me up. Maybe the heat of the water would put some blush in my cheeks.

Because other than that, I looked like death warmed over.

Dark crescents hung below my eyes. My skin was dull and lifeless. My eyes were less white around the irises.

Perfect look for posing nude for a gorgeous omega. He'd wonder at my lack of professionalism.

I was up before the sun and paced the house, waiting for the right moment to leave. I put on some jeans and a white T-shirt and slipped flip-flops on my feet. Easy things to get off.

I stood by my front door and leaned my head against it. Going to model brought up more bad memories than good. Sure, I'd met some good, kind people in the business but, more than I wanted to admit, people were mean and out for money above all.

People were commodities to them.

The pressure to be a certain weight.

To have certain muscles be super-defined while eating virtually nothing.

They had to oil my skin on some shoots because I was eating so little fat that my skin was dull and lusterless.

Also, they would've probably oiled my skin anyway.

One look at my condition this morning, and Antoine might not want to paint me at all.

Who could blame him?

When I got in the car, a glance at the dash showed me I'd managed to linger in the bathroom dissing my appearance until I had made myself late.

Perfect.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:07 am

Antoine

I nursed my second cup of coffee, the kitchen clock ticking away the minutes until seven and beyond. I had everything laid out to do the initial sketch in the living room where the light was similar to the dining room but there weren't paintings stacked everywhere. I didn't want my model or myself distracted by a mess.

The contractors drove down the driveway to the back, past the kitchen door, and I picked up the container of muffins and thermal carafe of coffee I had for them and went out back. I made them coffee every morning and had a cooler of water and iced teas for them as well. They were doing a great job and it also gave me an excuse to check up on them. A lot. And they put up with me. The night before, I had been restless and made muffins and cookies.

This morning, they were extra glad to see me when I gave them the coffee and treats. We still had quite a bit to go, but I could see that we were turning the corner. Adding a loft had been a big-time suck, but I could already see how glad I'd be to have it.

"The bathroom is almost done, Antoine," the contractor said. "I think you'll be pleased." He led me in and showed me all the progress, and I told him how great it looked. By the time I headed for the house, it was nearly seven thirty, and I was starting to wonder if the alpha model was going to come at all. Perhaps he had realized that my home studio, the messy imperfect place that it was, was not worthy of his efforts. That underwear campaign he'd been a part of had no doubt been shot at an impressive studio with all the lights and crew that implied.

He had explained he'd moved here and that it had been a while since he'd done any

modeling. And he had never sat for a portrait like this before. If he'd changed his mind, I would not hold him to the contract. But I would like to be informed so I could decide what to do next.

But as I reached the kitchen door, West came around the side of the house from the driveway, looking like pound shit. I mean, it was difficult for anyone as attractive as him to look bad, but whatever he'd been up to the night before, it did not leave him either paint or camera ready.

"I'm so sorry to be late." He met me at the kitchen door. "I knocked, but nobody answered."

"I was out back." I opened the door and waved him inside. "Are you all right?"

"What?" He entered and stopped just inside. "Oh yeah. I apologize again for being late."

"Have you had anything to eat?" His cheeks were pale and his eyes, so vibrantly green yesterday, were dull and shadowed.

"No." He shook his head. "But that's okay. I never eat breakfast."

"Sit down at the table." I was not pleased that he had been tardy and even less so that it looked like the reason was staying up late and overindulging in alcohol or something—didn't models have a reputation for partying? But I thought someone with his background would know better than to do it with work in the morning. "I'm going to make you something." I filled a mug with coffee and pushed the cream and sugar toward him. "Help yourself to a muffin while I scramble some eggs."

"No, really I'm fine. You don't have to go to any...is that cinnamon streusel?"

“Yes. I made them last night. Now, eat.”

While I whipped eggs with cream and set a pat of butter to sizzling in a skillet, I watched him out of the corner of my eye. He was obviously trying not to reveal how hungry he was, but he was halfway through his second muffin by the time I set the plate of eggs in front of him. “Want toast?”

“I don’t eat carbs much.”

“That’s a shame. I eat them way too much.”

He split open and buttered a third muffin and forked eggs into his mouth, apparently not recognizing the carb load of three gigantic muffins. Or maybe he was as out of it as he looked. “They aren’t good for the waistline.”

“Mm-hmm.” I poured a cup of coffee and sat down to fix it.

“Aren’t you going to eat?”

“I had something earlier.” I hadn’t, but the eggs I’d planned for myself would probably be welcomed by him. How long had he been hungry? Years, likely. “You go on. More eggs?”

“Oh, I couldn’t.”

I got up and served him the last of the eggs. When he was done, I refilled his mug and mine and sat down again. “Better?”

“I am, thank you so much. I really don’t eat in the mornings. Not sure what was wrong with me today.”

“Maybe you just like muffins.”

He looked at the plate as if he'd never seen it before. “I ate three?”

“I think so. I'm glad you liked them. But we need to talk.”

His pale cheeks flushed. “Oh right. I wondered if you would mind paying up front? I know the contract said after but...”

I had no idea why he needed it and hoped it wasn't for anything bad. “Zelle okay?”

“That would be wonderful.”

He looked so relieved I was even more worried than before. I completed the transaction on my phone and then set it down and went to get a paper bag that I filled with cookies. Returning to the table, I set the bag between us. “Okay. So take these and go home, get some rest and we'll try again tomorrow.”

“I...didn't you want to work today?”

“I did, but you are not at your best. Tomorrow will be fine.”

West left, and I followed him home at a distance, wanting to make sure he made it safely, but when I got there, I didn't leave right away. I waited to see...well, I didn't know what. But he had needed that money for something, and if a drug dealer showed up, I was going to... Again, I didn't know what, but I'd do something.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:07 am

West

After I sent the money to the company, right on time I might add, a phone call came in from my dad.

He'd never liked Clint.

Not one bit.

"Hey, Dad," I said. I walked out to the porch to sit outside and relax. Since all of this with the cart payment, my body needed a break from the constant stress.

"Hello, Son. I had a feeling you might want to talk about something with me."

My dad Otto had what he called feelings about things. He could always tell when I or my other dad Adam had something on their mind. Even from afar.

He knew his mate was sick even before the doctors did. The morning my dad died, he came to get me from my room before dawn to say my goodbyes.

Sighing, I decided to tell him. "Clint took the last of the money from our shared account. Money that was mine for the last payment on the cart."

"Ah, West. How in the world did he still have access to your money?"

"I forgot he was on the account. It had been years."

A growl ripped through him. He was a protective papa bear if there ever was. My other dad was a deer, and they thought for sure I would be one too. Then I shifted for the first time, proving them wrong. I was a polar bear, just like Otto. “Son, that was...well, it’s in the past now. You have money? What are you going to do?”

If I asked, he would’ve sent me money right away, but I didn’t like to take handouts. Taking money from Antoine before I’d posed already seemed like stealing.

“I got a job, locally. It pays well and all up front.”

“Doing what? What kind of job pays up front?”

I told him all about the job with Antoine. My parents weren’t prudes, and they had seen every one of my modeling gigs because I’d shared them.

“So you’ve made the last payment on the cart?” he asked.

“Yeah. I took care of it right before you called.”

Dad sighed. “Well, then, you go in there and model for him. Make it worth his while. Show him what you’ve got.”

I chuckled. “Dad, there’s...something else. What if I disappoint? What if I don’t do well and earn the money? I mean, he didn’t even ask to see me naked at the job interview.”

“I see,” my dad said. “So you like him. He’s an omega?”

“Yes.”

My dad laughed. “Bear?”

“Smelled like a fox to me.”

We finished up the conversation after my dad gave me the best pep talk ever but even when we hung up, I was plagued by doubts.

What if I froze? What if I got there, in front of that beautiful omega and lost every bit of self-confidence I had left? What if he didn't like the way I looked now? I had gained some weight, not a lot with my tight budget but some.

Couldn't even remember the last time I'd worked out beyond a few push-ups and a run most mornings.

Even more, I didn't want this omega to be disappointed when he saw me naked.

His approval mattered to me. I thought back to Antoine. I smelled no one else in the house other than him.

He didn't mention a mate.

This would be so hard to keep professional. Splayed out, naked before him.

Controlling my cock around him would be a job in itself.

Tonight, I needed to get some sleep. I showered and put on gray pajama pants, no shirt since it was still so hot even now, after dusk. I grabbed a bowl of soup and made a mental list for my trip to the grocery store the next day now that I had a bit extra. I tried not to think about the cookies...

A knock at the door startled me. I pulled it open to see Antoine standing outside under the flickering yellow light of my porch.

“Antoine?” I asked nearly tipping the bowl over and spilling my dinner. “Come on in before I make a mess.”

He laughed and followed me inside. I shut the door and suddenly became acutely aware of my home. All the flaws stuck out like sore thumbs, and I would bet they all got all his attention. My home was simple, and every piece of furnishing was either given to me or bought secondhand.

Nothing like the place he came from.

“Would you like some soup? I can only make about ten recipes, but it’s a mean soup,” I said, happy to offer him what I had but it wasn’t much.

If I could, I would offer him the best of the best, but that was beyond my means at this moment.

“I’ve already eaten, but if you have coffee?”

I nodded. “Of course.”

I made a pot and sat at the table, waiting for it to brew. “What brings you here, Antoine?” I was keenly aware of the fact that I wore no shirt. Goose bumps rose along my arms as the omega’s eyes took me in.

I’d never felt something so intimate and yet, we’d made no physical contact.

“Can I be honest?” he asked.

I cocked my head and forced a smile. “I wouldn’t want anything else from you.”

He gave a curt nod. The coffeepot chuffed and gurgled, signaling it was done, and I

poured him a cup, offering him sugar and creamer. One sugar. Lots of creamer. Noted.

“This morning when you showed up frazzled and, well, looking completely different than you had before, I thought...gods, I can’t even believe what I thought. I’m going to apologize in advance for this, but I thought maybe you had been on a bender the night before or maybe drugs. That, plus asking for the money in advance, well, it added to my wild theory.”

I sat back in my chair. “I can see how you would think that. You don’t know me. I’m sorry I gave that impression. Would you allow me to explain?”

He nodded. “Please do. My hypothesis went directly against the impression I got from you when you came to interview. I’d like to know the truth if you would share with me. I won’t tell a soul.”

Somehow, even if he hadn’t stated it, I knew he wasn’t a tea spiller.

I sighed. “Long story short. My ex took the money I’d saved up to buy the shaved ice cart. We had a shared account, and I forgot his name was on it. I needed the money because the last payment was due today and I had no other way to pay it. I stayed up all night figuring out how I would explain to you that I needed the money and showed up looking haggard after a lost night’s sleep. I’m sorry. All of this is very unprofessional. I should’ve explained the situation to you.”

“No.” Antoine held up his hand, palm out. “I understand why you didn’t. That’s personal, and I had no business prying.”

“You didn’t.” I covered his hand with mine on the table. The instant we touched, power zinged through me.

Antoine moved his hand first. Maybe I was making too much out of this. Perhaps all he wanted was a professional relationship. I hadn't asked, but there was a possibility he already had an alpha.

Gods, I hadn't even asked.

Probably because this wasn't a date. It was a job opportunity.

Mate.

I shook my head. Now wasn't the time for my polar bear to be crying out mate .

"Tell me about this shaved ice truck," Antoine said. "Is it a truck or a cart?"

I chuckled. "It's a truck but sometimes I call it a cart because when I first started to save, I thought all I could afford was a cart. And shaved ice is just what it says. It's ice shaved off of a huge block and then sweet flavored syrup is poured on top. There are variations of it. Snowballs. Snow cones. In the South, they put condensed milk on top and even stuff the snowball with cheesecake. My dads used to take me to a shaved ice cart when I was a kid. Always had fond memories of those times. I hoped to bring some of that happiness to Oliver Creek. Besides, it's hot as balls in the summer. We need an icy treat."

Antoine laughed hard at that. His smile brightened my home and my spirit and so did his laugh.

I hoped he didn't have a mate already because minute by minute, I became more attached to him.

"I think you're right. A treat does sound nice."

He wasn't talking to you, bear, I called out to my animal as he rumbled inside me.

"I'm sorry you had to come here at night. Perhaps I can walk you home?"

Antoine snorted and got up to put his cup in the sink. "Like that? West, you're bound to cause a riot in this small town with no shirt on. I have to go and you need your rest. Tomorrow is a big day for the both of us."

"Will do. Good night, Antoine."

I walked him to the door but before it shut, he looked over his shoulder. The man was so sexy when he did that. "I can't wait to see you naked, alpha."

Shoot! I should have offered him cookies with his coffee.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:07 am

Antoine

So he was the West who was getting up a shaved ice business. I probably should have asked if he was doing snowballs, but Roy would just have to wait and see.

I'd felt like a bit of a stalker when I followed West home, although I told myself that the only reason I had done it was to be sure he made it okay. The beating up a drug dealer thing? Yeah, that would not have happened. I'd have called the authorities and let them handle it. Or come up with another plan. My fox was more of a lover than a fighter and without a single alpha characteristic.

Which made my and his determination to protect this alpha completely out of character. I hadn't had a lot of relationships, and none serious, and my fox had been very disinterested in any of them. But since I opened my door to see those green eyes and the billboard image of his other assets popped into my mind, my animal had been aware, alert, and full of advice.

Unfortunately, the alpha was not interested in us beyond the contract we had between us. And that was fair enough. He did not need harassment from the artist hiring him. That happened all too often, or so I'd heard from the models I worked with in the past.

My fox had never even noticed any of them, and they'd all been hot. Of course, beyond enjoying their aesthetic beauty and the fact that I was privileged to paint their likenesses, I had no interest in them physically either.

I baked again, last night. Scones, this time, drizzled with a maple glaze. He claimed

he never ate carbs, but he enjoyed the muffins so much, I couldn't resist.

The knock came at five to seven, a little early, and I let West in and into the kitchen for breakfast again.

"I shouldn't do this," he protested. "If I eat, I'll have a pooch."

"And if you don't eat, you won't have the stamina to pose all day." I already had an egg casserole in the oven and set it on a trivet next to the scones. "Don't worry about your belly, paint is way more forgiving than the camera, at least in my experience."

He protested again but managed to do justice to the food and finish two cups of coffee and a glass of orange juice before pushing back from the table and patting his tummy. "I hope you're right about the paint because otherwise, you're going to have to title the work Pregnant Alpha in the Nude ."

I laughed, but the idea of one of us being pregnant took root. I'd long ago thought I'd be single forever and therefore never have a child of my own, but I could easily imagine carrying this alpha's babe. Something I needed to push right out of my mind and get down to business. "All right. Let's work."

I'd decided not to use the living room, wanting to get right to the poses I was interested in. I had moved an old chaise that used to be in my dad's bedroom from the attic and set it in the middle of the dining room.

"Now, I know I said paint was more forgiving and so is charcoal, but I am going to start with some photographs. They help me to work when you're on a break or not here. Are you all right with that?"

"Of course. You know I'm used to that anyway."

“Sure.” I got the camera ready. “I could probably just use my phone, since the cameras are so great, but I’ve had this one for a long time.”

“Does it use film?” He tilted his head, trying to get a look.

“No.” I chuckled. “I’m not sure where I’d even get film developed. Or how long it would take. They haven’t had those one-hour places I remember hearing about in a long, long time. If you’d go ahead and get undressed, we can begin.”

He began to take off his clothes, but he looked a little unsteady, shaking? “West, is something wrong? You were an underwear model...did you not want to do this?”

“I do want to do this, but that time in my life was traumatic, for many reasons, and I never planned to do it again.”

“Then you don’t have to.”

“You paid me, and—”

I strode right up and looked him in the eye. “Forget the money. I don’t want you to feel like you have to do anything you don’t want to do. Model fully dressed or not at all, okay? It’s only money and not worth your being shot right back into a time when you did not feel good about yourself.”

And then something changed. His eyes softened and a soft smile lifted the corners of his lips. “I want to do this. Not because you paid me, although fair is fair and I’d have to pay you back if I didn’t, but because you are making it my choice. Now, where should I be?”

Once he was naked and lounging on the chaise, I asked him about the bear being in the picture, and he blinked. “You haven’t seen my bear.”

“No, but I can sense him there, almost see him. Would you ask him if he would mind?”

“He really likes you. It won’t be a problem.” He laughed.

“Will you ask him anyway? Just so he knows I’m respectful of him?”

“Now he likes you even more. It’s a big yes.”

My only problem now would be controlling my reaction to him. He was not my first nude, but he was the first one who made it hard to concentrate.

West

I scooted off the velvet chaise lounge where Antoine had me pose. He'd placed my hands and legs in a way that had all of me bared to him. All of me. My head was turned to him, enabling me to watch him at work.

I also watched the omega struggle for control as he started.

He even broke one charcoal he had gripped it so tightly.

After a while, Antoine relaxed. His strokes became more fluid as I interpreted from this side of the canvas. His eyebrows didn't pinch so severely. Shoulders relaxed. His stance loosened. Hours later, he had told me we were done for the day.

"Can I see?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Not until it's done."

I pouted my lips but stood and reached for my pants. For the last hour, I'd had a hard-on and while I knew he had noticed since I was the center of his musings, I cringed hoping he didn't think I was a creeper.

I totally was.

Antoine was hot and even more when he was engrossed in his craft. My polar bear wanted nothing with the posing and everything with the omega standing across the room from me.

Gods, I wanted him.

I had to finagle my rock-hard dick into my pants and then pulled on a button-down that I'd worn for easy removal.

Reaching for the bottom button on my shirt, I raised my gaze to see Antoine staring at me. "Were you not done?" I asked. "Should I..." I paused my motions of buttoning up.

"I'm done for now, alpha. Tomorrow fine with you?"

I nodded.

He'd called me that the night before. I chalked it up to an accident. I was an alpha but generally people didn't call each other that unless they were mates or intimate.

"Why are you staring at me, omega?" I called him on the alpha thing with a call of my own.

"Because I want you."

"Then come and get me."

Antoine crossed the distance between us, and I bent slightly to make sure our mouths met in sync. His lips were soft and full, and our kiss evolved from a sweet peck to a delicious, lusty one quickly. His hands slid to my sides, moving under the shirt and to my back. He tugged me closer, and I obliged. Hell, I would oblige this omega anything if he kept on kissing me.

I pulled back for air. Our heavy breaths mingled. Our torsos were pressed together. "Should I apologize?" I said but kept my arms around him, not willing to let him go.

“I’m the one who made this unprofessional and now that I’ve had a taste of you, there’s no way I’m going back.”

I leaned down to taste his lips once more. “Do you want me to go home?”

“Fuck no,” he whispered. “I want you to come with me to the bedroom.”

Another kiss, this one long and languid. “Show me the way.”

With our fingers tangled, he led me down the hallway and into the nicest master bedroom I’d ever seen. Not that I’d been in a lot of fancy decorated rooms, but this one was all dark wood and cream bedding and elegance. Antoine tore off his shirt and bit his bottom lip. “Don’t make me wait, alpha.”

I reached for his belt and tugged him toward me with no gentleness. He gasped but, as I licked a trail up the side of his neck, he whimpered my name. “Take off your clothes and lie on the bed, omega.” I poured some of my alpha power into the command.

“Come with me,” Antoine said.

“Oh no, it’s your turn. On the bed. Let me see all of you.”

He groaned but did as he was told.

“On your back,” I said. “Legs spread.”

He did as I asked but looked at the ceiling instead of me.

I crawled over his form, taking him in. “Look at me, Antoine.” He moved slightly, dipping his chin to look at me. “What’s wrong?”

“I...this...I’ve never done this.”

“Had sex?” I asked as though he’d slapped me. No way I was taking his virginity like this. He deserved to be swept off his feet for his first time. He deserved to be taken slowly. Methodically.

“Of course I’ve had sex. I meant this. Other lovers have...it was dark.”

I sighed. What a shame. His lovers hadn’t worshiped him in the daylight as they should’ve. He was painting my image on a canvas, but Antoine was carved from the gods themselves. Someone should seriously make a sculpture of the perfection in front of me. “You are stunning, and it’s a shame others wanted to keep you in the dark. You deserve a spotlight, omega. Just like your paintings.”

He blushed from head to toe while I took in all his planes and valleys. I slid off the bed and took off my clothes, my eyes never leaving his form. His cock bobbed as I reached for my own erection, stroking myself at the sight of him. “You are the sexiest alpha I’ve ever seen.”

“Mmm...spread your legs. Let me see how ready, how slick you are for me.”

He moved his legs, but barely.

“Here, let me help you.”

I pushed his feet up so that his legs were bent. I placed my hands on his knees and moved them apart. His channel glistened with slick as his cock jumped, begging for my attention.

Yeah, he was ready for me.

When I looked back to his face, his eyes were on my cock as I continued to pump myself. “What do you want first, omega? You want your cock sucked, or would you like me inside you first?”

“Get inside me, please.”

“Such a demanding omega,” I said.

Antoine bucked his hips. “Please, West.”

I scooted up so that the throbbing head of my cock was at his slick entrance. He reached for his own erection but I pushed his hand away. “That’s mine. Put your hands above your head.”

He obeyed with his bottom lip pouting out. “Please.”

I pushed my length inside his tight channel, almost coming at the way he squeezed me. I rocked my hips, leaning back on my knees while I wrapped my hand around his cock. “Is this what you needed, Antoine? Tell me what else you need.”

“All of you. You’re holding back, West.”

I was. I was no small man in any way. “You think you can handle it?” I asked, teasing.

“Yes, alpha. Give it all to me.”

I slammed all the way inside him over and over while working his dick up and down. He was so beautiful writhing with me.

“Look at me when you come, omega.”

His green eyes bore into me as he cried out my name at the peak of his orgasm. Ribbons of cum spurted out over his belly while I spilled my seed inside him. “If I don’t stop now, I’m going to knot you, omega. Do you want that? Do you want my knot, Antoine?”

“Yes. Knot me, alpha!” he yelled, lifting his hips.

Two more pumps into his ass and I came again, this time as my knot swelled inside him, filling up his channel. This time, I let him jack himself off while my knot locked us together in sweet, swollen pairing.

Antoine

The next morning, I woke tucked in the alpha's arms. Little spoon to his big spoon and morning wood tucked in my crack. I lay still, not wanting to wake him, but his hand gliding down to fist my cock told me that was not an issue.

"Are you sore, omega?" he murmured, breath warm on my neck. "I neglected something important last night."

"I don't think you neglected any part of me." Yes, I was sore, although I wouldn't admit it. And I hoped I knew what he referred to.

"Right here." He scraped a tooth along the sensitive skin below my ear. "It's naked."

I shivered. "Yes, I guess it is. What do you propose to do about it?"

"This." He scraped his teeth over the spot while giving my cock a squeeze. "And this."

"Don't you have to be knotted in me to mark?" I asked.

"Not that I've ever heard, but if that is an invitation, don't mind if I do."

I was so slick he had no trouble driving straight inside me. I stretched to accommodate him, breathing hard, my attention split between where he jerked me, where he impaled me, and where he licked my neck in preparation for the marking I wanted so much. It was moving fast, but that was right. My fox recognized him the

moment he appeared at my door. And his strokes inside my body drove me quickly toward completion. It seemed all this man had to do was touch me and my balls tightened in anticipation.

He looped his free arm under my leg and brought it higher, opening me to deeper penetration, and that was more than I could handle without spilling all over his hand, sobbing his name.

“Mate.” He released my cock and pulled me tighter against him, pouring his cum into me and piercing the side of my throat.

I sagged into him, bound by his knot and the mark. “I could stay in bed like this all day.”

“Mmm. Don’t you need to work on the painting...oh no!”

His knot subsided, and I rolled to face him. “What’s wrong?”

“The truck is being delivered at eight. What time is it?”

I leaned past him to see the clock on the nightstand. “After seven.”

“Shoot.” He sat up and then leaned down to kiss me. “I’m sorry, omega mine, but I have to be there for the delivery. And I have you to thank for it. If you hadn’t helped me out by paying me in advance, I might have lost it.” He kissed me again and started for the bathroom.

“Can I come along?” I didn’t know if he wanted company for this serious but exciting moment in his life.

“There’s nothing I’d like more.”

We got dressed and hopped into my car for the drive to his home where the delivery was going to be made. He was so nervous, I felt I should be the one behind the wheel. “Tell me about the truck,” I asked to get him talking. “Did you design the outside?”

“It’s a wrap,” he said. “And the company had someone work with me to design it.”

“That sounds interesting.”

He told me all about the process and as an artist, although I didn’t work much with graphics, I found it fascinating. Colors and fonts and general style notes. “And I wanted it bright but not so bright that it would be garish, you know?”

He’d gone with the Hawaiian theme, tropical greenery and hibiscus flowers, and it sounded amazing. “I can’t wait to see it.”

It didn’t take long to get there, even with a quick stop for a to-go coffee and sausage, egg, and cheese croissant. West insisted he wasn’t hungry, but I noticed he managed to do justice to the sandwich. The other models I’d worked with had mentioned how careful they had to be with their diet, but I was starting to think he’d been under a whole other level of pressure. Shifters had a lot of leeway in terms of physical fitness, and that was also something those other models told me. Shifter metabolism made their lives a whole lot easier.

But West spoke as if he hadn’t had a slice of bread through his entire career and hadn’t really gone back to more normal eating yet. I loved watching him eat but hated thinking of how long he hadn’t done enough of it.

We arrived at his house at the same time as the delivery, but as I turned to comment as much, West jerked upright in the seat, the remains of his sandwich crumbling to the floorboards.

West

“Hello, West. I’ve missed you.”

My heart sank. I’d had an amazing night with my omega. The most amazing and loving sex this morning. I climbed out of the car to face my past.

My body shuddered in response to his voice.

And now Clint had soured the day with his presence. I bet that wasn’t all he was going to grace us with either. He had that look on his face. As a former people-pleaser, I could already tell that he had something on his mind.

“Why are you here, Clint?” I asked, noticing that he was leaned on my truck with one hip. Cocky son of a bitch. Always was. His arms were crossed over his chest, and he smiled.

His eyes ticked to Antoine. “I didn’t realize you were bringing a friend.”

I ignored his dig. Feeding it would only bring more words from him, and I had a feeling none of them would be nice. They never were when he wore that smile.

“I’m going to ask you again, Clint. Why are you here?”

“Oooh, the cub has grown some balls, I see. You’ve also gained some weight around the tummy. Off your strict diet, or did you eat from the emotional pain of leaving someone like me.”

Maybe I did, a little, but it wasn't because of the pain. It was from the utter regret of staying with him so damned long.

“Why do you care? I'm not yours. We aren't together and haven't been for a while.”

Clint shrugged. “I told you. I miss you.”

That was the second time he'd said it. I didn't believe it and, even if I did, I didn't give a shit. I had a beautiful omega now. One who would never degrade me or try to control me. One who was growing to love me for who I was, not who they wanted me to be.

He didn't miss me. He missed pushing me around, emotionally and physically. Makeup designers had to cover up bruises on a few occasions.

“Well, I'm taken. And even if I wasn't, you and I are over. There is a reason I asked you never to contact me again.”

I had. I had texted and sent an email. I wanted no contact with him. He was the kind of person who would twist and tangle a hello and have me back in his grasp in minutes.

“Aww, you didn't mean that, did you? After all we've been through? You said you loved me.”

Antoine, who had my hand in his, tensed slightly. “I did. That was a mistake. I confused infatuation and codependency for love.”

He ignored my response and shrugged one shoulder, pushing off my cart. “I'm sorry about the money. I needed it for something important.”

“I don’t care. I closed the account. It was a mistake to trust that you wouldn’t steal from me. I learned my lesson and a lot more from you, Clint.”

“Does he tell you he loves you too, little fox?” Clint turned his attention on Antoine.

I tried to step in front of my newly mated omega, but he stepped up first. “Do you have some kind of investment in this truck?”

Clint kicked at the tow attachment. “This piece of shit? He’ll be lucky if he can pay the rent with his snowball money. Kids selling lemonade from a cardboard box probably make more than West will.”

“In that case,” Antoine said. I’d never heard his forceful tone but, as he talked to Clint, it kind of turned me on. Gods, he was especially adorable when he was mad. “Why don’t you go back to wherever you came from and leave him alone?”

“Oh, having your little fox fight your battles. Pathetic alpha. You always were.”

There was a time when those words would’ve stung but, today, with my omega by my side, my brilliant, talented, genius of an omega here with me, there was nothing that could spoil my day. And I wasn’t letting this asshole say anything more.

“Come on,” I said and brought Antoine to the truck. I was excited to show my mate my truck. I’d worked hard to save for it and he had been a big part of me getting it. I showed him the machinery that came with the truck and he pulled out his phone. Before I knew it, we were in a full-blown planning session discussing flavors and toppings. My omega was as curious about the condensed milk as was I.

“You’re sure you won’t change your mind, West? This is what you want?” Clint’s voice plucked my strings and not in a good way. His voice that I once loved now sounded like an out-of-tune fiddle.

“He’s sure.” Antoine whirled on him with his hands on his hips.

“Just leave already, Clint,” I said. “I don’t want you anymore. I don’t love you and I never really did. I don’t miss you. If I never see you again in this lifetime, it will be too soon. Just go.”

Clint flipped us both off, but he gave us a gift. He left.

“Thank you for standing up for me, omega,” I said, pulling Antoine in for a hug. “No one has ever stood up for me before.”

“You’re welcome. He was giving me the creeps. One day you’ll have to explain how you put up with that for so long. In the meantime...have you heard of the flavor Island Dream?” He showed me his phone. “Passionfruit. Pineapple. And guava.”

“You know what?” I said, kissing his temple. “I’m gonna find your favorite flavor and name it after you.”

“The Antoine sounds nice. Oh, apple!”

Who knew the omega got so excited over shaved ice flavors? Not this guy.

Antoine

I liked shaved ice the few times I had it but until Roy mentioned it, I had never heard of a snowball. I thought about this while working on a surprise for West's grand opening. Food trucks often had those sandwich board signs—I thought they were called that anyway—set on the sidewalk or somewhere near the order window. I had snooped around enough when the truck was delivered to be pretty sure there wasn't one, and since I had been trying to come up with a gift for his first day, this seemed like a good idea.

At least I hoped so. Strolling around the park, where many trucks were parked, I looked over their signs in hopes of finding inspiration. Frankly, most of them were just boring with hours and maybe a few of their items listed. I went home and went to work sketching out what I had in mind. West would be opening shortly, so I didn't have time to take weeks to mull over what I might be doing. No, this was going to be a one-day project, few hours really. With that in mind, I tossed the sketch, slapped a coat of primer on the board I was going to use, and spent the time it dried wrapping some of my finished works for shipping.

Then I looked up pictures of shaved ice, of snowballs, snow cones, and anything else similar and ended up so totally confused by the differences and similarities, I decided not to paint one of them. Instead, I went another way. His truck had that whole Polynesian/tropical feel, and so should the sign.

Hauling the board outside, I found one of the workers in the backyard and asked them if they had a jigsaw.

A few hours later, I tucked the barely dry sign in the back of the car and headed for West's home where the truck was currently parked in the driveway. I still found it interesting that he chose to do something like shaved ice when he had been denied sweetness both in food and in life for so long. The truck was a vivid reminder to all the neighbors that soon there would be a whole new treat to be enjoyed in Oliver Creek.

When I parked in front, West came down the steps of his trailer, wrapped in an apron splattered with all the colors of the rainbow.

"Hey, omega." He came in to give me a sticky kiss. "I've been practicing my recipes and trying out some new combos."

"And taste testing if your kisses offer any indication." I licked my lips. "Guava dragon fruit?"

"You're good." He reached for my hand to pull me toward the truck. "Come and give me your opinions."

"I will, but first I've got something in the car." I turned to open the back. "I hope you like it."

"A gift for me?" He wiped his sticky hands on his apron. "Let me see."

I pulled out the sign I'd painted for him, and he went still. Instead of painting one kind of snow cone/ball or other icy treat, I'd painted them all but in a muted way that hopefully wouldn't have people asking for something he didn't make. "It's for your grand opening."

"How did you get a sign in the shape of a palm tree?"

I chuckled. “I have a crew working in the back, remember? They have tools, and once, I took a woodworking class where we used a jigsaw. So I borrowed one. Do you like it?”

“Like it? I love it!” He took it from me and carried it up to stand it next to the truck. “It even stays up.”

“That was the idea.” I followed him inside, and he made me a snowball in some combination of flavors I never guessed but absolutely loved. “So good.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re the best.” West touched a countertop and winced. “Really sticky. I need to get this thing cleaned up so I don’t draw every ant in Oliver Creek.”

“How about we clean up?” I wanted him to know if he had something to do, we had something to do. And not because I had to but because I wanted to. “And I thought maybe we could do dinner tomorrow if you’re free?”

His smile faded, and I could almost read his mind. An alpha was always raised to pick up the tab, to be responsible, and it had to be hard for him to feel like he didn’t have any extra money for things like restaurant meals right now. Before he could say anything, I continued, “Because I have some chicken we can put on the grill at my house?”

West

I thought of myself as a modern man. A believer in equality and respect for all.

But here I was, stressing over roles of omegas and alphas like a fool. Still, my bear demanded I be the alpha of this relationship in all ways. Providing for Antoine. Protecting him. Making all his needs priority in our life.

I got home from setting up the truck and took a long shower. Antoine had seen all of me, and this was a casual date, but I still wanted to present myself well to him. I craved his smile, his happiness.

After showering and getting dressed in some dark jeans and a light-gray button-down shirt, I made my way to the kitchen, remembering all the flavors that had piqued his interest as we searched for options.

He seemed very interested in the tropical flavors.

I pulled out the flour and other ingredients to make a simple homemade cake. My fathers had taught me to never go to a person's home for a visit without something to offer, even if it was small. In minutes, I whipped up a vanilla cake and used some guava jam as the filling between the two layers. There was just enough cream cheese in the fridge for me to create an icing, along with powdered sugar and milk.

At least, I had this to offer.

I knocked on his door, and he gushed over my offering. He put his finger into the

frosting and licked it off. “What?” he asked.

“Keep that up and we’ll be having dessert before dinner.”

Antoine cooked some lemon-pepper baked chicken and a tomato, cucumber salad. Perfect for a summer night. And at this point, anything that wasn’t bean soup or eggs and toast was gourmet to me.

“Tell me about your family,” I said as we dug into the food.

“My dads were incredible.” A smile I hadn’t seen before graced his face. “They encouraged me in everything I did, even when there were some who told me there was no money or future in art. That I would end up with art as my hobby, along with a real job. They turned that little shed in the back into a studio for me soon after I showed them my first painting. The teacher said I had natural talent.”

“You do have a great talent, Antoine. Truly. So, this is the house you grew up in? I hadn’t realized that.”

He nodded. “When my dads retired, they had been dreaming of moving to Key West. Spending their later years in the sun and they both love the ocean.”

“So they gave you this house?” I asked.

“No,” he laughed. “By the time they decided to retire, they put this house up for sale and I had my first big gallery showing. It sold out, and I used most of the money to buy this house. It felt wrong to see strangers living in it. Plus, after spending most of my teenaged years dreaming of getting out of this small town, all I wanted to do was to be here.”

“Happens to the best of us. I thought I wanted the life of a model. Traveling. Living

in big cities. Always on the go. But at the end of the day, none of the beds were comfortable. The food didn't hit right. I wanted a home base."

"That's why you bought the house here."

I nodded. "Oliver Creek feels like home. Plus, all the up-and-coming food trucks and restaurants, I saw my out from the bustle of my career."

"And your parents?" he asked.

"My dad Otto is alive and well. My other dad, Adam...well, we lost him to cancer. It wrecked both of us." So rare among shifters, it caught us completely off guard

"I'm so sorry." My omega got up and came over, sat in my lap, and wrapped his arms around my neck. "How long ago?"

"Five years. It was right before I met Clint."

Huh. I never realized that choosing Clint might've been because I was in a bad place. He had showered me with gifts and affection in the beginning, though we spent most of our time in the bedroom.

Strange the way I discovered things about myself at the most precarious times.

"You were vulnerable. He took advantage of that."

I made a grunting sound. He was right. I reveled in holding Antoine in my arms, letting some of the pain go. He nuzzled my neck, making my bear rumble low and slow.

"How about you strip for me, and I can paint you tonight."

“But we have cake,” I countered.

“Cake can wait, alpha. I want you naked.”

‘Yeah. Sure,’ I agreed but as he got off my lap, I couldn’t help but feel that once again, I might’ve stepped into a relationship with someone who only wanted me for my body.

Gods, I hoped not because I was head over heels in love with Antoine.

Would he leave me once this commission was over?

Was this part of his process? Sleeping with me and dating me? Was that part of this process for making the art feel real?

A thousand ifs ran through my mind as I took off my clothes, but I knew I had to complete this.

My future depended on it.

Antoine

The painting took longer than expected because I had to paint not only West but his bear. It was an entirely new experience and one I didn't expect to share with another model. Since I could feel the bear and almost see him in human form, that was what I wanted to share with anyone who came to the gallery and whoever eventually bought it.

And wasn't that the problem. As the polar bear reared up in my dining room and I added the shadow form I envisioned, I realized that this work would never be able to be sold. It was too intimate to part with. I did not have time to paint a second canvas before the showing, but I could do something I'd never seen before. The work would go to the gallery, but it would be marked artist's private collection; not for sale. Of course, that sort of notice only made something more desirable, and I would have to let the gallery know that no amount of money would change my decision.

The bear was magnificent, looming over the chair my alpha had posed on, as gorgeous in his way as West was in his. I used all the whites and grays and even reds and browns to bring in all the hues I picked up in his fur, painting the individual hairs then blurring them to create the effect I actually saw.

Hours later, exhausted, I slumped into a chair. "You can shift back anytime. I got what I need, and the rest I can do on my own."

But instead of the shift I expected, the bear dropped on all fours and padded over to me. Liquid eyes looked at me, wanting something... It couldn't be food. Animals generally hunted if they wanted something, although maybe a bear would like some

honey or something?

“Are you hungry?”

He bumped me with his nose, but I didn’t think that was a yes.

“What do you want?”

Run with mate.

That was not the bear but my fox. “Oh. Of course.” The bear was out but had been standing around all this time, and of course he wanted to run. My exhaustion lifted at the idea of it, and I was gladder than ever not to live in the middle of town. Behind my house were acres of woods where we could let our animals out and play.

Energized, I led the way out into the backyard then stripped down and shifted. I’d almost done it inside then remembered my fox wasn’t great at opening doors and the bear would probably have to just knock it down.

I held still while the bear circled us, sniffing and rumbling and nuzzling. When he’d finished, I darted out of the yard and toward the trees, followed by the polar bear. I had never run into a human back here, but wouldn’t they be surprised to see the big white animal running along the pathways.

Most would think he was faster than me, but a fox, or at least this fox, could run and maintain a higher rate than any bear I’d ever heard of. But it was close enough that we could race side by side and have a great time. The animals were thrilled to be together, and their joy spilled over until, when we got back to the house and shifted back, we fell into one another’s arms, laughing.

“That was amazing,” West said. “Although not as amazing as my bear being willing

to pose for all those hours. Patience is not one of his best characteristics.”

I stepped into my shorts and led the way back inside, holding the rest of my clothes. His were in the dining room where he’d undressed. “My fox enjoyed it so much. He is completely enchanted with your bear and insists we do that again soon.”

West set down his shirt and came over to gather me to him. “Every time we’re together is better than the time before. Can I see the painting now?” I hadn’t showed it to him yet, wanting him to see it finished. “I’ve never seen my bear.”

My heart squeezed. “Not even in a mirror?”

“He doesn’t fit in the bathroom very well.”

“Then of course. I actually saw my fox in a photo once. It was really special to me. Maybe we could get someone to take a picture of our animals together?”

He turned away from the canvas. “Is that how we look?”

“Well, pretty much. You can see it’s kind of shadowy because I wanted to show how I experience him with you even in this form.”

“Wow.” He turned back to the painting. “I’ve seen enough photos of my human form to know this is a special interpretation of my human form as well.” He held up a hand when I moved to protest. “Oh, it’s the right arms and legs and everything else, but there’s a glow I’ve never seen before.”

“I paint what I see.”

“You’re so talented.”

The moment seemed right to ask him something important... “West, why don’t you just move in? We’re together most of the time, and I miss you when we’re not.”

From his startled stare, he hadn’t seen it coming.

“It’s just a suggestion,” I said. “How we are now is good too.”

“As the alpha, I should be offering you my home, but it’s just a house I bought recently. This place has history for you, your studio is almost done, and I would be honored to move in, if you’re sure you want me to.”

“Want to come to our bedroom and see if you need any changes, then?” I took his hand and tugged him away from the dining room.

“No changes I...oh.” He followed me, grinning. “I’ll be glad to inspect.”

West

On Mondays, I didn't open the truck but, even though it technically was a day off, it really wasn't. There were no days off when you worked for yourself, I had discovered.

I drove to the city and bought new supplies. New flavors to try out and some different cups and straws. Antoine had opted to stay home. His stomach had been upset lately off and on. We chalked it up to too many shaved ice cups. Completely my fault for making him try every new flavor combination and then some.

It was a lot of sugar.

I got everything I could for the next day, minus the ice. I had it delivered every other day and bought a huge freezer courtesy of the money from selling my house. But business had been good and I could see myself actually being able to help provide for us.

We worked as a team, Antoine and I. We'd thrown out the roles of alpha and omega, except, of course for the bedroom roles. He worked so hard day in and day out to the point where sometimes I had to remind him to get sleep or eat.

Especially lately with the upset tummy business. Even his scent had changed a bit.

I put all the supplies into the garage and walked inside, ready to see my mate. He was especially gorgeous when he painted. He had been working on a piece that required the morning light streaming through the dining room and so, when I walked into our

home and saw him standing there in the sunshine, wearing only a shirt and underwear, I felt like I was in heaven and he was my angel.

“Good morning,” I said. Sometimes I got a greeting from him; other times I didn’t. My mate didn’t have a rude bone in his body, but there were times he was so engrossed that the world around him, including me, simply ceased to exist. It was one of the many things that I loved about him, his passion for his work.

Instead of a greeting, he put his paintbrushes down, always more than one in his hand, and groaned.

“What is it?” I asked, rushing over only to be shoved out of the way. He ran to the bathroom and, soon after, I heard the sounds of heaving.

He had been doing that too much lately.

The smell of every food on the planet with the exception of my snowballs made him sick. He was going to sleep earlier and waking up later.

Wait a damned minute.

Stomach. Sleepy. Food aversions. Scent change.

“Antoine?” I called out and stepped into the bathroom. I grabbed a washcloth, ran some hot water over it, and soaked another one with cool. My poor omega. Suffering through this...this morning sickness.

“I didn’t even eat this morning. No coffee. Nothing.” His chin quivered. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me. Did I mention that I hate being sick?”

I nodded and flushed the toilet and closed the lid, helping him to sit on top of it.

“Here you go.” I handed him the cloth for his face while placing the other one on the back of his neck. “And yes, you mentioned that once or twice.”

“Maybe it’s time we go to the healer. I need to finish my paintings and I can’t when I’m running here to throw up every five minutes.”

My mate was hurting and in turn, I was hurting with him. What pained him pained me.

“I think I know what might be happening to you, Antoine,” I said, speaking as gently as I could.

“What is it? Food poisoning? I thought of that, but we always cook at home, and you keep the kitchen spotless. There’s no way. There is something else I thought of…”

Before he spiraled any more, I put my hand up. “I think you might be pregnant, my love.”

He stopped talking immediately and sat up. “Do you, do you think so?”

“Think about your symptoms, Antoine.”

He gave me a faint smile. “I actually already did. And then I promptly put it out of my mind. But, the other day, I bought something just in case. I didn’t want to do it alone.”

He opened the drawer in the cabinet and pulled out pregnancy tests. Three of them.

“You never have to do anything alone. Especially this,” I said. We read the instructions together, and I stayed in the bathroom while he took the test and then hopped in the shower. He thought the cool water might help him.

As he got out, the timer went off, alerting us that the test was ready.

“Read it, alpha. Read it for me, please.”

I picked up the stick and saw two lines. I conferred with the instructions and then turned to my mate. “It’s positive, Antoine. You’re pregnant.”

He let a huge breath whoosh from his mouth. “We didn’t talk about this. I mean, we said we were going to have kids eventually but I didn’t know it would be this soon. I’m sorry.”

“What?” I raised my voice and reached for him, pulling him into my embrace. “Why in the world are you sorry? Our love did this. Our love created this little one in your belly. I’m so damned happy right now. Aren’t you? It’s not the best timing, but these things rarely are.”

“I am,” he said and dropped the towel. He put his hands on his belly. “Our babe is in there.”

“They are,” I replied and kissed his temple and then his lips. He’d brushed his teeth in the shower which I once thought was silly, but he did it to save time. “We still need to go to the healer and see about these symptoms though. There has to be something we can do.”

I put my hands over his, knowing that we created something together out of love and it was growing inside him. There was no limit to my joy.

“I’ll call Quinn the healer now. He’s in town.”

“Good,” I said. “And after that, I’m celebrating this body and you.”

Antoine

We traveled to the city for the gallery opening. It was part of my agreement with them, and it would be our first weekend away as a couple, making the duty much less onerous than usual. With everything happening so fast since the day we met, we hadn't even had much time for doing things like going out to dinner. While we were gone, Roy, West's best customer, was going to run the truck. He was beyond excited and glad to do it for all the ice he could eat.

Unlike humans who dated first and then moved in together—at least, so I had observed—shifters who met their fateds were likely to jump right into life under one roof and date in the honeymoon phase. But between getting everything done for the showing and the opening of West's new shaved ice truck, we were busy. Helping and supporting one another, getting West's house on the market and sold, keeping an eye on the construction in the backyard, starting my next series... And whenever we were alone together, passion took over.

"This is the hotel?" West stood on the sidewalk, head tilted back. "And the gallery is paying for it?"

"They make enough money from me to be able to afford it," I said. "Did I tell you that most of the paintings sold at the sneak peek a week ago?"

"No, but that's great. So, why are we here?"

"To build interest in the next one and meet some of our patrons." I led the way inside, towing my wheeled bag. "It will be fine, but if you'd rather not go, you can stay here

and not have to deal with the crowds.”

“No, it’s all good.” West waved away my concerns. “As long as you feel well.”

“I’m great.” A bit keyed up. But that was normal pregnancy or no pregnancy. “And very happy to get to introduce my mate to the people at the gallery.”

The hotel was one of the nicer buildings near our destination, and West and I had a few hours to relax before we had to meet the gallery owners for dinner. We spent it lounging in the big bathtub and enjoying a long nap, something I had never done in my life before this little baby took up residence.

Our evening was great, and I enjoyed watching West interact with the gallery owners as they asked him all about the foodie scene in Oliver Creek. They’d been swearing they’d come to visit soon and when he invited them to stay at our home, they were glad to accept. After a dinner of tapas and margaritas—virgin for me, although the healer said I could have the occasional drink—we went off on our own to tour the city and enjoy all the lights in a horse-drawn carriage. I’d seen couples in them for years and was always secretly envious of them. Sitting with my mate’s arm around my shoulders tonight, I wished all those who did not have a mate like mine to find someone special just for them because this was the most romantic thing I’d ever done.

I had meetings most of the next day, and West did a little exploring on his own, but we met up after lunch for another “nap,” this one with very little sleeping involved, although it would have been a good idea to rest up for the big evening ahead.

When we arrived at the gallery, it was to find a line outside.

“Wow. That’s new.” I’d done well here, but never drawn this kind of a crowd. “Maybe they have another artist featured in the little room.” There was a secondary,

much smaller showroom in the building, although I'd never seen it used.

We slipped through the crowd to the door and knocked on the glass. Randy, one of the owners, opened and let us in then locked it securely behind us.

"This is wild." He poured us each a sparkling water. "And they are all here for one thing."

I became uneasy. Most everything was already sold. Everything, in fact, except...
"What one thing is that?"

"Now, I know you said you didn't want to sell Shadow Bear, but the bidding has gone through the roof." Sandra, the other owner joined us. "It's huge."

"And I told you the painting is just for display as part of the show. It's going home with us."

"You're not selling it?" West looked confused. "But wasn't that why you painted it?"

"Originally, yes, but once it was completed, I couldn't."

West smiled at me. "How much money are we talking?"

Throughout the evening, the owners kept coming to us with the numbers in the auction that they hadn't even started. It was spontaneously happening on the website in some way I couldn't understand. But by midnight, it was so high, West and I had a little conference and decided that for the good of our family, we could not say no. It would create a beautiful nest egg for our children.

Everyone was so nice, many people expressing regret that they hadn't been able to purchase one of the others, but I assured them that the next series was well under way

and hoped they would enjoy them as well. We had delightful wine and delicious apps and then it was time to go back to the hotel for our last night in the city.

As I lay in the room, wide eyes staring up at the ceiling, West reached over to stroke my arm. “You can paint another one, you know.”

“Not the same.”

“No, but I’m sure it will be even better. You made the hard call for our family’s security, and I couldn’t love you more.”

West

I knew that as the newest, shiny offering in Oliver Creek that my shaved ice truck would be popular but I had no idea how popular.

The daycare center brought over their whole preschool class today and, after they left, a group of swimming instructors brought their kids over fresh from their lessons.

Those were in addition to the regulars. It was a blazing summer, and everyone needed an icy treat.

I closed around eight and made one last large shaved ice before I left. It was a new blackberry-mint flavor and while none of the kids ordered it, several of the adults had. One couple came back for second ones.

Also, I thought the mint might soothe my omega's tummy. He had gotten over the morning sickness issue but, now that he was about six months along, everything was now giving him a bit of heartburn. Especially dairy.

Didn't stop him from eating but he fussed a bit at night.

While I made the short walk to our home, I passed my old one. A new family had moved in. They had a little one, and the omega looked to be expecting a second any day now.

I was glad that it would make a home for a family.

The painting of me garnered enough money for us to never work again, but I loved my shaved ice truck. Seeing the happiness a little ice and flavoring brought to the local children. Experimenting with flavors. Even when it got busy, I reveled in the hustle and bustle of it.

Antoine didn't have to work another day either but he loved his art so much, and his talent should never be squandered. His painting deserved to be seen by the world. And now he could paint at his leisure.

Still, he got engrossed in certain ones, and I bet he had no idea how much it turned me on to see him so enthralled in his art.

I walked into the house, balancing two large shaved ices in my hands while kicking my shoes off. The shed was almost finished, so these days of entering my home and seeing my sweet mate turning this way and that as he created his masterpiece were ending, but our lives were changing every day.

The sight of him stopped me dead in my tracks.

He wore no shirt and only some of my pajama pants while he stood a few feet from the canvas, turning his head this way and that. His belly was splattered with paint, and I couldn't help but let out a sigh.

This man was mine.

"Is that the sigh of an alpha who is enchanted with his whale of an omega?" he asked, but his eyes were trained on his work. It was so fortunate that the healer agreed shifters could safely use most paints even while pregnant, as long as there was adequate ventilation.

"It's the sigh of an alpha who is enchanted with his beautiful and magnificent omega.

I'm spellbound, Antoine. How are you managing to get more gorgeous by the day?"

That got him. He turned and put his brush down. That belly, rounded with paint on it, made me want to forget the damned snowballs and dive right into him instead.

"Is that for me?" He ticked his chin at the cups in my hand.

"Blackberry mint. Thought the mint might help your heartburn."

"Did you now? Let's see how good it is."

He came over and took the straw into his mouth, staring at me the whole time. Another side effect of this pregnancy was his constant need for sex.

He would never hear a complaint from me about that.

"Well?" I asked as he swallowed the liquid and licked his lips.

"It's so good. Please tell me you brought both for me." He took one from my hand and got on his tiptoes to kiss me.

"I did. The last thing I want at the end of the day is anything with ice. Have you eaten dinner yet?"

He shook his head. "No. I lost track of time."

"Come on into the kitchen. Big protein breakfast for dinner for my two favorite people."

He sighed and sat down at the kitchen table. "You always take care of me, alpha."

I kissed his temple before opening the fridge. Big omelets were on my mind. “I always will. I love you, Antoine. Never knew love like this before you.”

Antoine teared up and started to cry. “They are happy tears. Don’t worry. I love you too, West.”

I managed to pry the second shaved ice from Antoine’s hand and served him a huge meat and cheese omelet and a bagel. We took a long walk afterward, taking in the sights of Oliver Creek. Someone had added some solar twinkle lights to the edges of the park in the center of town and at night they came on, giving the entire place a lovely glow.

I had read that a night walk helped with stomach issues and digestion. Plus, after a full day, it gave us time to talk and be with each other. We didn’t have a long time before our little family of two became three, and I wanted to soak up all this time with him that I could.

“I want to paint you again,” Antoine whispered when we were cuddled on a bench right in front of the metal sculpture in the center of the park.

“You do?” I asked.

He nodded. “I do. One just for me.”

“Let’s get home so I can model for you,” I said, taking his earlobe between my teeth.

“My thoughts exactly.”

Antoine

At some point in the pregnancy, it felt like things sped up. Suddenly, we didn't have endless time to prepare for the arrival of our child, and we hadn't begun to get ready. I realized that on one of my many trips to the restroom in the middle of the night and ended up sitting in the middle of the room that would be the nursery if I ever got off my rapidly expanding backside and got it done. I didn't know why I was gaining all over—I'd seen so many omegas with a baby bump sticking right out in front but not this omega. Quinn said everything was going as it should and that I did not need to worry about a thing, but what kind of a father was closing in on giving birth and not only had not furnished the nursery but didn't even have a onesie to put the baby in. It was going to be naked and diaperless.

I cried until I ran out of tears and then realized I wasn't going to be able to get up off the floor and fell asleep in a heap on the rug.

"Omega?" West's concerned voice woke me from a dream in which I had to carry a naked baby everywhere while people judged me for my awful parenting skills. "Antoine? Honey, what are you doing here?"

I rolled from my back onto my belly and pushed up onto hands and knees. "This is as far as I can go without help."

"I've got you." He stood behind me and wrapped his arms around my chest, easing me up onto my knees and then to my feet. "Want to tell me why you are on the nursery floor in the middle of the night?"

I sniffled, very close to tears again, and let him lead me back to our room. “I realized that I’m due very shortly and the room we were just in? That’s not a nursery, it’s a vacancy.” We had actually cleared out the guest room furniture months ago but never done anything else. “The baby is going to think we don’t love them.”

“Oh, omega, this is all my fault.” West guided me to the bed and settled me under the covers. “I wanted to surprise you with everything all done, but the contractor had a delay in the other project and hasn’t begun yet.”

“S-so you set it up to have the nursery done?”

“I did. He’s going to start Monday.”

“So while I did nothing, you planned the whole thing, talked to my contractor, and did it all.” The tears spilled over again. “Hear that, baby? You have one good, responsible daddy who will make sure you aren’t naked at the market.”

“Naked?” He looked so puzzled, I almost laughed. “Why would the baby be naked?”

“We don’t have any clothes for them.”

“I don’t want to hear any more negative things about my mate. You looked up all those nursery pictures online and had them in a digital file. That’s what the contractor is using.” He went around to his side of the bed and climbed in as well. “Then we’ll shop for baby clothes tomorrow, okay?”

“I’m sorry I was so upset.”

“And I’m sorry I tried to surprise you. I should have included you.” He pulled me close and kissed my lips. “How can I make it up to you?”

“I don’t know.”

He whispered a few suggestions, all of them naughty, and then we set out to try to make them all happen. My mate was the best at all things sexual, and tonight his motivation to make me feel better added something even more.

The next morning, we set out for town and the baby store where we bought enough newborn and three-month clothes to satisfy the most fashion-conscious baby. As my mate said, I shouldn’t feel bad because I had my hands full growing the baby and he wanted to help with everything he could.

My mate was the best at everything.

West

I woke up and patted the mattress beside me, noticing that my little spoon was gone. My little spoon with a baby inside him.

“Antoine?” I sat up in a rush. He never got up before me. We always woke up together, and lately he would roll over and go to sleep.

I threw the comforter from my body and checked the bathroom first. Our baby was pushing down on Antoine’s bladder more than ever lately, causing him to run to the bathroom several times an hour.

Except he wasn’t there.

As I walked into the living room, I noticed movement outside. Antoine was pacing the back porch with a cup of tea in his hand. He was wearing one of my T-shirts and a pair of my boxers. He refused to buy paternity clothes or even paternity boxers, so he’d somehow taken over my clothes instead. Not that I cared one bit.

“Hey,” I said, walking out the back door. “Sweetheart, what’s wrong?”

He shook his head. “Nothing? This little one is tumbling inside me. Their foot in my ribs was my breaking point. I had to get up.”

“And this is helping?” I walked over and checked the temperature of his tea. It was halfway gone and no longer hot.

“No? Yes? I don’t know. It gave me something to concentrate on. I’m telling you, West, this little one is a gymnast or an acrobat. Something.”

“I’m so sorry. I wish there was something I could do to help.” I put my hands on the sides of his belly and tried to communicate with our babe. I’d heard tales of shifters being able to bond with their babes before they were born but had no idea if it would work. Antoine was getting more and more uncomfortable in his body. It was hard for him to do most things.

He was thirty-two weeks along, which was long for a fox and a polar bear according to Quinn.

“Little one,” I cooed, trying to use my alpha power on him. “Calm down for your papa. He’s tired and wants to rest.”

“Oh.” Antoine looked at me with wide eyes. “That kind of worked. Keep talking to him.”

We sat on our porch swing, and I continued to talk to our cub in low tones, even putting my mouth near Antoine’s belly.

“I think I need a nap now,” he said. “I’m completely drained today, West.”

“That’s okay. You’re cooking a baby.”

He nodded and smiled at me. I helped him off the porch swing, when he stopped and cried out my name.

“What is it?” I asked.

“My water...”

My gaze darted to the porch floor where a puddle formed under my omega.

I could see the fear creeping up. Eyes wide. Color draining from his face. Mouth agape. “Everything is going to be okay, Antoine. We are prepared for this. I’m going to call the healer to come over. You are so strong and capable. Our baby is coming.”

“I need to shower,” he said more a whisper than anything.

“Let me call the healer and then we’ll get you into the shower. Let’s stay calm. I love you so much.”

He smiled at me with tears in his eyes. “I love you. Let’s have a baby.”

Antoine

We'd chosen the home birth plan, with the healer present, but when Quinn did not get there right away, I began to overthink the whole idea. At the birthing center, there were more tools available to me if I ran into trouble. "Do you think we should go to the center?" I asked "In case something goes wrong?"

West smiled at me. "Quinn will be here in a few minutes, so even if we left now, we'd pass him on the road. How are you doing, omega?"

"Not too bad, so far. Just a little scared."

"You've got this. And if Quinn even suggests we go, we'll leave immediately, okay?"

We had everything ready as the healer had suggested, and for all his soothing words, West kept going to the window and looking out.

"Any sign of him?" It had been well over a few minutes.

"No, but I'll call." He went into the kitchen where he'd left his phone and came back a couple of minutes later. "He had a flat tire, but it's fixed and he'll be here in a few minutes. He suggests we get you into that nightshirt you picked out for the birth and then you'll be more comfortable and ready when the time comes."

Also, it would give me something to do, I suspected, distracting me for a few minutes. But when I got the shirt on, the pains that had been about five minutes apart changed in intensity, and it was with great relief I heard the car door close outside.

“Alpha, hurry and let him in. I think the baby is coming.” And there was no time for any suggestions about going to the center. “I need to push.”

“No, don’t do that,” he said. “Please hang in there for a minute more. I’ll go get him.” He rushed out the door and came back in, practically shoving Quinn in front of him. “See? He’s here. Now, you can push the baby right out.”

Quinn looked from one of us to the other, laughter twinkling in his eyes. He dealt with this stuff every day, and he had always given me confidence when I had a worry or question. “So, West tells me your water broke? How far apart are the pains?”

He took me into the bedroom for a quick exam and far from being ready to push, he told me it would likely be another few hours and we could all relax. Easy for him to say.

But with his gentle guidance and reassurance, my alpha and I got through the time and even managed to play cards for a while just for the distraction. In fact, I had just laid down a winning gin rummy hand when I learned how strong the pains could be when it was almost time to push.

“Quinn?” I called, and he came out of the kitchen where he’d been making tea. “Could you examine me again?”

“Of course. But judging from your face and the look in your eyes, I almost don’t have to. Let’s get you in position.”

I had planned to use a birthing stool, but when I tried, my legs were too wobbly, and in the end, Sutton was born with me lying on the bed. He came out red and squalling and ready to take on the world. Like his alpha daddy. Quinn laid him on my chest and I fell in love for the second time in my life.

West

“Oh, come on, buddy. You have to give your papa a break.”

Sutton was doing the thing where he made a neh sound and started to get red in the face. Once he started kicking his legs, it was all over.

“I’m here. My milk came down the moment I heard him making that sound. Give me the little meat loaf.”

Didn’t know why my mate started calling Sutton his little meat loaf but it kind of fit. He was a chunky boy with thunder-thigh creases where his wrists met his hands. Dimples in his knuckles.

And an appetite that made me think he would shift into a cub once his animal demanded it.

I sighed. I wished I could help more with the feedings, but Antoine had the goods. “Here, buddy. Your papa had to stop painting to come and feed you.”

Antoine sat in the rocking chair in the nursery. I unbuttoned his shirt and got the cloth diaper for when Sutton dribbled, which always happened.

Soon the sounds of gulping filled the room.

Antoine and I took turns taking care of our little one on the days when my truck was open but with an infant and the fall approaching, we had decided that come October, I

would shut the truck down for the winter. We had enough money, thanks to Antoine selling that painting of me, and we could take some time to focus on our baby and each other.

Antoine would paint all winter, I hoped.

I made Antoine a cup of iced tea, red raspberry leaf, and a plate of cheese, crackers, and some vegetables to eat while he nursed. Feeding our babe really took it out of him but I was grateful he was able to. Some omegas weren't.

"Thank you, West. You always take care of us. Doesn't he, Sutton?" My mate cooed at our babe. Sutton stopped feeding to gurgle and smile at his papa and then me.

"I try, my love," I said and picked up things while he continued feeding. There was always laundry to be done and today was no exception. Taking trash out. But all worth it. I'd never been happier in my life.

And Antoine hadn't been quiet about wanting another baby already.

"Are you ready for your grandpas to visit?" I asked Sutton, tickling his pudgy toes.

"Have you talked to them?" Antoine asked.

"I have. They insisted on getting a car and driving into town once their plane lands. I offered to pick them up but they said no."

My mate nodded and switched Sutton to the other side of his chest.

"Are they excited?" he asked. "They are my fathers and you've been texting them more than me."

“You’ve been busy and yes. I would use the word ecstatic. They offered to babysit one night next week.”

“Why? Is something going on?”

I nodded and touched Antoine’s knee. “Yeah. I thought I would take my lovely omega on a date.”

Antoine closed his eyes. “Do you know how dreamy that sounds? I haven’t gotten you alone since he was born.”

“Well,” I murmured. “You’ve been healing. But it will be a little over six weeks postpartum when we go on our date. I may have booked us a fancy hotel for the night.”

He gasped. “Awfully presumptuous of you, alpha.”

My heart sank. “Was it? Are you not ready? I can cancel.”

He said nothing but when Sutton finished feeding and went down for a nap, he pushed me against the wall in the hallway and fisted the front of my shirt. “Please, don’t cancel, alpha. I need time alone with you.”

We’d, of course, had a lot of time alone but, since the baby, it had mostly been spent napping.

“Thank the gods,” I breathed out.

“Until then, kiss me.”

Antoine

The view out the window was basically the same as when I was a little boy and yet so different. The backyard had swings back then, too, but not one like West had ordered with an animal theme and every kind of swing and slide the company offered. I'd objected that Sutton was too little for any of it except the extra baby swing he'd added on, but there was no denying our little man anything in my mate's eyes.

His nursery had turned out as great as my studio, with the loft I could use for naps when I got so into my work I didn't even want to go into the house. But so far, it had only been used as a guest room by the gallery owners when they finally came to visit. The studio itself was everything I dreamed of. The contractor took way too long, but it was worth the inconvenience and expense. Especially with our son starting to get into everything. The paint was not edible, and easels were not kid proof.

So I left all the tools of my trade in the studio and enjoyed watching out the window where West currently pushed Sutton in the swing. They were adorable together whether playing or cuddling or when Sutton fed him his dinner or just about any time. I loved them so much, sometimes I thought I would faint with the sheer intensity of it.

And gratitude.